Processes of Integration and Disintegration in the European Arts

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Abstract:

This paper will consider changes in the sphere of arts resulting from various attempts at cancelling the social, political and ideological differences between the East and West, particularly after the fall of the Berlin wall. A review of the most significant visual art events, as well as those aimed at breaching the severed ties between East and West, leads to the following conclusion: the fall of the Berlin wall may have indeed resulted in major integration processes in some spheres, but on the plane of art it intensified a direct confrontation and raised a psychological block that is even more difficult to overcome. As artists enter into artistic dialogue with completely different perspectives and different backgrounds, conflicts are frequent, verging on public scandals and minor cultural wars, with retreat into one's own cultural scheme as the outcome. Moreover, as the artists sense that the collaboration is merely a reflection of the political, cultural and economic power games, all dialogue is rendered impossible. The consequence of integration is disintegration, and globalization bears regionalism. The author, naturally, also presents examples of artistic collaboration in the spirit of cultural tolerance (e.g. Documenta in Kassel), but concludes that finally even such events are primarily unequal exchanges (displays of diversities).

The overwhelming dominance of modern visual culture, conditioned above all by the rapid development of technology and the appearance of sophisticated new visual communication media, has resulted in significant developments in the arts. This phenomenon has lately attracted the attention of numerous art theoreticians.

Contemporary visual culture and art is a field that spawns many integration processes, among them the integration of the arts and science, art and technology, etc.

In the opinion of many experts/theoreticians and practitioners of the arts (C.G. Argan, G. Politi, F. Menna, U. Ecco) it is inappropriate nowadays to speak in terms of different spheres, as what were formerly two different areas of interest have now merged in a contextual embrace. Such claims are often verified by citing the achievements of the moderne and examples from the beginning of the 20th century, such as Bauhaus, which integrated applied arts, fine arts, design and architecture by binding together technology and art. For hundreds of years such an alliance had been inconceivable: from the start, Western culture was characterized by a division into the spheres of theory and praxis, *tehne* and *poesis*, all corresponding to the dualism of thinking and being. Still, even though this epochal shift took place at the beginning of the 20th century, the end of the century witnessed a significant change in the quality of this integration. This change was induced by the development of electronic media (computers in particular) and the effect was of two kinds.

1. Contemporary art emerged as a new form of communication, as a transfer of information about a particular experience (the art of integrated media, interactive art, multimedia art, etc.).

2. New technologies and arts converged, both in post-industrial societies and in those which were still less developed.

We can say that experiments in the field of visual arts were stimulated by widespread optimism regarding the new technologies. Such optimism has been particularly strong in the USA, as expressed by the syntagm of "The Electronic Commonwealth" (J.B. Abramson, F.C. Arterton, G.R. Orren), and it spread equally throughout Western and Eastern Europe. All of a sudden, highly efficient computer industries began to saturate the market with a generation of cheap and easily accessible graphic and other software for professionals and amateurs. Software producers launched a series of programs that enabled artists, architects, designers, animators, film crews and many others to work more efficiently, and perhaps, even more creatively. Developments in design and architecture have been particularly revolutionary.

Nowadays these tools are used on a universal scale. Studies of works of art produced using state-of-the-art software and hardware can no longer detect the difference between those coming from highly developed countries and third world countries. This

standardization phenomenon was expounded by the sociologist Scott Lasch: "If modernization is a process of cultural differentiation, then post-modernization is a process of undifferentiation". To facilitate understanding, we have to remind ourselves that this renowned theoretician of postmodern art is not in agreement with Jean Francois Lyotard, who perceives post-modern tendencies as a state that necessarily correlates with the post-industrial capitalist economy. In other words, Lyotard claims that culture and art are determined, in the strictest sense of the word, by economic circumstances. Contrary to this opinion, Lasch believes, and I share his opinion, that post-modern art and culture are primarily a paradigm rising above greater or smaller differences in the level of economic development. The process of standardization of culture and art was significantly aided by the development of electronic media. Everyone is using them today. Sociologists (F. Keiter) established long ago that technical and technological contents are more easily acculturated than beliefs. This in no way means that all spiritual contents spread less readily than technical ones. The difference probably derives from the universal character of applied technical and technological progress, whereas ideological changes are more neutral.

Regarding the situation in Croatian visual art, it is possible to say that it confirms Lasch's theory. It is a fact that a large number of Croatian artists masterfully negotiate different trends in contemporary art, including multimedia technology, despite Croatia not being a highly developed country. The capital, Zagreb, is the cultural center of Croatia with a long tradition in developing new media. As such, it has always been involved in all major alternative art events throughout the world. As early as the beginning of the 1960s and 1970s, Zagreb hosted a series of multimedia events, such as the Music Biennale, GEFF, and New Tendencies. Our Center for Multimedia Research opened in 1976, at the same time as many other independent multimedia institutes throughout the world. A number of Croatian artists received renowned international awards and credit for their artwork in the new media. Everything that has been said so far leads to the conclusion that, when art uses contemporary, particularly electronic media, it quickly and successfully links different worlds, bridging the gaps between developed and underdeveloped countries. New technologies are seen as a great challenge by underdeveloped countries, which believe that their penetration into the newly formed communication system will provide an opportunity for faster integration into the developed world. It can be said that this confirms Herbert Read's statement on the communicational advantage of visual language, on the universal nature of the language of a picture as compared to verbal communication. On the other side, art should not be observed only through its role in communication, or

the transfer of information, as a universal form of sending visual messages on universal themes. Because communication is not the most important purpose of art. Art does not see communication as an aim in itself, but through its cognitive activity, it introduces us to a world of universalities. Just like philosophy, art has always had an inherent need to search for a new universality, a tendency to discover something that we call "*sensus communis*" on the purpose of the world we live in. Contemporary art transcends the tangible reality of the environment in which it emerges by using symbolic language and revealing what is common to all of us. Thus, it frequently warns its audiences about global problems such as ecology and war, affects the consciousness of the human race, and provokes action. In these terms, we can list a significant number of projects that animate particular social spheres and try to promote communication between different cultures and different social and political models, such as "Manifesta IV" and this year's (2002) "Documenta XI". In this way, art undoubtedly plays a part in creating global culture.

Nevertheless, when dealing with the changes in culture and art that we witness today, which are the reflection of political, social or economic integration, then things become more complex, and terms such as integration and globalization, which are widely used today, should be used more cautiously. This is because differences in culture still exist, which might be local, national or regional, and they are not easy to bridge. This can be seen in the example of Europe which expected a strong fillip towards the creation of a cultural togetherness after the fall of the Berlin wall. After this very important European event, a space opened up for broad cultural cooperation between the East and the West, and between cultures that had previously been closed within the boundaries of their own national states. All efforts directed at annulling the social, political and ideological differences through a common market and the communication revolution contributed to the processes of integration in culture and art. The enthusiasm induced by the fall of the Berlin wall strengthened the belief that Tolstoy's myth on the possibility of communicating with the whole world was becoming a reality.

However, a review of the most significant art events, including those whose objective was to end the broken links between the East and the West, shows two completely opposing trends. It is true that, in terms of culture and art, an important process of integration has begun, but, at the same time, a process of disintegration has also emerged which has intensified direct confrontation on an artistic plane, and has built a psychological wall even more difficult to tear down. Since artists approach artistic dialogue from utterly different perspectives, with completely different experiences, this sets off conflicts, public

scandals and small but real cultural wars, which result in a retreat within their own cultural boundaries. Besides, if artists feel that cooperation is turning into a reflection of a political, cultural or economic power game, dialogue is no longer possible. When such a conclusion is reached at a cultural gathering, these differences can lead to separation. Thus, disintegration arises as the result of integration, and rationalization as a result of globalization. Consequently, it is not surprising that this cultural and artistic confrontation leads some authors to the conclusion that a possible escalation of conflicts among nations, races and cultures cannot be excluded. After all, our entire history so far has been a conflict of civilizations (S. Huntington).

From a number of examples, one case can be isolated to illustrate what has been said – the "Interpol" group exhibition in Stockholm in 1996, jointly organized by Victor Misiano, the director of the Moscow Contemporary Art Center, and Jan Aman, the director of a similar center in Stockholm. Misiano and the Russian artists took it for granted from the very beginning that they would be able to plan the entire concept of the exhibition, inappropriately behaving as members of a formerly powerful nation. This culminated in an incident at the exhibition itself, in which Wenda Gu's performance suffered. Wenda Gu, a Chinese American, had installed a large net in a pavilion, in which was thrown locks of blond hair from Russians and Swedes. In the middle, she had placed a real missile borrowed from the Swedish army. The Russian artists associated the work with racial differences and reacted by completely destroying it. One of them even stripped naked and pretended to be a dog on a chain trying to bite people passing by. The whole incident was videotaped, and so was still being discussed a long time after the event. The Russian artists' reaction was labelled as neofascist behaviour, although Misiano and the artists (Kulik, Brener, and others) are certainly not neo-fascists, indeed, as Russian Jews they are not encumbered with Russian nationalism. These and similar events that took place after this exhibition show, primarily, a lack of understanding of different cultures and the reasons which lie beneath the differences between the East and the West. Each European country had its own specific reasons for closing itself within its boundaries, including cultural boundaries, and for isolating itself from the rest of Europe. Now, the fact that these countries, one by one, are emerging from their isolation brings to the surface the problem of their insufficient knowledge of one another. In this way, Croatia, a small country with a huge heritage in visual arts, has never had a significant place in historical overviews of European art, although it has to be said that part of the reason for this is that it did not seek ways to present its possessions to Europe and the world. As a consequence, it is not uncommon that some great works of art exhibited in museums and

galleries all over the world, such as the marble statue by F. Laurane (1420-1502) exhibited at the Louvre, or the horseman in front of the UN building, are rarely recognized as Croatian artistic creations.

Furthermore, the West is often suspicious of art coming from the East, there are two reasons for this: it comes from an economically underdeveloped part of Europe, and it "sprang up" during the communist regime, following the dictate of the state and communist party apparatus which controlled cultural development in its totality. However, it has been proven that the economic and political circumstances, as bad as they were, did not automatically result in a lower standard of spiritual culture. On the contrary, the West was fascinated by the works of the Russian avant-garde from the beginning of the 20th century when they finally emerged from the storerooms where they had been kept for decades and hidden from their own public. C. G. Argan (1986) claimed that in actual fact, it is in the West at the end of the 20th century that we can notice a discrepancy between spiritual and material values, as if the spiritual sphere was lagging behind economic development. Therefore, we should not be surprised when artists who are sensitive to these differences sometimes react too passionately.

Unfortunately, small European countries, such as Croatia, sometimes conform to these prejudices when they present themselves as the West wants to see them. Croatian cultural policy in the first ten years after gaining independence, in over-presented itself to the world through naïve art and the so-called "Hlebine Rural School of Art" which stems from the social-critical movement "Zemlja" ("Earth") (1928-1935), which was received with great interest and was highly valued throughout world. Many Croatian art critics opposed this policy because it portrayed Croatia as a rural country of uneducated people, untouched by modern and post-modern movements. While the truth is that Croatia has a number of formally trained artists who confirm that Croatian cultural identity fully belongs to the contemporary European cultural environment. At the same time, the West undoubtedly shows great interest in an art which carries within itself an exceptionally regional component, and in cultures based on tradition, a fact which some sociologists (A. Hauser) explain by saying that the West, unlike the East, is characterized by a pull towards development which tends to weaken local traditions and strengthen centralized and standardized cultural activities. This phenomenon could be qualified as a form of "natural" curiosity and sensitivity to differences. The processes of integration in Europe, both in the political-economic, and in the cultural spheres, depend primarily on the speed with which the European Union is expanding. Entering such a broad community would

reduce the numerous differences and internal opposition. As things stand, the countries that are waiting at the gates of the EU to enter a community of equals, must first of all meet economic and political requirements, such as the ability to contribute to the common budget, adjust their economic level to the level of EU countries so as not to be a financial burden, and accept all the decisions adopted so far by the European Union. Only after meeting all of these demands can there be successful cooperation in the sphere of culture and art. As some countries are as yet unable to fulfil these demands, the phrases a "Europe of two speeds" and a "Europe of two cultures" have been coined in some circles. For this reason, Europe cannot consider integration as a trans-cultural project, and approximation as equalization, as culture and art also express, in addition to their universality, the national identity of European countries, and European cultural policy must take this fact into consideration.

For Croatia, as for many other countries that have recently set off towards independence, the only acceptable Europe is one which guarantees the protection of the national identity of all its members, and one which fosters cultural differences. At this particular moment in Croatia, there are many people who fear that joining Europe will result in a loss of national identity and sovereignty, mainly because they believe that "national" and "European" are mutually exclusive. It could be said that for Croatia the process of integration, particularly in a political sense, came too soon, at a time when the state itself was just being created, and one which provoked strong national feelings, at a time when Croatia was more preoccupied with its past than with its future. Turning to the past had a homogenizing function, but the search for national cultural features and the elaboration of national symbols produced an ambivalent attitude towards Europe. Croatia considers itself to be a part of Europe, either as a part of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, or as a member of the Roman Catholic community of nations. However, the awareness that it has always had a submissive role in Europe, which is the fate of all small nations, and that, in the course of this, it fought to achieve sovereignty and the establishment of an independent state, made wary of accepting any integration in a new community that could lead it into an unequal position.

If Europe develops in a spirit of cultural tolerance, then cooperation and exchange in the field of art will take the right course, despite the fact that in the end this will result in unequal exchanges. To make this possible, more material funds have to be invested in such cooperation, and, above all, it is important to lay the foundations of an education system in which art plays a central role.

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