

## WORD AND THOUGHT

### A Library for the People

Artist Irena Lagator Pejović has created an installation in the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art consisting of 864 books from the famous pocket edition, once found in nearly every household but today left to be sold on the pavement.

On pages 39 and 40 of the novella *Tonio Kröger*, translated in 1965 for "Word and Thought" by Anica Savić Rebac, the famous homecoming "by a roundabout route" is described. The protagonist walks, holding his hat firmly "in the wind that rustled and creaked in the trees," down a steep, windswept street, toward his parents' home. His heart pounds with apprehension that his father might emerge from the ground-floor door, in his coat, with a pen behind his ear, but on the door, he finds only a white plaque affixed, bearing the inscription: "Library for the People." Passing through the rooms of his former home, surveying that library, Kröger sees images of a past life.

We were reminded of this passage because in the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, as part of the exhibition by Irena Lagator Pejović and Jelena Micić entitled *Inventory — Matter, Art, Capitalism* (curator: Miroslav Karić), the artwork *Word and Thought. The Big Abstract Painting* by Irena Lagator, measuring 10 × 2.74 metres, is on display. An installation composed of 864 books from the pocket edition launched by the publishing house Rad in 1959.

We asked the visual artist, theorist, and university professor, born in Cetinje, why she chose this particular series of titles, how she collected them all, and what intrigued her most during the construction of *the wall*.

The finest poetry and prose, gathered between the recognisable red covers, once available in nearly every household, is now sold online for 200 or 300 dinars, the same price as at street-side antiquarian stalls, where, lined up on the pavement, it resembles a trail of blood. The end of the working class?

Her answers follow below:

#### A Trace of Culture

I included the installation in the exhibition because it condenses the key themes of the exhibition *Inventory — Matter, Art, Capitalism*: the issue of the material trace of culture, the relationship between knowledge and power, and the systemic erasure of collective heritage within the neoliberal order. It

refracts the ideas of inventory, archive, and counter-inventory - of what was once shared, accessible, and valued, but has since been systematically discarded, erased, and forgotten.

## Erased Space

The "painting" consists of books from the *Word and Thought* edition published by Rad publishing house, which played a pivotal role in the democratisation of knowledge, literature, and art in socialist Yugoslavia. Their mass availability, high-quality translations as an infrastructural act of post-war reconstruction, and literature conceived as a public good represented an alternative model of cultural production, opposed to today's market logic of cold exclusivity and ruthless profit. The fact that these books were later frequently and systematically removed from the collections of national libraries, consigned to oblivion, renders them a powerful symbol of the cultural and political erasure of a shared space.

## Collecting the Editions

I collected the titles for the exhibition primarily by reaching out to city and national libraries for cooperation regarding book loans, together with the Museum of Contemporary Art, but also partly by including titles from private libraries. It was made possible thanks to the generosity of the City Library "Vladislav Petković Dis" in Čačak, the National Library "Dr Đorđe Natošević" in Indija, the Library "Vlada Aksentijević" in Obrenovac, and the National Library and Reading Room "Njegoš" in Cetinje.

However, certain national libraries of the newly formed post-Yugoslav states had systematically deaccessioned these books, erasing the material traces of a shared cultural heritage, which further motivated me to render visible this invaluable publishing endeavor and the meaning its conception communicates for the contemporary context.

## The Practice of Borrowing

I am particularly interested in the practice of borrowing because it directly undermines the logic of consumerism. Borrowing produces not profit, but respect: a responsibility toward the object, trust among users, and the continuity of a common good. A book in circulation creates relationships and community, not market value. In this sense, the work does not thematise the past as nostalgia, but as a political counterpoint to the contemporary system in which ownership replaces participation, and consumption erases collective memory. It is precisely this lost model of collective culture that this work brings back into public space.

## A Political Gesture

Visually, the uniform red covers form a large monochromatic surface reminiscent of an abstract painting, by which I wish to evoke the collapse of boundaries between "high" art and mass culture. It is important to me to critically question the contemporary art system, which often evaluates form separately from social function, driven by vested interest. Through this interactive installation, I insist on art as a collective resource - not as a commodity, but as a space of care, equality, and accessibility. In the context of the joint exhibition with Jelena Micić, this work addresses the ethical layer of the show, the level at which our works communicate and activate the audience the most ambitiously: it does not merely represent an artefact of the past, but an active political gesture that restores visibility to knowledge, solidarity, and cultural infrastructure as conditions of collective survival.

## A Public Good

What intrigued me most was the radically different relationship to knowledge and art that the edition established in the late fifties and during Yugoslavia's cultural and economic ascent, without the logic of prestige and exclusivity. In that context, the book was not a commodity, but public infrastructure: mass-accessible, affordable, and intended for circulation, not accumulation. Now, in situation of hyperproduction of cultural "content," we are witnessing the opposite paradox - a formal abundance that in fact produces exclusion through price, ownership, and market privilege. In the Yugoslav context, knowledge was understood as a public good, not as a market commodity - yet today, despite the appearance of abundance, access to knowledge is increasingly conditioned by price and ownership.

## Behind the Wall

Beyond aesthetics, I am interested in ethical and political precision in art. The installation also functions as a boundary - but not as a barrier that divides; rather, as a membrane that simultaneously reveals and connects systems of value. Since the installation is physically mounted on a wall, we can read that on one side of the wall lies a model of culture as a common good: the edition as a materialisation of the idea that knowledge, translation, and literature must be mass-accessible, that they circulate, that they build community. On the other side lies the contemporary neoliberal order in which access to culture is conditioned by ownership, price, and status - a system in which the book becomes a commodity, rather than an infrastructure of renewal, continuity, and shared learning. I am particularly critically interested in systems within art, their export and import into different socio-political contexts, which is why I unequivocally point to the importance of the specificity of local content and the distinction between universalism and art in the global context.

## The Working Class

When we notice these books on the pavements today, do they not remind us of violent deaccessioning, of the painful systematic erasure of the material traces of solidarity and a collective project? Books sold off or destroyed truly are testimony to the end of a world. I ask myself why all our major publishing houses have disappeared. This is why their red color can function as a warning signal, an insistence on the visibility of what it apparently suited certain interests to make disappear, and its return to the present as an active alternative - a return, above all, of word and thought and all their subtle mutual connections and relationships. The books in my installation are accessible to the audience for reading - they circulate once again, they build community once again. The installation on the wall thus also becomes a platform: not merely a boundary between two worlds, but a stage on which a different relationship to culture, knowledge, and the common good can be imagined and practiced. The working class may have disappeared as the political subject it once was, but the questions it posed - who has access to knowledge? Who owns culture? What purpose does art serve? - remain substantively relevant and must not be consigned to the past.