

# Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 15, 2023

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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## *Resentiment, Artivism and Magic*

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ABSTRACT. Wars for imperial domination; terror caused by climate change; growing rift between excessively rich and powerful, and masses living under threshold of poverty; these and other ghosts are haunting contemporaneity. Artists respond, even mainstream cultural institutions are willing to prove that they are pillars of social responsibility by exhibiting and supporting artworks engaged in solutions, protesting, and subversion. Artistic activities have to be researched as to their different tactics in opposition to hegemonic strategies which are here to strengthen or maintain global regime of power. These artistic practices can be divided into three groups: resentment, artistic activism or artivism, and art's magic power. The first one is a typically modern phenomenon related to struggle between cultural pessimism and hope, and between avant-garde and decadence. The second and the third decide differently from where the power of art to change the world comes – from the ability to persuade and mobilize people to act outside the artworld through rational argumentation and opening a public space for deliberation, or, from the magic ability of artworks to create heterotopic worlds which influence situation by radiating imagination and desire to dream alternative way(s) of life. In presentation, these practices will be exemplified by three cases: Oliver Frlić theatrical work (especially one concerning Yugoslav nostalgia and denigration); Documenta 15 with its excessive politicization (especially allegedly anti-Semitic project of Taring Padi); and Venice biennale 2022 curated by Cecilia Alemani following the Milky way of surrealist dreams and desires.

In the leaflet published about the exhibition “The Figurative” at *Cukrarna* cultural centre in Ljubljana (which is not former *cukraszda* or patisserie but former sugar factory) for the opening on April 4, 2023, curators Alenka Gregorič and Mateja Podlesnik announced:

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From today's perspective, all epochs are generally considered important, even turning points, frequently times of crisis, often unbearably difficult and unrelenting. Nowadays, this is no exception, for we live in a time when long established systems and many values have been shattered or are no longer valid. The current crises, from the changes in climate to the centres of war, put us in fear and anxiety, in relentlessness and in a sense of spiritual sterility and intellectual paralysis, so that without the right orientation, we often find ourselves in an alienated world. (Gregorič and Podlesnik, 2023)

These sentences come as introduction to exhibition of those Slovene visual artists who kept the figurative alive from the Second World War up to now. We can't find the manners of post-modernism here, with its negation of crisis as modern way of dealing with historical time, and we can't approach these announcements under terms of contemporaneity into which all three historical times collapse. It is clear and simple image of modernity again, but radically concerned with the possibility that our times are apocalyptically pregnant with catastrophe. The consequence of such understanding of our times is that art must do something about it if it sticks to its founding idea and mission – if art can't do anything about it, it isn't worth to care about art at all. This return of radically modernist vocabulary which we can find everywhere, in art and beyond, we could understand as retrogressive reproduction of modernity and modernism, or, as another try to proceed beyond modernism because of its catastrophic results for nature and society. It is well known that ground-breaking earthquakes of history had first to express themselves in the language of previously dominant discourse; for instance, secularization started as introduction of new religious understanding, brought out by protestant movements; or, introduction of the modern republic interpreted its revolutionary agency wearing Roman republican robes at first. (Marx, 1995, pp. 5-7) New never appears as radical novelty but covered with robes of continuity. Giving three examples of artistic engagement with present crisis of humanity (*resentiment*, artivism and magic) I claim that dressing in modernist robe declares intention to fight with results of modernity and against the ideology of modernism on its own field, and that present exit of art from the field of culture into the political is driven by the need for radical change which intends to show that there is world and life beyond modernity.

## 1. Resentiment

*Ressentiment*, if it is allowed to use French expression, is not just resentment. Its roots are deeper and belong to typically modern phenomena like dandyism, melancholy or *mal du siècle*, spleen, decadence, *Entartung* (Max Nordau; Nordau 1898) or *Entkünstung* (Theodor W. Adorno; Adorno, 1974, pp. 32-33) and cultural pessimism. *Ressentiment* is the opposite of avant-gardism, but at the same time its potential result, a bitterness of failure and experience of lost faith in progress and salvation of this world, an affect coming from offense and deception of historical movement. There is no progress with our cause because there never was progress, claims *ressentiment*. Max Scheller mentions this statement on modernity and its progress as the most typical feature of *ressentiment*. (Scheller, 2018) This uneasiness (*Unbehagen*) in modernity and modernism is the first response we can detect in art's approach to the crisis of contemporaneity which immediately got rid of postmodern optimistic interpretation of the state of humanity after the end of history, and introduced melancholic relationship with the past and dystopic attitude to the future together with longing to re-establish the shattered dream that something better than the end of history is still possible. In art, we can now feel this current strongly, but its structure includes acceptance and protest, ironically and sarcastically exposing the weakness of *ressentiment* response to the state of things. As a good case of such confusing approach, we have theatre of Oliver Frlić and (as one of numerous cases of his controversial staging) *The Ristić Complex* which is inspired by much larger story about famous director Ljubiša Ristić from 1968 generation and his approach to Danilo Kiš complex story - novel *The Tomb of Boris Davidovich*.<sup>250</sup> When this book appeared in 1976, it became an instant bestseller at home and abroad; I remember that, as editor of Slovene journal *Problemi* I immediately proposed to Nande Miklavc a translation of the first story with the same title as the whole book, but, when it appeared in journal still in 1976 it was already just one of two immediate translations. Why instant bestseller? One reason was its subject – communist revolution together with Soviet and Eastern Europe violent and tragic

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<sup>250</sup> Danilo Kiš, 1976. *Grobnica za Borisa Davidovića: Sedam poglavljja jedne zajedničke povesti*. Beograd and Zagreb: BIGZ and Liber; in English: Danilo Kiš, 1978. *A tomb for Boris Davidovich*. Dallas: Dalkey Archive Press. Also available at: <https://oceanofpdf.com/authors/danilo-kis/pdf-epub-a-tomb-for-boris-davidovich-download/>. (1.6.2023)



history including new treatment of “Bukharin syndrome”,<sup>251</sup> another reason was contemporary reading which understood it as a post-modern relativization of historic progress together with a hint that future promised by communist revolution is already behind us; in addition, there was and still appears polemics about its originality or plagiarism because whole parts are taken from other sources. All this and more attracted young theatre director Ljubiša - Ljuša Ristić who arrived in Ljubljana for the first time in 1974 and proposed to direct Kiš novel for Pekarna theatre in 1976. There were problems with socialist censorship which did not like that Slovene theatre gets involved with Serbian controversy about Kiš and his plagiarism which was evidently a try at political persecution of author who later published a book of his answers to accusations. But as *A Tomb for Pekarna: nearly documentary drama* by one of the founders of Pekarna theatre Ivo Svetina from 2010 tells, everything was ready to go public when at the beginning of summer Ristić together with two actors “escaped” from Ljubljana to Split where they were engaged by the summer festival. The staging of a tomb of revolution started again in 1977 when a group of directors and authors from all parts of Yugoslavia including Ljuša Ristić founded KPGT<sup>252</sup> – a theatrical project to stage texts all around Yugoslavia. Under this umbrella, Ristić came back to Ljubljana, this time to Mladinsko theatre (it means “youthful”, but the institution doesn’t translate it because *Mladinsko* became a trade-mark), and in 1980 staged *Missa in A-minor* as another version of *Tomb*’s dramatization at a larger distance from the book as in 1976, but now about optimistic tragedy and tragic violence of revolution as seen from contemporaneity combined with 1968 demand for continuation of revolution because the first attack on future did not reach its final end. This production became legendary and still appears in the history of theatre as its proverbial political turn.<sup>253</sup> Ristić crossed all over

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<sup>251</sup> Syndrome being a combination of symptoms which witnesses that a certain cause is organizing disease in question, Boukharine syndrome represents a set of symptoms from Boukharine process when he admitted to completely unbelievable crimes going back to times before the revolution. The process was available to whole world’s public and encouraged otherwise pro-Soviet intellectuals and artists to start doubting that everything is right in the Soviet Union. This doubt developed into accusation, as in the novel by Arthjur Koestler *Darkness at Noon* (1940) whose hero Roubashov is novelist’s replacement for Boukharine.

<sup>252</sup> KPGT, short for Kazalište, Pozorište, Gledališče, Teatar, names theatre in all Yugoslav languages standing during 1980s for the idea of many nations – one country, staging the same theater pieces under different or the same directors in different Yugoslav republics.

<sup>253</sup> “Slovensko mladinsko gledališče (SMG) v Ljubljani, kjer je predstava nastala, je v začetku os3emdesetih let prevzelo vodilno vlogo v oblikovanju političnega gledališča v Jugoslaviji, ki ga je razumelo ‘predvsem kot umetniško dejanje in zaradi tega tudi v njegovi socialno poetični dimenziji, revolucija ni žretje lastnih otrok, ampak opredmetenje človekovih sanj in želja’, zapišejo člani gledališča.” (“The Slovenian Youth Theatre (SMG)

Yugoslavia with his directing, and found good support in Subotica and in Budva, but he still could not enter Belgrade theater – he was expelled from the capital after his student opposition engagement from 1968. His graduate piece by Feydeau staged in Yugoslav dramatic theatre of Belgrade *A Fleece in her ear* from 1971 was so popular that it became the longest living piece in history – up to 2014 when the last actor from the 1971 died. After 1990, Ristić still had two passions: to get in Belgrade back victorious as theatrical director and theatrical entrepreneur, and to keep going Yugoslavia as revolutionary federal state. This second passion obvious in founding of KPGT developed into political engagement with Yugoslav Left – Jugoslovenska levica JUL founded in 1994 whose president he became in 1997 (leading figure was in reality Milošević's wife) when it got 34% of vote at Serbian elections and entered into coalition with Milošević's Socialist Party (a direct successor of the Serbian League of Communists). Jul collapsed after this term and disappeared, but Ristić got his theatre in Belgrade at the premises of former sugar factory called Šećerana, completing this name of the place with the formal name of KPGT. It exists still and has just entered investment project with Belgrade municipality to build monumental cultural centre there, while KPGT will continue to function as its theatrical unit. Ljuša finally got what he was longing for, but everybody else from Yugoslav culture was asking why he had to engage in Serbian politics in such clumsy manner at such a bad moment with such wrong people? *Complex Ristić* in Frljić's title has in mind two questions which came from this: one, why Ristić became such prominent figure of non-prominent party, and how to understand his life work in theatre considering this decision? In the last years of Yugoslavia and the first years of post-Yugoslav wars this meant to support engagement in wars together with ethnic cleansing. Frljić's *Complex Ristić* is a resentimental commentary and interpretation of that enigma, and his Mladinsko casting provided in 2016 for presence of an actor who appeared in Ristić's *Missa* in 1980. In her text for theatrical journal, Dragica Potočnjak, acting in 1980 and in 2016, expressed her resentment:

I find it unworthy to write about banalities. Particularly when writing about things that shouldn't be

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in Ljubljana, where the show was created, took a leading role in the design of political theatre in Yugoslavia, which was understood "primarily as an artistic act and therefore in its socially poetic dimension, the revolution is not the eating of one's own children, but the tangible of human dreams and desires", written by the members of the theatre.") Taken from Gržinić, Marina and Aleš Erjavec (1991). *Ljubljana, Ljubljana: Osemdeseta leta v umetnosti in kulturi* (Ljubljana, Ljubljana: The 1980 in Art and Culture), Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, p. 65.

banalised. And yet in the last couple of decades, this is exactly what has happened. Everything gets so damn banalised. Even the worthiest things – faith and hope ... love – are turning into a banality. And the world is quicksand, incessantly gobbling up everything. This is why the performance *The Ristić Complex*, which I call *Missa for Yugoslavia* is no longer played in a minor key. Or a major key. It has been left without tonality. It is a requiem which doesn't liberate, does not deceive the auditorium with faith or hope in anything. Least of all, in some long-gone revolution. It doesn't burden itself with taking leave from it either. There were too many of these rituals of goodbye anyways. One of the most beautiful ones was written by Danilo Kiš. In *The Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, we also bade goodbye to Yugoslavia. Whoever still loves her resurrects her in memories. Whoever hates her resurrects her from the pulpits of daily politics. *Missa for Yugoslavia* is not resurrecting a corpse. It is not about nostalgia. Because nostalgia, too, is in this case banal. (Mladinsko, 2016)

The outcome, after blood flows across the scene, is both *ressentiment* and resentment. The public is expecting, if not a sentence of Ristić's jump from theatre to war, at least an explanation of this complex misunderstanding. What we get is how easily any theatre turns from theatre to the theatre of war. Or, that theatre was already a theatre of war before any blood was sprayed around the theatre stage. As we well know, the place where war goes on butchering mostly civilians is called – a theatre of war.

## 2. Artistic Activism or Artivism

The second way of contemporary art to become a movement for change in the space outside art is called artivism, and this term achieved theoretical meaning through Slovene theatre researcher Aldo Milohnić who used it to give a name to civil society's movements which used aesthetic means of protest for their communication at the site of protest and to reach general public through new media. One of Milohnić's comments about such practice which was eminently theatrical, and performative was that it crosses a line of art's autonomy. Brecht's suggestion to use art as a weapon, and his similar saying that "Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.", is a result of wrong attribution. The first to say that was Lev Trotsky (in *Literature and Revolution*, 1925). But – and that is what I want to show – it means that art as a weapon deserves a criticism of hammer more than criticism of mirror. This, however, brings out many confrontational issues, for instance, Kassel *documenta 15* (2022) curated by Indonesian group *ruangrupa* had artivism and its postcolonial and

decolonial thorn used to put together an engaged and excessively political program. One of these excesses happened because of allegedly antisemitic project done by the *Taring Padi* group. It is true that this scandal which gave *documenta 2022* exhibition its recognizable image even after the panel was covered happened in a country which has to be more cautious about antisemitism than anyone else. But it also happened in a country whose extreme right attacks Islam and Muslims on daily basis, including an attack which happened before the opening of the exhibition on a site provided for Palestinian artists. The intervention by *Taring Padi* was developed as *lambung*: a site for meeting of people (we would say that it is a site for participation of public in the art project), and the panel images suggested what could and should be talked about. Among these images were figures of Mossad agents (Mossad participated in Indonesian genocide under Suharto), but with hog's trunk, and caricature of a Jew with sidelocks, cigar and SS symbol on his hat. Long before *documenta* started and before (after two days) high panel entrance into *lambung* was covered, on January 19 (2022) organizers issued a statement on artistic and academic freedom which included dialog proceeding in tolerance and freedom of expression. (Statement 2023) They explicitly rejected any external interference with artistic freedom. Despite such statements, pressure was so strong that this work had to be hidden. It spites of covering, it is still the most visible art project of *documenta*, after Hamas attack on Israel and Israel's return even more so when all different positions about such politicizing of art turned into purely political positions and vehement criticism of one or the other side in conflict which long ago stopped to care about human rights and non-involvement of civilians: civilians on both sides are main target of both sides. To present villains with hog's trunk and make them recognizable using Nazi stereotypes is politically illiterate and artistically cheap, of course, but this work deserves something more than just an easy criticism because both in criticism and in defence of it, political differentiation between Israel and Jews, between antisemitism and criticism of Israel's politics was introduced. This differentiation allows criticism of Israeli politics and disallows antisemitic racist discourse to support criticism. From this point of view, *Taring Padi* expressed its criticism of Israeli politics using antisemitic stereotypes, one equalising Israeli secret police Mossad with pigs as a sign of filth in both religions, and another claiming that the proverbial Jew is just an extension of Nazi Schutzstaffel – SS. Looking at this outrageous expression from another perspective, we can find there a connection, even equalizer between Israel and Jewish nation. The first equalizer

is hidden in strong support for establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. This support included the idea of liberal against national socialist final solution of Jewish question. On the side of European and other countries where antisemitism flourished in modernity, founding a Jewish state meant that their countries can get rid of Jewish question for good, if not of all Jews too. On the side of Jewish nation, to have a state of their own meant solution of Jewish question as well, as with a state of its own they will become a normal nation. To confirm both reasons for establishment of Israel, this state has a constitutional principle which makes acceptance of any Jew who wants to migrate to Israel obligation of Israeli state. This institution makes repetition of Holocaust preventable and offers a permanent asylum for all victims of antisemitism. As Israel was not established in an empty space and on a virgin soil, the conflict of Arabs with Jews with anticolonial background and the conflict of Jews with Arabs in anti-Nazism discourse was imminent. To overcome it, one should be aware that Israel is a state of guarantee against antisemitism, and that Israel is itself a by-product of modern antisemitism at the same time. Without having that in mind, artivism supporting Palestinian cause will necessarily fall into hole of antisemitism while criticizing Israel, and artivism supporting Israel will get lost in colonial ideology. With artivism, art is taking sides in struggles and conflicts, and it inherits complex contexts which cannot stand simplification of public gesture. Be it as it is, artivism is penetration of art into other fields and domains which cannot defend its activist expression invoking artistic autonomy because it has been thrown away in the first place. Artivism has to accept and implement rules and laws of these fields and domains as its own, and not to impose modern art circumstances like autonomy of art and its position free of any ethical objection. Artist is a citizen of at least two fields expected to know and understand regulations of both. If we compare this example with student graffiti and slogans from 1968, we see that there are more sophisticated and more simplifying approaches. In contemporaneity, simplifying is understanding of the political field in terms of bipolarity (“us” and “them”), while contemporary global political field is complex and multipolar. This simplification deserves the label *schund* in its original 19<sup>th</sup> Century meaning of simplicist literary genre which defined popularity according to belief that people’s understanding of the world can be only simple. To follow Clement Greenberg, one could say that there are just two ways of artivism: avant-garde and *schund*.

### 3. Magic as Agency

The third kind of response to world's troubles makes the work of art a spiritual event capable to move people into agency through not-rational (not necessarily irrational) subconscious drive. Some of it was present as curatorial concept and selection of artworks for 2022 Venice Biennale. Its curator Cecilia Alemani explained: “*The Milk of Dreams* takes its title from a book by Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) in which the Surrealist artist describes a magical world where life is constantly re-envisioned through the prism of the imagination. It is a world where everyone can change, be transformed, become something or someone else; a world set free, brimming with possibilities. But it is also the allegory of a century that imposed intolerable pressure on the definition of the self, forcing Carrington into a life of exile: locked up in mental hospitals, an eternal object of fascination and desire, yet also a figure of startling power and mystery, always fleeing the structures of a fixed, coherent identity.” (Alemani, 2022) Magic practice of activism had first to readmit belief in power of art and of artwork, a belief which has been studied by Terry Eagleton as *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990): “Anyone who inspects the history of European philosophy since the Enlightenment must be struck by the curiously high priority assigned in it to aesthetic questions.” (Eagleton, 1990, p. 1) This priority was realized as “disenfranchisement of art” (Arthur Danto’s formulation) which gave priority to philosophical rationalization and explanation of artistic imagination. (Danto, 2004) Surrealist avantgarde project taken by Alemani as signpost for Biennale introduced activism in its second phase when automatism following psychoanalytical method was found too passive for the Thirties. At that time, Salvador Dali introduced paranoia as an active artistic grip which, following Marxism and its Eleventh Thesis, does not present the world but changes it. Magic is neither mysticism nor religious practice. It is a practice involving an object of magic power, an object which art has a power to produce. At first, magic practice needs to restore belief that art has special power to launch agency and cause action. Magic power of art is something illusory, but it still functions, and is immensely like the structure of commodity fetishism. Taking this into account, art of this kind becomes subversive and includes knowing that conspiracy is how the capital sucks blood of the generic being of humanity. And that is reality magic, a magic which was involved with reading *Capital* at Biennale 2015: not as something to follow with attention, turning it into understanding, but as a prayer in the church of art.

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