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Theater, public space and city identity – memory politics as a challenge in preserving Belgrade’s multicultural identity

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the possibilities of theater spectacle in public spaces to be imprinted within city memory and to participate in the representation of the politics of remembrance (and of forgetting). Belgrade as a “postmodern” city, city of complex, multiple identities in times of a dissolving wider state identity, of losing its geopolitical significance, is an excellent example for a critical analysis. Raising Serbian nationalism within official identity politics and politics of representation was questioned by numerous independent theater projects of remembrance and community building.

The research will focus on the contribution of the radical art movements and especially Belef (Belgrade summer festival) for the construction of new urban/national/generational... identities through specific artistic discourses. The analyzed period will comprise the start of radical art movements at the beginning of 90` and then all the relevant performances of BELEF festival in Belgrade in between 1997-2000 and from 2001-2005)

This approach will be based on the integrative analysis of three phenomena:

- new concepts of public arts policies (within cultural policies and politics of representation);
- hybridization of concepts & uses of public spaces within urban policies and practices
- Spread of politics of memory & musealisation in European arts and life practices (Huysen, A. 2001), but also in Serbia and Belgrade.

We will analyze all the performances whose main aims were to be acts and practices not only of memory representation, but of warning, integrating the traumatic side of history in collective memory – thus, creating new identity.

Starting with the hypothesis that the public arts in Belgrade throughout 90s had an ambiguous and ambivalent role, depending on the organizers’ (producers’) intentions, we will focus on those aspects of public arts which questioned on official policy of remembrance and representation as well as usually, by new official urban policy, suggested a concept of public space as space for entertainment and consumption.

The main controversies of public arts policies (concepts and roles) had been shifting in Belgrade (depending if the city power was in the opposition to the State government):

- Identity construction (from nationalistic to cosmopolitan)
- Aesthetic challenge (artist statement¹) or marketing issue
- Community relation building or neighbourhood aestatization
- Raising awareness or «calming down»
- Political provocation or power representation

At the same time the concept of the public space itself in the Balkans and specifically in Belgrade comprises new controversies, as urban traditions and new official demands have created different “needs” for public spaces:

- Space of social interaction – mahala
- Space of identity – locus memoriae (monument)
- Space of debate – cafe
- Space of purchasing, inquiring – čaršija and shopping mall
- Space of entertainment – festivity – square, park
- Space for “showing up” – representation – «corso» (pedestrian street)

Spread of politics of memory & musealisation is evident in numerous phenomena of contemporary culture.

- The cultural policy since 60` insisted on “historical/museological” restoration of old medieval (and fin-de siecle...) urban centers, but also industrial buildings (in finding new use – but keeping “old” image (New uses for old stones, Council of Europe) in Western Europe; in Eastern world and the Balkans, socialism wanted to be only “future oriented” – key words of “progress” has been electrification, industrialization and urbanization of old centers (meaning new constructions according to the dominant ideology). It was after 90` that this politics of restoration started to be developed, also as part of turn as far as possible to history, to erase the traces of the socialist “modernization” who neglected specificities of urban and cultural identities;²
- The festivities dates had been replaced – going more back to history... The festivities of socialist or Milosevic regime (the day of Belgrade or of the new Federation, etc.) , had been replaced by dates from far past – like the celebration of the city which moved from 20 of October (date of liberation in World War II by April festivities, connecting several historical dates from XIX century).
- Ambiguous anniversaries, apologies (going or non-going to Srebrenica, was important dilemma of Serbian present politicians, etc.)

¹ Since the project of De Still Markovic – I am a historical monument, 1984 in front of Student Cultural Center

² The Ceausescu project of Bucharest deconstruction and re-construction is the most extreme in this sense, as is the revival (in City theatrical Festival in 1993 (?)) of old bourgeois Bucharest tradition.

- Past in its both material and immaterial aspects became “heritage” industry – expected even to generate “new” employments & profits;
- “Retro” became trendy – fashion, furniture design, music...
- Nostalgia (Radio Nostalgia as paradigm of the trend – for all nostalgic phenomena³)
- Museums as buildings – ambitious architectural projects – became cathedrals for governments, cities and politicians at the end of the century (new sign of power and richness);
- Memory literature, diaries, confessional prose, autobiographies, popular history (feuilletons)... had fulfilled book shelves since 80`;
- Visual art projects incorporated memory practices – Marina Abramovic Balkan Baroque, Mrdjan Bajic Yugomuseum...
- As Media in the West also developed their relation to “memory politics” (from Schindler list to Titanic, but also The History Channel), media in Belgrade had “history live” transmitting throughout the 90`, but in the same time memory politics has been ambivalent, hectic, participating in revivals of the myths as much as in the discovery of the new facts⁴.

City and politics of memory

[T]he city is always a space already constituted and structured by symbolic mechanisms.
(James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City*, 8)

The immaterial city - “urban imaginary” (James Donald) usually is created from narratives about cities in academic and historical texts, essays, literature, movies... Locus memoriae, collective memory of the city is not just a hazardous product - it is the product of generational efforts – finally in its outcome – space of identity (Morley, Robbins). It is a construct of many generations, and a product of conscious policy. Selection of the public space to be used for the performances, the content and the iconography of the performance, are all part of the politics of remembering, which is, as such, part of a general cultural policy and its priorities and values. And today, policy of remembrance is part of a policy toward intangible cultural heritage, still lacking its strategies and instruments.

In the same time, the theater used to be, and still is, the art form mostly connected with process of identity construction and representation. And, if it is not just a performance,

³ The latest student theater festival in Belgrade – FIST (March 2006), had as a motto: The Concrete is but a stage (on shakespearean: The World is but a stage). The opening and the whole total design were built upon idea of “New Belgrade” – nostalgic revival of the revolutionary period of 50`, putting in relations revolutionary theater against theater of illusions. The student staged whole building of faculty of Drama Arts as a space of conflicts of two theatrical visions – but also two concepts of the world. Having a Faculty building out of concrete in the middle of the New Belgrade (city as a socialist project), but living in the middle of the process of “reconstruction” of a New Belgrade as a consumerist city of the beginning of the millennium – the students abandoned the critique of the new policy of construction (big shopping malls, banks...), and have chosen the nostalgic return to period they have not had the chance to experience directly.

⁴ This phenomenon has been described in the text for Vienna Cultural Policy Conference in July 2006.

but a festival, its stamp on “urban” structure, on precise site where activities are happening, is much more deep and profound, as festival has its ritual function of bringing community together, of creating a sense of common identity and values sharing through common esthetical experience (Jolly, 2006).

The importance of the politics of memory and oblivion in the process of political appropriation of memorials, celebrations, and commemorations in Milosevic, but also in post-Milosevic Serbia is obvious. Since 1945 the politics of memory underlined only those locus memoriae which had significance for working class movements, partisan battles etc. In this respect it would be more important to analyze the politics of oblivion, forgetting – why intercultural old Belgrade has been forgotten (The Synagogue destroyed in the war was replaced by a Fresco museum, the Buddhist temple and memory about it disappeared as well as all but one Mosque)⁵? Why was Belgrade bourgeois society forgotten, and how did it reappear, when and why (in 80’)? The theater artists participated in both policies of remembrance and in policies of oblivion – trying to position them as part of critical, activist art scene, or as part of the “arts” sector, “above” the issues of daily political debates (thus helping directly these “evasive” policies – policies of oblivion).

Of course, the socialist system developed structures of remembering, repressing and forgetting forms of “predatory nationalism” (Appadurai 2000) through the public educational system. Modified historical discourses became the norm as well as “the invention of tradition” (via construction of new ceremonies, celebrations, etc.). The period of the Milosevic governments did the same with a higher level intensity - where quasi historians had been in the first ranks of publicity and mediatization, and where the press, especially the popular press de-constructed (in fact destroyed) Yugoslav secular identity as the most dangerous, threatening to the safeguarding of traditional “ethnic” Serbian identity. Still, Milosevic politics of identity construction and representation had not been successful; relying on methods and formats of socialistic representations and as such more conformed to the tastes and needs of the elderly population (celebrations and events had absolutely had the spirit of “50” - from Gazimestan in 1989 to his inauguration as federal president in 1997).

But to study theater practices in forming new identities it would also be interesting to take into account new phenomena of migrations⁶ (immigrant flow and youth emigration...) as they are changing and influencing cultural practices... ways of socializing, communicating, space for gatherings...

Public arts & City of Belgrade

⁵ Light and Darkness, DVD and catalogue, Archive of City of Belgrade, Belgrade 2004.

⁶ Dynamics of capital within city of Belgrade remains to be explored more within social sciences and humanities, as it also has repercussions on the politics of memory and its representation (politics of display).

In the collective memory of the city, certain buildings, streets, corners and little walls, restaurants and cafes, shops and shopping malls, squares and parks, remain permanently imprinted through the event that marked them, whether artistic, social, political or sport.

The official politics of remembering, politics of memory usually focused on “political” spots in the city, on representative memorials, leaving social & cultural memories out of its purview. Youth “corner” gatherings (ćoškarenja, gluvarenja), different for each generation, neighbourhood gatherings and projects (Days in the street of Luka Vukajlović - CEP), just small non-mediated enterprises of blocks or separate buildings («soliter newspaper and web site» New Belgrade, gallery in the working class apartment house in Senjanine Iva street, etc.) survive as souvenirs/reminders for a long time giving a sense of closeness and belonging to the «space».

Only in the last couple of years has the policy of urban regeneration started developing as a consistent policy (although focusing on representation, aesthetization, consumption and entertainment development), but in its absence the artists have attempted to find an appropriate way of developing a dialogue with the city in which they live, especially through the programs of BELEF since 1997. Therefore, BELEF is the city festival - a celebration that originates from the spirit of the city, but at the same time it makes it richer, expanding its horizons and enabling it to get to know itself. But, to understand the effects of BELEF festival policy regarding new construction of city identity, it is necessary to analyze all forms of para-theatrical actions as well as street theater performances and other public arts events throughout the nineties.

Identity de-construction - beginning of the 90'

The opposition movements since 1991 have used different forms and methods of identity de-construction (humor, irony, mimicry, simulation games, carnival...)

The most important forms of the Student Protest in 1992 were linked with open spaces in the city of Belgrade, creating a new culture of street manifestations. Thus, the processions – typical para-theatrical forms, organized within Student protest 1992 through the city had different paths, different purposes and different iconography. Numerous actions - performances carried out at central city spaces, with their wit and different political messages, broke the habitual modes of communication and transmission of messages to the authorities. It was obvious that many of these actions are indebted to the spirit encouraged and developed through the programmes and activities of Radio B-92,⁷ whose reporting earned it political and generation credibility, and consequent increase in audience after March 1991.

So, in parallel with nationalistic euphoria, which brought folklore troupes from the provinces and (good) Russian choirs to Belgrade festivals – another type of manifestation occurred – first real street performances on the “Square of the Freedom” – upon B. Brecht, *This Babylonian confusion* of Dah Theater already in 1992. – clearly antiwar performance as well their next project *Legend About the End of the World*, the performance about three women in the ruins of a church or house or temple – as all of the “shelters” had been ruined in those times.

And it seems that this search for meaning within the urban structure exactly was born with the performances of group FIA - on the ruins of Gallery Sebastian (Dubrovnik “owned”) in 1992

⁷ For more details see: Dragicevic-Sesic, 1994.

(the only gallery which had the paintings turned toward walls during march 1991 protest). The destruction of this gallery by powerful enterprise Progress (director Mirko Marjanovic, Serbian prime Minister) for their new “postmodern” representative building, could not be stopped – but all the artist could do was a performance to reinforce, to endorse the memory, and to contribute one more brick for the informal politic of memory and remembrance, against the policy of oblivion and forgetting developed by the Milosevic government. It is important that “lost spaces” are kept in the collective memory of the city, thus making the city more rich and complex in meaning.

Annual performances of group FIA, for the promotion of their calendar (PUBLIKUM calendar as a project), each time on a different Belgrade spot, throughout the 90` brought a different multicultural dimension of forgotten Belgrade and Belgraders of different origins.

Then few performances of group Magnet in the spring of 1996 focused at spaces of power as spaces for possible revendication (Republican and City Government building, Television building, National Library...) – aiming to deconstruct chauvinistic myths within representative Serbian cultures. But, those performances had been memorized more as a political and not as artistic gestures.

Conquering the city - “Carnival” in city streets” (1996-97) – para-theatrical resistance

The word *walk* therefore became a symbol of the 96/97 protest; both for the student and civil demonstrations, and the largest number of graffiti treated precisely the topic of walk. The *thematic framework of walks* meant a specific “dramaturgy” - processing of political and daily events - the model had already been established in 1992. The theme imposed a certain itinerary and the structure of happenings so that the action performed had all the characteristics of a ritual: starting with the formation of the procession (just like a religious procession) to the “offer of sacrifice” - the donation⁸, and later on release of energy through the dance, rhythm of drums and whistles.

The street through which the protest procession passed again became an open stage. Here and there in the procession, different groups organise their entertainment: orchestras, drummers, ravers, in later periods also neighbours with make-shift instruments for creating noise, individuals or small groups with specific instruments, “light crew”... fancy dressed walkers, masked walkers.

The facades of the buildings were parallel event scenes: from the windows citizens threw confetti, strips of old paper or balloons; they turned lights on and off or waved lamps and chandeliers, placed pictures in the windows. This interstimulation and interaction of events in the streets and on facades of buildings has created a specific environment in a city - thus far unseen in the Balkans. Lights - fires (torches, lamplight, candles, rockets and makeshift fires) give a special tone to the festivities - whether in the squares or in street processions. Participants bring various lamps, fix bicycle “lights” on them, carry icon lamps on their heads, wave lanterns or aim them in various directions. This self-directed light show looks for answers on the facades, from apartments and balconies.

Segments of the procession are the typical segments of a carnival festivity. Cars with loud speakers are not only a replica of baroque pageant, they are also a part of a modern carnival tradition which requires greater audibility and visibility that a participant - actor, dancer, singer, could ensure while walking - directly on the street. Anyway, “where there is no noise, nothing

⁸ Students gave to Milosevic the round bread, to Chairman of the National Assembly Tomic - soldier's kit containing eggs, a whistle and a Photostat of citizens' signatures. On the other hand, actor Slobodan Bestic also had a “performance” giving students an offering of bread.

important can be happening” (Attali, 1983:23). Noise is the key element of carnivals and one of the main segments of walks: thus, noise in front of state administration buildings and media which participate in creating a false picture of the world, is simultaneously part carnival and part subversion. The fear of noise, especially manifest in totalitarian systems, is the fear of subversiveness of noise, fear, because it “announces requests for the autonomy of culture, for the recognition of the right to differentness and marginality” (Attali, 1983:28). But, noise had managed to grow into music, into authentic projects of individuals and groups which culminated in a common mass performance of a *Symphony for Whistles, Trumpets and Drums* at the concluding festivity of the Citizens' Protest with Zoran Hristic as conductor. This was the closing musical performance, but almost every walk, especially of the Student Protest had its performing segments, small actions and performances at specific points, which sent a direct political message to the public. The messages were not articulated in a dull political language, but witty and carnival solutions were sought.

Irony, sarcasm, invention in every performance appears in direct reaction to everything that happens. This constant game and creation of events - actions, is the essential feature of carnival - splitting with conventions, breaking taboos, in this case first the political and then all others.

All this paratheatrical actions are obtaining meaning in the analysis of Elisabeth Wilson (1993: 158): “Cities aren't villages; they aren't machines; they aren't works of art; and they aren't telecommunications stations. They are spaces for face to face contact of amazing variety and richness. They are spectacle – and what is wrong with that”.

But the streets have also witnessed the theatre in its classical form of representation during this winter protest. *Macbeth* in front of police cordon in Kolarceva Street, production of Center for Cultural Decontamination, enabled catharsis for actors and audiences, showing the possibilities of theater to contribute to deepening of the meaning of the social debate of those days, and to reinforce and endorse citizen movements. The same goes for Powder keg performance, who, not leaving the Yugoslav drama theater stage, integrated “walks” in the theater space thus making possible city turbulences to enter the closed institutional system – and to create sense of solidarity and shared visions among artist community and citizens.

Rethinking the city – radical theater of the second part of 90`

Belgrade, a cosmopolitan city - a city of multiple interrupted identities, separated from its essence during the 1990s, turning into a large Serbian small town (palanka). But the dreams of Belgrade that once were, the dreams of the great metropolis (from the time of the Non-aligned Movement, utopian dreams about the future world of a community of equals, but also the time of the exciting BITEF, midnight FEST, students' festivals.) - The dream of Belgrade as a regional cultural center and a place of intercultural dialogue of southern Slavic cultures - never ceased to live. We sometimes called it nostalgia; sometimes megalomania, sometimes futile effort, but all these words have essentially been way off the mark. In spite of everything - politics, the exodus of the youth, embargo, and misery - Belgrade has remained a multi-cultural, exciting city, a city in which different generations and different cultural models live together, albeit with different experiences. In this sense, Kalemegdan is a paradigm of the open city space full of memories, in which every generation, every social group finds its own mode of communication and "utilization" of signs, ramparts, buildings, walkways, monuments. The lost aura of a cosmopolitan city is brought back by artists through festivals and manifestations that are marking and constructing new meanings for Belgrade.

In the same time – the artists were sure that this utopian, multicultural dream in the time of destruction is not possible to return back, without speaking openly about genocide, massacres, ethnic cleansing. Politics of oblivion, of forgetting, of “not-knowing”, as the official policy of the

State of Serbia (“not participating in the war“), was not shared since 1997 by city government and key artists and intellectuals of the time.

But, the project *Listen, little men* (CZKD 1997) focused on the responsibility of the small, common man. Based on the book by Wilhelm Reich, it addressed marginal social groups: pensioners, housewives, refugees without citizenship, refugees who are still trying to preserve their cultural identity by continuing the tradition of the old community, unemployed youth wandering around at noon in shopping malls (Cumicevo sokace), working women who finish their jobs at 3 p.m. and travel home to suburbs in crowded buses, with their bags full of things they have bought at the market in the morning hours. The incidental audience was the true audience, and only with them could the play achieve its purpose: provocation of “small”, common people – people accused by Reich for both fascism and communism, because of “non-doing”, of not accepting the responsibility of a citizen to prevent the evil. (Excusing themselves with simple words: I am a little man, my voice can not be heard, I am not able to influence, and so, I am not responsible...). Wilhelm Reich wanted to make people feel responsible, so the translation of the book in Serbian in the mid 90` when the majority of the Serbian population felt exactly like Reich had described, provoked Ana Miljanic and CZKD to create a complex site-specific set of performances, starting at 10 a.m. at Kalemegdan as a “dance performance”, going through invisible theater in municipality (11), and then shopping mall (12), Belgrade high schools (1 p.m.), hotel Hyatt regency (2 p.m.), bus 47 (3 p.m.), Mirijevo suburb (4 p.m.), Radio B-92 media joke at 5, and finally TV Studio B Media News intervention (7 p.m.). The reactions of those incidental audiences have been diverse: from silently observing (Hyatt), enjoying or non-understanding (shopping mall), participating and performing (tango or ball game), discussing to approve or to protest (in the bus)... teasing and laughing, refusing or joining... This theater performance had developed specific meanings, developing from “locus memoriae” – as examples of Kalemegdan and Slavija bus can easily demonstrate...

These are the narratives of ordinary citizens – experiences of every-day life in a city - this was no theatre – this was life – real happening: dancing for 15 minutes with a prima ballerina in a park, patiently waiting in the queue, shopping in a shopping mall, playing ballot games... The artists only helped incidental audience, common people with complex life narrative (as it was everybody case in 90`) to enter this complex relationship in between city – other passengers – everyday practice (commuting, shopping...) to understand that this is not “just” happening / that it is politics and it is not innocent. So audience and “actors” several times exchanged their places, creating, at least for a moment a sensation of a better world (Kalemegdan, bus), or raising awareness about our own responsibilities in life (passport), or involving us in a dialogue with “unknown” neighbors (refugees from Croatia in Mirijevo, or gypsies in hotel Hyatt). How to think about our own city, city of hidden contradictions, where Hyatt and shopping mall glamour covers the poverty of the gypsy neighborhoods... Or how to re-think our own movements within city spaces, movements which are more and more same in a rush of everyday life, limited on the “needs” and “musts”, forgetting pleasure spaces within city.

So, combining personal narratives, with whom the majority of the incidental audience can identify (like retirement “memo” for dancer Sonja Vukicevic), the project wanted to bring different sense to the space and its possible use. So, this could be expressed as: we are not there only because we have nowhere else to go (retired people on Kalemegdan) – no, we are there because we want to have some beautiful moments in our life – and we are responsible for achieving it.

Is it possible to integrate them with theatrical action? Will we remember always, passing a certain city corner or square, the theatrical experience we have been exposed to?

How will city memory integrate all these events? How they will enter in a complex, multicultural city identity – identity of a hybrid city, with radical energy to question and to provoke?

“City centers have become increasingly places of paradox: playgrounds for the rich, but dustbins for the very poor (Elisabeth Wilson, 1993: 158). Belgrade city identities do not comprise only that ambiguity. Its identity is complex, hybrid...

The hidden minorities such as the Roma got a chance to become more visible in two theater projects: one of Center for Cultural Decontamination: *Medea-Hamlet*, where both professional artists from Burhan Theater (then already located in Germany) and Gypsy amateurs from Belgrade suburbs played together emotional coreodrama play on contemporary life of Belgrade gypsy population.

In the National Theater Ivana Momcilovic has created the performance *The holes, or when we have not been aligned*, on the basis of the texts of all the participants, to make visible citizens which are usually forgotten – gypsy children forced to work, refugees without future, army officers brought from Slovenia but still without living premises, gypsies expelled and deported from Kosovo as “colateral” victims of Albanian vengeance...

It is history through personal memories, history from the angles of victims, marginalized silent majorities...

But the Gypsy actors carrying the cassette deck home are stopped by the police, who, according to stereotype, immediately believe that they have with them something stolen... The theater will make them visible, but it is long process to transfer this visibility toward real public space. To change stigmatized image of any group demands coherent politics of construction of new meaning and its representation. Theater performances could only contribute, especially when they are created in National Theater on a level of symbolical supportive action, or to be, as they have been mostly in Serbia, part of the advocacy and lobbying process for the multicultural Belgrade, for the appreciation of the existing cultural diversity, and rehabilitation of the lost multiculturalism. This project was part of the new policy of the National Theater, policy of questioning the sense of its own existence.

Another effort in creating some meeting with non-visible citizens, effort of community building in richest Belgrade municipality of Vracar was also done by Dah theater in 2000. In a typical community art street theater action, actors tried to involve in incidental audience, children, groups of politically active citizens, in re-creating a new atmosphere for the neighborhood, and in production of critical questions and suggestions for local (municipal) authorities. The same type of theater and performance art actions had happened several times on Kosancicev venac in period 2001-2003 and again in 2005, trying to include narratives of ordinary citizens in the artistic form. But, the moments chosen for the action is usually the 6th of April, the Day of commemorating the

bombardement of Belgrade in 1941 (the moment when Yugoslavia had entered World War II), and when National library on Kosancicev venac had been ruined and burned. The ruins had been «cleaned» but nothing was re-built... and this empty spot in very center of Belgrade is used as «reminder» of the disastrous effects of wars and policies of oblivion (as majority of population do not even know what used to be there «before ruins»).

Continuously developing such kinds of theater projects, Dah Theater created: *Invisible city* – performed in the bus 26, in December 2005. The performances aimed to raise awareness of multicultural Belgrade – Belgrade which is slowly disappearing or hiding its multicultural faces behind globalization billboards and new signs of the postmodern city of consumption. The main issue here was: How to preserve heritage of others, and especially intangible heritage of others, other ethnic groups who disappeared and can not, through stories, life styles, gatherings and habits... keep their culture alive. How to keep memory on lost neighbors: Jewish community, gypsies, Buddhist kalmik, white Russians... and Albanians, who used to come as seasonal workers, but also on dispersed in the city Macedonians bakers, Gorani pastry shop owners...

The bus drive was also re-presenting new contemporary spatialisation of social relations – so theater performance was happening in the bus – but the stage was always the street, the neighborhoods the bus was passing through, and important city marks – buildings who are still keeping memories of lost communities.

-This performance was excellent interplay of the city and subjectivity – of the city and individual – artist, dweller... aiming toward new concept of citizen (new, imaginary, European concept not interiorized by community).

“The narratives of non-elite city dwellers often intersect and overlap with or are inspired by mainstream discourses about the city. But non-mainstream collective urban narratives can also interact with elite discourses by rejecting it and creating counter-narratives. Then again, personal narratives often digress from any urban collectivity and/or intersect with several ‘master-narratives’ about the city”. (Caroline Varlet, Paris; Wladimir Fischer, Vienna University; Anastasia Christou)

Belef festival – re-creating the city memory

Summer cultural programs - the programs that are equally a production of the most important players in the Serbian non-institutional artistic scene, but also a representation of colorful trends on the world artistic scene, are bringing completely new experiences, artistic adventures and re-discoveries of forgotten or hidden angles and meanings of the city. Teaching us how to see, like the spread of visual literacy among the Belgrade population unaccustomed to look away from their usual walking or driving routes toward the neighboring ruins or the ramparts of Kalemegdan has become the main feature of BELEF, the festival which ventures in private dialogue with the city's population in public space. This is a city festival that is the most open to the world, to world margins - peripheries that carry meaning and create new value - in spite of everything. "In From the Margins", like the well-known slogan (the title of the book) of the Council of Europe, BELEF puts different initiatives and projects, processes and works of art, in the heart of its programs. At the time of globalization and commercialization of art through its mass consumption in the form of goods protected by copyright (and not by the rights of the author), this opening of margins and recognition of cultural variety as the future of the world is all the more important.

Therefore, the main means of expression for BELEF in the "society of spectacle" (Debord) and institutional consumerism, are no longer shows, concerts and exhibitions in closed spaces of the main institutions, but billboards, leaflets, plotters on the walls, installations and electronics, that is, numerically expressed works of art, with performances in walking and park zones of the city, and on reborn summer stages.

The new practices of artistic adventures and behavior of Belgrade's audience correspond to these expressive art forms - the discovery of new spaces comes instead of loyalty to an institution, a walk instead of the convention of serious presence, and the ambiental placement of art processes and creations becomes the key to understanding and experiencing them. After all, the policy of private life in the summer has also changed: the seaside, cafes and weekend cottages, those symbols of the consumers' dream of the 1970s are no longer valid; new summer practices have been born - summer in the city, summer at Ada Ciganlija, BELEF summer. The city is not being abandoned; it is being lived in increasingly more.

The city's old topography that remembers the Turkish times: Dorcol, Cubura, Vracar, Bulbulder, Karaburma, Tasmajdan⁹; and the one from between the two wars when dates have been set between the London casino and the Moscow hotel, at Albania palace or at Slavija square. Slowly it started to be changed with some new signs and markings (shopping malls, cafes - "valleys" of them - new housing projects, floating cafes). Thus, all three Belgrades, that of the Balkans, the cosmopolitan one and the newest one - the Belgrade of searching for the new, still not a finalized identity, are living together - leaning on one another, intermingling and enriching one another richer.

The new urban identity of Belgrade calls for new markings of space, but also for a memory of the past, for some of the moments in history that have been pressed into and have been given landmark status to a certain city quarter. In the constant reappraisal of the local (historic) and the worldly (modern - global), with much ironic distance, the culture of invention and innovation prevails at BELEF. It is not a culture of consumerist or media representation, but a trans-cultural festival, a festival that calls for high social and cultural capital (Bourdieu), and which is constantly developing readiness to accept something new and different, therefore developing a new form of capital: intercultural or transcultural. Belgrade thus becomes a new center, not only of this new state (the state community of Serbia and Montenegro), but the regional Balkan or ex-Yugoslav center. The pluralism of thought and the pluralism of approach makes certain that neither urban elitism nor traditional populism prevail - therefore neither EXIT nor Guca¹⁰, but BELEF as the production driving wheel of Belgrade cultural scene in its encounter with the world.

In the Belef festival, local media products are equally important to local cultural practice (cruising the cafes, roving around shopping malls, roaming the water cafes) - great producers but also alternative actors and agents. Also important are world artists who are coming from the periphery of cultural events, but whose creations are nonetheless parts of the contemporary world scene. All of them together, the creators and the audience, form the inseparable part of the summer festival, because they are then engaged in open dialogue much more than during any other, purely artistic event (concert or tour.). Therefore, during the encounter between the

⁹ However the Stambol kapija (Istanbul gate) was replaced by National Theater and later National Museum since XIX century and the area was named Place (Square) of the Republic.

¹⁰ Exit festival (promoting world rock and techno music) in Novi Sad is the symbol of modern cosmopolitan urban contemporary culture, while Guca festival of folk brass bands is symbol of populist manifestation of nationalistic and inward oriented Serbia.

kletzmer orchestra and Tartar music with Australian scores, Spanish world music, the theater expression of Indonesia, Roma theater expression which is ever so established in Europe, the art of Italy, the Czech Republic, Portugal, Israel, Great Britain, and finally the art of the Tuareg, new conditions will be created for the abundance of sound, forms and colors, movements and lights, to make Belgrade once again a cosmopolitan, open city of the future. Belgrade in itself will be "a learning network", a network that provides the space for a meeting of cultures, for the abundance of adventures, for experience which is outside that of dominant cultural models and matrices - a network that connects the spaces of BELEF that have already been impressed in the collective memory, such as the Barutana (Powder Storage), Zindan Gate, the Summer Stage, Knez Mihajlova street and Republic square, but also the traditional spaces for art productions - the Sava Center, the City Hall, the Belgrade Cultural Center, the Museum of African Art, with new city spaces that have relatively seldom been used for cultural events - from the Ada Ciganlija river island to the corners of New Belgrade.

Thus, a new cultural policy - the policy of remembering, stimulating creativity and cultural variety through small, innovative cultural production - is gaining a new sense and meaning, conveying multiplication effects in the city's cultural scene. By engulfing its own heritage through contemporary practice in dialogue with other cultures, routes of future development are discovered and a new image of the city is created.

The most important point is how Belef has dealt with the politics of remembering. In this respect the most significant is the starting point of public representation of Yugomuseum, a project of Mrdjan Bajic. Belgrade spots of Yugomuseum – (Memorandum, House of Flowers...) are exactly the artistic challenge to this official politics of oblivion, where Tito's totalitarian regime had not been "such", where intellectuals (Academia) never invited to hatred and "territories".

But the performance program had started in the summer of 1997 to use contemporary dance troupes (Ister, Boris Caksiran, Beton hala theater, Dodest) to create performances in public spaces specifically for BELEF – for Belgrade citizens – and those performances often had entered in dialogue with previous experiences of re-appropriation of public spaces by citizens during protest (Mime Art performance: The water dance with drums, 1997). But even the guest performances – like Carmen Funebre (Theater Biuro Podrozy) or Zmijin svlak (Theater Schonspiel) and partially realized performance of the Sarajevo group Ambrosia, in fact had entered the logic of this politics of memory and remembrance, as it had actual meaning for the Belgrade audience.

In 1998, under the title *Urban Provocations*, the theater program named: *Urban guerilla unplugged*, introduced Medea as questioning her husband warrior (Stevan Bodroza production), Brechtiana performance, Alkestida (Jelena Bogavac), Angels in the cities (Dah theater) and as an ultimate point: Dream about flying of Ivana Vujic. Belef again took audiences throughout the city, in different spaces, trying to provoke feelings, but also to raise awareness and to demand Belgrade citizens not to forget their dream about flying, to re-start their energy and ambition in developing new visions and horizons. Still, from the standpoint of cultural diversity and a reminder on a lost multicultural state, the project not in theater, but in visual arts program of the Belef, was the most significant. The Russian group AES had developed their "Islamic" project, specifically for Belgrade – as a fear of "otherness". Belgrade in ruins, monuments converted in mosques, green color everywhere, and Albanian kids on cannons! Postcards distributed amongst the inhabitants of Belgrade, to reflect the fear and feeling of threat as soon as the word "Albanian" is pronounced, aimed to raise awareness in the population and to reveal those feelings, so that rational thinking and dialogue could be developed.

In 1999, immediately after bombardment stopped, the festival was again organized, this time under the title: Fragment of senses, with again theater program facing both city features and questions of memories and remembrance. Uros Jovanovic created a play in the inner courtyard of a common house on Vracar district, Dah Theater performed Documents of time, and Labin Art Express did social sculpturing on the streets and markets of Belgrade, provoking debates about Croatian presence in ruined city, Bojan Djurdjev, Jelena Bogavac, Nenad Colic... and again Ivana Vujic with the performance Room of my mother. This project based on the texts of Artaud, Buchner, Ionesco, on the songs of school events from 60 and 70`, on documents from our recent past, on sounds of the last war “we have not participated in”... This performance was about freedom and resistance but also about humiliation and inability in the same time. And many words – shelter, embassy, sky, hunger, electricity but also: Russia, Kosovo... And performance ends with silent cry of participants, powerful image of blocked society.

Not to be too detailed, throughout this period, the Belef festival wanted to use theater and visual arts in fighting for a renewal of the city identity as an open, cosmopolitan city, a city of complex memories on past cultural diversities. The youngest generation of theater directors have mostly chosen special, not very known sites: places of memory, of meaning, avoiding non-lieux (Auge) – non-sites like standard types of shopping malls, airports (in spite of their glamorous appearances and attractiveness for wider audiences)... Non-sites are the same anywhere in the world, as spaces of anonymous individuals and common consumption needs. Belgrade identity as a cosmopolitan city probably could be rebuilt through those “non-sites”, but it would be the fake, non-interiorized identity, identity without the past. That was the reason why theater artist always preferred spaces – palimpsest, spaces which embedded in them different meanings and carry huge signifying potential.

Usually, the main squares are the most popular for the performances and often have names according to political events or historical “glorious” past, such as the Square of National Appraising (Bratislava), Square of heroes (Budapest), Square of Republic (Belgrade). The artistic events happening there usually are of representational kind, or with populist, commercial intentions¹¹. Theater art which wants to enter in dialogue with the city, to develop real *in situ*, *site specific* projects, chooses street corners, vivid or forgotten neighborhoods, city margins, endangered urban structures, and postindustrial heritage, known and unknown courtyards (hidden spaces of extreme social value).

But – when the main topic is, as it was in Dah theater performance in July 2004 (10 years since the Srebrenica genocide): Maps of forbidden remembrance, the Square of the Republic is the only possible place – where 12 years before that, they had started its public arts event programs with the antiwar performance “This Babylonian confusion”.

Conclusion

The public art provocations represent a challenge for a consistent policy of remembrance/oblivion always introducing new «elements» and new dimensions. Political authorities in Belgrade first ignored and then had to take into consideration the propositions coming from the civil art sector, and, finally, to support it and integrate in their politics and programs. At the same time, the cultural establishment is not viewing public arts in a very

¹¹ Dah Theater, Mim Art Theater etc. as all of them had been organized outside of establishment, within civil society activities program.

positive manner (they are usually complaining about low art achievements of such work), and – on the third side – the population is often also critical, not sharing or understanding controversies brought up, often even not willing to remember and to be reminded. Attacking “values” of population – their stereotypes and prejudices, public art projects in Belgrade are fighting for new understanding not only of history but of us. That is the reason why, sometimes, their own projects pass to oblivion, like many of the antiwar or Roma inclusion projects.

“The objects, the ideas, the ideals - only become values in light of their social relationships”¹² – in the same manner, the city, its urban structure, become values only if we could establish different and deep, multilayered relationships with, keeping *locus memoriae*, but also, giving space for new, contemporary creativity and new artistic formats to appear. The cities should not be blocked in their development by keeping memories strong and firmly respected, what could frustrate and prevent any wish of contemporary creativity and feelings to rise.

So, the question raised in front of policy makers and cultural managers is: Is it possible to re-define city identity through the arts? What are cultural and political implications of the "urban imaginary"?

It is certain that future walks in the city of Belgrade will be different with all these new memories built in many different corners and it might contribute that multicultural diversity, nearly lost in its living form, will remain in collective memory in the city. Also, that it gives signs and focuses, gives advocacy arguments for new cultural policies to be developed, policies of memory, of facing conflict and ambivalent past, policy which is leading toward intercultural dialogue and mediation.

This text, through an analysis of performances, demonstrates how artists as the best social critics have seen the city and society, as the locus not only of conflicts and tensions, but also of aspirations and tendencies.

The main question remains the same: How long does the sorrow imposed by historical violence last? And: Where are the borders of my personal responsibilities for crimes I have not committed?

Our experience of the real – specifically, the real of the city – is always imagined, or, to use another of Vattimo's terms, "poetic" (James Donald). And, in the same time, as imagination "is always a creative but constrained interchange between the subjective and the social" (Donald, p.18), this construction of cosmopolitan, multicultural city identity through theater performances will highly depend on willingness of its inhabitants to participate in the reception.

The multicultural city of Belgrade is not only a text, but a palimpsest, a complex multilayered narrative, where the best and the most relevant artists have to be incited to add their narratives to a common collective memory and perception of the city. Trying to enable those narratives to use, but also to enter the urban texture, noises, rhythms and dynamism of the city this imaginary construct – such as city identity might become

¹² Hannah Arendt – The human condition, chapter IV, section Market

acceptable for the values of all those who describe themselves as the “urban” generation...

The city is the breeding ground of the experience of modernity and the tradition at the same time, and in this sense, contemporary theater in public space has all the possibilities to respond to the demands of both artists and audiences. That is the only way to return the aura to the city in this high time of multiplications and reproductions where the city is seen as a machine - art is giving again the chance for intercultural dialogue which will produce new, and complex meanings...

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