

ALBANIAN ARTIST UNITES MONTENEGRINS **Forbidden reality**

by Andrej NIKOLAIDIS

The trouble with conceptual art is that you cannot be sure whether something is a public toilet or an art installation until your art critic tells you. It is not clear whether a drunkard urinating in public is just that, or if it is a performance of a famous artist, until the organizers of the event in which an artist is performing by urinating tell you. But, that is the essence of conceptual art: since the painting has been sidestepped, knowing that it is obviously art, now we have to take the word of the critics who are able to tell the difference between urinating as a physiological need and urinating as an act of art. The line is obviously thin, and art critics are wise people worthy of admiration.

Cetinje is a town where nobody would stop drinking their morning coffee and their small chit chat even if a bomb were to fall in the middle of the town square. Thus, the town is an ideal setting for performances of conceptual artists. Oleg Kulik, for example, expresses himself artistically by raping dogs. He has put his arm into a cow's vagina and declared that to be art. The organizers of Cetinje Biennale did not hide their amazement with the ingenuity of his artistic concept—Kulik was invited to the Biennale, which was thought of as an event that takes the standards of expression in Montenegro further, and which turns Montenegro into a space that eagerly demonstrates how far artistic freedoms can go and how determined one has to be in defending them.

When reproductions of paintings splattered with feces were exhibited in the Biennale, we were authoritatively told that we are dealing with a work of art, and hence something that cannot be subject to censorship. From the very beginning, the Cetinje Biennale exhibited works that were very provocative. The story about artistic freedoms in Montenegro, it turns out, was only a theory. In reality, at the request of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the exhibition 'New Icon' was prohibited in 1997.

This conception of the Biennale was not betrayed this time round too. An artist from Prishtina, Albert Heta, exhibited his work: he transformed the Serbian Embassy building into an Embassy of the Republic of Kosova. The first to react were the Serbian political parties in Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church. According to them, Heta's work is an unprecedented scandal, 'a shame for Montenegro'. The priests said that most of the pieces of the Biennale were 'acts of insanity' and thereby made their opinion on contemporary art clear. Since the technique used in Heta's work is not scandalous, nor is the work visually beyond the conventional, it turns out that what is scandalous is that the Albanian flag waved in Montenegro, and that the author used what was once a Serbian Embassy to portray the existence of Kosova as an independent country.

His work, obviously, succeeded. What scandalized people was in fact, reality. Heta only broke through the Serbian line of self-deceit and made obvious what is patently undeniable: that the reality is that Kosova does exist, and that it is, in real terms, independent from Serbia. And that tomorrow, the building that once housed the Serbian Embassy can house the Kosovan Embassy.

But, the frontline of showing fury against reality was, surprisingly, strengthened by the acquiescence of the organizers of the Biennale. First they tried to explain what was already clear: that Heta's Kosovan Embassy is... a work of art. But since the 'shock' of the public would not diminish, the founder of the Biennale, Prince Nikola Petrovic, took it upon himself

to apologize to the Montenegrins about a reality that they cannot accept. He was, as he said, 'shocked' by Heta's work, as if what Heta did was to shoot a class of pupils in Cetinje and not show a piece of work, in which, by minimal interventions, he turned a building into something else. By doing that, the Prince showed that he is easy to shock—too easy for someone who stoically survived Kulik's rage on animals.

But if Kulik was to rape the animals with an Albanian banner flying high, the Prince would definitely be 'shocked'. The Prince publicly admitted that he was not in a situation to censor Heta's work. But Petar Cukovic had the chance to exercise censorship. After someone demolished Heta's work, and no one was 'shocked' by the fact that an artistic piece of work was vandalized, Petar Cukovic disqualified it with one of the most mindless censorship justifications of all time.

According to Cukovic, Heta's work was not removed because of the Albanian flag and because of the fact that the mention of the Kosovan Embassy made the Serb nationalists nervous. No, it was removed because Heta—listen to this—did not put a sign in front of his artistic work informing that it was a piece of art. It is the same as if you were to remove a painting from an exhibition because there is nothing under it saying that it is a painting. Or the same as if you banned a book from a library because it does not say novel on its covers. Or if you refuse to show a movie because the viewers might think it is reality.

Everything that happened around Heta's work is, indeed, a shame for Montenegro. But, it is a shame because of reasons totally different from those cited by furious Montenegrins, who are 'shocked' by the Embassy of Kosova. It is a shame because Heta's work brought to the surface the scale of deceit, lack of freedom and inequality existing in Montenegro. Reactions to Heta's work showed that elementary human stupidity in Montenegro is easily winning over human reason and freedoms. Heta tested our stupidity, primitivism and inability to accept a reality that goes against our wishes—the results are defeating for us. The confines of human stupidity are like the confines of space: unreachable. The Mayor of Cetinje, Aleksandar Aleksic, a liberal and by definition a defender of human rights, established that the Montenegrin Government is to blame for Heta's work, since it is 'sowing disarray amongst citizens' via the Kosovan Embassy.

In every town in Montenegro there is at least one building with the graffiti 'This is Serbia' written on it. You can hear the same slogan shouted in every Montenegrin square. Montenegrin sportsmen compete cheered on by Serbian flags with four S's. No one is shocked, even though these are not works of art and there are no information signs telling us about them. When the artist put an Albanian flag on the Serbian Embassy, he unleashed a hurricane of fury. One has to be corrupt to the core and not realize that the problem lies in the fact that it was an Albanian flag that was raised, and not a Serbian one. How come one can be raised any time and anywhere, while the other, if raised outside of the town of Ulqin, exposes the person who did it to being lynched.

In a society in which the public does not protest and intellectuals keep silent when thousands of throats in Herceg Novi shout 'kill and slay so that *Shiptar*¹ is no more', the public and the intellectuals are shocked by an Albanian flag on what was once a Serbian Embassy. In a society like that, there is no space for discussion on what is profane and what artistic. Here, we are still fighting for the mere survival of diversity.

¹ A derogative name for the Albanians used by Serbs.