

The creator of "paintings" that come out in space

Inspiration, or better say the starting point, for the work of Dragan Despotovic is in material reality. The artist lived in the Netherlands for fifteen years where he was pleasantly surprised by the appearance of old Dutch houses. The buildings are built by hand, rather than industrially, they are mostly in red and made of red dutch bricks, thus the houses have their individual character, the secret of generations living there, the richness of detail, as well as accentuated verticalism. Perhaps that is why his sculptures may be understood as propositions for architecture, too. With the crisis of art, both modern and postmodern manifestations have devalued, so nowadays the most famous architects start from the sculptural forms when designing great buildings, thus creating architecture similar to sculpturing. This is the reason why Despotovic's innovations in the period which Yves Michaud calls postmodernism are small architectural models in the best sense. Architecture as art has long ceased to be merely constructing and has become a field of imagination and exploration. Perhaps it is not the case of crisis, but a synthesis of art or the return of architecture to the artistic grounds where there is no clear classification of art. After all experiments, spatial art returns to its starting point, as in the time of megaliths, for which Lucy R. Lippard claims to be important for understanding contemporary art.

What does this actually mean when it comes to this artist? One should be aware that his field of work is broad, but not undefined. He specializes in assemblages, post-conceptual sculptural works, spatial works, painting in the classical and unconventional sense, and realistic "knife drawings", as he named his invention similar to the sgraffito technique. His entire artistic strategy is characterized by the lack of division onto fine art and new visual art, as well as consideration of tradition in neo avant-garde. It starts with the history, region and centuries of artistic experience, and ends with an installation devoid of modern alienation. His works have not succumbed to the cold aesthetics nor the casual improvisation that marks far too many contemporary achievements; they also defy junk art which has been explored a lot in Belgrade, too. His strategy involves consideration of layers of tradition with modern means and directing art towards new substantial and cognitive horizons. In reality, it means that an artist primarily seeks to contemplate each his work before he or she creates it, thus establishing not only a relationship with the past and the present, but with the future, as well. Unlike the representatives of post-conceptualism, Despotovic does not

believe in the aesthetic superiority of that art, nor does he believe that the world history of art ends with it. Instead of the end of art, he argues in favour of a new start, or better say new sensitivity, the aesthetics of a palimpsest, and a creative return to the experience of early avant-garde. In that sense, he is interested in the assemblage as a spatial collage, its development from Cubist collage, the early constructions of Picasso, Dadaist and surrealist objects, to the new realism of the 1960s and contemporary usage of objects in art. Starting from the assemblage as an informal form of expression between a painting and a sculpture, he creates "images/paintings" which step into space, have a third dimension, and on surface are still rich in colour, materials and layered art. In that way, he considers the basics of art – colour, tint, line, light and shade, form and composition. His realizations equally include found objects and fabrics as art elements with classical use of brush and paint, marked by abstraction and informal. Despotovic is always deconstructing his work in the direction of a new prevalence. That could be just a new way of solving old problems such as the direction of elements in a composition, colourism and graphism, background and the richness of details, the compliance of a form with the frame, and so on. His objects are in the spirit of passing and solving old or common values in a new key, which is the essence of art. He often starts from finished, found or purchased items, from aesthetics similar to the readymade, and ends with a painting, sometimes close to an icon, with clearly painted details of a saintly figure with a Byzantine blue halo. His other primary forms are elements of a new glossary of ancient art, a material language broken into parts as small chunks. Wire sculptures are nothing else than spatial drawings, a form of drawing lines through space. When thinking about art, Despotovic finds the primary, elementary, which is hardest to redefine, starting from the further transformation of the matter. For years he worked in the Netherlands as an assistant professor and a mentor to other artists, being well -known for his ability to because he treats Rembrandt or Van Gogh in a novel yet quintessential manner in his spatial works which are gladly exhibited by major Dutch museums.

In his quest for the primal form which would be highly contemporary and actual, Despotovic does not bypass Duchamp, surreal plays with objects, nor Russian constructivists. As interested in the fate of artistic elements as he is, for him even a gallery wall is a kind of frame, just like when he uses old frames as starting points for some of his works. In painting Despotovic is perhaps even close to Paul Klee, and has broken down and aesthetically

dissolved object manifestation by implementing in his work different industrial items, from winches, screws and nails, to debris which intrigues him with its shape, colour, surface or age. His works have a certain scum, a film, which is a trace of time and hand; they have history and old age, no matter how new they are. The whole world is the scene for his great re-evaluation of the material world into the spiritual one, simultaneous analysis and synthesis, and form deconstruction and construction. Regardless of how modern his art is, it can always be considered in old aesthetic categories of form, since he is not interested in the formless. He continues where Kurt Schwitters, the innovators of De Stijl and Russian constructivists have stopped – a sculpture has architectonics too, should be looked at from all its sides, and it is designed in such a way so that one can notice its visual richness. This is the starting point of both old and new artists, and in that way Despotovic creates his works, too. It is the emphasized verticalism of some sculptures, along with strong forms and works of small dimensions that lead his realizations towards monumentality. His visual tales of age and youth of objects are not deprived of hidden humour, fineness of surfaces and secret relations that through plays question famous historical propositions. Despotovic is never cynical or cold in his expression, and he does not resort to artistic wits, which is what separates him from the current artistic mainstream. His neo avant-gardism is marked by the intimate, human and sentimental which is what, among everything else, makes him a true artist. Some of his works only appear fragile; however, they are governed by strict principles of statics and dynamics. The objects that enter his works (those that are the starting point of his creation) all undergo a meticulous examination of their appearance, essence and uniqueness. He feels his works to the smallest details, since he does not paint – he creates, produces paintings, makes them by other means than the classical ones.

In Dragan Despotovic's mind of values one of the basic things (and things are the starting points) is how to "persuade" the matter into a spiritual transformation. He accomplishes this in the most difficult, most arduous way that most artists either avoid or are not aware of. With each his work, he not only explores the nature of art, the idea and the form, but also wonders what an artwork and indirectly artist is, who he is and why he creates.

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