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The Chronotopical Overview of Croatian Performance Art

Suzana Marjanić. *The Chronotopical Overview of Croatian Performance Art – from the Traveller to the Present*. Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, Udruga Bijeli val, 2013.

Suzana Marjanić has made a major contribution to Croatian art history with her book *The Chronotopical Overview of Croatian Performance Art – from the Traveller to the Present*. On more than 2,000 pages, she has systematized and analysed a treasury of hitherto unpublished information on the subject of Croatian performance art.

The author began researching on this topic more than ten years ago, when she wrote an appendix to the Croatian translation of the book *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* by RoseLee Goldberg, one of the seminal works dedicated to performance art on a global level. The translation was published by Test! – Theatre to the Students and URK – Association for Cultural Development, and although the publication of a locally written appendix proved to be against the copyright, this moment was crucial for triggering an idea about publishing a similar book that would be dedicated to the Croatian performance. The book was originally envisioned as merely identifying the key events in the history of Croatian performance, but with time and after a huge number of encounters and talks with artists (which were published on a regular basis in the form of interviews in the cultural biweekly *Zarez*), the idea behind the book gradually expanded. Today, in its completed form, this mega-edition consists not only of these interviews, but also includes a chronotopical strip offer-

ing an overview of all the events during the period in question, various chapters that analyse individual phenomena related to performance art, and their geographic classification according to various towns and cities – centres in which the performing scenes developed. One should also mention two prefaces, one of them written by the Croatian theoretician and editor Žarko Paić, who has focused on the philosophical understanding of performance as a notion, and the other by the prominent Serbian art historian and globally renowned author Miško Šuvaković, who has explained in an encyclopaedic form the evolution of performance in the global setting.

In the meantime, the original idea of a brief overview has grown into a gigantic version of itself: partly owing to the author's passionate enthusiasm for the topic, and partly to the flow of time. One should also thank the publishers – Bijeli Val and the Institute for Ethnology and Folklore, which observed the growth and development of the book with great excitement. Without their support, I believe that the topic would have to be dealt with in an 'economy' version, which would deprive the readers of various significant elements that they can now enjoy.

The size of the edition is also due to the approach of its quartet of graphic designers (Damir Bralić, Lana Grahek, Marko Hrasovec, and Luka Reicher), who decided to

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give it more emphasis by dividing the book into separate volumes, equipped with a hard cover, and granting an optimum of space to the large quantity of illustrations, various appendices, and so on.

From the Traveller to the present

How does one begin and how does one end various questions that plague the author who decides to write a history on a topic that has never been systematically treated before? Performance art is nowadays defined as a practice that originated in the visual arts of the 1950s and 1960s, but most authors of such comprehensive histories of performance art have made recourse to the Dadaist, Futurist, or other modernist movements. Regarding the fact that the Dada emerged through various disciplines, with some of the artists it expressed itself in an interdisciplinary form. It is thus in the context of the visual arts that we may speak of the first public 'performances' in which the artist became an integral part of his own artwork. The artist's body began to serve as a natural screen for the artificial images of cultural production, ideology, politics, and economy.

A distinctly Croatian form of Dadaism called Zenithism, was defined by its main protagonist, Ljubomir Micić, as the "abstract, meta-cosmic expressionism." In the introduction to her book, Suzana Marjanić explained which elements of Dadaist actions were present in performances by the group of secondary-school students called the Travellers as well as which Zenithist actions she considers as the germane to the development of performance in Croatia.

From our contemporary perspective, as we live in the time of an endlessly prolonged adolescence, it may seem odd to include the performances of secondary-school students in such a publication, but we should recall that all great artists from the period of modernism had produced an important part of their oeuvres by the age of 25. Likewise, it is therefore perfectly clear that these young people were considered adults and that their artistic actions left a corresponding trace in the media.

It is here where we come to another problem vexing all art historians: namely, the fact that this history of performance has been written for a very young country. The book focuses on the past century when the region's political climate changed more than once. And herein lies the challenge. As for the period in which Zenithism emerged, one should consider the context of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The movement emerged in Zagreb, yet shifted the centre of its activity to Belgrade after a few years. At that time, both cities belonged to the same political structure, but seen from today's perspective, it may seem that the movement changed the country. The same problem emerges regarding the period between the 1950s and the 1990s, since during the time of Socialist Yugoslavia, one might say that the urban settings in the capitals of its republics were culturally closer to each other than various settings within the same republic – particularly when speaking of Zagreb and Belgrade.

Suzana Marjanić has solved this problem by including only Croatian authors and artworks created in the territory of Croatia. That is most evident in her Chronotopical Strip – an extremely important element of

her book, which graphically, yet straightforwardly presents the most crucial events in Croatian performance art, with brief explanations of their historical contexts. More on these contexts can be read in other parts of the book.

The next issue an author of such a book must decide upon is where to stop – what is the ‘today’ that can serve as an adequate end to such an enterprise? It is significant that the author has chosen a performance that marked the entry of Croatia into the European Union, namely that of the recently deceased artist Željko Zorica Šiš. An audio-video installation, coupled with the serving of food and drinks, fuelled this controlled happening titled *KroatTisch-eu Freundschaft*. The happening took place over the period of 22 hours, from June 30 until 1:00 a.m. on July 1, as an alternative to the political festivities celebrating the entry of Croatia into the EU. Šiš’s work took place in the Square of the French Republic, simultaneous to the official events in Zagreb’s main square. The artist’s alternative comment on Croatia’s passage stemmed from the need to criticize the political system. The same can be said towards all the actions, happenings, and performances that appear on Suzana’s Chronotopical Strip. What does it tell us of the book in general? It tells of the way in which performance art has been defined: this history of performance is a history of anarchistic, antiwar, anti-nationalist, underground, alternative, freedom-loving, nihilistic ideas that originated in self-proclaimed and temporary autonomous zones. An explanation of that hypothesis is offered in the following paragraphs, which are dedicated to the book’s structure, going through it chapter by chapter.

From kynicism to activism

In the book’s fifteen chapters, Marjanić has evolved and analyzed various notions of performance art. In the first chapter, “Performance Art and Kynicism and/or Performing Resistance”, she has raised the issue of defining performance art, commenting upon various theories. However, the very subtitle of the chapter – “Performing Resistance” – focuses on the author’s main interest in performance. The key theories of performance and their definitions offered in the text lead to a single conclusion: performance art must be interpreted in a broader context that includes all ‘live art’ – including happenings, actions, theatre shows that contain elements of non-role acting, and even activism in some of its permutations.

Such a democratic approach makes it possible to include artists from very different fields of art – such as the punk star Satan Panonski, who anatomically reads his own body with the help of a scalpel, or the group Grč, whose members shocked the spectators by spilling blood over the audience. It also includes various actors and directors on the verge of theatre (Montažstroj, Bacači sjenki, Kugla, etc.), and even fashion performances that overstep the boundaries of clothing in order to explore different issues (Silvio Vujičić, Ivana Popović) – in short, anything that has to do with performance.

What follows is a series of historically and geographically structured chapters. The author starts with the aforementioned movement of Zenithism and continues with various early actions in Zagreb (Zagreb as a performance platform for actions, interactions, and reactions). The whole of

Chapter 4 is thus dedicated to the most consistent performance artist in Croatia, Tomislav Gotovac, and his impact on the Croatian performance art scene.

Vlasta Delimar, Vlasta Žanić, Sanja Iveković, Ivana Popović, Ksenija Kordić, Dunja Knebl, Kristina Leko, Milijana Babić, Ana Franjić and Maja Kovač, Ksenija Turčić, and Gloria Oreb are only some among the female artists in the chapter dedicated to performing women. The position of woman in art and public discourse is outspokenly defined in the very title of the chapter: “Licensed to Perform,” which implies a marginal social role and requires struggle on a fundamental level. These women (although few of them would call themselves feminist artists) used their bodies to come out and fight.

In 1975, members of the Student Satirical Theatre, active in the Student Centre in Zagreb, decided to rename their group to “Kugla glumište” (The Spherical Theatre), thus rejecting the theatre as a ‘cube’, as they termed it, with its strictly defined roles for spectators, performers, and so on. In 1985, Kugla glumište split into several fractions, some of which are still active today, such as Kugla of Damir Bartol Indoš. The differences between this Kugla and Kugla glumište, as well as their significance in the history of performance art, are the subject of Chapter 6.

The chapter titled “The Action Book of Myths, or: The Interventionist Corrections (Red, Green, Black, and Yellow Peristyle)” focuses on an informal artist group active in Split, known under the name of their most significant action: Red Peristyle, which has been reinterpreted a number of times as an articulation of the notion of rebellion. In her

text and through her interviews with many of its participants, Suzana Marjanić has taken us on a journey through the performance scenes of Dubrovnik, Istria, Rijeka, Osijek and Baranja, and Varaždin. The final chapter, titled “Performing the Protest, or: The Only Real Option is a General Strike”, introduces us to the issue of absolute activism. The first subject in this category is “Performing Varšavska Street”, the first major protest that the independent scene, led by the movements Green Action and Right to the City, organized in Zagreb as a planned uprising against the non-transparent methods of privatizing collective goods in the very centre of Zagreb. The rebellion thus included a series of creative actions. One may say that, between the first chapter on performing resistance, and the last one on performing protest as the only viable option, there are a series of chapters that express the author’s main interest in performance art. This could be surmised as follows: to develop a mode of resistance against hierarchy, repression, xenophobia, the patriarchal society, and ideology through the liberating acts of subversion, which uncover various social, political, media, gender, and sex-related conspiracies.

What now?

The book is written in an essayistic style and has an intriguing structure, since the author’s own analyses are interspersed with numerous interviews which introduce various ‘living’ viewpoints to the long text and transform the book into a reading experience that can captivate you like some of the

best novels. Despite being encyclopaedic in its scope, virtually no artist has been omitted. Nevertheless this reflects a subjective position, which has neither the measured style nor the detachment of an encyclopaedic overview. Some theoreticians, critics, historians, or simply fans of performance were afraid that, once this tome of performance encompassing thousands of pages is published, nothing would be left to

say. However, as is the case with many well written historical overviews, this book only opens up the discussion on the subject. All future researchers of performance will have their work greatly facilitated by the exhaustive factual record herein, such as historical context and key events. The field where the discourse can evolve has been set up – and the glove of interpretation thrown down!