

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

**“The Portal, The Altar, The Codex: Basilica Canadiana”**

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is presented as a support to the Thesis exhibition “The Altar, The Portal, The Codex: Basilica Canadiana”. Throughout the paper I am investigating the past and the present: my cultural inheritance, the artistic influences, mythology, tradition and rituals that played an important role in my art practice; but I am also discussing my current work in the context of contemporary art practices, especially within the medium of installation. My thesis is supported with the documentation of the artistic development of altarpieces, from medieval times up to my personal interpretation of the shrine, the temple and the sanctuary.

My work acts as a visual representation of issues of identity, and the support paper acts, in a way, as my personal journal, the record of my historical and cultural journey. It becomes a documentation of my 'displacement' and the new placement in this society.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

If I could name all of the people who have made an impact in my life and contributed to my personal and artistic growth, the list would be longer than this support paper. Therefore, I apologize to all of those that I neglect to mention.

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Finally, I wish to dedicate this entire show to the memory of my father, Ban Boric. I know that he would be proud of all my accomplishments, my life and my happiness.

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## THE ENTRANCE

...

The rose thieves sneak up to the rose  
One of them steals it  
Hides it in his heart

The wind's daughters appear  
See the picked beauty  
And run after the thieves

They open their hearts one by one  
In one they find a heart  
In another so help me nothing

They open and open their chests  
Until they find a heart  
And in that heart a stolen rose <sup>1</sup>

Vasko Popa

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<sup>1</sup>Vasko Popa (1922-1991), "Rose Thieves", The Horse has Six Legs – An Anthology of Serbian Poetry, translated by Charles Simic (Saint Paul, USA: Graywolf Press, 1992), p. 56



There are people who, as of their early childhood, are aware of their future calling. They sense their destination and find themselves very early on the right path.

I am not one of them. My road of self-discovery was always winding and filled with distractions. Sometimes it was a straight ride; on occasion, the road was blocked and I had to take a detour. I didn't know where it would lead. As a child, I wanted to be a doctor, a journalist and an astronomer. I wanted to touch the sky and reach the stars. The imagination is a wonderful thing. It is the ability to see the unseen, to sense what is there but is invisible to our eye. And so many things are such...

We can see the shell, but not the essence. We can see the tree, but not the roots. And the roots are the essence, for they bring life forces into the rest of the plant, into the body. So, we have to reach into the deepest abyss of our soul to find this essence.

I don't know at which point exactly I realized that all those things I was destined for were contained in ART. My creativity emerged through the layers of imagination. From there on I knew: I am an artist.

My art education was primarily classical, in the great tradition of East European art schools: formal and anatomical drawing, technology of painting, theory of form, mural techniques, and history of art and civilization. It provided me with a strong foundation, upon which my art is built. I felt 'prepared' to enter the art scene. But nothing had prepared me for the challenges which I was about to encounter: moving to a new continent was like opening a mystery box.

Meeting new people and a completely new and unknown culture demanded a lot of strength. I was lucky enough to become a part of a most compact and supportive art community that helped me fit right into my new place of living.

After spending a few years living in 'the real world' as a professional artist I felt the need to further my academic education and development. The University of Calgary would meet all my needs, offering a different approach from the one that I had in my previous educational institution, both culturally and traditionally, as well as an opportunity to interact with other artists, exchanging ideas and learning from each other.

In two years of graduate work, this institution has provided me with a new kind of experience and knowledge. My expectations were rather modest in the beginning, but as time passed, I began to fulfill my childhood dream: only the sky is the limit!

I had set myself a task to produce a vast body of work, but the new direction my work was taking, took me by surprise: it was unexpected, sometimes overwhelming, but challenging and highly rewarding.

## BETWEEN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

### SLEEPERS

Awake I steal what they dream.<sup>2</sup>

In the last two years, my work has progressed in a somewhat unpredicted way. I have started to radically depart from purely two-dimensional work: at first by collageing a variety of materials, some of which were three-dimensional, on a flat surface, and then by actually making three-dimensional work. As I was moving from painting towards sculpture, I realized it wasn't so much of a conscious decision to shift from one discipline to another, but rather an unexplained need to explore the third dimension. In fact, I wasn't at all changing disciplines, abandoning one for another, but beginning to work in between the disciplines, in the 'intermedia' zone. Still, painting remains my first 'love', and I am always faithful to it, whether I use it as the pure form, or in conjunction with other media.

My search for dimensional connections is not entirely new: it began several years ago while I was working on a series of three-dimensional masks on a two-dimensional surface. I was so intrigued with the results that I decided to extend this experimentation with dimensionality, which further led me to create a related series of three dimensional paintings (I also referred to them as '2D sculptures'). These paintings were non-conforming, jugged objects that placed images in and out of expected format.

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<sup>2</sup> Branko Miljkovic (1934-1961), The Horse has Six Legs – An Anthology of Serbian Poetry, p. 94

By connecting the visual with the tactile, I attempted to encourage the audience to engage all their senses, leading a viewer to a tactile discovery, without the actual physical connection. From there on, this idea of crossing between the media has never left me, and finally it came to full realization in this project.

My crossover into a new medium has resulted in the creation of a new form, one that is a combination of those that I have previously experimented with. My new design has characteristics of various art objects. It is an architectural construction that can stand on its own, but it also heavily relies on drawing, painting, sculptural relief, collage and assemblage. Once envisioned in the actual space, one that resembles the stage, it also has a theatrical look to it, acting as a set design for some still unwritten play. This allows me to fantasize about possible extension into yet another discipline – performance. I could see my project becoming a part of a multi-media act, involving music, poetry, dance, or some other kind of performing arts.

Without getting too deeply into a notion of “l’art pour l’art”-ism and the non-utilitarian purpose of art, I would like to think that there is a possible ‘use’ for my installation, in addition to the one of the thesis exhibition. I definitely think of these pieces as functional objects, whether this function is obvious or not. In fact, as I started to plan this project, and as I was creating individual pieces, what I had on my mind was their possible future use. For example, the altarpiece can be very functional as a screen, a room divider in a home, or even a business place, and the portal would be an ideal gazebo.

Certainly, this would be another way of exhibiting the work, rather than storing disassembled parts of it far away from viewers’ eyes. I believe that art lives as long as it is viewed.

Much as the artist derives energy from the reaction of an audience, so does his/her art reflect and rely on the viewer. Ultimately, art is what the viewer thinks of it.

## THE GOLDEN GIFTS OF BYZANTIUM

...

I sad u crkvi, na kamenom stubu,  
u iskicenom mozaik-odelu,  
Dok mirno snosis sudbu tvoju grubu,  
Gledam te tuznu, svecanu i belu;

I kao zvezde ugasene, koje  
Coveku ipak salju svetlost svoju,  
Te covek vidi sjaj, oblik i boju  
Dalekih zvezda sto vec ne postoje,

Tako na mene sa mracnoga zida,  
Na pocadjalnoj i starinskoj ploci,  
Sijaju sad, tuzna Simonida, -  
Tvoje vec davno iskopane oci!

...

Now, in this church, on a stone pillar  
In your ornate mosaic robes,  
While you calmly bear your cruel fate,  
I watch you sad, solemn, and white;

Like stars burned out long ago,  
Whose light shines on through space,  
Bringing man the glow and shape and color,  
Of remote stars no longer there,

So, for me, from this dark wall,  
From this soot covered, ancient slab,  
Still shine upon me, sad Simonida -  
Your eyes gouged so long ago! <sup>3</sup>

Milan Rakic

If I look at my art in a historical context, the influences stretch over the centuries. I can find these influences in both historical and contemporary art. I often refer to my heritage as dual. The binary element is always present, in one form or the other. The Byzantine heritage I grew up with has influenced my art practice the most.

My particular interest in iconography is certainly personal. Since my early childhood I remember being surrounded by icons; in Orthodox churches, homes, history books, even in my grandmother's stories. The serious faces of saints always carried certain melancholy in their eyes.

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<sup>3</sup> Milan Rakic (1876-1938), "Simonida", Anthology of Serbian Poetry: The Golden Age, translated by Mihailo Dordevic (Beograd: Nolit, 1984), p. 28/29

They carried a burden of centuries, soporific scent of incense, tarnished gold, unwritten prayers. I always keep their image in my mind. When I close my eyes I can smell incense, I can hear the songs in long forgotten languages, I can see the splendor of Byzantine gold.

I could point out two areas of iconographic influence on my art. The first one, as I have already mentioned, is the emotional and spiritual connection with my heritage. The other is artistic, reflected in vertical composition with strict hierarchical order between the elements, use of complementary colors in pure form, with refined values, and with the gold as a decorative element. I am particularly fond of combinations of gold with crimson and purple – suggestively royal colours, and I often use this fiery, yet noble union to complement the depth of cold, serene tones of blue and green. Another obvious connection is my partiality towards detail. Certainly this element is time-consuming, but the results are rewarding.<sup>4</sup>

### **Byzantine Decorative Art**

The East Roman Empire, known as Byzantium, existed for more than 1000 years. The borders of the empire were constantly changing during that time, and included the Balkan Peninsula, south Italy, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Kyrenaika. In the resulting mixture of nations, languages and cultures, Hellenism and the Greek language prevailed over those of others.

The Byzantine Empire was hardly an entity distinct from the Roman till the ninth century, and its inhabitants never constituted a definite ethnic group, like the Celts; they never formed a close cultural unit, like the Scythians; nor were their art and their influence confined to a limited area and period, as were those of Etruscans. The term connotes rather a phase of civilization, a way of life, developed to the full in a single center, Constantinople, though the city dominated a wide cultural sphere over a period of some eleven hundred years – from 330 to 1453 to be exact. At one time, in the fifth and sixth centuries, nearly all great cities of Christendom – Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, Ephesus, Salonica and

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted from my essay The Medieval Painting in Serbia, 1998

Athens, Ravenna, Milan and even Rome herself – were within this sphere and boasted an art and culture which were broadly Byzantine.<sup>5</sup>

Very few artifacts remain from the period between the Roman Emperor Augustus – the rise of Roman art - and Justinian's Christian empire (VI century).<sup>6</sup> The architecture of the Islamic world of Asia Minor and North Africa has made a strong impact on Byzantine architecture, which was based on Greco-Roman tradition. The culture of the Classical period was absorbing the influences of the Near East.

The most important achievements of Byzantine art were architectural, particularly the large buildings of religious character: cathedrals, churches, palaces and monasteries. The domes on these buildings were a reflection of Byzantine architecture of Islamic origin.

The profane architecture was not in the same range, or of the same beauty and importance as that of ecclesiastical architecture. The power and wealth of the Empire were also stimulating decorative arts and an extraordinary craftsmanship in ornaments, clothes, embroidery, ritual objects, illuminated manuscripts and jewelry. Some of the crafts that were flourishing included weaving, lace making and the goldsmith's trade.

The Byzantines also invented the 'cloisonné' technique, which was executed by pushing a very thin metal net on a gold plate and filling the individual sections with coloured enamel. This was often coupled with ivory. The emperor's authority forced a strict protocol and autocracy, which was also reflected in the art. Early Christianity strongly influenced the concept of art and decoration.

That was not a new phenomenon – all nations were developing their art and culture through religion. The idea of Christianity was deeply imbedded in the minds of Byzantine

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<sup>5</sup> David Talbot Rice, The Byzantines, Ancient Peoples and Places (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1962), p. 19

<sup>6</sup> Neaga Graur, Stiluri in Arta Decorativa (Bucarest: Ceres, 1981), p. 36

artists. The body was seen as a domicile of immemorial sins, explaining the ascetic look on the faces of saints depicted in paintings and mosaics. The human face is impersonal and dispassionate, and the body, as the very representation of sin, is covered; movements are stiff and the scenery has a timeless character.

The objects of secular life are not a part of the composition, and neither are details of the ambience, and seasonal or geographical references. This aesthetic concept is best seen in icon painting. However conventional, the gallery of portraits in early Byzantine paintings and especially mosaics is remarkably well executed. In the early medieval wall painting, the mosaic presents the technique where bright colour was dominant. Flamboyant style and heated colours, reinforced with gold, made the walls and the vault shiny and gleaming.

There was one rule in painting: rejection of local tones (nuances) and emphasis of the essential accents of colours. The drawing is almost graphic, and it is best seen on the golden background.

The church art and culture of many European countries, as well as the court protocol, preserved the Byzantine echo. Late Byzantine influences were visible in the manufacturing of various sacral objects, such as: censers / thuribles, icon lamps, reliquaries etc. But the local conditions brought in some originality in the art, which is most apparent in the architecture and interior decoration of ecclesiastical and imperial buildings in Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and other Balkan countries of Eastern Orthodox tradition.<sup>7</sup> Life in these parts of Europe had an almost nomadic character, mostly because of wars, invasions, and internal riots and turmoil.

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<sup>7</sup> Neaga Graur, p. 46



### **Byzantine Influences in Serbia**

In the period of great migrations, that lasted from the late 6<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the territory of Serbia was settled by Slavic tribes who crossed the Ural mountains from the East (Russia). The three major groups of Slavic tribes were: the East Slavs, those who remained east of the Urals; the West Slavs, who settled territories west of the Urals; and South Slavs, on the Balkan peninsula. Slavs began to set up their first organized states, characterized by early feudal organization. Among the South Slavs were the Serbian tribes. The barbaric Slavs, followers of pagan polytheistic cults, were gradually converted to Christianity. The Great Schism of the Christian church in the 11<sup>th</sup> century into eastern and western sects marked an important milestone and led to the creation of two very different types of art, and completely different developments of eastern and western civilizations. The countries of eastern Europe embraced Orthodoxy, under the influence of the Byzantine empire, and the direct jurisdiction of Constantinople, while western Europe accepted Catholicism.

Serbia, being on the east, adopted Orthodoxy, and it was only logical that the local artists would be influenced by Byzantine art. The Latin Empire was founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Constantinople, and Crusaders came all the way to Syria and Palestine, where they consolidated their positions.<sup>8</sup> At first, the art of the East strongly influenced western art. Many Greek artists and craftsmen found sanctuary in Slavic countries, one of which was Serbia. The influence of Byzantine art was decreasing with the fall of the empire (Constantinople was conquered by the Ottoman Turks in 1453), but was still present in Serbia and other Slavic countries. Although in some cases, such as in Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia, they developed their own regional and even national style, they never quite abandoned their Byzantine origins. On the other hand, the influence of Byzantine art was completely abandoned in the Western, Latin countries, where Gothic

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<sup>8</sup> Robin Cormack, Painting the soul: Icons, Death Masks and Shrouds, Essays in Art and Culture (London: Reaktion Books Ltd. 1997)

naturalism, which was directly opposed to the spiritual standpoint of Byzantine iconography, was on the rise.

### **The Ottoman Empire – Six Centuries of Dusk**

The Turkish conquest of the Byzantine Empire and the independent Balkan states lasted only a few decades, but slavery under the Turks lasted for almost six centuries. The loss of political and national independence of Greeks and Slavs, had a perceptible impact on all fields of social and cultural life. The Muslim conquerors did not have any interest in supporting the traditional art of the enslaved Christians, but they made a precedent: they allowed them to freely profess their religion. Since that was one of the rare allowable manifestations of their nationality, Christian religious art of these nations in their minds was preserving the national meaning.

As a result, traditional art helped the Serbs to preserve their national consciousness and identity during the centuries of slavery. The Turkish laws authorized the Patriarch of Constantinople, who was a Greek, to be church leader of all Christian subjects in the Ottoman Empire.

Serbia resisted the Turks for decades, but finally surrendered after the Kosovo battle, in 1389. Although some regions managed to keep a partial autonomy, the loss of political independence was the crucial factor of retrogression in social and cultural life. Most of the centers of culture were closed; the few that remained in hiding were experiencing a decline in productivity. The only Serbian monastery in Greece, Chilandar on Mount Athos, was still producing works of art.

After the fall of Constantinople, Mount Athos kept its autonomy. It remained the only center of cultural activity for centuries to come.

People often think of the Byzantine tradition as of one that implies richness, glorification of gold (gold leafing) and certain flamboyancy in style. It is, in fact, quite contrary. The Byzantine philosophy renounces all benefits of earthly life and embraces the eternal one. This misinterpretation of the Byzantine tradition is not unusual. The influence of Byzantine tradition may be only superficial, such as the use of gold leaf. To me, who actually originate from that tradition and feel it deeply as a part of my heritage, it has a different meaning.

In my work I wanted to repeat the strict and rigid Byzantine form, the construction of iconostasis, an altar-piece, but with a non-religious content. My work holds vibrant, vivid, organic forms, which reflect the adoration of natural elements and show the influence of Slavic mythology.<sup>9</sup>

This strict Christian form/construction that holds personal mythology can be seen as contradictory, as a paradox. I see it as a reconciliation of the two very different traditions. The roots of their conflict could be traced back to ages of mass baptism of the Slavic tribes. The moment when the baptizing of Slavs was completed - that very moment was the beginning of an end of Slavic mythology. Their mythology started to fade and eventually vanished.

Both Slavic and Byzantine traditions are equally important to me, and deeply rooted into my cultural background. However, I cannot help but see the Byzantine tradition and Christianity as the one that invades, the one that conquers and imposes its will on those of different beliefs. It is very unusual how these two contradictory traditions are still both present and inter-twined in the folklore and basically everyday life of Serbia. For, the Byzantine theology came out as a winner, and its tradition is dominant in the present culture and in our heritage, but it could not maintain its purity. It is permeated with myths and legends of the Old Slavic tribal community. Even the most important Serbian Orthodox saints, such as Saint Sava, have some characteristics of pagan Gods. As I find this 'union' is very intriguing, I attempt to translate it into a visual language.

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted from my essay The Artist's Journal, 1999

## **INSTALLATION ART: THE ENCOUNTER**

In my thesis project, the Byzantine influence is mostly formal, as much as it is obvious in my choice of subject matter and treatment of material; and it is even more evident if objects are taken out of context, and observed in their singularity. The process of installation, however, is something that I have encountered in Canada and wasn't of very much interest to me in my earlier art practice. As a form, the installation, although not a Canadian invention, certainly has deep roots in Canadian art.

The fact that I have decided to work with installation is a purely Canadian influence. After being repeatedly exposed to numerous examples of installation art, I have somehow, and quite subconsciously, started to operate within the new concepts.

The first concept was working in series (quite a distinctively North American tradition), which in the past I haven't pursued. I could definitely see a certain homogeneity of my work, predominantly in style, but I have always treated the individual pieces as unique and unrelated. However, now I work almost exclusively in series, and I have embarked upon the concept of repetition as I concentrate on a particular project. I usually produce work specifically for an exhibition. In that way I achieve coherence, formally and thematically.

The second one was the concept of presentation, the specific presentation of work, to be exact. My primary concern is how to connect the separate units into a visual and, more importantly, conceptual unity. I will elaborate this concept in the chapter "Space as Location and Form".

My shift towards mixed-media installation art wasn't forced on me in any way; it was self-initiated. Having said that, I have to acknowledge the influence of the installation art that precedes my practice. Installation art is not a new form, as is often mistaken. It derived from: Constructivism, Suprematism, Dada, Surrealism <sup>10</sup>, Conceptualism, Pop Art, Land Art. Constructivist <sup>11</sup> El Lissitzky is said to be the avant-garde figure of installation art. He created the first known installation in 1923, titled "The Proun Environment"<sup>12</sup>

Since then, this form has changed and developed in unforeseen ways. Since it borrows from a vast spectrum of disciplines, such as architecture, painting, sculpture, photography, theater and performance, its success depends on the disciplines' collaboration. Installation is usually site-specific, and lots of choices indeed are made according to the demands of internal and/or external space; for example, the size, choice of materials, organization of space, sound and lighting. Furthermore, installation art tremendously relies on the concept, issues, narratives and the use of media and technology. The results are sometimes unpredictable, even contradictory, but are almost always moving the boundaries of the established discipline and opening yet another door of possibilities.

Installation, by its nature, is of a temporary character. Like a butterfly, it lives just 'for a day'. It inhabits specific, physical space; it exists within that space. Once disassembled, even if reinstalled in a different setting, installation can never be the same, by the very fact that it interacts with the space; it becomes one with the space.

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<sup>10</sup> Museum of Salvador Dali in Barcelona exhibits a room with Dali's surrealist installation of furniture (a sofa, a fireplace and two paintings on the wall) shaped as mouth, nose and eyes. The 'face' becomes obvious from the distance, if standing on the doorway of the room.

<sup>11</sup> Constructivism was the dominant art movement in Russia from 1913-20.

<sup>12</sup> Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry on Installation, in Art & Design. Installation Art (Vol. 8 5/6), London: VCH Publishers (UK) Ltd. 1993 p. 7

## ART OF THE OBJECT

### 'A total work of art' <sup>13</sup>

Installation is a simulation of reality. It has the ability to 'transport' the viewer into imagined, non-existing places, a para-reality. The spectators are aware of the space they occupy (usually in the gallery), yet simultaneously they are in another place or time.

The notion of altering the very laws of physics, playing with space, scale and time is very appealing to an artist, and in a way empowering, as it gives him/her the absolute control of the situation.

While I was doing my research for the thesis, two installations in particular drew my attention:

The first one, created by Patrick Corillon was entitled The Ideal Place: Shelter (1993-94, HCAK –Hague Center for Contemporary Art, Holland). <sup>14</sup>

Corillon created a simple illusion of actual space, a house that actually wasn't there. The installation consisted of an entrance (the entry into a 'mystery') with a doormat in front of it and a partition made of wood and metal, which created the illusion of a room or a house. There was a veil of mystery surrounding this space. Going through the 'door' was to enter the mystery; at the other end there was an inscription, which solved the mystery. It was a story of a fictional character (Oscar Serti), who was the artist's alter ego:

Whenever a stupid publisher rejected one of his manuscripts, Oscar Serti would return home feeling the need to be on his own. Before shutting himself away in his study for hours on end, he would wipe his feet vigorously on the doormat to clean off all the squalor of the outside world.

<sup>13</sup> de Oliveira, Oxley and Petry on Installation, p.7

<sup>14</sup> Philip Peters in Art & Design, The Ideal Place (Vol. 10 5/6 1995), p. 46

On March 3, 1934, Serti set out to see a small-time publisher in the country. But so reluctant was he to face another rejection that he turned on his tracks without going through with the meeting. Back home, in an attempt to rid himself of the disgust he felt for himself at his own cowardliness, he removed his shoes and wiped his barefeet energetically on the coarse bristles of the doormat. At the sight of dark trails of blood on the mat, Serti decided to wipe his feet again and again, until he was sure they were perfectly clean.<sup>15</sup>

The doormat became the essential part of the installation. Certainly, this was a conceptually strong piece, but what actually fascinated and inspired me wasn't the story behind it, but a symbolic recreation of the real space.

The second installation that attracted my attention was Helen Chadwick's Blood Hyphen (1988 Edge Biennale, London).<sup>16</sup> Her installation was site-specific and of particular interest to me because of the religious character of the chosen space - it was placed in the Clerkenwell Medical Mission. A helium neon laser was highlighting the image of the artist's blown-up blood cells on a false ceiling. The scene could be approached by entering the church, going down the nave and climbing the pulpit. The image was further enhanced by the ecclesiastical atmosphere. The artist played with the notion of the body being represented by the actual architectural space, a 'spiritual' container for the organic matter.

My work, on the other hand, is a representation of the internal architectural space, an architectural container for emotional content. The images are a mirror of my thoughts, feelings, fears, memories - homage to the past - my past and the past of my people, but also to the present and future. At the same time I reflect on the transit - my transit, not only from one place to another, but from one way of living, one ideology, one philosophy to another. The context is historical, philosophical, personal; it is a self-reflection, self-examination, even a self-criticism. Finally, it brings a self-conclusion.

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<sup>15</sup> The actual text by Patrick Corillon was written in three languages.

<sup>16</sup> de Oliveira, Oxley and Petry on Installation, p. 15

I began with tradition and ended with contemporary discourse. Therefore, I have to pay tribute not only to the richness of cultural heritage that Byzantium has left us, but also to the creative diversity of the last hundred years. The 20<sup>th</sup> century has left a legacy of still inconceivable magnitude. This legacy has enabled me, amongst many other contemporary artists, to freely experiment with a variety of media, materials and concepts; uninhibited and unburdened of any restrictions, except for those we set for ourselves.



## IN SEARCH FOR THE IDENTITY

### Ostajte ovdje!

Ostajte ovdje!... Sunce tudjeg neba  
Nece vas grijat ko sto ovo grije;  
Grki su tamo zalogaji hljeba  
Gdje svoga nema i gdje brata nije.

Od svoje majke ko ce naci bolju?!  
A majka vasa zemlja vam je ova;  
Bacite pogled po krsu i polju,  
Svuda su groblja vasih pradjedova.

...

K'o pusta grana, kad jesenja krila  
Trgnu joj lisje i pokose ledom,  
Bez vas bi majka domovina bila;  
A majka place za svojim cedom.

...

Ovdje vas svako poznaje i voli,  
A tamo niko poznati vas nece;  
Bolji su svoji i krsevi goli  
No cv'jetna polja kud se tudjin krece.

...

Aleksa Santic

### Stay here!

Stay, oh stay here!... The sun of alien skies  
Will never warm you, as our sun does;  
Bitter shall be each bite of your bread there,  
Where you're alone and there's no brother.

Than one's mother, who can find better?  
And to you this country is your own mother;  
Throw a glance at each field and barren rock  
Everywhere are graves of your forefathers.

...

As a bare branch when the wings of autumn  
Tear away the leaves and strip her with ice,  
Such would your mother be without you;  
And a mother cries for a child who is gone.

...

Here you are known and by everyone loved  
And there you will be recognized by none;  
Better are one's own dry and barren rocks  
Than blossoming meadows where strangers  
tread. <sup>17</sup>

...

<sup>17</sup> Aleksa Santic (1868 –1924), Anthology of Serbian Poetry: The Golden Age, p.106

In the world of today, every person as an individual, or as a part of a group (socio-political, religious, ideological, national etc.) is facing the issues of identity and self-representation.

Nestor Garcia Canclini, a renowned Mexican anthropologist and interdisciplinary cultural critic states: "...the most radical redefinition of identity results from globalisation". In his paper "Rethinking Identity in times of Globalisation", <sup>18</sup> Canclini observed how subjects develop their identity narratives: from folklore and classical national arts to the multimedia audiovisual space referring to the newly formed cultural hybrid as the 'Aesthetics of Deterritorialisation'. <sup>19</sup>

I can certainly relate to this term: the substance of my expression derives from classical national art, with elements of folklore, yet it is represented with mixed media interactive installation art.

As an artist I work in between disciplines. As a human being I live in between different cultures and traditions. I am a free-spirited person, an explorer of the human condition, and an altruist. I have always enjoyed traveling and interacting with people of different origins and cultures, in an attempt to achieve the intellectual connections between various traditions. I believe in the collective knowledge of mankind, as I believe it should be exchanged on a global level, and the way to accomplish that is by reducing all the historical and cultural differences between people to one common 'meaning of life'. My art revolves around this meaning of life. My search for the meaning is enhanced with a search for 'self'. And if all my attempts end up without a definite result, that still doesn't undermine the very process of search.

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<sup>18</sup> The paper was written for the presentation at a conference held in August 1994 in San Salvador de Jujuy, Argentina

<sup>19</sup> Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Rethinking Identity in times of Globalisation in Art & Design, Art & Cultural Difference - Hybrids and Clusters* (Vol. 10 7/8 1995) p. 36

The concept of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism, however progressive it may be, still carries deep contradictions. The process of migration brings many transformations: socio-economic, cultural, emotional and spiritual. We are facing altered sensibilities and undergoing the process of **translation** from one culture to another in order to transcend socio-cultural conventions.

Much as installation art borrows from other disciplines, so does contemporary Canadian art, although still heavily based on Western doctrine, borrow from numerous cultures that form the modern Canadian society. Appropriating cross-elements from various cultures resulted in the forming of contemporary Canadian/global eclecticism. One question arises from this global mixture of cultural identities – the question of possession. Who exactly has the right to ‘own’ a (specific) culture? To be more specific: does a person - no matter of what origin, just by living in an eclectic society and being exposed to the variety of cultural influences - have a right to appropriate elements of an ethno-specific culture? Or, does one have to originate from a specific culture in order to be able to claim cultural ownership?

Clearly we tend to bind the identity of an individual and a community to a specific place. I can state with certainty that I identify with my own cultural origins and heritage on a different spiritual and emotional level, than I do with other cultures. I grew up being exposed to a specific culture in everyday life, and I suppose that gives me the right to ‘own’ it. Following the same logic, my interaction with other cultures puts me in the position of a spectator, not a participant. Yet, I am one of the many people who, in today’s modern world of migration and globalisation, have two or more identities.

I am standing at the cultural intersection – a crossroad between two identities, two worlds and even two time zones.

I use my art as a field for emotional recharge. I am trying to achieve a trans-cultural meaning by appropriating different elements of two cultures and combining them. Still, it is quite clear that one identity prevails over the other, not by a choice, but I dare say by genetic inheritance. This code is deeply imbedded in my cerebral labyrinths and it always finds its way of expression in one form or another.

– So how does identity relate to art, and what triggers the identity to act as an entity of its own?

Clearly we need to rethink the models for explaining how identity emerges out of the center – periphery dynamic. The migration of peoples across borders, the technological changes in circulating symbols, and the reorganisation of the means of production have produced a sequence of changes that Nestor Garcia Canclini calls deterritorialisation.

...It is one of the paradoxes of this age, which is so deeply marked by mobility and rupture, that the metaphors of identity place such exclusive value on a sense of 'rootedness' to the place of origin. The two extreme associations – displacement and transcendence – that trail mobility have implications for how we understand the position of the artist in a multicultural scene.<sup>20</sup>

Let me ponder for a while about the meanings and implications of these terms: **displacement and transcendence.**

Many people, willingly or unwillingly, move from one place to another; it is in human nature to migrate. I have experienced both temporary and permanent displacement. I've travelled a lot; however, all my trips ended in the security of my home...

Shortly before my moving to Canada, 7 years ago, I faced a difficult decision. I knew that this trip was different. This time it was for good. And it scared me, for I felt alienated and detached from my roots. I had never felt such a strong need to belong somewhere. It became imperative for me to embrace this sense of belonging, to carry it around like luggage, from one place to another.

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<sup>20</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, *An Introduction into the aesthetics of Deterritorialisation* in Art & Design, Art & Cultural Difference (Vol. 10 7/8 1995) p. 6

I don't know if I will ever be able to truly overcome the sense of displacement, no matter how hard I try. It is a challenge that every migrant faces. Sure, the new roots can grow, but will they be deep enough? The soil is new, the water is new, and sometimes even the sun looks different.

Here's an example: when I first moved to Canada I noticed that the water was very different. It literally made me sick for a long time: my teeth were hurting, my stomach was upset, my hair and skin condition changed for the worse. When I consulted a physician he explained to me that human bodies consist of 80% of water, and it is the water from our native soil, which is now being replaced with new water. So, the entire 'irrigational system' needs to be changed. Who would have thought? This is only one of the numerous changes that an individual faces when changing habitat.

On the other hand, **displacement** implies **detachment** from the roots, not only physical, but also spiritual. It is hard to realize that the place you have left has changed too. It will never be the same. We are constantly battling nostalgia, aching for the things that are long gone, or drastically changed, yet we could not fit there any more. This is a very surreal feeling, as if you don't belong anywhere. From an ideological standpoint, I am simultaneously challenging and defending the concept of (non)-belonging. There is a beautiful Serbian saying that describes this feeling – 'neither on Heaven nor Earth' ("Ni na nebu ni na zemlji"). My thesis could be summarized with these words. The structure that I'm building is earthly monumental, yet heavenly light. It is a temple in midair. I want to capture this feeling of levitating between heaven and earth. It becomes a documentation of both my 'displacement' and my new placement in this society.

**Transcendence**, the overcoming of displacement, is not an easy task. It implies the principle of acceptance and reconciliation of the foreign, unseen and unknown, with the familiar, common, known, inherited. An artist faces a dual challenge: how to open up to

cultural accumulation and exchange, and simultaneously preserve the essence of their national culture in a new environment. This places the artist in a somewhat difficult position: presenting work that is based on an alternate identity and on cultural differences that could lead to possible misinterpretation and rejection. Therefore, another challenge to the artist is how to introduce works to the audience in a way that can help them identify with the unfamiliar culture, perhaps by drawing parallels within the parameters of their own culture. In other words: common ground is required between the producer and the interpreter of art.

I, as every other immigrant, wish to preserve my cultural autonomy, uniqueness and originality; but at the same time I wish to be assimilated and integrated into the new (multi)-culture. This is a point where the stimuli of both worlds become more pronounced. The question is how to integrate them, without violating one or the other. The success depends on the dynamics of 'translation' and it becomes possible by the means of modernized institutions.

Guy Brett has noted that today's institutions of art tend to construct antagonist alternatives: an artist is either marginalized or placed within the mainstream, leaving no space for a third position.<sup>21</sup> The state institutions still operate on the premise of a single nation, as in times in which they were established, while more and more facing the needs of peoples with multi-identities. Multiculturalism does not equate with universalism.

If we embrace the principles of universality, then we agree on universal codes of aesthetics and beauty. But is there such a thing as universal beauty? It becomes even more difficult to make an objective critique, since we must face the fact that there is an absence of universal judgment code. The categories such as love, hate, fear, joy, pride, honour ... could be classified as universal, and common to mankind. The ideals of beauty are non-conforming and are subject to perpetual changes.

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<sup>21</sup> Papastergiadis, p. 6

Through different historical epochs, or geographical locations, the institutions of power dictate directives for categorisation of aesthetic criteria; every culture determines their own criteria, and passes judgment accordingly. The information age, however, brings many changes. Examples of 'ideal beauty', among other bits of information, are sent across the meridians in the matter of seconds. The exchange is evidently exclusive to those who own the information technologies, and that is still predominantly the West. Therefore, the content of exchange is based on western values.

The purely Western concept of the **individual** was very strange and foreign to me, coming from a very different tradition. Glorifying the autonomy of a person is directly opposite to the eastern concept of the collective, which was part of my culture. Both these concepts have their advantages and disadvantages, and I'm not rationally favoring one or the other, but I was brought up in the spirit of collectiveness, so I have a better understanding of this philosophy.

The concept of globalisation suggests the conversion of something considered to be small, local, and regional into that which is grand, global, and universal. I don't necessarily disagree with this concept, but rather with the way it is carried out. The diversity of consumer culture becomes homogenized; autonomy is blending into a new mutant-identity. Becoming one with the world reflects the western tendency to universalize. But why should everyone embrace this idea? If pluralism glorifies difference of opinion, then it should allow and respect non-pluralism as a different opinion.

The connection between the peoples, nations, traditions and cultures of the world needs to be on a different and higher level. It is necessary to identify what is common to mankind, what is human, rather than individual, ethnically, nationally, religiously specific. To survive in the contemporary world of globalisation, technological progress

and consumer culture, it is imperative to overcome cultural, historical, political, economical or educational differences.

The accumulated experiences are translated into a new, eclectic form - a hybrid-art. The transitional becomes transnational. "Modern identities are territorial and almost always monolingual. Postmodern identities, on the other hand, are transterritorial and multilingual." <sup>22</sup>

The question is: does cultural hybridisation disrupt the notion of identity? Or, does it create new identities? What is the relationship between cultural difference and hybridity? Penelope Harvey points to Canclini's notion of identity as co-production:

These are co-productions in which inequalities are in process, continually established, negotiated, challenged. To understand or even begin to describe these processes we need to evoke a simultaneous sense of continuity, rupture and hybridisation. <sup>23</sup>

For me, it was only logical to embrace a hybrid art form (installation) as a manifestation of hybrid identity. Many installation artists have been dealing with the issues of culture and history. The theme of 'place' also plays an important role in contemporary visual arts. The 'ideal' place is not necessarily always physical. Visual art depends on the nature of presentation and interpretation.

An interesting example of work addressing this context was presented at the Berlin exhibition "Die Endlichkeit Der Freiheit" (The Finiteness of Freedom) in 1990, by Ilya Kababov. <sup>24</sup> Kababov has placed two parallel wooden walls on the site of the demolished Berlin wall.

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<sup>22</sup> Canclini, p. 38

<sup>23</sup> Penelope Harvey, Postscript on 'Rethinking Identity in Times of Globalisation' in Art & Design, Art & Cultural Difference (Vol. 10 7/8 1995) p. 41

<sup>24</sup> de Oliviera, Oxley and Petry on Installation, p. 11



It was an intervention on a large-scale and the idea was to 'recreate' the Berlin wall as a monument of newly gained freedom, replacing the old symbol of segregation. The artist was able to send the message across, with very little intervention, by letting the work make its own statement.

## SPACE AS LOCATION AND FORM

### AGON

While the river banks are quarrelling  
The waters flow quietly.<sup>25</sup>

When judging a work of art it is important to consider each piece not only as an isolated object but also to think of it in terms of its placement – in a suitable space. The qualities of installation are reinforced by its placement in an appropriate space. For example, an intimate small sculpture is not suitable for the open space, and the monumental sculpture is best viewed in the open, rather than in confined space.

The individual parts are articulated towards the nucleus of the installation, which is also a compositional center. They need to look convincing as a compact unity.

In some installations by Joseph Kosuth, Tadashi Kawamata, and Per Barklay, the environment playing host to the work often originates the piece and forms a mutually dependent relationship. Installation is, in this respect, like other artforms, occupying territory traditionally seen as being outside the visual arts.<sup>26</sup>

Space, whether constructed by the artist or an *a priori* place, functions not only as location, but also as physical matter: as form. Space as form operates on multiple levels: a site for the entire installation, space between the objects (different components of installation), a 'container' for sound, lighting, and other effects.

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<sup>25</sup> Branko Miljkovic, The Horse has Six Legs – An Anthology of Serbian Poetry, p. 91

As a child, Miljkovic witnessed two massacres during the Second World War. He studied literature and philosophy, translated French symbolist poetry and Russian poetry. He hung himself in 1961, a week after printing a letter to a periodical renouncing all his poetry. Since his death, his brief life has become as legendary as Sylvia Plath's.

<sup>26</sup> de Oliviera, Oxley and Petry on Installation, p. 7

Even if sound is not an actual component of an installation, it is still always present, since the chosen space is not a soundproof vacuum. Last, but not least, there is the presence of the viewer in the space; the particular placing of spectators, their reaction and interaction also acts as an ‘element of composition’.

An installation is a loud and intrusive occupation of space – unlike the traditional placing of art on walls / floor, which usually shows an order of objects. This is the essential difference between installation and installed work.

Pure form hardly defines a discipline any longer. Installation relies on multiplicity of forms. Contemporary installation art predominantly explores and exploits space: the site-specific pieces deal with issues and narratives. The body as site becomes of more and more interest to both artists and audience. Site is a harmony of **place** (the cultural tie to ground, territory and identity), **space** (the cultural consensus on the perceptive grid of reference) and **scale** (the human body as measure of all things). “So, in that sense, the site of all *in situ* art is a ‘non-site’, as Robert Smithson once perceptively remarked.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Thierry de Duve, Ex Situ in Art & Design, Installation Art (Vol. 8 5/6), p. 25

## **PARTICIPATION: THE REACTION AND INTERACTION**

The concept of the total artwork mentioned above finds the further application through the function of the spectacle. The spectacle often focuses on the monumentality of possible experience by the public, but also functions as a vehicle for the ritual. Public spectacles, as carriers of ritualized signs and meanings underpin human activity. The dual focus rests both on the installation as it embraces the senses, and on the participation of the spectator. The term 'looking' is superseded in installation by the concept of 'spectating', which assumes a higher involvement by the audience.<sup>28</sup>

The viewer, as the spectator – of a spectacle – is the beholder of art. Much as the art is subject to perpetual change so is the role of the viewer. My perception of today's viewer is one of an active participant, rather than merely an observer. The audience becomes a valuable part of a visual happening.

While working on the installation I have often asked myself how would the different elements relate to each other, interact and create a unity, yet at the same time stand on their own. I have found a way to connect them by visually repeating certain forms, marks, signs, and symbols in different places. The viewers are challenged to move their eyes from one object to another. Instead of giving the viewers the coordinates for finding these common elements, I rely on their curiosity. I anticipate the audience's reaction to the work, as well as their interaction with it. Since there is a strong presence of elements of an alien culture, the audience is about to face a certain amount of unfamiliarity. However, they are also bound to recognize some elements that are known to them, and identify themselves with the familiar in the piece.

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<sup>28</sup> de Oliveira, Oxley and Petry on Installation, p. 15

The possible reaction is to grasp the familiar concepts and use them as a 'starting point' for exploration of the unfamiliar.

The interaction can be as simple as the physical contact with the work: entering the space through the portal and opening and closing of the doors of the altarpiece. My wish is not to impose a unique formula for interaction, since the work can be approached from all sides and be interpreted in many ways; however, the portal itself is an invitation into the space, much like in an actual temple. By approaching the piece, identifying the elements and reacting to them, a spectator not only follows the 'procession' but also becomes a part of it.

The repetition of visual elements has yet another purpose: it reinforces the sense of rhythm, which is a part of many (religious) rituals, such as: chanting, praying, grieving, meditation. The dance of dervishes or repeating a mantra has the same effect as any other ritual repetition – it creates a rhythm, a hypnotizing sound, and by putting a participant into the state of trance, it elevates the spirit into another level of consciousness. This was exactly my goal: to create a different level of consciousness with the use of visual rhythm, rather than through the use of sound.

The aesthetical purpose dictates the elements of form, and their choice. The quality of a piece lies in the inner richness of the organized unity and its aesthetical structure.<sup>29</sup> The aesthetical structure is not some abstraction; it's a creative way of establishing a relationship between the elements – an 'incarnation' of form. The criteria – for the pure disciplines – can be as simple as this:

In drawing, it is the line – its purity and strength. In painting, it is the colour. In sculpture it is the volume, the plasticity. In architecture, it is the arrangement between the mass and

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<sup>29</sup> Milun Mitrovic, Forma i Oblikovanje ("Form and Shape", Belgrade: VES, 1973), p. 7

the proportions. Since all of the above disciplines are equally represented in my installation, I have considered all of the mentioned criteria.

## **MATERIALS AND PROCESS**

The materials and the process are of equal importance in the installation. My wish was to bring the material to life and to stress its value, but also to attach a metaphorical meaning to it. I am clinging to tradition in my choice of techniques (mosaic, fresco, gold-leafing) but also jumping into the future with the use of modern materials – and by doing so I am ‘imitating’ the tradition.

The mixture of traditional and modern materials and techniques includes: wood, natural pigments, stains, spray paint, gold and copper leaf, plaster, wicker, candles, mosaic, sand, parchment paper, charcoal, graphite and various mediums. However excessive it seems, at the same time this is a more selective choice of materials, than in some of my earlier work.

The charcoal drawing is unpolished, unrefined and raw. As it emerges through the thin layer of paint, it indicates the domination of linear structure. Drawing is spontaneous and impulsive. The line is clear, firm, but warm. A dominating line expresses the inner rhythm; this shows my personal signature. I am visually calming the scene by alternating complex layers of paint with simple tonal passages. This visual play and vigorous brushwork is juxtaposed against the strict structure of pieces – the line wanders around, full of life forces, in search of an end. The destination seems to be yet unknown.

These choices look simple, yet they came as a result of two years of previous experimentation with various materials, styles and formats. To me it is essential to achieve the unity of idea and style, to unite form and content, particularly paying attention to the monumentality of the designated space.

As a sculptor, an architect and a builder, I am concerned with complexity of spacing and the balance of mass. As a painter, I concentrate on the expansion of colour accords, refined harmonies, richness of tone, and freshness of treatment.

Rather than using sharp colours that leave a pungent taste in the mouth, my preferred choices were simple, yet suggestive earthy tones that evoke the archaic and the archival. Colour acts as a subordinate to the internal organization of the composition. Strong presentation of characters introduces the emotional expression. The faces show physical and emotional pain; the scenes are dramatic, but clear and serene. This 'lyric abstraction' presents my spiritual breakthrough into the unknown.



## THE PORTAL

### Napustena Crkva

Lezi stara slika rassetoga Hrista.  
 Mlaz mu krvi curi niz slomljena rebra;  
 Oci mrtve, usne blede, Samrt ista;  
 Nad glavom oreol od kovanog srebra.

Dar negdasnjeg plemstva i pobožnog sebra,  
 Djerdan od dukata o vratu mu blista;  
 Po okviru utisnuta srma cista,  
 A okvir je rez'o umetnik iz Debra.

Takav lezi Hristos sred pustoga hrama.  
 I dok, postepeno, svuda pada tama,  
 I jato se nocnih tica na plen sprema,

Sam u pustoj crkvi, gde kruze vampiri,  
 Ocajan i strasan, Hristos ruke siri,  
 Vecno cekajuci pastvu, koje nema...

Milan Rakic

### The Abandoned Church

There lies the ancient icon of the crucified Christ  
 A trickle of blood seeps down his broken ribs;  
 Eyes dead, lips pale, Death itself;  
 Above the head, a halo of hammered silver.

Donated by former nobles and pious serfs,  
 A necklace of ducats glows about His neck;  
 The icon's frame inlaid in pure silver,  
 Was chased by an artist from Debar.

Thus lies Christ within the barren temple,  
 As dusk gradually falls everywhere,  
 And a flight of night birds prepares for plunder.

Alone in the Barren church where bats circle,  
 Desolate and awesome Christ opens his arms,  
 Eternally awaiting a flock that is no more...<sup>30</sup>

When I moved to Canada I was impressed, but also overwhelmed with new influences, and at the same time I felt torn out and detached from my roots. It became imperative for me to embrace the sense of belonging – therefore I started to explore my cultural heritage. I keep coming back to my roots in one-way or another. At the same time it also became quite clear to me that I have a new place of physical and spiritual existence, so I started to search for that place in a huge Canadian cultural mosaic. This dual component of my art became the main topic of my research. My thesis is based on this dualism and deals with transition – the physical crossing from one place to another – but also with the historical and chronological shift from the past to the present.

My installation consists of several architectural constructions of monumental size, coupled with smaller, intimate plaster reliefs. Two major components are the 'portal' and the 'altarpiece', and the 'codex' is placed on a pedestal between them. The entire installation has an ecclesiastic look and refers to an early Christian Basilica.

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<sup>30</sup> Milan Rakic, Anthology of Serbian Poetry: The Golden Age, p. 26/27

The first construction symbolizes a **portal**, the entrance to a temple. It is 8' high, 4' wide, with two sets of doors and windows. On the outside, the portal carries paintings executed in traditional fresco technique, mosaic and collaged parchment paper, and gold and copper leaf. The inside is dark, painted with powdered graphite and charcoal, and 12 plaster plates are placed on the walls. These plates are the carriers of my personal history, my family album and the 'document' of my past and present.

## **THE ALTAR**

The **altarpiece** is 8' high, 4' wide, with two sets of doors on each side. When fully opened, it stretches to 12', and it resembles the exterior shape of Byzantine churches. This is a free-standing piece, installed on a round mosaic base, and painted on all sides. Both Altar and Portal have a semicircular top, which refers to the dome. My initial intention was to place it in front of the east wall, which is the traditional placement of the iconostasis in orthodox temples. However, once installed in my designated space, visually it made more sense to place it in front of the north wall, to ensure a greater distance and better arrangement of all the other pieces. Although I had to sacrifice a concept, I've achieved visual unity, which was of more importance.

The altar - iconostasis is a sacred place in the church and traditionally it carries the icons – images of saints, and patrons of the church. The form of triptych, which I often use, refers to the medieval iconographic painting, on a large scale. The hierarchical order is defined by the placing of saints and by the size of the figure. The one of highest rank occupies the central position.

The rank is also determined with symbolic colours; for example the royal and clerical symbols are white robes with black crosses (I refer to this canon by using black and white contrasts in the 'portal' piece). The founders of the churches/monasteries were usually painted standing in a group with other members of their family, their fathers, brothers and sons. This type of composition is predominant in monumental fresco painting and for practical reasons: since their figures were centrally positioned within the church, they could be spotted immediately from the entrance.

I have always admired the beauty of the altars, yet they were a cause of contradictory feelings: the altar is a place behind which women are not allowed to enter. It is reserved for men; it's their privilege to see and participate in whatever ritual is performed behind it. Although I deeply respect the tradition, there is a part of me that opposes this discrimination. I have created my 'own' altar; one that can be easily approached from all sides and invites everyone behind it, regardless of gender. Therefore, the form and the placing of the altarpiece have partly an ideological reasoning.

## **THE CODEX**

The codex is a written text, a book of rules, a permanent document and the code. I refer to all written elements in my installation as to 'The Codex'— codex is not the actual writing of the text, but the sign, the mark, the semiotic symbol. It is not there to be read or interpreted but to associate, or to act as a decoration, an arabesque. Narrative behind it, if any, is very subtle and self-interpretative.

The plaster piece that is placed on a pedestal in the center of the space reads as a map, a guide for finding a hidden code. This piece is the structural center and the center of visual attraction. The Codex is filled with symbols and signs that refer to an ancient alphabet; therefore it introduces a 'meta-language' coupled with the 'family signature'. It is at the same time an homage to the past and a 'window' into the future.

**I have used the actual Cyrillic alphabet:**

А Б В Г Д Ё Ж З И Ј К Л Љ М Н Њ О П Р С Т Ћ У Ф Х Ц Ч Ш  
а б в г д ё ж з и ј к л љ м н њ о п р с т ћ у ф х ц ч ш

...and combined it with the Old Slavic and Greek alphabet:

Ω Υ Φ ς σ Ю Э π β ρ ς ς ε ю Υ Γ ъ к Ё Т η D E t F u U ý ú û õ æ ç ð ð H I

The ultimate result is the non-existing archaic script, the ancient long-forgotten language of our ancestors.

I am fully aware of the fact that, because of its look, this work is automatically placed into a religious context; however the content does not have a religious connotation whatsoever. There is an obvious influence of Orthodox tradition, but I find it hard to explain Orthodox religion in general. Those who have grown up with it experience it as a deeply profound and intimate religion, quiet and not intrusive, yet omnipresent not only in spiritual life but also in secular life. Throughout its history Orthodox Christianity was never forced upon the congregation but was rather a personal choice. Logically, the religious art mirrors such a character of a religion. The masterpieces of medieval art reflect this sense of introversion and intimacy, even in the monumental forms of art – architecture and fresco painting – where size acts as a predominant factor.

In comparison with the flamboyant, grandiose and extroverted style of Catholic cathedrals, which suggest the power of God and the insignificance of man, Orthodox churches and monasteries have a different, subtler, and darker atmosphere – and these are the exact elements that I used in my installation. I have relied mostly on my memory and on the images that I grew up with to present ‘the spirit of the East’. I have concentrated on this sense, both in the monumental size of my work juxtaposed with the intimate, detailed, almost crowded imagery and with a style that reflects the spirit of the past but is executed in contemporary techniques with the use of modern materials. Therefore, I am offering an ‘alternate’ reality of Byzantine tradition, the one that has transcended both time and place.

This is a strange and unusual place where the reality happily co-exists with para-reality.

## THE CLOSURE

My hunger is infinite and my hands always empty.

Down city streets at night I carry the moon on my fingers  
And leave my sadness under the windows of unhappy woman.

I'd give everything and yet I have nothing.  
My hunger is infinite and my hands always empty.<sup>31</sup>

The doors are closed, the lights turned off, the spectacle ended. As I gaze in the darkness, I ask myself – is this the end, or just the beginning?

I know that my journey has just started. I have a wandering spirit. It took me to numerous beautiful places – those that exist, and those that I see when I close my eyes. It encouraged me to try the impossible. When I failed, I tried again. When I succeeded, I tried even harder. On my journeys I have searched for the meaning of life. I kept a journal of my discoveries. This journal is my art. Every line is one word. Every brush stroke is one page. Every painting is one chapter. Wherever I go I take my 'journal' with me.

The pages are filled with ghosts. My images, much like I do, live their lives somewhere in between real and surreal. I often take excursions into the unknown, and I'm still searching for the epitome of existence. On these travels, my 'journal' is my companion and my witness.

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<sup>31</sup>Rade Drainac (1899-1943), The Horse has Six Legs – An Anthology of Serbian Poetry, p. 33

**De Profundis**

Ti utehu cekas. Ne, utehe nema;  
 Sto utehom zovu, zovi zaboravom;  
 Jad istinski dubok nikad ne zadrema.

Rastrzana tako medju snom i javom,  
 Gledajuci kako nepomicno bdije  
 Taj Andj'o stradanja nad tuznom ti glavom,

Ti zelis i cekas.

...

I ne pokidavsi ni jednu od uza  
 Sto nas vezu i sad za proslost, sto stoji  
 Za nama i gleda na nas k'o Meduza.

Jovan Ducic

**De Profundis**

You wait for solace. No, there is no solace;  
 What others call solace, you call oblivion;  
 A real, deep sorrow never falls asleep.

Thus, torn apart between vigilance and sleep,  
 Seeing and watching at your side the vigil  
 Of the Angel of Sorrow that stands at your head,

You long and you wait.

...

Without breaking even one single tie  
 That binds us still, now to the past which stands  
 Behind us, watching us, like Medusa.



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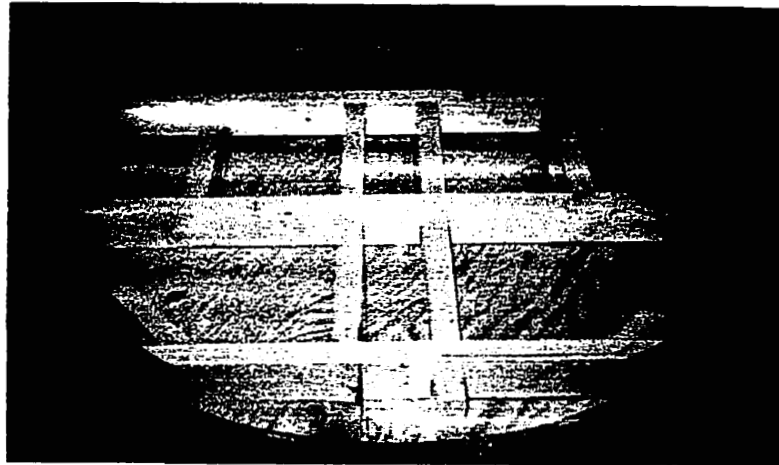


Figure 1: Construction of the base for the mosaic

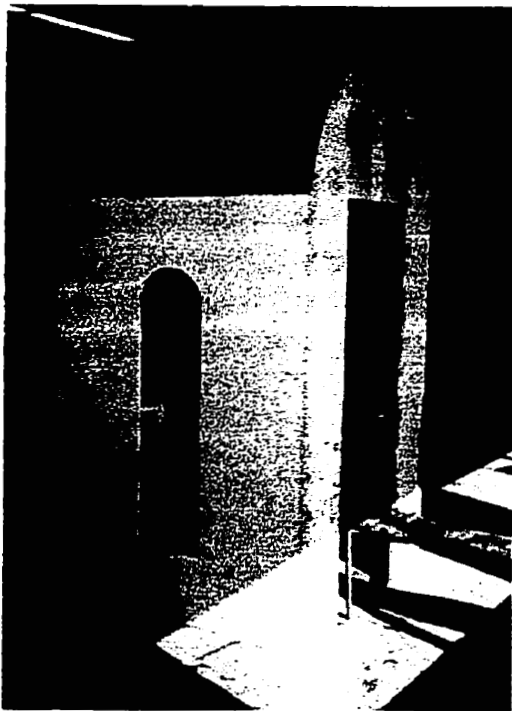


Figure 2: Construction of the Portal

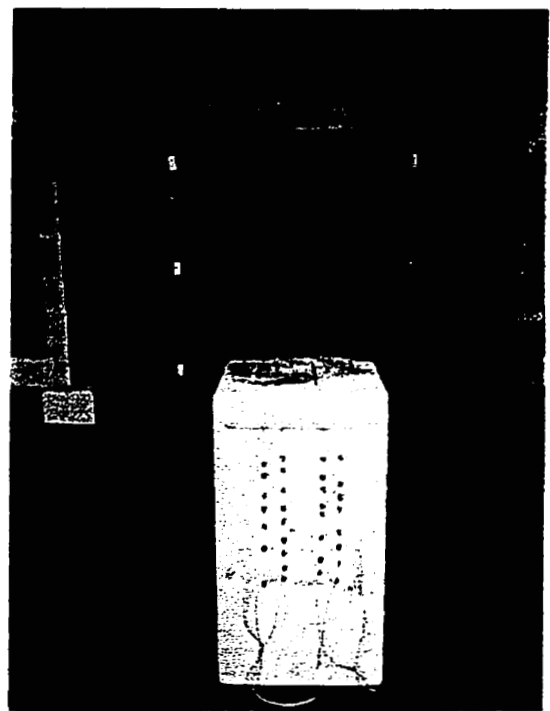


Figure 3: The Codex



Figure 4: The Portal, detail



Figure 5: The Altar door, detail

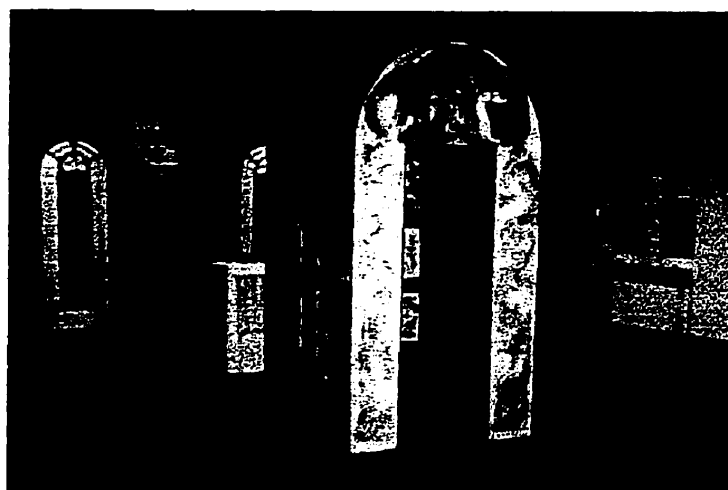


Figure 6: The Installation, front view

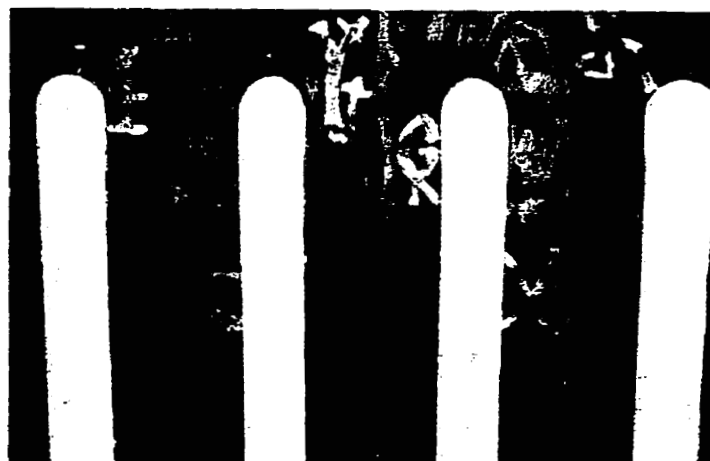


Figure 7: The Altar, detail

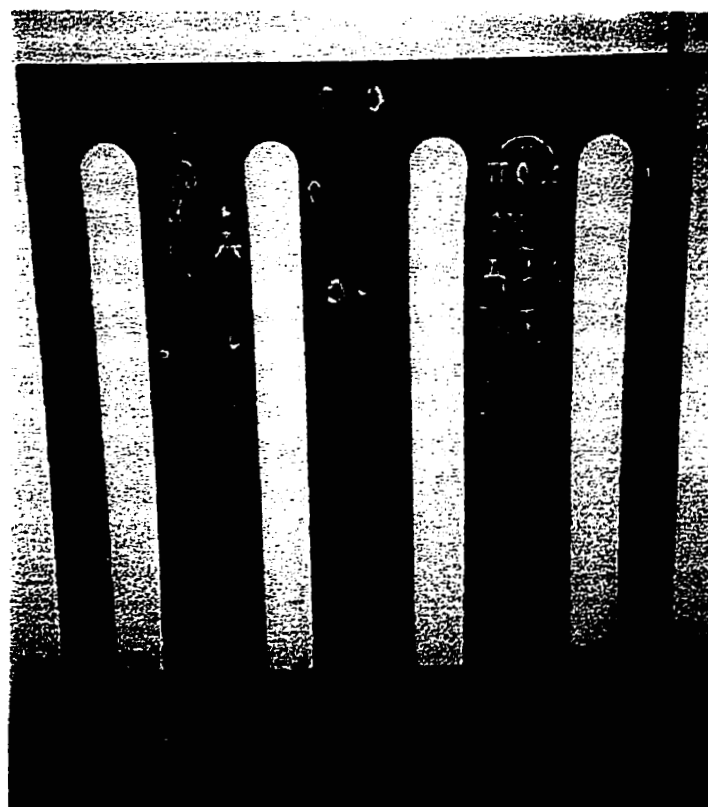


Figure 8: The Altar doors, back view



Figure 9: The Altarpiece base - Mosaic

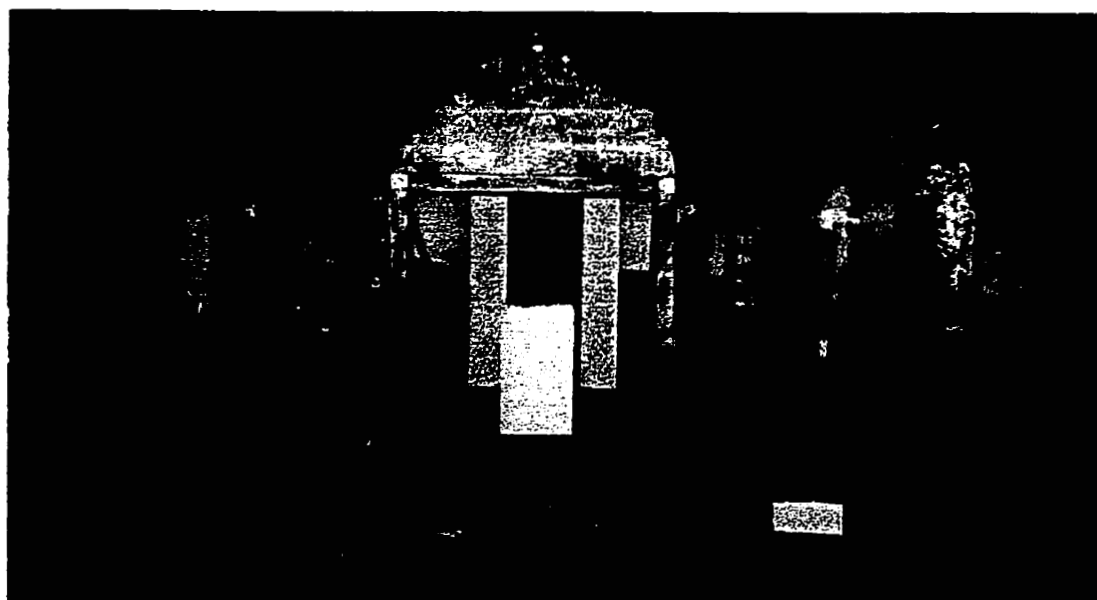


Figure 10: The Altar, back view

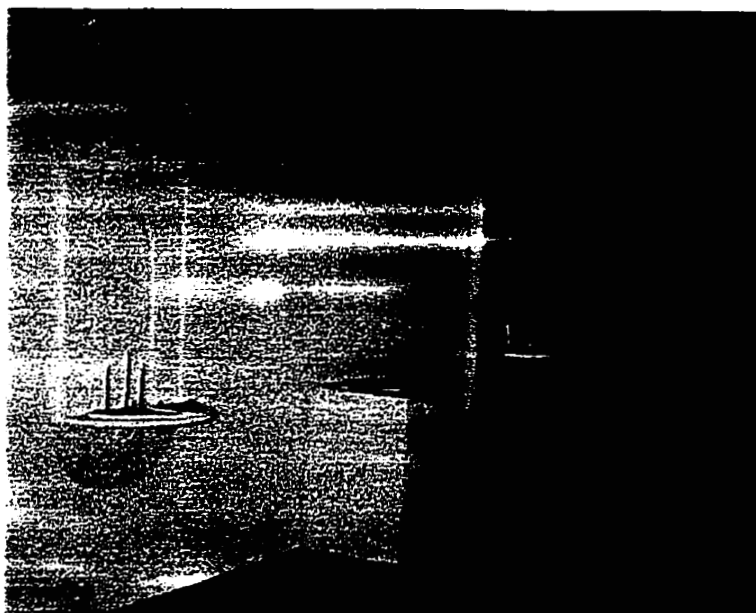


Figure 11: The Installation, side view

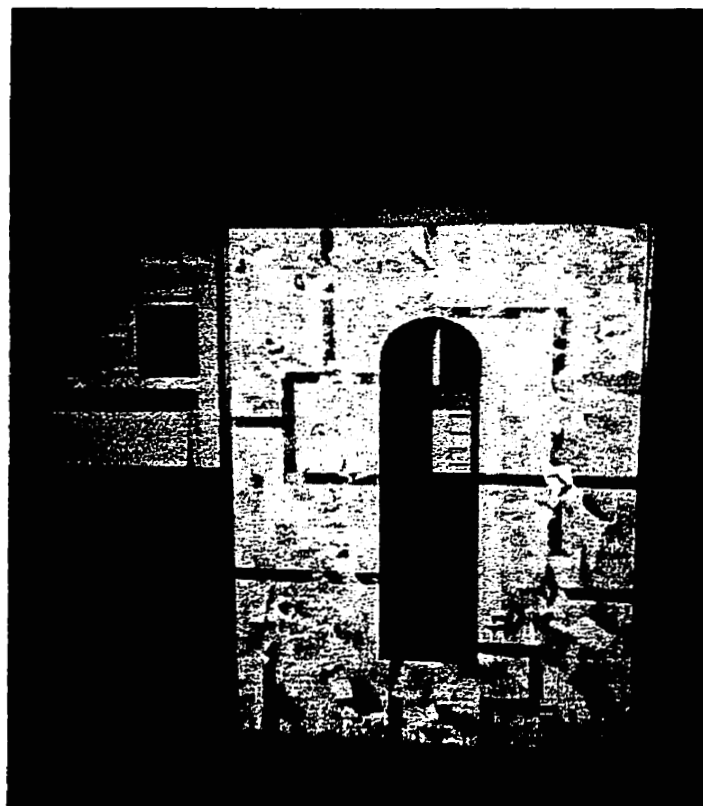


Figure 12: The Portal, side view

# LIST OF SLIDES:

## "The Altar, The Portal, The Codex: Basilica Canadiana" – Installation

1. Basilica Canadiana - Side window, plaster, paint, copper leaf and candles on wood, 48" x 24", 2000
2. Basilica Canadiana - The Installation, gallery view, Nickle Arts Museum, 2000
3. Basilica Canadiana - The Installation, view through the Portal doors
4. Basilica Canadiana – Shrine for the Dead Souls, mixed media on wood (spraypaint, willow, charcoal, rhoplex, gold leaf, string) 36"x 60", 2000
5. Basilica Canadiana – The Mosaic, ceramic tiles on wood, 48" diam., 2000
6. Basilica Canadiana - The Installation, view through the Portal window
7. Basilica Canadiana - The Installation, view through the Portal window
8. Basilica Canadiana – Family Icon, mixed media on plaster plate, 5" x 16", 2000.
9. Basilica Canadiana – The Portal, detail, charcoal and milkpaint on paper, 2000
10. Basilica Canadiana - The Installation, gallery view, Nickle Arts Museum, 2000