

»For me, reality is art« An Interview with Tomislav Gotovac

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Branka Stipančić

Branka Stipančić: Ever since the beginning of the sixties, your happenings, photographs, performances... have involved your body – what does your body signify to you in your art?

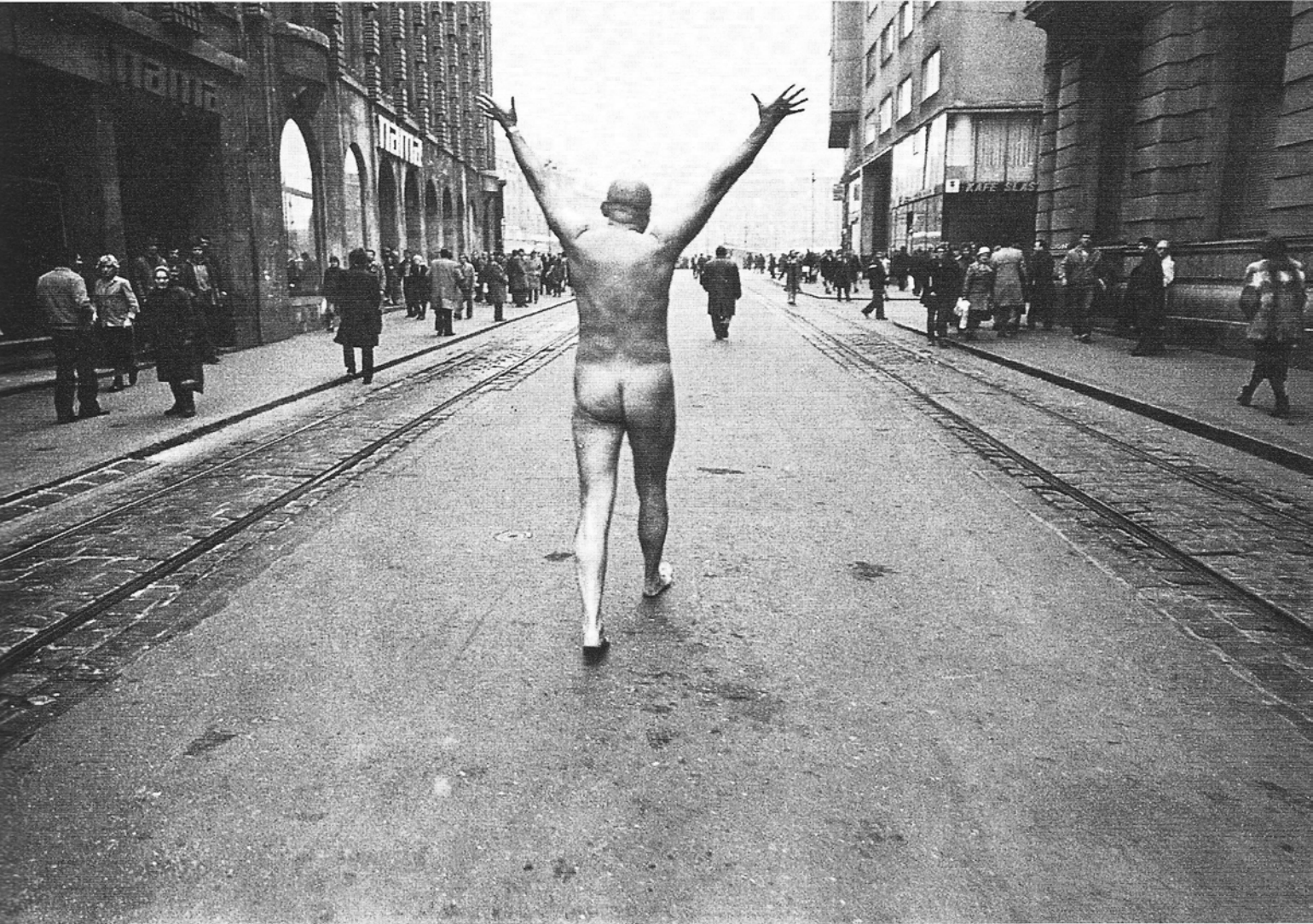
Tomislav Gotovac: During youth the body has a significant meaning to everybody. The capacities of the body are continually tested through play: through running, jumping, swimming. That is to say, childhood and experiments with your body, with the genitals and all other parts on the one hand, and on the other, when you went to church you could see the image of Christ, his tortures, Calvary and Golgotha. The body was important. In my understanding, Jesus Christ and everything around him was a performance, so I see Christ as being the first performer. Another thing that attracted the attention of young people was medieval torture. They did it to each other: those who had power to those who had not. Apart from that, there was also this great artistic story – I later realized through art that it was a real-life story – about Joan of Arc, and the great director Carl Theodor Dreyer. Then Akira Kurosawa. The body is important in *Rashomon*, in *The Seven Samurai* with Toshiro Mifune, in Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatari* with the messages of life written on the back of the main actor. Then Michelangelo's sculptures that I managed to see in reproductions and in some films. All of these are the origins of my focusing attention onto my body. In films, everything that happened was related to the body. Then this dark slapstick comedy from the beginning of the century with Mack Sennett and Charlie Chaplin dominating the scene, although Buster Keaton was the one that had most influence on me. Then avant-garde films by Fernand Léger, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp, Luis Buñuel... Since I used to spend most of my spare time in the cinema, where one is passive, I concentrated on the body even harder when I was not in the cinema. All of this caused the body to be charged with maximum load. I was absolutely concentrated on the body.

My first work, *The Heads*, from 1960, was situated in Kinoklub Zagreb (Cinema Club Zagreb). The photographer was Vladimir Petek. These were the replicas of certain film genres: of the Soviet October film, the French *film noir*, the American war movies and *film noir*. My heroes were Yves Montand, William Holden; from Russian films *The Story about the Soldier*, *Cranes are Flying*, *Shchors* by Dovzhenko, films by Pudovkin..... In 1960 the urge in me matured and I had to come forth with my body. That was the reminiscence of everything I saw in the cinema, of everything that filled my mind. In 1962, after I completed my military service, I went to Sljeme with a bunch of friends, among them was the photographer Ivica Hripko. There was a lot of snow and I wanted to strip myself naked and show around the *Elle* magazine that one of the girls had brought with her. But there were women in our company, and this was 1962, practically a concentration camp. It was not yet 1963 with that musical Biennial featuring Ann Halprin and Dancers' Workshop Company from San Francisco. Also IVSK with La Mamma and Living Theatre was yet to come. At that time everything was still like ...that, if you did something outside your most intimate circle of friends everybody thought you were nuts... So all that was recorded on the series of photographs entitled *Showing Elle* was my taking off my coat, pullover and shirt and making that performance.

Your performances often relate to films. This is obvious from the very titles of performances: Laying Naked on the Asphalt, Kissing the Asphalt (Zagreb, I Love You), Homage to Howard Hawks' Hatari! (1962) from 1981, then Cutting Hair and Shaving in a Public Place - homage to Carl Theodor Dreyer.... Also, you often say that everything consists of stage management in which we participate through our lives and art. I would like to know how you see the relation between your performances and film?

Born on 9 February 1937 in Sombor, he finished primary and grammar school in Zagreb, and then studied for a year at the Faculty of Architecture. His first film was screened at the GEF Festival of Avant-garde Film in Zagreb in 1963. He worked as a clerk in the National Bank of Croatia and the Vinograd Hospital from 1956 to 1967, when he took up studies in film direction at the Academy for Theatre, Film, Radio and Television in Belgrade, graduating in 1976. In 1971 he worked on *Plastic Jesus*, a study film by L. Stojanović, and was placed onto the »black list« for it. He has been engaged in the areas of photography, film, video, happening, and performance art.

I found it was impossible for me to make a »normal« film, that is to say a short or a feature film. In order to do that, you had to be a member of the Party, or you had to have good connections... Therefore, my ideas remained within intimate spheres. I pictured the project and was also the author of the scenario, the director and the actor. Through the films I realized that everything in life is directed and that events fulfill different scenarios present everywhere around us. Spontaneity is used as a coverage, yet as soon as you scratch a bit, you realize that spontaneity is not present in



Tomislav Gotovac
*Ležanje gol na asfaltu, poljubljanje
asfalta (Zagreb, ljubim te!).
Homage to Howard Hawks' Hatari!
/ Laying Naked on the Asphalt,
Kissing the Asphalt (Zagreb, I Love
You!). Homage to Howard Hawks'
Hatari!, 13.11.1981 (petek / Friday)
Foto / Photo: Ivan Posavec*

any social act. It goes only as far as from point A to point B, but not beyond. The titles of my performances actually release the charge that built up within me under the influence of various directors and films. I experienced this discharging as something material, and I was looking for a way of expelling this from within myself. The batteries were overcharged and threatened to explode. So I was simply sincere and admitted that everything I did was in fact related to what I picked up along the way, especially in the cinema. People usually conceal their paragons and talk about their own genius. Just as life exerts influence on great artists, art exerts influence on me. I simply wanted to talk about this in a pseudolanguage. All of my works are a kind of essay. So the titles of my performances contain the titles of some films, while some films, like *Circumference*, intentionally appear

as fine art. Look why the performance *Laying Naked on the Asphalt, Kissing the Asphalt (Zagreb, I Love You)* refers to Howard Hawks' film *Hatari!* In Hawks' film, hunters in Africa hunt animals for zoos around the world. The film begins with an unsuccessful chase of a rhino. In this film, each animal has its special significance, all of them refer to certain human feelings and situations: friendship, jokes between friends, love, love passion. There are rhinos, monkeys, elephants, small elephants, ostriches... The chief animal is the rhino, they first fail to capture it, then they chase other animals, and at the end of the film they manage to capture a rhino too. This is an unbelievably tenacious animal, aware of its vast mass, it will charge anything.... How did Hawks treat rhino in his film? As a mature love passion. The rhino has no scruples regarding anything, it will charge the tank or aircraft with its horn... Old Hawks only talked about the important things in life, that is to say about addictions, love, betrayal. The rhino symbolizes the rejection of the existence of any obstacle. For this performance I shaved my head and beard and my entire habitus reminded of that fucked rhino, that's why this performance is dedicated to Hawks. The film is entitled *Hatari!* which means »Help« in Swahili. This is what it is: once man realizes that nothing helps once he is in love, there are murders, suicides, changes of character, horrors, abuses, all of that.

What is your attitude towards Zagreb?

The way that James Joyce experienced Dublin, or John Dos Passos experienced Manhattan, or Hitchcock experienced any town that he brought into his films. Every single Hitchcock film is an epic about some city, for example *Strangers on a Train* is a story about Washington DC, several films relate a story about New York, one of them is *Rear Window*, the other is *Rope*, and *Vertigo* talks about San Francisco... A city is a being. A city is a level of identification with life. If you walk through Zagreb by night, it is beautiful, it is beautiful in the morning, in early spring, in late autumn, at night ... when Zagreb gets rid of those bums who hate it, litter it, leave behind scraps of paper and cigarette butts... it is beautiful. The same holds true of Paris – one half of French cinematography was filmed in Paris, one half of French poetry talks about the streets of Paris, Berlin inspired many painters. Everything that is important in art occurs in big cities. One of them is Zagreb. If I had to exchange it for another city, I would choose only Manhattan, more precisely the Lower East Side or East Village...

Your performance *Adapting to Objects on the Marshal Tito Square from 1997* was also a homage to Zagreb?

It is indeed a love relation with Zagreb. That is the reason why I had my clothes on, in order not to provoke conflicts. I've been familiar with the square for decades now, and its name sort of reminds me of my youth. We matured and grew old under Josip Broz. One could say that Broz descended from authority in 1990. This is not Yugonostalgia, but he was simply an inseparable component of our lives, like the air we breathed. At that time I was young, and youth is not exchangeable. The performance was meant to enable me to squeeze my body into every single crevice of that square so dear to me. There is the theatre there and Meštrović's *Well of Life* stands on that square. Meštrović's sculpture is simply manifest, it is superb. It is a part of my life, my first speculation about art. The chap who in 1941 arrived in Zagreb at the age of four, could go there and touch it, there was water there ... for me this was a sensation.

Once you said: »All that I did on the streets was my argument with reality, a passive one, since I did not force anybody into doing the same...«, »I placed myself in an uncomfortable position in order to make others, maybe, more comfortable ... this was a mild protest, but not against all conventions«.

Because the greatest people always placed themselves in an uncomfortable position when we were most comfortable, when we enjoyed the most.

What do you see as being the most important in a performance, that is to say while you are making preparations and when you perform?

The sweetest part is the conceptualization of a performance, that feels most perfect. After that one must set up tasks as complicated as possible so that during the performance you can forget all



Tomislav Gotovac
Srp, kladio in rdeča zvezda /
Hammer, Sickle and Red Star, 1984
Foto / Photo: Nino Semialjac

about yourself, that you can concentrate and infuse the performance with energy. During the so called »drastic performances« I am sorry that I cannot watch myself. Today I find it very important that the performance is as short and as concentrated as possible. I used to like extensive performances, but I realized that the most striking effect derives from shortness. Yet some things call for longer duration, like the *Employment* that lasted 10 years, from 1956 to 1967 with an interruption while I was doing military service; then *Non-cutting of Hair* – 5 years, from 1976, when I graduated in film directing, to 1981, then *Haircutting and Shaving* which lasted 5 years, from 1981 to 1986....

So you consider your first employment, actually the 10-year job, as your first performance?

Yes, that is the real-life performance. I asked the clerk in the Personnel Department of the Vinogradska hospital where I worked, to put down that I resigned after 10 years, but she instead wrote 10 years and 10 days on my employment record.

Your performances often consist of simple life situations like street sweeping, telephoning, listening to the radio, reading a newspaper, watching TV... On several occasions you said that life is close to art, that you do not see the difference between the two...

This all arises from my great love of film. Because in film, everything stands on an equal footing. In the picture a tree, a dog, a beautiful woman, water, rain ... everything is equal, has the same value. And I am a lover of the documentary, since to me the gaze is the most important thing in life. Intimately, I do not like the Baroque style, kings, palaces, rings, I do not understand how one can delight in diamonds. To me, a view of the park is a hundred times more beautiful than a diamond, to me diamonds are pure kitsch, downright shit. One glance at a puddle on the New York asphalt strikes me as more beautiful than a diamond. Or walking along Brooklyn Bridge, Williamsburg Bridge, Manhattan Bridge, along Delance Street, to me this is more beautiful than window shopping along the expensive Fifth Avenue.

All your performances discuss either directly or indirectly the notion of freedom and investigate the limits within which man is free or rather not free. The duration of several of your performances is defined in advance in relation to the moment of the police intervention, like for example The Artist in the Act of Begging. Please Give Charity. Thank You (26.12.1980), and Whistling (100) in 1979. These performances were to last until the arrival of the police and your arrest.

Not until the arrival of the police, but until the moment the »organs« intervene. This is not necessarily the police, this could be other people as well.

Once you said that »freedom was the fortune of most people, but they are ashamed of it«. I would like to ask you about your interest in freedom as part of your artistic work.

I used to discover my life in films and cinemas, and then I simply equated reality and film. To me, reality was art. To tell you the truth, these were the happiest days of my life, since everything that happened in so-called normal life I treated aesthetically. I do not admit of good or bad guys, all of them play parts. After all, they were all borne by some mother, they were loved and caressed, some turned out good, some turned out idiots, villains... I cannot hate anybody....

We talked about freedom.

That is one and the same thing. Some give freedom, others take it away. Some are happy to see you alive, others would kill you. All of this is a question of freedom. I can't imagine life without art and can't imagine art without anarchy. I do not like to see people bringing anarchy to other people's lives, but being anarchistic in art is the precondition for the survival and continuation of art, it prevents art from being fossilized from the inside out. What is more perfect than the work of Bach or Michelangelo, the Egyptian pyramids, Greek pilasters, Russian avant-garde or avant-garde cinema? That is the right thing, so how to proceed? I think that people who rip open those hidden holes in artistic existence at all levels are in fact the biggest anarchists, and that they are the ones who must sacrifice their comfort and success in life. Otherwise, there is no art.

You often swear in your performances. What does swearing mean to you?

Swearing is a normal psychological relief and it maintains a balance with the outside world. It is a folk custom. Swearing has always been with us. That kind of discharge is a relief with regard to all

hatred and the troubles that surround, torment and suffocate you. Instead of striking somebody you say »fuck you«. American movies are full of swearing, it is an integral part of the milieu.

And nakedness?

Nakedness means: this is what I am, this is how I was born, never mind whether ugly, or fat, or with a short or a long cock... that is not important at all. But if you want to have anything to do with me, then you should know! When one exposes his nakedness, it is like telling others: why do you have



Tomislav Gotovac
*Paranoia Wien Art. Hommage to
Glenn Miller, Krems-Stein, 1988*
Foto / Photo: Nino Semialjac

your clothes on? Take off your clothes and then we can compare. That way you challenge to a contest but in a passive manner. I did not just show up and strip somebody's clothes off, but I took off my own clothes. I greatly admire two young guys, very popular now in Croatia. One is Goran Ivanišević, the swearer, and the other is the leader of *Psihomodopop* – Gobac. I would undersign each of Goran Ivanišević's curses and all of Gobac's nakedness, even though they are half my age.

I would like to hear what your attitude is towards prohibitions, censorship, and self-censorship. Prohibitions are a part of the scenario and a part of stage directing. But none of those who impose prohibitions observes them. So, why not violate them? As long as you do not damage the integrity of another, do not cause evil and do not insult anybody directly...

Do you, as an artist, ever find yourself imposing self-censorship in order to avoid some future inconvenience?

I did not think of that as much as others. Yet there must be some respect, even though sometimes you transgress it... As a parameter you must set the goal not to hurt others intentionally, physically or psychically, the way that some people who have authority do. This is the difference in attitude between people who have authority and us, who do not have it. We, who do not have the power, try to fuck them. Well, if one falls for a fuck, it's not our fault.

Do you think that as an artist you can still stage the show or do you think that you yourself are a character in the scenarios »directed from the top«.

We continually co-exist with the possibilities they provide for you. Their prohibitions cannot be all-embracing. Now, how skillful you are and how much experience you possess so as to bring them around. Power holders in a way rejoice in us because we are a kind of detector for the so-called freedom that they show off to the world. The communists were like that, and those that are now in power are no different. I cannot blame the authorities because I know that they are not the absolute authority, but have somebody above them, their own directors. I see them as actors who play parts for the writers of scenarios and directors who exist somewhere else.

How do you feel as an artist here and now?

I think that to these young people who are just now discovering the world, we the elders – Kožarić, Jevšovars, Knifers, Gotovacs... – show the possible ways. That is the reason to live happily ... with all troubles...