

Art in small circles

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Abstract

As a researcher in the fields of Political Science and Intercultural Communication, my purpose here is linked with the current state of art in Albania, but only through the narratives, fables and symbolic structures that condition it. Even though art as it is now mainly composed of rigid shapes and colors thrown/scattered without much thought in it, I argue that for art to think (or work) outside this quasi-mainstream mindset, it has first to see how the latter dictates its horizons of possibility. I conclude that these are ready-made fables and concepts taken for granted in the mainstream and which very quickly create a “discursive tension” where our very space of not only artistic freedom is at stake, and for which a “discursive struggle” may be delineated.

Key words: Art, city, criticism

From the external requests that come to us, we tend to take for granted their meaning as it is translated by us. In a subject as broad as art criticism, would it not be natural to assume that we understand what is being asked of us? We are asked to be critical of art in Albania. The answer would depend on the internalization we have made of the understanding of criticism, art and their context in Albania. All the information we have stored in memory about this topic would be organized and mobilized to give an answer that often defines our position in the world, the angle from which we see the world. We tend to take for granted such general meanings – which are drummed into our ears in everyday life because they are common forms of human expression – because we understand them without much effort, and we may notice an inclination

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to have an opinion on these topics even though we don't exactly know where it came from. What we probably notice even less is that our response starts off from an internal angle, it is the angle that connects the inner with the outside world, the angle from which we have the whole arsenal to give all kinds of answers, sometimes without thinking long, wondering how could we have had such answers, without stopping a while to think about what those answers really mean for us. How did we create this representation [in our minds] about the topic or question, what is our concern with the issue, how is this knowledge composed? I would assume that, at least in our country, we tend to be politically critical about this topic by expressing complaints or frustrated needs.

Isn't there in our supposed answer more information, impressions, fantasy, facts or knowledge, really? There is a broad context inherited from the dominant culture – in the case of Albania, the traditional Western culture – that provides us with ready-made judgments about big topics such as the values we share, the good and bad which, aesthetically, are related to what we consider to be beautiful or ugly, which belongs to the order of moral judgments that also determine [in this sense] aesthetic tastes and ethical attitudes. Therefore, this paper, taking for granted its shortage of expertise for a genuine criticism of art in Albania, which would require a professional approach from the artistic field, will deal not with the thing itself, but with its expression, with the fables [or narratives] we tell ourselves and that create our connection with the world, our balance in life, and how we manifest them in making a living. The present treatment will remain at the level of the conceptual analysis [and beliefs] and some of its unexamined assumptions which are at work generally in the practices of art today. I would want to show how much this topic is related to our current political attitude as individuals and vice versa. It is impossible for art, love, science and politics (to take Badiou's proposal that truths are multiple) not to intersect with each other while having different ethics appropriate to each. What connects us with these four is the idea of thought itself as a process internal to itself. And the breakdown of concepts taken for granted, readily formed or borrowed, hopefully leads us to take a particular stance in local issues and beyond, especially as concerns political ones. A *concept* is an abstract idea of the category of reason that finds use through language in order to express the essential characteristics of something that exists for the one who sees it (Oxford Mini-dictionary, 2007). The *political concept* is formed in the public space where we interact and is dependent on the *prevailing cultural tradition*, inasmuch as the latter creates the conditions of its existence. As beings who do not understand themselves without the other, concepts [and languages] are what define how we bodily relate to the world and, conversely, to ourselves. Through them, we create a *common sense* that simplifies our interaction so that we don't always have to explain from scratch the terms of the way we relate. Like any abstract idea, the concept is subject

to a process of reason used by people and therefore changes along with historical developments. This process is inevitably related to *understanding*. As such, it can be *taken for granted* – that is, understanding the meaning in the sense in which we are accustomed to find the concept as it is widely *used*. The artistic product, the work of art, especially, brings forth concepts to us in our sensitivity as a pure form, a sensitivity to which we respond either by taking a stand or by reflecting. When we create or examine a work of art, we use concepts and thus new opportunities open up for us to reenter the process of the free play of reflection.

The concept in our idea of art, according to the dictionary, is “the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power” (Oxford Languages, Online). We note that this is a concept which precedes the representation of it as “subjects of study primarily concerned with human creativity and social life, such as languages, literature, and history (as contrasted with scientific or technical subjects)” (Oxford Languages, Online Dictionary). In the first sense, it is an expression from the inside out – art, expression of a creative skill in a visual form (Oxford Minidictionary, 2007); in the second it is a subject of study – the arts. Critique, on the other hand, is “a detailed analysis and assessment of something, especially a literary, philosophical, or political theory” (Oxford Languages, Online Dictionary). So, the request implied in the organizing title opens us to an issue of evaluation and detailed analysis of the state of expression or application of human creative skill and imagination in Albania. Somehow it recalls the political outlook, not so much the technique of an ethical judgement over a work of art. So we have come upon the evaluation of ethics as a set of moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conducting of an activity (Oxford Languages, Online Dictionary). We may have noticed until now that we have put into question the immediate meaning of the crucial signifiers of the quest. The hypothesis is that for quests of truths, the situation is such that we mainly borrow from the West forms of expression which may be outdated even in their countries of origin. We do this so mechanically that, even though we are far from being innovators in the fields of truth as Albanians, we hardly make any step forward without thinking to catch up to the West, and we don’t even stop to think about bringing something new or authentic.

Not only is the state of art reflected in society, but art also reflects the state of society in us. This is a two-sided issue of the concept of space. On the one hand, the public space is shrinking through the cutting off of connections; on the other hand, public space is conceived as a space for installation art, i.e. an artistic genre of three-dimensional works that are often site-specific and designed to transform the perception of a space. The more the public space shrinks, the more it transforms into the image of its own concept. In a quick look taken from field work in Albania,

we see that contemporary art coexists with works like *Reja* (Fujimoto, *The Cloud*, n.d.), which has essentially no taste, always serves for something else: to sit down, to display other arts on scene, other performing arts. We find plenty of mechanical installation-art in the city. With the fall of the Theater, a part of the history of the connection with classical art also fell, in the sense that it transformed into nostalgia (Koleka, 2020). The classics are put less and less on the scattered stages, so there are increasingly independent and non-liberating art forms, rigid art. We may notice street art, especially the supervised art, foreign artists who draw on the facades of the residential buildings – still better than the loud and bright advertisements. Any other art is underground, it does not create wider connections, but with itself. As in the drawings of electric street cabs when we see our beloved characters of the past, *Lupin III*, *Tom & Jerry*, *Batman*, *South Park* characters and so on, which more often than not bogs us down in a lonely nostalgia and does not inspire us into any further kind of shared worldviews. The preservation of cultural inheritance obstructs the new way of life, and the latter endangers inheritance through disregard and recklessness. Cultural objects are put at risk by the urban and development plans, and with their expected decline they inevitably turn into nostalgia for their beauty. So a state of art that, through nostalgia, isolates and oppresses instead of calling to express and transcend oneself. This assessment reflects not only the state of art, but also of political thought: cynicism, indifference and undoing of social ties. It seems like we are faking all the ways to preserve, create and recreate, with a kind of disregard to ethics and values that we hold dear from our cultural heritage. Are we faking our way through all this?

This mindset seems to be connected with a fable or motto which I have frequently heard as an expression to help hardworking people towards any success: *Fake it until you make it*. A possible first appearance of the phrase comes from around 1973 and an early reference to a very similar saying occurs in the Simon & Garfunkel song *Fakin' It*, released in 1968 as a single and also on their Bookends album. There, Simon sings, 'And I know I'm fakin' it, I'm not really makin' it' (The Idioms, n.d.). In today's standard writings, the expression takes on another life: 'Fake it until you make it', in a standard online search under psychology category, means to consciously cultivate an attitude, feeling, or perception of competence that you don't currently have by pretending you do until it becomes true. So it is a fable to which we become attached to and that becomes a guide for survival, competition, and progress in society, a fable that comes across more and more often in younger age groups. On the face of it, it seems to be rewarding in a certain future. But one might choose to wonder: why fake something that is not there yet and how is it possible for it to bring one to some kind of closure? In case one fakes it for oneself, one may risk creating a method as to how to fake solutions until the solution happens to come as if by surprise, forcing one to think that the

outcome is one and only, and that one cannot escape one's own destiny. Hence, one must act like one already anticipates one's destiny. This attitude lacks motivation. If one is making 'it', one does not have to think about faking it. It is what one is doing about 'it' that will make 'it' happen. So where does the part of faking takes place? By faking it for one's self, one risks lying to oneself, and losing the self in the process, becoming alien to oneself – but this is all about the other. Why fake it for the other? The pressure to succeed probably crushes the motivation, but what we perceive as success are merely examples we try to follow, connected merely numbers – those who already enough of the other's attention – not the idea of the concept of success and how would that be regulated by our internal goals. We may see here how, whatever one is making, one is making 'it' – which is life in its various forms of truths. Can we arrive at all to truths through hiding? How real is something made through a series of faking-it? For whom is it real? To what degree is it possible to make a real thing through faking it? Truth is still a value of western moral tradition, or is its meaning shifting?

So we see that, the mindset, when it is a self-expression, is also a way of communicating, of relating, and a way of getting in touch with oneself. Is this not the art of living? It is a way of connecting, of coming into contact, of functioning within the parameters of the society, mostly through comparing, which is an equivalent of quality. But do we find such equivalence in art? This kind of equivalences would only be understandable within an historical and cultural frame, the one with which we are linked. When we say art, don't we think of classical art, the world masterpieces that are repeated on stage or in paintings? Let me remind you that the annual concert in Vienna is also broadcasted on the Albanian public television, as an overriding cultural value and heritage. Isn't this one of the reasons why environmental activists in the West have recently taken a series of symbolic actions choosing famous works from the *Mona Lisa* to the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Benzine, 2022)? Although this activity could have been accompanied by the writing 'no painting was damaged during this action', we still note with concern their [the paintings'] fragility that highlights our sensitive connection to them. But what I still fail to understand though is one of the questions put by the activists: "What is worth more, art or life?" What we risk to overlook here is precisely that which we are excluding. Art may survive us, but not without us. What we reject from this action is the fact that we feel ever closer to the real loss of those works of art but by other means, let's say environmental or human. In small circles, this opened a debate in Albania as well. Classical art is rightly perceived as inviolable [or sacred] for the significance it has for humans in the context of the continuity of civilization. On the other hand, we live in a world of wars, a good deal of heritage has been destroyed in Syria, let's say, in these recent years (Henderson, 2016). But we don't perceive it as close to our own heritage. There were not many ethical

judgments related to this issue, only pity, because what we, from Albania, perceive about the world masterpieces of art are the Western ones, from which we also get our horizon of events. So, when the catastrophe is likely to happen but has not yet taken place, like global warming, we rebel against life itself, against its insufficient expression, or its inability to express itself properly, in the context of the absence of a good enough environment to make connections, social links, like a good enough art or preservation of it.

And from this point of view it seems like we may have lost touch, contact with our self-expression. For to whom are we expressing ourselves if there is no other, and what are we expressing in the *faking-it*? We get caught in what we say and pretend, in our fictions, and something real is produced in this very inability to formalize truth in language. So it is that, when we both know it, there is manifested an ethical connection of art within humanity. So, it is not out of order to say that we become political in art precisely when it comes to the classics, to that which we have already appreciated in such detail and which reflects our values. But we exercise a moral judgement for that which we already know to be regarded as beautiful. We live in a world where hazards such as global warming are far greater than everyday local risks, yet we give it a lower priority in our collective creations due to the intractable nature of the conflict. Conflict, for its part, has been regarded as progressive when management methods have been found, but today, conflict-solutions risk being faster, a threatening by buttons which don't have time to think and plan ahead. Meanwhile, the internal conflict finds respite [or a temporary salvation] in ready-made fables which tell us how to blossom and thrive in life.

At this point we encounter an ethical question, one to which we probably think we already know the answer because 'we got the lesson'. How will we know that we have not become accomplices to what we call "evil" in the world? But from the Western moral tradition's perspective, evil cannot be just ordinary, only monstrous. Even judging of the good is not based on normality, but on the extraordinary, the wonderful, the heroic. So what is evil before it becomes monstrous? The Nazis did not have a bad reputation in their beginnings. But reputation comes after the deed and societies try to prevent the events that if repeated would bring them a good deal of troubles. Would we not affirm today that we would not have cooperated with Nazism? We know from history that the Nazis were evil, but would we have been so sure about it if they had not lost the war? Is there any rational reason which tells us that the evil always loses or do we have to do something before it acquires tragic proportions? Fables tell us that good always prevails, but not without a fight. Can evil lose if it isn't fought against or if we systematically avoid the split it causes in our consciousness as it unfolds, even before it reaches monstrous dimensions? We risk becoming indifferent to nauseating things which people may do when they don't think anymore. Each one of us may find oneself in an activity which

hampers irreversibly humanity's lives and interests as a whole, just because one has not stopped long enough to discern the fable's narrative through which we are keeping alive a certain mechanism of faking it. Such a mechanism has to be defensive because, inasmuch as anything that one might have – if one creates a link – may be extinguished more quickly than it can be recuperated. In any case, it is self-expression (and transcending) which suffers from it, it is repressed or reduced.²

Human creative skill and imagination which produces these products of emotional power and beauty, is bound to thinking, concepts and beliefs which are traits of society as well as of the individual. Now envision a concept like *discursive struggle* (Jameson, 2016, page 6). The concept refers to a process that, being relatively different from propaganda and ideology, delegitimizes the language of opponents by devaluing their motto, disarming them of their conceptual tools. The proof that Jameson gives in the book is that of the 'free market' rhetoric as a dominant and all-powerful notion, where the discursive struggle of Thatcherism succeeded in making many people today think that there is no other alternative than to think that 'the free market not only really exists, but is eternal' (Jameson, 2016). This is a dormant belief since the start the industrial revolution. From then much has changed, but always within the confines of the successes or failures of this free market as the best mechanism that will bring about the potential talent of people in a free competitive arena. There are some values, such as the good, rightness, courage, that we can hold onto and which are the words we choose in order to motivate ourselves – these are what define us politically as well (indifference is also a political position – more and more widespread I must say – just like 'darkness is the absence of light'), and is that which determines our readiness to defend a certain set of values, the readiness that determines all other connections in life in relation to art, science, love and so on. To summarize, it is in this split between the world of reason and the world of feelings that political notions also developed, and we can say from personal experience that they are still turbulent worlds without a clear soil where they may be cultivated publicly. So, we may often not be aware of the fables that guide us because of their immediate practicality to be accepted in society – the trend, the prevailing current. Because, I am saying that, this type of political orientation that we have developed, that has produced an inmixing of values according to the expediency and conditions of survival, and which prevails more on communication channels than we are able to sustainably maintain and grow, has also influenced our expressive powers. The time we give to fantasy and reflection is "money" that cannot be equated with an added attention for a short while in social networks before being forgotten. We tend not to take advantage of this time for ourselves without missing out on everything in terms of real time

² Notice that even expression can be used as a way of repression.

from the world, a real time that always sinks us increasingly into a fantasy with no result, no product – which turns us into some kind of waste product instead of into a work of art.

Therefore, truths are not self-contained nor complete. Our quest to truths define our attitudes in the world, our vision of the world, our drive to reckon systems and to bring about changes, and art has no way to escape the construction of beliefs and attitudes that guide the individual and society in the world. But if we discern the fables we may modify the drive, and the inner emotional power may express itself without the need to collapse in itself. To pace down the rate of development, to slow down the pace of consumption, to come to the point where we allow thought to create and creatively imagine possible solutions for man as a whole, body mind and soul, in which art would have a truly creative context more than just mere recreation. We are on the same track as with the slowing of global warming, with the slowing of action so that thought may become discernable, with sustainable development measured to our global resources, in short, with a framework that can imagine us globally, beyond the universal singularity of classical art from which we do not cease to find inspiration, an inspiration which is stuck in significance.

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