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Igor Grubić: Visibility of New Political Modalities

This is a narrative about an artist who performs unexpected impacts by which fictional art abruptly ends³¹ in real everyday life forms. This is a narrative about an artist who performs unexpected impacts that end realistically everyday life forms in critical fictional art. Unexpected turns are constructs of the intersection of the political and the artistic through the selection, indexation, naming, choreography and directing of living or media forms and images, and their effects. On one occasion, Igor Grubić explicitly emphasized the importance of the relationship between art and life: “I do not separate art from everyday life. By taking on the role of an artist, I am aware that I am stepping out into the public sphere, where the eyes of the public are on me and therefore all my actions need to be responsible.”³²

Igor Grubić was born in Zagreb in 1969. He studied at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Society of Jesus and attended the Academy of Fine Arts and the Academy of Dramatic Arts. He began research in the field of art during the 1990s. Grubić realizes art works in interdisciplinary fields of performance, politically motivated activism, urban interventionism, choreographic events, photographic and media mediation of conceptual projects.

Igor Grubić dialectically continues on the complex local and international modalities of the engaged Neo-Avant-Garde and Conceptual Art of the 1960s and 70s. He participated in the return of the real in art productions during the global 1990s. Life forms, social formats and impacts of reality become his “new” media of research, performance and presentation in the world of art. He moves from the role of witness/participant to the performer of political affect and the distribution of its intense impacts in specific social contexts and situations. He established special references to the group/event *Red Peristyle* with the project “Black Peristyle” (1998). He remedialized the poetic actionism and activism of Vlado Martek with the project *Read Martek* (“366 Liberation Ritual”, 2008), the action of the *Academy* and the allegorical action of the *Red Escadrille* (*free flight of poetry*) from 2008. He had a fascinating emotional relationship with the mythical-revolutionary rituals of Joseph Beuys in the project *We Are the Revolution*. He connected the *Sun Eclipse project* with Ivan Kožarić’s sculpture *Landed Sun* (1971). He connected transpositions of quotations (*Little Quotes Lessons*),

³¹ Compare with the last sentence of the text: Hito Steyerl, “Duty Free Art,” in *Duty Free Art* (London: Verso, 2017), 89.

³² Igor Grubić, “366 Reasons,” in *366 Liberation rituals* (Zagreb: Galerija Miroslav Kraljević, 2009), 41.

in an intelligent and often witty way, with citation tactics, for example, by Mladen Stilinović. By entering the urban spaces in which he performed primary interventions or provocations, he connoted the urban performances of Tomislav Gotovac (*Marx and Lenin for beginners*). It is important to emphasize that he transformed the characteristic approaches of neo-avant-garde and conceptual artists to historical avant-garde. He showed the possibility of re-actualization of neo-avant-garde and conceptual art practices in contemporary times. He is not a follower of the great or provocative ideas / effects of neo-avant-garde and conceptual art, but an artist who registers temporal and spatial changes in art, culture and society. He shows that the concepts of neo-avant-garde and conceptual art must be modified, transposed between new social antagonisms and contradictions. He shows that political as well as emotional motivations change and gain a whole new effectiveness – because concepts gain different potentialities, meanings and affective expectations in the real world.

Socialist realist monuments, which after the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) became unacceptable for new transitional states/cultural policies, became symbols of the revitalization of the anti-fascist heritage by his intervention with the covering of monument heads with red pioneer scarves (*Scarves and Monuments*). The socialist realist monuments that were mainstream in the time of self-governing socialism, now, with red scarves, become symbolic impacts of the social alternative to the retro policies of transition, i.e. a challenge to the newly established national-realism. In Grubić's words: "By placing scarves on monuments, I aimed at reviving them and giving them an aura of active fighters in our every day life. Placing the scarves on monuments was often done at the same time as *Little Quotes Lessons*. Both actions were carried out with the aim of awaking and questioning (the impact of) our cultural and political heritage. I placed the scarves on monuments of the anti-fascist movement"³³. With the *East Side Story* (2008) project – a two-channel video installation – he problematized social intolerance and violence against people of different genders. He worked with choreographic and documentary materials recorded in Zagreb and Belgrade.

Grubić, by generation, belongs to those artistic tendencies, which, close to political theory, for example Chantal Mouffe³⁴, make a turn from the neutral aestheticism of postmodernism to political activism. This indicates a characteristic break with the concepts of postideology, but also modern, seemingly soft power. The critical potential of artistic presentations becomes important ranging from the treatment of the recent past (decline of self-governing socialism, emergence of transitional practices of capitalism, formation of nation states) through problematization of gender and racial violence, intolerance and ideological blindness in contemporary times.

His early works from the 1990s and during the first decade of the 2000s were performed around politics as a human situation and human activity that exists between the individual and society. He faced politics within social antagonisms and contradictions, above all, of post-Yugoslav societies and their traumatic reidentifications

³³ Igor Grubić, "Scarves and monuments," in *366 Liberation Rituals* (Zagreb: Galerija Miroslav Kraljević, 2009), 59.

³⁴ Chantal Mouffe, "Politics and the Political," in *On The Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 9.

in relation to the concepts of “Yugoslav society”, “Croatian society”, “Serbian society” or “European society”.³⁵ Compare the works *Angels with Dirty Faces* (or *Sooty-Faced Angels*³⁶) dedicated to the miners from Kolubara in Serbia and the project *Error in the System* (2009–2012), which he realized with the assistance of Barbara Matejčić, opposing the use of Ustasha symbols at the commemorations in Bleiburg, Austria. He set the notion of politics in the usual way (identification, power, coercion, censorship) and in the unusual way (private/public, pragmatic/ emotional, masked/unmasked), but always with a critical and autocritical redefinition of being:

Even when I was a high-school boy, while listening to New Wave post-punk bands (Gang of Four, The Clash...), I was infected by the spirit of social criticism which was evident in their songs: neomarxist criticism of consumerism, product fetishism and Western colonialism and their fight for workers’ rights and rights of minorities... Over time I realized that my desire for a more responsible and more just social system (through the fight for my own and others’ rights) was not faltering. During the nineties, shocked by the horrors of the war, I realized that if I wanted to criticize others I should start from myself; it is exactly here that personal demons and self-deception lurk and there is a need for continuous work on one’s vigilance and self-questioning. I decided to tattoo the word “disobedient” which would be a daily reminder of the principles that I set for myself to follow. In that sense the word “disobedient” does not only encompass Thoreau’s and Gandhi’s “citizen’s duty to be disobedient”, but also the duty of every individual to be disobedient in relation to his own mechanisms of self-deception: laziness, conformity, egoism, selfishness, fear of authority, greed etc.³⁷

The method of his work was to perform a mistakes or disturbances in the system of public communication and public judgment through artistic work as a tactical intervention.

Performing “eco” indexation or indexation of the relationship between deurbanization and ecology in certain works of art (*Do Animals ...?*, 2017; *Traces of Disappearing*³⁸, 2019; *Another Green World*, 2021) essentially expanded the traditional Western notion of politics. The non-human world of relationships must, therefore, be taken into account. Extrahuman - natural / ecological - effects and interactions with our individual and collective life forms must be taken into account. Art shows this

³⁵ See group exhibition *Bigger than Myself: Heroic Voices from ex Yugoslavia*, curated by Zdenka Badovinec, MA XXI, Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Roma, 2021.

³⁶ Igor Grubić, “Sooty / Faced Angels,” in *Fotografski ciklusi* (Pula: HDL Istre), 2–35.

³⁷ Igor Grubić, “Disobedient,” in *366 Liberation rituals* (Zagreb: Galerija Miroslav Kraljević, 2009), 131.

³⁸ Igor Grubić, “The Wild House,” in *Traces of Disappearing (In Three Acts) – Croatian Pavilion 58th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 52–179.

new direct situation directly or indirectly visible. The old European notion of politics as an arrangement of the human community, therefore, must include inhuman factors such as climate, ecology, mass diseases, collapsed nature, dispersive and devastated urbanization, pandemics, animal rights in relation to the concept of human rights, etc. The new notion of politics is, therefore, brought by art to visibility, but - more importantly - to participatory efficiency.

The project *Do Animals ...?* is based on Grubić's research on former, and now abandoned, slaughterhouses in northern Italy during his time in the RAVE East Village Artist Residency program. As a staunch supporter of animal rights and moreover as an activist, Grubić investigates the psychological effect these factories of death have on human consciousness. The work is composed of a series of five posters that feature photographs of now empty former slaughterhouses, overwritten with the artist's questions, that appear in the city center in the form of anonymous ads. Silent and cold, but at the same time distinctly disturbing, the images are visually conceived as the path an animal takes from life to death, from light to darkness. Like a surreal call to public moral responsibility, through his work the artist introduces the general public to his examination of humankind's conflicted feelings towards animals, taking full advantage of commercial mainstream media – urban billboards. This compelling urban intervention has already been shown in six northern Italian cities (including Turin, Trieste, and Udine). The *Do Animals...?* project is also accompanied by a film shot inside these former slaughterhouses at night, together with interviews with former slaughterhouse employees.³⁹ Five photographs representing the impacts of this project were exhibited at the *Overview effect* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, as were billboards in downtown Belgrade.⁴⁰

Grubić posed a series of questions about the status and rights of animals in the “new concept of politics” which includes a *non-human subject/agent* – in other words, an animal. His questions are:

- Do Animals Have Legal Rights?
- Do Animals Know They Are Products?
- Do Animals Dream about Freedom?
- Do Animals Survive Extermination?
- Do Animals Go to Heaven?

The possibility of asking these questions indicates a departure from the understanding and legalization of animals as non-intentional, instinctive and passive creatures or organic-mechanisms that are useful objects for humans. Thus, politics as a job for people and from people is introduced into a new area - the area of redefining nature.

³⁹ Adriana Rispoli, “Do Animals ...?,” exhibition, *Heavenly Beings. Neither Human nor Animal*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Metelkova, Ljubljana, July 10–November 4, 2018, <http://www.mg-lj.si/en/exhibitions/2372/igor-grubic/>, acc. on August 27, 2021.

⁴⁰Zoran Erić, Blanca de la Torre are the curators of the *Overview effect* exhibition, Beograd, Muzej savremene umetnosti, Jun 21–September 20, 2021.

The conceptual, aesthetic and activist area of articulation of relations and coexistence of people and non-people is established. The animal can then be recognized, experienced, understood and legitimized as a subject that is not necessarily based on an anthropocentric idealized model. For example, the Canadian theorist Brian Massumi asked a characteristic and revolutionary question in “What Animals Teach Us about Politics.”⁴¹ Grubić’s photographs/billboards with questions about animal rights, self-understanding, freedom, extermination and death express a new position on which the legal, psychological, political, action and religious continuum between humans and animals is built. But this continuum is motivated by the transformation of the understanding of politics from human work for people to sharing (*vita activa*) between people and non-people, that is, subjects of different types and characters. And that could mean that *zoe* and *bios* are inextricably linked in the complexity of political relations. It is an essential non-idyllic connection that seeks its visibility, i.e. recognition, from people. This connection is political because it is based on antagonisms that are constitutive of human and inhuman relations. Thus we must establish a new understanding of politics in society and nature.

Igor Grubić

Do Animals...?

2017 ongoing

Multidisciplinary project (5 posters, photography, film)



⁴¹ Brian Massumi, “What Animals Teach Us about Politics,” in *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 1.



