Milutin Gubash: From Serbia to the Bastille...
Considerations on *Which Way to the Bastille?* and the quest for an identity
A Skype interview given to Catherine Parayre with Maja Srndic
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CP – You recently published Which Way to the Bastille, a book (livre d'artiste) combining a written story and photographs. My very first question: how different is it for you to use the written word and the photograph from working with videos and installations? And my second question: would you like to continue with this form of text-and-image project?

MG – It's not the first time that I work with image and text. In a way, it's a return to much earlier work than the work that takes off from 2002-2003 that composes the ten-year survey that is taking place at Rodman Hall and three other venues.

These were works before I actually began to appear in my own work, before autobiography and autofiction became as present as they are now in my work. They had to do with more of a perception of place and a questioning of what documentary photography was for me and what kinds of problems it had associated with it. More specifically I was working with newspaper clippings from the city where I grew up, Calgary, Alberta. I was following these stories in one of the local newspapers. Although there were different facets in this project, one of the more interesting ones for me was following stories that turned out to be false.

A more recent project that involves image and text was commissioned by the art museum of Miami over the summer for a series of comic strips published in a kind of fake tabloid or flyer distributed to the Cuban immigrant public, their target audience, as I understand. Now I don't have any special interest in comic books. I used to read them when I was a kid and I like the esthetic, but it is not very pertinent to my practice. But in this case it happened to be a good way to realize a certain kind of narrative and image relationship. But when I am finished with it, probably I won't return to that form of image and text. I am now working on what is either a video or an audio piece. I'm not entirely sure yet what will finally constitute the project, but it has to do with the construction of a radio play about people listening to a radio play. I don't know if it involves images; it certainly involves text.

CP – Can you see yourself as a cartoon character?

MG – Very much so. Well, I think I am actually a clown figure in most of my work.

CP – In the book there are three languages: French, English, and the visual language of photography. Four languages in fact, as the book can be read as the multilingual / multimedia translation of your experience as a Serb, as someone who speaks the Serbian language. What are your thoughts on the role of different languages in the book?

MG – Actually, there is a fifth language in it and it's the language of video. And it could have been in the Serbian language as well. This was originally the goal of the editors as well, except that the translation into Serbian would have required too many more pages that they could accommodate. This is the pragmatic answer.

There is also something more philosophical or artistic that's often playing in my work; the book is one example of that. Indeed, in my experience, people are speaking different languages or they're coming to speak one language from another language and there's always some level of incommensurability, ability, translatability, misunderstanding or messages not being delivered or that were only implied but never directly said and received. There's another dimension to it, which is that I'm ghost-writing the story of my father's, who is telling you the story. I try to write the way that he speaks, which was awkward in English.

Actually, he was supposed to tell the story himself; he kept saying that he was doing so. I discovered after he died that he did not actually even start so particularly. He had just started a little bit. The video that I include with the book will be exhibited at Rodman Hall. It's an eight-minute video where I am prompting him to say the first lines of what became the book, and he can't do it. These are his own words but they're not coming out right. Finally after eight minutes, he tells me to go to hell and leaves.

I like exploring the idea that someone is speaking in a language that he is not comfortable with or that is not really his own but he tries to inhabit that space, and it's sometimes working and sometimes not and the joke comes back backwards and it's funnier than it would be otherwise or it's inadvertently funny or sometimes it creates another meaning. In the video all this is of course much more pronounced than in the book.

CP – If there were no text Which Way to the Bastille?, only photographs, do you think there would be something missing? Conversely, what kind of new effects would be created once the text was removed?

MG – Actually, the photographs in the book have been shown just as photographs with a small accompanying text and, in those cases where the photographs have been shown without, they were shown in a few venues before the book was published. In that case, people were either relating them to other videos or, maybe, they were looking at the images as photographs, not as supports to the text.

CP – Each of the photographs seems to bring light to an otherwise dark (or darkening) environment. Each features a character gazing at a well-lit place. In general, your work stages a challenging identity quest, maybe uncertain in terms of outcome. Could you tell us more about what you would like to find once you've reached your own Bastille? What are your expectations, if any?

MG – The Bastille in the book refers to an anecdote about my father blaming the French revolution for the failures of socialism in Yugoslavia and going to Paris to see the site of this originating failure, let's say. This becomes the kind of leitmotif in the book for me because it is about chasing a chimera; you'll never get to the Bastille because it's now a bus stop. It doesn't exist any more. I am cynical enough not to believe that I will ever find what it is that I am actually trying to circle around again and again in my work because I simply don't know what that is. We talk about things like identity and the quest for identity and a way to represent a failure in transformation, but, as a matter of fact, that's as much of a fiction as any other fiction in my work; I don't really know what the hell I am looking for.

MS – In your captivating earlier projects ‘These Paintings’ and ‘Hotel Tito,’ your concern seems to revolve around the question of what Serbian identity entails. In the video entitled ‘These Paintings’ you state, “In that way I’m actually trying to be a Serbian. In the way I understand Serbians, which is that they’re not Western. They always get everything wrong and even when they copy something good they screw it up, but then they end up making it their own thing. Like they miss the point that abstraction is apolitical art, and they try to make it into a political one, and it’s like that fuck up makes something else live. That’s what I’m trying to catch.” Can you elaborate more on what you mean by being a Serbian through your artwork? How is performing a Serbian identity different from performing a Former Yugoslav one? (Your work deals with the historical period when Serbia was subsumed under the fabric of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, so it is interesting that the Serbian identity is isolated). Also, how is a Serbian identity retained or can it only emerge when you consider your artistic experience in the West? Can you speak about the relationship between a Western identity and a Serbian identity?

MG – Lots of questions here.

As an artist, I don’t feel I am really beholden to any idea of what is true for other people. I am not comfortable with the idea that I am representing something that is outside of my own ideas or my own perceptions or my own experience. My comfort zone could maybe extend slightly beyond myself to people who are immediately around me and what I understand of their experiences, which perhaps I am also trying in some way to incorporate or represent.

Beyond that, it would be a provocation and it could be a way to include someone in a dialogue. What I am characterizing in that quote and maybe in those projects more generally is a bit of a caricature; it’s casting a broad net that some aspects of it will touch something for viewers.

My principal audience for a lot of my work are people who don’t have any particular kind of opinion or experience of those questions. In a sense, to make anything meaningful out of it, I am imagining that an audience actually has to find another way into the topic that is outside of what I am telling or outside of what I am representing.

The idea of trying to find what is an identity for me is one way of looking at my work. But another one is that the broader motif is maybe about failure and/or about futility or about absurdity.

CP – What failure or whose failure?

MG – Well, probably mine.

It’s a certain kind of outlook on life that I feel in other artists’ work; it’s probably in a broader sense in the culture that I find myself living in now. I feel that it’s a pervasive motif in contemporary life. I find it in music, I find it in film; I find it in all sorts of things. And I even used to find it in the outlooks of my students when I was a teacher. In a way, I am trying to touch that question in a more directed manner. Instead of talking about failure as though it’s a thing in itself, I’m trying to find failure in something.

I went to Serbia twice. I'm also born in Serbia in a city called Novi Sad and I have been twice as an adult to Novi Sad and I traveled a little bit more but I did not travel outside of Serbia as a matter of fact.

When I was traveling there – the first time was to do a research and some work for a project and the second time was to do an exhibition at a national museum – it would come to me again and again that someone would say “Oh gee, you know it's not going to work. It's certainly great that you are doing the show but you know something will go very wrong.” This example gives me a little bit of ammo that I am not entirely making up this about the Serbian mind. And indeed everything went wrong. It's true, but it also went right in many ways. It was actually one of the more touching experiences I had as an artist. It wasn't for any kind of nostalgia or romantic notion that I had. I actually just found that throughout the course of the evening – in spite of the fact that the technology did not work, the electricity did not continue – that everyone that I talked to, was interested in telling me what they were seeing in my work.

CP – What were they seeing? Do you remember?

MG – Well, they were making associations with a kind of symbolism that was surprising to me. I've been exhibiting regularly for twelve years as a professional artist. And while I've had a lot of shows in Canada and elsewhere, I don't know why the organizers picked me to show, I don't know about the audience that comes to the opening, about what they saw. You know, it's rare that people are really generous with you here. People are maybe a bit shy to offer you their opinions thinking that they might be a little bit off topic. I didn't find that kind of reservation there.

MS – In an interview with B92, conducted on October 1, 2009, a famous contemporary dramatist and screenplay writer Dusan Kovacevic was asked whether the combination of tragedy and comedy accurately depicts Serbian history and its people. He responded by saying that such a combination provides an accurate portrayal of the Serbian region, so accurate that it's fated. In the abovementioned video piece, 'These Paintings,' you state that there is something funny and sad about being Serbian. You use the examples of the peasant funeral processions and folk music, which contain these elements of bittersweet. Would you say that your own work accommodates this bittersweet vision of the Serbian people?

MG – Yes, that's my perception of the matter but, this is all a bit of a game in a way. I'm finding it and I'm representing it, but it could also be that I am representing it trying to find it afterwards. This is also coming to me from other sources, some of which are, let's say, maybe more popular, like Kusturica's films¹. How could you miss it in a Kusturica film? Life is funny, life is sad and that's about it.

It's something that I find in a lot of artists who come from that region, more popular artists like visual artist Marina Abramovic.² This idea of something that is alternating between being humorous and being awful is in her work fairly regularly. It's almost

¹ Emir Kusturica (1954-): Serbian filmmaker.

² Marina Abramovic (1946-): New York-based Serbian performance artist.

something ridiculous, sitting down and having a staring contest, like children, at one another. An aspect of it is funny and apparently it makes people cry as well.

MS – There seems to be a similarity between your work and the New Primitivists, a movement which originated in Sarajevo during the 1980s. In particular, I am thinking of the skits performed by the group Top Lista Nadrealista (Surrealists' Top Charts), who would parody or absurdly stage certain events and characters to politically critique the state of affairs in Former Yugoslavia and the identity it blanketed over its citizens. Did these works bear any influence on how you developed your own art, specifically some of the absurdist elements?

MG – There are very many influences in my work, some from popular culture, some from a more rarified realm of fine art. Not all of them are Balkan references. For instance, absurdist ideas are found in Monty Python³; it meant a big deal to me as a teenager. I mentioned Kusturica, so did you; I should also mention Dušan Makavejev⁴ who's actually my father's childhood friend

I discovered Makavejev through anecdotes my father used to tell me and, since my work is created out of that material that's most immediately around me in life, that connection feels a little stronger to me. He happens to be another artist from the same place that I come from. In terms of visual arts, the Slovenian collective Irwin⁵ was also an influence. It was by chance that I happened to be in New York and saw one of their shows. I was eighteen or nineteen years old. And I wandered into a gallery, a commercial gallery, where they were hosting this exhibition by this collective that also used humour, absurdity and this idea of failure and appropriation. It was a clumsy appropriation in order to question the status of art in contemporary society. It was a show of Malevich's⁶ white on white and black crosses, and theirs were the most ridiculous patsy versions of Malevich you could imagine. They were too small and painted really badly, almost crooked. I remember walking into the gallery; I was completely mystified by the exhibition. It has stayed with me until today. I still think of using it as an example.

There was also an artist from New York. His name is Sean Landers⁷, whom I encountered in his late teens or early twenties. It was at the time that I was starting to have my first mature thoughts about art. He was really popular at that time. All of his work was about being a kind of loser schlub artist. I remember one project which I saw at an exhibition of his in the Andrea Rosen gallery in New York. He was doing a work with a chimp. The chimp was helping him make his paintings. It was the most horrible kind of sitcom version of a variety version of an artist at work. What was remarkable to me was that it was so preposterous, so absurd, such a cliché of bad art that it actually worked. I remember that being a very big impact on me because it has something to do with my own sense of humour and my own perspective on life. It was as if I were seeing being supported if I can say it that way.

³ Monty Python: British comedy group in the BBC series *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-1974).

⁴ Dušan Makavejev (1932-): Serbian film director and screenwriter.

⁵ Collective Irwin (1980s onwards): the name of a group of five Slovenian painters.

⁶ Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935): Russian painter, geometric abstract art.

⁷ Sean Landers (1962-): New York-based US artist.

***MS** – In your works there is an ongoing conversation about fluid identity that questions (and perhaps seeks) petrified wholeness. What is your take on self-censorship and the editing of memory in your own work when an identity is sought? For example, in the video ‘Mirjana,’ your mother and you exclaim that you have forgotten some of the distinguished authors who had to be read in Former Yugoslavia. However, you’ve retained the memory of Draza Mihajlovic’s radio broadcast, and the influence of Roma music can be heard in your sitcoms. How are these different elements of memory from Former Yugoslavia seeping into your own work? Is the editing of memory selectively presented in your artwork, or is it unfiltered, seemingly presented as it is remembered? How does physical inclusion of your parents within your artwork feature into preservation of memory?*

MG – In the projects we’re discussing more than others, those memories aren’t mine; I wasn’t born although I understand that I am born out of that situation or condition. I am born out of that perception of the situation for them. In some ways I am trying to be faithful or accurate to what I understand of what their feelings on that are. I’m less interested in broad topics like politics or identity. What I’m really more interested in are individual relationships to questions or individual perceptions of those kinds of topics. Politics such as it is played out in my work is only really interesting to me because I am trying to understand how someone lives with that idea or how I am kind of implicated in that question. That carries ideas of misunderstanding, misperception, a lack of knowledge, making shit up, and the question of trying to preserve memory. Self-editing or self-censorship plays into that as well because memory comes through the fallibility of an individual, firstly mine as the author of these works. I’m probably the clumsiest of all and then, next, it goes to whoever it is that is also being represented or implicated in the work. In all cases, I think that there is not really a one-to-one relationship in the matter. For instance, my mother has always portrayed my mother in my work, which is portraying my mother; it is not my mother; that’s her face and that’s her in front of the camera, but she’s playing a version of herself as she understands it and, I guess, in a sense, as I understand it too. Sometimes I prompt her to do something or I put her in a situation where she doesn’t want to be in. She’s got to decide whether she prefers to make me happy while the camera is rolling or to tell me to knock it off.

I can answer you in another way by telling you about a project that, I think, will not be included in the Rodman Hall version of the survey. It is a very recent performance that I did which was commissioned by an organization for the Nuits blanches here. But... I had never played the trumpet before in my life.

I know going into it that I am going to fail and that it’s going to be awful. However, this is going to my idea of what is performance, I’m trying to inhabit something with my body and with my mind that is not easy to do and that is not an obvious and daily part of my life. Still, the project for me wasn’t complete having done that performance. What made it complete for me was that I hired my mother to come and videotape me to do this performance. She did absolutely the best she could. The performance was an hour in duration, but she’s not more a videographer than I am a trumpet player. It’s very hard to hold a camera steady for an hour. So it is kind of two things failing working at each other. But, for me, that’s a complete work. My mother is watching me fail trying to interpret

that alter that she bore me into and then took me out of and I'm failing at trying to understand her failing to inhabit fully that same set of questions.

CP – Is your mom a prop – I put this nicely – a companion in your work or is she also an artist?

MG – I think she... I think everyone is an artist actually. I think everyone has exactly the same set of creative tools to compose from. I happen to make it my business to figure out what they are and to try to work with them, but obviously there're pragmatic elements to that question. My mother doesn't really give a damn about the kinds of things that occupy me in my daily life. She's supportive of my decision; she finally has no choice.

CP – ... She's pretty involved; she holds the camera for you... ?

MG – Yes, very much so. When I first started to work with my parents, I think they were really puzzled with what was their role in the whole thing. I think they didn't tell me so very particularly but I could feel that they were not sure whether I was making fun of them or if it was the role in the work to being fools or to be made objects of maybe ridicule. What really broke the ice on that was the project where I turn to video, actually to film. We were making very short video clips that were having thirty-second extractions taken out of them to be broadcast on television like false or fake commercials. I gave my parents the kind of instruction or direction that it was going to television and that it was supposed to be funny. Well, suddenly, they had opinions about everything: "there's something wrong," "it should be or I should be looking this way" and "I should have this reaction." It suddenly broke the ice for them. I think that's where they started to feel that they had more agency in the projects that were to come rather than being, as you said, used as accessories. But I suppose there's an element of it and that's actually just there.