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DREAM MASTER: Conversation with Vladan Radovanović¹

It could be said that there is no individual who encompasses activities in the fields of contemporary music, art and technology, and polymedia practices approached in the inter- and transdisciplinary method in a more complete manner than Vladan Radovanović. His name has become synonymous with polymedia arts, with his pioneering work on electronic music in the former Yugoslavia and his leading role in establishing Radio Belgrade Electronic studio. Any attempt to address every artistic field in which Radovanović has innovated and traced new paths of creative expression with his unique solutions inevitably bears the risk that some of those activities remain left out.² In that respect, this interview is foremost focused on one work – the musical-poetical radiophonic³ work *The Eternal Lake* (*Malo večno jezero*, 1984) which initiated further streams in our conversation.

The choice for shaping the conversation with Vladan Radovanović in this manner⁴ was also initiated by the topic of crisis that is examined in this issue. On the one hand, the

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2 For more details on the multifaceted activity of Vladan Radovanović, see artist's website (<http://www.vladanradovanovic.rs/index.html>) and bilingual thematic monograph *Sintezijska umetnost / Art Synthesis: jednomedijsko i višemedijsko stvaralaštvo Vladana Radovanovića 1947–2005/ Vladan Radovanović mono-media and polymedia art 1947–2005.*, Narodni muzej, Kragujevac, 2005.

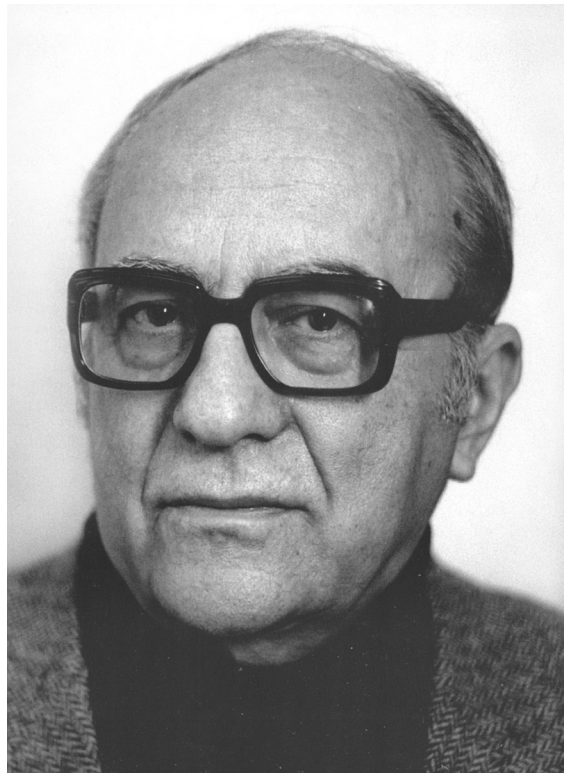
3 In relation to Radovanović's classification of polymedia art according to type of the media, movement and number of media, the author puts *The Eternal Lake* in the group of mono-media, mono-sensory and polymorph arts.

4 By this, I have foremost in mind shaping of the present version of the interview, based on several conversations with Vladan Radovanović during 2019, after which they were abbreviated and edited, and this authorized version was made.

present crisis has unveiled the difficult institutional position of artists, accentuating the need to emphasize the importance of artists' vocation in the society and to justify every help in the stabilization of their position. In this context, it is worth revisiting comments by writer Bora Ćosić on Radovanović: "Vladan, in a manner that to me seems to be foremost dignified, fought the right for 'artistic' tone of life as well as for showing products of fine arts as products of normal, direct human nature, gifted with discoveries..."⁵

On the other hand, the resonance that I felt between the sounds and semantical worlds of *The Eternal Lake* and my own internal world was emphasized during the pandemic-induced isolation. As was noted by Ivana Neimarević, the author "reached universal topics close to every man – questions of life's passing and meeting with death".⁶ In that sense, Radovanović's capability for self-reflexivity, for mediating feelings of loss and solitude by sound structure made of vocal-instrumental, electronic and ambient sounds and non-verbally treated voice and the voice in the form of speech, as well as sensibility skilled in "catching" dreams, makes his art evocative of some of ever-present questions on human experience. One such experience is dreaming and Radovanović's specific artistic activity is diving into the subconscious mind, striving for what is impossible to reach while awake, and materializing it through different media.⁷ *The Eternal Lake* is one of the manifestations of those subconscious events.

Times of crises provoke a rethinking of the importance of artistic endeavours and artists' positions. This is why I interviewed the artist whose uncompromising attitude speaks for that "defence" of arts, and decided to closely revisit procedures and processes that led to such layered work as *The Eternal Lake* which demonstrates the complexity and sensibility of artistic work.



Vladan Radovanović, Photo by Vladeta Stojić

⁵ Bora Ćosić, *Mixed media*, author's edition, Beograd, 1970. As quoted in: Milenko Pajić, "Dnevnik majstora sna", *Stvaralaštvo Vladana Radovanovića...*, op. cit., 98.

⁶ Ivana Neimarević, "Radiofonska dela Vladana Radovanovića", *Treći program*, no. 155–156, 2012, 251.

⁷ Radovanović writes down his dreams since 1953. Chosen dreams were published in the book *Noćnik* in 1972. Prior to *The Eternal Lake*, sound and radiophonic manifestations of dreams were realized in the works *Snoviđenja* and *Snevač*. More on Radovanović's practice of noting the dreams in: Milenko Pajić, op. cit.

*For the start of the conversation, I would like to ask how *The Eternal Lake* came to being and how did you decide to realize your preoccupation with dreams in a sound form?*

Mrs. Neda Depolo came to see me in 1984, in Radio Belgrade Electronic studio, and suggested that I put my dreams in radiophonic form. In the process of adaptation, I needed to transform dreams with drawings into the radiophonic verbal-musical structure. I had selected five dreams from my dream collection (*Noćnik*, note by MM), and the sixth was created on the basis of an experience I had with an old watch. It had a beautiful sound, but it was unbearable to listen to every night as it struck the passing of half an hour, then a full hour, then another half, then full, so one could not sleep. Due to it, I had the sound experience that initiated one whole dream. It happened during my gymnasium years, when I still did not have the opportunity to work with electronic media. One morning, the clock started to strike six. The first strike awakened me, after which I fell asleep shortly only to be awakened again with the sixth strike. During that time, I dreamt a dream which, thus, lasted for six seconds. I forgot the dream, but the experience of the length of that dream in regard to its real duration and dreamt transformations of clock strikes incited me to imagine a new dream and to try to create a dream transformation of the real clock strikes by the means of electronic music. In the work, this happens when the Dreamer (Snevač) starts to count: "One, two...". After the approach of a city's clocks striking, this wall clock strikes the time too. And from that the story of the fictional dream was further developed. After I chose the dreams, it was necessary to search for tones and noises to establish relation to the given story. Although the story was created first, that did not make the text considerably more important. It was always important to me to achieve that evenness of values and importance of both components. Đorđe Malavrazić, Radio Belgrade Drama programme Editor-in-Chief at the time *The Eternal Lake* was in the process of creation, generously granted a significant number of time-slots, which were needed in order to bring the work to fruition in a deserving manner. Then, we decided on actors for group scenes and talked about music. Since I realized I would not have enough time to compose all musical numbers, I decided to find suitable excerpts from my considerable oeuvre. I abbreviated them in the Electronic studio, or prolonged them, transformed them in the desired measure, and started to form the score. Concerning the choice of actors, we deliberated on who should play the role of Dreamer. That role was the most difficult and substantial. Since none of familiar voices or dictions suited my intention, we tried with my voice. After reviewing the results of the recording, everyone found it hard to imagine anyone else in the role of Dreamer. Not only do I think that only I was capable of performing some nuances in that way but I do not know how I, as a director, would instruct another person to perform in the same manner. After Dreamer was determined, I proceeded with deciding on the

music. Understandably, I determined what I will take from my own compositions, and what I will compose, I also selected ready-made effects and envisioned those that should be made. For instance, sand flowing is not a ready-made effect, but it is electronically produced. And one could say that the score was not always “going ahead” determining how every sound will be realized, but on occasion it was first decided what to make, and afterwards that was written in the score.

34

S
E
C

kucaње sata
gradski satovi

17.07 17.19 17.25 17.31

S
E
C

da da da da divno dolaze dugi duboki

stični časovnik

17.41

S
E
C

tonovi titraju traju Tako netraženi nikada nisu nicali Zamislim i začas zazvuče

18.10

Vladan Radovanović, *The Eternal Lake* (excerpt).

Was there any improvisation or was everything conceived in advance?

There was no improvisation. Everything was defined in advance. True, some textual-musical events I imagined more precisely, and some less so. On some occasions I had to search and research. Here, we are getting close to the concept of experiment and experimental music. Personally, I am not for calling modern and avant-garde music experimental. This is because the meaning of that expression – which is trial, testing, trying out something which is then evaluated as satisfactory and functional for us – is without saying something that is at work in the creative processes not only in music, but in arts in general, since Ancient Greece to the present day.

You quoted from works of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Stravinsky in The Eternal Lake, as well as referencing your earlier composition, Vokalinstra. Did you have any intention to make the work resonant with postmodern poetics?

Like Jonathan Kramer I consider quotations and references important characteristics of postmodernism. Since quotations are present in *The Eternal Lake*, it is not unusual that one could classify it as postmodern. However, for determining whether work belongs to that mega-style, it is not enough to notice that certain characteristics are present, but to consider whether that was done because of an author's intention to be part of that poetics, or due to some other reasons. All self-references in this case were used since the limited time and conditions did not allow for the composition and recording of the intended musical numbers. And quotes from other composers' works were used because the narrative of one dream required it. Hence, there is no justified reason for classifying *The Eternal Lake* as postmodern.

Did you create all sound effects by yourself or did you use pre-existing ones, available in the Radio Belgrade phonoarchive?

Most of that which Shingler and Wieringa name as effects – which comprise everything except speech, silence and music – I produced myself. It is evident in the score in which purely electronic sound and those non-electronic sounds transformed by frequency, amplitude and timbre are marked with E, and ambient sounds (transformed or simply transposed) are marked with C. For instance, created effects are: sand flowing, the special walk of two-legged aircraft, breathing, an auto sprinkler, the flying of menacing snowballs, a chain rattling, big book pages fluttering, an old clock striking, and others. Spatiality is also a special effect. Thus, to realize the impression of deep space, one has to use sounds, voices and effects which are differently placed. One could be at the front, and the other one very far away. That effect is otherwise called *presentness*. In *The Eternal Lake* it is

applied when Martians emerge, and the voice announcing their emergence comes from afar. Or, with the occasion of descending down the stairs. The voice is moving left-right, further-closer, moving in the spiral. The impression of spatiality is achieved by reverberation, i.e. reflection of the sound in a certain delay. That is a very appropriate mean for creating the space. The impression of distance is stronger when the reverberation is combined with response in which deep frequencies are filtrated, about 120Hz. Distanced sounds lose deep aliquots, since they are absorbed in the terrain. You see how many procedures are not deducible from the scores, but stand behind it as radiophonic knowledge of *métier*. In a more general sense, the word is foremost about knowing the peculiarities of a radio broadcast, about knowing limiting factors regarding dynamics and frequency range. Those ranges have to be taken into account when the work is created only for radio reproduction.

How did the process of shaping the form (as a whole made of six chosen dreams) proceed?

First, I made the decision on dream arrangement. That arrangement constitutes the backbone of events. After I made the arrangement, I expected the visit of – to use that Ancient Greek term – inspiration. I waited to be told what to do. This is always the real thing. Of course, there is certain knowledge of logic development, based on considerable experience that comes from reading books and gaining an awareness of the grouping of elements in temporal arts etc, but I believe that the real thing comes from intuition, origins of which we cannot investigate. Searching for the origin of inspiration inevitably brings us to a dead-end street. The explanation may be behind that dead end, hidden for us in the unconscious or the subconscious – I do not know. During introspection we may arrive at that moment when a spark of imagination is seen, heard, understood, but one can only make assumptions on what was before that moment. I would not do that now.

One aspect that leaves a strong impression on me upon every listening is the passage between two dreams, virtuously realized with soprano voices fading into the ambulance siren and then into electronic sound. How was that place conceived?

In the interregnum between two dreams, it was needed to connect prior the dream to the one that follows. The connecting usually proceeded through *prosnivanje*.⁸ So – the man briefly awakens from the dream, turns to the other side, and falls asleep again. However, in that meantime something could have happened outside of the Dreamer's room. There could be, for example, an ambulance car riding outside, thus connecting the adjacent dreams. In the example that was already indicated,

⁸ *Prosnivanje* is Radovanović's original term, hardly translatable in English. Approximate translation would be *phantasming, fancying, reverieing*.

the next dream, via an ambulance wailing, presents circumstances of occupational angst [such as during the occupation of Belgrade, Yugoslavia in WWII, MM], which I remember vividly, the anxiety of wondering if somebody is going to knock down the door with the boot, to pull you out from your hiding place under the pointed Schmeisser, to put a deadly machine in the building, and so on. Exactly the text of that following dream, after the ambulance siren, starts with most of the people having already been put on the lists, dressed in uniforms, many corpses, in different-coloured uniforms are getting ready to move, etc.

Is there any moment in composition that is of special significance to you? Are there some moments that are especially dear to you, in terms of making a creative breakthrough with them or being attached to them in the work process?

Yes. Those are the moments I saw in advance as being difficult and complex for realization, whether regarding putting text and music in relation to each other, whether in taking care that the complexity does not obscure that which is important to understand. This is because there has to be something of primary importance for a listener to rely on. Surely, there has to be multi-levelness, but it always has to be opposed with a hierarchy of importance. Not all events can be equally important in every moment, although they maybe interchangeable according to their importance, which I am fulfilling in my polymedia works. Otherwise, exactly this place which you have chosen is important to me too, since it seems like you can successfully slip into an external reality and then convincingly return back to oneiric reality. Regarding effect, I would single out a dreadful dream about my father who bites the ground while making the way out of the grave. This place starts here: "Father has to bite his way through all the layers to get out. Father comes into the ward but I know I can't trust him". That is a requiem-like moment, with those disruptions, with pedal electronic sounds and excerpts from *Vokalinstra*. I shudder every time I hear it.

Yes, it is striking with those blocks of sounds and breaks between them.

And another thing, in another sense: here I took only two-three sentences from one of my saddest dreams. It is like you would be the only one returning to the planet on which everything has died, and corpses are not rotting, but they remain as they were and are laid into one lake that is supposed to last forever. "Years have passed, I have come back, but they all laid down in the little eternal lake. All the girls too. And there was nothing else left in the world except the old boat-shack and the leaves". I would single out another moment, for instance, this polyphony made of my own voices. Some procession is passing and with it a big wheel with a ball on the side. On the ball is a hole which absorbs the power for the wheel movement. A little metal-made man peeks from the hole and sings one motive several times. Here, I quadruple my voice. With this procedure chaotic moments were created in which

the little metal man jumps out of the mentioned ball, hooks the sky, twists it and pulls it in the ball.

Why have you decided to layer your own voice, and not several different voices?

Because I could not trust that any actor could carry out those colours and pitch changes simply based on my instructions. I believed that I could do it best by myself. And I assumed that I would lose too much time with somebody else. One should always measure everything that needs to be done regarding what time is available—that is one of the key criteria.

What are the leading principles and criteria in your artistic practice?

According to one principle, I strive to make sound and text reach their full expression. Somewhere, something should be moved, something changed, one should give up some previous intention so the abovementioned principle can be fulfilled. Of course, the question of freedom can be raised. In my creative process, I am somewhat free to choose a certain principle. However, if I decided on one dominant principle, I will not be free to choose other principles too, I will have to leave them aside. Or, perhaps, some of them could be of secondary or tertiary importance. Then one could speak of certain hierarchical coordination as of some broader method. Inarguably, effect is the most important criteria for me. Since this is art, no matter what media is in question, effect has to be realized. If it is not realized, principles are of no use, no matter what they are. In the perspective of art work's effect, what comes first is always an effect on the author himself. Based on that effect, an author – text writer, music composer – needs to have the deciding word when he arrives at the crossroads of multiple solutions in the realization of his work. He could discuss with others about choosing solutions, but without the possibility for someone else to vote over him. In the case of *The Eternal Lake*, we had a somewhat collective work. Still, since I was author of both the text and music, as well as director, I had more votes on my side and I could dominate the decision-making process (I am joking, of course).

How do you define authorship and what is your attitude towards group authorship and collaborations, which is somewhat needed for creating radiophonic art such as The Eternal Lake? Could you tell me something about the hierarchy of collaborator's contributions to the final outcome?

I define authorship as putting the highest emphasis on the expression of individual decisions. I believe that a high density of individual decisions is applied when there is a personal decision on every musical parameter – and there are at least five of them. In *The Eternal Lake*, all decisions – both regarding text and music –

are individually taken. Although I have nothing against group authorship, it is my impression that in this case, when polymedia works are in question, the planning of correlation between media is made more difficult and “intimacy” in those relations is diminished. Personally, I have never planned polymedia works – and among those are also verbal-musical radiophonic works – in collaboration with other authors, nor do I have the need for that because I am capable of creating alone in different art fields. Incidentally, it is possible to make a difference between group collaboration in artistic shaping of the work and group collaboration in its technical realization. In relation to that differentiation, a hierarchy of participation and authorship can be established regarding the creation of *The Eternal Lake*. I am the only author with an artistic shaping of all media and in making the score of the work in its entirety and I independently chose and adapted my own texts, recorded segments of my own electroacoustic music, chose and transformed segments of music from several other authors, recorded electronic effects, personally interpreted and recorded the Dreamer’s part, created the score and directed. I agreed to sign Neda Depolo as a director too, but the truth is that all directorial decisions were made by myself. The exceptional Zoran Jerković recorded the other actors and mixed the sound material according to the score.

When you are working with a chosen technology and media, which have their own predisposition and conditions of usage, to what instance does your idea adapt to the means at your disposal? Are you trying to find a way to go around the limitations so you can achieve your inner vision or do you choose means based on your pre-existing ideas?

Almost none of this is disjunctive, but it is conjunctive: first and second and third. Foremost, there is a certain adaptation to the media. On the other hand, I would say that there is a prior idea, *pre-idea* (*predideja*), because this is not an idea reducible to words, but more a feeling of sound, and especially, its colour. It should be said that first inner *pro-sounding* (*prozvučavanja*) of the future musical-poetical work indicates a direction which the story will have in regard to reality. Paul Valéry once said how the first verse is gifted by gods, the rest has to be minted. In this sense, I have not heard my *The Eternal Lake* in its entirety, but in certain parts which then grew regarding one another. Not everything is granted. Not everything is perfect and given as completely polished, but a lot of it is given. That gift is the momentous event for the creator, it is a celebration. Not only is the piece not given in its entirety from the start, but it also does not have to be offered in an order that is eventually accepted as definitive. I could hear the beginning and a little bit beyond it, and afterwards the part which is not immediately connected to the beginning, a part that I do not know if it will come into the middle or at the end, and when I do find out – I fix it. All of this mostly happens with works with a time axis.

In other words: one follows the other.

That is correct. In the end, there is nothing more fulfilling to me than the state of creation, when – and this is not a pretty expression – you make decisions. But, it is not us who make decisions, decisions are made themselves, they impose themselves. At least this is mostly my case. When there is some doubt, as practical matters get in the way, this is the moments when ratio enters. In most cases I hear, see, palpate, experience movement. Many do not believe me. What can I do? This is how I act and I believe this is an appropriate manner of work because I am gifted in that sense.

Translated by Marija Maglov