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THE ABYSS OF THE GRAND GESTURES

Notes from steirischerherbst'21.

Dedicated to all the artists left outside.

Rewind to the past and repeat in the present, sponsored by *this* and *that* bank, multiple first VIP choice lounges were/are the spine of every art fair. The difference is that wealth management was never so widely proclaimed and spoken for as it was this year, as the art fairs reemerged from the pandemic. It is symbolized in Urs Fisher's *Untitled* (a *\$3 Million Bread House*) at Art Basel, constructed with loaves of bread attached to a wooden frame. Fresh bread is added to each installation, a symbol of an uneven distribution of wealth... an arrogant, grand gesture that never aimed at being a meeting point between the upper class of society and its underbelly. Thank god that Frieze had Vanessa da Silva's *Muamba Grove* sculptures, as at least they formally consider the idea of transmutation. Otherwise, the two spectres of the elitist structure sitting opposite from one another remain unintegrated, as mega-fortunes set poverty on an ignore mode. If there is already the

difference between private and public money, the latter drives festivals such as the steirischerherbst'21, bringing with this a greater responsibility for the grandeur for which it stands.

On that note, there I was in the audience of the roundtable *New Ecologies of Exhibition Making* at steirischerherbst'21 with the topic *The Way Out*, trying to figure out what is new exactly, why the self-absorbed art system is looking for the exit, and why the justifications of the artificially produced institutional diversity seem much less convincing than the idea of institutional degrowth (mentioned by WHW's Sabina Sabolović). In search of a truthful stimulus, my gaze stopped at the book in the hands of a super-cool and well-informed colleague: *A Pleasant Apocalypse, Notes from the Grand Hotel Abyss* (inspired by Georg Lukács' book of the same title). Oooh... the title made me want to grab what was in fact the reader for the steirischerherbst'19. All the words involved resonated with character, and indeed prophetically, as strong predecessors of 2021's pale umbrella theme *The Way Out: the grandiosity, the abyss, the pleasure, the apocalypse*. Exciting! Profound! The reader from the '19 edition contained indications of a time when the Graz Landhaus system of columns and arcs functioned as a euphemism

for protection "from those who don't belong because of their ethnicity, skin colour, level of education or cultural habits", the noble savages, the barbarians, so to say.

"the way out"

Today, under the excuse of vulnerability induced by the pandemic, there is a need to exit: to go to their end?! Or to some other end, perhaps? I would presume that the pandemic, the long lockdowns, the shortage of semiconductor computer chips, the explosion of NFTs and cryptocurrencies, the ecological crisis, the migrant crisis, the great resignations of workers, the threatening automation, the inflation and the space tourism on the horizon, would have released the barbarian even in the prosperous. But apart from being literally out in the public space of Graz, the program seemed enclosed in the old thematics conceptualized by the usual suspects, and without any reflection on the current, dramatically imposed topics and circumstances. If a critical articulation was to be found, it was yet again in the pale positioning towards otherness; the steirischerherbst "was about home and belonging, protecting the last bastion of "Westerners" from facing, in their own words, the barbarian Other—be they Ottoman, Slavonic [nota bene, the correct way to say it is Slavic!], communist, or Muslim".

"the grand"



Back in 2020, the team of steirischerherbst'20 were magnificent in their self-critique of the imposed conditions. In their words from the PARANOIA TV catalogue, "the whole religion of fluidity and mobility observed by biennials and festivals has turned out to be deeply complicit in neoliberal capitalism, while the notion of a unique experience, that these festivals were propagating and selling began to feel uncomfortably close to an exclusive club for the few". However, the line-up of 2021 only affirmed the truth in this statement, supporting the same old elitist structure in which critically acclaimed and awe-inspiring usual suspects are predominant, meaning that it was artists already omnipresent for more than a decade who got the chance for new commissions by the festival. Beyond being problematic for engaging with the usual suspects, this year's edition is to be criticized for being unaware and for massively ignoring the current agenda by the means of seemingly grand gestures.

If we were to learn from history, grand, spectacular gestures are blind to reality. Take Louis XIV's fireworks or the *Hall of Mirrors* at Versailles: they were slightly more than nicely designed scenography, their function being to hold together the ideological structure. The shine that they emanated aside, "they are unaware of the disaster it produces at the end of its scheme", in Cronenberg's lines from the film *Cosmopolis*.

This year, the team opted for *Sunrise till sunset*, a long durational performance by Tino Sehgal that included forty performers released from the art institution and emerging from between the trees like a mythological Pan. Just like Pan, they were able to turn form into something else, and perform between Mount Olympus (the institution) and earth (the park). The immediacy of the intimate contact might be the answer to Sehgal's question expressed at the panel, on how the art institution will keep up with change and stay relevant amidst the proliferation of digital images. The general feeling was that in the public space, we're all left out in the open. Lost, or simply scared.

Marinella Senatore's *Illuminaria*, originally displayed at Dior's show in the South of Italy, is undoubtedly a grand gesture. Positioned at the Europaplatz at the exit from the railway station, it

aims for processuality like one of the halls of mirrors at Versailles. It is radiant and sparkling, but has nothing to do with the glow of cybercapital, the glow of the screens, the actuality of today's public media space. It is just a well-designed funfair glow. While being adorably Instagrammable, the migrant exiting the station on their phone did fail to notice it. The *Illuminaria* had signs standing for the *revolution* and the *way out*, but never really pretended to resolve the position of the wretched of the earth. They are tricky, neon lights: we find them so often in contemporary art, and they simulate the post-industrial spectacle while only consuming energy.

Being staged at Messeplatz, Uriel Barthélémi's performance *Navigating The Ruins of the Old World* aimed for grandiosity and could be described with *your rope my rope, we move ropes and get together*, grandiose oversimplification of the postcolonial agenda.

Sounded much better than it looked.

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Disorder Patrol, another funny gesture by Flo Kasearu, transforms the police into commandos playing with ribbons. Flo has a history of attempting to break the walls of the institution, having self-institutionalised herself with her invention of a house museum back in Tallinn, and by proclaiming a pile of soil in her garden a mountain so that it thereby became a landmark. With the same vigour and confidence, she now choreographed and dressed the police for them to look silly. *Disorder Patrol* might look like the police performing in a circus, but it is only an illusory promise where the ones disciplining the society have gone awry. And although it shares a sense of humour and grotesque tones recognizable as Flo's style, the reality of it is that in order for it to happen, it had to be disciplined by another invisible police surveilling it, a permanent and unavoidable circle of control.

“the abyss”





So, which others get a chance to be a part of this grand conversation, and then at what maturity level? For example, in the beginning of the century and before the market had been conquered and controlled, there was a time when artists from the Balkans[1] were popular in Austria. Nowadays, the majority is swiped left, either by more exotic others playing the decolonial agenda or by the genetically non-modified hegemonic lineup, a Machiavellian stage assembled for the privileged all-over-again. Those ‘lucky ones’ who did take part in the conversation with the *steirischerherbst*’21 are ones who have already predominantly been assimilated in the German-speaking world.

In that regard, the opera performance *Conversations: I don't know that word...yet* by Dejan Kaludjerović and collaborators Marija Balbudžić, Bojan Đorđev, and Tanja Šljivar is exemplary. It is colorful and playful, the songs transport you places, but the taste that it provokes is bittersweet. The songs are based on the interviews that Kaludjerović did with circa fifty children in around eight global cities, Graz and Ljubljana being the most Western in the constellation. The children had responded naively to questions of inclusion and exclusion, foreigners, language, isolation, war, money, poverty. In *The Philosophy of the Provincial City* by Radomir Konstantinović, one of the characteristics of being provincial is shown as a permanent stage of infancy. It is a provincial positioning shown as a permanent stage of infancy. It is a provincial positioning that does not allow many of the subjects to develop a high level of maturity. Performed in Graz, this opera is a vivid monument to all of those kept at the infantile stage, not allowed to penetrate the fortress of Europe. So much more than an innocent, colorful playground in a public space, it is a reminder of those left out from grandiosity.

As a gesture addressed to the citizens of Graz, a widely distributed letter by Paul B. Preciado reached their mailboxes. Gestures of a big player, whose heart is so big as to send love to all citizens, playing

on their vulnerabilities and a presumption of their naivete where they would be satisfied with a decontextualized gesture of love-bombing. For a moment when receiving the letter, I loved the love, I loved the gestures, I loved the status and the value of Paul B. Preciado, but —if a disaster is what it leaves at the end of the scheme, as *Cosmopolis* warned, its good intentions are doubtful.

“the pleasure?!”

“the pleasure?!”



Finding the way out, for the politically conscious, implies transgressing the existing power relations. And, yes, Lars Cuzner, a con artist *with consciousness* dressed like an old school billionaire, was employed by steirischerherbst'21 for the very purpose of questioning them. But if we know anything about institutional critique, it is that it is there to reinforce the institution. Impersonating a ‘surveilled agitator’, he approached me at the art

press breakfast and asked me *why I was taking part, if I was aware of all of its abysses?* Because of its *grandiosity*, I guess?! And, some *pleasure?!* The one that always leaves a bit of space for hope, to leave the *stringing* one along part of it aside. Nevertheless, it is common knowledge that jouissance, as an ultimate form of pleasure, can’t possibly be solidified and nor can it be self-sufficient. If it is not unavoidably linked to a catastrophe by the process of objectification, it echoes the old dichotomy embodied in Eros and Thanatos.

“the apocalypse”

Grand gestures are not that difficult to read. Apart from being based on profit and revenues, they conceal a pyramidal scheme and preserve the pre-existing order of things. They provide *fireworks* to the conservative parties and, under the excuse of looking for a way out (this year’s title), *mirror* those who are conservative and apologetic, while the reality of apocalyptic capitalism remains apologetic, while the reality of apocalyptic capitalism remains hidden behind.

If one knows where one stands, there is no need for grand gestures, right? Unless one is forced to be gaslighted by them in an industry where *value is placed on exclusivity, wealth and status*. However, there is a certain insecurity behind the need to show that one is the grandest of the grandest, and that it MUSTN’T fall apart. But is the art world supposed to build better, or to build bigger? Are the major gestures a real, shared existence, or a barrier? It would be impossible for eminence to offer improvement to everybody’s lives, but it should at least reflect upon the difference of the objects it uses for its pleasure. Otherwise, distinction is based on a retro principle around nothingness. While power and art are in synchronicity, the grand gestures ignore the need for a larger, contextual responsiveness, and cross-fertilisation.

In a changing world, the major festivals could be evaluated by their cascading effects, by what they nurture. However, since the imperialists are trying to find a way out, the rest must be doomed, or at least super confused. Aren't they, the great Other, the subject who is supposed to know? At least, in their own way of finding out, they have tried their best.

It is up to you to compare contemporary magnitude with the over-the-top opulence of Versailles, which found itself followed by the revolution of the ones hungry for something as simple as bread...

If possible, next time just let the gestures be somehow grand in their cascading.

FOOTNOTES

[1] The Slavic people are, as heard at the previously-mentioned roundtable, the blacks of Europe. Their hype was manifested in exhibitions such as *In The Search for Balkania*, Neue Galerie Graz, 2002, or *Blood and Honey*, Museum Essl, Vienna (2003). Today, their bodies are often substituted with the black bodies, hanging on the hooks in *Red Rack* of those *Ravaged and Unconsenting* by Doreen Garner (2018), Halle für Kunst, Graz, a piece only related to *steirischerherbst'21*, however, through the shared geographical context of Graz. The artwork was borrowed from a private home of a German collector, private being of public importance.

IMAGE CREDITS

Marinella Senatore, *Assembly* (2021), installation. Photo: Mathias Völzke
Flo Kasearu, *Disorder Patrol* (2021), performance. Photo: Mathias Voelzke
Paul B. Preciado, *To All I Will Love* (2021), Unaddressed mailing. Photo: Mathias Völzke

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is an independent curator and art critic. After the digital turn in 2020, she became more involved in phygital (physical + digital) projects, conferences and exhibitions in the hybrid field of art + science + tech. She also curates in the metaverse (meta + universe). Historically speaking, Maja was the curator of the *Mediterranea 18 Young Artists Biennale*, in Tirana (2017), and has been both the curator (2007) and the commissioner (2013) of the *Serbian Pavilion* at the *Venice Biennale*. Maja holds a PhD in *Art Theory* (Thesis: "Institutional Critique and Curating") from the University of Arts in Belgrade. Her speaking engagements, among others, were/are at *MAC VAL* (2017), *Centre Pompidou* (2018), and *MNAC Bucharest* (2018), *AICA Serbia Conference* (2021), *Zlin Digital Exhibition Design Conference* (2021), *Interact Conference on Human-Computer Interaction* (2021) and *IKT Conference* (2021). She contributed to *Flash Art*, *Obieg*, *Artforum*, *Artmargins Online*, *Arts of the Working Class*, *springerin*.

Her areas of expertise from day one span from the geopolitical and the curatorial through curating as a practice of institutional critique. She sits at the Board of Advisors to *The Telos Society*, *Arts & Culture Research Lab Observatorium* in Athens and the Editorial Board of *The Large Glass* published by *MoCA, Skopje*. She is the art glass researcher and advisor for *Digital Glass Serbia*, a project whose goal is to evaluate the legacy of industrial glass production.

