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## **From the Archives of the Transition: The Collages of Josip Vaništa 1990–2000**

**Abstract:** Following the analysis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, carried out by Alain Badiou in his book *The Century*, the text begins with the quotation of Osip Mandelstam's poem *The Age*, in which the new century is seen in organic metaphors such as the “beast”, whose “spine” has already “broken” while emerging, thus foreboding that already in 1923, when the poem was written, the century of hope, the *Soviet Century* in its very nature, carried the seed of its own destruction. Consequently, the breakdown of this “century” in the field of so-called transitional social processes in all post-Communist societies is seen as a tragic, cruel privatization, a wild initial accumulation/pillage of capital in a new historical context, with new protagonists, and a new soulless morality.

For the most part, this text deals with analysis of the collages of Croatian neo-avant-garde artist Josip Vaništa, created during the period of transition and war in Croatia and the former Yugoslavia from 1990 to 2000. With minimal artist intervention, by simple collage and cutting of titles, short texts and photographs from the quondam press, Vaništa draws attention to the tragedy and absurdity of transitional social space.

**Keywords:** century; post-communism; transition; art; appropriation; collage; media

In Osip Mandelstam's poem *The Age*, replete with poetic images subjectivising the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a “living composition”, as something organic, as a “beast”, which, naturally, has a “spine”, “vertebrae”, “bones”, “paws”, etc., two lines of the last stanza run as follows:

*But your spine is cracked  
my beautiful, pitiful age.*<sup>1</sup>

Although the poem was written in long-ago 1923, it would turn out that Mandelstam's ingenious poetic visions of the nature of this century ‘overtook’ history itself,

<sup>1</sup> *Osip Mandelstam, 24 Selected Poems*, select. and trans. A. S. Kline, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Russian/Mandelstam.php>, acc. May 13, 2018.

as is often the case with great art. Even though, in the poet's vision, the spine of the century was shattered practically at its beginning, suggesting the idea that it was its birth, or, more exactly, its *inception*, that carried within itself the seed of the downfall of this newborn, and that this was but the realisation of its predetermined nature and the collapse of its desired and projected meaning, the actual historical downfall came only several decades later. Analysing this beast-age, and paying particular attention to Mandelstam's poem, Alain Badiou points to several possibilities for delimiting this turbulent time, naturally, according to a certain meaning, and not merely following a formal calendar. Among these articulations, let us single out the "short century", starting with the 1914–1918 war, including October 1917, and ending with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. This "short century" is also referred to by Badiou as the "Soviet Century".<sup>2</sup> Just as we see that its beginning kicks off a few years before the October Revolution itself, thus also its end, formally confirmed on December 26, 1991 by the Supreme Soviet's declaration on the end of the existence of the USSR, actually started earlier, when the Eastern Bloc collapsed and its member states gained autonomy. That is why writing on the matter, and even the global culture of memory relative to these events, primarily refers to the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in the autumn of 1989 as the event which marked the end of a huge, traumatic epoch and after which the world was no longer the same.

The fall of the Berlin Wall has also become a sublime symbolic image, a powerful foundational metaphor, and an omnipresent trope in the variable marking of the watershed of ages in the social, historical, economical-political and cultural-artistic fields. Time seems to have been divided into *before* and *after* this "Fall." Thus also in the art system this trope has taken up a huge space – it is the cornerstone and the topic of many thematic exhibitions, and in interpretive texts dealing with this period, ranging from serious critical and theoretical analyses to mere phrasemongering, the term "fall of the Berlin Wall" has become a kind of keyword. Further, to describe the character of general social processes – from economical-political to cultural-artistic ones – in all the post-communist societies arising after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the common term *transition* has been concocted. This term, too, has become a trope. Marking the *changeover* from one social system (communism) to another one (capitalism), it has become a kind of commonplace, a term whose inflated usage, which often converted it into an *empty portmanteau* for all and sundry, especially in the field of economic and political relations, diminished the possibility of understanding and seeing through the real meaning of *transitional* social processes. What remind hidden and opaque behind the affirmative content of the term *transition*, which should indicate the validity of the idea of *changing* from a (bad) socio-political system, the *negative* communist one, which was unhealthy, historically self-collapsed and broken, to another (good) one, the *positive* capitalist one, which was healthy, historically self-confirmed and strengthened, was most often the idea of a cruel *privatisation*, of a wild initial accumulation/pillage of capital in a new historical interpretation, with

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<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 1.

new protagonists and a new, soulless morality. In the words of Boris Groys, the process of the transition of the former communist East out of communism has turned out to be:

a drama of privatization that naturally played out beyond all the usual conventions of civilization. It is well known that this drama kindled many passions and produced many victims. Human nature, which had previously been suppressed, manifested itself as raw violence in the struggle over the private acquisition of collective assets.<sup>3</sup>

The works by Josip Vaništa and Oleg Kulik shown at this exhibition at Budapest's Ludwig Museum have not only been created, nearly in their entirety, during this time of transition, but also represent two of its powerful symbolic expressions. Their common denominator, the reference to the time of transition, that is, the time of a cruel, uncontrolled privatisation, is also the only common feature of these two authors. Everything else is mostly different and is the result not only of the natural differences – not only generational – between two artists, but also of differences regarding their artistic provenances, their basic artistic ideas and their belonging to different cultural and artistic, and even, to some extent, political contexts.<sup>4</sup>

Connoisseurs of Josip Vaništa's oeuvre must have been particularly intrigued by a series of collages which this doyen of the Croatian neo-avant-garde art scene and spiritual father of the now legendary Zagreb art group *Gorgona* (The Gorgon, 1959–1966)<sup>5</sup> systematically produced during the “transitional” 1990s, in the form, one could say, of an artist's diary (example 1). The more so as these collages – actually, only a minority of them – were first seen only recently. First, a single one was shown at the exhibition *Abolishing the Retrospective* at the Museum of Modern Art in Zagreb (April 25 – June 16, 2013), and then a larger selection was displayed at the one-day show *Transition* at the *Villa Polesini* in Poreč on July 28 of the same year. Approximately fifteen of these works by Vaništa were shown, together with works by Oleg Kulik and

<sup>3</sup> Boris Groys, “Privatization or Artificial Paradises of Post-Communism,” in Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2008), 166.

<sup>4</sup> Although former Yugoslavia certainly was a communist country, and although critically oriented intellectuals, of whom Josip Vaništa doubtlessly was one, understood perfectly the rigid ideological nature of communism, it is undeniable that Yugoslavia did not truly belong to the Eastern Bloc and that it had some characteristics of much *more democratic* life than in the USSR and its satellites. This included an incomparably more favourable and freer environment for artistic expression and action.

<sup>5</sup> Besides Josip Vaništa, the group consisted of the painters Julije Knifer, Marijan Jevšovar and Đuro Seder, the sculptor Ivan Kožarić, the architect Miljenko Horvat, the art critic Radoslav Putar, the art theoretician Matko Meštrović, and art critic and theoretician Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos.

In the broader art-historical context, the activities of the *Gorgona* group can be linked to the ideas of artists such as Yves Klein, John Cage, the Fluxus movement and the Zero group, with whom they shared a “common origin in the interaction of the heritage of Dada and the newly discovered philosophical thought of the East”. Nena Dimitrijević, “Gorgona – umjetnost kao način postojanja,” in *Gorgona*, ed. Marija Gattin (Zagreb, Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2002), 54.

the Blue Noses.<sup>6</sup> What is intriguing about this series, of course, is not in its serial form, in the format of a kind of diary entries – such a work form is known in the history of Modernism, in various forms of expression, ranging from traditional media, such as painting, drawing or sculpture, to the most varied conceptual works. The intrigue is here fed primarily by the following question: how was it at all possible, or, slightly more circumspectly, how did it come about that such an emblematic *monk of silence*, a devotee of *emptiness* and *whiteness*, a calm and meditative melancholic, removed from the world in his composure and concentration of thought and aristocratically focused on the “highest” and “unattainable”,<sup>7</sup> how did this person, such as he is, bring his gaze to bear upon the rawest orgies of the real, upon the very dregs of the *time of transition* in which an enchanted web which cannot be untangled was woven from bloody war, mindless politics, soulless and profiteering tycoon economics, raging nationalism, a pathetically aggressive Church, a feeble-minded entertainment industry and servile media, producing together vast, nearly immeasurable human misery (example 2)? The basis for an answer to this question may perhaps best be found *hidden* in Vaništa’s artistic genesis, both in terms of *content*, of the *theme* of his artistic work, and of the *how* of his work, that is, of the manner in which it is formally articulated.

As for the *content*, or the *thematic* aspect of Vaništa’s most recent collages, there is no doubt that in a certain way they recall one of his early works, the collage *Against the War* from 1944. It should be pointed out, however, that in his collages from the *transitional* 1990s the artist’s strategy of expression has a foundation beyond the youthful rhetorical-symbolic pathos of this early anti-war visual statement.

As for the formal articulation of the work, what should be underlined here is the importance of the general principle of the taking over or appropriation of some *ready-made object* (for example, a photograph of a store window, a reproduction of the Mona Lisa, quotations from some writer or thinker, newspaper cuttings, etc.), which Vaništa has actively used from the time of his experience in *Gorgona* up to the present day. As Nena Dimitrijević points out in what is the reference work on the topic, this was a *procedé* typical not only of Vaništa, but of the internal activities of the *Gorgona* group as a whole. This meant that this “Gorgonian selection” required:

material and food in everyday life. From daily newspapers and entertainment periodicals, as well as from their own living experience, the members selected those phenomena and events which by some quality stood out from the realm of the ordinary and reasonable, the logical and foreseeable. This Gorgonian work was partly based on the principle of the ready-made: the entire intervention consisted of noticing, choosing and ‘appropriating’ or transferring from the realm of life into the realm

<sup>6</sup> This exhibition was organised as part of the event *The Artist on Vacation*, for which the idea was originated by Marinko Sudac and which was organised by the *Marinko Sudac Collection* and the *Institute for the Study of the Avant-garde* from Zagreb, as well as the *Valamar* hotel company.

<sup>7</sup> Stanko Lasić, “Svijet bez neba,” in *Ukidanje retrospektive*, ed. Nada Beroš (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2013), 29.

of art of those phenomena and situations which satisfied the Gorgonian criteria. However, unlike Duchamp, who sought a neutral, cold and unassociative object which he would join to artistic products, *Gorgona* applied a criterion appropriate to itself: events from the news or from their own lives were sought which, by their absurd, grotesque or bizarre qualities, stood out from the context of the quotidian and, in the opinion of the Gorgonians, fell into the realm of the artistic by their very nature.<sup>8</sup>

However, beyond this method of appropriation and conceptual manipulation of *ready-made objects*, it would appear that there is something equally important in regard to a hidden *inner* meaning of this formal articulation. It could be argued, namely, that throughout Vaništa's artistic experience, from the earliest days up to the present, a constant is in a certain way present, even if in varied manifestations – the *invisible* as an active constituent part of his work. This *invisible* is primarily *constructive, form-giving* (for example, in the following paintings: *Self-Portrait*, 1943; *Bread*, 1952; the drawings *Who Are We, What Are We, Where Are We Going?*, 1954; *Self-Portrait*, 1954; *Kafka*, 1954; *Marcel Proust*, 1954; *Dry Bread*, 1955; *Van Gogh's Bed at St. Rémy*, 1957; *Gide*, 1957; ...*Self-Portrait*, 2001/2006; *Landscape*, 2008; *The Empty Plate*, 2013, etc.). But the uncertainties and absences in the early paintings, as well as the emptiness of surfaces – paper or canvas – in later or recent works of this type, are not mere aesthetic fields articulating a chosen image in a dynamic relationship with material *presences* and *darknesses*, through the most delicate of nuances at the very edge of visibility. It would seem that for Vaništa this *surfacing* of representation out of nothingness, even if seductively *presented for our information* as a delicate, highly refined and suggestive material manifestation of some scene, is itself primarily conceptual, mentally determined and founded. This *constructive, form-giving* element, this inscription of drafting or painting *matter* onto an empty surface is not motivated by a desire to demonstrate the aesthetic skill of distributing signs (a skill which is evident and extraordinary) on a chosen working surface; this delicate, fragile inscription appears as a kind of plastic exegesis on the relationship itself between 'being and nothingness', on how to represent as material, as visible something that *insinuates* itself between the two without damaging or betraying the very idea of its *immateriality* and *invisibility*. Therefore, this embodiment of the *immaterial* and *invisible* in Vaništa's works is always based on the principles of reduction, scarcity, concentration and the minimalist use of expressive means. This monastic, *hermit-like* mentality of the artist is also attested to by numerous quotes in his *Thoughts for the Months*<sup>9</sup>, such as this one from Lao Tzu: "It is the emptiness inside that makes the vessel useful"<sup>10</sup>, or another one from Yves Klein: "I have realised that

<sup>8</sup> Dimitrijević, "Gorgona – umjetnost kao način postojanja," 66–67.

<sup>9</sup> Exchange of these typewritten "thoughts for the months" was one of the exclusive forms of communication among the members of the *Gorgona* group.

<sup>10</sup> Josip Vaništa, "Misli za mjesec, 1964," in *Gorgona*, ed. Marija Gattin (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2002), 16.

pictures are just the ashes of art. The authentic value of a picture, its essence, lies outside the visible”,<sup>11</sup> as well as in his own, original notes: “Exclusion was more important than what was included in a drawing. It took me to simplicity, reduction, emptiness. And then to silence.”<sup>12</sup> This inclination towards reduction, towards the invisible and the immaterial, would come to a sort of conceptual climax in the well-known proto-conceptualist work *Picture/Description* from 1964, in which the only *visible* element is a precise description of the “picture”, produced on a typewriter: the dimensions of the “picture” and a *description* of the “surface” and the “line” which “bisects” the “picture” through the middle.

In the series of these diaristic *transitional* collages, the author is also in a way *hidden* or *invisible*, that is, he is *minimally* present only as a manipulator of ready-made objects. His basic, actually, his only material are clippings from newspapers or periodicals which are then glued to white A4-size paper, usually with two, sometimes more, cuttings being placed side by side (example 3). Clearly, the artist did not need any special skill for this type of operation, nor was any particular physical effort required: only scissors or a scalpel, glue and plain white paper. It is not difficult to recognise in all this a “Gorgonian” mentality: extremely simple work operations, lack of emphasis on the “work” as an aesthetic object, a “tendency directed at the extra-aesthetic reality”, of which Vaništa himself wrote in a text devoted to *Gorgona* from 2000.<sup>13</sup> It is in this text that the artist suggests the idea of the continuity of the Gorgonian spirit:

The *Gorgona* journal ceased publication in 1966, after eleven issues, but *Gorgona* did not entirely vanish. It spoke through *Postgorgona*, then through *Post Scriptum*, through letters we wrote to each other. Its spirit was not completely vanquished. It possibly anticipated the face of the horror we are passing through. For many years we were criticised for our pessimism and tragic view of the world. In 1991, meeting me on the street, Knifer told me: ‘You were not wrong, life has become impossibility itself’.<sup>14</sup>

And, indeed, Vaništa’s later collages represent the “face of the very horror we are passing through”. More precisely, this “transitional horror” to which these works by Vaništa clearly testify, has many faces: it includes the totality of the social field, practically all spheres of social life – from politics and war, as its darkest expression, via the economy, mass culture, sports and the media, all the way to private life (example 4). However, in a typically Gorgonian manner, this horror, this totality of the

<sup>11</sup> Quoted according to Dimitrijević, “Gorgona – umjetnost kao način postojanja,” 66.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted according to Marija Gattin, “Protokol dostavljanja misli,” in *Gorgona*, ed. Marija Gattin (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2002), 39–40.

<sup>13</sup> Josip Vaništa, “Gorgona,” in *Gorgona*, ed. by Marija Gattin (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2002), 157.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 158.

tragic transitional social field, is not spoken of descriptively, no lengthy commentary is given, nor subjective experiences or reflexions; just a simple montage of press fragments, photographs and short texts lets things speak for themselves “in a form in which the essential will truly be preserved”.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes a knowledge of the local context is necessary so that the viewer or reader can establish a mental *tertium comparationis* in order to understand the connotations of the juxtaposed elements, but for the most part these things speak directly, legibly, precisely, clearly and strictly, leaving no space for any doubt about the real, tragic nature of the orgies of transitional reality. If, at the time of *Gorgona*, the use of ready-made objects from everyday life, from extra-aesthetic reality, could have been a sign, to quote Vaništa again, of the *confirmation* of “normal behaviour and normal life in a world replete with ideology”,<sup>16</sup> then this transitional collage diary appears as a sign of the *impossibility* of establishing such behaviour and such a life, at least in a world whose central axes are again determined by an ideology, albeit this time that of neo-liberal capitalism, which – the paradox! – just like its defeated communist adversary called and still calls upon the holy spirit of freedom. To use the words of Stanko Lasić on the occasion of Vaništa’s literary works, is it not precisely here that we see testimony of a “wasteland in which all illusions have been destroyed” and are not these collages by Vaništa unforgiving reports on a “world with no sky”?<sup>17</sup> Do Mandelstam’s verses quoted at the beginning of this text not echo in them?

translated by Srđan Vujica

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<sup>15</sup> S. Lasić thus describes Vaništa’s literary procedé in his book *Zapisi*. Lasić, “Svijet bez neba,” 30.

<sup>16</sup> Vaništa, “Gorgona,” 157.

<sup>17</sup> Lasić, “Svijet bez neba,” 34.



**Jugoslavija  
u finalu!**  
Posle izvanredne igre u polufinalnom meču sa Itali-



*Marinko*

**Example 1.** *Yugoslavia in the Finals.* Collage on paper, 297 x 210 mm.  
From the 1990–2000 Series. Marinko Sudac Collection





Example 2. *This Is Where My Home Is*. Collage on paper, 297 x 210 mm.  
From the 1990–2000 Series. Marinko Sudac Collection copy

Nakon žestokih okršaja u Sarajevu

## Život se postupno normalizira

U glavnom gradu BiH, iako i dalje ne rade mnoge radne organizacije i škole, gradski promet samo djelomično funkcioniра, a kriminal je u porastu, stanovnici ipak žive mirnije nego proteklih dana.



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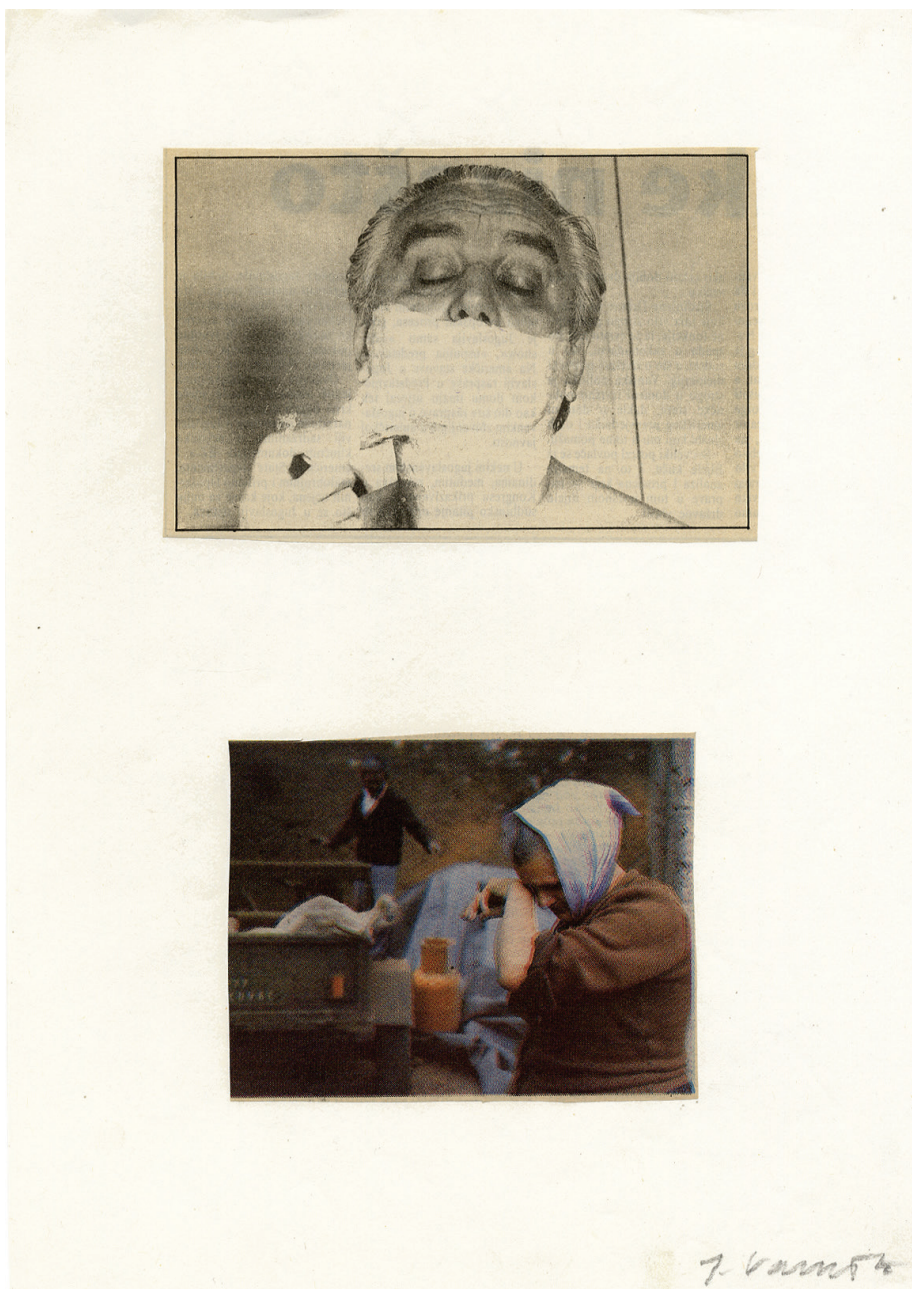


*J. Karant*

Example 3. A Nuptial Ride for Newlyweds. Collage on paper, 297 x 210 mm.

From the 1990–2000 Series. Marinko Sudac Collection copy





**Example 4.** *Morning ritual.* Collage on paper, 297 x 210 mm.  
From the 1990–2000 Series. Marinko Sudac Collection copy



Example 5. *Tourists Keep Arriving*. Collage on paper, 297 x 210 mm.  
From the 1990–2000 Series. Marinko Sudac Collection copy

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Article received: March 31, 2018  
Article accepted: April 10, 2018  
Original scholarly paper