

About Death Anniversary
1968 - 2004



Vladimir Nikolić

About the Death Anniversary

Did you ever talk, but no one was listening? Felt like you were talking to a deaf person? In basic terms – Death Anniversary is a performance in which one is trying to communicate with a person who cannot hear him. I had that experience almost every time I was showing my work internationally.

They (art catalogue text writers, curators, journalists, etc.) always read my work in the geopolitical context of the country I represent. So no matter what my work was about – it was seen only in the light of this Balkan communism-post-communism, war-post-war, anti-modern tradition, weird local habits, and described in terms of cultural, social and political references related to the place I come from.

The question is - is this context unavoidably related to me and my work? Sometimes it really is. But that is not a 'default' situation of my art production, nor a starting point of each of my works. 'Death Anniversary' is a way of showing what it looks like to be an artist with geopolitical burden. This is the situation in which you cannot walk on

the international art scene as a free man/artist – because you are always wearing this heavy load of your origin. This should be quite inappropriate and illogical for the international art scene – but unfortunately this is something a certain kind of artists cannot avoid. I guess we could say that it is not given to us to be seen as artists, but rather as cultural phenomena from a certain part of the world – an exotic and peripheral part at that.

I know, one should strive for his position on the international art scene – it has never been an easy task, no matter where you came from. But today, in the contemporary art, it becomes too easy for some people. It requires a literary presentation of cultural phenomena from one's geographical background through his art works. So now there is an army of international artists going around, recording tons of phenomena and wacky stuff in their countries, presenting them then in pure white spaces of the international art scene, and of course, signing them as authors. The drop which spills the cup is the fact that they are offering this pretentiously as a ready made.

Ready made should be about taking an object out of its usual context, and creating a new existence and meaning for it. It is about the process of changing the mental perception of things around us, not just about moving the stuff from its original location into the gallery. It is awesomely stupid, often. It doesn't mean anything. So this is how we get this *look how they celebrate religious holidays in my village* art. This kind of art violates the idea of

ready made, it sets back Duchamp's art piece to a standard functional urinal.

Thus, the 'Death Anniversary' lies somewhere between the western image of contemporary art in The Balkans, and the idea of a ready made from The Balkans as a way climbing onto the international art scene. This is the reason why of all the other giant artists in art history I chose to commemorate the death anniversary of Marcel Duchamp. Also, I wanted to show and share my grief about the whole situation surrounding an artist whose work is so many times used in a wrong way.

All the things that happened before we arrived at Duchamp's grave were only emphasizing the symbolic structure of the final work, in an accidental and odd way.



Milica Milošević, a dirge singer

First I had to find a professional dirge singer. There are not many of them left, since what they do is a remnant of a very old tradition. I had to search in Montenegro, where this tradition is still alive in some rural parts. And I found one – Milica Milošević from village Drijenak, near town of Kolašin in north Montenegro.

Milica is a shepherdess, she works for Mijat Mijatović (1920) who owns the cattle. As it turned out later, Mijat was everything but an ordinary old man. His cattle business was just a way to survive, but he was better known as an intellectual guru of north Montenegro, respected by some members of Serbian Academy of Science and Art. Mijat was regarded as a keeper of the tradition. As a living gate to the past and traditional values.

For the most part of the year Milica lives high in the mountains, with the cattle. In winter she would come down to the village and stay in Mijat's house. This is where I sent the introduction letter:

Dear Mrs. Milošević,

I have learned about you, and obtained your address, from Mrs. Stanka Šćepanović, the widow of the late colonel Petar Šćepanović from the village of Plana.

My name is Vladimir Nikolić. I live in Belgrade, and work as an artist, after having obtained my M.A. degree in painting from the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade. My parents come from Peć, Kosovo. My father's family comes originally from Ozrinić, near Nikšić. I am related to Živko Nikolić, our great director and author. My grandmother on the mother's side comes from the Strugar family from Ceklin, near Cetinje, and is related to general Pavle Stugar, the former Second Army Chief of Staff.

I am writing to you because I would like to engage your services in the ceremony of marking the death anniversary of a great artist who died on 1968 and was buried in Rouan, near Paris in France. His name is Marcel Duchamp, and he is considered to be one of the most prominent and most influential artists of the twentieth century.

My idea is to honor him and pay my respect to him, in my role as a Serbian artist, by marking his death anniversary at his grave site in our traditional way, and with your help and participation. You and I would travel to Paris and then to the cemetery in Rouan, and would mark this anniversary with a dirge at his grave site.

I have heard many good words about you and I know that your songs of mourning are highly praised. I do hope that you will be interested in participating in my project, and I shall be looking forward to meeting you personally.

Yours sincerely,

*Vladimir Nikolić
Belgrade, May 5, 2004*

Now, one could ask – what is the purpose of introducing oneself through all those relatives, their origin and life achievements?

In Montenegrin tradition everything is about your social status and your origin. It doesn't matter who you are and what you do. It is who your predecessors are and where you come from that counts.¹

After six weeks, they received my letter and both Milica and Mijat showed interest in my proposal. We set up a meeting in their village. This was the opportunity to present Marcel Duchamp to Milica. I had to explain the idea of his importance in the art world and art history, so she could have some basic orientation in preparing a dirge song for Duchamp's death anniversary.

1 Well, this is how it works in Montenegrin rural communities, and that is how it works on the international scene for the artists outside of the western world. It is very similar – the fact that I am coming from the Balkans is more important than my personal work. The context determines me, I am not in the position to create my own context. Or to be more precise – my art work needs to illustrate where I am coming from. Doing some contemporary art is not an issue here. We are dealing with ethno art, miss-presented as contemporary art. Just take a look at all those written words in project proposals or exhibition catalogues and reviews, with endless background explanations creating a photo robot of the Balkan artist before they show you an art piece which becomes irrelevant at that point.

This reversed perspective between ethno and international is what brings me to Death Anniversary.

How does it usually work for a professional dirge singer? The family who lost its member gives some life details and information about the deceased to a dirge singer. Her task is to perform dramatically a dirge song about the tragedy of his death, about his heroic life, celebrating his achievements, yet pitying his destiny. So I had to provide her with information about Duchamp in the way that she could manipulate it in the dirge song.

According to what I heard happened in the village after my visit – this was a successful visit. The whole village liked my idea so much that many people started talking about it and about Marcel Duchamp. They even started discussing what would be the best way to commemorate his death anniversary on the 1st October. During my second visit, Mijat presented me a poem, a hand written dirge song about late Marcel Duchamp, written by a village doctor whose hobby was traditional poetry and writing. However, Mijat was not satisfied with this poem and thought that Milica should look for another approach to the subject.

Nevertheless, the village people were very suspicious. They couldn't believe that Milica would actually travel with me to France. It is so far away, and Milica had not left the village many times in her life, especially not to go to some foreign country. She also never had a passport. For them, as much as they liked the idea, it was science fiction.

And they were almost right.

Many months passed in my desperate search for money. I tried to contact all institutions and curators I had heard of and worked with – but with no results. After one year of searching – I found someone who was willing to contribute to the production costs. Actually, this person found me. A young curator from Seoul, Jee Sook Beck, came to Belgrade for a research. She was preparing an exhibition on contemporary art from ex Yugoslavian republics. She was interested in my new works and liked my idea about Duchamp's death anniversary. She promised me some money for the production costs with the idea to show the final work at the exhibition in Seoul. But that wasn't enough. So I waited a few months before the rest of the money came from the Swiss foundation – Pro Helvetia.

The money problem was solved and the next big problem was getting visas for EU. Before I start thinking how to get Shengen visas for Milica and myself – I had to pay and organize issuing of passport for Milica in Montenegro, because she had never had one. It took me few weeks before she got it.

A small introduction about visas

If you are from the Balkans, especially from Serbia or Montenegro – you need a visa for traveling to other countries. We need visas for almost all countries in the world. We are a rejected nation. Nation non grata. There are reasons for this kind of policy, but this is not the place where

I should talk about that (but guess what – there are some artists who have become internationally recognized by making works about visa protocols and borders). Anyway, foreign embassies in Belgrade ask you for tons of papers and certificates to stamp you a 3 day visa. You need papers and evidence from your employer, school, your personal bank account information, telephone bills from the last 600 years, copied pages from the exhibition catalogues with your work, private health insurance, etc, etc. In short - foreign embassy asks you for any kind of document which can help them reject your visa request.

Milica was the exact type of person who cannot get a visa – ever! She was unemployed, single, no children, without any kind of property and social security, with a brand new and blank passport. Such persons would be rejected even before they approach the consular officer.

Someone even told me that it would be easier to take Milica out of Serbia as an art piece then as a human being.

Of course, as an artist, I tried to ask for help from the French Cultural Center – but they couldn't help me in this matter.

So, avoiding the truth in the French consulate was the only way...

Through private connections I found a small cosmetic company in Montenegro, willing to issue a false contract

showing that Milica is their employee with an annual salary big enough for the French embassy standards. One needs to prove to have enough money to spend a few days on the EU soil.

So what was in this false job contract? Well, Milica was the employee who provides medical herbs from high mountains for the cosmetic products. Everything in this contract was a false, except Milica's name and the company name. So, now she had a passport, a job and a good salary.

Appointment in the embassy

Another rule – the person who needs a visa has to show up in person at the consulate with the documents. This means that I cannot apply for Milica. A huge problem! In this case she would have to come few days earlier to Belgrade and stay until the departure. Since my budget was too small to afford to pay her a hotel, she would have to stay at my home. Why would this be a problem? Because I couldn't let Milica become close with my family.

This is a complicated part, and requires a longer explanation:

My parents are originally from Kosovo. They moved to Belgrade many decades ago, but a lot of our family stayed there. When the bombing of Yugoslavia started in 1999,

the answer of Serbian forces was throwing out systematically Albanians from Kosovo, over the south and south west borders. Few months later NATO forces entered Kosovo, along with Albanian people who were returning. This time Serbian forces had to leave Kosovo, and most of the Serbs were following. But not all of them.

In Peć, the town in Kosovo where my family was, everyone escaped to Serbia including my relatives. Everyone but my grandmother. She didn't want to leave. So she stayed. Alone. Few days later Italian forces which were a part of NATO, entered Peć. Italians were in charge of this part of Kosovo. Now this was a curiosity. In the World War II, Italian army occupied Pec. My grandfather was taken to a prison camp in south Italy. Later, when Italy capitulated, he and his two friends traveled back to Yugoslavia on foot. My grandmother stayed in Peć during the war and my mother was 2 years old and would probably not have survived, and I wouldn't be here writing this – if it were not for an Italian soldier who shared with her his daily food portion, holding my mother on his knees. I guess there is no place or time where you could not find good people...even if they belong to the 'enemy'.

Back to my grandmother and 1999. So, there she was living long enough to meet the Italian army for the second time in her life in her town. And trying to speak to them remembering few Italian words she learned during the previous war.

Albanians were back, but many of them did not find their

houses. The Serbian paramilitary forces destroyed them, in other to insure that Albanians cannot come back. 'Good old' rule of ethnic cleansing. Tested in all areas of ex Yugoslavia affected with civil war. Albanians started moving into the Serbian houses. Our family house was big enough, with three floors, so two Albanian families moved in, letting my grandmother stay on the middle floor.

Those days, Albanians from Kosovo were not the only ones who came back. Many Albanians from Albania took advantage of the border opened by NATO forces. Some of them came to take what was left there behind the Serbs. Also, many Serb houses were burned. Now the Albanians were doing the same ugly things to Serbs, even in the presence of NATO.

One day, those who were robbing and burning houses around, came to our family house. They wanted to take the furniture and burn the house down, but the Albanians who already lived there stopped them. Of course, they hid my grandmother in order to protect her. From that day on, grandmother was not safe anymore. They had to evacuate her to a safe zone – a XIII century monastery heavily guard by NATO solders. A sad day for my grandmother, since she hated church people, in a good spirit of communist attitude against religion. From there, she was evacuated to Montenegro where she was picked by her son and from that day on she has been living with me and my family in Belgrade.

Now, what on earth all of this had to do with the appointment in the French embassy?

I knew that if my grandmother and Milica spend enough time together, with all this history background and stories which old people love to talk about every day – Milica would create a wrong picture about me and our trip to France, and become useless for the performance on the Duchamp gravesite. I was afraid that she would forget about Duchamp and his importance for art history, and focus her creativity on a much closer subject to her – Kosovo, heroic stories, national history, myths, legends, politics, etc. I was imagining how we stand on Duchamp's grave, singing about Serbian heroes and misery of Serbian people in general. Believe me, I had nightmares...

Why would I be afraid that a dirge singer can get a wrong idea about our trip to France through all of this? Because it was hard for her to understand who Marcel Duchamp is and why I am commemorating the death anniversary of a person who is not my relative or a friend. Those were not known parameters in her system. I asked her to use her tool and knowledge in a way that she had never used it before. So it was a very fragile situation. When you find yourself in the field of unknown, one of the ways to escape is to turn to the prejudices.

In Serbia and Montenegro among common people, by default there is prejudice about the western world. Also, the Kosovo problem is a millennium old subject among the

Serbs. All of this is closer to the person like Milica, who is interpreting outside reality through national history and myths. Much closer than XX century avant-garde art and importance of Marcel Duchamp.

Anyway – the two of them must not meet.²

2 Now, this is an interesting point. I had to hide my grandmother, my family and Kosovo stories from Milica, in order to avoid misinterpretation of the meaning of my art and my intentions. This is interesting, because sometimes I wish I could hide my geographical background from the curators and their assistants who present my work to the audience.

Because they are using this default keys for reading and interpretation, explaining my work through recent Balkan history references. To simplify it – you can make an abstract painting, but they will find the way to connect it with the Balkan ‘realism’.

I was begging the embassy, I was asking the French Cultural Center for help, but no results. I couldn't actually explain my problem, it was too weird. Who could take this for serious even if I speak it out?

My time was oozing out, the 1st of October was approaching very fast, I was running around looking for anyone who knew someone in the embassy – who could let me apply for our visas without bringing Milica to Belgrade.

Now, maybe someone could say – well, a rule is a rule – it cannot be avoided. Don't ask for the impossible. But it is not so. The point is that what I asked for was possible, if you know the right person in the embassy, or if you travel in a certain way. For example let us take the football club. When they play as guests in some European country, do you think that 11 players and the club management go to the embassy to hand over their passports and documents? Of course not. The embassy accepts their documents without their presence. There are many cases when the embassy is accepting documents without the presence of the person who travels, but I just did not fit in the scenario.

When my time finally ran out, and the problem was not solved, without any options left, I asked for a reception at the French Cultural Center again. I decided to tell my story no matter how odd it is. I opened my soul and shared my nightmare with the guy in charge for cultural exchange. I told him that if Milica meets my grandmother and my family for one day, just one day, if she comes to Belgrade,

she will sing about Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić at Duchamp's gravesite.

When I mentioned those two individuals accused by the Hag Tribunal of war crimes, the man's face turned white. He immediately took action, made a phone call to the embassy and the problem was solved. Milica didn't have to come to Belgrade! I could hand over the documents for both of us. Hallelujah.

Making the appointment in the embassy means to come at dawn and join the long line of visa applicants. After a few hours, the moment of truth was there. The documents were in the hands of the immigration officer who was looking suspiciously at the Milica's employment papers. Then he started turning the pages of her passport, looking for some previously issued visas or stamps. Nothing was there. I could see he was about to deny her visa. Suddenly, he found a herb - a shamrock in her passport and remembered the contract which said that she was working for a cosmetic company as medicinal herb picker. He smiled and approved our visas.

We had a right to stay in EU for 5 days.

Later, when I called Milica to ask her what was the shamrock doing in her passport, she told me she put it there for luck...

So far, Milica had a passport, a job, a salary, a visa and an

airplane ticket to Paris.

The journey

The next task was to make Milica travel by plane. But it was not as difficult as one could imagine. It turned out that she was a very brave woman. She was afraid, a lot, but she knew how to handle the fear. After all, she is a woman who spent her life in the mountains. She just held my hand strong when the plane was taking off. And she was comforting herself – ‘you are young and your life is worth more than mine. If you are not afraid for yours, then I am surely not for mine’. And then, at the Paris airport, she was more afraid when she saw a black man than she ever was on the plane. It was the first time in her life to meet someone who looks different.

At the next corner, we waited for a taxi. There was a homeless man sitting on the street. Milica asked me who that man was. When we reached the city, we encountered many homeless people in the street. She didn’t ask for their identity any more. She was shocked. More or less, all her life she was surrounded with people who lived life similar to hers. Coming to Paris was her chance to experience true differences between the people.³

3 Even today, most of the questions about ‘Death Anniversary’ are how a person like Milica reacts at the lights and wonders of western civilization and many people believe that this part is the most interesting in the whole story and should be somehow visible in the final artwork. I wouldn’t disagree totally, but let us

Rouen cemetery or try your luck at the worst moment...

After I purchased the train tickets to Rouen twice – somehow I lost the first ones at the station, we were approaching Rouen, our final destination.

We arrive to Rouen. First I checked with a taxi driver how far the cemetery was, and then we went to the nearest café for me to change. It was the 1st of October, we were near the cemetery and I had to put on my black suit for the death anniversary. The moment was there, about to happen, I was in the café toilet looking at myself in the mirror after putting on the suit. I was scared and nervous to death. 18 months of various quests and obstacles were behind me and I had only 3 hours to make it worth of doing. Why 3 hours? Because our visas were expiring and my budget couldn't stand for more hotel bills. That day we had to do the performance or there would be no performance.⁴

say that this part is not so relevant for the meaning of this artwork. Besides, Hollywood has made many movies on this subject. Making another version with a visitor from Montenegro doesn't sound to me as an interesting thing. Amusing – yes, but wouldn't make any sense to me.

4 When I said I found money for the production, I meant this - it was only enough to buy the tickets, pay the visas, stay 3 days in France paying hotel only for Milica, eating the street food and paying Milica for her job. Me and the cameraman were sleeping at my friend's apartment in Paris. About the cameraman – Dani Glid, he was not just a cameraman, but an artist, a well known Belgrade painter and a friend of mine who is also an experienced photographer and cameraman willing to help.

The tension was growing in me as we were approaching the cemetery. We ended between two huge, and I mean HUGE hills – Rouen cemetery. Thousands, millions of graves on our left and on our right. Hundreds of hectares covered with graves.

During all those months of obstacles and problems with money and administrations, warring how to explain the legacy of Marcel Duchamp to a dirge singer from village Drijenak – I forgot, simply forgot to locate Duchamp's grave before we arrived in Rouen.

Now it was too late. We were standing there as a small boat in the ocean without the navigation, lost in space with 3 hours left.

During those moments I thought I was the man with the tiniest brain in the world. How stupid can a man be to suffer all those efforts, to come to that point, and then realize that he forgot to do such a small and obvious thing making everything else impossible?

We had less than 3 hours until closing of the cemetery. We saw one entrance behind us, it wasn't the main entrance but it was near us. Who knows how many entrances were there. We entered the cemetery. There was a small office or something like that, but no one was working there. I found just one paper on the glass, a very bad copy of some kind of map drawn by hand. Some names were also on the map, but one could barely read it. And guess what? Among the names, there was Duchamp. Just that – Du-

champ. I couldn't be sure that was the famous Duchamp family and Marcel's grave, but there was nothing else I could do, except try my luck. I was sure we would find some other Duchamp family.

So, we tried to locate the part of the cemetery from the map. After few minutes we were lost and the last thing we could do was to start walking between graves looking for the Marcel Duchamp's name.

There are no words to express how hopeless I felt in those moments. I felt like a drop in the ocean...I think I wasn't looking for the grave anymore. I was looking in the mirror in my head for the greatest idiot on earth. I was thinking about Dani – my companion and Milica, and how they traveled so far, relying on a fool like me.

My dark thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a glimpse of familiar font/letters. A simple, very modest gravestone with the letters engraved as a script, as a handwriting. There it was! Marcel Duchamp's grave! I recognized it from the picture on the internet. A modest family grave with a spectacular view of the famous Rouen cathedral in the city beneath the hill. And the grave with the most spectacular epitaph:

D'ailleurs, c'est toujours les autres qui meurent
(Anyway, it's always other people who die)

To express my feelings from that moment on, after everything I had been through with my friends – I would have to be a writer or a poet. But I am only a visual artist. So I shall not even try. Let us just say, without exaggerating – I had to find a needle in a large haystack - and I found it. He who dares wins (Derek Edward Trotter).

Performance

The reason of being there. The Performance. A death anniversary performance. To be honest, after so much time I forgot why we were there at all... Even this Balkan context was in the sunset on the international art scene, it was expiring. The world was turning to another otherness.

I noticed something was wrong with Milica. She was not in the right mood. This was the moment when she finally realized that no one was there except the two of us and Dani, who was documenting the performance. Of course, she expected the local ‘village’ to show up. She always performs in front of the community. In Montenegro, funerals and commemorations are highly rated social events. It was clear that all the time she thought someone was waiting for us at our final destination. She found disappointment...

We tried once, to check the equipment and how long approximately the performance would last, since Milica had not prepared the lyrics for the dirge songs in advance – lyrics come to her – possessing her on the site. After we finished with the rehearsal, we were ready but

Milica refused to repeat it. She said that was it. No more. She was done...

The time was running out. The cemetery was going to be closed very soon, we had to finish and leave the cemetery before they locked the gates, otherwise we would stay there overnight ...a scary thought.

I lighted two cigarettes. One for me and one for Milica. We didn't talk for a few minutes. Then I gave my best to explain the situation. I was begging her to do it, for the sake of everything we had been through, and the time and money I had spent so far.

It was obvious that she felt all the time that something was wrong with the whole situation, the whole story – that it didn't fit in the tradition and her knowledge and experience. But with each problem we encountered, I think, that deep in her heart she trusted me. Trusted me more than she trusted her feeling that something was wrong.

She finally changed her mind and agreed to do it. Before she started, I asked her one more time to mention the art in her dirge song. That far I remembered why we were there. And she did. She sang that people are trying to be like Marcel Duchamp, but that art remained alone after his death. She also mentioned that people should respect art...I was happy.

Returning to Belgrade was easy. I needed no plane to fly.

That was my pilgrimage, and homage to Marcel Duchamp. With this work I wanted to present how I see the internationalism of the so called Balkan art scene, created at the beginning of the 2000's – outside of the Balkans. Everything that was going on during the preparation of this work and its realization crosses roads and mixes symbolically with art and curatorial praxes surrounding 'the Balkan art scene'. So my subversion was taking a true Balkan artist (Milica) to the wrong place – to the ultimate point of art universality.

During the performance, Milica, an ethno artist - was actually singing not to Marcel Duchamp, but to the international art audience, because this kind of ethno music was popular at the moment, while I used that opportunity to steal a few minutes alone with art/Duchamp.

Paris 2007

