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DAMNJAN: ART IDENTIFIED WITH THE ARTIST'S EXISTENCE

For his solo exhibition at the ULUS [The Association of Fine Artists of Serbia] Gallery, Damnjan has singled out four chapters from his opus of several decades: a selection from the series *Interventions*, 1972, first shown at an exhibition held at the Gallery of the Students' Cultural Centre in 1973, and three selections not exhibited in Belgrade until now, such as *Brushstrokes* (Pennellate), works from the series *A False Manzoni* (Un falso Manzoni) and a selection from the series *Greetings from Peking* (Saluti da Pekino), considering that at this particular moment he will present his current artistic preoccupations most appropriately through precisely such a selection of the three last segments of his opus.

The work *Interventions*, using printed forms made for administrative purposes, was created at a time when, in the context of introducing new technologies in the artistic practices of the 1970's, the following very significant question was raised as a matter of principle: can the drawing as a manual discipline survive in such a context? Offering this work of his as an example, Damnjan answers the above question resolutely in the affirmative: of course it can, provided that conceptual and mental decisions replace the technical skill and the routine of drawing some real or imaginary objectual motif. In order to prove this in practice, Damnjan took several printed forms as ready-mades of sorts, left the first one as he found it, introducing into the structure of the other ones barely visible and perceptible straight lines made using India ink and a ruler, thus effecting a shift from non-artistic material to a work bearing the author's signature and the seal of a confirmed status of "verified artistic value". The connotations of this operation are multisemantic. At the level of internal artistic language, what was performed was an operation of transforming a work of art from the status of a ready-made to the status of an entirely innovative treatment of the discipline of the drawing; at the

level of sociological, even political reading and interpretation of the meaning of this work, it is a subversive gesture through which the artist, as a free person, confers upon himself the right of emphasising the priority of art over and above all the established bureaucratic and other real or potential restrictions of the behaviour of individual human beings in all contemporary social and political systems.

If Damnjan had performed his *Brushstrokes* (Pennellate) on a canvas, it would be entirely justified to speak of works realised using the technique of painting, as was the case with his primary and elementary pictures from the 1970's. But since these *Brushstrokes*, verified by the author's signature and authorial seal, have filled numerous pages of notebooks and drawing pads of various dimensions, this gives rise to the question of which artistic category these works actually belong to. The expected answer to this question should be: they belong to the category of the authorial "artist's book", in other words, a unique book as a specific work of art. However, let us allow the following hypothesis: instead of books, maybe these are still pictures, only no longer those created using a brush on canvas and mounted on a wall, but pictures created using the notebook format, which the viewer holds in his/her hands and examines leafing through the pages of the notebook. What is at work here, then, is pondering and presenting in practical terms what a contemporary picture can look like if it does not adhere *de rigueur* to the customary and standard object of a picture as an enframed canvas. The thesis that these notebooks could be pictures of sorts is supported by the artist's testimonies concerning the manner and materials used in the process of their realisation. For, the act of painting was really applied, that is, working with painterly brushes of various sizes, as well as working with the colour matter of diverse colouristic characteristics, whereas what was introduced in the actual painterly process was the time that is to elapse from the moment of spreading a layer of entirely fresh colour, through its gradual drying to the final and closing stage of the book as a picture or the picture as a book, in the ambiguous status of an art work "verified" by the artist's signature and seal. What was performed, then, was an operation

through which Damnjan confirmed his continued preoccupation with the issues of displacing the status of a work of art outside the conventions of the basic and standard fine arts disciplines. If, that is, a drawing and the act of drawing can be a process of conducting interventions on printed forms, why could not a painting and the act of painting be realised and presented in the external form of a drawing pad and a notebook?

As far back as 1976, that is, long before the frequent use, in the 1980's, of the methods of "citation", "appropriation", "repetition with differences", legitimate "copies", even verified "forgeries", all within the framework of legitimate artistic understandings of the epoch of postmodernism, Damnjan realised a succession of "False De Chiricos" (*Un Falso De Chirico*) and "False Carràs" (*Un falso Carrà*), only to recently dedicate himself to realising "False Manzoni's" (*Un falso Manzoni*). Piero Manzoni (1933-1963), who died aged thirty, is today a major name of Italian, European and world art. Manzoni's boxes containing "Artist's Shit" (*Merda d'artista*) and boiled eggs, representing "edible sculptures" (*Sculture da mangiare*) within the framework of the concept of "Consumption of art" (*Consumazione dell'arte*), are just some of this artist's extremely provocative gestures following in the footsteps of Duchamp's view of the nature of art. Damnjan was attracted to Manzoni as much on account of respecting his specific contributions to art as due to the fact that, by "producing forgeries of Manzoni", he himself could initiate a succession of debatable and controversial issues pertaining to the functioning of the contemporary institutional and market system of art. But in order to make his own strategy more efficient, Damnjan had to perform a number of very sophisticated operations – such as making putative eggs of wood, wooden boxes wherein such eggs were placed, which were done by expert assistants – so as to guarantee, by means of the authorial seal instead of his own signature, the validity of this entire undertaking dedicated to a re-examination of the relationship between the original work and its subsequent simulacrum. Owing to such an operation, the work of an artist deceased long ago such as Manzoni,

even though highly rated historically but rare in physical terms, has been brought back to the contemporary art scene, not only in the form of replicas faithful to the originals, but first of all through Damnjan's authentic newly created art works, not Manzoni's. The works dealing with the theme of the relationship between Manzoni and Damnjan are supplemented by the series entitled "Manzoni's Right Thumb" (*Pollice destro di Manzoni*), which constitutes a reference to the issue of the artist's signature as a mark and guarantee of the authenticity of the authorship of a work of art, in this case more primary than that one bearing the inscription of the artist's name and surname.

While in *Interventions*, *Brushstrokes* and forgeries based on works by other artists he dealt with internal linguistic problems and the ways of participating within "the system of art", in the segment of the exhibition entitled *Greetings from Peking* Damnjan turned to contents outside the sphere of art in the acts of appropriating and artistically modifying messages expanded through the mediation of mass media. Namely, he selects front or inside pages of foreign or domestic daily papers, cuts them out and glues them onto cardboard, verifies them using authorial seals, draws stylised stereotyped faces with recognisable racial characteristics on the margins, using all those interventions to react to numerous alarming current social and political news items, featured in the media almost on a daily basis. The selection of those contents appears to balance on a borderline between possible open options: are they to be interpreted as an expression of the author's subjective preferences, or as his acts of objectively pointing out the role of the mass media, which, by continuously presenting ideologically slanted data and conclusions, saturate the surroundings they operate in? Whichever of these options is the true one, through this segment of his exhibition Damnjan expresses his conviction that dealing with art today and everywhere cannot, and quite simply must not, be fenced off and limited only by internal linguistic matters, but should open to references of everyday historical reality, and in doing so should find ways of formulating and imparting such references using methods available to the artist.

Through the selected thematic segments of this exhibition of his, Damnjan once again verifies and expands the scope of the artistic problems that have preoccupied him lately. In the Serbian art of the early 1960's and later, Damnjan opened up a succession of problematic areas, proceeding from a unified notion of the landscapes of *Sandy Beaches* and *Sunken Cities*, through minimalist painting, entering the sphere of diverse methods of the new artistic practices of the 1970's with performances, the use of the media of photography, short film and video, primary and analytical painting and drawing, producing authorial copies based on pictures made by pioneers of modern art, to his particularly specific "body painting", applied to his own face and the faces and bodies of others, still lifes with painted real bottles as adjusted found objects of sorts, large-format paintings whose entire two-dimensional surface, completely homogenised, is covered solely by countless brushstrokes and spreads of colour, performances in front of an audience in the course of which he conducts the process of painting using giant brushes on canvases placed directly on the ground, or creating entire assemblages made of piles of fresh edible fruit and vegetables, which are covered with coloured dust towards the end of the performance... From then to the present day, owing to numerous exhibitions in our country and abroad – participating in Kassel's *Dokumenta* and the Biennials in São Paulo and Tokyo, and on two occasions in Venice – and also to domestic and international awards, and a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1986, he has long been recognised as one of the key protagonists of contemporary Serbian art. But all of that has never prevented him from constantly testing the further potential of his imagination and the ability to apply numerous operative procedures, previously untried. Moreover, this classic who does not want to be one and who feels like an alternative artist of sorts in relation to his own historical status, instead of carefully preserving what he has already achieved, constantly takes risks anew by facing uncertain and endless challenges. But it is precisely because of this that Damnjan appears to be so much of a role model, at least to those who, just like him, consider that even today – as at

the time of and in keeping with the ideational heritage of radical modernism and historical avant-gardes – the vocation of an artist and dealing with art may be fulfilled only through a total identification of art and everyday existence.