

Contemporary Arts in the Former Yugoslavia through the Russian Avant-garde: The Square of Malevich and the Poetics of OBERIU

Masumi Kameda

In the former Yugoslavian countries, there are still many new translations of Russian writers of the avant-garde, exhibitions of Russian painters of the avant-garde and performances of Russian dramaturges of the avant-garde. The Russian avant-garde movement, which ran through the first half of 20th century, was motivated by the idea to sweep away all the traditional powers as well as all the traditional cultural values and to change reality itself, not to imitate it. Artists of Russian avant-garde tried to reorganize the whole world under a completely new society through their artistic projects. Malevich and Khebnikov, as well as other pre-revolutionary artists, conceived the most radical theories about creating the new epistemology.

After the October revolution of 1917, the traditional Russian way of life was totally destroyed, and the utopia of the Russian avant-garde movement was realized by the birth of the first communist country in the world, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Artists of avant-garde continued to concretely organize the new state by the artistic practice in which being artistic is tautology of being political. Yet post-revolutionary artists like Mayakovski and Rodchenko often found the realization of their project to create “the new world order” in cooperation with Communist Party. As the Soviet government became more stable, social

realism was defined as the only one principle of art in the Soviet Union,¹ and the government started to root out writers and artists who didn't subscribe to that social realism.

The Russian avant-garde, in today's former Yugoslavian countries, has been accepted, reconstructed and consumed as a purely aesthetic, i.e. de-politicized art practice. Yet another aspect appears when we observe the contemporary art practices which refer to ideologies. Such are the general characteristics of the culture in post-communist countries, that the trend to refer to its social background is the main feature of contemporary art in the former Yugoslavian countries. Since the term "conceptual art" may confine when the work was done and its subject matter, it could be said that the attitude to make a point relating to the social context of the work – as Nicolas Bourriaud defined with the term "art relational"² – is mainstream in the art practices in the former Yugoslavian countries in which various ideologies are often ironically alluded to. And in the presentation of the connection between art and ideology, Russian avant-garde has the most strong and symbolic role. This paper aims to focus on the relationship and the analogy between the Russian (and Soviet) avant-garde movement and art practices in the former Yugoslavian countries.

I

In this section, the history of the reception of the Russian avant-garde in the former Yugoslavia is divided into two periods; the contemporary acceptance from the late 1910s to 1920s and the process of re-discovering since the 1950s. The first stage of the reception corresponds to the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918–1929) which grew out of the ruins of the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian Empires. Although there was no united Yugoslav avant-garde move-

1 The 1st Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 set the final regulation of this style.

2 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998).

ment, several magazines and other publications served to create the local movements in the Yugoslavian region. The second stage is the age of “re-discovering” Russian avant-garde, when the Yugoslavian federation was separated from the Eastern Bloc and rejected the USSR’s influence on Yugoslav politics and culture as the society was opened to the Western Bloc. In the 1950s and 1960s, parallel to the re-discovery of Russian avant-garde in the West, artists and researchers started to dedicate their work to the avant-gardes of Russia and of their own region.

1

During World War I, the influences on the art scene in what would soon become the new state were German expressionism and Italian futurism. Then, after the Russian revolution, capital cities felt the impact of what the “Slavic brother” Russians did, and avant-garde artists started to assimilate western avant-garde trends with Russian trends such as constructivism, which was considered to be the core of the proletarian culture. The common feature of the Yugoslav avant-garde is that it ascribed to the visual arts, although much of the culture in former Yugoslavian countries was language-based.

The Yugoslav region was under the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires for a long time, and after the breakup of those empires, the south Slavic peoples joined into a single state; the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (together with the kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929–1941), this period is called “first Yugoslavia”). They had difficulty establishing a nation state because of the multi-ethnicity in this region. Rather, it could be considered that to introduce the inclusive notion as “South slavs” into the region consisting of Catholicism mainly in Slovenia and in Croatia, Orthodoxy in Serbia, and among them Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina was a artificial attempt.

Ljubomir Micić (1895–1971) published the magazine *Zenit* [Zenith]³ in Zagreb in 1921, starting an original avant-garde movement

3 On the role of Russian avant-garde artist for the magazine *Zenit*, see: *Ичин, Корнелия. Русские экспрессионисты и конструктивисты в журнале «Зенит» // Русская Почта; Журнал о русской литературе и культуре №1. Белград: Народна библиотека Србије, 2008.*

which is called zenitism. This magazine carried many contributed articles, brought international collaborators together and closely worked with Chech Devětsil, Hungarian MA and Polish Blok. Micić visited “The First Exhibition of Russian Art” in Berlin in 1922, and turned to constructivism away from his previous expressionistic tendency. Issue no. 17–18 “Russian New Art” (October–November 1922) devoted to the Russian avant-garde movement with the help of invited editors as El Lissitzky, and Ilya Ehrenburg. Micić, influenced by the national wing of Russian futurism from which V. V. Khlebnikov and B. K. Livshits are the representative figures, propagated a negation of culture, a return to the primitive and an emphasis on Slavic traditions, thus proposing the idea that the Balkans should serve as a link between the Western and Eastern part of Europe. His zenitism proclaims the Balkanization of Europe, which is supposed to create a new civilization, destroying the civilization of “old” Europe with the barbaric “new” power of the Balkans. Belgrade artists were influenced more by Surrealism, however, the proletarian culture and the impact of the revolution made it different from Surrealism in France or other countries. In 1924, Belgrade had “The First Zenit International Exhibition,” organized by Micić, which was taken part in by Wassily Kandinsky, El Lissitzky and so on. Slovenian early avant-garde is characterized by its radical political views inclined to Communism. Especially, Avgust Černigoj (1898–1985),⁴ a painter who learned in Weimar at Bauhaus in the class of Moholy-Nagy, was strongly influenced by the theory of INKhUK⁵ Černigoj’s *Tank*, succeeding Micić’s Balkanism after the discontinuation of publication *Zenit*, claimed to build a bridge of a new civilization between Europe and the Balkans to establish “the land of South Slavs.”

As Russian avant-garde led the revolution with its own art projects, the early avant-garde in the first Yugoslavia served as a bellwether of “utopia” to make another Slavic communist state.⁶ However, there was

4 Černigoj was forced to leave Ljubljana because of his communist propaganda. He moved to Trieste and there he founded the Trieste Constructivist Group.

5 Institution of Artistic Culture in Moscow, established in 1920.

6 The one of the most famous Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža (1893–1981) also insisted the importance to establish a new Communist country by South Slavs. See: Miroslav Krleža, “Hrvatska književna laž,” *Plamen*, br.1 (Zagreb, 1919).

another element – to find a single identity to unite this “young” country in the position of the “betweenness” separating the Eastern part of Europe and the Western part of Europe. Avant-gardists in Yugoslavia aimed to describe the “barbarous Balkan” as the region which holds the strength to make the whole of Europe reborn in its “barbarouness” and where there could be a link between two parts of the continent, as the voice of Eastern Europe speaking towards the Western part. The kingdom becomes a dictatorship in 1929 in order to accelerate national and cultural unification and the country’s name was changed to Yugoslavia. In this process of centralization, the government prohibited the avant-garde as a dangerous leftist thought, thus lots of artists and writers left Yugoslavia. The oppression against the avant-gard movement was intensified by the socialist Yugoslavia, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (so-called second Yugoslavia) because at that time avant-garde was regarded as an expression of bourgeois culture.

2

After the distancing of Tito’s Yugoslavia from the Soviet Bloc by the early 1950s, there was a respect for freedom of expression as long as the government was not the target, as well as open borders which allowed international exchange and artists could be engaged in autonomous aesthetics. At that time, Zagreb was one of the most advanced research centers on the Russian avant-garde and Russian formalism, which was revealed by the research and translations of Soviet avant-garde by Aleksandar Flaker. In 1954, Flaker published translations of prohibited writers in the Soviet Union; Mikhail Zoshchenko, Issac Babeli etc.⁷ Then art historians, art theorists and scholars of aesthetics started to investigate the avant-garde movement in Russia and the Soviet Union, so from the middle of 1960s, and especially from 1970s, the re-discovery of Yugoslav early avant-garde had also started.⁸

7 Aleksandar Flaker (ed.), *Heretici i Sanjari: Izbor iz poslijeoktobarske ruske proze* (Zagreb: Kultura, 1954).

8 In Belgrade, catalogues on Yugoslav 20th century’s art *Jugoslavenska umetnost XX veka* were periodically published from the middle of 1960s.

The period of re-discovering the early Russian and Yugoslavian avant-garde was parallel to the period of the neo-avant-garde movement. Artists of the neo-avant-garde movement aimed to dismantle socialist realism and bourgeois modernism especially by overstepping the traditional disciplines and the medium of their expression. Artists tried to remove the political connotation and ideological symbols from the works completely, so that they could show that there was still a sphere into which political powers or ideologies couldn't reach.⁹ Like similar trends in Yugoslavia, the Slovenian visual art group OHO (1966–1971) aimed at the de-automatization of everyday symbols, objects and actions. Their publication *Zvočna Knjiga* [Sound Book] consists of rustling papers in a box. On the one side of the paper, readers can find the word “silence.” When readers turn the paper over, rustling papers make sound, then on the other side of the paper, the word “noise” is written. This “book” estranges the process of reading texts on paper, emphasizing a characteristic of papers as a medium. At the same time, researchers tried to dedicate their work to focus on the aesthetic aspect of the art practices, to be independent from political intervention. The Zagreb School of Stylistics, which was the center of researching Russian avant-garde in Yugoslavia,¹⁰ carried the banner of the “immanent approach” that regarded the avant-garde movement as a pure aesthetic formation.¹¹

9 Exception can be seen in the field of theater, cinema, and literature. Yugoslav so-called Black Wave movement in cinema, which has occurred in Serbia and the Vojvodina in the late 1960s directly showed its political views against the current policy. They were constantly under the political attack, but still they could receive economical support from the government funding. See: Nevena Daković “The Unfilmable Scenario and Neglected Theory: Yugoslav Avant-garde Film, 1920–1990,” Dubravka Djuric and Misko Suvakovic, eds., *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991* (2006).

10 From 1977, they held the international symposium in Croatia. From that symposium they published 9 volumes of Glossaries on Russian avant-garde. Editors are Aleksandar Flaker and Dubravka Ugrešić, who is now active as a contemporary writer.

11 See: Aleksandar Flaker, *Stilske formacije* (Zagreb: Liber, 1976) and Josip Užarević ured., *Oko književnosti: Osamdeset godina Aleksandra Flakera* (Zagreb: Disput, 2004).

A widening of the economic gap among the republics within Yugoslavia resulted in a recurrence of ethnic problems. Especially in Slovenia and in Croatia, there had been a tendency toward independence from Yugoslavia. So for Tito's Yugoslavia, it was the most urgent issue to hold the balance among ethnic groups and among republics. It could be said that the re-discovery of early avant-garde in Yugoslavia is a unique phenomenon because artists and researchers were at the most enthusiastic phase towards early avant-garde when the ideological aspect of it was the very annoying problem of the state. Communism, which was an essential motivation of the Russian avant-garde movement and the identity as "Balkans," which Yugoslav early avant-garde attempted to establish, not only did not lose their ideological meanings but also has challenged to make those meanings invalidate in Yugoslavian context.

II

The artistic trend "post-modern" or "post-avant-garde," which started in the 1980s, is, in general, characterized by its use of allusions and appropriations. In particular, former Yugoslav art practices are characterized by their use of styles and references from early avant-gardes. Slovenian art practice often refers to the early avant-garde of their region. A good example of it is the name of groups which reference earlier trends in Slovenia; the post-avant-garde theater group Rdeči pilot [Red Pilot] named themselves after the magazine Rdeči pilot, which was published by Anton Podbevšek in Ljubljana in 1922,¹² and the name of the umbrella organization Neue Slowenische Kunst (1984–) is taken from the title of an article by Herwarth Walden on his journal *Der Sturm*, "Junge Slowenische Kunst" (1928). However, the most marked appropriations are taken from the Russian avant-garde, especially the use of the square of Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935).

Boris Groys shows the dichotomy among Russian avant-garde and European avant-garde. Russian avant-garde "won" due to its utopian nature, which was the radical motivation of the early avant-garde move-

12 This magazine had strong inclination towards Communism, so that Podbevšek managed publish just 2 numbers of it.

ment, had been realized by the revolution the birth of the communist state. On the other hand, European avant-garde “lost” because it tried to oppose the social context of the art market; the institutions and museums which enabled the production, distribution and consumption of art, but ultimately it only made art remain within that conventional context. Groys defines the post-modern in Russia as “post-utopia,” which differentiates it from the post-modern in the West which has tendency towards “anti-utopia.”¹³ He also termed the art practices referring to the collapsing or collapsed communism system “post-utopian art.” Ilya Kabakov is the central figure of the Moscow school of conceptualism, which is characterized by its “post-utopian” concept, and his “Sitting-in-the-closet Primakov” from the illustrations “Ten characters” which ironically refers to the square. This black square is presented as what a little boy sees when while hiding in a closet, while it is obvious that this is the “Black Square” (1915) by Malevich. Malevich’s Suprematism¹⁴ strives for the “pure abstraction” of the expression of the senses, and the “Black Square” is the symbol of his theory of the object as a sign for a non-object because it has neither difference between top and bottom, right and left nor perspective. The black square not only affected Russian constructivism, but also became a token of the origin of “utopia” in the context of the Soviet society. In this work by Kabakov, the black square functions as the metaphor of the reality of “utopia=Soviet,” which penetrate so deeply into everyday Soviet life that it can not be erased. So this chapter examines which kind of meanings the allusion from Russian avant-garde, especially the square of Malevich, has in the Yugoslav context.

1

In 1985, there was “The Last Futurist Exhibition by Kazimir Malevich”¹⁵ which was held in an apartment in Belgrade. This wasn’t the only

13 Гроис, Борис. *Стиль Сталин // Утопия и обмен*. М., Знак, 1993.

14 Малевич, Казимир. *Супрематизм. Мир как беспредметность, или Вечный покой // Малевич, Казимир. Собранные сочинений в пять томах*. Т. 3. М.: Гилея, 2000.

15 “The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10” (1915) in Petrograd was Malevic’s debut exhibition. Serbian artist Goran Djordjević (1950–) had initiative for this

retrospective, but as the title of the exhibition implies, the “last stage” of the utopia in the Yugoslav context represents works by Malevich as if those were made to symbolize the end of communism in Yugoslavia. In the 1970s the communist system was to be dismantled in the former Yugoslavia as ethnic problems were becoming more and more serious.¹⁶ Especially after the Tito’s death (1980), the communist party wasn’t successful in fighting inflation, and ethnic leaders gained powers; Slobodan Milošević in Serbia, Franjo Tuđman in Croatia and so on. What is presented in “The Last Futurist Exhibition by Kazimir Malevich” is that the end of the reality of “utopian Yugoslavia” is getting close, so this exhibition was a gesture to retrace the “reality of utopian Yugoslavia” which is parallel to what Malevich symbolized as its last stage. The work which express that gesture in it most explicit manner is “Malevich between the two wars” (1984) by the Slovenian visual art group IRWIN. This painting in a thick frame consists of a portrait of one girl in a typical bourgeois modernist style, on the middle tier red and black rectangles, and an illustration of two men in a powerful and optimistic style at the top. This exhibits the turning point of the history by tracing the change of styles in fine art practice in Eastern Europe. Showing the social context of paintings, they represent aesthetic forms which are strongly supported by contemporaneous ideologies, so at the level of interpretation there is no pure aesthetic valuation which is not based on some ideology. The fact that these rectangles can’t be anything but the square of Malevich in this painting reveals that even the simple square form can contain a very political meaning depending on the context, and the historical transition resulting in drastic discrepancies in artistic styles.

exhibition. Djordjević often uses the appropriation of Malevich, for example, “Malevich, Lichtenstein, Kosuth: 1 in 3 Pictures-Copies” (1980).

16 In Croatia in 1971, the cultural institution Matica Hrvatska insisted the independence of Croatia and developed their movement mobilizing 30.000 students to the “Croatian Spring.” After all Tito suppressed the movement which was followed by taking more than 400 communist members’ names off the books and re-organizing Matica Hrvatska to control it.

2

Mladen Stilinović,¹⁷ in his installation “Crveno – Roza” [Red – Pink] (1973–1983),¹⁸ showed several images painted over in either red or pink, mainly square forms. In this installation with images and signs on various medium, he demonstrates the case where the communist symbolic color red and pink, the color of consumerism, are painted over accurately in ideological meanings. The case where colors are painted wrongly and the case where colors are in opposition between “red as the symbolic color of communism” and “pink as that of consumerism” is upset down. For example, the “correct way” of painting colors is the photograph of politicians raising their hands which are painted over in red, the square frame on the photograph where a man smoking is painted over in pink. The “wrong way” of painting colors could be found in the strip of Donald Duck by Disney where all the speech balloons are painted over in red. However, the criterion for deciding its “correctness” is questionable in cases where the Dinar bill¹⁹ on which the design of Yugoslav flag is painted by hand is shown on a pink background. The star, the most obvious symbol of communism, is pink and placed to hide the private parts of a naked woman in a pornographic picture. The advertisement of Coca-Cola, whose symbol color should be red, is painted over in pink. Additionally, the Catholic-like painting on the red background on which there is the black square among sheep, and the black-background square photograph of the Holy Father with his red cloak and his face painted over in red, create an ideological interpretation on the context of this installation. As was the case in other communist countries, religion was prohibited by the Communist Party in Yugoslavia, yet religious beliefs were hard to erase as religion had functioned as the foundation of the ethnic differences inside the federation. The black square, which should usually be seen as an allusion to Malevich, here reminds people the symbol color of “ustaša,” whose extreme nationalist Croatian members established a puppet state of Nazi Germany (1941–1945). The Independent State of

17 An artist born in Belgrade in 1947, living in Croatia.

18 Alenka Gregorič, Branka Stipančić ured., *Mladen Stilinović: Umetnik na delu 1973–1983* (Ljubljana: Galerija Škuc, 2005).

19 The currency in Yugoslavia.

Croatia took a policy based on the idea of “greater Croatia,” which required belonging to Catholicism as they sent non-Catholic citizens, not only Jewish but also Orthodox people, to concentration camps where a large number of them were killed.

“Eksploatacija mrtvih” [Exploitation of the Dead] (1984–1990)²⁰ by Stilinović refers to the Russian avant-garde in a more explicit way. This installation, beginning with the picture of Malevich on his death bed, presents a variety of signs which had been taboo, are taboo, or are going to be taboo. Stilinović uses earlier avant-garde fashions: Suprematism, geometric abstraction, constructivism, socialist realism and Optimism (which derives from socialist realism). Note that as early as the 1980s, those styles barely transmitted ideological meanings any longer, rather they simply remained as optical patterns i.e. dead bodies. Besides those earlier sign systems, he shows collages of photographs of cemeteries both in the Catholic manner and in the Communist manner, political meetings, hammer and sickle, collective farms, sports gatherings, funerals and so on. Stilinović put slashes on paintings or phonographs, or surrounded them with black frames so that images became similar to obituaries. In general, stars and crosses not only allude to Communism and Christianity, but also function as signs of death. Also, Stilinović’s symbolical use of the colors red and black is related to Malevich’s rhetoric of red and black squares connoting death; the red star for the death of Communist members since Lenin’s death, the black cross for other people. Especially in Slovenia and in Croatia after the 1970s, ideologies such as the unification of South Slavs or communism in the Soviet manner already had attempted to be forgotten as if they were negative experiences. Optimism in socialist realist fashion actually remained at that time, but it was just as a “shell” of the former ideology. “Eksploatacija mrtvih” exposes that various images filled in the society in Yugoslavia in 1980s are nothing but “shells” of ideologies, or at least, could be interpreted as such. And yet, paradoxically, those images are extremely burdened by several ideologies at the same time. Russian avant-garde had been a “shell” of ideology since the process of its re-discovery in Yugoslavia,

20 Branka Stipančić, Tihomir Milovac, eds., *Mladen Stilinović: Exploitation of Dead* (Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, 2007).

because it was accepted as pure aesthetic formation, i.e. in a completely de-ideologized manner, so that it can function as the most symbolic sign of a “shell” of ideology. Stilinović, again in this installation, represents a kind of conversion; stars painted over by black, a red spoon hanged into plenty of coins, hand-painted red crosses and squares on photographs of Catholic cemeteries. This kind of conversion which is familiar in Stilinović’s work shows that to revive an ideological meaning in an image, namely, to re-politicize the image reveals its arbitrariness. As was the political choice to de-politicize Russian avant-garde when artists and researchers re-discovered the early avant-garde in the 1950s, it also depended on political choices to re-politicize images and signs. The way of copying and appropriating Russian avant-garde in Yugoslavian contemporary arts exhibits that one single image or sign can’t be one single representation of an ideology, because the ideological meaning is not inherent in the image but is burdened.

III

To examine the relationship between the ideological meanings and the images which represent those ideological meanings, this section comparatively analyzes the methodology between Russian avant-garde and contemporary art practices in the former Yugoslavia, taking Daniil Kharms and Aleksandr Vvedensky from the Soviet avant-garde group OBERIU, and Slovenian groups Laibach, IRWIN and New Constructivism (Novi Kolektivizem) as the subject of discussion. Those Slovenian groups are under the umbrella organization Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), as mentioned mentioned above, started their activities in the 1980s, while the OBERIU group (1927–1932) is called “the last Soviet avant-garde.” This analysis aims to show the analogy in the means of resistance to the totalitarian political order at the time adopted by two OBERIU members and by the Slovenian contemporary groups Laibach, IRWIN and New Constructivism.²¹

21 See: Inke Arns, Sylvia Sasse, “Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance” in IRWIN, ed., *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London: Afterall Books, 2006).

1

OBERIU's first event, "Three Left Hours" was held at the Leningrad House of the Press in 1928. The program included a poetry reading, staging of Kharms' drama "Elizaveta Bam (Елизавета Бам),"²² a screening of their film, the convening of a forum, and the whole event was "theatricalized." In a well known episode, Kharms dressed up in a strange costume and tried to attract passerby to come to the event from the parapet of the Leningrad House of the Press while a ballerina was dancing alongside the poetry reading, Vvedensky appeared from a wardrobe and the discussion itself contained lots of lines excerpted from the drama "Elizaveta Bam."²³ Because of the political repression imposed on members of OBERIU, they were neither able to publish works except children's literature, hold a performance nor make films, yet they continued writing. Afterwards, their manuscripts were found in the West, and Kharms and Vvedensky, after their death under Stalin's regime, were given admiration as the progenitors of the "absurd art," which refers to the art from the middle of 20th century onward, i.e. Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Albert Camus and so on.

Kharms and Vvedensky have a lot in common in their poetry. In particular, the most outstanding feature of their poetry can be identified in that they showed the illogical way to juxtapose various elements in an attempt to disorient human beings's senses. A good example of this is Vvedensky's drama text "Christmas at Ivanovs' (Елка у Ивановых)," (1938) in which "children" suddenly die unexpectedly in its last scene;

DUNYA SHUSTROVA, 82-year-old girl: I'm dying, sitting in the armchair/

MOTHER P. What is she saying?

22 Хармс, Даниил. Дней катыдр: Избранные стихотворения, поэмы, драматические произведения [сост. вступ. ст. и примеч. Михаила Мейлаха]. М.: «Гилея», 1999.

23 On "Three Left Hours," see: Neil Cornwell, "Introduction: Daniil Kharms, Black Miniaturist" in Neil Cornwell, ed., *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd: Essays and Materials* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

MISHA PESTROV, 76-year-old-boy: I wanted longevity. There is no longevity. (He dies.)

NANNY: Children's diseases, children's diseases. When will they ever learn how to conquer them? (She dies.)²⁴

The nurse here regards the symptom that "children" die one after the other as "childhood disease," but it also infects the nurse and children's parents. This kind of round based on the metonymical change of subjects seems to express a more radical "absurdity" than the round based on the change of objects. The other examples from "Christmas at Ivanovs" is the scene where judges abruptly feel sick and die one after another, which is similar to the motif of Kharm's very short story "Unsuccessful show" [Неудачный спектакль] (1934), which was written 4 years before "Christmas at Ivanovs'." "Unsuccessful show" is also a drama-style text, in which characters show up one by one just to say the beginning of their lines and somehow get sick, so they have to leave the stage immediately. Another of Kharm's short stories "The Dream (Сон)" (1936) is also based on this repetition of metonymical change. In this story the main character Kalugin wakes up and falls asleep several times and dreams a series of dreams. In his first dream Kalugin is crouching in the bush, then the policeman goes through the bush. In his second dream Kalugin is walking by the bush, and the policeman is crouching in the bush. His third dream is the same as the first one, and the fourth one is again the opposite of the previous dream. But in the last dream Kalugin is crouching by the policeman, and it is the bush itself which goes by them. After this dream Kalugin never wakes up. In this short story,

24 Translated by Geroge Gibian (*The Man with the Black Coat: Russia's Literature of the Absurd* (Northwestern University Press, 1997), p.228).

Original in Russian:

Дуня Шустрова (*девочка 82 лет.*) Я умру, сидя в кресле.

Пзырева-мать. Что она говорит.

Миша Пестров (*мальчик 76 лет.*) Хотел долголетия. Нет долголетия. Умер.

Нянька. Детские болезни, детские болезни. Когда только научатся вас побеждать. (*Умирает*). (*Введенский, Указ. соч., Т. 2. С. 66.*)

Kalugin and the policeman were changing their position in relation to the bush, but at last the bush took that position.²⁵

The logic of metonymical unifying subjects by a predicate can be regarded as the central feature of the poetry of Kharms and Vvedensky. Subjects are strung together with a certain predicate (dies, goes by, crouches, fall into the catastrophes) just because they are physically near (or they have some kind of a proximity), not because they share any internal connections. And the absurdity of this false logic is the very absurdity of the Soviet regime which ultimately killed Kharms and Vvedensky, and other avant-garde artists and writers.²⁶ This is obvious where their representative two works are concerned. As mentioned above, Kharms' "Elizaveta Bam" and Vvedensky's "Christmas at Ivanovs" are both in dramatic form and about the "murderer" woman. "Elizaveta Bam" begins when policemen come to Elizaveta Bam's apartment to arrest her, but she herself has nothing to do with the murder, in contrast to Vvedensky's "Christmas at Ivanovs" where the murderer woman, the nurse, actually kills one of "children" at the beginning. Then policemen took her to court for trial (instead of the trial, the fairy tale-like "conversation of Kozlov and Oslov" is told in court). The judges then pronounce the death penalty, yet in the next scene the nurse is again in the house

25 Kharms' short story "Incidents (Случаи)" (1936) also has the same motif of the rotating of subjects. In this story, characters are chained to the each tragedy because of the "absurd ground," for example, their family names end with "-ov." This is the citation of the whole text: Однажды Орлов объеялся толченым горохом и умер. А Крылов, узнав об этом, тоже умер. А Спиридов умер сам собой. А жена Спиридонова упала с буфета и тоже умерла. А дети Спиридонова утонули в пруду. А бабушка Спиридонова спилась и пошла по дорогам. А Михайлов перестал причесываться и заболел паршой. А Круглов нарисовал даму с книгом в руках и сошел с ума. А Парахрестов получил тереграфом четыреста рублей и так заважничал, что его вытолкали со службы. Хорошие люди и не умеют поставить себя на твердую ногу. (Хармс, Даниил [Даниил Хармс; художники, Капанова Ольга Александровна. Локшин Валерий Вениаминович]. Т. 2. М.: АО «Виктори», 1994. С. 258.)

26 It is said that Kharms and Vvedensky died in a forced labor camp after their arrest.

as if nothing had happened. Both stories contain plenty of black humor and absurd narrative, but on the other hand, this situation was the very reality of the Soviet people. In the 1920s, Stalin gained power to control the government and the party, and from the middle of 1930s a tempest of purges stormed in Soviet Union. Kharms' "Elizaveta Bam" and Vvedensky's "Christmas at Ivanovs" express the absurdity of the Soviet government which arrested artists, writers, communists and other citizens with completely false warrants and had held false open trials, in its extreme state i.e. in a "more absurd" way.

2

Laibach²⁷ appeared in the punk rock movement, but their activities were prohibited by the Yugoslav government from 1983 to 1987 because of their specific actions which could be immediately connected with Nazism. Both NSK and Laibach are German words which could associate Yugoslav people with the period of Nazi Germany's occupation.²⁸ Their performances were often held in full regalia, their concerts were quite similar to the political meetings of Nazis, and their posters showed a man who looks like Hitler. In 1989, when Laibach held an event in Belgrade, the capital city of Yugoslavia, before the start of the concert, Peter Mlaker from the NSK group made a speech which openly referenced a political address made by Slobodan Milošević, the Serbian ethnic leader. Mlaker, appropriating Milošević's Serb nationalistic rhetoric, changed the key terms from Serbian (Serbo-Croatian at that time) to German. Clearly he intended to show that the speech of Milošević, or in general, amounted to a nationalistic and ethnocentric tendency in the same way as Nazism did.²⁹

27 On Laibach, IRWIN, *New Constructivism*, see: Marina Gržnić, "Neue Slowenische Kunst" in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*.

28 Of course, in the region under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, German language was regarded as the first foreign language, so German language can't be connected just to Nazi. Laibach is the German name of Ljubljana, Slovenian capital city.

29 This "performance" is similar to the theatricalized event of OBERIU. Notice that the film "The Harms Case (Slučaj Harms)" was made in 1987 by a Yugoslavian director Slobodan Pešić, as the first film which is based upon the life and literary works of Kharms.

While the activity of Laibach was banned, the visual art group IRWIN exhibited “Was ist Kunst?” [What is art?] in which they displayed portraits of members of the Laibach group along with portraits of people who are supposed to have been a part of the Nazi regime, so that they juxtapose what is crossed off from the current society. New Constructivism, the design department of NSK, is well-known for the “poster scandal.” They submitted their poster to the competition for the “Day of Youth (Dan Mladosti)” which had celebrated Tito’s birthday in 1986. The federal jury of the Yugoslav Youth Organization, which is a youth branch of the Communist Party, gave the poster first prize as the one which expressed the highest ideals of the Yugoslavian state. That became a big scandal because the poster was a remake of a Nazi work,³⁰ and New Constructivism had just inverted the Nazi symbols and changed them into socialist symbols. It is ironic that the committee themselves chose the Nazi poster for a pan-Yugoslavian event.

These groups don’t show cynical attitudes towards Nazism and totalitarianism in general, but express its similarity to Nazism and to totalitarianism in the extreme. According to Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, their activities are not an ironic imitation of the current power with analytic distance, but they contain an “obscene superego” using the method of “over-identification” to totalitarian rituals.³¹ Namely, instead of a direct subversion of the power, they expose the structure of the totalitarian regime, showing the methodology of totalitarianism itself and how people are unconsciously mobilized by the political power.

The logic of these Slovenian contemporary art groups is also the false logic unified by a predicate, as is the case of OBERIU. Laibach, IRWIN and New Constructivism share the rhetoric to juxtapose various subjects which have a tendency towards totalitarianism, and combine all of them into one with the phrase “be Nazism.” The subjective elements consist of the image of Tito, Milošević, the Yugoslav government, Nazism, the nature of live performance which is distinctive to rock bands,

30 The original one is: *Das dritte Reich. Allegorie des Heldentums* [The third Reich. Allegory of Heroism] (1936) by Richard Klein.

31 Slavoj Žižek, “Why Are Laibach and NSK Not Fascists?” in *M’ARS: Časopis Moderne Galerije*, Vol. 3.4 (Ljubljana, 1993).

Russian and Yugoslavian early avant-garde movements, and activities in and of themselves. These subjects are joined not by the predicate “be totalitarian,” but by the predicate “be Nazism,” which should be one element of the subject matter as Nazism is one type of totalitarian power. So it can be said that the predicate “be Nazism” is synecdochically related to the predicate “be totalitarian.” Laibach, IRWIN and New Constructivism, in unifying all elements which are more or less totalitarian into one single predicate by the synecdochism, behave “more totalitarianistic” than the government. Because the false logic of these groups is totalitarian logic, it exceeds Yugoslav (or Slovenian) current policy in its totalitarianism. Their way of unifying the image or the sign with the certain ideology, being somehow off the point from the ordinal logical point of view, shows that images and signs which are expected to express a single ideology, actually can function to express various meanings, can be reused and substituted for another ideology.

IV

Analyzing contemporary arts in former Yugoslavia through the Russian avant-garde, this paper examines the relationship among ideologies and art practices. First, it can be noticed that appropriations or copies of the Russian avant-garde in Yugoslavia function not as a symbol of a Communist ideology, but as a symbol of the whole of ideologies which were or have been twisted throughout the history of Yugoslavia. Almost all of these ideologies in Yugoslavia were brought from the outside, even “Balkanism,” so that the Russian avant-garde is an explicit emblem of the ideological influence from outside. So the re-politicizing of Russian avant-garde is equal to underlining the trace of ideologies which colored the former Yugoslav region. Second, the common method between Slovenian contemporary groups and Russian avant-garde groups OBERIU was to juxtapose various subjects to the single predicate by the metonymical or synecdochic false logic, so that they imitate the characteristics of the current regime in extreme ways. Their political and ideological situation is reflected in this methodological difference. Metonymically connected objects emerge as cognitive labels for the whole

concept, thus OBERIU could express the single ideological entity, Communism, which decided what is “logically” correct in Soviet society. On contrast, synecdochic method of Slovenian art practices emphasize that there is no single ideology that is not “contaminated” by any other ideology. Yugoslavia had been burdened with very complex and transitional ideologies; Communism and Capitalism, Nazism (Croatian Ustaša) and Partisan, nationalism and Slavism, as well as ethno-centrism and religious ideologies. This is still a marked cultural feature in the former Yugoslavian region, even after the collapse of Yugoslavia. Contemporary art practices in former Yugoslavia region which refer to these ideologies function as the device with which the plurality of possible meanings of symbols, images and signs and its arbitrariness of correspondence to ideologies are to be exposed. That is clear when the Russian art practice is taken into consideration, both comparatively and contrastively, because in Russia or in the Soviet Union, the ideology was the single absolute “utopia,” whereas in Yugoslavia it has always plural.