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Artiste Anonyme / Anonymous Conceptual Artist / Umjetnik u krizi: Goran Trbuljak's Names and Namelessness¹

*Sly as a fox and twice as quick: there are countless ways
of 'making do.'*

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984: 29)

“From time to time I stuck my finger through a hole in the door of the Modern Art Gallery without the management's knowledge” (Trbuljak, 1973: n.p). This short text, printed alternately in Croatian, English, or parallel translations, captions a photograph of a double wooden door decorated with geometric carvings [fig. 1]². Deep shadow dominates the left side of the composition, indicating that the photo was taken outdoors. To the right of the shadow protrudes the curved sliver of artist Goran Trbuljak's finger. Dated 1969, the combination of text and image forms one of Trbuljak's first known works, made when the artist was twenty-one and a student in the graphics department at the Akademija likovnih umjetnosti in Zagreb, then part of the Yugoslav Socijalistička Republika Hrvatska (Croatia)³. Trbuljak

¹ This paper is an excerpt from my in-progress dissertation “*Umjetnik radi: Stilinović and Trbuljak on Art, Work and Life.*” I would like to thank the organizers of the *Hide-and-Seek* conference; my fellow panelists Lada Nakonechna, Ralf Sander, and Barbara Tiberi; and Stephen Wright for his question regarding political stakes versus games of hide-and-see for their assistance in the development of this paper. Thank you also to my advisor Ann Reynolds, and to my writing group colleagues Jessi DiTillio and Francesca Balboni, for comments on earlier drafts of this text. Finally, thank you to Goran Trbuljak, as always, for your generosity and curiosity.

² I have opted here to refer to this language as “Croatian,” but it might be properly referred to as “Serbo-Croatian” as that is how it was known at the time of the text's printing in 1973. Then, Serbo-Croatian or *Srpsko-hrvatski* was one of three official languages of Yugoslavia (along with Macedonian and Slovenian). Today, these languages are generally understood as pluricentric, but are referred to by national variations.

³ While in my dissertation I refer more frequently to the socio-political context and history of Yugoslavia in relation to the artists and artworks under discussion, these connections are not made as explicit in this article. Such references will mostly occur, where relevant, in the footnotes. It is important to note at the outset, however, a few details about



Fig. 1. Goran Trbuljak, *Kroz rupu na vratima...* (1969). Street action documentation
Image courtesy Galerija Gregor Podnar

the particularities of Yugoslav socialism. In 1948, due to a perception of dictator Josip Broz Tito's insubordinate aspirations for power and autonomy in the Balkan region, Stalin kicked Yugoslavia out of the Cominform, isolating the fledgling country from the Soviet Bloc's financial assistance, and also from Soviet doctrine. In the years following 1948, Yugoslavia shifted from an emulation of Stalinist models like five-year planning and forced collectivization toward a system that strived for innovation, liberalism and independence for its citizens. In 1950 the first law establishing a self-management system was introduced. Self-management was based on a principle of social ownership of the means of production, and a hybridization of collectivist and cooperative styles in which worker councils were theoretically given autonomy to control state-owned operations and set wages and other policies independently and cooperatively. In practice, councils remained hierarchized and the system did not ensure true equity. Yugoslavia experienced economic success and stability by the 1960s and the quality of life in Yugoslav cities increased dramatically. Notably, Yugoslav citizens had passports and could travel freely. The perception of Yugoslavia as a hopeful alternative path within socialism was not entirely false, but did mask the country's problems. Poverty and illiteracy remained widespread in rural and less developed areas and republics. Thousands left Yugoslavia to find jobs as *Gastarbeiter* in Germany and elsewhere. Criticism of the

had noticed the hole in the door at some point in his walks through the city and, finding amusement and excitement in the idea of people passing by on busy Zrinjevac street noticing his gesture while they remained invisible to him (and he only slightly visible to them), later returned with photographer Nada Orel to document the action (Trbuljak, 2018)⁴.

Humorous and compact, the work typifies Trbuljak's practice, and foretold a career-long interest in breaching boundaries and poking fun. Today, it can also aptly symbolize a condition in the literature on the artist. While this work, and Trbuljak more generally, have often been understood primarily in relation to a critique of art institutions, both actually manifest an appeal to the street and the spontaneously constituted public of strangers that forms there⁵. The turn to the street as a site for art is perhaps a repudiation of the studio, gallery, and museum, but to understand the move solely as such does not allow adequately for the street's particular allure. Moreover, in this and other projects, Trbuljak exists in the gallery and on the street at once.

The course of Trbuljak's life as an artist has been marked by such a tendency to reject occupying a single position. Instead, he wanders – often vacillating between modes of behavior and styles of self-positioning. One of the primary swings manifested through Trbuljak's work has been between an ethic of self-effacement or self-concealment, and a fixation on his own name and signature⁶. Given this back and forth, Trbuljak demonstrates simultaneously the ways that certain forms of anonymity or namelessness can be a temporary liberation from the pressures of authorship and individuality, and the hazards of making a name for oneself as

Yugoslav system, expressions of republican nationalism and other forms of dissent could be punished by losing one's job or imprisonment. From the beginning, art held an important place in socialist Yugoslavia. Soon after the Tito-Stalin split, socialist realism was no longer enforced. Resultantly, in Yugoslavia, there were no clear distinctions between official and unofficial art practice. Diverse forms of art were tolerated and granted government support, which did not mean that all artists were treated equally. In Yugoslavia, self-censorship, and more direct acts of suppression by the government both existed.

⁴ The door is not the main entrance to the Moderna galerija, but the one to the Kabinet grafike on the side of the building. The same door is still in use today (absent the hole).

⁵ For example, in the eighth chapter of Piotr Piotrowski's book *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* the author uses Trbuljak as the primary example of Yugoslav conceptualism, and highlights works by Trbuljak that took the form of slogans about exhibitions, calling them the summation of Trbuljak's artistic contribution. Describing Trbuljak's project *O galerijama* (to be discussed later in this text), Piotrowski calls it a "radical critique, produced in the language of conceptual art," which posed epistemological questions about "the entire system of art." See P. Piotrowski (2009). *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*. A. Brzyski (transl.). London: Reaktion Books, p. 330.

⁶ Lada Dražin has pointed out the centrality of the use of Trbuljak's name as a material in his art. See L. Dražin (1994). Goran Trbuljak – Anonymous Conceptual Artist. In: B. Stipančić (ed.). *Riječi i slike*. Zagreb: Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, pp. 86–87.

an artist⁷. For in addition to the voluntary, and playful, forms of obfuscation that can be linked to the artist, there are involuntary ones. First, there is the canonical obscurity that follows from being born in a small, former socialist country in the Balkans and, secondly, as alluded to above, the artist has been masked by an association with the limiting art-critical paradigms of both institutional critique and conceptual art.⁸

In this text, the benefits and pitfalls of Trbuljak's particular forms of invisibility are explored through a discussion of works made from the late 1960s through the early 1970s. Throughout, the writing of Michel de Certeau offers a theoretical framework for interpreting Trbuljak's approach in art that, beyond art world critique, affords insight into the artist's engagement with the street, the body, and his insistent liminality. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau describes forms of practice he calls tactical. A tactic is a way in which generally powerless subjects, through fleeting seizures and everyday gestures, regain time, pleasure and agency from an otherwise controlled and hostile environment. These gestures, however, like Trbuljak's in his art, lack place and permanence. As de Certeau writes of a tactic, "Whatever it wins it does not keep" (1984: xix). Trbuljak's art, including his frequent plays on anonymity and self-concealment, is tactical in nature. It is how he has "made do" within urban, political and art world systems. Reading Trbuljak's work alongside de Certeau's notion of tactical practice creates space for an art

⁷ Izabel Galliera has similarly argued for the importance of anonymity in the street practice of Hungarian artist Gábor Tóth. Drawing on the artist's own comments on the subject of projects such as *Food Vending Machine* from 1980 in which the artist bought items from a vending machine and then bartered with passers-by to exchange the food for personal items, Galliera writes, "Tóth saw in the concept of anonymity a powerful way to undermine the institutionalized canon of art history, particularly its Modernist myth, which values the Artist as the sole creator of an Artwork." See I. Galliera (2017). *Socially Engaged Art After Socialism: Art and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe*. London: I.B. Tauris, p. 51.

⁸ These two impediments to visibility are actually linked, as artists from former socialist (Central and Eastern European, Balkan, etc.) countries are often pigeonholed into a singular relationship to art via dominant political narratives. This happens often through a tendency for survey texts and exhibitions aimed at forming and promoting a region-specific canon of artists at the expense of breadth of examples and depth of analysis. A related tendency is for artworks by artists living under socialist regimes to be examined only through a lens of authoritarian oppression or protest, while the nuances of, for example, formal choices are overlooked. As Ruth Noack has written of the lack of aesthetic consideration in the discourse on the performance work *Trokut* (1979) by Trbuljak's colleague in Zagreb Sanja Iveković, "...isn't it rather obvious that the existence of aesthetic discourse or lack thereof must be attributed to something other than the inherent features of an artwork? There certainly are contexts in which references to the formal aspects of a work does not discredit its political character, whereas in others there does not even seem to be a language with which to start. Isn't it the case that hegemonic art contexts have less trouble discussing aesthetics with politics and politics with aesthetics than communities that are marginalised?" See R. Noack (2013). *Triangle*. London: Afterall, p. 18. In the case of Trbuljak, institutional critique becomes a kind of political critique by proxy, as the entire art world of former Yugoslavia was run by the state.

history that values the small, the self-effacing, the anonymous, the unsure, and the impermanent, as much as the bold and the radical.

* * *

To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984:103)

In Trbuljak's early work he used the streets of Zagreb as a space to explore and experiment⁹. These projects chronicle his frequent travels through the city by foot and by tram and reveal both the point of view of a young artist beginning to establish a practice, and the intimate texture of small moments enjoyed in the city. In one, from April 1970, Trbuljak photographed holes and loose patches of asphalt in the street in several places around Zagreb, then produced photocopies of these images and placed the reproductions on the street near to where the original images were taken, leaving the photocopies on the street for ten days [fig. 2]. Pointing, twice, to the textures in the asphalt by juxtaposing them with their photographic representation, Trbuljak attempted to wake the attention of passersby (Trbuljak, 2016). It is striking the amount of care Trbuljak took in producing this ephemeral, and entirely anonymous, intervention. Walking by the places in the street, returning to photograph them, producing the prints, returning to place them on the street: his actions dilated the experience of a momentary observation into an undertaking that likely spanned multiple days.

In comparison to his Yugoslav contemporaries who also occupied the street as a space of artistic activity – such as Croatian performance artist Tomislav Gotovac

⁹ The atmosphere of Zagreb in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the time when Trbuljak began doing his street projects was a time of transformation in the city, both in terms of government-led city-planning, and citizen- and artist-led protest and intervention. Zagreb was steadily expanding in size and population as citizens from villages moved to the city for work and education. Newspaper headlines frequently and enthusiastically announced the arrival of taller, and more modern buildings to the skyline. At this time, Zagreb experienced both left-wing and student protests and protests associated with the Croatian Spring, a movement demanding greater representation and autonomy for Croatia, and Croatian language and literature, within the Yugoslav federation. It was this mood of constant change and negotiation between citizens and the state that made Trbuljak, and many other artists and peers, feel free and inclined to act in the space of the city. Performances, happenings and less categorizable art actions on the street are a through line of alternative and avant-garde practice with a deep history in Zagreb. Maja Fowkes and Ivana Bago have made claims for the influence of contemporary protest culture, as well as dissatisfaction with atomized, characterless socialist urbanism, in these projects. See I. Bago (2017). *The City as a Space of Plastic Happening: From Grand Proposals to Exceptional Gestures in the Art of the 1970s in Zagreb*. *Journal of Urban History*. No. 44:1, pp. 26–53; M. Fowkes (2015). *The Green Bloc: Neo-avant-garde Art and Ecology under Socialism*. Budapest: Central European University Press.

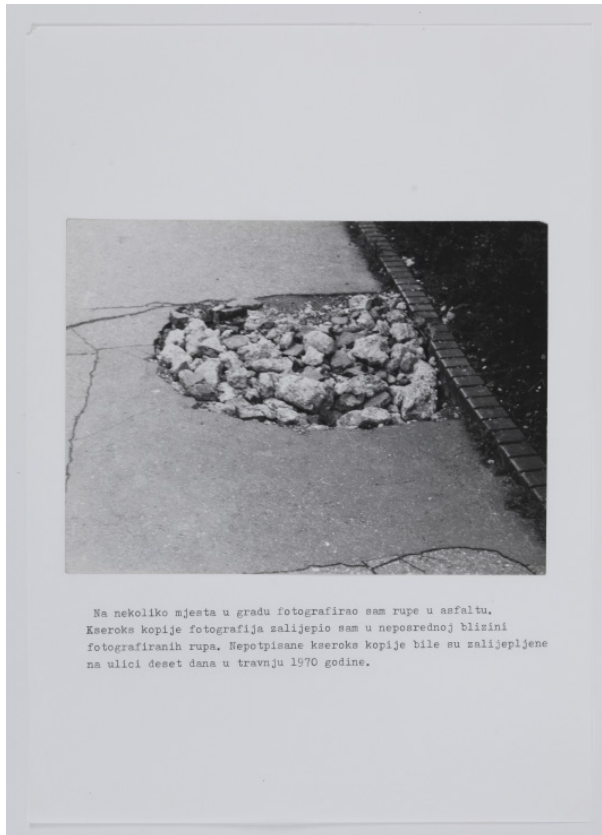


Fig. 2. Goran Trbuljak, *Na nekoliko mjesta u gradu...* (1970). Street action documentation
Image courtesy Galerija Gregor Podnar

in his 1971 streaking action in Belgrade or in the Slovenian group OHO's 1968 work *Triglav*, in which the artist's presence in public space (naked, humorous, surprising, etc.) essentially constituted the art – Trbuljak avoided drawing attention to himself¹⁰. The documentation of his projects lacks any observable trace of the

¹⁰ In her book on the history of performance art in Eastern Europe from the 1960s to the present, Amy Bryzgel discusses both Gotovac's and OHO's projects in terms of the political and national discursive possibilities of the artist presenting their body in public. She refers to Gotovac's naked sprint through Belgrade, filmed as part of the production of Lazar Strojanić's film *Plastični Isus*, as what was probably the first streaking action in the region. Bryzgel argues that while the phenomenon of the streak had emerged in the context of the sexual revolution, for example, in the United States, to perform one in Yugoslavia where there had been no such revolution was a truly shocking act. In the case of the OHO project, which took place in Ljubljana's Zvezda park, the name of the work refers to the mountain Triglav, the highest peak in Slovenia, and a symbol of the nation, which is today pictured on Slovenia's flag. Triglav can be translated into English as "three head" (referring to its three peaks). In the performance, Milenko Matanović, David Nez, Drago Dellabernardina exposed their three heads in public, arranged into a loose triangle formation, with their

artist, as he was the one who typically took the photographs¹¹. While choosing the public visibility of the street as the location of his actions, Trbuljak simultaneously assumed the invisibility of anonymity as a position of identity. Made for the enjoyment of strangers, who were not intentionally seeking an art experience, a name became associated with many of Trbuljak's street works only when their documentation was published in the catalogue of his 1973 solo exhibition at the Galerija suvremene umjetnosti.

Trbuljak's projects on the street can also be differentiated from other artists using public space as a site of artmaking due to their unassuming intentions. In contrast to, for example, the revolutionary aims of Situationist urban practices like the *dérive*, Trbuljak's animus in his early projects was to share his observations with others, and hope that they might delight in the smallest details of urban experience as he did (Trbuljak, 2016)¹². Trbuljak's street practice might in this way, in its slightness and subtlety, initially feel apolitical¹³. However, de Certeau's theory of tactical everyday practice opens up different interpretive possibilities.

bodies covered in black fabric—thus impersonating the mountain in a humorous public performance, spoofing this significant national monument. See A. Bryzgel (2017). *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 34–35, and 126–127.

¹¹ The project referenced at the beginning of this text is a notable exception, along with his project *Referendum* from 1972, photographed by Petar Dabac.

¹² The connections between Trbuljak's art on the street and Situationist practice are numerous, including the artist's interest in walking, his sense of play, and the arrangement of scenarios for strangers on the street to encounter. However, Guy Debord described the Situationist movement in 1963 as manifesting "simultaneously as an artistic avant-garde, as an experimental investigation of the free construction of daily life, and finally as a contribution to the theoretical and practical articulation of a new revolutionary contestation" (1989: 148). It is in this final component, a crucial one, that Trbuljak's art differs. Trbuljak has never articulated a totalizing or goal-oriented theory of politics or art in the way of Debord, and his art does not seem to invite one (see note 13). For this translation see G. Debord (1989). *The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics or Art*. In: E. Sussman (Ed.), *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957–1972*. T. Levin (transl.) Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 148–153.

¹³ The question of the political character of street practice, performance and happenings in the context of socialist Europe has been a central question in recent literature. Klara Kemp-Welch's *Antipolitics: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1965–1989* has been a key source in this discourse. Through case studies of six artists in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, Kemp-Welch traces how attitudes toward politics and political engagement shifted from the 50s through the 80s, and especially how certain artists' forms of refusal of political content articulated a mode of complex political critique. Most relevant to the discussion of Trbuljak is Kemp-Welch's chapter on Jiří Kovanda's "reticent" street practice in Prague. Similarly to Trbuljak, Kovanda created art in public spaces, but with a diffident relationship to interaction with his public audience. In *I Hide* (1977) Kovanda attempted to hide himself in various public places in Prague. In 'Contact' 3 September 1977, he walked down the street intentionally rubbing his body into passers-by while being documented. Kemp-Welch refers to these projects a "litmus test of the openness of the Czechoslovak public sphere" (2014: 198) as well as a means for Kovanda to communicate his desire

De Certeau defines a tactic's relationship to the vaguely outlined "order of things" as lacking "any illusion that it will change any time soon" (1984: 26). Rather, this order is temporarily occupied by alternative social and moral values through the invisible, ephemeral actions of ordinary people. Therefore, walking in the city, for example, has a kind of political value even when absent a political motive. As a speaker appropriates language in the creation of unique utterances, interpretations and improvisations, as the reader temporarily inhabits a text (like a rented room), the walker finds their body's pathway in the city.

Another of Trbuljak's projects points precisely to such momentary hijackings of order. The work consists of a photograph of a staircase, accompanied by a text that in English reads, "A bang on this pipe produces a sound different from the sounds of the neighboring pipes" (Trbuljak, 1973: n.p.). Again, Trbuljak is not pictured, and in this case he is not made the subject of the statement, as in other projects when he writes, "I stuck my finger..." etc. His presence in the artwork is irrelevant by design, except insofar as it tracks that when he walked past this staircase, probably a number of times, he used its handrail for an unintended purpose, striking it in different places with his hand or another object, taking note of the sounds produced, and deciding that these observations were worthy of sharing (Trbuljak, 2016). These kinds of idle, exploratory gestures, not unique to Trbuljak, and not in any way revolutionary, are also not insignificant. They represent moments of playful, active embodiment accessible not only to the artist, but anyone able to walk down the street. Trbuljak's stance of anonymity, although ultimately temporary, emphasizes this accessibility.

* * *

*Called Everyman (a name that betrays the absence of a name),
this anti-hero is thus also Nobody...*

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984: 2)

The self-effacing proclivities present in Trbuljak's street practice manifested concurrently through projects in which he employed pseudonyms Trbuljak, for example, made two submissions to Klaus Groh's 1971 compendium of alternative art from Central and Eastern Europe, *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa*. The first, published under his own name, was a collection of three works representing objects in successive states of change through photography and drawing: a series of four

for contact with the public, since "Being an unofficial artist in Prague was in many respects equivalent to being in hiding..." (2014: 207). Trbuljak's self-effacing tendencies must be differentiated from Kovanda's in this regard. Since official and unofficial distinctions did not exist in Yugoslavia (at least not as clearly as elsewhere in socialist Europe) Trbuljak did not necessarily need to hide his activities. He was able to exhibit, received government prizes, and was a member of the Udruženje likovnih umjetnika Hrvatske (the Croatian republican artist's union).

self-portraits of the artist pouting and squinting into the camera, taken once per year from 1968 to 1971; a collection of six drawings of circles representing an apple, first alone, then pierced by wire, then wrapped in wire; and four photographs of gentle waves breaking onto a stony beach, each taken at the same time of day four days in a row in July of 1969. Trbuljak's second contribution, submitted under the pseudonym Grgur Kulijaš, consisted of three handwritten project proposals. Each was a conditional statement, beginning, "If any of my three projects is published in Klaus Groh's book..." followed by one of three outcomes: "I will be the happiest man in the world," "I will enter into history," "I will no longer have to do conceptual art" (Groh, 1971: n.p.)¹⁴. These two projects manifest a push and pull between concealing and revealing. In one, Trbuljak presents himself by name and by image. In the other, he performs what he has referred to as an act of fraud (1973).

In November of the same year, Trbuljak had his first solo exhibition (at the Galerija Studentskog centra), and performed yet another act of simultaneous concealing and revealing. Art historian Branka Stipančić has written that when moving from the anonymity of the street to the visibility of the gallery, Trbuljak was forced to negotiate his values as an artist by acquiring a name (1994). Indeed, this negotiation – to have a name or not, when and where, which name (already present in *Aktuelle Kunst*) – has continued for much of the rest of Trbuljak's career. His solution in the case of the exhibition was to display a single copy of a poster as the sole content of the show. The poster featured a smug, black-and-white photo of the artist and bore the slogan, "Ne želim pokazati ništa novo i originalno" ("I do not want to show anything new or original"). While today this poster is one of Trbuljak's best known and most-discussed works, the critical response in Zagreb at the time was lukewarm¹⁵. By presenting his name and face along with this statement in the context of a public exhibition, Trbuljak had exposed himself to critique.

The reviews Trbuljak received reflected the attitudes of some critics at that time towards an artform becoming increasingly popular among the younger generation of artists across Yugoslavia. These artists produced texts, proposals, performances and installations as art. Their work was initially called conceptual art and

¹⁴ Translation by author.

¹⁵ This poster and its slogan have been referenced frequently in surveys of Croatian, Yugoslav and Eastern European art. In addition to the above reference from Piotrowski (note 5) see, for example, B. Stipančić and S. Cramer (1993). *The Horse Who Sings: Radical Art from Croatia*. Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 5; S. Uzelac (2002). *Art as the Trace of Culture*. In: T. Milovac (Ed.). *The Misfits: Conceptualist Strategies in Croatian Contemporary Art*. Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art, pp. 24-25; L. Kovač (2003). *Impossible Photographs*. In: D. Djurić D. and M. Šuvaković (Eds.). *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991*. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 288; and I. Bago (2014). *Dematerialization and Politicization of the Exhibition: Curation as Institutional Critique in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s*. In: *Museum and Curatorial Studies Review*. No. 2, p. 21.

later became associated with the regionally-specific and theoretically-expansive term *Nova umjetnička praksa* (New Art Practice)¹⁶. As the reviews showed, while there was a general consensus that conceptual art had something to do with the primacy of mental activity, there were differing judgments about such activity's worthiness as art. Critic Tonko Maroević wrote of Trbuljak's gesture, that it had sparked neither approval, nor protests, nor any particular excitement, owing to the fact that it had been somewhat expected (1971). He explained that Trbuljak's association with conceptual art, defined by Maroević as specious efforts at purity and mental abstraction that paled in comparison to the achievements of avant-garde artists like Malevich, had set this expectation.

In contrast to Maroević's condescending disapproval, Belgrade-based critic and curator Ješa Denegri commended Trbuljak's work and quickly became a champion of the young artist. In his writing on Trbuljak, Denegri defined conceptual art as both "pure mental activity" (1971: 22) and "a medium of direct critique of the system of art" (1977: 22) in which the artist could not rely on the innovations of the past¹⁷. In a series of essays and exhibitions featuring Trbuljak, Denegri praised the artist's "search for radical conclusions" and his abandonment of "all possible codes of aesthetic value" (1971: 22)¹⁸. He also established a list of works by the artist, and a way of interpreting them, that today remains orthodoxy. This list includes the artist's commentaries on the perceived pressures and vacuities of exhibitions that he presented on posters in art shows in the 70s, along with other works that most resemble forms of art world critique¹⁹.

While Trbuljak himself referenced conceptual art by name in a few projects, his submission to *Aktuelle Kunst* as Kulijaš might suggest that he did not brandish the association as a badge of honor, so much as present it tentatively, and experimentally, like a fake ID. Other projects and statements by the artist later in the decade confirm this possible skepticism. Between 1971 and 1973 Trbuljak sent

¹⁶ See M. Susovski (Ed.). (1978). *Nova umjetnička praksa*. Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti.

¹⁷ Translation by author.

¹⁸ Translation by author. It is clear not only from Denegri's writing on Trbuljak, but on the entire movement of *Nova umjetnička praksa* that this group of artists and their critique of the art system was particularly important and inspiring to him. Although he wrote on a multitude of artistic phenomena, he returned time and again to these figures. In his essay from the *Nova umjetnička praksa* catalogue, Denegri writes triumphantly of the young generation of artists that they had been motivated "by the need of the subject for self-expression and self-affirmation in an active and contradictory spiritual reality which is always full of tension." See J. Denegri (1978). Art in the Past Decade. In: M. Susovski (Ed.). *Nova umjetnička praksa*. Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, p. 12.

¹⁹ These slogan works include "Ne želim pokazati ništa novo i originalno" (1971), "Činjenica da je nekom dana mogućnost da napravi izložbu važnija je od onoga što će na toj izložbi biti pokazano" (The fact that someone has been given the possibility to make an exhibition is more important than what will be shown) and "Ovom izložbom održavam kontinuitet u svom radu" (By this exhibition I maintain continuity in my work).

out postcards with the words “Anonymous Conceptual Artist” printed across the front. This moniker can be read in two ways. Firstly, that Trbuljak did not yet have a name in international conceptualism. Secondly, perhaps, that Trbuljak felt there was a certain anonymity associated with this term. In a 1979 interview, Trbuljak referenced a *ladica* (drawer) system in art criticism (Sinković, 1979). Once his works were linked with a category, he felt as though they had been filed away in a drawer, invisible behind a label. Although the genre title of conceptual art was useful in making sense of a current zeitgeist for Moroević and Denegri, it has grown increasingly ineffectual over time. While initially associated with mental and linguistic activity and the “dematerialization” of the art object (Lippard, Chandler, 1968), the term has subsequently been stretched at times to encompass nearly all types of non-traditional artworks and expanded in regards to political, international, affective, and spiritual associations²⁰. Given the unfixed nature of the term, especially in the case of an artist like Trbuljak, already subject to the multiple forms of anonymity outlined above, references to conceptualism become a substitute for, rather than a tool of, interpretive engagement, something that obscures rather than elucidates²¹. Attending more closely to the specificities of his artworks and considering alternative pathways to interpretation are necessary.

Take the example Trbuljak’s *O galerijama*, in which the artist first used the French pseudonym *Artiste Anonyme*. In 1972, Trbuljak temporarily relocated from Zagreb to Paris, where he had been accepted to study painting at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts on a prize from the Yugoslav government. Once in Paris, he did not spend his days behind a canvas, or even attending classes. Instead, he visited the Louvre, went often to the cinema and, as he had done in Zagreb, wandered the

²⁰ As I have argued elsewhere, the term “conceptualism” has been stretched to the point of being often incoherent. Borrowing from Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper’s arguments about the word “identity,” I claim that conceptualism has been strained simultaneously by its “strong” uses (those evoking a specific form of philosophically-engaged practice involving text, numbers, grids, and connections to the cities of New York and London and so on) and “weak” ones (those that attempt to expand “conceptualism” using various qualifiers, while ultimately remaining beholden to the “strong” definition). See D. Smith (2016). *Death as Catalysis: Adrian Piper’s What Will Become of Me. KAPSULA*. No. 3, pp. 6–15. Texts offering expansions and reconsiderations of conceptualism include L. Camnitzer, J. Farver, R. Weiss and L. Beke (Eds.). (1999). *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*. New York: Queens Museum of Art; A. Alberro (2003). *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*. Cambridge: MIT Press; P. Eleey (2009). *The Quick and the Dead*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center; and E. Meltzer (2013). *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. My intention is not to cast judgments on the worthiness and relevance of these texts, but rather on the feasibility of continuing to use the terms *conceptual art* and *conceptualism* in regards to Trbuljak.

²¹ Most references to the artist in articles, books, catalogues and newspapers use this term, typically as part of an extended title boasting Trbuljak as the most significant Croatian conceptual artist. See, for example the review: *Izložba Gorana Trbuljaka u Galeriji Rigo*. April 26, 2016. Culturenet.hr, <http://www.culturenet.hr/default.aspx?id=70183>, Last accessed June 30, 2018.

city (Trbuljak, 2016). Time and again, Trbuljak never quite takes up the role he seems meant to fill, defying expectations of traditional artistic activity and of alternative art activity, as well.

Given that Trbuljak was in Paris on a government scholarship, ostensibly studying painting, his actions take on the flavor of something de Certeau calls *la perruque* (1984: 25). De Certeau defines *la perruque* as small acts of time theft or diversions of company resources towards a worker's desires. When the worker borrows their boss' tools to create something of their own design, or writes a love letter on the clock, they introduce new values into dominant economic and social frameworks. Trbuljak took this opportunity in Paris to grapple with what it meant to occupy a new city, in a new region and a new socio-political system²². In Paris, Trbuljak encountered new contexts of art exhibition and sale, contending for the first time with independent, commercial galleries²³. He also contended, once again, with anonymity. Although he had toyed with anonymous interventions and pseudonyms in Zagreb, Trbuljak had subsequently made a name for himself in Yugoslavia as a provocative young artist, while in Paris he enjoyed no such currency.

Between October 25th, 1972 and January 25th, 1973 Trbuljak visited nine Paris galleries and museums and repeated a set of prescribed actions²⁴. He walked in the door, and without introducing himself or stating his purpose, requested to speak to the director. He then handed over a typewritten sheet of paper with a small photograph of the façade of the gallery pasted onto it. Below the photograph, uneven, typewritten text bore the date, the name of the gallery, and closed with a question, "Voulez-vous exposer ce travail dans votre galerie?" (Would you like to show this work in your gallery?) At the bottom of the page the director was prompted to respond with one of three options: "OUI," "NON," or "PEUT ETRE" (yes, no, or maybe). The bottom right corner of each page was signed ARTISTE

²² In an interview published in the catalogue *Living Art on the Edge of Europe* Trbuljak is quoted on this matter, "I was aware of my position as a foreigner, totally anonymous. I had nothing to show because what I did in another context could not function in Paris. My work probably meant nothing to Western Europeans." See G. Trbuljak (2006). Goran Trbuljak talked to Branka Stipančić. In: N. Zonneberg and E. van Straaten (Eds). *Living Art on the Edge of Europe*. Otterlo: Kröller-Müller Museum, p. 56.

²³ There existed a system and hierarchy of sale in Yugoslavia, but it took very different forms than in a city like Paris. Artworks were purchased by the state out of exhibitions organized by artist unions, and there were also *prodajni* (sales) exhibitions and galleries, including the Prodajna galerija founded in Belgrade in 1963, and the exhibition that Želimir Košćević organized in summer 1966 with the intention of selling artworks to tourists and visitors to Croatia.

²⁴ I am intentionally excluding from my count of galleries, and below the count of affirmative responses, the sheet addressed to Galerie des Locataires, or Tenant's gallery, which Trbuljak collaborated in running with Ida Biard (another transplant from Zagreb to Paris). Ivana Bago has used this particular sheet as a way to discuss the paradigm of hospitality in the operation of Biard's nomadic, strongly anti-capitalist, curatorial project. See I. Bago (2012). A Window and a Basement: Negotiating Hospitality at La Galerie Des Locataires and Podroom – The Working Community of Artists. In: *ARTMargins*, No. 1:2–3, pp. 116–146.

ANONYME. On some days Trbuljak only approached one gallery, and on others he visited at least five. Overall, he received two affirmations of interest, five rejections, one maybe, and one no response.

Denegri wrote in 1977 that Trbuljak's work highlighted that galleries serve, "to stabilize and neutralize certain orientations of art" while maintaining a status quo (1977: 22)²⁵. Resultantly, the anonymous artist "stays outside the system of cultural circulation" (Denegri, 1977: 22)²⁶. Denegri actually exaggerated the outcome of the survey in his essay to further these claims, writing that it resulted in an entirely negative response. Denegri's statements on the conservatism of the gallery system as a whole may be uncontroversial, but, truly, how were the gallerists supposed to respond to Trbuljak's questionnaire? Who was this young man refusing to introduce himself while requesting a signed response to a survey of uncertain origin and motive? What was the "work" referred to on the survey? Given the circumstances, any ambivalence on the part of the people working in the galleries seems justified, and the fact that he received any affirmations of interest might evidence a relative lack of conservatism.

Such ambiguities in the persistent presentation of Trbuljak's project as "radical critique" (Piotrowski, 2009: 330) do not undermine its value, but rather generate opportunities to reconsider the implications of *O galerijama*. In contrast to the notion of "pure mental activity" (Denegri, 1971: 22), how might Trbuljak's art's connection to the body, so clearly demonstrated in his street practice, be brought into sharper focus?²⁷ From the work of taking the initial photographs of the galleries, to moving between them after what were probably brief encounters, the project mostly consisted of walking on the street, and not confronting the gallery.

O galerijama also opens up broader contextual considerations, among them Trbuljak's own position as a recent transplant to the city. In the project, anonymity undeniably protected the artist's body by masking Trbuljak's foreignness. Put in this light, Trbuljak's travels through Paris bear resemblance to the works of émigré artists made during the same period. In 1970, the Mexican-born artist Felipe Ehrenberg, who lived in London from 1968 through 1974, produced *Tube-O-Nauts' Travels*, a project in which he and a collaborator explored the London underground for nearly 18 consecutive hours, transferring 26 times, traveling on every line of the subway during the course of one day, and stopping just short of their goal of exiting through the same station they originally entered due to physical exhaustion (Mayor, 1972)²⁸. Ehrenberg documented *Tube-O-Nauts* through photography, audio recordings, maps, and lists of notable headlines and advertisements encountered. Trbuljak's and Ehrenberg's projects share a nomadic, furtive, and anonymous quality. While each simultaneously fits within a critical discourse of conceptualism

²⁵ Translation by author.

²⁶ Translation by author.

²⁷ Translation by author.

²⁸ Ehrenberg's collaborator was Rodolfo Alcaraz, identified as "Laus."

by using text, systems and data, the projects also call to mind displacement and isolation, play and exploration. They are both tactical approaches to “making do” in situations of artmaking, urban space, and relocation.

* * *

In 2004, Trbuljak was featured in an exhibition titled *Kurze Karrieren (Short Careers)* at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna, featuring eleven artists and one artist collective who all “withdrew from the official art world, each in their own way” (Neuburger, Saxenhuber, 2004: 11). The catalogue entry on Trbuljak begins with a description of *Artiste en Crise 1981*, the name of a photographic poster work, exhibition, and arguably Trbuljak’s last pseudonym, from 1981, in which his outstretched hands (captured with a Xerox machine) appear posed in a gesture of supplication or surrender, also referred to by the Croatian title *Umjetnik u krizi*. The author of the entry frames the work as a turning point for the artist: the beginning of his work as a cameraman after the art world turned away from conceptualism, leaving the artist disillusioned.

While the text in the *Kurze Karrieren* catalogue implies that Trbuljak essentially went into hiding starting in the 1980s, the artist’s declaration of artistic crisis was not so sudden or total a retreat, but rather something more performative. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw Trbuljak moving professionally towards graphic design and cinematography, though by the end of the decade he was already participating in gallery shows in addition to these occupations, and has continued to produce photographs, posters and other artworks into the present. Trbuljak’s reasons for pursuing cinematography and graphic design were initially practical, he was seeking a means of employment after, as he put it in 1979, “It became clear to me that I couldn’t live off of amusing only myself and no one else” (Sinković, 1979: 12)²⁹. Cinematography was chosen over directing or other aspects of film since Trbuljak wanted, at first, to make a clear separation between what he saw as a craft and a day job and his artistic practice (Trbuljak, 2018)³⁰. As a cinematographer, Trbuljak’s concerns were entirely visual, oriented primarily toward the framing of light and space. He also chose a role that, while essential, is often peripheral, and nameless, in comparison to that of the director and actors. In this way, Trbuljak’s crisis was not entirely a break with his sensibilities. As an artist, Trbuljak seems to have always moved through the world keenly observant, with an attraction for small details that he shares with others, while, as a rule, maintaining a distance, often through a tendency to conceal himself through anonymity or pseudonyms.

²⁹ Translation by author.

³⁰ Trbuljak’s personal and artistic crisis, not coincidentally, corresponded with a national and economic crisis in Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was unable to begin paying back foreign loans taken out primarily during the 70s. Inflation rose dramatically, while the standard of living steadily declined in the final years of the 70s and early years of the 80s.

Trbuljak's recent work has been particularly marked by a self-deprecating tone. In a poster work from 2006–2008, Trbuljak reflected on the continuation of his anonymous status with variations on the text: "Old and depressive anonymous is looking for a permanent display place in some nice new art museum space" [fig. 3]. However, he has actually always held a place, if slightly outside, occupying a zone whose consolation is that a kind of freedom might exist there in equal proportion to the frustrations of anonymity.

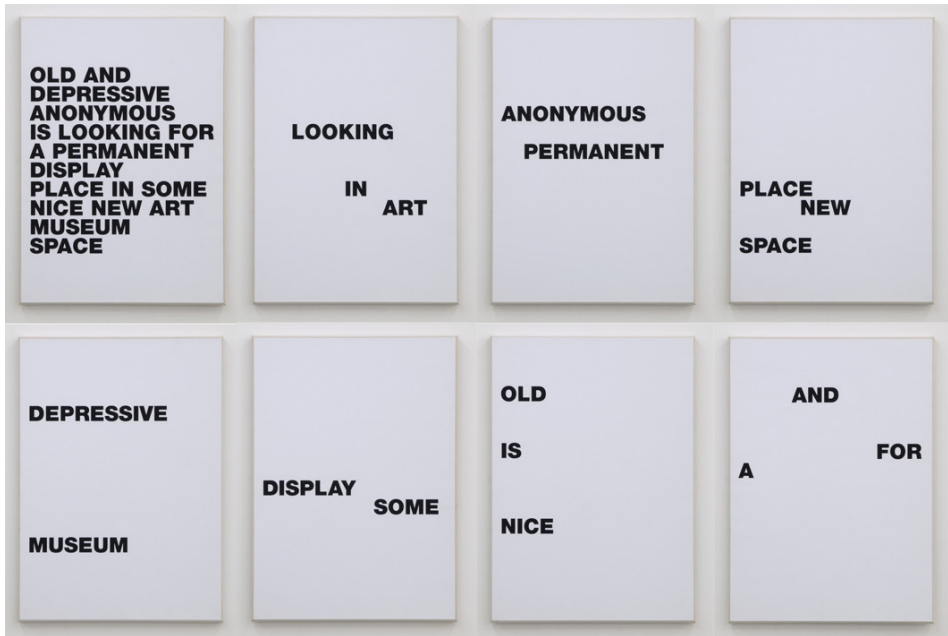


Fig. 3. Goran Trbuljak, *Untitled* (2006–2008). Silk prints mounted on canvas, each panel 71 x 51.5 cm. Image courtesy Galerija Gregor Podnar

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Artiste Anonyme / Anonymous Conceptual Artist / Umjetnik u krizi: Goran Trbuljak's Names and Namelessness

Abstract

Goran Trbuljak (b. 1948) is recognized as one of the central figures of Yugoslav *Nova umjetnička praksa* (New Art Practice), primarily for his early works that engaged in a questioning of the status of the figure of the artist and the institution of the exhibition. This article focuses on the centrality of various forms of self-concealment, primarily anonymity and the use of pseudonyms, in Trbuljak's art. I also discuss what I refer to as the involuntary obfuscation that has come through Trbuljak's association with conceptual art and institutional critique, labels that have tended to block rather than advance the discussion of his practice. I urge new paths to interpretation through considerations of Trbuljak's interest in the street, walking, the body, and his insistence on a position liminality, never quite committing himself to one particular role, ideology or space. I refer to Michel de Certeau's notions of the *tactic* and *la perruque* from *The Practice of Everyday Life* as a way to understand the political dimensions of Trbuljak's tendencies.

Keywords: Goran Trbuljak, performance, walking art

Słowa kluczowe: Goran Trbuljak, performans, sztuka chodzenia

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