

Vladimir Vidmar:

NIKA ŠPAN

NEVER FROM A WHITE CANVAS

When Nika Špan began to pursue her artistic career, the local art scene and, accordingly, the paradigm of (contemporary) art were defined by two different momenta (not without common ground): on the one hand, the programmes at major institutions (including the Academy) promoted new image painting, which was the Slovene answer to New British Sculpture, while on the other hand, an extremely intensive decade for alternative art culminated in the unparalleled impact of the NSK phenomenon. Špan's art developed as a departure from both.

In the 1990s, the shared point of departure in Špan's works was her desire to look outside, addressing not only the artist, but also the viewer. This by no means implies a quest for an external gaze; on the contrary, it represents an awareness of how deeply the works are subject to the various facets of context, whether this means the physical, spatial and temporal structure or the parameters of art as an institution. For Nika Špan, looking outside is always an attempt to look beyond what could be the predefined limitation of the work of art in terms of reflection. As every experience (of art) is decisively determined by space-time and institutional mechanisms, her projects (since the beginning of the 1990s) can be understood as an emphatic demand to reject any 'autopoetics' as being overly categorically confined within the narrowly defined frames of more or less recognisable art 'identities', and to open up to experimenting with the parameters of a situation. In this way, she articulates very specific expressions, which primarily target the phenomenology of the artistic experience as a complex intertwining of physical laws, psychology, language and other symbolic systems and traditions, protocols and mechanisms of art institutions. Her projects, often defined as situations, are unfinished until they feature the spectator, whose unpredictable input contributes a unique structural consistency, without eliminating the basic tension between the spectator, the parameters of the situation, and the artist's role in this equation.

Špan's explorations, mise-en-scenes and experiments have always revolved around the question of the work of art. Although the change from

understanding a work of art as an object to seeing it as a situation was common in Slovene art in the 1990s, it seems that in the case of Nika Špan, the issue is far more complex than being limited to a change in the 'nature' of a work of art or its eventual (re-)dematerialisation. This could be seen in her work *Waiting Room*, where she participated in a group exhibition by working as a gallery guard. Here, the artist exposed herself for the first time to the opposing forces of different systems, which, while being simultaneously written on her body, had different investments.

The exhibited work of art (the project's subtitle, *Performance-Ready Made*, is very indicative) was a body that was being directly subjected to the mechanisms of institutionalised art, i.e. she was a unique living sculpture. At another level, still defined by the codes of the art system, her selected manner of 'participation' can be read as a performance, which was combined with another, economic, interest: from this perspective, guarding an exhibition is considered artistically neutral, as it is understood in terms of being paid for at an hourly rate. The project was given a poetic note by the fact that the exhibition was set up in a former railway waiting room, and the artist commuted by train: this can be understood as another step towards desanctifying the exalted nature of a work of art and its divine origin. For what could possibly be more ordinary than a citizen setting off to work every day by train? And is the nature of the work of art not material (or even materialistic, if we apply a political undertone to Špan's work, which is not characteristic), regardless of how conceptual or dematerialised it is in its formulation?

The radical articulation of such momenta was apparent in *Sold Works* projects, which was exhibited in 1998 in Mala Galerija. The artist painted the exhibition walls in 19 strips of colour in hues used in her regular job (i.e. unlike her artistic work, a paid job) of house painter and decorator. The paint strips that turned the gallery into a large-scale formalist masterpiece (we could not but notice the ironic positioning of heroic modernism, which finally lost ground in the 1990s), were created in hues selected for their rooms by her clients; every strip of paint also included a photograph of the correlating artist's (non-artistic) painting job. The project is unique in being very concisely formulated and in its radical juxtaposition of a *de facto* line of work. Although Špan 'painted walls' on both occasions, the decorative painting job was done as an obligation, needed to make a living, a means of survival to pay the bills, while the gallery and the mechanisms of the incorporated system elevated the same type of work into creative expression, a work of art. Formally the same, but conceptually opposing,

activities were linked by the artist's body and its physical presence, which was directly highlighted during the opening performance at *Sold Works*: the artist, smartly dressed, with no paint stains, entertained the public by playing the guitar. Her monotonous, repetitive strumming, which replays the monotonous painting work, acted as an auditory backdrop to the exhibition and was accompanied by the evidence of the transformational nature of her (physical) work, a video recording of the muscular back of the artist projected onto the gallery windows. 'Work sets you free', but this happens only if the art system raises it from the purely existential realm to the kingdom of creativity and freedom. Although Špan's emphasis was at least partially ironic, seeking to demystify how art builds its ambitious high-brow statements by deliberately ignoring its not even slightly elevated bases, we can simultaneously read it as defining art as an attempt (together with, for instance, science) to reflect, to give meaning. For Špan, combining everyday experiences with a field governed by the rules of art as an institution, does not signify 'a disclosure of a practical activity as a potential work of art', as argued in the accompanying text to *Sold Works*. *Sold Works* were not an attempt to retroactively label the work – which had been done outside the gallery – art. Rather the opposite: it deals with the impossibility of merging these two registers. Art cannot assimilate life without taking something away from it or adding something to it, because, according to Špan, 'art always artifies', which means that art is ruled by institutional rules, rather than the dynamics of (everyday) life. Consequently, the form in which a reflection is materialised becomes all the more important, and this testifies to the exceptional formal precision of Špan's work. Her projects offer the following answer to the question as to whether and how life can enter a work of art: it is the other way around; it comes from the other side, by orienting the work towards the exterior. Art cannot assimilate the experience of life, but it can open itself up to this experience as a form of its reflection, as one of the mechanisms we use to give life meaning.

Perhaps this intermediary role of art, which is also defined by its form, this mediation that always adds and takes away something, is – with a hint of humour – summed up by Špan's work *Video not Video*. This work was created in 1997 for the second Triennial of Contemporary Slovene Art, which was curated by Peter Weibel, one of the main protagonists of video art. *Video not Video* is comprised of two silent recordings, one projected onto a wall, and the other shown on a monitor opposite. The first recording is of a curator nodding and shaking his head: his reactions to watching a recording of the artist's hands, trying to explain her previous projects and current thoughts through sketches, drawings and plans.

Although examinations of this project have so far insisted on the alleged exposure of the superiority of the curator's position, the role of power within the art system, as well as a critical consideration of new technologies, I would prefer not to read the work in this spirit of the art of the 1990s, and rather examine it in the spirit of the work created by Nika Špan. In this respect, I would define it as contemplation on the effort to communicate, the non-obviousness of the exchange, with the constant threat of losing the essential and risking the addition of the inauthentic. Once Špan includes us, as viewers, as having a key role in a situation, we can uniquely complete the work of art ourselves. We bring the work of art to a conclusion by reading too much or too little into it. The viewer is the unstable third element, serving to destabilise the dichotomy of art and life, opening up the work.

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