Against Art by Other Means

(Goran Đorđević: 1972-1985)

Branislav Dimitrijević

In January 1980, the leading daily newspaper in Belgrade, *Politika*, published a small announcement for the opening, on January 29 at 6 pm, of an exhibition at the Students' Cultural Centre (SKC) by the artist Goran Đorđević, entitled *Against Art*. The gallery also distributed a small invitation card, while omitting the exhibition's title. The artist later stipulated that the gallery had objected to the title and consequently removed it.[1] Nevertheless, the invitation card (the only printed document accompanying the exhibition) still contained a short statement in Serbian and English declaring that:

> "A work of art expresses, among other things, certain attitude toward art. The works shown at this exhibition are not works of art. They are only attitudes toward art. More precisely they are attitudes against art. I think it is high time to tear the powdered mask of freedom and humanism off art and reveal its proper face of faithful and humble servant."[2]

Below the text, a black and white reproduction of a kitsch painting of a neo-classical backdrop depicts a handsome young painter holding a brush and a palette in front of an easel painting of three beautiful maidens, one of whom is playing a lute. The same image reappeared pasted on the side of a rectangular block of wood on the gallery floor – resembling one of Carl Andre's "timber pieces." Above, a row of framed pencil drawings hung on one of the gallery's walls. Copied from iconic artworks from the canon of art history, commonly reproduced in art history books, the drawings, however, hung in apparently reverse historical order. They began with conceptual artists Joseph Kosuth and Daniel Buren and ended with the Venus of Willendorf and the imprint of a hand in a prehistoric cave.

This must have been a rather disconcerting exhibition for the gallery. Opening in 1971, the SVC gallery earned a reputation as a platform for "new artistic practice," a term coined by Ješa Denegri, the most influential young art critic in Yugoslavia at the time, to encompass practices of conceptual art, body art, land art and *arte povera*.[3] Throughout the 1970s, the gallery and its exhibition program curated by leading young curators in Belgrade (Dunja Blažević, Biljana Tomić, and Bojana Pejić) became the leading venue for local and international artists bent on subverting the academic and institutional mainstream of modernist art in Yugoslavia. In particular, the gallery came to be identified with an informal group of six artists who fully embodied the "new artistic practice": Marina Abramović, Raša Todosijević, Neša Paripović, Gergely Urkom, Zoran Popović, and Era Milivojević. Their performances, videos, and installations, along with the work f such influential international figures as Joseph Beuys, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and Gina Pane, signified the most radical artistic position in Belgrade at the time.

In 1972, Goran Đorđević came to Belgrade from Kosovo to study electrical engineering. Before arriving, he had already acquired an interest in art – especially the Avant-Garde and, in particular, Malevich. Indeed, as a solo artist (and, at the time, a painter), he exhibited for the first time in Prishtina in 1971. In Belgrade, he found the SVC a stimulating environment for his ideas and started exhibiting there as early as 1973. His works from this period can be classified as "pure" analytic conceptualism, and consisted mostly of graphs, schemes, diagrams, formulas, and 8mm films that sought to find mathematical explanations for thought-processes, as well as a response to the class character of art and a means to overcome it. In 1978, Ješa

Denegri noted that despite their "scientific" appearance they did not merely aim to synthesise art and science, but contained "sociological implications that provoke relations and criteria within the existing art system."[4] Denegri writings on art were influenced by radical Marxism, and concurred with the position of Art and Language, which, at the time, had a certain "counter Beuysian" influence on several artists in Belgrade – notably on Đorđević and Zoran Popović.

In 1976, Đorđević published "On the Class Character of Art" in the third issue of the New-York-based art journal *The Fox,* in which he reached the conclusion that "art is primarily the results of an illusion of freedom, and not a way of expressing the liberties of the human being" and that "every activity of which the goal is the assertion of an artistic consciousness represents at the same time the prolongation of that illusion."[5] As he had stated it in his first interview (published in Prishtina in the student magazine *Novi svet*), Đorđević perceived art discourse as a continuation of religious discourse in which the notion of "creativity" becomes the main ideological trope through which art exercises its class character. Already in the interview he claimed that "the man [sic] has never created, neither will he ever create," and that art is not concerned with creative processes but rather processes of research.[6]

When Đorđević came to Belgrade and started working and exhibiting at the SKC, he promptly assumed an unpopular position in which he viewed the "new artistic practice," with which he had become associated, as essentially maintaining the illusion of freedom and the myth of creativity – despite its innovative formal aspects. Primarily influenced by Joseph Beuys (who gave an influential lecture at the gallery in 1974), the scene around SKC actively rejected modernist formalism, yet maintained a humanist position, which as Đorđević saw it, did not break, but rather upheld the "illusion of freedom." In 1977, Đorđević published his next critical essay, "The subject and the pseudo-subject of artistic practice," in the Belgrade cultural journal *Vidici.* Here, he castigates the art-system, and the role of "new art" in it, and concludes with a bold statement: "I believe that in the current situation it is only justifiable to organise or support, according to concrete circumstances, those activities within the art system which provide its real diversion."[7] Two years later, Đorđević corroborated his position by calling upon artists to join his "International Artists' Strike."

In the early 1979, Đorđević addressed the following statement by letter to several hundreds artists:

> "Would you agree to take part in an international strike of artists? As a protest against the art system's unbroken repression of the artist and the alienation from the results of his practice. It would be very important to demonstrate a possibility of coordinating activity independent from art institutions, and organise an International strike of artists. This strike should represent a boycott of art system in a period of several months. Duration, exact date of beginning, and forms of boycott will be worked out on the completion of the list of enrolled artists and propositions. Please give notice of this to the artists you know. The deadline for applications/suggestions is 15/05/79."

The list of invited artists included those associated with the advent of "new artistic practice," and included Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, Bertrams, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Hiller, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Marioni, Mel Ramsden, Raša Todosijević, Lawrence Weiner, among others. In a subsequent interview Đorđević stated: "I would like to point out that, for me *art* was only what was called 'conceptual art' or 'new art' and in retrospect historical Modernism […] The strike referred to 'New Art Practice' and what was going on with and within it. As far as I am concerned, it was a sort of epilogue to this explicit critical-activist work in the SKC."[8]

The attempt to organise the strike was certainly bound to fail. Yet Đorđević receive responses from around forty artists. The majority expressed their reserve or doubted the possibility that it could be undertaken.

Some responses were, however, positive. Together, they now form a valuable document, a tapestry of artist's position, from a seminal moment in the late 1970s. In a special issue of the student journal *3+4* (published in Belgrade in 1980), Đorđević wrote an introduction to the published responses in which he asserts: "The idea of the International artists' strike is under present circumstances probably an utopia. However, as the processes of institutionalisation of art activities are being successfully applied even to the most radical art projects there is a possibility that this idea could one day become an actual alternative. I therefore believe that publishing of the replies I received could be of certain interest."[9]

The following examples illustrate the diversity of responses:

Dear Goran Dordevic
Thank you for your letter of 22 Feb 79. I think the art system has the same relation to the world system that a seismograph has to an earthquake. You cannot change a phenomenon by means of the instrument that records it. To change the art system one must change the world system.
Be well, Carl Andre.

Dear Goran
Thank you for your communication on the proposed International Strike for Artists. I did not respond because I do not believe that this proposal is neither efficient nor sensible. Museums and commercial galleries will go on functioning very well without the cooperation of the socially concerned artist, and these of course would be the only ones to possibly join such a strike. Rather than withholding socially critical works from the art-system every trick in the book should be employed to inject such works into the mainstream art world, particularly since they are normally not well received there.
Sincerely yours, Hans Haacke.

Dear Goran
Thanks for your letter. Personally I am already on strike of producing any new form in my work since 1965 (i.e. 14 years). I don't see what I could do more.
Best regards, [Daniel] Buren.

The reason Les Levine did not reply is because we receive literally thousands of circulars in the studio each month and it is impossible for Mr. Levine to respond personally to each one of these. We can only deal with personal mail. It's likely Mr. Levine didn't even see your circular. However, Les Levine is not interested in strikes of any sort, artists' or otherwise.
Yours sincerely, Mulberry Baxter

Dear Goran
[...] I am in complete agreement with what you say about institutions although it would be unproductive for me to join a strike.
Yours, John [Latham]

Dear Goran Dordevic
Sorry to take so long, but rather than strike I spend all my energy on striking back at the art system by working around and outside of it and against it and letting it pay for my attempts to subvert it.
All best, Lucy R. Lippard

Dear Goran Đorđević

Certainly not to say that one can (or should) work within the so-called system but bring about a different system BUT there may be a method of working around the system. Perhaps by integrating the problems of the production of art & at the same time attempting to both make & show art. When an artist no longer makes art they can no longer function as an artist but as a concerned citizen. The concerned citizen at the same time must work at their work & concern themselves with the level of the culture…
Most best regards & warm greetings, Lawrence Weiner

In his response, Mel Ramsden quoted one of Art & Language's "Corrected slogans," "Don't talk to sociologist," from 1975 (as performed by Red Krayola):

> *Don't unite artists and don't talk to them. If you or they are made to think that there's a "rational core" in that talk or unity in support of the view that "society" is maintained harmoniously — rather than by exploitation and force: violence.*

In June 1979, a month after the deadline for applications and suggestion, Đorđević paid a visit to Ramsden who was living in Middleton Cheney in South Northamptonshire. Later Đorđević emphasised the importance of this conversation, in which both artists voiced their disappointment in the outcomes of the conceptualist revolution in art, which both felt had become increasingly aestheticised and integrated into the art system. According to Đorđević, they both agreed that conceptual art had only succeeded in at least one area: *iconoclasm.* "I remember that Mel Ramsden, a member of the group Art & Language, who Zoran Popović and I visited after the London Film Festival in 1979, said that iconoclasm stood for the most significant achievement of conceptual art. Even though, at the time; I agreed with his opinion, it remained with me, as I felt something was not quite right there. Most likely an iconic appearance – a drawing on paper after one of Kosuth's *Definitions*, which I made – had something to do with it. Between the cave painting and Kosuth, there were other drawings – copies of Malevich, Duchamp, Manzoni, Buren, the entire history of art, including conceptual art, all 'translated' into a traditional medium – drawing on paper. These works establish some kind of connection between 'high' art and what is termed 'kitsch.' My experience with conceptual art is that I would meet and get to know many artists who, in my opinion, produced bigger kitsch than this exhibition. Somewhere I used the term 'white kitsch' for these types of minimalist works."[10]

With this in mind, and after his failed attempt to organise the Strike, Đorđević changed his strategy and entered the final phase of his artistic output (which lasted until 1985). He "discovered" the *copy*, and began to use it as a means to act against art with the means of art itself – if we can briefly define his new theoretical, ideological, and artistic tactics. In the only interview he gave (in Belgrade) during this period, published in the leading art magazine *Moment*, in 1984, he declared: "It happened that the term 'Conceptual art' started being used by those artists I did not want to be associated with. Simply, I felt that the difference between Tradition and Avant-Garde became minimal. Then I started to think about works to be realised in traditional materials." By exploring the possibility to work on an "un-artistic use of a traditional artistic medium," Đorđević created a vacillating cultural subversion: "If my attitudes may seem radical to some, I must say that they are, first of all, an expression of sympathy with intellectual anarchism that is unfortunately not far away from utopistic by having in mind that the true power of Tradition and Institution is incongruously and discouragingly big."[11]

In *Against Art*, Đorđević also hung another series of drawings, alongside the "Short History of Art," based this time on a painting entitled *The Harbingers of the Apocalypse*, which Đorđević "created" in his late teens in Pristina, during an attempt to educate himself in the art of painting. He considered the painting awful and

therefore absurd to produce copies of it. He subsequently discovered that a copy could be more interesting – even more "artistic," and "meaningful" – than its original. Đorđević organised his next exhibition in his apartment in New Belgrade in March 1980; it subsequently travelled to the Museum für (Sub-)Kultur (Berlin), in autumn 1980; to the PM Gallery (Zagreb) and the ŠKUC Gallery (Ljubljana), in March 1981; and finally to SKC Gallery, in April 1981.[12] Đorđević exhibited his series of "faithful" copies of *The Harbingers* alongside works by other artists who he invited to "inspired" by his "masterpiece." Contributions by Raša Todosijević, Zoran Popović, Mel Ramsden, Jonathan Borofsky, Braco Dimitrijević, Carolee Schneemann, Lawrence Weiner, Kristin Koenigs, Marina Abramović, Ulay, and others were not identical copies, but rather "some kind of interpretation" as if they were not about a simple repetition but about some novel ground-breaking method of contemporary art in which the copy became a main vehicle to convey artistic truth. This is how Đorđević later explained this situation:

> "During this period, I made fifty, faithful copies, because I was concerned that the deviation from the original should be as slight as possible. It seems that, for many, this task was complicated from the conceptual point of view. A copy is an uneasy terrain, because the literal copy really appears as something utterly pointless. Nevertheless, it soon turned out that it was not possible to make something entirely worthless. I sensed that the copy is a very complicated, interesting, and unexplored territory, so that, in a certain sense, I have yet to master it. Based on the copies of *The Harbingers of Apocalypse* that I made, I wrote the book *Treatise on Meaninglessness* (*Traktat o besmislu*). This small book had ten pages of text, with photographs of originals and ten copies. The images were accompanied by a short text, comprising two sentences: 'When I was 19 years old, I made this painting; 11 years later I started making copies of it.' I sent the treatise to the editorial staff of the philosophical magazine *Theoria*, with the idea of publishing it as a philosophical piece. The magazine was affiliated with the Society of Philosophy of Serbia and the decision to publish it took a considerably long time. The work was published in 1984 under the title 'Philosophical Treatise on Meaninglessness.' The editorial staff added the term 'philosophical' to the original title."[13]

Đorđević only made copies after original paintings twice during his "artistic career": following the series after his own *The Harbingers* painting, he also made copies of a Mondrian, in the collection of the National Museum in Belgrade (1983), the only time he divulged his painterly "skills." He copied other works from photographic reproductions, thus not only undermining the status of the original, but also the status of the copy: his hand-made copies of reproductions thus became "original copies." For the most part, Đorđević added these copies to other images (or other copies), thus creating *montages* of differing duplicative orders, a mode of *trans-contextualisation* which deploys irony to establish differences in the midst of sameness, and uses familiar signifiers to disturb familiarity. In most cases, Đorđević "fused," the copies of modern and contemporary works with some "traditionally" kitsch motif: Duchamp's *Fountain* is depicted among the the sculptures in the Belvedere; a young nobleman rides his horse over a Carl Andre "floor piece"; Joseph Beuys in his characteristic fishing jacket walks through a picturesque landscape; a reclining nymph glances through a Neoplastic catalogue; and, finally, Jesus himself points at a Mondrian painting, as if it were his sacred heart: *Sacratissimi Cordis Iesu*. For his last exhibition, *Scenes of Modern Art*, which took place in Belgrade and Ljubljana in 1985, Đorđević inserted copies of Malevich and Mondrian into *Playboy* caricatures depicting joyous sexual encounters in elegant modern apartments. He also inserted "caricatures" of modern paintings hanging on the walls in these imaginary apartments, which he copied onto canvas, thus producing what he would describe as "real paintings" that embody the caricature of "modern art."

In 1982-83, he received a Fulbright scholarship (in order to continue his studies in electrical engineering and computing). During this time he spent a year at the Visible Language Workshop at MIT, where he also wrote a computer program which produced copies of Malevich and Mondrian. While at MIT, he regularly travelled

to New York, where he acquainted himself with the alternative art scene in the Lower East Side. In New York, he exhibited his copies with the Colab collective and in the exhibition *Artists' Call Against US Policy in Central America* at the Judson Memorial Church in 1984. For the latter, which included Sherrie Levine and Mike Bidlo (two artists associated with appropriation art as it emerged in the early 1980s), his five cardboard copies of Malevich hung directly across from Levine's re-photographs of Walker Evans. Levine painted her own copies, "After Malevich," only a few months later (unfortunately, it not within the scope of this essay to speculate further on this coincidence).[14] Sometime during the summer of 1985, however, Đorđević disappeared from the art scene. Since, there has been no evidence that he continued to produce any artworks or art projects.

He never published a statement explaining his decision to leave the art world. Yet perhaps a clue can be found in the Dutch artist Joep Bertrams's letter in response to Đorđević's call for the International artists strike in 1979. The letter contains only one sentence: "Anonymous is the answer."[15] Another clue might be a letter published in *Art in America* in September 1986. The letter is signed by Kazimir Malevich from Belgrade, Yugoslavia, the first paragraph of which reads:

My dear friends
I was very much surprised to learn from the article "Diaorama" (A.i.A. March '86) of the artist David Diao, who actually copied my work using the famous photo of "The Last Futurist Exhibition" held in Petrograd. Dec. 17, 1915 - Jan. 19. 1916. I was a little bit confused, but eventually I liked both the idea and the paintings. Hope one day to see them for real. It was not less surprising to learn from the same article that my work has recently been used by some other artists from your beautiful town of New York. I can't stop asking myself: Why? Why now, after so many years?[16]

At the same time, a strange event took place in a Belgrade lecture theatre: someone announced as Walter Benjamin gave a lecture titled "Mondrian 1963-1996" in front of a dozen Mondrian paintings. The transcript of the lecture later appeared in an art magazine. After presenting the topic of his discussion, Walter Benjamin asserts that:

> *1) These are not the original Mondrian paintings. 2) These are not forgeries. 3) We do not know who painted them. After a careful observation we can at best call them technically unsuccessful copies. […] Our main difficulty is therefore in our (non)acceptance of a possibility that these paintings are works of art. Because, if this were so we would not stumble at the first step, we would not wonder about their meaning… However, the question bothers us like a boring fly on a hot summer day. I don't know if it may help us, but I suggest, as a hypothesis, for the sake of practise, to consider that nonsense is, in fact, the incentive behind the appearance of these paintings, and their "meaning" as such. […] When creating his painting our unknown author did not have to and was, in fact, unable to solve Mondrian's plastic problems. For reasons that remain unclear to us, he painted a copy and thus had only to solve the problems of manual reproduction. It may occur to us that the object of his interest may be the Copy as such, a kind of re-examination of this para-artistic form and its status, and perhaps the possibility that it may carry some other meaning. If this is the case, then behind the two identical paintings we may find different ideas. Yet, while, in the original Mondrian we may almost see the idea behind the painting, does this also apply to its copy? Because in the copy we primarily see Mondrian, and possibly only him. This means that, along with its own idea, the copy, keeps something of the idea behind the original. Another paradoxical assertion may enter our minds, which is not easy to utter even jokingly, namely that the meaning of the copy is much richer than the original…*[17]

Over the last 30 years, several "institutions" have emerged that prominently exhibit copies: the Salon de Fleurus, which opened in Manhattan in 1992; the Kunsthistorisches Mausoleum, which opened in 2004 in Belgrade; and the Museum of American Art in Berlin (along with others, which this writer does not know of).[18] Ocassionally, the name "Goran Đorđević" has been rumoured in connection with certain doormen, technical assistants, museum guards – and even in relation to certain well-known figures, who we impulsively assume now belong to history.

Notes

1. For this and other information on the exhibition, see Đorđević's first interview about his work since his "disappearance" from the art world in 1985: "Story on Copy: An Interview with Goran Đorđević," *Prelom* [English edition], 8 (2006), 249-269.
2. From the invitation card for the exhibition in SKC in Belgrade, January 1980. For this and other information, see the only comprehensive publication on Đorđević, *Protiv umetnosti. Goran Đorđević: Kopije 1979-1985* eds., Branislav Dimitrijević, Dejan Sretenović and Jelena Vesić (Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2014).
3. At that time Denegri was primarily influenced by the writings of Germano Celant and Catharine Millet, who both used the term "new artistic practice."
4. Ješa Denegri, "Goran Đorđević," in *Nova umjetnička praksa 1966-1978*, ed. Marijan Susovski (Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1978): 63.
5. Goran Djordjević, "On the Class Character of Art," *The Fox*, 3 (1976), 163-165.
6. Milorad Denić, "Postoji samo istraživanje – Intervju sa mladim slikarom Goranom Đorđevićem," *Novi svet*, 24 (1972), 11.
7. Goran Đorđević, "Subjekt i pseudosubjekt umetničke prakse", *Vidici*, 3, (1977), 6-8.
8. "Story on Copy: An Interview with Goran Đorđević," 254.
9. For correspondence and documentation related to the "strike," see "The International Strike of Artists?," *3+4* (1980), 41-85.
10. "Story on Copy," 255.
11. Slobodan Mijušković, "Goran Đorđević. Original i kopija", *Moment*, 2 (1985), 9-11.
12. The exhibition did not take place in the main SKC gallery, because of Đorđevićs continued dispute over the "censored" title of *Against Art*, but in the so called Happy New Art Gallery, which welcomed a new generation of artists emerging in the early 1980s.
13. "Story on Copy," 256.
14. For the further discussion see: Branislav Dimitrijević, "Too Much – O My God – Art Here!" in *International Exhibition of Modern Art Featuring Alfred Barr's Museum of Modern Art, New York*, Branislav Dimitriiević and Dejan Sretenović eds. (Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art – La Biennale di Venezia, 2003): 9-46.
15. *The International Strike of Artists?*: 83.
16. "A Letter from Kazimir Malevich," *Art in America*, 74, no. 9 (September 1986), 9.
17. Walter Benjamin, "Mondrian 1963-1996," *New Moment*, 1 (1993), 13. Benjamin delivered his lecture in Serbo-Croatian, from which it has been translated here.
18. For information on these "institutions" see: *What is Modern Art?* Inke Arns and Walter Benjamin, eds., (Berlin: Revolver, 2006).