

Received: July 1, 2015  
Accepted: July 8, 2015  
Original scholarly paper  
UDC: 766:305-055.3(497.11)"2013"  
7.038.531(497.11)"2013"  
305-055.3(497.11)"2013"

**Biljana Kosmogina and Saša Kesic**

*Members of the 3a3or Group*  
sasa\_kesic\_1983@yahoo.com

## **Queer Calendars: Art-Activist Project of Contemporary Transition Art**

**Abstract:** This text is about an art-activist project in the context of transition art: *Queer Calendars*, a project by the *3a3or* Group. These calendars are a reaction to the *necropolitics* of post-socialism, as the setting of different, critical, activist platforms and procedures in every homogeneous field of identification and control in neoliberal capitalism. As in the time of the global project of totalizing, it is necessary to use queer tactics for the politicization of art, which work as political strategies of subversion of every stable structure of power, including governing in micro- or macro- cultures and societies.

**Key words:** *Queer Calendars*, post-socialism, global capitalism, *necropolitics*, queer, object(ion), *3a3or* Group

### **Introduction: Post-socialism – from bio to *necropolitics***

Post-socialism is the transition of the *Second World* – post-communist cultures and societies in the renewed or realised national countries, cultures, and arts. The post-socialist national country, from the beginning of the nineties, operates “[...] as the simulation monster of the historical copies without real patterns in the reality.”<sup>1</sup> In the neoliberal world, that East European matrix of the monster stages itself as collective ethnic and national identity, which was repressed, censored, manipulated and annulled in the period of communism.

In her book *Fiction Reconstructed: Eastern Europe, Post-Socialism and the Retro-Avant-Garde*, in which she writes about theory, politics and aesthetics from 1985 to 1997, Marina Gržinić indicates the rupture between two stadiums in the development of the West-East European community – the first, which lasts until 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) and which

---

<sup>1</sup> Miško Šuvaković, *Pojmovnik teorije umetnosti*, Beograd, Orion art, 2011, 573.

presents the relationship between Western Europe and communist Eastern Europe, and the second, which starts in 1989 and presents the relationship between Western Europeans and their post-socialist neighbours. The year the wall fell is actually imposed on Eastern Europeans as the road to democracy and freedom through begging. However, Eastern Europe failed – it did not succeed to register itself on the map of important political, cultural and artistic happenings in Europe, i.e. it did not become a stable social area.

Michael Foucault highlighted that biopolitics is a necessary aspect of the construction and development of capitalism – the accumulation of capital requires the accumulation of life, i.e. bringing a human body into the apparatus of production, for the sake of managing its forces. In the period of globalization, the process of capitalist integration takes place by the “[...] mass deterritorialisation of the symbolic (nations) and infrastructural (countries) arrangements of human lives, and, then, market-economic (transnational or multinational companies, mega market) joining and networking of the deterritorial and decoded trends in production, exchange and consumption of goods in contemporary world.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, global capitalism is a widening of the local practices of production, exchange and consumption to a supranational, planetary level. This model is further expanded to non-economic production in the area of culture, art, entertainment and all species of the shaping of everyday life as such.

As human capital is a basement of all kinds of global capitalism, it follows that life itself becomes a good. Biopower is, today, a question of the direct instrumentalization of life, enabled in contemporary technologies of new media. “Control is, thus, composed of surveillance systems (surveillance cameras following us everywhere), increasingly more detailed digitalized databases of personal information available to the state, as well as being composed of public opinion (market) researches and other forms of acquiring more and more precise personal data.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, we have to go a step further and face the fact that today it is necessary to politicize biopolitics by *necropolitics*.

The concept of *necropolitics* was established by Achille Mbembe in order to define the transformation of the regulation of life within the extreme conditions which global neoliberal capitalism produces today. Unlike biopolitics, which is carried out through the regulation of life from the perspective of the production of a life style, *necropolitics* regulates life from the perspective of the production of death; it brings it down to mere existence – life on the very minimum. In his study *Necropolitics*, Mbembe starts from the hypotheses that Foucault’s concept of biopower is not enough to explain contemporary shapes of control. He introduces the concept of *necropower* to reconfigure the relationship between resistance, victim and terror:

“Technologies of destruction have become more tactile, more anatomical and sensorial, in a context in which the choice is between life and death. If power still depends on tight control over bodies (or on concentrating them in camps), the new technologies of destruction are less concerned with inscribing bodies within disciplinary apparatuses as inscribing them, when the time comes, within the order of the maximal economy now represented by the ‘massacre.’”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 290.

<sup>3</sup> Marina Gržinić, *Subjectivization, Biopolitics and Necropolitics: Where do We Stand*, <http://grzinic-smid.si/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Rear2008tikulacija6.pdf>, ac. 19. 01. 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, <http://ruraleconomics.fib.ugm.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/05-Achille-Mbembe-Necropolitics.pdf>, ac. 19. 01. 2015.

*Necropolitics* is, therefore, connected with a *necrocapitalism* and *necroeconomy*, which produce and localize *worlds of death*. The project *Queer Calendars* is an example that Serbia in the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century is that kind of world; its societies – *live corpses* – are presented in the photos for individual months.

### Initiative, preparation and intention

In cooperation with a few NGOs from the region (Macedonia, Croatia and Serbia), the conference *Queer Activism, Nationalism and Public Space* was held in December 2012, which activated an initiative for creating a queer platform of the Balkans. Connecting and the cooperation of organizations in order to achieve common aims is necessary because of better visibility and the larger echo of the results of the common actions. At the beginning of 2013, in Belgrade, the Group *3a3or* was formed. Its members (of different occupations and nationalities) initiated the project *Queer Calendars*.

The idea of the project was in connecting the socially-accepted practice of mailing postcards, greetings and calendars on a specific holiday (New Year's Day, Christmas, Easter) or some other happening (weddings, birthdays, celebrations of important events, travelling, etc.). Official greetings are sent out of fashion and courtesy, without emotions, while private greetings are sent to close people as an expression of sensitivity. The postcard/greeting/calendar can represent an original art form, although practice says that the motives are hyper-productive, expected, stereotypical and pathetic (a heart, a flower or a bouquet of flowers, a sunset, a holy landscape, gentle little animals [teddy bears, cats and dogs], heterosexual couples sitting embraced on a bench, or walking on the beach holding hands, or a religious motive [crucifixion, icons, fresco, etc.]). On postcards from travelling there are recognizable city squares, avenues or historical sights, which present a typical feature of that destination. With these project the authors critiqued the fact that those postcards/greetings/calendars presented only beautified version of reality and did not provide insight into a real picture of life; they did not engage in the essential problems of society, including minority and threatened groups, poverty, crisis, depression or real economic, social and ecological aspects. "Therefore, visual attack has to be directed to pictures of *identification* (visualized symbols of identities) of the political being in the society."<sup>5</sup>

With an intention to depart from the widespread stereotypes of the production of false reality, *3a3or* members decided to make subversive calendars. Calendars with *abject* motives were mailed to every governing structure – political parties, institutions and media – in Serbia.

"The abject is related to perversion. [...] The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them."<sup>6</sup>

Twelve different photos for the twelve months of the year represent a critique of the system, bad economic conditions and social relations. This project is an opposition to the capitalist model and *lulling* – a global trend which insists on uniformity and conformity, which can be

<sup>5</sup> Miško Šuvaković, *Studije slučaja*, Pančevo, Mali Nemo, 2006, 125.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror – An Essay of Abjection*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982, 15.

read on the front pages of fashion and family magazines. It is usually represented by expensive cars, branded clothes, slim bodies, white teeth, cosmetic treatments, silicon breasts and the Botox smile of models and actresses, which inverts the difficult *necrocapitalist* reality of the degraded individual and impoverished families, who with an average salary of 350 euros per month<sup>7</sup> can hardly survive.

“Queer expression becomes a weapon in the disturbance of the stable social mechanisms which every power tries to establish and perform over any ‘mass,’ in order to transform it to race, gender, tribe, nation or class.”<sup>8</sup>

The calendar was made as an aspect of the protest against bad politics which led people to economic and psychological collapse, the merciless financial imposts (taxes and debt credits) under the patronage of banks and corporations, and also against the enormous influence of the media, which utilize a sensationalistic attitude in the creation of public opinion and deal with the internal take-over and arbitrary shaping of the news and pandering to politicians for their own interests.

### Realisation of the project

“The double or triple game between the show, the *deleted trace*, everyday reality and the unreachable Real shows the drama of human existence in hypothetical or real/realized *conspiracies*.”<sup>9</sup>

*Queer calendars* cover all aspects of the exhausted, abused and confused Serbian society in transition. They refer to: poverty, the indifference of the country to the Roma community, homophobia, violence against women, the pollution of the environment, a new emigrant wave from Serbia, autocracy, abusing citizens, and discrimination against older people. The themes cause us to think of *abjection*, discomfort, hostility and disgust. The aim was to make the recipient deeply concerned with what he or she sees. The *necrocapitalist* present is difficult, bizarre and brutal, as are the themes of these calendars.

More than 300 calendars were packed in envelopes and anonymously sent to the addresses of political parties, corporations, institutions (banks and universities), and the media in Serbia. Calendars were addressed and sent by name to the president of the country, the prime minister, the mayor of Belgrade, and other officials: leaders of political parties, directors of banks, deans of universities, the Academy of Science and Art, the most influential journalists and journalists' associations (UNS and NUNS), local televisions, radios, magazines, the daily press, and also religious institutions (the seat of Serbian Orthodox Church, Serbian bishops, University of Theology). Depending on the position, some recipients got more than one calendar. The anonymity of the senders is selected strategically, with the aim of provoking the attention of the recipient.

<sup>7</sup> *Average Monthly Salary in Serbia*, [http://www.paragraf.rs/statistika/01\\_stat.htm](http://www.paragraf.rs/statistika/01_stat.htm), ac. 01. 09. 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Miško Šuvaković, *Studije slučaja*, op. cit., 120.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

## Caused reactions – echo of the action

“Artistic work is, regardless of media, an instrument for performing the *event* (provocation, problem) in micro-political frameworks, in order to cause the activation of the minority in relation to majority knowledge, i.e. minority powerlessness in relation to majority power.”<sup>10</sup>

In May 2013, after finishing the action of sending queer calendars, an unexpected reaction was produced. Only one of the recipients (from approximately 200) – the editorial offices of *Radio Sto Plus* from Novi Pazar – reacted publicly, by interpreting the mail as a threat. “In the editorial offices of Radio Sto Plus from Novi Pazar a postcard with an anonymous threatening message arrived yesterday. The postcard was sent by mail from Belgrade and it featured a calendar with an illustration of a barbed wire with stringed bombs and the following text: ‘Don’t eat everything that shines – better teeth than the kidney.’”<sup>11</sup>

A news article titled “Radio *Sto Plus* threatened” was published on the sites of many media houses, the journalists’ association and the OEBS mission in the Balkans. On the controversial graphic illustration, the New Year’s decorations strung on a barbed wire were misinterpreted as bombs, which was the cause of the strong reaction. This was in accordance with the words of Stuart Hall: “At a certain point, however, the broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse.”<sup>12</sup>

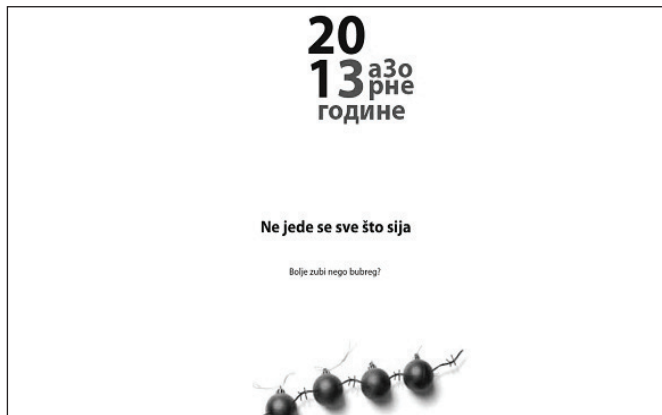


Fig. 1: The bottom of the controversial calendar

This kind of free interpretation is a consequence of the absence of the context in which the calendar could be placed. The anonymity of the sender, as a confusing message in an area already sensitive and subjected to tension, was interpreted in a way that did not correspond with

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/drustvo/radio\\_sto\\_plus\\_dobio\\_pretnje.55.html?news\\_id=261448#sthash.RTSMIHA8.dpuf](http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/drustvo/radio_sto_plus_dobio_pretnje.55.html?news_id=261448#sthash.RTSMIHA8.dpuf), ac. 21.08.2013.

<sup>12</sup> Stuart Hall, “Encoding – decoding”, in: S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe and P. Willis (eds.), *Culture Media Language*, London, Hutchinson, 1980, 509.

the intention of the senders and the aims of the project – “the point was to present the deep structural problem of culture, society or the state, through these tactics and changes in the position of *art*, not to perform one more psychological game or existential attempt of expression.”<sup>13</sup>

A loaded threat is an obvious example of fear and *ad hoc* acceptance of the position of a victim, although it should be clear to media representatives that lined golden teeth above a spoon and the message *Don't eat everything that shines – better your teeth than your kidney* explicitly refers to the hopeless financial situation of the population. As relief from poverty, families often sell gold from the family inheritance to obtain basic food. Therefore, the photo shows that even pulling out our golden teeth can be a viable option in conditions of extreme poverty. Also, by the phrase *better your teeth than your kidney*, the authors added examples in which people sold kidneys for a living. This means that the “[...] *queer atmosphere* is not shown through the individual or collective identification of a singular or universal body, but through performing the re-visualisation and re-semantics of the visible world of hyperreal media itself (reality which is more real than real).”<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 2: The top of the controversial calendar

It is symptomatic that the other media outlets that got those calendars did not react in the same way, although they ‘collegially sympathized’ with the station in Novi Pazar, broadcasting the news about the threat. The Serbian Journalist’s Association (UNS) severely condemned the ‘perpetrator’, without stating that they had also received the calendar. Because of that, more than the others, they had an opportunity to perceive the meaning and transmit it to the public at large.

<sup>13</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Dve decenije posle – Autentični čin prekoračenja temeljne fantazme”, *TkH*, Beograd, 2004, br. 8, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Miško Šuvaković, *Studije slučaja*, op. cit., 116.