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Dragan Živadinov + Blaž Šef L.

Ljubljana, 26th of June 2020

I first met Dragan in 2014 in Vitanje when KSEVT had been opened for almost two years.¹⁵

When we spoke on the phone, six years later, he invited me to see his theatre play. He told me that he is *motivated* to help me out and talk to me. In the middle of my conversation (I was pacing up and down the apartment) my partner walked through the door.

CS: Was that him?

She could not have known who I was speaking with, but apparently, I transformed into something she could recognize. I once read that this phenomenon is a remnant of pre-historic evolutionary adaptation – that one starts to mimic the other member of the same species he or she wants to impress or befriend.

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When I entered the room he extended his hand towards me.

DŽ: Živadinov.

They were wrapping up anyway, I was told.¹⁶ Dragan concluded with a talk about history, art, baroque, Deleuze, rock'n'roll and casually admitted that a lot of what he is saying is *for me* – to provide me with an insight in the way he works. When they finished with their rehearsal, I started with a hypothesis that the fact that Post-gravity art as an avant-garde¹⁷ artistic movement manifested itself in an architectural object of European, global or even *galactic* dimensions – that of KSEVT, is a one-of-a-kind phenomenon. He agreed.

That was almost the only thing *I* said.

DŽ: There is a saying: every style becomes a style when it is encoded in architecture. Until style doesn't have its architecture one cannot call it a style.

Dragan has a special way of formulating sentences. It all works together with his overall demeanour – his military-style clothes, warm smile and his deep, performative voice. And shortly after explaining his

¹⁵ In 2014, at the time of my first visit to Vitanje as a part of the Visiting School, everything seemed possible. At the final day of our projects' presentations, Dragan held a talk where he spoke about his work, about KSEVT's mission, about future plans and everyone in attendance was impressed – both by the prospects of what this project might become as well as by his personality.

¹⁶ At the moment when I entered Blaž and another actor were performing a scene. I sat next to Dragan, who had his legs on the coffee table in front of him and had crossed his arms behind his head. I introduced myself and high-fived Blaž who I haven't seen in years.

¹⁷ I used the term retro-avant-garde at first since I knew that NSK is dealing with this terminology, but Dragan insisted on labelling the Post-gravity art an avant-garde movement.

engagement with architecture and his partially biased position¹⁸ he dived into his life story – to gain credibility, he told me – being 20-something when he met Peter Noever who changed his life forever.¹⁹

DŽ: Now I have to reveal you an axiom.

I knew this was going to be good.

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In the next hour, a barrage of information, stories, references and events unfolded in front of me.

It started with the axiom of the genius of the architects who designed the building of KSEVT, continued through his start as an artist in Zagreb and his first architectural exhibition at the age of 24, a book of utopian Russian architectures, his experience from Museum of Applied Arts and Contemporary Art in Vienna, about considering 25th century as the only meaningful reference point when he thinks about the past, present or future, and finally the story of Norman Foster flying to Dragan's theatre play in his private jet, buying his book and asking him to sign it.

DŽ: So... I am interested in heterotopy, that can be also referred to as 'optimal projection' in architecture. What is an optimal projection? A half-way towards utopia. It is something we can still think of and imagine. Once we cannot do that anymore – utopia starts.²⁰

He continued with Anton Mavretič,²¹ dr. Jurij Baturin who took an image of Srečko Kosovel²² into space, Akihiro Kubota, Boris Groys, Nahum, Tsiolkovsky...²³ There were people from all over the artistic, technical, space-exploration or any other remote or related field that Dragan would refer to. And after that the story of KSEVT revealed itself in great detail, starting with the famous exhibition²⁴ that travelled to Brussels where

¹⁸ He observed that as a historian he is supposed to try to be as objective as possible, but at the same time he is an oral source that is unable to distance himself which creates a complication of sorts, noting: 'I like it when things get complicated.'

¹⁹ Peter Noever is an Austrian designer and curator and was a director of the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts and Contemporary Art in Vienna for 25 years. Dragan first met him when he was a 20-something student and Noever was passing through Slovenia, stopping at Dragan's grandmother's inn by mere coincidence. They met there and Noever invited Dragan for a visit to Vienna a year later, which became one of the defining moments for Dragan's career.

²⁰ I wondered if Dragan's understanding was aligned with what Foucault is describing as heterotopia, but could not get to the bottom of it. I decided to not dwell too much on this and embraced Dragan's explanation. See: Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowicz, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 2.16 (1986), 22-27.

²¹ Dr Anton Mavretič was a Slovenian scientist, involved in the development of Voyager's plasma wave spectrometer. See: Boris Pleskovič, 'In Memoriam: Anton Mavretič (1934–2019)', *Dnevnik* <<https://www.dnevnik.si/1042915069>> [Accessed 19 August 2020].

²² Srečko Kosovel was one of the most revered poets in the history of Slovenian literature. He wrote mainly poems under the influence of impressionist, expressionist, futurist and constructivist style, however, all his works were published posthumous, due to his premature death at the age of 22. See: Janez Vrečko, *Constructivism and Kosovel* (Ljubljana: Ljubljana University Press, 2015).

²³ During the course of the conversation he mentioned a lot of people, most of whom I have never heard of. I tried and looked them up afterwards and I realized that, although they are extremely important in their respective fields they did not have much in common with the focus of my research.

²⁴ The exhibition in question took place in Brussels in 2006 in the newly opened gallery *LJU Cosinus BRX* in the building of European Commission. Entitled *Umbot Noordung* the exhibition was dedicated to Herman Potočnik Noordung and the 50-year performance *Noordung 1995::2045*. See: Blaž Šef, 'Kabinet Čudes: Komisarjevo Pismo', *Delo* <<https://www.delo.si/znanje/izobrazevanje/kabinet-cudes-komisarjevo-pismo.html>> [Accessed 1 August 2020].

the European Commissioner Günter Verheugen²⁵ and the President of European Commission José Manuel Barroso saw it and decided to send a letter of support to Slovenian ministry of foreign affairs.²⁶

VŽ: Could KSEVT happen anywhere else?

Except for the first hypothesis I proposed, I kept quiet up to that point.

DŽ: NO! NO! NO! Impossible! Why not? There's a phenomenon in architecture that is often forgotten – the phenomenon of surprise.

Dragan was convinced that a surprise of this magnitude could happen only in Vitanje.

BŠ: Two weeks before the inauguration nobody was interested in what we were doing.

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DŽ: We've been talking for 42 minutes now – that leaves us with four minutes for each!

At this point, he grabbed Mladen Dolar's book²⁷ and opened it. Although it would be impossible to describe everything that followed especially if one has not experienced Dragan's enthusiasm in person, I will try to present what he said during the four lectures as closely as possible to how he did it for me.

The following four lectures showcase what Dragan calls *optimal projection* and its relation to KSEVT.

²⁵ Günter Verheugen was European Commissioner for Enterprise and Industry from 2004 to 2010.

²⁶ According to Dragan, Verheugen was *obsessed* with the space programme and Barroso with contemporary art so this proved to be of great help later on. After securing the funds for the start of the building of KSEVT through a European funded open-call, the main vision of the project became to create an environment for the post-doctoral researchers from all over the world that need *space apparatus* for thinking about art in zero-gravity that is not subjected to the national ministries of defence and therefore military and commercial logic. While he was explaining this I became aware that a lot of what he is saying sounds almost like a fiction story. Later on, I learnt that most of Dragan's achievements, however improbable they sound, were a product of his determination, hard work and unstoppable drive.

²⁷ Mladen Dolar, *Uprizarjanje Konceptov: Spisi O Umetnosti* (Ljubljana: Maska, 2019).

On the right-hand-side, you can see a painting from 1925 by Ilya Chashnik, entitled Red Circle on Black Surface. We see a red circle, which is in essence – a star. Bellow, we see a *planit* in some kind of relation to this circle. This represents something that we call abstraction, but other words can describe this as well, such as supremacy.

On the left-hand side, there is a photograph from 2006. This is a photography of the sun. This is mimesis, not an abstraction! This is a sun that reminisces the circle and this is *supremus* – The International Space Station. And what is the small black thing? This is Space Shuttle Atlantis, performing a docking mechanism.

**THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH! THIS IS A PROJECTION!
THIS IS A REALIZATION!**

Art sometimes precedes science. When Chasnik painted this he created an optimal projection for the art on the orbit.

I am not interested in finding solutions for architectural problems but to produce a way of thinking between gravitational – which you can also call terraformative – architecture and orbital architecture, independently of which planet we are talking about.

From all of that, you can understand the relationship between mimesis and anti-mimesis. Anti-mimesis is sometimes also an optimal projection of mimesis or heterotopy – halfway towards utopia.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 207.

On your left-hand side, you can see *Supremus 56* by Kazimir Malevich. This is *Mona Lisa* of the 20th century.

This is not a painting! This is a blueprint of the optimal projection! These are *planits*. Malevich, besides supremacy, also works with *arkhitektons* – structures without doors or windows, without a function of entering or exiting. And to a certain degree, *arkhitektons* are transported into architecture as well, such as in the case of Malevich's *Pilot's House*.

What is *planit*? It consists of planet and satellite, together forming *planit*. Malevich had a projection that in between Moon and Earth he would install *planits*, so if there would be an outer-space intelligence flying by they could say 'Oh, someone is culturalizing something here!'. This is a projection.

Next to it, *Constructivist Ambience of Trieste* created a black and white square and in between they installed – what? *Levitation Structures*! They exhibited this in 1927 and joined supremacy with constructivism. White represents a cosmic space, black represents the economy of planet Earth. With *Levitation Structures* we gain the historical support in *Constructivist Ambience of Trieste*!

WHAT IS POST-GRAVITATIONAL ART?

POST-GRAVITATIONAL ART IS NOT A STYLE!

It is any kind of form of art that for its synthesis uses the mindset of gravitation zero.

Supremus 56 is the most important painting of the 20th century, however, it is not Post-gravitational painting, since we know exactly where it hangs, where the nail supporting it and its gravity is installed.

This painting is an optimal projection!

²⁹ Ibid., p. 206.

Remember the axiom? These four architectural offices are all magnificent. But before we started building we needed a projection – an architectural one!

Do you see this painting? This painting is THE ONLY suprematistic painting that is not painted on either black or white background.

This is THE ONLY ONE that is painted with the horizon!

THE ONLY ONE that was painted as an architecture!

If you look at Zaha Hadid, she only brings organic into the constructivism – something that Rozhdestvensky did already in 1935! Constructivists or de-constructivists, El Lissitzky and Alexander Archipenko influenced Zaha Hadid, but she COULD NOT HAVE KNOWN ROZHDESTVENSKY!

The most important thing is the title of the painting:

COSMIC DEVICE.

We knew this painting but haven't told anyone! Architects did not know! NO ONE KNEW! The optimal projection existed before KSEVT was erected. And what is more – utopic projection existed. The only motive they got was the Space Wheel. One could only be amazed by their virtuosity.

And the result is here: the horizon, grass, supremacy... This has nothing to do with a flying saucer, this has everything to do with the cosmic device.

Cosmic Apparatus.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 208.

The last sketch is about the first turn of the Tatlin's project for the *Monument to the Third International*. You know about Tatlin's tower right?

Look. This is the first turn in the projection that is going upwards.

In the culturalization of space and cosmification of art.

³¹ Ibid., p. 209.