

Warmth of a National Thing

Since the mid-nineties the projects of Zoran Todorović have been dealing with different instances of *biopolitical control* in the frameworks of contemporary institutional regulations and dominant but conflicting ideas of social progress. They have been critically observing and exploring the ways in which body, its “products” and manifestations can be used as raw materials for disturbing actions/events that take place somewhere on the brim of cultural integratedness. In a number of projects, Todorovic challenged the limits of representation and participation, as well as ethical norms and aesthetic standards. Some of these projects are: *Assimilation* (1998, ongoing), the event of public consuming of food made out of remains of human body after plastic surgery; *Agalma* (2004, ongoing), the event of public washing with soap made of fat removed from the artist’s body during a surgery; and *Laughter* (2001), for which he used nitrous oxide, a gas that acts upon the nervous system (causing laughter, but in too high a dosage also an outbreak of hysteria), which he released during a group exhibition in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade. Based on these projects, it has been said that Todorović is first and foremost interested in “potential or real affect/affects that the event of performing an artwork in its singularity there and then produces among human lives” and that we are dealing with events “without symbolic justification” that took place “in a singular situation among some people and for some people”.¹[1]

Consequently, we are dealing with events that, by discarding “symbolic justification”, do not manifest themselves as representations but as a priori unrealizable symbolizations – a “cut in the real”. However, a question arises whether “producing affects” – which ensures some individual “shock” after a passion for bizarre, and which is being nurtured in the social field as a discourse of “scandal” – is in the domain of singularity of the event itself, “beyond calculation and prediction” as Alain Badiou would say? Or we are actually dealing with strictly defined premeditation that raises the affects of shock and scandal to a level of “triggering” social *paranoia* as an aspect of “rationality” that there exists something outside/before the event that manipulates and therefore symbolizes us who are “in the event”. This paranoia marks the place of *caesura* (“sound pause”) between personal and political.²[2] Therefore, a question arises, of determining the relationship between the *real* and *symbolic* on the one hand, and the *affective* and *cognitive* on the other, a question that becomes especially relevant when some Todorović’s event appear in already strictly contextually defined, that is to say *a priori* symbolized format.

The project *Warmth* was for the first time shown in the Serbian Pavilion at the 53 Venice Biennale where the exhibition format is at the same time the format of national presentation.³[3] The project includes the process of systematic stockpiling of human hair (up

1[1] Miško Šuvaković, “Critical Effect & Intensity of Affect”, in *Intensity of Affect. Performances, Actions, Installations: A Retrospective of Zoran Todorovic*, Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, Novi Sad, 2009.

2[2] This is exactly what makes the discourses of racism and nationalism paranoid discourses. See: Victor Burgin, “Paranoiac Space”, in *In/different Spaces, Place and Memory in Visual Culture*, University of California Press, 1996.

to 3 tons). The hair was collected for moths in hairdressing salons, where it is cut off voluntarily, according to personal desires, as well as in military barracks, where haircutting is a norm in a surrounding of discipline, control or social care of “ideological state apparatuses”. This *biowaste* was “recycled” as material for fabrics looking like blankets or mats, and the conditions in which this process took place were thoroughly documented; namely, recordings were made of all the production stages (haircutting, collecting, storing, cleaning, steaming, felting, cutting). Also carefully documented was the complex organization of this work that included a number of collaborators and factory production. Final felted products were folded up and packed into standard “bales” ready for transportation, export, exhibition, use or examination. In the context of “national representation”, this, not very attractive, nor very useful, nor very “desired” product could be understood as some kind of a DNA map in which are inscribed all the bodies whose hair was interweaved, the bodies that could theoretically be identified by forensic analysis.

Todorović’s product has, therefore, for the first time appeared in a problematic and for an artist highly dangerous space of representation of the nation or state. The notion of “national representation” usually implies either co-participation in the dominant “culture of branding”, or we are dealing with traditional, ceremonial celebration of a proverbial “grandiosity” of each state into which all its citizens are forced to believe as an indivisible, seamless essence. Hence in the contextualization of Todorović’s project as a form of representation of Serbia, it has become an act that cannot at all be identified with previously stated forms of neo-liberal (“nation is a brand”) or conservative (“nation is organic community”) patriotism, but takes into consideration the symptomatic manifestations of both forms.

To observe these blankets as a surface into which the Serbian DNA has been “inscribed” can even be quite in accordance with both the “branded” and the “organic” idea of national representation. Moreover, these organic products direct us towards the ultimate consequences of a synthesis of these two forms of conception of national affiliation and expression of identity to Other. The derived product is of organic origin, a *body-product*: it is *ours* in the full meaning of the word, that is to say *authentic*, which actually is in agreement with the declared *strategic desire* of both the “organic Serbia” and “branded Serbia”; both the “imaginary Serbia” and “symbolic Serbia”.

Nevertheless, the singularity of the event itself also introduces a third element that essentially resists assimilation of both the discourse of branding and imaginary national essentialism, and makes them both *unrealizable*. Here, in a “Žižekian” way, we can lean on the well-known triad in Lacan’s classification system that is the basis of his psychoanalytic theory: *symbolic-imaginary-real*. Namely, while the liberal/postmodern understanding of nation as a “brand” is a question of *symbolic* order, the conservative/pre-modern understanding of nation as an “organic community” belongs to the *imaginary*. What is in fact crucial in this project for understanding of both is the controversy of comprehension of the order of the *real*: *real* as a “material substrate” connected to biology; *real* as impossible to symbolize or even imagine; *real* as fundamental object of anxiety and *real* as “exterior” that is

What Will Be Left to Me? In spite of generational and conceptual differences between these two artists, it has been noticed that they share a common standpoint/starting point that artist is a free mediator within the space of social interaction in which her or his artistic subjectivity emerges and situates itself among the more complex “frictions” of the *world* made out of social matter, which in fact was the reaction to the title of the whole Biennale, which read “Making Worlds”.

at the same time an aspect of “interior”. Even the act of thinking itself can be, in an anti-Cartesian way, interpreted as a consequence of a traumatic encounter with the external real, the *real* as pure “inevitability”: “we don’t think spontaneously, we are coerced to think”.⁴[4]

Therefore, however Todorović’s product may seem affectional, its “operation” lies first of all in a “rational” provoking of different forms of *cognitive dissonance*.⁵[5] First such dissonance is actually the basis of representing the nation (the national state) through an impossible attempt to reconcile the “organic” and the “represented”, that is to say an attempt to “symbolize the imaginary”, which takes place here in the space of biopolitics (i.e. in its critical restaging). The discovery of DNA has provided us with a scientific explanation for the existence of living organisms, by which a “secret” has been revealed on how our bodies are structured and in which way they reproduce themselves all the way up to mastering cloning as total functionalization of this discovery. This “usefulness” of genes leads us to a conclusion that genes are the means by which living beings reproduce themselves (i.e. that this is their function), while in fact it is the opposite: living beings are the means for the self-reproduction of genes. It is not surprising that one of the key dissonances that create the *power of horror* in a horror movie is very often a scenario according to which our bodies are merely transporters of some “alien gene” that tends to reproduce itself. It seizes our bodies and uses them as sheer means, as temporary “hosts” that die after they have been used by some *alien gene* that subsequently moves into a new body through the use of which it continues its mission of procreation.

A hair is a protein filament and its ability to preserve genes is recognized in science and forensics. While other body parts decay rapidly (tissues, organs) or are easily contaminated by external bacteria (bones, teeth), DNA in hair can supposedly survive even the process of cleaning from external contamination.⁶[6] Hence the industrial felting of hairs in order to make a fabric, the process that simulates the symbolic process of genetic interlacing as a biopolitical foundation for the construction of a social *genos* as a pre-political entity created by the imaginary identification of a genetically joined proto-formation as the “essence” of a nation. Therefore, both in the domain of *symbolic* and in the domain of *imaginary*, Todorović’s project can become the national representation in the “chemical” form that can be hypothetically checked by a forensic analysis. That is why Todorović admits that the ideal version of his project would be the one for which all citizens of Serbia would donate their hair. Both in the actual sample, and in the ideal version of the project, the analysis would in fact reveal that the Serbian *gene* is irreversibly contaminated by impure genes, in other words, a question would arise whether the Serbian nation exists at all and is it possible for it to become represented.

If theory has already determined that every identity is imaginary, i.e. that the identity manifests itself in the order of the *imaginary* – in which visible phenomena hide their

4 See: Slavoj Žižek, “Da Capo senza Fine” in J. Butler, E. Laclau, S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Naklada Jesenski i Turk, Zagreb, 2007, p. 213.

5[5] In psychology, *cognitive dissonance* implies a disturbing sense caused by simultaneous holding of two contradictory notions: most often attitudes or beliefs on the one hand, and facts or forms of behavior on the other.

6[6] See for example: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21015458/>. Here there is even speculation of a possibility of cloning a mammoth that lived 25 000 years ago and whose fossilized hairs were discovered in Siberia.

structures but subsequently are structured and articulated in symbolic order – the genetic map is not imaginary but perhaps only some kind of a symbolic *cut in the real*. Every national-fascistic urge starts from the concept of pureness of a genetic chart, and every contamination with some impure DNA represents not only a symbolic alarm for maintenance of social cohesion/*sabornost* based on the nation, but also some kind of an *unheimlich*, something inside of us that is foreign to us.

Julia Kristeva once theoretically explained the notion of *abjection* (obnoxiousness, repulsion, disgust) as something outside of symbolic order and outside of the distinction between subject and object, namely between some imaginary *Self* and some symbolic *Other*. *Abject* is only an object to a degree in which it stands opposite to the subject and vice versa. As an example of *abject*, we most often take excrement, something that is both external and internal in relation to the body and that causes repulsion (affect). However, the ultimate *abject* is in fact “a decaying body, lifeless completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and inorganic”. This “body without soul” represents “fundamental pollution”.⁷ [7] On the basis of its status of belonging to the body while still on the head, and being a mere external object when it is cut off, and on the basis of already described status that it has in the forensics (resistance to rapid decaying), hair carries transition between animate and non-animate: but it is actually non-animate when it grows from the living body (hair does not feel, hair does not bleed), and becomes “alive” when the body is dead.

If we refer once again to a popular horror-imaginarium, the connection between hair and corpse is the ultimate image of *living death*. The skull that some explorer will dig out seems like a speculative sight, the head of some “Yorick” that was alive a long time ago but now belongs to medicine or archaeology; however, half-decomposed head from which the hair has not yet totally fell out fills us with dread. Hence, when that first skull flies out of a closet in some film, this seems funny, while if the other rolls away, we are shocked. Alternatively, let us remember an already classical motive from Japanese horror movies where emblematic terror is created by the horrible image of a girl’s figure whose head we see from behind. We only see her hair and we know that, if she would turn to look at us, we would see something unimaginable and therefore presented here as something *unpresentable*, having in mind that in these kinds of narratives the revealing of *this* is permanently postponed so that *it* becomes the “fundamental object of anxiety”, Thing in the register of the real.

Nevertheless, as Freud asserted long time ago: the subconscious does not know of death! In other words, one could even conclude that “in its most radical form, *consciousness* is awareness of our transience and mortality”.⁸[8] If we place Todorović’s project exclusively in the domain of *affective*, then we actually reduce its effects to the effects of a horror film (or some “tunnel of horror” in an amusement park), which is what most of the time really happens to the existing art genres of “biopolitical art”, “radical performance” or “*abject-art*”. The affectiveness of these art genres is often just an aspect of the spectacle (immediate “affect” as a replacement for emotion of the aesthetic experience), while dealing with the body as if becomes a “Pavlovian” experiment in which the observers/public become the object of observation: how they “spontaneously” react to the power of horror that resists the conscious, the conscious that knows of death in spite of the workings of the subconscious for which death does not exist.

7[7] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p. 108.

8[8] S. Žižek, “Da Capo senza Fine”, p. 253.

Todorović's project in fact goes in the opposite direction from the "*abject-art*". It overcomes the theatricalization of the "conditional reflex" of abjection by "processing" and eventually "objectivizing" the abject: it turns it into a product, gives it utility and presents it administratively (each "blanket" gets a "declaration" of manufacture) with documentation of its development. With Todorović, the final product of a biopolitical event is often some usable item (jelly, soap, blanket) that holds a contingency of biological needs (food, hygiene, warmth). These kinds of needs are institutional in the biopolitical order: they are included in "ideological state apparatuses" (in Althusser's sense), and represent the ultimate services that the liberal state offers to the excluded, as for example in shelters for the homeless or soup kitchens. This utility of the bodily, i.e. the *use of body* through "modest proposals" of its material recycling, distorts the capitalist logic, namely the fundamental market dialectics of production and consumption, and even the "ethical logic" of capitalism restricted to the dialectics of private enrichment and public charity.

This logic also refracts a question of appearance of this project in the form of national representation. In the text of the book that accompanied this project at the Venice Biennale, Stevan Vuković actually points to a "biochemical" fact when we are discussing impoverished "transitional" societies: that in truth "the mere biovalue is the only value that the majority of population can exchange in the market" and that therefore Todorović's project is also a reflection of certain necessity to come up with "a new kind of an industrial branch in the framework of creative industries".⁹[9] What is crucial in Todorović's proposition is its material fullness that in fact makes this proposition an unavoidable act of non-integratedness in the field of false tension that emerges when the national imaginarium is confronted with the logic of global capitalism that assigns identities based on the characteristics of market goods that can in the end be represented as a realization of some national essence. This is exactly why Todorović's project can be represented as both national representation and a representation of economic/political segregation, although it does not represent but only endures representation.

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9 9] Stevan Vuković, "Art in the Field of Bioeconomy", in *Zoran Todorović/Warmth*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, p. 146. Vuković also mentions a bizarre way in which a Romanian factory covered its amassed debt when the management developed a scheme for sperm donation from the workers in the form of work obligation that they performed in the workplace.