

IVAN GRUBANOV: ARTISTS AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

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It is raining again in Amsterdam (why does this still surprise me? by now I am supposed to be used to the constant weather changes...). I'm leafing through my sketchbook, listening to Arrow Jazz FM which is going to lose its license to air as I've heard recently... something to do with money and ... more money... and alternative radio stations... switching from one to another as soon as I hear a commercial jingle or a tune I do not like... If only everything in life was as easy to change and control as turning the dial on my old radio...

Change, a popular word among politicians and their followers these days... There was a time, not so long ago when I could not listen to radio or even engage in a conversation without hearing the name of Slobodan Milosevic. Times have changed. As Barthes and others have proposed, nothing can be created out of place and time, so how do artists respond to constant change I wonder. ¹

Social, economic and political turbulence and change can be experienced as overwhelming, uncontrollable events. This must have been excruciating in the midst of the latest Balkan War for Ivan Grubanov (1976, Serbia), who decided to illegally smuggle drawing material into the International Tribunal for War Crimes in The Hague during the trial of Slobodan Milosevic, and mark what he sees with pen and paper. The court cameras captured Grubanov's presence. Later these drawings, the videos and even trial entry tickets have made it into his project *Visitor*. ²

Grubanov's simplistic and quickly made narrative sketches of the trial scenes, two hundred in total, are his own way of dealing with the fallen authority and the political omnipresence of the trial in the life of his generation. Drawings are artist's manifesto - a refusal to identify with collective identity of any kind. Some of the artworks bare captures of questions and answers uttered by the prosecutors, judges or the accused. Capture in a drawing as shown here above-left says: "You said there were 90% Albanians in the city of Pec".

As much as drawings seem ambivalent toward the figure of Slobodan Milosevic - because the artist is avoiding any attempt to create aesthetically appealing artworks or even show the drawer's individuality, by absence of emotional, personalized line and by mimicking journalistic and archival recordings of historic events - these drawings are actually not ambivalent at all. They are sending a clear message: the artist is merely a witness of the historic trial, indexing and documenting the history as it reveals itself in front of his eyes, a visitor capable of self-control and therefore controlling the moment. But is this really the case? Is Grubanov in control of the moments in the court or is *he* captivated and controlled by them? Why has the artist visited the trial over the period of two years extensively? Maybe Grubanov poses an ethical question in the *Visitor* - one of forgiveness and action, as Charles Esche suggested. ³

All these and similar questions put the author and artistic practice at the centre of the artwork. Artistic practice can take many forms, it can be defined by technology and organised religion; it can be experimental or nomadic... Its unforeseeable flow and constant morphing from one form to another are part of its appeal and charm. Some artists feel the need to act as agents of change, or as agents of

human conscience, some are politically committed, the others are poetically inclined and so is their practice. Artistic practice can evolve, shift, expand or get stuck into repetition and mannerism.

Artists need to control and change the world we live in, up to a certain extent anyway, otherwise why would they even bother? As agents of change, artists can initiate change in the broad sense of the word. Sometimes a sheer record of streaming reality can be an act of significant change, as Grubanov has shown. The thing is... turbulent age of dense *Zeitgeist* brings a lot of “noise” and “debris” with it, making it even more difficult for the individual caught up in a horrific gravity force of mass media, tradition and habits, to come to a quick judgment of a situation, to scale the events in order to make decisions, to grasp the world. So the idea of artists being able to put their “artist’s superhero gargoyles” on to observe the world in its pure form is appealing..

I guess it is reassuring to imagine that the artists do carry “superhero powers” which allow them to position themselves as outsiders and *visitors* of history, to escape linear *time-and-place-continuum* by spreading their superhero’s cape and fly over paradigms and episteme, travelling into “no-time” and “no-place” - only to come back wiser, inspired, changed and ready to deliver the immaculate judgment and understanding of the *Zeitgeist*, with its myriad of patterns..

Ah, it is not raining any more... ☼

‘Ivan Grubanov: Artist as an agent of change’ is a part of Tatjana Macic’s series of essays and critical thoughts under the collective title: *artist as a superhero*

ENDNOTES

1. Barthes, Roland, *‘The Death of the Author’*, in: *Image Music Text*. S. Heath, Ed. Trans. London, 1977, 190-215.
2. Ivan Grubanov, *Visitor*, exhibition catalogue, Belgrade, 2005.
3. Quote Charles Esche: *“Looking at these drawings takes us into a mind reduced to simply bearing witness, being a visitor in his own house and trying to combine forgiveness and action in one gesture.”* Charles Esche: ‘Visiting and Witnessing’ in: Ivan Grubanov, *The Evil Painter*, Nürnberg 2008, 107-109.