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Interview with Siniša Rešin-Tucić, Jelena Marjanov and Ivan Pravdić, members of the Magnet group

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School and programme

Sinisa Rešin-Tucić: I remember the summer of 1993. - inflation, chaos, Ivan Džidić's arrival in Novi Sad to invite Vujica [Rešin Tucić] to run a creative writing course in Belgrade *writing on: The Avant-garde Tradition*. That is the first thing I remember.

Jelena Marjanov: I saw the announcement for the establishment of the 'Avant-garde Tradition' group at the Stari Grad Cultural Centre in Belgrade, on RTS in an afternoon show.

Ivan Pravdić: The course was run by Vujica Rešin-Tucić and Ostoja Kisić, with Vujica organizing the Avant-garde Tradition programme, where artists from the 1960s and 1970s from all over the former Yugoslavia were invited to talk with us and everyone who was able to come responded they would. Actors of the Novi Sad and Belgrade neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s participated to a large extent.

Siniša: It took place about three times a week, and Vujica commuted from Novi Sad, and he always prepared something for the school, such as Judita Šalgo's tapes, to show that literature was not only rhyming poems. Rather, literature was a much broader idea. And the main premise was: We don't want to be better writers, but to improve ourselves as people.

Ivan: We focused on the poetics of creation, yet not only with words, but to apply the principles we use with words to colours, to signs, to images. So there were many experiments that the avant-garde had dealt with and we took over, and it was a model for us to make our own works in similar combined media, mail art, visual poetry and performance, and that was part of the programme run by Vujica Rešin Tucić .

There was a course *Kontradiktorium*, run by Ostoja Kisić for two years where, through the history of traditional, ancient and contemporary art, we discovered the paradoxes and how they have been expressed. So it was a specific fast-forward through art history, most notably literature and poetry. It was a school and we even naturally relied on the Renato Poggioli's *school-movement model*. I don't know right now, but we started from school where we had the opportunity to meet some of the artists we had never heard of. We were 17, 18, 19 years old then. Siniša was 15 years old. It was in the secondary school.

Siniša: The point of this was not social engagement; we weren't dealing with the politics in the society, but were oriented towards avant-garde exclusively.

Ivan: Experiment and expansion of own creative practices. From that school, a performance was initiated in December 1993 at the Stari Grad Cultural Centre in Belgrade. *Gens Una Sumus*', a simultaneous performance of a number of young authors - about 25 to 30, with most attendees scattered throughout the large hall. This was the moment when it was noticed that such performances had a public presentation potential and a potential public echo, and after that a new form of work through camps was launched, with a special intensive drill with a separate group of participants in the block that

lasted for one to two weeks. As part of that programme we created new joint programmes every day in public spaces, and exteriors on Lake Palić in public cultural institutions.

At that point, it was a group of about 15 to 20 young people who were exclusively focused on artistic production 24 hours a day. For example, one of the topics was a singled out word as a visual cue, so we made a bunch of ribbons with words written on them. We arranged the space, creating spatial installations, and there were workshop facilitators and guests who supported us in the team processes and made the basic terminology familiar, and encouraged us to realise that such creation processes were possible.

There were no imposed tasks, anyone could initiate an idea, and there were no restrictions. Ideas were analysed and this was discussed with other participants in the camp. In such an atmosphere there was a lot of collaborative work either as an aid to an individual idea or as a joint authors' works that originated on the icy surface of the lake, intervention in abandoned houses in Palić, in the Subotica City Library, where Slavko Matković was working at the time.

Getting started and forming a group

Ivan: Our group was formed in such an atmosphere, because one recognises possibilities through performance, and within the camps we naturally articulated ourselves as a group.

Jelena: The Academy had already formed a group through its programme, during all these camps, even before the first issue of *Magnet* magazine was published. So, *Magnet* was first initiated as the magazine of the 'Avant-garde Tradition' group and then the first issue was launched.

Siniša: That was all developing very nicely, we had public appearances, and the education process continued, but at one point Vujica (Rešin Tucić) stopped running that school, saying that there was no more interest.

Ivan: Yes, in fact the Open Society Fund stopped funding this form of work and shifted its support to media and social inclusion projects as opposed to this program which was very exclusive in the sense that it was a relatively small group of young people who dealt only with art for personal development: Miroslav Nune Popović, Jelena Marjanov, Siniša Tucić, Ivan Pravdić, Venislav Džidić, Katarina Pantelić, Nikola Popović, [Marija Lončar, Vladimir Acan, Mina Vuletić, Dejan Jakovljević] etc. And in the process, textualism and literary practice through the works of Vojislav Despotov and Judita Šalgo had a greater influence on us than the Belgrade practice of the period that relied on performance and the visual arts.

Siniša: We wanted to be writers, each of us worked on a manuscript of one's own poems

Ivan: We could no longer work within the school, and then we met again. We worked together. What we were doing was interesting to us, and then we started to go out to the public field slowly, outside the previously provided channels through the Open Society Fund. We started organizing exhibitions, poetic performances, publishing texts in other magazines, but we kept that format of work together through meeting and socialising, and then we published another issue of the *Magnet Magazine*. We had a financial administrative problem because of the tax bases with our newly formed publishing house agency, so we decided to quickly kill the registration and we decided that we had no other choice but to go out and thus realise our communication publicly.

We did two exhibitions as a group during that period, and here we appeared as producers, more precisely Nune Popović, who started it with a collection of counter-culture covers, fanzines, because we tried to make the formats of promotions, exhibitions and public announcements as diverse as possible – multi-media with live performances, with a dozen different performers, photographers, poets, artists who were interested in trying out all these forms of expression. So, in addition to those events where we were the producers, we simultaneously promoted the second issue of *Magnet* through a joint performance where we appeared as authors.

The school was stopped, and there were still many of us together, and we wanted to do something together. On the other hand, we were disappointed with the termination of the school and the financing of the magazine – being unable to provide any public results. We talked about street performances as a format for further action, and the core of the group was defined in the process - there were Jelena, Nune, myself, the others knew about the plans, participated in the preparations, consultations, debates about the final performance, some gave up in the process, and we remained persistent in doing so. So the format of street performance had caused the articulation of a group of us who were ready to create a provocative action in a public space such as *Phallus Serbia*.

Jelena: Nune and Ivan had a tactically clearly defined plan for how to do the performance, the whole context was clear to me, because I felt like doing something different, I felt like doing something shocking. And I made a clear decision to participate in it.

Performance Methods

Ivan: There was no audience in the galleries, there was no real impact and effect on the public, and we were guided by the fact that through art we had improved ourselves, we realized that through the use of artistic means we might try to make the world around us a better place.

For me, the joint version of events was dominating. As I remember, for it was 23 years ago, we came up with ideas for performances through mutual conversation, work, play, and even sometimes we conducted behavioural performances like surrealists, to create a small excess, a small interactive experience from everyday life, and it seemed to us that was the most natural way of doing things. Because, if we agreed that we wanted to make a public act to show what we were dissatisfied with, to highlight issues that we thought were a problem, such statements simply came about because we had been hanging out intensely every day. Anarchistically agreed.

Jelena: Yes, exactly.

Ivan: We could talk about everything, everyone could clearly say what they wanted, even if there were conflicts. Everyone had the right to pull out or not to participate in the planned action. It was most normal.

Jelena: They could also return to work after the action and resume work.

Ivan: For this first specific case *Phallus Serbia* we decided to do the performance three weeks before the performance, knowing that we would be arrested. For us, this was one of the most important awareness-raising moments - knowing that something would end unfavourably for us without giving up on our attention to how to make the performance most effective, as we were aware of the political provocation we were developing through performance.

The method was created on the move, precisely because of the perceived danger. The idea of what the elements of performance were was presented and everyone individually decided whether to participate in it or not. There was no pressure, no anger, but those ready to join the performance would join it. Of course they remained there as support, but over time the group dissipated. Out of 30 of us, ten remained in 1996, and by 1997 there were even fewer of us, and that first street performance *Phallus Serbia* was carried out by Jelena, Nune, me, and Dejan Jakovljević, who wore a balaclava and drummed the drum during the procession.

We were encouraged by the outcome, because the logistics of the whole event had been set well, we had announced the performance as a public rally to the police, so we officially announced a 'no content' event on the application, but felt that we'd be arrested, and all our friends, college professors, acquaintances and a few journalists gathered around the police station and rallied there until they released us. We had planned it to avoid being held in custody.

All in all, we did great, because we implemented a shock method in a public space having organised that, and on the other hand, the system probably found it a convenient form of a test balloon - what could that be?

And indeed, now that we think of it, the three of us walked from the City Library and by the time we reached the middle of the street at SANU (Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences), a crowd of people were already following us. It was a big crowd towards the end, but since we were at the head of the procession, it was easy for the police to pick us up and escort us to the police station.

Jelena: Another example is the performance of *'The Last Supper'*, which we funded entirely on our own, although we had tried to find support, it was realised entirely on our own.

Ivan: So basically all of our actions were self-funded, e.g. *Phallus Serbia*. Maria Lončar made it out of papier mâché and a cardboard tube. She was a student at the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade then. Afterwards, we performed *'Revelation'*, wherein we smashed a TV set, right in front of the state television RTS, at the point where a bomb hit later during the 1999 bombing; and the fourth performance *'Exorcism of the Devil'* when we whipped the National Library and the fifth performance *'Gold Bars'*, we took the procession to the National Bank of Serbia only Jelena, Nune and I were public protagonists, others pulled out.

Political implications

Ivan: We varied from brutality to grave irony. It was the time of indignation. That was half a year before the great political crisis. As artists we wanted to express all the futility of the country, which later escalated in ballots theft and major demonstrations in 1996.

Siniša: We attacked Milošević's war policy and the institutions that supported the regime

Ivan: Basically, those basic points of power - the President, SANU [Serbian Academy of Sciences], TV [State broadcaster], tradition, National Library of Serbia, National Bank, etc. marked the first cycle - these 5 performances - but it was always important for us as artists to create a *game*; to create and emphasize ambiguity, while daily political realities and protests were inscribing mostly one-way messages.

Of course received threats, attempts by some intellectuals to talk us out of our intentions, but being carried away with a good feeling after the first public performance and arrest, we were on some sort of adrenaline rush that was unstoppable.

Jelena: After the protests were completed and the crisis was partially halted, a new government was established in Belgrade after the 1996 election crisis and we then implemented the '*88 Eggs for the New Opposition Authorities*' action because our intention was to point to a problem that was evident that the new government behaved the same as the previous one.

Siniša: That performance could also be seen as a precursor to *white* (unmarked) *ballots*, which occurred in the 2012 electoral crisis, and indicated that the change of parties in power does not affect systemic changes.

Termination of the group

Ivan: The protest was over, energy was deflated, the expectations of the citizens were let down, a new crisis was started and the quiet chaos in Kosovo, all this nonsense was felt, which was why our performances were so dark during 1997. And, indeed, after the performance '*You have been Slaughtered, Our Condolences*' we simply did not even need to communicate, there were occasional forms of support in the realization of individual projects, but as a group we found ourselves preparing the third issue of the magazine Magnet, which has never been published, but later much of that content appeared in the monograph *Živela sloboda* [Long Live Freedom] produced by the Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina in 2011, so the material that had been prepared for the third issue of our journal was published there. And by that time it had already been clear to us and so the third issue was being prepared as a historical overview of everything that had been realized up to that point, longer analytical texts were published in Nova Atlantida, Slovenia, an extensive interview with Nune in Mladina, Slovenia, so we parted our ways.

From March 1999, the situation changed, Nune worked in the *Dnevni Telegraph* daily and when journalist Čuruvija [Slavko] was killed (political assassination) he left Serbia, too. Practically since that time we have no longer been in touch or in any activity.

We see a link in political protests through performance, that they relied on our model of work, and in the further development of events since 1999 the resistance movement 'Otpor'[resistance] often used street performance, quick actions, we called it 'terror-artism' and 'and guerrilla performance.' We created neologisms to explain the formats we used. There was no need for a group anymore once that entered the general discourse of social struggle, when we were no longer physically together, Nune was abroad, Jelena and I were doing other things, and everyone else continued their individual projects.

Jelena: I left, but I did not give up on creativity, and I did not give up solely because of the encouragement and fearlessness that Siniša's father, Vujica Rešin Tucić, instilled in us during school.

Reflections of the public

Ivan: It was unclear to everyone, both to the police and to art critics, whether we belonged to performance or contemporary art practice, because we were not close to the activities of the Centre for Contemporary Art Belgrade, but were just an organized group of individuals. We were all students from different faculties who studied economics, literature, dramaturgy, philology, journalism, etc.

Siniša: None of the theoreticians talked about us, only Jovan Despotović published one text in the daily newspaper Danas. We were mostly ignored, but some individuals appeared publicly at the time when Nune was to be sentenced, e.g. Bogdan Bogdanović, Filip David, and our friend Srđan V. Tešin, who is also a bookseller and who supported us all the time, but for the most part, our acquaintances were silent and did not speak out, and only after October 5 (political change in 2000) did Miško Šuvaković started mentioning Magnet. But until then, there was not a word.

Ivan: Until then, the term activism was unknown among the local public, no discourse had been made, especially not related to the public space in which we most often worked. There was no reflection in the media, we were predominantly ignored, especially at the time the actions took place, and at the same time we were being attacked, both on a personal level, and by some public figures like Bogdan Tirnanić. Mind you, this was only in the written media, we did not exist to the electronic media. But on the other hand, it was international contributions of the likes of the Associated Press and CNN network that reflected our presence beyond the local environment.

Although, it should be noted that after 2000, due to my involvement with Magnet, I was able to get a job as a programme editor at the SKC (Student Cultural Centre) institution. Slavko Timotijević invited me and accepted my proposed programme, respecting my previous engagement, so I started working for a state institution.

Then, in 2005, a large exhibition 'On Normality' was held at the MSUB (Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade), which included the Magnet group and later there was a retrospective exhibition 'Long Live Freedom' at MSUV (Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina) 2011.

Finally, we have changed; we have found different ways to express ourselves.

It is good that we continued, Siniša wrote a whole series of books. After five years I retired from working in SKC to focus on my work as an author, and later on my work at the University.