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BRANKO VE POLJANSKI AND THE SURREALIST CONCEPT OF IMAGE*

Abstract:

In the context of the Yugoslav avant-garde, Branko Ve Poljanski (1989–1947) was known as a publicist and poet, ideologue and activists of Zenitism (1921–1926). During the post-Zenitist period (1927–1947) he developed his career as a painter in Paris, where he gained direct insight into the conceptual platform and formal solutions of Surrealism. Despite the animosities between the leaders of the two movements, a considerable portion of Poljanski’s visual production stemmed from the creative assimilation of the Surrealist concept of image, which is reflected in the thematic and formal plane, as well as the metaphors of the scene. This is confirmed by his (self)-reflective artworks, where the main topoi are somnambulistic visions, love, and madness, and the methodology of articulation of the visual expression rests on the primitive lexicon, the principle of free association and procedure of simulated automatism. In a series of self-portraits, depictions of female and male characters, figures and situations, Poljanski develops the image of “otherness” of Caucasian Europeans in principle and the Self in particular, raising the issue of artistic freedom, gender relations, and social morality. Even though not manifestly Surrealism, this is a conceptually very similar but autochthonous understanding and presenting of his own persona and reality.

Keywords:

Branko Ve Poljanski, Primitivism, Zenitism, Surrealism, Syncretism, Fine arts, Paris.

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In the context of the Yugoslav avant-garde, Branko Micić alias Branko Ve Poljanski (Sošice, Jastrebarsko district, Austria-Hungary, 22 October 1898 – Recloses, near Fontainebleau, France, 14 January 1947) was known as a gifted poet and publicist, prominent activist and impresario of Zenitism.¹ *Spiritus movens* of this first original Yugoslav avant-garde movement and editor of its herald – the *Zenit* international review, which was published in Zagreb (1921–1923) and Belgrade (1924–1926), was Poljanski's older brother, Ljudomir Micić (1895–1971).² With the intention of establishing the movement as the only avant-garde in the local art context, Micić challenged the authenticity and creative contribution of Yugo-Dada (1922) and the Belgrade Surrealism (1930–1932), and demanded that the Yugoslav associates of the *Zenit* magazine expressly identify with Zenitism. In relations with foreign artists he largely demonstrated flexibility and openness for their innovative concepts and radical experiments. An exception was André Breton's Surrealist faction,³ towards which he was quite antagonistic. Yet, the results of recent studies confirm that there were informal contacts and working relations between the Micić brothers and certain Surrealists in Paris and Belgrade (see Ilić and Peruničić 2021, 95, 104, 111, 113, 118; Kruljac 2023, 57), especially during the crisis period and the dissolution of Zenitism, following the ban on *Zenit* No. 43 in December 1926, due to the politically provocative text *Zenitizam kroz prizmu marksizma* (Zenitism through the prism of Marxism). Facing the threat of going to prison, Micić was forced to immediately leave Belgrade and emigrate to France, while Poljanski remained in their homeland, idealistically believing that the battle for Zenitism had still not been lost. Alone in this struggle, and resigned to the constant challenging of this poetic talent, in mid-July 1927 he handed out copies of his books of poetry to passersby in Terazije square, as an act of protest, announcing that he no longer wanted to be a poet in an 'evil world'. Following month he joined his brother in Paris, where he started building his career as a painter.⁴

1 He was also a theatre actor, editor of the *Svetokret* (The world-goes-round, 1 issue, Ljubljana 1921) avant-garde magazine and the *Kinofon* (12 issues, Zagreb 1921–1922) film review, the first of its kind in Yugoslavia. For recent research on the forms of Poljanski's artistic expression and public activity, including reference sources and literature, see Kruljac 2023.

2 The history of the Zenitist movement and the biography of its leader have been the subject of extensive research and considerations in Serbian art historiography (see Golubović and Subotić 2008).

3 Following the failure of the 1922 'Congrès de Paris' and the split within the Dada movement, poets Paul Dermée and Yvan Goll published the *Surréalisme* magazine in 1922, with the idea of bringing together representatives of different pro-Surrealist tendencies (Gale 1997, 198–217), which was supported by Micić (Golubović and Subotić 2008, 38). This faction was opposed and overpowered by Breton and the group of artists gathered around the Parisian magazine *Littérature*, which in 1924 formed the Surrealist movement. The group of Serbian authors, headed by Marko Ristić, who was the leader of the Belgrade Surrealists after 1930, sided with this faction (see Todić 2002; Sretenović 2016).

4 Letters and newspapers clippings from this period are the main sources pertaining to the last months of Poljanski's stay in Belgrade and his public performance, i.e. protest demonstration in Terazije square (see Ilić and Peruničić 2021, 62–138; Kruljac 2023, 56–58, 111).

Poljanski had first visited the City of Light in 1925/26, when, as a representative of the *Zenit* magazine, he promoted Zenitism through programmatic actions and protest demonstrations, while establishing new artist contacts and expanding the circle of associates of the magazine and movement. At that time, Poljanski took the first steps in trying to profile himself as a painter. Judging by the surviving drawing of a female nude with corrections signed by André Lhote in 1926,⁵ this *terminus post quem* year marks the beginning of Poljanski's new artistic experiment. However, this nude and a series of others, which resemble study drawings, are not proof that the artist had studied systematically and zealously at L'Académie André Lhote,⁶ like the Yugoslav painters that he interacted with in Paris in 1925/26 and after 1927 (Kruljac 2023, 116–117). Since Poljanski's name is not recorded in the existing documents of the Association André Lhote in Paris, it is presumed that he had attended classes at this respectable painting school informally and sporadically. His works created after 1928 do not contain the typical Lhotesque geometric composition construction and form modulation,⁷ which leads to the conclusion that Poljanski primarily mastered the formal elements, creative principles, drawing and painting techniques on his own. In establishing himself as a painter, he assimilated and adapted different models of expression that were current on the Paris scene at the time to his fundamentally primitivistic conception of visuality.

In the years after the First World War, strong authorial personalities, numerous groups, associations and movements were active on the internationalised Parisian scene, as exponents of stylistically and conceptually divergent artistic trends. Modern art developed freely, however, during the period of postwar consolidation and in the atmosphere of increased nationalism, the dominant tendency was directed towards restoring traditional spiritual, ethical and aesthetical values. Consequently, the leading movements were Art Deco and 'return to order' (from the French *retour à l'ordre*),⁸ the anti-avant-garde phenomenon embodied in the artists associated with

5 Even though himself a self-taught painter, André Lhote (1885–1962) had made the journey from Impressionism, to Cézanneism and Cubism, to Post-Cubism and interwar Classicism. Starting in 1915/16 he built in parallel a career as a teacher at several 'free' art academies located on Boulevard de Montparnasse and on Boulevard Raspail, and in 1925 he founded L'Académie André Lhote in Paris, at 18 Rue d'Odessa (Bermann Martin 2020, 18–29).

6 Due to Lhote's open teaching approach and the flexibility of the school's study programme, during the interwar period L'Académie André Lhote was considered one of the most popular private art schools in Paris, especially among émigré artists. The Academy's secretary was Nicolas Poliakov, a Russian-born painter and former student of the Art School in Belgrade, which likely contributed to the large number of Yugoslav artists opting to study under Lhote (Marten Mari and Ambrozić 1974, 23–27; Magaš Bilandžić 2017, 91–95).

7 Even though he insisted on the supremacy of composition, geometric form, articulation of movement and harmonisation of formal elements, Lhote respected the individual approach and inventiveness of his students in solving these problems (Merenik 2016, 22–23).

8 The syntagm 'return to order' was introduced into the theoretical discourse by Jan Cocteau in 1926, as the umbrella term for a series of *neo* and *retro* phenomena in art, based on the realistic paradigm and revival of the traditional concept of the painting (Silver 2010, 35).

the School of Paris,⁹ along with Lhote as one of its leading proponents. Founded on the reaffirmation of artistic tradition, the renewal of the figure and narration, conventional genres and techniques, this tendency was manifested in a series of different morphological variants.¹⁰ Another parallel tendency was the *avant-garde*. It was extremely unsympathetic towards academic tradition, but endorsing creative freedoms, the power of artistic imagination, and the idea of revolution through art. This artistic formation encompassed aesthetic concepts based on the language of abstraction and geometric matrix (Orphism 1912, Circle et Carré (Circle and square) 1929, Abstraction-Création 1931), Parisian Dada (1919), and its offshoot – the Surrealist movement (1924). In the articulation of the Surrealist concept of image, manual deftness was no longer crucial, but the artists' propensity to oneric or eccentric visual expression and formal experimentation. It was manifested in the stylistic and linguistic heterogeneity of the expression models (ranging from abstraction to figuration), as well as a series of nonstandard operative procedures and artistic creations. In the search for inspiration, Breton and his circle recognised the primitive cultures from Asia and Oceania, the European artistic heritage from the near and distant past, as well as the creativity of mentally challenged persons, children and autodidactic artists, i.e. visual forms devoid of rational logic, academic canons, and Western cultural conventions (Rhodes 1994, 110). The preferred literary templates were the works of Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Isidore Ducasse alias Comte de Lautréamont, Marquis de Sade or Guillaume Apollinaire, and the leading exemplars in the domain of fine arts were Gustave Moreau, Giorgio de Chirico, Paul Klee, and Pablo Picasso, in one word the champions of authentic artistic imaginativeness. Inspired by psychoanalysis, the Surrealist artistic practice introduced therapeutic methods of automatic writing and free association (see Vagnoni and Scopelliti 2024, 26–28; Rousseau 2024, 10–12), while somnambulistic visions, love, and madness became the main topoi.¹¹ Since newer historiography

9 The syntagm 'School of Paris' was introduced into the theoretical discourse by Roger Allard in 1924, as a designation for émigré artists who were active in Paris at the time, and in 1925 critic André Warnod expanded its meaning to include French authors who had joined this artist association. In the initial phase, its main exponents were Kees van Dongen (1897), Jules Pascin (1905), Amedeo Modigliani (1906), Jacques Lipchitz (1909), Moïze Kisling and Marc Chagall (1910), Chana Orloff (1911), Chaïm Soutine and Tsuguharu Foujita (1913), as well as Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova (1914). The School of Paris did not have a leader, firm organisation or manifests, nor did it promote any concrete programme or certain style. Even though they were not advocates of *avant-garde* ideas, its proponents also did not abide by academic canons. Some of them had close relations with Picasso and Apollinaire, and most had contacts with *École des Beaux-Arts* and the 'free' academies in Montparnasse (Bouvet and Durozoi 2010, 217–218, 220–221, 227).

10 These were different variants of Realism, ranging from idealist factions of interwar Classicism and Purism, primitivism and oneric visions, to the Naturalism and radical Verism (see Clair 1981, 8–13; Derouet 1981, 196–202; Fer, Batchelor, and Wood 1994, 17, 251–264; Silver 2010, 15–35, 159; Bouvet and Durozoi 2010, 193–214).

11 For more details on the conceptual and formal characteristics of Surrealism see Nadeau 1989; Gale 1997, 173–398; Dufrière et al. 2024.

has mapped and explicated a series of intentions, motivation, orientation and preferences indicating that Zenitism and Surrealism shared a similar conceptual and ideological matrix,¹² the focus of the discussion below will be the analysis of Poljanski's artwork, with the aim of determining, furthering and expanding the existing knowledge on similarities and interferences of the two movements.

As an autodidact painter, Poljanski was unburdened by the convention of a single strictly codified style. In principle, he aligned with the 'return to order' trend, and in 1929 he exhibited alongside members of the School of Paris (Kruljac, 2023, 147–151). Even though his works created between 1928 and 1930 belong to the figurative discourse based on the dominantly realistic paradigm, conventional genres (self-portrait, nude, figural composition), mediums (drawing, painting) and operative procedures, they show clear influences of Surrealism, which are apparent in the thematic, morphological and semantic aspects. The subtext of these works encompass a symbolic dimension that is derived from the intuitive experience and presentation of reality and the Self. Therefore, the concept of Poljanski's painting could be defined as a synthesis of the extrovert 'subjectivist motivation', 'perceptual primitivism', and Surrealist visual logic, which was devoid of history, culture, causality, rational thought, and outward appearance.

In the art of the modern period, primitivism did not represent an organised movement or group with a clearly defined programme or a single style; rather it was a collection of different artist reactions to the idea of the primitive and primitive artefacts. In the Western European context, it emerged from the artists' need to create a true image of Otherness of one's own position, as an alternative to the urban civilisation, through the subversion of the bourgeois aesthetic canons, and cultural and social conventions (see Perry 1994, 3–82). Colin Rhodes distinguishes two basic principles in the articulation of the primitivist visual expression. The first is 'stylistic primitivism', characteristic of Picasso and representatives of the School of Paris (Marc Chagall, Constantin Brancusi, Jacques Lipchitz, etc.), which is based on the conscious assimilation and creative elaboration of the formal aspects of primitive artefacts whose identity disappears in the final result. The second is 'perceptual primitivism', which refers to the process of intuitively achieving primeval models of observation and representation of reality, based on symbolic or mythical sources of artistic imagination. This concept of primitivism is analogous to both Micić's understanding of 'unconscious primitivity' (see Micić 1921, 11–12) and Breton's definition of 'integral primitivism' (see Breton (1928) 2002, 3; Susik 2024, 14–15), and is found in the works of avant-garde artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Jean (Hans) Arp, or Max Ernst, André Masson, Joan Miró, and other Surrealists.¹³ Poljanski, whose methodology of developing and rendering

12 For comparative readings of the conceptual and ideological matrix of Zenitism and Surrealism in principle, and the role of women within these movements in particular, see recent studies in Golubović 2007, 245–254; Golubović and Subotić 2008, 34, 203–204; Bukumira 2021, 205–222; Todić 2020, 57–73; Svirčev 2021, 543–561; Subotić 2024, 13–33.

13 The term *primitivie* indicates the tendencies of these artists towards the spontaneous, intuitive, primordial and uncoded visual discourse, stemming from their maladjustment or dissatisfaction with

unconventional visual expressions is close to the Surrealist *modus operandi*, belongs to the same discourse. This is supported by the primitivist vocabulary, the process of simulated automatism, the creative principle of free association and illogical juxtaposition, the symbolically coded iconographic motifs, and the semantic polyvalence of his works. The metaphoricity of the scenes and procedures reveal an entire range of emotions, moods and mental states that Poljanski experienced between 1928 and 1930 (Subotić 2007, 202–203). Consequently, in decoding the potential meanings of certain works we relied not only on the ideology of Surrealism and the cultural history of the epoch, but also on the theoretical postulates of psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Carl Gustav Jung.

With the intention to imbue Zenitism in France, Micić translated the existing literary texts in French and penned novels in which he conjured the movement's past, with Poljanski involved in defining their visual identity as the author of the illustrations. The difficulty of finding an adequate publisher prompted Micić to disregard previous animosities and attempt to cooperate with the French Surrealists.¹⁴ It is possible that this incited Poljanski to rely on the Surrealist concept of image in creating the illustrations for Micić's novel *Hardi! A la Barbarie* (Onward! To Barbarity, 1928), as well as other artworks. This was manifested in the cancellation of traditional aesthetic norms in the depiction of the human face and figure, especially female nudes, the canonical genre of Academicism (see Ajdačić 2015, 160–161). The motif remains predominantly two-dimensional, while the procedure of simulated automatism serves to construct as well as deconstruct forms.

In addition to glorifying Micić as the originator of Zenitism and his own poetic contribution to the movement, in the illustrations Poljanski focuses on the metaphorical depiction of the ideas and views that form the backbone of the Zenitist programme.¹⁵ These were at the time the current and provocative sociopolitical topics (imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, authoritarianism, revolution, gender relations, etc.), which were infused with self-reflexive and autobiographical content, personal views, opinions and experience of the author. The first series consists of four illustrations where nude female figures personify the materialistically organised and imperialistically ordered Western civilization, whose hegemony and value system Poljanski systematically undermines. Illustration No. 7, *La civilisation danse* (Civilisation dances), is a bizarre depiction of a woman stepping with one foot on human skulls scattered on a mat, while the other, raised foot simulates dancing to

life in the Western European civilization, which they consider artificial, inhibiting and repressive (Rhodes 1994, 7–9, 59, 107–120, 146–148, 158–164; Fer, Batchelor, and Wood 1994, 180).

14 Despite the principal support, the letter that Philippe Soupault sent Micić on 30 June 1928 indicates that the Surrealists were not interested in printing his untitled manuscript (see National Museum of Serbia, Ljubomir Micić Legacy). This was likely the novel *Hardi! A la Barbarie*, which was published that same year in Paris by Jouve et Cie.

15 These are 17 drawings, rendered in some cases in pencil but more often in India ink and pen, which are kept today at the National Museum of Serbia in Belgrade, as part of the Ljubomir Micić Legacy (see Kovačić 1994, 197–206).

the rhythm of the music suggested by the sheet music on the wall. Even though Freud's theory of sexuality points out that the differences between man and women are not biologically defined but socially conditioned (see Fer, Batchelor and Wood 1994, 182, 216), at the time when the illustrations for Micić's novel were created, the prevailing belief was that the male body was rational and spiritual, and that the female body was instinctive and animal, regardless of whether it comes from the civilised or primitive world (Ajdačić 2013, 189–191). This is why it is no coincidence that this and other examples of the reverse side of Western civilisation is personified by the woman – specifically a Caucasian woman. Her body is subject to malformation, manipulation and metamorphose (Subotić 2007, 202), and in the ultimate consequence, the woman is transformed into a grotesque, bizarre, hybrid being or chimera – an emblematic motif in the works of Surrealists such as André Masson and Max Ernst (Sarré 2024, 52–54). In principle, such anti-academic depictions, executed in the manner of modern primitivism, meant disputing the image that Western civilization had of itself. In the aforementioned illustration, Poljanski depicted the female creature with half a head (brain) and exaggerated sexual attributes, in an ecstatic *Danse Macabre*. Even though at first glance it seems like a spontaneous and dysfunctional scribble, the angled line that flows from the sheet music and transects the woman's neck, reaching the mat with the skulls, is actually the trajectory of the dominant system of thought based on manipulation and delusions. Relying on the iconographic motif of the dancer, derived from Picasso's *Les Trois Danseuses* (The Three Dancers, 1925), and the procedure that is reminiscent of the pre-civilisation graffiti, Poljanski builds a metaphorical image of the Pyric victory of Western civilization, prejudicing its carnivalistic death. Illustration No. 11, *Poslednja igra* (The last dance), in which the personification of Europe is holding the flag of peace, which it declaratively supports, as well as a flower with petals containing the French words for freedom, peace, civilisation, art, and philosophy – whose cradle it purports to be. The chimerical nature of the being of European civilisation (the combination of tradition and innovation, spiritual and material, etc.) is indicated by an airplane interpolated onto her head as a symbol of technological prosperity, but it served as an instrument of destruction in the Great War. The two-headed woman holding the globe, from which skulls are falling out into a jug with the word freedom, depicted in illustration No. 15, is *Gospodica Engleska* (Miss England), judging by the inscription on her crowns. From Poljanski's perspective, this country devoted its body and soul solely to its imperialist ambitions and material interests, while humanity, democracy and peace were just dead words on paper. His cynical attitude culminates in the ninth illustration, *Je suis Miss Amérique* (I am Miss America, fig. 1), which represents a grotesque female figure holding in its teeth a lever that moves the world (a globe), waving a flag of peace and its own identity, while defecating on the humanist values that had for centuries been the foundation of civilised society. Illustration No. 10, *Ples pred američkom zastavom* (Dance in front of American flag), shows a woman with a snake neck seemingly harmlessly dancing



Fig. 1. *Je suis Miss America* (I am Miss America), 1928, India ink and pen on paper, 38.8 x 29.7 cm (National Museum of Serbia, Inv. No. 35_3986)

with a man, who is unaware that he has been ensnared by her seductive charm. It is possible that in this illustration Poljanski refers to the triumphant enthusiasm of the Allies following the First World War, from which America (personified by the chimeric female being) came out as an economic superpower, while the ‘spirit of France’ (personified in the male figure), which nationally oriented intellectuals claimed denoted order, discipline and reason,¹⁶ collapsed under the flood of the American popular and indigenous culture.¹⁷ Generally speaking, this was an appropriation and modification of the Symbolistic concept of the femme fatale, which represents a danger and threat to the spirit and body of the man.¹⁸

Illustration No. 6, *Žena odrubljene glave* (Woman with severed head), is thematically linked to Zenitism, but in order to decode its meaning it is necessary

to reflect on two other drawings that did not make it into the final selection reproduced in the book. The first, *Zénitisme, moi je suis l'esprit!* (Zenitism, I am the spirit, fig. 2), depicts a grotesque mermaid, a chimeric female body with fins instead of legs, fight for primacy with the personification of the Communist International. While holding in one hand the flag containing the sun (the symbol of life), hammer and sickle – the identification symbols of the proletarian organization, with the other she is pointing to the word ‘zenitizam’ – implying the leftist orientation of the Yugoslav avant-garde movement. Based on the second drawing, *Žena lomi barjak*

16 On the origin of this conceptual construct and its interpretations, see Derouet 1981, 196–202; Fer, Batchelor, and Wood 1994, 3–18; Silver 2010, 20–22, 29, 137–143, 260; Green 2000, 185–230; Bouvet and Durozoi 2010, 193–214.

17 Two other drawings, which were not reproduced in Micić’s book, but thematically build on the analysed illustrations, also belong to this discourse. The chimera-like *Žena sa četiri glave* (Woman with Four Heads) personifies Europe, England and America, along with Peace (identified by a flag). This Peace is projected in accordance with particular interests of superpowers, which are remaining blind to the problems of the ‘other’ or the rest of the world. In the second drawing titled *Europe*, the Old Continent is also depicted as a hybrid of a female figure and a map of the continent. Seated on a gold throne, this chimeric being holding the flag of peace in one hand, while stabbing humanity in the heart with the other. Behind the mask of a peaceful ruler hides a ferocious executioner.

18 For more on the concept of femme fatale in Symbolism see Dijkstra 1986; Mathews 1999, 86–125; Menon 2006.



Fig. 2. *Zénitisme, moi je suis l'esprit* (Zenitism, I am the spirit), 1928, India ink and pen on paper, 29.6 x 38.8 cm (National Museum of Serbia, Inv. No. 35_4084)

(Woman breaking standard), in which a female figure, personalizing the Yugoslav state authorities, is destroying a hammer and sickle flag, while the humiliated man (likely Poljanski) is trying to prevent her – it becomes clear who is responsible for the collapse of Zenitism. In illustration No. 6, the naked female figure with severed head personifies *nuda veritas* (the naked truth), and since in Freud's theory decapitation represents castration (Fer, Batchelor and Wood 1994, 199) – in this case she embodies aphasia. Accordingly, Poljanski's search for his path to freedom, symbolised by a bird, and the answer to how to move forward after the collapse of Zenitism – led to him abandoning poetry and his homeland.

The second series of illustrations indicates Poljanski's preoccupation with the nude body, the erotic, and love, where he tries to explain his complicated and unresolved relations with women.¹⁹ Stemming from personal experience, obsessions and fantasies, this coincided with the prevalence of these issues in the broader sociocultural context. The waning influence of religion and church, the oversight of the human body and sexual life in the modern period was taken up by culture and society. One of the main mechanisms of societal control and oppression was the moral norm of conscious humility, i.e. sexual restraint. The absence of this virtue in the case of women was considered a sign of mental and physical disorder or degeneration. Consequently, two female stereotypes were established, the normal

19 A letter from Anuška Micić, to her husband Ljubomir, in Paris, dated 22 April 1927, indicates Poljanski's latent homosexuality (see Ilić and Peruničić 2021, 124).



Fig. 3. *Mais oui, c'est l'amour!* (Oh Yes, It's Love!), 1928, pencil on paper, 29.6 x 38.8 cm (National Museum of Serbia, Inv. No. 35_4062)

(mother) and the deviant (prostitute), which were also manifested in art (Fer, Batchelor and Wood 1994, 52, 176–178, 182, 206, 212). From the late 19th century, female nudity symbolised the rejection of masks, social and moral norms imposed by bourgeois culture, and the issue of the erotic represented a testing point for the freedoms and the self-confirmation of the artist. Understood to be closer to the irrational, unconscious and madness, in the Surrealist discourse the woman existed as a muse, object of sexual desire, fantasy and obsession, or as a symbol of transgression and otherness.²⁰ Instead of idealised depictions of the erotic seduction of the female body, the Surrealists, who were fascinated by taboos, offered a demonised and dehumanised image of the woman. In their works, female hypersexuality is indicated by deformed facial features and body parts, enlarged sexual attributes, extremities, feet, hands, nails (see Ajdačić 2013, 189–191; Fer, Batchelor and Wood 1994, 52, 176–178, 182, 206; Rhodes 1994, 38, 59, 62, 65). Analogously, in illustration No. 12, *Žena ogromnih stopala* (Woman with huge feet), Poljanec transforming the woman into a bestial being with psychological and physical manifestations of elephantiasis. In other examples, he introduces symbols with ambivalent meaning: from the apple as the mark of sin or offense, and the Baudelairean flower from the garden of evil, like in illustration No. 14, to the spider as a symbol of repressed sexuality and the phallic-shaped vase implying the sexual domination of the woman over the man.²¹ It

20 For details on the representation of the female body in the Surrealist discourse, see Fer, Batchelor, and Wood 1994, 185, 212–231; Sowels 2024, 22–23; Watz 2024, 122–124.

21 For more about the meaning of these attributes, see Ajdačić 2013, 245, 261–262.

is irrelevant whether the woman represents the fighting Amazon, demonised Venus, perfidious Salome, or sinful Eve – in Poljanski's drawings she figures predominantly as a factor of threat and misfortune.²²

With André Masson the pendulum shifts towards provocation, fornication and perversion, and his automatic drawings depicting sexual debauchery were inspired by Marquis de Sade's erotic literature. The fact that Poljanski was aware of this is confirmed by illustration No. 13, *Mémoires de Casanova* (Casanova's memoirs), in which two grotesque female figures are holding a book, the namesake novel by Marquis de Sade that discusses orgies. However, explicit scenes of sex are rare among Poljanski's works. An exception is the drawing *Mais oui, c'est l'amour!* (Oh yes, it's love!, fig. 3), which depicts a prostitute and her client, i.e. Poljanski, in a sexual relation,²³ while their hearts are pierced by Cupid's arrow. The only element that undermines the normality of this scene is a seemingly insignificant detail – the chamber pot containing bodily excretions. It implies that a life reduced to physiological needs does not bring fulfilment and hedonism, but rather causes repulsion towards one's own being and existence at the mercy of urges. In addition to the deeply personal meaning, at another level of interpretation this drawing raises the issue of petit-bourgeois decorum and hypocritical values: at the time Paris was considered the 'new Babylon' due to the legal prostitution (prohibited by law in 1946) and numerous brothels, but 'buying love' was still a taboo subject in French bourgeois society (Bouvet and Durozoi 2010, 396). With this drawing Poljanski openly announces that he uses the services of prostitutes, expressing his right to quite different and new morality, in which the bourgeois hypocrisy and sexual restraint are qualified as a flaw, and open sexuality and the right to choose a partner without prejudice – as a virtue. Due to such a statement he was denounced as a social outcast, even though in essence he was not immoral. His morality ironizes the petit-bourgeois understanding of love in marriage as a lucrative relationship, and affirms remunerated love as proof of sincerity and achieved freedom.

The fourth illustration, *Dva modela* (Two models, fig. 4), indicates that Poljanski in fact has a desire to establish harmonious relations with women: the male and female standing nudes are depicted in different dispositions, and the double signature suggests that the illustration can be viewed two ways – vertically and horizontally. Questioning the modernist concept of 'pure perception', which implies the vertical arrangement of the viewers body, Rosalind Krauss pleads for the establishment of a horizontal axis that corresponds to the nonlinear perception of four-legged mammals, i.e. the 'optically unconscious' (Krauss 1996, 13–15, 156–157). Viewed in this context, Poljanski's compositional solution could be

22 A similar symbolic depiction of the female body, based on the mythical subtext and primitivist vocabulary, is articulated in 20th century Serbian painting by Milena Pavlović Barili and Ksenija Divjak, but with quite different meaning (see Merenik 2006, 46–54).

23 The identity of the actors in this scene is determined based on *La chambre dans mon hôtel!* (Room in my hotel!), an almost identically conceptualised drawing depicting a prostitute on a bed, also from 1928.



Fig. 4. *Dva modela* (Two models), 1928, India ink and pen on paper, 30.5 x 37.9 cm (National Museum of Serbia, Inv. No. 35_4074)

understood as the return to the primordial vision characteristic of primitive cultures, and the illustration could be interpreted as a depiction of the natural relationship between the sexes, devoid of social conventions.²⁴ At the time obstacles to love were no longer based on the fear of committing sinning, and psychoanalysis had shifted the identification of the cause of unfulfillment in this respect towards confronting the personality with disorders in relations with the opposite sex (Ajdačić 2013, 214). The separate series of drawings in which Poljanski repeats the image of the female figure alongside the depiction of himself, speaks of an inability to achieve a sincere romantic relationship. In the drawing *Žena sa jabukom i muški lik* (Woman with apple and male face) he narcissistically projects the mirror appearance of his *Ideal-I* (Lacan (1936) 1993, 610), satisfying his own need to prove that he is worthy of

love. In the other two drawings, where he gradually deforms and fragments the female figure and the depiction of himself to the point of unrecognition, we see his intuitive cognition that love is a deception, an illusion – just like the image in the mirror. For this reason the male–female relations in these drawings bear a sign of alienation, not closeness.

Inspired by the myths of Eros and Thanatos, the Surrealist representations of love as a destructive force (Mahon 2024, 144–146) evidently inspired Poljanski's next two drawings. They can also be interpreted starting from Lacanian psychoanalysis, which points to the existence of two primary drives in a person: the life drive and the death drive, with the libido being linked to the latter. In the first drawing the woman is sadistically ripping out the man's bleeding heart, while in the second she is triumphantly standing over his body – having put him to death by stabbing him in the heart. The bloody and wounded body of the male (Poljanski) does not belong to the sphere of Eros, but to the sphere of Thanatos; it is a metaphorical death indicating the loss of desire. However, unlike Masson's scenes of raw passion and brutal sexual relations, Poljanski is satisfied with metaphor and metonymy, the menacing appearance of the woman and the emblematic signs of violence (blood and knife). The drawing with the inscription '*Beby ist müche!*' ('Baby is tired!'), fig.

24 The same problematic discourse includes the drawing of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, whose iconography Poljanski supplements with the motif of the piglet, as a symbol of the corporal aspect of their relationship, and the figure of God the Father, as the spiritual cohesive factor.

5) depicts a woman's head with the mouth open, preparing to swallow a miniature male figure. According to Lacan, the object of desire of the person loving and the person being loved is the same – the body of the beloved. This rivalry is linked to the desire for food (body), which is none other than the sexual drive. Consequently, this scene indicates that the sexual appetite of the woman transform the man, i.e. Poljanski, into the submissive victim. Finally, the drawing titled *Schleim* (Flegm), depicting the anatomical cross section of a male head, with a miniature figure of a man struck in the oesophagus, implies that in establishing normal relations with the opposite sex Poljanski is seeking sanctuary, i.e. support of the father figure, which in his case was his authoritative older brother Ljubomir Micić. To have another within oneself is a cannibalistic superiority over the life of another, Lacan asserts.²⁵ However, as in this example the subject (Poljanski) identifies with himself as a rival, when internalising the object of one's own wish (body), the struggle with the rival in fact means the struggle with one's self, which results in self-destruction (Krauss 1996, 277–278). From the standpoint of Poljanski's biography, these drawings represent an authentic testimony.

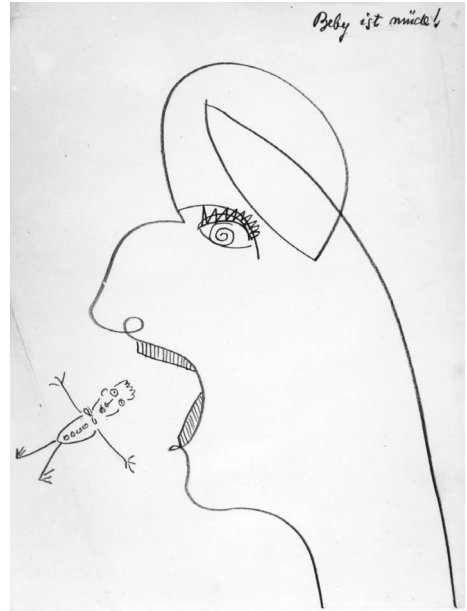


Fig. 5. *Beby ist müde!* (Baby is tired!), 1928, pencil on paper, 38.8 x 29.6 cm (National Museum of Serbia, Inv. No. 35_3774)

Unable to afford professional models, Poljanski most often draws and paints his own image or figure. The drawing titled *Glava umetnika* (Head of the artist, fig. 6) at first glance appears like a conventional self-representation of an aethereal face. The fluid line resembling a scribble, which starts at the temple and meanders along the left side of the face, is the only disruptive element. Through it Poljanski references the complexity of the mind (his own and humankind's in general), which is unfathomable and intricate, like a labyrinth. This is another of Surrealism's emblematic motifs (see Ottinger 2024, 4–6; Görden–Lammers 2024, 134–136), and in Carl Gustav Jung's theory the left side and labyrinth symbolise the Dionysian nature of creativity, as well as the deeply repressed demonic forces (Jung et al. 1987, 215, 170–171; Trebješanin 2008, 244–245). The two other self-portraits, executed in aquarelle, are far from physiognomically accurate, conventional depictions of the artist's persona. Actually, they are disturbing depictions of different psychological and psychotic states of his mind. In the first one, the ominous expression and appearance stem from the

25 For detailed insight into the fundamental principles of Lacanian psychoanalysis, see Lacan 1986, 219–222, 271–275, 286, 288, 293–294; Lacan (1936) 1993, 609–612.



Fig. 6. *Glava umetnika* (Head of the artist), 1928, India ink and pen on paper, 27 x 20.8 cm (National Museum of Serbia, Inv. No. 35_4045)

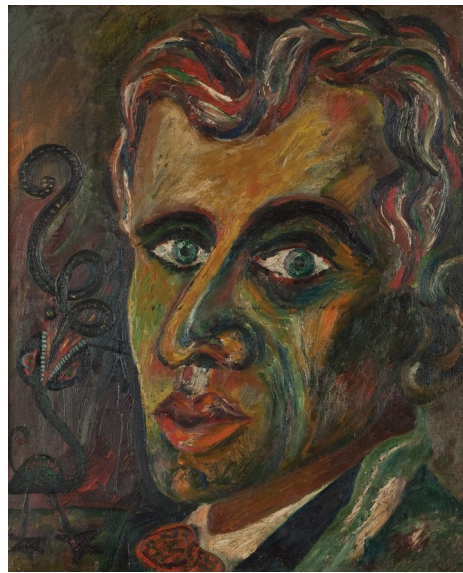


Fig. 7. *Autoportret* (Self-portrait), c. 1928, oil on canvas, 61.2 x 50.3 cm (National Museum of Serbia, Inv. No. 32_1564)

deformed facial features and the cross-eyed manic gaze. A blade is depicted next to the left cheek, below the eye, suggesting a self-destructive urge, while the right side of the background is made up of complex square and rectangular areas, indicating the rational aspect of the author's psyche (Trebješanin 2008: 95). It vanishes in the self-portrait with an open mouth, implying the artist's descent into irrationality, i.e. the defeat of good and triumph of evil. The state of complete stupor is suggested by the dehumanised facial features with the 'blinded' eyes and bizarre-looking mouth, resembling the jaws of an animal. The intensive colours, devoid of descriptive function and energetic strokes give these self-representations an tone of demonic and ominous, evil fate. Although seemingly hallucinatory, the third painting *Autoportret* (Self-portrait, fig. 7) suggests the moment of Poljanski's awakening, i.e. 'recognition of the shadow' or confrontation with the dark side of the Self (Jung et al. 1987: 168). The barely noticeable black bird-like being with burning eyes and flames coming from its mouth, which is devouring a snake in the background, can be interpreted as a personification of the femme fatale (a certain Héléne) who is capable of confronting the artist's vices – alcoholism and drug addiction – as triggers of his madness.²⁶ In this example, the conceptual and semantic planes of the painting are once again in harmony with the operative procedure. The depiction of the Poljanski's face in agony

²⁶ During 1930, when his psychotic states reached dramatic levels, Poljanski was hospitalised and spent several months at a sanatorium in Vaucluse, on an estate that had once belonged to Marquis de Sade (Kruljac 2023: 151).

is achieved through expressive brushstrokes and by contrasting the red lips, whites of the glaring eyes with dilated pupils, and unnaturally green-yellow incarnate, with such visual rhetoric stemming from Matthias Grünewald's representations of Christ's suffering and Hieronymus Bosch's infernal phantasmagoria.

The drawing *Tri lika u pušačkoj seansi* (Three characters in a smoking session), in which Poljanski uses squiggly contours to build a hallucinatory scene resembling the influence of opiates, introduces us to the last series of works with Surrealist features. Devoid of meaning, drawings of male and female characters originating from the artist's imagination. These are more or less complex linear depictions of one or more faces, in which Poljanski simulates the Surrealist automatic method. The image is dominated by curved and sharp forms, executed spontaneously, as a continuous stroke, but with full awareness of the formal experiment's final result.

This series concludes with the drawing *Razigrana forma* (Lively form, fig. 8), in which Poljanski approaches associative abstraction. The same linguistic discourse includes three compositions from 1930, whose semantic plane can be linked to Paul Klee's statement 'The more horrible the world is (as today) the more abstract art will be, whereas a happy world produces a realistic art' (Klee 1961, 463). For this artist, as is the case with Kandinsky and Miró, the entire civilization was irreparably consumed by evil, deception and lies. The cosmos, with its primordial purity and clarity, appeared as the only solution in their search for spiritual sanctuary, which is why their cosmogeny-themed works contain a positive omen (see Frémond 2024, 202–204). Poljanski's *Kosmogonija* (Cosmogony) is also filled with symbolic representations of the sun, stars, planets, all-seeing eye, but they are engulfed in a violent storm, which is suggested by energetic strokes in black and red, giving the entire scene an apocalyptic tone. Even though less dynamic in the execution, the following two paintings appear equally ominous and enigmatic. Despite the encryption of *Ornamentalna kompozicija I* (Ornamental composition I, fig. 9) and *II*, in which the light and ethereal humanoid silhouette is placed opposite the black background containing a multitude of symbols and codes associated with Gnosticism, occultism, alchemy, esoter, etc.,²⁷ these paintings can be interpreted, based on information from Poljanski's biography, as archetypal images of the artist's soul (*anima*) tortured by mental crisis and immersed

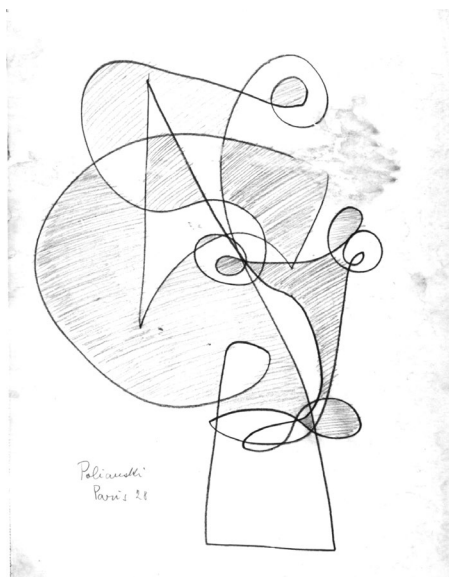


Fig. 8. *Razigrana forma* (Lively form), 1928, pencil on paper, 38.9 x 29.7 cm (National Museum of Serbia, Inv. No. 35_4080)

27 For more information on the Surrealists' fascination with these topics, see Lepetit 2024, 172–174.



Fig. 9. Ornamentalna kompozicija I (Ornamental composition I), c. 1930, gouache on paper, 63.2 x 25.8 cm (National Museum of Serbia, Inv. No. 32_1572)

deep into mysticism and the unconscious. Precisely this elusive boundary between the imaginary and real, improvisation and structure, encrypted meaning and recognizable motives, links these works with the Surrealist matrix.

With the desire to gain affirmation in the stylistically heterogeneous and highly competitive art scene in Paris, as an autodidact painter Poljanski opted for the Surrealist concept of image. Aesthetically subversive and conceptually sufficiently flexible, the Surrealist pictorial logic was suitable for his intuitive understanding of visuality, freed of Cartesian rigid structures and rules. This is confirmed by his (self-)reflexive works in which the dominant topoi are somnambulistic visions, love, and madness, while the methodology of articulation of the visual expression is based on the primitivist vocabulary, the principle of free associations, and the procedure of simulated automatism. In the series of self-portraits, depictions of female and male characters, figures or situations, Poljanski raises the question of artistic freedom and the right to difference, and through the open discussion of the erotic, deviant, unconscious aspect of his own being and other taboo themes, he problematizes the dark sides of the modernity of Western society, bourgeois taste and morality. Even though the considered artworks do not represent manifest Surrealism, these are a conceptually closely related but autochthonous representation of Poljanski's own persona and reality through art, which is the closest to Jean Cocteau's unorthodox surrealism.

Translated by Vuk Tošić

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BRANKO VE POLJANSKI I NADREALISTIČKA KONCEPCIJA SLIKE

Apsirakt:

U kontekstu jugoslovenske avangarde Branko Ve Poljanski (1898–1947) poznat je kao publicista i pesnik, ideolog i aktivista zenitizma (1921–1926). Tokom postzentitističkog perioda (1927–1947) gradio je karijeru slikara u Parizu, gde je stekao neposredne uvide u idejnu platformu i formalna rešenja nadrealizma. Uprkos animozitetima između lidera ova dva pokreta, znatan deo vizuelne produkcije Poljanskog proistekao je iz kreativne asimilacije nadrealističke koncepcije slike, koja se očitava na tematskoj i formalno-jezičkoj ravni, kao i u metaforici prizora. To potvrđuju njegovi radovi (auto)refleksivnih sadržaja u kojima se kao glavni toposi detektuju snoviđenje, ljubav i ludilo, a metodologija artikulacije vizuelnog iskaza počiva na primitivističkoj leksici, principu slobodnih asocijacija i postupku simuliranog automatizma. U nizu autoportreta, prikaza ženskih i muških likova, figura ili situacija Poljanski gradi sliku „drugosti“ belih Evropljana načelno i *Sopstva* posebno, problematizujući pitanja umetničke slobode, rodniĸ odnosa i društvenog morala. Iako nije u pitanju manifestni nadrealizam, reĸ je o idejno vrlo srodnom ali autohtonom poimanju i predoĸavanju vlastite persone i stvarnosti.

Ključne reĸi:

Branko Ve Poljanski, primitivizam, zenitizam, nadrealizam, sinkretizam, likovna umetnost, Pariz

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