

**Sanela Nikolić\***

*Faculty of Music, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia*

**Book Review: Miško Šuvaković, *Neo-Aesthetic Theory. Complexity and Complicity Must Be Defended*. Wien: Hollitzer Verlag, 2017, 343 pp., ISBN 978-3-99012-370-6 hbk**

A neo-aesthetic theory in the study of Miško Šuvaković *Neo-Aesthetic Theory. Complexity and Complicity Must Be Defended* appears in the way of methodologically consistent, elaborated and scholarly founded exercising a neo-aesthetics platform as a research and an interpretation of the encounter of contemporary philosophical theories with the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It is about establishing an aesthetic platform on the concepts of biopolitical philosophy by Giorgio Agamben and the post-Marxist philosophical theory of Shantal Mouffe. Miško Šuvaković applied philosophic concepts such as *forms of life, bare life, politics, the political* and *social antagonisms* to the interpretation of various disciplinary and media cases of art, meaning and function, with a focus on considering geographically differently localized neo-avant-garde artistic practices.

After the introduction, in the seven chapters of the *Neo-Aesthetic Theory* (“Politics of Theory”; “Socialism/Cold War/Post-socialism”; “Music Through Aesthetics”; “Critical Architecture”; “Performance Art”; “Post-Media Art” and “Experimental Theory”) twenty four theoretical texts were presented, which were published in Serbian or English in the period from 2003 to 2016 within the framework of Šuvaković’s monograph *Umetnost i politika*,<sup>1</sup> then in the collective monographs (*Impossible Histories – Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia 1918–1991, The Freedom of Sound. John Cage Behind the Iron Curtain, Architecture and Ideology, Istorija umetnosti u Srbiji: XX vek, Vol 1*), the collections (*Music Identities on Paper and Screen, Music/Transition/Continuities*) and scientific magazines (*Filozofski vestnik, International Yearbook of Aesthetics, Maska, Borec, New Sound, Teorija koja hoda, Journal of Performing Arts Theory*), with addition of three texts which have been published for the first time in this study.

In the first two texts – “The Modern, Modernism, and Repetition: New/Newest” and “The Return of the Political in Contemporary Aesthetics, Philosophy

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<sup>1</sup> Miško Šuvaković, *Umetnost i politika. Savremena estetika, filozofija, teorija umetnosti u vremenu globalne tranzicije* [Art and Politics. Contemporary Aesthetics, Philosophy, Theory of Art in Time of Global Transition], Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2012.

and Art” – Šuvaković elaborates on two essential foundations of the platform of his neo-aesthetic theory: the first refers to the modernist condition *newer than new* as immanent to the profile of aesthetics as a discipline, while the other implies the return of the political into aesthetics as a philosophical discipline. Šuvaković’s neo-aesthetic theory is essentially modernist because it is interested in the *new state of affairs* and it speaks about modernity “as situations of a *new sensibility* of time within contemporaneity”. (17) In the first text, the author has determined modernity as a historical time in which the present takes place through continuously critical and corrective rejection of the past moment, and with a look into the future. In the same way as different modernisms of the modern era emerged as a progressive quest for newer than new, Šuvaković’s neo-aesthetic theoretical platform reflects the *new sensibility* of its author for the theoretical establishment of the relationship between aesthetics and contemporaneity. “There is no unique notion of ‘aesthetics’ which would be irrevocably delimited by the concepts of ‘the science of the beautiful’, of ‘the philosophy of specialized sensibility’, of ‘the revolutionary or emancipatory potential of sensibility’, or of ‘the metacritique of the aesthetics and philosophy of art’. All of these outlined identifications of aesthetics have their specific synchrony and diachrony [...] Due to certain revisions of aesthetics, forgotten or completed aesthetical stories were ritualized and revised in the new conditions of human life and the political, i.e. in the antagonisms of ‘new’ time. The aesthetic now becomes a sort of contradictory cause and effect of the phenomena of politics and the political.” (141) Šuvaković’s neo-aesthetic theory originated from the standpoint that every modernity, and even modernity of aesthetics as a discipline, occurs at different times and in different spaces, more precisely, in different *politics* of different times and spaces, where those differences require sensibility for adequate conceptualizations and critical relationships towards society as a continuous clash of antagonisms, of margins and hegemonic centers, of international and local forms of life – *politics and the political*. In the second text “The Return of the Political in Contemporary Aesthetics, Philosophy and Art” Šuvaković explains the very reasons for *the return of the political* into aesthetics/aesthetic when it comes to establishing a relationship between aesthetic and modernity in his theoretical platform. “The political is defined as the multiplicity of all the antagonisms that constitute human society. Politics denotes social confrontation and attempting to resolve those social antagonisms, i.e. attempting to resolve the political, which constitutes society.” (159) After 1989, there was a transition of politics from fundamental social global issues to individual activities in the domain of identity and representations in everyday life, even in the fields of art and the sensual as the domain where the political took place. Aesthetics, now, deals with contradictory causes and effects of the phenomena of politics and the political in the field of art – elements of politics and the political are too *sensible* phenomena connected in a complex way with discourses of society.

In the following two texts of the first chapter “Troubles with the Economy, Geography and History. The Social Turn” and “Grey Zones – Political Economy through Forms of Life. Eleven Theses on Feuerbach, Fridman, Hayek and Speculative Realism”

Šuvaković applies and elaborates on the key concepts of the Agamben and Mouffe philosophy in relation to the field of art, and points to the biopolitical and post-Marxist philosophy as the basis of his neo-aesthetic theory. Šuvaković's key thesis about which benchmarks determine our modernity to which an aesthetician should be sensible to, and whose state of affairs aesthetics as a discipline needs an insight into, equally refers both to Agamben's theories and to theoretical thoughts of Mouffe and says: global capitalism is in a permanent state of crisis, i.e. in "*a permanent state of emergency*", and every economic crisis is created in order to change and control biopolitical conditions of real life: "production and reproduction of *real life* form the fundamental grounding of sociality, which may be implemented by regulating and deregulating *political economy*." (63) "Without a crisis, i.e. 'state of emergency', this disciplining could not be imposed legitimately. [...] A crisis, therefore, may be identified as a situation which claims necessary economic renewal as an excuse for a biopolitical 'drill' of population for the new conditions of consumption exchange and production." (58) Every form of production and reproduction in contemporary society is controlled by the dominant political economy of capitalism, where all *real lives* appear as *forms of life*, which means as objects or figures in a dual game of a body directed toward an object and an object directed toward an individual and collective body. The totality of the relationship between politics and the political is intertwined in the concept of *social antagonism*. In a constellation where the political is a dimension of antagonism that is constitutive to human societies and politics is a set of practices and institutions by which the order is created that organizes human coexistence in the context of the conflict based on the political, art can belong to both areas. The conflict between *esthesis* and *noesis* to which the philosophical aesthetics of the enlightenment was focused was transposed in Šuvaković's neo-aesthetics to a conflict between politics and the political resulting in social antagonisms and a permanent state of emergency as attempts to overcome the political that constitutes the social of our contemporary lives.

The second chapter "SOCIALISM. COLD WAR. POSTSOCIALISM" combines several case studies in which societies of socialism, the Cold War and post-socialism are regarded as societies of antagonisms both at the mutual level and on the internal plane, and various case studies are theorized as forms of the political. It is pointed to examples of the Cold War confrontations of the ruling Bloc cultures, i.e. engaged and Party-oriented artistic creativity in the East (the text "The Aesthetics of Disruption. Platforms of Avant-Garde Production in Socialist Yugoslavia and Serbia"); a conceptual art in Yugoslavia as a complex series of processes which provoked, criticized and theoretically interpreted the anomalies of modernism in social realism is discussed (the text "Conceptual Art. The Yugoslav Case"); it is indicated in a process of opening up and hybridization of the closed and canonically determined domain of modernist music toward free experimentation, transgression, and the interdisciplinary search for new modalities of musical and extra-musical explorations (the text "Beyond Borders. John Cage, Cold War Politics and Artistic Experimentation in the Socialist Federal republic of Yugoslavia"). The second chapter as a whole acts as an example of

a new history that illustrates Šuvaković's view that "there is no single coherent and integrative history of 20th-century art, but only a multitude of competing narratives of interpretation that we call histories or accept as history in relation to struggles between competing artistic, cultural, social, i.e. political platform." (84)

This chapter is followed by a series of chapters in which author deals with various artistic disciplines in relation to key concepts, terms and problem points of his neo-aesthetic theory, that is, interprets various cases of music, architecture, art performances, avant-garde dance, and post-media practices as manifestations of antagonistic relations between politics and the political. In the chapter "MUSIC THROUGH AESTHETICS" (the texts "The Phenomenology of the Screen (and/or/as) Event. Musical De-Ontologisation", "Aesthetics, Politics and Music. The Context of Contemporary Critical Theory", and "Music and Politics: the Reconstruction of Aesthetics and Contemporary World") he theoretically develops the thesis that "music is not only the representative of politics and the political, but also an esthetic – meaning sensible at the individual and collective level – potential of generating society and the social." (149) As for architecture, in the chapter "CRITICAL ARCHITECTURE" (the texts "General Theory of Ideology. Architecture" and "Architecture as Cultural Practice") Šuvaković examines certain cases of architectural practices in line with the claim that "architecture is essentially a political and ideological practice that uses its techno-aesthetic and techno-artistic strategies to participate in the organization of individual and collective human life, as well as in representing the symbolic and imaginary field of visibility of a society for itself and other." (164) The fifth chapter "PERFORMANCE ART" (the texts "Technologies of Performance in Performance Art. Concepts and Phenomenological Research"; "The Avant-Garde: Performance and Dance. Ideologies, Events, Discourses"; "Discourses and Dance. An Introduction to the Analysis of the Resistance of Philosophy and Theory towards Dance"; "Theoretical Performance") was meant to be a history of art performances and avant-garde dance which was written from the standpoint that the studies in question were the ones which "strive for immanence in a political sense, and that means to working with sociality." (228) The sixth chapter "POST-MEDIA ART" deals with various cases of artistic practices that Šuvaković designates as "art in the age of culture that emerges with the production of global empires, from the USA to EU, in a post-Cold War age." (221). Post-media practices as a hybrid linking of various artistic, poetic, and extra-artistic phenomena in the presentation of political, aesthetic, ethical, and poetic artistic ideas are characteristic as "the new art in the age of culture resides in its emerging from the centers autonomies of the macro-political order into an art with conspicuous cultural functions in the new reconfiguration of media and actuality." (211) Different manifestations of post-media art were discussed: how a woman attained subjectivity with a voice distinguishing her body as female in artistic work of Katalin Ladik (the text "Appropriations of Music. Postmedia Music"); the concept of research in art and the concept of experimental art as a planned and organized research situation leading toward 'the artistically' new (the text "Beyond Paper. Postmedia and Flexible Art"); Bio

Art which denotes those art practices that are based on a spectacularizing working with biological and biopolitical systems and practices and where forms of life become a kind of post media in artistic acting (the text “Bio Art. Pre Human/The Human/The Posthuman”); problem of (e)migrating and globalization of life in work of contemporary artist Jun Yang who works with strategies and tactics of successful and unsuccessful functional and de-functionalized translating in moving not only between two countries or two continents, but also by moving between two transitional civilization orders of producing life (the text “Simultaneously Always, Now and Every Where. A Real Fiction”); work of Tomislav Gotovac who “shows discomfort a man can feel inhibiting his own body, or forcing his body to function in a strictly controlled micro-social context expressing a new sensibility about living at the margins of society which was characteristic of the counter-culture of the 1960s.” (295, the text “Multiple Political/Sexual Bodies. Between the Public and the Intimate”); Susan Bee and Mira Schor as artists who entered the realm of reconstruction of ‘painterly defiance’ to the domination of the totally mediated production, communication and consumption characteristic for the global neo-liberalism and thus established a radicalized leftist, feminist and auto-critical process of re-examine the contradictory relations between the public and the private (the text “Auto-criticism of Subjectivisation. Painting as Postmedia Politics”).

Ending his study with a chapter called “EXPERIMENTAL THEORY” Šuvaković points to the possibility of realizing neo-aesthetics as a hybrid theoretical genre when, at the site of the expected consistent theoretical meta-language, its asymmetric narrative appears corresponding to the genre of the literary essay. In the text “A Narrative. An Utterly Ordinary Evening – *PETIT a*” there is a narrative in a form of a dialogue about the artist Živko Grozdanić, while the text “A Claustrophobic Event. Bare Life” deals with an installation of a Croatian artist Tomo Savić Gecan from the exhibition Manifesta 3 in Ljubljana in 2000 where the artist works with a non-space and the *zero degree* experience. The installation in question was set up by Savić Gecan as a completely empty white room with phosphorescent lighting and one sliding wall. Šuvaković’s experimental narrative that talks about “a captured girl in a shrinking room” indicates the ‘felling’ of *bare life*, indeed a *form of life* expiring in space which, for unknown reasons, almost imperceptibly runs out, can be attributed to Savić Gecan’s works.

In this study the aesthetic theory reappears from philosophy, it is expressed as neo-aesthetic because it is formulated in new social conditions and draws concepts from the philosophy that has been reconstructed as (bio)political philosophy. Šuvaković’s neo-aesthetic platform as a theory based on contemporary (bio)political philosophy shows that aesthetics as a discipline still adapts to the conditions of its contemporaneity and that it is possible to consistently perform and elaborate new aesthetic theory through a detailed analysis of various examples of artistic practices. It is a neo-aesthetic theory that through essential conceptual hubs of the theoretical platform sees the *complexity* and *complicity* of its modernity in which “life is unwound

and unwinding between the public and the private, depicted and undepicted – in a *permanent state of emergency*”. (11) Šuvaković states that “opposite to the communist revolution, bureaucratic communism, the crisis of real socialism, transitions, nationalist paranoid hysteria, the establishment of global neo-liberalism and global crises [...] there is a recurrence, in the lines of the *letter* which follows, with the only weapons which modern man has been able to build-up in his resistance to a *permanent state of emergency*, and this is a minimum rationality, a critical approach and a radical analysis.” (11) If the *state of emergency* is a norm today, if we are caught in the time and space of super-surveillance, control and regulation, then the *theory* is the only possible resistance to that norm, as a form of rational, critical thinking that is directed at what is both metaphysically and existentially caught between “undepicted, mute life and depicted enunciated life” (12), and that is what we simply call *life*. Therefore, *Neo-Aesthetic Theory* speaks not only about certain art practices during the 20<sup>th</sup> and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also about the life that has been played out between antagonisms and crises of modernity, and in relation to which the aesthetic platform is re-actualized as a discipline which recognizes the totality of man’s existence.