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**The Magician's Hand in  
the Cold Light of Day**

**Feb 9  
April 5  
2020**

**Milutin  
Gubash**

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Curator : Michel de Broin.

In his exhibition *The Magician's Hand in the Cold Light of Day*, Milutin Gubash explores the history of Serbia—an integral part of his own personal history—and the theme of war and its representation by the Fourth Estate; in other words, the news media, which is manipulated in as many ways as there are agendas behind it. To varying degrees, the press, mass media, and historical archives are the driving elements in the artist's new installation work. Here, documents that construct an event and *make* an image cast doubt on their own transparency and, by extension, the history of those who write it. What role does the artist play in relation to the historian or the journalist? If, as Noam Chomsky states, the role of the intellectual is to get as close as possible to the truth<sup>1</sup>, then the role of the artist, according to Hans Belting, is to submit “reality” to an exercise in collage-montage that stimulates criticism and thus comes closer to the same truth<sup>2</sup>. By manipulating images and information—an integral part of the art-making process—Gubash questions the idea of transparency, both figuratively and literally. That is, in terms of an image's readability and the artist's responsibility toward his or her claims.

## **WAR**

A motorized bicycle sits near the entrance to the exhibition. Looking through its protective sheet, one can see that its chain and wheels are moving and producing a slow, churning sound. Wires extend from the engine to other installations in the next room. A strange atmosphere permeates the gallery, due in part to the waning light. In the front area of the second room, an image is projected onto a free-standing white screen. An aluminum object placed between the projector and the screen casts a shadow that partially obscures the image. Nonetheless, one can deduce that the image is an archival photograph from World War I depicting the bodies of Serbian women and children who were victims of the war<sup>3</sup>. It appears that Gubash fabricated the object as

a way to temper the image's dramatic impact. But the device is so ineffectual that it becomes a caricature that instead lends a dark irony to the whole.

Each of these elements focuses on the image of war and its various permutations. The motorized bicycle becomes an incarnation of the war machine, the industry that feeds it, and the many disasters it provokes. The manipulation of images symbolized by false censorship evokes the tension between seeing and knowing, or how images can undermine truth.

## **SPECTACLE**

Further on, we find a 1960s-era film set filled with a variety of vintage cameras and equipment, which, presumably, are no longer functional. Microphone stands, old cameras, and projector cases animate the space by simulating their intended purpose. Among them lie body parts cobbled together out of recycled clothing, plastic objects, shoes, etc. The scene is both shocking and absurd, and was inspired by a documentary photograph of the bombing of the Markale market<sup>4</sup> in Sarajevo during the Bosnian War. Taken moments after the attack that killed or injured hundreds of civilians, the image is extremely graphic and difficult to look at. Dismembered bodies are scattered across the market. In a reminiscence of the past, Gubash reinterprets and symbolically rehashes this traumatic event through the mass medium of television.

Docufiction, which intersects all of Gubash's work, is especially present in this installation and its critical commentary is virulent, to say the least. The gulf between the Markale Massacre photograph and its parodic reinterpretation as a film set not only reminds us of the media's responsibility in the spread of information, but also of the public's responsibility.



The Markale Massacres in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) in 1994 and 1995.

In his seminal book *The Society of the Spectacle*<sup>5</sup>, Guy Debord states that since the arrival of television, “Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.” Similarly, the story of the Markale Massacres dissipates in the representation of the image-making apparatus itself. This apparatus—the cameras, booms, projectors, lights—takes precedence over the subject, which is relegated to the background. The dismembered bodies are treated as everyday waste; they are downgraded to the status of merchandise and, as such, become mere props. The discrepancy between this scene and its referent is all the more horrifying in that it becomes a comedy, a film genre that is emblematic of mass culture within capitalist societies.

## MAGIC

The exhibition concludes with an audio work presented in a dark room, where a man and a woman are heard reading a play titled *The Magician’s Method*. Originally written by Gubash’s paternal grandfather (a doctor and poet who worked under the Tito regime, and after whom Milutin was named), the version heard here was re-written by Gubash himself<sup>6</sup>. Family history has been the cornerstone of the artist’s work, and has given rise to countless investigations into his war-torn origins. Through

his grandfather’s voice, Gubash leads us into a private world of first-person singular declamations.

The play features a discussion between a magician and his assistant backstage at a theatre before the start of a play. Although the style of theatre is reminiscent of the Grand-Guignol<sup>7</sup>, this evocation is soon neutralized by the roboticized voices of the two performers. The magician’s long diatribes are thwarted by the machine’s dehumanizing effects. The intensity of his speech is reduced to a purely mechanical form, killing its very essence. His dialogue becomes disembodied, and the protagonists, alienated.

At first, *The Magician’s Method* seems to deal with the political and social situation in Yugoslavia under Tito’s leadership after World War II. But Gubash forms a parallel between the former republic and the world of contemporary art. Both systems have been subject to alienating forms of power: for one, totalitarianism; for the other, capitalism. Christophe Ramaux, in reference to Pierre-Michel Menger’s book *Portrait de l’artiste en travailleur*<sup>8</sup>, writes:

Creative work versus alienated work, individual creation versus capitalist rationalisation, etc., the artist and his work have long been thought of, positioned, as the antithesis of capitalism. Like L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello before him, the author [Menger] insists, on the contrary, on contemporary capitalism’s ability to reclaim the figure of the artist: “far from the romantic, dissenting or subversive representations of the artist, we should view the creative person as an exemplary model of the new worker.”<sup>9</sup>

In this sense, if artists compared their artistic claims to the power they actually wield within the social realm, certain moral issues would emerge<sup>10</sup>.

Milutin Gubash's carefully constructed installations restage his experiments like an open studio in the gallery. The laboratory and its raw materials both reveal the mechanisms behind the image, the mediated information it transmits, and the economic system in which it operates. In this sense, the motorcycle-war machine provides the necessary energy for his installations to create questionable images, while the diatribes of the artist-magician disappear behind the robot voice, whose primary attribute is in fact its mechanical nature. Tragedy is caricaturized, information becomes entertainment, and personal stance grows weak under the weight of the hypocritical system that gave rise to it. While the word *magie* may be an anagram of *image*, this exhibition is much more than just smoke and mirrors.

Text by Marie-Claude Landry  
Translated by Jo-Anne Balcaen

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Noam Chomsky, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," *The New York Review of Books*, February 23, 1967.
- <sup>2</sup> Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- <sup>3</sup> According to Gubash, this image was used as propaganda to convince the United States to join the conflict.
- <sup>4</sup> Widely known as the Markale Massacres, the events refer to two attacks by the army of the Bosnian Serb Republic during the siege of Sarajevo.
- <sup>5</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 2006).
- <sup>6</sup> The play will be presented as part of the multidisciplinary festival *Les nourritures terrestres*, which will be held on May 22, 2020, in Saint-Jérôme. Gubash is currently debating whether or not he will play the part of the magician.
- <sup>7</sup> According to Agnès Pierron, the Grand-Guignol is "a theatre of horror and comedy that grew out of a theatre on a dead-end street off rue Chaptal, in the 9th arrondissement of Paris, between 1897 and 1962. It is traditionally a one-act play that assumes a particular form of condensed terror." See Philippe Adrien, Geneviève De Kermabob, Agnès Pierron, "Grand-peur et misère du Grand-Guignol", *Études théâtrales*, no. 44-45 (2009): 139.
- <sup>8</sup> Pierre-Michel Menger, *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur. Métamorphoses du capitalisme*, La République des idées, Seuil, 2003.
- <sup>9</sup> Christophe Ramaux, "Tous des saltimbanques (et fatalement précaires)", in *Mouvement*, 2003, no. 29, 151.
- <sup>10</sup> As an example, Gubash mentions the contradiction between the denunciation of the environmental crisis by some artists and the waste that is generated in the production of art that condemns this same crisis. Interview with the artist on January 7, 2020.

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