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Art and Reason, or: Art as Social Strategy

All utopias fail in the Balkans: the greater Serbian principality in the Middle Ages, the Ottoman Empire, the Danube monarchy, the greater Serbian monarchy, the Yugoslavian multi-ethnic state, market-based socialism and, in the future possibly, the European Union, too.

At the same time, all the states that arose from the legacy of the old Yugoslavia have to find new identities. The permanent diminishment of the states since the Ottoman Empire and the Danube monarchy were dismantled into tiny states such as Kosovo did not solve the fundamental problem of the western Balkans: the establishment of ethnically homogeneous societies which, in an ideal scenario, represent the basis of the modern nation state.

The new societies, too, are ethnically heterogeneous structures, the basis of which cannot be, in the long term, about ethnicity and nationalism – their downfall would be the price to pay. These societies are thus unintentional laboratories of the post-modern era and have an uncertain outcome.

The politics of modern times proved fatal for almost all multi-ethnic societies – the Danube monarchy, the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia – because the idea of the classical nation state collided with the social reality of populations that were mixed both ethnically and from a religious point of view. All these societies were and are characterised by the fault lines of the most differing cultures and religions. Neither democracies nor totalitarian utopias could restrain or pacify the centrifugal forces of these societies. The wars in the former Yugoslavia were, ultimately, a helpless attempt at belated nation building.

The future of this south-eastern European region can thus only lie on the other side of the classic nation states: a post-modern political and social vision for a post-national Europe. In my opinion, Irena Lagator's project about a "society of unlimited responsibility" starts off at this point. Her installation *Witness of Time* from 2001 may clarify these circumstances. She fitted out the window openings of an old military fortress from Austro-Hungarian times with red cloths – drape-like – which, seen from afar, convey the impression of an inhabited, romantic idyll. Closer inspection reveals the assumed vision to be deceptive: a ruin testifies to a culture that failed long ago, the military might of which could not stand up to national ideologies, religious convictions and ethnic

arrogance. At the same time the installation – next to a timelessness that is hard to define – communicates the appearance of something new with a brighter intuitiveness.

The ruined fortress becomes a place of reflection, of the vanishing of time and space, becomes a non-place: a utopia. Unlike the great utopias of the Renaissance of a Francis Bacon or a Tommaso Campanella, who depicted a precursor to modern totalitarianism – thereby proclaiming political religions – her vision of ruin remains cautious. No certainties or revelations are communicated, but rather the possibility of an open future.

Irena Lagator understands her artistic function as “a social strategy”; art as the vehicle of the human – that is, of the social civilising. With this claim, she belongs to a post-avant garde generation of artists who no longer herald the presumptuous claim to the liberation of mankind and the salvation of human pre-history from misery. The radical art avant-gardes of the classical modern period often forgot that the freedom of art also always contains its social responsibility. Art’s complete freedom implies the artist’s absolute lack of responsibility. Political theory can sing a song about the absolute freedom of the totalitarian agitators; aesthetic theory still has to learn it.

The project on “unlimited social responsibility” sets high standards among societies which would only like to take on limited responsibility. Even over fifty years ago the conservative art historian Hans Sedlmayr spoke of the “loss of the middle way” which, among other things, he saw in the radical autonomy of the arts and the ever-threatening collectivisation of societies.

Irena Lagator avoids the danger of pronouncing (artistic) truths by devising multiple realities; and by changing perspectives she denies the observer and artistic creation any one-dimensionality. Her installations with thousands of material fibres may communicate an insight into the fragility of our knowledge and what we believe to be certain.

What is more, her installations communicate an awareness of how fleeting time and space are, of the finite nature of everything and of human endeavour. Nevertheless, she calls for responsibility on the part of artists and societies: with gentle reason she reminds us whether we want to find ourselves in the museum of the humane or in the memorial to the collective lack of reason, to the barbaric lack of responsibility.