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The Power of the Void

Speculative Realism and Artworks of Tomo Savić Gecan

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Certain artists have entered the adventure of search for emptiness preceding and following every act of life: human productive reproduction the society. In different historical periods, those artists – Savić Gecan included – have obsessively, persistently and dramatically confronted the powers of emptiness within social and cultural institutions, apparatuses and situations. Tomo Savić Gecan started investigating the empty at the time of artistic reflections following the eclectic postmodernism of the 1980s or, more precisely, at the time of the so-called art in the 'of culture.' Tomo Savić Gecan's works, installations and performances brought forth in this context even though they were with standard art production of that time. His production differs from practices based on media representations and performances referring to or rooted in and cultural conditions and circumstances. Gecan's work is different through displacement, absence, totalizing minimalism and exception from fictional contexts of ordinary life featuring unexpected instruments of intervention. This paper argues that Tomo Savić Gecan's artworks are based on the idea that the spectator's mind is oriented towards external objects. If such objects are empty, then they become indexing structures for mental constructions.

Keywords: Tomo Savić Gecan, power of emptiness, object-mind, index, installation, event, outside

1. Philosophical Remarks: Direct Experience

The foundation of my argument is the following: Tomo Savić Gecan's artworks are based on the idea that the spectator mind is oriented¹ towards external objects. If such objects are empty, then they become indexing structures for mental constructions.

Minimal changes in the outside² state of things. Transparent situations set up in the outside world of corporeal, sensuous existence. Minimal displacements between the visible and invisible events in the world of objects and spatial relationships invoke effects, intensities and consequences of disturbance. Disturbance is a means to a situation. Uncertainty regarding the stability of relationships between objects, spaces, time intervals and social functions. Creation of a sense of uncertainty and instability in the situations claimed by public institutions, mostly institutions of everyday life of culture: a gallery, a park, a museum, a shopping mall.

Instabilities cause contingent motion in undetermined directions. The relationship between motion and non-motion, the visible and the invisible acquire significance: invisible motion, conspicuous non-motion and a hint of a potential change. A change may cause a catastrophe, yet the catastrophe never happens, merely the minimal, almost neutral diversions, displacements and lapses from the *ordinary experienced reality* of normal life and standard perception.

The ordinary experienced reality is, in fact, a normal reality which consists of relationships between the incidental and perpetual with regard to as opposed to the visible and the invisible. The incidental is expected while the perpetual does not follow a pattern or a law. Rather, it comes from the mystery of the miraculous.³ Everything happens at *zero level* which suggests that nothing ever happened. However, although nothing is ever the same, it is as if everything remained the same. Contradictions lie in one's experience and contrasts in

**1996 St. Toma Gallery, Rovinj
Otok / Island, Dubrovnik**

Iron railings, of the type used as barriers between the pavement and the road were constructed. The railings were first exhibited in St. Toma gallery in Rovinj on a solo exhibition. In the second stage, the same railings were installed on the road in Dubrovnik in the primary function.

the feelings of one's position in the world. The world is uncertain and unstable.

Being uncertain about the primary and immediate human experience of existence (*Daßsein*). What is suggested is a sense of fear but not the fear itself. The absence of panic. A fear that comes not from something or someone, but from the uncertainty of the barely noticeable infinite possibilities of displacement and transformations of situations in the world as a whole or in the fragments of the world which are difficult to assemble. The displacement into an unknown situation which resembles a familiar one. The fear which is not grounded in the experience that verifies our knowledge of the mechanism of life's events.

The ordinary human everyday empiricism is subverted. This is not a panic fear or anxiety about the future but the uncertainty of the ability to grasp empirically what happens or happened in a specific time and place – in the here and now. An intricate web of the visible and invisible aspects, relationships, roles and functions discourages the observer/participant from relying on his/her verified experience and to rationalize, explain, and present events in an obvious way. Something is missing there and then, and what has been missing is an essential determinant for being in the world at that singular moment and that singular spot⁴.

A situation is set: displacements in space and time are nothing but tactical operations or performances. It is as if everything has its own in place while minor lapses render the order of the micro-world or the macro-world dangerous, almost detrimental to the awareness about the presence of the observer/participant in the world. An unmoti-

**1997 Dunaujvaros, Hungary, Institute of
Contemporary Art: Who by Fire # 1**

On the ground plan of the gallery a fictional mental space was drawn.

2000 Manifesta 3, Modern Gallery, Ljubljana

One of the walls invisibly moves and fills in the space.

vated event appears as a challenge to the ordinary, normal stability of the subject. What takes place escapes perception and conceals its cause. What actually occurs is the confounding of transparent relationships between causes, events and consequences in the observer's experience.

The essential and determining ignorance and inexperience lead the subject into a situation of fear, into an almost imperceptible isolation. An illusion of autism. Autism as a refuge from the dangers of the outside world. A metaphor of autism rather than a simulation of it. The world is alien to the subject, whoever he/she might be, does not accept it. The subject feels insecure in the situations created by the artist, that is, the interventions by Tomo Savić Gecan, which cause the subject to develop a sense of insecurity-incapability to use phantasm⁵ in order to situate, locate, determine or conceive human existence in relation to the outside world in the here and now.

There is no sacrifice, no heroic act, no nocturnal demons, no horror, no uncanny abjections,⁶ phantoms, in fact, there are no daily demons either and no sublime... What is performed is a relationship/situation consisting of a barely perceptible insecurity in one's own senses, and in the rationalization of available relationships between the experience of the senses and the acts of one's consciousness/body.

The situation is open and uncertain... Something lapses and in so doing indicates a void, a deferral (*différance*)⁷ or something that precedes language (*Ursprung*), something that does not conform to the rules of pragmatic daily operations among the people and for the people connected to the institutions of culture and society.

The thing (*das Ding*) which gives meaning to an event is absent. The situation is set through minimal displacements, lapses, recesses and deferrals, that is, through invisible or concealed causal bonds connecting what is normally not connected into a sequence of cause and consequence. It seems as if nothing happened: the neutrality is overwhelming. Yet, nothing is the same and indifference is replaced by a sense of fear which becomes confusion and, finally, a sensation of being afloat and dislocated from the world. Is the existence of the world at stake here?

A triumph of a performed indifferent abstraction in the world of habits, customs, normality, contract and, above all, visibility, transparency, and spectacularity.

2. *Aesthetic Remarks: Who, When and Where? The Fascination with Absence and the Void: The Anti-Metaphysics of the Real*

This is an essay about an artist who is concerned with creating absence or setting up a void in the world of objects and human relationships. He causes disturbances in the causal chain of events within the contemporary system of art, culture and life. He works with galleries, museums and other public spaces, which he uses for staging barely perceptible events, as zero-degree experiences.

I met Tomo Savić Gecan for the first time in February of 1997 in the Hungarian industrial town of *Dunaújváros*.⁸ At the town's Institute of Contemporary Art, he created a 'mental performance' based on an act of conscience which suggested the relocation of a gallery office into the space of the gallery itself. The act of conscience was indexed⁹ by marking the coordinates of the space that was relocated. The barely visible intentional operation is marked and promised in a suggestive way. Vision is subordinated to an act of imaginary rendering. The *Cognitive Event* is equivalent to spatial indexing,¹⁰ for example, the point 'S' was relocated and placed onto the point 'T'.

Tomo Savić Gecan is a Croatian-Dutch artist whose artistic practices were formed in the early and the mid-1990s. He appeared in the art scene of Zagreb together with a generation of young artists who showed 'cultural traces' as the media of their artistic work.¹¹ Gecan's work of that time differed essentially from that of the rest of the artists of his generation in that he performed events which belonged to the category of a radical, minimalist and aperceptive critical reductionism. He reduced the sensuousness of an artwork to the intentional indexing of its potentiality, and the intentionality of an artwork to the propositional indexing of interventions in the space, time and behaviour in the context of a gallery. Unlike the majority of Croatian neo-conceptualists of the mid 1990s who featured explicit cultural significations and their dissemination by means of the mass media of representation or consumption, Tomo Savić Gecan worked with isolated causes, imperceptible events, neutralized intensities, deferred consequences and elaborated indexations of the bearers of meaning within cultural institutions and their spatial-temporal situations.

**2001 20 years of the PM Gallery; House of Croatian Artist, Dubrovnik, Art Galler
2006 On Mobility, De Appel, Amsterdam**

Each gallery visitor sets the ticket price for the next visitor.

In other words, the media of Gecan's work are not cultural representations but spatial, temporal and behavioural phenomena experienced in the context of cultural institutions by the spectators, viewers or participants in a project. He explicitly engages with the *body/mind* models of situating events in the world of the senses as opposed to, or even going beyond, exaggerated sensuousness.

Many conceptual and phenomenal events that had to do with the 'absence' and the 'void' were developed during the twentieth century. These events were performed through deferral, displacement, discharging, distinction and indexing of the exclusivity of being here and now. In addition, they were characterized by the emphasis on the liminal-minimal presence, the rhetoric of emptiness, the perpetuity of the neutral, by the digression, appropriation, crossing out and the reduction of form, by the transformation of symbols into signs, and of signs into points of absence and deferral, that is, into mere signifiers. A signifier being:

... the signifier for which all the other signifiers represent the subject: that is to say, in the absence of this signifier, all the other signifiers represent nothing, since nothing is represented only for something else. What represents the subject for all other signifiers.¹²

The negative metaphysics of absence and void is a great challenge posed by the twentieth-century art to the dawning of the twenty-first century.

Marcel Duchamp elaborated on the concept of the readymade by referring to an aesthetic anaesthesia:

This choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good and bad taste... in fact a *complete* anaesthesia.¹³

By confronting white with white, Malevich advanced the idea of supremacy¹⁴ as a 'pure' experience of the *thing itself*, as if a painting had become an effect and the intensity of that effect. Ad Reinhardt¹⁵ ended his search for the ultimate limit of a painting and of painting as such, in the zone between the pictorial and the conceptual. Yves Klein reached beyond the appearance of material objects and attempted to present the void itself so that it can be experienced as an absence that is displayed in a spectacular way. Piero Manzoni centred the gaze on the traces of his human existence by exhibiting his own breath, fingerprints, canned excrement, inscriptions on a woman's body... The painter Julije Knifer depicted absence and void in an allegorical monotonous repetition of a sign which, through a denial of progress or development in painting, disclosed the power of the void: that what is

2003 Portal II, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel

1. a continuous registration of visitors movements
2. this registration will define changes in architecture elsewhere

beyond the visible. The American painter Robert Rym explored sequences of painting at a zero degree of pictorial writing – the white script of painting. Indexing the entropy of the soil, the geological strata or the layers of detritus, Robert Smithson indicated the visibility of disappearance. Entropy was a medium through which he recorded the worlds which vanished in the geological process of layering. Sol LeWitt provoked the visible world of modern art with conceptual fetishes of the invisible – he once wrote that ‘even a *blind man can make art*.¹⁶ The South African conceptual artist Ian Wilson instead of displaying the visual, offered a speech about the invisibility of linguistic narrative in the space of the gallery. Goran Trbuljak demonstrated that an institution was self-sufficient: a gallery can exist even without art, that is, an exhibition in a renowned gallery is more important than what is on display: anything can be put on display. Anish Kapoor sculpted an ancient Indian ‘habitat’ for the void that fills a space. Anna Mendieta performed an act of absence of her own body with regard to the location of potential presence, it was as if she located the ritual emptiness of the grave. Anthony Gormley recorded the traces of the body through his imprints in the solid material of the sculpture. Rachel Whiteread filled the emptiness of a house and underlined the void in architecture. Cindy Sherman repeated the rhetorical role of a pose and through this divested the display of her masked behavioural body of psychological motivation. In the last works before her death, Hannah Wilke attempted to grasp and reveal the visibility of the *void* of death. Vadim Fishkin connected his heartbeats to the light-emitting system of a lighthouse and through this outlined a thin border between the absence and presence of human existence. Felix Gonzales-Torres explored the expiration and termination in a body which escapes life through the loss of immunity and his work is marked by emptying the space of a gallery, depriving galleries of artworks and so on...

These are quite varied instances of the anticipation of effects – actions and intensities – from the absent and the void, to the deferred and the erased ... The multiplicity of the absent and the void was brought about in completely different contexts of painting, sculpture, per-

formance, that is, the corporeal, institutional, productive, meditative, activist, creative or destructive artistic practices of the long twentieth century.

3. *Ontological Remarks: Negative Ontology of Tomo Savić Gecan's Work*

What is absence? Or, rather, how does one represent or display the *void*?

A significant difference exists between what is represented and what is displayed and it requires further elaboration.

Absence is that which is not here. Absence is that which is not present. The *void*, however, is that which cannot be thought of! That which is neither here and now not there. That which is absent is that which is displaced. The void is that which does not contain anything. The void exists in the here and now but is without those things. Absence is that which is not here and this ‘not being here’ includes time, a time of deferral.

Questions about absence and the void are questions about the active illusion of a ‘negative core’ which lies at the heart of meaning. The concept of an ‘empty or absent core’, which is not subject to the laws of symbolization but which nonetheless regulates symbolization, was conceived through a reflection about the fragility of the *human subject* when it comes to shaping or living life and about humanity between the symbolic and the non-symbolic.

Can absence and the void be experienced and how?

The paradox of experience lies in the fact that experience is a product, a remnant, debris, a shaving, a trace of participation or compliance which acquires meaning through symbolization. What results from this is that symbolization is nothing but interpretation. Experience appears as a pre-remnant, a surplus which becomes part of culture only through symbolization: a surplus of a visible human life for other human lives. In contrast to this, experience itself escapes symbolization. An experience which is identified within a culture, however, remains the product of the very symbolization which situates it in human lives.

Nevertheless, the human world as a world of meaning is shaped around this ‘empty’ and ‘absent’ experience. It is a world of an endless supply of images – representations – which are saturated with meaning and which conceals their *true nature*. The *true nature* being the void and absence.

An example. The sensory externalization and display of accumulated horror caused by a destruction of ordinary human affairs manifested themselves in the real-time, that is, live media (TV, Internet) broadcasts about the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US or the 2004 tsunami disaster in southeast Asia, but also in the numerous me-

dia coverage and assessments of the genocides committed in Africa and Europe during the 1990s. These events shook the world not only because they were real but because they were almost instantly reported through audio-visual broadcasts and so brought the global audiences face to face with human tragedies and suffering. The idea of 'witnessing' was made real by representing the impossible experience of those who were involved directly *in* the catastrophe such as a crime or violence, through images and a meaningful interpretation which was generated by a symbolic order.

Historic accounts of floods, earthquakes or battles have always been mediated¹⁷. With live satellite and internet communication everything has become almost *here* and *now*, and present in a plausible way. In addition, new and all-encompassing media spectacles represent a specific tactic aimed at an instant processing of documentary footage which renders temporal and spatial distance relative. News about disasters in the previous centuries reached the interested audience, that is, members of a given culture with a delay. For instance, *Théodore Géricault painted The Raft of the Medusa* two to three years after the incident. The public saw it four years later. On the other hand, the broadcasts of the demolition of the World Trade Center or the tsunami reached us within a couple of hours, that is, almost instantly. A student from the Balkans recounted that his parents in Southeast Europe found out about the WTC attack before him even though he was on the New York subway just a few stops from the WTC. The new media spectacles compress time and space and combine fact and fiction into public, all-encompassing and in most cases broadcasted *events*.

Tomo Savić Gecan conceives experience as being imperceptible which is opposed to the spectacular nature of an *impossible experience* wrapped in meaning and sense. An imperceptible experience was part of his project *Untitled* (Utrecht – Zagreb, 2001) in which he linked two apparently unconnected events:

- 1) the entry of visitors to the exhibition *Common Ground* in the Gallery Begane Grond in Utrecht, and
- 2) the stopping of the escalators at the *Kaptol Centar* shopping mall in Zagreb¹⁸.

The performance established a relationship between two geographical points – cities – in Europe: Utrecht and Zagreb. There is no contingency between the events at these two points; therefore, there is no chain of events, such as the situation 'W' in Utrecht caused an event 'Y', that is a change somewhere in Zagreb. Instead, the artist established an artificial relationship between the two cities characterized by an impossible and absurd contingency. A motion taking place in space 'W' causes a mo-

tion in space 'Y'. What goes on cannot be seen or empirically apprehended. Two completely separate events. The two events cannot be connected with each other through the experience of the people who came for an exhibition launch in Utrecht or in of the people who went shopping in a mall at Zagreb. The two events became connected only through the external intervention of the artist who established the possibility for the contingency between 'W' and 'Y'. The artist's intervention connected the event 'W' in Utrecht with the event 'Y' in Zagreb by means of a technical hardware/software relationship. It emerged as a performance and a performed relationship between the two geographical locations and cultural venues. Without this intervention-as-event and event-as-potential-interpretation, the relationship between 'W' and 'Y' was unrepresentable. The artist consciously claimed, that is, occupied the space of the missing contingency, and by this, informed us that something happened to someone else. Yet, that someone cannot grasp from his or her own experience what happened to his or her there and then.

Now, imagine an analogous story, almost a fairy tale!

There is a girl or a boy, let's say, a boy who lives somewhere in Northern Europe. He decided to work hard for the whole year, for example in a bank, to be able to fulfil his dream. He works every day, seven days a week. He works extra hours and weekends. He puts aside every cent he has saved. He knows that this is for what he wants the most. He wants a summer holiday on a faraway warm seashore on the other side of the world. He wants freedom. He wants to be alone somewhere far away. The day has finally come: the 'D-Day'! His agency booked a two-week vacation in a top-class, five-star hotel on an anonymous island. The endless sandy beaches, the mesmerizing sea, the... He daydreams of a faraway beach at the end of the world. He takes a non-stop, twelve-hour flight. He snoozes, sips a cocktail, chats with the stewardesses. He closes and then opens his eyes and sees the palm trees on the island of happiness. He is relaxed. He is content. He reaches the island. A hotel cabby meets him at the airport and drives him along the seaside. The endless ocean, the palm trees and elephants on the other side. The scent of freedom. His suite overlooks the

2004 Isabella Bortolozzi Gallery, Berlin

The passing of visitors during the Portal 2 exhibition in Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel (XII 2003-II 2004) causes small changes in the architecture in Isabella Bortolozzi Gallery, Berlin (XI 2004-I 2005).

2005 La Biennale di Venezia, Venezia

During the 51. Biennale di Venezia visitors to W139 Center for Contemporary Art in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, change the temperature of the water in the Spordiklubi Reval-Sport in Tallinn, Estonia by 1°C.

ocean. He takes a shower, puts on a new shirt and white linen trousers. He sits at a hotel terrace bar, slowly sipping a colourful cocktail. This is *the real thing*. Dancing all night at the club just for himself, he feels other people's gazes on his dancing body. This night is his only, he does not want other nights and does not want to share this night with others. It is as if he has never worked in that bloody bank. Afterwards he falls into a deep sleep until the morning. Twittering birds and the sound of the waves wake him. He goes to the beach before breakfast, runs across the sand and lies on his towel. The warm breeze caresses his face, his shoulders, his chest... his body. He feels the morning sun. He closes his eyes and stretches. He opens his eyes, looks at the open sea and spots something unusual. An enormous black wave is approaching the shore. The wave consumes *everything*, the sky is heavy and dark, and everything is gone. A few minutes later, someone in the other end of the world, reads on the internet that a tsunami has caused a fatal disaster. He or she reads that there are no survivors on some islands. That some islands are no longer there.

There is no contingency between his arrival on the paradise island and the tsunami. There is no such thing as a causal chain of events which connects the wave and his stay on the island. The word 'fate' does not account for anything. A gap in the symbolic order has emerged: a void, an absence that cannot be symbolized. The impossible has happened and it escape the comprehension of the protagonist of the event. His experience is erased instantly. The 'nothingness' has been anchored in a fatal way.

The analogy between Tomo Savić Gecan's work *Untitled* (Utrecht – Zagreb) and this tragic narrative does not lie in the degree of the tragic or the absurd but in the determining role of the 'nothingness' which, through its absence, that is, through its essential emptiness, controls something that happens here and now.

What remains is culture as investigation and interpretation. Investigation leads to interpretation and interpretation leads to knowledge about what has happened and why it has happened. However, the 'why' remains unanswered in both cases. Was it the wish of the artist or fate (or an act of God, the Devil, supernatural forces)? And, whose knowledge is at stake? The knowledge of the sub-

ject participating in an event or the subjects who claim or acquire the role of 'external others', those who learn about something that has happened to someone else in a specific time and place by investigating. The reality of their respective experiences lacks the symbolic representation of the one who experienced the actual event... To him or her, this is the inconceivable emptiness (death, madness, fear, confusion, disorientation, inertia, neglect, random stopping of the escalators).

Symbolic representation acquires meaning only in the eyes of the subject outside the event who, by his or her intricacies of symbolization represents, interprets, grasps or even experiences something that does not have a necessary mode of symbolization to the person who found himself or herself at a particular moment in time surrounded by nothingness of experience. It is as if there is no difference between the boy in the story and a casual visitor to the exhibition in Utrecht or the shopping mall in Zagreb: what happened, what they experienced – the pain and death in the wave or the stopping of the escalators in the shopping centre – was not symbolically understood. The answer to the question 'What happened there?' is missing. Those of us who know the story about the flood in the Bible or Gecan's project connecting Utrecht and Zagreb were not there to experience it. That is the contradiction of experience. That is the central focus of Gecan's work. Cause, consequence and knowledge of a performed act are not in harmony and they cannot be communicated. They have to be materialized in representations which are comprehensive to others, that is, someone who is outside an art work and engaged in the transforming situation, that is, the events underpinning Gecan's artistic practice.

4. Cultural/Metaphysical Remarks: The Consumption of Forms of Life

Contemporary culture features short circuits or corridors between art and culture. It features movements which transform art into culture and penetrate the world of its effects. Those are the productions, multiplications, exchange-

2007 Galerija PM, Julie Knifer: Power of emptiness

The glazed areas that made it impossible for visitors freely to circulate in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb during the exhibition *Here Tomorrow*, 2002, have been transformed into drinking glasses.

es, consumptions, uses, applications as well as pleasures relating to the ‘appearance of meaning’ in art as an artefact of the ordinary. These are the acts, deeds, behaviours or interventions which incorporate culture into art and, vice versa, which incorporate art into the everyday procedures and events of culture, that is, of human life.

This is the situation in which art finds itself in the age of confusion: today, at the beginning of the twenty first century, art lies beyond recognizable contextualization of trends, styles, manners, movements, tendencies or various media types. Contemporary art creates performances within the chaotic, accelerated and incomprehensible art phenomena in the open field of new media and performance practices.

Tomo Savić Gecan’s works, installations and performances have been produced in this context but at the same time, they are incompatible with the regular productions of art in the so-called age of culture. His productions differ from the practices based on media representations and performed documents¹⁹ on or out of social and cultural conditions and circumstances. Gecan’s work is different through its displacement and absence, a totalizing minimalism and exception from the fictional context of ordinary life in which they appear as unexpected and intervening instruments.

Tomo Savić Gecan is an artist who appears to go behind the *screen of everyday reality*. This ‘magic’ eeriness is intensified by the Duchamp-like unaesthetic rhetoric and critical effect of the spatial situation on the spectator/accomplice/participant. What is it all about?

In an age of cultural hegemony, Tomo Savić Gecan as an artist deals with isolated effects, affectations, attractions and consequences of the artificial world that composes our contemporary, daily, unnatural way of life. His artistic acts remain outside the autonomy of art although his starting point is the context of artistic and cultural institutions. He does not have a closed and defined space of artistic practice that has been legitimized because every cultural space belongs to the world as its media sample. The space of an intervention can be:

- a fictional-mental space inscribed in a gallery (*Dunaujváros*),
- a behavioural space of motion indexed by the displaced metal railings installed on a road (*Dubrovnik*),
- the space of a Sport Hall (Zagreb),
- the space of elevators in a shopping mall (Zagreb),
- the space disturbed by the absence of shop windows (Brussels)
- the space disappearing behind sliding walls (Ljubljana)

However, each of his interventions is based on a strong conceptual charge-effect and on the minimal

visual intervention; each is conceived merely as a *trigger* for challenging mental determinism. Mental as corporeal. Gecan’s minimized visual, spatial or material world affects the body and the mind of the observer. The observer discovers himself in the midst of an event which he or she cannot grasp as a whole or determine by meaning or experience.

In addition, the observer finds himself or herself caught in a trap of a missing cause and, as a consequence, becomes aware that this absence is *the* artwork itself. The absence of a recognizable cause as an artwork represents the phenomenalization of mental imagery within a specific cultural context. What happens to the observer is something that escapes symbolization, something that occurs as an effluvial stage of the artwork²⁰ or a situation pertaining to a relational²¹ aesthetics of contemporary art.

Tomo Savić Gecan is an artist who confronts the observer with the void or an event appearing as a non-event, albeit through minimal phenomenologies which emerge and unfold in the human world. Various interventions inside the institutions of contemporary art, culture and society are performed in order to demonstrate that the *zero degree* is not an accomplished modernist reduction residing in the autonomy of artistic and aesthetical space. In contrast, the *zero degree* is an active subversive cultural act – a symptom – in which the body of the observer is structured and re-structured in new and unexpected moves through environmental samples accommodated by the artist in the institutions of culture and everyday life. Tomo Savić Gecan does this in museums, galleries, art magazines, shopping malls, parks, sport halls, city walks, human situations and so on.

symbolization

intervention

performativity

abstract knowledge
as event

involvement in life
action in space and time

**symptom
at the zero degree**

Tomo Savić Gecan's art productions

Philosophical Remarks: Contradictions of the Visible and the Invisible

Tomo Savić Gecan conceives his spatial and *situational* performances as the opposites to the spectacle.

He starts from the premise that our age favours events over visible relationships between different kinds of objects.

He demonstrates that the illusion of existence does not come from the narrative or signifying power of the image to imitate the real world or construct a potential fictional one. He demonstrates that the material illusion of an intervention comes from a minimal intervention-event in the world of the normal and the customary. The illusion prompted by his work comes from the almost imperceptible changes of ordinary normal conditions, that is, the relationships between objects, space, time and human common-sense primary experience.

He subverts the ideology of the spectacle, rendering the invisible as visible and omnipresent in the interest of capital, power, public opinion, stability of the subject and so on. Tomo Savić Gecan confronts the observer and through him or her as an instrument which shows something or the absence of something in an event, he confronts himself with visibility which vanishes through invisible changes, voids, deferrals or incongruities of causal chains. What is accomplished through these actions is the loss of stability, normality, or regularity of the normal world of the habitual and the ordinary. Human relationships become the effects of incomplete, normal human lives which are sliding towards the edge. Not a grand drama, but a minimal impalpable intervention in the world has made it endangered, rendering life questionable and social relationships fragile. Nevertheless, what appears as fragility is not a grand narrative, but an almost imponderable change in situations, something that escapes the regular order of things.

Tomo Savić Gecan employs a tactic that is similar to the one used by the directors of the *X-Files*²². Of course, the similarities are not obvious on the narrative level but in the mechanism which invokes a minimal intervention in the order of a symbolically situated reality which instantly and unexpectedly becomes the cause of questions, confusion, displacements and even disasters. Interventions he introduces into the order of the world do not look like interventions. The transformation with which Gecan intervenes belongs to the order below the threshold of expectations. No accumulation of meaning, a sum total of meaning or a demonstration of visible power can rationalize such an intervention.

Reducing the format of a magazine by 1 mm, changing the temperature by 1 degree or phoning the members

of an audience who attended an exhibition five years ago escape the basic common-sense practicality and rationality of human activity which is nowadays so closely connected with the spectacular which consist not only of a simple combination of images but includes the social relationships between individuals which are mediated through images. The image disappears. It is not dematerialized as in the conceptual art²³ but converges with the minimal level of materiality the transience of which escapes the scope of our attention.

That level – the thin layer of the existence of reality – is the true medium of Gecan's interventions in space, time, human behaviour and in public institutions of culture and art. That thin layer of reality puts the subject in an awkward position. Something has happened and that which has happened changed the world. The world is completely changed and, yet, it is as if nothing has happened. Causes are invisible, connections are unmotivated, interventions are opaque. The dichotomy 'has happened – has not happened' is the one and only true dramaturgy of Gecan's interventions aimed against the spectacle and hegemony of the visible, becoming, as is the case with all modern and postmodern spectacles, a kind of a cage, a ban or a barrier which situates human life in a captivity that is explained and demonstrated in a rational way.

2011 Witte de With "Melanchotopia"

With each passenger who takes a particular taxi in Rotterdam, the level of humidity in the exhibition space changes.

2011 Witte de With "Melanchotopia"

Every change in temperature in the city of Rotterdam causes one of the spaces in Witte de With to open and close.

2011 Witte de With "Melanchotopia"

With every phone call to the office of the curators of Melanchotopia, the light level in the exhibition space varies.

2011 Witte de With "Melanchotopia"

The temperature in the exhibition space is influenced by the movement of the people in the Berlage Institute.

Tomo Savić Gecan works with that which cannot be made into a spectacle but can be demonstrated as the sheer neutrality, a pure event, a loss, an inscription of the void into the void:

The human being poses the day as such, and the day thereby becomes the presence of the day – against a background that is not a background of concrete night-time, but of possible absence of daytime, where the night dwells, and *vice versa* moreover²⁴.

All this means that the vision of the world which is objectified through the spectacle is no longer credible

and does not refer to that which a subject can rely on when establishing relationships with other subjects. The image has vanished in the event. All of that is almost imperceptible, neutral and escapes our senses. This escape unfolds in the middle of a conspiracy theory. The artist stages and performs his conspiracy theories. This escape is the essence of Tomo Savić Gecan's art: it is at the same time the performance of his art and its intensity and through them it becomes an affect.

Translated by Irena Šentevska

Bilješke

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- ³ Giles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 2.
- ⁴ Gilles Deleuze, "Immanence: A Life", in *Pure Immanence – Essays on a Life*, (ed. John Reichman), Zone Books, New York, 2001, pp. 25-33.
- ⁵ Giorgio Agamben, "The Lost Object", in *Stanzas – Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis – London, 1993, pp. 19-21.
- ⁶ *Abject Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1993; Mladen Dolar, *Das Unheimliche*, Analecta, Ljubljana, 1994.
- ⁷ Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, Seuil, Paris, 1967.
- ⁸ Exhibition *Who by Fire #1*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Dunaújváros, 1997.
- ⁹ Rosalind Krauss, "The Notes on the Index: Part 1" and "The Notes on the Index: Part 2", in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, London, 1985, pp. 196-209 and 210-219.
- ¹⁰ Rosalind Krauss: 'By index I mean that type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples', pp. 211.
- ¹¹ *Here Tomorrow*, (ed. Roxana Marcoci), Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 2002.
- ¹² Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the Freudian unconscious", in *Écrit. A Selections*, Routledge, London, 2001, pp. 242.
- ¹³ Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of Readymades", *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, (eds. Michel Sanouillet, Elmer Peterson), Thames and Hudson, London, 1975, pp. 141-142.
- ¹⁴ Kazimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, Paul Theobald, Chicago, 1959, p. 67.
- ¹⁵ Barbara Rose (ed), *Art as Art; The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991.
- ¹⁶ Lucy R. Lippard, "Sol LeWitt: Nonvisual Structures", in *Changing - Essays in Art Criticism*, A Dutton Paperback, New York, 1971, p. 160.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, the account of the Flood by the British author Julian Barnes (Chapter 1 – The Stowaway), in *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1989.
- ¹⁸ Production: Begane Grond, Utrecht. Realization: Ljudmila, Ljubljana & Poligon, Zagreb.
- ¹⁹ Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation", in *Art Power*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2008, pp. 53-65.
- ²⁰ Yves Michaud, *L'art à l'état gazeux: essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique*, Hachette Littérature, 2004. See: Yves Michaud, "Suvremena umjetnost u post-postu", in *Umjetnost u plinovitu stanju. Esej o trijumfu estetike*, Ljevak, Zagreb, 2004, p. 80.
- ²¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas, "Relational aesthetics and random materialism", in *Relational Aesthetics*, Presses du réel, Paris, 2002, pp. 18-24.
- ²² *The X-Files* is a Peabody, Golden Globe and Emmy Award-winning American science-fiction television series, created by Chris Carter, which first aired in 1993 and ended in 2002. The show was a hit for the Fox network and its characters and slogans (for example, 'The Truth Is Out There', 'Trust No One', 'I Want to Believe') became the touchstones of pop culture in the 1990s. Seen as a defining series of its era, *The X-Files* tapped into the public mistrust of governments and large institutions and embraced conspiracy theories and spirituality while focusing on efforts to uncover the existence of extraterrestrial life. *The X-Files* also spawned two theatrical movies and one TV spin-off, *The Lone Gunmen*.
- ²³ Lucy R. Lippard, "Preface", in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Studio Vista, London, 1973, pp. 5-9.
- ²⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses – Book 3: 1955-1956*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997, p. 141.

Sažetak

Moć praznine

Spekulativni realizam i umjetnički radovi Tome Savića Gecana

Fundamentalna teza moje rasprave glasi: djela Tome Savića Gecana su zasnovana na konceptu da je um promatrača orijentiran ka vanjskim predmetima. Ako su vanjski predmeti prazni, tada su oni indeksne strukture za mentalne konstrukcije.

Tomo Savić Gecan je hrvatsko-holandski umjetnik čija se umjetnička praksa formirala početkom i sredinom devedesetih godina dvadesetog stoljeća. On se pojavio na zagrebačkoj umjetničkoj sceni s tada mladim umjetnicima koji otkrivaju kulturalne tragove kao mediji svog umjetničkog rada. Njegov rad se tada bitno razlikovao od ostalih umjetnika njegove generacije po tome što je izvodio događaje radikalnog minimalističkog i apercetivno kritičkog redukcionizma. Reducirao je čulnost umjetničkog djela na intencionalno indeksiranje potencijalnosti umjetničkog djela na popozicijsko-indeksne intervencije u prostoru, vremenu i ponašanju unutar, najčešće galerijskog života. Dok se većina umjetnika hrvatskoga neokonceptualizma sredinom devedesetih godina bavila eksplicitnim kulturalnim značenjima i njihovim distribucijama posredstvom masovnih medija prikazivanja ili potrošnje, Tomo Savić Gecan je radio s izoliranim uzrocima, neprimjetnim događajima, ne-

utraliziranim intenzitetima, odloženim posljedicama i razrađenim indeksacijama nositelja značenja unutar kulturalnih institucija i njihovih prostorno-vremenskih situacija u ljudskom životu. Drugim riječima, postmediji umjetničkih radova Tome Savića Gecana nisu kulturalne reprezentacije, već prostorne, vremenske i bihevioralne pojavnosti kulturalnih institucija u odnosu na tijelo/ponašanje promatrača, gledatelja ili sudionika u projektu. On je eksplicitno radio s body/mind modelima situiranja događaja u čulni svijet nasuprot ili izvan naglašene čulnosti. Mnogostruki konceptualni i čulno-pojavni događaji odsutnosti i praznine u umjetnost su se odigravali tijekom dugog dvadesetog stoljeća. Ti događaji su se izvodili odlaganjem, premještanjem pražnjenjem, razlučivanjem te indeksiranjem izuzetnosti bivanja tu i tada. Ali, izvođeni su i isticanjem granične-minimalne prisutnosti, retoričnošću praznog, ponovljivošću neutralnog, odstupanjem, oduzimanjem precrtavanjem, redukcijom oblika, preobražajem simbola u znak i znaka u mjesto odsutnosti i odlaganja, tj. u sam označitelj.

Ključne riječi: Tomo Savić Gecan, snaga praznine, object-mind, instalacija, indeks, događaj, izvan