

TIGER'S LEAP: A METHOD OF RELOADING HISTORY OF LOCAL SCENESⁱ

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A Happy Consensual Tribe

Many experts agree that contemporary dance emerged in Western societies (Europe and the USA) during the second half of the 20th century; reflecting this fact, many agree, that contemporary dance is conditioned by a democratic society. On the other hand, it is commonly accepted that Eastern societies (communist/socialist) overslept the second half of the 20th century behind the Iron curtain that divided democratic (capitalist) West and totalitarian (communist) East. So it only stands to reason that there was no contemporary dance in the East. Following this teleological view of history as progress, contemporary dance "expectedly" appeared in Eastern societies alongside their transition to democracy-capitalism in the 90s and 2000s. There is a prevailing consent not only that contemporary dance appears organically in the new social conditions, but that it is proof of the very democracy of the ex-Eastern societies. Naturally this "late awaking" of the East results in its always-being-late in its actual attempts to keep step with the contemporary dance scene of the West.ⁱⁱ

A lot of experts are in accordance with many things. And when majority agrees on many "facts" the river of history may flow smoothly, from its spring to its delta, the future clearly caused by the past... And here we are, in the present where on the international dance scene, one can see contemporary dance from both the ex-East and the ex-West (although the proportion is still not equal) that now belongs to the borderless (although not quite "history-less") global society...

Good morning, Mr. Columbus

My colleague, performer and cultural worker Saša Asentić, and I have spent a lot of time discussing the (hi)story above. At one point, a question flashed up to us: "Isn't it quite similar to Columbus' 'discovery' of America – a land that had existed for centuries under another (its own) name?" With this "Good morning, Mr. Columbus", we started the research work *A Tiger's Leap into the Past (evacuated genealogy)*. The work is a part of Saša Asentić's larger artistic-research project *Indigo Dance*, started in 2006, which apart from *A Tiger's Leap* consists of the installation/impossible project proposal *Bal/Can-Can Sussie Dance*, and the performance-lecture *My Private Bio-politics*.



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Each segment of the project deals with a specific aspect of the structure of the local dance scene and its position in the international "danceworld". *A Tiger's Leap*, in particular, deals with the history of contemporary dance in Serbia, and here I will only focus on it with regard to its methodology rather than its content.ⁱⁱⁱ

Our Own Tiger's Leap

A Tiger's Leap Into the Past is aimed at articulating the past of the contemporary local dance in historical terms. Its point of departure is the following set of questions: Why don't we have a local history of contemporary dance (Why was it never written?) How do we use the notion "contemporary dance"? Should we operate with the notion as universal umbrella term for all artistic and cultural practices of bodily movement, that have certain currency? Are there other names in the local past that signify the same or similar practices? That is, is there a history of contemporary dance in Serbia at all? What can we identify as local dance history? What did we have in place of the contemporary dance in the past? Why wasn't it called contemporary dance at the time? Can we call it contemporary dance now? Does it have the right to claim contemporaneity? Is it about the state of affairs or about the right to contemporaneity?

Departing from these questions *A Tiger's Leap* is done as a series of video interviews with actors, participants, and witnesses of the local dance and performance scene in different periods of the 20th century.^{iv} The work is an open long-term research project without a pre-determined list of interviewees. We simply started with the biggest figure in local dance history (of the first decades of the 20th century), Maga Magazinović, and then followed the divergent traces that emerged through the interviews themselves. This way, the work is constantly self-broadening and self-(re)defining through new players mentioned/invited by those already involved. To all of them we posed more or less same questions grouped around three big issues:

- *conditions of work* (addressing organizational, technical, financial, educational, and infrastructural circumstances of work in the field of dance and performance on the levels of the state/city cultural policy, institutional positioning, and personal relations and experiences);
- *conceptual framework* (addressing concepts, terms, names, and notions with which they operated; artistic influences (persons, styles, techniques, and paradigms); references to the history of ballet and dance; and relations to other artistic fields, as well as to the surrounding social and political contexts);



- *public reception of the work* (addressing reviews and critical reflections in mass media, theoretical approaches, audience, and general public opinion).

This rhizomatically-structured history is based on a twofold formula that I took – and modified to certain extent – from Foucault’s new historicism^v:

ARCHAEOLOGY

[It is used as a method of researching many segments, facts, names, opinions, experiences, and agencies present in one context and period in the past, without the idea of historical big (majoritarian) narration, i.e. a red thread that connects all segments into a unified story.];

+ LINKS THROUGH TIME

[They appeared from within this self-regulating structure as various indirect links, re-read(ing) connections, and reversible cause-effect lines.];

= GENEALOGY

[It is the provisional and particular result of the linkages that offers chronology of the archaeological layers but without teleological progress (that leads one (former) layer clearly toward another (latter) one)].

In this way, we got a vast rhizomatic network of ideas, concepts, images, stories, experiences, and remembrances (Benjamin’s *Eingedenken*), offered to the audience’s interpretations depending on their own historical moments, contexts, and subjectivities. This also explains why we did interviews and did not proceed by collecting solid historiographic data – we both simply do not believe in pure data, the "objective facts", the objects found in the past “as they were”. Thus we foster the subjective perspectives that give meaning to the facts from the position of here and now of the singular historical subjects; therein the facts (e.g. documents, video recordings etc.) are illustrative or demonstrative material added to the history constructed this way. This idea is firmly connected to Walter Benjamin’s conception of history that I proposed as the general political-theoretical methodology of the work. As it is a more complex and more broadly useful issue, I’ll explain it later, after some concrete descriptions of the research work *A Tiger’s Leap into the Past*.

History (of dance) is not given, it should be constructed

In the first round we made interviews with Katalin Ladik, poet, actress and performer; Svenka Savić, professor at the Faculty of Philosophy and dance critic; Dubravka Maletić, choreographer; Sonja Vukićević, choreographer and dancer; Nela Antonović,



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choreo-director; Jovan Ćirilov, theater scholar and art director of the *Bitef festival*; Vladimir Kopicl, writer and cultural critic; and Boris Kovač, composer and multi-media artist. To these interviews, we added a video exploration of the book *My Life* written by Maga Magazinović (philosopher and choreographer), which is an autobiography in a style close to (self-)interview.^{vi}

The first public display of the work took place in February 2007 in the Museum of Contemporary Art of Vojvodina in Novi Sad. The video archive had an important interactive element; we placed a big sheet of canvas on the wall that was supposed to be used by the visitors/spectators of the video archive to draw a map of the history of the contemporary local dance. There was an invitation at the blank canvas: “History of dance is not given, it should be constructed”. This was another way (apart from the position we took while interviewing) to invite the actors on the local scene to construct their own history, and because of this we appropriated the representation method of Irwin’s project *East Art Map*^{vii} as the highlight of the event. Accordingly, we also included my own self-interview as a live performance in the video exhibition, wherein I served as a guide and gave an introductory word to the exhibition, and also served as a witness and participant in the current dance scene. However, my self-interview is not included permanently in the archive, as I am not “invited” by the interviewees themselves.

As we didn’t close the circle of the possibilities and streams open through the interviews, the work is still ongoing.

The art space is not only determined by what it includes, but also, or even more so, by what it excludes

For the second round we made – together with video artist Marta Popivoda – a cluster of interviews about unrealized local dance and performance projects in the last few decades. This work connected *A Tiger’s Leap* with another work that Marta Popivoda, Bojana Cvejić, and I made in Graz in 2006 (within Steirischer Herbst): *Archiving Performances at the Edge of the Void*. We used the principles of the former work (making the invisible visible, including the excluded, affirming the negation) and combined them with the procedures of *A Tiger’s Leap* (interview, remembrance, storytelling). This time we focused on the incubating period and early years (from the 70s to nowadays), when the contemporary dance scene in Serbia had emerged and been recognized as such. It was displayed as the video installation *Recycle Bin – Archiving Performances at the Edge of the Void* in March 2008 in the Magacin u Kraljevica Marka in Belgrade. The interviewees were Jovan Ćirilov; Vladimir Kopicl; Sonja Vukićević; Katalin Ladik; Nela Antonović; Miroslav



Benka, theater director; Bojana Cvejić, theorist and dramaturge; Olivera Kovačević-Crnjanski, dancer and choreographer; Dragana Alfirević, performer; and Dušan Murić, performer and cultural activist.

This work aims to show the “other scene” of the positive history written through *A Tiger’s Leap*. It speaks about non-existing, erased, rejected, impossible or unrealized dance and performance projects, pieces, festivals, venues, educational projects, and networks. These works-to-be/not-done are situated “on the edge of the void” of the current situation in the local danceworld. For these proposals, concepts, and models for potential works, their membership to the local dance scene is ambiguous and undecidable, thus concentrating the “historicity” of the current situation.^{viii}

A Public Domain Net Archive

The third aspect of the work *A Tiger’s Leap* is the creation of a free and open-access online archive, with help of Marta Popivoda.^{ix} Together with the interviews that we already put on the net, it is going to bring video recordings, documents, as well as the interactive provisional/changeable historical map(s). This part of the project began in October 2008, and its aims are twofold. The first, and more simple, one is to share publicly and for free what we did and obtained as cultural workers. The second, more complex, one is to intervene into those things which “many agree” upon, by making the archive as visible as possible through internet browsers.

Walter Benjamin’s Political Theory of History

I would close the text with some explanations of the political-historical methodology that lies behind this work.

A Tiger’s Leap into the Past (evacuated genealogy) is based on and its title directly taken from the last text of intriguing Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte (On the Concept of History)*.^x This reference shifts our approach from neutral archiving or objective historicizing of the past of the local contemporary dance scene toward critically illuminating aspects of the past that were invisible then, and are still not visible from the perspective of predominant historicization of dance at the global scale.

According to Benjamin: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’. ... It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”^{xi} Therefore we use the form of interview that gives word to subjective perspectives that are not supposed to notify the past the way it really was. On the contrary: they blast the past they speak about out of the continuum of the regular history into the



present that is supposed to be changed, transformed, revolutionized through them – as a legacy for future. It is Benjamin’s “tiger’s leap” that, in his conception of history, re-orientates history entirely toward the future.

Another important influence that comes from Benjamin’s text is his re-reading of history as “memory-scene” (*Gedächtnisszene*), wherein actuality becomes the precondition of readability of the historical images. Thus, what we address and challenge here is, above all, the very “actuality” to which *A Tiger’s Leap* functions as a reality-check, staging its political structures, power hierarchy, and ownership, not only over products and material infrastructures but also over the concepts, names, and paradigms – history itself. What is crucial for us here is Benjamin’s notion *Eingedenken*, often translated as “remembrance” or “memory”. However, Slavoj Žižek asserts^{xii} that *Eingedenken* cannot be translated simply as remembrance or reminiscence, since with Benjamin *Eingedenken* is an interested taking over of the past from the position of the oppressed and exploited class and for the sake of its benefit. Reading the oppressed and exploited class as the local dance practice and discourse in global history, the past that *A Tiger’s Leap* constructs mostly consists of specific and particular memories of the interviewees, who “here and now” write the “there and then” in a genealogy that is evacuated from the regular history of the contemporary dance scene. It is about re-actualizing “the depository of historical knowledge” embedded in the memories of those who have been overlooked, erased, rejected, and forgotten.

The third important influence to our work was Benjamin’s “theoretical approach to history”. According to Benjamin’s *On the Concept of History*, the tiger’s leap is the leap of the present into the past that was already waiting for it, waiting, according to Žižek, in order to be established through it. Žižek notes that Benjamin was a unique Marxist thinker of that time who considered history as text, as for him the meaning and historical dimension of the events would be decided only afterwards, through their inscriptions into the symbolic network – into the story of history, I would stress. It is not about a trendy historical relativism, that claims we can never know the past because our understanding always depends on our current knowledge/position. Benjamin’s key theoretical insight, for Žižek, is that it is the present, not the past, which is relativized and remains open for future rewriting through this procedure. The present is, hopefully, a “retroactive force”; it not only re-reads but also writes the past, and thus breaks the homogenous continual time of the official history.^{xiii}

(Instead a conclusion): The Tiger is Leaping Around



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At the very end I would like to take the described methodology and procedure of historization outside the work *A Tiger's Leap into the Past*. For me, it is mere an explicit example of them, while the method of tiger's leap itself has wider scope of usage, both outside this work and outside the specific context of Eastern European dance scene. According to this, I would emphasis the similarities it shares with the works and projects such as: already mentioned East Art Map by Slovenian art group Irwin, which (re)constructs the history of visual arts in Eastern Europe after the WWII; Swedish Dance History by Marten Spangberg, which departures from the statement: "History must be written, and those who write it define the future";^{xiv} What's Welsh for Performance? by Heike Roms, which explores a constructive character of history of performance art, confronting its history in Welsh with an already accepted canonized history;^{xv} East Dance Academy platform (as well as its specific projects such as Maska's platform ARTCHIVE – Contaminated with History, series of re-enactment performances in Ljubljana and Zagreb etc); etc. The differences between those projects are notable, from their topics to their contexts, but an important similarity which I would like to stress by connecting them is in their attempt at problematization of big, smooth, majoritarian histories. This problematization is realized through similar political orientations, where the tiger's leap appears as a method of intervention by minoritarian subjects, whose concern is to render another future. In that sense, the tiger's leap in the mentioned works shouldn't be considered a historical revisionism, but a futurist intervention into the present that will become the past of another and different future. The one in which the historical univocalism will be impossible and replaced with multiple voices that will be heard all around.

This text was translated into Spanish and included in the book HACER HISTORIA (Isabel de Naverán Ed.), on the collection CdL: Cuerpo de Letra, published by Mercat de les Flors, Institut del Teatre and Centro Coreográfico Galego, 2010.

ⁱ The text already had several versions, starting from a short statement in the *A Tiger's Leap* leaflet in 2007. It was presented as a lecture at the Maska seminar of contemporary performing arts in Ljubljana in 2008. The first published version appeared in *Maska*, vol. XXIII, no. 117–118, 2008. In 2009 it was presented within the broadened frame of *My Private Bio-politics* performance in DTW New York, Tsekh Moscow, Theaterhaus Hildesheim, and Societaetstheater Dresden. In 2010 it is reworked again and will appear in EDA lexicon of poetic terms "Parallel Slalom".

ⁱⁱ Cf. Bojana Kunst, "Performing the Other Body", in: *Bal canis*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2002), pp. 75–76.

ⁱⁱⁱ I used this research work for several theorizations of the local contemporary dance scene and its past, wherein the content given through the work was fully employed. Cf. Ana Vujanović, "Not Quite Not Right Eastern Western Dance: On The Contemporary Dance Scene In Serbia", <http://www.tkh->

generator.net/en/projekti/raster-2008-%E2%80%93-yearbook-independent-performing-arts-scene-serbia (20. 12. 2009)

^{iv} Ending with the 90s, when contemporary dance (first as a form of theatre, and then as an independent artistic discipline) was being introduced to the local scene.

^v Particularly from the books *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The History of Sexuality I The Will to Knowledge*.

^{vi} Maga Magazinović, *Moj život*, Jelena Šantić (ed.), Clio, Belgrade, 2000.

^{vii} Cf. Irwin (eds.), *East Art Map. Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, An Afterall Book, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of London 2006. Their famous slogan is: “History is not given, please help us to construct it.” See: <http://www.eastartmap.org/>

^{viii} According to Alain Badiou, “the edge of the void” of a historical situation is the site of the event, since it is from there that structural transformation is possible.

^{ix} See the archive at: http://www.perart.org/en/contemporary_dance/tigers_leap.html

^x Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, in *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken, 1969.

^{xi} *Ibid.* p. 255.

^{xii} In Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London/New York, 1989.

^{xiii} I would mention, at least for the reason of academic precision, that I re-read Benjamin’s tiger in the way that is most appropriate to the concerns, time, and context of our own work. Therefore, whilst working on *A Tiger’s Leap* I excluded his widely discussed theological references, his contesting Marxist historical dialectics, the image of the chess-playing automaton, the *Angelus Novus*, and many other aspects as well, while employing the tiger’s leap as an action-event of transformation of the present that breaks with the course of history inviting and writing the past for the sake of the future. Benjamin’s gesture *par excellence* I would say...

^{xiv} See: www.inpex.se/events/swedish-dance-history

^{xv} See: www.performance-wales.org. “Traditionally, histories of performance art have tended to concentrate on a well-documented (mostly US-based) canon of works, neglecting local scenes outside of the centres of art production. This project aims to chart the manner in which performance art as an international artistic movement was negotiated in response to the particularities of specific cultural situations during its formative years – here examined in the context of Wales between 1965 and 1979.”