ARTFORUM



# The New Normal

## TOM HOLERT ON CONTEMPORARY ART IN BELGRADE

**Vesna Pavlović, *Herzlich willkommen im Hotel Hyatt Belgrad* (A Cordial Welcome to the Hotel Hyatt Belgrade), 1999,** color photograph, 19 3/4 x 29 1/2".

**IN APRIL 1999,** during the bombardment of the Serbian capital by NATO planes, the photographer Vesna Pavlović took pictures of guests in the Belgrade Hyatt. One of the photos shows a man lying on a deck chair at the edge of the hotel's swimming pool, draped in a white terry-cloth robe, checking his messages on his mobile phone (*Herzlich willkommen im Hotel Hyatt Belgrad* [A Cordial Welcome to the Hotel Hyatt Belgrade], 1999). While Pavlović leaves it to the audience to decide whether the subject is a Western journalist or a local mafia boss, there's no ambiguity about this man's nonchalance in the midst of the airborne devastation befalling the city outside his luxurious redoubt: It's a grotesque demonstration of repression and ignorance, and an effective metaphor for a society's refusal to acknowledge its own secession from "normalcy." In fact, in Serbia during the '90s, the term *normality* became a kind of ideological password, part of a code meant to sublimate societal antagonisms through the invocation of "the nation" or of a postcommunist version of capitalism, or both. In this context, Serbian artists, like every citizen, were offered a choice. They could endorse and help maintain this official refusal of reality, or they could resist it, becoming, so to speak, *refusés* of refusal—probing the conditions of nationalism, war, UN sanctions, and social disintegration with a spectrum of practices ranging from figurative painting to public interventions, from performance art to critique of media representation and neo-Conceptualist tactics.

And yet to date, institutional attempts to take stock of the diverse forms of cultural opposition to Slobodan Milošević's regime have generally presented Serbian art within a pan-Balkan framework that elides the differences between various local and national contexts. Resisting this wistful impulse, the recent "On Normality: Art in Serbia 1989–2001" (Sept. 11–Nov. 7, 2005) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade (MOCAB) was an important exhibition about a time that few people seem to remember, from a country whose continued existence the world often appears to want to forget. A team of three MOCAB curators—Branislava Anđelković, Branislav Dimitrijević, and Dejan Sretenović—presented works by more than seventy-five artists and collectives, in what amounted to both an ambitious survey of the art of a difficult and disastrous decade, and a lesson on cultural production as a force of resistance and dissent.

**Biljana Đurđević, *Poslednji dani Deda Mraza* (The Last Days of Santa Claus), 2001,** oil on linen, 70 7/8 x 78 3/4".

Some of the show's particular resonance might have derived from the fraught history of the venue itself: Following the 1993 sacking of then director Zoran Gavrić, MOCAB mutated into a chapel consecrated to a bizarre strain of nationalist culture. The new director, Radislav Trkulja, a painter who enjoyed the support of right-wing ideologue Dragoš Kalajić, promulgated an invented history of Serbian art based largely on mytho-erotic painting that aimed to legitimize an official politics based on violence (and, implicitly, sex) in the name of ethnic superiority. In 2001, after the departure of Milošević's apparatchiks, the museum's current staff—a team of curators including Anđelković, who today is also the director—took charge. All were part of a close-knit group of critics and curators who were influential actors on the Belgrade art scene throughout the '90s. Anđelković, Dimitrijević, and Sretenović had been running Belgrade's Center for Contemporary Arts, arguably the most adventurous art institution in the Balkans at the time. Their curatorial and theoretical projects from this period were characterized by circumspection and political savvy: They eschewed nationalist kitsch, yet never shied away from critiques of the latent sexisms, racisms, and nationalisms in the anti-Milošević camp, or from the uncomfortable fact that Serbia's dissident cultural producers frequently relied on the help of Western moneys and organizational support. These foreign institutions, of course, had their own ideas regarding the "democratizing" function of civil society, and they expected to see their funds going toward representations of a civilized liberal subject in the process of becoming an acceptable member of Western society. The critic Miško Šuvaković dubbed such model-dissident work "Soros realism," after the financier-philanthropist George Soros, who funded the Center for Contemporary Arts and a number of other cultural initiatives in Eastern Europe.

Avoiding "Soros realism" and other curatorial pitfalls, the organizers of "On Normality" presented a nuanced overview of Serbian art in the '90s. As a tentative start date for the period in question, Anđelković, Dimitrijević, and Sretenović chose the summer of 1989, which saw the second (and last) Yugoslav Documenta, an event that aspired to the internationalism of the Western art world and asserted the existence of a common Yugoslavian culture—despite the fact that divisive political and social developments were already percolating in the multinational Yugoslav federation. The true dimensions of the crisis became apparent that June, when half a million Serbs gathered in Kosovo to commemorate the six-hundredth anniversary of their devastating defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. The main speaker at this uncanny ceremony was Milošević, who was just beginning to consolidate his power. As similar nationalist assaults on the integrity of the federation were reported from Croatia and Slovenia, belief in the possibility of a "Yugoslav" art came to seem increasingly delusional.

Over the next few years, against the pseudotolerant cultural policy of the Milošević regime, the art of the "other Serbia" developed. In "On Normality," the true heterogeneity of this shadow populace was given its due. Moving much of the

permanent collection (mainly Yugoslav-modernist paintings and sculptures) to storage, the curators filled the somewhat decrepit but airy Titoist-moderne galleries with works that appeared almost cacophonously disparate. The links seemed tentative at best between Nikola Savić's decorative abstractions; Adrian Kovacs's sophisticated painterly play with the semantics of art history and the mythologies of the artist; the interventionist micropractices of collectives like ŠKART and Asocijacija Apsolutno; or the perverse and angry critique of totalitarianism in Dragoljub Raša Todosijević's installation *Gott liebt die Serben* (God Loves the Serbs), 1993/2002, which featured a giant red wall-mounted swastika and a text, set in a heavy black-letter font, about a Serbian woman who curses God and socialism alike. For every generalization one might have been tempted to make, an exception presented itself. While, for example, most of the artists who worked outside and against the nationalist continuum of Serbia in the '90s avoided dealing directly with the mass-media imagery that enforced the regime's glamorization of violence, the artist and well-known actor Uroš Đurić chose to directly address and satirize the linked cultures of war and pornography. In "On Normality," we find a number of his fake magazine covers in which he poses as a laddish militia member or casts friends as other prototypical characters of Serbia's Generation X. In earlier paintings, from 1990 and '91, Đurić deploys a pseudonaive style to depict himself and fellow artists in a typology of Belgrade underground figures: the drunk, the rock-band guitarist, et al.

Another and altogether different approach to media critique is manifest in *Poslednji dani Deda Mraza* (The Last Days of Santa Claus), 2001, an impressive painting by Biljana Đurđević. The corpse of a paunchy middle-aged man is laid out on a wooden table in an old-fashioned morgue, his figure foreshortened and stretching diagonally across the picture plane. His red coat, trimmed with white fur, has fallen open to reveal a grayish undershirt and briefs. He sports fashionable sunglasses, as if transported to his resting place straight from a nearby shopping mall. The young, Belgrade-based Đurđević, one of the few artists in "On Normality" who is widely known outside of Serbia, has invested little empathy in her rendering of this corpse. Rather, Đurđević's baroque, necrophiliac realism comes across as a scrupulously unflinching, unforgiving, and perhaps even vengeful study in disillusionment. It doesn't take much of a leap to read this postmortem as a response to a society that counts graphic images of dead bodies among its infotainment staples, sustaining itself through a politics of fear practiced by both ideologues and organized crime bosses.

Though the styles, mediums, and strategies of the works on view differed, as do the backgrounds of each artist, a fragile sense of community was nevertheless tangible—the result of long and persistent work on, and with, the specific cultural and social conditions of Serbia's isolation. When the current museum administration took over the modernist shell of MOCAB in 2001, this nascent community moved into a position of (relative) power. And with power comes increased scrutiny. Some artists, such as those aligned with highly mediatized forms of "Soros realism," may feel they have been misconstrued or screened out by the version of the '90s put forward by "On Normality." But the curators' choices seem legitimate and, given the circumstances, necessary. They have presented works that posit art not as a tool for representation in the service of political and economic power, but as a form of knowledge about society and hegemony. There is little that inspires optimism in Serbia's present-day political situation: Reformist prime minister Zoran Đinđić was assassinated in 2003, and ultranationalists—now organized under the banner of the Serbian Radical Party—continue to wield considerable clout. In fact, MOCAB's curators have to deal not only with the everyday problems of running a stately but underfinanced museum but also with nationalists' growing influence on cultural policy. However, this hasn't stopped them from thinking ambitiously. Anđelković is contemplating an international design competition for a new wing, which would provide much-needed new space and put MOCAB on the global architectural map. Serbia's cultural producers are beginning to look past their own borders, and we have much to gain from reciprocating that regard.

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