Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy and Yugoslav Internationalism

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* **Introduction**

In this paper, broadly addressing art and ideology, my aim is to ask what are the ways in which cultural workers can position themselves in relation to ideological underpinnings of the system they live in. I will discuss this in the context of the former Yugoslavia and I will refer to the nation-building tools that are ‘soft power’ and 'cultural diplomacy'. I will speak of them in the context of what I have called ‘Yugoslav Internationalism’ during the Cold War period, a time when Edo Murtic was actively working and exhibiting as one of the key voices of socialist Yugoslavia on the international cultural scene. I should probably add that unlike most people in today's symposium, I will not speak about Edo Murtic specifically, but will simply raise questions about the relationship between art and power. My role today is, I believe, more contextual.

In response to the proposition of the introductory text of this symposium that in the poltical context of SFRJ *'free artistic gestures brought in the visual language of abstract expressionism and sybmolised social emancipation towards a more democratic society'* I would argue that indeed such gestures did symbolise social emancipation, but that the freedom for artists in Yugoslavia did not come from within the artwork itself as a fully autonomous process - the possibility of becoming fully immersed in colour, form, texture - as is suggested here, but that freedom came less literally, from the tensions, contradiction and the dynamism of constant renegotiation of art's role in society, art's relationship to power. This constntly shifting position and renegotiation of the value of art, between how authorities percieved art and the discourses within art, made for a dynamic and unique artistic environment unlike that in the Soviet Bloc's dissident or official artists, and unlike the Western commercially and market driven art discourses.

I also want to ask, from the perspective that the subject of Yugoslav socialism, was the worker, - for the purposes of this talk is the cultural worker - and I want to point to the role and working conditions of the cutural worker in Yugoslav socialism. I want to discuss notion of artistic freedom, but also to the question of value – where was vaue placed in terms of art, and artists labour? In other words, what political and socioeconomic conditions need to be in place to enable the 'free gesture' that we are speaking about here and what kind of 'freedom' does this free gesture enable? Who is free and how are they free?

**Yugoslav Internationalism, Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy**

Yugoslavia is an example of a country whose soft power and cultural diplomacy were extremely successful, given its releatively limited economic power, before such terms existed as prolific fields of academic research as they do now. The inherent understanding of culture as a vehicle for transmitting political messaging was central to reinforcing of its own socialist path, following its split from USSR in 1948. It is clear that Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power were key tools in the country's toolbox of international relations.

Coined in 1990 by the American foreign policy expert Joseph Nye, the soft power is defined as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideas, and policies. […] When you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction. Seduction is always more effective than coercion.”

Soft Power stands, of course, in contrast to ‘hard power’, the traditional tools such as weapons, munitions, armies and economic sanctions: the muscle and might of foreign policy. Nye formulated three pillars of Soft Power: - political values, - foreign policy and culture, all used to charm, persuade and befriend, whether by foreign aid and humanitarian relief, or teaching languages and showcasing culture.

When it comes to Cultural Diplomacy The political scientist Milton C. Cummings has defined it as *‘the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding’* This definition of Cultural Diplomacy incorporates a sense of reciprocity, openness and willingness to learn from others, although as a definition is strikingly apolitical.

SLIDE OF UN

For instance a recent research from King's college shows that they are used interchangeably to describe highly choreographed events, with attendees were carefully selected and seated on particular tables, to encourage and facilitate dialogue between specific individuals, with a view to forming strategic alliances at subsequent negotiations. They spoke of gathering, frequently centred on food and drinks, often referred to as ‘gastrodiplomacy’.(I am drawing on a recentresearch project by colleagues at King's college interviewing UN, Diplomats working at the **United Nations Office in Geneva)**.

Yugoslavia's cultural diplomacy operated across many levels and was closely tied to its political image (just think of Tito casting Richard Burton to play him in the film Sutjeska). For example, a prominent and dynamic cultural worker, Zoran Krzisnik, the enterpreneurial fouding director of the Ljubljana Graphics Biennial which started in 1955 argued that often it would be the politicians that would call him to organise an exhibition, when they needed to get in touch with their counterparts in other countries. For example he claimed in an interview with Beti Zerovc:

 *'Whenever a political crisis arose between Austria and Slovenia, the late Boris Kraigher would ring and say: “You know what, organise an exhibition, I need to meet up with their president...”[...] We opened an exhibition, while the politicians resolved their problems. This, too, is part of curatorship, art management… ' acknowledging the embeddednes in politics within his own profession.*

**1961**

**SLIDE OF NON ALIGNED MOVEMENT**

Take for instance the year 1961, cited in relation to the exhibition Contemporary Art from the USA  held in Zagreb, was also a year with numerous significant political and cultural events across the country, that reflect the internationalism of Yugoslav political and cultural sphere. As the berlin wall started to be built, in Belgrade the first conference of the Non-Alignet Movement held in September The same year, the launch of the Music Biennial in Zagreb took place, where audiences could experience music by Cage, Stockhausen, Kagel, Pierre Schaeffer, performances by Charlotte Moorman, Nam June Paik etc. The first exhibition of New Tendencies was held in Zagreb, The first International Jazz festival was held in Ljbuljana. These manifestations provided platforms for an idea of international exchange that was core to the Yugoslav vision.

Yugoslavia’s founding principles, formed as a legacy of the People’s Liberation Struggle (1941 – 1945), encompassed the idea of art being a democratizing force with a central emancipatory role in the building of the new socialist state. These principles were envisaged, and communicated in ways that was aimed at making Yugoslavia's vision, the vision of each Yugoslav.

Stane Dolanc, one of President Tito’s closest advisors, wrote about the constitution of the subject in the country as being inextricably linked to the political rationality of self-management. According to Dolanc, Yugoslav governmentality meant that the goals of self-management would align with individual’s own goals. Dolanc wrote:

*Self-management is a specific form of social organization and a specific way of living which deeply affects the entire structure of one’s personality, and the personalities of all working people and self-managing citizens. Within the conditions and relations of self-management one’s entire consciousness changes, as do value systems, goals, morality, motivations, etcetera. Forms in which such changes occur in an individual are numerous and complex, and it is for this reason that a more profound engagement is needed of all scientific disciplines, which are directed towards the human being as an individual. (Stane Dolanc*, *Marxist Science and Social Praxis - Notebooks For Theory And Praxis Of Self-Management, 1978)*

**Autonomy and artistic agency**

So what to make of this alignment of social organisation and subjectivity? Thinking about culture from the perspective of the Soft Power Index (image of inde) - as one of many pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that makes up an external impression of a country - does art have any possibility of autonomy, of agency, to transcend this discourse and transform real social relations? What plausible ways might there be for artists to negotiate the issue of representation and to strive towards some forms of autonomy. Or is it just doomed and is an artist just a small player fitting into the bigger picture?

We know that the relationship between ideology and the possibility of autonomy has been theorised extensively, from the perspective that art is a way of seeing - it allows us to perceive the ideology from which it is born (Althusser), to Bourdieau's idea of the cultural field in which positions shift, but the field itself remains the same and Foucault’s approach that power is everywhere, diffused and embodied in discourse.

Victor Burgin has said that “the only imaginable non-political being is a totally self-sufficient hermit”,[[1]](#footnote-1) alluding to the impossibility of remaining independent of the wider system in which an artist operates. Politics is the space created when the dominant status quo is challenged and struggled against. A space created for those who have held no sanctioned platform or voice. He argues that: ‘politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part’ (Rancière, 1999).

 If all art is complicit to some extent with the superstructures within which it develops and operates, does even the most critical voice become muted when presented within the market driven ecosystem of biennials and exhibitions at the service of national iconography? Is non-participation the only possibility of autonomy?

Kosmaj image

One might argue that socialist modernism gradually relegated culture to a more illustrative role, as a form of ‘soft power’ for the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, as a way of delineating a clear opposition to socialist realism and the past affiliations with the Soviet Union, but I argue that the picture is more complex than this and to problematise this proposition. Here I propose a reading of artists’ diverse positions in and around 1960s as varied expressions of resistance to the severing of links with Yugoslavia’s founding principles.

The broad alignment of the political and artistic modernist visions, the attempts to reasses arts role, not through artists functioning as the mouthpiece of the political sytem as has often been suggested, but through certain utopian visions for a better society, were shared between the Yugoslav political utopias and artistic utopias. The critique that abstraction rendered what was once “ revolutionary” now “ bourgeois” (Denegri 2003, 177), using modern art to project a certain image in the world, is of course valid, but it is the resistances, ruptures – in the continous reassessment where the possibilities lie.

But whilst instrumentalisation of culture and the relegation to an illustrative role was indeed a major departure from the promise of the centrality of culture in Yugoslav society, this does not negate the utopian visions of individual artists, whether they were expressed through an alignment with abstract expressionism as is the case with Edo Murtic, or similarly Western-influenced pop declaration by Olja ivanjicki in 1962, or Dusan Otasevic;s return to craft in his Pop works, Gorgona's deliberatley opaque anti-magazine, and in the later generation's in the hippie anti-war collectivity of the OHO group, or the proto-feminism of Sanja Ivekovic – the dynamism of Yugoslav art lay not in a particular aesthetics, but precisely in the tensions and ruptures of the contradictions.

In summary, I argue that the multiple artistic positions, and expressions, amongst them abstract expressionism, in Yugoslavia of 1960s, did indeed usher in a form of free thinking, not through the artistic gesture itself, but through the possibilities that enabled a broad spectrum of practices – both those that could be called the 'semi-official' artist, those whose work was more representative of the general vision, and very different artistic voices to coincide. When we talk about Yugsolavia of this period, we often talk about 'contradiction' – for example Tvrtko Jakovina has written about a 'sczicofrenc state', 'ljiljaana kolesnik has written about 'conflicting visions of modrnity', I have organised a conference entitled 'feeding off contradiction', Branislav Dimitrijevic has written about the ''two parallel but conflicting forms of cultural logics' – the logic of Partisan asceticism and, on the other hand, utopian consumerism. Despite the country's overarching leaning towards abstraction, the tensions, contradictions and differences across the period are precisely what renders it a site of artistic freedom.

Taking from the title of this symposium: gesture and freedom, I conclude that the freedom in socialist modernism and its critiques lay in the many imaginaries of the role of art in society and the repeated critical reevaluation of the conditions of art production, via in the multiplicity of artistic positions. My argument is, therefore, that freedom lay not in a particular aesthetic response, such as abstraction (although it can be found there too), but precisely in the artistic freedom to occupy many divergent positions and keep reasessing the the role of art, or the cultural worker and to open up possibilities for art's social potential, moving attention away from the objects created. Unlike today in the globalised art scene, the dominant logic is the logic of the market, in Yugoslavia, where there was no art market, the multiplicity of voices were governed by the question of what can art be in society.

1. Victor Burgin, “Art, Common Sense and Photography”, in Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds., *Visual Culture: The Reader*, Sage Publications, London, 1999, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)