

Self-management

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In order to discuss the commons today especially in relation to art and culture and speaking from our particular location we must return at least 60 years back, to the 1950s, a period when Yugoslavia broke with the Soviet Union after it refused to submit to the Soviet domination which left it in cultural, economic and political isolation from the rest of the socialist bloc. That also meant that Agitprop department which until then controlled basically all cultural happenings in Yugoslavia (Agitprop took after the Soviet model and was controlled by the Yugoslav communist party) was abolished. Subsequently all these changes lead to the development of a new kind of state cultural politics – the one based on self-management.

However, deliberations on the socialist cultural politics might sound anachronistic or even conservative especially if observed in the light of current museological discourses on the so called new prototypes of art institutions, uses of art, educational turn, participation in art and so on. In addition to all these categories the very notion of “working class” which represented the most important part of the self-management system has also become obsolete, especially due to the fact that in most of the Western world immaterial labor has to a large extent replaced industrial work. Compared to the now historical proletariat the contemporary cognitariat does not constitute a class. Seen in this light the socialist self-managed museums, their governance and the content which such museums provided could be considered today as conservative, subordinated to the state, ideologically restricted, highly bureaucratized while favoring conventional art formats, didactic means of providing knowledge about art and so on.

But, on another level, can we still even consider the question of class struggle and class struggle related antagonisms within the art institutions nowadays as used to be the case in Yugoslavia? What about the dichotomy between elitism, intellectual elitism included and social and political engagement in such institutions? Or to put it terms of a more modern vocabulary: How does the process of *commoning* - social process that creates and reproduces the common - happens within the cultural field today?

In order to answer some of these dilemmas I would attempt to link some progressive socialist cultural policies, museum models and directions as well as their emancipatory utopias to today's deliberations on the new prototypes of art institution – “museum of the commons”. It is not a coincidence that in many socialist countries around the world art and politics were united in their quest for creating utopian models adapted to social and political changes especially in the 60s and 70s. Experimental museology and concepts such as integrated museum, social museum, living museum, museum of the workers were widely discussed in the so called global south. Progressive cultural politics considered culture and art as “commons”, something that belonged to all; at least that was the case in theory.

Now let's return to Yugoslavia. As a consequence of all the political events and specific economic climate in Yugoslavia in the early 50s, self-management was introduced eventhough some have identified the origins of Yugoslav self-management already in the Second World War anti-fascist committees. Its main ideologue was Edvard Kardelj¹ and it was promoted by economists like Branko Horvat, theoreticians like Darko Suvin, Rudi Supek and others. They did not only affirm it but they were also critical towards it. Self-management had a profound influence on the society as a whole: it introduced a new type of managing labor organizations, the working people's participation in decision making, and workers' councils. Self-management brought about increased autonomy of

¹ There are many books on the topic. For example: Edvard Kardelj: Samoupravljanje, DZS, Ljubljana 1979 or in English: Edvard Kardelj: Self-management and the Political System, Socialist Thought & Practice, Yugoslavia, 1981.

production economic units, which was a step forward from the planned economy as practiced in the Soviet Union, as it handed the factories to the workers, the withering of the state. Workers officially managed the “socially” owned means of production (associative labour). Self-management was also introduced in cultural institutions where it was called “social management”; with museum workers’ council and later on with delegate system; a collective body consisting of third of its members who were the representatives of the employees and two thirds were external members who represented “social interest” in the activities of the institution. The basic idea was that those producing and those consuming culture jointly decide on matters of importance for the institution i.e. the financial plan, annual accounts, the work programme. Stane Dolanc, a high rank Yugoslav communist party official said in his speech in Moderna galerija in 1973: “The new position of culture in socialist self-management destroys the historic wall between the working masses and the culture”². This new vision also produced a change in the interpretation of culture: culture was not anymore considered as artistic expression per se but included all types of creative manifestation - in physical labour, politics, social life, education, science, new solutions in social services. Culture was less and less treated as a sector and more and more as an integral part of the overall creative effort of society, a link providing interaction between intellectual and physical labour.³ The old “statist culture” was replaced with the so called “socialized culture.”

In a specific way it was the 1950s which were a period of cultural blossoming in the former Yugoslavia. For example: the formal status of a freelance cultural worker was introduced (including all the social benefits), significant part of the national budget went towards numerous cultural activities, modernism was introduced as the favored style (modernist works were sent to biennials), and cultural infrastructure, including museums, was to be built or reconstructed. Some of the main concerns of Yugoslav cultural policy at that time were, for example, including culture in the entire socio-economic context and transforming citizens from passive users into active co-creators of culture; which is definitely something that could also be observed today in the context of the “commons” as I already mentioned. The goal was that art (also top-level or high art) and culture were to be accessible to all. The idea behind was to teach citizens / workers how to manage their country better. Such as, for example, organizing the didactic exhibitions, already in 1952 in Moderna galerija⁴ or perhaps a better known “Didactic exhibition on abstract art”⁵, an educational attempt by a group of artists from Zagreb in 1957. The exhibition was highly successful; it had travelled all around Yugoslavia for almost ten years and was set up in various spaces: city halls, schools, and museums. Also booklets on art produced within workers universities and so on.

As mentioned these cultural practices took many different forms, including for example amateur cinema and photo clubs, which were established in factories and other workers organizations. They provided opportunities for avant-garde experimenting in the spirit of socialist self-management. This is really a special case, similar to that of the soviet Proletkult from 1917, because in this way certain links were maintained between the so-called high culture and the workers. If workers didn't come to the museum and galleries, artists and museum workers would come to the factories. In museums of modern and contemporary art in Yugoslavia especially since the 1970s art was brought from the museums to factories, to workers’ associations etc., where special seminars on modern art were conducted with the goal to reach the broadest possible public. One such widely recognized program was called “forma viva”, a sort of artists in residence program, where artists were temporarily working in various factories and in exchange for the material they would in return leave their works to the factory. Some of them, (for instance, the Panonija Agricultural Complex in

² Čestitke, obračuni in načrti. 60 let Moderne galerije (catalogue). Moderna galerija, Ljubljana 2008, p. 15.

³ For a more thorough analysis see: Stevan Majstorović: Cultural policy in Yugoslavia, UNESCO (Studies and documents on cultural politics), 1980.

⁴ The series of didactic exhibitions included color reproductions of French Impressionists (1951-1952), Cubists (1952), Fauvists (1952) with accompanying lectures by prominent Slovenian art historians.

⁵ Suvremena umjetnost I. didaktička izložba: apstraktna umjetnost (catalogue). GSU, Zagreb, 1957.

Vojvodina) even built their own cultural centers with studios for painters. Others, such as the Podravka Food Industry⁶ in Croatia or Lek pharmaceutical industry in Ljubljana, have opened art galleries; the Steel Works in Sisak, Croatia, or steel factory Ravne na Koroškem in Slovenia have established collaborations of artists with workers on jointly creating art works. The idea was to transform all forms of human labour into a creative activity and this particular direction was known as “culture of work”⁷.

But what is also interesting is that at that time we had two different understandings of the idea of the “commons” in culture. The first is the official one, linking self-management with culture, opening the museums to the working people, educating all levels of population, etc. This direction included workers as an important part of the process of the commoning where an emphasis was put on the so called “socialization of culture.” The slogan was: Culture to the people!

And the other understanding of the “commons” is the alternative or more utopic one, the one which included for example the 1960s neo-avant-garde collectives where art was to become life belonging to everyone in a process of democratization of the artistic production and reception, or the alternatives of the 1980s which were very much connected to the wider social and political movements of that time in Yugoslavia. Actually many art collectives were organized on something that from today’s perspective could be seen as the principles of self-management. In the sense of Massimo de Angelis who said: whatever is produced in the common must stay in the common. So, paradoxically, since there was no art market for those works of art, art was in a way emancipated from the “aesthetic regime”, and the artists able to create without the interfering interests of the state or art market so art could stay in the common.

The negative side of self-management was a high level of bureaucratization; it was a very complicated system, with committees, assemblies, interest communities, chambers of working people etc. established for basically everything, demanding too much time from workers who had to engage in various tasks for which they were not competent. Also conflicts between artistic missions and collective management of the institutions were inevitable. It has been said that the introduction of self-management in culture only meant “to break cultural nationalism down into harmless units and to reduce the danger of elitism and cultural centralism.”⁸ There was also a huge gap between uneven economic and cultural development in various parts of Yugoslavia (north-south division). As a consequence the so called “demetropolization of culture” happened in the 1970s, with houses of culture being built in the countryside all over the country stimulating and favoring amateur art production.

Opposition to the socialist system, even in the form of irony, was often sanctioned, for example, many Black Wave films were banned, film directors not allowed to film, writers were occasionally accused of being “bourgeoisie” or enemies of socialism and could not publish their works anymore and so on. Many artists actually commented that it was basically possible to do almost any kind of artistic experiment during the time of socialism with two exceptions: critising president Tito and the Yugoslav Army. A quite known case is the *Oktobar 75*⁹ project from Student Cultural Center (SKC) Belgrade where a group of artists organized a symposium on art and political engagement. Dunja Blažević, who was a head of SKC visual program at that time, proposed to various artists to critically rethink “the sphere of socialist self-management in the sphere of culture”. However, the

⁶ Extensive research on the topic was done by Ivan Jakopović: *Radnici kultura revolucija (Razgovori s radnicima)*. Zavod za kulturu Hrvatske, Zagreb 1976.

⁷ Stevan Majstorović: *Cultural policy in Yugoslavia*, UNESCO (Studies and documents on cultural politics), 1980.

⁸ “Cultural policy in Slovenia” (authors: Vesna Čopič and Gregor Tomc), European programme of national cultural policy reviews, Council of Europe Publishing 1998, p. 47.

⁹ A recent analysis on the case: *The Case of the Student Cultural Center in the 1970s by Prelom kolektiv in Political Practices of (post) Yugoslav Art*, Belgrade 2010, pp. 126-153.

one kind of criticism that was not tolerated was the criticism of the left which came from the left itself.¹⁰

At the end this model – self management - failed to be part of the actual “workers struggle”. There are many reasons why it failed and these reasons are far too complex to debate in the frame of this text.¹¹

There are some important issues to be learned from Yugoslav self-management project, not only to resurrect some forgotten traditions and cultural practices but also as an alternative to prevailing Western cultural model. Looking back at what happened in the 1990s, it is quite obvious that museums in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe integrated into the global art system, adopting to a lesser or greater degree the Western cannon of art history and subsequently to the logic of capitalism. What we are interested in today is not the repetition of the old ideas but rather to consider self-management as counter model to think about new forms of commons, also in art and culture¹².

I would like to thank my colleagues from the Archives department of Moderna galerija for helping me with the archival materials.

¹⁰ I refer to the Praxis School, Korčula Summer School (attended among others by Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Henri Lefebvre), Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade; which experienced repressive measures by the League of Communists (especially after 1974).

¹¹ See for example an analysis in: Samo jednom se ljubi: radiografija SFR Jugoslavije (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung South East Europe, 2014) – "You Love Only Once. Radiography of SFR Yugoslavia, 1945–1972", Suvin's attempt at dialectical history of Socialist Yugoslavia (yet unpublished in English).

¹² That reconsideration could possibly be done on three levels: on the level of governance, on the level of knowledge production and on the level of heritage.