

A Few Remarks on “Minor Matters”

Kontekst Collective (Vida Knežević and Marko Miletić)

The times of open oppression are mostly times when much is said about great and noble things. In such times, it takes courage to speak about things so unworthy of being mentioned as food and workers' housing, amidst so much noise being made to the effect that the most important thing is to make sacrifices.¹

*But those of you who accept these conditions, those who have allowed their conscience to sleep, those who seek a life without problems, a quiet life... I ask of you:
Are you quite sure that you are still alive?
What are you fighting for?²*

1.

The case of the workers of the “Jugoremedija” factory and their struggle to realise their rights³ has a special place in the recent history of the workers' movement in postsocialist Serbia. During the era of socialist Yugoslavia this factory was merely one of the many examples of successfully carried out industrialisation of the country, whereas today its case occupies a unique place in the economic-political reality of Serbia. Namely, “Jugoremedija” has become the first factory in Serbia whose workers have managed, through strikes, struggle for their rights and self-organisation, to get back the ownership of the factory, and following a cycle of privatisation, they initiated successful production again. During the course of their strike, the workers realised the necessity of engaging in a broader political struggle,⁴ as well as the importance of the solidarity they shared with workers from other companies, and also with members of other movements and organisations struggling for better working and living conditions.⁵

Still, even though the workers of “Jugoremedija” convincingly showed during the period in question (from 1st March 2007 to 27th December 2012) that they can successfully manage the factory themselves, they were constantly exposed to the pressure of market reforms and privatisation, coupled with the state apparatus then in power. The workers' demands that they be allowed to manage the company themselves were rejected. At the moment of writing this text, pressures have been renewed with a view to destroying this once important pharmaceutical company.⁶

2.

The brief description of the case of the Jugoremedija factory presented above is representative of a part of the landscape of postsocialist Yugoslavia – the context from which we speak about certain aspects of the restoration of capitalism in these parts. Namely, during the 1990's, the re-establishment of capitalist market economy in the countries of the former Yugoslavia led to mass unemployment, privatisation of social and state resources and production facilities, the destruction of industrial giants, the impoverishment of the population and a severe stratification of society. The redistribution of capital in Yugoslavia presupposed armed conflicts and numerous victims of the opposed elites of various nations in these parts, aided and abetted by international centres of economic and political power and capital, intent on creating a market hegemony. The wars additionally worsened the social conditions of society, led to mass migrations and intensified and legitimised

crime. There ensued the deterioration of the social welfare system, developed during the period of socialism, which led many workers into the sphere of grey economy, wherein they were forced into becoming small-scale entrepreneurs in order to fulfil the minimum requirements for sustaining themselves and their families.

Today, the period of real socialism in the former Yugoslavia and its social and economic achievements are for the most part not talked about. And when they do get talked about, it is mostly done in a very problematic manner.⁷ The contours of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia appeared in the popular front policy and the antifascist movement developed during the course of World War Two, which sets it apart from the other Eastern European socialist countries, whose establishment was mainly a consequence of the development and the geopolitical influence of the Soviet Union.⁸ However, one could go a step further here and posit the thesis that the roots of the Yugoslav self-management experiment and socialist regime can be sought in the period preceding the war, a period that actually made possible the subsequent “course of history”. Taking this thesis into consideration, it gets very interesting to ponder the present through the prism of this specific socio-historical period, which, as it appears to us today, is much “closer” to us than the post-World War Two socialist past.

The then capitalist regime in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, its economic crisis, the general militarisation of society and the rise of the political right, pronounced class differences and the general pauperisation of the population are just some of the similarities with the current socio-political situation in Serbia that we can perceive. What we must bear in mind is that, in such an economic and political situation, there occurred a revolutionisation of the masses, intensification of leftist ideas, and their spreading through various social groups (workers, students, “intellectuals”, etc.). In such a socio-political context, class struggle developed, as did the anti-fascist movement and the people's liberation struggle afterwards, as the common denominators of the subsequently established socialist state.

When we ponder the period of revolutionary developments, the question of interest to us that arises in this context is the position of “intellectuals”⁹ in these struggles, specifically in the manner in which Benjamin raises the issue. In his texts, Walter Benjamin dealt to a large extent with the issue of the positioning and subjectivisation of “intellectuals” in political conflicts, especially pondering their attitude towards the proletariat and matters pertaining to organisation. Benjamin addressed his criticism to a group of the then self-proclaimed “activists” who manifested their activism only at the level of content, while entirely neglecting the pondering and changing the production relations within the framework of which they worked; that is precisely what eventually led to the appropriation of such practices within the framework of the capitalist system, which integrated them within its own apparatus. The topical nature of this criticism can be confirmed on almost every local scene of contemporary art.

We shall single out several events wherein one can see how the

then intellectual proletariat in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia spoke of its material position, and how it tried to change it through solidarity with the working class and joint struggle.

Event no. 1. The manifesto of the artist Mirko Kujačić and “boycotters”

In 1932, the artist Mirko Kujačić organised a solo exhibition at the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Art Pavilion, which should actually be observed at the level of a political gesture in the sphere of art. Within the framework of the aforementioned exhibition, Kujačić, apart from several rather conventional realistic paintings, presented two works on two entirely white canvases; onto one of them, he placed worn-out workers’ heavy shoes, while on the other he hung a bunch of onions. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue containing a manifesto by Kujačić, wherein he publicly declared himself to be against the prevalent situation in the fine arts of that time, criticising, among other things, his own work until then. At the opening ceremony, the artist appeared wearing a blue worker’s shirt and read out his manifesto before the gathered visitors, proclaiming the need for a struggle against the dominant bourgeois concepts of art, against art for art’s sake, against the glorification of the artist’s personality, “against tradition”, “eternal beauty”, “individualistic thought”, and for “humanistic thought”, “the poetry of progress”, for a “collective art of justice”.¹⁰ This gesture on Kujačić’s part, however radical it was for Belgrade’s cultural scene of that time, would not be so important to us if it had not addressed the problems of the then “intellectual proletariat”, which he was a part of himself. In the mid-1930’s, fine artists lived under very difficult conditions, the state had no support system that would at least partly alleviate their difficult financial position.¹¹ Also, there was no state infrastructure that would support art production, and there was only a very small number of artists who had a studio of their own. Kujačić did not remain alone in his protest; together with other colleagues, he formed a group that developed a critique of bourgeois concepts of art and organised a solidarity-based struggle striving to achieve a better financial position. In 1936, this group of fine artists initiated a boycott of the private association “Cvijeta Zuzorić”, the very venue where Kujačić had read out his manifesto four years before. What one should bear in mind is the fact that “Cvijeta Zuzorić” was the only support available to artists at the time; this private association granted loans to artists so that they could make ends meet, or possibly invest a certain amount of money in the production of their works, while at the same time the said association profited through the exploitation of the artists’ work. The “boycotters” stressed the following: “Through a misinterpretation of the work of the artist in our society, the erroneous belief that the artist is a being outside the social process of work, as well as social economic relations, has been formed. However, it is indisputable that the artist’s work is conditioned by the economic relations in society. Even those who have claimed and assured us that ‘a genius is born’ out of misery, should they pay but a little attention to reality, and if they are not professional illusionists, must see clearly that the artist has all the essential human characteristics – namely, that he eats, works, lives.”¹² Further on in the text, the “boycotters” presented some very clear economic calculations that had led to their protest, the price of renting a venue for the purpose of organising exhibitions, the ticket prices and the percentage thereof due to them and the pavilion respectively, the percentage of the selling price due to the artists, etc. They started organising their presentations independently, charging only half the admission fee and investing the money thus earned into a joint solidarity fund.

Also, during the very first exhibition thus organised, they conducted an opinion poll, within the framework of which they invited the visitors to think about the financial position of artists, as well as their place in social production. A direct consequence of this protest is reflected in the fact that this group of artists took control over the professional association of fine artists, which they subsequently brought closer to workers’ and students’ movements, with which they would jointly participate in the revolution. The association of fine artists still exists, and it is still the only organisation that provides the basic social welfare and financial support to artists.

Event no. 2. The revolutionary student protests of the 1930’s in Belgrade and “4th April”

That same year when artists initiated their boycott, students started their most intense struggle against the University authorities of that time. In the 1930’s, the students of Belgrade University had a reputation of being among the most revolutionary students in Europe. In view of the fact that in Yugoslavia leftist political parties were prohibited by law at the time, it was precisely the above-mentioned students who constituted the basis of the development and dissemination of revolutionary ideas. The historian Milan Radanović presents the following information about this movement: “During the course of the 1930’s, students were killed and wounded in street demonstrations by the gendarmerie, they were subjected to torture in prison during police investigations, they were tried before courts of law, they were isolated in penitentiaries and inside a special prison camp for students, they were exposed to attacks conducted by armed fascist groups that enjoyed the support of the regime and the political police. In spite of these very difficult circumstances, the revolutionary movement became the dominant force at Belgrade University, which, after 1935, managed to engage more than half of the student population in their activities.”¹³ In early April 1936, they went on strike out of solidarity with their colleagues from Zagreb, and announced very clearly formulated social demands for, among other things: “... the abolition of tuition fees, a decrease of entry fees, exam fees and other taxes, a reinstatement of the students’ fund and associations, a return of students’ halls of residence into the hands of students, etc.”¹⁴ On 4th April, members of fascist organisations physically attacked students during their protest, killing the student Žarko Marinović. “Comrade Marinović” was not the first or the last victim among the members of the students’ movement in Yugoslavia, but he became a symbol of the struggle for a better position of students.¹⁵ This general strike was brought to a close after twenty-five days in a triumph of the revolutionary students. This generation of students did not cease their activities after this partial victory; over 5,000 students of Belgrade University fought as members of the Partisan movement during World War Two, and 205 of them were proclaimed national heroes.¹⁶ The most significant result of their struggle is the entirely free education at all levels during the existence of socialist Yugoslavia; free education is something we must win back by struggling for it again.

3.

In his speech entitled “In Defence of Culture”,¹⁷ delivered at the Second Writers’ Congress, held in 1937, Bertolt Brecht very directly connected economic problems with a bad situation in the sphere of culture. After the attack on the economic and political positions of workers had proved successful, after the freedom of association and forming trade unions had been successfully restricted, as was also the case with the freedom of the press and the freedom of assembly, Brecht pointed out that the attack on culture finally had

to bear fruit. He concluded that it was not understood fast enough that the destruction of the position of workers and trade unions was precisely the place where culture was attacked as well.

Even though the situation we live in today is not as extreme as the one from the 1930's, the position of culture today is very much as it was then (naturally, with all its specific characteristics and contradictions), as is the place from which attacks against it are launched. The reinstatement of the capitalist system in the final decade of the 20th century, naturally enough, was reflected on the sphere of culture as well. The neoliberal cultural policy rapidly leads to the privatisation of cultural production, the flexibilisation of labour relations and their precarisation, insecurity concerning employment and income, instability in life, short-term contracts, lack of health care and pension insurance, the non-existence of vacations, sick leaves and maternity leaves, loss of opportunities for establishing trade unions, etc. Speaking of the labour market, Močnik also commented on precarious labour relations, which have become something that is automatically presumed for the majority of cultural workers. According to him, the structural effect of precarious labour relations is to shift the logic of circulation into the sphere of production.¹⁸ This would mean that, even while we are working on a project, we are simultaneously on the labour market, we are constantly employable but never employed, we are aware that, before work on one project is brought to a close, we must secure the next engagement in order to ensure financial means of sustenance for ourselves.

Even though more and more workers are forced into unpaid work and undefined working and living conditions, such a position often remains unreflected and mystified. In the words of members of the Radical Education Collective, "the atomisation of workers, which prevents collective action, is looked upon as autonomy, unpaid work is looked upon as a common practice in the world of art production, and false promises about getting a permanent job one day, provided that one endures the insufferable conditions, is looked upon as 'networking' and developing one's own reputation. The erasure of a boundary between free time and working hours is looked upon, at the theoretical level, as 'development'."¹⁹ In addition to the above, the flexibilisation of labour relations acts as a spur to the competitiveness of those who provide labour power, be it institutional or non-institutional (self-organised) cultural workers, the consequence of which is that it acts as a deterrent to solidarity among them, which is why there are almost no organised political actions and protests.

It is precisely the question of labour relations within the framework of production that could be one of the important positions from which we can start pondering the ways of struggling for improving our position in the sphere of work and in life, and for attaining a better position for cultural production. To begin with, it would be good to start thinking about our position within the framework of the production process, and not about a special place for our products in society as a whole. This does not at all mean that we should stop creating and presenting art, but we must give up on self-sufficiency and put in efforts, together with workers from other sectors, students and the unemployed, aimed at creating different production relations.

Translation: Novica Petrović

1 Brecht, Bertolt. (1979). Pet teškoća u pisanju istine. In: *Dijalektika u teatru*. Beograd: Nolit. 161.

2 Excerpt from a work presented at the exhibition: Nina Höchtl, Tales of Protest. A Necessity. 2009.

3 Incidentally, the factory is located in Zrenjanin, a city that was among the more important industrial centres of socialist Yugoslavia and a symbol of Yugoslavia's industrial and economic progress after the Second World War. "Jugoremedija" was founded in 1961, as a pharmaceutical company that specialised in exporting antibiotics to Eastern European markets, and by the end of the 1980's it was the eighth largest pharmaceutical firm in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, with an annual turnover rate exceeding \$ 50 million. See: Musić, Goran. (2013). *Radnička klasa Srbije u tranziciji 1988-2013 [Serbia's Working Class in Transition 1988-2013]*. Beograd: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. 80.

4 Joining forces with workers from other city firms ("Jugoremedija", "BEK", "Šinvoz", "Pivara" [Brewery], the carpet factory "Proleter", "Šećerana" [sugar refinery], "Sloga-Mideri"...), the workers of "Jugoremedija" established the Ravnopravnost [Equality] movement in 2007. Their first goal was to run in the local election in 2008, when they managed to win seats in the City Assembly and speak on behalf of workers during its sessions. <http://www.ravnopravnost.org>

5 The struggle of the workers of "Jugoremedija" drew considerable attention on the art scene, leading to the production of several works directly presenting the events related to their struggle, whereas the places of cultural production were often the venues where panel discussions were held concerning the issues pertaining to the case of "Jugoremedija". The workers themselves, first of all because of the need to disseminate information about their struggle, started making short documentary films, and after that organised educational activities and a festival of workers' films entitled "Long Live Our Work...".

6 <http://www.ravnopravnost.org/NW156.html>"html (accessed on 15.09.2013).

7 See the text: Kirn, Gal. (2010). *Jugoslavija: od partizanske politike do posforidističke tendencije [Yugoslavia: from Partisan Policy to Post-Fordist Tendencies]*. Up&Underground, a periodical for art, theory and activism, no. 17/18, Zagreb.

8 Musić, Goran. (2013). Ibid. 13.

9 What Benjamin means here is the broader notion of "intellectual", encompassing all kinds of artists, journalists and scientists, as well as all the atomised areas of cognitive work. See: Raunig, Gerald. (2006). *Umetnost i revolucija. Umetnički aktivizam tokom 20. veka [Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century]*. Novi Sad: Futura publikacije.

10 Kujačić, Mirko. *Moj manifest [My Manifesto]*. (1932). Beograd: Vreme.

11 See: Čosić, Božica. (1969). *Socijalna umetnost u Srbiji [Social Art in Serbia]*. In: Protić, Miodrag i dr. (Eds.). *Jugoslovenska umetnost XX veka: 1929-1950. Nadrealizam. Socijalna Umetnost*. Beograd: Muzej savremene umetnosti.

12 The History Archive of Belgrade. 1936. The Motives for Boycotting "Cvjeta Zuzorić" – the Artists' Demands. The "Cvjeta Zuzorić" collection, item 103.

13 See: Radanović, Milan. (2012). Antifašizam se kalio u skamijama [Antifascism Was Created in the Lecture Halls], <http://www.e-novine.com/drustvo/57978-Antifaizam-kalio-skamijama.html> (accessed on 13. 9. 2013).

14 The Archive of Serbia, Belgrade. 1936. Collection, item ck no.7 – 1932 – 2.

15 To commemorate this event, 4th April is celebrated as Belgrade University Students' Day.

16 Radanović, Milan. (2012). Ibid.

17 Brecht, Bertolt. Speech at the Second Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, 1937: http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/works/brecht/fascism-culture.htm.

18 See: Močnik, Rastko. (2011). *Tržište radne snage i sastav radničke klase [The labor market and the composition of the working class]*. In: Popović, Željko and Zoran Gajić (Eds.). *Kroz tranziciju, prilozi teoriji privatizacije*. Novi Sad: AKO.

19 Participants' notes from the panel discussion "In the Engine Room: Working Conditions in Culture", held at the Cultural Centre Rex in Belgrade, 26th June 2011, <http://rexpro.b92.net/mvm/engineerroom.html> (accessed on 12.09.2013).

A Sketch for the Possibility of Art against Neoliberal Capitalism

Kontekst Collective, 2012

Video documentation of the performance act, 6' 37"
Serbian with English subtitles

The performance act by Kontekst Collective was developed as part of the project "Oktober XXX: Exhibition–Symposium–Performance" by curator and author Jelena Vesić.

"Oktober XXX" was conceptualized as processual re-enactment— involving critical reading, interpretation and actualization—of questions initiated and contemplated within experimental counter-exhibition "Oktober 75" that took place in the Student Cultural Center (SKC) Belgrade. In October in 1975, various cultural workers active in SKC—critics, gallerists, curators and artists—decided to publish their critical statements on the concept of self-managed art in relation to the workers self-management as the official program of Yugoslav socialist state politics. For Oktober XXX various actors of independent and left-oriented intellectual, artistic and activist scene were invited to speak about art and society from their different, and sometimes opposed, positions.

Kontekst Collective based the arguments presented in the performance on the theses that are an outcome of 2 years work on the project Kontekst, struggle for autonomous space. The manifest it-

self and the performance represent a paraphrase of a gesture made by the artist Mirko Kujačić in 1932 that happened in a political context that represents an important reference point for their research and a possibility of deliberation of alternatives to the contemporary capitalist system.

Kontekst, struggle for autonomous space, represents in fact a condition we found ourselves in, initiated by a concrete situation—the closing of Kontekst Gallery that we ran at The Cultural Center "Stari Grad". The conflict with the new management of this institution, that bases its cultural policy on the principle of neoliberal cultural policy, leads us to different experiments and attempts at finding a new actual space for our intervention in concrete reality. Thus we enter different negotiations and actions - from participation in initiating and problematizing the squat "Inex Film" through signing and after termination of contract with the Municipality of New Belgrade on the use of a community space to an attempt to restructure the relations with the city institutions at Magacin space. At the same time, the situation we found ourselves in additionally provokes us to engage in concrete socio-political-economical context in which we work and live, the work and production conditions, as well as the place of a worker in the cultural sector within the economy.

On Solidarity

Kontekst Collective, 2012

Video, 13'52"
Serbo-Croatian with English subtitles

Student protests and blockades, based on the principle of plenum as a direct democratic student body are an increasingly present phenomenon at the universities of Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Rijeka, Novi Sad, and other cities in this region. The key goals of these protests are related to the possibility of achieving publicly financed education that would be accessible to all, as well as to defend the autonomy of the university and possibility for student self-organization.

Even though it may not be a universally known fact, student protests based on the principles of direct democracy were also a very popular form of organization in the revolutionary student movements at the universities of Belgrade and Zagreb between the two World Wars. Basic aim of the video is to actualize a part of the forgotten history of revolutionary student movement in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and to emphasize the students interconnectedness, struggle, communication, and solidarity, which often exceeded the limits of the student movement.

A few remarks on "Minor Matters"... in words and pictures

Kurs, 2013

wall painting

This is a visual scene in the form of a wall painting based on archival material gathered during the research, originated as an intervention on the discursive frame set by Kontekst Collective within the exhibition Unexpected Encounters. The work was further de-

veloped in communication between our two collectives and combines different topics and concepts, from the question of material position of artists, students and workers to the deliberation on the means of their struggle.

Workers' Inquiry

Radical Education Collective & Škart, 2012

Fanzine and posters

Bojana Piškur, member of Radical Education Collective and a curator in Moderna galerija Ljubljana together with Đorđe Balmazović from Škart collective conducted a common research investigation "Workers' Inquiry" which concerned the positions of cultural workers in Serbia. The research took place in Belgrade and Novi Sad in September 2012. The aim of the investigation was to disclose the modes and different levels of exploitation of the cultural workers as well as the ways in which to employ this newly produced knowledge to work towards social transformation.

The methodology of the research is based on Marx's "The Workers' Inquiry" from 1881, when *Revue Socialiste* asked him to carry out a study into the conditions of the French proletariat. The 100-question research takes Marx's argument about capitalism hiding its methods of exploitation as its starting point. While artistic production is still granted relative creative autonomy, the deteriorating economic circumstances and working conditions of artists, and their declining control over the reproduction and dis-

tribution of their ideas, knowledge and commodities are pushing them further into a contractual relationship with the capital. The contradictions of work in the sphere of culture have become so obscured that work is often considered to be not only stimulating and fulfilling, but also free from any elements of exploitation. The key to understanding exploitation lies in discerning how it shapes the work and life of cultural workers. Workers' Inquiry unveils the antagonisms of art production and labour, resistance against exploitation and commodification, as well as various subjective components embedded in the work processes and work itself. It also serves as a kind of self-emancipation tool as it discloses the ways and different levels of exploitation of interviewees in the spirit of Marx who said: emancipation of workers must come from the workers themselves.

"Workers' Inquiry" has so far been carried out in Madrid, Spain (2010), and Belgrade and Novi Sad, Serbia; the questions were adapted to each specific local situation and conducted in various formats, either as oral interviews or a written narrative.

Tales of protest. A necessity

Nina Höchtl, 2009

5-channel video installation, 5'57"

Serbian with Serbian Cyrillic script and English subtitles

In November 2008, I spent a one-month residency in Belgrade (Kontekst Gallery in collaboration with < rotor >, Graz) researching into the fight of the workers from the factory "Jugoremedija" in Zrenjanin. For two years the workers fought for their factory and against the privatization of their work place. Throughout their struggle they lived partly in the factory, squatted the city hall for 4 months, protested 3 days and nights in front of the Agency for Privatization in Belgrade, got beaten up, injured and imprisoned by the police and private security. During this 2 years period the workers did not earn and many were left behind by their families. In 2006, "Jugoremedija" became the first factory amongst the "transition" countries in Eastern Europe undergoing neo-liberal privatization to be recovered and controlled by its workers.

In summer 2009 I came back to Serbia to research further into the subject. I soon found that alone in August there were around 40 smaller or bigger protests per day. Based on this research and

interviews with the workers (mainly from the factory "Jugoremedija") I developed "Tales of protest. A necessity.". The conversations with the workers and witnessing their protest in front of the Privatization agency and the governmental building in Belgrade triggered to question my own position as an artist and framer of the workers' struggle: What am I fighting for? Do I let anything be done to myself?

In this installation five fictionalized characters (Milenka, Bogdan, Nina, Zolt, Zoran) tell their tales, juxtaposed with text derived from these tales, and footage from Sergei Eisenstein's silent film "Strike". In 1925, Eisenstein depicted a complex re-creation of the developments of a 1912 factory strike in pre-revolutionary Russia. The Proletkult Theatre (Theatre of the People, 1917 – 1927) acted the workers. My interest in this film lies on the scenes that portray collectivism. These scenes are in opposition to the individualism of each tale in my installation. All the characters' voices generate a murmur that the audience can only understand focusing on one tale.