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Autonomous Spaces of Deregulation and Critique

Is a Cooperation with Neoliberal Art Institutions Possible? // 1 //

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[See also Boris Buden's commentary.]

Cooperation with Neoliberal Cultural Institutions in Serbia

In Serbia, the land which hasn't yet experienced the complete influence of regulations by the European Union and neoliberal capitalism in the field of culture and in art and cultural institutions, cooperation between independent (or progressive) groups and those institutions is more simple, and it could be seen as more “natural” in comparison with the experiences of organizations in the countries of mature capitalism. Here public institutions of art and culture cannot be viewed as being completely neoliberal, as they usually are in the developed countries of the European Union, but could instead be regarded as ruined, which is a direct consequence of systematic neglect following the collapse of socialism. // 2 // Their existence and sustainability is often based on passivity (on a very fact that they exist), and at this point it seems that the direction they will take will be neither the

development of the concept of creative industries and flow of private capital in those institutions, nor representational as foundations of national identity, which would mean "pumping up" the budgets of those institutions and depleting public funds. Their economic sustainability is completely based on public funding. On the other hand, if they are registered as civic associations (which is mostly the case), independent art and cultural groups belong to a non-governmental sector, which is not only unregulated, but has also been completely demonized in the past as a carrier of "imperial and colonizing elements" in Serbian society. A position with this kind of heritage does not make it any easier for the NGO sector to function in a political environment where carriers of the authoritarian regime from the past are still active and often hold important positions in the state executive apparatus. The position and significance of these independent cultural groups, in some cases and in some ways, corresponds to the role of non-governmental organizations, which often claim that their basic purpose is take a position of pleading for the interests of a civil society. But it seems that NGOs now find themselves more in a space full of tensions, because on the one hand they are supposed to advocate for the interests of citizens, but on the other they most frequently and paradoxically end up representing the interests of different multinational companies and supranational bodies. Consequently, certain independent cultural groups could end up advocating for the interests of public (neoliberal) cultural institutions, instead of standing for the interests of independent and progressive cultural production. Independent cultural groups definitely have to distance themselves from this kind of paradox duality. Still, many self-organized art and cultural groups, such as New Media Center_kuda.org, where I work, function in this way – as civic associations claiming the right to participate in public funding for cultural development. As a member of a small

collective like this, I would consider a position of economic sustainability based on the public funding very problematic myself, if we were not constantly working on creating temporary bodies in coalitions with other art and cultural institutions (public and informal), in order to create new spaces for political action, with the aim of realizing desired change. According to Badiou, the strength of this kind of action lies in a position in which it is possible to make one's own decisions and to create one's own space for political action, in order to sustain the aforementioned relations of critique, against the self-marginalization of one's own actions. Every other position could be regarded as defensive.

The notion of autonomy arises here as one of the focal points and as a place charged with different meanings. The question of how to define an autonomous space for acting today is a crucial one. // 3 // For a start, it is very important to remember that the autonomy of political actions is not necessarily located outside a state, a system or an institution, but rather it reveals itself as a potential which disorganizes, whose difference is determined by relations of critique, negation, refusal, non-compliance, assumption, etc. Autonomy means neither isolation, self-referentiality nor self-canonization. Political autonomy should be seen primarily as a potential to chose one's position, one's own space for acting, and to establish the aforementioned relations of critique, negotiation, negation and/or non-compliance. Therefore, it is a potential for creating a strategy and for defining terms and conditions under which someone takes action, and where her or his political decisions have been made. This is exactly what Alain Badiou sees as a precondition for the creation of a political heterogeneity, which consequently leads to the genesis of a substantial, vital and homogeneous political vision, the practical form of which is a movement itself. To that effect, in commenting on the global

social movement, he argues that we ourselves have to control a position from which we are fighting, criticizing or negating, and never go where the adversary is, in other words, a position in relation to which we are building our own position. In this respect, Badiou is very critical of the global movement against economic globalization, seeing it as doomed to fail and especially regarding it as a reformist position with no precisely defined aims or strategies. Its aims, in his view, are most frequently expressed in a general call for a reform of global neoliberal capitalism or, conversely, a call for its abolition. What Badiou finds essential is constant experimentation in the social, collective field with new forms of fighting, new inter-relations and new organizations as carriers of precise meaning and a precise strategy for action. Badiou proposes neither a fatalistic annulment of the anti-globalization movement, nor autonomous actions that would mean intentional non-communication with the object of the critique – a state, a system or an institution. Instead, he speaks of self-reflection, self-critique, a notion of one's own position of acting. and about creating a potentially affirmative space for political struggle.

Although cooperation with public institutions of arts and culture in Serbia seems to be more simple because of the smaller scope of the entire scene, this does not mean that that the smaller scope reflects the quality of the cooperation. In many cases, following a seemingly good start of the cooperation and mutual understanding, it seems that problems arise mostly due to the lack of "concentration" on the part of those institutions, which is need to carry out the cooperation to its end, often resulting in damage to independent groups because their fees and/or production costs are not paid. It it evident that official institutions do not completely understand the model according to which independent institutions function, and thus end up exacerbating the degree of precarity and

the unregulated, flexible position of members of those independent groups by that very lack of understanding.

By practicing different models of self-sustainability, the collective "kuda.org", together with two other independent groups (Kružok and Alternative Cultural Organization-AKO), has initiated a separate autonomous project, the Youth Social Center in Novi Sad, dedicated primarily to young people and to social, political and cultural activities that could influence them to initiate independent political actions. The project has promising start – a house which is owned by these three organizations, which is quite significant at the practical level of autonomy (at least of physical space). // 4 // The foundation of a center like this is of great importance for the local environment because it is an attempt to revitalize independent cultural public spaces that have been devastated by systematic privatizations since 1970 up to the present. At the same time, it faces a major challenge in the question of how an institution like this can be sustained, because at the moment it is solely based on the volunteer engagement of project members. As great a challenge as this kind of work represents, other models have to be practiced so that volunteerism does not lead to precarity and the exploitation of the intellectual production of those who are involved in this institution, or again to avoid self-victimization and self-precarization. In this particular example, the political aspect is only just emerging. Following Badiou, but also Žižek, it is very important to deduce the way in which it is possible determine and declare one's own position of political struggle. According to their opinions, it is essential to take and declare one's own autonomous position specifically by affirming it, determining it as a positive position. In that sense, Badiou cites as an example the experiences of the movement of workers "without papers" in France, who didn't say, "Our position is bad. We want papers...", but rather

"We are the workers of this country, and when someone is working in this country, then he/she is the citizen of this country." Or in Žižek's example he describes how the process of the expansion of a subject of the Declaration of Human Rights in 18th century progressed: the Declaration covered only the rights of a white male, excluding the rights of women, lower classes, other races, etc., until the moment when the excluded declared themselves, demanding their rights and ultimately acquiring them. Žižek says that some strategies from the past are worth following today as well. If we attempt to translate these examples to the specific theme of this text, to the critique of cultural policies that ensure the existence of neoliberal cultural institutions today, and to reconsider the potential cooperation of independent cultural institutions with them, then it would be possible to say that independent cultural institutions and individuals, fighting for their own position cannot stop at saying, "My position is very bad; all I can do is to protest against it". Instead they need to define their position as "With my acting as an independent cultural or art institution or an individual, I represent a legitimate actor in the art and cultural scene, which gives me the right to criticize it, to work for its change and deregulation." A declaration of one's own autonomous position with the aim of recognizing possibilities for change and acting to realize them, is the first step in forming new political fronts, also in the field of contemporary cultural practice.

Critique of Neoliberal Cultural Institutions

In order to be able to answer the question of whether cooperation with neoliberal art institutions is possible at all, the question has to be asked in a different way: Where is there a space for autonomous actions that is not marginal, but instead represents a potential for deregulation, critique and negation in the case of art and cultural

institutions? At the moment when the relationship of the European Union to culture and cultural institutions is predominantly determined by the pressure of instrumentalization and commodification, where cooperation with the private, business sector is justified as part of neoliberal creative industries, and where the omnipresence of creativity is encouraged as an imperative of contemporary cultural production, a space for autonomous and critical action seems more and more constrained. Museum complexes increasingly look like shopping malls, where specific art production is offered based on the economic exploitation of intellectual property, offered by flexible cultural workers with disturbingly unregulated working places in those very institutions. What interest could there be in cooperating with such repulsive art and cultural institutions?

Before I try answer to this question, it is necessary to think about the functional working methods of independent art and cultural groups, especially when economic sustainability as an important organizational element is in question. Certainly there are many different models, but the most prevailing one is where the sustainability of those institutions is based on public funding, on tax money from the citizens of a state, or a supranational structure such as the European Union. Public funding intended to support cultural activities has been distributed by specially mandated bodies for those kind of activities – ministries for culture – which is a representative example of how the concept of parliamentary democracy functions. Fighting for their share of public funding, independent cultural organizations often behave like public art and cultural institutions, and they forget that their position is not supposed to be passive one, but rather represents a basis for the formation of new political battle field. In short, every critique of contemporary neoliberal art institutions and their economic

structure is superficial, unless it includes a critique of the predominant concept in today's politics: liberal parliamentary democracy in general, as a political framework for global capitalism. Some of the many existing models for the economic sustainability of independent groups could also include independence from public funding enabled by self-sustainability, in the sense of the commercialization of certain services. Yet another model would mean a different approach to internal economy – regular employment, offering services such is graphic or web design, etc. – in order to work "for a cause", for what we really care about, after a regular job. Of course, independent groups could also function on the basis of complete volunteerism or reach sustainability through an exchange of services, although this is still a model with very limited possibilities. Of course there are many models. The one that is the focal point of our attention here is cooperation, including the economic sustainability of that cooperation, with public art and cultural institutions. As it was said before, this kind of cooperation should not be viewed as compromising one's independent and "righteous" position, which brings the whole operation to a purely moralistic dilemma of uncompromised action, but rather as opening a space for realizing a cooperation potential, but cooperation based on questioning, critique, negation and deregulation. This kind of practice could represent a precondition for creating a space for political struggle and thoughtful negotiations, which could lead to a change of conditions of work or of cooperation, regardless of whether it is a matter of organizing a common event or an attempt to influence working conditions in very neoliberal art institution.

In that sense and despite many negative experiences, there are still some possibilities for productive cooperation with public institutions (or others), as long as the conditions for that

cooperation are well defined and agreed upon, and assuming that each side takes responsibility for the cooperation (this is where a moral obligation should play a substantial role). It should not be assumed that the rules or conditions for cooperation are immutable, once they have been established. They can be called into question by anyone at any time. They can be changed, or the cooperation can be abandoned, as long as the price of abandoning the cooperation is the same for all participants. Thoughtful and well argued critique of this kind of cooperation is always welcome! This also represents one of the possible ways of changing an established cooperation or its progress, or canceling it, if it becomes evident that it is unsuccessful or wrong.

Instead of Conclusion – The Power of Change

In the documentary movie “The Corporation”, former chairman of The Royal Dutch Shell, Sir Mark Moody-Stuart, discussed his personal encounter with a small group of environmental activists who were placing a banner with “Killer” written on it on the roof of his family home somewhere in The Netherlands, trying to call his attention to the necessity of raising corporate responsibility for environmental protection. After shouting slogans, pointing out banners and protesting, they all together sat together on Stuart's lawn discussing the reasons for the protest over tea. Stuart's conclusion was that those young protesters are frustrated because they cannot make a real change for environmental protection or in general, and that this is the reason they are protesting. He also said that he understands this and he is grateful that he is the one who can make this change. Yet at the same time, his company continued to pollute the majority of natural water resources in Nigeria. What does this picture tell us, except that officers of multinational corporation see the protest of global social

movement as an expression of non-potential and frustration due to the inability to make a real change? It also tells much about the current positions of those who claim to want to make a change, yet the change does not happen. Then there are some in a position to make a change, but they only do so to legitimize their own strategies, while actually maintaining the same social problematic (or not doing anything concerning environment protection, in this particular case). This picture is highly indicative of conditions of autonomous political struggles today. In other words, it poses the question: *What is the subjective possibility of political engagement today,* its autonomous position on the one hand, and its potential to change on the other?

A challenge of action aiming to make a direct social change (what can we do against global capital?) is that this action usually ends up caught in the same "hegemonic ideological coordinates" it seeks to suspend: those who actually want to take action for change are not only tolerated, but even supported by media; even if they seemingly interfere in the territory of the economy (criticizing companies which have no respect for ecological standards), they are tolerated and supported until they reach certain limits. According to Žižek, this is a perfect example of interpassivity: to take action not with the intention of effecting any real change, but to discourage really making a difference and achieving change. In this way, any activity becomes depoliticized and falls into the domain of morality and the legitimation of certain interests, and it loses the possibility of intervention in a well defined political struggle. Žižek also argues that democracy today is based on the possibility of transforming a political enemy into an adversary – "unconditional antagonism to agonistic competition". Defined political struggle is not so much about agonistic competition within the boundaries of what is approved, of political subjects that regard themselves legitimate

adversaries, but it is, first of all, about a struggle over the demarcation of this territory, the demarcation that distinguishes the legitimate adversary from the illegitimate enemy. Žižek asks why legal and moral terrain is not changed into a "new battlefield" of political hegemony, and why do we not restore very direct legal-moralistic arguments to discredit the enemy. It seems that his suggestion belongs more to a domain of the affirmative, rather then to the domain of politics of negation, whereby he also raises the question of a truly democratic globalization: why not initiate a big global campaign, a sort of international regulatory body for ecology, with legal status and executive power, which would determine criteria of what is seen as an ecological crime and punish those who commit it? Why not mobilize the whole legal-moralistic apparatus in order to treat those responsible not only as political adversaries, but as criminals? At this point, Žižek is being very provocative, because he poses the question of why not by using a method that is usually used by a political "enemy" – a method that this political enemy defines as progressive and autonomous practices consider repulsive. In this sense, Žižek is not taking a reformist position, but is actually posing an affirmative question of how to create conditions that would ensure real social or political change.

It is therefore necessary for multiple processes to be developed simultaneously: choosing one's own position and degree of its autonomy while still avoiding a moralistic misapprehension of that autonomy being misinterpreted. At the same time, following Žižek, the political field of one's action needs to be defined, thereby carefully determining the position of the political enemy, namely the position of a clear distinction of who or what kind of practice needs to be criticized and deregulated. Trying to escape the usual moralistic position of the "purity" of action, as purity could

determine its political potential, it is very important to continue to build our own autonomous space for political action. As said before, the autonomy of a space does not mean marginalization from social relationships or relationships that are established by different kinds of cooperation and constructive critique. In this sense, it is imperative to build a space that represents a potential for disorganizing, which is defined by relations of thoughtful critique, negation, refusal and non-compliance.