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MEAT AND DRINK IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Maja Ćirić



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*Searching, Finding and
Understanding Food in Visual Art:
Raša Todosijević and the view
from post-Yugoslavia*

Under the assumption that the food one has been eating is the food one has digested, I start from my own niche, from where I have been nurtured: the visual art world of a minor South Eastern European country, the post-Yugoslav Republic of Serbia. The universal aspect of the food is what allows me to write about the particular art practice of the conceptual artist Raša Todosijević. By understanding the modes of integration of food in his visual artworks, I want to point to the versatile creative potential that is created out of the relationship between food and visual arts. Todosijević's case is simultaneously about the symbolic and the rational implementation of food which allows a discussion on the meaning of art and life.

I have always loved dictionaries, for the missing structures and the hidden meanings embodied in them. A passion for curiosities led me to an article that aimed to explain the meaning of the words of another time. It reminded me of

the expression "meat and drink" that, according to the article, comes from an older meaning of the word *meat* that refers to food in general – solid food of various kinds (not just animal flesh), as opposed to drink.

Raša Todosijević is an artist whose conceptual art practice emerged in the group of six (the others being Marina Abramović, Era Milivojević, Neša Paripović, Zoran Popović and Gergelj Urkom) whose collaboration peaked in the context of the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade, Serbia (1971-1973). His valuable practice continues to this day. International acclaim came only recently though, with his artworks being bought for the permanent collection of the TATE Modern, a measure of status in a hegemonic artworld.

Although his art practice is interesting in so many ways, the food as an important medium, material, has been completely ignored by the critics, like a word whose meaning is hidden in a dictionary. I asked Todosijević if there is a lesser known text he could recommend, that explains his use of food and he said there is not a single word about it.

Claiming that there is no sense in explaining why it is so, and keeping to himself any possible reasons, he convinced me not to even look for it. Looking at all the reproductions of the artworks that he sent me, I've calculated at least twenty two artworks in which he has used 'meat'. All kinds of it: beans, fish, oranges, bread, oil, chocolate, etc.

So, how was I to decipher its meanings? By looking at the reproductions and digging through remotely related texts, using an art history methodology?

This time, I couldn't.

A text, without an author writing in her own voice, is like a meat (in the old meaning of the word), served without a drink. It has content, a texture, a taste even, but it deprives you of full indulgence. It aims to provide you with the information, but it is not supposed to be digested properly. It does not allow you to, metaphorically speaking, drink and by drinking to set yourself in another dimension of time and space. It is like a realistic map, but not an imaginary one. If it was written from an academic perspective it would be grounded, while what I aim for is an essayistic contribution to the gastro-cultural travelogue through the land of visual arts.

What Todosijević and his peers were doing back in the

seventies was, in exact terms, problematising the definition of artistic practice that would be based on only visual representation. When asked about his food-based works, Todosijević said that it was difficult for him at the moment to write essays and self-explain what he wanted and why he wanted it. He said that it was a big job and required extensive work, explanations etc, and given that he was dealing with other things, he was forced



to rationalize his time and work. He also said that he would like to help me, but that by helping me he would have to abandon other work, which he was not prepared to do. He did provide me with a clue though. An old wolf, a master of playing with the language and form, without a word, he sent me a couple of his unpublished stories related to food.

The way to understand his relationship to food, I thought,



was to understand his stories and to connect these stories to his visual art works. Strangely enough, all the stories that he sent me were more about hunger and food chains than about food. They were about food in absence, about those eating too much or too little. I thought it might be about his relation to hunger as a metaphor,^[3] an individual, intellectual, spiritual or ideological hunger.

A quite contrary explanation was found in the story titled *The Bold Truth* written on the 15th of August, 1992. In Belgrade, during a severe economic and political crisis, where he says, "Only a person who is fed can write a good essay about hunger. Those who think that the ones who are fed cannot discuss the depths they have not seen and in which they did not put their fingers in are mistaken. Those who are starving exaggerate! Out of hunger, out of these tiny weasels, they create a monster, a Leviathan. Despite the enormous success and being proven historically, *grandeur* hunger is not an expert. She is an amateur and a bungler. She acts

as a painter of the Sacred Heart, as the one who knows it all, who cannot take sides, who does not compare nor link by kinship, and the one who does not act systematically. Hunger is more of an astrologist than an astronomer. This should be taken into account while explaining sterile thoughts on hunger. Just as any

amateur hunger is puzzlingly subjective, gaps in education, broad and unsettled knowledge are the keys to the alleged secrecy. Hunger connects everyone and everything without any principle. It is eclectic who cares about space and time. Hunger throws emphasis on the pain, on the physical experience

of his presence. Expressionism, coincidence, naked enthusiasm, nonstructural endeavor, they all mute the real picture."



His cynicism or his denial of hunger emerges from this story, just like in the cycle of installations *Schlafphase*, (literally meaning "Sleeping Flag") created between 1978 and 1984. These consist of autonomous, incomprehensible symbols, for example, a dead carp on a plaster

surface. If it is to be understood through his stories, this is an example of a strong (fed) artist who can treat hunger as a subject. Though fish is certainly not a symbol of spirituality because according to the story quoted above, spiritual hunger and hunger for knowledge about hunger is stupidity. Basically by sticking my nose in the implementation of food in his work, I am, according to the story above, stupid. I am "sticking my nose in other people's soup and proclaiming philosophical curiosity, the swing thought gluttony, primordial astonishment". Curious people in the story receive a fist in the head; the punch makes their head wander in front of a plate while their minds rotate around the mashed potatoes.

Todosijević's visual art and his stories cannot be understood

through the optics of the essays in the book *Food, Blood and Soil* by Alexander Genis, despite the fact that what art and food have in common is that they are always connected to the context. Todosijević is far more cynical than that. He denies the possibility of a local context as a source of any suffering, despite the crisis that has been encountered. The proof of that is yet another cycle of installations, drawings and sculptures, started in 1989. In *Gott Liebt die Serben (God loves the Serbs)*, Todosijević mocks nationalism by bringing in kitsch aestheticism to the forefront. In 1998, in Belgrade and Čačak, and later on entertaining Germans in a theater in Berlin he served his guests the Serbian national dishes - beans, bread and beer, on a table shaped like a swastika. In addition to numerous installations

on the swastika shaped tables, the artist added letters thanking himself in the name of the citizens of each city.

Was he thanking himself for providing the context, a super-structure

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for an individual artistic way of redefining the use of food? Just like when he sat up on a stage at for a restaurant called 'Freedom' in a gallery. Or was he re-positioning the hegemony of the art world while cynically supplying the starving Austrian artists with soup and chocolate? This, while Serbian artists were in a far worse position, isolated and going hungry.

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Maja Ćirić is an independent curator living and working in Belgrade, Serbia.

Her works are available at <https://uartsinbelgrade.academia.edu/MajaCircic>

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- [1]. Balcan Banquet, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, Serbia, 2002
- [2]. The Todosijevich Foundation, for Starving Austrian Artists, 2002 poster, Belgrade
- [3]. Shlaffage, 1978-1984, installation, (alive carps in plaster), Student Cultural Center, Belgrade, Serbia
- [4]. Nailed Bread, part of the installation The Ranges, Gallery of Contemporary Art Zagreb
- [5]. Raša Todosijević, Fountain of Death, 2002 Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, Serbia