

The Exception Proves the Rule

A report by Eduard Freudmann and Ivana Marjanović

In Novi Sad, the exhibition Exception – the Contemporary Arts Scene from Prishtina¹ that opened on January 22nd, 2008 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, was inaugurated by the president of the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Bojan Kostreš (LSV – the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina). In his speech, he stated that Kosovar artists were welcome in Novi Sad irrespective of Kosovo's status, be it independent or part of Serbia. Harsh attacks followed, by representatives of nationalist parties (DSS – the Democratic Party of Serbia and SPS – Socialist Party of Serbia). The attacks led Kostreš – in order to defend himself – to approach the Serbian nationalistic common standard by misinterpreting that “the fact that Kosovo-Albanian artists came to Novi Sad shows that they feel like citizens of the Republic of Serbia.”² Furthermore, the exhibition was abused by the Radical Party in their televised election campaign advertisement, stating: “The exhibition glorifies atrocities committed by Albanian terrorists in Kosovo.”³ Additionally, the presidential candidate Tomislav Nikolić (SRS – the Serbian Radical Party) referred to the exhibition as attacking his opponent, Boris Tadić (DS – the Democratic Party), in a prime time head-to-head confrontation on Serbian state TV.⁴

On February 3rd, 2008 – between the openings in Novi Sad and Belgrade – the second poll of the Serbian presidential elections was held. The “moderate” and “pro-Western” candidate, Boris Tadić, won it by a narrow margin of 2% against the ultra-nationalist Tomislav Nikolić. In February, the situation in Serbia was tense, because of the expected declaration of independence by Kosovo on February 17th, 2008.

On February 7th, four days after the elections, the exhibition was violently prevented from being opened in Belgrade. On February 8th, the City Council and the Serbian Ministry of Culture issued press releases, condemning the incidents by stating that “Belgrade has always been and will remain an open city,” and referring to “the basic principles of tolerance, the respect of cultural

¹ The exhibition presents artworks by Albanian artists of the younger generation from Kosovo: Artan Balaj, Jakup Ferri, Driton Hajredini, Flaka Haliti, Fitore Isufi Koja, Dren Maliqi, Alban Muja, Vigan Nimani, Nurhan Qehaja, Alketa Xhafa and Lulzim Zeqiri. The curators of the exhibition are Vida Knežević, Kristian Lukić, Ivana Marjanović and Gordana Nikolić.

² Glas javnosti, 28 October 2008, retrieved on 10 August 2008, <http://www.glas-javnosti.co.yu/clanak/glas-javnosti-28-01-2008/adem-jasari-kao-pop-ikona>

³ From the election's campaign video broadcasted on Serbian television. Link on YouTube: retrieved on 10 August 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxCgz78ro6o>

⁴ “Your representatives support exhibitions about Jashari,” Suočavanje kandidata/predsednički izbori, 30 January 2008, RTS 1

variety, the freedom of speech and artistic expression.”⁵ Nevertheless, both institutions stated that they could not support the exhibition beyond such a declaration, as they were not in charge of it, thus shifting their responsibility to the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs. Overall, it is possible to say that the Serbian political landscape was opposing the exhibition; the protagonists were either attacking it (the SRS, SPS, and the DSS) or not commenting on it (the DS). Supportive statements were rare and only given by small parties such as G17 Plus and the LDP (the Liberal Democratic Party), as well as by a large part of the NGO sector.

The very first press reactions, after the opening of the exhibition in Novi Sad, were surprisingly positive – one of the yellow press papers even listed the event in their daily “top rankings.” Subsequently, the media coverage started with the attacks. Initially, the attacks were against the involved politician (Kostreš) and the institution (Museum of Contemporary Art, Vojvodina), but as soon as the exhibition was about to open in Belgrade, the media started to attack the organizers (the curators and NGOs). The media was not at all interested in the concept and content of the show, even less in the new contextual space of dialogue and reflection that would have been opened up with the exhibition. The media was rather attracted by the putative scandalous potential they scented. They drew the attention solely to Dren Maliqi’s artwork *Face to Face*. The work displayed Andy Warhol’s double image of Elvis Presley as a cowboy face-to-face with the double image of Adem Jashari, a leader of the UÇK (Kosovo Liberation Army). Jashari is considered a freedom fighter by the Albanians and is stylized as a national icon in Kosovo, whereas Serbians consider him a war criminal and terrorist. Displaying Jashari’s picture and the scandalization it brought, led to hysterical and hostile reactions throughout the Serbian public. With the constant use of nationalistic terminology, the exhibition was declared as an event that glorified Albanian separatists and terrorists. Experts and non-experts spoke in the media about the violators of the Belgrade exhibition in superlatives, glorifying them, and accusing the curators and organizers of the exhibition as being anti-Serbian, guilty of treason.

The first indication of a violent act was the public request by the “Association of displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija” to close down the exhibition in Novi Sad. It included the threat of sending their members to accomplish the

⁵ Posted by seecult.org, “The Ministry Criticized the Incident and Demands Support of the Exhibition of Artists from Prishtina” 8 February 2008, retrieved on 10 August 2008, <http://www.seecult.org/porta/html/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=26715>; Posted by seecult.org, “Judgment on the Incidents and the Exhibition ‘Exception,’” 8 February 2008, retrieved on 10 August 2008, <http://www.seecult.org/porta/html/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=26716>; Kontekst Gallery, 7 February 2007, retrieved on 10 August 2008, <http://www.kontekstgalerija.org>

closing in case the organizers would not comply.⁶ Meanwhile, in far right-wing internet forums, it was announced that the exhibition would travel to Belgrade and plans were made as to how to disrupt it.⁷

On the day before the Belgrade opening, the clerical-fascist movement “Otačastveni Pokret Obraz” (the Fatherland Dignity Movement) invited “all Serbian patriots to attend the opening [...] and to show to the Albanian separatists and their Belgrade accomplices what [the patriots] think about the artistic and political goals of such a manifestation.”⁸ On February 7th 2008, half an hour before the exhibition was about to be opened, a mob of 300 fanatic Obraz members, football hooligans and other nationalist forces gathered in the streets around the gallery. Police had to prevent them from attacking the gallery (at the same time, they also prevented visitors from reaching the gallery and attending the opening). Nonetheless, violators succeeded in entering the exhibition space and tore down Maliqi’s artwork. One of them interrupted the opening speech by capturing the stage and holding a hate-speech in which he discredited the participating artists and accused the organizers of betraying their fatherland and humanity. By holding up a stone, he intended to reproduce the countrywide spread cliché of stone throwing, and therefore of uncivilized Albanians. Although he was marched off by the police, his intervention made the police instruct the organizers of the exhibition to shut it down before it had even been opened. On the day after, the glass door of the gallery was broken. As the building was under police surveillance, the perpetrators were arrested and examined by the police who subsequently proposed staging a public performance including the institution’s director and the perpetrators, among whom the latter would apologize for their actions.

In providing a possible overview of the events, it could be said that the police has to be considered an active protagonist in the events. However, their special units prevented the mob from accessing and attacking the gallery space. At the same time, the police let the opening be disrupted in order to insist on the claim that the organizers would have to close the exhibition. The police not only let vandals pass through the controlled gate and destroy the artwork; they did not intervene during the violation of the opening speech either, though

⁶ Blic Online, 25 January 2008, retrieved on 10 August 2008, <http://www.blic.co.yu/vojvodina.php?id=28102>

⁷ “The Art of Terrorism,” 6 February 2008, retrieved on 10 August 2008, http://www.obraz.org.yu/Aktivnosti/Saopstenja_i_komentari/2008/UmetnostTerorizma.htm; retrieved on 10 August 2008, <http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php?p=5184838>; retrieved on 10 August 2008, <http://www.juznifront.net/jfforum/viewtopic.php?p=143971&sid=8e26d7f2d5c605b18c395273725de5bc>

⁸ “The Art of Terrorism,” 6 February 2008, retrieved on 10 August 2008, http://www.obraz.org.yu/Aktivnosti/Saopstenja_i_komentari/2008/UmetnostTerorizma.htm

considerable police forces were present in the gallery. In spite of repeated requests, the police refused to do so referring to freedom of speech. At that point, the director of the space in which the gallery is located agreed to close down the exhibition taking into consideration the police evaluation that the “safety of visitors and organizers can no longer be guaranteed.” Subsequently, the police evicted the visitors and pressed the director to sign an agreement to renounce the opening of the exhibition. On the next day, the police demanded that the artworks, which were visible from outside the gallery, be removed. Afterwards, they demanded the works be removed from the space altogether – according to their conception, the transport should have been organized with massive police protection, which was obviously an attempt to frighten the organizers in order to make them not even think of reconstructing and opening the exhibition in the future.

In conclusion, six points have to be further stressed:

Firstly, the exhibition provided one of the rare opportunities for reviving the repressive apartheid policy Serbia had imposed on Kosovo until losing access to its territory in 1999.

Secondly, Serbia’s cultural policy is conceived by ultra-nationalist powers, and executed by violent mob forces while official institutions of the Republic of Serbia compliantly assist.

Thirdly, the part of Serbian society that designates itself “democratic,” turned out to be in support of the nationalist consensus. The large part of the Serbian cultural scene reacted accordingly by commenting that it is was “not the right moment for such an exhibition when they take 15% of our territory,”⁹ and relativizing the incidents when judging that the exhibition’s “artistic value is very low.”¹⁰

Fourthly, the exhibition’s non-protection is the continuation of the state of exception in Serbian public space after the overthrow of the Milošević regime in 2000. It came into effect in 2001, when the Gay Pride Parade in Belgrade was bloodily annihilated by fascist organizations and violent football hooligans who could comply, due to insufficient police protection. Government officials, in charge of securing the right to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly

⁹ Stated by a member of the Belgrade City Council.

¹⁰ Art historian, Saša Janjić, in “Izložbe visokog rizika/A high risk exhibition,” *Politika*, 9 February 2008, retrieved on 8 August 2008, <http://www.politika.co.yu/rubrike/Drustvo/Izlozbe-visokog-rizika.lt.html>

provided by the Serbian constitution, remained silent.¹¹ Since then, it has not been possible to organize a Gay Pride Parade in Belgrade.

Fifthly, emanating from Boris Groys' assumption that art differs from non-art by being under extraordinary police protection,¹² the exhibition's non-protection executed by the Serbian police must be understood as an attempt to invalidate the exhibition's artworks and convert them into non-art.

Sixthly, Jashari's depiction was not the cause of disagreement in the hysterical scandalization campaign. Essentially, reactions of hatred and blind destruction were triggered by the fact that Serbian cultural racism could not bear having its stereotype of "uncivilized Albanians" be strongly contrasted, and therefore nullified, by perfectly articulated artistic positions of Prishtina's contemporary art scene.

¹¹ Prime Minister, Zoran Đinđić, even stated that it was not the right moment for such a manifestation.

¹² "Things that are acknowledged as art are put under special protection. We take care of those things, for their existence, for their integrity. To destruct, to blast, to annihilate those things is considered as Barbarianism, as unacceptable or at least as iconoclasm, whereas it is considered as normal to destruct things that are not artworks." Boris Groys, "Repräsentation und Ausnahmezustand," 2001, retrieved on 8 August 2008, http://groys.hfg-karlsruhe.de/txt/stdrep_151101.pdf