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Follow that Big Yellow Duck! On Jokes and Urban Commons

Marija Marić

June 11th 2016, Belgrade. Only recently has a two meters tall yellow styrofoam duck been sitting here, on the grass plot in front of the City Hall. Now, thousands of people of all age gather here again, well equipped with whistles, hand-made drums, posters and flags with that same duck as the central protagonist.

Like in a ritual, everybody has come to express honor and worship to their God. As young activists loudly address the crowd from the small, provisional stage, a deafening whistling follows. Anger and laughter pervade the atmosphere, naturally collaborating with each other. A few minutes later, a small truck, carrying loudspeakers and a flag with the face of an angry duck, slowly moves down the street, passing by the Parliament building. Everyone follows. As we reach the House of the Constitutional Court, the truck stops. Its followers stop too. The rolls of toilet paper suddenly fill the air, ending on the surrounding trees and street lampposts. Soon, the walk continues. An elderly woman walks next to me, wearing a plastic whistle in the shape of a small yellow duck around her neck, shouting loudly: «Resignations!»

June 17th 2016, Novi Sad. A few meters away from my house, in front of the building of Radio Television of Vojvodina, a small group of people gathers, holding a large poster of the crossed-out yellow duck. A truck is parked in front of the standing crowd, playing loud music. A bit further away, side streets are clogged with a number of parked buses from various parts of the country. After a while, the group moves, soon dispersing throughout the city, some for shopping, others for food and drinks. A police officer stands on the corner, monitoring the event. I approach him, asking what is going on. He says—it's a counter-protest. I ask—what are they protesting against? He says—they are protesting against the protests in Belgrade.¹

A Bad Joke

But, what is the story behind the big yellow duck? The story of a real estate development called «Belgrade Waterfront», and thousands of people it brought to the streets in what will become a series of the biggest protests in Serbia since the fall of Milošević's regime.

«Belgrade Waterfront» is a large-scale real estate, urban development project initiated in 2014 by the Serbian Government and Abu Dhabi based private company Eagle Hills. With the total estimated costs of

3.5 billion euros, the project represents the single most expensive venture of the Serbian Government so far. Located on the unbuilt lot of the Sava Riverbank in the center of the city, «Belgrade Waterfront» consists of almost two million square meters of mixed-use luxury housing and retail properties, featuring the biggest shopping mall and the highest tower in the region, designed by SOM.²

Announced for the first time in 2012, as part of the municipal pre-election campaign of the Serbian Progressive Party, the project was discarded as another «grand maquette», uncannily familiar pitch of the populist political propaganda in Serbia.³ Abandoning the principles of workers' self-management and societal ownership after the breakup of Yugoslavia, post-socialist political elites opted for «vulgar capitalism» in which the market rhetoric, disguised as «transition» and «democratisation» was exploited to clear the way for corrupted development and economic inequality. Since 1990s, urban space in former Yugoslav republics has been shaped by the rules of private property, legal controversies and what had been often described as «investor urbanism».

During the 2014 parliamentary election campaign, the project appeared again, this time officially branded with the promotional hub, the realistic model and the large billboard. In March 2015, a draft of the «Lex Specialis»⁴ arrived to the Parliament. The legal revision proposed a quick expropriation of the private land, exempted the investor from paying the obligatory taxes for the usage of the land and proclaimed 1.8 million sqm of luxury housing and office space to be of the «public interest». The urgent legal procedure was justified by the urgency of «the deadline for the end of the project».⁵ In April 2015, Lex Specialis was adopted and «Belgrade Waterfront» was now legally possible.

Without any public competition, the contract between the Serbian Government and Eagle Hills was signed two weeks later. Published only after a couple of months, the contract showed that, out of the 3.5 billion euros of the project's total value, Eagle Hills is obliged to invest only 150 million euros and provide another



Yellow Duck on the 'Boat Carnival' held on August 29th 2015, in Belgrade. Photograph by Horda Sage

150 million euros of loan, while Serbian taxpayers take responsibility for the rest. At the same time, Eagle Hills' participation in the ownership of the company *«Belgrade Waterfront»* is 68 percent.⁶

A year later, in the night between April 24th and 25th 2016, after the parliamentary elections in Serbia were finished and the results announced, with the Serbian Progressive Party as the winning majority, a bizarre event occurred. Several unidentified men, wearing balaclava masks and driving bulldozers without license plates, illegally demolished buildings in the Savamala district, clearing the way for the *«Belgrade Waterfront»* construction. Despite calls, the police did not come. The only witness was a guard, who died in a hospital a couple of days later. As nobody claimed responsibility for the event, the public anger grew. Soon, Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian Prime Minister at the time, the leader of the Serbian Progressive Party and the father of the project, took the stage and said that «whoever did it, was a complete idiot for not doing it in the middle of the day.»⁷ Rallies started, with protesters calling for the resignation of «complete idiots.»⁸

Big Yellow Duck

Already in 2014, a group of activists with various backgrounds founded an Initiative *«Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd»* roughly translatable into *«Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own»*. The aim of the group was to publicly expose non-transparent processes of the project advancement, with an attempt of including the public opinion into the plan development. In the beginning, their engagement was mostly based on protest letters, complaints and existing participatory tools, which, as they write, were without any significant effect.⁹

When, in November 2014, the General Urban Plan of Belgrade changed according to the investor's model for the future *«Belgrade Waterfront»* location, against legal regulations and without any public consultancy, the Initiative once more filed complaints. They invited citizens to join the public session to be held in November 2015, in the building of the Assembly of the City of Belgrade, writing: «Belgrade floats freely on the water, despite laws and public interest. On Wednesday, November 5th, the last simulation of including citizens into the process of planning will take place. Flood follows. We should be prepared.»¹⁰ As all of their remarks to the plan were rejected, and in the middle of the public session, the activists took out lifebelts and small yellow rubber ducks, in what will become *«Operation Lifebelt»* (*Operacija Šlauf*).¹¹ This was the first performative action of the group, where absurd and comedy were employed as a means of critique and struggle against absurd and tragedy of the project. A day later, newspapers and social media circulated the story followed by photos of a serious-looking public meeting of the city officials with colorful lifebelts and yellow ducks being spread around the room.

In Serbian language, a duck means both a duck and a dick.¹² Duck as a fraud, but also duck of the resistance that monitors the drowning of a corrupt

city. Duck as an official symbol of the protests appeared for the first time in March 2015, when *«Lex Specialis»* for the *«Belgrade Waterfront»* project came into the Parliament.¹³ Made of styrofoam, approximately two meters tall, the duck was now a hack that entered Serbian politics and trolled any seriousness on the side of the political elites. It multiplied as a joke, image and symbol that could fit in anything related to the political corruption, even beyond *«Belgrade Waterfront»* project. It travelled around the city, it was parked in front of the National Parliament, it visited the City Hall, it drove on a boat in the Sava River monitoring the construction site. It was angry. After the night demolitions in Hercegovačka Street, it wore a balaclava mask. Everyone was taking photos of it, photo-shopping it into their profile pictures on social networks. The duck was all around. It was growing.

The power of the duck was in its simplicity and potential for multiplication. Politicians narrating real estate fictions of *«creative»*, *«green»*, *«smart»*, *«spectacular»* experiences for the future residents of the most expensive square meter in the country, now faced a big yellow duck standing in front of the expected audience. The duck became a *«meme»*, a visual, cultural, performative gesture that spreads across the community. It was a *«continuation of politics by other means»*.¹⁴ The duck mobilized easily because it transformed the long-lasting and chronic political depression into something funny, and therefore less overwhelming, less absolute. Suddenly, the political arena was not reserved only for those ready to play dirty. Instead, at that point it was actually about playing, and everyone could participate.

The duck also saved activists from over-exposure. Although the most visible ones were misrepresented in the media and connected to various foreign power structures, it still, up to a certain degree, anonymised the group. It was the duck who was angry, it was the duck who was leading the protests, it was the duck who was rebellious. It enabled a kind of positive simplification of the struggle. The duck was a public joke, and not a public art. Its designer was unknown, so it belonged to everybody. In her study of the *«Anonymous»*, the anthropologist Gabriella Coleman looks into the ways the group *«underwent a metamorphosis from underworld trolls into public-facing activists»*.¹⁵ Built around the anti-leader and anti-celebrity ethics that decentralizes the power within the group and helps its expansion, she argued that collective identity did not homogenize the group. Similarly, the duck as a collective identity, made it easier for many on the outside to identify with, first the group's sense of humor, and then also the real thing—the struggle they set off.

The History of Laughter is Everyone's History

«This history of walking is an amateur history, just as walking is an amateur act. To use a walking metaphor, it trespasses through everybody else's field—through anatomy, anthropology, architecture, gardening, geography, political and cultural history, literature,

sexuality, religious studies—and doesn't stop in any of them on its long route. For if a field of expertise can be imagined as a real field—a nice rectangular confine carefully tilled and yielding a specific crop—then the subject of walking resembles walking itself in its lack of confines. [...] The history of walking is everyone's history, and any written version can only hope to indicate some of the more well-trodden paths in the author's vicinity.»¹⁶

Joke is a critique that operates on a common sense. Jokes are commons, *per se*. They belong to everybody, both to the powerful and the weak. In order to laugh, you do not need to be an expert. Jokes are anonymous, their maker is unknown, his or her identity gets lost as the joke travels. In the words of Metahaven, the creator of the joke is truly a designer, enabling communication across the distance—«jokes, when politically effective, perform what everybody knew but couldn't say.»¹⁷ As they spread, they also mutate, are edited, are lost. Jokes are a free, and therefore, endlessly accessible resource. They are not about high quality, but about easy distribution, circulation and manipulation. This decentralized network through which jokes disperse, is also its actual production site, and the producers are all those who laugh and retell the funny story.

Jokes make shared history, they unite those who laugh. Already at the beginning of 20th century, French philosopher Henri Bergson took jokes seriously, proposing laughter as the key element for understanding social, collective and popular imagination. He wrote: «You could hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. [...] Our laughter is always the laughter of a group.»¹⁸ Jokes mobilize amateurs and imply collaboration. Still, their histories are invisible.

Jokes as Entry Points

Confronted with large-scale problems or abstract concepts such as global capitalism, inequality, corrupt state—we stand paralysed. How does one affect something *«global»*? How does one work against mechanisms of inequality that evolve and perfect throughout centuries? How does one change a corrupt state? It seems as if our possibilities are infinitesimally small and our actions irrelevant. Thus, we give up.

Jokes help us access large scales and abstract ideas; they are at the same time local and global, particular and universal. In her book *«Friction»*, anthropologist Anna Tsing writes: «Scale is not just a neutral frame for viewing the world; scale must be brought into being; proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as taken for granted.»¹⁹ Instead of talking about scale as dimensionality, we should rather talk about *«scale-making»*, scale as a way of seeing, a way of talking and a way of entering the problem. Jokes are tools that can reshuffle our ideas of scale, opening an entry point to what would normally be too abstract and what normally we would not be able to enter. Jokes are the means of translating the distant into close, big into small, and too-serious into approachable.

For a joke to be functional, there has to be somebody that will laugh. Travelling the distance from the anonymous creator to the anonymous receiver, a joke has to bridge universal with particular; it has to bring common sense into the relationship to the specific. Thus, jokes work with the knowledge, culture and common sense of a community. This can be a community of two people, but it can also be a global community—in the end, we all laughed at Trump, although he was not really a joke. At the same time, the yellow duck from Belgrade is a language-based joke, and the laughter in this case has limitations. But how hard can we laugh within these limits? «Can we laugh so loudly at those in power that they fall? Can jokes, in fact, bring down governments?»²⁰

On Nowness

In her book *«Extrastatecraft»*, architect and a theorist Keller Easterling looks into how repeatable spatial formulas, constituting the global *«infrastructure space»*, play a role in formulating new forms of power and governance beyond the State. Still, she writes, «the things that make infrastructure space powerful—its multipliers, its irrational fictions, or its undeclared consequential activities—are perhaps the very things that make it immune to righteous declaration and prescription.» Proposing *«An Expanded Activist Repertoire in Infrastructure Space»*, Easterling argues for an approach that is «more performative than prescriptive» where architects could learn from «pirates, prisoners, hackers, comedians.»²¹

«Belgrade Waterfront» was one such *«extrastatecraft»* in action. Still, it triggered urban resistance that quickly exploded into a wider political struggle, larger than the project itself. The struggle over the right to the city opened the door for rethinking politics and citizenship in the environment shaped by social and economic inequality. Gathered in common fight, citizens and activists showed understanding of urban space more insightful than the experts.

Finally, this takes us to the question—what are the positions from which architects speak? Could the future of critical architecture be in designing new subjectivities, new roles architects can occupy, instead of in designing new objects and typologies? In her essay *«What is a Theorist»*, Irit Rogoff looks into the ways (historical) research very often escapes its connection to the worldly struggles: «The answer lies, to my mind at least, in substituting the historical specificity of that being studied with the historical specificity of the he/she/they doing the studying.»²² Following this, we could say that only by consciously working with one's own *«historical specificity»*, either as an architectural student, as an architect, as a worker, or a class, one can be truly critical. Perhaps architectural critique doesn't have to do as much with what we produce, but as how we do it. And with recognizing and working with our own *«nowness»*.

- 1 The third public protest of the Initiative *‘Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd’* (‘Don’t Let Belgrade D(town)’ held in Belgrade, and the first *‘counter-protest’* named *‘Stop anarhiji’* (‘Stop the Anarchy’) with anonymous organizers, held in Novi Sad, respectively.
- 2 <http://www.eaglehills.com/our-developments/serbia/belgrade-waterfront>. Retrieved: 5.8.2017.
- 3 On the same location of the *‘Belgrade Waterfront’*, Slobodan Milošević proposed to build *‘Europolis’*, a monumental plan for the new city, never realized.
- 4 Full title of the *‘Lex Specialis’*: *‘Bill on Determination of the Public Interest and Special Procedures for Expropriation and Construction Permits for the Realization of the Belgrade Waterfront Project.’*
- 5 Legal analysis of the *‘Lex Specialis’* from the official publication of the Initiative *‘Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd’*, Issue 2, March 2016, Belgrade, p. 7.
- 6 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ugovor-o-beogradu-na-vodi-otkriva-veliku-prevaru/27260571.html>. Retrieved: 5.8.2017.
- 7 A press statement from May 10th 2016.
- 8 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/26/serbs-rally-against-shady-demolitions-after-masked-crew-tied-up-witnesses>. Retrieved: 5.8.2017.
- 9 <http://www.eurozine.com/report-from-belgrade-waterfront/>. Retrieved: 5.8.2017.
- 10 <https://nedavimobeograd.wordpress.com/2014/11/03/ne-davimo-beograd-operacija-slauf/>. Retrieved: 5.8.2017.
- 11 Čukić, et al., 2014.
- 12 Originally *‘duck’*, but used in jargon as a *‘dick’*, or a *‘fraud’*.
- 13 <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1495169>. Retrieved: 5.8.2017.
- 14 Metahaven, *‘Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design and Politics’*, (Kindle Edition), Moscow 2013.
- 15 Gabriella Coleman, *‘Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous’*, (Kindle Edition), London 2014.
- 16 Rebecca Solnit, *‘Wanderlust: A History of Walking’*, (Kindle Edition), New York 2001.
- 17 Metahaven, 2013.
- 18 Henri Bergson, *‘Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic’*, London 1911, p 6.
- 19 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *‘Friction. An Ethnography of Global Connection’*, Princeton and Oxford 2005, p. 58.
- 20 Metahaven, 2013.
- 21 Keller Easterling, *‘Extrastatecraft. The Power of Infrastructure Space’*, (Kindle Edition), London and New York 2014.
- 22 Irit Rogoff, *‘What is a Theorist’*, in: Katharyna Sykora (Ed.) *‘Was ist ein Künstler’*, Berlin 2003, p. 149.