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**The Sublime Forms of Contemporary Art
Review of the book by Nadežda Elezović, *Meta-Spiritual
Art in Croatia [Metaspiritalna umjetnost u Hrvatskoj]*,
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The book by Nadežda Elezović, PhD, a curator and professor at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Art History, is an exceptionally valuable study of a phenomenon that emerged alongside the historical avant-garde as the latter settled scores with the metaphysical legacy of Western art history. In other words, the book speaks of the problem of abolishing and overcoming the divine and the sacred within the idea of a synthesis of art and life in a new society of modern industrial production, whereby the mythical-religious, metareferential framework of the notion of art loses credibility. In a spiritual sense, the issue of the absolute is crucial for understanding avant-garde art in the cases of both Kazimir Malevich and Marcel Duchamp. Moreover, we should not forget that Wassily Kandinsky was the artist-thinker who genuinely addressed the relation between the spiritual and modern art in his book *On the Spiritual in Art*. Nadežda Elezović's study is based on the research originally presented in her doctoral dissertation titled *Meta-Spiritual Art in Croatia in the Second Half of the 20th Century*. The basic intention, therefore, is to demonstrate the recontextualization of the notion of the spiritual in the post-avant-garde and postmodernism, within a context of Croatian art production in the second half of the 20th century.

The introductory chapter traces the connection between art and religious themes from antiquity and sacral Christian art to modernism and the avant-garde, especially in abstract art and its main protagonists, such as Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Malevich. In this matter, the author claims that Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy and congenial mystical teachings possibly provide the key to the emergence of a certain branch of abstract painting, notably with Kandinsky's organic abstraction, Mondrian's neoplasticism, and the suprematism of Malevich. Despite the fact that modern art has shed the referential framework of monotheist religion, the remnant within the structures of Modernism and the Avant-garde, as well as Neo-avant-garde, post-modern, and contemporary art, can be designated as meta-spiritual art. Therefore, the author endeavors to introduce this dynamic realm of diverse approaches to 'the

spiritual in art’ as a novel interdisciplinary domain within the humanities, especially within art history and art theory. In this connection, it is always worthwhile recalling an incident that took place in the early 1970s in Bonn. During his lecture to rebellious post-1968 students, the shaman of conceptual-performing art, Joseph Beuys, answered a question posed by an already nervous attendee in the great hall where the ‘event’ took place. When asked why he keeps talking about God, although the lecture’s subject is the essence of contemporary art, Beuys retorted: “Aber Gott und die Welt ist die Kunst!” [“But God and the world is the art!”]

Nadežda Elezović sets out with the premise that understanding the phenomenon of the spiritual and meta-spiritual in 20th-century art importantly requires observing its liminal status in relation to the reigning currents of modernism and postmodernism. It is therefore essential to show how, due to the omnipresent spirit of materialism, deconstruction, and formalist theoretical approaches, art that questions the spiritual and mystical must necessarily manifest as the Other. Nevertheless, the 1980s already saw a shift in artistic practices, exhibition activity, and, to some extent, art theory, along with an intensified interest in spiritual art. Thus, Nadežda Elezović refers to the impossibility of a ‘positive’ approach to these phenomena and tendencies, as the complexity of the entire range of layers and means used by visual art in exploring the spiritual and meta-spiritual requires a decisive theoretical turn. That is, to grasp the integral picture of art production and the autoreferentiality of artists dedicated to the sacred and mystical ‘today’, one must cross over from an interdisciplinary to a transdisciplinary consideration of art. In a chapter titled “History of Research” (pp. 26–60), the author presents the initial hypotheses of her scientific research. These are, first and foremost, the reasons that led her to undertake the research, given the heightened interest among international researchers in the interdisciplinary domain of art theory during two research waves, one in the 1970s and the other in the 1980s. Connecting their international experiences in thematizing this problem, Nadežda Elezović demonstrates that, considering the Croatian meta-spiritual art’s experience, particularly in the cases of Mirko Zrinščak and Boris Demur, establishing a precise theoretical origin for interpretation is necessary, as it was absent from prior research.

The author adopts a definition of meta-spiritual art from *Pojmovnik teorije umjetnosti* [*Lexicon of Art Theory*] and *Pojmovnik suvremene umjetnosti* [*A Glossary of Contemporary Art*] by Miodrag Šuvaković. The subject at hand is the recontextualization of the spiritual in the art practices of the post-avant-garde and postmodernism, as well as the aspiration to situate esoteric, religious, occult, magical, and mythical traditions within a contemporary artist’s framework. In this manner, the author’s complex insight into the state of things concerning meta-spirituality becomes a historical-artistic account of both genesis and transformation of the notions of spirituality and meta-spirituality in the Croatian art of the second half of the 20th century, hence the artworks of Mirko Zrinščak and Boris Demur become the art case studies. The ‘theoretical platform’, referred to as such by the author, presumes the above-mentioned theorist Miodrag Šuvaković, along with the studies of Tomaž Brejc, who introduced

the notion of ‘transcendental conceptualism’, and Renato Barilli, who is credited with instituting ‘mystical conceptualism’.

In the chapter titled ‘Theoretical Studies of Meta-spirituality in the Spaces of Former Yugoslavia’ (pp. 61–106), the research of meta-spirituality in art focuses on the cultural space of the state that formerly existed in these territories. The author analyses magazines and other publications such as *Mentalni prostor* No. 3/1986 and No. 4/1987, as well as the translations of essays by international researchers published in 1990 in the Novi Sad-based magazine *Polja* No. 377-378. At the time, the theory began to influence art, while interdisciplinary correlations between myth and religion, as well as between science and philosophy, became important to art production. Exemplifying Miodrag Šuvaković’s analysis of the model of spiritual tendencies, the author argues that meta-spiritual art, in connection with the symbolic systems of philosophical-religious traditions, results from an artist’s autoreferential statement about their views on art. When theory directly affects the deliberation of what conceptual art endeavors to execute within the space of action-image-activity, then the very discipline of art history finds itself under a question mark.



The chapter titled ‘Reception of the Spiritual in Abstract Art in Croatian History and Art Theory’ (pp. 107–145), places the emphasis on the context of the spiritual in abstract painting, while the strategies of statements concerning meta-spirituality get manifested through Zen and visual art, mystical conceptualism, and transcendental conceptualism, all the way to the dematerialization of the artistic object. We

are engaging in a deeper analysis of authorial approaches to interpreting the phenomenon of the spiritual in Croatian art of the second half of the 20th century. The author shows how Rudi Supek's 1953 debate, titled *Konfuzija oko astratizma* [*Confusion Around Abstractionism*], can be regarded as an early statement on the spiritual in modern abstract painting. In this debate, Supek – a renowned sociologist who's otherwise associated with the 1960s Praxis School of the so-called creative Marxism that originated in the former Yugoslavia – polemicizes with the positions held by the artists of the EXAT'51 Group. It is rather interesting to see how the views of Rudi Supek, not only regarding the origins of contemporary art but also concerning Sartre and French Existentialism, were in fact dogmatic theorizing whose ultimate intention ended up as an utter failure in interpreting both Existentialism and Marx as the crown authority for grasping the social consequences of the art's status in capitalism. Recollecting the text above is called for in any 'present' recontextualization of Supek's views. Krleža's critical liberation from Stalinist dialectical materialism and theory of reflection, as well as socialist realism, is far more important for the sociological comprehension of contemporary art during those crucial years than almost all the, mainly orthodox, contributions of Marxist theorists (Boris Žihel and Rudi Supek) that were active in the former Yugoslavia in the 1950s, with rare exceptions like those seen in the philosophical opinion of Vanja Sutlić.

This chapter ends with the analyses of treatises by art historians and art theorists such as Zdenko Rus, Marijan Susovski, and Jerko Denegri, in which the spiritual is linked to the origin of the neo-avant-garde group GORGONA. The author endeavors to correlate notions like emptiness, absurdity, and monotony – connoted as aesthetic categories – with the more recent approaches to the painting of Julije Knifer that are exemplified in the texts by Nataša Lah and Žarko Paić, which speak about the recontextualization of spirituality in contemporary art.

Arguably, the most interesting theoretical chapter in the book is 'Postulating the Theoretical Platform of Meta-spirituality' (pp. 146–204), which presents the theoretical platform of meta-spiritual art through the issue of the invisible within aesthetics. In this regard, Nadežda Elezović articulately argues the difference between the historical Avant-garde and the Neo-avant-garde regarding the notion of spirituality, demonstrating her claim through the case of Peter Bürger and, consequently, Aby Warburg. Furthermore, the author deliberates Walter Benjamin's loss of aura with the rise of technical reproduction, attempting to derive a meeting place between the spiritual and meta-spiritual from Benjamin's theory of post-auratic art. This chapter is also the most technically elaborate, as it enriches the discussion with contributions from George Bataille and Jean Baudrillard, the pivotal thinkers of Post-structuralism. Furthermore, the chapter's concluding section initiates a debate on the meta-spiritual in postmodernist art theory by examining the contributions of Arthur Danto and Rosalind Krauss.

The book's final chapter (pp. 205–293) presents the case studies of artwork by Mirko Zrinščak, as well as works by Boris Demur, whose oeuvre ranges from a sublime

form to a metaphysical contextualization of the sign of the spiral as a holographic image of spiral art. In hermeneutic terms, this chapter masterfully reconciles theoretical discursiveness and inductive insight within the meaning horizon of the pivotal artists of Croatian spiritual and meta-spiritual art of the second half of the 20th century.

The Conclusion (pp. 294–311) recapitulates the study's basic arguments. Also, this is where Nadežda Elezović credibly demonstrates how the sculptural oeuvre of Mirko Zrinščak and the spiral cycle of Boris Demur can be read within the paradigm of meta-spiritual art. The author's theoretical innovations include the neologisms of meta-auratic art and neoritual art. Though both are applicable to analyzing this direction of contemporary art, they also demand a deeper critical confrontation, effectively adding to the gravitas of this, first and foremost, a precisely and systematically articulated study.

Drawing on her sovereign knowledge of literature from the sphere that pursues interdisciplinary connections between art history and art theory on one hand, and contributions from the other fields of humanities that thematize the issue of meta-spiritual art on the other hand, Nadežda Elezović inaugurates a new research domain in Croatia and does so in an original manner. Therefore, this study can be considered the initiator for all future research of this kind. Endowed with a clear methodological setup, the study demonstrates that, epistemologically speaking, the Croatian art practice of the second half of the 20th century testifies to the rise of tendencies that, within the framework of postmodern art, possess more than the eclecticism of the main currents of late-20th-century art. Though the notion of meta-spiritual art was frequently part of the liminal discourse on visibility, due to the reigning paradigm of the so-called logocentrism as interpreted by Jacques Derrida, one cannot doubt its importance for understanding the new relation that postmodern and contemporary art manifest regarding the mystical and sacred.

A special value of this book lays with a fact that it unlocks a possibility for a different scientific consideration of a phenomenon which cannot remain liminal, as it is clear that the art history of the 20th century, both in the case of historic Avant-garde and Neo-avant-garde, is in the sign of the autoreferential complex of the idea of art as the synthesis of image and text. The author differentiates between modern notions of spirituality and those of postmodern meta-spirituality. Concerning the latter, she relies on Aby Warburg's anthropological course of thought, while Walter Benjamin remains her crucial authority when analyzing the relation between the ritual and the occurrence of 'artwork's aura'.

It is necessary to emphasize that the author applies the notional complexes of 'meta-auratic art' and 'neoritual function of an artwork' in the art case studies exploring the artworks by Mirko Zrinščak and Boris Demur. I hold this to be an appropriate theoretical means of connecting a referential subject and the autoreferential practice of an artist's activity. The analysis of a link between spiritual and post-avant-garde clearly points to the consequences of confronting the essence of contemporary art with its own origin point, posited within a triad of scientific notions of projects,

research, and experiments concerning the outcome of ‘the epoch of purposeful rationality’. However, that is not the issue. The foremost problem is that the direction of reflecting on this meta-spirituality has become a necessary step in understanding the relation between history as a meaningful development and art as an occurrence that provides the former with a speculative-reflective level, in whose absence life itself has no ‘higher’ meaning.

The author of this book presented a truly adept insight into this thematic transgression. Simultaneously, she reaffirmed whatever remained all but hidden and liminal to the research gaze.