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LOCAL ARTISTS AT THE 56TH BELGRADE OCTOBER SALON

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56TH BELGRADE OCTOBER SALON, SEPTEMBER 23-NOVEMBER 6, 2016

The 56th October Salon occupied two major venues in Belgrade: a long-abandoned building on Resavska Street, which was previously the headquarters of ex-Yugoslavia's Military Academy, and, in the very heart of the city, the Belgrade Cultural Center on Knez Mihailova Street. Entitled *The Pleasure of Love: Transient Emotion in Contemporary Art*, the 2016 exhibition showcased works by 67 artists from 26 countries, each of which sought to explore the human condition through the prism of love. In focusing on love, curator David Elliott characterized the Salon as taking a forthright stand against "our age of hate,"⁽¹⁾ in which politics and public life are defined by "bureaucratic obfuscation of vested interests, greed, mendaciousness, stupidity and anger."⁽²⁾ Equally, however, the exhibition would acknowledge the inherent complexity of love's divine force, with Elliott opening the accompanying catalog with eighteenth-century French poet Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian's all-too-true observation, "The pleasure of love lasts only a moment . . . the grief of love lasts a whole life through." At its heart, the 56th October Salon was an exhibition about tension: the tension between the ephemeral and the enduring, between agony and ecstasy, and, ultimately, between the ideal and the real.

Indeed, the tension between the real and the ideal emerged as the exhibition's dominant motif – and, importantly, rather than offering concrete conceptual definitions for these twin terms, their interpretation was left open to a variety of possibilities.⁽³⁾ Gender, environmental, social and bodily issues all featured in the thematic scope of the selected works, with the assembled artists each striving to strike a balance between various positions associated with these challenging issues. As a result, rather than simply offering narratives and visual experiments on these topics, the works engaged directly with the politics of love, presenting a critical stance on its application, meaning, and abuse in contemporary societies from all around the world. Yet ultimately, of course, the October Salon again took place in a capital still haunted by the specter of the Yugoslav past and uncertain about its European future. Examining a selection of works contributed to the Salon by local artists provides particular insight into the importance of the politics of love within this specific context.



Vladimir and Milica Perić, "Damaged Faces," photo installation, 2013. Image courtesy of the authors.

After entering the Resavska Street venue, visitors were confronted with Vladimir and Milica Perić's work *Damaged Faces* (2013), a photo installation comprised of a subset of photographs from their larger, ongoing project *The Museum of Childhood*, which explores, archives, and recycles iconic objects from everyday life produced in Yugoslavia during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. With *Damaged Faces* the artists present a series of children's portraits in varying states of decay; these old, found photographs were arranged in rows along a wall, with the title inspired by their generally poor condition. The appropriation of these images represents a statement on the transience of existence and memory, and also a reflection upon how personal conditions and identities are changed, damaged, or erased through exposure to different social and historical factors.



Rena Rädle and Vladan Jeremić, "Fragile Presence," wall drawing, newspapers, 2016. Photo by Boris Burić. Image courtesy of October Salon.

An adjacent room was the stage for *Fragile Presence* (2016), in which a series of large wall drawings and stacks of newspapers by Rena Rädle and Vladan Jeremić continued this exploration of identity, albeit with a focus on a collective experience that surpasses individuation. Created in a moment of global change, and reflecting upon the uprisings in the Middle East, the global refugee crisis, and the fencing in of Europe, the work is a visualized narrative of the collective struggle for freedom and agency by those on the margins. Depicted are a series of figures working relentlessly to break down the barriers hampering their spatial progression, through a series of chaotic actions that unfold under the watchful gaze of military drones drawn in the shape of an all-seeing eye. These collective actions ran across three walls of the exhibition space and were also presented in print, with the images repeated in newspapers offered to visitors as a visual manifesto of the struggle they could collect and take with them. The motifs of barbed wire and stars that dominate the work are reminiscent of EU border politics; this barbed wire, however, is about to be destroyed by a pair of bolt cutters brought to the battlefield by a winged arm. By also evoking memories of the trauma of forced displacement associated with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the installation instilled a unique sense of empathy for the victims of the current crisis. In these times when individuality is appropriated by state and corporate mechanisms, collective action, and the creation of a collective political body, remains the only hope for changing the conditions imposed by neoliberal and nationalist practices.

The extent to which meaningful change can be effected was further explored in Siniša Radulović's video installation *77 Questions* (2015), which provided a sharp commentary on the contemporary practice of activist art. Consisting of found footage and images set to audio from a question-and-answer session, Radulović's video jumps between a man performing a series of physical exercises in the interior of a space shuttle and a first-person view of someone tentatively making their way along a log in order to cross a fast-moving river. As a robotic female voice poses questions and the man – eventually identified as an activist performance artist – answers them (lie-detector style) with either a yes or a no, we learn that the man is a fraud: yes, he is an artist; yes, he is an activist artist; but no, he has never been arrested; no, he has never raised money for charity; and no, he does not ultimately believe in the possibility of effective activism from within the art institution. Does he feel ethical or social responsibility to others? No. When the robotic voice asks to see some of his work, the video is interrupted by a sequence from a piece by the artist depicting the plight of migrants, which the robotic voice describes as "very deep." At exhibition openings, does he carefully look at and consider the works of other artists? No, he is more concerned with the movements of gallerists and curators. The artist goes on to declare himself an environmentalist artist; but no, he does not believe in global warming. Why is the artist unable to speak truth to power? What lies behind the superficiality of contemporary art? All is revealed when the robotic voice asks her final question: "Are you human?" The answer is no. A reinterpretation of the traditional ivory tower symbol, the space shuttle continues its aimless voyage through the dark, cold and unloving vacuum of space.

77 Questions resonated especially well with a series of three video pieces by Miloš Tomić and, in particular, his animated short film *Of Slaves and Robots* (2016). In this work, Tomić's animation is set to an English recording (performed by Serbian children's television personality Raša Popov) of a 1968 speech by mathematician Radivoj Kašanin on freedom taken from the Radio Belgrade archive, which concludes with the argument that it is better to be a slave than a robot. Though both slaves and robots are confined within their subjected positions, Tomić's piece makes the point that slaves are still ultimately human beings who can dream of liberty, love, empathize with others, and even rebel – unlike the robot or, indeed, Radulović's performance artist.

Siniša Ilić's video *Without a Proposition for a Concrete Solution* (2016) similarly revolved around several layers of meaning with a common starting point: a card received by the artist's father from a friend from Egypt, written in Cyrillic. More important than the immediate message inside is the card's color palette of greens and reds, which is transposed onto lithographs and a watercolor drawing created in the video to connect several different temporal and thematic elements. Beginning with the card as a symbol of the friendship between two persons and between the countries of Yugoslavia and Egypt (whose historic relations were established within the Non-Aligned Movement founded in Belgrade in 1961), the video takes us to a room where two characters discuss the various difficulties encountered by immigrants in Amsterdam. The figures are not shown, just their hands; instead of sound, their dialogue is presented through intertitles. The creation of lithographs with war motifs (possibly referencing the Yugoslav wars, as well as the recent conflict in Egypt) is shown, and finally the clumsy creation of a world map in watercolor, with focus limited to the creator's hands. Through color, Ilić creates a link between past friendships, the contemporary struggle of immigrants (as the background of the intertitles is also red), and past war realities experienced by both the Yugoslavs and the Egyptians. The final watercolor theme depicting the creation of a map of the world represents a unifying gesture that links all the narratives together, stating that the selected relations and events are intricately connected to all of us. This work articulated the artist's wish to surpass the existing normative and often imposed values and models of relationships, and to offer, through visual connection of different historical layers, an alternative quiet space of friendship and solidarity.



Bojan Fajfrić, "The Cause of Death," still from the video, 2015. Photo by Boris Burić. Image courtesy of October Salon.

Another work that mixed different temporal and historical strata was *The Cause of Death* (2015) by Bojan Fajfrić. This video piece is divided into five segments; each segment depicts the author in different circumstances, but all inevitably lead to his death. The antagonist in the video is a girl who fires the bullets that kill Fajfrić, but instead of speaking with their own voices, both actors are overdubbed with audio segments taken from famous films of the Yugoslav Dark Wave, and the segments of video are titled according to the leads of these films, respectively Jimmy, Jugoslava, Milena, Tom and Iva. The understanding of Fajfrić's work is conditioned by the knowledge of this particular cinematography, as its ideological and historical significance are the points of reference here: the Dark Wave, with its pessimistic narratives often ending with a tragedy, was a subversive element within the general optimism and film practices of the 1960s and '70s in Yugoslavia. By bridging the temporal distance between past and present, *The Cause of Death* takes the critique of the neoliberal turn in the former Yugoslavia, exemplified in the tragedies of its protagonist, to a present moment where the consequences of such unfinished ideological positioning are still present. The artist seems to contend that such "bullets" from the past can still kill. The past seeps into the present and often continues to define our existence.

In his conceptual framework for the Salon, Elliott asserts that art (which, being ostensibly autonomous and powerless, must speak the truth) is often held out as being in direct contrast to politics (which, in this comparison, does not).⁽⁴⁾ Yet in considering the examined work, it is impossible to disentangle these two forms of human endeavor; just as they were explored throughout the Salon, art and politics have always been engaged in a complex and volatile love affair. Whatever ideal world is presented by an artwork, the underlying worldview is conditioned by its contemporary context and historical legacies. Thus love, as the theme of the Salon, was represented in multifarious forms – but never in the restrictive form of pure emotion. Instead, values such as freedom, solidarity, and empathy emerged from the assembled works to critically question what is the politics of love today, and ultimately what art must do in order to play a meaningful role in "our age of hate."

For another review of the biennial, see: "56th Belgrade October Salon" by Greg de Cuir, Jr.

1. David Elliott, "Love in an Age of Hate," *The Pleasure of Love, Transient Emotion in Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue (2016), 23. [back]

2. Ibid., 9. [back]

3. David Elliott, "Concept," *The Pleasure of Love*, official webpage of the Belgrade October Salon, available at: <http://oktobarskison.org/concept-2/> (accessed on 3 October 2016). [back]

4. Ibid. [back]