

KIBELA

Stojan Grauf

Očividci / Eyewitnesses



15 September – 7 October 2017

KiBela, Space for Art
MMC KIBLA, Maribor, Slovenia

The Betnava Heritage and Eyewitnesses

Klemen Brvar

We live in an increasingly amnesic time and space. The dictate of the self-eroding scientific/technological apparatus is too powerful and does not allow roots to nourish, or heritage to deepen, man's understanding of the world around us. Instead of monuments and messages of yesteryear that have been washed ashore, or better yet, forged through time, the present integrates the past in an increasingly arbitrary and twisted manner. Of course, all this can be hidden under a coat of any kind of autonomy, freedom of choice, sovereignty, and thereby equality of opinion, perspective, or expression. And yet, as the past is manifested and interpreted into the here and now, more and more through spectacle, shock, false commitment, and other yellowed impulses, a sense of insipidity and bereavement cannot be shaken off.

The lengthening shadow of content devaluation and pragmatic encroachment upon the essence of things stretches across many areas. It can be found quite nearby, in many local stories. Thus the Betnava Mansion (*Betnavski dvorec*), one of the most beautiful Baroque mansions in Slovenia, originally built in the Renaissance style, which shows today Janus' face of glory and banal elemental forces, is perceived in the wider public mainly as a synonym for a political affair and (justifiable) outrage. Is such a single-layered perception in an age, which (at least indirectly) allows influence and participation in decision-making, enough for the negative feelings and emotions of this symptomatic transition tale to be channeled towards constructive solutions? Probably not. But what most certainly sets us on this track is the knowledge about what kind of heritage we are dealing with: the Betnava Mansion and its nearby surroundings have an exceptionally rich legacy, which places this manor on the outskirts of the city at the center of attention in many a perspective.

Undoubtedly, the most evident is its architectural and landscape heritage. The ambitious restoration plans for »Maribor's Schönbrunn«, designed by the new millennium and the new-old owner, have assumed, if one is familiar with the first patronage of the Lavantine/Maribor diocese between the years 1863 and 1941, a return to the golden age. In the second half of the 20th century, namely, the estate was nationalized, its management was passed on to the Maribor agricultural cooperative, and commercial and farming outbuildings were erected. For some time the mansion served as a housing facility, and in

the transitional 1990s, even as a furniture showroom. Its condition today, however – with missing gutters, humidity, the consequences of a fire, the abandoned construction site, the bared excavations, the overgrown park and the pond whose water supply is cut off when needed – is in an even greater disharmony with the now long-gone past. The latter is witnessed by the fact that the archbishop's summer residency employed a special manager with an assistant and a also gardener, who took care of the already beautifully nurtured surroundings with gardens, alleys, and exotic trees. Another testimony to the mansion's relevance is a list of its past owners including the noble families of Auersperg, Szekely, Herberstein, Khiessl, and Brandis, who were among the most powerful worthies and landowners in the wider area, each in their own time. The Brandis family, for example, is credited for the late baroque appearance of the manor house as we know it today; in the middle of the 18th century, a still unknown master of architecture rebuilt the mansion and its chapel in Florentine style, after the fashion of Vienna castle architecture of the time.

With its new look, Betnava lost its Early-Renaissance appearance of a fortified residence from the late 16th century, defined by the quadrilateral basis with stocky corner towers and the defensive moat with a drawbridge. At that time, from 1587 onwards, the existing owners – the Herbersteins, who were adherents of the new Protestant religion themselves, made it possible for the growing local community of evangelicals to design a religious-educational complex next to the mansion. A prayer room, a school, the pastor's office, and the cemetery have placed Betnava on the map as an important Reformation center for some time. After 1600, the holy wrath of the Counter-Reformation was to blame for the fact that all of the buildings, including the cemetery, were demolished. In their place, gallows were erected.

The distant history of the mansion is extremely interesting as well, and places Betnava in a broader context. The first mention of the estate with the mansion in written sources dates back to 1313, when it was owned by the Maribor townsman Rudolf, a former city judge and the Styrian state scribe. In 1375 his descendants, who were also important function holders in the town, sold their family house in Main Square (*Glavni trg*), and adopted the name of Betnava three years later.

The roots, however, reach further back, to ancient times. Natural characteristics, and especially the road connecting the Roman town of Celeia (*Celje*) to Flavia Solva (the Austrian *Leibnitz*) was the main reason for the existence of a waystation on this location, which is not far from another important Roman traffic road between Petoviono (*Ptuj*), and Virnum on the Zollfeld Plain. The very probable existence of such a station is suggested by an altar to Epona, the Celtic-Roman protector of horses, found not far from the mansion. Another sign of Roman colonization, which typically occurred alongside roads during the 2nd and 4th centuries, is a series of countryside villas' remains (*villae rusticae*) under the south-east edge of the Pohorje Hills, between the settlements of Razvanje and Hoče. The Betnava villa foundations with their typical hypocaust, i.e. a system of central heating, were hiding, among other things, a considerable number of Roman coins. That an important trade and transportation route ran through this area is further supported by altars to Mercury, the Roman god of trade, found near Pivola, and to Mithra, an oriental mystery cult, which was worshipped, apart from soldiers and slaves, especially by the tradesmen of that period, and which is embedded today in the crypt of the Church of St George in Hoče. We must not neglect to mention Poštela, a fortified elevated settlement that holds a special place in the district's ancient history. This strategic point, from which a large part of the Drava Plain can be seen, was a refuge for local inhabitants from the lowlands in those insecure and troubled times. Poštela, with its mighty trenches still visible to this day, was populated in several periods, reaching the highlight during the Late Iron Age, between the 8th and the 6th century B. C. From the perspective of the facts known so far concerning human population, Poštela is a direct predecessor of the »Burg in der Mark« (German for »city in the Mark«, »Mark« being a frontier county in the Frankish state), which was built on the Piramida Hill in the middle of the 12th century. Later on, the town of Maribor developed below Piramida Hill.

Perhaps the least known is the artistic dimension of the Betnava heritage. The baroquization had also affected the mansion's interior, where today we can admire the luxurious three-stage staircase and the representative hall with illusionistic frescoes. The painted ceiling archway is adorned by an allegory of Spring, and the castle chapel is also painted in Baroque style. For some time, the mansion hosted a collection of

around 130 fine art works by world-class painting masters and their students. In the beginning of the 19th century, the then owner of Betnava, Clemens count of Brandis, evidently a lover and connoisseur of fine arts, used four rooms to exhibit works from Dürer's, Rubens' and van Dyke's school, the schools of Paolo Caliari Veronese and Caravaggio, and works by masters Giovanni Pietro de Pomis, Philips Wouvermann, and Hans Adam Weissenkircher. The collection of portraits, religious motifs, mythological allegories, and landscapes was later dispersed: a part of it came into the hands of the Lavantine Diocese and can be found today in its headquarters and in the Maribor Regional Museum, and a part was transferred to the Slivnica Mansion, where most of the works were kept until 1945, when they were taken over by the Yugoslavian Federal Collection Center.

A link to the fine arts has been maintained by Betnava through the mid-nineteen-eighties as well. It was then that the park and the nearby Betnava Forest (*Betnavski gozd*) became a space for showcasing contemporary artistic practices by younger-generation local Maribor artists. It started out in 1984 with Stojan Grauf's first outdoor solo exhibition, through which the artist established a particular and peculiar dialog between the artwork and the natural environment. In the following two years, Betnava became a stage for eventful multimedia neo-avant-garde actions; a collective of artists linked through informal ties were using music, performance, installations, projections, concerts, and dance, to loosen institutional frames and contribute to a more open attitude towards visual culture.

Whichever way we look at it, the complexity and multi-directionality of the Betnava heritage, with its harmonic spatial relationship between human and nature, is an exceptional starting point for the mansion and its surroundings to (re-)emerge as a tourist destination, a culture & arts hub, and a meeting point for the people of Maribor. Perhaps the circumstances in which the present exhibition was set up are the first step out of the current vacuum. During the painter's creative process, taking place on the clearing among the trees, circled by ancient »eyewitnesses« of the past, a group of different eyewitnesses formed, eager for change. It always begins this way: someone has to be the person to take the gardening tools and watering can out of the hands of the baroque angels above the mansion's portal, and place them into their own.

Stojan Grauf is presented on this occasion as a trans-disciplinary bio-artist: the exhibited works are entirely ecological, painted with natural pigments made by the artist himself. In KiBela Gallery, Grauf sets up his own portion of nature by revitalizing a segment of the once active, but today almost forgotten Betnava Park, where the cycle of *biological* paintings entitled *Eyewitnesses* was created.

Upon his graduation from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in 1984, in a time when artists in Maribor were mobilized (yet again) to revitalize the Betnava estate and park, Stojan Grauf was the first to showcase his works in the Betnava Park with his first solo exhibition, which included elements of nature in the set-up of the show. Unfortunately, today the Betnava Mansion and the surrounding park are abandoned. On a symbolic level, StojanGrauf is the only true, "real" eyewitness to this decay, as he has been tracking its ruin for over thirty years. Every summer to this day, the artist moves his studio to the Betnava Park, or, better yet, to the overgrown forest inside which the park was left to fade away. Even the stream that once ran around the mansion and used to be full of fish, has now dried out.

Grauf is a recognizable artist, who draws inspiration solely from nature, merging with it, and constantly re-creating the symbiosis that ties humans to their environment. A genuine bio-artist; not in the sense of interdisciplinary, research-oriented art, which hopes to create living matter out of the artificial, but rather as a testimony to the natural decay, an eyewitness to the ruin, which he tries to elevate, through active re-animation and a constant "returning of the same", to the point of an immanent, even absolute re-cycling of that, which has always been circling in nature, and which has been extrapolated by man.

From this perspective, Grauf's paintings are entirely ecological, created in nature and made from natural materials. The only commercially acquired product is the watercolor paper, other materials used are plant-based bio-pigments, made from greens found in the Betnava Park. The charcoal, too, was self-made by the artist from willow tree branches growing in spring-time by the Drava River; the color pigments from soil, grass, nettles, dandelions, violets and other flowers, and fruits of the forest, such as blackberries or strawberries, all of which can be found in the Betnava Park. Bark collected from trees, such as the tulip tree, sycamores, lindens, oaks, or hornbeams, was used as a coating for the paper before applying natural hand-made pigments made from various plants' residue to paint. Eyewitnesses, or, as the artist himself puts it, co-authors of his works, are also snails, ants, earthworms, spiders and other insects, companions to the artist's creative process, which sometimes even climb up onto and across the canvas, leaving behind a trace. Stojan Grauf retains originality in his artistic work partly by returning to the past: as he goes about the entire time-consuming process of preparing the pigments, he tackles the tradition of classic painters, who insisted on the importance of authorship even regarding the preparation and mixing of the colors to be used, let alone the idea of abandoning

studio-based painting practices, and strengthening a Rousseauian "return to nature". Thus, the holistic message behind Stojan Grauf's entire artistic oeuvre is a way for him to express and display not only his respect, but first and foremost his remarkable and unconditional love of nature.

À votre service, monde. Love, Stojan.

— Nina Jeza

Stojan Grauf, a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Ljubljana, is a well-known local artist from Maribor, known especially as a master of drawing – the primal virtue of any art work. This middle-generation artist has always been closely tied to the city of Maribor, where he continues to live and work. Some of the most fundamental impulses behind his inspiration are related to primal nature and all-natural materials. Stojan Grauf has been self-employed in the field of culture since 1987, working in painting, restoration, murals, graphic design, and the development of indoor and outdoor planning and design concepts. His works have been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions home and abroad, winning a number of awards and prizes.

Asja Grauf is an academically trained flute player. She plays in various ensembles, including electro-acoustic and improvised music genres. She has (co-) created musical pieces for puppet shows, fairy-tale and storytelling performances, and painting exhibitions. She also works as an educator, teaching flute in music schools and organizing workshops, through which she connects music to other expressive fields, such as dance and the fine arts.

Stojan Grauf, *Eyewitnesses*

Kurated by Nina Jeza

Opening: Friday 15 September 2017, at 7 p. m.

The opening ceremony accompanied by a performance by Asja Grauf (flute).

On display until 7 October, 2017

KiBela, Space for Art / MMC KIBLA, Ulica kneza Koclja 9, Maribor, Slovenia

Monday–Friday: 9:00–22:00 / Saturday: 16:00–22:00

KIBLA

ACE KIBLA is co-funded by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia and the Municipality of Maribor. Project RISK CHANGE (2016–2020) is co-financed by the Creative Europe program of the European Union.

ACE KIBLA is a member of M3C, Multimedia Centers Network of Slovenia; International Platform X-OP eXchange of Operators and Producers; and McRU, Network of Slovenian Arts Research Centers.