

ABSOLUTELY NOW: Death, Confusion, Sale

The art association Apsolutno as chroniclers of a transformation that the West has never fully understood

Inke Arns

Good Evening. Breaking news. The facts. At first sight the video *Good Evening* (1996) appears to be a funny or somewhat ironic commentary on the abundance of globally available television stations and the differences and similarities of their respective form and language. However, if you look at it more closely, and if you take into account the subtitle that accompanies it (1996 APSOLUTNO 0004), the notion „Good Evening“ does have a darker meaning, one which refers to the time and the place in which it was created. It uses the ever same welcome phrase of the plethora of global satellite (news) feeds available in 1996 in Serbia. However, despite all its humor, *Good Evening* is extremely ambivalent: Not only does the video refer to the impact of the media on the experience of reality – questioning the way the media present information as fact – it also is a farewell to the 20th century and a dark welcoming of the dawning new millenium. What would the 21st century bring for the citizens of former Yugoslavia? Would it be any better than the previous one?

The association Apsolutno was founded in 1993 in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia. Four members collaborated on the production of the association: Zoran Pantelić, Dragan Rakić (†), Bojana Petrić and Dragan Miletić (1995-2001). Since 1995 all the works have been signed APSOLUTNO, without any reference to personal names. The production of Apsolutno started in the field of fine arts from where it gradually developed to include not only aesthetic, but also cultural, social and political aspects. The work of the association is based on interdisciplinary work and media pluralism with the aim to make it open to new readings.

Since 1995, Apsolutno made a subjective inventory of events, ideas and influences that marked the last five years of the millennium. By exploring the ‘absolute now and absolute here’ Apsolutno aimed to pose questions, create metaphors and point to absurd situations and paradoxes brought by the time we live in.

We? Who is this *we*? And which time exactly? Well, it can be said that the art association Apsolutno acted as chroniclers of a radical transformation that the West has never fully

understood: the transition of a Socialist country (ok, with self-management) to a parliamentary democracy and a capitalist economy. To the Western ear this may not sound like much, but in fact this transition consisted in a massive and total change of economy, ideology (politics), and society, in short: *everything* that people were familiar with, up to that point in time. Actually, the whole of Eastern Europe experienced this radical transition since 1989 – albeit with gradual differences. With the Yugoslav Wars¹ between 1991 and 1999 and UN sanctions imposed on the country, Yugoslavia experienced by far the most violent phase following the political break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic compared to all other states in Eastern Europe.

Apsolutno's work selected for this exhibition reflects on the respective present of a state in transition and allows us to look at it like through a magnifying glass. The exhibition consists of three consecutive exhibition setups (or 'chapters' if you will) within a month. By focusing on the topics of Death, Confusion and Sale, the exhibition puts an emphasis on Apsolutno's analysis of the present of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia/Serbia and the radical changes in the political, social and economic context formulated in their artistic work over the past two decades. Death, Confusion and Sale follow a chronological order in the development of Yugoslavia/Serbia in the 1990s/2000s. Very clearly, the exhibition is not conceived as a *retrospective* presenting a comprehensive overview of Apsolutno's work; rather, it intends to *highlight* the most important works of the collective dealing with topics that are still of importance for the present-day situation in Serbia.

Death

It all literally started with death. The Yugoslav patient had actually been in agony since Tito's death in 1980. However, it took another ten years for the state to follow suit. The end of Socialism meant not only the death of the political system but also of the economic system. In Yugoslavia this shock therapy was amplified by the effects of the UN sanctions imposed on the country during the Yugoslav Wars. The sanctions abruptly halted the country's economy and pushed it from a situation of relative prosperity into an economic crisis with hyperinflation of 3.6 million percent a year of the Yugoslav dinar; a rate never heard of previously.²

¹ The wars are generally considered to be a series of largely separate but related military conflicts occurring and affecting most of the former Yugoslav republics: War in Slovenia (1991), Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995), Bosnian War (1992–1995), and Kosovo War (1998–1999), including the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia.

² The inflation exceeded that experienced in the Great Depression of 1929.

The video *Absolutely Dead* (1995) documents a forensic investigation into the „death of two transoceanic liners under suspicious circumstances.“ The two ships were found in the shipyard of Novi Sad, Vojvodina, Yugoslavia, between the 1,258 and 1,259th kilometer of the Danube. The ships – both 105 meters long, 16,2 meters wide and 9 meters high, and each with a cargo capacity of 5,700 tons – were lying parallel to each other with their bows turned towards the South-West. It was not only the confusing geographical location – far from any ocean – but also the fact that both ships, although new and not yet completed at the time of the investigation on 21 September 1995, were completely rusted that provided sufficient grounds for an in-depth examination. The conclusion reached after the hours-long quasi-archaeological expedition into the rusted and partially water-filled interiors of the ships was the assessment that “both the position of the ships as well as the location and time at which they were found indicated absolute death.” After completing the examination the group barricaded the scene of the crime with yellow barrier tape printed with the words “Keep off! - absolutely dead.” The completion of the two ships had been prevented by the economic sanctions imposed on Yugoslavia by the United Nations in 1992.³ In this forensic investigation, Apsolutno addressed not only the catastrophic economic situation that was provoked by the sanctions and symbolised by the two ships. Rather, their examination was an act of enshrining, as archaeologists of the present, a strangeness of perspective that is manifest in the distanced assessment of the existence of these paradoxical objects.

A *trophy* is a reward for a specific achievement, and serves as recognition or evidence of merit. *Atrophy*, however, is the partial or complete wasting away of a part of the body. Causes of atrophy include poor nourishment, poor circulation, and disuse or lack of exercise. The idea for *a.trophy* originated during the 78 days of the NATO operation „Allied Forces“ in Yugoslavia in 1999. It features a sequence from Petar Lalović’s documentary film *The Last Oasis* (1984) which was shot in the early 1980s in Kopački rit, one of the largest wildlife refuges on the Balkan Peninsula, located in the Baranja County (today Croatia). It was here, in Eastern Slavonia, which was then part of the self-proclaimed Republic of Serbian Krajina, where in the first half of the 1990s the deadliest conflicts of the Yugoslav Wars took place. The film scene used for *a.trophy* shows a deer shedding its antlers. For hunters like Tito (who enjoyed hunting in the region where *The Last Oasis* was filmed) a deer shedding its antlers means that it cannot be a trophy anymore. Only when taken with the skull do the antlers have

³ United Nations Security Council Resolution (U.N.S.C.R.) 757, May 30, 1992; see the timeline in: *Serbia Sanctions (SERBSANC)*, Case no.: 391, <http://www1.american.edu/ted/serbsanc.htm> (last accessed 23 Nov 2014)

a value. For the deer shedding its antlers this also represents a turning point: On the one hand it means that it is old and that it is losing its symbol of power. At the same time the animal's life becomes much safer. A hunter might be frustrated at the sight of a deer shedding its antlers. But for the cameraman and the director of *The Last Oasis*, this moment must have been the "real trophy since it captures an extremely rarely seen event in nature, a moment when everything turns into its opposite." Apsolutno proposes to add yet another layer of meaning to *a.trophy*, this time a geopolitical one, by linking it to Yugoslavia's role in the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement: At a summit in Belgrade in 1961, Burma, India, Indonesia, Egypt, Ghana and Yugoslavia initiated the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). It was formed as an attempt to thwart the Cold War. Thirty-one years later, in 1992, after the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, the membership of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was suspended at the regular Ministerial Meeting of the Movement, held in New York. Yugoslavia, one of the initiators of the NAM, „ended up expelled from the organisation it had founded. Radical political shifts like this one cyclically strike the Balkans. In this part of the world, a socio-political trophy frequently transforms into atrophy." Apsolutno themselves, however, by using Lalović's film sequence, precisely turn it into the trophy of an atrophy.

Confusion

Confusion happens when one system ends while another one is still in the state of formation. In *Le Quattro Stagioni* (1996) and *The Semiotics of Confusion* (1995-1998) Apsolutno focus on the Balkans as a semiotically rich territory, a semiotic palimpsest if you will, an area that is, and has always been, full of conflicting symbols overwriting each other.⁴ *Le Quattro Stagioni* consists of four photographs taken during the spring, summer, autumn and winter of 1996. Each picture shows one member of Apsolutno dressed in a 19th century costume. The pictures have been taken in a location where symbols clash: On a memorial cemetery in Sombor where partisans who died fighting the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia are buried, situated on the grounds belonging to the Orthodox church, next to a chapel built in a style imitating the Serbian-Moravian style. The site is a symbolic meeting ground of the red star and the Orthodox cross and their respective narratives. The Apsolutno members are looking

⁴ The Slovenian artist collective Irwin as well as Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) are also addressing this issue in their work. See Inke Arns: *Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) – eine Analyse ihrer künstlerischen Strategien im Kontext der 1980er Jahre in Jugoslawien*, Regensburg: Museum Ostdeutsche Galerie, 2002; Irwin: *Retroprincip 1983-2003*, ed. Inke Arns, Frankfurt/Main: Revolver, 2003; Inke Arns: *Objects in the mirror may be closer than they appear! Die Avantgarde im Rückspiegel. Zum Paradigmenwechsel der künstlerischen Avantgarderezeption in (Ex-)Jugoslawien und Russland von den 1980er Jahren bis in die Gegenwart*, Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2004, <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/docviews/abstract.php?id=20894>; Inke Arns: *Avantgarda v vzvratnem ogledalu*, Ljubljana: Maska (Transformacije 21), 2006.

forward to the future, their impatience being symbolized by their bicycles. In the twinkling of an eye the group gives us additional information which we might believe or not: „In order to travel faster, they use a device which is well-known locally: a corn cob put into the bicycle wheel.“ Partisans, 19th century optimism about what the future would bring, local folk knowledge, Orthodox crosses or speedy bicycles, all this comes together in these pictures taken at a time when the future seemed all but clear.

Semiotics of Confusion, on the other hand, focused onto the absolute now, and the clash of symbols perceived in the years 1995-1998 in Novi Sad and Belgrade. Following the violent breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia since 1991, and the formation of five new states (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia⁵), questions of national identity became prominent. Apsolutno looked into the variety of semiotic activities of that time, both official and individual, which in an interesting way reflected events in the social and political sphere. The group documented flags, border-markers, coats-of-arms and other national and state symbols, banknotes, passports, license plates on vehicles and other official documents issued by the authorities, as well as various public individual responses to these. In Apsolutno's words: „On the semiotic level, this process of disintegration and formation has been followed and in some cases preceded by feverish symbol-engineering: old national and state symbols have been discarded, ancient ones revived or recycled and completely new ones designed. New authorities attached enormous significance to the introduction of new symbols, as through these it was possible to create a new sense of national identity, national pride and a new political and ideological framework for future orientation. In other words, the change on the symbolic level was seen as an important vehicle of political change, as communication via symbols was a language that people understood and to which they responded.“

At first sight the video *In the Balkans* (1998) deals with the incompatibility of various technical standards used in different regions of the world. The material for this video was shot at the Black Sea, in Bulgaria, using the SECAM system. It was then edited in the U.S. on an NTSC based AVID system without being actually transferred to NTSC. The result is a b/w stretched image, rich in glitches and noise caused by the manipulation of the incompatible source. Finally, the NTSC master copy was transferred to PAL and brought back to the

⁵ The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was officially renamed Serbia and Montenegro in 2003. In 2006, Montenegro voted in favor of its independence. In 2008 the province of Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia.

Balkans. The video is a mute reflection on the incompatibility of languages – and, in a metaphorical sense, it can also be read as a somber statement about the impossibility of most communication. At the same time, *In the Balkans* holds up a mirror to global media's suggestion of the Balkans "as something IN BULK, a distant black and white mass, without structure or organization. The image is hardly readable as it lacks clarity. The only sound is silence juxtaposed to an overwhelming noise arriving from this region that could be neither documented nor understood." By short-circuiting technical standards, Apsolutno criticize global media and the negative image they are drawing of the 'regressive' and 'mute' Balkans.

Sale

After *Death and Confusion*, what we are left with is *Sale*. The end of Socialism brought about the advent of capitalism in its most brutal form. Those who are left with nothing have to sell themselves, or parts of themselves. In Ekatarinburg I saw a poster in 2012 saying „We buy hair“, and: “The longer, the better.” It took me a while to understand what this actually meant. If you have nothing, sell your hair, we will make hairpieces out of it that will be exported to the West. That's not even the worst solution, as hair will grow again after you cut it. But think about other parts of the body. Organs. Think about people. Women. Workforce. It's time for the ultimate sale: of bare life. It's cheap nowadays.

Borders define who is in and who is out, who can buy and who has to sell. The project *Human* (1996-1999) is exactly about focusing one's attention onto the existence of the dividing line between East and West which has not disappeared with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. On the contrary: While the borders between the states in Western Europe have disappeared with the establishment of a “united” Europe, in Eastern Europe a multitude of new national(istic) states with strictly controlled border regimes were formed. In this process, the external border of the EU has been reinforced and is heavily guarded by Frontex nowadays.⁶ As part of the project *Human*, Apsolutno marked the border between East and West between 1996 and 1999 by placing traffic signs on the no-man's-land between the borders of the countries along the line carrying the inscription "HUMAN" (written in the languages of the neighboring countries). Thus the association made the invisible borderline visible and pointed to the factual (in)equality of people and their destinies on both sides of the border on European territory. The online game auction *The Absolute Sale* (1997-2002) was a continuation of the

⁶ With Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia and Croatia becoming full members of the EU the border between East and West has yet again shifted towards the East compared to the beginning of the *Human* project in 1996.

Human project: It is a web project based on an ironic view of the position of the Eastern European artist in relation to the Western art market. The piece simulates an auction in which viewers play the role of prospective buyers. However, the sale is constantly postponed, as is the integration of Eastern European countries into the EU. The piece deals with the definition of Europe, a geographical, political and mental space which, depending on the perspective one takes, is at the same time united and divided.

Whose Now

What do I mean by saying that the art association Apsolutno are chroniclers of a transformation that the West has never fully grasped? Let me explain by giving examples from Germany. Twenty-five years ago the Berlin Wall fell. People in East Germany had to adapt to radically new living conditions: a new political culture, a new economic system, a new social contract. For many this meant that they had to radically re-invent themselves. British artist Phil Collins is one of the few artists who made a relevant work about those people who had to go through this process of complete re-invention of the self.⁷ Meanwhile, what happened to the people in the West of Germany? Nothing. Life simply continued. How did they experience the change? Well, from time to time there was a Trabant or a Wartburg (East German car brand) on the street. In addition, the solidarity tax was introduced which was used to finance the rebuilding of East Germany. That's about all that changed for West Germans. Death, Confusion and Sale have always been – and still are – experienced by others. Through their forensic approach Apsolutno addresses these topics – and we see that they are still of great importance for the present-day situation in Serbia. And we are beginning to wonder about whether the West or the East is better fit for future challenges of a global kind.

All quotations by Apsolutno are taken from *The Absolute Report*, Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006.

⁷ Phil Collins: *marxism today (prologue)*, 2010, as shown at the *6th berlin biennial*, Berlin 2010.