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Evaluation Report of the PhD Thesis

PhD Thesis Title: *Regaining the Past. Yugoslav Legacy in the Period of Transition: the Case of Formal and Alternative Institutions of Art and Culture in Serbia at the End of the 20th and the Beginning of the 21st Century*

PhD Candidate: *Tijana Vuković*

Tijana Vuković opens her PhD thesis with a common statement of Yugoslavia as a hybrid community, that did not last for a long time but, nevertheless, managed to imprint this heterogenous unity to most of its participating states, ethnicities, nationalities and cultures. Thus, a common cultural sphere was created, not only in a Habermas' terms, as a derivate of a specific public sphere, but, on the other hand, in terms of *long-enough coexistence* and intercommunication processing. Analytical algorithm employed here, as mentioned by the candidate, should therefore be a dense and complex (maybe discursive) analysis of the Yugoslav "common cultural space". Braking points, a variety of sociopetal and sociofugal energies that managed to maintain this heterogeneity of cultural production, and its artistic divergence, are hereby put in the context of the emergence of different Yugoslav States, not only those within the whole, those being disintegrated after the 1990s War, but also those that have managed to keep its divergence inside of the First, Second or the Third, Socialist and Federal State. Before, during the existence of Yugoslav state, and in the post Yugoslav period, common cultural (and art) space was shaped by the similar language, culture, connections, mentality, territory, economic relations, different foreign influences and its art production.

Disintegration of Yugoslavia could thus be monitored in the reflection of its cultural institutions, not only those in the focus of the State but those left on the margins, in the *offside* of the State cultural policies. It is a common fact that after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in disastrous war conflicts, a large economic and cultural crisis hit the whole Balkan region. This crisis had many faces, usually subdued to common markers

and denominators, such as transition or post-transition, post-socialism, post-communism, post-Yugoslav, post-nationalism, even post-colonial and post-dependent. Tijana Vuković emphasizes all of the cruelties of war in Bosnia, political and cultural intolerance, economic and social embargo, economic crisis that had occurred afterwards, severe inflation, protests, that all caused a cultural and collective trauma – of course, not only in Bosnia but in all of the former Yugoslav countries that had been affected by waring times. In the first chapter of her PhD thesis, elaborating the concept of the unwanted legacy, especially in the context of memory studies, Tijana Vuković successfully grasps different topics related to disintegrative cultural trauma specific for this region, especially Serbia, such as: non-predictable dynamics of culture and its production, disowning strategies of the past and vulnerable present, problems of non-existing legacy of the country that no longer exists, questions of symbolic investments in the "new" culture, "new" state, or even newly formed historical legacy. By being aware that, simultaneously, high level of narrativization and thus fragmentation of discourses always occurs in all institutions, mainly as a consequence of the crisis in society, Tijana Vuković manages to avoid most of the stereotypical presumptions about social, economic and cultural equalness of the Yugoslav State disintegration process. For example, if in Serbia It reflected in the dysfunctionality of institutions and eventually in closing down, in some other countries of the ex-Yugoslav cultural field it might have had a totally different algorithm of disintegration, thus also seeking a different network for the analysis.

After the dark period of the 1990s, in 2000, Serbia dived into progressive democratic changes and an unblocked transition process, that will become a large source of disappointment in Serbian society. During all the changes and fluctuations, Yugoslavia (idea and a state) figurate as a main culprit for a crisis and a huge mistake in the newest history. Individual memory and private space of citizens in Serbia was still crowded by the memories of the previous period but translating into cultural memory became doubtful. For that kind of translation, and revitalization of the part of the culture, space for speech, discussion, search for meaning should be essential, initiated and placed in institutions of culture. In her research, therefore, we are confronted with the candidate's eagerness to investigate wheter and how Yugoslavia continued to exist in cultural institutions as a phenomenon, through values of its ideology and common and wide cultural space, as a notion, motif, and theme of the projects and events, in spite of all mentioned circumstances. For this kind of interpretation Tijana Vuković is well equipped with a discourse and content analysis of many symbolic investments in cultural and artistic production in this area, finally achieving her goal to represent the importance of Yugoslav legacy as a specific and heterogenous symbolic heritage in the first place, from the perspective of its process-oriented development, its sociopolitical investment in making continuity and finding or even re-creating a variety of meanings, symbols and narratives about its

dynamic past, primarily as a way of overcoming cultural trauma. And even though the notion of cultural trauma can be reconsidered, even diminished as an ill-centered term, in an overall network of candidate's interpretation of the cultural/artistic past(s), it functions quite well.

Tijana Vuković emphasizes that the main categories and points of view to be employed as a methodology of this PhD research could be named as "interdisciplinary cultural study approach". At first glance, one could be sceptic about the correct terminology of the research methods, especially after reading a couple of first macro-chapters. Of course, it is evident that through content analysis, notions of representations interpretation, discovering of symbolic or concrete presence/absence, discourse analysis – to name just a few of them, the candidate is simultaneously researching a topic as well as methodology being applied on it. More severe meta-methodological consideration, eager to settle this PhD thesis in a specific field, would definitely set this as a problem. But, whole set of material for this research – different catalogues from the exhibitions and following publications, articles from newspapers and magazines, academic literature, non-official interviews, videos, comments on exhibitions, comments, as a part of the program in each institution, personal interpretations of actors (artists, academics, curators, activists, audience) and key-figures, expressed in informal interviews and meetings, noted or recorded etc. – settle this thesis in a broader cultural studies or even applied-anthropological context. For a subsequent publication in a form of a monographic oeuvre, I would recommend a stronger and more precise depicting and situating of the main methods, definitely in a qualitative context of ethnography, discourse analysis etc. For this moment I wouldn't classify this as an inconvenience for the flow-structure and the argumentative continuity of an overall thesis.

Complete PhD thesis is actually divided into four parts: State of Art, Historical Context, Official Institutions; Alternative Institutions accompanied with the Introduction at the beginning, and Conclusions at the end (together with Bibliography, List of Photos and Summary in English, Polish and Serbian). There are, as mentioned before, different micro-sections, necessary for this extremely dense analytical tissue. First of all, together with an overview of books, articles and projects that are connected with a theme of the work (the influence of Bakić, Kuljić, Dimitrijevcić and Buden is more and evident), the candidate faces us with a variety of aspects and an overall content, not only those related to the topic but also those important for establishing a historical link to the SFRJ-period in general, thus situating her own research somewhere in-between representation interpretation, cultural policy and cultural memory analysis. Yugoslavia, depicted as a starting point for a heterogenous historical, social and cultural imagination, is defined here almost as a *longue durée* structure. This, of course, is not so innovative while interpreted in the context of its so-

called historical persistency but it is not so common to use this argument while analyzing its specific cultural policies, before and after the decay. This is definitely innovative in this PhD thesis. The second chapter, titled Historical context, is dedicated to the history of South Slavic unity with overview of Yugoslav history, thus emphasizing decision-making in cultural spheres as an important phenomenon, not only in the Socialist context but in the era of its disintegration and formation of a specific post-dependency policies, not only in Serbia but in almost all of the ex-Yugoslav States. Although this chapter is relatively short – and one cannot expect that Yugoslav State's disintegration should be presented here, just as an introduction - it is very precise and elaborated, because it depicts only those topic and problems that will become of utmost importance afterwards, while cultural policies of the main art institutions are being analyzed, such as Writers Union, the Academy, museums, etc. Central analytical part of this research is concentrated on three official and three alternative institutions. Tijana Vuković was eager to describe and illustrate the place and role of the Yugoslav narrative and legacy in different cultural institutions, thus perplexing them with different economic backgrounds, decision-making strategies and sociocultural and production conditions analysis. Among the official institutions depicted here, these are Serbian Pavilion in Venice (Paviljon Republike Srbije u Veneciji), Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (Muzej savremene umetnosti u Beogradu), Museum of Yugoslavia (Muzej Jugoslavije), and among nonofficial (alternative) ones, these are Centre for Cultural Decontamination (Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju/ CZKD), squat Inex, and alternative cultural center Catch 22 (Kvaka 22). A broader image of "how things really function", on the field, which is an anthropological insight, is just an introduction to more vivid form and more complete map of the institutions in Serbia in the post Yugoslav period. Although this seem to be isolated examples, they can function as a common ground for different interpretations of what once happened (or what could happen) with "the Yugoslav Kulturnation" and/or "Yugoslavism", or any other disintegrated "Ex-Nationalism", especially regarding its cultural potential. Of course, different strategies leading from Yugoslavism as a cultural concept to Yugoslavism as a political concept, and *vice versa*, are analyzed in these case-studies chapters in a convincingly enough manner. The Pavilion of Republic Serbia in Venice, former Pavilion of Yugoslavia in Venice emanates a surplus of the integrational concept of forging history, as this is the only institution where Yugoslavia still exists in the frame of international art and culture manifestations (even just as a living memory and context). The Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, opened in 1965 as the most prominent cultural institution representing the Yugoslav and Serbian Art of the 20th century, is interpreted as a common ground for symbolic filling of one integral cultural diplomacy with the (leftovers of) Yugoslav art and culture (re)creations. The Museum of Yugoslavia, the only institution in former Yugoslav space dedicated fully to representation of Yugoslavia,

employs a memory-oriented agenda, thus producing even more trauma, in the purest sense of the word. This institution, as Tijana Vuković emphasizes, throughout its history, showed the enormous capacity for transformation, communicating the possibility of the new modern institution. In the most impressive and elaborated way the candidate interprets both, social, historical and, above all, organizational concepts that led these three institutions to become "of utmost importance", for Yugoslavia, for Serbia, and then again, for different kinds of "Yugoslavisms".

Analytical part dedicated to alternative cultural institutions in Serbia also contains three chapters with the short introduction, thus bringing the explanation and description of alternative institutions as a newer cultural concept and somehow a neoliberal, thus post-Socialist phenomenon *sui generis*. The first chapter is dedicated to the Centre for Cultural Decontamination (Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju / CZKD), being one of the oldest non-official organizations in Serbia, that has emerged from a decisive protest against the regime of Slobodan Milošević in 1995. Although it maybe depicts the older generation of the so-called politically independent cultural institutions, it nevertheless reflects some of the paradoxes of Serbian and Yugoslav identity paradoxes. Thus, this interpretation could easily be applied on almost all of the alternative institutions in ex-Yugoslavia, especially Bosnia and Croatia. But, Tijana Vuković goes even further in her PhD thesis, analyzing production policies of the even more off-off-stream institutions that have emerged in a last couple of decades, and still exist, overlapping her interpretation with the general Serbian and, broader, European cultural policy. Therefore, the second case she decided to describe is a squat and cultural center Inex, established in a building of the Inex Film Company. Here she offers us an interesting interpretation of the ethics of the commons, somewhat as an inheritance of a togetherness model, often set as a derivate of Yugoslavism. The end of the analytical part dedicated to alternative institutions represents the case of Kvaka 22, as an example for the youngest generations of the artists and cultural workers, activists and citizens, and their approach towards culture and art, past and present. In this chapter a question of Yugonostalgia emerges as a central one, probably because Kvaka 22's legacy approaches the author's era, which is again a surplus of ethnographic subjectivity and an extremely valuable contribution to this thesis. In her research Tijana Vuković mentions some other institutions as well, both alternative and state-centered, always emphasizing why she didn't choose to interpret them in more details. Such is the National Museum of Serbia that didn't really go through transformation that could exemplify the Yugo-nostalgic and Yugo-traumatic orientation, or Krokodil society, which is more literary-oriented, etc. In her conclusions Tijana Vuković presented some common denominators of the described institutions from the perspective of Yugoslav legacy, trying to settle them in a broader context – as a common space for them all. She underlines that she wanted to accentuat the conclusion about the

significance of cooperation between institutions, mostly in the field of cultural memory but not just in this area. The phenomenon of relatedness and interconnectedness appears to be crucial for the resolution of the ongoing cultural crisis. Main problems depicted in this dissertation are more than relevant today, and could be applied to all ex-Yugoslav states, especially when considering this semi-long cultural legacy as deeply fragmentated, not being able to transform its potential into pure and diverse, heterogenous and post-dependent creativity, or deeply conformist, not willing to put the issue of decay, continuity, wide or narrow gaps and cultural intersections, common denominators of cultural production etc., into a broader context. In dealing with all of the cultural traumas depicted by her thesis, at least, according to Tijana Vuković – in my opinion her arguments are well elaborated – notions of interconnection and relation are set as examples of good practice, not only in the organizational sphere of cultural policy but in all other relevant epistemic fields, fields of knowledge. This is the only way towards openness, multiculturalism, modernism as progression and cooperation, beyond the over-imposed "Balkan mentality" scheme and, on the other side, beyond the utopic vision of the "Dionysius of Socialism".

To conclude, the dissertation titled *Regaining the Past. Yugoslav Legacy in the Period of Transition: the Case of Formal and Alternative Institutions of Art and Culture in Serbia at the End of the 20th and the Beginning of the 21st Century*, written by a PhD Candidate Tijana Vuković is an original contribution to humanities, especially to interdisciplinary world of *artes liberales*. The author demonstrated, both, an excellent knowledge of the historical context, as well as a firm and argument-oriented skills for collecting, interpreting and presenting a variety of written (fictional or non-fictional, archival or present, academic or non-academic, etc.) and ethnographic materials in a coherent and elaborated monographic oeuvre.

Because of all of the afore mentioned, I hereby confirm that this dissertation fulfills all the conditions for the PhD thesis, so the candidate, Ms. Tijana Vuković qualifies for the next stage of the doctoral dissertation procedure. Upon evaluation, hereby I propose *magna cum laude*.

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