

Look at the Voices

Anja Tomljenović. Croatia

I
“Thank you for coming, Sir, it means a lot to us,” she offered her hand with a slightly nervous smile.

“Hello Mia, you don’t have to call me Sir, I have not been a professor for a year now,” he cordially replied looking through his glasses. They both knew it was a habit. She nodded and they walked into the studio which was different from how he had remembered it. The earthquake did not spare even the Academy of Fine Arts.

“As you can see, chunks of the wall have fallen off in some places, the larger windows shattered, but it’s fair to say it could have been worse. At least we still have a place where we can come and work.” A mitigating circumstance. Mia’s cycle of abstract paintings in red was peeking shyly behind a small wooden board pyramid. As far as he knew, she was the only one in Croatia, and possibly beyond, using the natural dye alizarin, extracted from a seaside plant called madder. Not far from the red painting army of smaller canvases, two young men were fidgeting on a still dusty sofa. Visibly excited and a bit nervous, they got up to shake hands with the professor. “You probably remember Roko, and this is our friend Josip, from the Academy of Dramatic Arts.”

“Hi, Roko, nice to meet you, Josip. You know, I recently stumbled upon your documentary

on TV, the one talking about the behavior of foraging bees, which increasingly do not leave the hive as they are confused and don’t know how to show the way to pollen and water. It is clear that nature is protesting, problems are obvious: extremely high temperatures, the use of pesticides, inadequate protection of producers. You have your grandfather’s attitude and voice.”

“Thank you,” he replied with thoughtful eyes full of awe.

“Roko, what about you? Any progress on cleaning up Pag?” he hesitated after posing the question; it sounded more humorous in his head.

“You know, professor... It’s getting worse each year. Too many tourists, too little respect,” Roko sighed and shrugged his scrawny shoulders, referring to the abundance of materials for his sculptures. He makes them from tiny pieces of plastic, bottles, glass, syringes, greasy sponges, stray nets and other litter he collects on beaches, in the shape of oversized shells, since the island where he was born was formed by sedimentation of mollusk shells and various sea animals. Who wouldn’t buy such a souvenir?

“I know, I know. Well, one day it just has to get better. So, if I understood it correctly from your e-mail, you want to start a project related to climate change?”

“Yes, you know, any conversation about these things here usually boils down to the melting of the North Pole and the extinction of polar

bears. We are not against it, on the contrary, but we find it more productive to do something locally,' Josip replied and Roko continued. 'We've been discussing what could be done... It is no longer enough to organize exhibitions; people will be slow in coming back to museums and galleries once the preventive measures against the virus are relaxed. We were trying to find a solution which would reach people more directly. Maybe even more emotionally.'

'We must do something, young people are apathetic, many are unemployed... We believe that the society will change if we make sure there is enough space for everyone, if we expand communication channels and invite people to re-examine critically the reality surrounding us,' Mia took over the conversation, readily taking a paper out of a drawer to sketch out their idea.

'Quite ambitious... And you are asking for my support in doing this?'

'Yes, we decided to invite you because you have authority. Nobody takes us seriously. If the whole operation is labeled as 'vandalism', we will have achieved nothing.'

'Sure. And if I say no?'

'We'll have to risk being reported before we manage to set up everything.'

'We'll pay you whatever it takes,' Josip interrupted.

'Nonsense, I really don't need the money. So, how have you envisaged the whole thing?'

II

His wife deftly persuaded him to accept the offer he had recently received by e-mail. She knows him too well after 49 years of marriage. He is a retired professor of art history, which means that apart from writing a few texts for exhibitions held by acquaintances and watering the garden, he usually has no obligations. The cultural scene of Zagreb is rather small,

so it's always more or less limited to the same names. A long time ago, the professor had been witness to the very exciting process of the birth of environmental awareness in art. The period after 1968 called for direct communication between the author and the audience. In doing so, artists abandoned the institutional frameworks of museums and galleries, seeking alternative forms of expression to make their messages reach a wider audience, of those both more and less interested in art. In this endeavor, the public space, in which various art groups and individuals looked for their place in the sun (literally and metaphorically), had proven to be ideal.

As he is rummaging through his personal collection containing exhibition catalogs and old files, he is reflecting on the idea that the Earth should be listened to with a stethoscope, like a man who is coughing severely. It is the very approach that Marko Pogačnik used in his own method of healing the planet, the so-called lithopuncture. He put up installations, usually stones, in highly energetic places in nature, that is, environmentally destroyed locations (industrial zones or abandoned mines). Interestingly, the TOK group had to carry out some of the interventions in public spaces at night, as the professor's protégés will have to do. For instance, the TOK group members put up transparent plastic trash cans on the streets and left marks of car tires on the facade of the *Nama* Department Store. It was particularly amusing when the professor once found postcards showing a factory chimney with the inscription *Greetings from Zagreb* in his mailbox. After the experimental wind blew into the artists' creative lungs, all the problems of crossing from one country to another intervened with the reality. Faith in the humanity, and not to mention faith in art, gradually faded away. The professor got up from the wobbly chair in which he had been rocking just a moment ago and agreed with the result of his own analy-



Sculpture and bust on Zrinjevac (Zagreb).

sis – there is a chronic lack of communication today, especially artistic.

III

‘Dear viewers, we are reporting live from Zrinjevac, where we are speaking with Professor Ljudevit Horvat, one of the most distinguished art history professors in Croatia. Mr. Horvat, this morning the citizens were surprised by a strange sight in the city center. As it happens, sculptures of various women from the Croatian history showed up near the busts on Zrinjevac. Could you tell us what this is about?’

‘Well, this intervention aims to provide visibility for women who are still unjustly

neglected in the overview of the Croatian history and culture, as well as in the education system, and thus to draw attention to social and environmental issues. Equality is a prerequisite for any serious political and cultural undertaking, so even when it comes to addressing the current issue of climate change, we can help only after we have made sure that everyone’s voice is heard.’

He stopped for a moment after spotting out of the corner of his eye two police officers approaching. They looked each other up and down and he breathed a sigh of relief when he realized they would let him finish his thought.

‘It is an educational project which symbolically draws attention to the issue of equality, and this is our version which is, of course, one

of many. A sculpture is added next to each bust on Zrinjevac, so that, in addition to the well-known faces of men, as of this morning, we can see Jelena Slavna, Katarina Zrinski, Ivana Brlić Mažuranić, Nasta Rojc, Dora Pejačević and Marija Jurić-Zagorka. Each of them with her own recognizable tool – pen, book or sheet music. These temporary sculptures are made of discarded and rotted wood, straw and stones, in full size. The use of natural materials also symbolically indicates the need for discussing the problem at its heart, its root.’

‘We have noticed that the citizens’ reactions on social media are diverse, ranging from amazement to disapproval.’

‘Yes, it is our responsibility to perceive this example as a seriously engaged initiative which aims to shed some light on contemporary social issues from the perspective of art. Passers by are

expected to become active participants because an artwork is realized only when the spectator recognizes and adopts a critical thought. We urgently need solidarity and community policies which might be a solution in the fight against climate change, as well as fights of any other kind. I would like to highlight that I will personally speak to the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art and suggest her to organize an exhibition on this topic. Also, if you don’t mind, I would like to ask the ones who came up with the idea to say a few more words.’

He looked at Mia, Josip and Roko, who were standing by and watching the interview. As soon as he mentioned them, they froze up. He approached them and walked them towards the camera whispering,

‘Now your voice is heard, make sure it resounds.’