

WAS IST KUNST?

Dragoljub Raša Todosijević

28. 6. – 17. 9. 2023P

Prague City Gallery

The Stone Bell House

Staroměstské náměstí 13, Prague 1

Tuesday – Sunday 10 am – 8 pm

Dragoljub Raša Todosijević belongs to the first generation of Yugoslav conceptual artists who turned against the state doctrine regarding artistic production - primarily painting – that had been continuously developed in Yugoslav academies since the early 1960s. He is one of the founding figures of the Yugoslav and Serbian neo-avant-garde, whose early focus was on criticism of modernist artworks and artistic practice. Todosijević later turned to a critical reinterpretation of controversial symbols, such as the swastika.

The exhibition is divided into sections, in which each artwork gradually tells the story of art and artistic creation as such. They address the global conditions of the production and distribution of art and, to a certain extent, foreshadow the turn towards postmodernism.

Todosijević's artistic practice is an invitation to reflect on the conditions under which artworks and art in general exist. This is the thrust of the question 'Was ist Kunst?', which refers to his iconic work from 1978 and also serves as the title of the exhibition,” says Jakub Král, the exhibition's curator.

The way in which this question is answered reflects not only changes within the art world, but also a global transformation in the dissemination of information, a marked departure from the perception traditional linear history as a gradual overcoming of previous epochs, and a shift in the focus of interest to an as yet undefined and therefore difficult to grasp present.

The beginning of the exhibition on the second floor is framed by Todosijević's personal setting of the criteria for what could be considered a work of art in the future. When he says, in his performance *Odluka kao umetnost* (Decision as Art), that art is a matter of decision and that the creative impulse can be any motive for creating a work of art, he becomes a relativist and a nomad. In one of Todosijević's later performances, entitled *Umetnost i istorija* (Art and History), he spent several hours listing the names of all the artists he could think of, demonstratively adding his own name to them in order to democratise the entire genealogy for his own benefit. The turning point in the narrative of Todosijević's work is the monumental

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Edinburgh Statement text installation - the manifestation of a farewell to the traditional value system of the art world. From then on, Todosijević focused exclusively on creation as artistic production (e.g. *Lines*) or the production of critical ideas that expose the ideological underpinnings of the modernist work of art. He addresses such issues as market commodification or the physical sacralisation of works of art.

Todosijević explicitly turns to the great figures of modern art, but does not, as one might expect, go back to Marcel Duchamp as the founder of the conceptual branch of twentieth-century art, but rather to Pablo Picasso, as the embodiment of the life and work of the genius Artist, basically repainting a set of his female portraits in the series *Zovem se Pablo Pikaso* (My name is Pablo Picasso). With this gesture of total appropriation of Picasso's elegant portrait painting, he critically addresses the origins of the cult of the great genius artist, who becomes the globally revered figure that Todosijević thus subversively proclaims himself to be. In the next series, entitled *Depresivna apstrakcija* (Depressive Abstraction), he confronts the art of classical European modernism with a "developmentally inferior" form of abstract art, which he himself created and which he declares to be oriental in its own way. The narrative of Todosijević's practice concludes with a monumental installation entitled *Gott liebt die Serben* (God Loves the Serbs), which illustrates another of the exhibition's cardinal themes: the possible ways in which symbols can be interpreted. Their meanings are fixed in our past, but dissolve in the present, thus offering a radical update in the face of a profoundly changing world.

The experience of the sheer fluidity with which the world evolves has blurred the lines, in Raša Todosijević's practice when it comes to reading symbols in his work, as illustrated in the specific example of the swastika, which symbolises the totalitarian political thought in the first half of the twentieth century. One way or another, Todosijević, like other artistic groups originating from the region of former Yugoslavia, leaves us alone with our doubts about what such a symbol, taken out of context, can actually mean. It may well be that this symbol will answer, each time in a completely different way, the questions we raise in relation to art and our world and our present.

"The exhibition is not, in principle, a traditional retrospective, although it does present the essential moments and strategies of Todosijević's work in full. And just as the artist himself approaches the narration of history in general, as well as art history, in a specific way, we too have taken the liberty of approaching his work interpretively, and have attempted to update some of its symbols, tactics and concepts, which are still alive and urgent for today's world." concludes Jakub Král.

Curator of the exhibition: Jakub Král

Designer of the exhibition: Matěj Smrkovský



Prague City Gallery is one of the most important galleries in the Czech Republic, focusing its exhibition activities mainly on modern and contemporary art. It collects, preserves and professionally processes the art collections of the City of Prague. Currently, the GHMP exhibits in seven venues: The Stone Bell House, the Municipal Library – 2nd floor, the Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace, the House of Photography, Bilek's Villa, the Troja Château and František Bilek's House in Chýnov.

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Graphic Design and Architecture: Studio Zdaar (David Šrot a Kryštof Novák)

The exhibition is held under the auspices of Mgr. Martin Baxa, Minister of Culture.

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Entrance Fee: CZK 150 full (adults) / CZK 60 discounted (students) / CZK 20 senior citizens

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ACCOMPANYING PROGRAM

Guided Tours:

Thu, 29 June 2023, 6 p.m.

with Dragoljub Raša Todosijević

Thu 27 July 2023, 6 p.m.

with the curator Jakub Král

Wed 6 Sept 2023, 6 p.m.

with the curator Jakub Král

A Walk Through Action-Packed Prague in and around the Old Town Square

Wed 30 Aug 2023, 5 p.m.

Pavλίna Morganová is an art historian and curator, head of the Research Centre for Art History at the Academy of Fine Arts. She is the author of the book *A Walk Through Prague. Actions, Performances, Happenings 1949-1989* (VVP AVU 2014). The walk will start at the ticket office of the Stone Bell House.

Karel Veselý: On the Edge. Symbols of Totalitarian Regimes in Popular Music

Wed 13 Sept 2023, 6 p.m.

Hall of the Stone Bell House

As part of the accompanying programme to the exhibition by Dragoljub Raša Todosijević, music journalist and writer Karel Veselý will give a lecture on the ambiguous use of symbols of totalitarian regimes by various artists and bands. Examples of music will also be played. Why does the swastika play an important role in punk fashion? How Laibach use symbols of Slovenian fascism? Do black metal bands really belong to the neo-Nazi scene? The lecture will ask where the fascination with the symbols of totalitarianism comes from and how artists who use them are teetering on the edge of law or morality. Karel Veselý is the author of several books on contemporary popular music (*Fire Music, All Cats Are Grey*) and collaborates with media such as Aktuálně.cz, Full Moon and A2.