

Oh, Zoran Pavelić!

The presentation of Zoran Pavelić through his solo show in MMSU Rijeka is our contribution to the evaluation of his work and at the same time an attempt to explain how he occupied a special position on the Croatian art scene. Pavelić has been active since the mid-1980s, navigating the areas of diverse production which are anchored in multimediality, unspectacular aspects of work, and invisible and commonplace behavioral forms and gestures, often not aiming at aesthetical pleasure but pointing attention to the need for action. The exhibition will display in segments a number of works that are mutually interlaced, prompting non-linear reading and thus bypassing the logic of chronology. Particular focus will be placed on the works that represent his creative principles and exciting ideas.

Zoran Pavelić's oeuvre has largely followed the creative principles of Fluxus and Neo-Dada. He has developed several distinctive artistic procedures that can be subsumed under key notions such as authorship and signature, the collective and anonymous author, high culture and pop-culture, artistic vs. non-artistic, connection between life and art, spirit and matter, while cultivating the principles of process, non-objectness, incompleteness, ephemerality and appreciation of coincidence.

The facade of the MMSU displays two banners as a lead-in to the exhibition; *Idea of Freedom*¹ on the front side, and *Centre of Periphery* on the lateral side of the building, facing the Benčić Art District in the making. They proclaim that the author's artistic position is built on the premise that art needs to be free. The seemingly worn-out idea of freedom has to be thoroughly considered from all angles – firstly, as an idealistic position that Pavelić wants to reach through his life practice devoid of compulsion and burden of utility (in terms of well-known connections: artistic work vs. art market vs. profit, or successful artist vs. famous artist vs. rich artist). By accepting free art, which imposes its own rules, the artist places himself in front of an impossible requirement and then faces a dilemma: if art is free, does that mean that the artist is free as well (free from the requirements of free art)? If we look for an answer on the other banner on the facade, *Centre of Periphery*, then Pavelić's answer is ambiguous. It seems that he approves the idea of artist's freedom but not as a starting point but as the consequence. For freedom is not established *a priori*, but through action on the margins, or more precisely, through creation on the margins. There is a thesis that innovation in art always comes from the margins.² However, Pavelić does not necessarily follow this train of thought. He observes the asymmetric relationship between the center and

¹ Ben Vautier's print *Ethnies en Lutttes pour le Droit à la Différence*, 1979.

² Giovanni Lista, "Dada e l'avanguardia", u *Dada l'arte della negazione*, Comune di Roma, 1994., pp. 39-54.

periphery, which proves to be beneficial inasmuch as it promotes the vitality of the idea of freedom and prevents it from dozing off in self-sufficiency.³ It has to be said, though, that acting under the burden of constant demand for free art requires immense responsibility toward this requirement.⁴ Thus we have to leave room for the possibility that the idea of freedom is just nominal and that categorical statements such as *Art is Useless*⁵ are not here to fulfill the condition of freedom (neither do they guarantee freedom) but represent an *wakening mechanism* of creation, which Pavelić develops through many of his works and significantly suggests as the title of his Rijeka solo show. In a film encyclopedia, Pavelić found an explanation for man's innate reaction to stimuli which the psyche sublimates into spontaneous artistic expression. It has to be assumed that Pavelić responded to the term of spontaneity since it is one of the characteristics of his work procedures. But what is it that makes him so vibrant? Maybe, it is the very thing that art canon does not like to encounter – the formal and stylistic incoherence and unpredictability, and also his insistence on renewing his own as well as others' ideas that have already been inscribed in the mental map of contemporary art. He responds to them according to the principle of *wakening mechanism*, employing procedures of appropriation, quotation, re-enactment and adoration. Tentatively speaking, he developed an eclectic language that partly renews the avant-garde idea of art with a mission, so it has to be constantly fed and reminded of what is worthy in it, and on the other hand, he undermines the idea of progress and individuality and the notion of a unique, one-and-only author. Pavelić artistically defines himself as a transmitter and translator of messages from the overall corpus of art with the result that he uses his body as means of gestural and behavioral action. Examples can be seen in the *Invisible Actions* and *On the Very Spot* series, where he registers his own presence in an area that exhibits someone else's work. When viewing another artist's work, he does not observe the piece, nor does he try to comprehend it (understanding had already happened), but expresses a spiritual bond. Such is the case of adoration in which he evokes Gorgona group as one of his role-models. He adopts Gorgona's ideal of active non-activity. Moreover, he performs "his own" adoration with his head bent and so becomes unrecognizable on the photographs. He aims at keeping an extremely low profile or, more precisely, to an even lower bow before the artwork he faces. We can add to this corpus of preoccupations several other series, from *markings*, *prize awarding* to *Roll-Calls* where he does something completely opposite: instead of silent presence at exhibited work or author, he addresses the multitudes (those that are not present, the dead and invisible ones). This work seems

³ Several works deal that with the relationship between the center and periphery are: *The Batina Times* (2004) created at Baranja Art Colony (BUK) and is homonymous with the exhibition *The Baltic Times* in MSU Zagreb; gilded wooden sword from the Centre of Periphery -Baranya Vár (2005) with reference to a medieval fortress in Baranya Vár, of importance at those times but deleted from current memory.

⁴ In his book *Infinitely Demanding*, Simon Critchley concludes that contemporary anarchism does not target freedom but responsibility.

⁵ This refers to the famous artwork by Ben Vautier from 1968.

like a paradox because Pavelić does not summon those by whom he wants to be heard, but wants *them* to be heard.⁶

A holistic notion of togetherness correlates with art as a special place of totality, which is invoked multiple times; for example, in *The Artist's House* (2003) as a temple of artistic community, or in the work *A Long Body*, which explicates the continuity of creation and existence of an active art scene. One can recognize here the Fluxus behavior, poetic, intimate and ephemeral forms of expression available to the public through residual forms (event documents, objects that remain as artefacts after a performance, such as stands that are used in marking actions and awarding of prizes). In this sense, incoherence cannot be considered as heretic or undesirable behavior but as a natural state of things in which the artist works. Potentially, it is a field of wakening mechanism in accordance with Fluxus worldview which proclaims that within a certain situation every available object can become a creative material for art production. Zoran Pavelić creates on-the-go, spontaneously, following the logic of associative sequences, linking people and art movements into a specific art gesture which hints at synchronicity or at least a correlation of events on their meandering paths of historic (artistic) happenings. He not only documents or honors works of art and assumes a curator role, but he also sometimes awards prizes, first to Goran Trbuljak and then to Tomo Savić Gecan. This arbitrary mock act recalls a specific event from the art history, namely, Trbuljak's work from 1972 and the exhibition of the same name in MSU the following year, where he provokingly addressed the awards committee and spoke of a work he would create in the future. Pavelić follows Trbuljak's active nihilism, takes over the committee's role and on his own initiative awards the prize on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the exhibition of that work. This way he highlights the closeness of poetics of two artists of different generations at the retrospective show of Tomo Savić Gecan in the MSU during the pandemic year of 2020, and decides to award a *GT Prize* for Gecan's courage in the act of non-exhibiting.

It is worth noting that such employment of absurdity on the aesthetic and conceptual level stems from proto-Dada and Dada movements and their skepticism towards the idea that modern society can be recovered from nonsense.⁷ In this act of awarding a prize, on the one hand we can recognize irony, indicating the fundamental discrepancy with the order of things in the art world, which is falls behind as a rule, (so the artist himself awards prizes), and on the other hand, the joy that Pavelić

⁶ In 2002 in Osijek, in 2013 in Rijeka and in 2018 in Novi Sad he calls out people from cultural institutions by reading their names from mailing lists while in Branjin Vrh, he reads the names of animal species living there.

⁷ Some less known movements that developed tradition of absurdity and subversion should be mentioned as well, such as a group of artists called *Hydropathes* in Paris and *Scapigliatti* group in Milan, active from 1881 as part of the independent circle gathered around the architect Luigi Conconi, and after that *Salon des Incoherents* in Paris. They both used a prefabricated object that was given a new name with a humorous note (*readymade*) and gesture as creation. This was later employed by Duchamp, who exhibited at *the Salon of Humorists*, as part of the *Salon of the Independent Artists* in 1907-1908.

Giovanni Lista, in *Dada, L'arte della negazione*, Pallazo delle esposizioni, Roma, 1994.

feels in having the opportunity to pay respect to his colleagues in a manner that circumvents the regular procedures.⁸ Pavelić often employs the procedure of reiteration that should not be viewed as mere repetition of words or titles of artworks, namely, he elaborates a thought with various synonyms and alterations. In this manner he later renamed *The Long Body* to *Cultural Band* and *Home/Spirit* to *No One is Safe*. By developing an “original work” he often arrives at a new concept (*GT Prize* originated from *Invisible Action*).

Some of these include procedures of renaming which cause chaos in well-known syntagms, aiming at mind games with an intention to undermine the commonly accepted realities. Prone to change nomadic moods, Pavelić uses misnaming as his favorite stylistic tools: he renames *Glas Istre* daily paper into *Glas slike (Voice of Image)*; *Slobodna Dalmacija* becomes *Slobodna umjetnost (Free Art)*, *Voice in America* is changed into *Voice of Artists*. He transposes the motif of a piece of tram rail (shown in cross-section view) onto *Non-Posters* under the title *Croatia BC* (2006) and into an object medium in his work *Found* (2023). He multiplies in various alterations Kožarić’s catchphrases and Knifer’s meanders; he takes the motif of a drum and the drummer from the Joy Division album cover. By referring to his colleague artists, by citing and modifying, Pavelić implements the culture of puns and so supports the anti-progress attitudes towards society and art.⁹

All things are important for Pavelić and some are even more so. The crucial factor is chance and not the author’s will. We should mention two actions which were results of pure circumstances: in *Returning the Flag* to the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (Rijeka) in 2008, the artist returns the Albanian flag which he found in the museum storage, took by mistake and used at the *Ambient 90* exhibition in 2000. Another example is the unsuccessful attempt to replace a photograph of Joseph Beuys with the photograph of the same work signed by Pavelić as his own. He adjusts this action of switching the works, and places the photograph on the floor instead of the wall. In both cases the circumstances in which the author finds himself become an integral part of the work.¹⁰

Elaboration in several versions, formats and editions, a series of interpretations of a single theme is a methodological determinant of the Fluxus movement. Pavelić’s rich collection of non-posters

⁸ When in the mid-sixties Robert Filliou proposed an exhibition in shop windows he intended to get rid of the intermediaries and judgement of the critics, *Fluxus Codex*, The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection, Detroit in cooperation with Harry N. Abrams Inc, New York, reprint 1995, p. 244.

⁹ Lista, op. cit. p. 41.

¹⁰ The replacement of the photograph entitled *Joseph Beuys in PM* happened on 27 March 2008 in PM, at the *Conceptual Art* exhibition (Miško Šuvaković was the curator and owner of works), in: Ružica Šimunović, *Zoran Pavelić: Politički govor je suprematizam*, PLEH, Zagreb 2012, p. 170.

(they look like posters but have a different function), painted gramophone records, objects and newspapers represent a real challenge for art historians. Here is an author who does not create thematic sets, but breaks down his works into various media, transposing themes into different variations while the very labelling of works is prone to changes (posters, non-posters, *Appropriated/Appropriations*, *Semantic map*). It is the constant elements that we detect first rather than breaking points and maybe the most intriguing thing is to observe the way in which some themes correspond. Intermediality is a key trait of his opus and can be best exemplified by the way he treats gramophone records as paper, albums or artist's books. His Pleh Records have "released" around ten Pleh-boxes since 2006. He dedicates them in the form of artist books to other artists (*DM 2017*, *TG 2018*, *Der Zug nach Kassel 2022*, *Daily Arts / Marking – One Month Action 2010-2022*). Apart from Fluxus¹¹, they may also be linked to representatives of visual poetry from the sixties who changed the working principles of poetry completely. According to them, poetry can be listened to, read, watched but also chewed, touched, licked, ingested and smelled.¹² Pavelić's LP records thus cannot be listened to, but they can be observed and visually digested. The same holds true for the art book *Kultura 2011* which requires an effort of decryption on the part of the reader as it consists of fragments of various work-in-progress projects or everyday situations occurring since 1990 onwards. It seems that the author distributes them randomly since it is of primary importance to cultivate a spirit of arbitrariness and playfulness which enables the meaning to emerge accidentally.¹³

Despite the correspondence with Fluxus poetics, which advocated a non-intellectual, egalitarian and useful art, Pavelić does not strictly follow the rule. Intervention in public space titled *Political Speech is Suprematism* (1999), which certainly changed the public reception of his artistic work, is a serious academically "educated act".¹⁴ This complex statement contains elements of intellectual humor stemming from the expectation that what is written in a public space high above our heads should be crystal clear. Since this is contrary to our everyday experience, the artist decides to act accordingly. Using an apparently logical but at the same time ambiguous expression he denounces the ever-present manipulations and obscure formulations of decisions important for the public. With this expression he does not address everybody, but only the informed minority, the

¹¹ For example, Milan Knižak's *Destroyed Music* (1980) with broken and burnt LPs.

¹² Lambert Pignotti's *Eat Poetry* performance in which he handed out to the audience "chewing poems" in the form of signed consecrated hosts which read "poetry". He also performed at the Fluxus festival of new music in Wiesbaden in 1962. (Fluxus internationale Festspiele neuer Musik). Martina Corgnati, "Editions and multiplications in Italy: the fertile country, before and during Fluxus", in: *Fluxus, arte per tutti, Edizioni Italiane dalla collezione Bonotto*, Danilo Montanari, Ravenna, 2023, p. 23.

¹³ As a parallel one should mention plastic and metal versions of flux-boxes by Per Kirkeby and wooden ones by George Maciunas that resemble souvenirs rather than items of thoughtful choice. *Fluxus Codex*, p. 294.

¹⁴ Sonja Briski Uzelac: "Umjetnik kao posttotalitarni subjekt", *Život umjetnosti*, No. 64, 2001, p. 72.

cultured community for whom suprematism as a historical movement is a known fact. Thus, the declarative inclusiveness of the expression proves itself to be worthless. Pavelić denounces exclusiveness and the right to such exclusiveness. When referring to suprematism, he recalls the famous saying of Malevich – *the supremacy of pure feelings* – and condemns political speech where pure feelings are merely arbitrary since politics should not be an artistic act (should we be reminded that aesthetization of politics leads to totalitarianism?).

Zoran Pavelić does not believe in the vision of historical avant-garde movements which aims at a comprehensive social reform as it is simply impossible these days. Similarly, his request *It is important that the voice of artists be heard* does not presuppose a consecrated artist. He is motivated by the idea of anarchic subject whose presence disturbs the reigning principle of consensus as a guarantee of social balance. *Voice of an Artist* performance (2003) presented at HDLU does not employ voice in a literal sense. The format of the performance is a gag consisting of “stepping” in a circle, growing into crescendo and ending in an instinctive and abrupt standstill. The “voice” is formed metaphorically, as an echo of creative tension suffusing the semidarkness where the visitors direct their attention to the auditory aspect of the work. Talking about voice and sound, we should mention *Action in Time* video installation, exhibited in a separate room of the Museum (named Jaslice). In the video, we follow a composition of a minimalistically repetitive form on twelve drums positioned in a circle. On the central drum is a drawing of Knifer’s meander which can be contextually construed as a sign of continual duration, especially if we take into account that this work is coupled with the installation *Centred* (1979. – 2023) where a shoe is crushed to the floor with a five-meter-long bar pressing it down. To paraphrase Malevich: these two works are placed in an artistic relationship according to “pure feeling” and make a *suprematist composition (a feeling of existence)* that lasts in the rhythm of sound and the volume of space simultaneously. Associations again move in several directions: a motif of drum brings to mind the artist’s voice that has to be heard in order to create the feeling of tension, that is, alert for an immediate action. The bar, stretching from floor to ceiling and crushing Pavelić’s shoe resolves the conflicting emotions of limitation and infinity.

Along these lines is a video called *Circling-Pendulum* (1968-2011-2018) where the author blends the visual and auditory aspect of the work. The recording shows a black and white photograph of the HDLU building at a time when it displayed a slogan *Political Speech is Suprematism*. The photograph is framed and laid on the floor while Pavelić records it, holding the camera in his hand and circling around it. The impression he tries to convey to the audience is a certain kind of synesthesia, matching moving images and sound background. It is obvious that Pavelić is guided by his feelings when he chooses *Pendulum Music* (1968) by Steve Reich in which pendulums swing in

front of loudspeakers, creating feedback tones in order to emphasize the analogy of his own circling motion and swinging pendulums. In his own distinctive way, he repeats the thought from the action performed in 1999, as it is still relevant and the issue of (in)security of human existence and home is latently present. For Pavelić, repetitive performance is not just a re-enactment but (*supremacist*) a feeling of rhythm.¹⁵

¹⁵ Kazimir Malevich explicitly states: “The suprematist square and the forms emanating from it may be compared to primitive brushstrokes (signs) of a prehistoric man which together do not represent an ornament but a feeling of rhythm.” *Nepredmetni svijet*, Centar za kulturnu djelatnost, Galerija Nova, Zagreb, 1981., p. 74.