

Exhibiting as a Part of Art Work Production **by Milica Tomić, artist, Belgrade**

Milica Tomić was born in Belgrade in 1960.

1990 MA Academy of Arts in Belgrade

2008 PhD Candidate, Department of Interdisciplinary studies/Multimedia Art, University of Arts in Belgrade

2002 Founder and member of the Monument Group

Works and lives in Belgrade as visual artist, primarily video, film, photography, performance, action, light and sound installation, web projects, discussions etc. Tomić's work centres on issues of political violence, nationality and identity, with particular attention to the tensions between personal experience and media constructed images. Milica Tomić's has exhibited globally since 1998: Venice Biennale in 2001 and 2003, Sao Paulo Biennale in 1998, Istanbul Biennale in 2003 and Sidney Biennale in 2006, Prague Biennale in 2007, Gyumri Biennale in 2008.

Tomić's work was exhibited in a wide international context including Museum voor Moderne Kunst, Arnhem, Holland; Kunsthalle Wien, Austria; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; MUMOK- Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Austria; Fundacio Joan Miro, Barcelona, Spain; Ludwig Museum Budapest, Hungary; Malmo Konsthall, Malmo, Sweden; Palazzo Della Triennale Milano, Milan, Italy; Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade, Serbia; GfZK - Galerie fur Zeitgenussische Kunst, Leipzig, Germany; State Museum of Contemporary Art Thessaloniki, Greece; Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany; Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, Copenhagen, Denmark; Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, USA; Freud Museum, London, UK; KIASMA Nykytaiteen Museo, Helsinki, Finland; Nasjonalmuseet for Kunst, Arkitektur og Design, Oslo, Norway; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Holland; Museum MADRE, Italy etc.

Tomić is an author of numerous international art projects and workshops, as well as visiting artist at international institutions of contemporary art: NIFCA (Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art), Kuvataideakatemia/Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, Finland; Piet Zwart Instituut, Rotterdam, Holland; Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna, Austria and others.

Artist in Residence:

2006. International DAAD Artist-in-Berlin Programme, Berlin, Germany;

2004. International programme Artist-in-Residence, ArtPace, San Antonio, Texas, USA.

Thank you for inviting me. I am very glad that *Initiative for Architecture of Exhibiting* created and articulated a context in which a discussion on exhibiting architecture and arts became possible in Serbia.

This lecture will pertain to some experiences connected with exhibiting a work of art from the perspective of artists. I shall also deal with the problems, dilemmas and troubles that I encounter on a daily basis as an artist in connection with exhibiting a work of art. Mention will also be made of the educational project "How to Send a Message – how to produce a contemporary artwork step by step", and of the exhibition "How to End a Message", and the development of a model of cooperation between curators, artists and architects. This specific model of cooperation refers to the conceptualisation and production of a work of art, and also to the policy and strategy of exhibiting a work of art, both in technical-performative and in conceptual terms. The basic assumption of this cooperation as regards the policy and strategy of exhibiting is: one artwork, one exhibition policy and strategy.

Let us go back to the problems artists are faced with when it comes to exhibiting their works... In the course of working on an exhibition, as an artist I usually cooperate with the curator. In the Serbian language, the expression "curatorial practices" is still not used officially, but regardless of this, I shall gladly use it in the course of this lecture.

Curatorial practice? In the form that we recognise today, it only appeared in the 1990's. If we go back to the 1970's and 1980's, the term used at the time was "*Ausstellungsmacher*" or exhibition-maker, the best-known representatives of which were Kasper König, René Block, Harald Szeemann¹, etc. Their role within the framework of exhibition production referred to managing exhibition production, concept, the selection of artists and the display of artworks in relation to the exhibition space. The position of a curator is more complex by far: he/she provides the exhibition concept, sets the theme, establishes the theoretical platform of the exhibition, makes a selection of artists, articulates and interprets the concepts of their works in relation to the exhibition concept, develops and states the connections and relations established by the works, that is, specific artistic theoretical and political positions supported by the exhibition and the works themselves. A very important aspect of making an exhibition, of course, are the media wherein these works appear; here I do not refer to the technical medium only, but also to the conceptual framework of the artworks. The curator then works on the production of the discourse that the exhibition produces in a particular constellation in relation to the context in which it appears; he/she also works on exhibition organisation, the display and the architecture of the exhibition, and on communication with the artists featured.

The curatorial position is really extraordinarily complex and requires a varied and simultaneous engagement. In the 1990's there were very few educational and artistic institutions that featured curatorial practice studies within the framework of their educational system. Today, almost every museum, university, academy, features a course, studies or a department of curatorial studies. (As far as I know, in the educational system of Serbia there are no curatorial studies as yet.) However, as it turned out at the beginning of the 2000's already, the curatorial position or function is much too demanding and complex, and works much better when it is split into a number of segments. One of the essential segments is the very architecture of the exhibition, connected first of all to the concept of the works and the exhibition, and dealt with mostly by the curators themselves. In the cases when there do exist architects or, which is the worse variant, a technical sector that, unfortunately, merely "serves" the architecture of the exhibition, the curator is the only intermediary between the artists and the architects.

In the final phase of preparing an exhibition, following its conceptualisation, talks with the artists, the selection of works, etc., an artist cooperates very intensively with technicians, builders and workers "building" the exhibition. As far as the exhibition architecture and the team in charge of this segment of work are concerned, direct cooperation with us artists is not the usual practice... the curator forwards to us the ground plan of the venue, on some rare occasions we get photographs of the exhibition space... we try ourselves to deal with this and to influence the presentation of our work in space...

The architecture of the exhibition space undoubtedly influences the work itself... In the case of works that represent interventions in the architecture of the exhibition venue, the physical space, and also in the case of works exhibited in public spaces, for the most part connected with architectural and urban space, architecture assumes the decisive importance in the work, defines the work itself... Unfortunately, however, in most exhibitions architects do not feature at all. It is precisely the curators who, in cooperation with technicians, builders, etc., deal with the problem of space, minimally consulting the artists. In most exhibitions, including even the major biennials, the architecture of the exhibition is considered to be a technical matter. The work of artists is usually left at the mercy of decisions that are made in the course of cooperation between the curator and the architect, who, in the final analysis, take our requests into consideration, even though we never get complete insight into how our work will finally function in space, and unfortunately mostly attempt to adjust our work to the space being offered.

In the case of works exhibited in public spaces, mostly connected with architectural and urban space, where the exhibition architecture plays a great role, an architect participates only rarely. On the other hand, there are artists who themselves very intensely and very clearly resolve the issue of the space where their work is to be exhibited, and the exhibition architecture is subordinated to them; it is at this point, we can say, that the artist takes over the role of the designer or the architect of the exhibition, but unfortunately it only extends to his/her own work. Artists always focus on their own works only, on the production of their own space, ignoring the question of how that work will function in relation to the overall context of the exhibition and what kind of impact they will have on other works. This situation is usual for great international exhibitions, biennials, where artists altogether lose any kind of relation with the collective when it comes to exhibiting. There are projects specially prepared for venues under construction, artworks specially produced, through the mediation of curators, in the course of building some venue, which are on permanent display in that particular space. As regards my personal experience, in this case also, the curator acts as a mediator between the artist and the architect of the venue in question.

Many times I have experienced the architecture of an exhibition as entirely separate from its artworks, where architecture manifests a very violent attitude and the architect realises what is absolutely his/her own expression, as a response to the theme of the exhibition, considering this approach a creative, artistic contribution to the exhibition itself. I believe that the actual effect is precisely the opposite, that this approach, unfortunately, in the final analysis boils down to ignoring the works themselves, while the architecture itself becomes the focus of the exhibition, being shifted to the foreground, tiring and burdening the observer. The minimum requirement of each artist in relation to the exhibition architecture is to reduce architecture to the level of providing a framework for the artworks, in which case the architecture is subordinated to the function of the exhibition and the artworks.

However, the example of the project *"How to Send a Message – how to produce a contemporary artwork step by step"* does not presuppose any of the above-mentioned variants of the relations between the exhibition architecture and the artwork, but represents an attempt to develop a model of intensive cooperation that results in:

- an exhibition architecture which is a constitutive element of the work; which disappears in the work itself;
- the exhibition architecture becoming the architecture of the work itself.

What did the process of the project "*How to Send a Message*" consist of and how did it develop?

I started and designed this project within the framework of a workshop at the Art Academy in Vienna, in the class of Eva Schlegel in 2001. The work method and the thematic framework of the workshop were generated from the concept of a film made by the Belgian director Philippe de Pierpont and the dramaturge Ivana Momčilović in 1996. – *Whatever Happened to My Friends?* I participated in this film as one of the authors, responsible for one of the seven segments of the film. Thematically, the film dealt with the problem of a new generation of Yugoslav expatriates. The concept of the film, consisting of seven different short filmed stories, rests on the basic story that provides the film's framework: a young Belgian moves into a flat in Bruxelles, where he finds the forgotten documents and the private correspondence of Ivana, a girl who left her country, Yugoslavia, in 1991, and who lived in that flat before him. From the moment he moves in, day after day, he receives her mail, the filmed messages of her friends from Yugoslavia, currently displaced, living all over the world as immigrants. The message, of course, never reaches Ivana but the young man, unknown to her and her friends. But this "mistake", misunderstanding, universalises the private relations of Ivana and her friends, providing us with an opportunity to participate as viewers, and enabling private, intimate correspondence to become an artwork, in this case – a film. This structure of the film seemed to me an ideal model for a students' workshop.

I realised the workshop so as to help them reach their most intimate motives and obsessions, which would find a place in their work through the working process. The workshop thus provided a way of initiating thinking about work and the situation when they are blocked, when they have no ideas, actually, how to invest their most intimate inwardness and include it in the production of an artwork. The activation process consisted of a succession of individual conversations and of presentations of their achievements within the work group:

- the purpose of the first conversation was for the student to choose a recipient of the message, without thinking of the message itself;
- the purpose of the second conversation was to formulate a message, that is, the message was almost automatically created once the addressee was established; one could say that the addressee him/herself becomes the message, whereas the message itself becomes another name for the theme of the work;
- the third step was the moment when the students presented the

theme of the work in front of their colleagues and discussed the way in which they would deal with the theme, which meant that, through a discussion, they arrived at the medium in which the work would be realised.

In 2002., I started workshops at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade (the class of Mrđan Bajić) and the Art Academy in Helsinki (in addition to students from the Helsinki Academy, students from other Nordic countries participated as well), in the course of which I developed the working method employed in the Vienna workshop, defining it as an attempt to research the process of creation, production of an artwork and to make visible all the complexity of the relationship between the party commissioning the message, its sender and recipient in the sphere of contemporary art. Also, how to make visible and accessible, even for the purpose of a discussion, the actual steps, that is, all the phases of the gestation of an artwork. That is how the title of the project originated: *How to Send a Message – how to produce a contemporary artwork step by step.*

The NIFCA (Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art), which was then located in Helsinki, opened its door to this project, making it possible to include students with whom I worked at the Art Academy in Helsinki (from Reykjavik, Bergen, Trondheim, Stockholm, Helsinki), as well as students from Belgrade and Vienna. This presupposed joint and very intensive cooperation in a process lasted two years, which resulted in a great final exhibition in Belgrade. The meeting of the two groups, the Scandinavian and the Belgrade one, occurred in Helsinki, on the island of Suomenlinna, at the art residence of the NIFCA.

At the beginning of the workshop, the students presented their work so far, thus locating their place within the joint group, presented the context in which they worked and defined the social and political space in which they moved. In the second phase of the workshop, they presented the basic concepts of their future works. In the course of the discussion, in view of the fact that it turned out that the policy of their works and the policy of the context in which they worked, their historical and social background were precisely that which they did not manage to articulate and were actually not aware of. In view of the fact that their thinking in relation to the community within which they worked was self-evident, they never raised the question of the interpretation of that work within some other environment. I was of the opinion that the best way for the students to gain insight into the results of their work was to dislocate the production and the exhibition of the work from the space and the place where the idea of the work originated to a context that was entirely unfamiliar.

We decided to organise an exhibition in Belgrade entitled *How to End a Message?* In this phase of the work gestation, I introduced the question of the manner and the strategy of exhibiting the work. Involving architects in the discussion during the conceptual phase of the work production was supposed to initiate thinking about the manner of exhibition and to define the space where the work would be exhibited, thereby making the work display a constitutive part of the work, and to define the medium in which the work would appear. Within the Helsinki workshop, we invited the architect and architecture theorist Ljiljana Blagojević to participate. Soon afterwards we were joined by members of the current Belgrade branch of the architectural group Exeditio, namely: Nataša Ilinčić, Milica Lopičić, Davor Ereš and Marko Todorović.

In the Belgrade workshop, while we developed the first exhibition concepts of works for the exhibition "How to End a Message", the Art Director of the 2004 October Salon, Anda Rottenberg, included this exhibition as a separate, autonomous segment of the international exhibition. Therefore, "How to End a Message" was an entirely independent project, even though it was part of an international exhibition, not only in conceptual-production terms but also in exhibition terms as well.

The way in which we worked and developed the method and the relationship between architecture, exhibiting and work gestation was articulated into a working axiom: One work – one exhibition strategy and policy. At the Students' Cultural Centre Gallery, within the framework of the workshop, we arranged a working exhibition of proposals and thoughts of all the 25 participants. This exhibition was mounted by the artists, in cooperation with the architects (*shows slides*).

The proposals were permanently discussed, following which we made three pools with different tasks: one pool consisted of a group of architects managed by Ljiljana Blagojević; they discussed the proposed concepts, analysed them in production, material and spatial terms. The second pool was managed by myself as the project leader, and I analysed the work concept with the students individually, in relation to their immediate experience with the architects. The third pool was made up of two students whose role was to negate and bring into question the work concept of the other participants. The students had the opportunity of analysing their concept from all angles and to become certain of their decisions through a process of confrontation (*shows slides*).

The students who assumed the task of "critics" had another project, namely, to develop the strategies of communication with the public in the broadest sense and the manner of promoting and presenting the exhibition, and

also to present the process of creation of a contemporary work of art and make it accessible to each and every citizen who might be interested. Their task was to make the exhibition and the works exhibited visible and open to discussion in public spaces (*shows slides*)... that is to say, in a public and open space whose purpose is not related to exhibitions: streets, squares, cafés, green markets, spots where people gather in suburban areas and the surrounding settlements in the area around Belgrade (*shows slides*). At the end of this workshop, the result was a clear concept of each work, and also the method through which we would realise the architecture and the graphic design of the exhibition. Each work presupposed an entirely different approach, an absolutely specific own way of exhibiting, for the manner of exhibiting, in one sense, absolutely depended on the idea, and on the conceptual and technical medium in which the work was to appear; meanwhile, the task of the architects was... that was the initial phase of work... to tackle the problems of contemporary art, which may appear absurd, but this fundamental misunderstanding is often the cause of unsuccessful exhibition architecture. The Expeditio team absolutely had to deal with the problem and actively participate, reviewing each concept of the future work in terms of the very idea, and also in terms of how that idea was to be realised in terms of material and space (*shows slides*).

The result of this method of work is that the exhibition architecture greatly influences the actual concept and distribution of the idea of the work in question. In this way, the architecture and the design of the exhibition became a constitutive part of the actual work, so that we can say that the architecture and the display of the work disappear in the actual work. In the end, this cooperation leads to the final form, which we might define as the architecture of an artwork.

Now I'm going to show you several examples from the exhibition and examples of works that appeared within the framework of the exhibition. Twenty artists participated in the final exhibition, some of them joined forces and produced joint works. Even though eventually 20 students did participate in the exhibition while five of them did not manage to develop their work to its final form, their contribution to the entire process and the final exhibition was equally important and creative (*shows slides*).

(presents various works and shows slides) Artists/students: Jesper Alvaer, Arbeitsgruppen, Marko Crnobrnja, Dragan Đorđević, Minna Henriksson and Alexander Nikolić, Ann-Cathrin Hertling, Bjørn-Kowalski Hansen, Karri Kuoppala, Milica Ružičić, Dragan Rajšić, Miodrag Vargić, Perttu Saksa, Boris Šribar, Maja Rakočević, Darinka Pop-Mitić, John Mäkinen and Ivan Bon.

(shows slides) I'm going to end this lecture and presentation of students' works with a work entitled "Bench", which is paradigmatic in terms of production and exhibition, and will provide an example that will best present the manner of work I have been talking about until now. It is a work created by a group of three artists from Sweden – *Arbeitsgruppen*, which actually came into being in the course of the workshop. *(shows slides)*

The object of their work was a moving wooden staircase used for the disembarkation of passengers from ships onto docks, placed in the very centre of Stockholm *(shows slides)*. For years, this staircase had been the gathering point of local neo-Nazis, who used it as a bench. Around this "bench", then, there gathered skinheads and neo-Nazis, who left marks on the bench, thus leaving traces of their presence: from swastikas to various racist jokes and slogans...

The artists replaced the bench with a new one, a replica of the old bench, with no inscriptions upon it *(shows slides)*.

They took the old bench, written all over with messages of the "culture of neo-Nazism and racism", on a tour of European cities on the Stockholm-Belgrade route *(shows slides)*. Their project dealt with cultural exchange in the context of European states, actually with "exporting Swedish culture", a hidden and suppressed part of Swedish culture, which does not presuppose the dominant and allowed values; the aim of their project was to bring the dominant values into connection with what was hidden and suppressed.

The group rented a truck and embarked on a tour of Europe, in the course of which they exhibited the bench, an artefact of their local brand of Swedish racism *(shows slides)*.

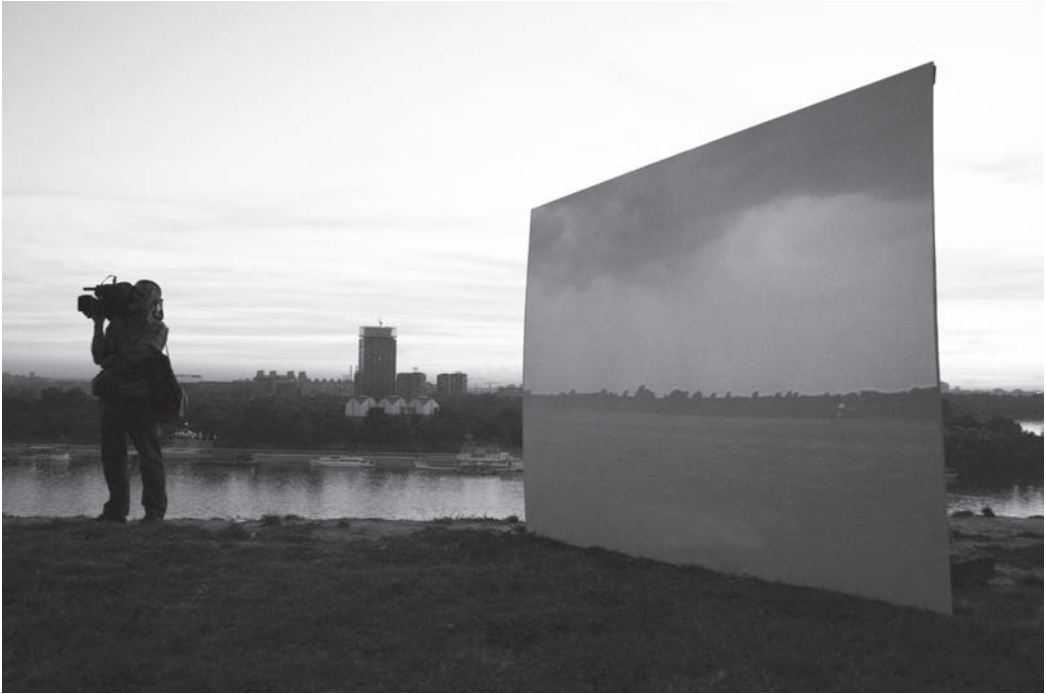
Let me go back briefly to their initial proposal before working with the architects. Their original intention was to produce a piece of furniture in the spirit of Swedish modernist design, or to take over an IKEA piece of furniture and write upon it, in a part of it not easily accessible to the eye, various racist jokes and signs... and then to exhibit this piece of furniture in Belgrade *(shows slides)*. Having gone through the entire work process, they actually understood the production and the exhibition space in a different way. They found an already existing object, and made the whole of Europe become their production and presentation space by dislocating the work from Stockholm to Belgrade. Then *Arbeitsgruppen* proposed to exhibit the bench in some public place in Belgrade that is a gathering point of the local neo-Fascists and skinheads *(shows slides)*. In the end, after a long discussion with all the participants of the workshop, especially the architects, the bench was placed inside the Kalemegdan Fortress, a park fortress, the oldest core

of the city, about which there is a consensus that it is the most beautiful place in the city, which affords the best view of the entire city, especially New Belgrade and the confluence of the two rivers, that is to say, a place overlooking "the West" (*shows slides*).

Therefore, the entire city affords the possibility of exhibiting, that is, fulfils the specific requirement that the exhibition place should entail the overlapping of the most beautiful spot in the city and the horrible contents of the objects being exhibited. Classical work on the display architecture, which presupposes locating the work inside a gallery or museum space has been disposed of in advance in this particular case, so that the architects actually participated in discovering the spatial equivalent in a public space that would correspond to the politics of the work itself. In other words, the architecture of the work's display was to locate the work in a phantasmagoric space of simultaneous beauty and horror, which confronted the architecture itself with the challenge of having to go beyond the confines of its craft and step into the area of the cognitive logic of the work itself.

An essential part of the work is a letter addressed to the Mayor of Belgrade, wherein *Arbeitsgruppen* members offer the bench as a donation to the city of Belgrade, so that this part of Swedish culture could be permanently exhibited within its public space. The Mayor declined the gift, and "Bench" eventually went on permanent display in the yard of the Centre for Cultural Decontamination, that is, the only place and the only institution that was prepared to permanently accept and display this object (*shows slides*). Within the framework of the exhibition, the work was exhibited in the Kalemegdan Fortress, and in the course of the opening ceremony the artists presented the work's journey from Stockholm to Belgrade (*shows slides*). They began their presentation at dusk, next to the bench, placed in the exact spot that offers the best view of "the West" in Belgrade, where they played the film depicting their journey from Stockholm to Belgrade (*shows slides*). Thank you very kindly indeed for your attention, if there should be any questions...

1. H. Szeemann often said he preferred the simple title of *Ausstellungsmacher* (exhibition-maker), but he acknowledged at the same time how many different functions this one job comprised: "administrator, amateur, author of introductions, librarian, manager and accountant, animator, conservator, financier, and diplomat."



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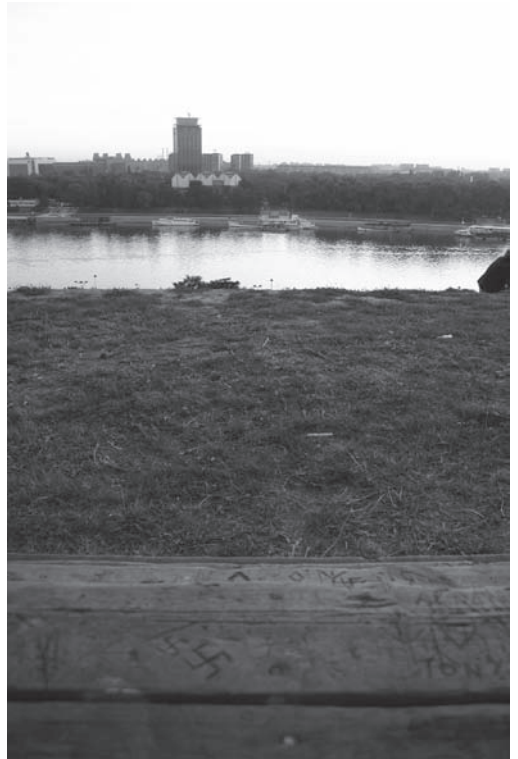
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