


NOW IS HERE!

Alja Lobnik & Janez Janša



It is worth mentioning that Franco Berardi thought that future as a choice or a collective conscious action, as it was expressed in his 1909 futuristic manifest, reached its peak in 1968 and ended in 1977 when Sex Pistols released their *No Future* album (William Davies: *Economic Science Fictions*, p. 15, 2018). To Berardi, neoliberalism meant the withdrawal of individuals into virtual and imaginary spheres of political transformations, combined with the terrifying feeling that the dominant political institutions were constant and never-changing. According to him, collective invention becomes a virtually impossible task. But as we ourselves simply cannot agree with this prospectless position, we consider the envisioning of potential futures as a political collective action, which has the ability to play with the structures of possible and impossible, thinkable and unthinkable.

It would be grandiose to say that we are doing anything of the sort with the project, but the latter does give rise to question about envisioning the future as a common action, with a qualitative difference of opening the potentials of possibilities and impossibilities of various times. In 2006, when the 100th issue of *Maska* was in the works, artists covered in the magazine were invited to come up with concepts for the future, the distant year of 2023, when the 200th issue was to be published. It was actually published in 2020, as the pace of *Maska*'s publication increased. 50 artists proposed concepts exhibited at the Modern Gallery, the idea being that they would become part of the permanent collection ARTEAST 2000+ upon realisation in 2023. The proposed concepts from 17 years ago do not suggest the fear of the possibility of losing the future to the degree known today, in the time of rampant capitalism and the ecological crisis.

Now is Here! – After 17 years, the time has come for these projects, which have existed as mere potentialities, to be realised. Due to our production framework, we invited artists based in Slovenia to present their projects between 25 and 29 September at the Old Power Station, Kino Šiška, the DUM Project Space and the Elias Institute. We wanted to leave the question about the future somewhat open, not wanting for the continuities and their impressions to simply end here and now. Some artists passed on the baton and invited the younger generation of authors to participate. *Now is Here!!* is not about the loss of the future, particularly if inventing speculative future scenarios is seen as a variety of parallel narrations reshaping our present. Or, in the words of Donna Haraway: “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.” (Haraway: *SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far*, p. 4, 2011)

The main elements of the project – the beginning of its creation, its optics, its coexistence with the *Maska* magazine and the core issues that arose in 2006, emerge today and are projected into a potential tomorrow – were presented in dialogue format by the curators of *Now is Here!*, Alja Lobnik, Director of the *Maska* Institute, and Janez Janša, the initiator of the project and the editor of the *Maska* Magazine at the time when the project was created.

JJ: When we were preparing the 100th issue of *Maska*, the editorial team thought about how to celebrate the anniversary. An anniversary is always a time to do a summary. At the time,

Maska was already divided into three sets of activities – publishing (magazines and a book), production (artistic production), and educational activities. We took advantage of this opportunity to synthesise all three activities, channelling the complexity affirmed throughout this time into this event. We decided to focus on two iconic performances that marked the modern period of performing arts – *Pupiliija, papa pupilo pa pupilčki* (1969) and *Krst pod Triglavom* (1986), reconstructing both in two completely different ways.

The next question was how to view the future, how to think it and create it. We invited about 180 artists and groups that had been the topic of our writings in the previous five years, from 2000 onwards, to think of projects to be realised upon the publication of the 200th issue of Maska that was supposed to come out in 2023 (according to the publication schedule at the time). We received 61 project proposals. Many invitees refused to participate, as they simply couldn't envision something so far off. This remains one of the central questions now, as we approach the realisation – how distant a future can we envision?

The proposals were exhibited at the Modern Gallery as part of an exhibition curated by Zdenka Badovinac, the idea being that, upon their realisation, they would become part of the international collection ARTEAST 2000+ managed by the Modern Gallery. All participating artists were invited to choose a piece from the collection with which they wanted their project to be featured. The result was an exhibition, a crossroads between the current collection and potential new pieces, which are still accessible at the completely unaltered website maska2023.org (designed by Vuk Ćosić at the time). In 2013, ten years before the realisation, we followed up with the 1:1 exhibition at the MSUM, reminding the authors of the projects they envisioned. Most of them were surprised that the idea was still alive, but largely ended up believing that some day the concept would be realised.

Alja: Next year, Maska will be celebrating 30 years, and it is perhaps because of the interdisciplinary nature of this project and the time it marks that it can be a fruitful place of remembrance, celebration and creation. And because envisioning the future, which is becoming an increasingly political issue par excellence, has recently been a common topic of discussion. What I find interesting about this is that, 17 years ago, you were asking yourselves similar questions – the question of continuity, the question of whether we would still be around, and the question of whether this time would ever come. Projects like *Now is Here!* have a certain determination about them that this future will come; it was possible to envision the continuity of one's practices. And looking at it in retrospect, many concepts contain a trace of this move that was sometimes developed in impossible working conditions.

We invited local artists to participate so that they, too, could pass on the baton to younger generations, either collaborating with them or devising their own projects for the future. The project itself attempts to address not only the possibility of envisioning a continuous work of art, but especially the conditions for it; embedded in the project is the question of the permanence of our independent cultural scene and how to ensure a long life for art as well as organisations in precarious working conditions. Another key question is therefore what will happen with the organisations when their founders take a step back.

JJ: If we take a closer look at the projects showcased this year, the temporal dimension of spaces dedicated to art is intriguing. What is the potential of continuity for these spaces? When the 100th issue of Maska was published, Bojana Piškur created a folder of spaces in Ljubljana, which had been managed as spaces dedicated to cultural activities from the 1960s onwards and were no longer used for the purposes of art in 2006. The surprising fact about it was that there were about 40 of them. Mala Kline for instance realised a project that she was dreaming about back in 2006, and managed to create an art centre in Mohorje with her coworkers. So what are the conditions for a cultural space that is not established or managed by the State or the local community to endure and live its lives beyond the initial enthusiasm?

On a whole other, “non-spatial” level, continuity is part of the NSK *State in Time* platform. The *State in Time* has its own citizens with passports, and there is also a protocol for obtaining citizenship. For continuity to exist, a certain maintenance regime is required. Andreja Rauch Podrzavnik and the Cona Institute refer to meeting spaces or mental spaces for contemplation; they express a certain lack, which has more to do with our lives than artistic practices themselves, and with what is eliminated by the logic of radical individualisation, i.e., remains on the outside, and they contemplate how it is established in social terms in these conditions.

I think the question of NGO continuity is extremely relevant today, as this modus of production emerged back in the 1980s and expanded with the independence, the new legal regime and the possibility of doing this type of production. This part of production has simply become indispensable or has been institutionalised, including in terms of funding. However, it is still very precarious and internally not immune to the logics of power, exploitation, insecurity and rights violations. And its possibilities of thinking about how it will continue are limited. Time will require a certain reflection on what kind of continuity is possible in the world of art. People will leave, die, get tired of their work or feel that the time has come to pass everything on to someone else. The most important question is whether we will ensure that this thing keeps going, as it doesn't concern only a handful individuals; rather, a certain value has been created and other people can also assume responsibility for it, not necessarily only in the sense of protecting the heritage.

Alja: A question that arises is definitely how to pass on the organisations, how to find people willing to participate and take on the responsibility for and the heritage of these organisations. Who will remain or who will enter these precarious working conditions, and what to do with the heritage that has accumulated over the years? Those who will face this will certainly encounter a certain ambivalent tension in relation to the past and their own future, where there is even space to imagine practices concerning our own lives. It will not be an easy task, as the art sphere is marked by strong individuals and interpersonal relations, into which one needs to be invited to participate. But to pry open this space also means to insist on openness and fluidity and understanding that, while younger generations are less experienced, less recognised, they have a certain passion to the content they create, which has sadly been lost in many other areas.

Yet what I also find very important is that we reconsider the very structure of the NGO sector and the organisations subject to this funding regime, as the sector's precarisation means constant insecurity, fear of losing funding and the strain of constantly proving yourself, where nothing is ever really recognised and there is no time to take a moment and celebrate a job well done. This method of financing is making us compete against each other, eroding the idea of community and solidarity on the scene and transforming us into the ever-spinning wheels of production, where putting in neutral, even for a moment, can be fatal. I would be especially interested to know how to reestablish the idea of collectiveness in these conditions, if we can imagine it at all? Does precarity also carry a potential idea of freedom, an in-between space, a space of intangibility that still allows for the emergence of new strategies that would have been impossible in safer, more rigid structures?

JJ: As far as cultural policy goes, things are simple. The public sector will not expand significantly, namely with the establishment of new public institutions. The State is sceptical of expansion, as it burdens it with additional responsibilities, but also because it is increasingly being led as a company and less and less as a service for the citizens that it is actually supposed to be. The State is afraid of new obligations, regardless of who is in power. In the future, the State should definitely address the modus of public-private partnerships, which are very few. This would ensure continuity from its part without forcing those who wish to work in different ways into a standardised form of management.

Another question is related to what you mentioned, namely the general question of equality –

should you be in an unequal position because you live your life differently, either of your own choosing or because of something you have no control over? This question is at the very core of the idea of democracy. Meaning, enabling a decent life to anyone participating in the community, no matter how they want to live, provided that their way of life does not endanger the lives of others. No question about the future can be taken seriously without first resolving the issue of decent living conditions and thereby equality as the possibility of a decent life.

Alja: For a moment I would like to go back to the life of the NGO sector. All of us who are part of this sector feel that it is becoming a space of total professionalisation or that it is operating at a high production level which, paradoxically, means that it is shrinking. If its heritage are the 1980s social movements and its attitude the anti-institutional 1990s which, in their deviations, created its own conditions for alternative models of art production, relations between the public and the NGO sector today seem to be less antagonistic and consequently less clear. On the one hand, NGOs are becoming a meeting point of knowledge about drawing on various forms of public funding and developing various survival strategies that are the result of their constant vulnerability, while on the other, public institutions have become a relatively open space with safe, sustainable structures. The paradoxes that are part of life in the NGO cultural landscape thus also require different ways of collaboration, certain continuities between the people in the public and NGO sectors. It is probably worth preserving this potential with the idea that the NGO sector had of itself about existing as an anti-institutional enfant terrible, but reposition it in the changed constellations.

JJ: There will likely emerge a space of a third modus of cultural production, a less controlled one that is neither state nor NGO in nature. The authorities answered this question very clearly in the case of the Autonomous Factory Rog. The authorities simply cannot stand open and undefined situations. The authorities must control and will always fight for clear situations. Rog had a certain indefinableness in its very manner of operation, it was charged with potential because sociality was being built based on a bottom-up approach, from direct social relationships. The space and its participants were allowed to establish their own dynamics. Rog became a space of urbanity that the business-minded authorities simply couldn't stand. It is beyond the horizon of the business way of thinking. A democratic government is based on establishing conditions for what doesn't have the voice, space or possibilities and emerges in relation to what exists. What exists simply cannot be the only criteria of government.

The debate about NGOs must also raise another almost taboo issue of the NGOs connecting and coming together, assuming shared responsibilities, but not according to the logic of rationalisation. By the way, authorities absolutely love that we connect pragmatically, that we have joint PR, joint accounting, etc. But in this instance, I am referring to connections arising from interest-based collaboration and not some other ambitious plan. For that, there should be a public financing mechanism. The current methods of financing have turned such connections into a taboo, for fear of losing financing by coming together. And with good reason; when the MSUM was founded, even the Modern Gallery experienced exactly that – the programme funding remained the same, even though the institution brought together two museums.

Alja: In my opinion, dialogical collaboration is a prerequisite, as closing oneself off into one's own structures, both physical and mental, is simply insufficient. And collaboration creates the conditions for connecting with one another relationally, for co-existing in space. Rok Vevar once wrote that, at a certain moment, references in performances to other performances disappeared in our space, as if the performances and the actors themselves had stopped following, watching and talking to each other, which is of course also related to working conditions, in which hyperproduction commands all our attention. How are we to co-exist if we do it in parallels, in isolation, without even knowing each other?

JJ: Maybe we can look at this whole thing in the sense of projective temporality of Bojana Kunst or other practices developed in relation to the issue of time. Our lives in the neoliberal context are defined through the logic of investment. You get an education to do something with it, not to learn something. Namely, to improve your position on the labour market, and so on and so forth, from one project to another. Every project you create as an artist or as a writer is, in a way, an investment. With the article or book you write, you hope to receive an invitation for a new job. You are simply caught in the logic of investment all the time.

References are crucial, even in private companies, i.e., the logic being that something that was done was done in order to get new work. In the public tenders to which Maska applies, the past is something that is qualified for the future. And paradoxically – we are always living in the future, although we never really reach it. When the future is to become the present, you already have to generate a new future. And this logic of investment will need to be challenged, perhaps with the logic of endurance.

Alja: What Bojana Kunst describes in her concept of projective temporality is a constant investment in the future that is anticipated, planned, informed, and when it turns into reality, your head is already in new futures. In fact, that is not the potential future we are trying to reflect on and open with this and other projects. It is therefore not a case of projective envisioning of the future, or some kind of accelerationism, where acceleration would cancel everything out. The potential of envisioning the future that we consider relevant is particularly the now, and the affectation of this present. Speculative futures become a breeding ground for what is unimaginable in the conditions of capitalism. Even with the idea of Yugo-futurism, developed particularly in the Maska magazine (*Yugo-futurism, Year XXXV, Issue 200cc, Winter 2020 and YUFU 2.0, Year XXXVII., Issue 209–210, Summer 2022*) and conferences (the YUFU Conference at the graphic biennial Iskra Delta, 2021, and the Rustling of Sweatpants at the Bitef Festival, 2022), the concept was based mainly on the generation-specific life in the region, touching upon a question that is essential to us – how to envision a common regional future and how to produce these ties through collaboration. The concept of Yugo-futurism attempts to capture the idea of futurism on the half-periphery and at the same time produces a common space, new relations that were certainly not inherited but had to be (re)invented. The worlds of Zagreb, Belgrade, Sarajevo, etc., were unknown to us; we felt as if we didn't belong in the central European discourse, while also being profoundly marked by this specific geopolitical situation and therefore feeling closeness within this unknown context. That, for me, is the main reflection that we are trying to create through various ideas about the future. This will also be the focus of discursive work, which, on the one hand, will deal with the concept of Yugo-futurism and, on the other, the issue of growing up as a logic of sustainability, proposing to the present new ways of existence.

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