# Artivistic interventions as humorous re-appropriations

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Abstract

*The article reflects on the synergic interaction of artistic creativity and activist engagement through a humorous approach of some contemporary civilian protest actions in Slovenia. The article proposes the concept of "artivism" as a hybrid term for activist-artistic interventions. Case studies discussed are examples of subversive re-appropriations of insulting statements made by the former Prime Minister and his party in a creative and humorous way. These infamous and defamatory expressions, initially used by politicians to verbally attack protesters, were re-appropriated and recuperated by "artivists" and turned back, like a boomerang, at those who had originally sent them into the public, as offensively constructed verbal degradations.* Uprising of Zombies *in winter 2012–2013 and the public protests organized by the movement called the Erased in 2003 indicate humorous artistic expressions that are turned into symbolic weapons of people's resistance against domination of corrupted political elite.*

*Keywords: artivism, re-appropriation, uprising, zombies, grotesque.*

## 1. Autonomous art and its discontents

A work of art is neither a parliament or cabinet session, nor a party meeting, but that does not mean that art may not be political. The notion of the political is much broader than politics as a profession and the same may be said about art. In this article I am especially interested in hybrid forms of artistic and activist performative events with strong political connotations. Furthermore, my intention is to reflect on the synergic interaction of artistic creativity and activist engagement through a humorous approach of some contemporary protest actions. A lucid and humorous utilisation of the method of subversive re-appropriation was an important component of so-called *Uprising of Zombies*, a series of protests and other street events provoked by corrupted political elite in Slovenia in winter 2012/2013. Some infamous and defamatory expressions, initially used by politicians to verbally attack protesters, were re-appropriated and recuperated by "artivists"

and turned back, like a boomerang, at those who had originally sent them into the public as offensively constructed verbal degradations. It is difficult to say how effective was this form of humorous subversion, but it is a fact that in times of mass protests in Slovenia, all coalition parties and their leaders resigned from or left the government, which led to a political crisis and new parliamentary elections.

Humour is an important component of many artistic and activist ("artivist") public actions and performances. Protesters' deployment of humour marks not only a legitimate, but also a relatively safe form of resistance, provided that humorous activist performances are recognized as artistic expressions in the legal sphere. In the modern, liberal bourgeois state, art is part of the body of human rights, which is why the legal sphere grants the "freedom of artistic creation" to the contemporary artist regardless of whether he or she is good or bad, rude or refined, conservative or progressive, political or apolitical. For instance, article 169 of the Penal Code of the Republic of Slovenia says that while insults are punishable by law, art is exempt (under certain terms, i.e. "provided that the manner of expressing words offensive to another or the other circumstances of the case indicate that this expression was not meant to be derogatory"). Furthermore, in the commented edition of the Code of Obligations there is an explanation that a statement "made on stage during a play" is "not a seriously meant statement", and therefore has no legal consequences: "A statement not meant seriously, often referred to as a joking statement, is made without serious intent and not expected to be believed. The motive behind uttering such a statement plays no role." The "freedom of artistic creation" is thus a pragmatic legal instrument, which "radical" artists and other participants in artistic and activist practices can potentially turn to their own benefit. However, if we want to understand the position of art practices within the realm of the contemporary, neoliberal state, we must take a few steps back into the past, when so-called "autonomous art" emerged as a category of bourgeois society.

In the early Renaissance, the artistic craftsman – supported by church and secular patrons – started disengaging from the guild and began transforming into a "court artist". Although a court artist, who does not yet function in a market situation in the strict sense of the word, became relatively "autonomous" in relation to the guild and its rules, covering areas such as artisanal production modes, prices, and product quality control, s/he still had to yield to the demands of the church or secular patron (Warnke 1985; Bredekamp 1972). The Industrial Revolution and the rise of the bourgeoisie in the 18th century brought about, among other things, the liberation of society from its feudal bonds and the emergence of the market. Great changes befell all parts of European society, including the status of erstwhile venerated professions of the feudal system, such as doctors, lawyers, scientists, and artists. The bourgeoisie first put all these professions on the market and then turned them into its own paid wage workers. The "free" bourgeois artist, who was already working on the market, cut his personal ties with the patron, thus gaining "autonomy" in relation to the great commissioner, but falling under the rule of capital. Arnold Hauser maintains that the development of the market economy was of key importance for the emergence of artistic autonomy, and a part of this process was also the formation of the art market:

> After the dissolution of the guilds and the abolition of the regulation of production and consumption by forces like the court and the government, the boom on the market changes into a wild competitive struggle and for the first time in the history […] we have a class that can be called an artistic proletariat.

(Hauser 1986: 139–140.)

This is the time of so-called "Amsterdam cycle" of the domination of urban centres, which is followed by the period of economic superiority of modern states and national economies. In the 17th century, as much as fifty percent of the Dutch population lived in the cities of the United Provinces, which was at the time the highest percentage of urban population in Europe. High incomes were generated by trade and financial capital, but the other, not so pleasant side of that process was the pauperisation of the proletariat. Collateral victims of market economy expansion were also Dutch artists who had to find themselves other income beside their artistic professions (Hauser 1986: 445). Artists managed to fend off their servility to court or church patrons, they became "equal" and "free", like all other bourgeois subjects, but now they had to compete at the art market. Thus precisely owing to the commodification of art, artists were enabled to decide autonomously about the way their own creative work is produced and offered at the art market. Toward the end of the 19th century, that structural moment led to the emergence of *l'art pour l'art*, which "autonomised" art in ideological terms as well. However, the 20th-century artistic avant-gardes, namely the historical avant-garde from the early years and the neo-avant-garde of the late 1960s, rejected the typically bourgeois perception of the idea of autonomous art and strove to erase the boundaries between art and other spheres of society.[1]

Autonomous art also gave rise to the dilemma of how to determine the boundaries of the artistic. The essentialist and substantialist approach of bourgeois aesthetics is reflected in its obsession with ontological definitions of "art", "the artist", and "the work of art", with no regard for the socio-historical conditions of using those terms and therefore doomed to end in aporias. Bourgeois aesthetics accepts the assumption that the work of art produces no extra-aesthetic effect and this denial is characteristic of the autonomised sphere of art. In Andrew Hewitt's words:

> As the bourgeoisie sought ideological and political liberty from the tutelage of absolutist states in the eighteenth century, art was guaranteed a degree of freedom at the cost of its disempowerment as a social force. Within limits one could reason freely in art because it was agreed that art was without direct social consequence.
>
> (Hewitt 2005: 16.)

This was the beginning of the modern conception of the artist: a typical idea that "artists are independent from society's normal standards of taste, that artists are independent innovators, and that the function of art is to communicate the inner insights of the artist to the viewer" (Sawyer 2006: 13). In other words, the cult of an individual, ingenious artist created an ideological base for obscuring the historical circumstances through which "art withdrew from everyday social practice" (Bürger 1998: 64).

## 2. Humour as a "weapon" in resistance movements

In turbulent times of mass revolts, political revolutions, wars or resistance movements, arts and culture tend to come closer to social practices. Among numerous cultural groups and individual artists active in the Slovenian (and Yugoslavian) resistance movement during the Second World War there is an interesting example of a modern dance performer Marta Paulin, whose Partisan *nom de guerre* was Brina. Thanks to Partisan war photographer Jože Petek we have a few fascinating photographs of Brina dancing in a grassy meadow in front of a large number of fighters of a newly founded Partisan brigade.[2] During the 1930s, Marta Paulin had studied with

Meta Vidmar, who had founded a school of modern dance in Ljubljana, after successfully completing her own studies at Mary Wigman's school in Dresden in 1927. In August 1943, she joined the Partisans and became a member of the 14th Division's cultural group, which, among others, also included her comrade in arms and legendary Slovenian poet Karel Destovnik Kajuh. Marta Paulin thus decided to take part in a revolution in which she could dance, to use a phrase commonly attributed to Emma Goldman.[3] Sadly, Marta Paulin Brina, one of the most talented pioneers of modern dance in Slovenia, terminated her career in modern dance after only six months with the Partisans, because her legs froze during a campaign that the 14th Division undertook in Styria. Fortunately, Jože Petek's photographs have preserved at least a few scenes from the all too short career of Brina the Partisan dancer, which makes them an invaluable source in the history of Slovenian modern dance, which in its own peculiar way took hold even in the extreme conditions of the Partisan struggle. Thanks to its fusion with a people's resistance movement, this peculiar Partisan choreography came close to the ideals of the avantgarde, by accomplishing, as noted by Partisan art historian Miklavž Komelj, "what avant-garde theatre stood for, in the most primitive of conditions" (Komelj 2009: 120) – a direct and unbreakable bond between the performer and the audience.
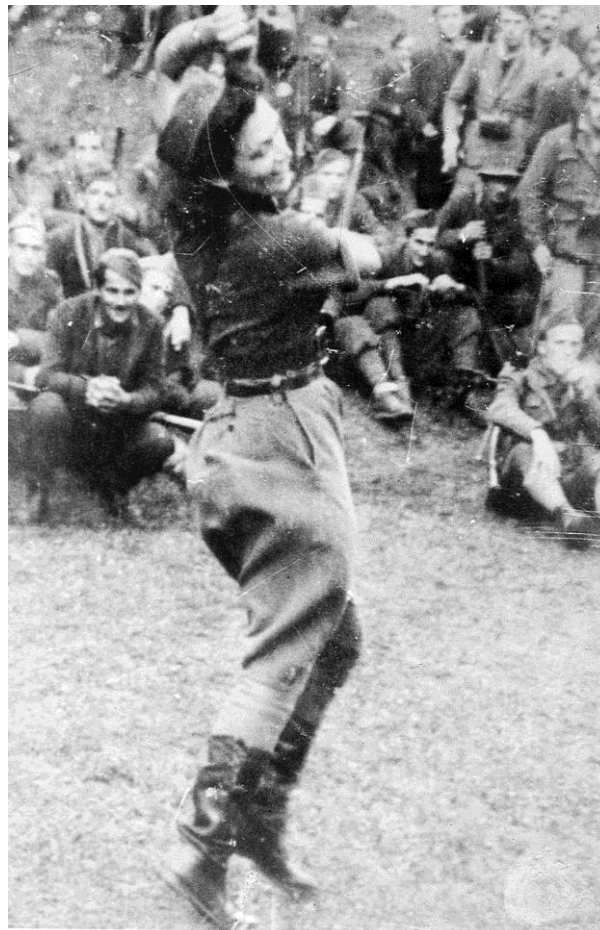


Figure 1. Marta Paulin Brina dancing with the partisans. Photo credit: Jože Petek (1943).

Mass resistance movements, often involving artists of diverse profiles and backgrounds, such as anti-fascist movements, anti-colonial movements, more recently movements for protecting various minority rights, protests against corrupt political elites, and against the dictatorship of capital and autocrats of various political colours and ideological persuasions are perhaps the best examples of what Hewitt calls the performative or integrative aesthetic ideology, as opposed to the mimetic aesthetic ideology.[4] His idea of the aesthetic "in which the integration of all social members is possible" (Hewitt 2005: 21) may be reached only by means of a radical reform of the art sphere. On the other hand, the experiences of 20th century avantgarde and neo-avantgarde movements show that any reform of art practice, however radical, will fail without simultaneous radical changes in society. That is likewise suggested by art practices that emerge in turbulent situations of social change and participate, in their own peculiar ways, in the ideological struggle to incite, achieve, and interpret those changes. The aesthetic sophistication of resistance art lies precisely in its freedom from all aesthetic concerns. If anyone can dance, as Rudolf Laban claimed, then there has to be room for everyone to dance the revolution as best they can. In turbulent situations art practices become an integral part of the resistance against violent destruction of the society. An intelligent, humorous refusal of the barbaric ideology of war is the best response to primitive militarism. For instance, when in the mid-1990s, during the Siege of Sarajevo, Haris Pašović initiated the Sarajevo Film Festival, journalists allegedly asked him: "Why a film festival in the midst of war?" and he responded by asking them in return: "But why a war in the midst of a film festival?" (Diklić 2004). Pašović's statement is an excellent example of intelligent humour that helped the inhabitants of Sarajevo to survive even in terrible conditions of the besieged city. Zoran Bečić, an actor from Sarajevo, who, like Pašović, experienced life in wartime Sarajevo at close quarters, defiantly explained the rationale of performing theatre plays under constant shelling: "I was not part of a theatre that sought to glorify any sort of politics, party, platform. My theatre was literally fighting for life, for the life of the city and its citizens, for the life of artistic creation" (Diklić 2004: 35). In such art, tools of artistic expression inevitably turn into weapons of resistance – in line with Brecht's motto: "Reach for the book: it is a weapon!" and the Partisan dancer Brina's understanding of dance and the poetry of her comrade in arms Kajuh: "As a creator in dance expression, I stood side by side with a poet who used poetry as a weapon" (Paulin 1975: 26). At least in the case of Sarajevo, and thanks to the inexhaustible sense of humour of its inhabitants, we might paraphrase Brecht's motto as: "Reach for humour: it is a weapon!" In fact, this paraphrase is mirroring another statement by Brecht, namely his insistence that "If it isn't funny, it isn't true" (cit. in Zupančič 2008).

Art practice that perceives itself as a "weapon" is one that has radically renounced a rather bourgeois understanding of autonomy and this not despite, but precisely *because* it does not claim to compensate for armed struggle in times of war, or political struggle in times of peace. Particularly at times that give rise to mass movements of resistance against military, physical, verbal, structural, and other forms of violence, the erstwhile separate and autonomised spheres of art and politics usually coalesce in an organic way and then it becomes obvious that these old terms are burdened with sediments of tradition and ideology. Coining new or hybrid terms, such as my own attempt with "artivism" (Milohnić 2005) is a visible expression of that theoretical frustration, as well as an attempt to open up spaces for theoretical reflection on what is happening here and now, before our eyes. This indeed involves us, in one way or another, and makes us aware that the area demands instant reflection, as well as new, more adequate theoretical tools for realising it which have yet to be constructed. None of this is, however,

restricted to contemporary forms of resistance, since one finds similar attempts at conceptualising new performative-political practices in almost all emancipatory movements of the previous century, such as the *Proletkult* of the Soviet Revolution, the "urgent theatre" (*teatro de urgencia*) of the Spanish Civil War, or the "frontline theatre" (*frontno gledališče*) of the Slovenian Partisans during the Second World War.

## 3.   The subversive re-appropriation method in choreographies of resistance

In this essay, I would like to outline possible interpretation of contemporary activist-performative practices in Slovenia as humorous happenings. Two examples are especially interesting in reflecting on humorous forms of performative acts of resistance. They are predicated on a witty employment of the subversive re-appropriation method – appropriating or adopting previously infamous or defamatory expressions or metaphors, initially used to attack certain social groups, but then recuperated by those very groups, by means of their own engagement, and turned back, like a boomerang, at those who had originally sent them into the public, as offensively constructed verbal or iconic degradations.

A significant act of this type was performed by several representatives of the Erased and allied activists on 8 October 2003 outside the Slovenian parliament building in Ljubljana. The Erased are a group of over 25,000 citizens of Slovenia whose names the government of Slovenia illegally erased from the public register of permanent residents in 1992, thereby depriving them of their legal, political, and social rights. The case is considered by many national and international human rights organizations as the most blatant and massive violation of human rights in the short history of Slovenia as an independent state. Although the Constitutional Court has already delivered judgment saying that the permanent residence status has to be returned retroactively to all of them, many of the Erased are still waiting for the authorities to implement this judgment. Dressed in white overalls, the activists occupied the road in front of the parliament building, lay down on the road, and arranged their bodies in a 30-foot configuration that read "IZBRIS" (erasure). They were protected from incoming traffic by activists holding banners that featured the 'No Standing Anytime'-sign and an inscription that said: "Keep driving! We don't exist". The action was provoked by statements made by certain right wing politicians, including members of parliament, claiming that the erased "don't exist", that they were made up by "enemies of Slovenian statehood", or that those people had "erased themselves" (Dedić et al. 2003). The activists were thereby warning about blatant violations of the erased citizens' human rights, by re-appropriating the politicians' claims about "the non-existent erased". They were thus throwing back their original message to those politicians in the reverse, humorous form and in line with the autonomist tradition stemming from the concept of using one's own body as a means of direct political action. *Izbris* was structured as a gestic performative that irrevocably links gesture and utterance, or, in other words, the body and the signifier. If, according to the classic definition of a performative, to utter the sentence is not to *describe* my doing but it is to *do* it (Austin 1962: 6), then we may say that introducing a gestural performative is an attempt to extend the speech act into the domain of the visual: physical and bodily acts, gestures, graphisms, and the like, in a word – non-verbal but nonetheless performative speech acts. A physical act generates an illusion of a speech act: the activists' bodies, originally acting in the domain of performance or action (*actio*), are literally incorporating a statement by means of the materiality of their bodies and thus enter into the domain of utterance or pronunciation (*pronuntiatio*), in a non-verbal, but nonetheless eloquent

manner. This actionist 'writing' with their own bodies produces a metaphoric condensation: the performative dimension of the utterance of "izbris" lies precisely in using the activists' bodies to make the erasure itself literally visible.



Figure 2. Performative bodies of "the Erased". Photo credit: Denis Sarkic (2003).

The absurdity of the predicament of over 25,000 citizens of Slovenia, turned into "dead souls" through bureaucratic thinking, is ironically shown in the banner, which tells drivers to disregard what is going on outside the parliament building, because its actors "don't exist". In other words, playing with the implicit metaphor of dead souls enabled the activists to label an event or *performance* as a non-event or *afformance* (Hamacher 1994): if the key actors of an event "don't exist", then one might conclude that the event as such does not exist either. However, given the characteristic feature of every performative act that the utterance it makes is neither true nor false, we must begin by assuming that the constative aspect of the utterance bears no direct consequences on the materiality of the act; therefore, the performative nature of the resulting situation establishes a position where the act, merely by existing as such, generates the possibility of its own negation, or, in other words, guarantees a constellation where a non-event is also an event. As we perceive that circumstance already on an intuitive level, we attribute an ironic meaning to the statement "we don't exist" and immediately understand it as an intentional contradiction that refers to the absurdity of the position of the erased and, at the same time, offers a key for reading the entire event.

## 4. Uprising of zombies

For *Izbris* and other similar, direct actions, what is crucial is using the body not as representative, but as constitutive and, as such, mobilised into contemporary practices of resistance. We are already familiar with similar *corpographic* uses of the body, both from past artistic practices, especially in the field of performance art and action painting, as well as in more recent political

initiatives. Lately, there has been another uprising of those who "don't exist" in Slovenia; this time, it was not only the Erased, but also all those whom Slovenia's right-leaning political elite regards as "ghosts from the past", the communist "living dead", otherwise called "zombies".



Figure 3. *Uprising of zombies*. Photo credit: Miha Fras (2013).

This wave of mass uprisings against the corrupt political elite began in early winter of 2012, in Maribor, as a protest against the local authorities headed by the then mayor Franc Kangler, now the defendant in a number of court cases concerning corruption and financial mismanagement at the expense of the city. From Maribor, this wave of mass demonstrations spread across Slovenia and several of the most massive protests were held in Ljubljana at the beginning of 2013, against the leader of Slovenia's then right-wing government Janez Janša and Zoran Janković, mayor of Ljubljana and a self-proclaimed leftist, though in reality one of Slovenia's biggest tycoons. Under much public pressure and due to a report published by the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, which accused precisely those two politicians for failing to account for their considerable personal fortunes, Janša's government fell apart and Janković had to give up on his appetite to become the next prime minister. Around that time, there emerged on Twitter a claim of Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party that the protests were staged by the "communist international" and that they were not an uprising of the people, but an "uprising of zombies". A great number of protesters immediately re-appropriated this statement and took to the streets of Ljubljana in December 2012 dressed as zombies.

Janša's party's defamatory quip thus incited a wave of corpographic and choreographic creativity on the part of the protesters, because there was probably no protester who had not seen at least one zombie film. And there was also the wealth of pop-cultural artefacts, ranging from novels, short stories, and comics, to TV series and zombie video games, not to mention an entire

mythology of the living dead, dancing their *danses macabres* on church frescoes since medieval times, such as on the most famous Slovenian fresco of that type in the village of Hrastovlje. Since losing power, it seems as though the former prime minister of Slovenia had succumbed to a zombie persecution mania, discussed by Jorge Fernández Gonzalo in his recently published book, *Filosofía zombi*: "A zombie is the other, I see my own reflection in him, the putrid reflection of bodily decomposition. A minimal difference between one and the other, despite the maximum distance that must be covered between life and death" (Gonzalo 2012: 29). Trying to terrify people with alleged conspiracies of some phantom "communist internationals" well into the 21st century speaks volumes about the paranoid minds of those who use such qualifications to discredit their political opponents.

Zombies have over time established itself as a part of popular culture, and – at least in some of the most commercial versions – become a chicken that lays golden eggs. Commodification is a sword of Damocles hanging over the head of all protest actions. Another danger is the softening of the rebellious spirit of the masses if protest movements are dominated by various moralistic intellectuals. "Elsewhere in Slovenia uprising were not as intense as in Maribor," says Cirila Toplak. These uprisings have "almost completely lost their political power and have been 'normalized', not only in terms of predictable collective behaviour, but also in terms of collaboration with a system that in polite, non-violent and so generously allowed protests, limited to a symbolic and performance, finds a welcome demonstration of its 'democracy'" (Toplak 2013: 23).[5] On the other hand, the same author nevertheless makes the difference between 'tragedy' of party politics, which takes place "before the increasingly empty hall", and a completely different humorous 'street theatre', which arose from the protest movement: "The uprising gave rise to experimental theatre, in which spectators are also actors, and the theatre of resistance, which does not endorse collective political stereotypes but it radically calls them into question" (Toplak 2013: 25). Just as there is no single definition of politics, for politics is not only a matter of the parties, the government and parliament, so also does culture have countless faces: from cultural institutions to all kinds of alternative cultures. In the most ungrateful position are members of those alternative groups, who combine artistic and activist approaches in their political life. These hybrid groups are ignored by both the artists and the activists because they do not know what these *artivists* really want and what to do with them – as if the humour which is characteristic of artivists' public actions and performances is not a legitimate form of resistance against ideological brainwashing, political repression and economic exploitation.[6]

## 5. Comic monsters and grotesque humour

Giant puppets of death, silly zombies and other funny creatures that reclaimed the streets and squares of numerous Slovenian cities in those winter carnival times might have appeared to the paranoid Prime Minister as doubly terrifying images of hell, to paraphrase Bakhtin: as scarecrows of infernal death and as scarecrows of the authority of the past (Bakhtin 1984: 395). Protesting zombies used grotesque laughter as the combination of the horrific with the comic: "Even the metaphors we live by signal the 'Janus face' of laughter; after all, we speak of something being 'dead funny', laughing ourselves to tears, or even laughing ourselves to death" (Edwards and Graulund 2013: 93–94). According to Bakhtin, the grotesque connection between death and humour can be traced back to medieval times and Renaissance when the image of death was "a more or less funny monstrosity" (Bakhtin 1984: 51). An important effect of the "comic monster" and the grotesque humour in carnival is the liberation of people from

censorship: "Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power" (Bakhtin 1984: 94).

Bakhtin's concept of "carnivalization" can cloud the sharpness of an analytical perspective if it is used as a shortcut to rather simplistic interpretations of performative dimensions of protest actions and mass demonstrations. Carnival romp of the recent protests in Slovenia is merely superficial, external appearance of an action, "the uprising of the people", in which the masses nevertheless managed to sufficiently articulate its key political objective, and that is the claim that the ruling elite to descend from power. Bakhtin's interpretation of the carnival and the "folk culture" can be much criticized, but some of his findings still hold. Among them is definitely this that "carnival does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators," because "[c]arnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (Bakhtin 1984: 7). Furthermore, carnival "is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art" (Bakhtin 1984: 7). It is an eminently participatory manifestation of public presence, in which all participants are equal and active: "Carnival is not contemplated and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants *live* in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect" (Bakhtin 2003: 122). Parody, grotesque, and other forms of carnival humour are devastating for hierarchical structures, self-sufficient authorities and void quasi-democratic rituals of alienated political elites. One of the key points of Bakhtin's theory of carnival is humorous distortion of typical seriousness of social and political hierarchies. In his words, it serves the purpose of

> liberating one from fear, bringing the world maximally close to a person and bringing one person maximally close to another […], with its joy at change and its joyful relativity, is opposed to that one-sided and gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order.
>
> (Bakhtin 2003: 160.)

If mass protests of the people in almost all parts of Slovenia were really uprisings of "all the people", then all participants were integral part of these events, regardless of whether they performed zombies' masquerades, or exhibited banners with explicit political messages. Without all of these groups of protesters, the uprisings would not have been what they were: significant political manifestations, where people demonstrated their determination to demand and achieve changes, and at the same time a spontaneous eruption of "folk culture" which does not deserve to be criticized of being supposedly "apolitical", if, as Bakhtin says, it has always "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (Bakhtin 1984: 10). After all, demonstrations of American pacifists against the war in Vietnam would not have been the same if they had not been supported by The Bread and Puppet Theater, which, like Slovenian protesting zombies, used giant puppets and masks. There may indeed be some truth in the words of Jean-Jacques Lebel, who was actively involved in student demonstrations in Paris in 1968: "The first stage of an uprising [...], the first stage of *any* revolution, is always theatrical" (Lebel 1998: 180).

## 6.   Methods of subversion in a "volatile state" of the comic

Notions like "theatrical", "dramatic", etc. can be used in a narrow or a broader sense, as characteristics of certain art practices such as theatre or drama, or as descriptions of specific daily activities or situations with certain theatrical or dramatic potential, e.g. a non-natural way of speaking or behaviour, designed for effect; a situation of high tension among individuals. In Henri Bergson's seminal essay on the meaning of the comic (Bergson 1977 [1924]) there is an important distinction between the comic and the witty (*spirituel*). Furthermore, the word wit (*esprit*) can have two meanings, the broader one (for instance, witty thinking, speaking, performing) and the more restricted (for instance, as practiced in comedy). There are many ways of being witty, says Bergson, and consequently there are many possible definitions of it. His rather metaphorical definition of the witty is "the comic in a highly volatile state" (Bergson 1977: 70). In this "volatile state" of the comic we can find a number of witty activists' methods of subversion.

One of them is usually referred to as "subversive affirmation" and it is well known, especially in the politically propulsive art practices of former-socialist Eastern European countries. Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, editors of a special issue on subversive affirmation for the Slovenian performing arts journal *Maska*, offered a possible definition of the concept: "Subversive affirmation is an artistic/political tactic that allows artists/activists to take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them. It is characterized precisely by the fact that with affirmation there simultaneously occurs a distancing from, or revelation of, what is being affirmed" (Arns and Sasse 2006: 6). It is crucial for the proper functioning of this mechanism that there is a surplus of identification which destabilizes affirmation and turns it into its opposite. Subversive affirmation can have different forms, one of them is known as "over-identification". The basic principle of the over-identification method is embedded in reasoning about a political system as an internalized cynicism. The most effective way to break through this ideological barrier is not to take the "classical" dissident position, but to do the opposite, to engage in a fanatic struggle for the (criticized) Idea in its "purest" and most "authentic" form. As pointed out by Arns and Sasse, the tactic of over-identification is "a repetition, an appropriation of components and elements of the ruling ideology" (2006: 10).

The over-identification of protesting performers with "non-existing" persons and "zombies" produces the "alienation effect" which has similar consequences as we know from Brecht's epic theatre: usual, self-evident, "normal" social situations are unveiled as ideological constructions. The re-appropriation method of protest actions *Erasure* and *Uprising of Zombies* is thus an absurd type of subversive affirmation. According to Bergson, this mechanism may also be traced in many humorous situations. For instance, frequently reiterated sentences or statements are usually accepted as a matter of course in public communication. Due to the automatic repetition of those statements, Bergson suggests that "our attention nods", but only "until we are suddenly aroused by the absurdity of the meaning" (Bergson 1977: 72). As in many jokes, for instance, it is precisely that moment of absurdity which is responsible for the comic effect. Hundreds and thousands of protesters wearing the zombie masks during the uprising in Ljubljana of course didn't really believe that they were zombies; they just over-identified with the statement of the ruling party, referring to them as "zombies", in order to point out the comic absurdity of such an accusation. In other words, by wearing the zombie masks, protesters have symbolically taken off the ideological masks from the faces of the ruling party politicians.

Bakhtin, Bergson and many other theorists of the comic have no doubts about an inherent emancipatory quality of theatrical or carnival comedy. It is not always so, however, that comic subversion works properly in all cases or by default. As demonstrated by Todd McGowan in his essay "The barriers to a critical comedy", comic subversion can also fail to subvert: "Comedy can assist the authorities in cementing their authority just as easily as it can undermine that authority. There is, in short, no inherent political valence to the comic act" (McGowan 2014: 203–204). Following this duality, he speaks about two types of comedy: critical and conservative. Proposed criteria for determination of critical or conservative forms of comedy are answers to two questions: first, who creates the comedy and second, who is its object. Following these two McGowan's criteria, our examples of *artivistic* actions would fall under the type of critical comedy.

## 7.  Activism and a sense of humour

By way of conclusion, it is worthwhile recalling Roland Barthes, who said that it is not good to rush with judgments on what is "engaged" in arts and culture since both engaged and the seemingly non-engaged can appear to be manifestations of the same idea. Barthes' observations ring true today: a theatre play, a street performance, or some hybrid forms of *artivistic* events are neither parliament nor cabinet sessions, nor they are party meetings, but that does not mean that these forms of art may not be political. The notion of the political is much broader than politics as a profession and the same may be said about art. Politics is not something extraneous to art, it is an integral part of art. The process of reflecting on that relationship can never be finished, just as the very concepts of art and politics can never be fully reconsidered.

There are certain problems that are visible and perceived as problems almost exclusively from a structural position in society from which they *can* be perceived as such. Those who are most affected or harmed by injustices are most likely to pose radical questions. This is where the respective structural positions of political activist and engaged artist come together in the figure of *artivist*. These contemporary rebellion histrionics seem strange to the silent majority, but precisely for that reason they are in a position to ask important questions in a humorous way. They pose questions about issues that are otherwise not challenged, since they are somehow taken for granted, presumed, exempted, in short, drummed into us. This is what generates the sheer grotesqueness of those spectacular displays of well-trained, uniformed, professionally educated *robocops*, who at political protests seemingly defend parliaments, governmental buildings and other premises of professional politicians from street performances of the Erased "dead souls", zombies and other "artivistic" groups practicing humorous re-appropriations. Members of those groups are aesthetically unburdened by forms of expression and props used in their street performances; their preoccupations reside more in the field of political intervention than in the aesthetic sphere of what is primarily a bourgeois project of so-called autonomous art. This is the affirmative and emancipatory dimension of that kind of artistic and political activism, which wouldn't be possible without a sense of humour.

### Notes

[1] Basically, this remains a key issue today as well. A strict division between autonomised social spheres (economy, politics, culture or the sciences) became obsolete a long time ago and

has been kept alive only by the particular interests of various establishments within those spheres. In that sense, art is no exception at all. This is why progressive art practices often attack precisely this ossified structure of the institution of art.

[2] Some 30 years later, she described her Partisan dance performances in a memoir note:

I became a dancer on outdoor stages. Instead of dancing on the boards of a theatre stage, suddenly, I was dancing anywhere. [...] On an outdoor stage, a small move from an indoor theatre turns into a whole march. If I was going to master that huge space and be accepted in it, my dancing moves had to become big, clear, broad. [...] Standing, by myself, before a multitude of fighters and realising that I could express, with my gift of dancing and my feeble body, that which connected us, that I could master even that boundless natural space, I felt power in my feet, whilst treading the hard earth. My arms could feel the breadth of the woods and climb over the trees. There was no imitation in my dancing, which would stem from formalist moves (Paulin 1975: 25–26).

[3] Of course, this is a reference to a line by that famous feminist and anarchist: "If I can't dance I don't want to be in your revolution". But that statement is not grounded in historical facts, because Emma Goldman never actually said or wrote it down. The line was conceived and later used as a slogan and printed on t-shirts by an American anarchist activist in the 1970s, as a possible paraphrase of an excerpt from her autobiography, *Living My Life*, which was confirmed first hand by Alix Kates Shulman more than 20 years ago in "Dances with feminists" (Shulman 1991).

[4] According to Hewitt:

A mimetic aesthetic ideology would be one in which the artistic representation of a better life serves to blind the audience to the social realities in which they live. […] Aesthetic satisfaction in the mere 'symbol' of a social utopia distracts us from the political praxis necessary to bring that utopian condition about in reality. Art serves as a sop for unrealized political action. […] What I am calling the performative or integrative aesthetic ideology, meanwhile, is one in which art does not simply misrepresent, in a palliative manner, an existing social order. Instead, the aesthetic now becomes the realm in which new social orders are produced (rather than represented) and in which the integration of all social members is possible (Hewitt 2005: 21).

[5] Franc Trček, well-known activist from Maribor, Slovenia, says something similar:

Even though we may look sympathetically at a culture that more or less wittily ridicules       stupid primitive domestic political and not-so-small part of the economic and intellectual  elites, we must be aware that the excessive 'culturalization' of resistance […] will not solve the eternal antagonism between labor and capital in the existing system (Trček 2013: 67).

[6] An interesting observation in this respect stems from Jürgen Schmidt, a collaborator of the *VolxTheaterKarawane* (the Austrian artistic-activist group which was arrested when participating in the alter-globalisation protests in Genoa), in which he describes the hybrid, border situation of their group in relation to politics and art:

With its method the Caravan broke the dichotomy between art and politics; it seemingly       took the position between both chairs while it was sceptically observed by both sides.  Although  within  the field of art it was criticized as 'activist autonomist' and within the field   of political activism it was

presented as 'stupid artists', the Caravan always endeavoured to thwart this dominant logic (Schmidt cited in Milohnić 2005: 57).

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