



## Avant-Garde anatomy: dissection and re-composition of art and its history in the works of Milorad Krstić

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### ABSTRACT

Numerous artists have revisited or got inspired by artworks of earlier periods, thus making their own paraphrase of previous creations. Not only artists of the (early) Modern Age had revisited Antiquity, but even Avant-Garde artists have not entirely dissociated themselves from certain forms, motifs, approaches or themes of the classical traditions. It is so, despite the Avant-Garde artists' focus on creating along new visions, and offering radically novel perspectives in and for art and its infrastructure, that was a similar feature in most of the movements within the classical Avant-Garde. Later however, even Avant-Garde itself got historicised, and, as a consequence, became possible subject-matter of reevaluation, as we can observe it in the paraphrasing practice of several artists from the 20th and 21st centuries. The works of Milorad Krstić — that are put in the centre of this study as a thought-provoking case study with fascinating consequences for aesthetics too — represent a particular approach within the aforementioned revisitations of art in general and the re-interpretation of Avant-Garde and 20th century art in particular. One of the specialities of his approach lies in the fact that he does not merely return to previous works, including those that are of crucial importance in the Avant-Garde, simply for inspiration, but his practice of the evaluative examination of the art of the 20th century will be essentially defined by the Avant-Garde techniques. In his *Das Anatomische Theater* he dissects the 20th century, but then encyclopaedically re-assembles the fragments to a novel total work of art that presents the history of art of the period. Then, in his full-length animation movie *Ruben Brandt, collector* he continues re-assembling and re-telling art history by constantly inserting fragments of it in the novel work itself, hence the collection will become not only the subject-matter of the film, but even one of its most spectacular features.

### KEYWORDS

re-visitations of the past; Avant-Garde; Milorad Krstić; *Das Anatomische Theater*; *Ruben Brandt, collector*

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Dissection aims at studying the small bits into which the whole is dissected. However, through this process we strive to understand not only how those particular parts in question work, but also to see how the whole functions — how the part relates to the whole and what is the role that this relation between the two has in order to make the entire ensemble function. Hence it makes us understand that not only the part cannot work without the whole, but how these parts and fractions build up the functioning whole. Although this anatomical analogy may seem extremely far from the world of art and aesthetics, Milorad Krstić — the protagonist in my present study — proves to us with his oeuvre that this complex view of equally complex phenomena (that of the art, culture, history and society) can be very beneficial.

The Yugoslavian-born and since 1989 Budapest-based artist Milorad Krstić creates bold and inspiring associations, modes of rephrasing and connections with materials deriving from throughout the history of art and culture, with a special emphasis on the arts of the 20th century in general and of the Avant-Garde in particular. In the following I analyse some aspects in his complex oeuvre, and show the particularity of his approach, focusing especially on what we can learn from him about perceiving and analysing art, aesthetics and their history.

Art often moves forwards by looking backwards. Inspiration may come in numerous ways and from innumerable sources, among this latter to be counted also the sources of inspiration arriving from the work of artists who are contemporaries of the creator, as well as those who are representatives of the earlier decades, or even millennia. The revisitation is sometimes more direct and “general”, like in the case of the Italian Renaissance where the return of many antique forms, themes, stylistic solutions etc. characterised the period’s art production. Similarly in the 19th century revival styles, again, forms, elements of decoration and styles from earlier periods were generally applied. On the other hand, revisitation and re-interpretation can be a feature that we observe on the level of the individual artist, even in periods that seem to rely on a previous era’s creative production in a significantly less accentuated way (Milani, 2017). Even Avant-Garde artists have not entirely dissociated themselves from certain forms, motifs, approaches or themes of the classical traditions. It is so, even though the Avant-Garde artists’ focus on creating along new visions, and offering radically novel perspectives in and for art and its infrastructure, that was a similar feature in most of the movements within the classical Avant-Garde. In other words, despite the fact that many movements and groups within the Avant-Garde were emphasising the revolutionarily new elements in their approach — sometimes “revolutionary” could almost be taken literally — they could not start entirely from scratch. The load from the past (both recent and more classical) had to be carried along, either as forerunners to build on (like the Cubist with the legacy of Paul Cézanne) or

a burden of which it seemed almost impossible to free themselves (like the Futurists with Italy's art heritage). This complex and intricate web of connections and cross-references were analysed already in the 1930, if we recall for example Alfred H. Barr's famous diagram, "charting the sources and evolution of modern art" (Lowry, 2012: 358). Later however, even Avant-Garde itself got historicised, and, as a consequence, became possible subject-matter of revaluation, as we can observe it in the re-visiting and paraphrasing practices of several artists from the 20th and 21st centuries. A great example of this could be the series by Roy Lichtenstein, *Bull profile* from 1973 and *Cow going abstract* in 1974, in which the artist recounts the steps of abstraction in early 20th century art in an ironic way, by "progressively abstracting" the animals (The National Gallery of Art website, n.d.).

In many cases these revisitations aim at the rephrasing of one individual artist or even a particular work. Compared to these, one of the particularities of the works of Milorad Krstić however is that he takes the entire history of Western art — or at least a significantly large portion of it — as a primary source to create his works. The other particularity is that not only the motifs, but even the working method has strong connections to his chosen and preferred art historical periods, hence creating a double connection, and, in certain sense, a double homage to it. Let's see some further details of these two particularities.

After the above introductory thoughts on dissection, paraphrase and re-interpretation it will not come as surprise that a central concept for our present investigation will be that of the fragment. The concept of fragment — as well as its importance in art and aesthetics — naturally goes back much earlier than our present focus in this study, the fragment being a central point of theoretical investigations already in the 18th century and in Romanticism (Świtek, 2009). The continued interest resulted in the fact that many Avant-Garde movements, as well as individual artists immediately preceding the classical Avant-Garde, can be connected to and/or their aims and forms described by the concept of fragment, broadly construed, hence including not only fragment(ation) but also "actual" breaking and smashing. In his photographs Eadweard Muybridge fragmented the visuality of singular motion into sequences of stills. Soon after him, Cubism fragmented the singular view into fragments shown from different viewpoints. Dadaism, in a way, fractured the concept of art and its traditional infrastructure for their establishing the anti-establishment in art — just like they used the scraps of waste material for the creation of works out of materials previously not considered as being noble enough. Futurism attempted at the same smashing of artworks themselves — fortunately however only in their manifestos... Even if, however, the idea and concept of destruction has influenced the Futurists' aesthetic approaches to visual perception and the process of painting too, as we can read for example in the "Technical Manifesto"

of Futurist Painting, from 1910: “We declare [...] that movement and light destroy the materiality of bodies” (quoted in: Rainey, Poggi, & Wittman, 2009: 66). Surrealism diminished the dominance of reality through the diminishing of the strict division between reality and fantasy, or, as the art historian Werner Hofmann emphasised what we can learn from the Surrealists, fantasy should not be treated as a dimension outside of reality, hence their aim with breaking the boundaries is to synthesise the antinomy of sensing and comprehension, experience and knowledge (Hofmann, 2003). Needless to say, some of the artists in the aforementioned movements were more aware of the aesthetic implications of their research in the theoretical aspects of art, including the survey of the effects of fragmentation and of the power of the fragment itself, while other creators working in other movements were more “instinctive”, and were working without an overly strong emphasis on the speculative approaches and on the philosophical consequences of their production.

How and why would the polyvalent appearance of fragment and fragmentation help us in understanding Milorad Krstić’s works and world? Not only because the Avant-Garde and its fragmentariness plays a central role in his investigations on art and its history, but, perhaps even more importantly, because the artist has a double movement connected to the handling of fragment, fragmentariness and fragmentation that is almost contradictory, i.e. that of dismembering and re-joining. He is first dissecting the chosen subject, for example the 20th century in his multimedia project *Das Anatomische Theater*, cutting up art, history, culture, politics and society, but not for the pure sake of dismembering as a sort of destroying act. Rather for preparing these fractions for future demonstrations — hence here is how anatomy will become an anatomical theatre. Therefore, as a great inheritor of the Avant-Garde, Milorad Krstić initially radically disjoins, but then he re-combines whatever he has and has found. It will thus become an extremely conscious collection and re-collection — what’s more: reconnection — of the fragments. A subjective encyclopaedia, with encyclopaedic subjectivity.

Therefore, the *Das Anatomische Theater* will become a thrilling intellectual journey to present and re-present the events of the 20th century, in chronological order. The title of project refers to the public anatomical demonstration halls, spreading from the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries, known not only indirectly from visual documents, but some of them still visitable up until today, e.g. that of the Archiginnasio in Bologna, decorated with wonderful wooden sculptures of anatomical illustration figures (Archiginnasio website, n.d.). The main difference however is that in Milorad Krstić’s project it is not a human corpse lying on the dissection table, but the 20th century itself. In order to understand it better, it is worth to quote the artist’s brief summary statement, that appeared in relation to one of the exhibitions of the project, in the Gallery Skuc in Ljubljana in 2006:

The Theater is anatomical in nature because within it the 20<sup>th</sup> century is placed on a dissection table; the people, the events and the phenomena therefore do not wear costumes or masks; on the contrary, even the skin is torn off, tissue is cut, bone and muscle are revealed, and the nervous, blood and lymph systems are observed. The walls of the Theater remind us of the walls of a biological lab surrounded by glass showcases filled with neatly arranged bottles in which, floating in a 40% formaldehyde solution, the body parts of world's history await their curious observer.

Eroticism, which often appears in the scenes of *Das Anatomische Theater* many times bordering on obscenity, and which is deeply rooted in the depths of the age-old traditions of Eros and Thanatos, is evoked to counterbalance the tragic events and the totalitarian systems that brought doom to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The civilized nations have long forgotten that, in more primitive stages of their existence, they too used erotic art to expel the evil spirits. With the help of its irony and eroticism, *Das Anatomische Theater* banishes the evil powers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (quoted on: Ljudmila website, n.d.)

This will on the one hand make it more understandable why the fragmented elements of the 20th century are re-assembled in a total work, scrutinising the complexities of the century — that, on a higher level will itself also become a *Gesamtkunstwerk* — the *Das Anatomische Theater* project itself has various forms of realisation: individual artworks, prints, a massive book (Krstić, 2007a), a website (Krstić, 2007b), installations, exhibitions, a CD, and many of its elements appearing in later works, including not only a dance performance but also the film *Ruben Brandt, collector*. As a matter of fact, this variety in the material and in the forms of expressions and genres of presentation is also an Avant-Garde characteristic. Therefore, in Krstić' work it becomes a new layer of his tribute to the Avant-Garde: It suffices to recall for example the broad diversity in creating and performing art in Dadaism — one of the movements that played a very strong influence on the artist's oeuvre.

On the other hand however, this will also result in a particular portraying of the 20th century. As I mentioned above, the dissection aims at preparing the material for new demonstration, recollecting and re-joining the pieces to understand their interconnection and the functioning of the whole. In other words, the *Das Anatomische Theater* attempts to make the entire 20th century to be seen simultaneously, and, in fact, the various materialisations of the project are all allowing this. Whether browsing the book, entering the exhibition space, or discovering the works on the CD and the surfing website, anyone can further dissect the century in an arbitrary order.

The more crucial question however is the organisation of the material. We all have experienced how useful it can be when historic events and cultural phenomena can be observed in a simultaneous way, and we may remember the curious illustration charts from our history books where parallel events originally happening in different locations are shown together. Besides these schematic chronological demonstrations we may also recall the attempts of interpreting

historical eras on scientific and theoretical basis, including the experiments by Giambattista Vico (Vico, 2020) or Oswald Spengler (Spengler, 2017). However, in each of these attempts several challenges arise, including how to pair the events, how to find — and how not to force — the parallels, how to highlight the connections and influences. Subjectivity in the selection is almost unavoidable. However, while in science and history it may be a flaw, in an art project it may exactly become the important added value of such a project. Therefore, instead of attempting (and most likely failing) to reach objectivity, Milorad Krstić has chosen to provide the viewer with his special reading of history and its flow, of the cross-influences in art, and developed his own interpretation of the main forces that he claims drive and organise the events and phenomena.

This is practically an act of re-writing the history of the 20th century, in both senses of the expression: re-writing as recounting, (or telling again), and re-writing as writing a new account. He has thus found a way to recreate the process and to replay the whole flow of history. The organising structure of this replay — the aforementioned particular view developed by the artist — resembles the double movement of the carousel. Double movement, since a carousel goes at the same time forward and around. It goes forward in and across time and space, at least in children's fantasy, who may cross continents and gloriously fight entire wars on their decorously painted wooden horses. But at a later stage of our life, and when observing history, we also recognise the other, and often apparently more discouraging movement: it also goes round and round, regularly turning back to the same point. This is why such a replay can resemble history itself. It may provide us with a second chance of action: either correction or making the same mistakes. Or, in fact we may have a third option too: just turning our gaze away and not having awareness of the phenomenon, that can latter, nevertheless, lead to just as dangerous consequences as the simple repeating of the historic mistake. It is all up to us how we relate to and handle a situation. The works within the *Das Anatomische Theater* project, despite all their apparent irony and seemingly harmless lightness also serve as constant and very serious imperatives; they are reminders of the unavoidable necessity of confronting the past, including its most terrible periods and events. This confrontation and learning process can only be effectuated and mastered by developing our own interpretation, as we have seen Milorad Krstić doing it. It will thus strengthen us in our efforts to withstand actual, present issues of contemporary history affecting our lives, by knowing more of the past and its working and re-emergence. This is why we agree with János Kurdy Fehér's observation regarding the process: "We can perform the operation the artist himself applies in *Das Anatomische Theater*: dissection, investigation and separation of parts, placing them in new, yet unknown systems of relations, giving them new interpretations" (Kurdy Fehér, 2007: 11). In practically each and every piece we can find examples for this dissection, re-interpretation and

re-connection of the events, ideas, concepts, approaches and styles, when Milorad Krstić creates new cross-references between instances of history, politics, society, technology, psychology, art and aesthetics etc. It is observable for example when — as an illustration for the year 1915 in *Das Anatomische Theater* — the Futurist idea(l) of the war as the hygiene of the world appears through references to both medicine, technology and art. Or when the year 1953 is featured, among others, through the first issue of Playboy and one of Ian Fleming's James Bond stories. However, in the same year also Joe McCarthy gets mentioned, what's more, mentioned in a context of another anatomical theatre... In this way it is the recalling of the scrutiny of anatomy with totally different overtones compared to what Milorad Krstić himself is doing with his own *Das Anatomische Theater* (see these and many other works on the project's website; Krstić, 2007b).

All this again brings us back to the aforementioned eroticism and irony. In every *Das Anatomische Theater* work, on every page of the book we can note the interaction of these two, in carefully mixed proportions. It is quite obvious to trace the Freudian roots behind these two stylistic pillars of the entire project — as we could read the reference to Eros and Thanatos in the artist statement quoted above — and we can also enjoy the visual results of the attempt of releasing the historical tensions of the century. In a perhaps Romantic and pathetic reading we could say that through this approach Milorad Krstić savours his personal freedom of re-living the century and in re-assembling its fragments through the interpretative process resulting in the project. However, it is even more important to see that the *Das Anatomische Theater* is not merely the visual documentation of a personal interpretation of history, but may become a worldview and even style of life. At least it has become one for the artist himself, who tirelessly continues to dissect not only the past but our contemporary world too, among others in his photo books (Krstić, 2003; Krstić, 2008) or on the pictures and photomontages he uploaded on his blog (Krstić blog). This is what we can learn from him and through his works, how the investigation and re-elaboration of history had sharpened his eyes in dissecting present phenomena too. After having seen his works, we can also see the world as if it was lying on the dissection table, waiting to be understood by mixing irony with extreme scrutiny.

On a technical level however, we shall also note that the cross-connections between the dissected fragments are traceable not only between the various forms of the complex project — i.e. that images from exhibitions appear in the book, in the website, or in the CD — but also on the level of the individual works too. In the beginning of the complex project, already in the 1990s, drawings, sketches, paintings were created, and motifs and figures from these may re-emerge, in a more or less modified form in another piece on another computer print, on the pages of the book or in the artist's films.

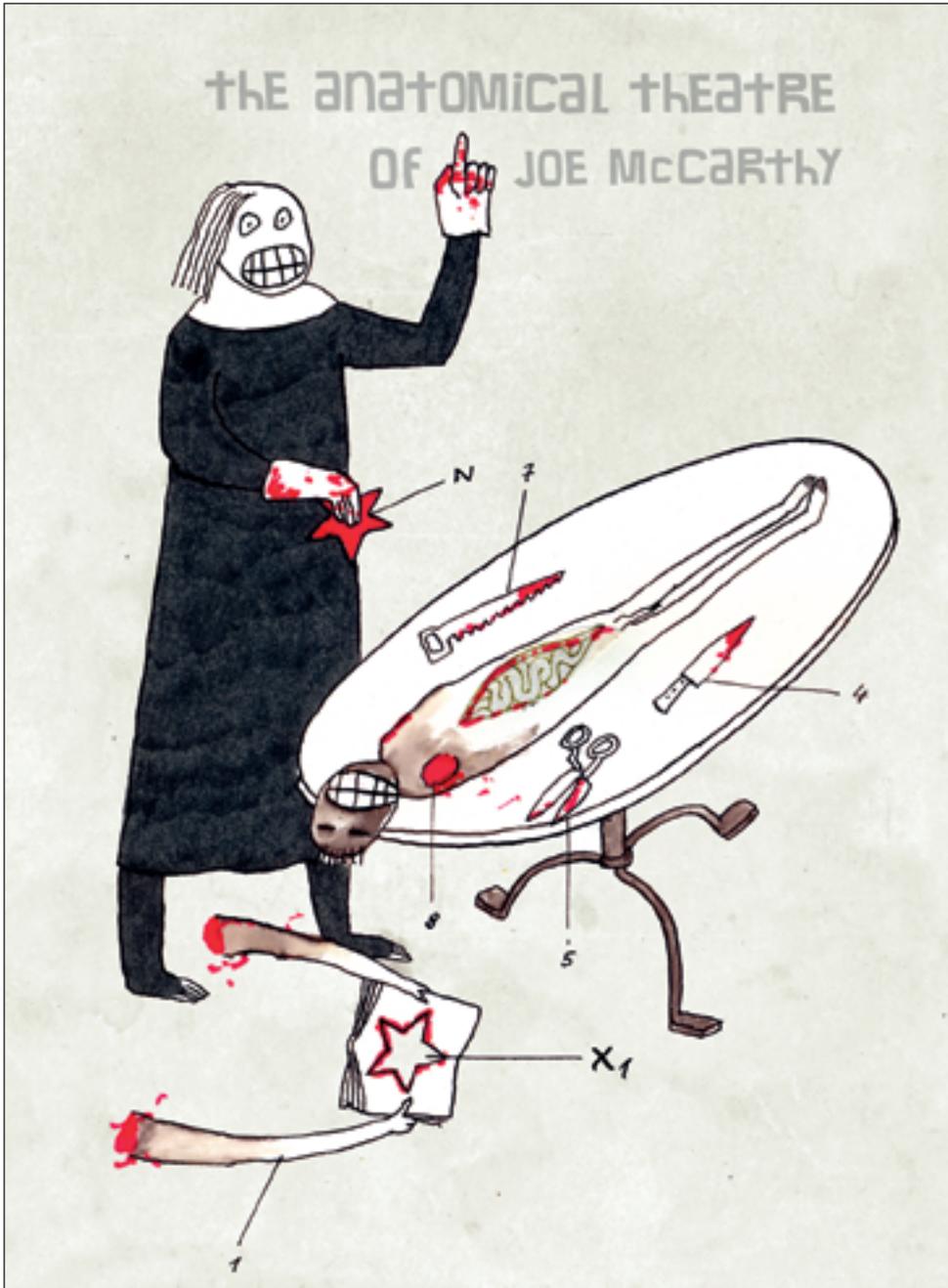
However, the creative re-use of the fragments of history, the cross-connections between phenomena in the world of art, and the ceaseless references to actual pieces as well as the creative re-assembling of all these have reached an even higher level and became more explicit in Milorad Krstić's latest project, the full-length animation movie *Ruben Brandt, collector*. The film has received numerous international awards, and was among the 25 shortlisted animated films competing for the Oscar nomination in 2019. Here the collecting is not only the subject-matter in the plot of the film, but also a working method and defining style, an essential feature and most typical and spectacular aspect of the movie.

Without revealing too much of the plot, it tells the story of a series of art thefts, and the desperate venture of a private detective trying to find the mysterious Collector behind the robberies. The genre of the movie is just as multiform and hybrid as the elements in the *Das Anatomische Theater*: action, psycho-thriller, art movie — which also implies that it can be enjoyed by diverse audience, who all may focus on different aspects. What interests us the most here however is the aforementioned feature that has become one of the most discussed characteristics of the movie: the hundreds of references, quotes and paraphrases embedded in the film. The positively overwhelming amount of quotes appear continuously, sometimes so quickly that one can hardly perceive them, like an urban setting during car chasing, elements of architecture and design, sculptures and paintings seen for a few instances, even postures of figures contain references to artworks. Giorgio de Chirico's empty cityscapes inspire the context for urban scenes, Duchamp's Bicycle Wheel appears in an interior, Tom Wesselmann's Bathroom gets recreated, references to Romantic-era landscape paintings appear, just like Alfred Hitchcock's thrilling scenes and location are recognisable, just to quote a few of the myriad of examples. Actually, references can also be on a meta-level, as self-references, because we can also find allusions to Milorad Krstić's own earlier films, for example a hint at the artist's 1995 film *My baby left me*, for which he received the Silver Bear Award in Berlin.

The two large artistic projects discussed here, the *Das Anatomische Theater* and *Ruben Brandt, collector* both show a really noteworthy example of the process of creation through an extreme enthusiasm of search, research, dissection and re-joining. Fragment and completeness are thus not dichotomies, but mutually completing each other by the incessant work of creating through collecting. Art is haunting the artist, just like the protagonist in the film *Ruben Brandt, collector*, and Milorad Krstić is striving to channel this in his drive of making sense of the world. The encyclopaedic works are composed of the elements meticulously dissected and re-arranged in such a way that is definitely impossible in the real world and with a human corpse, only in the world of art, with the body of art and its history: where this whole is definitely more than the sum of its parts.

Milorad Krstić, *Das Anatomische Theater*, 2006,  
archival pigment print, courtesy the artist









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