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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.

slowly moves down the street, passing by the Parlia-signed by SOM.² ment building. Everyone follows. As we reach the ly: «Resignations!»

clogged with a number of parked buses from various tor urbanism. parts of the country. After a while, the group moves, 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 and Belgrade Waterfront was now legally possible. streets in what will become a series of the biggest protests in Serbia since the fall of Milošević's regime.

tate, urban development project initiated in 2014 by months, the contract showed that, out of the 3.5 billion the Serbian Government and Abu Dhabi based private euros of the project's total value, Eagle Hills is obliged company Eagle Hills. With the total estimated costs of to invest only 150 million euros and provide another

Like in a ritual, everybody has come to express honor 3.5 billion euros, the project represents the single most and worship to their God. As young activists loudly ad- expensive venture of the Serbian Government so far. dress the crowd from the small, provisional stage, a Located on the unbuilt lot of the Sava Riverbank in the deafening whistling follows. Anger and laughter per- center of the city, (Belgrade Waterfront) consists of alvade the atmosphere, naturally collaborating with each most two million square meters of mixed-use luxury other. A few minutes later, a small truck, carrying loud- housing and retail properties, featuring the biggest speakers and a flag with the face of an angry duck, shopping mall and the highest tower in the region, de-

Announced for the first time in 2012, as part House of the Constitutional Court, the truck stops. Its of the municipal pre-election campaign of the Serbian followers stop too. The rolls of toilet paper suddenly fill Progressive Party, the project was discarded as another the air, ending on the surrounding trees and street (grand maquette), uncannily familiar pitch of the poplampposts. Soon, the walk continues. An elderly woman ulist political propaganda in Serbia.³ Abandoning the walks next to me, wearing a plastic whistle in the shape principles of workers' self-management and societal of a small yellow duck around her neck, shouting loud- ownership after the breakup of Yugoslavia, post-socialist political elites opted for «vulgar capitalism» in which June 17th 2016, Novi Sad. A few meters away the market rhetoric, disguised as (transition) and (defrom my house, in front of the building of Radio Tele- mocratisation was exploited to clear the way for corvision of Vojvodina, a small group of people gathers, rupted development and economic inequality. Since holding a large poster of the crossed-out yellow duck. 1990s, urban space in former Yugoslav republics has A truck is parked in front of the standing crowd, play- been shaped by the rules of private property, legal coning loud music. A bit further away, side streets are troversies and what had been often described as inves-

During the 2014 parliamentary election camsoon dispersing throughout the city, some for shop- paign, the project appeared again, this time officially ping, others for food and drinks. A police officer stands branded with the promotional hub, the realistic model on the corner, monitoring the event. I approach him, and the large billboard. In March 2015, a draft of the «Lex Specialis» 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

Without any public competition, the contract between the Serbian Government and Eagle Hills was Belgrade Waterfront is a large-scale real es- signed two weeks later. Published only after a couple of



Belgrade Waterfront is 68 percent.

Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian Prime Minister at the works. The duck was all around. It was growing. time, the leader of the Serbian Progressive Party and the father of the project, took the stage and said that and potential for multiplication. Politicians narrating «whoever did it, was a complete idiot for not doing it in real estate fictions of 'creative', 'green', 'smart', 'specthe middle of the day.» Rallies started, with protesters tacular experiences for the future residents of the calling for the resignation of «complete idiots.»8

Big Yellow Duck

Already in 2014, a group of activists with various backroughly translatable into (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own). formed the long-lasting and chronic mostly based on protest letters, complaints and exist- ing, and everyone could participate. ing participatory tools, which, as they write, were without any significant effect.9

Plan of Belgrade changed according to the investor's power structures, it still, up to a certain degree, anonymodel for the future (Belgrade Waterfront) location, mised the group. It was the duck who was angry, it was against legal regulations and without any public con- the duck who was leading the protests, it was the duck sultancy, the Initiative once more filed complaints. who was rebellious. It enabled a kind of positive sim-They invited citizens to join the public session to be plification of the struggle. The duck was a public joke, held in November 2015, in the building of the Assem- and not a public art. Its designer was unknown, so it bly of the City of Belgrade, writing: «Belgrade floats belonged to everybody. In her study of the Anonyfreely on the water, despite laws and public interest. mous, the anthropologist Gabriella Coleman looks On Wednesday, November 5th, the last simulation of into the ways the group «underwent a metamorphosis including citizens into the process of planning will take from underworld trolls into public-facing activists.»¹⁵ place. Flood follows. We should be prepared.»¹⁰ As all Built around the anti-leader and anti-celebrity ethics of their remarks to the plan were rejected, and in the that decentralizes the power within the group and middle of the public session, the activists took out life- helps its expansion, she argued that collective identity belts and small yellow rubber ducks, in what will be- did not homogenize the group. Similarly, the duck as a come Operation Lifebelt (Operacija Šlauf). This was collective identity, made it easier for many on the outthe first performative action of the group, where ab-side to identify with, first the group's sense of humor, surd and comedy were employed as a means of critique and then also the real thing—the struggle they set off. 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 "This history of walking is an amateur history, just as yellow ducks being spread around the room.

duck and a dick.¹² Duck as a fraud, but also duck of the anatomy, anthropology, architecture,

150 million euros of loan, while Serbian taxpayers take city. Duck as an official symbol of the protests appeared responsibility for the rest. At the same time, Eagle for the first time in March 2015, when Lex Specialis Hills' participation in the ownership of the company for the Belgrade Waterfront project came into the Parliament.¹³ Made of styrofoam, approximately two A year later, in the night between April 24th meters tall, the duck was now a hack that entered Serand 25th 2016, after the parliamentary elections in bian politics and trolled any seriousness on the side of Serbia were finished and the results announced, with the political elites. It multiplied as a joke, image and the Serbian Progressive Party as the winning majority, symbol that could fit in anything related to the politia bizarre event occurred. Several unidentified men, cal corruption, even beyond Belgrade Waterfront wearing balaclava masks and driving bulldozers with- project. It travelled around the city, it was parked in out license plates, illegally demolished buildings in the front of the National Parliament, it visited the City Savamala district, clearing the way for the Belgrade Hall, it drove on a boat in the Sava River monitoring Waterfront construction. Despite calls, the police did the construction site. It was angry. After the night not come. The only witness was a guard, who died in a demolitions in Hercegovačka Street, it wore a balaclava hospital a couple of days later. As nobody claimed re- mask. Everyone was taking photos of it, photosponsibility for the event, the public anger grew. Soon, shopping it into their profile pictures on social net-

The power of the duck was in its simplicity 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 megrounds founded an Initiative (Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd) mes.»¹⁴ The duck mobilized easily because it trans-The aim of the group was to publicly expose non-trans- depression into something funny, and therefore less parent processes of the project advancement, with an overwhelming, less absolute. Suddenly, the political attempt of including the public opinion into the plan arena was not reserved only for those ready to play development. In the beginning, their engagement was dirty. Instead, at that point it was actually about play-

The duck also saved activists from over-exposure. Although the most visible ones were misrepre-When, in November 2014, the General Urban sented in the media and connected to various foreign

The History of Laughter is Everyone's History

walking is an amateur act. To use a walking metaphor, In Serbian language, a duck means both a it trespasses through everybody else's field-through resistance that monitors the drowning of a corrupt geography, political and cultural history, literature,

vicinity.»16

gets lost as the joke travels. In the words of Metahaven, ments?»²⁰ 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 those who laugh and retell the funny story.

felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to ers, comedians.»²¹ stand in need of an echo. [...] Our laughter is always the ply collaboration. Still, their histories are invisible.

Jokes as Entry Points

state—we stand paralysed. How does one affect some- space more insightful than the experts. thing (global)? How does one work against mechanisms actions irrelevant. Thus, we give up.

ly we would not be able to enter. Jokes are the means of with our own onwness. translating the distant into close, big into small, and too-serious into approachable.

sexuality, religious studies—and doesn't stop in any of For a joke to be functional, there has to be somebody them on its long route. For if a field of expertise can be that will laugh. Travelling the distance from the anonyimagined as a real field—a nice rectangular confine mous creator to the anonymous receiver, a joke has to carefully tilled and yielding a specific crop—then the bridge universal with particular; it has to bring comsubject of walking resembles walking itself in its lack of mon sense into the relationship to the specific. Thus, confines. [...] The history of walking is everyone's his- jokes work with the knowledge, culture and common tory, and any written version can only hope to indicate sense of a community. This can be a community of two some of the more well-trodden paths in the author's people, but it can also be a global community—in the end, we all laughed at Trump, although he was not re-Joke is a critique that operates on a common ally a joke. At the same time, the yellow duck from Belsense. Jokes are commons, per se. They belong to grade is a language-based joke, and the laughter in this everybody, both to the powerful and the weak. In order case has limitations. But how hard can we laugh within to laugh, you do not need to be an expert. Jokes are these limits? «Can we laugh so loudly at those in power anonymous, their maker is unknown, his or her identity that they fall? Can jokes, in fact, bring down govern-

On Nowness

say.»¹⁷ As they spread, they also mutate, are edited, are In her book (Extrastatecraft), architect and a theorist lost. Jokes are a free, and therefore, endlessly accessible Keller Easterling looks into how repeatable spatial forresource. They are not about high quality, but about mulas, constituting the global (infrastructure space), easy distribution, circulation and manipulation. This play a role in formulating new forms of power and govdecentralized network through which jokes disperse, is ernance beyond the State. Still, she writes, «the things also its actual production site, and the producers are all that make infrastructure space powerful—its multipliers, its irrational fictions, or its undeclared consequen-Jokes make shared history, they unite those tial activities—are perhaps the very things that make it who laugh. Already at the beginning of 20th century, immune to righteous declaration and prescription.» French philosopher Henri Bergson took jokes serious- Proposing (An Expanded Activist Repertoire in Infraly, proposing laughter as the key element for under- structure Space, Easterling argues for an approach standing social, collective and popular imagination. He that is «more performative than prescriptive» where wrote: "You could hardly appreciate the comic if you architects could learn from "pirates, prisoners, hack-

(Belgrade Waterfront) was one such (extralaughter of a group.» 18 Jokes mobilize amateurs and imstatecrafts 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 Confronted with large-scale problems or abstract con- economic inequality. Gathered in common fight, citicepts such as global capitalism, inequality, corrupt zens and activists showed understanding of urban

Finally, this takes us to the question—what of inequality that evolve and perfect throughout centuare the positions from which architects speak? Could ries? How does one change a corrupt state? It seems as the future of critical architecture be in designing new if our possibilities are infinitesimally small and our subjectivities, new roles architects can occupy, instead of in designing new objects and typologies? In her Jokes help us access large scales and abstract essay What is a Theorist, Irit Rogoff looks into the ideas; they are at the same time local and global, par- ways (historical) research very often escapes its connecticular and universal. In her book (Friction), anthropoltion to the worldly struggles: «The answer lies, to my ogist Anna Tsing writes: «Scale is not just a neutral mind at least, in substituting the historical specificity frame for viewing the world; scale must be brought of that being studied with the historical specificity of into being; proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as the he/she/they doing the studying.»²² Following this, taken for granted.» 19 Instead of talking about scale as we could say that only by consciously working with dimensionality, we should rather talk about (scale- one's own (historical specificity), either as an architecmaking, scale as a way of seeing, a way of talking and a tural student, as an architect, as a worker, or a class, way of entering the problem. Jokes are tools that can one can be truly critical. Perhaps architectural critique reshuffle our ideas of scale, opening an entry point to doesn't have to do as much with what we produce, but what would normally be too abstract and what normal- as how we do it. And with recognizing and working

Follow that Big Yellow Duck!

- 1 The third public protest of the Initiative (Ne Da(vi)mo Beograd) ((Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own)) held in Belgrade, and the first (counter-protest) named (Stop anarhiji) ((Stop the Anarchy)) with anonymous organizers, held in Novi Sad, respectively.
- http://www.eaglehills.com/our-developments/serbia/belgrade-waterfront. Retreived: 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 Deteremination 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-preva-ru/27260571.html. Retreived: 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. Retreived: 5.8.2017.
- 9 http://www.eurozine.com/report-from-belgrade-waterfront/. Retreived: 5.8.2017.
- 10 https://nedavimobeograd.wordpress.com/2014/11/03/ne-davimo-beograd-operacija-slauf/. Retreived: 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.Retreived: 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 Kunstler, Berlin 2003, p. 149.