

In the name of combative good or fighting for the common cause in Ljubljana

by Tomislav Šola, 1997.

This is a friendly account of six years of fighting of mostly young people in Ljubljana, capital of Slovenia (a two million state that emerged first from the fall of Yugoslavia) for their right to decide upon the quality of their own future and that of citizens. At first a group and, nowadays a network, of individuals and organized groups, - what is now called "Retina network" presents an extremely interesting experience of social and political commitment in the fight for the humane city, for the corrective action to the ruling institutions of the society. On Metelkova street in Ljubljana, the former military headquarters, the walled complex of barracks was spotted as a possible development for alternative culture. The moment was proper, being between the resented past and vague idealist projections of an independent, democratic Slovenian future. As it all happens in the country of the former European East, it presents an example, interesting in its similarities and differences from the known Western predecessors.

The circumstances

The interesting detail is that the initial group of the Metelkova project was formed by an official from the city authorities within the scope of her job. The aim was to engage fresh minds, - a logical thought by the decadent end of one System and an interesting point in the case, in defining "the spaces of difference". One has to add, namely, that Socialism in Slovenia (and indeed in most of ex-Yugoslavia) had a relative human measure in the last ten to fifteen years of its existence. This has to be said out of two reasons at least: First, no necessary difference is made in literature, between former Yugoslavia and the countries that had the bad luck of being literally behind the Curtain; Secondly, the meek, late Yugoslav Communism allowed in its last period, however reluctantly, quite a bit of artistic and social radicalism, especially in Slovenia. The 80s were the time of flourishing social, cultural and artistic off-scene. By saying this, I decline, exactly like the group around Metelkova, the need for heroes: there weren't any and those who were would care that they are not recognized as such. Except for their creative act. As nationalist heroes of the former regime illustrate dramatically all over former Yugoslavia, heroes in politics are always expensive and sometimes fatally dangerous. This is why the creative protagonists of culture like it differently. The possible third reason would be the respect for the true sufferance of the people from the countries of the Warsaw pact (doing them justice by declining the comparison), and indeed, righteous recognition of the measure of tolerance present at that time in

Slovenia. (As a true alternative would like it, this way the black and white picture of the world and the vogue of heroism should be fought back). Any system, let alone the repressive one, provides its points of support in the reticence of people to define their freedom as responsibility and individual creative contribution. Therefore, the counter-active action finds always the same adversaries everywhere, their colour being only the surface difference.

The group was so well composed that it decided to function independently from the Secretariat for the Culture, Research and Sports. Its task was the "articulation of the spaces of difference" i.e. to indicate needs, domains, authors & their work who are active outside the frames of official culture and give them a chance in the name of democratic right for diversity and expression. (The official who gave the first impulse stayed on with the group.)

The birth of the project

Metelkova street was a name well-rooted in the mind of Slovenian citizens. The place is a big complex of military barracks with hundred years of (foreign and "foreign") military presence. The last regime, held there, in the 1990s, the military court against a group of young people accused of revealing secret military plans. In terms of human rights campaign, claims for the use of Slovenian language at the Court, and live demonstrations of civil protest, Metelkova was a symbolic introduction of the fall of the Regime and the upsurge of Slovenian independence. So, the wicked genius loci is there as a challenging object of creative transfiguration. What good spirit does one breath in to transform the oppressive monster into a compassionate guardian angel? How does one change the place of repression and excessive uniformity into the place of freedom and accepted diversity? The shortest answer, like from a joke, is: with pains. The alternative initiative needed to have an organizational shape and this is why Retina Network was established, grouping individuals, associations and institutions interested to help.

The battle and squatting

After the Yugoslav Peoples Army left the barracks in 1991, the City authorities were persuaded in the long process to give the complex over to Retina Network. Some permanent status was achieved in 1992, over seven buildings, but a year later, the City authorities were more clear about their true standing: by a sudden decision to demolish the entire complex they would get rid of the nuisance, and provide a precious location in the centre for any real-estate speculation.

Members of the Network and supporters occupied the site in a non-violent action against "the act of vandalism". The spirit of their right reached many minds: the chief of police of Ljubljana called their action "proper" and the act of the authorities "desperate". In the following months of euphoria, some 200 events took place on the premises, making it an obvious place of public happening. The precedent was achieved in the democratic fight: the non-

institutional action of organized citizens can stop illegal official decisions. The City authorities reacted by cutting off the water and electricity. In the cold and darkness of that December, the place was vacated except by the most desperate squatters, artists and others. What followed were six court cases at the Public Prosecutor, which were dropped after a long fight and, indeed, new city elections. The renewed Network acquired the responsibility for its part of the site. The office of the Network, "Retina", with the status of a non-profit organization handles the enormous job of an action balanced between very disparate partners and collaborators.

The implication of the creative and others

In an alternative cultural centre, action undertaken is supposed to be non-institutional, experimental, counter-active, and, - off. Be it theatre groups or individual artists, it gathered *the different*: those from the margins, out of the frame where things happen in, always expectable, tolerable variety from what is perceived as acceptable, plausible, - official.

Non-institutional does not necessarily mean alternative, as there are many individuals and groups which function independently outside institutions. Their difficult position can be a temptation leading to unwanted compromises, and this merited assistance. Although not being the preference, Metelkova was seen as a chance to shelter them too. Their quality, besides that of their work, is independence from the institutional framework.

Altogether, in those years of fighting, the place was a busy one, with some 500 smaller and bigger events. It thus became an obvious point on the cultural map of Ljubljana and Slovenia. Everything was there: from theatre, dance, performance, artists' studios, wall painting, improvised exhibitions, installations, poetry, discussions, lectures, presentations, workshops, etc.

All that felt disregarded or abandoned, like the handicapped, bikers, anarchists, gay, lesbian, or members of ethnic minorities, though they have something happening on Metelkova that is sympathetic to their difference. Some of those groups indeed ended up there.

As civil initiative propped against official political reticence and reluctance to give over the implicit control over the culture, it attracted the drop-outs of the society, which are the least easy group to deal with. Those squatters, themselves often a consequence and part of urban pathology, were the troublemakers to the very case fought for, yet their presence possesses symbolic and practical legitimacy within the initiative. There can be no segregation at the entrances to the forum and its democratic offer.

Left without energy and water, at the time when it housed around 300 inhabitants, the complex was a sad and improper sight, very much protested against by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. But, the combative core group succeeded to avoid the trap and prove the relevance of the initiative.

Developments

Two years ago, the Government finally decided to give over the remaining, south part of the barracks complex to the national museum institutions suffering dramatic lack of space. The decision was much helped by Retina Network's secret lobbying as the alternative possibility was that of placing there the police headquarters. One building will house the Museum of Ethnography and the other will be occupied by an extension of the Museum of Modern Art. Some others will be turned into museum storages, some into museum workshops and one building will house The Office of Cultural heritage. That gives the entire complex a new image, produces an obvious potential, and suggests possible exchanges.

The Retina Network never had time to think about the possibility, but they find it now an inspiring and rather logical neighbourhood. The domain of the Network is the present, as they like to stipulate, whereas that of museums is the past, so they should make the logical whole. They started to discuss possibilities with their new neighbours, but their ideal of decisive, non-elitist independence on one side and that of the official culture serviced by museums, on the other, will be hard to match. If it only could! Most probably, the cooperation will have difficulties because it will require careful indicating of the common denominators. There is a long way still in front of museums until they reach the counter-active qualities and start to act as corrective mechanisms of the society. I have no doubts that Metelkovci (translated term, denoting core group and the supporters, would say: those who come from or belong to Metelkova street) will explore the ways to involve museum people in the drama of the world around them. Will they accept, or will they know how, remains a sceptical guess to all that know the reluctance inspired by museum scientism. But let it be clear, that understanding the true nature of the contemporary museum, leaves no doubt who should face the change: we witness the dramatic years of museum profession which will or not survive, - depending upon what usable product it will offer to the troubled community around them. In this respect, this neighbouring will be an interesting experiment which will bring, no doubt, interesting results. The happy circumstance is that the Ethnographic museum of Slovenia belongs among institutions led by questions, not by comfortable assumptions. Moving into the new buildings and installing their new and (for the first time in Slovenian history) comprehensive permanent exhibition, might become a starting point of an adventure. Will they use the little help of their neighbours, a tradition any ethnographic museum could demonstrate in its benefiting quality? Ethnology is either ethnography or some kind of daring clash with reality, a kind of anthropology of everyday life. As for the Museum of Modern art, i.e. its department that will be there, the potentials are almost greater, but scepticism probably more justified: art museums are difficult to move, except in the direction which, in spite of all the declarations, drags them still further away from the non-visitors.

It would be most advantageous for both sides and the overall impact of the entire complex if the museums involved have some fresh and inspired forces working in them so that the cumulative effect would be the result of creative

dialogue. In brief, museums who wish themselves relevance and affinity of their users, could not wish for a more inspiring partner. The possibilities by which they could together transcend and overcome the fatal fragmentation of museums' message are many indeed, some of them being tried and talked about in the last ten years. The particular, institutional interests always won. So far.

The space of Metelkova acquired this air of difference that counts. Metelkovci affirmed the alternative as a relevant counter-balance to what is official and institutional. These are the values to be built upon. It would be unrealistic though that the national museums (which always suffer from an excess of importance) would choose alternativist discourse. Yet it would be fine if they could provide an analysis indicating which common and complementary actions the entire national museum provision should and could realize within such an inspiring context. The imperfection of the museum service is quite a source for such creativity, but maybe they should leave the critical analysis of their contribution to Metelkovci and then change according to their suggestions. This is, indeed, why Metelkova is needed and why it appeared at all.

Concluding remarks

The danger of fatigue

Even when showing the necessary minimum of submissiveness and goodwill for the organized alternative, authorities and the administration create difficulties. By their nature and the system- subconsciousness they provide the bottlenecks and "rough surface" for the initiatives to slide into realization. The alternative (i.e. sensed as different and unfitted to the prevailing patterns), is expected to work hard: the trouble is proportional to the extent of the difference. What the System counts with is fatigue. Exposed to harsh circumstances, enthusiasm is expendable value. In other words, time is the enemy until things start to be permanent. This phase has just begun by the offices of Retina moving into the first renovated building. But fatigue has many forms.

The fight against relativism

The ethic integrity of anyone is exposed to the mind entropy in which any value is devoured by the relativism of corruptive System. The System prefers to dismiss moral preferences, clear affinities, grand ideas of making the world a better place, as an irresponsible anarchist choice, almost a sort of disregard for the majority. In the grey mass of all, all is equalled to nothing and Nothing is camouflaged by the remedies offered by the System: endless institutionalism whose only creativity is a constant invention of rules and regulations by which, eventually, "the mass" serves The Machine (as Mumford would say) more efficiently. The legal system is based upon providing human rights (natural and civil), whereas the spiritual need gave rise to religious institutions. These sets of institutions efficiently under service both, justice and the spirit. The alternative is always a hermeneutics of truth, always in an effort to make things and their relations clear, with a moral choice as an arbiter. Voices, however different, cannot be allowed to disappear in the cacophony of relativism. Therefore,

Metelkovci, or any other group that starts the counter-action, have to retain moral integrity and allow the difference. They make true diversity possible, as a form of constant exposure to difference, and as a literal and mental space of exchange. The ideal is that media and the public opinion look towards Metelkova to hear a relevant contribution that approaches the problem without any implied inhibition.

The alternative established?

The Alternative which becomes exclusive, radical and hermetic presents easy prey for the Establishment: the prospective adherents and sympathizers are repelled by the closed codes, insistent doctrine and unintelligible language. At that phase, any alternative has already become an institution itself, which, if happens can be a rare monster. The anti-elite can reach such a level of high-definition that it turns into a closed system that is not able to accept innovation and diversity.

Metelkova, or any other organized alternative, can slip into self-ghettoization, helped by the very fact of limited urban location, by the possession of its place. Well conscious of this, Retina invents new partners and welcomes any changed circumstances. It can survive only while in constant motion. They intend to pull down most of the walls surrounding the barracks to make the connection with their surroundings physically obvious.

The fate

There is no other fate for an alternative but to remain alternative. As an opened system, a permanent process, it has to retain the ability to attract new energies, to capture the potential energy, the positive drive, created in frustration. As much it "loses" seeing bits of its ideals realized in its environment, it must acquire from the fresh inspiration and discontent with the imperfect environment: the alternative can only be reinforced by the new malcontents and troublemakers, and by the traitors to the System. It can also be helped by the bad conscience of the individual protagonists of the governing forces. If lucky, it will receive help in the grave moments of abandon, the moments of trial that any initiative for change has to suffer. On Metelkova, the core group, helped by some artists and sympathizers succeeded to move forward despite heavy losses which occurred in the few moments of crisis. What can serve as a crucial argument of the existence of Metelkova, now or in the future, is creativity, fresh ideas, and honesty. This will always be respected by allies and even some enemies.

