

Vladimir Vidmar:

Škuc Gallery 40th Anniversary: Exhibition. Nika Špan: U

This year, Škuc Gallery celebrates the 40th anniversary of its activities on the premises at Stari trg. During this period, the gallery has been writing history whose parts have acquired cult status, while it also performed a key role in the affirmation and promotion of generations of artists, curators and other cultural workers as well as the very paradigm of contemporary art in Slovenia. In addition to its extremely rich and diverse exhibition programme, with activities ranging from experimental excursions to study exhibitions, Škuc Gallery has always opened up a space for interrogation and reflection of art and it has always legitimised its position through an emphatic reflection of its context or its conceptual starting points. Therefore, we shall mark Škuc Gallery's 40th anniversary in 2018 with three exhibitions addressing some of the questions that turn out to be both relevant for the gallery's past and determining or topical for the state of affairs in the field of contemporary art today.

While the first of the three exhibitions, *Institution: Case Study*, dealt with the nexus of the institutional by critically reading three projects from the past decade, the second exhibition, tautologically subtitled *Exhibition*, revisits the 1990s to establish how this period, crucial for the paradigm of contemporary art, determines thinking about art today. The curators invited Nika Špan to join our reflection and intervention; Špan is one of the most visible protagonists of this period and her practice in general is characterised by a meticulous reflection on the conditions of possibility of art. The result of this reflection is an installation which treats the gallery space as a unique passage, a detour, which thwarts the experience of gallery interior and takes us back to the place where we started. Functionally, the intervention could be described most precisely as a bypass of the vital organ of art – the gallery space – and the initiating power and surplus experience it should guarantee.

So what exactly happens here? If the certain content which we associate with the mechanisms of the modernist white cube is missing, what kind of experience are we dealing with? Obviously, there is a "sobering" emphasis, a moment of disillusion of artistic experience, which reduces the entire space of the gallery to an empty bypass, which leaves the visitor wanting. All magic is missing, there is no redemption and no catharsis, quite the contrary, the only thing left is awareness of some unrealised experience, which in turn becomes the new Experience of art. Thus, this bypass of the vital organ becomes a new vital organ, maintaining the life of art after the death of the modernist paradigm. Yet, on the other hand, we cannot avoid the impression that this white hall actually "works"; there remains the suspicion that it works for others, probably also for us, but beyond our will and knowledge. By combining these two moments, the bypass articulates a complex statement about art in the 1990s, as well as about

how the traps, in which the latter gets caught and (partially) problematises, determine the manoeuvring space of art today. On the one hand, the pass encapsulates a cool, distant logic of the art of the nineties, its processes of the deconstruction of the institutional, the rationalisation of the auratic and the turning “outwards” into the broader social and political field; but on the other hand, despite this, there is a desire for things to be different, for the institution to work properly and guarantee the “artistry” of an experience or object. If we wanted to describe this situation vividly, we could compare it to the position of the pretended atheist, who is, nevertheless, deeply affected every time he encounters some evidence testifying to the non-existence of God, the position of man whose apparent soberness of actions is motivated by a disappointed longing for a great guarantor. We need to ask ourselves whether all these moments of revelation and demythologisation of the actual modes of functioning of the institution of art, so popular in the art practices of the 1990s, in fact do away with these illusions or, quite the opposite, they reinforce them. In his theory of fetishism in the *Plague of phantasms*, Žižek emphasises: “far from destroying the ‘fetishist’ illusion, the insight into the production mechanism in fact even strengthens it, in so far as it renders palpable the gap between the bodily causes and their surface-effect ...” In short, the disclosure of the mechanism that makes magic possible does not undermine it; rather, we can be even more fascinated observing the discrepancy between the causes and the final effect.

With her *U* project, Nika Špan thus defines in a multifaceted manner the position of the art of the 1990s and its traps. The project remains true to the artistic attitude of that period in that it puts its bet on the viewer’s experience, delegitimising the official trajectory of artistic experience and throwing us into the world, into the street, where it can also be read as a somewhat ironic commentary on the activities in the art of the 1990s. Namely, *U* works even without its emptiness being filled by the viewer’s experience, for despite the intended demythologisation, the magic still works, we expect it, we wonder how it comes over us. We are by no means prepared to give it up, even though the mechanism of its functioning has been revealed and explained to us. Nika Špan’s *U* project is thus a statement about the 1990s, which reflects on this decade in art, but somehow also subverts it. Yet, this is not a reductive critical gesture which would simply do away with a set of positions and mechanisms; rather, it tries to draw attention to its unwitting horizon: critical art, attacking institutions, is at times driven by a secret desire for the institutions to actually work, as supposedly they once had, before capitalism stripped them of their power to initiate one into the world of art^[1]. Nika Špan’s *U* project is a commentary that illuminates this loop for a moment: by “allowing” itself to be reduced neither to the experience of the visitor nor to itself, the *U* project returns to us to reflect upon the formative moment of the art paradigm in which we work today, together with the secret desire lurking behind its critical and transgressive gestures.

[1] Here we draw from one of the hypotheses from Marko Jenko's lecture *Body and Frame: A Hypothesis on Conceptual Art*. The lecture was part of *Concept/s: Hegel's Aesthetics* conference that took place at Moderna galerija in Ljubljana between 11th and 14th January 2018.

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