

Uroš Djurić

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Uroš Djurić, *Untitled*
(*Black Star*), 1999

In most of your pictures, your own portrait is in the centre. In 1994, you and Stevan Markuš published the *Autonomism Manifesto*. On the basis that human beings are not rational, but seek rational explanations; the authors decided to make the self-portrait the main subject of their art.

The concept of Autonomism is based on the projection of personality as a mediator of ideas. The self-portrait creates its historically determined model with the specific feature that the author's image acts as a part of the content by being included in the representation. This image is not used as a simple mirror image of the painter or his appurtenances and affiliations, but as a tool for conceptual manoeuvres.

Since we started exhibiting, around 1990, the moguls of art criticism and theory have marked us as a "new figuration", presenting us as a new big thing, drastic, provocative, urban-oriented representatives of the "media generation" – the generation that acquired its knowledge of art history through reproductions and illustrations – comics, sci-fi and horror addicts, pop junkies... All nonsense. They built a pedestal for our monument: all we had to do was to jump on it and strike a pose. Surprisingly, we sat down and wrote a manifesto, which was an odd thing in the 90s, but the message was sharp and precise.

What were the reactions?

The Untouchables were in a state of shock... I mean you can't do that! No one ever does it, biting the hand that feeds you, no matter how wrong that hand might be! But it wasn't good enough for us...

We had been framed in a Hollywood cliché of "fugitives", but what they didn't notice was that we're both quite educated. Markuš... this guy was raised on the classical paradigm, while having problems with the law. He was an unpredictable dude, heavy street fighter, his parents were desperate. His parents are teachers of literature in grammar schools; they travelled abroad a lot in the 70s – as did my own family. I saw the Venice Biennale in 1978, when I was 14. I was constantly bumming 'round Europe during the 80s... So what if we were spending most of our lives as restless street punks? It was all our choice! We didn't want to feed any of those stereotypes.

Did you see the *Autonomism Manifesto* as a programme of artistic opposition?

The *Autonomism Manifesto* was written to reject all these limitations. As Markuš said in an interview: "It was created to reduce potentially shallow stories about our painting to a minimum. The Manifesto is not a programme and doesn't purport to change anything essential in art, because such attempts bring about aesthetic radicalisation, in other words, art products, which are the image of their own death. And so it is not avant-garde either,

we consider ourselves to be classics.” We defined our position through the term *autonomy*, which was interpreted to mean “obedience to its own laws” and established the personal principle as the major principle of all. According to specific social and political circumstances around us, we promoted subversion as an ability not to get caught up in a big process of development and contribution to some generalised progress, based on the marginalisation of human values and seemingly clear aims. Younger art theorists immediately recognized that attitude. Stevan Vuković recently wrote, concerning it, “...the *Autonomists’* intention to produce histories of their own, stories that escape the constraints of theory-led production, interpretation dominated by art historians, and exhibited in the framework imposed by the curators...” We wanted to create the context in which the work is being produced, viewed and exhibited. When we talk about autonomy, we’re not talking from the position of some romantic, 19th century individual. Vuković also said that we (both Markuš and I) were always aware of the histories of the terms we were using and the very term ‘Autonomism’ refers mainly to left-wing social and political movements, which emerged in the 1960s from worker-based (*operaismo*) roots, fighting to force changes in the organization of the system independent of the state, trade unions or political parties. He said that our Manifesto was published about the time of the big revival of worker-based discourse, firstly in political and then cultural studies, which had its highest peak when the book, *Empire*, of Hardt and Negri went into print and became part of the library of every left-oriented intellectual. In that new context the term ‘Autonomy’ was linked not to ‘individual autonomy’ but to the ‘autonomy of networks’ and the power of productive synergies.

That was an important observation and a reason why this wasn’t recognized by the previous generations of art theorists. Mainly because their leftist practice was something very different.

Your suprematist landscapes and self-portraits as well as works of *Non-Objective Autonomism* refer strongly to the formal code of the Russian Avant-garde of the 1920s.

After the Manifesto had been published and the big exhibition we had in ’95, there was kind of a silence around us. No shows, no bids. I was broke, had neither money nor studio. Local wars followed with social crises reaching their climax... I got an offer to get back to the Academy for post-graduate studies, which I did. I spent three very important and fertile years there. I immediately started to research my own position, trying to understand where and how I got into this clash with the representatives of the art establishment. The main catch was their travesty of the idea of conceptual art according to some rigid norms of conceptual aesthetics. Suddenly I recalled one case. In 1983, I saw the exhibition of Russian avant-garde in the *Museum of Contemporary Art* in Belgrade, collected from Russian muse-

ums. Malevich, who’s already glorified as an icon of radical modernism, was presented with works that were part of the so-called *Post-suprematist figuration* of the mid-20s. The organizers were a bit disappointed as this phase was still treated as a regression compared to his previous revolutionary *Suprematist* cycle. I stood in front of *The Athletes* or *Red Cavalry*, fascinated... Regression? What were they talking about? There was an interesting step, a big change in scope towards the interpretation of that period, which came in the mid/late 80s – early 90s. Anyway, it was an ideal platform from which to develop my own concept. I treated the whole History of Art as a dead object, a ready-made. I jumped into a formal element of Malevich’s iconographic model and stripped it of all social and historical manipulation by putting it into a different context, filling it with unexpected contents. From the beginning, my art had always been socially oriented; I was explor-



Uroš Djurić, *Non-objective Autonomism. Murder or 2 Greatest Serbian Painters Subdued by Their Own Greatness*, 1997

ing conflicts and the relations between identity and society. For example, Malevich was doing these “portraits” of different classes or social types like sportsmen, peasants, mystics and carpenters; dealing with the collectivist euphoria and class struggles of that historical period. Our civilization was experiencing other phenomena, the crisis of self that emerged from conformism, consumerism and global indifference. So I started to do portraits of real people, canonizing the friends and protagonists of the Belgrade arts scene. Frontal portraits were rendered in the iconographic pattern of Malevich’s late period, which means that the identity of the portrayed person was not recognized, as is usual in portrait painting, by the facial features, the characterization of the image, but by given attributes such as gesture, or a personal affinity for the fetishism of clothes. We’re all our own products and we project our visions of self as well as certain attitudes, which could

be treated as iconographic models. According to Malevich's theory, namely, that the face is experienced only as a mask hiding the truth about our being. The project was presented in June 1998, as a solo show in the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, under the title *Non-objective Autonomism*. The defenders of Conceptual aesthetics, to some extent comparable to Malevich's case, thought it was a flop, a step backward. A year after, they were published in *Flash Art*.

In your show *Go Johnny Go*, you have been represented with around a dozen drawings and paintings – all self-portraits with various electric guitars. You are not only a visual artist; you are a musician as well. Did you play all these instruments yourself?

No, I didn't. I'm not a musician. I play the guitar, but this is different, and an important aspect of my life. I have a big record collection; my hi-fi's constantly on while I'm working, almost like a ritual. I have spent half of my life in nightclubs. Most of my gang lived on the edge of social streams; we were marginalised. Lack of money was our reality. *Guitar Self-portraits* came from that sense of frustration; when you can't realize your desires due to objective circumstances. These works were the projection of fantasies. In *Autonomism Manifesto*, we're talking about that state, the desire to express a possible reality detached from the real world, as well as the art itself, the state where fantasy together with concrete events, real and made-up characters or objects, historical styles and art movements, ideas, signs, symbols and performances go on functioning undisturbed. Context is only the scenery where the symbolic constitution of a possible reality is happening, where the "personal principle" can be expressed to the full.

I earned a big sum of money in the year 2000. The very first thing I did was to go to the nearest guitar shop and buy myself the most expensive Fender Telecaster, with its natural wood body and rosewood neck. Then I started to work on self-portraits that included my new guitar, a realized fantasy; a kind of living experiment in the field of social and class emancipation.

You were part of the Belgrade punk-scene in the 1980s and then moved to Berlin. The beginning of the dissolution of Yugoslavia through war caught up with you in Brussels, when you were installing a show. You were not permitted to return to Germany. What were your feelings when you got back to your hometown?

I'll try to explain this more precisely as all these experiences were important in forming the Autonomism concept. I started in 1980, when I joined the incipient punk scene; I played with *Urban Guerrilla*, a short-lived but radical and influential band. The scene was hot and expansive but suddenly it

expired in late '83 – '84, while I was in the army. I got back to a changed city. I started to study art history, I spent three strange years there, I lost interest after the first year, it was such a waste of time. The only good thing that was happening in the mid-80s was the rise of an alternative scene around the Academy night club, run by Fine Arts students as well as a whole bunch of losers, freaks, punks, chic chicks, gays and junkies, all mixed. I was travelling abroad a lot, and that's how I discovered Berlin. The city surrounded by The Wall looked like an established utopia of the kind we inhabited in the Belgrade nightclubs. I got in contact with people that were part of the Autonomist political movement, perhaps the most powerful social alternative in Europe at that time. The key thing was that I articulated my idea of art in such surroundings. I never moved to Berlin, but I travelled there quite often – thanks to the Eastern block the return ticket cost around 10 DM. I had already been enrolled at the Belgrade Academy of Fine Arts and I spent almost every summer from 1988 to 1992 in Germany. When I was in my final year, Milica Tomić invited me along with several other artists to take part in some exhibition in Brussels. It was our first show abroad. The civil war had already started, but we weren't really aware of the scale of its devastation. Then, on 1 June 1992, which was the day of our opening, the UN sanctions against Yugoslavia started. We were stuck there; our flight was cancelled. Milica went to Frankfurt; I went to Berlin. Serbs were already singled out as the bad guys; I didn't want to stay in that atmosphere, with the unseen mark on my head. The huge demonstrations against Milošević started right after the sanctions were implemented and soon after I decided to go back, to confront reality, I wanted to be part of that. I thought, "The Shithead would be politically dead by the end of the year." Milica came back to Belgrade in December. This was the time of our rise on the local scene.

At the end of the 1990s you started to work on the *Populist Project*. The main thesis is that populism as a hegemonic ideology has displaced social utopias; the main theme is the interaction of the star-system and identity. In *Celebrities*, you exhibit yourself, in various situations with famous people from different spheres, with politicians, artists, movie stars and musicians.

During the 90s, our society was passing through heavy political and social turbulence, the complete social and class structure was upside down, being permanently filled with populist contents. In comparison with the 80s and my conscious living on the margins of the public sphere, the 90s pushed me into centre-field; I became a star. I was suddenly recognized as one of the most prominent figures on the contemporary art scene as well as a character from feature films, having radio shows on the B92 station, participating in the publishing of adult comics, working as a graphic designer, a DJ... even though I was in the centre of the public and media interest, there was a

huge disproportion between my class and my social position. My public success and activities weren't something one could materialize at that time. The closed society, with completely different parameters compared with the outside world, was a leading phenomenon of our way of life. The real stars in Serbia of the 90s were criminals, war heroes, politicians, folk singers, merchants, and bankers... This pseudo-elite formed a new class based on open material interest, monopolies and fast enrichment. The main criterion for entering the club was to be part of their game. The only space in which I might confirm my "star" position was in portrait shots with foreign celebrities. Even though all the photos were coming from the real situations; they looked more like a fantasy than a reality. It's connected to the spirit of the time.

Hometown-Boys, First Serbian Porn, Art and Society magazine, represent your artistic response to the war in Yugoslavia. A series of faked magazine covers, digitally mounted from your own photographs and downloads from the internet – lifestyle with a ribald dose of sex, glamour and bawling chauvinism. Are you sarcastic?

I wouldn't say so. We're witnessing something that looks like a programme, a new Bible or populism manifesto produced in the form of a lifestyle magazine. Basically, these magazines are opinion makers of the new age, the age of consumerism. They're called lifestyle magazines, but they don't sell style, they sell norms and ideological postulates of populist ideology. *Hometown Boys* sells a lifestyle of my own, and it's real. Maybe it's bad, but that's what I am, that's the whole spectrum of my interests, what I'm made of... I'm not selling an inaccessible ideal; I'm presenting reality, which any lifestyle should be. That's my self-portrait in the shape of a magazine cover. Many people told me they would like to read it...

God Loves the Dreams of Serbian Artists – Uroš Djurić in a group portrait with European football clubs: real photography, no montage. The world of art and the world of football both have their own and quite different moral justifications. Are you living as a cross-border commuter?

The role of both art and football in the emancipation of the lower classes in the late 19th and early 20th century was enormous. These were referential fields, meeting places of the classes that were in deep conflict. My grandfather, who was a tailor in Budapest, played for Ferencváros before The Great War. He was a social democrat, a worker who spoke three languages. His ideal was South America, as France was the only republic in Europe. He went to London via Berlin with two comrades, they wanted to take a ship and go to Lima. He changed his mind and went back to the royal-imperialist monarchy. In just two generations, one of his sons became a world-

Installation view,
Kunsthalle Wien 2003:
Uroš Djurić, *Populist*
project *Hometown Boys*,
1999-2000



renowned byzantologist and vice-president of the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts, the other two became a machine engineer and a painter, one daughter had a diploma in archaeology, the grandchildren are a visual artist, a film editor, a musician, a costume designer, an art historian... a huge jump in social terms, like nothing that ever happened before in history. He was not alive to see all that, but he lived for it, he belonged to the generation that trusted in progress. I was following that line.

In the second half of the 90s, after the end of the UN sanctions, the only big international stars that appeared in Belgrade were football players that were playing international matches. Being a local star, I was invisible to them. So I started to appear in hotel lobbies, taking fan photos with all the major players like Gullit, Shearer or Matthaus... It was such a depression then, nobody was there, no one cared, I was the only freak waiting... From the moment I established myself on the international scene, my position changed, so I started to negotiate directly with clubs. I was photographed together with the team, dressed properly in a club kit, in a form that simulated the official club photo. That's a simple story about acceptability, about progress and models of society.

Pioneers. Artists of the former socialist countries, decorated with the red scarf that was yours when you were a boy and a member of the Red Pioneers. Socialism is dead – long live Socialism?

A decade after the demolition of the *Berlin Wall*, we had plenty of exhibitions and writings from the West that attempted to put Central/East European art into a kind of schema – *The West having 'discovered' Central/East European art in the late 90s!* – resulting in the creation of a highly artificial counterbalance. This dismissal prevented any understanding of the subtle dif-



Uroš Djurić, *Populist Project. God Loves the Dreams of Serbian Artists*, 2001

ferences between systems, countries, scenes, community standards, individuals, and the like. By having members of the Central and Eastern European artistic and theoretical community reposition this Pioneer scarf around their necks, I posit that some of them are experiencing significant ideological or theoretical conflict in the face of this Western misunderstanding. It's a gesture of resistance against Western stereotypes of art from the former Eastern Bloc. The idea is to show that this group has already passed through a kind of social nullification once, in the name of equality, and it should not be continued.

In recent years, you took part rather frequently in exhibitions in Austria and Germany; rather often as well "The Balkans" was the theme of these shows. Do you sometimes feel exploited as an exotic by a saturated western art world?

Not all that often. It depends on the context of representation. The nature of my work doesn't belong to the cliché of so-called Eastern European or Balkan art. If the idea is to present a wide range of art practices from a certain region, it's okay with me as long as my work's not misused for some big conclusion that feeds prejudices.

In several projects, you have cooperated with Elke Krystufek. Where do you see parallels and stress fields in the dialogue with the Austrian artist?

She's an impressive personality; her production is enormous, flamboyant. There were lots of parallels, concerning the exploitation of the self, social and political, even cultural aspects of the work, the reception... My main shock was when I discovered that we both started with such similar positions almost at the same time, around 1989... When we met in 2001, it was easy for us to develop a contact that turned into a collaboration entitled *Life*

as a *Narrative*, shown in a couple of exhibitions. I started a series of works named *Elkepop*. I did a ton of self-portraits in the style of Elke Krystufek. It was a replica of what I did with Malevich in '96, but with a living artist this time. It was an exciting experience. When we first exhibited this project in Belgrade, in the *Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art*, people would ask: "...Okay... but where are your works?"

Are you working on a new project?

I am. It's an ambitious project with the Bosnian artist Šejla Kamerić. She's a brilliant artist, an exceptional woman. The project is called *Parallel Life*, following the forbidden love of two jet-setters, members of post-conflict societies, something like *Dodi & Di*, with a happy end.

Uroš Djurić in conversation with Gerald Matt and Sigrid Mittersteiner in January 2006. The artist took part in the exhibitions *Attack! Kunst und Krieg in den Zeiten der Medien* (2003) and *Go Johnny Go! Die E-Gitarre – Kunst und Mythos* (2003) at Kunsthalle Wien.

Uroš Djurić was born in Belgrade, Serbia, in 1964. He lives and works in Belgrade.