

The Anatomy of Local Studies

Lela B. Njatin

P74 Gallery, 10 – 29 March 2020

Ljubljana

Exhibition concept by Lela B. Njatin and Lilijana Stepančič

About the Artist

Lela B. Njatin (1963) is a visual artist with a status of self-employed in culture. She lives and works in Ljubljana and Kočevje. She exhibited for the first time at the group exhibition *Dasevididasenekidela* (1980) at the Kočevje Fine Art Salon, and has published (since 1979) in various collections and journals such as *Westeast*, *Problemi*, *Dialogi*, *Reč*, *Pitanja*, *Delo* (Belgrade) and *Uj Symposion*. In her early works, she primarily linked the visual and literary fields, but also created installations and performances. She was a member of the *ad hoc* group Lines of Force (1983) and has collaborated with the Borghesia group (1983-1984). Since 2010 she has been creating interdisciplinary projects, participatory art, anti-memorials, and other fine art works. Her first solo exhibition, *I Didn't Want to Know, but I Have Since Come to Know*, took place at the Vžigalica Gallery / MGML (2013) in Ljubljana.

About the Exhibition

The Anatomy of Local Studies provides an insight into the semi-past history of fine arts, into the part that is pushed to the brink of national art-history narratives. It is conceived as an interweaving of three groups of works.

The first group forms the central part of the exhibition. It features Lela B. Njatin's neo-avant-garde and alternative pieces, which were created between 1977 and 1986 and with which the artist entered the world of creativity. The second group speaks about continuity and changes in her oeuvre. It contains pieces that were created four decades later. In 2015, Lela B. Njatin created two series of imprints of her own body on office paper, deliberately repeating neo-avant-garde body art actions from the beginning of her creative path. Even though they come from the same person, the imprints are different. Together with the older ones, they form pairs that show the imprints of the body between which time has nested – passing, changing, and reshaping. The third group of works are pairs consisting of one piece by Lela B. Njatin and a piece by another artist, by one of the representatives of the Yugoslav neo-conceptual practices, such as Sanja Iveković, Vlado Martek, Jovan Jovanović and Miodrag Milošević, Raša Todosijević and Gábor Tóth. These pairs communicate the interweaving of neo-avant-garde creative concepts and the commonality, though the latter is often just an idea or virtual art space represented, in the case of Lela B. Njatin, by mail art, i.e. the art that travelled by mail from place to place, from artist to another artist, acting as a publisher, organizer or exhibitor who made the shipment public. The fact is that at that time Lela B. Njatin did not personally know any of these artists (except Jovan Jovanović, who led the film workshops of the Association of Cultural Organizations of Slovenia, the present-day Public Fund for Cultural Activities) who represent the other part of the pair in this exhibition, although she did form a group with them outside the canonical art as well as participated in group performances and was familiar with their works.

The exhibited pieces are thematically and formally tied to the body (of the artist and performers), which is used as a means of expression in the function of artistic communication, with which Lela B. Njatin explores – with the methods of conceptual and alternative practices

– a human, art, and social context. Similarly to other women artists, though older than her, who at approximately the same time worked in Zagreb, Belgrade, and Novi Sad (Sanja Iveković, Marina Abramović and Katalin Ladik), Lela B. Njatin uses the body to, among other things, deconstruct the female social gender in relation to the then prevailing ideology in a socialist, gender-equal but nevertheless machistic society that built and defined women's and men's social and private roles and positions. In that regard, the exhibited pieces – *Red, Sit!*, *The Breast with Ichor*, and *The Red Breast*, all made in 1979, and *200 Sitzings with a Red Ass*, 1981 – represent the first examples of women's / feminist art in Slovenia.

Some of the pieces are exhibited for the first time, but most for the first time in almost forty years. Thus, the exhibition complements the historical list of the then neo-avant-garde and alternative works, it brings new perspectives on this creativity in Slovenia, and challenges some of the narratives about it that are being constructed today by the national art history.

Namely, the exhibition tells us that in Slovenia, after the abandonment of the joint performances of the OHO group, neo-avant-garde art continued to live, that, in addition to some members of the OHO-Catalogue movement, it was created by another or a younger generation of artists, and that Slovenia, after the departure of the OHO group to Šempas near Nova Gorica, did not become a neo-avant-garde desert which was to be transformed into a garden of Eden only in 1983 by the Irwin group, as it is perpetuated in the national representations of that period.

These pieces also confirm that the art of the second neo-avant-garde generation is not provincial and second rate in comparison with the works of OHO, as indicated by the selective tradition.

Furthermore, Lela B. Njatin's works indicate that neo-avant-garde practices from the second half of the 1970s were embedded in alternative art from the early 1980s; this means that the artistic alternative of that time cannot be characterized as a radical break with the dominant, as it is marked today, but rather represents the continuity of the orientation of art that opposed the canonized practices with the content discussed, as well as with the formal performances of the works. Prior to the alternative, the neo-avant-garde was already treating topics that were marginal, banal, and irrelevant, in short, non-artistic from the point of view of the canon, and used techniques such as industrial printing, photocopying, and the body of an artist, therefore the procedures that were not perceived by the established canon as artistic assets and tools. There was, however, a difference between neo-avant-garde and alternative periods, which was reflected in the level of integration of art in society. While neo-avant-garde art mostly worked within its own circle of ideas and people, the artistic alternative connected itself with other fields of culture and society and acted in an organized manner, mainly following the example of the Laibach group. The main elements of the neo-avant-garde were class and proletariat, while the alternative raised issues related to gays, lesbians, ecology, human rights, conscientious objection, feminism, urban planning, and other topics relevant to the intellectual and activist circles of Western centres.

Last but not least, the exhibition highlights the already forgotten fact that there has been a fruitful artistic and cultural exchange between the neo-avant-garde and alternative artists in Yugoslavia. For example, in 1981, Lela B. Njatin collaborated with some of *Westeast's* other artists in the *May 75* artists' publication, released in Zagreb, and in 1984, she collaborated with the Borghesia multimedia show, *Lüstmorder*, at the Student Centre in Zagreb. Her work has also found its way into publications such as *Uj Symposion* in Novi Sad, *Delo* and *Reč* in Belgrade, and *Pitanja* in Zagreb.

Central to the exhibition are the works of Lela B. Njatin, created between 1977 and 1986, which belong to the neo-avant-garde and alternative artistic creativity in Slovenia from the second third of the 1970s to the first half of the 1980s. The developments in the fine arts of that time in this area were marked by a visible split between the marginal and the dominant fine art practices and their institutions, the inclusion of punk and postmodern artistic paradigm in the creativity of artists, and the transition of the neo-avant-garde creativity to the alternative.

The work of Lela B. Njatin was intertwined with various artistic initiatives, movements, and groups that existed outside the then current art canon. Her first works of art were created in the milieu of young artists in Kočevje, where she lived. At the time, Kočevje was also home to art that was linked to the historical avant-garde and continued the neo-avant-garde practices of the second half of the 1960s. Kočevje was one of the smaller towns in Slovenia where this practice had its premises and people, but not because it would offer shelter to its expulsion into the province, as was typical of some other socialist countries of the then Europe. It was a result of a diverse, democratic, and decentralized socialist educational project.

In Kočevje, in 1980, Lela B. Njatin exhibited at the group exhibition *Dasevididasenekidela*, which she also co-organized, and participated in neo-avant-garde installations *There is no food without work* and *Hanging*. The latter is a response to the creativity of Man Ray, while the first is a *site-specific* installation that documents the work of setting up exhibitions, as well as the work of a person setting them up, which was second-rated and invisible to the public in comparison to artistic creativity. The *There is no food without work* installation may be thought of as a contemporary neo-avant-garde monument to the working class, and through the usage of today's tools of art theory it might be considered one of the first works of criticism of the institutional art system. Three years earlier, in 1977, in Kočevje, in collaboration with Vito Oražem, Lela B. Njatin carried out her first performance *Art... on art*. Her pieces on office paper, which show visual poetry and body imprints in body art actions, were also created in this town. These works have been reproduced (or performed) in the circulation of several hundred copies and have been included in exhibitions in Slovenia, in the mail art collections, and *Westeast* art publications. The early neo-avant-garde, concrete, and conceptual artwork of Lela B. Njatin came to life in the circle of artists of the informal association *Westeast*, whose centre was another small Slovenian town, Kranj.

At the beginning of the 1980s, when Lela B. Njatin moved to Ljubljana to study at the Faculty of Arts, she worked with a women's alternative group of fashion designers called Lines of Force and designed visual image and costumes for male members of the Borghesia group. She collaborated with Laibach and the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre. Together with Srečko Bajda (alias Felix Casio) she created comics, and one of them, *Rostfrei*, was published in 1982 in the legendary publication *Punk Problemi*.

At the time when these works were being created, Lela B. Njatin belonged to a young generation of artists which was being formed in an environment of modernism while shifting away from it. She was particularly fond of the historical avant-gardes. She was attracted to socially subversive, marginal or repressed contents which she most often performed in ephemeral art forms of body art, performance, photocopy, installation, poster or fashion show, and gave them a neo-avant-garde and alternative artistic expression. She looked for the intersections between fine arts, literature, fashion, popular culture and performance. She believed in the utopian power of art. In short, her work has all the expressions of artistic avant-garde.

The then generation of artists, to which Lela B. Njatin belonged, grew up not only within modernism, but also with the ideology of socialism, according to which art belonged to all, and everyone could be its creator. In this context, could a generation of neo-avant-garde and alternative artists still have been an artistic avant-garde, i.e. excluded from the community and self-identified as its predecessor, if the social context eliminated elitism in principle? And, weren't their activities some kind of a rivalry to the League of Communists, to its exclusive role in particular, which it had appropriated as a legitimate builder of the avant-garde social relations and the "owner" of the utopian ideal of a future communist society? Did this rival stance of the young generation of the neo-avant-garde and the alternative artists which, in comparison to the League of Communists, was a minor and marginal group, set a mirror to the League of Communists, i.e. to those who considered themselves legitimate representatives of the social avant-garde? Or it was perhaps more than that, a kind of a conscious political opposition in terms of reforming the established social system, which was considered to be not avant-garde enough, or in terms of demolishing the system, which began to be attributed to it with the establishment of Slovenia as an independent state, and is today the basis of the national cultural myth? These and similar questions are raised by the present exhibition. It is in this sense that its title, *The Anatomy of Local Studies*, should be understood.