

**Sezgin Boynik:
Cultural Roots of Contemporary
Art in Kosovo**

a. Art Now!

One of the most influential books for the contemporary art scene of Kosovo was *Art Now* published by Taschen. My friendship with the Kosovo art scene started later, when the first edition of the book was already completely stale and worn out, and the new edition had come to Exit contemporary art centre's library. Then the topic of the discussion was that Sislej Xhafa, an artist from Kosovo, was not included in the list of millennial artists, but instead the Albanian artist Anri Sala had the honour to be part of the cream of the contemporary art world.

Apart from this anecdote, the book *Art Now* obviously did not have any significant effect on the Albanian national aesthetic identity. *Art Now* was more a book about the aesthetic regulations in contemporary art. In other words, it was a book about how things should look in art. To young Kosovo art students it was a guidebook that taught them how to think, how to see and how to say things as contemporary artists. One must keep in mind that, alongside the Internet, other books by Taschen and different encyclopaedias, *Art Now* is only one of the many educational objects in the art world of Kosovo. I chose *Art Now* because it was totally thumb-marked with use.

So what were the Kosovar artists learning from *Art Now*?

Apart from names of artists, they were also getting acquainted with the logic of contemporary art forms. My thesis is that this logic, which they constructed from studying *Art Now* and related sources, was different from that of their contemporaries in the places the art in *Art Now* originated from.

First of all, the students from the Prishtina Art Academy had a heavy burden of interpretation; their professors, mainly non-figurative modernists that used many metaphors, wanted to interpret the world through art symbolism so that the history of their hidden metaphors could also illustrate their way of seeing the world. As every professor had his (until recently professors were always men) way of seeing the world, and the world of tactical politics was no longer valid (because the basis of their metaphorical politics in the new millennium had radically changed), the students started to see the difference. The eagle's-wing-in-the-deserted-black-field-with-the-big-hands-of-the-mother-abstraction-in-grey-cloud-depression did no longer interest them and neither did the archetypical figurations of mythological forms. The aesthetics of the *Art Now* helped young students to escape chaotic paternalistic complex abstractionism, which artist Mehmet Behluli calls 'the teaching of confusion', referring to the over-complicated art theories of modernist Kosovar painters. They wanted to look for new possibilities of the art logic, which would be simpler and more tied in with film, music, slang, and of course yarns from their daily lives. The art of *Art Now* did not seem to 'give a fuck' about the anxiety of interpretation; rather, it was all about the art of simplicity.

Could you say that this lesson drawn from *Art Now* was too simplistic?

As was Nam June Paik with a portable Sony camera, the young Kosovar artists were also excited about the new tool called video. It was the most proper medium for 'not giving a fuck' about any symbolical interpretation of reality.

Video made it possible to alter the boredom and anxiety in the ateliers of the Prishtina academy. It should not come as a surprise that the first artworks made with video mainly resembled jokes and sketches of situational comedy. Among the first jokes were parodies of propagators of artists from the world of *Art Now*, Yoko Ono and Damien Hirst, to mention just two.

In fact, the situation itself is a genuine comedy as none of the artist of the young new wave generation saw any video works before they started making them themselves. The knowledge about video art was based on the stills in the *Art Now* publication. Moving images of video works were captured and frozen in one or maybe two or three different stills. Since the artists were looking at videos the way they were looking at paintings, they read *Art Now* differently from their contemporaries in the places where the art depicted in *Art Now* originated. *Art Now* had such an impact on the art scene in Kosovo that the forms that arose then are still visible in works of many artists from the new generation.

These forms are lacking the main fundamentals of the western historical avant-garde. For example, the time conception in the video art from Kosovo is very linear and every situation is happening in real time. There is no cutting or reversing, no cyclical or non-sequential time conception. This is obvious in the basic form of contemporary art created in Kosovo: not one single work is done with collage or montage. Everything pretends to be Real and Authentic. Also the cult of the artist as an Author and authentic originator of an artwork ties in with this conception of the work based in real time. Even when works made in Kosovo are referring to moments in the history of contemporary

art, they are adapted to the actual situation in Kosovo without using found material as reference. Actors, authors, scene, situation, ideas – everything has to be original and authentic.

There are always many ideas ‘up in the air’ in the world of contemporary art in Kosovo. This thesis will be made clear when we proceed with analysing some of the essential elements in the Kosovo art practice of recent times.

b. Marcel Duchamp

In 2002 at the Summer School of the Prishtina University Mehmet Behluli, a professor at the Art Academy, and Sislej Xhafa, a visiting lecturer, organised a course on contemporary art with the title ‘Duchamp Effect’.

The course aimed at bringing new perspectives to the students of the Prishtina Art Academy and especially presenting them with new alternatives, different from the rigid conservative frames common to the Prishtina Academy’s ateliers. The intention was to teach to the students that “there are no limits of expression in contemporary art”. The influence of Duchamp on contemporary art in Kosovo, again, was not in line with the radical negation of art, or with the idea to transgress art with the use value of everyday objects. But students from the Art Academy were given a different kind of a lesson; they were taught that everything could be art, especially the things that their professors never thought or imagined as art.

I should remark about the new wave art scene in Kosovo that contemporary art education didn’t happen systematically, genealogically and according to the dialectics of historical avant-garde movements. There were no father

figures like Duchamp or Beuys, or new heroes from the *Art Now* book. So when students were thinking about one specific artist they didn’t take into account his or her history of development of ideas, they did not connect these ideas to the times when they originated, or how these ideas related to politics and the economy. In short, many of the students did not actually care about the history and site-specificity of ideas.

The important thing was to have an idea; and since the students became familiar with the concept of the ‘ready-made’, suddenly a lot of ideas popped up in the art world. Ready-made was for students, and also for their professors, an uncontrolled flow of expression. For an artist it was just enough to express their thoughts, or put across their own authentic and original ideas!

This also explains why in Kosovo, unlike in many other places, artists, long before they make any work, like to talk about it extensively. At parties, drinking sessions, dinners, or simply when strolling around, artists communicate their ideas for new art works, even when they are just a blitz of something that is not-yet.

Some of the artists are talking so often about their ideas that they never have time to realise them. There are many examples in Kosovo of artists with many never-realised ideas. One of the best examples is Tahar Alemdar, an artist from Prizren who unintentionally became the best conceptualist artist in Kosovo. Alemdar, who was also one of the first new wave art students and had attended the ‘Duchamp effect’ seminar, took the ready-made concept so literally and factually that the ‘idea’ became more important than anything else. For years now Alemdar has just been producing ideas, many of which are brilliant, but he

hardly ever made any of them materialise. Here comes a question for sociologists: can we think of any interrelation between the ready-made art culture and Kosovo's current political situation? Perhaps we can, but this article is just about forms.

c. Joseph Beuys

Unlike Duchamp, Beuys never had such an important influence on Kosovo. In the abovementioned seminar 'social sculpture' may have been one of the topics, hardly anyone is ever talking about it or mentioning it.

But the spectre of Beuys has been haunting the art scene in Kosovo for many years. He is a historical figure in the Kosovo art history. He somehow happened to become a symbol of confrontation with the Western hegemonic art system.

The first confrontation with Beuys was one of negation, and the second resulted in glorification. In both cases discussion was impossible.

The first encounter happened when Beuys visited Belgrade in 1974 to attend an artists' meeting at the Students' Cultural Center (SKC). In those days Beuys giving a long presentation at the meeting was a very big event for the Yugoslav contemporary/expanded art scene. Almost everybody in the expanded progressive media art scene of Yugoslavia was euphoric about Beuys, except for Shkelzen Maliqi, a philosopher from Kosovo who was then studying in Belgrade. His critique, published in the bulletin of the SKC in the same year, was an attack on Beuys as a utopian thinker. Maliqi clearly argued that Beuys was not. As a summary Maliqi was saying that Beuys, who saw himself as a philosopher, had

failed to grasp the fundamentals of the utopian-philosophy of Hegel (with whom Maliqi starts his article) and the revolutionary thoughts of Lenin (with whom he concludes his article). Maliqi criticised Beuys for not being as radical, critical and socially engaged as he claims to be, but for just making a 'plastic-art philosophy'.

In the year 1974 Kosovo obtained expanded constitutional rights in Yugoslavia and the Kosovo population considered itself economically, politically and culturally closer to the modern world of Yugoslavia. But, of course, Maliqi's critique never had any real influence on the conceptualist scene, or on the Kosovo art and cultural scene.

The second meeting of the Kosovo art and cultural scene with Beuys occurred 20 years later. This time it generated an evocation. Mehmet Behluli, who was painting objects with tar, remembers the 1990s as a depressive and miserable era. His house was his place, and for him, like for many Albanians, there was no other public space than their private houses. In the 1990s Albanians in Kosovo were totally isolated. In the late 1990s Behluli painted his famous "Joseph Beuys visiting my House". (Behluli cannot remember exactly whether it happened in 1996 or 1997 and I think that this amnesia also shows the effect of the cultural quarantine of those times.) Of course this was a utopia. In the 1990s hardly anyone visited Kosovo, especially not artists or curators.

This evocation is like an omen of Kosovo contemporary politics, culture and also art, and this difference in confrontation with Beuys by Kosovars shows also a change in the main paradigm of Kosovo's actual situation. What was once an instance of modernist, rational and self-reflexive hope, turned into status quo postmodernist agnostic mysticism.

d. René Block

Even if Beuys never visited Kosovo, his gallery owner, the famous curator René Block visited Behluli and other artists in Kosovo and claimed that Kosovo is the capitol of the avant-garde in the Balkans. The rest is a short international glorious history of Kosovo contemporary art plus euphoria supported by national representation through contemporary art.