

HIDDEN ECONOMIES AROUND SLAVIJA SQUARE¹

Public art isn't a hero on a horse anymore

Arlene Raven

Hero on a horse vs. context specific art

The historical role of the “hero on the horse”, as Arlene Raven summarized this centuries-long “image” we identify with the public monument, was to represent social ideals and embody the political or cultural memory of a certain nation. This kind of monument existed in order to “commemorate”, in permanent materials, the deeds of great citizens, the examples of national heroes, the causes for civic pride and the incentives of high resolve which are offered by the past”.² It is clear that the message contained in monuments placed in important public spaces, like for example city squares, is to express visible signs of authority. Public monuments are therefore used to assert power through a particular idea of history, of nationhood and of the celebration of superior individual achievements.³

Public art maintains this role, which is still highly present in the urban environments of cities like Belgrade and countries like Serbia, in spite of numerous alternative approaches to artistic interventions in the urban core, whose development we have been witnessing since 1960s in the form of site specific and context specific art, counter-monuments, community based art, etc. Eventually, Belgrade city officials and the cultural establishment tend to give room to the solutions of artists or urban designers that can be treated as “embellishment” of the city.

¹ The version of this text was first published in German under the title “Der ‚Disfunktionale‘ Ort und seine verborgenen Oekonomien”, in Annette Weisser & Ingo Vetter Arbeiten 1996 – 2006, Revolver Verlag, Frankfurt, 2006. (pp. 65-83).

² The statement of Charles Mulford Robinson, as quoted by Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions - Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988. (p. 23).

³ Eric Hobsbawm, pref. cat.: *Art and Power*, London: Hayward Gallery, 1996. (p. 12).

However, any kind of research-oriented, analytical, not to mention critical form of intervention, is out of focus and far from public attention.

If we were to concentrate on examples that are busy vivisectioning the context of the urban tissue where such work is being placed, i.e. context specific art practices, we would have to introduce a few basic methodological assumptions. The term spatioanalysis could serve here as a theoretical tool for the process of “unfolding” all of the historical layers that are superimposed in a certain location of a city. The term could also be used for the analysis of the way in which these layers were produced in specific socio-political contexts. It is therefore important to emphasise that the physical form of the cityscape is inseparable from the specific society in which it develops. Cities, as a result, are not perceived to be constituted solely by material artefacts; they are also seen as open ground for the projection of ideologies, the expression of cultural values and the demonstration of power. The organization and shaping of the city, as well as the attribution of meaning to its different spaces, might be viewed as social processes. Spatial forms are seen as social structures and the reorganization of urban space as a component of full-scale social restructuring. In short, the produced and reproduced space of the city represents the site and the outcome of social, political and economic struggles.⁴

Having set the methodological tools for the analysis, our case study will be the installation that in 2001 artists from Germany, Annette Weisser and Ingo Vetter, placed on the edge of the site known as Mitić’s Hole, an empty lot located on Slavija Square in Belgrade.⁵

⁴ For this line of argument see, among others, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Cambridge MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990; Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, London and New York: Verso, 1989, and Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions – Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1988.

⁵ The work was realized in the project “Dysfunctional places / Displaced functionalities” held in the framework of the 2001 Belgrade Summer Festival. The curators were Heike Munder, Stevan Vuković and Zoran Erić; the participating artists were Annette Weisser and Ingo Vetter, Mischa Kuball, Ben Cain and Tina Gverović, Talent Factory, Apsolutno and Milorad Mladenović. The project invited artists to investigate different “dysfunctional” sites, and foresaw a research phase involving the analysis of urban, architectural, topographic, cultural, historical and geo-strategic aspects. Each artistic project was expected to develop context-specific interventions that demonstrated other potentials of the chosen site, or to construct new types of functionality taking into consideration the many contextual limitations imposed upon the location.

Story about the square that is actually a round-about

From the mid 19th century, when it was unpopulated and used by rich Belgrade citizens for shooting ducks, to the present day, the area around Slavija Square has undergone a very peculiar history of urban development. Throughout this period, there were several decisive moments with landmark buildings or monuments that marked socio-spatial transformations of that site. The very first idea of urbanizing this area came from a Scottish entrepreneur Francis Mackenzie, who bought the land and prepared it for subsequent development. The area was at that time still legally beyond city limits and therefore much cheaper, fostering faster development and causing, as a result, one of the biggest problems for the city.⁶ Being a Nazarene, Mackenzie decided to build a temple named the Hall of Peace to the outrage of Belgrade “Orthodox” public. However, the Hall of Peace was used not just for religious but also for educational purposes, thus showing the visionary and enlightened role of the Scotsman, whose initiative produced the first socio-spatial context for Slavija.⁷

After World War II, the new communist regime renamed Slavija after Dimitrije Tucović, one of the foremost Serbian socialists. His remains were re-buried on the square and a monument was commissioned to the renowned sculptor Stevan Bodnarov. Besides the round plateau around the monument, the “square” was actually nothing more than a roundabout with the heavy traffic. The period marked by the rule of Slobodan Milošević from mid 1980s till the end of 1990s, produced a specific socio-spatial context and made a severe impact on the urban transformations of the city of Belgrade. On Dimitrije Tucović Square, the landmark that marks the first phase of the Hall of Peace - whose final function was to be a cinema named Slavija - was destroyed together with one of the oldest city pharmacies, in spite of the fact that it was proclaimed public monument of architecture and thus protected by law. Concurrently, «the square» became earmarked for the future vast National Bank, which the Belgrade authorities started to build in 1992.⁸ What,

⁶ Dubravka Stojanović, *Kaldrma i asfalt, Urbanizacija i evropeizacija Beograda 1890-1914*, Belgrade: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2008. (pp. 35-36).

⁷ Nenad Žarković, *Presentation on history and built heritage of the Slavija Square* delivered within the International Symposium "MEMORY OF THE CITY - Policies and Practices of the Memory Preservation and Integration in the City's Development", held in Belgrade on 12-13th September 2011.

⁸ Yugoslav architects were invited to tender proposals in an open competition for an eleven-storey bank with four basement levels for the safes and treasury departments. After the outbreak of war the original concept of uniting various Yugoslav banks in one central building was no longer feasible, and so it was reserved solely for the National

however, was most interesting phenomena of that time and the one which attracted the artists Annette Weisser and Ingo Vetter, was the strange flow of different economies revolving around Dimitrije Tucović Square and particularly the empty lot known as the Mitić's Hole. These economies were the outcome of a particular way socio-spatial context was being produced in the 1990s and therefore a context that deserves a closer reflection.

Urban space produced by “official” economies of destruction

The political context of the 1990s – the disintegration of the former Socialist Republic, the neighbouring wars, the UN sanctions, a hyperinflation which rose by the minute and the economic collapse – created a situation of outer and inner isolation under the rule of an authoritarian regime. Unlike other cities, in which urban change was a slow but regulated process, Belgrade went through a period of chaotic rule under Milošević and his oligarchy and suffered from the consequences of NATO bombings which severely damaged some of the landmarks of modernist architecture in its urban core. Throughout the 1990s, the master plan for urbanizing Belgrade, which had survived from the Tito era, was ignored, while illegal building, negligence and destruction characterized the process of urban change. The main attribute of the authoritarian system was the uncontrolled “grey economy” starting at the top of the state hierarchy and ending with “smuggling” and the sale of basic goods on the streets.

Mlađan Dinkić has described the system of economic flows in Serbia in the 1990s as an “economy of destruction”.⁹ The first step of which was the “robbery of the people”, perpetrated by several “projects” such as the “Loan for the Serbian Industrial Renaissance” in 1989, the induced hyperinflation of 1993 and flourishing pyramid investment chains in “wild banks” like Dafiment or Jugoskandik, which offered citizens monthly interest rates as high as 30 percent. The dramatic hyperinflation in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was inevitable in view of the specific social circumstances.¹⁰ The most important precondition for its occurrence was the

Bank. After a long building history fraught with corruption scandals, the building was finally opened and put to use in 2006.

⁹ Mlađan Dinkić, *Ekonomija destrukcije*, Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 1996. (p. 80).

¹⁰ In April 1993 the UN declaration 820 decreed a total blockade of all financial transactions with Yugoslavia. Hyperinflation mounted rapidly in this socio-political environment, and in January 1994 peaked with daily price increases amounting to 62% (almost 3% hourly).

complete monopoly over political and economic power exercised by a small oligarchy led by an authoritarian ruler, whose acts were beyond the control of the state or its institutions.

The ruthless abuse of monetary-control was the formal cause of hyperinflation and the resultant extreme social stratification. While the majority of the population faced impoverishment, a political-financial elite came into being. It was represented by leading politicians, by a selected circle of directors of state-run companies and banks and by the owners of certain “private” but essentially “parastatal” companies. Their material and formal status was based on a monopoly of a different kind: namely over the emission and distribution of currency, the import and trading of certain goods, control over the media and privileged status in financial transactions with the state. Thus, the interest of this elite was geared not towards the development of the national economy but towards maintaining and advancing its personal dominance and wealth.¹¹ The rest of the population had to seek survival in the “grey economy”: in smuggling and in small business on the improvised stands, kiosks or even “temporary housing projects” set up on the streets. All these ephemeral economies decisively influenced the process of urban growth and the image of the city of Belgrade.

Detecting hidden economies around Slavija Square

The given socio-political-spatial-economic context of Belgrade meant that many sites no longer served their primary purpose, with the result that they were generally perceived as “dead points” within the functional dynamic of the city. After closer examination of these sites, Annette Weisser and Ingo Vetter were most attracted by an empty lot known as Mitić’s Hole, located on Dimitrije Tucović Square. The colloquial name of the site came after the rich retailing family who owned it before World War II had earmarked it as the prestigious location for the fourth big department store in their chain. The outbreak of war put an end to their plans and the post-war property laws led to their plot being nationalized. Nothing was built there for almost 35 years, in spite of numerous attempts and unrealized proposals. After 1980, under Mayor Bogdan Bogdanović, the site was transformed into a park with a strikingly visible sundial. In 1992

¹¹ Mladen Dinkić, *Ekonomija destrukcije*, Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 1996 (pp. 234, 235).

Milošević's regime granted the land to Dafina (the "Serbian mother"), who owned the country's largest "wild bank" of the period, for the purpose of building a bank in which she could continue to launder money on behalf of the government. This ambitious architectural project started with the laying of foundations and the symbolic rite of placing 1,500 German Marks under the foundation stone. Building was halted in 1994, however, when Dafina's bank was shut down after the end of hyperinflation. Directly opposite the construction site was the above-mentioned landmark of Dimitrije Tucović Square, the National Bank, at the time still under-construction. The fact that the Dafiment bank and the National Bank were intended to face each other, thus visibly linking within the urban fabric two different facets of the same "economy of destruction", was the biggest – and probably not accidental – irony of that phase in Serbian history.

The artistic intervention comprised of an installation that symbolically reflected the layering of different economies revolving around its site. It was conceived as an exact replica of the facade elements of the National Bank under construction, meaning that artists were required to use exactly the same materials including commissioning the same factory to cut the Italian glass. Even the remaining marble was procured from the building site and used as a base of the installation. As a subtle response to the context, the installation of Annette Weisser and Ingo Vetter also involved formal mimicry of the site environment of kiosks and boutique booths. An important part of the artistic project was a (more or less successful) process of negotiation with all of the agents involved in the socio-spatial economy of the site. First of all with the direct users of the corner where the installation was to be placed – local "hustlers" operating the notorious scam of making a small ball disappear below three matchboxes and consequently with the owner of an illegal boutique for pregnant or "overweight" women. The argument used by the artists was that the "economy" of the entrepreneurs would not be jeopardized and would in fact even profit from the intervention. The boutique owner was persuaded by the promise of media coverage during the opening of the project and the "free advertising" his shop would gain through figuring prominently in the background while the curators were being interviewed by TV stations. Publicity was the last thing the hustlers wanted, and so a different tactic was required. They accepted that the installation might have its uses: They could hide their "merchandise" behind it, or prop a sunshade up against it. However, one group involved in the economy of the site remained outside the artists' reach: a family of twenty Roma refugees from Kosovo living behind the construction fences of "Mitić's Hole", who collected old newspapers and cardboard for the

purpose of re-sale.

The installation accurately imaged Serbian society in the 1990s and dissected its economies, both official and hidden, ranging from the state-directed to that of one of the most neglected social groups. All the protagonists continued to go about their daily business with varying degrees of success. At the same time the installation revealed the “life” behind the apparently dysfunctional site, demonstrating that the functionality of an urban site is more a question of its use rather than the primary architectural or municipal purpose. Despite the flourishing “temporary architectural objects” such as boutique booths or kiosks on the site, the municipal authorities forbade permanent installations and authorised the exhibition for a brief period of time. However, the life of the ephemeral installation was prolonged, mainly as a place for advertisements and posters and it remained in position until finally the authorities decided to turn “Mitić’s Hole” into a park once again.¹² The “glass construction” on its edges was then removed, together with the other “temporary architectural objects” considered to be detrimental to the embellishment of Slavija Square (that had regained its first name after the political changes of 2000). The new neo-liberal economy needed no reminders of the old economies, let alone critical public art.

Slavija Square park soon became known by the patrons of this new playground as the “Raiffeisen Bank”, one of the most successful transitional banks in the region of South-East Europe. Today, the Bank’s huge logo looms over the playground, visually marking the view on Slavija Square and symbolising the strongest driving force behind recent urban transformations: that of neo-liberal, predatory capitalism.

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¹² After the political upheaval and the anti- Milošević “revolution” of October 5, 2000, the Democratic Party took power in Belgrade. It took the new city government almost two years to decide what to do with the empty lot on Slavija Square. Public auctions were staged, and proposals were received from big international construction companies in Austria and Israel. Finally, however, the authorities decided against selling the site and opted for yet another “temporary solution” – a park.

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