

Zoran Gajić

An Undistilled Critique

But what is artistic about the work 'Integration'? Is it the craft beer made from water distilled from the migrants' urine (biocraft)? Is it the drink happening and the performance organised for the purpose of toasting or tasting? Or is it, maybe, the idea of urinating on the ground of a land that cannot be reached, because it is also the land one can only piss on today. Pissing on the ground that underlies every ideology of blood and soil, walls and persecution. Is that the idea being proposed for this work of art?

Todorović's proposal to like *Integration* has reached me. I recognise myself as the universal recipient (addressee) of this message. As one of all of us. I am not an artist but, on the contrary, an ignoramus who insists on beauty and on liking as a way of thinking about a work of art. I can freely conclude that *Integration* is a work that the artist himself likes, however dissatisfied he may be with its final appearance. But here is another assertion: a work implies appearance because it must appear, and aspectual attention did not disappear with the advent of the conceptual, regardless of the fact that the work *Integration* is a work of contemporary art which is said to be in a post-conceptual state. As a matter of fact, that state is the state of non-representative democracy in the world of art and the universality of taste which we cannot escape from if we are thinking of art as thinking and not of art as ideology. In ideology, there is nothing to think about, except for the thinking of the theoretician whose construct it is, and with which he proves that for him the fact that people think is - a scandal. I was convinced that the concept of ideology was useless.

Just because we are in a post-conceptual state, we also think that we are in a post-avant-garde state. For me, the prefix *post-* means that we are in a state where conceptualism and avant-gardism are taken for granted and that there is nothing revolutionary in them anymore. Perhaps that is why today we have so many artists who value activism and politics, along with theory, more than art itself. Hence, it is a situation which is widely reproduced and from which we will have to get out if we wish to continue to where we think we are heading. However, borders are all around us and walls are being erected. The borders spread in such a way that the entire territories that we used to call peripheral become camps and shelters, inhabited by people who are held up by

them, not only in space but also in time. The present lays siege to time and transforms it into contemporaneity, in which the opportunity to escape into subjectivities appears. That is why I expect a transformation.

The transformation which the work *Integration* brings to light, as an idea and as an affect, is quite different from the one we could see and experience in *Assimilation*. We could feel the former with the non-aesthetic sense of taste. Beer is drinkable and appetising, aspic is unhealthy even when it is edible. There is not a hint of cannibalism in *Integration*, and this work does not come up against humanity, which was the case with *Gypsies and Dogs*, although there was a problem with the humanitarians who tried to thwart Zoran's action of collecting urine. 'Doctors Without Borders' obviously have a different view of the walls Todorović jumped over in the name of the migrants.

The artist has no obligation to legitimise the mandate to speak on behalf of all of us - and among us also are the refugees. They are so close that we feel our own migratory capacity. That is why Todorović can represent them, just as he could represent the Roma children and their parents, from whom he received a lifetime's mandate as an artist. In the case of refugees, it is also political, because they are not identity but political prisoners, and they are ready to give a mandate to anyone who is willing to speak about the unjust punishment they are being subjected to.

But what is beautiful, that is to say, artistic about the work *Integration*? Is it the craft beer made from water distilled from the migrants' urine (biocraft)? Is it the drink happening of and the performance organised for the purpose of toasting or tasting? Is it because *Integration*, in one of its elements or at one moment, became a delegated performance, since people were invited to urinate into a canister with an improvised pissoir? Is the entire action a work of performance art, of which there is a record in the form of documentation that can also be exhibited in a gallery, and thanks to which the action can be repeated on other occasions? Or is it, maybe, idea of urinating on the ground of a land that cannot be reached, because it is also the land one can only piss on today. Pissing on the ground that underlies every ideology of blood and soil, walls and persecution. Is that the idea proposed for this work of art?

However, I shall be honest and say that it is an idea I heard while speaking to the artist. It was one of the ideas in the process of thinking about *Integration*. Since then, perhaps it is only I who have the key to possible readings of this work of art. I can see the pissing on the ground in *Integration*, although the performance of spilling a barrel of urine on the floor of a gallery in London never took place. In fact, the opportunity of talking to the artist made me think that one of the answers to the incomprehensibility of contemporary art and the condition for understanding, experiencing and enjoying it, lies in - knowing

the artist. But it is clear that we also love the works of artists we do not know personally, and with whom we do not have the privilege of knowing or going into every detail or moment of the creation and development of the works they are preparing or have already created. Finally, we have no possibility, and are probably not able to hear every thought the artist tells us or could tell us, which would offer help for a deeper understanding and perhaps a greater liking of what he creates. What makes a contemporary artist more acceptable and comprehensible, and his work more beautiful (we need to like it), is the *idea* of what he proposes for a work of art. That idea is then also mine, and in thinking about it I think about everything it reminds me of, but in such a way that it brings me back to the artist's intention, and the possibility of realising that what is exactly thinkable in a work can become a work of art.

However, the idea of pissing on the ground risks turning into the idea of extracting water from migrants who are fleeing in large numbers from countries where water is a problem. Almost all the countries they come from are countries where water has long been a problem. Water will also become a problem for people who may no longer have to move and work on oil, but that is not the subject or object of this idea. In this case, it would be an ecologically correct nagging and one's own idea, not the thought that was intended in *Integration*. First of all, people had already urinated, and when they heard about the artist's intention, they urinated even more and came to assist Zoran Todorović in collecting his equipment in time and removing the urine before the humanitarians could throw it into the shelter's loo. Therefore, what is being pondered in the work is not an ecological problem, but the problem of a man who runs away and cannot reach his destination because the destination is the same as the place from which he was expelled. And he is exhausted on that path, not in the work of art. At the same time, that path is the path of the idea that was supposed to be expressed in a work of art, but during its creation and presentation (the performance), it became, owing to anger and indignation, the idea of the victim of extraction, as seen by a correctionist who has now also become an environmentalist. It is a political and historical fact that today exploitation has become extraction and suppression, i.e. exclusion, and in many countries without the need for management; that open violence and naked power are at work today, that crime and offence establish relations of production which, in my opinion were also the relations of power described by Marx. But the work *Integration* is something else. It may have been motivated by this situation, but it does not reproduce it; it confronts it with an artistic thinking that inspires and encourages our thinking, to include even the subject of the political situation in question.

The idea of drinking water from migrants' urine and of making that drink taste pleasant to a Westerner becomes possible if the drink itself is beer. Therefore, this is the way in which a man who is running away and who is looking for peace and a normal, banal

democratic life, can be integrated into a model society and a final destination. And this is why not only the artists who exhibited at LADA (Live Art Development Agency) were invited for the drink; every visitor had the opportunity to understand the idea that was in the glass. There was not enough beer for everyone, so our team from the Group for Conceptual Politics, where Zoran also presented his work, had to share one beer only. And, to tell the truth, people did not really show much affinity for it. However, it was not necessary to agree with that taste.

What this work has, the migrants lack - and so, together with them, do we. *Integration* required a lot of engagement, action and organisation - in other words, a lot of effort - and that is what is also worthy of attention and admiration about it. Many people, as well as several institutions and organisations, were involved and employed in its implementation: from the gallery and artists who invited Todorović to exhibit his work, through the craft beer producers who gave him the recipe, and the Faculty of Fine Arts which provided space for the artist's laboratory, to institutions such as the Wine Station, the Institute for Public Health and the Institute of Nuclear Sciences in Vinča, where a beer consisting of water obtained by distilling urine was finally sterilised; and from the collaboration with the shelter for refugees and the contacts he had to deal with to get in there, to transactions with a shipping company to export the beer to England. All these are elements or moments of a work of art that incline me to like it. Be it as it may, *Integration* is an artistic organisation (screenplay and fiction, as Bruno Latour would say), that is, an organised work of an artist with all the people involved in its realisation and achievement, in spite of the fact that nobody today works with refugees, nor do they themselves get involved in any politically organised actions. In this way, art is also here to show us what we lack, and that is - politics.

Today it appears as if both artists and refugees are stopped at the border. Contemporary art has always seemed to me to be the work of artists-in-waiting. Waiting to obtain their status and cross the threshold and enter a time in which we can progress through history. Perhaps the clock has ticked for the historicisation of contemporary art with the establishment of academic chairs for its study and teaching, but for people who are victims of wars and governments, history will mean nothing without politics, which could provide it with a structure. Without their voice, they will remain invisible, and so will we, if we do not implement in politics what Todorović is hinting at with his indignation. That is why it is necessary to see the border also as a threshold to be crossed, and to begin the identification which allows us to legitimise ourselves; because the liminality of the situation in which we find ourselves is such that it can leave us on the margins forever and, as anthropologist Michel Agier puts it, this can be associated with a state of general insecurity.

But is this exactly what I like? Do I like the fact that such a strong political idea and attitude, an opinion about politics and the reality we live in, is proposed for a work of art? Yes. But that is not all, nor is it what makes *Integration* an intentionally aesthetic work. What I like about this work of art - and it does not decorate this work only (and I have nothing against decoration), but also some other works by Zoran Todorović - is the exposure to danger. It has already been said that some of Todorović's works are works of danger and that he is an artist of the dangerous. But apart from exposing the audience to danger, Todorović's *Integration*, along with *Gypsies and Dogs* and, perhaps more than any other work, the *Lorem Ipsum Portraits*, are all works that expose himself to danger. It is the danger of being proclaimed incorrect and wrong, cynical or banal, but also of risking one's own head. To think of a work of art as the exploitation of people and children, of the Roma, the audience and collaborators on the project, is merely an excuse for disliking it and an injustice towards the artist's speech - a criticism which can always be inflicted in the name of a theoretical and art-historical qualification that wishes to be political and correct at the same time. All these are the dangers Todorović exposes himself to by pointing to ruptures and creating situations in which the Zeitgeist, which engaged and responsible people think is theirs only, reveals itself. In exposing himself to such danger, Zoran's work seeks and deserves our appreciation.

Unease is the right word for what we experience when we look at what Todorović's works offer for us to taste. We swallow saliva without a problem, but if someone were to bring it to us in a glass, the majority of us would be disgusted. We sympathise with murderers, but when we need to say this publicly, we prefer to leave the saying so to others. We condemn poverty and misery, but when someone shows us that we are responsible for their continuation, we take offence and justify ourselves with references to a system of exploitation that is beyond us. Unease is a consequence of the objectification of the subjective and of the subject, of the subjected and the subjugated within us, repressed by ourselves because it is inappropriate even for us. Art, however, brings it to light and returns it to us without moral judgment, if the artist allows himself to be exposed to condemnation, and that is exactly what Todorović does. It is not a question of cynicism, because Todorović does not distance himself. Nor does he mock us. That is why his humanity eludes the humanitarians who are named as such on account of their vocation and who enumerate and classify the problems the solutions for which they then look for in the institutions. Zoran, on the other hand, invites us to solve the matter ourselves - and first of all, with ourselves.

And what kind of liking is that? It is the state of being struck - a work of art strikes us. It finds us where we think we are hidden and well-protected, and yet it touches us. Just as the sense of taste is not only aesthetic, so the sense of touch is not only physical.

Zoran's work touches our soul, which I know for sure Zoran also thinks is the dungeon of the body. And we also spoke about Foucault.