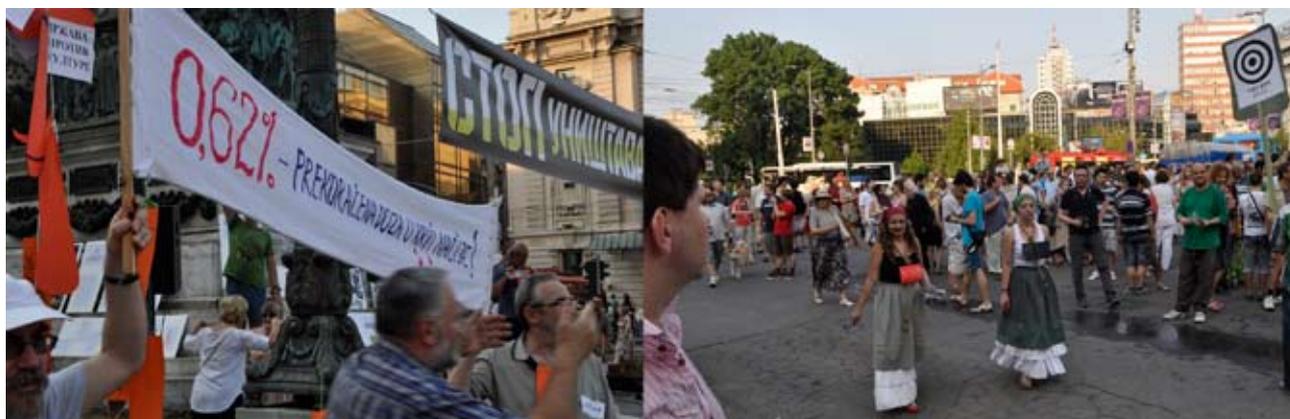


# Artists between aestheticization of the struggle and unionization

**Rena Rädle and Vladan Jeremić**

On June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013, artists and cultural workers organized one of the biggest protests in Belgrade and other cities across Serbia.<sup>1</sup> About 800 people, most of them workers in public cultural institutions, and some from independent organizations, joined the demonstration in Belgrade's Republic Square. Although the vast majority of them live and work in harsh conditions, during this public protest they unfortunately avoided addressing directly their economic problems, such as unpaid social insurance contributions, precarious working conditions and inadequate distribution of public funds. Among other complaints, an objective cause for the protest were the cuts of the budget for culture, that shrunk it to 0,62% of the total state budget of Serbia, as well as the reallocation of main parts of these funds for religious and "patriotic" projects. In spite of this, the organizing committee stressed in its press release that the main aim of the protest was the struggle against the degradation of culture and the decay of the society's moral values that "every European nation needs to protect." Representatives of independent organizations expressed their discontent demanding the withdrawal of political party-interests from cultural institutions. In the course of the devastation of state institutions, a good part of the cultural production has been already handed over to the cultural industries, and is, directly or indirectly, managed by individuals belonging to party structures like in the case of project MIKSER – "a multidisciplinary platform which centres around the affirmation of cultural industry of the Balkans and organization of the biggest regional festival of the festival of creative arts."<sup>2</sup>

The contradictions and confusion of the protest described above provoked a set of questions concerning the organization of artists and cultural workers and their representation in organizational bodies. First of all, how is it possible to successfully organize artists and cultural workers today, in reference to their position within the production process?



Protest of artists and cultural workers in Belgrade, June 2013, Photo by Rena Rädle

How to strengthen the struggle over workers' rights and for a cultural production in the context of the public goods? How to position toward the activities of neoliberal managers, promoting the creative industries and intensively advocating gentrification, such as Belgrade's Savamala project related to various initiatives and organisations in Serbia?<sup>3</sup> Who is actually profiting from the work of interns and a growing army of volunteers in the context of cultural production?

In this article we will give a brief overview about some aspects of the present-day struggles in culture and the arts, and discuss existing forms of organization, with a focus on the situation in Serbia. We will pay special attention to different ways to struggle and strategies for organization that could be successful in local and international contexts.

## **Art Strikes, Anti-Authorship and Institutional Critique**

Generally, there are two ways for artists of dealing with the material condition of the artist in society. Firstly, there is, let's say, the pragmatism one, when artists join organizations to regulate their legal and economic status. Secondly, there is the artistic-ideological dimension, when artists try to problematize their position through the artistic work itself. Working on both fronts is desirable and not mutually exclusive, even though the opposite happens quite often.

The problem with the second position can be followed easily through the history of the artists' social struggles. Here we can observe a paradoxical situation in that, what started as an emancipatory step and act of protest or critique, is later captured in the realm of commodification. Through aestheticization, the struggle of the artist easily becomes an artistic product or cultural commodity.

This tendency became obvious in the 1970s, exactly in the period when conceptual art developed out of a critique of the art market: The politics of a practice that engaged with the struggle for the material working and living conditions of the artists was presented by some conceptual artists as their own artistic practice.

The art strike quickly became a means to struggle; the famous 1969 strike was organized in support of the artist Takis who removed his works from the MoMA. The “Art Workers’ Coalition”<sup>4</sup> was founded around his case. The group called artists to go on strike, published statements and tried to influence the museum’s exhibition politics through direct criticism of the institution. Simultaneously with these practices the afore-mentioned problem of the commodification of the struggle emerged. In addition to strikes against the commercialization of the arts, another practice of the 1980s was the negation or creation of fictive authorship. This strategy went against the treatment of artistic acts as branded goods and was meant to prevent



Protest in Belgrade, June 2013, Photo by Rena Rädle

the accumulation of market value through the mere status of being a “criticizing and striking” author. The second famous art strike was organized by Gustav Metzger from 1977 to 1980, followed by another one from 1990 to 1993 called by Stewart Home. In 1979, Goran Đorđević joined the international debate on art strike and developed his own artistic agenda.

The question arises if these strikes really contributed to the improvement of the artists’ position and to the decommercialization of artistic production, although they might have been successful in some of their specific aims. The problem becomes more complicated through the fact that, among others, the market value of art is defined by a complex system of mediators and through the speculative framework posed by banks, auction houses and leading galleries. That means that for example a strike of volunteers and workers of galleries, museums, cultural agencies and auction houses would momentarily have a stronger effect than a strike of the artists-producers themselves. If we understand the strike in a certain moment in time as a relevant means to struggle, we will have to think about how to include all the above mentioned groups into coordinated action with clear political demands.

In the beginning of the 1990s institutional critique emerged. Its well-known protagonists were Andrea Fraser and Hans Haacke. Both artists are an example for a next wave of aestheticization of the artists' struggles, that was first transformed within the conceptual arts and then filtered through the discourses of structuralist and critical theory. Today, we have inherited from institutional critique a whole culturological framework of criticality circulating through the social relations of the post-ideological discourse. Yet it does not offer much in the field of the real struggle of the artists and cultural workers for material conditions, especially across the European economic peripheries that are confronted with austerity measures, different parameters and conditions of production.

### **Artists' organisations and unionization**

As the pressure on cultural workers across Europe became stronger due to budget cuts and their increasingly precarious position, a series of new platforms or organizations emerged alongside the traditional ones. Through them, artists and other producers of culture are trying to concretely strengthen their position towards agencies, institutions and various financiers of cultural production in the private and public sector. Apart from these new initiatives, in many countries classical artists' associations still exist, which protect and support art production and realization of the artists' social rights. They resemble guild-like organizations through which a producer of designated artistic products can achieve the status of a so-called "freelance artist." These organizations can be useful political actors when it comes to legal regulations concerning the taxation of art work or social security.

In Serbia, one of the major problems of the local artists' organization ULUS<sup>5</sup> is that the relations of cultural production have become very contradictory in the current systemic crisis of neoliberal capitalism, and that it did not find an answer to the collapse of the social position of the artists being confronted with unpaid and precarious work in culture. Additionally, the process of privatization of public spaces is heavily affecting ULUS, depriving the organization of spaces for production and presentation of its members' works, such as galleries and workshops. However, attempts to establish an artists' union do exist, with the mission to meet this challenge.

A different form of cultural organization in Serbia is the NKSS Association<sup>6</sup> "Nezavisna kulturna scena Srbije" (Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia), which does not focus on the association of artists-producers but links civil society organizations. This association tried to implement some projects of "successful" initiatives in the region, such as "Clubture" from Croatia. The strategy of this Serbian organization is to position itself as an intermediary between the ministry and individual organizations in terms of allocation of funds.

With the founding of NKSS, the formerly active platform "Druga scena" (The Other Scene) was in a way curtailed, since the majority of active members joined NKSS. While "Druga scena's" program quoted among its goals defending "public

goods of general societal importance, but not as means of gaining profit or realizing other individual private interests” and supporting “the improvement of the social position of the cultural workers”<sup>7</sup>, the NKSS’s program is limited to the establishment of a superstructure for applications for local or international, public or private donors, aiming at joined lobby work for certain cultural politics and managing donations from bigger funders for its members.

Especially the Balkan region is heavily affected by NGO industry, and culture is always interconnected with non-profit funds. In that respect example organizations such as W.A.G.E.<sup>8</sup> that criticizes the lacking transparency of funds paid to artists by non-profit foundations in New York, could share their knowledge and experience with their Balkan colleagues. W.A.G.E. established a certificate that documents payment and social contributions, putting pressure on foundations and non-governmental organizations and thus preventing the cuts of artist fees. Also important are organizations such as the Carrotworkers’ Collective and the PWB (Precarious Workers Brigades)<sup>9</sup> that came out of the protests against cuts in London. PWB for example question the massive voluntary work in cultural production, with the young producers in culture serving years and years in internships and mini-jobs that violate their social rights.

An important organizational framework are platforms and organizations that work internationally. An example of such a form of organization is the platform ArtLeaks<sup>10</sup> that operates through the realization of various events, publications, magazines, public statements and campaigns and puts pressure through social networks and regular open meetings in different countries. This way it supports local



Protest in Belgrade, June 2013, Photo by Deana Jovanović

struggles against violations of workers' rights of artists and cultural workers, making them visible and articulating them on a global level. It should be underlined that ArtLeaks drifts from a platform towards the evolution of a sustainable union. One of its longterm goals would be the formation of the first international union of artists and cultural workers that operates along the lines of the production of public goods and supports the artist-producer according to the principle that artistic means can be a legitimate means of struggle.

In these terms we don't need to discard the experience of the conceptual art of the 1970s, nor the art strikes and anti-authorship of the 1980s, or the organization experiences from the internet activisms and networks of the 1990s. Artists and cultural workers need to conflate these historical experiences into a means of political struggle for artists' workers' rights and the acknowledgement of their work. Joining a broader emancipatory project, without which it will be indeed hard to achieve these rights in the long run, artists will succeed to advance the society's resources and conditions and thereby their own position.

It must be emphasized that the above quoted strategies and ways of organizing might look even less progressive when compared to the practices of some artists during the 1930s in Yugoslavia. Some of the most interesting are the groups "Život" (Life) and "Zemlja" (Earth) who fought for social art and demanded full rights for artists as workers. In 1932, Mirko Kujačić, the founder of "Život" from Belgrade, wrote a manifesto in which he demanded the improvement of the material condition of the artists.<sup>11</sup> With his colleagues from the group he went into direct conflict with the so-called "l'art pour l'art-artists" (art for art's sake), who were then leading the art pavilion "Cvijeta Zuzorić" in Belgrade. Kujačić turned up in the gallery dressed in a blue workers' shirt, read out the manifesto and put a pair of workers' shoes on the wall. The simple demand of these artists was that the societal role of the artist needs to be understood in a broader socio-political sense, not only through the narrow frame of the guild. When the Zagreb group "Zemlja" exhibited in Belgrade in 1935, the artists of the group "Život" made vivid propaganda and mobilized trade unions, the women's movement, students' and workers' youth groups for the opening.<sup>12</sup> They activated the whole society and in this way, art left the confines of bourgeois taste and actualized itself as living political action. In our view, what is actually lacking today, are similar contemporary practices that address society at large, and thus relate the artist to political and social movements that, by acting on the local and international level can transform society.

This article is based on a text written in Serbian for culturenet.hr and a talk by Vladan Jeremić held at the round table discussion “Levels of contradictions and means of articulation,” organized by the Centar za dramsku umjetnost, on 12.12.2013. at Gallery Nova, Zagreb. Participants of the round table discussion were: Vladan Jeremić, Sabina Sabolović, Goran Sergej Pristaš i Marko Kostanić.

**Vladan Jeremić and Rena Rädle** are artists and cultural workers. They live and work in Belgrade, Serbia.

<http://www.modukit.com/raedle-jeremic>

### Endnotes

1 <http://art-leaks.org/2013/06/23/artists-and-cultural-workers-stage-massive-protests-in-serbia/>

2 <http://mikser.rs/en/>

3 Mikser na vodi, Marko Miletić, <http://www.bilten.org/?p=868>

4 <http://www.primaryinformation.org/projects/art-workers-coalition/>

5 <http://www.ulus.rs/>

6 <http://www.nezavisnakultura.net/>

7 <http://drugascena.wordpress.com/>

8 <http://www.wageforwork.com/>

9 <http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/>

10 <http://art-leaks.org/about/>

11 Zidne novine, Udruženje KURS,

[http://www.zidne.udruzenjekurs.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/zidne-novine-br-2\\_web.pdf](http://www.zidne.udruzenjekurs.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/zidne-novine-br-2_web.pdf)

12 Revolucionarno slikarstvo, Spektar, Zagreb, 1977, Josip Depolo, Zemlja 1929-1935, p. 21-22.