

**Art organization, kuda.org**

**Interview with Dean Zahtila - Labin Art Express**

**Labin, March 2019.**

### **Initiation of LAE establishment and circumstances in which activities are initiated**

Dean Zahtila: *Labin Art Express* was founded in 1991, but its roots go a little further into the past. To be honest, simply out of some kind of need to deal with something at the time when every day there was curfew in the streets and the whole city was dark, and the only thing that was shown on TV were war scenes. We had an irresistible need to deal with culture and art, and we decided to establish ourselves, in the only possible formal legal way of organising (grouping) as a group of citizens for the purpose of meeting their needs in culture and art, it was the Cultural Artistic Society (CAS). It was then that *Labin Art Express* was founded as *CAS Labin Art Express*. Even now we are invited to various folklore festivals all over Europe, because at that time cultural artistic society was considered to be exclusively traditional culture, not contemporary culture, and even less art. *Labin Art Express* was created on the initiative of the two of us (Krešimir Farkaš and Dean Zahtila), but then, in order to register the Cultural Art Society, we needed ten people. We had to have ten signatures. I would not mention all of them, I just want to mention Graziano Kiršić, who was the principal of the secondary school Mate Blažin in Labin, and later he was one of the first heads of culture of the Istra County as our member, the member of *Labin Art Express*. He did not quite understand what we wanted and our view of the world. He did not understand the kind of art we wanted to work on, but he always told us that he supported it. He trusted us. That everything we talked and wrote about, and so on, that we really wanted to do it. Thanks to this, with his great help, besides the help of Vesna Girardi-Jurkić, we are here now.

Immediately we went with the manifesto and with the project saying why we were founded - to turn this space into a cultural centre. And not just this space, but we also wanted the entire mine to become the *culture mine*. We announced it right away, and in 1992 we had an exhibition where we presented the entire project through artwork, through our artistic vision of what we would like to be happening in those areas. At the start, the three men were the most important for LAE, me (Dean Zahtila), Krešimir Farkaš and Graziano Kiršić.

In 2005 we changed (CAS), since new law on civic associations was changed in 1998. We were a cultural arts association (CAS), and in 2005 we changed everything into *Labin Art Express Association*. Our field of work was no longer just culture and art. We were engaged in politics and we also had a town council member in the Labin Town Council for four years. We wanted to continue, but we gave up because we did not have enough people. It was too small a town to find people who would deal with all that we wanted to do.

### **Radio as a tactical medium and instrument of visibility**

Dean Zahtila: 1993/92. We submitted a request (for a broadcasting license) in the year, and in 1993 we took off as *Radio Labin Art Express*, which was here in this complex where we are now, in Labin in the *Cultural Centre Lamparna*. In order to establish a radio station, we had to be a

legal entity or a firm. The Cultural Art Society KUD was treated equally as a legal entity and we applied for the competition, and we received a concession for a radio station that only played music 24 hours a day. We also broadcast the news exclusively from foreign services like Deutsche Welle, BBC, Voice of America. We started broadcasting in 1993 during the worst period of war our dear former SFRY. We also played Serbian bands. A Serbian band was the same as the English band to me, and regarding the fact that they (Serbs/Croats) were at war - I was not at war. And in 1995, we were banned from broadcasting. We continued broadcasting for another 6 months, and then, thanks to one person from the Ministry of Maritime Affairs, Transport and Communications, we were informed that the authorities would come in with the police and would confiscate our complete equipment. Then we really decided to stop everything and hide all that equipment and keep it. And in February 1996, we had to stop broadcasting.

### **Methods of financing, development of organisation, space and programs**

Dean Zahtila: At that time, the EU asked members of the opposition in Croatia, dissidents to the existing government, which was why we were the guests of the European Parliament 2-3 times and they offered us support. So with their help we received money, that is, one part of the necessary money, not all of it, for the construction of *CC Lamparna* in Labin.

In 1993, we first signed a contract with the Town of Labin for this space, which we entered in 1991. Apart from the first motive to engage in culture and art, the second motive of my associate Krešimir Farkaš and myself was to really protect and revitalise those beautiful places in the very centre of Labin, because there was none of this Podlabin that now stretches up to the mine. Here under the Old Town there was only an empty meadow where the mining shaft originated, which we call a Šaht, was created, after to the German word "Schacht". We were surprised by the strength and beauty of these spaces, and we proclaimed - *This is ours!* And in 1992, we designed the project *CC Lamparna* and presented it in the form of a collective multimedia exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, while it was still in the Old Town.

The culture minister, Vesna Girardi-Jurkić, helped us a lot in the beginning, which was absurd on the one hand, but on the other it was not, because she was one of the biggest HDZs (Croatian Democratic Union) hardliners and one of the closest associates of Franjo Tuđman, but she was also an Istrian. That's why she always asked us never to stress her support, but, in essence, she arranged for us to get these spaces.

Without Graziano Kiršić, we would have found it very difficult to conclude a contract with the town, which was very favourable for us, because we were not paying anything for 20 years. Which was right because we had invested in the space. Of the 5M kunas that have been invested in this centre so far, the city invested a total of 200K kunas or similar. This is a town building and they were supposed to invest in something at least - they had the roof repaired. Since it was a large area, it was still more expensive. Soros Fund also helped us a bit, and, in large part, besides the EU, our private funds from our private pockets were also invested, which is very important. In 1993, we signed the first contract with the town, and in 1996, finally the second one for 20 years, and after that, we started investing (into the space), with the help of the EU and the funds I previously mentioned and our private money. And in 1998 we finally officially opened *CC*

*Lamparna*. Mind you, during this period, from 1993 to 1998, we were constantly doing programmes, regardless of the construction and reconstruction. So at the time we had 3 or 4 international art workshops and 4-5 theatre and dance ones. I do not think there is a contemporary Croatian artist, actor or dancer or musician who did not participate in some of these programmes, or workshops, and who was not in Labin. This is our connection with the Croatian scene. It functioned exclusively on that level that people were coming here.

### **Network collaboration and networking with programmes**

Dean Zahtila: We have been working constantly. It's not that we were just building *Lamparna* and sitting at home, and went every day to watch the works progress. For years *Lamparna* had no water or electricity until it was reconstructed. We had to bring the generators inside, the roof was leaking, the conditions were horrid until everything was settled. We had guests artists who participated in our exhibitions, now I can remember Ganin Božić who participated in that first one. In 1993, we were already exhibiting at the ŠKUC Gallery in Ljubljana. The exhibition was done by me, Krešimir Farkaš, Denis Zustović, Nataša Stanić and Gianino Božić, who was our guest at the time. 1993 was very important because Massimo Savić joined us, and then we decided that we had to somehow separate our culture and our engagement with art. We deal with culture exclusively as a kind of production and political activism. This is our, as you call it, cultural activism, within which we do productions, festivals, exhibitions, concerts, etc., related to *Lamparna*. The second direction was artistic production related to *LAE* which we called *Metal Guru*. In 1995, we did the Biennial of Young Mediterranean Artists and we started with various projects called *Metal Guru*, mainly abroad. We did very little in Croatia because nobody wanted to pay for anything. From the start, we thought that the only way for art to survive was that somebody pays for it. It is absurd to pay a cleaner in *Lamparna* to clean my floors and not pay the artist who is doing the exhibition. I demand the same attitude towards us as well. The only reason why we perform very little in Croatia, where we only performed within the projects of the Museum of Contemporary Art and nothing else is because we ask for all the people who work to be paid. If we are five, then five, if three - then three, if two - then two.

### **Management and decision making within LAE**

Dean Zahtila: Regardless of the fact that we loved the idea of self-management, we still think that only those who work may manage and have a say. Organisation system of *CAS Labin Art Express* was from the very start *totalitarian*, in the sense that as the president of the association I have the absolute last say. So I have to approve something in the end. But that members have given that right to me - I did not steal that right - they wanted it. Next to me, Krešimir Farkaš was the only one professionally involved since the very establishment of '91. It has been our source of income since 1991 and this has been the only thing we do. We insisted on being given more importance when voting than everyone else, and they agreed with that. Because other members had day jobs, for example, Denis Zusnić worked at a school and spent one hour a day on the projects of the association. We simply merged our lives and work and professional dealing with culture and art through *Labin Art Express*. Our life has become inseparable from *Labin Art Express*, we have invested ourselves completely in it. We have proposed that only we make decisions, and this was accepted. And he (Krešimir Farkaš), because he did not like to make

decisions, said "Dean, you decide". That's how we have functioned and we are functioning today, although today there are a lot more of us. It is incredible, don't get me wrong, I think that this is because 99% of people, regardless of their capacities, prefer someone else to decide instead of them. Somehow this decision-making has been difficult to people, and I feel capable of deciding for others. We have our assembly and board, of course, but let's say that my word bears the same weight as the word of the board. Let's say it is so. When I say that I decide, these are purely strategic decisions. I am the one who can say "No, I refuse to go to have an exhibition there and that's it. I refuse, I do not want to do the exhibition there. Regardless of the fact that you are all for it, if I think it's not good for this and that reason. "But I have to convince them, I need to explain and convince them that it's not good for us. Or I must say "Hell, if they are not able to pay a 2K Kuna for a lorry, I don't want to go there at all. What does it say about their attitude towards the artist, and art and the world, hell."

(I repeat) To be a member of *Labin Art Express* you do not need to be an artist. That's number one. That's why only 3 or 4 persons are artists, out of the 14 of us. Basically, everyone, because we are in such a position, all of the 14 people who are members must do something. This is the change that we made in relation to before, because formally there had to be 10 of us. We are a totally professional organisation, where people have regularly received salaries for years. They are between 5-7 of us. So, 4 are always employed full-time, and these 2-3 are here part-time. Damn, people usually leave because they are offered some better jobs in some other industry, tourism, etc. and then they go. But 5 of us are always employed full-time and two part-time, depending on the projects.

We used to resolve conflicts, and so we never had any conflicts. Me and Krešo (Krešimir Farkaš) would solve them even through fistfight. Well, that was once, but he and I were friends. Of course I cannot fight now. Let's say now, if I'm working with you project, I will not fight you. But with a friend I can. Strange, I'm always, in a way ... All the people I work with, today I mean, are exclusively those who want the same thing as I do. So ... there are really few conflicts. I do not remember. As for the rest, I've told you that I have the last say.

I have to mention a few more people who are very important. They are Ksena Županić, who is alive. She joined us penultimately. Sanja Švrljuga died two years ago. She was replaced by Damir Stojnić from Rijeka. An artist. And that is that. And Massimo is always in there, but we only work with him on music. Now we are working on one finished album, which has been finished for 7-8 years and we will publish it only now.

### **About engagement and program orientation**

Dean Zahtila: Generally, we write a manifesto for each major project. I do not see another way of dealing with art if I am not able to present what I really want first. I find it very surprising and frustrating with many artists, that they can only express themselves through work, and nobody can present their work in some other way, in writing, or what have you. In my opinion, today in the 21st century a person can no longer think through one medium - art simply goes beyond the genre - painting, sculpture, not even video or film. Today, in the 21st century, art is exclusively interdisciplinary and can have everything within. One epoch is over - The time of painting has

passed. The most beautiful paintings have already been made, the most beautiful sculptures have been made, the best films have been shot, so why should I paint, sculpt or make films?! So I need something new, and that's ours *Underground City Project*. Utopia just came about for that. What else can I do? So let's make a *society* as an art project. The town and society in it as an art project. It was an artistic reason why we are doing it all.

There are no more places for art, such as galleries and museums. Art should be brought to the streets, to people. We put it everywhere, in the street, in the school, everywhere. Never mind galleries. What kids go to exhibitions? None do.

That's why today, when we do the exhibitions like now this Biennial (*Biennial of Industrial Art in Labin*), we really think that the venue is just as important as the exhibition itself, because we know that people will enter that space, hell. Right? You can no longer be an artist and not be present. How can I put it, simply, when they say "are you socially engaged?" What kind of art is it if it is not fucking socially engaged?! What the fuck is this art about? What the fuck is that? Some art that has nothing to do with anything? What is that? What kind of question is that, fuck? There is no art any more that is not socially engaged - or it is not art. So, Art that is not socially engaged is not Art!

Project *Underground City* is totally our artistic utopia as an art project and the only fundamental work that we need to do while we are living in this world. Unfortunately, from the original three founders, two people have died, both Graziano Kiršić and Krešimir Farkaš.

In 1999, when Krešimir Farkaš died, I did not know what to do for about two years. Because basically, I was the one who was the producer, and he was the one who was the visionary, the artist, and so on. But since we had spent so many years together, after his death, I had to take over that part of the job, too. I was fortunate that in those last years I had come across people who also wanted to give everything for this idea of ours. Primarily, I'm talking about *Underground City*. Everything we do, basically, this one *Lamparna Centre*, these are just steps towards what we want to do, so let's go down and start building a city under ground. I know that I will not live to see it built, but it is enough for me to set the foundation stone, and then - who knows. Like every city, a city becomes one starting with a single house, then two, then three, four, and then the centre, and this takes 20 years, centuries, etc. It is very important to say that after Krešimir Farkaš's death, I started cooperating with more and more people. It was, basically, the only way to make up for that creative hard core that I missed then, after his death. Because with Massimo (Savić) we only work on music and performances.

### **The greatest success/failure of LAE**

Dean Zahtila: The greatest success is that we have survived for so many years. And the biggest failure is that this mine is not yet completely ours.