



The Partisans in Print



Responding to Rastko Močnik's contribution to this volume, this essay is an attempt to subtilise his proposition that the break the Partisan art introduced in relation to bourgeois aesthetics consists in its open embrace of propagandism. The thesis of this essay is that, pace Močnik, the Partisan doctrine of propagandism was not an epochal transformation of the relationship between art and ideology, but a vulgarisation of it. Moreover, it was also quickly rejected as such in the Partisan debates and art themselves. This rejection seems to have followed from the insight that any reduction of art to ideology paradoxically blocks art's ideological charge itself, just as the bourgeois aestheticist elevation of art beyond the reach of ideology misses no less than the artistic charge of art. This insight, not propagandism, is what makes the Partisan art relevant today.

SLOVENIAN PARTISAN ART, ANTI-FASCISM, SLOVENIAN GRAPHIC ART, MODERN AESTHETICS, BORIS KIDRIČ

Эта статья является отзывом на в этом сборнике размещенную статью Растка Мочника и особенно на её предпосылку, что новизна партизанского искусства в сравнении с буржуазной эстетикой состоит в его полном восприятии пропагандизма. В этом отзыве демонстрируется, что партизанская доктрина пропагандизма являлась не эпохальной трансформацией взаимоотношения искусства и идеологии, а его вульгаризацией. Сверх того, от этой доктрины как таковой быстро отказалось и само партизанское искусство. Этот отказ свидетельствует об убеждении партизанских художников, что любое подчинение искусства идеологии парадоксально блокирует его идеологический потенциал, точно так же, как буржуазное эстетическое возвышение искусства по ту сторону идеологии приводит к уничтожению его художественного потенциала. Это убеждение, а не пропагандизм, и делает партизанское искусство актуальным сегодня.

СЛОВЕНСКОЕ ПАРТИЗАНСКОЕ ИСКУССТВО, АНТИФАШИЗМ, СЛОВЕНСКАЯ ГРАФИКА, ЭСТЕТИКА ЭПОХИ МОДЕРНА, БОРИС КИДРИЧ

1

Other contributors to the catalogue included Lilijana Stepančić, Božo Repe, Donovan Pavlinec, Andrej Šemrov and Breda Škrjanec. For my first review of the exhibition, which is also the basis of this article, see Komelj.

I

The exhibition *Partizanski tisk / The Partisans in Print*, curated by Donovan Pavlinec and held in the International Centre of Graphic Arts (MGLC) in Ljubljana between November 2004 and late March 2005, introduced a selection of Slovenian Partisan graphic art created mostly in the framework of an organised art initiative during the last two years of World War II. Alongside commissioned propagandistic works there also existed a steady production of works that were no less politically engaged, even though they were created independently. To a great extent, the exhibition consisted of well-known material that was already exhibited on multiple occasions in the past decades, but has for the last fifteen years been more or less systematically pushed into oblivion, together with the consciousness of the momentous historical importance of the Yugoslav People's Liberation Struggle. The exhibition was the first monumental overview of this specific artistic production after more than fifteen years. The openly political quality of its intensive message, so rare in Slovenian art, came as a surprise—the Partisan print was in fact a powerful symbolic weapon in the anti-fascist struggle. The exhibition, no doubt held at an appropriate moment (just before the sixtieth anniversary of the victory over fascism, and already in a time when fascism in its various forms was threatening to rise again both locally and globally), was undoubtedly a political act.

This is also the meaning given to the exhibition by Rastko Močnik in the conceptually key text of the catalogue (a new version of which appears in this volume).¹ The text reactivates, as it were, the programme of the Partisan art, or, broadly speaking, 'the Partisan symbolic politics', connecting its effects to the effects of contemporary politically

engaged artistic practices. This is certainly a radically new approach to the topic. Essential here is Močnik's claim that the new proximity of the Partisan artistic production does not rest on some new perception of these works beyond ideology, as art in its pure aesthetic dimension, as the opposite of ideology, thanks to the weakening of the ideological pressure that during the past decades identified the memory of that production with the ruling ideology. On the contrary: for Močnik, the relevance of these works derives from the fact that only now we can see their specific ideological charge—which was never reducible to the ruling ideology in the first place: in socialism, the anti-fascist artistic production did indeed function as a source of its legitimisation, but it was 'also a fundamental element of *resistance* against the one-party rule during socialism' precisely because it brought attention to the ruling ideology's origins in the emancipatory revolutionary project (p. 28 in this volume). This specific ideological charge is contained in the basic standpoint from which these works problematised the relative autonomy of art understood in the bourgeois sense:² 'This is why the dominant modern (that is, bourgeois) view, which understands ideology as the opposite and the denial of art, perceiving the relationship between art and ideology through the notions of instrument and means, misses the historical, more precisely, the epochal transformation and innovation introduced by the Partisan symbolic production.' (P. 23 in this volume.)³ This redefined the field of culture itself: 'It abolished culture as a sphere whose very existence realises the barbarity of the ruling classes, and transformed it into a space of emancipation.' (P. 26 in this volume.) Močnik's approach to the Partisan culture and art tries to adhere to the following principle: 'The Partisan culture and art were produced in a radical situation, or, in existentialist parlance, in a liminal position. As a result, they are

2 The strongest challenge to this autonomy was put forward by Boris Kidrič during the discussion about art and the People's Liberation Struggle at the second meeting of the Slovenian Art Club in Črnomelj on 8 November 1944. At the meeting, Kidrič said the following: 'There is also the theoretical defence of art. But if at this time you stand to defend art, then you are already outside time.' I quote Kidrič's words as they are found in the transcript of the first meeting of the Slovenian Art Club in Črnomelj on 14 October 1944. All other passages from the transcripts of both meetings are quoted from a copy kept in a separate collection; the transcripts themselves are available in the The Archives of the Republic of Slovenia.

3 It is interesting how, for instance, Matej Bor, the poet who after the war took the direction of a somewhat traditionalist intimism, insisted that his first Partisan book, the 1942 *Previharimo viharje* (Let Us Outhurricane the Hurricanes), be read according to different criteria than his later poetry.

themselves radical and liminal. If we want to think about them at their own level, we must think radically and assume a liminal perspective.’ (P. 21 in this volume.)

To this I want to add that even as we analyse this artistic production *at the level of formulation*, its ‘liminality’ must be understood beyond its stylistic characteristics, as *signs take on new meaning in radically changed conditions of their production*. Karel Destovnik—Kajuh, a revolutionary poet who was killed as a Partisan fighter in 1944 at the age of twenty-one, writes about the new meaning of signs in his poem *Mrtvim tovarišem* (To the Dead Comrades), in which the blood of fallen Partisans transforms into trailblazing symbols. Ultimately, the black-and-white printmaking technique itself, with its sharp borders without shading (the prevalence of the linocut technique was indeed determined by the difficult material conditions in which the Partisan artists created), corresponded in an extraordinary way with the manner in which the world appeared under these extreme conditions.

What interests me in this essay is the question of *what exactly* does this transformation, this break, this epochality, *consist of*—the question of how we can connect it to concrete historical material. And it is here precisely that the answer suggested by Močnik is quite questionable. We can understand some of Močnik’s elaborations as suggesting that the break is in propagandism itself: that what transcended the bourgeois conception of art was precisely the identification of art with propagandism. Močnik quotes Diego Rivera’s statement about art as propaganda (p. 23 n. 4 in this volume), which, however, does not outline a narrow, merely propagandistic position, but instead warns that what we admire as the aesthetic dimension in Giotto and Breughel was actually created in the context of ideological and class struggles of the time by an unambiguous taking of sides in those struggles. Yet Močnik

uses this argument as a basis for a full-fledged apology of the so-called Partisan birch-tree, which represented a traumatic moment in the encounter between the *vulgarised* version of ideological propaganda and (visual) art in the Slovenian People's Liberation Struggle:

[T]oday, we can understand the positions [within the Partisan symbolic production] that even the Partisans considered to be radical excesses of headquarters propagandism. Today, for instance, we no longer have difficulties with understanding the famous doctrine of the 'Partisan birch-tree'. As passed on to us by its opponents, this propagandistic doctrine, supposedly unworthy of art, maintained that even a well drawn birch-tree cannot be a work of art if there is no rifle leaning against it or if it is not pierced by a burst shot. Who could not recognise today in this demand the device, praised by French film theorists as 'acousmatism', whose effects are achieved by not showing the killer and by registering only his heavy breathing instead, or by showing not the killer's axe-wielding hands but only the wide open eyes of the horror-stricken victim? (P. 32 in this volume.)

What is problematic here is, of course, not the description of acousmatism, but something else entirely: Močnik *displaces* to the level of the description of the device something that *was never given* as a description of the device, but as a dictate, a ban, a coercion, a constraint. His interpretation veils the reason *why* the birch-tree was considered an excess, namely the fact that it was really about the birch-tree as a dictate, and *not* as a device. The device itself did not seem problematic even to such advocates of 'timeless' art as Josip Vidmar, a prominent literary critic and co-founder of the Liberation Front of the Slovenian People. Moreover, it is precisely in those Partisan works that were the *furthest away*

from short-term propagandism that we can discover this type of device: France Mihelič's images of a burned village with trees damaged in battle, which can be regarded as some of the most 'non-ideological' works of Partisan graphic art (even though, as we will see, attributes such as 'non-ideological' cannot work here), perfectly fit, as far as the *device* is concerned, the doctrine of the Partisan birch-tree. At the same time, as we will clearly see from Boris Kidrič's argument, the Partisan birch-tree was in reality not at all about the relationship between art and ideology, but about an *erroneous conception* of that relationship, of its vulgarisation. Kidrič, a leading figure of the Partisan movement in Slovenia and the president of the first Slovenian revolutionary government, clearly emphasised that such a banalisation *takes away* the entire ideological edge of the problem of this relationship. Hence, the issue was neither about the device, nor about the problem of the connection between art and ideology—but about an absurdity so blatant that it was immediately condemned by both the cultural workers and the political leadership. At the same time, this absurdity can of course be read as a symptom of the latent tensions that became obvious precisely at the moment when all sides declared that it was an absurdity. The birch-tree triggered two member meetings of the Slovenian Art Club in Črnomelj, on 14 October and 8 November 1944 (Kidrič attended the second one); but the birch-tree 'theory' itself was never discussed during these debates, since not only Vidmar but also Kidrič and Aleš Bebler dismissed it as nonsense. This was certainly not just a matter of tactics, of a (temporary) retreat of politicians and ideologues in front of the demands of cultural workers for the (relative) autonomy of the cultural sphere, or, say, a matter of pacification of cultural workers by the Communist party. The question about art and ideology was only really opened at the moment when it turned out that it was not at all a question about the birch-tree. A dif-

ferentiation in the discussion, which was also a differentiation *within* the ‘cultural workers camp’, was delineated precisely *beyond* this vulgarisation, about which there was absolutely no disagreement.

It is not my intention to criticise Močnik’s essay, which represents a break in the study of the Partisan cultural production as it makes its object radically relevant. I approach his text above all as an encouragement and a starting point against which I try to develop my own reflection on the political dimension of the Partisan art and culture—a question that is certainly *not* the question about the Partisan birch-tree, but is nevertheless connected to the questions raised in autumn 1944 by the discussion brought about by the unfortunate birch-tree. I especially want to stress that even when we think the break that the Partisan movement introduced into the social status of art and culture, we need to acknowledge the ideological differentiation in the Partisan movement itself, as well as the specificity of the formulative level of artistic production. No simplification can make these issues ‘clearer’, or ‘sharper’, but can instead miss them altogether. The problem lies in the fact that it is precisely the *ideological charge of art* that disappears when we try to *reduce* art to ideology (just as it is the specifically *artistic charge* that disappears when art is perceived by bourgeois aesthetics as something that exists in some sort of vacuum, a protected space of aestheticisation beyond the reach of ideology). It was precisely this fact that was perfectly clear to Boris Kidrič, too, when he attended the Slovenian Art Club meeting with the intention to say the ideological ‘final word’ in the discussion triggered by the doctrine of the Partisan birch-tree.⁴

I will therefore try to use concrete historical material to provide a few starting points in an attempt to give a somewhat more precise answer to the question of the means and the way in which the transformation that Močnik outlines so invaluablely was actually accomplished.

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At the second meeting of the Slovenian Art Club, Božo Vodusek addressed Kidrič with the following provocative remark: ‘Well, for instance, let us take theatre, where you would use political subject matter. You would make your characters perfect, their opponents degenerate. Such a play would be weak’; Kidrič immediately replied: ‘Not only artistically weak, but also politically weak.’

II

The standard way of reading the transcripts of the discussion led in the two Slovenian Art Club meetings is quite contrary to Močnik's and can be found in Donovan Pavlinec's contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition *Partizanski tisk / The Partisans in Print*. Pavlinec sees the dispute occasioned by the Partisan birch-tree as a dispute between the party, which is supposed to have launched the birch 'theory', and the artistic camp, which managed to withstand this attack on its autonomy (see Pavlinec). Such a reading, however, makes the differentiation *within* the so-called artistic camp disappear—and with it also the emancipatory potential created in the discussion precisely by problematising the role of art in bourgeois society.

The most subtle formulation of the question of what was at stake in this discussion was given by the painter Alenka Gerlovič in her fascinating memoir 'Moja partizanščina' (My Partisan Years), even though—or perhaps precisely because—it was posed from a very personal viewpoint. In the text, Gerlovič wrote the following lines about the second meeting, which took place one day after the death of Franc Rozman—Stane, the commander-in-chief of Slovenian Partisans, right after the commemoration ceremony, that is, in an extremely difficult and serious moment of the People's Liberation Struggle:

That afternoon, we had another meeting about the wretched birch-tree after all. It was called by the Liberation Front. If I remember correctly, the meeting must have taken place on the ground floor of the house whose address is now Stane Rozman Street 8, where the office of the police magistrate is located today. At the meeting, there was a discussion between Josip Vidmar and Boris Kidrič. Vidmar claimed that it was

not necessary for the art of the new society to be different than before because people had not changed essentially. Maybe on the outside they had, but the 'secret chamber' of the heart remained untouched by external events, the war, the revolution. He mentioned love as an example. Kidrič disagreed. He believed that the People's Liberation Struggle had utterly transformed the people and that the relationship between man and woman was bound to change as well. I quietly agreed with Kidrič then. I was convinced that the paradise of the future would know neither patriarchal heads of the family nor the kitchen drudgery of women. Everything would be completely different. Love would be freed from the banality of the quotidian. (Gerlovič 132)

If we compare this text to the transcript of the meeting, we find direct mentions neither of love nor of the relationship between man and woman in Kidrič's statements; this, however, does not mean that Kidrič did not talk about this. The transcript does not contain everything that was said at the time, and the written summary is approximate, as the transcript itself says. Love is mentioned in Vidmar's elaboration:

It is beyond any doubt that we can demand that the artist side with the People's Liberation Struggle. But there is also the following issue. We know artists who intuitively have talents only for certain aspects of life. Gogol, for instance, is deaf for one sphere, the sphere of Love. Love for him is only the subject of farce, of comedy. In what position is an artist who has no talent for that sphere, for the sphere of our struggle, today? What is he to do, and what are we who judge him to do? We must accept that he has the right and duty to speak of his own proper sphere.

Kidrič's reply includes the following: 'I agree we have to approve of such art, too. But one thing I do not agree with. There is no sector beyond the reach of our struggle.' Gerlovič had certainly brought a powerful personal emphasis in her perception of the discussion—it is by this means that she became susceptible to the emancipatory potential of the position that demanded a political transformation of art in connection with the radical transformation of society. (Kidrič formulated this demand by demystifying the separation of 'artist' from 'man': 'The question of art and tendency should not be posed at all. If you are an artist, you are necessarily also tendentious. And by that I don't mean sloganeering. I mean the artist co-experiencing the unfolding of current events. We can demand that not only of the artist but of every other man as well. It is impossible not to demand of the artist what we demand of everyone.')

Gerlovič's remark that she 'quietly' sided with Kidrič tells us that a generalised interpretation of the polemic between Vidmar and Kidrič as a polemic between artists and those in power is false. What is really interesting about both member meetings is the differentiation among the cultural workers themselves. And not only that: as we will see, in the polemic with Vidmar Kidrič hints at the idea that precisely as an advocate of the essentially unchangeable absolute art Vidmar acts from the standpoint of ideology and even power (the ideology of so-called absolute art as a subtle kind of decreeing, as we will see below).

I should stress here that we cannot talk about the People's Liberation Struggle as an ideologically homogeneous and monolithic movement, since the movement joined together fundamentally different perspectives. (This difference continued to exist even after the organisational unification of the leadership structure under the hegemony of the Communist party in 1943.) Today, it is easy to forget how very different

and even opposing these ideas and perspectives were. The easiest way to perceive the vast distance between different intellectual *foundations* of the people who went on to unite as a single Liberation Front without changing those foundations in any essential way is to read Edvard Kardelj's sharp and lucid review of Vidmar's *Kulturni problem slovenstva* (The Cultural Problem of Slovenianness) published in the journal *Književnost* (Literature) in 1932. (Significantly, the review was not republished in the various selections of Kardelj's works after the war, even though it is one of his most radical texts.) In the case of visual artists, who mostly joined the Partisans only after the capitulation of Italy, it would be pointless to talk about a single ideology or to identify their motivation *en bloc* either with the desire to revolutionise bourgeois art or with the opposite desire to safeguard the traditional tenets of that art.

But even more important than the heterogeneity of the relationships between subjective intentions was the specific duality of the objective conditions of artistic production. It is interesting that, say, Nikolaj Pirnat, a leading author of the Partisan graphic art in Slovenia, was engaged in both anti-academism, which most radically questioned the legitimisation of art in bourgeois society, and the preparatory work for the establishment of the Slovenian Art Academy: the courses whose function was to serve as a provisory Partisan art academy were from the onset viewed of as the embryo of a future Slovenian art academy, whose establishment after the war was legitimised precisely by the break accomplished by the People's Liberation Struggle. In short, there simultaneously appeared a necessity to establish a civilisational structure that was supposed to enable the fulfilment of cultural needs in the traditional bourgeois sense, which was still only an expected future development having in mind the general level of Slovenian cultural

5

Comrade Jakac: Božidar Jakac, a prominent Slovenian painter, a personal friend of Tito since 1943; in 1944, he became the president of the Slovenian Art Club, and after the war, the first dean of the Art Academy in Ljubljana.

achievement, as well as a very sharp break with the ideological origins of academism, a break that did not hesitate to problematise the fundamental notions of art.

Here, I have in mind Pirnat's reply at the first of the two member meetings. The reply was his only contribution to the discussion, but at the same time it was the point of the most radical auto-problematisation of art in the Partisan movement (that is, an instance of the liminal position of which Močnik writes). I am quoting here the corresponding part of the discussion initiated by Marjan Tepina, an architect who worked in Le Corbusier's Parisian atelier before the war:

COMRADE TEPINA: *I see a paradox here. There is a lot of talk here about how the gap between intellectuals and masses has been bridged. We can't claim that, however, because we need to acknowledge that our group consists exclusively of people from Ljubljana. And we also have to acknowledge that among us there are no artists formed in the People's Liberation Struggle. We deny those artists. But we should support the new, self-made artists.*

COMRADE JAKAC: *Indeed, any art, but not dilettantism.*

COMRADE PIRNAT: *Who legitimises us as art? We brought our legitimisation with us from Ljubljana. But what do the people have to say about that?*⁵

In principle, this last question could be understood as a simple usage of the rhetoric of the time and as a hint to the need to lower the bar, to make a populist adjustment to uneducated 'masses'. But Pirnat's subtle art, accomplished with the use of a well-thought-out and extremely purified artistic technique, does not allow for such an interpretation. It is more likely a case of the same auto-problematisation that was

so significant for the historical avant-garde: a case of subverting the ruling symbolic foundations, not in the sense of Pirnat giving up on his art and advocating dilettantism, but perhaps in the sense of creating awareness of the fundamental uncertainty, risk, ‘liminality of the situation’, which is the condition of every symbolic production of the new. When Pirnat realises that the ongoing radical transformation of the social infrastructure is taking away any assurance of legitimacy for what he does, he does not give up on his work; on the contrary, this very realisation is what enables him—in compliance with the imperative that it is impossible not to demand of the artist what is demanded of any other individual—to conceive of his work as a contribution to the symbolic production of the new and as partaking in revolutionary activity.

At the second meeting, where the artists kept silent about their positions, there occurred in the polemic between Vidmar and Kidrič something that could be understood as Vidmar advocating art, and Kidrič trying to discipline it. But if we read Kidrič from the perspective pointed out by Gerlovič, we cannot overlook the possibility that it is actually Kidrič who in the given historical situation speaks *for the artists*⁶ much more radically than Vidmar, as he problematises the bourgeois conception of art and demystifies the anti-intellectualist conception of artistic practice. Granted, we can read everything that he says as a rhetorical tactic of pacification in a dispute for which in that phase of the revolutionary process the time has not yet come to be solved by other, administrative, means; but Kidrič does for a brief moment open up a space in which it is possible—even if only briefly and ‘quietly’—to recognise a real, emancipatory potential (emancipatory also for art itself) that was felt so sensitively by Gerlovič, an artist who was always extremely emphatic about the freedom of art.

⁶ Interestingly, in that particular historical situation certain cultural workers’ advocating of absolute art as something that even during the war should remain untouched in its essence by politics could in relation to the concrete artistic production of the time function as ideological censorship at least as powerful as the direct demand to completely politicise this production.

7

Kidrič demands here, from a position of power and in the name of the desire to make art politically co-creative, something that actually meant the depoliticisation of art because the 'realisation' of politics was taken to be a static fact rather than a process that should be constantly open to criticism. Such a conservative position was very powerful in the post-war cultural politics. In those times, the following platitude was often repeated: by participating in the People's Liberation Struggle, art has fulfilled its crucial political role and can now finally enjoy the freedom of its autonomy, which it can most clearly express by supporting the ruling politics; art does not have to worry about the rest, and should stay away from the problems that have been solved once and for all. It is interesting that it was precisely this ideological tendency that was farcically reconstructed in the 1990s, after Slovenia declared independence. At the time, many representatives of the ruling culture argued that after the Slovenian thousand-year-old dream had come true, and after totalitarianism had finally ended, literature did not have to be politically engaged anymore, as it was awarded once and for all its natural →

What is Kidrič's key emphasis when he dismisses the question about the Partisan birch-tree and transfers it to another level? It is the assumption that the bourgeois ideology of absolute art, advocated in accordance with his aesthetics by Vidmar, has itself the effect of a kind of ideological dictate *analogous* to the propagandistic dictate of the Partisan birch-tree. Furthermore, Kidrič's assumption is that this bourgeois ideology occurs at the same level of ideological struggle for hegemony in the space of the ruling culture; that the thesis about the non-ideological nature of art is an *ideological* thesis—and that at the same time the very subordination of art to propagandistic *dictate* deprives art of its ideological charge; that it is precisely in its political and ideological dimension that art can occur *beyond* dictate; and that this very fact obliges art to participate in the emancipatory political project. There is no difference between the metaphysical and the propagandistic dictate. Among other things, the transcript contains the following statement by Kidrič:

The universal human values are absolute, but nevertheless they are relative because they were impossible to realise. At the same time it is clear that our struggle eliminates this opposition between the absolute and the universally human. It eliminates the opposition, so to speak, between the masses and the intelligentsia. . . .

Our struggle, our time, must connect the artist to the people. Art cannot be decreed neither by the People's Liberation birch-tree, nor by absolute art. So it is my opinion that this debate is unnecessary. (My emphasis.)

The discussion is therefore not about the Partisan birch-tree *contra* bourgeois culture but, on the contrary, about the fact that the Parti-

san birch-tree theory and the ideology of the eternal bourgeois culture share the same the mental horizon. For Kidrič, the difference between art and propaganda is in the fact that propaganda operates ‘more roughly and generalises things’. There is then no opposition between art and propaganda for him, but a distinction; and *this distinction* is that to which the specific ideological and political effect of art is tied: a theatre piece depicting the opposing ideological sides as black and white would be, according to Kidrič, ‘weak not only artistically, but also politically’.

Once we realise that the ideology of absolute art, too, is a type of decreeing, it becomes clear that *the very logic that abolishes the bourgeois conception of art simultaneously abolishes the possibility of a ‘decree by the people’s liberation birch-tree’*. The demarcation line of class struggle is thus drawn not between the two sides of this opposition, but between the opposition itself and the space that opens up *beyond* it.

It is true, however, that it is possible to read Kidrič’s statement as part of tactics in the Party strategy to assume hegemony in the sphere of cultural politics and to discipline the artists. Kidrič even explicitly mentions their discipline. Moreover, his final emphasis⁷ can be understood not only as a command, but also as a ban: ‘What is the artist’s relation to politics? One of a demand for new politics. And as soon as the demanded politics is realised, it is its right that the artist supports it.’ There is an impression that a certain door, only just opened, was now being closed. It is precisely the moment of openness, the distinction between the intention contained in the argumentation itself and the intention that had instrumentalised this argumentation, that I want to address here. The intention contained in the logic of argumentation, independently of the instrumentalising intention, was able to open the space of possibility of transformation. Quite a few statements made

→ space of pure aesthetics. How ironic, and symptomatic of their historical amnesia, that these representatives of the new ideological order simply repeated the argument used by the conservative tendency of the post-war government structure when it tried to depoliticise the role of art in World War II!

8 He introduces his treatment of that problem in the following way:

Behind the defence of the freedom of art there often hides the lack of artistic talent.

For Kidrič, artistic talent implies a certain level of openness to the binding social issues, a certain readiness for political engagement.

9 See Kranjec; incidentally, that exhibition was the last activity of the Slovenian Art Club.

by Kidrič at the meeting show us very clearly that Kidrič here already talks from the position of power. But while doing so, he still relies on the argumentation that belongs to an ideological project that is *in its origins* a radically emancipatory project. His thought should be read in its internal tension in which only the break with the bourgeois logic of art, problematic for him from the standpoint of art itself,⁸ enables him—precisely beyond *advocating* art—to invoke art in its transformative potential *beyond* decreeing, even though it is possible to conceive of this very gesture as a tactical move intended to instrumentalise art. *It is essential that we do not overlook this distinction.* If we fail to perceive it, the *ideological* potential of a large part of the Partisan cultural production cannot be grasped as a break at all, given its continuity of style, which in visual art relates to the pre-war socially critical figural art in the tradition of Expressionism and New Objectivity.

If we are to discuss this break here, one thing needs to be emphasised (and has already been emphasised by Močnik): the *real* break occurs precisely at the moment of openness that I tried to thematise, and not, say, in the sense that it also implies a continuity with it in later production. As early as the summer of 1945, the promise of the new art, related to the transformation of the world and recognised by Gerlovič in Kidrič's intervention in the Slovenian Art Club debate in Črnomelj, could seem like something outdated. It is enough to read Miško Kranjec's text in the catalogue of the June 1945 exhibition of Slovenian Partisan artists to understand the scope of the change: Kranjec seems to be apologising on behalf of those who have been inappropriately expecting complete newness, and says that culture is not really something that could function one way today, and the other tomorrow.⁹ (The problem, of course, is the fact that in this case 'today' and 'tomorrow' were not just any 'today' and 'tomorrow'. The epochal

revolutionary break achieved by the People's Liberation Struggle was silenced by the very logic of uttering such a statement: it was reduced to a normal, usual sequence of hours between 'today' and 'tomorrow'.)

III

The encounter with the Partisan art is an encounter with a revolutionary moment that has opened a gap in the sequence between 'today' and 'tomorrow', thus producing the space for transformation. It is this gap that also constantly traverses the Partisan artistic production itself. If we can look for the ideological charge, the emancipatory potential, the historical break of the Partisan artistic production neither in the possibility of its reductive identification with mere propaganda, nor in its reduction to an 'innocent' aesthetic sphere, perhaps we can discover the ideological charge, the emancipatory potential and the historical break precisely in the *relationship* between the 'propagandistic' and the 'artistic' (the artistic in the sense of the Marcusean 'aesthetic dimension',¹⁰ which I conceive of here as being diametrically opposite to aestheticisation). It was precisely in the context of propaganda that the emphasis on the specific aesthetic dimension was not apolitical, but *became* instead extremely political. And it was in the context of the specific aesthetic dimension that the choice of propaganda *received* its specific political charge. What is essential is the way in which this relationship was established.

It is interesting to read here what Filip Kumbatovič Kalan, the organiser of the professional Slovenian National Theatre on the Liberated Territory and a participant in the Črnomelj debate, wrote in 1975 about the painter France Mihelič, once again in relation to the Slovenian Art Club debates:

10
 '[L]iterature is not revolutionary because it is written for the working class or for "the revolution." Literature can be called revolutionary in a meaningful sense only with reference to itself, as content having become form. The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating. The more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change.' (Marcuse XII–XIII)

In this deafening noise of big words and dishonest acts, sometimes a memory of the romantic discussions about the value or non-value of art that we carried on so often in the Partisan days of long ago flashes in my mind. And then it seems to me that we were certainly not so very romantic as it is claimed today by those who do not know that we saw things for what they were, and ultimately for what they still are today. We saw them as such because life forced us to see them as such. I can still hear the exciting chord of peasant wisdom and worldly irony in the wheezy Partisan baritone of France Mihelič speaking about the reasons why the Slovenian wartime graphic art was the way it was. We were in Semič, in the hospitable Bela Krajina, at the founding general assembly of the Slovenian Art Club during the first days of October 1944. Every art has a deeply ethical significance, he said. Those were the words of a painter who was hardly the favourite of the many impatient activists of the time, because of his fondness for spreading the unpleasant truth. And so, spoke on the calm voice of the painter to his armed comrades, every true art is antimilitarist. Nothing can change this, not even the fact that we are at war, at war against crime and tyranny. But he did not stop at this simple conclusion. Not only in the words he spoke, but also in that chord of wisdom and irony, one could distinctly hear that he wasn't ready to cut anyone any slack, be it in times of war or of peace. He spoke of how the revolution and its aspirations were often represented unconvincingly and were formally inadequate, that there appeared everywhere the so-called social kitsch, and that many people, sharply revolutionary in their content, expressed this content in a sharply conservative, and yes, even dilettante style. He spoke against empty declarativeness, against the superficial art of David's glitzy decorativeness, which merely followed an external dictate rather than expressing the artist himself and his true convictions. (Kalan 206-7)

Is all this about a simple affirmation of art as something that is timeless, eternal, independent from any historical context, unchangeable? Is it perhaps, in opposition to the politicisation advocated by the ‘impatient activists’, about the affirmation of *apolitical* art? Obviously not, as Kalan stresses the *political* effect of Mihelič’s position: it is *antimilitarist*, that is, *explicitly political*; which also means that there exists a socially critical element at the very moment of the establishment of the new social relations. It was precisely as an artist who was aware of the antimilitarist dimension of art that Mihelič decided to create propaganda material for the liberation and revolutionary struggle after he joined the Partisan movement; among other things he made the most brilliant (*and extremely antimilitarist*) Partisan propaganda cartoons, full of wild, grotesque, sometimes even dark humour. *His awareness of the fundamental incompatibility of art and war* was the very reason that led him, at the moment when that was necessary, to make a conscious decision to become a militant of the people’s liberation and revolutionary struggle—and it was only by consciously and radically entering the space of this incompatibility that he, as an artist, was able to assert the power of resistance inherent to the antimilitarist potential of art. It was by consciously deciding to create propaganda that Mihelič most drastically opposed any aestheticisation of war (aestheticisation so significant for fascism). He constantly *condemned* the attempts to aestheticise the war. Even in his less propagandistic, more personal Partisan works he opposed his *condemning* images of ruins to the romantic aesthetic of ruins that was so close to fascism. It is *in this* that his Partisan art is at its most political. Simultaneously, *only this* allows Mihelič not only to preserve his artistic sensibility undiminished in times of war, but to increase it. His burned trees are not *emblems* of war, but its *victims*.

This quality makes them the ideal opposite of the Partisan birch-tree doctrine: if the Partisan birch-tree is about the claim that because of the war trees are not important in themselves any more but only as an *emblem* of the war, then Mihelič maintains that trees are important precisely in their concreteness and foreignness and that the very standpoint from which we become aware of their importance is also the standpoint from which we can resist the attempt at any *aestheticisation* of war devastation.

The very assertion that ‘every real art is antimilitarist’ is a case of extreme politicisation of the consciousness about art *precisely in the sense* in which art is (or, can be) the freest.

It was this consciousness that demanded two things at the same time: the break with the bourgeois identification of the aesthetic dimension with aestheticisation (fascism and Nazism were ravaging the world in the very name of the total aestheticisation of life and the ‘spreading of high culture’) and the defence of culture and its best tradition *against* the fascist and Nazi devastation, the defence by means of this very break, that is, by way of problematising the fundamental ideological tenets of bourgeois culture, in the sense in which Pier Paolo Pasolini later claimed that only revolutions can save the tradition. The Partisan art was constantly created under the presupposition that by fighting fascism it was in fact rescuing the emancipatory potential of cultural tradition, the presupposition that was constantly and explicitly emphasised in the international anti-fascist movement ever since the Spanish Civil War and the congresses for the defence of culture. The Slovenian Partisan culture was created by following the trajectory traced by the international anti-fascist movement—and simultaneously, in the context of that movement, its importance stood out on an international scale.

The radical problematisation of art—art in the bourgeois sense—was *necessary* in the People’s Liberation Struggle precisely because of the fundamental incompatibility of the aesthetic dimension and war. And it is from this break that the Partisan art, which was at its most intensive at the moment it *addressed* this incompatibility, *had to be created and could be created*.

Fascism and Nazism, on the other hand, presupposed the perfect compatibility of art and war. Moreover, they equated war and aesthetics. The cruellest of their acts were committed in the name of total aestheticisation. And it was precisely in the name of total aestheticisation that they were actually *destroying* art and culture. Walter Benjamin’s notion of aestheticisation of politics¹¹ goes to the heart of the matter. When we read the last official reports by Germans from the Stalingrad hell, written moments before their breakdown, we can recognise that the aestheticisation intensifies as the hell gets worse: Wagnerian aesthetics, enchantment with fire, smoke and ruins, allusions to the Nibelungs (for primary sources, see Piekalkiewicz). But even at the moment of cataclysm there is no problematisation of aestheticisation: the cataclysm is its final fulfilment.

As for the Slovenian Home Guard movement, even a superficial overview of its propaganda makes it clear that the movement, or more broadly, White Guardism, was evidently a fascist ideology, a ‘native’, Slovenian variety of fascism—which is what gets systematically forgotten today; of course, I do not wish to derive from this fact the individual responsibility of the members of the movement as a military formation; they were themselves in relation to that ideology largely victims of their leadership, which had produced it. In this movement, too, we can find a very perverse fascist aestheticisation, even though in comparison to the bombastic style of the German Nazis the sentimental Home Guard

11

“The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged. The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life.” (Benjamin 121)

12

In Vinko Žitnik's poem *Domobrančev pomenek z Božičkom* (Home Guard's Conversation with Santa Claus) the home guard addresses Santa Claus, cheering: 'Oh how poor you are, my child sweet and homeless, my baby heavenly and penniless! / Come into me, in my warming heart you will find the manger and the stables!', etc.; and Santa Claus replies: 'Oh trust in me, the new world is in blood, in fire by my hand created!', concluding with the following lines: 'Oh, that you may fight bravely, my soldier, and burn in your love for me! / I brought fire to the world and wish all catches it indeed!' (Žitnik; in the original: 'O kako si beden, sladki moj brezdomček, moj nebeški revček! / Pridi vame, v mojem gorkem srcu najdi jaslice in hlevček! ... O zaupaj vame: moja roka nov svet v ognju, krvi ustvarja! ... O, le bori hrabro se, vojščak moj. In v ljubezni gori zame! / Ogenj sem na svet prinesel in kako želim, da ves svet vname!')

13

Not only did the Home Guard ideologues constantly place the anti-Partisan fight within the Nazi, racist context of what Leon Rupnik, the leader of the Home Guard movement, called the 'war between Judaism and humanity', but in the excesses of their propaganda →

aestheticisation seems very humble. War is not aestheticised by way of beating on drums in the name of Nibelungian or Siegfriedian heroism, but by way of representing its physical, destructive fire as the heart of the warming spiritual fire of God, in harmony with the homestead tradition. Hence the aestheticisation of, say, Christmas imagery¹² or the rural idyll, all heartily seasoned with racism:¹³ everything strives to maintain the illusion of the intimate sphere of 'beauty' and 'good' as *untouched* by ideology. *While the Partisan art was producing radically antimilitarist messages by engaging in militant action, the Home Guard was producing extremely militarist messages by perversely cultivating the appearance of the pious and humble 'depths of the heart' untouched by current events.* (It was this very ideology that finally drove the Home Guard to make the disgraceful oath to Hitler, which was in turn no obstacle for the 'intimate' expectation of Allied victory.) Granted, poems by France Balantič, a poet who was killed as a Home Guard fighter, were certainly not written with the intention to become what could be called 'Home Guard poetry'; moreover, when the unfortunate poet became a Home Guard fighter, he stopped writing entirely. Yet it is typical that after Balantič's death it was quite simple to use his poetry as Home Guard propaganda. For it was precisely its aestheticised 'non-ideology' that was the necessary element that the ideology of the White Guard needed to legitimise itself. What happened in the Partisan movement was exactly the opposite: the problematisation of the fundamental points of the aestheticist conception of art and its role in a given socio-political situation was what made the Partisan art *possible*.

The paradigmatic illustration of this principle occurred as early as the so-called cultural silence of 1941: by demanding of Slovenian cultural workers not to collaborate with the official, that is, the occupiers' cultural institutions, the Liberation Front found a way *not* to silence culture.

In that same sense should be understood the demand *to suspend love in order to still be able to love*—to love, without resorting to the illusion that the intimate sphere is untouched by the political, the very illusion that serves as the ideological pillar of militarist ideologies: ‘Crush the love inside you— / you who love the new world!’ (‘V sebi zatri ljubezen— / kdor ljubiš novi svet!’).¹⁴ This seems like an extremely harsh appeal, but it was its inexorable bluntness that made it radically ethical. It was precisely the fidelity to this appeal—the radical fidelity in which the very adherence to the appeal discovers its limits, the radical fidelity supplemented by ‘unfaithfulness’, that is, by the manifestation of love that was *not* possible to crush—that made possible the Partisan *love* poem, which was not simply an aestheticisation but was in its aesthetic dimension deeply political (I am thinking primarily of Kajuh’s poems here). The concluding verse of the first poem in Kajuh’s cycle *Ljubezenske* (Love Poems) can be read as a direct reply to Bor: ‘And yet in my heart I could not / shatter such a poem!’ (‘A vendar nisem mogel v srcu / te-le pesmi streti!’). In the way in which the poem and love break through the ethically motivated attempt at their shattering, Kajuh’s position is related to the position of someone whom he admired very much—Vladimir Mayakovsky (225), who in his propaganda work, as he states in the testament-poem *Vo ves’ golos* (*At the Top of My Voice*), had consciously ‘set [his] heel / on the throat / of [his] own song’ (‘stanovjas’ / na gorlo / sobstvennoj pesne’). But this very act is what *gave* his poem a voice; Mayakovsky’s statement needs to be read in the context of the fact that he had *not* reduced his poetry to propaganda.

(On the other side, the most important thing for the Home Guard propagandists and ideologues was that Home Guard fighters remain, even when they kill, ‘free of bad thoughts’, that their souls continue

→ they identified communism with ‘Orientalism’ and ‘Asianness’, going even so far as representing the Slovenian Partisans as a movement through which the domestic communists and internationalists brought the violent non-Slovenians and even ‘Asians’ into the country. (This was, of course, one of the rhetorical mechanisms designed to aid the Nazi collaborationists in their attempt to map their fight against Slovenian Partisans as a collective fight of the ‘new Europeans’ against foreigners.)

14
This is the final verse of Matej Bor’s poem *V novi svet* (Into the New World): see Bor.

to feel Catholic, pure, and full of blessed forgiveness. Moreover, when the ‘ideal’ Home Guard fighter, as imagined by the propaganda, shoots at the Partisans he is filled with Christmas inner peace and goodwill, while praying perversely to baby Jesus to save the Partisans’ souls and touch their misled hearts with his baby fingers [see, e.g., Mejač].)

Therefore, when we discuss the Partisan art we must think simultaneously the break with aestheticisation (aestheticisation as the very principle of the bourgeois isolation of art) and the power of resistance inherent to the aesthetic dimension, which is constituted only *in this very break with aestheticisation*. The aesthetic dimension should *in this constellation* be seen as the very opposite of aestheticisation, as the resistance to aestheticisation. It was the problematisation of the bourgeois conception of art that gave this aesthetic dimension of the Partisan artistic production its ideological charge, which, even insofar as it is propaganda, increases not with the degree of *reduction* to propaganda (because the perfect *reduction* to propaganda is really a form of aestheticisation) but, on the contrary, with the degree of sensibility, with the power of enduring in the engaged position, in the ‘existential’ range described so subtly by Rosa Luxemburg in her prison letters. ♡

— Translated by Hrvoje Tutek

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Povzetek

Povod za ta članek je bila razstava *Partizanski tisk / The Partisans in Print*, ki jo je Donovan Pavlinec leta 2004 postavil za ljubljanski Mednarodni grafični likovni center. Članek se odziva predvsem na ključni tekst kataloga razstave, tj. na članek Rastka Močnika o partizanski simbolni politiki (nova verzija katerega je izšla v tej reviji). Močnik v tem članku reaktivira program partizanske umetnosti, s tem ko njegove učinke poveže z učinki sodobne, izrazito politične umetnosti. Po njem novi interes za partizansko umetnost ne izhaja iz nekakšne nove recepcije teh umetnin onkraj socialistične ideologije, pač pa, nasprotno, iz dejstva, da lahko šele danes prepoznamo njihov specifični ideološki potencial. Ta po Močniku tako in tako ni bil nikdar zvedljiv na vladajočo ideologijo: v enostrankarskem socializmu je bila antifašistična umetnost ne le vir njegove legitimacije, ampak predvsem ključna forma upora proti njemu, saj je opozarjala na njegovo utemeljenost v prelomnosti partizanske politike.

Toda v čem je sploh bila ta prelomnost? Prav Močnikov odgovor na to vprašanje se zdi najbolj problematičen. Po njem je bila partizanska umetnost prelomna s svojim anti-esteticističnim sprejetjem propagandizma, predvsem t. i. doktrine partizanske breze, po kateri niti podoba breze ne more biti umetnina, če breza ni prestreljena ali če ob njej ne sloni puška. Močnik v partizanski brezi vidi primer modernega postopka akuzmatizma, s tem pa podeli status umetniškega postopka nečemu, kar sploh ni bilo podano kot postopek, temveč kot diktat. Zato Močnik tudi ne upošteva dejstva, da je že v partizanskih razpravah partizanska breza obveljala za diktat in s tem eksces. Obravnavana je bila kot vulgarizacija – in ne kot zaželena transformacija – prevladujočega esteticističnega razmerja med umetnostjo in ideologijo.

Močnikov članek, ki je prelomen prispevek k proučevanju partizanske umetnosti, saj to obravnava z vidika njene relevantnosti za današnjo umetnost in kulturo, je torej lahko izhodišče premisleka o politični razsežnosti partizanske umetnosti in estetike. Ta problematika sicer ni problematika partizanske breze, je pa vsekakor povezana z vprašanji, postavljenimi v partizanski obravnavi in končni zavrnitvi doktrine partizanske breze. Problematičnost te doktrine je v tem, da vsako podrejanje umetnosti ideologiji paradokсно blokira sam ideološki naboj umetnosti (tako kot buržoazno esteticistično postavljanje umetnosti nad ideologijo zgreši sam umetniški naboj umetnosti). Tega se je zavedal tudi Boris Kidrič, vodilna osebnost partizanskega gibanja v Sloveniji in predsednik prve slovenske poveljne vlade, ko je leta 1944 bistveno prispeval k argumentirani zavrnitvi doktrine partizanske breze.

Tukajšnji članek tako poskuša na podlagi zgodovinskega gradiva podati izhodišča za odgovor na vprašanje, kako je bila umetniška in kulturna transformacija, ki jo prelomno oriše Močnik, dejansko realizirana.

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