

# THE LARGE GLASS

No. 27 / 28, 2019

journal of contemporary art,  
culture and theory

ISSN 1409-5823



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Cover: Shezad Dawood, Leviathan Cycle, Episode 1: Ben, 2017 HD Video, 12'52" (detail)  
Courtesy of the artist and UBIK Productions (with footage from the Goddard Space Flight Center, NASA)

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# Relocating Red Narratives

No one is surprised, nowadays, to witness that some of the boldest proposals at La Biennale di Venezia are far from the traditional circuits. Such is the case of the pavilion of the Republic of North Macedonia, represented this year by the artist Nada Prlja.

Nada Prlja's practice is well known for dealing with the complexity of situations of inequality and injustice in society, from current politics to issues of nationalism and immigration. On this occasion she encourages leftist thought and solidarity by seeking to revive the notion of idealism in contemporary society as an alternative form of motivation.

*Subversion to Red* is an original multidisciplinary project that examines - under an evocative title - how historically forms of art can be used to relocate/'recycle' aspects of the past to current and contemporary forms. The artist speaks about the importance of historical narratives and prompts the exercise of reviewing these by offering multiple possible readings. More specifically, Prlja encourages us to revisit notions of idealism and ideology through a de/reconstruction of the postulates of leftist thought and Marxist theory in order to explore their compatibility with today's society. Researching and examining political, societal and artistic forms of the past, the artist asks whether it is possible to extrapolate them to the legitimacy of their corresponding ideological forms in the present. This discourse takes shape in the exhibition through a body of work consisting of a series of paintings, sculptures, photographs, a video performance and a live art event.

The three sculptures, occupying three of the six exhibition spaces in the Palazzo Rota Ivancich, share the title *The Collection: She does what she wants*. It is not surprising that Prlja uses 'The Collection' in the title for these three works, as the sculptures are inspired by selected works of art from the sixties from the unique collection of the *Museum of Contemporary Art Skopje* (MoCA Skopje). Prlja's choice to highlight this collection and this museum in her exhibition at *La Biennale* is not accidental, as the museum and the collection are founded on the notion of solidarity - the collection itself comprises of 7,600 works of art all donated by different countries and individual artists following the devastating earthquake in the city of Skopje (1963). The notion of solidarity is a key concept of leftist thought and a key aspiration of Prlja's exhibition, *Subversion to Red*.

The relevance of the Museum's collection as a personal reference is likewise significant, as it played a crucial role in Nada



The Collection: She does what she wants, History of Humankind, XX century, 2019

Metal profiles, concrete, 141x150x175cm.  
Courtesy of Nada Prlja Photo © Raul Betti

Prlja's adolescence during her frequent visits to the museum while attending the *Fine Art High School* in Skopje, influencing her understand of the unique role of art and the artist's responsibility in a particular social reality. For *Subversion to Red*, after researching the museum's collection, Prlja selected artworks by the artists *Jordan Grabuloski*, *Olga Jevric* and *Boris Nikoloski*, considering them to represent artists' freedom of expression in opposition to the constraints that commonly defined the cultural context of one-party states. These artists went beyond the

expected in an environment which supported and respected their work, in conditions enabled by the particularities of socialist-era Yugoslavia. With this 'looking back' and revisiting the concept of Solidarity, building on the individuality and resilience of the selected artists who were working in the region in the 1960s, Prlja opposes the world of novelty, invention and temporary trends that has come to be expected within the contemporary art world, looking instead to a possible reshaping of the past for a better future.

Through interweaving conceptual threads from the past and the present, it highlights the ways past and present are being amalgamated, where Prlja's new works and the works from the MoCA Skopje collection become one. What is the particular link between, for example, *The Collection: She does what she wants, Untitled I* (2019) by Prlja, and *Olga Jevric's* work from the 60s, by which Prlja is inspired (work which has likewise received international attention, with Jevric's participation in the Yugoslav pavilion during the 29th Venice Biennale). For Prlja, an important aspect of Jevric's work is its inclusion of non-artistic "lumps" of material, found objects celebrating the materials characteristic of the construction industry of the 60s. Prlja similarly incorporates fragments of concrete and steel as elements of urban debris, referring to the duality of that urban landscape: modernist on the one hand and chaotic and unregulated on the other. The overarching form of the sculpture is also associated with the shape of one of the key buildings of the post-earthquake reconstruction of Skopje, the expressive structural frame of the housing towers of the City Wall building complex (built according to urban guidelines designed by Kenzo Tange). The global support provided for the immense project of reconstructing Skopje following the devastating earthquake of 1963 led to it becoming known as the City of Solidarity. The sculpture thereby also refers to the fragility of cultural heritage in the city.

In the case of *The Collection: She does what she wants, Untitled II* (2019), Prlja applies the working method used by artist Boris Nikoloski - combining geometric forms that create asymmetric sculptures - to create a series of concrete book forms placed on a metal plinth. On the plinth of another nearby triangular base are piled up fragments of offset prints of Nikoloski's sculpture *Device 2* (1967), reflecting on the return to realistic sculpture prompted by the artist's loss of belief in modernity during the latter part of his career. With the gesture of cutting the prints, Prlja refers to Nikoloski's method of reusing some of his previous sculptures as a way of creating new works while reflecting on the artistic conflict represented by this figuralism.

The most personal of the works in the exhibition is probably the group of paintings entitled *Department for Conservation and Restoration* (2015-ongoing), a self initiated action of restoration (repainting) by Prlja of the no longer existing public mural *Epic for Freedom* (1981) by *Borko Lazeski*. The work relates to Prlja's childhood experience of frequent visits to the Main Post Office in Skopje, encountering in its main



Red-iness: Robespierre, 2013, Video  
Video, single screen, 5 min., loop.

Courtesy of Calvert 22 Foundation and Nada Prlja Photo © Andrea Avezù / La Biennale di Venezia

hall the mural by Lazeski. Her fascination with the rupture of the monumentality of the building's main hall, accomplished by the murals and the silence of the vast space, can also be observed in the way in which she configures the space of the Venetian *Palazzo Rota Ivancich*, playing with the power of art in changing the perception of the viewer. A certain tone of decadence, characteristic of the 17th century palazzo, contrasts with the artist's works installed within them, enhancing the coherence of the discourse and the content, something which is not easily achieved in this type of "scenario" of working in a site-specific manner within a historic building.

Prlja's strategy here is one of appropriating Lazeski's murals to create a series of paintings, changing both the scale and manner of representation of the subject matter, pointing out through their fragmentation the impossibility of an identical/complete restoration of Lazeski's works. As with her other works in this exhibition, she creates a freely interpreted version of Lazeski's mural painting as a way of reflecting upon the fragility of memory and its importance in the reformulation of the past, while questioning how artists can play a part in strengthening the sense of solidarity between the citizens and their city. Considering how the artist can truly 'give back' to the city or society is an intention that goes through all of Prlja's works in *Subversion to Red*.

Is there any real space for novelty in artistic forms and discourses? Perhaps before embarking on an obsessive search for new formula we should first properly understand and review those from the past. In order to do this, one of the factors that the artist uses is time, identifying the gap between the time of realization of the works to which she refers, the 1960s, and the present time in which she reinterprets them, indicating how this temporary distance affects the understanding of the past, so necessary for the restoration operation that she is proposing. Nevertheless, what also needs to be asked is whether there may be any hope for an ideological restoration, too? Can we put forward this question in today's world, which appears to be doomed and approaching an apocalyptic end?

The collaborative character of the whole exhibition and project comes to the fore with the live art event *Red Discussion 2* performed during the opening event of the Pavilion and subsequently documented with a video of the same name. This collaborative or communal aspect of the work is likewise accentuated by the colour red, which imbues the entire project and in particular the theatrical setting of this performative event with a red painted table, the surface of which is covered with phrases noted down during the performative discussion, including 'We need time', 'Contest hegemonic order', 'We need the capacity to understand the situation', 'Revolution' and 'To be-in-common'... The words and phrases written onto the table by Vlad Morariu are 'offerings' for a better future, established by the participating theoreticians and curators Charles Esche, Maurizio Lazzarato, Chantal Mouffe, Laura Rancovich and Artan Sadiku.

Prlja wonders about the potential activation of critical practices at a time when electoral marketing dominates everything and post-truth seems to have been assumed as a simple electoral resource. The artist 'places on the table' a new, particular discourse which has never been fully surpassed, a discourse that marked a 'before and after' in Europe and in world politics. She does this through a work of art that establishes a comparative counterpoint between the ideological policies of two centuries, the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup>, and by inciting a revival of the concept of revolution itself. To accomplish the promises of the old left, these need to be repositioned in a deliberately awkward way, as is intended, for example, with *Red Discussion 2*. Perhaps this is the only way to reclaim these ideals and return them to their proper position, reviewing them from angles that are still pending and still unresolved.

Nada Prlja rebuilds older forms in order to reconstruct collective memory, and with them their narratives. She re-frames them in the present, within what we could call the "political present", combining them with a subtle analysis and subversive criticism of capitalism. Somehow she manages to point out the inaction characteristic of the present and of current politics, appealing for a call to action through the Arts.

Then inevitably, questions arise: What are the alternatives? How to position oneself against corporate imperialism and other similar phenomena of present-day reality? Can we still genuinely formulate new forms of social organization or are we simply reinterpreting old ones?

Drawing a critical line between past, present and possible futures, Prlja invites us to re-think these issues at a time when a multifactorial global climate crisis is ever present and at a time when human solidarity and empathy is needed more than ever before. Therefore, after visiting *the North Macedonian Pavilion*, I concluded that the time for the symbolic, metaphorical, fine-art-object is over. I was reassured that there are artists working today who are attempting through their engaged work to respond to the current crises and the most pressing issues of our age in a direct manner and with an appropriate sense of urgency. □



Humane Communism, 2016  
Workshop documentation, 20 Photographs.  
Held at the National Gallery of Arts, Tirana, Albania. Organised by TAL Tirana Art Lab.  
Courtesy of TAL and Nada Prlja Photo © Raul Betti



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