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Interview with Božidar Mandić - The Family of Clear Streams (Porodica bistrih potoka) art commune

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FROM THE FIRST COMMUNE TO THE COMMUNE IN NATURE

Božidar Mandić: I have lived in various forms of communes for 49 years, and I think a commune is one of the most intense, most beautiful forms of human existence. Of course, it's both the hardest and the most beautiful. It all had its roots in the 1970s in Novi Sad in an avant-garde atmosphere and a group that first gathered around the Youth Tribune. I'm just going to list some people, such as Slobodan Tišma, Miroslav Mandić, Peđa Vranešević, Mirko Radojičić, Slavko Bogdanović, Čeda Drča, Ana Raković, and 15 other people. We founded a communitarian psychology there, from which art emerged, which was later persecuted, it was attacked, so that of fourteen people, eight were convicted. Some went to prison, some were given suspended sentences, in any case it was a grave consequence, which resulted in us creating a commune or a life we called intimacy from art in 1972 or so.

From that public activity in the space that was called Youth Tribune and is now the Cultural Centre Novi Sad, we rented a venue called Teslina 18, *and this is now, to put it simply, a cult The Family of Clear Streams point, because it was perceived as something big, in a house where various forms of living took place - alternative, avant-garde, and where this group that acted publicly later moved to.* (?) So these people lived in that house, including László Kerekes, and painters, a very different life was lived there. Because it was near Futoški Park, we practically lived in Futoški Park, played football, so to speak, hid our aesthetic standpoints and waited for our friends to return from prison, and then tried to find a house in the country, and to establish a kind of third front, because we realized that the seventies were offering two very distinct aspects: One was terrorism and the other was bureaucracy. Being poets and artists, we could not accept either of these, so we chose the third road which lead to nature. And then we too started looking for a house. And from '72 to '77 we were actively looking for a house, first in Vojvodina, then in Istria, Bosnia, and finally we came to Serbia. And so I found here, on Mountain Rudnik, a beautiful home, having seen 250 abandoned houses, and I immediately felt it in my heart, that this was my home, that the house looks a bit like a portrait of me, and I've been here for 43 years. This is how The Family of Clear Streams (Porodica bistrih potoka) art commune was created, it was a new experience.

COMMUNE INITIATION AND DEVELOPMENT PHASES

Božidar Mandić: That situation in Novi Sad; we all talked a lot. Nobody wanted to do public art. We were all kind of abstinent and resistant to do public art. And then we had a lot of communitarian meetings, we sought ... Slobodan Tišma and Čeda Drča, they were in charge of Vojvodina, they visited over 200 abandoned farms. One was very intriguing, it was in Bajša, we were going there for two years, negotiating the buy. There was this guy Vikonja, who was reluctant to sell... Tišma always

addressed him to him, Mr. Vi-konj (You-horse), would you sell us... we joked. And then we went to Istria, Braila, my wife and I. Ana Raković-Drča, she searched in Bosnia, Mirko Radojičić and I and Braila went around Bosnia and searched. And only in the end we began to locate and search in Serbia. Here, too, Dušan Belić and I searched for houses for a year. We found a lot of abandoned houses. At the moment we have information that there are over 70,000 abandoned houses, which means that almost half a million people could move in without having to build, living idyllic and poetic lives. And when we came to this home here, I immediately liked it and we bought the house in two days. This home has five buildings, one house that was made in '68, which means at the time of the revolution, when I too believed that the world could be better. This is a a mud, stone, wood and brick house - everything is made of organic materials and seems like five organs. And now, that is nice. None of those old friends from Novi Sad came to live with us. We were joined by Marija Blagojević, a very interesting film director and esoteric writer, Dusan Belić, a sociologist, and Lučka Rojec from Slovenia, with two children, Elion and Gregor. And there were Braila and I and Ista, afterwards Aja and Sun were born.

But here we started that commune idyll, trying to live together. I like to say that the commune is a common love or fucking of two or more people who love each other. We founded one free commune, no interests, no religion. There are now economic communes, artistic ones. Ours was a free one. In it we wanted people who lived here to create a co-sensibility. We based that new experience here, and that meant starting from the scratch. We knew nothing - didn't know what an animal was, or grass or garden. It was as if we were sent there from outer space. And that feeling was primarily exploratory, experimental, with one intuitive feeling that a young man could do anything. And I just say, we have been here since the 1st of May '77, over four decades, in a new form of communitarian aspect. It means that we have founded an indigenous economy here, we have realized that money is insignificant, that our existence can be relaxed, with no fears, etc. We have started an open home atmosphere, a strong affirmation for philosophy, earth, art, and a modest economy. We had our own garden, a cow, hens, sheep, bees, and we could live without money. Sometimes people would give us money and we would put it under a mattress. When we needed it to buy maybe oil or sugar, that money would be all mouldy. We'd do it very rarely.

In any case, The Family of Clear Streams is already history, even perhaps a small real myth, because we have endured for 43 years with such alternative independent views, independent - not belonging to anyone. Nobody covers your back, neither the state, nor the police, nor the church, nor the guild. One example is the paradigm of how an individual can suggest something in this world without being intimidated, for example, by the psychology of the masses, which is that everyone must live in a similar way; but that there are exclusive solutions, authenticity. And that is the aesthetic inspiration that still holds me, after 43 years.

We talked a lot, made agreements and thought that we had some ethos regarding that. For example, in the evening we would plan what we would do the next day; a goat should be fed, a cow should be milked, a garden should be tilled, a house should be patched, whitewashed, etc. But these were nice communitarian meetings. I have to say, almost always the first year in commune works quite nicely. People are in love with each other, there is the rapture, we scream a lot, the second year is a little

harder, because this tension comes, and even this love sexual intertwining occurs, there are new spasms, new traumas, etc. But anyway, for me it was nice, it's an openness where we talked in the evening what we would do the next day, and in the morning we *adjusted the creation*. When there were five, six, eight of us, so many of us were in the commune, it all worked out very well. And of course, in the evenings we had those criticising meetings, there was even a chair for it; you sit back and criticise. 'It wasn't polite when you told me 'give me water' you could have said 'please''. We learned about mindfulness, obedience. It was a relationship with people who lived there, which could be developed further. We all quickly identify the selfish ones, those not nice, and this is emphasized. And those who do not have the giving energy inside the very centre of the commune leave very quickly. But what is basic is the history of The Family of Clear Streams. A lot of phases, an intense commune, then family commune, in the end I stayed in a monocultural life. At the moment, I am living ephemeral communes. People come and go, etc., One young man comes and goes, living with me for seven years, but these are ephemeral forms now, but I am still holding on to this one spirit.

ABOUT INTERNAL DYNAMICS IN THE COMMUNE

Božidar Mandić: Of course, there are a lot of conflicts in communes as well, so we had meetings every night; discussing who hurt whom. For example, when you live long with someone, it is enough to walk by half a meter away and it already hurts, because auras rub against each other. Auras cannot withstand that one, collective, intense relationship. However, I think that a commune is something that is beautiful, because identity develops quickly within it. There are no lies in the commune. In a society, there can be lies, in a family too, an individual can lie, but there are no lies in the commune. That is why my attitude to the commune is something I respect most. And I say, after this group Mirko Novković, then came Zoka Zdravković, etc. came. People came and left, to join the family commune where Braila and I were in charge; and whoever came - they were guests. Someone would spend half a year with us, but it was no longer such an intense commune, because that intense commune that is beautiful - and we all slept in one room, shared everything, so there was no separation, etc. - it is very beautiful, and its identity it can be hardly withstood. There is a sense of a cult and it is an attribution of a commune to live a super-identity. You have to have 400% more energy to join, to be tolerant, to connect, to be able to make living and good decisions. And so, the commune is an impression for me, too. All communes are ephemeral. It is difficult to withstand these beauties of intensity, but people still prefer to live in a convention. Here I have been going on for a long time, almost for fifty years, and I have never abandoned this idea of living together, which is in some way the basic motto - I always do it for you first. So, this is just a small agora, where ordinary people, intellectuals, the poor, the unhappy, joyful people come. An open home where anyone can find their place, if one is free and not aggressive. The key word here is hugs, from day one. We hugged, loved people, we played. And that's the difference between Šempas and us. We never taught anyone anything, to be honest, we never learned from anyone.

MOTIVES AND INSIGHTS

Božidar Mandić: I come from art, I came here to nature, to live in the forest. I did not come to the countryside, I am not from ethnic culture. I am a man of avant-garde views, and I think we have anticipated at least some things a little earlier than sociological reflections. But anyway, some summary of my life, having gone through various stages, is that I'm now returning to art and presenting that experience that is of a distinctive, authentic character. You live with plants, with waterfalls, with mountains, with wind; this is completely different knowledge from what a socially-psychologically determined person knows. I bring it up as much as possible through art, and in that sense *The Family of Clear Streams* is a living sculpture of modern art. When I hoe, when I hold a hoe, it's a work of art. When I make beds for people who sleep, it's art. When I sweep the floor in the gallery, it's dedicated to aesthetics, to thinking about art. And of course, I do one and specific art, since I also write, I play theatrical plays. I am a fine art researcher, dealing with art that emerges from this world of mine. At this point, since I have been fighting the necrophiliac determination, which has been going on for about 40-50 years, it is just that all I do is work for the *bios*. For biophilic engagement, the struggle for life and through art, and the struggle of life for art. So, I think I found some symbiosis, an amalgamate that just nourishes one another, because at this point one of the biggest questions is the survival of the planet, the survival of civilisation, and that's my engaged artistic question, to which I answer - return to nature, return to your soul, return to courage, return to risk. And especially today, when we see this narcissistic epoch, communitarianism is for me a suggestion of how to counteract the overblown uncontrolled psychology of egocentricity, and conditionally speaking, of being irresponsible to another and taking only for one. As if you eat yourself, you have no feeling. So, commune-centrism is the relevant opposition for me today.

INSPIRATIONS AND EXAMPLES

Božidar Mandić: Marko Pogačnik, he is a wonderful man. We met in Novi Sad in the '70s, they had their own action, the OHO group. And here we have already started common discussions that one has to go into nature. Marko went to the Šempas' in '72, and I visited him, and he impressed me a lot. But as I like to say, I was most influenced by the KOD group. I was their active observer, participating alongside. I even had some of my artistic suggestions. But it is, above all, the creation of co-sensibility that overrides normal individual processes, and that is what excited me. There was another Adam Franko's really big commune it was in Rokavci, a slightly different commune than our artistic ones. They were three couples of sociologists, had also lived beautifully for six years; and they visited us and I visited them. We even had one public lecture at SKC on communes. Even after *The Family of Clear Streams* there have been many small communes. One of them is on Fruška Gora, that is Radovan Vlahović. Then, it's the Sunshine Farm near Subotica, nine years old, László and Milica, a wonderful anthroposophical commune, and wonderful people. It's the Baštara in Ljubovija, Peđa Đolović, who lived there for three-four years. That is now Bostava in Zaječar, they have been living therefor twenty-something years ... there are two or three of them. There are a dozen communes between Ljig and Gornji Milanovac, Katarina's commune ... there are quite a few of us, I think. There are also some on Stara Planina Mountain, but I do not know them. In any case, there are potentials for young people to

flee the cities, even in small numbers. In Europe, this is much more structural, in Germany, seven percent already live against the system. There are 2000 communes in Spain, there are fifteen large communes in France, Longo Mai, it is a large '68 based commune, you may have heard.

EXTERNAL RELATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Božidar Mandić: But it is not impossible that it appeared as the Gogol's coat - that we still embraced some of the communes, and that the idea may be spreading and talked about. I don't even know, there are so many of us in the media, I'm not even aware of it. But it is also spread by word of mouth - here, people live there. Sometimes people come back and say 'If I hadn't come here 25 years ago, I would've killed myself' ... Do you understand me? It's some indirect maybe, atmospheric influence.

We communicated a lot through letters. My children went to school and would bring five, six, seven letters a week. We corresponded a lot, and I had received 3700 letters until fifteen years ago, say in 30 years. Surely, we have realized the dream of many. At first it was clearer, and we were somehow more valued. Now, this is a new policy, ignoring, minorizing, so now society, the establishment, to put it simply, is minorizing what we have done.

I bring non-institutional knowledge to the institutions and that is a good symbiosis. Because the institutional of institutions is boring and the non-institutional outside institutions is anaemic. So I came up with a culture of monastic and plausible action. So, here I live as a monk who gnostically i.e. intuitively, directly receives knowledge, and then I bring it to a plausible world through big media. I was a columnist for daily Danas and Politika, Radio Belgrade, I play at the National Theatre and I think it's a good symbiosis and a bridge. So, the non-dependency, you being accepted there, and yet being able to do the opposite without breaking anything and in some way remain integral.

They have started building a road and it is really one of the hardest blows on the *Family* because civilization has come. We were completely isolated. For example, a plastic bag would be brought here once every three months. Now you can see twenty plastic bags a day. So civilization represents a suction escalation. This is something new in general in a capitalist establishment attack. They suck. In that sense, it was a big blow for me. For five years we did not allow the road to pass. It was a great struggle and one example where individuals could resist corporations, government institutions, ministers, false laws, etc. However, the road was approved, because they are much stronger etc, and it was a moment when I learned something, and that comes with age - that everything that breaks you, you have to fix. When that happened, it was a big blow on The Family of Clear Streams. Then I realized, I have to fix it. And this is one of very important words in the 21st century, not only for me, but for psychophilosophy - to fix.

EXTERNAL FORMS OF EXPRESSION

Božidar Mandić: Then, of course, experience condensed here that required itself to be valorised, say in the form of short poems. I first wrote short poems and a book called *Words from the Woods* came into being. Later it became just another permanent job, a need arose to turn some of the elements we see in nature into exhibits - cow dung, stone, wood, which excited me aesthetically. And then, because of living in the commune, we realized that we were already a theatre; and wherever we appeared, it was already a theatrical play. I've worked on a lot, there's also my book and plays, how I get to express myself. This is when young people work in the garden, wash the dishes, carry boulders from the stream, and so they get to have actors' expression. This is certainly a unique technique that is not a technique because it does not exist. But it creates that collective sensibility where we can react quickly on stage. So, what everyone tells us, some praise us, some spit on us, etc., but everyone says - it feels like you love each other on stage. We have transferred communitarian psychology to the theatre and that's where it lingers most. I have to say that my actors and I, almost experience coitus, creating a play or playing. It is, above all, ecstasy, it is by no means a utilitarian act, or an act that has to be recognized, rewarded, or valorised by the guild. It's - let's create a theatre that represents our identities, which has no technical conditionality, but simply, with our bodies, with words, with a cry, with the mind, we want to return the theatre to man. So, I am very happy that we have always brought to the theatre that collective cry, which transforms into a theatrical, stage aesthetics and which is very questionable for me personally. For, I still haven't seen any of my shows. We have an internal logic and it is the most important thing to us. To rejoice while we play - it is an internal logic. But of course, we believe in our own theatre, and I know it's certainly different from all the classics. But it is also different from all the alternative and avant-garde ones. I find different solutions, I last a long time, there must be different designs that concern inhaling and exhaling. I've lived here for a very long time, I've almost never gone out, and then there comes a time when you need to bring it up; if not, you choke on beauty. Yes, people do not know *Solve et coagula* means.

THE CONTINUITY ATTITUDE

Božidar Mandić: I am already in the summarising phase of life too. Forty-three years, it's a long way. For example, Henry David Thoreau lived in the woods for two years, so he wrote the cult book *Walden*. I have been living here for 43 years, my intention is to squeeze the experience as much as I can. To write more books, more plays, make exhibitions and still host people here, to the extent that I can, because now I'm a little older and into reducing, etc. But I do not give up these two or three concepts that I have just mentioned - namely to squeeze out the experience that is exclusive - to live in the forest, to live in opposition to the system, to civilization, etc., to bring it through works of art. That's why, among other things, a living sculpture of modern art. That life is never dried up; and that the author is in fact, at this point, a kind of a loner in the apocalypse who has to scream ... AAAAA ... one can live differently.