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**A SYNTHETIC BREAKFAST IN A BATH
VLADAN RADOVANOVIĆ: A PRAYER BREAKFAST
UNDER THE WINGS OF A WHITE ANGEL**

Abstract: Vladan Radovanović's latest, site specific work - *A Prayer Breakfast Under The Wings Of A White Angel* - was premiered within 45th *October Saloon*, held during September and October 2004 in Belgrade. It exists both as performance and installation. Religious ritual, expected after experiencing the smell of incense, tasting of red wine and bread, introduction of the figure of white angel and angel's song, was adjusted to the performativity of pure signs. Semiotic effects of the piece were cleaned from the ideology of religion, by the old Turkish bathroom, where it was performed. *A Prayer Breakfast Under The Wings Of A White Angel* establishes itself as a further problematization of media synthesis that author seeks for. However, Radovanović's open critique of the society is intriguing and new in his output.

I walk into a round space with four apses. The singing of female voices echoes in the empty room. In the middle, a circular hollow for ritual bathing. In the apse across from the entrance, the figure of a white angel. In the air, a pungent smell of incense. The circumstances suggest an almost religious anticipation of a ritual about to commence... My attention is drawn to the asymmetry of the figure: the right wing is lowered, the left raised. The body is filled with a bright white light illuminating five graded nuances of violet, colouring the figure's depth, and with as many nuances of orange edging the interior of the head. The visage is unrecognizable, androgynous, sans eyes, nose and mouth, a smooth surface emitting an orange-yellow light. Above the angelic head, a tridimensional equilateral Malevichesque cross emerges from an Escherian matrix of two-dimensional blue and white twin crosses that sit in the background behind the figure. Facing the figure, a stand with wine, bread and smouldering incense. A woman dressed in black descends into the emptied space for bathing, takes a morsel of bread and a sip of wine and starts singing wordlessly, contrapuntally joining in the already reproduced song of female voices. During the atonal singing, I begin to count green and white ceramic tiles covering the walls and imagine rituals that used to take place here, in the Turkish bath. The contrast between the highly aestheticised geometric figure of the angel and the dilapidated, "rough" and seductive interior of the hamam is extremely dynamic.

In Vladan Radovanović's work *Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog anđjela (A Prayer Breakfast Under the Wings of a White Angel)*, the religious ritual we were led to believe would ensue by the smell of incense, the use of red wine and bread and the introduction of the figure of angel and angelic song, is reduced to a succession of the performative effect of symbols. This effect could, unexpectedly, be read purged of the ideology of religion due to the presence of a strong associative network of contexts of the only public bath in Belgrade. Sociologically, this work is also subversive, having in mind the considerable power exercised by the institution of the Orthodox Church in post-socialist Serbia. The

subversiveness lies in the introduction of noises¹ into stereotypes of anticipation relative to the symbols of church rituals.

The work *Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela* was staged and premiered within the 45th, which also happened to be the first international, October Salon in Belgrade, which was held from September 10 to October 31, 2004 under the slogan *Kontinentalni doručak (Continental Breakfast)*. This work by Radovanović exists in two forms: as a performance and as an installation. The author does not participate in the performance, as might be expected; rather, the performer is a woman rendering the voice part to reproduced electroacoustic music. Jelena Jovanović sang at the opening. However, after the opening, the work could be perceived as an installation. The spatial-visual objects, light-emitting devices, sound source, smell source and gustatory items remained on the “stage”. Still, the only sound source in the installation was a CD player incessantly reproducing Radovanović’s composition *Poj belog andjela (The Song of the White Angel)*, built of female voice samples. At the author’s request, “the sound source was placed on a shelf at the back of the apse so that the bulk of sound energy should pass through an oval orifice on a white Klirit”,² i.e. through an opening that represents the angel’s face. The installation, compared to the performance, lacked a live performance of the voice part, as well as the performer’s tasting of bread and wine on the stage.

In his explanation of the work, the author states that “the project belongs to synthetic art...” and that “as regards artistic media in the project, the focus is on a synthesis of the visual-spatial (painting, lumino kinetics, sculpture, architecture), the sonic (electroacoustic music), smell and taste”.³ Radovanović attempts to achieve synthetic art which he considers to be “a blending of different media-artistic components by bringing them into correlation (and not only mere synchronicity), where the relationships between elements of different media are very much determined by the author’s consciousness”.⁴ In Radovanović’s poetics the stress is on his attitude “towards the work as a ‘personalized object (...), towards pushing back the frontiers of art, not only on the level of art synthesis, but also on the level of media synthesis: towards the idea itself as (...) a category whose universality is manifested in the possibility of its articulation in various media”.⁵ Radovanović emphasizes that synthetic art is not a synthesis of arts, because what happens is a simultaneous creation using different media, rather than using different arts. According to his endeavours, the integration of different artistic media produces an art whose character is synthetic. The multimedia character of taking food as a ritual served as a stimulus to create this work.

¹ We are borrowing the term noise from Umberto Eco’s information theory. Eco claims that if a music work is understood as establishing a system of different messages (referential, emotional, phatic or connective, metaphysical, metamusical or esthetical), the aesthetic message then reveals possibilities of an interruption or noise in the communicative chain. Cf. Umberto Eco, *Kultura, informacija, komunikacija*, Belgrade, Nolit, 1973, p. 71.

² Vladan Radovanović, description of the work *Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela*, manuscript.

³ Vladan Radovanović, *About the project Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela*, manuscript.

⁴ Vladan Radovanović, *Ibid.*

Anda Rottenberg, Art Director of the 45th October Salon, thus summarized the concept of the exhibition: “Coffee, cream, juice, croissant, butter and jam. A typical French breakfast called “continental”, as opposed to the British which includes tea (or coffee), porridge, fried bacon and eggs on toast. Both breakfasts, known worldwide, have become a part of global culture as a product of European provenance...”⁶ However, Ms Rottenberg was particularly interested in the relationship between the centres and outskirts of Europe, as well as “What is the notion of Europe from the point of view of the Europeans themselves?” and “What does ‘continental breakfast’ mean to the citizens of Kiev, Ljubljana, Porto or Reykjavik?”⁷ She wonders if the term “continental breakfast” makes any sense at all anymore and whether we can escape globalization by returning to local habits.⁸ Radovanović also notes that the *Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela* complied with the set topic of the *October Salon*, and that through this project he advocates “...preserving personal, national and religious identities rather than greying and equating cultures”, as well as “...preserving authorship rather than *the death of the author*”.⁹

The fact that the work *Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela* was performed inside a Turkish bath in Belgrade, and the specificity of that performing venue, incorporates multilayered deposits of meaning into Radovanović’s work. The Turkish bath did not only serve to wash the body. Important events in the life of an individual were often marked by ritual bathing. Baths took place on various occasions – as a token of welcome to the guest, on the occasion of circumcision, on the occasion of returning from the army, while brides-to-be were even bathed to the accompaniment of food and music. The bath was also part of everyday life, and it could be visited by people from different social-economic classes, but not by men and women at the same time.

There also used to be a whole array of ritual objects that were usually taken to the hamam for bathing: sets of silk and cotton towels, special footwear that kept the customers’ feet clean and dry, massage fabrics, metal basins for soap and pouring water, henna bowls, jewellery boxes, boxes with stibnite used for painting the eyelids, mats onto which clothes were laid, as well as bottles with rose-scented perfume which was thought to be the only appropriate fragrance to be applied to the body after a bath...

Insight into the rituals performed in the Turkish bath additionally clarifies the events in Radovanović’s *Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela*. Ritual objects in this case are those used in the liturgical service, while the rose scent is replaced by incense. The strict church canons prescribing

⁵ Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, *Umetnost i izvan nje*, Novi Sad, Matica Srpska, Odeljenje za scenske umetnosti i muziku, 1991, p. 186.

⁶ Anda Rottenberg, *Kontinentalni doručak*, http://www.oktobarskosalon.org.yu/45/andakat_s.htm, accessed on June 7, 2005.

⁷ Anda Rottenberg, *Ibid.*

⁸ Anda Rottenberg, “Okolo stola” (Around the Table) in: *Kontinentalni doručak*, http://www.oktobarskosalon.org.yu/45/andakat_s.htm, accessed on June 7, 2005.

⁹ Vladan Radovanović, *About the project Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela*, manuscript.

detailed protocols of the service were here left out entirely. The high degree of definition of visual-spatial and music events was made compliant with the author's precise guidelines.

The specific context into which the venue of the performance of this piece is incorporated underlines the significance which is usually brought into artistic work by context. Imagine, for instance, that Radovanović's work was staged in a church rather than in the Turkish bath. This would then lend an entirely different reading to the weave of meanings. On a theatre stage or in a gallery, its meaning would be different again, while additional contextual differences would be inscribed in it if, for example, it involved a New York, Istanbul, Moscow or Jerusalem art institution.

The music component of *Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela* carries the fewest inscribed layers of meaning subject to different interpretations. This is reinforced by the fact that this music does not include a text to contribute to interpretation; rather, the parts are composed to the vowel *a* (three electroacoustic parts marked Angel – the first, second and third voice) or neutral syllables (the contralto part). The author notes that the space in which the work is performed should preferably be isolated or separated from surrounding sounds.

The music written for the work *Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela* consists of the following sections: Introduction – Voices, Descent and the First Taking of Wine and Bread, 1. Psalm – Voices, the Second Taking of Wine and Bread – Bells, 2. Psalm – Voices, The Third Taking of Wine and Bread – Bells, 3. Psalm – Voices, Ascent and End of Performance. The asymmetric, cumulative structure of the music flow can be represented schematically as: a b a1 b1 a2 b2 a3 b3. The introduction is three-part, whereas in the sections entitled *Psalms* the three-part structure (Angel 1st voice, Angel 2nd voice, Angel 3rd voice) is joined by contralto. The sections marked by the letter b are also three-part (Bell 1, Bell 2 and Bell 3). Sections a and b are contrasted – used voice samples, nuances of *piano* dynamics, free polyphony whose texture occasionally resembles the texture of Palestrina's vocal polyphony (sections a) stand in contrast to the b sections, which feature bell samples, *mezzoforte* dynamics and a texture of free three-part polyphony in which the frequency of events is higher and time values shorter. The score specifies that the performer should render the contralto part in the a sections (barring the introduction), and that she should taste wine and bread during the b sections (barring section b3). What is common to sections a and b is free atonality. It is precisely this atonality that imparts a unique expressive quality to the electroacoustic "song" and electro-acoustic "chime". By means of this quality they are removed from the context in which they usually appear in church rituals, and which is commonly associated with tonality or modality. For lack of dramaturgical stereotypes, atonal music flow is best suited to being incorporated into a work created in keeping with the concept of synthetic art, to which Radovanović aspires.

One of Radovanović's last synthetic works that we could experience live in Belgrade was *Sazveždja (Constellations)* in 1994. Compared to this and other synthetic works by Radovanović, *Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela* is established as a continuance and further examination of

the problem of media synthesis. What is certainly intriguing and novel here is Radovanović subtly sounding and openly commenting on the dynamics of the culture in which he creates. The need to critically analyze the ruling system in an intensifying reconstitution of society's axiological scale, regulated in line with the accumulated national criteria, is one of the manifest dimensions of *Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela*. Although he advocates "...preserving personal, national and religious identities", with this work Radovanović in fact demonstrates a plurality of ways in which this preservation can be carried out, as well as destabilized, made flexible. Also, the fact that the work was premiered in a *site-specific* context made the layering of the semantic sphere more intensively topical than in Radovanović's earlier works. Despite the mentioned forays, typical of the postmodernist creator, what remains is the author's firm and impressive antiglobalist attitude which can actually be identified with his endeavour to preserve the *strong* author's subject as opposed to Bart's *death of the author*. The dynamics that exists in *Molitveni doručak pod okriljem belog andjela* between high-modernist tendencies and postmodernist contexts will surely continue to make Radovanović's poetics topical.

Translated by Dušan Zabrdac