

Make a Wish

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The exhibition *Make a Wish* continues to present artists from Rijeka's art scene who came of age in the nineties and found more stimulating working conditions abroad. After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, Ukić attended the Academy in Düsseldorf (2000-2004), where he remained, with occasional activities on the local scene, primarily in Zagreb, Split and Rijeka.

The current exhibition features new large-scale works of demanding production, developed in dialogue with space and indirectly pointing to the building's history and its repurposing from industrial use to a museum. In addition to smaller-scale wall art, the exhibition is based on objects between sculptural pieces and architecture, with an interest in the research of materials as a significant starting point, yet with new preoccupations and focal points. Whilst before he regarded matter as an independent component of his work, partly tamed in a random form it provides, now it immerses us into a physical experience of space where the visitor's body becomes an important component. The exhibition itself takes the form of a stage and a visitor takes part with their own presence, in a dilemma before Ukić's ambiguous objects which belong to the world of both everyday life and fiction, to both the familiar and the abhorrent (*Make a Wish!*)

The concrete and plastic configurations stimulate a diversion of the customary sculptural tradition oriented towards totality and noble materials, a largely idealised, full-fledged (figurative) representation and a vertical transposition of the material. Using the material differently from its original use, Ukić changes the usability of everyday objects and calls for their redefinition. By choosing industrial materials which act unpredictably and require a balance between control and surrender, the author alternates in the role of a maker and a passive observer. Ukić focuses on the questions of what sculpture can be today and how it is connected with social and manufacturing relations (*Make a Wish!*).

Witnessing the breakup of welfare state in which physically unfinished constructions become a mirror of reality, Ukić turns his gaze towards the future. In this context, *Fugue (First Slab)* becomes a metaphor of late capitalism dominated by the architecture of a *non-place*ⁱ – begun but unfinished building, abandoned concrete plants we mostly find around city outskirts. Unlike anthropologically defined places, non-places are considered the places of passing through, of not lingering or residing, where senseful communication lacks, just like a clear vision of the future. Playing with the idea of alienation which is an important trait of a *non-place*, Ukić raises awareness about the status of a

space we build by means of everyday socialisation. Make a wish: a place as a synonym of home, where the body feels welcome or a *non-place* where bodies are random by-passers?

The exhibited works communicate by immediate materiality: coarse processing and texture of either hands, or building work in an initial stage of construction, or deflated pipes. They evoke ambiguous feelings: on the one hand the knowledge that we are waiting in the line of symbolical decay, and on the other hope that common sense will nevertheless save us, in line with our inoculated idea of progress which has not completely disappeared. This unstable space of ecological and economic-political (im)possibilities indicates a point where we have, to a certain extent, overcome the disappointment of defeats, but not the pointlessness of new alternatives.

The largest sculpture takes the shape of connected hands, under the name *Circle Dance*. Cast in life-size and multiplied, the hands are devoid of the body carrying them. They are suspended from the ceiling and set in an archaic form resembling a circle dance, stretching out towards and holding onto one another. The hands are visibly unalive, but they strike as alive; they are fragmentary, but they evoke corporeal unity and like phantom limbs they signify the memory of totality and longing for a return of the lost. *Circle Dance* doesn't transmit the idea of a utopia or nostalgia, but rather opens up questions about the possibilities of a better reality, the way it should look and if this is a project we should carry out together, since no one is currently offering a vision of the future (*Make a Wish!*).

In terms of media, Ukić's staging could be called sculpture in an expanded field which humorously expresses daily preoccupations, from the crisis of a coherent physical experience, the confusing dichotomy between reality and fiction, to the dilemma of common interests and relations of mutuality. He plays with recognizable iconography and advocates for alternative methods of structuring the visible. Using industrial and synthetic materials, Ukić designates the environment of fast growth and decay, which bequeaths depleted places and rejected plans. He contests *non-places* as equal substitutes to a place, which are in a society of profit sold as normal human habitat, developed due to uncontrolled urbanity and negligence to public space as a platform of socialization. This is favored also by the networked society which turns physical space into places of consumption and underfeeds its capacities for sociality, reducing communication to super-evolved digital infrastructures. Two opposing world views, one based on the economy of profit and the other on the productive energy of community led by the principle of pleasure, beyond particular interests, become a seesaw for an exchange of Ukić's deliberations.

What shall we talk about after the big stories are over?

Vladimir Vidmar

In 2015, Nikola Ukić planted a sculpture. He dug a hole, poured its 'seed' inside and let it grow into a large, adult statue. Growing, the sculpture was defined by the composition of its 'seed', its environment, it also fed on what it found in the soil. It grew and matured almost like the surrounded flora. With the exception that its 'seed' – a polyurethane mass – unlike its neighbours, is inorganic, which is why its DNA made it possible for it to grow incomparably faster. And, indeed, watching the footage of the making of Ukić's *Blow Up* sculptures, it seems to us that we are watching a classic scientific documentary about a pseudo-nature, in which usually, for didactic reasons, the growth of plants is depicted in *fast-motion*. The *Blow Ups* make quite an appropriate beginning of this text because in a simple but radical form they articulate Ukić's trademark diagram of **contemporary sculpture** and its conceptual field. Equally so, they represent a clear cross-section of the preoccupations of Ukić's previous works and projects, which are presented in this exhibition, including them in a conceptual line summarised by the title of this text. *Blow Up* focuses on the barrenness of the dichotomy between nature and culture, whereby both are shown to be unsustainable categories, and thus dichotomous thinking in general, the value of which is guaranteed only by a certain historical diagram of power. *Blow Up* hybridises them both, nature and sculpture/culture, not by returning to a long-lost harmony, equilibrium, but to the inherent cross-contamination of each other. This contamination is in Ukić's work constantly transferred from the conceptual to the methodological principle, and vice versa: a glance at the aforementioned works in that unusual, yet happy symbiosis of organic and inorganic, smooth polyurethane and pebbles, which he incorporated in his expansion, illustrates the porosity of all borders, and sculpture as a process of their re-examination.

Contamination is a principle that manifests itself in Ukić's work on several levels, including immediate media implications. Just as the works from the *Blow Up series* were created by combining the organic and inorganic in a new equation of nature, culture and sculpture, so the works *Selfmastering I*, 2012, *Memory of Forms*, 2010, or *Eclipse* (2013) renounce both self-referentiality and potential narrative to basically speak about the ideological disintegration of modernism and the possibility of great metanarratives in general. Photos of the sculptures by the English sculptor Henry Moore from Düsseldorf's Hofgarten or the iconic meanders (Knifer's or the primordial, archaic ones) become victims of the spontaneous growth of polyurethane sculpture, which in its unpredictable

expansion, distorting the images of paradigmatic works of art (modernism) printed on their surfaces, challenges its order and its universal translatability. The spontaneous expansion of polyurethane, Ukić's favourite material, and the dramatic distortions by which the fragments of modernist masterpieces lose their integrity in the face of their carriers' polyurethane surfaces' free expansion, become paradigmatic for the disintegration of the old and the rise of the new diagrams of power. The metaphor of these works, the loss of 'rational' order and heroic utopia in free expansion that cannot be controlled, but only partially directed – which also describes Ukić's process of 'making' these works – clearly marks our current zeitgeist, its social, political and *artistic* implications. It also announces new projects presented at the exhibition in the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, which complement the lavish choreography of juggling between the rational and the organic, progress and growth, shaping and becoming with the question – where to next? What will we talk about after the big stories are over?

Although motivated by the need to emancipate sculpture from its participation in the violence of the colours of reason and blind matter, and deeply committed to the process of its redemption, the practice of sculpture as a historical field in his work has by no means lost faith in emancipation, but he takes the need to set that faith on completely different ground all the more seriously. I believe that three new projects by Ukić created for the *Make a Wish* exhibition at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka should also be read this way. Moreover, I think that it is necessary, or at least meaningful, to read them not as three separate projects, but as constitutive parts of one. In a way, it seems that Ukić is manifestly building a new house for us here – while demolishing the old one – and while building, he is thinking about new ways of being in the community. *Fugue*, *Ducts* and *Circle Dance* examine what progress is today and how it is possible. Do we need new categories and what to do with the old ones? On an Earth that is getting smaller, in which the Anthropocene is the last, fatal chapter for millions of species, how can you even think of any project of emancipation of humanity that does not imply new collateral victims, human beings or beings from other worlds, as the poet Jure Detela calls them. This is what the *Ducts* speak about, another unusual, hybrid creature, of which we don't know if it represents a living thing or a deadened being. It seems like one of the Transformers we caught mid-transformation, partially already alive and fluid, and still clinging to the wall like an installation. *Ducts* starting from their title – *Untitled (Ducts)* – speak of the moment of liberation of/from form and function and establish an unusual tension between the categories of progress and growth, planned and spontaneous: installations as guarantors of universal urban development, civilisation and dignified life for all, become 'untied', free to realise their material existence according to a completely different principle. Here, sculpture has become nature (with all the implications of that claim) in an ambivalent, potentially threatening expansion that we

are unable to anticipate, let alone control. But here it is not about a moralistic ecological parable, but about the articulation of the need for new coordinates of life in a time that, in order to survive, requires more radical changes in the paradigm of looking at the world, beyond (Western) rationality. For the same reason, Ukić revives the ground on which we walk, a large concrete slab that not at all shyly shows its reinforced interior, a prerequisite for its existence, in the work *Fugue (First Slab)*. It is difficult to shake off the impression that the reference to the concrete slab as the basis of construction seems manifest in some way, which is also confirmed by the title, *The First Slab*. The title is also indicative in its first part, *Fugue*, where it directly evokes compositions that vary one theme in different voices. This work indeed takes over the principle of the ‘art of the fugue’ in which the visitors themselves become the bearers of individual sections by moving around the slab to develop the basic theme. More accurately, the slab is equipped with sensors and marks the visitor’s movements with sound vibrations, which makes visiting the exhibition both a musical and performative act. In Ukić’s fugue, intricate baroque decorations are replaced by the idiosyncrasies of our bodies and movements, which by inhabiting and using the same space necessarily imply a composition, a kind of community. The community is thus placed at the heart of Ukić’s new triptych of *Ducts*, *Fugue* and *Circle Dance*. A community that lost the great central Principle of its organisation, that had to renounce faith in the Mind that guides it through the endless paths of History. But it by no means ceased to be a community, on the contrary, left to the immanent fact of its being, without any metaphysics, it even more directly faces with finding its meaning within itself, and it seems that this is exactly the thought that Ukić confronts us with here. *Circle Dance* is a piece that emphatically testifies to this. An unusual tangle of hands that are inseparably intertwined with their mutual grips, with clear allusions to vernacular, folk culture and its implications of spontaneity and immediacy. *Circle Dance* seems to be an invitation to look at what immediately unites us as a community, but under completely different conditions than those of religion, nation, race, identity markers in general. Only disembodied hands remain, decontextualised and yet clearly individualised, recognisable and yet *unheimlich* with their fluid, unnatural contortions. Perhaps they also renounce Nature as a principle, as another compromised category that cannot satisfactorily contain the complexity and freedom of the community. Despite this, *Circle Dance*, as well as *Ducts* and *Fugue*, with their idiom of incompleteness, decay and referential asceticism, do not seem melancholic, pessimistic or resigned. Their cruelty and weight certainly require us to face a certain loss of centre and foothold that deeply mark the experience of reality of the subjects of the 21st century, but at the same time they do not settle for nostalgia, but with their immediacy, sincerity and humour seem to be looking for creative power – as a central category of art and the community – precisely in this deficiency.

ⁱ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, London-New York, 1995.