

Artificially Scarcity and Art

Only a cemetery can be transformed into a complete museum, rather than museums of rare objects, as is the case today. Only museums that resemble cemeteries constitute memories of all people, without any exceptions, not just those who are important; only cemetery-museums create – Nikolai Feodorov (Николай Фёдорович Фёдоров).¹

Art, with its inherently subjective and speculative nature, resembles the speculativeness and relativism of the value of capital. Strict policies of ownership and management of works of art cannot follow the development of information and communication technologies. Collections of art works with limited access become public archives, and the accumulation of art works loses the aura of social status and bears the uneasy mark of private entrepreneurship and financial speculation.²

In art history there are examples of practices focused on a critique of commodification and hyper-productivism in art, and also on a critique of the institution of the art market and the mediatory role of dealers in the accumulation of art works, in terms of an investment which can potentially increase their financial value. The dematerialisation of art through conceptual art and the “new artistic practices” of the 1960s and 1970s, and their breakthrough into everyday life, unfolded through a shift away from the market paradigm and the gallery environment of high art. However, this extrainstitutional artistic practice left

¹ Fedorov, N. F. *What Was Man Created For? The Philosophy of the Common Task: Selected Works*. Koutiassov, E.; and Minto, M. (eds.), Lausanne, Switzerland: Honeyglen/L'Age d'Homme, 1990.

² [Introductory part of the opening text of the conference *Umetničko delo. Akumulacija i dostupnost [Work of Art. Accumulation and Accessibility]*, Lukić, K. and Nikolić, G. (eds.), The Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina, December 2010.

*behind material traces of its critique which command a high market value today and are part of the great collections of museums, galleries and private collectors, and also of institutionalised historical narratives. The reproducibility of certain art media – among them digital art, film and video – raises the question of the exclusivity of ownership and use of these contents within institutional and extrainstitutional frameworks. This question became even more acute with the Internet revolution during the 1990s and campaigns for free software and free culture after the year 2000, and also due to the increased presence of open on-line video archives which, by affirming the values of networking, communication and creative cooperation, change the meaning of the notion of the authorship and ownership of works of art.*³

The common denominator of conceptual art is the aspiration to overcome the material limitations of the picture, sculpture or other object-related art. In the period after World War Two, the triumphant return of abstract art in the West, through a series of exhibitions in Western Europe, organised by New York's MOMA, led to the quick entry of avant-garde abstract art in the art market of the 1950s. The commodification of the Cold War *Weltschmerz* of abstract expressionists, and generally the development of the post-war art market, soon led to a crisis of object-related art and increased the presence of various artistic practices that primarily strove to avoid the limiting character of object-related art. Various dematerialisation strategies were employed; the practices of historical avant-gardes were rediscovered; the borderline between art and life, art and politics, was explored. The radical character of the abstract pictorial avant-garde was lost in the market subsumption of abstract art, when even *Weltschmerz* was no longer of any help. As early as the 1950s, art tendencies that would later culminate in conceptual art and a new artistic practice already reappeared.

Analysing the book *Symbolic Economies* by Jean-Joseph Goux, Anthony Iles and Marina Vishmidt link Karl Marx's scheme of the development of a general equivalent with the discovery of forms of representation in the domains of art, literature and language. Goux is of the opinion that the modalities of signification and capitalist systems of exchange develop along parallel lines. Goux describes the tendency towards abstraction within the

³ Ibid.

framework of capitalist exchange and the tendency towards *dematerialisation* in art as two sides of the general crisis of representation, underlined by crises of value forms that can be exactly determined in historical terms (occurring in 1919, 1920 and 1970). Each crisis marks the limit of the ability of the existing system to represent real world goods through money, and in each of the above cases a way out of the crisis was found in the broadening or increasing abstraction of monetary forms. To put it more simply, movement towards abstraction in art and movement towards abstraction in the monetary domain overlap.⁴

Capitalist exchange is the mediation of the totality of production through a general or universal equivalent – money/gold. Money, therefore, is the measure that de-forms everything by quantifying it. Iles and Vishmidt claim that *the urgent withdrawal of gold standards by Britain, Germany and USA during World War Two coincided with the crisis of representation in art, the result of which were “readymade” and “automatic forms”, which brought artistic representation and economic exchange into an awkwardly conspiratorial relationship.*⁵

Art is simultaneously an innovator of forms of representation – by way of extending the boundaries of what can be represented and, occasionally, of its abolition – by way of avoiding equivalence and upsetting the order of measure. Art as a special commodity rebels against its status of commodity, demanding a revaluation of all values. Art and money are speculative goods; art relies on the reputation of the artist, whereas money relies on the reputation of the state. As such, just like credit notes, art constitutes betting on the future, which does not necessarily pay off: *Art works take a loan from a practice that has yet to occur, and no one knows whether their credentials are backed in any way whatsoever.*⁶

⁴ Anthony Iles & Marina Vishmidt, “Uposli sve što ti dođe pod ruku [Employ Whatever You Lay Your Hands on]”, Ćurčić, B. and Nikolić, G. (eds.), *Labor & Leisure: Umetnik i (ne)rad*, The Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina, 2012 (forthcoming).

⁵ Ibid.

Accumulation

In the 1960s and 1970s, a critique of the art market appeared in the West, while in Eastern Europe there hardly existed anything in the way of a contemporary art market. Over time, in the West, despite the attempts of a considerable number of art scene protagonists to keep conceptual practice outside the market, a part of the production of art works, especially their documentation, the so-called ephemeralia, started circulating through the system of sales galleries and auction houses, which Lucy Lippard was one of the first to write about.⁷ On account of a lack of a structured art market system in Eastern Europe, this practice was, to a greater or lesser degree, documented and represented through a system of public institutions, museums and galleries, but that art was generally not treated as a commodity.

An appreciable accumulation of 1960s and 1970s conceptual art in the region of the former Yugoslavia began after 2000, when several serious private collectors and collection houses appeared; on the one hand, they already possessed sufficient knowledge on the practice of conceptual art, and on the other, they were in a position to effect the initial accumulation of art works and were able, through a small investment, to purchase works at a low price, often directly from the authors themselves. In view of the fact that the value of this art and these works has been increasing over the past decade, one can say that, in some cases, a profit of up to 1000% on the investment was achieved within the space of just a few years. In the future, the trend appears to be that the price of certain works by certain authors will increase just as much again, provided that the initial accumulation phase is brought to a close and that the ownership passes from the authors to the third persons. Parallel with this, the process of the valorisation of the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s is unfolding. On the one hand, collectors parasitize the energy and work of public institutions whose task it is to valorise and communicate cultural heritage, or sometimes finance research into and the valorisation of the recent art history of Central and Eastern Europe.

The majority of authors who were active in the 1960s and 1970s have been marginalised in various ways, while some have even been subjected to political persecution. Even though it

⁷ Lippard, Lucy, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, 1997.

may provisionally be said that they were *rehabilitated* in the 1990s, amidst the storm of transition there simply did not exist a social consensus to historicize this practice, especially under the circumstances of the specific wartime *transition* of the countries coming into being from the former Yugoslavia. When the initial accumulation of capital during the wartime 1990s came to an end, and when this capital was in a position to participate in the accumulation of conceptual art after 2000, the protagonists of conceptual practice were marginalised socially, and even on the cultural scene as well. The collapse of the state system of buying up works of art and the absence of structural research of that period resulted in a situation in which the majority of works, documentation, ephemeralia, were owned by the authors, due to a lack of broader interest in those works. In other words, the situation was conducive to buying those works at the lowest price possible, with a relatively low degree of risk, for market research had already been conducted sufficiently to enable investment. Such research was conducted either directly on behalf of collectors or indirectly, through rare instances of the valorisation of conceptual practice in the 1990s and after the year 2000.

As a rule, private collections are not presented to the public as investment projects, while the situation in the West is somewhat more transparent in that respect. They are presented as cultural capital, the preservation of the national heritage, often as cultural events of the first order. Occasionally, these collections are presented in museums of contemporary art and public institutions, where an additional capitalisation of sorts occurs, increasing the value of the given collection, and this value increase is often not directly connected with individual works forming a part of this collection, but constitutes an increase in the symbolic capital of the collection, that is to say, the collection is culturalised and thus becomes part of the cultural heritage.

In the post-socialist milieu, two concepts of accumulation exist (this classification does not apply solely to the post-socialist milieu). One is the concept of cultural heritage, a typical product of the European nineteenth century and cultural identity; such collections are publicly owned and are located in important institutions, and in practically the majority of the cases the actual collections and works are public property, even though they were acquired from private collections in various ways, whether in the form of a gift received from the owner or by way of expropriation and nationalisation, typical of post-socialist countries. This concept of

accumulation, even though it functioned in various social systems, essentially did not constitute a departure from the nineteenth century national (bourgeois) logic of representation.

The other concept of accumulation is a privately owned collection, in which case the actual motives for accumulation are always immediately apparent. As a rule, such collections are more recent in origin, even though they constitute the spiritual inheritors of the pre-WW2 bourgeois accumulation. Communicating with the public, the owners and managers of those collections manifest knowledge and sophistication, and a passion for art is also valued. In the case of more specifically profiled collections, for example, those dealing with avant-garde art, there are occasional aspirations towards a less restrained presentation of the given collection to the public, that is, to present the actual collection of avant-garde art as *avant-garde art*, thus ensuring legitimacy within the target group.

To the majority of conceptual artists, object-related art was something foreign and undesirable, whereas they treated documentation primarily as documentation, not as a potential commodity fetish. At worst, the documentation possessed the character of the so-called cultural capital. But as cultural capital contains the abstractness of capital, at a given moment it can easily become equal to financial capital. Just as, during the 1970s and 1980s in the West, works' documentation and ephemeralia got commodified and began circulating on the art market, a similar process occurred in the countries of the former Yugoslavia in the period after the year 2000. A direct experience of initial accumulation occasionally resulted in emotional shocks in artists. If one bears in mind that some protagonists of the Novi Sad avant-garde of the 1970s ended up in prison on account of their activities, that some of them left the country, that some were forbidden to get employed, that many were under pressure, and that the lives of many, without sounding pathetic or resorting to the cynicism characteristic of today, were made difficult to say the least, what does it look like, after so many years, to meet the financialization machine head-on, especially in the guise of initial accumulation? How does it feel when, after such a long time, memories, attitudes, struggles, principled views and loves turn into operationalisations of financial capital? Does the final, long-awaited valorisation of the former artistic practice appear not as a perhaps wished-for social valorisation, but as simple cold subsumption? In some cases, especially of artists marginalised until then, financialisation actually represented a handshake, a warm embrace and recognition. Even though the emotionality of financialisation is, as a rule, brief-lasting, that moment

resembles the moment of becoming indebted. A momentary pleasure looks like eternity, and pleasure is inevitably accompanied by guilt.⁸

Artificial scarcity

In reproductive art (graphic art, photography, film, video, digital art), and especially in digitalised reproductive art, the cost of producing copies is close to zero, and in point of fact, the principle of abundance has been realised (subject to access to appropriate hardware, software, electric power and the Internet). For reproductive art to be dealt with in the art market, conditions had to be established that would enable an increase of profit in the course of circulation of art works. In view of the low production cost of copies in reproductive art, and the fact that it is almost non-existent in the case of digital reproductive art, and taking into consideration that their distribution is easy, the question that arose was: what is the interest of a buyer of art works when it comes to purchasing a reproductive art work? What is the interest of the buyer in a situation when such a work is accessible to everyone?⁹

The model employed by artists in the West, in collusion with collectors, was to create an artificial scarcity of their own products on the market. Thus they introduced editions that gained in importance with the appearance of video art, and the same model is being attempted in the realm of digital art. Having made an arrangement with agents and galleries, artists would limit the number of copies of their works (for example, by setting the limit at 10 *original* copies), and sometimes they would even establish a hierarchy among the limited

⁸ For more details on debt and on the common etymology of debt and guilt, see David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Melville House, New York, 2011.

⁹ A well-known example is that of Michel Auder, who, when Portapak appeared on the market, started producing video works without limiting the number of copies. He later sold a video work on his wife Cindy Sherman for only 100 dollars; when, in the course of communicating with a museum, he increased the price and demanded the sum of 1,200 dollars for a work to be exhibited in the said museum, he was told that the price he asked was too high, whereupon he replied: *Is there anything on museum walls that costs 100 dollars?* Cf. <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/02/15/arts/an-uncertain-market-for-video-art.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

number of copies. A certain number of copies would be signed by the artist, and they would command a higher price, usually being fewer in number than the unsigned ones. During *the Golden Age* of video art, that is, in the 1980s, there was almost a consensus in the mainstream art circles to the effect that the existence of an *illegal copy* was tantamount to a criminal offence, even though it was easier than ever to copy a video cassette. An artificial scarcity was sometimes created by limiting the number of screenings, so that a given video work was limited to, for example, 10 screenings in the whole world during a calendar year.

Steven Shaviro claims that shortage, in theological terms, is equivalent to original sin. We cannot know abundance, for we have been driven out of Heaven: *In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken*. Shaviro claims that capitalism cannot bear its own abundance, that this is the key to Marx's theory of crisis. Capitalism creates abundance, which at the same time threatens the principle of scarcity, which is the essential meaning of capitalism. In other words, if the problem of shortage were solved, there would be nothing left to stimulate competition, and then the imperative of expanding and increasing production would become absurd. Faced with the possibility of abundance, capitalism must impose a state of shortage for the purpose of maintaining the system. Creating an artificial shortage of one's own work of art in this way is close to the manner of thinking of the economists Joseph Schumpeter and Friedrich Hayek, who do not regard the market as a force that establishes a balance in the distribution of resources, eventually providing everyone with as much as he/she needs, but as one that emphasises the unstable character of capitalism as *creative destruction* (Schumpeter), in constant flux and strengthened by despotic monopolisation rather than *perfect competition*.¹⁰

To Nikolai Feodorov, the Russian philosopher, futurist and mystic, the role of a Museum (and consequently that of a collection/archive) is the resurrection of every living being with the help of advanced technologies. According to Feodorov, museums should resemble cemeteries. *Only a cemetery can be transformed into a complete museum, rather than museums of rare objects, as is the case today*.¹¹ Interestingly enough, Feodorov

¹⁰ Shaviro, Steven, *Scarcity and Abundance*, <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=418>.

¹¹ Fedorov, N. F. *What Was Man Created For? The Philosophy of the Common Task: Selected Works*. Koutiassov, E. and Minto, M. (eds.), Lausanne, Switzerland: Honeyglen/L'Age d'Homme, 1990

published nothing during his lifetime; all his works were published posthumously, with the proviso that the publishers should renounce ownership rights and that the books should be distributed freely. He was against the ownership of books and ideas.

Digitalisation and communication open up the possibility for everyone (provided he/she has access to hardware, software, electric power and the Internet) to see works of art, not through the hierarchical star system in which only those artists who are at the top of the pyramid can communicate, but through a horizontal, equal starting position determined by archive policies (and even the economic concept of the long tail¹²). Naturally, search engine policies and archive policies have their own laws, and a premature promise of equality and *democraticness* is subject to both *visible* and *invisible* forces of archive management, but it is indisputable that the hierarchical pyramidal model of presentation of collections in which *the winner takes all* will no longer be able to function in that way. Ephemeralia and documentation assume the commodified character of the original of an art work in private collections and in those collections that are entitled to participate in market transactions with their works, that is, to sell them and buy new ones. Public museums (which mostly do not have the right to participate in the market contest), even though they contribute to the general financialisation of conceptual art through the digitalisation of art works and documentation, remain one step ahead of private collections, which still tend to mystify the specific content of their own collections. Public institutions, even though their room for manoeuvring is fairly limited, in this way at least partially relieve the effects of the warm embrace of financialisation, which at one point seemed to be the only one there was.

¹² *The Long Tail or long tail refers to the statistical property that a larger share of population rests within the tail of a probability distribution than observed under a 'normal' or Gaussian distribution. (...) The term Long Tail has gained popularity in recent times as describing the retailing strategy of selling a large number of unique items with relatively small quantities sold of each – usually in addition to selling fewer popular items in large quantities. The Long Tail was popularized by Chris Anderson in an October 2004 Wired magazine article, in which he mentioned Amazon.com and Netflix as examples of businesses applying this strategy. Cf. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_Tail.*