

ALEKSANDAR BOŠKOVIĆ

**NOTHING (:) MADE IN
YUGOSLAVIA**

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Luka Glušac

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Author:

Aleksandar Bošković

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Nothing (:) Made in Yugoslavia

“Metaphysical, save us from physical,” reads a quirky note on a café bill in Belgrade. The brief yet telling note reminds us that something abstract and mystical, strikingly different from our materially driven capitalist world of consumption, lurks behind it. Moreover, it suggests that this invisible element may even *save us* from the social, economic, and political confines we live in. Caught in the world of raging capitalist “bankocracy” driven by profit and power, we seldom reflect on the deeply buried metaphysical modes of evaluation which *money*—as a “relation of relations,” the standard “measure of all measures,” or the “universal equivalent”—gives expression to. Yet, if we look to art and its experimental practices, we can recognize the call for a trans-evaluation of values and a fight against

existing systems. These practices remind us of the necessity of the articulation of the people's commons, which has been profoundly reevaluated by the populist and corporate language of contemporary neoliberal capitalist rhetoric. Experimental practices of art inculcate an awareness of, and various forms of resistance to, the surrounding ideological stupefaction, political subordination, and economic exploitation. Moreover, experimental art practices reveal that *nothingness* is to be found not only beyond the everyday world of lavish senseless consumption but also at the center of the commons—as its most metaphysical uncommon.

Nothing (:) *Made in Yugoslavia* deals specifically with Yugoslav experimental art practices. It investigates the relationship between negation practices across different arts and media – literature, film, visual arts, and radio – in the former Yugoslavia(s) (1918–2006) and the notion of artistic, economic, and symbolic value(s). Considering that experimental art is often seen as “disobedient,” i.e. subversive, revolutionary, anti-institutional, anti-industrial, anti-illusionistic, and sometimes even anti-capitalist, it is necessary to outline the fundamental contours of the ideological framework within which experimental art practices emerged in the former interwar, socialist, and post-socialist Yugoslavia(s). It goes without saying that the Yugoslav experimental art practices are marked by their relation to politics within frameworks of its ideological, state, and social contradictions: whether a parliamentary monarchy, a multiethnic state with unresolved national questions and a sphere of cultural production under the control of the “comprador bourgeoisie” (the plutocratic and exploitative Yugoslav bourgeoisie that helped the colonizers and lived off sales) during the interwar period (Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes / Kingdom of Yugoslavia); or a combination of a one-party social system

with elements of a market economy and a proponent of the third way and the ideas of the Non-Aligned Movement, with foundation in the People's Liberation Struggle and the ideology of Marxism, which were both glorified and scrutinized in official and experimental art during the socialist Yugoslavia (SFRY); or a combination of repression, militarism, sanctions, hyperinflation, enforced poverty, war, and isolation affecting the population during the autocratic rule of Slobodan Milošević, along with the optimistic, corporate vapid talk that arrived with the alleged political liberation and democracy of the post-Milošević era during the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (comprising merely Serbia and Montenegro). Along with the particulars of the moment, Yugoslav experimental art practices also address decolonial aesthetics and its radical epistemologies. Examining how they questioned, with the aim of deconstructing, existing ideologies (and their values) helps create a space for us today to appreciate how we might operate both *within* and *as* a deconstructive ideology and the ultimate expression of freedom.

It is very important to understand "nothing" not in a pessimistic way, but rather as a manifestation of freedom. Nothing is usually something we are often not aware of or have forgotten, but which is functionally effective. Nothing is a fertile and generative concept that opens up a world of possibilities. Yugoslav experimental art practices that in some way address nothingness (emptiness, silence, entropy of representation) demonstrate that "Nothing must be factored into the Standard" (MID) whether the Standard is represented by *money* as the unity of measure for any other entity, or by a theoretically defined philosophical concept such as Stephen W. Greenchurch's *infinitive* value, that is, something that determines all other values and all other concepts based on its indefiniteness. Yugoslav post-conceptual writer Sreten Ugrčić in his monograph

Infinitive (1997), reminds us of the argument about ultimate value that Greenchurch took from Eudoxus and Aristotle: if the supreme value could be fundamentally determined, it would mean that there is some higher value that is above it; however, since this is not possible, it must remain undetermined. Most people, even politically active and self-aware ones, are not aware of this gap between what is *definitive* (values of which we are aware and to which we are subordinate) and what is indefinite and which is a condition of those determining parameters (*infinitive*). And Ugričić's *Infinitive* warns and reminds us of that crucial dimension, without which a free democratic subject could not exist. In other words, we are likely to be instrumentalized and manipulated if there is no awareness of that other dimension (nothingness) that protects us.

Nothing, therefore, really matters. In one of the earliest examples of the Yugoslav avant-garde, the proto-conceptual zenithist experimental writings of Mita Dimitrijević MID – *The Sexual Equilibrium of Money or A Trade Correspondence on the Currency Question* (1925) and *The Metaphysics of Nothing* (1926) – we see how questions related to nothing address political, economic, and cultural values. As a “book on negativism,” *The Sexual Equilibrium of Money* opposes what MID perceived as an American and west European “bankocracy”; it plunges into a poetic and philosophical examination of the “trade (import-export) of words” and its connection to the notion of value, that is, *money* as a universal measure of the values of all other commodities. The book includes “the key” that will help the reader unlock its hermetically closed doors of possible meanings, which is found in the words “steal freely.” This “key” reminds the reader that MID's books are almost entirely composed of quotations, self-quotations, para-documentary materials, slogans, and so on, in an “authentic” zenithist

fashion of literary banditry. MID's negativism is further explored in the conceptual sequel *The Metaphysics of Nothing*, a quasi-philosophical treatise on the concept of value, its recuperations and meanings in economics, philosophy, spiritualism, and language. The nothing that ceaselessly repeats and reappears throughout MID's books is, actually, the *nothing of language*: a faraway echo of a Dada-game, but first and foremost an expression of a lost faith in language, or an attempt to manifest a *nothingness* that is inexpressible in a language of words.

These Yugoslav experimental art practices compel us to rethink how we perceive, recognize, and establish various forms of visibility in the people's common. Both the power to act directly on others and the power to move others tend to be expressed through metaphors of vision: the first represented as something hidden, the second realized through forms of visual display. Whenever one examines the process by which the value of material objects or immaterial phenomena is established, one ends up almost invariably facing issues of visibility and invisibility. Following Greenchurch, Ugričić helps us realize that the *unseen* (that which is invisible) is the condition of the appearance of values (infinite), while the *seen*, or that which appears visible and which Greenchurch calls *definitive*, covers the invisible and curtains the infinite. The *definitive* determines and defines our measurement criterion, and when we become subordinate to it, we consequently miss something immeasurable. The people's commons, or that what is *seen* through forms of visual display and what has the power to move others to action, according to Ugričić's reading of Greenchurch, only curtains the *unseen* and covers up the power to act directly on others.

For example, both MID and Ugričić employ literary banditry and a postmodern strategy of mystification that

hinge on their relationship with the notion of responsibility: MID (and zenithism) by demonstrating that the cultural supremacy of Western civilization is achieved through acts of barbarity for which it does not find itself accountable nor responsible; Ugričić by unmasking mystification and fiction, imitation, and mistrust, both as principles and as consequences of the Western politics of identity. Actually, experimental Yugoslav art practices remind us that the same principle applies to post-Balkans and Europeans: responsibility instead of identity. As Ugričić writes, “We are that what we are responsible for. Neither more nor less than that. Everything else is not only pure but a miserable fiction and mystification. The culture of identity was Balkan, the Balkans was its unfortunate effect. Today, the culture of responsibility is a symbolic infrastructure of an integrated, self-conscious and effective, complete Europe—the infrastructure of the post-Balkan era.”

Again, it is the awareness of the gap between the *seen* (visible) and the *unseen* (invisible) that protects us from being manipulated and instrumentalized, according to Ugričić. At the same time, it reminds us of *nothing* as a “central concept of two categorical oppositions and two elementary impulses which propel and yet cancel each other without separating the seen and the unseen,” according to MID. That is, it reminds us that *action* and *reflection* endlessly imply each other in an infinite variety of conversions and transformations.

Apart from conceptual writers such as MID and Ugričić, there are conceptual visual artists such as Mladen Stilinović, whose experimental art practices address the questions of value and its relation to nothingness. As one of the most powerful symbols of power, through which dominant reality is affirmed and celebrated, money takes on a central role in Stilinović’s work. Stilinović is interested in money as a public and private instrument of power – that

is, money as the reification of social and human relations, their condensation and materialization (Karl Marx) – and also as material. Through his works with paper money, be it making collages with banknotes or their fragments, or adding text (such as “Slow destruction of American economy” to an American one-dollar note, or “surplus value” to a Yugoslav one-hundred-dinar banknote), Stilinović transforms its “value” while accentuating money’s formal structure and aesthetics. A work such as *About Money and Zeroes* (2006), affirms that money appears essential, especially with its recognizable combination of power and symbolism (the authority portraits of heads of state, scientists, architecture, and other symbols of national sovereignty), and yet, simultaneously reveals that it has no essence. Money is not really “anything”; its nature has always been and presumably always will be a matter of political contention.

Moreover, with his small artist books, Stilinović entices readers to a joyful recognition of the forces of entropy in our material world. On semi-transparent paper, his booklet *Subtraction of Zeroes* (1993) begins with twelve zeroes on a page, with each subsequent page subtracting one zero until nothing is left. This playfulness recalls Greenchurch’s claim that if *The Axiological Infinitive* were a book about mathematics its name would have been *The Zero*, because zero is the only number that is not a number. Stilinović’s artist book *The Artist at Work* (1978), featuring photographs of himself in a bed, covered with a blanket and in different sleeping positions, offering his body to the gaze of spectators, “undermines the obligation to work—the true common ground between ideologies of capitalism and communism” (Groys 2014). This artist book, together with Stilinović’s 1993 manifesto *In Praise of Laziness*, demonstrate not only that “the work of the artist is hard to quantify” (Stipančić 2007:

14), but also that at the centre of the ideology of work, which is in the foundations of the people's commons, is "non-work" (Kunst 2015). Art in the former Yugoslavia was produced in the absence of the capitalist system of the production and dissemination of art (gallery system, museum system, competition system, preoccupation with objects, etc.), which enabled artists to concentrate on art and laziness. Contrary to the artists in the East, about who Stilinović writes, "Even when they did produce art, they knew it was in vain, it was nothing," the artists of today cannot work with an awareness that this creative process is really (worth) nothing.

This type of research follows Yugoslav experimental art practices beyond their investigation of money as the universal measurement of value to a different (and deeper) kind of question – not what is the value of any one thing, but how actually is value defined? The most important political struggle in any society will always be over how value itself is to be defined, and this research shows that invisible non-work or nothingness is at the centre of the ideology of work, and in the hypocrisy of the celebration of work, immured in the foundations of the people's commons in the ideologies of both communism and capitalism. As the philosopher Aaron Schuster has shown, laziness or non-work is to be found at the neoliberal core: "Some of the laziest masters of this planet are the credit rating agencies that affect the fate of the entire planet by 'opinions only' and without any public accountability whatsoever" (Kunst 2015: 188). If the Yugoslav conceptual artists enjoyed this privilege of non-work and "lazy art" in socialism, it is now the neoliberals who speculate and conceive of the future that are masters of "laziness as the new postmodern ethics" (ibid.). Research into Yugoslav experimental art practices can help us excavate the invisible – the values (the commons) that have been buried, obfuscated, or reevaluated by capitalism and its corporate language

and imagery so that we are easily manipulated and instrumentalized. As these examples of Yugoslav experimental art practices show, their rejection of official ideology, be it socialist or capitalist, national and/or neoliberal, did not abolish the ideological, metaphysical, spiritual world altogether, but rather “transformed it into blank nothingness. This nothingness is not simply an absence of ideology but is rather a space of ideological freedom that should not be identified with freedom from ideology” (Groys 2014). It is the space that opens up the void (infinite) from which you can more clearly perceive what appears as visible (definitive) along with other voids.

This research demonstrates that as much as non-work is at the core of the ideology of work, nothingness is at the core of both language and literature. Yugoslav experimental art practices make it clear that art and literature don't fall under the laws of the aesthetic, political, or aesthetic-political order. They cannot be subordinated to any authority or serve a single political goal. They help us see that no value exists without the dimension of fictionality, and they in fact perform how fictionality contributes to establishing a certain value. Stilinović subtracts zeroes or exhibits images of his sleeping body as documentation of the artist's work. MID treats excessive use of the word “nothing” by politicians, poets, philosophers, and journalists as found language throughout his books. And Ugričić explicates the theory of the axiological infinite elaborated by Stewart W. Greenchurch in his 1990 book *The Axiological Infinite*—yet neither this book nor Mr. Greenchurch himself exist outside the pages of Ugričić's monograph. It is crucial, it appears, to performatively render the invisible *nothingness* into a palpably joyous celebration of the experience of radical spiritual freedom. Otherwise, our materially driven capitalist world of “lavish senseless consumption” will indubitably render us into nothing.

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