General Skepticism in the Arts

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This paper discusses the artistic procedure in general and the contemporary artistic procedure with "anti-art works," which opened up conditions for "general skepticism" in the arts. Here, the question "Who chooses" concerns art institutions that maintain the reproduction of the art system despite the revolt of "anti-artistic" production.

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The principal question of the colloquium *Who Chooses?* relies on the *ad hominem* argument and the consequent presupposition that the selection of literary works is in the hand of a particular person or the institution he or she represents. This question immediately brings to mind editors and publishing houses, but certainly also, among many others, state committees and administrators that distribute state subsidies, teachers and university professors that prepare reading lists in textbooks, critics and editors of book reviews, and librarians that select books for public libraries. The question also suggests that decision-making relies on the personal affinities of the individual involved in the selection of literary works, and invites, through the back door, the question of "objectiveness," all the more so because the person in charge is supposed to be trapped into a particular institutional practice, either the hegemonic ideologies of the state apparatuses or the profit-seeking strategies of publishing houses. The question of the colloquium therefore presupposes a determination of the final selection of literary works by the political and economic context, which can become disconcerting if, at the same time, one adheres to the ideology of the autonomous art field, that is, if one believes in "real" literary production that can remain immune to political and economic demands, and, consequently, presuppose the possibility of "objective" selection.

The question of the colloquium then implicitly raises objections to the personal affinities of the people in charge or accusations of institutions' repressive nature, objections I would rather avoid. Instead, I develop an analysis of the artistic procedure and use some concrete examples to show

why dysfunctions among artistic and institutional practices (which raise the troubling question "Who chooses?") may sometimes happen.

The artistic procedure

Proceeding from Rastko Močnik's analysis based on Voloshinov and Medvedev (Močnik, "Eastwest"), it can be seen that the artistic procedure belongs to the sphere of ideology because it is a form of ideological elaboration: artistic production works with a sign system actualized in interpersonal social communication, and so it is definitely "ideological." For this reason, the question of sign and sign system is important for understanding artistic practice. Voloshinov carried out an important intervention into Saussure's theory of the sign interpreted by Voloshinov as a mechanical connection of a signifier and a signified; although these converge accidentally or randomly in Saussure's linguistics, from then on, says Voloshinov, they are bound to each other in a steady fixed sign. In opposition to Saussure, Voloshinov developed a theory of a changeable sign or, as he also termed it, a "dialectical" sign. "Existence reflected in a sign is not merely reflected but *refracted*" (Voloshinov 23; see also Kržan). The conclusion drawn from this statement resolved the problem of why opposing social groups do not use different languages in expressing their disagreements: they use the same language, Voloshinov replies, but give the same signs different accentuations, different meanings. "A sign, in this sense," Močnik writes, "is a *refraction* of differently oriented 'social interests,' it is an arena of class struggle" (Močnik, "Eastwest" 20). A sign that does not intersect various accents – and hence is not the arena of social struggles – loses its vitality, dynamism, and capacity for further development.

The artistic procedure starts from the ideological elaboration that is inherently attached to every sign system. According to Močnik, ideological elaboration is the primary ideological elaboration (the "primary refraction") by means of a sign that reflects social existence and, at the same time, facilitates constant refraction of various accentuations. This inner nature of signs is particularly active in a time of social crisis or revolutionary turmoil, when language is capable of following and reflecting social changes by accepting new accentuations. In comparison to primary ideological elaboration, artistic procedure is "secondary elaboration": "In this sense, artistic practices perform a sort of *secondary elaboration* upon ideologically already 'refracted' material." (Močnik, "Eastwest" 21)

One must pause here for a moment. If an ideological sign system facilitates and even demands a constant refraction of accentuations in the

sign, and if primary ideological elaboration is also depicted by and included in secondary elaboration, then one must pose the question when primary ideological elaboration stops and secondary elaboration begins. Pierre Macherey's book *A Theory of Literary Production* is helpful here. The author, says Macherey, works upon material that is "the vehicle and source of everyday ideology" (Macherey 72), something that corresponds to Voloshinov's "ideological material." This "everyday ideology" is a "formless discourse" (ibid.) – a continuous and unfinished discourse that is senseful and, at the same time, meaningless everyday speech: this is an amorphous language that tells something by conveying no meaning at all. The artistic procedure, according to Macherey, obstructs the continuous sense course of language by putting it into a frame. By enframing the course of language, the author gives it a certain form and meaning. The artwork therefore distinguishes itself from the ideological elaboration by enframing everyday speech, enabling the author to take control over free and unrestrained language. For this reason, the artistic procedure does not pertain to everyday ideology, although it proceeds from it; artistic procedure is able to produce an implicit critique of ideological content – by giving it form and meaning. The artistic procedure is ideological through the material it uses, and is, at the same time, outside the realm of ideology because it is able to detach and distance itself from the material it uses. Macherey described this situation in a nice pathetic phrase: "The artwork begins where formless 'life' ends" (Macherey 74; translation modified). The artistic procedure succeeds in establishing itself as autonomous; although it operates in ideology, it is at the same time different from ideology and capable of being separated from it. However, one important dimension of artistic procedure is still missing.

Hidden structures

Each field of art creates its own hidden (historical, social, and empirical) structure through which authors create representations and "tell their stories" without being able to considerably impact the way their stories are constructed. An author, consequently, always creates within a community because he or she creates in often unspoken and silent agreement with readers, commissioners, publishers, and critics that predispose common conventions, norms, and matrices of how amorphous everyday speech should be enframed and structured. Authors do not create by themselves or for themselves, but always with others and for others. The community provides processes of verification and assures the legitimation of genres,

styles, and canon, for example. Consequently, it establishes the social field of art containing a thin net of art mediators and intermediary institutions (publishers, critics, and commissioners).

The artistic procedure occurs at all three levels mentioned above: 1) the level of *ideological elaboration* represents the material of representation, 2) this level is then subjected to *secondary elaboration* as the artist revolts against formless everyday discourse and gives it shape and meaning, and 3) the artistic procedure nonetheless also takes place within the social institution of art because it refers to the "inner normativity" provided by the art institution. From the viewpoint of its agents, "inner normativity" functions as hidden structures.

The three levels are interconnected in such a way that none of them can supersede the other two: secondary elaboration does not suppress the primary ideological elaboration without which art would be unable to offer anything sensual and tangible (presuming that art is supposed to make something "visible"). The artist's reliance on social codifications of artistic procedures, on the other hand, does not impede his or her critical intervention into primary ideological elaborations. The interconnection of all three levels produces a convergence of the "outer" and "inner" world: the "outer" world comes in through primary ideological material as everyday economic and political practice, whereas the "inner" art world comes in through established codifications or norms. Although inspirations come from incompatible sides, they can converge in the art world and finally produce the "cognitive aesthetic effect."

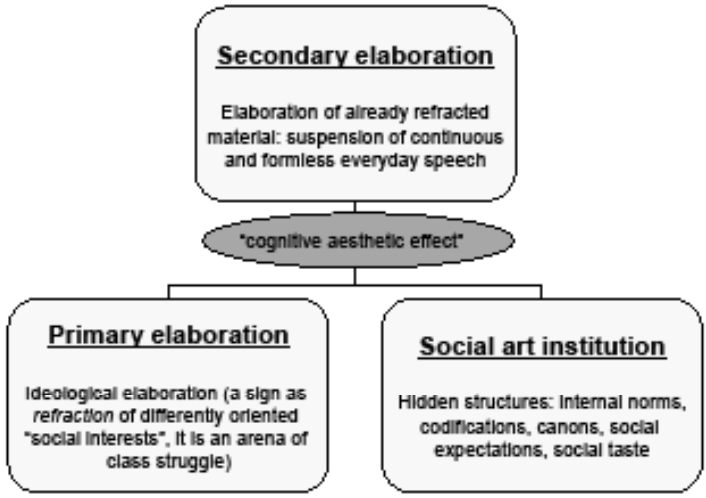

Figure 1: The artistic procedure

The technological turn

Technological evolutions have constant effects on modifications of the artistic procedure yet, even with this in mind, the possibility of technological reproduction of images and motion in the nineteenth century seems to have had exceptionally fundamental effects on artistic production. The photographic reproduction of images in the first half of the nineteenth century, followed by the reproduction of voice by phonogram and the reproduction of movement by film, were supposed to change, as Walter Benjamin believed, "the entire nature of art" (Benjamin 220). The possibility of technological reproduction certainly rendered handmade reproduction obsolete, especially painting but also other art practices. It is important to note here that, with technological reproduction, the arts lost their monopoly over imitation and representation of reality.

Technological reproduction took away from the arts their most cherished function by which the arts have provided the preservation of (historical) memory to their audience. The essential function of the arts was the transformation of mortal into immortal by bestowing eternal memory onto transient subjects, that is, the monumental function of the arts that could be replaced by that time by photography and its "documentary function." Namely, photography is all the more convincing if it catches people at the right moment (*kairos*, happy moment), when they do not have time to strike a pose (Barthes, *Camera*): in fact, the less artistic its representation, the stronger its validity. The monumental function appears unnatural with respect to direct technological representations, which can represent persons or situations at every moment and put forward the polyvalence of images reproduced, the polyvalence in which "representativeness" is lost as one of many valences. For this reason, it is hard to imagine a portrait painting in the age of photography, although in some cases one is deliberately displayed in order to oppose the documentary function of photography. In the senate room of the University of Arts in Belgrade, I was once astonished by portrait paintings of the rectors, which were actually charming, given the personal imprints of the artists under the influence of various artistic styles, but nevertheless conveyed heavy monumental meanings to visitors. It was evident why simple photographs would be inappropriate in this context, especially if they were real documentary photographs revealing the persons portrayed in a "weak" transient moment. The resistance against the documentary function of photography also exists in photography itself in the sense of changing photography into art and of forcing the monumental function upon it. The greatest danger for photography, says Barthes, would be to change it into an art, that is,

to suppress the immediate documentary function of photography and to replace it with the monumental function of painting.[1]

According to Walter Benjamin, the instruments of technological reproduction made the traditional role of art obsolete. The arts, he explains, were long attached to the religious cult, and when this was no longer demanded they developed their own "theology of art," the latest result of which was "pure art." This was understandable in the time of pre-modern artistic practices, which could make only a "superficial" presentation because of limited technological means, whereas technological reproduction could offer an "X-ray presentation" and conjunction of the artistic with the scientific approach. Benjamin even adds that an artwork will obtain completely new functions in the future, among which the artistic might be a mere coincidence, since its practice will derive from politics rather that from the occult artistic tradition.

The entrance of technological reproduction into the art scene changed the interrelation of the three levels of the artistic procedure, as shown in Figure 1. Art lost its connection with the immediate material by losing its monopoly over the representation of reality and its ability to bestow an eternal memory upon things and persons represented. From then on, the artistic procedure as secondary elaboration can only have a "dialogue" with its own conditions of existence, and question the existence of art, social expectations and taste, the rule of art institutions, and the formation of the canon. Questioning the very nature of art practices and art institutions, modern art can only produce "anti-art works," works that question and oppose the established social meaning of art, as shown in Figure 2.

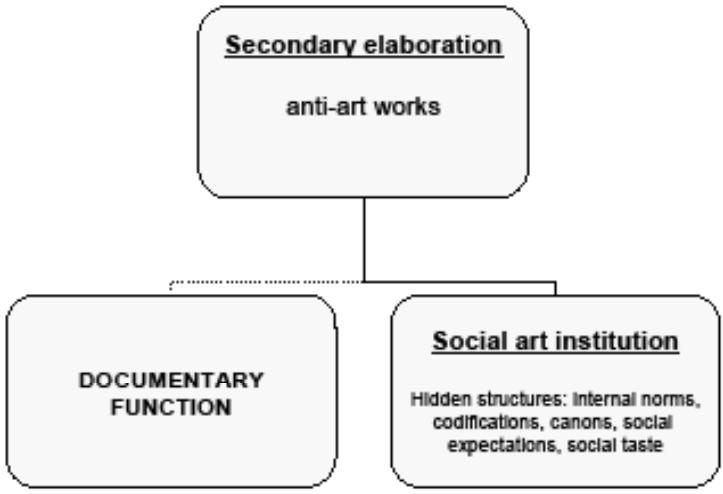

Figure 2: The artistic procedure in modern art

Who decides?

Most intriguing is the role of art mediators after the "technological turn" and their response to the inherent development of the arts. Intensification of the self-referentiality in the artistic procedure has opened a problematic that might be identified as "general skepticism" towards the arts. The connected term "specific skepticism" was created within anthropological research on witch-doctoring when Edward Evans-Pritchard discovered that members of the Azande people did not believe in witch-doctoring without a certain skepticism.[2] They distrusted certain witch-doctors, identifying them as charlatans and abusers of human naivety, but nevertheless continued to believe in "real" witch-doctoring. Geoffrey Lloyd took up the argument in his book *Magic, Reason and Experience* (see Lloyd), examining the inevitable question of general skepticism that follows from the question of "specific skepticism." The conditions of "general skepticism" were fulfilled, Lloyd says, in Ancient Greece as the distrust in magic practices became general and opened the floor for the general doubt of modern sciences. Xenophanes, Heraclites, and many other Ancient Greeks introduced systematic doubt in magic with respect to medical treatment, legal processes, religious practices, and scientific approaches, and they contributed to the rise of Greek science. I believe that a similar conclusion can be drawn for modern art, which intervenes in the art field with a series of infringements on the presumed idea of the arts. Marcel Duchamp inaugurated such infringements by exhibiting a "found object" or "ready-made" (with *Fountain*, which had to be a urinal, *sic*) instead of a real art object; later, Piero Manzoni offered a piece of the artist's shit (*Merda d'artista*) as an art object, demystifying the social idea of art. They are important for being among the adherents of sacrilegious (secretory) art that interplays with people's revolt against the social institution of art.

Cultural mediators (museums, curators, and art reviews in this case) have a great merit in preventing the full consequences of this "interplay" and the possibility, proclaimed by the very "interplay," of general skepticism as unconditional and systemic doubt in the arts. They managed to avoid the possible outcome of general skepticism by establishing the "interplay" itself as an artistic procedure and canonizing it as modern and contemporary art. Art institutions impede artists in coming to an end with the consequences of their artistic interventions. Artists, in turn, find a constant source of inspiration for new artistic interventions and new criticism of art institutions in the strategies of impediment undertaken by art specialists and art institutions. In this way, the artist and art institutions remain enclosed in the perpetual game which concerns only those involved in the game.

Author or producer?

In order not to become lost in vain abstractions, let me take a concrete example and analyze inconsistent positions of artistic practice on the one hand, and of the social art institution on the other. My example derives from the production of OHO, a Slovenian avant-garde group that produced its own publications. My thesis can be too easily illustrated with an edition of Franci Zagoričnik's *Opus nič* (Opus Nothing), a book that contains five blank numbered pages in addition to the title and the colophon on the front and the back page. A collection of matchbox editions could also prove interesting in this perspective. I nevertheless take as an example a "conventional" poem from Tomaž Šalamun's 1968 collection of poems *Namen pelerine* (The Purpose of the Cape; see Šalamun 3):

football player massimo bianchi and clerk luciana carere
barkeeper roberto lella and housekeeper graziela vrech
driver enrico marsetti and seller floridia ruggiero
driver enzo romano and seller ana maria pavani
welder pier giuseppe spagnoli and dressmaker rita boffa
radio mechanic fulvio merlach and clerk franca parenzan
sailor marino vio and nurse anna franceschi
architect nereo apollonio and hairdresser lucia pitacco
hotel director renato raguzzi and teacher silva pilat
finance officer luigi romanelli and housekeeper loredana parovel
physician edoardo castelli and physician fiorella lanfrè
bank courrier fabio longaro and clerk maria pia manin
high clerk alesandro castelnuovo and student petrina saina
post agent gianfranco pangher and telephone operator diana bortolotti

The poem represents a list of male and female names with their professions that recall conventional newspaper announcements of marriage. Tomaž Šalamun uses a method common to all OHO members in various art fields, by representing things as they are without any artistic elaborations or at least, if this is not possible, with minimal artistic intervention. In OHO works, the world appears as a (real) world of things contrary to an (artistic) anthropocentric vision. Šalamun similarly takes words as things without foisting additional meaning upon words, without metaphors or rhetoric. The result of Šalamun's poem is an inverted representation of romantic subject matter as has occupied the long tradition of modern European poetry: a love relation is represented here as an emotionless newspaper announcement. It is, as it seems, a mere quotation of everyday communication, but it nevertheless catches a peak moment of two lovers as they are ready to promise eternal fidelity to each other. The author pro-

vided only an excerpt from the newspaper, and yet routine phrasing produces meanings and associations without the intention of the author or even against his will because, as Rastko Močnik stated, language is creative by itself (Močnik, "Izpeljava"). The cognitive aesthetic effect of the OHO group's poetry, and of Šalamun's poem in this case, is in the self-creativity of language itself, which escapes reification.

The OHO group went even further in seizing on (written) language as a thing in order to resist the inability of language to become a thing. David Nez and Milenko Matanović (see the two illustrations below) represented writing as its minimal visual appearance, that is, a line. David Nez held a pencil over a piece of paper during his travels and let his hand produce random marks, and Milenko Matanović made a line of wood and rope and let it drift in the current of the Ljubljanica River.

All three works also perverted the representation of the artist as the author. Šalamun, Nez, and Matanović are not the "creators" of really "new creations"; they only transferred something from its original context into another one (i.e., to the context of artwork) or they let themselves be manipulated as mechanical instruments in originating a new work (e.g., David Nez). They did not create something, but rather reused something or added new labor to a preexisting object, not having "created a new thing from nothing" as creators or authors are supposed to do. In this way, they made manifest the function of the "author" as Macherey described it: as a person through whom language and preexisting "recites" speak. As Roland Barthes ("The Death") says, the author usually has to forget himself or herself in order to make language practices resurge on the surface.

What the author does, Barthes explains, is to combine various "recites" and make the texture of "quotations" – if it were believed differently, he says, it would be the individualism of modern society that made the artist equal to the Creator Himself.[3] "Artworks" therefore openly make a mock of originality and ingenuity of authors that were supposed to create without predecessors and the transfer of knowledge – the group overtly challenged and ridiculed the role of the creator. With the dissolution of the collective in 1971, most of its members in fact ceased to "produce art."

Institutions to decide

Notwithstanding the overt counter-game of artistic practice against mystification of authorship, art systems rely on this myth in the legal, social, and economic dimension. I briefly give only some examples which revive an already dead myth. First, the author's rights, a legal system that prescribes the modes of remuneration for authors, are based on the presumption of authors' creativity as justification of intellectual property rights. Second, the art market (i.e., the trade in artworks and copyrights as well as the system of donations and tax exemptions) would be handicapped without the "creative value" (Bourdieu's *symbolic alchemy*) ascribed to artworks. Last but not least, the attitude of nation-states towards art institutions is also built upon the idea of the national artistic genius and the progress of character through creativity.[4] Without this belief, the "cultural state" would dissolve into a dream and it would no longer be so generous in distributing subsidies for the arts or in protecting the author's rights. The art system would fall apart without the assumption of creativity, and so the assumption might be a wrong one, but is also a necessary one one for the preservation of the above mentioned art institutions. The artist as an "individual" might contradict the idealized image of a creator in concrete artworks, but as a member of the art community (i.e., of the art system) he or she must play the role of a creator. Illustrative of this is Tomaž Šalamun, the author of the poem cited above, who is today considered one of the greatest Slovenian poets of the postwar period. Consequently, the ones that "decide," the art institutions, impede the evolution of artistic practice and do not let it break the vicious circle of authorship. They enclose the debate about the author in artistic practice and transform the problem that tackles the social nature of art into a problem of artistic representation. What should be resolved at the social level becomes "tricky," unsolvable aesthetic subject matter, a game between two makers of the artwork, the producer and the creator:[5] the one that denies the existence

of the author and refutes authorship, and the one that asserts all credit over creation as personal merit. This game becomes an artistic "trick" or "fun" that produces the aesthetic pleasure and the cognitive aesthetic effect.[6]

However, according to Bourdieu, "by refusing to play the game, to contest art *according to the rules of art* [as they are set by art institutions], their authors are not questioning a way of playing the game, but challenging the game itself and the belief underlying it, and that is the only unforgivable transgression" (Bourdieu 170). Art institutions are nevertheless able to refute any "unforgivable transgression" and, moreover, revive the institution of art like a phoenix from the ashes by changing, for example, Barthes' prediction of the death of the author into a metaphor and an aesthetic problem. Art institutions take the role of guardians of the old rules of art that enable them to stick to literary doctrines (predominantly from the authors' point of view, as Barthes critically showed in the essay "The Death of the Author"), old-fashioned publishing strategies (in which the ghost of the author appears as the author's personal imprint in the literary works), and nationalistic cultural policies.

Life itself nonetheless strikes back. Commercialization of publishing imposes its rules of profit-seeking strategies and thereby forces authors against their will into the role of real "producers." Entrepreneurs are willing to let them keep the sacredness of the author, but in exchange for the real material exploitation hidden under the appearance of sacredness. Authors' material working conditions do not differ from the working and living conditions of the general "cognitariat," a new army of mass workforce that is replacing the withdrawing industrial proletariat. From the flexible workforce that offers its services to occasional employers and is forced to forget its political, social, and economic rights, the authors differ only with respect to potential entitlement of the author's rights, that is, that one day they may get a chance to enjoy rent revenues from the objects of author's rights. Yet in the everyday conditions of production the rent functions as a promise of resurrection, through which the employers keep authors humble and ready for sacrifices in the great expectation of becoming well-known and rich artists one day, although they know in advance that their chances are slim.

The system of author's rights is an illusion of fair remuneration for artists, but an illusion necessary for justifying the deregulation and privatization of public services, the globalization of the cultural market, and the commercialization and homogenization of cultural goods (Breznik). These processes yield new dominant "hidden structures" that authors have to take into consideration and through which they seek links to potential

readership. The market of cultural goods as the most important institution for the selection of literary works (and which decides which works the public will have access to) enforces banality and predictability through its "hidden structures," which give authors only the freedom to adapt to the expectations of mass consumers.

NOTES

[1] How it was actually achieved is described from the judicial point of view in Bernard Edelman's book *Le droit saisi par la photographie*.

[2] Jack Goody described the evolution of the argument (68–69) starting with Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* and finishing with the term "general skepticism" in Lloyd's *Magic, Reason and Experience: Studies in the Origins and Development of Greek Science*.

[3] See the important contributions on the subject in *The Author: Who or What is Writing Literature?*, a special issue of *Primerjalna književnost* (2009) edited by Vanesa Matajc and Gašper Troha.

[4] Cf. Taja Kramberger's (see Kramberger) and Braco Rotar's (see Rotar) critiques of the teleological approach in national historiography, which presumes the progress from uncivilized (savage) to civilized state with the support of "national culture" and "national artists."

[5] Jernej Habjan provided a cogent concrete example of such interplay by identifying the playground of two "enunciators" as "art at zero-point" (Habjan 56).

[6] For more about the important theoretical value of "fun," see Močnik, *Extravagantia* 113 ff.

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