

Current Contributions to the Theory and History of Theatre of Resistance

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The title of the article¹ refers directly to the title of the symposium *Transformations in Theory. Current Research*, organised by the Academy of Fine Arts and Design at the University of Ljubljana. Since I was in the final stages of finishing my then upcoming book entitled *Gledališče upora (The Theatre of Resistance)* when the symposium in Koper was taking place (October 2020), it seemed reasonable to present there precisely the findings of this “current research”. The book has in the meantime been published by the Ljubljana University Press, Faculty of Arts (2021), so the aim of the present contribution is to call attention to some of the book’s key findings and to a degree expand upon them. For the sake of “authenticity”, the second part of the article focuses on the resistance (activist and performative) practices of Marko Breclj, who of course was not the central figure of my presentation at the symposium purely by chance—the event took place right next to the Bell Tower of the Koper Cathedral where years ago Breclj and his colleagues performed the resounding action *Tapisonirano unebouzetje (Upholstered Assumption)* (more on this in the continuation).

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The term “theatre of resistance” can be understood in different ways, and it also cannot be reduced to a single period in the history of theatre, given that the word “resistance” refers to many phenomena, historical and contemporaneous. *The Dictionary of the Slovenian Standard Language* defines the word resistance in the widest possible sense (“activity with which one resists”) and cites peasant uprisings as historical examples. Different examples of resistance can be found also in the 20th century; the most prominent example in the Slovenian territory is undoubtedly resistance against the occupiers during the Second World War, and more recently, the “Slovenian people’s uprising” in the time of the second government of the then Prime Minister Janez Janša. The term “theatre” is also not unambiguous and has undergone numerous changes over the centuries; in the last century, the term “performing arts” emerged under the influence of performance art, which also captures hybrid forms of expression or those created at the intersection of visual, music, dance, theatre and paratheatrical practices. One of the early discussions of the theatre of resistance is the monograph *The Theatre of Revolt* by Robert Brustein, which has been reprinted several times since its first publication in 1962. Having said that, we do need to bear in mind that Brustein’s term “revolt” is similar to, but not exactly the same as, “resistance”; further, the title of his book is somewhat misleading, because he focuses mainly on playwrights and dramatic texts, leaving their stagings outside of his immediate research interest. Brustein’s study was also the basis for Gašper Troha’s presentation at the symposium *Theatre of Resistance* held in Maribor, in which he attempted to draw a distinction between the theatre of resistance and the theatre of resistance fighters.² I use the term “theatre of resistance” in the widest sense: as theatre created within or as part of resistance or a resistance movement; as theatre created by resistance fighters for resistance fighters and also for those who perhaps are not exactly resistance fighters, but support it or at least do not actively oppose it; and lastly, as theatre that can only circumstantially be called that, since while it includes certain recognisable theatrical elements (masks, costumes, puppets, etc.), it nevertheless takes place outside of a theatrical setting, is distinctly political and engaged and sometimes even completely unburdened by aesthetic considerations, as in the case of performative and paratheatrical actions in the frame of protest manifestations and alike. My understanding of the theatre of resistance is thus not based on Brustein’s “theatre

2 The symposium took place on 23 and 24 October 2014 in Maribor and was organised by the Theatre and Interart Research programme and the Theatre and Film Studies Centre at the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television of the University of Ljubljana. Based on a presentation at this symposium, Gašper Troha’s article was later published in the journal *Dia-logi* (Troha 2015).

of revolt”, but is more akin to the concept of “radical performance”, as developed by Baz Kershaw in his book *The Radical in Performance*. I also draw on the history of political theatre rooted in—at least historically—left-wing and socio-emancipatory theatres, starting with the founding of the Proletarian Theatre in Berlin (1919) and the publication of Erwin Piscator’s *The Political Theatre* (1929). Today, this concept is much wider, something that Kershaw also points out (1999, 63).

1. THEATRE’S RESISTANCE AGAINST EXPLOITATION

It follows, in my view, that in the context of the history of Slovenian theatre the research into the theatre of resistance should start with the First World War at the latest and the constitution of the Workers’ Stage (Delavski oder) in Ljubljana. In 1919, at the same time as Piscator founded the Proletarian Theatre, the Svoboda Workers’ Cultural and Educational Society organised a theatre group. Its first breakthrough was the performance *Jakob Ruda*, which premièred on 23 April 1920 and turned into a mass workers’ manifestation. On the very next day, a violent clash between the gendarme and the workers broke out on the street Zaloška cesta; 13 people were killed, among them a 5-year-old girl, at least 30 were wounded. The brutal police repression happened when a group of protesters tried to enter the city centre to join demonstrations in support of the railway workers. The next breakthrough event happened in 1927, when Bratko Kreft took on the lead to found and lead the Workers’ Stage under the wings of the Svoboda Workers’ and Sports Society (as it later become known as), which he initially wanted to call Proletarian Stage but abandoned the name due to political pressures.³ His staging of *The Crisis*, a social drama by Rudolf Golouh that the Workers’ Stage premièred at the Ljubljana National Theatre a year later, caused quite a stir before it even premièred. Six days before the scheduled premièred, Svoboda received a decree from the Police Commissioner banning the performance. The ban provoked sharp criticism in the workers’ press: in addition to the ban itself, the date of the decree coincided with the 8th anniversary of the police shooting on Zaloška. Public protests ensued and, finally, the authorities yielded and permitted the Workers’ Stage to perform the play. The text was highly topical (a strike, workers’ increased social hardship amidst the crisis, workers’ disunity, etc.); but what was

3 The decision to name the theatre “workers’ stage” is explained by one of the actors and directors at the Ljubljana Workers’ Stage, Fran Petré: “The word [proletarian] sounded proud and self-confident, coming from the workers’ mouths. But the authorities did not like it and as the pressure mounted, reluctance to use it in the press grew as well. In these circumstances, the milder expression workers’ stage therefore prevailed.” (Petré, 1964, 14)

seen for the first time was the use of mass scenes—the performance reportedly included approximately 100 actors, members of the choir and musicians. Even though the authorities only allowed the première and a reprise on 12 May to take place—banning the rerun in Maribor—*The Crisis* turned out to be a great success for the Workers' Stage. The workers' audience in the packed auditorium of the National Theatre easily identified with the play's topic, which highlighted the existential threats faced by the workers during the growing economic crisis and political turmoil in the country. The performance was also a milestone in how socially engaged drama was staged, as Kreft perceptively decided to move the performing focus to impressive mass scenes and reinforce their theatricality with the inclusion of a workers' band and a choir.

The year 1932 proved to be another important milestone in the history of the Workers' Stage. Namely, in that year, several performances directed by Ferdo Delak were staged, which—after the initial breakthrough achieved by Kreft—finally put the Workers' Stage on the map of the Slovenian theatrical avant-garde. The event that has to be highlighted is the ground-breaking and now famous staging of Delak's dramatisation of Ivan Cankar's *Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica* (The Bailiff Yerney and His Rights). Delak's key dramaturgical innovation was the use of the "speaking choir", which represented the bailiff Yerney, while this collective actor was juxtaposed with a single actor, who interpreted his antagonists. With this simple but remarkably effective conceptual shift, Delak aligned Cankar's parable with its gist: if in the literary text Yerney functions as an allegory of all servants, in Delak's stage version he becomes a tangible representation of multiplied bodies, of a *multitude* (in the jargon of the operaismo political theory) of disenfranchised seekers of justice. With this dramaturgical and directorial manoeuvre, he raised individualistic running around in circles from Pontius to Pilate to the level of collective action, which is also not guaranteed to be effective, but at least hypothetically opens up the possibility of success. On the antagonist side, a reverse dramaturgical gesture is used, as Yerney's different opponents (the young Sitar, Mayor, Judge, Priest) are interpreted by a single actor. This metaphorical condensation of the antagonist in a single body with multiple faces is a personification of the gentlefolk, of the ruling class, which is, although consisting of numerous components, held together by the same "connective tissue"—capital. Based on responses in the then press, Delak did not succumb to the temptation to flatten this multi-headed figure into a caricatured anthropomorphic monster (which would reduce the complexity of the relation to mere agitprop), but instead portrayed Yerney's opponent as an ordinary person, who stands out as special simply because he

occupies the dominant, privileged position in the social structure. This relation, which can, in general terms, be defined as social distance, was depicted—again with (an aesthetically) simple intervention—with the physical distance between the choir of servants, positioned lower in the performing space, and the opponent(s), positioned high up (on a pedestal). Delak's lucid and fresh reading of Cankar's *Yerney* and his accurate transposition of the dramaturgical concept into the three-dimensional space of the theatre was perfectly complemented by projections of exceptional drawings by Ljubivoj Ravnikar, simple scenography (stage platforms and red curtains) and, as importantly, well-considered casting. The audience was thrilled, the performance was critically praised in the press; two more performances were held in Ljubljana and four performances in Celje, Zagreb, Maribor (2000 spectators!) and Ptuj.

Theatre experts recognised the Workers' Stage as a unique artistic phenomenon during its existence, and, even from an appropriate historical distance, this assessment has gone unaltered. Kreft and Delak tailored their directing methods to the circumstances and learned from workers' theatres from abroad. So what is characteristic of this method? To start with, a well-thought-through repertory politics: selecting socially and politically engaged texts, which thematised the poverty-stricken urban proletariat and the destitute rural population, which was important for attracting the workers' audience.

Another important characteristic of this method was collective acting. Both Kreft and Delak often relied on mass scenes, which soon became the Workers' Stage "trademark". The third procedure used by the Worker's Stage, which was perhaps the biggest step forward in their way of performing, was Delak's introduction of the "speaking choir". By employing these specific performance strategies, the Workers' Stage produced an effect, which can—by analogy with Brecht's estrangement effect—be called the amateur effect of proletarian acting. Brecht regarded amateurism as a positive notion, while diletantism for him meant a bad version of amateurism, one that cannot develop its own mode of artistic expression, in other words, one that cannot overcome a mere mimicking of art professionals. Brecht's conceptual and methodological differentiation between amateurism and diletantism can thus help us understand the success of the Workers' Stage in the time when Bratko Kreft and Ferdo Delak were running it. In this period, the Workers' Stage developed its own—distinctive and recognisable—way of performing and did not succumb to the temptation of entering a non-productive (and inevitably already lost) competition with Slovenian professional theatres.

Throughout its existence, the Workers' Stage, of course, had to adapt to the political circumstances to be able to continue its activities but did so only to the extent necessary. Choosing the word "workers" instead of the word "proletarian" for the name of the theatre was one such compromise; often, repertory policies had to be "watered down" to avoid censorship and gain acceptance for the theatre's performances (a few were nevertheless banned), etc. But then again, the Workers' Stage never hid its political affiliations; for everyone involved, each performance was also a political manifestation of the workers' resistance and was understood as part of a general struggle for a more just society.

2. THEATRE'S RESISTANCE AGAINST OCCUPATION

Another important chapter in the history of theatre of resistance was the partisan theatre. Of all the resistance movements of the previous century, which were not few (comp. Brajović et al., 1968), we can find no cultural or artistic involvement as massive and as accomplished as that practiced by the Yugoslav partisans. The founding of the Slovenian National Theatre (SNT) on 12 January 1944 in liberated territory in White Carniola was an especially important milestone in the history of Slovenian theatre, since for the first time a public cultural institution with the official name of Slovenian National Theatre appeared.

The theatre's first general director Filip Kumbatovič Kalan later reminisced that at the very beginning of the theatre's activities no one could say for certain that the founding of a theatrical institution in liberated territory would be as important as it later proved to be. At the time, they still had doubts and wondered whether this "ceremonially established and officially approved theatre is not a mere ridiculous and needless Lilliput". They knew that there were a few truly brilliant and also extremely experienced actors in the then ensemble of the State Theatre in Ljubljana, whereas only younger and not as established actors performed at the Slovenian National Theatre at the time. Moreover, "these older and more experienced actors are working under entirely different conditions, despite the occupation and police surveillance; they have a management and a stage, an equipped stage and regular and scheduled rehearsals and can work without major distractions" (Kalan, 1975, 119). It goes without saying that under such circumstances theatre makers too had to follow the tested partisan maxim "find a way" (any way you can), so they cut this Gordian knot of comparing the incomparable by declaring that "having these lengthy rehearsals and trying to take into account all the traditional theatrical circumstances is too time

consuming – put in simple terms, that this is a very old-fashioned and outdated method of cultural warfare for a partisan” (ibid., 119).

Partisan theatre makers were therefore not overly concerned if the procedural and technical protocols of the old bourgeois theatre were not followed in all their particulars; instead, they relied on their own resourcefulness, which they mastered during that time of scarcity. A similar knack for improvisation was also essential for putting together the programme. There was a lack of new, topical dramatic texts that would go beyond the level of a propaganda-entertainment sketch. The theatre thus decided that they “have to take more risks”, and this “more” meant “performing those plays on the partisan stage that prove that we belong to the great tradition of the European culture” (ibid., 166). They chose *The Imaginary Invalid*, although “the people of strictly rationed joy” insisted that “Molière is not and could never be the right author under the partisan circumstances” and that “this miserable and long-deceased court comedian is utterly devoid of any incentive for combat”. But the opposite happened. Directed by Jože Tiran, *The Imaginary Invalid* proved to be quite a success and stayed in the theatre’s repertory until the liberation. The premiere in Črnomelj (4 November 1944) attracted a large audience and the auditorium was bursting at the seams.

The partisan Molière acquired a certain romantic tinge over the years; partly because those involved with the performance often described it as the greatest achievement of SNT on liberated territory, partly because of the praise it received and not least because of the incredibly warm reception from the audience. It became an event, not only of the turbulent times but also an event in the history of Slovenian theatre.⁴ The avant-gardeness of the gesture should, in other words, be considered against the background of the specific circumstances of the performance’s creation, the savagery of the time and the brutality of historical events that—directly or indirectly—swept over partisan theatre practitioners too. Staging classical texts on the partisan stage was part and parcel of the culture of resistance, which, according to Ivanka Mežan, actress at the SNT on liberated territory, “was bringing a glimmer of hope” into those very difficult times (Valič, Mežan, Konjajev, 2015, 18). It is in this sense that we can interpret Walter Benjamin’s thought from his famous essay “On the Concept of History”:

4 Another particular feature of Slovenian partisan theatre was the modern dancer Marta Paulin, known under the partisan name Brina. Her solo dance performances in the frame of partisan theatre were a unique phenomenon in the history of the theatre of resistance. Unfortunately, she had to stop her regular dance appearances six months after joining the partisans because her feet froze during a march of the 14th Brigade to Styria.

**“In every era, attempts must be made anew to wrest tradition away from conformism that is about to overpower it”
(Benjamin, 1998, 217).**

The stagings of classical texts on partisan stages thus prove the thesis that the political in theatre is not only a matter of content, but that the very gesture of deciding to include a certain dramatic text into the programme can be political, with which even dramatic classics may come to life as symbolic “resistance of literature” in the historical context of its actualisation. So, if we interpret the partisan Molière on the horizon of the “historical articulation of the past”, which for Benjamin means “to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger”, we can perhaps observe an important symbolic gesture of resistance in this flirtation with the bourgeois theatre as well.

An important characteristic of partisan culture and art is that it was an integral part of the national liberation impulse of the people (hence the famous metaphor made by a member of the American allies’ mission at the Main Command of the National Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Slovenia, Lieutenant Vuchinich,⁵ about the invincibility of the nation that fights with a gun and a book in hand) and that it was at the same time also bound into the revolutionary tradition of proletarian internationalism. Certain authors (e.g. Radišić, 1984; Hribar Ožegović, 1965) connect the revolutionary component of partisan theatre with the tradition of radical artistic practices that emerge during the turbulent times of social revolutions. One of the early examples of this is the Paris Commune of 1871, which while lasting only 72 days at the very least indicated that it had a vision of a new, free and emancipatory art. The avant-garde tendencies of the Soviet artists following the October Revolution had greater chances of achieving this goal—for the first time in history, the victorious social revolution created political and material conditions for the emergence of an incredibly widespread revolutionary art of considerable quality, which flourished until Stalin came to power and instigated the systematic suppression of free thinkers, including many avant-garde artists. After the First World War, Piscator’s Proletarian Theatre emerged in Germany, which was a well of ideas and inspiration for many later experiments, among other for Brecht’s theatre and certain Slovenian avant-garde artists. Partisan art, or at least its most progressive part, relied—in terms of content and staff—especially on the pre-war network of workers’ stages: for example, Delak’s

5 Lieutenant Vuchinich came up with this metaphor at a gathering of partisan cultural workers in January 1944 in the Slovenian town of Semič.

dramatisation of *The Bailiff Yerney*, prepared for the Workers' Stage, was one of the most sought after performance texts by Yugoslav partisan theatre groups. What is crucial is that partisan art did not presume that it could act as a substitute for politics, let alone for armed struggle against the occupiers and their quisling supporters; instead, it was doubly articulated—in relation to the then social conditions and to itself. Miklavž Komelj thinks that the art that was part of the partisan movement participated in the revolutionary moment through allowing this “transformative process” to affect it in return:

“The liminality of partisan art is namely not in art adapting to a liminal situation, but in the fact that it was precisely in this liminal situation, which escalated the inner tensions and contradictions in the arts, that the question of principle was raised: What is art and why and for whom it is art” (Komelj, 2009, 47).

3. ZOMBIE RESISTANCE AGAINST AUTHORITARIAN DESPOTS

In the 1980s, the famous German playwright Heiner Müller emphasised that “literature should resist the theatre”, in other words, that the text is productive for theatre only when it resists direct, automatic or even literal staging (Müller, 1986, 18). Of course, I agree with Müller’s point, but would add that it may be applied not only to the relation between literature and theatre but to the relation between theatre and society as well. Namely, only the theatre that resists (society) is productive for society.

The position of art cannot be changed within the existing frames of society; for this to happen, not only art practices characteristic of it but the whole of society would have to undergo radical transformation. The assumption that radical reform of the art practice does not suffice if it is not accompanied by the simultaneous radical transformation of the society was also the point of departure for different art practices that emerged from the turbulent situations of social change and which, in one way or another, became involved in the ideological struggle to trigger, bring about and interpret these changes.

I have written several times before about certain important examples of activist-performative events that took place in Slovenia over the past two decades; so, to avoid repeating myself, I will focus here only on certain characteristics of the “people’s uprising” that took place in Ljubljana, although the movement initially started in Maribor

and spilled over to other parts of the country. I will limit myself to the use of “zombie” puppets and masks, which spread through the streets and squares of Ljubljana as an uncontrolled epidemic. This distinctive form of improvised “street theatre” qualifies as the paradigmatic example of contemporary performing practices of resistance that are predicated on a witty employment of the *subversive re-appropriation* method – appropriating or adopting previously infamous or defamatory expressions or metaphors, initially used to attack certain social groups, but then recuperated by those very groups, by means of their own engagement, and turned back at those who had originally sent them into the public, as offensively constructed verbal or iconic degradations.

The wave of mass uprisings against the corrupt political elite swept across Slovenia in winter of 2012 and early spring of 2013, starting in Maribor as a protest against the local authorities headed by the then mayor Franc Kangler. Following the outbreak of protests in Maribor, mass demonstrations were also held in Ljubljana, in support of the Maribor uprising and against the leader of Slovenia’s then right-wing government Janez Janša and mayor of Ljubljana Zoran Janković. Around that time, there emerged a claim on the website of the Slovenian Democratic Party, whose president was (and still is) Janez Janša, that the protests were staged by “the communist international” and that they were not an uprising of the people but an “uprising of zombies”. This preposterous wording “uprising of zombies” was immediately picked up by the protesters and performatively re-appropriated: it incited a wave of animation, corpographic and choreographic creativity on the part of the protesters, who came up with a myriad of variations on the living dead.

The uprising zombies were not criticised only by the ruling establishment, criticism was heard also from the intellectuals who in other respects supported the protesters.⁶

But if the protesters in masks gave an impression of carnival playfulness, this does not mean that it all was about fun and merry-making. If mass protests were really “of all the people”, then all participants were integral part of these events, regardless of whether they performed zombies’ masquerades, or exhibited banners with explicit political messages. Without all of these groups of protesters, the uprisings would have not been what they were: significant political manifestations, where people demonstrated their determination to demand and achieve changes, and at the same time a spontaneous eruption of “folk

6 I have analysed some of the more visible examples of such criticism in my book *Umetnost v času uladavine prava in kapitala* (Art in Times of the Rule of Law and Capital) (Milohnič, 2016, 137–139).

culture”, which does not deserve to be criticised as being supposedly “apolitical”, if, as Mikhail Bakhtin says, it has always celebrated “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (Bahtin, 2008, 16). After all, demonstrations of American pacifists against the war in Vietnam would not have been the same if they had not been supported by the famous street theatre *The Bread and Puppet Theatre*, which, like Slovenian protesting zombies, used giant puppets and masks. Bakhtin’s “carnivalisation” was often also mentioned by authors writing about the student protests in Belgrade in 1992 and especially in 1996 and 1997. Numerous examples of humorous and subversive street art performances created by inventive protesters can be found in the article written by Aleksandra Jovičević “Theatre, Paratheatre and Carnival” (Jovičević, 2000) and particularly in the article by Milena Dragičević Šešić “The Street as a Political Space” (Dragičević Šešić, 2001). Among the numerous lucid protest actions, I would like to draw attention to the one involving Belgrade students, who cleaned up and decontaminated Belgrade’s main square Terazije, where a day before the supporters of Milošević’s regime had held a counter-rally. Similarly as in Ljubljana, the Belgrade protesters performed their actions using the method of subversive re-appropriation, or as Milena Dragičević Šešić described it: “Irony, sarcasm, and invention in every performance emerged in direct reaction to everything that happened. If the citizens at counter-demonstration shouted ‘Sheep!’ at the protesters, it only took a few days for real sheep to appear in front of the cordon, with messages decorating their fleeces” (Dragičević Šešić, 2001, 79–80). The humour pertaining to the zombie masks is partly rooted in the mechanism of repetition, which Henri Bergson has written about in the famous *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Certain expressions appear repeatedly in everyday communication and thus become “one of those hackneyed sentences that are accepted as a matter of course”, which is why we don’t question their actual meaning and “our attention nods”. But this can quickly change, if, for any kind of reason, the position of enunciation changes and our nodding attention is “suddenly aroused by the absurdity of meaning” (Bergson, 1977, 72). As in many jokes, it is precisely that moment of absurdity which is responsible for the comic effect. A similar effect was achieved by the zombie uprising: of course, the protesters wearing zombie masks didn’t really believe they were communist zombies, as was claimed by the mouthpieces of the then ruling party; they just over-identified with the statement to demonstrate the comic absurdity of accusations about their supposed (political) zombiness.⁷

7 Over-identification is one aspect of the method of subversive affirmation, a politically subtle form of resistance that enables one to criticise power by adopting the role of a fanatical

In other words, by wearing the zombie masks, the protesters symbolically took off the ideological masks from the faces of the ruling party politicians.

This improvised “street theatre” of protesting zombies is a hybrid form of performative events with strong political connotations, their aesthetic dimension is in the function of strengthening the channel of communication through which the protesters send critical messages to the authorities. Looked at from this activist aspect, probably the closest to these events are Marko Breclj’s “soft terrorist” actions, as he called this unusual blend of performative ludism, political commentary and non-violent direct action.

4. SOFT TERRORIST RESISTANCE AGAINST DEMOCRATIC DESPOTISM

In his *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Henri Bergson introduces an important distinction between the witty (*spirituel*) and the comic—the effect of the first is that it makes us laugh at the person who uttered the word (statement), while the later “makes us laugh either at a third party or at ourselves” (*ibid.*, 67). Wit is “the comic in a highly volatile state” (*ibid.*, 70), and in this state of matter the activist artist or the artistic activist—in a word *artist*⁸—is like a fish in water; this is the right environment to practice the activist method of subversive re-appropriation, which was already roughly outlined by Bergson: “You take up a metaphor, a phrase, an argument, and turn it against the man who is, or might be, its author, so that he is made to say what he did not mean to say and lets himself be caught, to some extent, in the toils of language” (*ibid.*, 68).

promotor of the (criticised) Idea in its purest and most authentic form. The method was developed by the art movement *Neue sloweinische Kunst* (NSK) in the 1980s. I write more about this in *Teorije sodobnega gledališča in performansa* (*Theories of Contemporary Theatre and Performance*) (Milohnič, 2009, 186–187).

8 The expression “artist” is a derivative of the compound “artivism”, which implies a hybrid field between art and activism, similarly as in the expression “hacktivism”, which came to be used during the 1990s to describe activist practices in the context of new digital media. In this (“technological”) context, the first to start using the term *artivismo* was the Italian artist Giacomo Verde; his seminal writings on the subject were shortly followed by a mailing list of media activists *Activism-Hacking-Artivism* created by the Italian researcher and curator Tatiana Bazzichelli. In 2005, I transposed the term into the performing arts theory by writing an article for the performing arts journal *Maska* entitled “Artivism”, dealing with artist performative practices. The article was later re-published in different journals, books and on websites in Slovenian, English, Croatian, Serbian and Italian. The term has by now been firmly established and is only rarely put in quotation marks.

In Slovenia, the prototype of an activist, this activist-artistic composite, was without any doubt Marko Breclj. He was the absolute phenomenon, a performer extraordinaire, a tenacious fighter against the despotism of local sheriffs (especially, of course, the former mayor of Koper Boris Popovič, but also the mayor of Ljubljana Zoran Janković and the former mayor of Maribor Franc Kangler), supporter of youth culture clubs in virtually all Slovenian towns, the founder of the Association of Friends of Moderate Progress (when choosing the name, Breclj was inspired by no other than the celebrated satirist Jaroslav Hašek and his Party of Moderate Progress Within the Bounds of the Law), an excellent musician and a brilliant speaker as well as a writer, for a little while even a city councillor and I could go on and on—around half a century of Breclj's public life has amounted to a large number of actions and activities that elude definitions and boxes. Over all these years, Breclj remained true to himself, consistent in his stubborn insistence on his vision, uncompromising and free-thinking. In his lecture at the Workers and Punks' University (13 May 1998), he stressed that a man is free only when he "has dug deep enough to come to his own, independent standpoint and perspective, from which he can then act", but that it is also important that he has a chance "to mature in contact with artistic expression, with the most current artistic expression of resistance of his time" (Breclj, 2003, 132). And what is an expression of resistance?

"Expression of resistance is the one that refuses to accept the social situation and adopts a critical attitude towards it," this is why "a free man should be in contact with the free-thinking intellectual and artistic currents" (ibid., 133).

There is no doubt that Breclj himself contributed enormously to the "artistic expression of resistance of his time". Breclj was never "just" an artist, his position of enunciation was always multi-layered, effortlessly breaking the rigid boundaries between art, politics, activism, etc. The same is true for the genre boxes within the field of art, which Breclj rejected and was intentionally careless in dealing with, he did not trouble himself with genre purity and created hybrid events that often eluded clear-cut definitions. The essence of their meaning is perhaps best described by Tanja Lesničar Pučko, who called them "socio-artistic diversions" (Lesničar Pučko, 2005, 26). In her article "An Attack on the Church or the Limits of Church's Artistic Credo?", she points out that Breclj is not only a musician, performer and activist but, above all, a poet, so he is constantly inventing new words, for example "vatentat" (cotton wool attack), a word coined for the event of blowing salivated

cotton balls through a straw into the then foreign minister Dimitrij Rupel during his speech at the University of Koper in 2003.

Vatentat was one of the numerous “soft terrorist actions”, which Breclj and his colleagues started conceiving a few years earlier, although at the time they did not yet present them in these terms, and which continued also later. The contribution “Soft Terrorism”, which is based on an interview Alenka Pirman did with Marko Breclj in March 2006, lists as many as sixteen “soft terrorist” actions that Breclj had performed until then either on his own or together with his associates (comp. Breclj, 2006). An overview of the actions reveals an astonishing variety of “targets”—his artist repertoire includes virtually all key centres of power, from mayors, ministers and the government, the church and the cardinals to NATO and the US Marines. Perhaps the most resounding soft terrorist action was *Tapisonirano vnebouzetje* (*Upholstered Assumption*), which took place exactly one month before *Vatentat*. In 2003, when the environmental noise pollution assessment, which also measured the noise emitted by church bells, was made public and the measurements revealed that the bell noise often exceeded the permissible levels, this theme broke out in the media. With their action of silencing (upholstering) the bells of the Koper Cathedral on Assumption Day, Breclj and his associates joined the public debate in their own specific way. The action was meticulously planned and effectively realised and thus produced no damage on the bell clappers themselves; it did however cause inconvenience to some of its participants.⁹ Breclj, known for his determination, later continued with his soft terrorist actions, a little less so over the past few years, when it became increasingly difficult for him to perform due to poor health and the COVID-19 pandemic, factors that were, of course, beyond his control.

Soft terrorist actions are an unusual blend of performative ludism, political commentary and non-violent direct action, embellished with a large dose of humour, or as Tanja Lesničar Pučko says, “Breclj’s way of performing is always very serious, very radical, fully aware of the possible consequences, yet at the same time he never loses his poetics of the humorous and the non-destructive (cotton wool for the minister, felt for the bells, flour for the artists at the Ljubljana Post Office, ‘lessons in politics’ for the American marines at the Koper Youth Centre, etc.)” (Lesničar Pučko, 2005, 26).

9 One of the protagonists was Aleš Žumer, president of the ROV cultural society from the town of Železniki. The Železniki Municipal Council, in which the Slovenian People’s Party held a majority, considered his participation sufficient grounds for discontinuing the co-funding of the association’s activities from the municipal budget, claiming that the society’s activities harmed the reputation of the Železniki municipality—a textbook example of how economic censorship can be used to clamp down on divergent views from the other side of the ideological divide.

I might add that the thread running through his soft terrorist performance actions is a merciless castigation of a wide range of manifestations of “democratic despotism”, as he called it in his witty and ironical manner and which found its way into the titles of some of his actions, e.g. *To the Democratic Despot Kangler* (2012), for which he created a unique artefact containing his excrement for the then mayor of Maribor.

Because Brecelj was truly original in everything he did, he cannot be compared with any other activist performer; in certain elements perhaps, at best, with the Serbian activist Nikola Džafo and his LED ART (ICE ART). Like Brecelj’s, Džafo’s practice includes miminalistic performative gestures with a maximum of effect, to which he also gives witty names, often using word play, irony and self-irony; he is engaged and tenacious, and his projects are hybrid mixtures of political protest, performance and artistic installation. LED ART started as an informal group in 1993, when Džafo with a few of his friends organised the exhibition *Frozen Art* in Belgrade. Džafo is also the co-founder of the famous Centre for Cultural Decontamination, where the group held an opening performance on 1 January 1995. Also in 1995, they performed *Ko was šiša*—in Džafo’s words, “a voluntary exercise in shame”—when they publicly shaved the hair of at least 20 well-known, critical intellectuals.¹⁰ Two years later, LED ART participated in the protests in Belgrade with three activist actions: *Vrnimo jim sliko (z ogledali proti policijskemu kordonu)* (*Let’s Reflect Them (with mirrors against the police cordon)*), *Predsednikov rešilni jopič* (*The President’s Life Vest*) and *Kreda za incidente* (*Incident Chalk*) (comp. Grginčević, 2004, 131–139).

The “monumental performance” *Kolenovanje* (*Kneeling*) is probably Brecelj’s most widely known action, which he was performing over the course of seven years of Boris Popović as mayor of Koper. Because *Kolenovanje* spanned a long period, it could be placed in the tradition of durational performances, practiced by numerous performance artists (e.g. Marina Abramović) as well as theatre directors (e.g. Robert Wilson, Tim Etchells, etc.), and in Slovenia since the 1960s by Marko Pogačnik with an event in which he put his body on display at an art gallery in Kranj (comp. Milohnić, 2009, 167). But this is only one of the dimensions of

10 *Ko was šiša* is, of course, a play on words: besides the literal meaning (who cuts your hair), there is also the metaphorical meaning of this Serbian phrase that connotes that nobody is interested in what you think; at the same time, it is reminiscent of the expression “sheep for shearing” (in the sense to be passive, let yourself be exploited, not resisting). In addition, the use of German in the title (the German word “was” means “what” and is also a homonym for the Serbian—and Slovenian—word “you”) as well as in the performance’s subtitle (“Stutzen macht frei” meaning “shearing sets you free”, paraphrase of the “Arbeit macht frei”—“Work sets you free”—slogan displayed at the entrance of the Nazi concentration camp) is reminiscent of the famous performance by Raša Todosijević *Was ist Kunst, Marinela Koželj?* from the late 1970s, in which he was using repressive techniques of police interrogation, Gestapo torture, etc.

Kolenovanje, since Breclj was not concerned only with the medium but with delivering a clearly political and activist gesture of protest against the despotism of a local sheriff. It would, therefore, be too reductive to interpret *Kolenovanje* only in the sphere of art, since Breclj—not only in this performance but continuously—traversed it, combining it with different forms of protest, micro resistances, activism, etc. As Blaž Lukan pointed out in his article “Kneeling: Soft Terrorist Performance by Marko Breclj”, *Kolenovanje* is a “transitive performance” and Marko Breclj a “performative author of perpetual transitioning”, characterised by “different crossings and intertwinements of seemingly incompatible categories: a concrete, ‘hard’ political plan and the ‘soft’ poetisation of its execution, direct ethical and political condemnation of selected public figures and phenomena and their parodic metaphorisation, conspiratorial subversion and performative guerrilla and public and declarative, manifestational political activism, etc.” (Lukan, 2015, 145)

Calling *Kolenovanje* a “monumental performance” is, of course, a witty (self)ironic use of the expression, since the performance itself was based on a minimalist gesture: every time he stumbled upon Mayor Popović, Breclj would get on his knees and bow down to him. To this end, he attached slippers to his knees with adhesive tape, but later preferred using rolls of toilet paper. The decision to use these props (for which he immediately—much in his style—came up with a new word: “kolenovalniki” (“kneers”)) was driven primarily by practical concerns (to be able to kneel for a longer period, to keep the trousers clean, etc.), although both props also carry symbolical weight: slippers as a symbol of submissiveness (in Slovenian “copatar”, a man wearing slippers, means a submissive person), but also of homeliness, which can be pleasant or horrible (or both at once, as in Freud’s notion of *das Unheimliche*, uncanny); toilet paper as a basic necessity, which can on the other hand also be a metaphor for the political “bog”, the faecality of power and so on. Breclj always performed the action alone, but the execution, of course, required the presence of the mayor. The only exception is a (staged) photograph by Andraž Gombač from the Primorske novice newspaper, depicting Breclj and four of his associates and collaborators kneeling in front of a portrait of Boris Popović with a halo around his head. A scene reminiscent of worshipping the absolutist ruler, when the subjects would kneel in front of a portrait of King Louis XIV when he was not in Versailles. *Kolenovanje* is a performance in which Breclj over-identifies with the position of the subject and, by using the method of subversive affirmation, offers an unyielding critique of the autocratic policies of the mayor of Koper, who of course was avoiding contacts with Breclj, often unsuccessfully, as the performer was always

on the lookout, carrying his knee equipment wherever he went, ready to fall on his knees in front of—as he called him—the “skytouching palmer” Popović. But on the days when the mayor did manage to escape him, Brecelj used his portrait—a cardboard figure with a halo around the head, which can be seen in the mentioned photograph and which was used also in a few of his other performances, e.g. *Tek okoli despotskega Kopra* (*Running Around the Despot Koper*) (2012), when he attached the image to a chair (throne) and carried it through the city streets.

5. FROM CURRENT RESEARCH TO THE RESEARCH OF TOPICALITY

This article presents a few selected examples of the theatre of resistance in Slovenia in the 20th century that were significant in their time and still deserve attention because they can speak volumes on innovation and engagement even today, followed by several more recent examples of activist practices, which can be understood as special forms of theatre of resistance in the widest (performative) sense. The list of phenomena from the history of Slovenian theatre that can be included in this category is by no means an exhaustive one; new examples of such practices are still created in the present, encouraged by the authoritarian tendencies of the current government. There certainly won't be any shortage of relevant material for future “current research” into the theatre of resistance in Slovenia, because despite increased repression there are always enough people who are aware that speaking truth to power and the authoritarian political elites and telling them what they would prefer not to hear is important for a democratic society.

Although it is characteristic of the present time that it favours communication in the virtual reality, the primary forms of resistance are still those protest manifestations that take place in the physical public space. Like all other rights that are never won once and for all, the right to voice concerns and express dissent in the physical spaces of public life has to be fought for again and again. During the Belgrade protests in the mid-1990s, police cordons blocked the streets to prevent the protesters from marching through the streets; as a result, the movement's main strategic goal became having the right to move freely within the city. “Walking as a form defined the protests and symbolised their spirit,” says Dragičević Šešić (2001, 75). This spirit was distilled into a protest slogan “I think therefore I walk”, which was a witty paraphrase of René Descartes's famous formulation “Cogito ergo sum”. In 1996 and 1997, the word “walking” thus became the synonym of the Belgrade

protests and, interestingly, the same happened with the word “cycling” in the case of more recent protests in Ljubljana against the third government of the Prime Minister Janez Janša. They began in spring 2020 and continued every Friday without interruption until the parliamentary elections in April 2022, when Janša’s party lost power. Wanting to voice their opinions at a time when mass gatherings were prohibited due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the protesters decided to protest against the government by cycling through the streets of Ljubljana. The bicycle became the symbol of resistance as well as a symbol of inventiveness, wit and unbridled imagination of these rebels of a new age. Apparently, a new meaning will have to be added to the existing dictionary definition of the word “bicycle”. This too should be the task of the future research into performative practices of resistance that take place here and now. If this future current, topical research is done quick enough, it could perhaps be called “research of topicality”.

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