

E V E N T S A R E N O T

As we roam through echoes of WWII revolutionary song Bilećanka in their video Ruins of Future Utopia we feel as if we are witnessing an unspoken understanding and camaraderie between the long-term friends and collaborators. Saša and VVhile talk of arranging randomness, charting across elastic space of nostalgia and melancholy and how collapsing structures can be used as a means for exploring histories both personal and political.

Miloš Zec in conversation with
VVhile and Saša Tkačenko

Miloš Zec: How did the paths between VVhile and Saša Tkačenko cross?

VVhile: We met in 2013 for the first time, at a festival in Majdanpek, which Saša invited us to take part in. Our sound was a bit different from what it's like now, but I think he found it interesting even back then. I think we already had an idea that we would work together some day.

Saša Tkačenko: I was a fan of Touch Guys of America, 36 Daggers and Cut Self Not (all of which were VVhile members' past projects). When VVhile took off, I knew that this was a band I would like to work with. At the time I was appointed art director of a festival in a small town in Serbia, so it made sense to invite them to play. Andrija and I started a conversation after the concert, ended up talking for an hour and realized that we would definitely like to make some sort of collaboration happen.

Miloš Zec: The first thing I wanted to ask you about was the collaboration between you. How would you describe your approach, when it comes to collaborative work, not only in the sense of this specific project

(Ruins of Future Utopia) but also when it comes to the influence of collaborative workflow on your artistic practice in general?

Saša Tkačenko: We turned this mutual understanding into collaboration easily, and since our first talk up until the Ruins we worked on several projects together. Andrija played the guitar for the Lust for Life video that I filmed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Vojvodina, I made one version of *Horizon* for the concert launch of their album More. From today's point of view, I'd say that we're bound by the gut to leave our respective comfort zones. This is what I'm looking for when I work with other people. What I found interesting in this project was the very way that VVhile makes music. If I'd dare to describe it as precisely as possible, I'd say that their music is the harmony of disharmony. The synergy they share when making sound has always been fascinating to me. At their rehearsals, I was always trying to figure out how, when and who produces particular sounds that somehow mix together into a perfect blend that is VVhile. What I'm trying to say I guess is that music-making, as they do it, is also some kind of a complex collaboration that has an immense influence over me. I was trying to provoke

I M P O R T A N T A N Y M O R E

this aspect of their work even more, through the narrative embedded in this exhibition.

VVhile: This has been one of the most important ideas for us, as a band, from the very beginning. I think that similar people somehow find each other and collaboration is the next most logical step in the way. When there's only two people in a band, there is always a feeling that something or someone is missing. If you consider the way traditional rock and roll bands are seen, it's implied that we could use an additional guitar or two, and what not. In that sense, rather than compensating for missing musical instruments, we wanted to surround ourselves with people who share the same passion as we do. We thought it would be great to just make music and see how other creatives respond to it visually, or through some other media. Some collaborations started because of our own initiative, some just happened, spontaneously. Saša's approach is very precise, with a very raw, clear-cut visual language, which is something we can identify with.

Miloš Zec: As for the project itself, Saša told me that he sometimes sees Ruins of Future Utopia as an appropriation of others' creative work. What do you think about that (as a band)? It's also quite intriguing that VVhile is releasing a vinyl with the same recording as well. It seems that the result of it all is a complex situation in which a song shifts between different contexts: in one moment it's the center piece of a video work, in-situ improvisation filmed in a specific way and presented as an integral part of an art exhibition; in the next, it's an audio piece meant to be played at home.

VVhile: This is an interesting question, considering Bilećanka as an echo of our former collective identity, as something that was a common thing or a given in the socialist regime, which now becomes a subject of appropriation. We don't think of Ruins of Future Utopia as different from any of our other songs. For us, the place where music happens is between the performer and the audience. In that sense, we don't see any difference between various spatial contexts, because all musical pieces move, from a club to your living room, playing on the phone in your pocket while on a tram, or in a gallery space.

Saša Tkačenko: The most valuable quality of Ruins of Future Utopia is its fluidity. This series has been in the making since 2014. During this period, it went through several stages, and the thing that remained the same in all of

them is Bilećanka and VVhile carrying out their own version of the song. I have developed this sort of practice over time, especially when it comes to video works, in which I let go of control and allow other participants to take it into their own hands. There's always an initial frame, let's call it primitive screen-writing, but I'm ready to soften its edges when I work with others. This process can be quite stressful and unpredictable, but I think it's the best way to get the most out of any collaboration. Space and a reference to it are motives that appear in my work very often. The idea for Ruins of Future Utopia venue changed a lot. Some of the spaces that I was considering include the pavilion of Yugoslavia in Venice, Genex towers in Belgrade and the dome of the Museum of African Art in Belgrade, for which we even scheduled a recording in December 2017. Some things happened and made us postpone it, which had us realize that the spatial component is part of white noise that takes away the gist of the work. That's when we decided to do it at the gallery, a white cube that's neutral enough to allow Bilećanka to be purely appropriated by VVhile. Appropriation is always there, regardless of the form or medium in which the work is presented.

Miloš Zec: Have you ever thought about playing this live? Or rather, do you consider Ruins of Future Utopia only in terms of music, or are there any visual and spatial aspects that matter to you?

VVhile: Given that most of the recording was actually an improv, "reinterpretation" would not be a repetition of the previous version, but a piece that would build up gradually anew, in relation to a few musical sequences that were pre-made and the narrative that revolves around the conception, the life and the end of an utopia. The space where the song was made has definitely had influence on us, with its specific acoustic quality and bearing in mind how much it differs from the places where we usually play our music. This is mostly the reason why we'd like to do this in a more typical concert venue, in order to see how something originally made in an isolated environment gets a new life in interaction with the audience and in a familiar surrounding. We do feel attracted to unusual spaces, but our experience tells us that the acoustic aspects are much more important to us than the visuals.

Saša Tkačenko: I would really like to experience Ruins of Future Utopia in a new context, live. Actually I'm sure that's going to happen at some point, it's only a matter of time and how things work out.

Miloš Zec: I know that music is very important to Saša, symbolically and contextually, in his artistic practice. What about VVhile and your relationship to visual art? Are there any visual artists who had impact on your music?

VVhile: I don't think there's a direct influence of visual art on the music we make. On the other hand, we do consider our album covers, posters, shirt design, video and photography related to the band important. People we worked with were all artists whose practice we like and perceive as something that could complement our own work. In this field, beside Saša, we also had the opportunity to work with the artist Emir Šehanović, This Town Needs Posters and B.A.K.A from Zagreb, photographers Tamara and Nikola Stokanović (N+T), Aleksandar Stamatovski, Marija Radosavljević, Miloš Stošić, video artist Julio Woods, illustrators Stefan Unković, Ricardo Cavola, Milica Pantelić, to name a few.

Miloš Zec: This is a unique situation for the band, I'd say, in the light of what you said about sounding differently depending on the venue. Is the exhibition a place from which the viewer can focus on music as an object, rather than be immersed in the work and the atmosphere?

VVhile: We felt naked in this space, with no stage to make the distance between us and our listeners / viewers, in a very bright room with cameras surrounding us. At concerts, there is a single perspective from which people see us play, and the space is usually dark, which configures an impression of security and safety. We had no audience, which somehow even emphasized the way we felt about being exposed, not to mention the live audio recording carried out in a single take. What we found interesting, when we saw the video for the first time, was how much it actually reveals about how the piece was done and played, which viewers usually cannot experience at concerts.

Saša Tkačenko: VVhile is distinct in a sense that it easily overcomes the classic approach to creating music. Perhaps this is just how I like to see it, but I have always thought of their work as sculptural. I'm not referring to their appearance as a band, with all of the monumental gadgets and instruments. I'm talking about the sound, which is monumental, as it conquers the entire volume of the space it's played in.

Miloš Zec: In texts relating to the show, as well as its title, territory of this research has been conceptually marked by terms such as nostalgia, utopia, ruin and a non-existent country – Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia has almost been excluded from school education and our everyday lives. How would you describe your personal and professional relationship with the sociological imagination of Yugoslavian socialism?

Saša Tkačenko: Nostalgia and melancholy were two terms that have determined this exhibition conceptually and visually. Taking into consideration that the

words that make nostalgia, νόστος (nóstos) ἰάλγος (álgos), respectively mean going home and pain, it's easy to define Yugoslavia, or even more precisely to envisage its ruins, still present all around us, reminding us of the paradox of the sustainability of a utopia as a lasting idea. This show looks into the past, but it speaks of the present moment, of wandering and pain that comes out of the impossibility to go home, because there might be no home any more.

VVhile: When you're born and raised in a specific place and consider it your homeland, and then you see it all break apart and continue to do so for years, you cannot help but feel as if something was taken from you. On the other hand, as you grow up, mature and learn, the term homeland becomes relative and you realize that every territorial characteristic we call state is actually fictional as much as it's real: real, as it contains all the elements related to functioning and order (the state apparatus, borders, institutions...), and fictional in terms of belonging, identity... The real has disappeared, in the case of Yugoslavia, when the country fell apart, but the other counterpart remains in various forms in people who grew up in it and during its critical final years. This varies between antagonism, an impulse to deny this identity, and the so-called Yugonostalgia. Add all the similar languages to it, as well as our shared history, and we come to a point in which we're focused more on the people of former Yugoslavia than any other nation. In our case, through old friendships mostly developed through punk and hardcore music scene, we have maintained a circle of friends in all former Yugoslavian countries. We organize concerts with and for each other, help each other with promotions and our record releases...

Miloš Zec: Do you have any memories of specific events from this period that you keep going back to?

Saša Tkačenko: If we consider that nostalgia is idealizing history, as Svetlana Boym says in her book *Future of Nostalgia*, inventing a fictional narrative builds up on realistic information, but has been slightly modified for the purpose of an ideal image. This is the definition that I apparently looked up to, when I unconsciously made a construct of a world from my past. When I started revisiting these events, in order to support them with real facts, it turned out that they didn't really happen as I thought they did, and not in that specific order. Times and actors of my memories were entangled in some new reality, and I almost gave up on all this. I thought that this was my personal problem, but thanks to this book I realized that nostalgia simply works that way. Events are not important any more, I see them as switches that go on and off, loading the field from which my work emerged.

VVhile: This happens inevitably, whenever we go back to the period of our childhood or youth, because the country we grew up in was a given that made our daily lives. But this type of nostalgia is not related to the country.

It's about the people, events and places that still exist today, even if they were part of a country called Yugoslavia back then and is called differently now. These are still the same places. And these are the individual memories that we both experience ourselves.

Miloš Zec: It was just yesterday that I read the review of a new work by Chris Watson, one of today's most famous sound recordists, with a quote from one of his statements saying how events can haunt spaces and how this possibility to absorb the quality of audio surroundings is what interests him most. Did you all know about Bilećanka from before, or did Saša come up with this through his research? How did you choose Bilećanka as a starting point? The song originated in the brutal conditions of the Bileća concentration camp and it became a cult song of former Yugoslavia, so how does it resonate with you, here, today?

Saša Tkačenko: I come from a family of Partisans and songs speaking of the NOB (National Liberation Movement) have always been present. Bilećanka was one of those songs that had a musical and lyrical monumentality. The song served as a link between two systems that were connected solely by the idea of Yugoslavian-ism. It was very important for me to point out that this is older and bigger than the system itself (monarchy vs. socialism). The song appeared in 1940, during the Monarchy of Yugoslavia, in a concentration camp where the government had been incarcerating young communists. It emerged as a song of resistance and decisiveness to defend the ideas that kept the prisoners captive, and so it became one of the key songs in a sea of many more that were made to lighten up the spirit and keep the strength of many fighters and victims of the Second World War. In socialist Yugoslavia, after the war, a few audio recordings of this song were made, with a choir singing and as a piece for the orchestra. Today, after the country fell apart, the song has been forgotten, despite the powerful message that it carries. Bilećanka is an echo in this piece, it is the foundation of a new song, Ruins of Future Utopia, and its presence – or absence – has been recreated by VVhile, as a sort of glitch from the past that illuminates the critical aspects of the time we live in today. The song and its faith escalate in their absurdity through the ending sequence of the exhibition, a work called Celebrating Ruins. The piece is a constructed ruin, made out of remaining pieces of sculptures and objects that constituted the exhibition, with screens mounted on it, still streaming Ruins of Future Utopia. In the finale of the show, Bilećanka was still playing, even if only in parts, from the ruins inside a gallery, delivering the last atoms of ideas that have long disappeared in battles and conflicts during the 90's in Yugoslavia.

VVhile: We knew the song as one of the symbols of communism and NOB. It was only after Saša suggested that we should take it as a premise for our collaborative work that we found out more about its history. This opened up some new ways to look at it, through the inception of the song in the

context of concentration camps and ideals of those who were imprisoned, the way that it gained life as one of the anthems of the antifascist forces, and then again transfigured into a piece of rigid propaganda of the single-party regime, ending with the end of Yugoslavia, marginalized just like everything else that belonged to “communism”. Precisely this cycle of events inspired us to try to represent this narrative through sound, seeing it through rise, transformation and disappearance. Of a song. Or of a country. Or...

Miloš Zec: As a conclusion: conceptual artist Tom Burr said, and I think that this idea can be easily related to the Ruins, that the elements of his installations are often an *index of something material that is missing*. This seems like a good way to introduce the idea of something present and absent at the same time, at the exhibition as a space for imagination, with regards to our region and the objects that inhabit it. Perhaps it is in this way that the objects from this show stand in for the temporal and spatial existence and experiences. What is your attitude towards music, time and the way we remember certain things from our lives?

Saša Tkačenko: If we look at music through the exhibition, it's like tissue that goes through every detail. I'll try to explain this figuratively: sound, like gravity, keeps all the objects on the ground, keeping them from floating around in forgotten utopias. Perhaps the best aspect of this work is that it does not end when the exhibition ends. It's very important that the person reading this text plays the record and listens to it in their own space. This is the gesture that brings about *something material that is missing*.