

BROKEN DREAMS OF DEMOCRATIC CIVILISING AND THE PROMISE OF (INTER) DEPENDENCE

*"What if civil society as a concept
is wrong?"*

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INTRODUCTION

Both in the very first and the very dominant and more recent writings on civil society, democracy and the public sphere, it is civil society organisations, citizen associations and other similar forms of organised public expressions that are seen as guaranteeing democracy. Counterbalancing the stereotypical images of selfish, profit-seeking companies and massive, patronising, controlling states, these small, self-organised and grassroots forms of public participation have earned the halo of freedom, equality and justice. In arts and culture, these formal ways of organising one's public presence in society merged, to a certain extent, with the idea of a more individualist, yet nevertheless equally freedom-loving artist in pursuit of artistic excellence and social change. The 'independent arts scene', as a common name for such a hybrid across Europe, connotes a creative collective founded by the voluntary action of citizens which is able to produce and exhibit artistic works and cultural expressions that are autonomous and free from censorship, dogma and ideology by the state or by big corporate actors.

However, such a scene is far from homogeneous and unified, to a point that the very definition of independent can be far from accurate. While some of them are orbiting around state-run cultural institutions, others are pleasing the likes of the corporate elites or international funders. In most cases, they are not self-funding amateur citizen associations, but rather professional service providers and their shape and substance ranges from an enthusiastic team of three volunteers in Transilvania, who organise local choir concerts, to enormous and influential networks with back-door access to the European Commission such as IETM or Europa Nostra to professional artistic collectives who produce high-end exhibitions and performances across the globe.

Despite that, in their (self)representation, the independents have maintained the image of neutrality and distance from the self-interested and possibly corrupt institutions of power. Such a position

grants them various privileges - such as special funds or award schemes - as well as expectations from the wider society. What is problematic is that even though these organisations occupy similar positions, their practices differ, sometimes dramatically. Anyone who has invested time in joint platforms and associations of such organisations knows how desperate any attempt at formulating a common position or vision might become. "So many voices speak about it, name it, give it a shape and an aura of certainty".¹ This is particularly bothersome once a coherent and targeted action is to be designed. In such cases, questions of representation and tokenism arise.

In this text, we first look at a particular empirical case of independent arts organisations. This precise focus gives us the opportunity to recognise and understand differences and issues within this category. Based on this case study, we go on to claim that independence is not a good attribute either for categorising or governing such organisations. Instead, we offer interdependence and liaising as possibly much better ways to understand as well as to navigate arts and cultural organisations.

THE CASE OF THE POST-YUGOSLAV INDEPENDENT ART SCENE

During socialist Yugoslavia, civil society had an important role in social and political mobilisation in the field of leisure activities (sports clubs), ecology (scouts and ecology clubs - so-called Gorani), traditional culture (cultural societies, so-called KUDs) and professional associations. They all cherished self-governance civic participation and social cohesion and operated at arm's length from the state. Within the post-socialist transition of ex-Yugoslav countries that began in the nineties, a new understanding of civil society was introduced, mainly through education and funding mechanisms coming from Western Europe and the USA, all of which required the formation of new CSOs. While in Serbia this process overlapped, as well, with the overthrowing of the ultra-nationalist regime of Slobodan Milošević, in most ex-Yugoslav countries civil society formation was an ideological move away from socialism and closer to liberal democracy. This move is a well-known liberal diplomatic manoeuvre, also supporting the creation of Western liberal-style civil society that has been part of the wider "civilising missions" across the world for centuries.² Seen from this perspective, supporting civil society becomes a much broader intervention in (neo)liberalisation and ideological seizure of the country. It is notable that at the same time, the same funders supported oppositional parties who, once they took power, returned the favour to their funders by adopting neoliberal policies like trade liberalisation and privatisation.

In the fields of arts and culture, over the years, several grassroots initiatives and collectives grew into respectable civil institutions in Belgrade, Kotor, Zagreb, Sarajevo and Ljubljana. One could say that they revolve around the idea of art as a field of research, critique and reflection of power relations and ideologies. They have often been the ones to initiate sensitive debates like LGBTQ rights; patriarchal

- 1 Wickramasinghe, Nira (2005). The Idea of Civil Society in the South: Imaginings, Transplants, Designs. *Science & Society*, 69 (3): 458-486.
- 2 Baiocchi, Gianpaolo (2017). Cultural Sociology and Civil Society in a World of Flows: Recapturing Ambiguity, Hybridity, and the Political. J.C. Alexander, R.N. Jacobs, P. Smith (Eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*.

treatment of women; rising nationalist and populist discourses; treatment of asylum seekers or new forms of neoliberal capitalist exploitation through dubious privatisations, liaising of government and big business and similar. Notorious examples include CZKD from Belgrade, Pogon from Zagreb, Expeditio from Kotor, and others. Similarly, they have established collaborations and partnerships in the region which often go against the grain of the dominant foreign and domestic policies. Examples include collaboration between Serbian and Kosovar or Serbian and Croat organisations and individuals - the former has provoked open violence from ultra-right groups in Belgrade, as well as governmental sanctions and prohibitions.

In part because of their dissent practices, as well as decreased interest of the EU for the region of the so-called Western Balkans, many of these organisations have faced (and increasingly face) hard times in terms of their financial sustainability as professional organisations who have full time employment requirements. One of the coping strategies was to form local, national and transnational associations, as well as dedicated spaces for the production and exhibition of their work (e.g. Pogon from Zagreb or Magacin from Belgrade). With mixed success, today we have the Association Independent Arts Scene of Serbia (NKSS), Jadro from Macedonia, Clulture from Croatia, Culture 2020 from Bosnia, Asocijacija from Slovenia, as well as a regional platform Kooperativa.

The Croatian struggle for the legitimacy and the autonomy of the independent art scene went furthest with a dedicated budget, space and participation in national cultural policymaking. Apart from KulturaNova (Zagreb), other initiatives, associations and organisations from this pool have had a troublesome relationship with local and national governments. Although ignorance is the most common reaction to their critique, in some cases confrontations went much further - in the form of media accusations, social media wars etc. - as in the case of Novi Sad, Belgrade and Zagreb.

Finally, some of these initiatives have stepped into the realm of parliamentary politics. In Zagreb, a local political movement “Zagreb Is Ours”, incorporating many practices, members and experiences of the independent art scene, managed to enter local parliament. In Belgrade, a large group of activists formed a movement called “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” (which overlapped to a large extent with the membership of the independent art scene and their spaces) and decided to participate in local elections in 2017. Despite marginal results, they managed not only to politicise the cultural scene, but also to create tensions within the association with those organisations and individuals who wanted to clearly separate arts from politics.

In understanding the wider position of these organisations, it is important to go beyond their troublesome relation with the state and financial struggles. These organisations face deeper problems related to their position in the society and politics. First is the problem of the erosion of the legitimacy and meaning of civil society as such. In parallel to the formation of the new civil society, many groups, institutions and individuals wanted to capitalise on the symbolic value of NGOs and went on to register one (even though culture has been a popular field to do so, NGOs have grown in all areas of public life). As a result, a whole range of very different formations occurred while maintaining the same facade of independence and civil rights. Some of them have a radically different understanding of arts, culture and politics.

A range of entrepreneurial CSOs, that we call *supermarket organisations*, understood that new international funds of the 2000s can be consumed if one follows international political tides. Even though their competences are sometimes respectable, they pursued the “everything goes” logic, dealing one day with arts, tomorrow with environmentalism, then with gender issues only to delve into intercultural dialogue and reconciliation when funders require it. Although they keep their distance from the local and national government, their direct or indirect relation with foreign governments is far from critical and distant.

Then, there are the new right traditional, patriarchal, nationalist and religious organisations that were formed in the wake of progressive liberal and/or emancipatory tides. In a quest to regain their traditional powers, much undermined by both socialism and new democratic appeals, they saw CSOs as a way to move their agendas. In some cases, upon the return of the nationalist parties to power across the region, they became favourites and started receiving very substantial funds from the state. Moreover, there emerged a breed of *phantom, parastate* CSOs in culture and arts, which were founded by the parties in power in order to grab the money and resources allocated to the civil sector. It is common that they are registered just before the calls for projects and that they close their operations soon after the project ends. Several independent evaluations of distributed money on public calls have noticed these organisations.³ Unlike other types who are also consonant with dominant power positions - albeit somewhat vaguely and indirectly - these organisations present a clear mockery of civil society and are used as an efficient mechanism for direct top-down control of civil society as a possible arena of dissent. In sum, civil society in the arts and culture today is inhabited by a confusing range of organisations who are often very far from democratic, egalitarian values. And to have a sense of perspective, independent art scene associations gather dozens of organisations, whereas there are thousands of CSOs dealing with culture and arts in the wide sense in the region.

As a result, the progressive authority of the sector has been undermined and their image corrupted. For the progressive independent art scene, this means that it is very hard to claim any kind of authority just on the fact that one comes from civil society. As key actors in the formation and development of the sphere as well as beneficiaries of the privileged position, this undermining is very haunting. Consequently, this is calling for CSOs to define and distinguish themselves on grounds that are not sectorial or formal.

One possible solution is the more explicit ideological self-formulation. However, this is where another problem occurs. There is a big ideological difference, even within the narrowest circle of the independent art scene. As one of the prominent members of the Serbian independent scene confessed: “if we were to open the question of ideology, we would fall apart tomorrow”.⁴ However, it is not the diversity that is an issue here. It is rather an obscurity of these positions. Since “civil society” was

3 See: NKSS (2018). Analiza konkursa Ministarstva kulture 2018. Beograd: Nezavisna kulturna scena Srbije. Tomka, G., Volić, I., Cvetičanin, P. (2016). Novosadsko polje kulture. Novi Sad: Tims.

4 Ristić, Irena; Đeković, Virdžinija (2017). Čišćenje dvorišta: Dijalozi o kulturi. Beograd: Asocijacija Nezavisna kulturna scena Srbije, p. 13.

a vague and welcoming sphere, there was no pressing need to define the position for entering. Whoever wanted to become part of it, could. People joined because of beliefs, because of money, because of necessity... and quite rarely were these reasons conscious or explicit.

Despite all these issues, there is still an ideal of a live, powerful and vibrant civil society that can stand strong against the whims of corporate and/or state machinations. This ideal operates not only in the public, but also in a very intimate sphere of self-expectations, motivation and sense of meaning. Failure to achieve this ideal is not only felt across the region (and wider), but is also contributing to shameful, depressive, burn-out modes of working and feeling.

These problems - external pressures from the market and the state, symbolic corruption and appropriation of the sector by partisan powers, internal vagueness and intimate feelings of failure and isolation - hindered these organisations in forming wider and stronger coalitions of similarly oriented organisations and individuals who act for a shared goal. And that is the very definition of liberal social society. As a result, civil society organisations are today stretched between the ideals of how a civil society should look and act and the harsh reality of their everyday existence and affiliation.

We argue that a possible way out of this impasse could be a new articulation of a politically- engaged, emancipatory organisation in culture and arts that departs from the imaginary of civil society. Whereas building a strong independent scene is a noble dream to have and pursue, we suggest that it might actually be part of the problem. What if civil society as a concept is wrong? What if it were a false dream? Or if it were never really suited for progressive struggles of our days and our geographies?

EXPLORING (INTER)DEPENDENCE

While sketching an alternative to the idea of “civil society” and the “independent scene”, we will be guided by the limitations of these categories, which fall within the problems of formality, universality and exclusivity.

The most obvious one is the problem of the formality of “civil society”. As any kind of legal form, civil society organisations can also be tricked, misused and appropriated. Hence, if we want to create some kind of category, but also a form of belonging and collective ground for action, we need to step away from the formal categorisation of arts and cultural entities. Being civil, private or public is secondary to the ways and goals the organisation devotes its time and resources to.

Another deeper and broader problem is the universality of the notion of civil society. Just as the Enlightenment view created an image of the universal human condition or democracy, civil society is another fruit of such an imposing view. Together with Napoleonic armies, British military ships or US deadly drones, democracy and civil society have been transplanted in a quest for ideological hegemony. This does not mean that other countries or parts of the world are not capable of rational thinking, democratic governance or egalitarian struggles. It is rather that different contexts can dream and create different democracies and different kinds of freedoms and equalities.

Freeing oneself from the universality of the civil society, means getting rid of its oppressive political potentials. It also means taking a better look at the “actually existing democracies”⁵ and finding more suitable ways of organising dissent and democratic movements. However, producing alternative views on democracy or civil society is hard work over a long time. It starts with reflecting and proceeds with endless process of (re)defining one’s own ideological position. This inevitably means re-politicisation of arts and culture - two fields which often build their legitimacy on the very idea of being apolitical, that is distant from the main powers upon which they desperately depend. However, any dream of an apolitical position sclerotises social practice over time and delivers it to a deadly grip of power or to the self-imposed margin of society.

Finally, both notions of “independency” and “civil society” are infested with the virus of exclusivity and differentiation. Being independent means not only being distant, but also (implies) a privilege of being distant. Similarly, “civil” has a family resemblance to civilising as an oppressive, exclusive practice. As Alexander notices while discussing the problem of civil society, “civility of the self always articulates itself in the language of the incivility of the other”.⁶ Hence, for politically-engaged (rather than distant) practices and organisations, being close, intertwined and related, rather than distant and sovereign, might provide a healthier foundation for emancipatory work.

Writing after the September 11th attacks, Judith Butler criticised the US administration for employing violent, revengeful, paranoid actions to guarantee the impossible - independence from the world around it. However, despite these measures, “the fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not something that can be willed away”. According to her, grieving in times of trouble is not only a way to regaining one’s own stability. It is also an opportunity to recognise and cherish others and rebuild lost connections. Instead of employing massive surveillance programs at home and deploying troops around the world to spread terror, what they could have done is reconsidered the US position in the global world. What they missed is the opportunity to grieve together with millions of people around the world whose grieving for the loss of life is not an accident, but an everyday reality (in part due to US military operations worldwide). Precisely this relation to and with others could have been a starting point for reshaping the world in a brighter way. As Butler suggested, “the inevitable interdependency” can become “a basis for a global political community” that can be crucial for rebuilding global trust and peace.⁷

Taking this logic to a much less radical and existential yet still troubling issue of resource scarcity, burn-out, disillusion and precarity in the field of arts and culture, the quest for independence can be understood equally as impossible and harmful. *Impossible* because no community or artwork happens in isolation, nor in carefully carved out networks of good and desirable partners. Independence is a myth: as Social Network Analysis (SNA) has shown us in the case of art and culture, the world

5 Fraser, Nancy (2008). *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Univ Of Minnesota Press.

6 Alexander, Jeffrey (2006). *The Civil Sphere*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. p.50.

7 Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life The powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso.

of arts is a much more complex, puzzling and messy place than we usually think. *Harmful* because it celebrates distance. Instead, what we should focus on is (inter)dependency. The crucial question is not whether we are independent, but on whom we are depending, as well as who is depending on us. It is a move from the freedom *from* others to the freedom *with* others.

Moving away from formality, universality and independence introduces a whole different set of questions. Rather than thinking about resilience, security, distance and sustainability, this path makes us wonder about collaboration, sharing of resources and dialogue. Who are our collaborators? Who are our audiences? Who are our funders? What kind of issues, worries and hopes do we share? How could we learn from each other? What are the crucial issues on which our positions differ? How could we work together? In what ways do we depend on them? What would the world look like to them if we were to vanish tomorrow? Are we granting them the same freedoms, duties and expectations we have of ourselves? Why?

It is important to note that rapprochement to others does not necessarily mean agreement. Being close does not necessarily mean similar nor consonant. There is much to learn from difference and learning and sensing cannot happen in isolation. It also does not mean ignoring existing structural and conscious boundaries and barriers in the naive “equals in dignity” fashion - social boundaries and inequalities are easily reproduced precisely because of their tacitness and obscurity. It is rather a question of what we want to look at and celebrate. Where independency celebrates distance and insulation, (inter)dependency celebrates proximity and exposure; no matter how troubling or soothing it might be. And that precisely could be a birthplace of new alliances, commonalities and waking disagreements, which go beyond the broken dreams of democratic civilising.

L'ASILO (Naples)

“Culture is a common and cannot be privatised”

THE COMMUNITY OF L'ASILO BELIEVES THAT CULTURE IS A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT FOR THE PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN BEINGS. THE GROUP SEEKS TO LIBERATE ART AND CULTURE FROM THE CONTROL OF THE MARKET AND PROFIT. CRITICISING THE LANGUAGE AND FORMATS OF BUSINESS RELATED TO THE ARTS, L'ASILO VALUES INCLUSION, FREEDOM AND CREATIVITY AND IS AGAINST EVERY FORM OF FASCISM, RACISM, HOMOPHOBIA, SEXISM AND ANY OTHER TYPE OF DISCRIMINATION AND INEQUALITY. IT IS A SELF-GOVERNED ORGANIZATION AND HAS ADOPTED A PROCESS OF CONSENSUAL DECISION-MAKING TO ENSURE IT IS OPERATING FOR THE COMMON GOOD IN AN INCLUSIVE, NON-AUTHORITARIAN, MANNER.

Following the global economic crisis that really took hold in Italy in 2009, privatisation and funding cuts in culture and public spending in general became widespread. This meant that many national and local cultural spaces were being eroded or were under threat of closure. From this sprang a movement of occupied cultural spaces. In 2012 a group of artistic activists and researchers occupied a 16th century convent in Naples that had been virtually destroyed by an earthquake and then renovated with EU funds. The refurbished buildings had remained heavily underutilised for years. After three months of occupation, this action was accepted by the city administration as an experiment on commons and civic use. The occupying artists did not want to claim the space for themselves, but for the city. This left them in a grey area legally. The rules for what they were doing had not yet been written and they were in a position that had not yet been thought of or covered by law and so they realised that they had to work *with* the administration (not against it) to develop recognition for the concept of a cultural commons and started writing their own rules. This resulted in the Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use. Four years later, this declaration was formally recognised by the city, thus giving birth to a new form of institution called “Emerging Urban Commons ruled by Civic Use”. In 2015, following two and a half years of continuous work with stakeholders (the local community, activists, local authorities), L'Asilo was formally recognised as this new type of institution operating under the Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use. This gave official recognition to:

- an informal community
- its self-regulatory powers
- and its self-managing and self-governing structure

As a result, L'Asilo is now an independent production centre, providing rehearsal spaces, residencies and a venue for performances, open to all. The spaces are equipped for making art and include a