

Cvetnić, Sanja. “*Caput mortuum* or: On Melancholy”

Text for *Caput Mortuum* exhibition catalogue, SC Gallery, Zagreb, Croatia, 2010

In a dispersed reality that rearranges itself like kaleidoscope pebbles, melancholy is the membrane preserving the image of comforting, meaningful existence. Artworks washed ashore in the course of history offer a melancholic contact with the sunken generation. Long deceased and gone, turned into ashes and dust, their artists, commissioners, and the first audience for which they were made resist oblivion through the fragments of their world and time.<sup>1</sup> Similarly to this experience and interpretation of artistic heritage, contemporary artistic practice casts a nostalgic eye on its own history, confronting the ancient techniques, symbols, and ideas. But the melancholy that we encounter in the artworks of Silvio Vujičić (b. 1978 in Zagreb) is not a consequence of the Hippocratic “black bile” (Gr. μέλας χολή) prevailing over the three other bodily humours (blood, phlegm, and yellow bile); it is a strategy of facing the erosive terrain of post-historical artistic scene as analyzed by Arthur C. Danto in his book *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the End of History* (1997).<sup>2</sup>

For his recent art installation exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, the *Alchemic Polyptych* (2009), Vujičić elevated the research on the technology of textile dyeing onto a level that was unprecedented in contemporary artistic practice. He established a laboratory where he could restore the neglected pigments of mineral, vegetal, and animal (insects) origin, which had been suppressed long ago by synthetic surrogates. He had selected them aware of their alchemic history and the iconography of colours. Their role was essential as the commentary/guide for understanding the artwork as a whole and also for establishing a conceptual relation to its (post-)historical reference – the *Ghent Altarpiece* (1432) by Jan van Eyck.<sup>3</sup> In his *Caput mortuum*, which is site-specific – produced for the atrium of Theatre &TD – the poetic melancholy of Silvio Vujičić, just as in the *Alchemic Polyptych*, directs the observer to reflect on the abyss between the present and the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> “[At the level of artistic practice, however,] it was no longer an historical imperative to extend the tracks into the aesthetic unknown. In the post-historical phase, there are countless directions for art making to take, none more privileged, historically at least, than the rest. And part of what that meant was that painting, since no longer chief vehicle of historical development, was now but one medium in the open disjunction of media and practices that defined the art world which included installation, performance, video, computer, and various modalities of mixed media, not to mention earthworks, body art, what I call ‘object art’, and a great deal of art that had earlier been invidiously stigmatized as craft.” Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the End of History*. The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 1995. Bollingen Series XXXV: 44 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 135-6.

<sup>3</sup> The installation was inaugurated on 12 December 2009 at the newly opened Museum of Contemporary Art and exhibited there until 12 May 2010. Cf. the accompanying publication: Silvio Vujičić, *Alkemijski politih* [*Alchemic Polyptych*] (Zagreb: Silvio Vujičić, 2009).

The starting point of the site-specific installation *Caput mortuum* was the neglected fountain of a circular base, with an empty concrete platform in its centre,<sup>4</sup> unearthed by the artist – as an industrial archaeologist – in the five-sided atrium of the Italian Pavilion (designed by Dante Petroni in 1937) of the former Zagreb Fair.<sup>5</sup> An ecologically intolerable water leak into the sewage (like a realized metaphor of the Water and Sewage communal service, the present-day Water Supply and Disposal within Zagreb Holding) was solved five years ago (2005) by being buried into the ground and covered like some undesirable shame. But such industrial dissipation is incompatible with the present spirit of the place. In 1959, the fairgrounds at Savska Road No. 25 was transformed into the Student Centre and has meanwhile become a synonym for student encounters, cultural events, or eating at the canteen. The former exhibition pavilions were given new functions. In the mid-1960s, the Italian Pavilion became the Chamber Theatre, and later Theatre &TD. Be it for the scenographic perfection of architects from Mussolini's Italy or the suggestiveness of my old sunny encounter with that unusual space, or perhaps even the vicinity of theatre magic – the following polished sentence from Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (likewise written in the 1930s) might well describe the monumental power of the small atrium, approached through a colonnade:

“In a white cape with blood-red lining, shuffling with a cavalry-man's gait, early in the morning on the fourteenth day of the spring month of Nisan, there emerged on the covered colonnade between the two wings of Herod the Great's palace the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate.”<sup>6</sup>

It is precisely in “the spring month of Nisan” of 2010 (when that month started on 16 March) – accidentally, if such a thing exists – Silvio Vujičić revived the murmur of water in the midst of the scenic oasis. Freed from the burden of soil, the fountain was again put to function. Vujičić replicated the corroded iron water tube at the bottom of the fountain pool, or rather projected it onto the level of the observers' eyes, by placing another iron “halo” on five iron pillars. He has wrapped the entire fountain (including the tubes, the empty platform, and the pool) into large-formatted cotton fabric (11.5 x 4.5 m). The fabric softens the sound of water that slowly drips from the openings on the top of the ring, while the wrapping around the iron tubes acquires traces of rust, or iron oxide (Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>), in a

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<sup>4</sup> In his overview of Zagreb fountains (1994), Tihomir Jukić mentioned a far more prominent *Deer Fountain*, which was named thus after a sculpture by Dušan Džamonja (1956) and placed in front of the cinema and restaurant at the Student Centre. Cf. Tihomir Jukić, “Tipologija zagrebačkih fontana” [The typology of Zagreb fountains], *Prostor* 3-4/II (Zagreb: Faculty of Architecture, 1994), pp. 351-366 (here: 353, 357, 364).

<sup>5</sup> This durable economic and industrial exhibition, through which Zagreb continued its medieval tradition of fairs and its more recent variants, such as the *First Dalmatian-Croatian-Slavonian Economic Exhibition* (held in 1864) shifted localities, partly answering to the needs of its growth and partly because it was evicted by the urbanization of its various localities. It survived several, very different political regimes, and on Savska Road it left some relics of its history. The earliest exhibitions of the fair (then known as *Zagrebački zbor*) took place before World War I, at the fairgrounds between Martićeva and Heinzelova streets, while Zagreb was still a part of the imperial and royal Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and then of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and in 1936 it was moved to Savska Road. Soon after World War II, the fair was revived in the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, but it was now in different ownership and had a different name: *Zagrebački velesajam* (1946/47). In 1956, the fair was first moved south of the Sava River, to its present fairgrounds, and in the 1990s, it survived the change of regime and lived to see the Republic of Croatia. Cf. Kruno Sabolić (ed.), *Od Zbora do velesajma 1909. – 1999.* [From Zbor to Velesajam, 1909-1999] (Zagreb: Zagrebački velesajam and Ars Media, 1999), pp. 75, 80, and 81.

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*. Transl. by Michael Karpelson (Lulu Press, 2006), p. 13.

chemical reaction. Vujičić lets these stains become drawings, the lines of time, water, and air being drawn upon the white background of fabric. The procedure is known among the top fashion designers. It was used by the British-Turkish (Cyprus-born) fashion artist Hussein Chalayan (b. 1970 in Nicosia) in his collection *The Tangent Flows* (1993). Before exhibiting the garments, he treated them with iron dust and buried them in his garden, letting them acquire a warm hue of rust in the soil.<sup>7</sup> However, oxidation is not only the name of a chemical reaction and the final procedure, but also opens up ways to Vujičić's conceptual thinking. Its residue (Lat. *residuum*) – iron oxide – not only leaves drawn-like traces, but is also known in alchemy as the *Dead Men's Head* (Lat. *Caput mortuum*). Its symbol is a circle with three dots (two for the eyes, one for the mouth), like a schematized silhouette of a skull. *Caput mortuum* is also the name of a historical, bright crimson pigment (It. *rosso veneziano*) that used to be won from the carbon oxide (Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>), as well as the somewhat darker pigment called Mummy Brown, which was won – among other things – from the powder of ground human and animal mummies. Didn't the procurator of Judea leave his white cape "with blood-red lining" on the eve of the day that would end at Golgotha (Aram. *Gûlgaltâ*, meaning "Skull" in the local language, גלגלתא)?

The multilayered decision to leave drawing on the fabric to the traces of decay, traces that would document the bodily form like Veronica's veil or the Shroud of Turin, and that precisely in the month of Nisan, when the Passion events described in the New Testament took place, did not, after all, have its key in the Gospels, or rather in the Passion to which the above-mentioned relics and the time framework would seem to point by association. Silvio Vujičić has placed his installation into a space that was once built as the stage for showing the triumphant growth of economic and industrial power, but was then left to cultural and student life, to the audience that is financially incapable of halting the pavilion's decay and change the ghost-like scenery that one experiences upon entering deeper into the thicket of wild vegetation in the triangular space between two railways, in which the Student Centre on Savska Road is located.

Impressions that are far closer to Vujičić's way of thinking are the casts of Victorian houses by British artist Rachel Whiteread (b. 1963), such as *Ghost* (1990) or *House* (1993)<sup>8</sup> – by the way, Whiteread is also the first woman who received the Turner Award (1993) – impenetrable objects that preserve, cast in plaster, concrete, or bitumen, like a glove turned inside-out, the negative of spaces that were once filled with people, objects, smells, and emotions. Vujičić and Whiteread differ in their techniques and topics, and yet *Caput mortuum* and *Ghost* or even *Holocaust Memorial* (2000) reveal a comparable, even common melancholy of space and poetics of loss. Just as Whiteread's artworks are more than a reversed image of the former real spaces, since they gradually, to the very decay, inscribe a new reality into the negatives, Vujičić has let the drawings created by iron oxidation describe what used to be and what is now. Eventually, they will destroy the fabric they are inscribing, dripping on it

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<sup>7</sup> Graduation work of Hussein Chalayan at the Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design in London.

<sup>8</sup> Her later, large-formatted works such as the *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial – Nameless Library* (2000), or small ones such as *Charity Box* (2007), follow the same poetics.

and staining it, since the corrosion process will continue, unstoppable, until its basis is turned into dust. In this disappearance, one recognizes Vujičić's dialogue with the past – with alchemic symbols, abandoned matters and procedures (pigment) – which comes from his mistrust towards the future. His artworks are doomed to perish fast, just like the present, which offers no solutions, only doubts and a pile of questions. In her book on *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression* (2006), Christine Ross has written that allegory is created whenever one text (the fountain) overlaps with another (fabric with the drawing): “Allegory, as both an attitude and a technique, ‘occurs whenever one text is doubled by another’; it is a supplement to (and a commentary on) the original.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, Vujičić's *Caput mortuum*, in its coordinates of a site-specific artwork, becomes an allegory of space (the Zagreb Fair *alias* Student Centre) that the artwork and the artist both enter:

“Allegory dissolves myth by depicting the nakedness and degradation of the object for what it is and for exposing, however momentarily, the soul of the commodity as hell.”<sup>10</sup>

By using allegory, Vujičić also reveals the melancholy of poetics:

“Allegory, a mode of writing or picturing that elaborates a fragmented view of the world to show the world to be a rebus in need of interpretation, is the melancholic attitude par excellence, for it signals both the incapacity to mourn and the hope to recover the lost loved object.”<sup>11</sup>

A comparable melancholic disclosure is found in the artworks of Helen Chadwick (b. 1953 in Croydon – d. 1996 in London), where she took a work of art, painting *An Allegory of Misrule* by Johann Georg Platzer (mid-eighteenth century),<sup>12</sup> as a starting point for dialogue in her piece of the same name from 1987, in which she offered a horrifying projection (or analysis?) of the world.<sup>13</sup> And yet, neither Chadwick nor Vujičić start from catastrophic hypotheses; it is during their work that fragments of the world with which they are in dialogue get deformed and eventually disclose, “however momentarily, the soul of the commodity as hell.”

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So far, our view on *Caput mortuum* was moving within the space of the atrium, with its fountain covered by fabric, but that has been neither the final act nor the only medium of performance for this artwork. From the public space, Vujičić took a part of the installation – the fabric interspersed with traces of rust – into the gallery of MM Centre (the Czechoslovakian Pavilion of the Zagreb Fair, designed by Ferdinand Fencel in 1938). The performance of transferring the fabric from the atrium to the gallery, with the cart and with laying it on exhibition tables, resembled the forensic transfer of a dead body into the room for dismemberment. After the distance of a hundred and eleven steps was crossed (“with a cavalry-man's gait”), the character of the artwork was completely changed: from a

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<sup>9</sup> Christine Ross, *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Max Pensky, op. cit. (1993), p. 168.

<sup>11</sup> Christine Ross, op. cit. (2006), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Oil on copperplate, 56.4 x 75.7 cm. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.

<sup>13</sup> *Allegory of Misrule*, serigraph, 127 x 105 cm. Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery.

site-specific installation that commented on the space, or rather entered into an engaged dialogue with it, it acquired an isolated, personal identity. All that appeared as a part of the installation – water, iron, the neglected fountain in the atrium with two birch-trees – and acquired frozen emblematic meanings, at least apparently. In his study on *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (1993), Max Pensky has described a comparable metamorphosis:

“[As in this way] the baroque imagination realized the extent to which nature itself is allegorical, is composed of fragments that transpose themselves into emblems, that nature itself is transfigured into an interwoven network of occult signs, shimmering with potential meaning but themselves undeciphered and thus quite meaningless on their own. For the baroque as for the Benjamin itself in his earlier essay on language, ‘nature serves the purpose of expressing its meaning.’ As the expression of its ‘spiritual content’, nature enters into the allegorical intention as the meaningful/meaningless emblem, the true expression of nature’s ‘meaning’ in its fallen state, in the image of historical catastrophe.”<sup>14</sup>

The sort of visual/literary expression described by Pensky – the emblem – and the first mention of that term are found in a book called *Emblematum liber*, briefly *Emblemata*.<sup>15</sup> Its author was Andrea Alciato (Andreas Alciatus, b. 1492 in Milan or Alzate Brianza, d. 1550 in Pavia), a distinguished jurist and professor of Roman Law at the universities of Italy and France.<sup>16</sup> Addressing his friend, humanist and passionate antiquarian Conrad Peutinger (Augsburg, 1465-1547)<sup>17</sup> in the preface to his first authorized edition of *Emblematum libellus* (Paris: Chrétien Wechel, 1534), Alciato explained why and for whom he had made the book, or rather described the new visual/literary genre of *picta poesis*. After critically listing various pastimes and forms of entertainment (“While children amuse themselves with walnuts and young people with dice, lazy people spend their time playing cards.”), he goes on recommending to the fans of antiquity and learned amusement: “for us it is seemly to create silent signs.”<sup>18</sup> These *silent* emblems are complex: they consist of a *motto*, *lemma*, or *inscriptio* (a brief thought that serves as the title of an emblem), a *pictura* or *icona* (the “image”, a woodcut or etching that visually describes its content), and the *subscriptio* (the signature, that is, epigrammatic verses that explain the meaning of the first two parts and introduce references from classical literature or

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<sup>14</sup> Max Pensky, op. cit. (1993), p. 120.

<sup>15</sup> The first unauthorized edition was published in 1531 in Augsburg. The most thorough history of editions is still that of Henry Green, *Andrea Alciati and His Book of Emblems: A Biographical and Bibliographical Study* (London: Trubner & Co, 1872).

<sup>16</sup> Alciato was an expert on ancient culture and his classical education was particularly broad-based; his interpretations of the Roman Law are still a topic of research. Cf. Roberto Abbondanza, “Alciato (Alciati), Andrea,” in: *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1960), pp. 69-77.

<sup>17</sup> Same as Alciato, he studied law in Padua and Bologna, and later entered into diplomatic service with the Habsburg imperial court, for Maximilian I and Charles V.

<sup>18</sup> The entire passage runs as follows: “Dum pueros iuglans, iuvenes dum tessera fallit, / Detinet & segnes chartula picta viros. / Haec nos festivis Emblemata cudimus horis, / Artificum illustri signaque facta manu. / Vestibus ut torulos, petasis ut figere parmas, / Et valeat tacitis scribere quisque notis. / At tibi supremus pretiosa nomismata Caesar, / Et veterum eximias donet habere manus. / Ipse dabo vati chartacea munera vates, / Quae Chonrade mei pignus amoris habe.” ANDREAE / ALCIATI EMBLEMA-/ TUM LIBELLUS / PARISIIS, // Excudebat Christianus Wechelus, / sub scuto Basileiensi, in vico / Iacobaeo. Anno / M.D. XXXIII. fol. A2v.

Scriptural books, substitutable through a prose text).<sup>19</sup> The way Alciato envisioned them, emblems soon required explanations, so that a fourth part was added in the second half of the century, namely the commentary.<sup>20</sup> The collection of emblems that the Italian erudite and an excellent interpreter of Roman Law modestly imagined as learned entertainment for people immersed in ancient culture, became the most sought for book in the sixteenth century after the Bible,<sup>21</sup> and according to Peter M. Daly (1990), the overall number of emblematic books surpasses two thousand titles.<sup>22</sup> The crown of publishing success with *Emblematum libellus* – the most important and largest edition of Alciato’s book – came out in Padua in 1621.<sup>23</sup> It is from that edition that Silvio Vujičić has singled out Emblem LIX. Its title is *Impossibile* and a free translation of its verses would run as follows:

“Why do you wash the Ethiopian in vain? Oh do stop:  
No one can turn the shades of black night into light.”<sup>24</sup>

The visual part of the emblem (Lat. *pictura, icona*) shows two white men washing a black man at the fountain, an uneasy reminder of the European colonial guilt. However, in the gallery space, in his alchemic transformation of the artwork from a public into a private gesture, Silvio Vujičić has used this emblem in order to link its abandoned, site-specific part with the performance and the exhibited corpse of the fabric bearing the yellow and reddish-brown traces of iron oxide from the fountain’s ring. The artist has reached for the emblem as the key, with a desire to make us read *Caput mortuum* through four alchemic degrees: *nigredo* (black, decay), *albedo* (white, purification), *citrinitas* (yellow, illumination), and *rubedo* (red, fullness).<sup>25</sup> He has offered the key to the observer to use, since at the same gallery he also exhibited the appropriated emblematic scene of Alciato’s unwashable Ethiopian on the fountain (*nota bene*: rust cannot be washed out either), changing the printing technique and transferring it into the space of the gallery. Instead of an etching enclosed into the covers of a bound book, the artist has exhibited the scene alone, printed in ground iron, or rather iron dust (Fe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>) that

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hessel Miedema, “The Term *Emblema* in Alciati,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 31 (London: The Warburg Institute, 1968), pp. 234-250; Elizabeth K. Hill, “What Is an Emblem?” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXIX/2 (Oxford, UK and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing for The American Society for Aesthetics, 1970 (Winter), pp. 261-265; Bernhard F. Scholz, “Libellum composui epigrammaton, cui titulum feci *Emblemata*: Alciatus’s Use of the Term *Emblema* Once Again,” *Emblematica: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Emblem Studies* 1 (New York: AMS Press, 1986), pp. 213-226.

<sup>20</sup> The most important commentaries, written and published together with various editions of the *Emblemata*, include those by Barthélemy Aneau (1549), Sebastian Stockhamer (1556), Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas (1573), Claude Mignault (1571 and 1584), Diego López (1615 and 1655), Lorenzo Pignoria (1618), Giulio Cesare Capaccio (1620), and Johann Thuilus (1621).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Peter M. Daly and Mary V. Silcox, *The English Emblem: Bibliography of Secondary Literature* (Munich and New York: K.G. Saur, 1990), pp. XV-XVI.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> It was according to this edition that Peter Daly has established the numbering of the emblems and also collated it with other editions used by the researchers. Peter M. Daly, Virginia W. Callahan, and Simon Cuttler (eds.), *Andreas Alciatus, Index Emblematicus, Vol. I. The Latin Emblems: Indexes and Lists* (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> “Abluis Æthiopem quid frustra? ah desine: noctis / Illustrare nigrae nemo potest tenebras.” *ANDREÆ ALCATI EMBLEMATA CUM COMMENTARIIS CLAVDII MINOIS I.C. FRANCISCI SANCTI BROCENSIS & Notis LAVRENTII PIGNORII PATAVINI. Patauij apud Petrum Paulum Tozzium, Sub Signo SS. Nominis IESV 1621*. A copy is preserved at the library of the Franciscan monastery in Kraljeva Sutjeska (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

<sup>25</sup> *Nigredo, albedo, rubedo* is the title of an installation by Anselm Kiefer (Donaueschingen, 1945), consisting of nine wooden panels painted in oil, with applications of dry palm leaves, dried sunflowers, and earth. *Für Paul Celan* exhibition, Paris, Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery, October-November 2006.

has been immersed into the oversaturated solution of sodium chloride (NaCl), common kitchen salt, in order to stimulate processes of crystallization and corrosion. In the intimate space of the gallery, Silvio Vujičić has given to the observer a sense of the graveness of achieving the fullness of individuation (lat. *principium individuationis*). He has offered his personal melancholy, not only as an old habit, or as an artistic strategy alone, but as a mantle of protection.