

**THE BEGINNINGS OF PERFORMANCE ART IN CROATIA  
OR  
FROM THE HIGH SCHOOL GROUP TRAVELERI TO GOTOVAC  
LYING NUDE ON THE ASPHALT**

**Suzana Marjanić**

The subversive force of performance art in Croatia has its roots in Dadaism and Zenithism—more specifically, in the provocative actions of a group of Zagreb high school boys who called themselves Traveleri (the Travellers) at the very beginning of the 1920s. On the streets of Zagreb, the Traveleri would raise their hats in greeting to the horses and not to the coachmen, this everyday gesture of provocation being defined by Marijan Susovski as precisely Dadaist.<sup>1</sup> I will focus here on three cases of the avant-garde performance, pointing out that certain Zenithist and Dadaist evening provocations can be seen as the first Croatian theoretical performances: performance-cum-lecture practices interrogating the status of the world of art, while at the same time requiring an engaged action and reaction from the audience itself.

**Mikac's Zenithist Propaganda Evenings**

The Zenithist evenings of Marijan Mikac, which he held in 1923 in Sisak, Topusko, and Petrinja, can be interpreted in light of recently published correspondence between Mikac and the Zenith philosopher Ljubomir Micić (the publication of which we owe to Vidosava Golubović). In these letters, Mikac described the Zenithist soirées in which he acquainted the visitors with Zenithism and with his own production from the collection *Effect on Defect (Efekt na defektu)*, published in 1923, with fragments from a novel, then unpublished, *Monkey Phenomenon (Fenomen majmun)*, actually published in 1925.<sup>2</sup> The lectures of Mikac that were organized for the sake of the promotion of Zenithism can be considered a Zenithist theoretical performance. For, as Branimir Donat points out, Mikac, in the cities mentioned, organized Zenithist soirées in which he familiarized the visitors with the journal *Zenit* and in general with avant-garde trends, and also sold Zenithist publications and books by Micić.<sup>3</sup>

## The Dadaist Matinée in Osijek

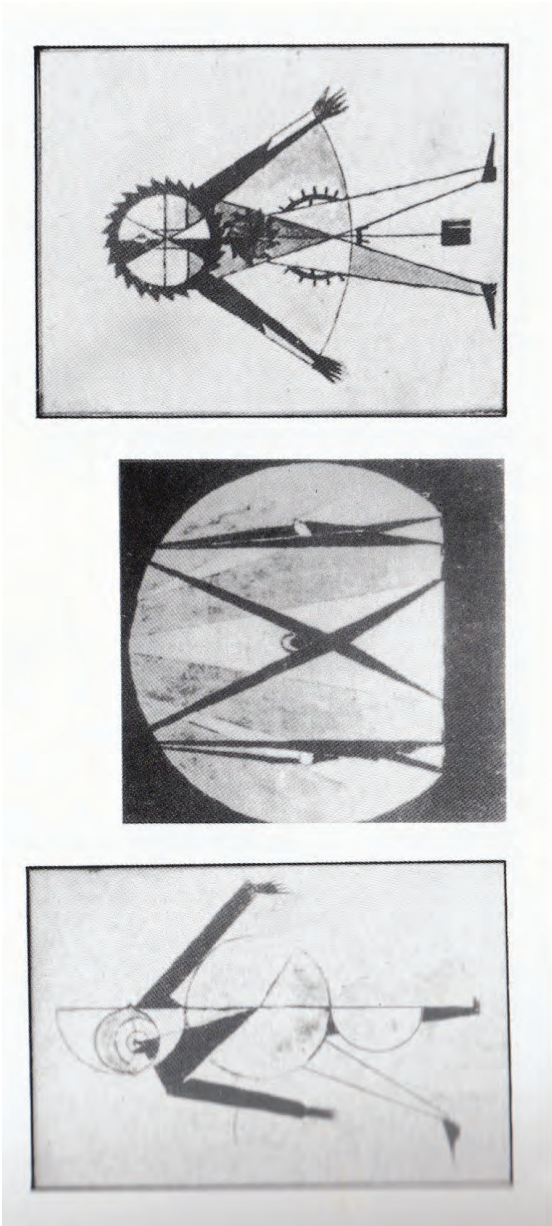
We can also count as avant-garde theoretical performance the Dadaist matinée that, by way of the collective appearance of a poetic and artistic group, was created to produce an aesthetic provocation on August 20, 1922, in the Royal Cinema in Osijek. This was the first Dada event in this area, organized by the Dada forerunner Dragan Aleksić. On the same day, Aleksić sent a letter to Tristan Tzara, from which we can learn that the matinée was held on Sunday at 10:30, that eight more Dada-stars, as he called them, took part, and that they produced “8 dramas with real-tricks.”<sup>4</sup>

## The Zagreb High School Group Traveleri

The show *They Are Coming* can be taken as an example of Zenithist theatre with elements of performance art (*the breakthrough of reality*). It was staged on December 16, 1922 in the gym hall of the 1st General-Curriculum High School in Zagreb, by the previously mentioned Traveleri, whose leader, the painter Josip Seissel, used the pseudonym Jo Klek in the Zenithist period. Marijan Susovski opines that the most suitable adjective to give to this performance is Dadaist because “it was conceived on the principle of the Dadaist provocative collage” and of the Dada cabarets in which the writer was both the actor and the director. The Dadaist show was structured as a collage of different writings published in *Zenit*. It was composed of Marinetti’s drama of objects (text-*synthesis*) *They Are Coming*, fragments of Micić’s *Aeroplane with No Engine* (*Aeroplan bez motora*), and poetry by Branko Ve Poljanski and Ivan Goll.<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning that this performance, which the Traveleri put on just before graduating from high school, was the first performance of Marinetti’s drama of objects (text-*synthesis*) outside of Italy.

Marijan Susovski calls this performance “our first ‘happening’” which ended with a live donkey being brought onto the stage

with one of the two characters on the stage asking where it had come from, while the other replied that it had come from the audience, after which the ass was led out of the theatre through the auditorium where the high school teachers were sitting. For the teaching staff, the donkey scene was the height of provocation and their pupils’ avant-garde follies, after which, the very next day, the actors were advised to



Jo Klek (Jossip Seissel), costume designs for *They Are Coming by the Traveler*, Zagreb, 1922

complete their education elsewhere, and most of those who took part were forced to finish their schooling in Belgrade.<sup>6</sup>

This first Dada show ended by the high school headmaster calling in young Seissel and others and saying, “Boys, better beat it.”<sup>7</sup>

## The New Art Practice

The next major demonstration of performance art that resulted in its initiation into Croatian visual culture took place at the end of the 1960s in the period of conceptual art. In Croatian art history, this period is better known as New Art Practice. The exhibition *New Art Practice 1966–1978* was held at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 1978. The characteristics of this movement can be summed up in the following definitions as formulated by Nataša Ilić: emphasis on concept and playing down the values of skill of execution, importance of process not product, taking issue with the role of the work, the audience and the reaction of the public, work in differing media, site-specific aspects, unconventional venues for events and exhibitions, and the context of the everyday, impermanence, accumulation, discursiveness.<sup>8</sup>

In this short survey, I can recall only a few of the prominent artists in these beginnings of performance art in Croatia. Gorgona, an informal grouping of authors (1959–1966), often held meetings in the form of strolls in the environs of Zagreb, the occasion for which might be watching the sunset or what they called “a committee inspection of the beginning of spring (or autumn).”<sup>9</sup> Goran Trbuljak and Braco Dimitrijević worked as a pair known as the Pensioner Tihomir Simčić Group, a *non-formal* and fictive group, for a brief period in 1969–1970. The Group of Six Artists [Authors] (Grupa šestorice autora) consisted of Vlado Martek, Željko Jerman, Boris Demur, Mladen Stilinović, Sven Stilinović, and Fedor Vučemilović.<sup>10</sup> The TOK Group consisted of Vladimir Gudac, Dubravko Budić, Davor Lončarić, Ivan Šimunović, Gustav Zechel, and Darko Zubčević, which worked from 1972–1973. Željko Borčić, Boris Bučan, Vlasta Delimar, Vladimir Dodig Trokut (Trokut started working inside the Red Peristyle group in Split), and Ladislav Galeta. Tom Gotovac is celebrated in our art history as the first stalker in Europe; Gotovac’s first public denuding was known as *Striking u centru glavnog grada—Trčanje gol u centru Grada (Streaking)*, which means streaking in the capital and the center of the



*Happ Our-Happening, Zagreb, April 10, 1967*

town, which he staged in Sremska Ulica in Belgrade in 1971. Mention should also be made of Josip Pino Ivančić, Sanja Iveković, Jagoda Kaloper, Željko Kipke, Zlatko Kutnjak, Antun Maračić, Dalibor Martinis, Marijan Molnar, Goran Petercol, Josip Stošić, Gorki Žuvela, and others. I apologise to those who were not included in this list. As Ješa Denegri indicates in the catalogue *The New Art Practice 1966-1978* (ed. Marijan Susovski), the activity of the New Art Practice in former Yugoslavia was extremely vigorous, and it was, even in its own time, hard to register and catalogue it all.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Happ Our–Happening**

*Happ Our–Happening* (*Happ naš–happening*, April 10, 1967) was the first actionist and ritual performance, a staged mixture of happening and Fluxus, the first processual action in this country, recorded in Croatian art history as “the only happening that was designed with elements of destruction.” It was held in the Poetry Cellar of the Pavao Markovac Culture Society at Ilica 12, Zagreb and its protagonists were Tomislav Gotovac, Ivo Lukas, Hrvoje Šercar, and a photographic model. A remake of this actionist ritual event was repeated a year later for the shooting of the film *An Accidental Life* (*Slučajni život*) by Ante Peterlić, one scene of it being cut into the film *Plastic Jesus* (*Plastični Isus*, 1971) by Lazar Stojanović. The protagonists chose April 10—the day on which the fascist Ustasha marionette state ISC (Independent State of Croatia) was set up in 1941—as a deliberate act of provocation.

In 1967, they filled the basement room with thick clouds of incense, placed an empty snail shell on every chair, and covered the floor of the room with more shells. The beginning of the happ-performance was marked by the song “Spring is Here” by Chris Connor, and two slides of a nude *Playboy* model were projected.

During this section of the show, the photographic model was supposed to be naked (in the first version of the happening she refused to undress), and she held a paper bag containing rice and sweets with rustling wrappers, thus attempting to distract the attention of the audience from what was happening on the stage. As well as a dresser, the stage contained instruments (harmonica, violin, guitar), and cages in which there were four or five hens. Šercar, Lukas, and Gotovac in dark suits and white shirts with ties strolled onto the stage, opened bottles of milk, broke and ate bread, and drank milk. Next they took



two sledgehammers and a large axe and started reducing the dresser to small pieces. This destruction was shocking to the audience of the time, as Gotovac recalls. Then suddenly they stopped the smashing and started throwing paper balls filled with feathers at the audience, who at once responded, took up the balls, and started aiming them at the performers. The chief destroyers took out the hens and threw them at the audience, and then the two sides began throwing the animals back and forth at each other.

Next they started a raucous concert with the instruments, which they did not know how to play, and the final act was meant to involve the slaughtering of the hens. For it had been planned that their heads would be cut off with the axe on a block, and since the wall was whitewashed, they wanted to smear their hands in the hens' blood and leave their bloody fingerprints on the white walls. Just as they were preparing for this final act, with its references to Action Painting and the ritualism of the Vienna Actionists, someone turned off the electricity (luckily for the hens, I have to add from my own ethical niche), as a result of which in this horror and total darkness, the audience lit matches. Since the audience did not know whether the blackout was a deliberate act or not, both the public and performers stayed in the total darkness of wonder and horror for fifteen minutes without anyone moving.<sup>12</sup>

## **Red Peristyle**

A year after this first processual action in Croatia, a group of Split beats did their own first action. On the night between January 10 and 11, 1968, they painted the stone floor of the late antiquity Peristyle, the main square of Diocletian's Palace in Split, red, and declared themselves the Red Peristyle group. This action of painting the Peristyle red, as a protest against the general state of culture in the country, ended with police arrests. Some people saw in this, as Davor Matičević recalls, "a procedure similar to the classic Dalí addition of moustaches to the Mona Lisa."<sup>13</sup> This group of beats (according to the papers they were Pavle Dulčić, Slaven Sumić, Radovan Kogej, and five other unnamed youngsters, two of whom were students of the Education College and the others from the Applied Arts School in Split) was attacked in the subsequent newspaper reports: "Vandalism of group of youths—Red Peristyle," "Split Peristyle painted red—Attack on Diocletian," and "After painting Split Peristyle red—no red faces."<sup>14</sup>



Tomislav Gotovac, *Lying naked on the asphalt, kissing the asphalt* (*Zagreb, I love you!*),  
*Hommage to Howard Hawks and his film Hatari!*, 1961, Zagreb, 1981



## Lying Naked on the Asphalt, Kissing the Asphalt

The final year of the *initiation* of performance art in Croatia took place in 1981 (here I am referring to the situation in conceptual art from the starting point of the New Art Practice), when Tom Gotovac carried out the performance action (10th action-object) *Lying naked on the asphalt, kissing the asphalt*.<sup>15</sup> This now cult street action, in which he exhibited his naked body, was entitled in full *Lying Naked on the Asphalt, Kissing the Asphalt (Zagreb, I love you!), Hommage to Howard Hawks and his film Hatari, 1961*. It was produced symbolically on November 13 (Friday), precisely at noon as marked by the cannon that sounds in the old town of Grič (in Zagreb).<sup>16</sup> Gotovac came out of the entrance into the yard of Ilica 8, walked nude along Ilica and round Trg Republike (Republic Square), and kissed the asphalt. The costume design was a naked body, shaved head, shaved eyebrows and wristwatch. After he had declared “Zagreb, I love you!” he lay down on the asphalt and kissed it, the inevitable sequel to which was his being taken into police custody. The performance lasted seven minutes. In Gotovac’s words, the policeman who took him to the station announced that he had arrested one “who was stark naked, walked round the Square yelling ‘Zagreb, I love you’ and wasn’t aggressive.”

The Hawks film told of hunters taking animals in Africa for zoos, and started with an unsuccessful hunt for a rhino, which Gotovac used as a symbol of the artist on the run from the police state. Several times, Gotovac was to point out, looking at the cult photograph on which he is shown lying prone in Ilica in front of the Church of the Wounded Jesus, that he was making a pastiche of the position of the priest before the mass and that his figure on the asphalt in Ilica recalled the rhino, or, in his words, the pure and candid animal, an “animal that just goes onwards.” In Swahili, as he pointed out, *Hatari* means “Help,” and this work meant “Help. I am a lone rhino. *Hatari!*”

With Gotovac’s action-object of public nudity in the heart of Zagreb in 1981, a year after the death of Big Brother Tito, I close this short tale concerning the initiation of performance art in Croatia.

## NOTES

1. Marijan Susovski, *Josip Seissel: nadrealističko razdoblje: slike, crteži, akvareli, tempere, pasteli, crtači blokovi od 1920 do 1987* (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 1997). Cf. *Avangardna umjetnost u regiji 1915–1989*, ed. Marinko Sudac (Zagreb: Galerijski Centar Varaždin, 2005).

2. Vidosava Golubović, “Iz prepiske oko *Zenita* i zenitizma. Marijan Mikac / Ljubomir Micić,” *Ljetopis Srpskog kulturnog društva Prosvjeta* 4 (1999): 277–293.

Cf. Vidosava Golubović and Irina Subotić, *Zenit 1921–1926* (Beograd: Narodna biblioteka Srbije, Institut za književnost i umetnost, Beograd–SKD Prosvjeta, Zagreb, 2008).

Cf. *Zenit i avangarda 20ih (dvadesetih) godina*, curated by Irina Subotić (Beograd: Narodni muzej Beograd, Institut za književnost i umetnost, 1983).

3. Branimir Donat, “Performans kao oblik komunikacije hrvatske dade i njenih inačica s javnošću,” in *Dani hvarskog kazališta–hrvatska književnost, kazalište i avangarda dvadesetih godina 20. Stoljeća* (Zagreb–Split: HAZU, Književni krug, 2004), 5–12.

4. Branka Brlečić-Vujić, *Orfejeva oporuka: od moderne do postmoderne* (Osijek: MH Ogranak Osijek, 2004).

5. Actually, the Marinetti drama of objects *They Are Coming* was published in the 14th issue of *Zenit* in 1922, translated by Micić.

6. Susovski, 17.

7. Vera Horvat-Pintarić, *Josip Seissel* (Zagreb: Galerija Nova, 1978).

8. Nataša Ilić, “Umjetnost i aktivizam,” in *Knjiga i društvo 22%. Umjetnost i aktivizam* (Zagreb: Autonomna tvornica kulture, 1998), 10.

9. Cf. *Gorgona, mit, mitološka imena (monografija)*, ed. Marija Gattin (Zagreb: MSU, 2003).

10. Cf. Janka Vukmir, ed., *Grupa šestorice autora* (Zagreb: SCCA, 1998).

11. Marijan Susovski, ed., *Nova umjetnička praksa 1966–1978* (Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1978). Cf. Marijan Susovski, ed., *Inovacije u hrvatskoj umjetnosti sedamdesetih godina* (Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1982). Cf. Tihomir Milovac, ed., *Neprikladni: konceptualističke strategije u hrvatskoj suvremenoj umjetnosti = The Misfits* (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2002).

12. Cf. Aleksandar Battista Ilić and Diana Nenadić, ed., *Tomislav Gotovac: monografija* (Zagreb: Hrvatski filmski savez, Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2003).

13. Cf. Davor Matičević, “Zagrebački krug,” in *Nova umjetnička praksa 1966–1978*, ed. Marijan Susovski (Zagreb: Galerija suvremene umjetnosti, 1978), 21–28.

14. Suzana Marjanić, “Akcijski mitoslov ili o intervencionističkim korekcijama: Crveni, Zeleni i Crni Peristol,” in *Krležini dani u Osijeku 2008. Tekst, podtekst i intertekst u*

*hrvatskoj drami i kazalištu*, edited by Branko Hećimović (Zagreb, Osijek, 2009), 204–222.

15. The first act of public nudity in Zagreb was pulled off by Tom(islav) Gotovac in the production of a sound object, the action *100 (Whistling)* on the one-time Republic Square as part of the 10th Zagreb Music Biennial on May 12, 1979 (around noon to one o'clock) in which 102 persons took part, i.e., one hundred performers with whistles, one leader alias Tom Gotovac and his assistant.

16. His street performance art, actions, and action-objects he used to perform started sharply at noon, with the sound of the Grič cannon.

### **Translated by Graham McMaster**

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URL: [http://www.matrixartprojects.org/map\\_live.html](http://www.matrixartprojects.org/map_live.html)

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