09 2007

The Principle of Secrecy and the Difficulty of Institutional Critique in Kosovo

Sezgin Boynik

1.

In order to analyze current and innovative contemporary art in Kosovo we have to go back to the beginning of the nineties, where the cultural roots of the present situation are found. At that time, and also before it,, contrary to typical avant-garde theories, these cultural roots were not related to art as an autonomous sphere. In Kosovo contemporary art has always been an ad hoc engagement with political and social circumstances. Seen only from this perspective, the contemporary art of Kosovo can be understood as highly political. But what I will try to show here is that this ad hoc (or immediate) engagement has a potential to be misunderstood and misinterpreted as radical institutional critique.

In the beginning of the nineties, when Kosovo Albanians were faced with extensive social repression and completely erased from official representations, there were quite a few contemporary art events organized in Pristina as well as in other cities in Kosovo. These exhibitions, which were mainly the usual modernist

metaphorical representations, were important in the sense that they could represent “Albanian culture” within the realm of aesthetic representations; the very existence of these exhibitions was enough to show that a trace of “Albanian culture” exists in Kosovo. Of course these exhibitions were underground.

2.

As it is commonly known, Kosovo, which was an autonomic and autonomous region of the Republic of Serbia, and which had been enjoying extensive political rights in Yugoslavia since the constitution of 1974, lost these achieved rights in the beginning of the nineties. The new constitution, which was composed by the Serbian nationalist policy, excluded all the rights of Albanian self-representation. The constitutional change in the beginning of the nineties was executed in all the republics of Yugoslavia. This meant a suspension of Yugoslav federalism and the self-management system, and a change from a one- party to a multi-political party system. In all the Yugoslavian republics this change was received with the euphoria of a discourse of democratization. But in Kosovo this transformation was experienced as a series of clandestine changes, physically with miners going down to the 9th horizon of the mine coal as a protest against their working conditions, to the imprisonment of the politician Azem Vlasi, who was formerly the right hand of the late Tito, and then the withdrawal of all Albanians to underground institutions, such as parliament, schools and galleries.

Going underground in this case did not mean to literally become illegal, but rather it could be seen as a manner of functioning parallel to the centre of hegemony, without having any connection with it. Or as Albanians liked to say: ‘constructing parallel

institutions'. In practice this meant that Albanian students in Kosovo started to educate themselves not in the state supported schools, but in private houses, basements or in warehouses. If we compare this counter-hegemonic tactic with historical counter-cultural experiments, it is surprising to see how many similarities this form of resistance has with many avant-garde and radical artistic and political manifestations. For example, the parallel institutions are very similar to what NSK had planned to subvert in the socialist federative Yugoslavia, and also similar to the counter-cultural distant critique of the society of the spectacle by the Situationist International. Within the avant-garde movements, the parallel institutions were a tactical approach, but in the case of Kosovo (and the Situationists) it was a problem and concern of a strategy. The difference between the tactic and the strategy is that tactic is understood as something that leads to an immediate result, whereas strategy is a way of practice. The strategy of the parallel institutions in Kosovo was a long-term tactic aimed to destroy the oppressive hegemony by creating an alternative counter-hegemony against it. It had no compromises or conflicts with the official system of power. Interpreted in this way, the theory and practice of parallel institutions can be seen as an ad hoc strategy to overthrow repression. And once the hegemony is overthrown or destroyed, the strategy of parallel institutions would be dysfunctional and superfluous. This would mean that Kosovo would be able to make the step from an exceptional to a normal state.

But since the 1999, when the political situation was normalised in the sense that the banal violence of the Serbian hegemony was no longer present, all the pseudo-institutions, NGOs and contemporary art galleries were still dreaming of a normal state of things. Normalised institutions in a normalised Kosovo, this is currently the *point du capitone* of the semi-official corrupted

projects of the Ministry of Culture and of the democratic open society militancy of the contemporary art centres.

To demonstrate this thesis we have to go back to where we started, to the situation of contemporary art in the beginning of the nineties.

3.

The roots of the boring art of the nineties can be found in the aesthetics of the dark and archaic national metaphors of abstract academic modernist paintings. This history is best analysed by the philosopher Shkelzen Maliqi, who managed to show how the developments in painting in Kosovo from the sixties to the seventies changed in accordance (reflexively) with current politics; with a semi-abstract style, all the painters were using the same metaphors of Albanian national symbolism like towers, cage and torso. In the sixties, when the Serbian policy of oppression was highly visible in Kosovo, these metaphors were very covert and painted with a dark and pessimistic feeling, but immediately after the constitution of 1974 they adopted a more colourful visual language and were also more openly elaborated with 'hidden' national symbolism.

As usual, modern as well as contemporary art is often related to national representation. Such was the situation in Kosovo. But because of the historical circumstances this representation lost its ties with the official representation and went underground, became clandestine. This is where contemporary art (and culture) in Kosovo ran into its initial set of problems, which it is still facing.

To clarify the thesis of this article, some historical facts are needed: even with the constitution of 1974, which guaranteed far-ranging

rights under the Republic of Serbia, Kosovo remained always a Third World Country within Yugoslavia. The Albanians were always seen as the other (according to the ethnicity based theory, because Albanians were the only non-Slavic ethnic group in Yugoslavia), and they were economically and culturally most under-developed. Even the artists who were active in the seventies, the 'golden years' of Kosovo, had a feeling of belatedness. The sense of being late was further exacerbated by the socialist-realist engagement of artists and their 'national' ambivalent relation to Albania, the 'distant' neighbour. The plan of being part of Yugoslavia was brutally interrupted in the late 80's; a decade when Kosovar Albanians were probably closest to the project of Yugoslavia (Azem Vlasi?!). In short, the process of the modernisation of Kosovo, which started seriously after the Second World War, was expropriated in the early nineties.

4.

In the nineties, when the project of modernisation was brutally halted, the concept of the public sphere was also radically transformed. After the parallel institutions, the public sphere was no longer the same. Or more to the point, public space did not exist for some people. Consequently, Kosovar Albanians continued to use their public space in a very 'secret' way. This secrecy, which helped to construct a national political resistance within the community, also significantly influenced the cultural scene, and this influence is still evident. The principle of secrecy was part of the tactic of counter-hegemony, which the political leader of this opposition at the time, Ibrahim Rugova, described as passive resistance. But the secrecy of the parallel institutions was not total, because the Serbian police knew about the underground schools and parliaments in Kosovo, yet they let it happen nonetheless. This

would be a very interesting case for study, but most probable reason why the Serbian police overlooked the situation was that they didn't take the tactic of parallel institutions seriously and were also hoping that a passive resistance would abolish any real (public) opposition and real (armed) struggle. With this interpretation there is a danger of falling into the trap of describing the Serbian police as being overly planned and intelligently vicious. One can be sure that the tactic of secrecy influenced the Albanian cultural scene more than is immediately evident; the Albanian intellectuals are still acting as though within the parallel institutions. This semi-paralyzed situation, as I aim to show with the case of contemporary art, is the collateral damage of parallel institutions, which continued to be practiced as a tactic (or lifestyle), even when there was no longer a need for it.

5.

The transition in contemporary art from the boring and miserable nineties to the euphoric 21st century is the best example of this collateral damage. After 1999 the Kosovar Albanians no longer had any reason to be secret. Public space was completely theirs (except for that of NATO, UN and some foreign NGOs). The argument of this article is that the tactic of secrecy continued even after the moment when there was no longer any need for it.

Apart from Albert Heta, there are no artists in Kosovo, who have dealt with the issue of public space or realised works in public spaces. Heta's intervention in Pristina to the British Airways billboard advertisement "It Is Time To Go Visiting" by jamming it with the flyer saying "No Visa Required" is probably the best example of a work in public space. This work directly attacks the visa regime and aggressive advertising campaign of the British

Airways, which does not even consider the Kosovo Albanians as possible customers in its advertisements. The work questions international (NATO, UN and foreign NGOs) economic policies in Kosovo and also addresses the problem of the isolation of Kosovo. To put it in a more friendly way, the work is one of the rare experiments in breaking the secrecy and silence of Kosovo Albanians. But the silence that Heta's work is breaking is not silence that many people in Kosovo relate to, because even if no visa were required to travel to London, the real question is how many Kosovars could actually afford to take this trip. Heta, like many other artists in Kosovo, is not interested in the dark side of the economic policies of Kosovo. Their concerns are more about international recognition of Kosovo as an independent, European, liberal and capitalist state. There is no mention to be found in any artwork of the 75 % of Kosovars who are unemployed and live below the poverty level. Once again, the real problem is silenced in secrecy. For contemporary artists in Kosovo, the problem is still the same as it was for the painters in the seventies and eighties: the main issue is the national and official (state) representation. And as it is commonly known, there is no room for poverty and poor people in the official representation of the state.

6.

In Kosovo it is difficult to talk about a critique of institutions, because all the official and semi-official institutions are dreaming of a normalisation, which means a complete realisation of institutions joined in consensus about the formation of state. Artists must also be part of this construction. This is the reason why there is no critique of institutions in Kosovo; the common argument is that when there is no 'real' institution, it is not merely absurd, but wholly impossible to talk about a critique of it. Artists' work must

support the construction of institutions. Under these circumstances it is impossible to discuss recuperation, radical political stands, or a withdrawal from the art market.

Because of this, it is interesting to notice that in Kosovo many young emerging artists have decided to stop producing artworks. For example, artists from the young generation, like Jakup Ferri, Dren Maliqi and Lulezim Zeqiri, and also established artists like Sokol Beqiri and Erzen Shkolloli, have stopped making art now. Their decision is not based on any notion of a conscious refusal of institutions, nor can it be seen as an attitude of a radical break from institutions. The reason for their refusal is the widespread impression that the cultural milieu of Kosovo is lethargic, miserable, confused, aimless, boring etc. Yet there is never a clearly articulated reason for this decision. Once again, the decision is made ad hoc, without any public discussion, and in the shadow and tradition of the tactics of secrecy of parallel institutions.

7.

Due to the lack of institutions, many art critics and curators regarded the art scene of Kosovo that emerged after 1999 as highly innovative and giving birth to a very interesting art phenomenon (from Edi Muka's 'new proletarians' to Rene Block's 'new avant-gardes'). These deconstructive interpretations of the contemporary art scene confuse even more the complex interrelationships of institution, public space, secrecy, nationalism, economy and international hegemony in Kosovo. Because of this, anyone attempting to think about the situation in Kosovo from the perspective of institutional critique must consider the local history of tactics, public space, nationalism and economy in a very

analytical and cautious way. Otherwise, very conservative impulses might be misinterpreted as innovative and critical.

Edited by Aileen Derieg