

From: Bratko Bibič »Hrup z Metelkove: tranzicije prostorov in kulture v Ljubljani«, Mirovni inštitut, 2003, strani 215-223. (Bratko Bibič: The Noise From Metelkova: Ljubljana Spaces and Culture in Transitions. Published by the Peace Institute, 2003, in Slovenian with English summary, pages 215-223.)

(INSTEAD OF) SUMMARY

The initiative to relocate the (former Yugoslav) Army from the barracks on Metelkova (i.e. Metelko Street) in Ljubljana and to convert the premises in the center of the city into a cultural, art, social etc. ex-center ("The Cell", the "Project Metelkova" in 1989-90); the foundation of the Network for Metelkova (1990-96), whose operations united several hundred group and individual actors of various statuses from heterogeneous fields of art, culture and socially *engagé* movements; the seizure of the barracks complex after an attempt (contrary to the previous political decision and illegal) at its demolition (1993); the unremitting efforts of the numerous actors in the face of dire conditions and an increasingly indifferent or downright hostile environment (1993-95); finally, the breakthrough from the imposed isolation, followed by an upsurge of activities, programs, projects and publics in the recent years – these are the milestones in the turbulent ten years of existence of Metelkova City as a re-concentration of energy, spiritual reconstitution and material realization of views in the artistic and cultural, political and social production in Slovenia and Ljubljana in the 1990's.

Artistic and (sub)cultural practices have been one of the pillars, and the people involved in them the majority actors and driving force of the ongoing project of the Metelkova army barracks conversion in all the stages of the process. This is quite understandable given the fact that their “struggle for space”, including the almost lacking working facilities such as art studios, was one of the crucial arenas of the struggle for “real”, not only imaginary “space for the alternatives”, representing freedom in art, culture, and politics of the 1980’s in Ljubljana. All the events related to Metelkova City as such a “real space” should not be understood merely in the narrow terms of art and culture. Due to the frequently crucial role of the “alternative scene”, of subcultures, subpolitics and new social movements, such as the pacifist movement and the coming-out movement of gay and lesbian minorities, the initiative of the Network for Metelkova was seen as one of the key social initiatives in the process of democratization and pluralization of the (urban, political, cultural) public in Slovenia in the 1980’s, as a “touchstone” for the potential of the so-called “civil society” to “maintain democracy” as Slovenia and Ljubljana entered the “transitional” 1990’s. Were the initiative to fail, that would have been a “bad omen” for the future of democracy in Slovenia.

Urbicide

“Architecture is war. War is architecture.” (L. Woods)

The collapse of the Iron Curtain brought in its wake an atmosphere of joy and a belief that great innovations were possible; the “real utopia” of the Metelkova barracks conversion acquired the status of a pilot project, part of a comprehensive initiative to demilitarize both the city of Ljubljana and Slovenia. The Network for Metelkova was “the most forceful element” of the “utopian campaign” of SOVA (Slovenija odpravi vojaški aparat – Slovenia Abolishes the Military Apparatus). The project of demilitarizing Slovenia, instigated by the (new social) peace movement, enjoyed widespread public and political support in the late 1980’s, i.e. the period before the outbreak of war in former Yugoslavia. Converting the army barracks on Metelkova into a “demilitarized zone” at the time the initiative occurred (1989-90) should “thus be seen as an overture to the symphony of ‘magical transfiguration’ of everything military into civil, social, peaceful and cultural, as an overture to Ljubljana as a demilitarized zone of peace and cultural wealth, as an overture to Slovenia devoid of armed forces and pursuing a global and active policy of peace.”

The Yugoslav Army supreme command for Slovenia, whose headquarters were in the Metelkova barracks, was one of the final links in the transfer of the order received in June 1991 from the high command in Belgrade that, for the first time in post-WW2 Yugoslavia, the regular army should actually leave the barracks to uphold the nominally still non-aligned socialist federative, but rapidly disintegrating, Yugoslav society and state in the wake of globalisation. A series of wars, starting with the ten-day armed conflict in Slovenia, which snowballed as it progressed south and southeast and was very recently still not over yet (Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia), overtook the project of demilitarizing Metelkova, Ljubljana, and Slovenia, just as it did numerous other similar peace initiatives in Europe and elsewhere. The Peace Institute, which succeeded The Movement for the Culture of Peace and Nonviolence, the initiator of demilitarization, spent the early 1990's "in an atmosphere which contrasted strikingly with that of the late 1980's".

"The Ljubljana Berlin Wall Falls!"

(the title of a front-page article reporting the attempt at demolition and the subsequent seizing of Metelkova in the leading Slovenian daily Delo, September 12, 1993)

Some time after the Yugoslav army left Slovenia and vacated the barracks on Metelkova (1991), on a certain September night in 1993, "unknown perpetrators" started to illegally pull down some of the buildings in the north part of the complex; that same night members and sympathizers of the Network for Metelkova occupied the complex as an act of civil disobedience. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina had by that time already escalated into an all-out rampage of destruction, and the sight of ruins on the site of the former Metelkova barracks on the morning of September 11, 1993, triggered in the disbelieving observers almost inevitable associations with the contemporary media images of ruins in Bosnia, of houses, public and infrastructure buildings completely or partly demolished, punctured by shells, blasted away by planted explosives ... The two images intertwined "in situ" when soon after the takeover of Metelkova the attic of the former military prison hosted the exhibition "Urbicide", which followed step by step, with large-format documentary black-and-white photographs the destruction of Mostar simultaneously as it occurred.

By resorting to radical destruction implied in the demolition of the buildings on Metelkova, which had by a previous political decision of both the town and state authorities been allocated to the Network for Metelkova, the first post-socialist

(executive) municipal authorities opted for a brutal and antagonistic advancement of their narrow/reductive ideological, political and, in terms of real-estate, speculative interests. This forced also the other side to take more radical action for a "other image" of the city; by counter-seizing and actively using (in terms of program and production) the partly demolished buildings and the open spaces and by itself doing construction work to "rebuild" the premises, it offered resistance – directly in space – to the ruthless abuse of power. The demolition itself and the actions of the town hall which followed the occupation of Metelkova were ample proof that the progressive intellectual concentration and accumulation was met by equally increasing repression, that the concentration of difference at Metelkova after the seizing of the complex acquired a 'frightening' power in the eyes of municipal authorities precisely because of the specific space caught in an urban-architectural *socius* which also functioned as a material *factum* and not just an intellectual structure. Metelkova City became "a nightmare of the municipal authorities in Ljubljana", acquiring and never again shaking off the reputation of being dangerous, because it has never been under any (in)direct control of the structures of authority and capital, because it still is an autonomous field of urban artistic, cultural, social, (sub)political public life and creative production.

The Ljubljana New Urban Frontier

The Metelkova Project, which saw itself also as a town planning project for the "reconstruction of Ljubljana", was recognized as the most explicit and thematically extensive vision of "urban culture" of that time in Ljubljana and also Slovenia, as a project of "spontaneous creation of a different urban space", which had the potential to become a paradigmatic example of postmodern spatial practice in post-socialist Ljubljana. After the demolition of buildings which were in a fairly good condition of repair when the Yugoslav Army left, Metelkova City transformed in the eyes of urban planners into a "degraded urban area of military type". Currently, the local political leaders link the rebuilding and renovation of the degraded urban area of Metelkova City with extensive, both ongoing and planned, reconstruction and restoration of old buildings and construction of new ones in the neighborhood, which is fast becoming a gentrified residential district. The prosperous inhabitants of the recently constructed apartment buildings in the immediate vicinity would, on the not-in-my-back-yard principle, instead of Metelkova City, this "Ljubljana Bronx ghetto" – a topological metaphor that is otherwise used for another, ethnically mixed and socially segregated part of town – rather see a "park of culture", a Ljubljana Greenwich Village as it were. Seen from the perspective of

powerful strategic, political, investment, social and symbolic interests, Metelkova City is the place of the “new urban frontier”, the place of the “gentrification frontier”. The perimeter thoroughfares are to be broadened and landscaped (turned into “boulevards”), voluminous, often mega-plex and multiplex architecture is to be incorporated, and the area of Metelkova is to become a representative part of the Ljubljana city center. In 2000, a plan for constructing a new “academy multiplex” was incorporated into this vision of urban repossession, a multiplex which would unite under its roof the three Slovenian academies – of fine arts; of music; and of theater, radio, television and film – and would be located on the site of the present Metelkova City, which is being eradicated from the current awareness of the state capital – and also from the physical, material, functional spatial and corporeal presence of the city – because it is the opposite of “representative”. Representative points of the city and state, however, no longer hold interest for contemporary (public) art, which does not wish to represent the power of the state, the success of a “well managed” and “beautiful city” policy and/or the spectacular power of capital; it is far more interested in critical, analytical, also subversive attitudes to the complexities, contradictions and conflicts of urban space and life, where the survival strategies of artists and numerous other inhabitants are a vital necessity.

Holes in the Wall

“Picture a building going through the process of transformation. First it is big and ugly and half-torn down, just waiting to be completely demolished. Then it is interesting, our eyes view it in a way in which they normally view a work of art.” (J. Ljubičič, the Alcatraz gallery, the Stable, Metelkova City)

When Metelkova was pushed to the demonized margin of the social conscious, the artists working there gradually came to the conviction that, contrary to the urbicidal town planning of politics, developers and investment capital, it was not necessary to pull anything down, but merely to restore. The “degraded environment” of Metelkova, including or perhaps best represented by the building called the Stable (Hlev), became the subject of spontaneous and uninhibited social, urban, artistic recycling of space as a medium, as an object or even as a ‘material’ manipulated by the language of art.

The idea of “renovating” the Stable by “preserving” the holes, these physically perceptible consequences of the commenced but never completed demolition of the building, can first be found in the context of the Metelkova Development Plan (1994-95).

The MDP, which tapped on the participatory principles of “community architecture” and was headed by K. Kaufman, a New York architect seasoned in the squats of Brooklyn and Manhattan, reads: “The holes [made in the process of demolition] will be incorporated into the facade design.” One method of “preserving” the “holes” in the facade was used at the time MDP was still in its draft stage (1994). The larger gaps in the north wall of the Stable were filled in to enable the functioning of a bikers’ club “MC Eisenkreuz”, and the facade finished with a coat of light paint on which the outlines of the now filled-in “holes” were rendered in sgraffito. In the summer of 1997, as a spontaneous reaction to an unsigned and undated order issued by the (new) municipal authorities to complete the demolition work, mosaics began to take shape on the damaged, hole-ridden facades of the south wing of the Stable. In their work, an international colony of young artists proceeded from a very simple idea: If the endangered facades were protected by artistic mosaics, the proposed ultimate demolition of the Stable might be obstructed. The transformation of Metelkova and the Stable along the line “army barracks – partly demolished deserted ex-barracks – squat” thus proceeded to “a work in progress”, an interrelationship of artistic and useful functions, a synthesis of construction and art work which has yielded – and is still yielding – the current “image of the Stable” and of numerous other premises at Metelkova. “The specificity of this space, its history, and above all the nature of its new residents have transformed the former barracks into a contemporary forma viva.” And the ugly wounds on the facades of Metelkova City “have become in a way funny, likeable...”

The holes in the facade of the Stable symbolize a given moment, the incident of demolition, and at the same time also the occupation of Metelkova as a (still) continuing act of civil disobedience which at a certain point put a stop to the demolition. With the takeover of the complex there opened up, and was gradually realized, the possibility of the appearance of a different, parallel counterspace of Ljubljana. The transformation of the damaged building into a public architectural installation by preserving and exploiting the holes “froze” the act of demolition into a “reminder”, i.e. that dimension of a “memorial” which activates the memory of exactly – though not solely – that act. In the *bricolage* of recycled waste, ready-made objects and cheap materials we can recognize the gesture of symbolic signifying with which the actors of Metelkova City invested the space of destruction with the opposite sense. The people responsible for the demolition of the Stable and other buildings of Metelkova City have never been called to account for their actions, despite the denunciation of “unknown perpetrators” and the subsequent police investigation which yielded enough clues for their identification. In its capacity as a public monument, the Stable is a “memorial to the unknown perpetrator”; it is a gesture aimed against erasing historical memory and at updating it. This memory obviously does

not pertain within the scope of the historical preservation of architectural (military) heritage from the end of the 19th century; but it does pertain to the field of current urban and political practices of public urban art, which in Ljubljana – where public commissions are an exception rather than the rule, and public art works stemming from free creative initiatives practically nonexistent – nobody ordered anyway.

Rats, Ax & Trowel on the Square of No Historical Memory

The transformation of the Stable and other premises of Metelkova City marks the position and activities of the artists and other actors at Metelkova in a broad artistic and social context. Their practices are not limited to the field of fine arts, where they overstep the boundaries of the established norms in Slovene art and tap a wide selection from the traditions of avant-garde and contemporary artistic practices to the esthetics of subcultures and identity (sub)politics, whose fate the residents of Metelkova at least partly share and in conjunction with which they have created, primarily by designing the interiors of premises for public performances, a specific “Metelkova Style”; they also have a broader social background of explicitly existential overtones from which they draw their charge of social commitment and from which stems also the radicalness of their formal solutions which culminated with the show the artists from Metelkova City staged in the Ljubljana ŠKUC Gallery (1997), exhibiting trapped live rats.

Owing to a remake of the activities of the several hundred year old German traveling artisans’ guild “Axt und Kelle” (Ax & Trowel), which discontinued its operations only during the time of nazism, refusing to be folded under its corporatist wing, forty young German and Swiss masons, carpenters, sculptors ... of both sexes spent the long, hot summer of 2001 doing voluntary work to alter yet again the “image of Ljubljana” in Metelkova City. They built a monumental awning over the entrance to the Stable, which in addition to the “Alcatraz” gallery now houses also the “Trough Mess” (Menza pri koritu), a hall primarily dedicated to stylistically extremely varied concerts of “off” music, where toward the end of 2000 a punk group “Ratos de Porao” from Sao Paulo performed, thus establishing a contingent “rat bridge” between Sao Paulo and Metelkova City. “The Arc of Triumph” is the ironic name of the canopy built over the open hearth outside the theater-club Gromki; outside, asylum seekers cook and barbecue over an open fire, while inside international experimental concerts of the program Dephonia take place, as well as anti-copyright screenings of films, low-budget, cabaret-type theater performances, theoretical lectures, political debates about utopistics at the Workers’ Punk University, about modern

pop music ... A granite obelisk bearing the inscription “SEDEŽ U.Z.I.” (B.F.I. HQ – Bureau for Intervention Headquarters), erected the day after the incident, is dedicated to the morning of August 1, 2001, when a large number of police stormed Metelkova, looking for the non-existent headquarters of the anti-globalist group and for evidence of a conspiracy against the New World Order which the anti-globalists were ostensibly plotting in the post-Göteborg, post-Genoa Ljubljana. The obelisk is a kind of public monument to the real utopia of arcana; in an unmistakable “Metelkova Style” reversal, the unveiling of the finished work of “Axt und Kelle” on the last day of August 2001 was accompanied by a brass quintet from the Slovene Police Orchestra and they simulated the ceremonial fanfares also next to the “B.F.I. HQ” obelisk. September 11 was drawing near, and with it the 8th anniversary of the takeover of Metelkova and the subsequent re-building of Metelkova City.

First published as a preface to the catalogue in: Art Center Metelkova mesto, Slovenia, XXV Bienal de Sao Paulo (March 23 - June 2, 2002) - Iconografias Metropolitanas, City Art Museum, Ljubljana 2002