

THE VOICE OF REBELLION



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**Performing in Public Spaces as Activism,
Belgrade in the 1990's, the case of ŠKART.**

KEY TERMS

War

Art activism

Performance

Public space

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ABSTRACT

We often think that activism must be imposing and noisy, whereas the collective Škart, consisting of Prota and Žole, proved us wrong with their small-scale, abstract and positive activist interventions in Belgrade in the 1990s during the war in former Yugoslavia. The analysis of their philosophy as performers or self-identified poets, as well as their public art actions, led the research towards identifying three strategies used by Škart for their poetic activism. The first one is the collective's autonomy from the art world's expectations of their practice and status as artists. The second is their urge to bring their art pieces to the streets, analysing what it means to be in a public space and the room it leaves for audiences to start dialogues and bridge communities. And the third one is the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Škart collective believes in the importance of visual identities and abstract activism for the continuity and longevity of their messages and practices. This research is supported by three interviews that provided a considerable amount of exclusive insights by Prota, one of the two members of the Škart collective, Milena Dragičević Šesić, an expert on ex-Yugoslav art activism and Miroslav Karić, curator and author. All three are witnesses and audiences of the time.

To my mom

And a special thank you
to my incredible interviewees Milena, Prota and Mićko,
as well as my helpful tutors Natasha Adamou and Guy Barton.

INTRODUCTION

How can activism have positive impact in hegemonic socio-political context? This research focuses on Belgrade in the 1990's decade. This decade is about the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the independence wars, the ethnic conflicts, and the various war crimes that happened during Slobodan Milošević's era. In a time where democracy and freedom of expression were at risk, citizens expressed their opposition to the oppressive regime, on the streets. Amongst the citizens were artists, and the art sphere in Belgrade was vibrant. We found all kinds of artistic practices that were oppositional, and thus activist. The different activist strategies used by the art agents of that period are all valid and impactful, of course. However, this research will focus on one art collective, Škart, constituted of Protá and Žole. We will analyse some of the collective's artistic interventions from 1990 to 2000, and examine the specificity and benefits of their practice, considering the context and the other engaged art agents of that time. Protá and Žole felt the urge to show their discontent towards the political regime in power, and that initiated their activist practice. They believed in the power of community: connecting people together and starting dialogues. And their strategy: the use of a new language, their own language. This language, or artistic practice, found its way into the field of poetic, graphic and positive activism.

This research will dissect three important strategies of Škart's collective on their socially engaged activism. It will begin with the importance for Škart to be independent, morally, and financially. They rejected the project-based approach or any affiliation to demanding art institutions. They were not depending on anyone but themselves. And that allowed them total freedom of expression and choice. That's the reason they prefer being called poets rather than artists. The relationship between art and poetry will be analysed, through the philosophy of Marcel Broodthaers as well. Because for both, poetry had an important place in their practice. This can be

explained by the fact that they preferred to suggest ideas rather than impose them. Their art pieces are always filled with poetry and abstraction. In their practice, anonymity was also a key aspect. They wanted their artwork to be louder than their names, as artists. They strongly believed in the power of their interventions. However, to be able to realise these, they needed funding. In this segment, the thoughts of Boris Groys will be enounced on the importance of independence in art activist practice, and Georges Soros Foundation importance in these times will be introduced.

Following this first analysis of the importance of Škart's autonomy, the research will lead us through the urge of going in the streets. The concept of public space will be introduced, and it will be linked to the numerous protests that were happening in Belgrade throughout the 1990s decade. A question will then arise: what is the difference between citizen protesting discontent and activist artists performing? This question will be answered through Chantal Mouffe's thinking on the concept of "antagonistic" and "agonistic" behaviours. We will then link all these thoughts to Škart's practice and analyse how the use of public spaces in a purpose of art activism can open dialogues. But also recognise the risks the streets bring the activist art practices performing during dangerous hegemonical times.

However, this understanding will lead us through the questioning of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. We will acknowledge the aesthetic of hate that was prominent in that period and the determination of Škart to bring an aesthetic of hope. This will be supported by Walter Benjamin's thoughts on "aestheticisation of politics" and "politicisation of aesthetics". The discussion will thus lead us to understand the new language Škart suggests through their activism: small scale, positive and poetic activism. That will be opposed to Led Art's activist interventions. We will analyse, interpret, and compare some of Led Art and Škart's public activist art interventions. And we will acknowledge the benefits Škart's poetic, abstract practice brings in terms of continuity and adaptability of their art in time, even if the context has changed.

METHODOLOGY

This research comes from a place of trying to understand the history of a country I call home, Serbia, but which not long ago was part of a bigger country that no longer exists, Yugoslavia.

I am half Serbian, and half of my family lived in Belgrade and suffered the catastrophe of the bombing in the 1990s in ex-Yugoslavia; their traumatic experience is still an open wound in the collective memory and a substantial part of my heritage. My mother fled from Belgrade during the war to move to Brussels, and my urge to understand my mother's history was the starting point of my research. Primarily, I delved into the geo-political and historical context of the former Yugoslavia in the chaotic decade roughly from 1900 to 2000. This research took place on different levels: books and essays on the socio-political context, official archives and images, speeches, movies, series, and cultural and artistic projects. But also, some key references are the divergent collective stories and memories I have heard and discussed with my family and friends from Belgrade.

Going from data collection to data analysis and having acquired all this knowledge, I decided to pursue my research through topic-guided semi-structured interviews¹. And I conducted three interviews in Belgrade. This field-based methodology was essential for me in this research, and I had the chance to hear the narratives of important professionals engaged in that period: Milena Dragičević-Sesić,

¹ Charmaz, K., & Belgrave, L. (2012). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. *The SAGE handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft*, 2, 347-365.

Miroslav Karić and Dragan Protić. In other words, I interviewed people who were direct witnesses, and by that, I mean an institutional figure (Milena), an engaged art curator (Miroslav) and an artist performer (Dragan). These three individuals will be introduced, and we will discuss the material I got from the interviews throughout the dissertation. However, a longer et deeper description of these interviews can be found in the appendix of this dissertation. However, the interview with Dragan Protić moved me, and I realised Škart collective had very little documentation on their practice, especially their work in the 1990s. The archives being essentially photographs, I wanted to add a layer of documentation to their practice by interviewing them. However, I am aware that for this dissertation, I only have one of the two voices that make up Škart.

The dissertation then took a turn: I focused on the practice of Škart collective and their activist public performances during the decade between 1990-2000. I believe Škart was important and powerful by their small-scale interventions in the streets. They were the initiators of dialogues between people at a time when social fragmentation was taking place. Their artistic actions were discrete and poetic while being extremely engaged. And I decided to examine the strategies of their subtle activism. In a time when democracy was unstable, freedom of speech was claimed, and Škart had a particular way of advocating it. I chose to focus my case study on this collective because I believe in the power of their practice. To this day, Škart is a collective still active in the art sphere and believes in the continuity of its practices.

I believe that the multifaceted research process, the personal and family interest and the valuable material I obtained from the interviews are key elements of the methodology used for this thesis.



Milena Dragičević-Šesić



Dragan Protić



Miroslav Karić

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Serbian art scene of the last decades has developed in a specific social and political context. After WW1, Josip Broz Tito founded the Yugoslav communist regime, of which he remained the main leader until his death in 1980. From 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall, to the collapse of the Eastern bloc, to then the fall of the communist political and economic system, the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia that led to the violent civil wars of the 1990s, that then led to the international isolation with the embargo imposed, and finally, after 2000, the process of social democratisation and the neo-liberal transition. These circumstances were not typical of the rest of the Eastern European countries, at least not in such a dramatic way, and they have left a lasting influence on Serbia's local artistic and cultural practices.

A FEW HISTORICAL EVENTS

Yugoslavia was a state in South-Eastern Europe that existed under different names and forms between 1918 and 2006 (until 1992, it comprised seven present-day countries: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Northern Macedonia, and Kosovo). The wars in Yugoslavia were a series of violent conflicts that occurred on the territories of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2001. Two wars took place, affecting all six republics of the now-defunct Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Most of the wars ended in peace agreements involving full international recognition of the new states, but with enormous human costs and economic damage to the region. Initially, the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) sought to preserve the unity of

the whole of Yugoslavia by crushing secessionist governments. However, it came under increasing influence from the Serbian government of Slobodan Milošević, which evoked Serbian nationalist rhetoric and wished to use the Yugoslav cause to preserve the unity of the Serbs in a single state. As a result, the JNA lost Slovenes, Croats, Kosovo Albanians, Bosnians and ethnic Macedonians and effectively became a Serbian army.

According to a 1994 UN report, the Serbian side did not aim to restore Yugoslavia but to create a "Greater Serbia" from parts of Croatia and Bosnia. And as claimed by the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić, "I don't see what's wrong with Greater Serbia. There's nothing wrong with a greater Germany, or with Great Britain." The tone and the transparency of this thinking show the general intention of those in power for a "Greater Serbia"¹. Often described as the deadliest conflicts in Europe since World War II, the wars were marked by numerous war crimes, including genocide, crimes against humanity and rape. The Bosnian genocide was the first European crime to be officially judged as genocidal since World War II, and many critical individual participants have subsequently been charged with war crimes.

In 1989, Slobodan Milosevic became the country's leader until 2000. Then, the 'democratic' parliamentary system was introduced, at least on paper. But this decade is remembered as the period of Milosevic's 'soft' dictatorship, the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the bloody civil wars between 1991 and 1995 in Slovenia, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Croatia. It was also the time of the international isolation of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (composed of Serbia and Montenegro after the split of the other former Yugoslav republics) because of its involvement in the war. By the end of the decade, the war was also being fought in Kosovo, a province (or former province, depending on the question) in southern Serbia, which provoked a NATO pact military intervention in 1999. During the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and early 2000s, several rounds of international sanctions were imposed on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

In 2000, Milošević's quasi-totalitarian regime was toppled by peaceful, democratic demonstrations when democratic opposition parties formed a new pro-European government. Since then, Serbia has embarked on a neoliberal transition that has led to radical changes in its foreign policy, moving the country from nationalist self-isolation to a policy of European integration: Serbia officially applied for EU

¹ Lukic, R. (1994). Greater Serbia: A New Reality in the Balkans. *Nationalities Papers*, 22(1), 49-70.

membership in December 2009). However, post-war times have left immense scars on Serbia and its inhabitants. And to this day, the political situation and democracy are very unstable. In 2014, the "Serbian Progressive Party", known as SNS, won the elections and party leader Aleksandar Vučić then became prime minister. Three years later, he moved to the presidency¹. Vucic was the information minister under the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. In 2020, the Economist Intelligence Unit described Serbia as a "flawed democracy". And in April 2022, President Aleksandar Vučić was re-elected. But despite his multiple successes to come to power, the president's past means that a significant proportion of Serbs will never accept him as their leader. His subsequent apology and conversion to a pro-EU policy were not appreciated by the public.

¹ "Serbia election: Opposition scorns 'hoax' vote in EU candidate state". *BBC News*. 19 June 2020.

ŠKART

AND THE ART SPHERE



Fig.1 Kuponi (Coupons),1995. Image courtesy of ŠKART

INTRODUCTION OF ŠKART

I had the chance to interview Prota (Dragan Protić), one of the two members of the collective Škart, in his studio on a very early Saturday morning in August 2022. His studio was located in a green and peaceful courtyard in the city centre of Belgrade. The inside of the studio was full of documents, magazines, books, decorative objects, textiles, and furniture. An environment that lent itself perfectly to creativity and imagination while using a minimum of resources and perfectly reflecting the values of reuse and recycling. Škart was created as Yugoslavia was sinking into civil war. The art collective was born in an abandoned print shop in 1990 when two students from the Faculty of Architecture, Department of Urbanism, in Belgrade – Dragan Protić and Djordje Balmazović, known as Prota and Žole, respectively – tried to make their own graphic prints. They met every Monday at 5 pm when one of their professors opened an empty room in the faculty to let them be creative. They often failed at what they imagined creating, but they realised that the beauty of their failures was more interesting than what they imagined ending up with initially. They began to think about things that were overlooked, less visible or outside the social norms. The duo decided to call themselves Škart, which means “trash”, “despised”, or “leftover” in Serbian.

The work of the collective could be divided into two phases: their practice in the 1990s and their practice from 2000 onwards. In the 1990's we could call this period: Public poetic activism. And we could define the 2000s-today era as: The power of collectivity. When the collective Škart started their practice in the 1990s, of course, the context was a major factor that influenced their work. It was led by the urge to have a social impact, and two elements kept coming up in the analysis of their practice: the use of public space and the poetic activism. Whereas the post-war period (2000-today), when the Yugoslav wars ended in 2001, the trauma, social fragmentation and isolation continued to be felt. For Škart, collective work was a way of overcoming narrow individualistic interests during a turbulent period, offering new configurations regarding the relationship between artistic practice, collective desire, activism, and solidarity. What can be underlined is their constant desire to bring human beings together and guide them towards interactions and creation, or in this case, of war – recreation of communities. So, their exploitation of the streets is an attempt, and often a success, to reach a wider audience. Škart group will insist throughout the decade on the production of counter-spaces of alternative forms of sociability. However, the interventions are only the end of their reflection; everything starts from this visceral

need to oppose the oppressive and destructive regime that was in power. And this bitterness is reflected in the subtle opposition of their works. Their activist method is positive, benevolent, and hopeful. They want to give hope for a brighter future or play on the melancholy of happier times. Their philosophy revolves around the possibilities through abstraction and poetry. And poetry will stay a key feature of their practice to this day; they even define their practice as “visual poetry”¹

As we are focused on their practice during the decade between 1990 and 2000: as I named it “The public poetic activism” period, throughout this dissertation, we are going to analyse three important street performances/actions using graphic interventions: “Sadness Project” from 1992-1993, “Coupons” (fig.1) from 1995 and “Your Shit-Your Responsibility” from 1999 to 2000.

THE ART SPHERE

Before dissecting their actions and analysing the activist strategies used by the collective during this period, it is important to situate Škart in the Belgrade artistic sphere within this socio-political framework. The collective has always been attracted to collaborations and indeed advocates that we are stronger as a collective than as individuals. And so it was in the early 1990s that they joined forces with various resistance groups such as Women in Black², B92³, and the Center for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD)⁴. They were creatively oppositional together through collaborations and strong support of each action against the regime. Žole and Prota had real skills in graphic design, and they used it a lot in their practice and in their collaborations. That was their way of being part of the resistance: through aesthetics, graphics, and abstraction. Another important institution was the Student Cultural Center (SKC). It was a by-product of the student revolutions of 1968. Understanding

¹ Dragan Protić. Belgrade, Serbia. 06/08/2022.

² Founded in 1991, “Žene u crnom”, in Serbian, or “Women in Black” in English, is a network of women engaged in peacebuilding activities. This feminist network was created in 1991 during the war in response to Milosevic's aggressive political regime. They perform in the streets, dressed in black and in silence. As they explain in an interview: “Our aim is to create a physical presence, so that we cannot be ignored. We ‘hijack’ the public space from the dominant discourse of denial.” To this day, they are still demonstrating they are at more or less 2000 public interventions.

³ B92 was the pioneer of independent Yugoslav radio media during the troubled years of the 1990s.

⁴ The Centre for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD) is a non-profit cultural institution in Belgrade. Founded in 1994, during the Balkan wars, the organisation believes in critical thinking and that culture, art, and public discourse are valid ways to challenge nationalism, xenophobia and all forms of violence.

that students needed a place to express themselves while in the streets, Tito created these centres across Yugoslavia as a means of containing the rebellious activity of the country's youth. In these places, students were left to experiment and create freely outside of the more formal art institutions. In the 1970-the 1980s, the Belgrade SKC was hosting important figures such as Marina Abramović and Joseph Beys.

Two other important activist art groups were Magnet and Led Art. Magnet, initiated by Rešin Tucić, who led a total of eight performances on the streets of Belgrade in 1996 and 1997, had a more disconcerting strategy with very straightforward actions. They believed in freedom of expression, and Magnet asserted the right to free opinion in the very place where the most significant repression is carried out by the dominant regime. Their 1996 performance, "faluSerbia" (fig. 3), consisted of a sculpture of a phallus with a picture of Slobodan Milosevic on it being transported through Belgrade and inviting spectators to touch it and kiss it. This art piece is as ironic as it is chilling of the very clear meaning behind it. In general, Magnet's actions were carried out guerrilla-style, as a surprise to the regime and the public, in a creative, satirical, direct and exclusively non-violent way, with a clear visual and linguistic message adapted to the mass media. They wanted to shock, provoke, and disturb. Which is quite the opposite approach to the activist strategy of Škart. This will be further analysed in the dissertation. And another influential alternative art group, somehow similar to Magnet, was Led Art, founded by Niko Džafo in 1993. Led Art literally means "ice art". The motto of Led Art was and still is: "ethics before aesthetics". They were guided by the utopian idea that art can, should and will change the world. And they thought that the most impactful way was the guerrilla way, with street actions. Led Art has brought together more than 300 people, not only from the art world, in almost fifty projects during its ten years of activity. Nikola Džafo has moved art from the traditional gallery space into urban spaces. As well as, Škart believed in the power of public spaces, and especially the power of the streets. The similarities and differences in the activist strategies of Škart, Led Art, and Magnet will be further analysed.

As these art agents, collectives and institutions cited above were active in the streets of Belgrade, actions against Milosevic's regime from ex-Yugoslavian artists were going on around the world and through various platforms. We can cite Marina Abramović's "Balkan Baroque" piece (fig.4). Performed in 1997 for the Venice Biennale as a response to the atrocities committed in her home country. The work consisted of the artist vigorously rubbing thousands of bloody cow bones for four days in reference to the ethnic cleansing that took place in the Balkans during the 1990s. As Marina Abramovic justifies: "The idea of washing the bones and trying to remove the blood

is impossible. You can't wash the blood off your hands just like you can't wash the shame of war." ¹ Marina Abramović uses her artistic practice to denounce her opposition to the current state. And another engaged artist worth mentioning among the most important ones of the decades for her activist approach is Miliča Tomić. Her 1999 piece "I Am Miliča Tomić" is a video work that revolves around Miliča's face, body, and the series of statements she makes. The statements go in the following pattern: 'I am Miliča Tomić, I am Korean', 'I am Miliča Tomić, I am Norwegian', and so on 65 times. As she goes round and round, and with each sentence, a new wound appears on her so that by the time she finishes, she is completely covered in cuts that add up to blood. What is explored here is the very formation, the very making of identity. The play reflects the political violence, questions of nationality and identity, and images shaped by the media, all of these were at the heart of the war.

Now that Škart has been presented and contextualised in the art sphere of the 1990s among other activist individuals, groups, and institutions, it is necessary to leave room for the description and analysis of their specific activist strategies, supported by theories and comparisons with other art activists.

¹ Marina Abramovic. « Balkan Baroque : The Movie ». 1999



Fig.3 FaluSerbia, Knez Mihailova Belgrade, 1996. Image courtesy of Magnet.



Fig.4 Balkan Baroque, Marina Abramović, Venice biennale, 1997. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

THE AUTONOMY OF ŠKART

“ *I prefer being referred to as a poet because it's a useless job* ”

Prota, Škart

“ THE ARTIST AS POET ”

Škart’s activism could exist with two characteristics: the invisibility of the artist and independence from the art institution.

Žole and Prota always wanted their artworks to be louder than their names, and they both were on the same page regarding that concern. They didn’t want to be brand images of their art nor invest time, money, and energy in creating some kind of artist superstar image. They believed in the power of art and, especially, the aura of their practice. They believed their art pieces would have a positive social impact and be an agent of change. But they didn’t believe in the added value of anyone recognising them as the artists behind the pieces. They are sure that their anonymity leaves more room for the art pieces to have a positive impact and for the focus to be on the art, not the artists.

When I asked Prota if he considered himself an artist, he responded to me: “No. Because if I did, I would have had obligations. I prefer being referred to as a poet because it’s a useless job.”¹ Ironically, Prota wanted to express what being an artist entailed: he would have to meet many requirements and expectations, and he would have constraints. He would be expected to put on exhibitions and be represented by official institutions. Audiences would constantly be hoping to discover new artworks and new exhibitions. In addition, the commercial aspect would take a prominent place and have an impact on the whole process of creating the work of art: from the initial thoughts to its exposure to the world and then to the ownership of the piece. If there is anything Škart never gave up on over thirty years, it would be poetry. To Škart, poetry is a language of opportunities and a promising territory². This concept of the artist as the poet has previously been explored by Belgian artist-poet Marcel Broodthaers³. He declared himself an “artist” at the age of forty after working as a writer, bookseller, journalist, and photographer. His inspirations are strongly influenced by Mallarmé and Magritte, and he is interested in the relationship between the artist and society and between art and poetry. He desacralised art with his

¹ Dragan Protic. Belgrade, Serbia. 06/08/2022.

² Seda Yildiz, « Building Human Relations Through Art : Belgrade art collective Škart, from 1990 to present. », Onomatopée, 2022.

³ Marcel Broodthaers was a Belgian artist and poet who was born on 28 January 1924 in Brussels and died on 28 January 1976 in Cologne.

“industrial poems” from 1968 to 1972 and his “literary paintings” from 1972 to 1973. Broodthaers saw in these works a play on “the image as text and the text as image”, criticising the utilitarian use of conceptual art as linguistic information and privileging its poetic dimension. Marcel Broodthaers engaged in a genuine questioning of the status of the art piece and the process by which it becomes one. But Broodthaers also questions the aura of tangible art pieces with a commercial purpose. Here, he makes the distinction between poetry and art and would like the work of art to come closer to poetry. Poetry is a form of literature that uses the aesthetic and often rhythmic qualities of language. It leaves much room for interpretation and leaves the reader to his or her imagination using ambiguity, symbolism, and irony. Poetry has much of what he sees as the missing assets of art. And even though it is unclear whether he was an artist who believed in the aura of poetry or a poet who believed in the aura of art? The combination of the two was necessary for his practice, which is why he is remembered to this day.

Thus, a pattern can be identified in the practice of Marcel Broodthaers and of Škart collective. On the one hand, the dissociation from the expectations and obligations that come with being an identified artist. And on the other hand, the refuge in the sphere of poetry, freedom of interpretation and suggestivity.

“SELF-PRODUCTION, SELF-DISTRIBUTION”

In advocating the autonomy of the collective, Prota clearly explained how Škart worked then and still works today, and he called it: “Self-production, Self-distribution”. From the initial idea to the production to the delivery to the audience experience to the end of the art piece: they regulate everything and are free of deciding. They never wanted to be controlled by private or public actors who own and thus control their property. They did not want, back in the 1990s, and still do not want, to this day, to be regulated by another agenda. And that is the specificity of their practice and what makes them important activists. Their autonomy gives them freedom of choice and freedom of speech. Because that is one of the specificities of art activism: expressing opposition to a current state. However, this does not mean they are not at risk; on the contrary, it is dangerous because it goes against what the current state advocates; thus, oppositional thinkers often pay the price. When activism exists, it often is because the power in place limits the freedoms of its citizens. And

those for whom it is not suitable to create an opposition. Škart performed in the streets of Belgrade in the 1990s because it was, as Prota claimed, “a personal rebellion against the war”. They couldn’t produce art for art's sake, but they produced engaging and engaging art. Because they felt a visceral need for this activism. However, even if activism is usually associated with big-scale, oppositional and loud interventions, it is not restricted to that. By looking at the definition of activism from the Cambridge Dictionary: “The use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one”, we do see characteristics of Škart’s practice, and it confirms that their practices are activist. Škart collective’s activism is discreet but not silent. And their activism finds refuge in small-scale, abstract, and positive art interventions. So, it distanced itself from the capitalist aspect of the art world: any kind of profit art could bring to artists or institutions. Evidently, the financial question is important to be raised.

Even when they had very little or even no funding at all, they kept on prioritising their autonomy and the anti-capitalist approach. When they had no money from the state, their income was either the money they were making, mostly through graphic design commissioned projects they were paid for, or by private, often international, alternative funding. However, that decade and that specific regime made it extremely complicated for agents of culture and art to survive in this world; there was almost no money left for them. And it is specific to authoritarian regimes, either controlling the art sphere by supporting it financially but imposing to put the regime to its advantage or completely leaving the art sphere without any funding. Because art and politics have similar features: they both play on emotions affecting people, they both make audiences imagine another possible future, and they both use and know the power of symbols. So, politicians know the power of art. But politicians in power have financial privilege. As author Boris Groys explains in his e-flux essay “On Art Activism”, for art to be activist, it shouldn’t be financed by politics. It should have its own-relying financial support system, which can be “weak and uncertain”, as he mentions¹. And it follows Skart’s philosophy of financial autonomy.

One very important organisation that helped the Balkans in art production in that decade was “The Open Society Foundations of Georges Soros”. The Open Society Foundations (OSF) is a network of foundations established in 1971 by the Hungarian-born American billionaire and philanthropist George Soros. The objectives

¹ Boris Groys, “On Art Activism”, pp 3, “e-flux: Nr.56”, 2014.

of the network are to promote democratic governance, human rights, and economic, social, and legal reform. In 1992, Soros opened arts centres across Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union. This network of 20 centres, called the Soros Centres for Contemporary Arts, provided information on grants, scholarships, and international competitions. It organised annual exhibitions of local contemporary art and supported artists' participation in exhibitions, conferences, and learning opportunities abroad. In 1993, the OSF distributed \$100 million in humanitarian and emergency aid during the war in Yugoslavia. When interviewing Milena Dragičević-Sesić, Miroslav Karić and Dragan Protić, all three extolled the merits of the foundation and its valuable help in supporting alternative cultural and artistic organisations during the war. The ability of these organisations to exist depends on external and non-governmental funding. Because without funding, activism cannot exist. As Milena Dragičević-Sesić, an expert in the domain of art activism in ex-Yugoslavia, said to me in our interview: "Eastern Europe couldn't have had activism and alternative culture without Georges Soros."¹ And this resumes well the importance of this organisation for the existence of art activism in the 1990s in ex-Yugoslavia.

"SADNESS PROJECT"

To illustrate their use of poetry and their independence from creation to distribution, we will be analysing their "Sadness Project" (fig.5). During the winter of 1992-1993, Prota and Žole distributed poems to passers-by in Belgrade as part of the "Sadness Project". In total, they created 23 different poems. To cite a few: "Sadness of potential Return", "Sadness of Pregnancy", "Sadness of Potential Friendship", "Sadness of Potential Traveller", "Sadness of Potential Guns", "Sadness of Vegetables", "Sadness of Potential Consumer", etc.

This project was a public declaration of personal sadness and the social fragmentation that was present in Belgrade in the 1990s. In the first round of sanctions, imposed in response to the Bosnian war and lasting from April 1992 to October 1995, Yugoslavia was subjected to a United Nations (UN) embargo. Supermarkets were completely empty. The country experienced the highest inflation rate, an hyperinflation. Even the basic necessities cost thousands or even millions of dinars,

¹ Milena Dragičević Šesić. 05/08/2022. Belgrade, Serbia.

and they were no longer commonplace products but rare commodities. My mother often told me an anecdote about a certain salary she was supposed to receive during the 1990s before she left Belgrade for Brussels. This was when she was working as a TV presenter, and that month she did not receive her salary in the form of money but in the form of a big bag of flour. That was the situation people were living in at the time.

Škart made this project live in different ways for more than a year. On the one hand, they distributed the printed cardboards in the streets of Belgrade whenever they had the finances to print a few hundred of them. And when they distributed them, it wasn't randomly, not any poem to any passer-by; on the contrary, they targeted the specific audiences to whom they were giving the chosen poems; they were distributing the "Sadness of Vegetables" in a farmers' market, so these audiences that didn't really choose to be one were feeling somehow concerned. And these artworks were suggestive; you could understand whatever you wanted, and everyone had their personal guess. However, the certain common truth behind the poetry came as no surprise: there is a real problem and deep sadness around the theme of vegetables and food, among so many others. As Prota said, "We wanted to provoke people to think. (...) Why are the shops empty and why had the country ended up under such austerity?".

It took a lot of courage to keep this performance going on for weeks and to keep on approaching people on the street who, most of the time, didn't care about it and threw the poems away, as Žole said in an interview with Seda Yildiz "Giving away something for free. To someone, which they didn't ask for. More than half of them were not interested. Most of the time, a few steps later, they were throwing these poetry cards into the bin."¹ But as Prota specified to me, it wasn't about those who didn't believe in this magic; it was about those who stopped and asked what it was, those who came back to them and asked them if they could have another cardboard, regardless of the percentage. Some people were collecting them over the weeks because they needed it: they needed those little moments where human relations were built through art. And those little interactions were a significant and important part of the "Sadness Project".

On the other hand, they wanted this project to live beyond the moment of interaction or ignorance when the small prints were given and then received or

¹ Seda Yildiz, « Building Human Relations Through Art : Belgrade art collective Škart, from 1990 to present. », Onomatopée, 2022.

rejected by strangers. So, they were also sending these poems via mail and thus creating mail art to their local and international network of friends and collaborators. Their mail was sent anonymously and one-way. So, the lucky receivers wouldn't know for sure who is behind the collective ŠKART.

And finally, the last pole through which the project existed was via the independent radio B92. Founded in 1989, B92 was the main oppositional radio station in Belgrade. It was one of the few media to broadcast independent news during Slobodan Milošević by supporting the protest movements that developed in Belgrade in the 1990s. Škart and B92 had a close relationship and were important collaborators during wartime. And by broadcasting poems on the radio, gave a whole new perspective and opened the artwork to a new audience. However, again, ŠKART wouldn't present themselves nor say who is behind the artwork.





Fig.5 Sadness Project, Belgrade, 1992-1993. Image courtesy of Škart.

“ THE VOICE OF REBELLION ”



Fig.6 Free Walking Pass, 1996/97. Image courtesy of Škart.

STREETS DEMONSTRATIONS: PERFORMING OR PROTESTING ?

In human societies, particularly urban ones, public space represents all the spaces for passage and gathering for the use of all. They belong to the state, a legal or moral entity or, exceptionally, to the private domain. In the realm of the arts, public spaces can also be found in public institutions like museums, or some galleries financed, thus owned, by the state.

Concerning Škart, Prota and Žole knew that to enter art institutions and be exposed in galleries, museums, and official institutions, you would have to create a network, know someone that knows someone and little by little climb the stairs of hierarchy. However, they were not really interested in this approach for the exposure of their art and especially not in this socio-political context. They had a different approach to how they wanted to perform and exhibit. What they did is they took the city as their big open-door exhibition space. And following this idea and Lucy R. Lippard's thoughts, if we take art as the medium for communicative exchanges, art deserves to have the greatest diversity of expression and the greatest visibility¹. And this describes well Skart's practice: they were financially and morally independent and thus free of choice and expression, and they decided to use the public spaces to exhibit and perform the purpose of their artworks, which was their strategy for the greatest visibility. While interviewing Prota, he mentioned that he didn't completely consider these interventions as art but rather as "a voice of rebellion" ², which was striking to me. What is the boundary between a furious artist performing an activist art intervention in a public space or a furious citizen protesting in the streets against a regime?

During the 1990s, protests were happening with hundreds of thousands of people in the centre of Belgrade. Some were public protests, and some were student protests. The most important student protest lasted for three months – 120 days, during the winter in a time when faculties were on strike towards the regime. Somehow, students from all faculties of Belgrade were involved. And an important one was the University Arts of Belgrade, with many of its students protesting in the student protests of 1996-1997 (fig.7), but also through their art practices. These art students were essential because they were the creative ones keeping the fire alive:

¹ Lucy R. Lippard, "*Trojan horses: activist art and power.*", 1984.

² Dragan Protić, Belgrade, Serbia. 06/08/2022.

from banners to songs, to plays, to artworks,... One of the leaders and key figures of these demonstrations, thanks to whom they lasted 24/7 because he performed night and day, was Čedomir Jovanović, a former student of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts of Belgrade and an important political figure afterwards¹. In this protest, Žole and Prota were also present, and they had an art piece going on. During the three months, they were making and distributing "Walking Passes", which were little square cardboard with a thread around it, for walkers to put around their necks. On the cardboard, there were some motivational sentences like "Permission for a walk of freedom" (fig.6). This was just one more support and sign for the young people who are on the streets to keep on protesting and being engaged in this battle for humanity. That's what Škart was doing: promoting the culture of protest subtly by connecting people together through positive emotions, visual graphics, and poetry.

After numerous protests over the years, the regime banned them in the city centre. The excuse was that they disrupted car traffic. Milosevic's regime placed large numbers of police on the streets to enforce the ban, but it didn't stop a citizen from wanting to go outside, on the streets and perform discontent. So, many new nonviolent protest methods were designed. To cite a few: « The Dog walking Protest», where people brought their dogs to the protest one day, claiming that they were just out to walk their pets that day, « The Green Man Protest », where protesters waited on the sidewalk until the "green man" light appears at the crosswalks. Then everyone runs into the crosswalks for a few frenzied minutes of dancing and cheering. When the light turns red again, they quickly return to the sidewalks. Or even « The Traffic Jams Protest», where people brought their cars to the city's centre, creating major traffic jams and honking their horns. This chaos allowed the marchers to walk down the streets without being accused of disrupting traffic. So, it's undeniable that citizens needed to go out and perform against the current regime, whether in the field of art or 'just' as citizens. And one feature of the conceptualization of the new actions was the imagination behind these; it was oppositional while being creative. So, what are the differences between art activist interventions and non-identified artists who protest in suggestive ways against that certain regime?

¹ Čedomir Jovanović was a former student of dramaturgy in the Faculty of Dramatic Arts of Belgrade who was then a very important politician. During the three months of protests, Čedomir Jovanović became closer to the Democratic Party (DS) and its then-leader, Zoran Đinđić. Afterwards, he became politically involved and quickly climbed the ranks to find himself negotiating with Slobodan Milosevic in 2001 and convincing him to surrender peacefully; he thus participated in the arrest of the former Yugoslav president. As Čedomir Jovanović started protesting through his position of art student, he continued his battle by entering the politics and wanting to change things from the inside.

The thing is, when citizens feel anger and when artists feel anger, they both reunite in the streets, in the public spaces where potentially freedom of speech should be more accessible. We can talk of antagonistic behaviours: they are against something and show physical and visible opposition. What should be interesting to consider is translating this antagonistic behaviour into an agonistic one: control these oppositional behaviours to turn them into a positive form of conflict. These theories have been discussed and argued in length by a few scholars such as Chantal Mouffe, Ernest Laclau or Jurgen Habermas.

Jurgen Habermas calls the "Public Sphere" all political public spaces where everyone is welcomed (because it is not private and thus public), and citizens can all gather in this neutral space, discuss issues concerning politics and finally arrive at a rational consensus together. Giving back the power to the people without exclusion? Chantal Mouffe claims it is a "conceptual impossibility". We live in a hegemonically structured society, which is why disagreements and conflicts happen. But alongside Mouffe's idea, confrontations are "healthy" in a society because it indicates that democracy is alive¹. Even though antagonistic approaches are more combative and hostile, it is in this sphere that one could place the citizens who protest in the streets; it is a cry of revolt. However, artists, being themselves rebellious citizens with an antagonistic approach, want to take an agonistic approach to their art practices. And that is a foundation of Škart's practice: their agonistic approach to activism, questioning it while highlighting the benefits of this practice. They are against the regime; they bring their art to the public space and believe in their practice's positiveness.

However, not only artists can add that layer of hope; citizens have also done it through their imaginative protests after Milosevic banned the protests. Bringing this layer of fantasy is a form of soft activism. They suggest their opposition via actions that cannot make them guilty of not respecting the rules. Maybe at that point, it enters the realm of art? Because art is that one safe place where artists have freedom of expression. However, art is a big thread to politics because it can accuse and oppose and can stay in the sphere of "but, it's art!". However, performing and protesting against a regime in the streets apprehend the involvement of the hegemonical power through police or military power. Because performing in the streets implies being vulnerable. So, the idea of autonomy and independence while performing publicly

¹ Mouffe, Chantal (2007) "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces", *Art & Research. A Journal of ideas, Contexts and Methods.* pp 3.

removes an aspect of safety some closed public spaces could secure for artists and performers. But as Prota claimed: "streets are spaces of open dialogues." And daring to perform to a wider audience, with a risk of being arrested or interrupted by the authorities, is an important part of art activism. Because if it stays inside, in public or private art institutions, it only speaks to the same art-aware audience continually. The aim is to move audiences, question them, make them react and finally, open dialogues. That is the aim of Škart, starting conversations and human interactions. They dared to go out on the streets because they knew the added value was worth it. And while speaking of danger, I asked Prota if they had ever experienced some dangerous situations or some problems with police or passers-by, and he exclaimed they had never had any problem. The explanation for that is that they never criticized directly; they suggested through visual poetry. And by suggesting, you can't be found guilty because it's the whole concept of poetry– you let spectators interpret. So, if the day came when they had to defend themselves, Škart could always find refuge in abstraction and imagination.



Fig.7 Images from the 120 days protest of 1996-1997. Scans from a private archive. 1997.



ETHICS = AESTHETICS



Fig.8 Kuponi (Coupons), 1995. Image courtesy of ŠKART

ABSTRACT POETIC ACTIVISM

What is the role of aesthetics in activist art? For Škart, aesthetics is very important in their practice, as much as ethics. They believe in the power of the visual, the graphical and the aesthetically pleasing. Their prints are always poetic, minimal, and very graphic. The minimalism allows the audience to face only a few pieces of information and thus gives space for imagination and interpretation of the poetry. Besides being just graphic, their practice enters the realm of poetic abstraction as communication. It is never obviously explicit but rather very suggestive.

At a time when the aesthetics of hostility prevailed, Prota and Žole wanted to bring an aesthetic of hope. They believed in the magic of symbols and words. Their art doesn't finger-point someone or something, so even if it suggests some oppositional and activist thoughts, it is made through a positive lens. They are making audiences remember the positive that was missing instead of highlighting the negative that is happening. Because what was happening was incitement to hatred through hate speeches, and as Prota mentions, "*hate speeches are linked to hate aesthetics*"¹. In times of war, politicians extensively use art as a medium of persuasion. However, the "aestheticisation of politics" or the "politicisation of aesthetics", two subjects discussed at length by Walter Benjamin, are at the heart of the practices of dominant hegemonies.

On the one hand, the "aestheticisation of politics" comprises the strategy of aestheticising to divert attention from the precise goal of the other. This approach is a way of controlling and exploiting art and the art world. Art was put on institutional service to the political regimes. And anything that did not correspond to the regime's ideals was considered "degenerative". Benjamin links these thoughts to the horrors experienced in Nazi Germany and refers to Fascist practices. Here, Benjamin points to the communist practice that opposes the latter, which he calls the "politicisation of art". In a way, this practice gives power back to the creative world in a society of censorship. And proposes to artists to have an independent discourse through their works². Independent can thus be taken to imply oppositional. And Škart's activist practice finds refuge in this latter interpretation of the "politicisation of art": They protested using graphism, minimalism and poetry while passing on positive messages. Their art practice contained visual and graphic aesthetics but also the aesthetics of

¹ Dragan Protić. Belgrade, Serbia. 06/08/2022.

² Benjamin, Walter. (1935) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, 1936."

words; of language. And even if hate speech and animosity were prominent, as Prota mentioned, a new language was needed; a language of hope. And they suggested this language: their abstract activist poetry.

ETHICS = AESTHETICS

After that, it is logical to raise the subject of ethics. How did artists position themselves ethically back then? And this is a question I asked my three interviewees. Concerning Belgrade's art scene from the 1990s, some art groups and artists have taken a very radical stand. As Led Art has with his motto "Ethics before Aesthetics". Nikola Džafo, the initiator of the Led Art group, has always advocated this thinking and way of creating. So, they were more interested in showing their opposition, way of thinking and values of freedom than in investing in aesthetics. However, aesthetics was still important; it was just not their starting point, unlike Škart. And as they said in an interview, they were against the regime's aesthetic that "maximally glorifies non-values ». So, they were pro-aesthetics, just not the ones popular at that time. Led Art was not afraid to shock, upset and disturb its audience. The specificity of their artistic practice was to include and invite the audience to take part in the intervention, whether it was lying on the floor around a drawing of a dead body on the ground or inviting the audience to get into a frozen truck with artworks inside, or even having the audience standing in front of police officers with mirrors facing them. Led Art is an activist group that made large-scale interventions knowing the risks they ran. Two important pieces were "Frozen Art" in 1993 and "Reconstruction of Crime" in 1995. In May 1993, the art group Led Art carried out its first major action entitled "Frozen Art" (fig.10). They performed it in front of "Dom Omladine", which was the House of Youth of Belgrade. The artists used to freeze their artworks, symbolically preserving art for better times. It also meant that they put their creativity aside to help stop the madness already taking over the territory of the former Yugoslavia through artistic actions. The use of ice is very symbolic: the art world is frozen, but ice will melt. Led Art pointed out allusions to environmental problems and pollution long before anyone else. Their performances were impressive and unsettling¹. Another essential intervention was the "Reconstruction of Crime" in 1994 (fig.11). The project is based on the idea that, as Džafo said: "growing evil must be opposed by all available means,

¹ Milena Dragicevic Sestic, "Ethics within Poetics », LED ART – documents of time 1993-2003, Multimedia Center, Novi Sad, 2004. pp 33.

and they propose that artists will oppose evil with art"¹. The procedure was inspired by the police' outlining the victim's body with chalk after a fatal incident, thus creating an "incident drawing". The most famous performance happened during the student and civil demonstrations in Belgrade in 1996². Led Art members and demonstrators had "drawn around" where the police had attacked with water cannons and beaten dozens of them. So, Led Art has this specificity of going in the streets to perform discontent, but they also wanted this aspect of grandeur: everyone from the art scene was there during their performances. Even the radio B92 reported live what was going on. But they also challenged the norms of the art world with the exhibition process. Exhibiting and hosting "openings" outside? In the streets? On the grounds? In a frozen truck? So, this is one strategy. Which is also often way more related to the common understanding of "activism". Loud, big and mediatised interventions against a regime.

Concerning Škart, they had a very different approach. They believed aesthetics create ethics. They believed in small-scale and almost nonvisible activism. They believed in authentic and caring activism. And they believed in the power of visual and graphic communication. And as Škart said in an interview, "*We had no power, no media, no weapons. But through our graphic work, we tried to make room for everything that was silenced by war.*"³. Inciting conversations and dialogues. And people could also keep a substantial part of their artistic interventions. Which opened a whole new sphere of accessibility to the audiences. While giving them these concrete artworks, audiences could participate with an added sense of responsibility: they are with Škart and Škart is with them. An interesting artwork they have created, and the last one of that decade, is their 1999-2000 piece "Your Shit – Your Responsibility" (fig.9). They distributed stickers with this motto and a drawing of an animal defecating. Škart here is more straightforward while adding a touch of satire. The message is clear, "shit" is happening, and someone will take responsibility for this. This was their last intervention before Milosevic got imprisoned. Audiences, Škart and friends stuck them up all over Belgrade.

Even if Škart wanted to remain anonymous, people would recognise them throughout the years and understand little by little their approach and philosophy. For example, during the "Sadness Project", Žole distributed the "Sadness" poetry prints every Thursday while doing his job as a newspaper seller in the streets. So, people

¹ Nikola Dzafo, "LED ART or Reconstruction of Crime in the Balkans », LED ART – documents of time 1993-2003, Multimedia Center, Novi Sad, 2004. pp 33.

²«Reconstruction of Crime», 1996. During student protests. Youtube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYUtBQLZh6Y>.

³ Protić, Dragan. Interview with Arie Lengkeek and Jacco Van Uden, in Act Climate Transition, 26/01/2022.

would know where to find him. They were approaching him, and asking for other poems, they wanted to collect them. After performing for a decade, their practice would be recognisable. So, their visual identity was strong. And as stated previously, they didn't want the fame of the artists, but they would welcome the fame of their art. What I mean is, if passers-by recognised their art in the streets, were keen to discover what would be Škart's next poetic intervention be, and identify other Škart's enthusiasts, it is the ultimate achievement for the collective: they created this community of open dialogues and joy for small poetic interventions. And people wanted more and more to be part of this poetic experience because it probably felt better than reality? An interesting aspect they responded to is this demand for inspiration and escape from delusion. And audiences enjoyed it because it created a community, a sort of sub-culture, a kind of group feeling. And to this day, Prota said he still receives pictures with coupons hanging on some bags, in some interiors, or sees some in the streets.

However, Miroslav Karić picked up something very interesting when the subject of ethics and aesthetics arrived. When the question of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics was posed, he securely said he thinks aesthetics is important, because he believes it can function as a tool for a better, faster breakthroughs to the general public of public spaces. He believes in the attraction eyes have towards the aesthetically pleasing and the beautiful. But also, to art that makes the audience associate it with something they know. And that is the case of Škart,, they make art that is attractive, everyone can relate to it.

So, by all means, both activist strategies are impactful because the message goes across anyway. Be it through shocking, disturbing visual aesthetic or poetic abstract visual aesthetic.

CONTINUITY

Prota explained this moment when, not long ago, he opened some boxes of archives of their work and found some prints, objects, photographs of some interventions, and art pieces of the 1990s. And very happily exclaimed that he was surprised by how good he thought all of it was. And he explained he still has a positive eye on these art pieces because they all come from "naivety" and "authenticity". I understood that Prota still related to his artworks; he still felt like these works were understandable and engaging, whatever the period we are in. And that would be the

biggest success of their practice. Their artworks were impactful when they were created and performed in those difficult times of the 1990s, which was their aim. However, still relating to these artworks today demonstrates something even more powerful: their artworks live through time which means they achieved one of the key aspects of their practice: continuity. It doesn't age nor stay in the time frame it has been done. As it suggested something then, it can suggest something new today. And according to them, this is the greatest trace they can leave of their practice. I asked Prota if he would have done something different today looking back at their interventions; Prota said that even 23 years later, he wouldn't change anything. How he did it in the 1990s, he wouldn't do anything differently today.

To illustrate this, another activist performance made by Škart was in 1995, "Kuponi" (fig.8). The group printed and distributed small coupons in the streets. These allowed the owner to exchange the pamphlet for items such as a "revolution", "tolerance", or an "orgasm"... Concepts that would make people think in times of upheaval. These small prints were very powerful in meaning. How would you feel receiving a coupon of "revolution" while you see your country entering into one of the deadliest wars? How would you feel receiving a coupon of "fear" when you don't know what the future is made of in your country? And finally, how would you feel receiving a coupon of "happiness" when everything around you make you feel like there is no room for this emotion? Škart collective strived for that: questioning yourself and your surroundings. And then starting dialogues around you. This is the perfect example of the "adaptability" of their art practice: it can adapt to different situations in different contexts because it is so suggestive and abstract that to this day, it is relevant



Fig.9 Your Shit-Your Responsibility, 1999. Image courtesy of ŠKART.

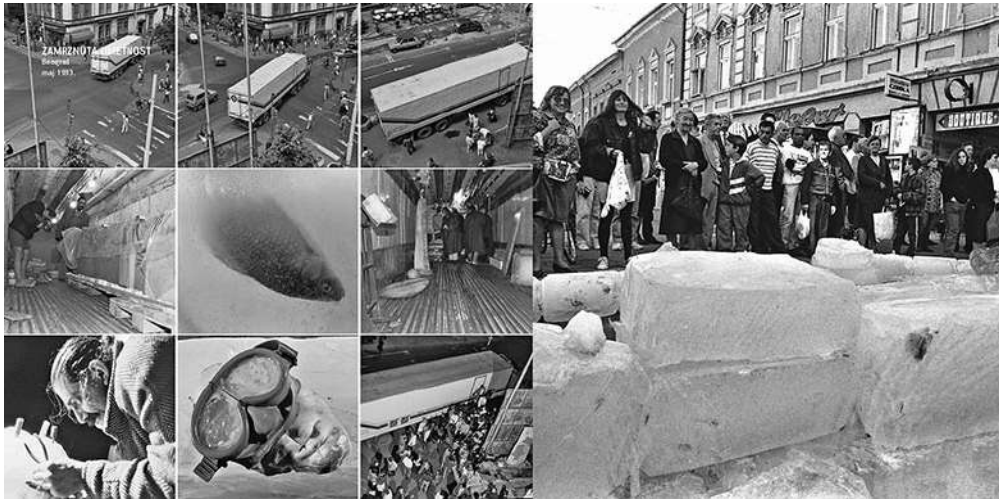


Fig.10 Frozen Art, 1993 in Belgrade & Novi Sad. Image courtesy of Led Art.



Fig.11, "Reconstruction of Crime" performance, 1994 in Belgrade. Image courtesy of Led Art.

CONCLUSION

This research has allowed me to understand the different approaches that artists take when engaging in activist practice. But most of all, it has proven me the positive impact Škart 's practice had in Belgrade, during the 1990s decade. This research was supported by some historical context and the explanation t-of the methodology used for this study. The engagement of the three practitioners (Milena, Prota, Miroslav) that were witnesses of that difficult time was priceless to understand better the importance of public art activism. By focusing on Škart's practice, we explored what where the strategies of the art collective when it came to activist interventions. We realised three aspects were key: their autonomy and independence from the art institutions, their use of public spaces as a landmark for human interactions and dialogues, and their belief that abstract, positive and poetic aesthetics can create ethics.

It has been demonstrated that every activist intervention has an impact but Škart's practice has shown to have a few advantages. Their dissociation of any art institutions has led them to have the greatest freedom of choice and expression. Their anonymity has enabled their art to be elevated and have more room to impact audiences. Their poetic and abstract works allowed the audience to interpret, imagine and associate more with them. Their small-scale activist interventions performed on the public space where too abstract for them to be at real risk. Their continuity of interventions, in addition to poetic tangible artworks given to audiences, have created a sense of community, and belonging in times where social dissolution was at its peak. And finally, their poetic abstraction has allowed their works not to fade away in this decade but to live with the times and to remain up to date until today.

I found out through this research that interviews with witnesses is the most valuable knowledge I can gain in a subject I am researching on. And particularly if these witnesses were present at that time, engaged in those issues, and passionate human beings.

This research has opened some interesting doors that I would have liked to explore further: the method of archiving activist practices, especially performances in public spaces, and understanding what the strategies of documentation are at a time when artworks seem to be designed for the present moment, because of its oppositional purpose, and how these archives live through time when the context has changed. On the other hand, I would have liked to research more the question of ethics in the state institutions and their artistic production in these times of war, when the fundings they had been from the hegemonical state.

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FILMOGRAPHY

- "Porodica", directed by Bojan Vuletic, 2022.
- « Quo Vadis, Aida? », directed by Jasmila Žbanić, 2020.

APPENDIX

All three interviews were conducted in Serbian and were recorded. The recordings are available upon request. The transcription and translation is in progress. Dragan Protić's interview, transcript and translation are further in the appendix.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS

- Miroslav Karic is a curator, an art coordinator, and the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Belgrade. He has a deep knowledge of what happened in the Belgrade art scene, from communism to soft dictatorship, through Milosevic, to the Serbia of today, as he lived and suffered directly on a personal and professional level. The Museum of Contemporary Art of Belgrade has an impressive collection of artworks and archives. However, the museum was closed for ten years due to renovation and funding problems and only reopened in 2017. The relationship created and the interview I had with him enabled me to access official and exclusive archives as well as personal and professional experiences, stories and insights I was happy to hear and discover. He gave me great overview of the art scene and allowed me to understand the impact of activism in that time
- Dragan Protić, called Prota is trained as architect in urbanism, Dragan Protić co-founded together with Đorđe Balmazović the ŠKART group, an influential art collective of the 90s in Belgrade. ŠKART group, founded in 1990 at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade, was and is still functioning as an ongoing productive conflict of poetry, architecture, graphic design, mixed media and social activism. Prota's interview has given me considerable information and insights of how performing in the streets in Belgrade in the 90s was. As they have very few documentations about their work, the interview I had with him was essential for my research and to bring new elements on the table about their practice.

- Milena Dragičević-Sesić is a very important academical figure of the cultural work in Belgrade. She is Head of the UNESCO Chair on Interculturalism, Art Management and Mediation and former President of the University of Arts, Belgrade. Milena has published a book “Art and Culture of Resistance” which is very relevant for this dissertation research. Milena is a mature scholar with nuanced analysis and theories on the art scene of Belgrade in the nineties. She explained to me the different phases of activism in ex-Yugoslavia and contextualised how and why the 1990’s protests were going for years. Her historical contribution to my research and analysis throughout interviews is considerable and essential for my research and I am more than lucky to have had this time with her.

Interview transcript: Dragan Protić

The interview took place on the Saturday 06/08/2022 in Belgrade in his atelier. It lasted one hour. The interview has been recorded. The original version is in Serbian. This version is translated in English.

U: What were the key elements of Škart and how did you end up forming Škart collective?

D: We somehow started working from our own space. Therefore, we studied architecture and were formed there. And there we started working in a small hidden studio on an art cabinet. We had a key that the professor secretly left for us above a lamp so that we came when there was no class and on weekends. And by that it means that we did not directly create on the art stage nor on the applied one. And that we don't have that vestibule somehow framed by the history of art. So, we started from some of our practices that we picked up from the side. Now concretely there are various influences on the one hand, a lot of influence of conceptual and visual poetry and concrete poetry that was done in various previous decades, and yet something that was perhaps closer to us is what happened in the 70s in Yugoslavia. That is, that space on the one hand, on the other hand, considering that we are architects, we were engaged in some kind of experimentation with attack and visual means. So, for example, at the very beginning we made posters of visual poetry. Quite actually abstract and irritating ones where, for example, the letter below only had a rare letter written on it. We had you posters or around town every Monday morning at 5:00. and we have been doing this for months, and in fact, this continuity is somehow and even present in some invisible continuity. Therefore, it was not known what a scrap is and who is a scrap. It didn't matter to us yet. But to have that constant rhythm of action. Now that you actually asked what are the 2 influences. On the other hand, I think now what seemed interesting to us then are also influences and the world's conceptual scene. And situational situations of various 2 actually formats, but at the same time formats of guerilla struggle. Means partisan struggle, which again means invisibility and continuity. But considering that we didn't belong to anyone's scene, we kind of looked for each other. Of course we searched and made mistakes, we searched, we made mistakes, but we didn't give up. and what was

very important to us at the very beginning was not to do project things. don't work limiting things. from any side. Which means we initiate the action ourselves, carry it out ourselves, and determine how long it will last. Sometimes it's half a year, sometimes it's right now, some things we do last for 23 years, 23. So, influences from the side, but not a direct formula that we would repeat or confirm, but really some kind of tracing, here I repeat the times of combinations of urban research because we were at the urban planning department, means some kind of recognition by the city secretary. and on the other hand, the continuity of production, whatever it may be. In the beginning it was visual poetry, so it seems that it developed again in various ways. And independent means total financial, production and editorial independence, it means that we are never given anything, we pay for it ourselves, spend it ourselves, distribute it ourselves, that's what they later called me: self production self distribution.

U: How did your audience react? and why did you do it? And would you do it similarly today?

D: We realized that we see what we would be interested in seeing in the city: what would excite us, what would move us. Because apparently a period of some kind of hate speech has already begun, and in the midst of that hate speech, according to us, some abstract poetry, something that is totally open, something that does not oblige you, is not even related to what it means, something that does not call anyone out, something that he doesn't sell you anything, something that doesn't seduce you with false promises. Now if you asked me if I would do the same: yes. I would do the exact same thing. what's interesting is that we are constantly fighting each other, and this space is also not my space, someone else's, and now it will soon come true from here, I don't know where I am, I have no money, no address...nothing! but that's it, a little digression! But when we moved there, many of our things were in boxes in various areas for 23 years unopened. and now he somehow hid in some shed. and because of this book I had to open some of those boxes to find some works. I was also surprised and happy and said wonderful, so this is real, even from this distance, regardless of the fact that we did it, it's exciting for me! so that would be it again. Because it comes from some naivety. and it comes from someone really, from some inner rebellion that it can be different and that it should be different. and if necessary, we don't know what and how, but we will invent it ourselves. completely hopeless at the beginning, as I say visual poetry posters; who needs that? Nobody cares, nobody needs that! If you are persistent in that rebellion in another language, because a new language was needed, the language is somehow too utilitarian. and needed a new language and architecture somehow too utilitarian, that's why we ran away from architecture into something, we don't know anything. Maybe poetry? activist poetry? I would say in some experiment.

U: What do you think about the relationship between aesthetics and activist art?

D: About Led Art collective, which were also very important at that time! Their concept was ethics before aesthetics. And continuity. It's not something we had. We never framed our position. But I wouldn't, so I'm quoting them to you, because I wouldn't so radically say ethics before aesthetics. I think ethics and I aesthetics are very important. And that aesthetics can also create ethics. So in our case, the insistence on some solidity of that graphicism and minimalism was the introduction of some new language. which speaks precisely against all those, I repeat, hate speech but also the aesthetics of hate. it was very close one to the other. I think that some dialogue aesthetics have actually emerged. now I'm trying to think of what to call it, and the aesthetic possibility? or whatever, but we have never, I repeat, manifestly declared ourselves like led art. I never thought that, I heard that from them once. but our position was that aesthetics creates ethics is the same.

U: What is your idea of the collective?

D: And during studies, at our faculty, teamwork was highly developed. the architect's work itself is a kind of unification of various different knowledge and various spatially technical and planning factors, so to speak. If group work was something we were taught to do, we just continued it through cards. At the same time, it was a small strategy. considering that we are anonymous from the Faculty of Architecture, we thought that we would use 1 name that is sufficiently nihilistic and irritatingly easier to get home anywhere than with our first and last name. Why? Because the world is full of names and surnames, who cares anymore? I would be interested to see a visual poem on the street. I would be bored anyway, now I hear "some Uros Negovanovic appeared"... I don't care! I want to hear that a group of skarts appeared, for example, that was kind of intriguing to me! We are more an artwork than an artist. one more thing, in the history of art collectives were often the ones who had the strength to make revolutionary breakthroughs in all fields. So the Collective is a union of forces - united skills - united thoughts. So more power definitely. there were a lot of us from college, there were about a dozen different friends who soon all continued to do their own thing; were comics, Designs,... and now at the end I'm a scrap. At the very beginning there were 4 members, Zole and I, 1 composer and 1 philosopher. the composer soon left because of some love affair. And the philosopher moved to America. that's how Djordje and I ended up. At the very beginning, since we are from the Faculty of Urbanism, we realized that we are not interested in the privileged context, the privileged safe context of the gallery, someone exactly the street! as 1 space of uncertainty. Later, already after 10 years of practice, our experience on the street is important to somehow open that privileged space, again which we acquired through our practice, to others and then we initiated and founded several new collectives. who again continued on their own and this is what I told you for 23 years, continued to work. they still exist today, and it's wonderful that they actually live without money, again without limitations and without project-based initiatives.

U: What made you do what you did then?

D: In the beginning, curiosity and bugs from architecture. to know the desire to experiment and escape from architecture. Already a year later, when the war was so obvious to them, a direct personal rebellion against the war. No, no problem with politics. Fortunately, 90 of them, if the initiatives were considered, I think they were not that many, but they were not so generally visible that anyone would take them seriously. Too abstract! everything that was then, so to speak, used as the language of rebellion can be comfortably used today in some other space, some third space. It is obviously some kind of universal language that is applicable on a daily basis in contrast to everyday language. Which is often used on a daily basis and becomes banal the very next day. It was already nice, for example, when we started with sorrows, people started collecting them, and now where we took them out on the street on Thursdays, Djordje sold newspapers on the street, Vrijeme, and then he was that street distributor on the street itself. With the sale of newspapers, people could come to him to take their grief. And a few of us did actions in various places. Yes, already after the first few people, I repeat, they started to collect them II somehow felt the need for it to exist and to go and to continue. we often asked her "what will be the next sadness" because every Sunday for about 9 months. And years later, people carried those sorrows hanging on their backpacks around their houses, etc. They sent photos, let's say how people started to migrate it already in 2001-2002, then they took it all over the world. This again gave me a sign that continuity is important and that it often arises as something invisible that seems unnecessary to actually find its place. as we assumed. they were some kind of anti-war diary record in poems and subjects like myself that it was this particular subject action. whenever we did actions, it was important that there was some trace of it that remained in the hand of someone unknown. so the action is not only a performance which is an impression, but it is a dialogue. That you, as someone who witnessed it, get something that you can read. what can you throw away. all the same, the voice of rebellion that maybe you are missing or that is in agreement with your position and gives you a little support again and that was wonderful. Can I get that please" find me somewhere that need is rarely actually put to art. after the opening rarely does anyone tell you please give me if you can get it for me or when is the next one etc... in this case there was no opening there was no ceremony there was nothing that 1 anonymous. Here is the last one with other promotions and vouchers. so people often collect coupons and exchange them, etc. but imagine then years later someone says to me: let's say I have a friend who got cancer, can you please send me some vouchers for miracle. And I sent it. That's wonderful.

U: What were the strategies of your archives?

D: None. We didn't sign, we didn't write, neither exhibitions nor guest appearances. Nothing, we are totally disorganized about it. Precisely because the activities were everyday and in those other waves of presence you actually don't have time to stop and archive something, so there was no awareness of the need for activation. Precisely because we didn't understand it as some kind of means for positioning on the artistic scene. Was the voice of rebellion and he has his place then and anyway it didn't matter anymore so that's it. I'm glad that we can transfer knowledge, but we didn't actually have the idea that through the archive we would gain any knowledge, but by direct work, that's why we, the other

groups, are the facilitator, yes, they actually continue in that direct contact, but I, in now if the archive helps and if it is some tool with for a new dialogue why not. Good stuff.

U: Do you consider yourself an artist?

D: Just as we ran away from architecture, so that we wouldn't be architects, I would never call myself an artist. because it is a new obligation for me in the new salon. By no means. but there is a little prank sometimes, if I need to express myself, I write a poem. And I like that. it is both useless and enables a kind of unnecessaryness.

U: But how did you finance everything?

We developed a kind of graphic design language and all the time, even today, we support ourselves by working as a graphic designer. and that's it for us. that's our job. So we used the money earned from the design for something else. Poetry is useless, design is useful. And I do design to be able to do poetry. Yes, but again, through that design, we managed to insert the attitudes that we acquired through the practice of imposing an aesthetic that we think is worth fighting for, what they were talking about is that aesthetics is ethics. So we are not very easy to work with, we insist on aesthetics that we think are important.

U: Would you be happy to have an exhibition in an art institution?

D: We broke it off sometime in 2001, anyway, we were invited to the Venice Biennale. that is, to present our work to Serbia at the Biennale in Venice. So many people call us since then. And like this question, if there is no archive and if nothing is already organized and visible, if someone wants to deal with it, why not, I think it is again a continuation of that dialogue with the most famous, let's see if someone wants to, so he can, and I think so, we are not exclusive in that matter. Ah so we went all over the world we had various presentations. And as little as possible we have always insisted, if there is already, some kind of gallery context to allow us to perform something outside the gallery. Whether a workshop, a playroom at the university or in a school was given as street actions or anything. Means the necessity of going out into that unnamed space; into free space, into dangerous space, is very important. If you're asking if we're happy, I'm not happy with closing anything. And I don't like that locked from locked outside of working hours, and only for the dedicated. But if it gives a chance to something else, if it is a way to realize something else, then yes.

U: What is your relationship with the streets?

D: Yes, but not even to the street itself. but on some kind of open space: open dialogue. So let's say, in the last 20 years, there have been workshops in pensioners' homes, at colleges, in schools, in homes for children, that is, in spaces that are, in a way, ghettos. But which are definitely outside the galleries. And which are ready for dialogue. Because sometimes the street is again 1 street can be a totally deaf space. You need to be open: to feel that space of new dialogue. The street used to be that, I don't know, maybe it was a prison. We went to prisons. We went to migration camps, they are all spaces of dialogue. And that is the only important thing for us, wherever, but dialogue.