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A NEW PATCH FOR THE WORLD GAME: Dejan Kaludjerović's Europoly

In this essay I want to continue some of my previous explorations of specific applications of game forms in the Balkan art context through a kind of preliminary analysis of Europoly - the most recent art work in a form of a board game created by the artist Dejan Kaludjerović. Europoly basically mimes the appearance and the rules of the board game Monopoly and consists of both large spatial installation to be presented in exhibition spaces and a portable version of the board game for playing in different places.

By copying the visual appearance, rules or even the entire structure of the most famous of the conventional board games Kaludjerović applies the metaphor of the game to the cultural, social and political circumstances in contemporary Europe. He discusses some urgent issues such as the re-interpretation of the European identity, or the necessity for expansion of its borders and of the rules for inclusion or exclusion from European political geography by taking into account the recent changes that came as a result of the enlargement of the European Union. Similarly to a number of Balkan artists (such as Tadej Pogacar, Ana Stojkovic, Lucezar Boyadjiev, or Gentian Shkurti), Kaludjerović uses the already existing game as a metaphoric framework for discussion the expansion of consumerism, the re-enforced unequal exchange of labour and immigration of qualified experts, or the difficulties of the integration of the immigrants. (1)

The work basically deals with the relation between the personal and group identity and the power involved in the process of integration of different individuals and nations in new enlarged Europe. Thus, it questions the contradictory evaluation of life performance of the individuals in different political systems, whether it functions through pure statistics of relations, or through taking into account the value of the individual. Throughout the game there are 22 selected professions represented by individuals/immigrants (existing non EU citizens working in the EU who have been photographed especially for this purpose) that are valued differently in their new environments only because they are foreigners. Also, there is a series of

accompanying objects that symbolise different values of different systems, e.g. the car Yugo as a symbol of the ex-Yugoslav past of the artist, or various designer bags, profession cards, or Eu community chest cards, usually attached to the European system of values. The success/failure binary and the status anxiety that play crucial role in the capitalist consumeristic society are some of the targets of this project.. Within the theoretical context of the cultural translation of different media it is important to examine how this work stretches the 'rules of the game' to fit the art context and how the game metaphor functions in the complex political situation of the globalised world. Although game theory is not always and entirely applicable when analysing social, economic, or political 'games' in reality, and may even fall short when the analysed 'games' are art projects, I found some of its assumptions helpful for making comparisons between reality, and the virtual reality of the 'real games' and the 'art games'.

Certain obvious parallels may be drawn between the game theory and the kind of daily decisions we all make. (2) There are several assumptions presented in the usual definition that sound very close to what usually happens on the playing field of life — and especially to what has been taking place in different European regions over the past fifteen years. I will list only four of them:

I. Each decision maker ['PLAYER'] has available to him two or more well-specified choices or sequences of choices (called 'PLAYS'). (3)

II. Every possible combination of plays available to the players leads to a well-defined end-state (win, loss, or draw) that terminates the game.' (4)

IV. Each decision maker has perfect knowledge of the game and of his opposition; that is, he knows in full detail the rules of the game as well as the payoffs of all other players.

V. All decision makers are rational; that is, each player, given two alternatives, will select the one that yields him the greater payoff.' (5)

Consider, for example, the decision faced each of the former Yugoslav Republics as to whether or not they would like to remain in the Federation, or the decision faced by its citizens whether or not they would leave after Yugoslavia split, when the conflicts spread all through its territory at the beginning of the 90s.

Although the second assumption also sounds as if it might be applicable to the Balkan context, it is far more difficult for us to judge who won and who lost in the making of certain decisions. Still, the game theory assumption that decision-makers have full knowledge of the rules of the game but no knowledge about their opponents' moves (according to the Web Dictionary of Cybernetics and Systems) can be discussed in the context Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s. In this regard, in fact, it is much more interesting to observe how game theory differs from what happens in real life and, indeed, how the general assumptions of this sophisticated theory may even contradict life experience:

The last two assumptions can hardly be applied to everyday life situations and are, in particular, of little use when it comes to explaining the events that took place during the wars in the former Yugoslavia. None of the 'players' had 'perfect knowledge' of what was going on, nor there were 'rules', while the decisions that were made were in no way 'rational' and the 'payoff' was impossible to estimate.

In addition to taking the enlargement of Europe as a kind of metaphor for monopolization of the definition of European identity, Europoly is also an ambiguous comment on the inevitable rise of consumerism to which the ex-communist countries in the period of transition are inevitably exposed without any previous experience and preparation.

In order to understand the importance of the critique of consumerism we can turn to Slavoj Žižek's account of the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism, which he discusses with reference to the work of Lacan. Commodity fetishism can be understood as being 'a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.'⁽⁶⁾ The value of a certain commodity assumes the quasi-'natural' property of another commodity, namely, money. The essential feature of commodity fetishism, consequently, does not imply the famous replacement of man with things ('a relation between men assumes the form of a relation between things'); rather, it consists of a certain misrecognition which concerns the relations between a structured network and one of its elements'.⁽⁷⁾

In this regard, we should also consider Žižek's radical interpretation of Marx as an anticipator of Lacan's theory of reflection and identification in the mirror phase. According to Žižek, the identification of the king solely through his subjects sounds very much like Lacan's description of subjectification and identification with the Other. When it comes to identifying with things, Žižek makes the paradoxical

observation that commodity fetishism appears in capitalist societies where there is exchange between free people but does not exist in societies where there is a relation of fetishism between men themselves, that is, in pre-capitalist societies. In such societies commodity fetishism has not developed because the production there is 'natural', that is, products are not produced for the market. (8) On the contrary, in a society where relations between men are not 'relations of domination and servitude', where people see in each other only other subjects who share similar concerns, and where these other people are of interest to you only if they possess something — a commodity that can satisfy your needs — then in such a society commodity fetishism, that is, the social relation between things, serves as a cover for real social relations between individuals, which can be treated as a 'hysteria of conversion.' (9)

Such a "patch" to the well-known Monopoly game, while perhaps not very functional, nevertheless targets in its critique both the capitalist "game", which teaches even the youngest children the strict social distinction between winners and losers, the "status anxiety" and the globalising tendencies of world trade. In that sense Europoly sounds as closer to the rules of a role-playing game (RPG) where the roles are strictly distributed and difficult to change.

The consumerist society, where among other products there is abundance of entertaining but violent games, is seen as an ideal that is often worth the risk of dangerous and forbidden journeys to "the other side". But for those who undertake such journeys, even if they complete their 'adventures' in the most successful way, there is only a simulation of an award.

The game Europoly may be interpreted as yet another "patch" to different interpretations of the "game" practices in European politics. The term "patch" that refers to the recently developed technical capacity allowing to players to modify their favourite games by adding programme variables seems applicable for Kaludjerović's art work. Not only does Europoly combine fun with a certain degree of social and political critique, but it also shows that humor and fun may well become means to deliver critical ideas. It actually offers interesting proof how such 'patches' can transcend the rules of the game and enter the world of adults, how the boundary lines between reality, "real games" and "art games" can easily be blurred and even erased.

In conclusion, I would like to note that it is very difficult to estimate the emotional and psychological impact art games might have if they are produced and played to the same extent as “real games”. For the time being, however, these kinds of art projects/games are produced only to question the rules of the real world “game.” In this way Europoly aims to challenge the blurred distinctions between “the art work” and “the sellable product” in the consumerist societies and to question and push to its limits the capitalistic system of values. It also in a way re-defines the notion of ready-made wherein the ready-made is established in reverse – it is produced according to the artist’s idea but is being sold according to the market rules. (10)

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1. For a critique of the neo-liberal economic system see: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason - Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 1999, 357.
2. As the Web Dictionary of Cybernetics and Systems defines it: ‘Game theory is a branch of mathematical analysis developed to study decision making in conflict situations. Such a situation exists when two or more decision makers who have different objectives act on the same system or share the same resources.’ Web Dictionary of Cybernetics and Systems, ..
3. Ibid., < http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/ASC/GAME_THEOR.html >. 4. Ibid., < http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/ASC/GAME_THEOR.html >. 5. Ibid., < http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/ASC/GAME_THEOR.html >. 6. Slavoj Zizek, “How did Marx Invent the System”, in *Mapping of Ideology*, ed. by S. Zizek, Verso, London, New York, 1999, p. 308
7. Ibid., p. 310 8. Ibid., p. 310 9. Ibid., p. 314 10. For a more precise argumentation on the importance of new definitions of ready-made proposed by artists from different cultural contexts see: Suzana Milevska, “The Ready-made and the Question of Fabrication of Objects and Subjects”, *Afterimage*, Rochester, Vol. 28, No.4 pp.27-29