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ART IS CREATIVITY. BUT IT IS ALSO AN INSTITUTION. AND EVERY INSTITUTION IS POWER

Mara Ambrožič Verderber in conversation with Patricija Maličev. The interview was published in the Saturday Supplement of the *Delo* newspaper (November 18, 2024, pp. 24-27).

Four years ago, you took over the position of director of the Piran Coastal Galleries. You came from abroad with a wealth of experience and knowledge. What has happened since then?

● In 2020, when I was still raising my baby, I saw in the *Primorske novice* newspaper that a call for a director of the public institute the Piran Coastal Galleries was open for approximately one week. I applied in September 2020, right after the pandemic lock-down, when we couldn't go anywhere. I was very happy and, of course, also satisfied that the Municipality of Piran offered me the position at that time. In the first year, I was also very dedicated and engaged in getting to know the internal dynamics, local specifics, and problems of the area of Slovenian Istria, where I have been leading the institute for four full years now. In the very first year, we outlined the long-term development of the institution, which we are carrying out together with local communities, including the founding Municipality of Piran and the Municipality of Koper, and with the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia. The institution also reflects its goals, which have an national and international context, because the Piran Coastal Galleries is primarily financed by the Ministry of Culture, and having been designated a provincial national museum of the fine arts, serves the public cultural interest by implementing cultural activities in the area of the Republic of Slovenia and beyond.

With what goals?

● The continuation and historical upgrade of those goals that those who came before me set as the fundamental pillars of this art institution – and here I am thinking, above all, of Toni Biloslav,

without whom the OGP would not exist. The goals we are implementing are connected with global trends, placing Slovenian artists of local and national importance in a new artistic panorama and enhancing purchases for the OGP's public collection, establishing a digital connection with the world, networking with domestic intelligentsia abroad, and supporting young talents and the so-called 'middle generation,' as well as those who have something to say. We do all of this with the aim of helping our cultural environment and institutions succeed in presenting art in an insightful way, as a critical field that helps people think about hope, about inner beauty, and about facing fundamental existential dilemmas.

The propulsive moment of art is precisely the one that reminds us that we need to delve deeper into matters and that the local environment, just like world politics, can be a very dangerous place if we do not confront certain issues in an open and transparent way, in the form of conferences, public discussions and meetings. Achieving a higher level of cultivated dialogue is very important for our space, as is the balance between 'old' and 'new.'

To this end, in recent years, the institute has developed a rich andragogic programme of exhibitions, that is, for older and adult audiences, as well as for professional audiences and, of course, also a programme aimed at the younger generations and the very youngest. These are open events that explain what culture and art are today and why we urgently need an effective, pragmatic, and high-quality transformation of the central cultural institutions in the Republic of Slovenia. The accessibility, openness, and flexibility of an institution is not only a question of infrastructural capacity, but is manifested externally in the prism of a different production model, one which must be advanced in accordance with the 21st century.

You mentioned historical time and the life and creation of artists. A few days ago, I saw a Slovenian fine artist on social media who by selling her works and soliciting donations was trying to raise 25,000 euros, which she has to pay in order not to be evicted from her apartment. Then there are our guest artists who have been living abroad for a long time, representing Slovenia without it doing anything special for them, such as Tobias Putrih and Jasmina Cibic. As a rule, they, and everyone else these days, prepare an exhibition with ready-made products, apparently this "bring what you already have" is now quite popular. Of course, the biggest problem is the financial side, that they receive almost nothing in payment.

● It is in this sense that we at OGP have launched collaborations and are planning (new) productions with the diasporic, dispersed structure of our cultural intelligence around the world. Support for artists in the implementation of new productions must always be clear from the point of view of the management of the institution, be it a regional or national institution. Those who have quality content and also have a certain mileage behind them should be given the opportunity to engage at the highest level. Every co-production, every collaboration, which requires a high level of professional skill in weaving and connecting different agendas and contacts, also represents a step towards a more sustainable solution to challenges, in a financial sense, as well.

What does that mean?

● The additional funds obtained for co-productions are used for the comprehensive implementation of a given project, which means professional support for artists, for critics, for artists' assistants, for covering expenses, and also for administrative work, promotion, and the design side. The benefits of this financial support can ultimately be seen in

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the learned know-how it brings, which will later serve other future art projects. Synchronous connections open up possibilities for obtaining information about the resources available in other grant tenders. The conditions, or infrastructure, if you like, established in this way also create opportunities for other creators, who initially enjoy perhaps only marginal benefits from such collaboration, but in the second phase, the effects of a well-prepared co-production later strengthen one's understanding of the importance of art in its socio-economic dimension. And also in terms of the fees and production funds involved.

Being locked into a certain narrow reality that operates under the guise of short- or medium-term wishes, imagined or actual attempts at playing politics, can be harmful for everyone.

If artists are supposed to be the first to detect the most troublesome friction points in society, often in a visionary way, how should the state, its institutions as stakeholders of culture and art, act towards them?

● It is common knowledge that art is also a mirror of society. Institutions help the general public to see and understand these friction points. Creating a balance between artists and cultural workers, the social factory of cultural workers in the social space, and the internal/external reality of institutions, is a great challenge, but this is the only way to strengthen solidarity between different actors and, at the same time, draw attention to anomalies in the system.

When the situation is reviewed in a given context and critical points are identified – each context naturally has its own specifics – an implementation plan is drawn up. It is then necessary to start with a search for consensus, not only with employees or with politics, but with artists, individuals, and other auxiliary partners who form the wider cultural and economic life.

This complex cooperation that I have described, which takes place over time and is built up over many years, especially in smaller communities, because every new position and vision provokes resistance, or even attacks. Outside the centre it is simply more difficult to include new stakeholders and visions. But there is no future without them. A circle of people opens up and establishes so-called cultural networking, which enables the flow of information, methodologies, and, in this way, through public services or scholarships or regular financial income, empowers individuals who are unable to achieve stability. And that energy helps keep things moving forward. The hope that it is possible to accept both new people and systemic changes must never be extinguished.

For example?

● In 2021, OGP started working with Marjetica Potrč, who spent a whole year working with the local community in Piran on the Water and Earth project in order to think together with citizens and local stakeholders about how to cultivate a healthy relationship with heritage and natural resources in a city that is in a demographic deficit and in the grip of tourism.

Citizens thus experienced what it means to work with renowned artists. Why? This is because above-average artists, in this case Marjetica Potrč (also the recipient of the RS Medal for Merit in 2023), overturn clichéd notions of what an artist should be. Today's artists are successful, like top Slovenian athletes, but at the same time, they must also be managers, educators, lecturers, interlocutors, and inventors. And there are quite a few of them.

Immediately after independence, Slovenian art became violently centralised. Then, there were tendencies towards decentralisation, which happened, but not as fully as they should have. How do you create this content decentralisation at OGP? How independent can you be? As far as I know, you have secured 140,000 euros from tenders this year. How are you doing?

● You have to work persistently to ensure that good and relevant content is not circulated only in Ljubljana. At OGP, we try to get the public to also come to Piran or Koper for inspiration, to see good exhibitions, even some that cannot be seen anywhere else in Slovenia. Collaborations with other provincial or national institutions are very important for OGP, just like the aforementioned international collaborations. These comprise the fundamental directions that we pursue at OGP (e.g. with UGM Maribor, Moderna Galerija Ljubljana, and many others). Despite our small size, we have noticed that sometimes it is easier to take the exhibitions to the audience than the other way around. Therefore, it is important to present high-quality exhibitions that deal with themes or works of art that other national or regional institutions have already thoroughly researched and excellently produced to the widest possible public. As a recent example, I would cite in particular the exhibition *Vedno na voljo*, which showed the transformative contribution of Slovenian authors to the process of introducing urgent socio-political changes.

Outside the framework of our country, during these years we also carried out cooperative work with NITJA in Oslo, which was very successful, in which provided financial support to artists of the Slovenian middle generation and promoted our OGP art collection. We hope that the same will happen in the context of a planned medium-sized co-production that awaits us later in 2025, aimed at the development of a transatlantic project entitled *Prekiniti tokokrog nadzora* (Break the Circle of Control). In this case, too, the Piran Coastal Galleries is responsible for leading the project. We are pleased that based on the submitted content and structure of the project, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Italy awarded us 4th place out of 38 applications, right after the United Arab Emirates, Germany, and Colombia. Every experience of this kind is connected when there is also international solidarity between the actors who prepare the project together. And every propulsive connection with the world then allows our artists to breathe with full lungs.

What is solidarity between artists, and what is solidarity from those who are supposed to support them?

● There are many ways an arts institution can commit to fostering solidarity – by collaborating with artists whose practices encourage conversations about pressing issues, or by creating an audience that feels like a witness rather than a mere observer. On 8 October, at the Gdansk City Gallery in Poland, the *Dissident Histories. Insurgent Futurities* of Marina Gržnić, Aina Šmid, and Jovita Pristovšek opened. It had been presented to the Slovenian public for the first time a year and a half earlier in the form of a retrospective at the Loža Gallery in Koper. The day after the inauguration, an international symposium was also held at the Center for European Solidarity. There, we asked, among other things, whether, in the light of catastrophic wars, artists and art institutions should use art as a means to share often inexpressible feelings with a wider audience or to be active in politics and the community. According to most definitions, solidarity is the consciousness of a community and the connection between individuals, especially in social and cultural life. In art, it becomes important when the topic of pressure exerted on marginal groups, including women, is devalued and even manipulated to the point that it is talked about very little.

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In the context of the word 'manipulation,' I am interested in something: to what extent do you perceive that in recent years in Slovenia, a *class taste* in audiences and participants has been starting to form – perhaps this is most evident in the capital – which can be very elementary, somewhat violent and exclusionary, even in the sense of the sacred cows of art, who somehow conduct it, and of course, the curators.

● It must be said that art is creativity, but it is also an institution, and every institution is also power. So, creativity often does not match the rules of the institution and also not what society as such normatively dictates. Taste is not about recognising superficial beauty, for example, in some motif of a boat or a sunset, which has excellent colour, and which can be completed casually, without justification, and presented to the public as a beautiful or even an unconventional attraction. Taste is also related to understanding seeing and the ways in which particularity manifests itself. Taste can also mean understanding that something that is happening around us is tasteless, completely and simply perverted, something that should not be tolerated. Because this is the only way to establish a relationship with beauty, which is actually beautiful and is beautiful because its content makes us feel good or we discover something through it. Even if it doesn't appear to us as something cute or shiny at first glance.

The beauty of content which gets under our skin, sharpens our taste at the same time and reminds us that we are changed, transformed, and that we have learned something and are therefore richer. So, if it is distasteful to listen to the truth, it means that it is equally perverse to accept the fact that someone is imposing silence on you. Obscenity is a category of beauty, it must not be silenced, it must be revealed, as Édouard Manet taught us in 1863 with his painting *Olympia*, which is now a classic.

We must pour ourselves pure wine, extraordinary turns in art were mostly made by visionaries who were not recognised in their time, or 'at the right time,' so to speak. In today's world, because we are living through an unprecedented technological revolution, the matter is completely different. At the Piran Coastal Galleries, we try to identify talents (an example is Next Generation project), as well as presenting already recognised and awarded Slovenian artists to the Primorska and Slovenian public abroad. Jasmina Cibic is definitely among these, someone who has made a deep mark in the history of contemporary art with her achievements. It happens quite often that Slovenian artists who are acknowledged and recognised in the world remain misunderstood within the domestic cultural space.

Artists and cultural figures have always created and worked within transnational flows. Perhaps it is worth mentioning here the period before Slovenia's entry into the EU, right after 2000. This period marked our generation, which had the opportunity to travel abroad to work and to study. Even though we were not yet in the EU at the time, it was certainly easier for us than for those who had ploughed the fallow land before us and perhaps prepared this space for our and future generations. This period certainly deserves particular consideration by art institutions.

What should the professional and personal integrity of the head of an art institution consist of?

● Professional moral and ethical integrity are one thing, knowledge is another, and understanding that when you lead an institution, your responsibility is not only to those you lead, to the employees, but also to the public and targeted interest groups, i.e. creators. Achieving the previously mentioned higher level of cultural activity and dialogue is equally important for our Slovenian society, as is achieving a balance between the speed of technological change, ambitious visions, and the coordination of intergenerational goals, which enable the transfer of knowledge and skills between those who are leaving and those who are

coming. Accepting the fact that today's society is fluid and dynamic and that it is necessary to learn how to shake off emotional attachments to the past and enable adaptation at all levels, which must be consistent with the founding goals of our cultural state institutions, is a goal that every institution must strive towards.

Leaders must ensure that institutions are transformed to support creators and target audiences. The professional development of public personnel and an awareness of modern work methods should be the basis for evaluating the work of creators and the basis for more accessible and effective connection with all target groups within the population, especially with the middle and younger generations. Institutions must accept that such conditions are created on several levels and are multifaceted, and this creates an orderly and organised environment for production, where, of course, there is no room for absolutely everything – that is why we also have room in the country for amateur culture, which is extremely widespread. It is good that it exists, and we must respect it, even its traditional, local, and popular dimensions. But when we talk about a modern institution that has to think at this time also about the coming time, we must realise that these institutions must also build and transform their own perception.

But also their image, their visual identity. They must shake off 'flatness' and encourage the broader environment so that our culture can be top-notch, so that society and life will be able to rapidly change and so that art can become a field where exciting classical and experimental events take place, which will inspire hope and courage, even beyond national borders.

Some are just at the beginning of their career, some are in the middle, and some are recognised artists who need a suitable space. The professional integrity of a national or regional institution must speak to people or has to find ways to present different levels of cultural and artistic creation in order to explain to people and the public what art is and what it has the potential to be. So that even a layman will understand what art is, what love for art, is and where the beauty lies in enjoying art. Anyone who enjoys art knows the pleasure that comes from art itself. It is not only a source of pleasure, it is also an experience that has an enlightening power. This moment is a gift that one receives as a precious thing.

OGP is one of the few institutions in its field where you actually pay artists...

● I wouldn't know about others, but we have created a way for them to be paid fairly.

Why is it so easy to evaluate an athlete but so difficult to evaluate an artist?

● Since Romanticism, the stigma that the artist is a figure that represents man in search of himself has been consolidated. The search for the modern ideal is most tragicomically depicted in Chaplin's works. In sports, performance is measurable and comparable, but in art there are no such parallels. A man who pushes the boundaries of modernity or even pushes into the future knows when he does it that he is doing it for the first time and can even be labelled a freak.

Whoever pushes the most often also pays a high price. But so did all visionaries, including Copernicus, Da Vinci and Tesla, who all died penniless. Of course, being a visionary is not for everyone. It requires dedication, which is demanding from the point of view of material survival and psychological or physical stability.

Not all problems in art can be solved with measurable indicators, but we can already solve many of them today. At this historical moment, because the culture industry has changed, because creators are enabled to engage in a wider geopolitical and economic space, because there are more resources (even if they are scattered), and also because there is an increased interest in cultural life.

Today's audiences are much more diverse than they used to be. Therefore, we have to

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implement diverse programmes, to implement them simultaneously, and never forget that there is always a peak somewhere. The point is to show excellence. Top intellectuals, artists, can be like athletes. When they achieve something, it can be a source of pride for culture. But why is it even important to be proud of culture? Because it enlightens us, it strengthens us in our expression and understanding of the world.-

For example?

● One way is through the creative warning that follows some positive *modus operandi*. It shows how we can draw something instructive, perhaps even entertaining, from every experience through creative engagement. Something that can also make you smile (intellectuals are known for being able to make themselves laugh in order to hold up a mirror to the other). And this cabaret moment, this Voltairianism, which we have been holding to since Dadaism, admonishes us and reminds us that through playfulness, through the transformation of pressures into irony and allegory, one which does not succumb to cynicism, modernity and shifts are created.

In this context, we can mention, for example, this year's collaboration with the *Društvo prijateljev zmernega napredka* (Association of Moderate Progress) within the framework of the exhibition dedicated to Marko Brecelj. The Koper man always warned that culture is something that allows you to penetrate, to break through reality itself, and then something emerges on the other side. Because all this apparent institutional arrangement can also be confusing. Clothes don't make the man. And the fact is that many musical and performative leaps in the Slovenian scene would not have happened if it weren't for Brecelj.

That is to say, this cynicism – which I learned about with Giorgio Agamben and Franco "Bifo" Berardi when I studied in Venice – which leads to a constant search for culprits, shifting responsibilities, and bullying intellectuals, unfortunately does not quite lead anywhere. Moreover, when such signs appear, it is naked proof that the environment is at the mercy of banal people and the narrow interests of a few. Arendt explained to us half a century ago that this leads in only one direction: to destruction. The writings of Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, and John Berger, as well as today's architects, artists, and philosophers, such as Eyal Weizman, Hito Steyerl, and Slavoj Žižek, remind us of this. And this includes thinkers from both the left and right.

Alamut, the music project of the group Laibach, which I offered for implementation to the Apolitical Foundation in London, which then supported the idea of making it possible for Laibach to co-produce with Iranian partners as a tribute to Vladimir Bartolo's novel of the same name, pointed out how this destructive danger is on the march. Ivan Novak led the project idea, and at that time, before the arrival of Covid-19, I brought these financiers and kick-started the project in terms of business and management, in close cooperation with Sonora Music in Berlin. In recent years, Laibach has presented a large international co-production, with a very complex structure, all over Europe, including under the auspices of the Ljubljana Festival. Such a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is always beneficial to everyone.

How much support do you have as the director of OGP from the local environment?

● I must say that since the beginning of my mandate, we have successfully navigated and coordinated our needs and achieved our set goals both with the UDD (Office for Social Activities) in the Municipality of Piran and with the Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Ankaran The charity of all stakeholders has yielded visible results. In Piran, we also organised the preparation of documents that will serve in the future renovation of the cultural infrastructure (Monfort) and the Forma viva park in Seča. However, I see a big problem in the general lack

of systemic support (similar to the country's housing policy), where Slovenia will have to build a solid and sustainable support system. This is a system that can survive any political change or even an earthquake.

Is it to be understood as a kind of anomaly or an idea to strive for and support?

● I think, as I said before, that changes are necessary. Even local politics is not always the same, it changes. Tendentially, it is necessary to know that the authorities can withdraw their support at any time they choose, regardless of the results and consequences of such a move. This generally applies to the entire Slovenian area.

We know that politics and culture should operate as two separate spheres. It should be the job of politics to appoint experts to positions. It is a political decision to trust the profession. In this way, cultural institutions are supported in the phase when it is necessary to adopt long-term development plans, ensure one's financial survival, and fight and connect with formative and constructive stakeholders. It is important to identify anomalies and convince decision-makers that even politicians must understand that they cannot afford everything.

This is a systemic problem.

● I can only speak about my field, which is related to the field of cultural production and the development and refinement of cultural institutions that need to change. The wish is for these institutions to radiate a commitment to their mission, to show openness to what is different, to support artists with the professional readiness of their staff, and everything we described earlier. Let's continue to leave the mirror in the hands of successful artists, who are guardians of a universal message and pioneers, including in the development of tactics for peaceful coexistence, which we really need these days.

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