



Marčelo Brajnović: Among people – for the second time!

Muzej-Museo Lapidarium, 2022





This booklet, maybe rather a libretto that accompanies the posthumous exhibition of Marčelo Brajnović's works *Among People - for the Second Time!* attempts to highlight some previously unknown details about the artist's legacy from the contemporary perspective. Irrespectively of the fact that Marčelo Brajnović is one of the outstanding Istrian/Croatian artists, some of his works are unknown to the public, especially the ones from 1960s, then a number of those in private hands, as well as those purchased by The Lapidarium Museum during the artist's life.

Therefore, neither the exhibition nor the booklet strives for a monographic overview, but represent our reverence and a step towards a better insight into Marčelo Brajnović's visual, textual and conceptual creative work. It will be necessary - especially now after his entire oeuvre has been rounded up - to examine, interpret, explain and evaluate this valuable heritage, which will pose itself as an unavoidable task before all future interpreters of Marčelo's diversified oeuvre.

It is enough to list only a reduced number of facts from Marčelo Brajnović's art biography. He was one of the first artists from Istria who ventured to study visual art in Zagreb and partly in Belgrade and associate and work together with colleagues leaning towards abstract expression. There he got to know Zvezdana Hegedušić, his future wife. All this took place within one decade, approximately from the end of the 40s and the beginning of the 50s of the last century. During that period he actively took part in visual art events both in Pula and Rovinj, and in the 60s, along with Ivan Kožarić and Miroslav Šutej, he introduced a series of innovations into the paradigm of Croatian post-war art in the form of objects, assemblages and ready-mades. This young Marčelo was followed by his more mature phase, which took its shape during the periods he spent as a painter in several European countries. As a multi-faceted artist and text-writer, after the return to his native Rovinjsko Selo he began to build his living and work space, together with his family, at the Gumila brijeg, a plateau better known as Golo Brdo (Bare Mountain).



In Croatian (Istrian) cultural environment Marčelo Brajnović has a special, cultic importance. He was a participant of historical turning points of the post-war Yugoslav art scene. In his early abstract paintings, he was close to EXAT 51, in his actions and agitations to Gorgona, while shortly after that, as he strived for the representation of his personal feelings, he took up painting - easel oils on canvas, often large, in handmade painted frames.

With his recognizable figurative and landscape motifs he created a cryptic art universe in which dreams intertwine with reality, the lyrical with the narrative, the archaic with the contemporary. We might say that this is a kind of realism caught in surreal space. Into this space he introduced recognizable traditional (Istrian) elements and a specific personal mythology (Jehovah's Witness) blended together with a critical attitude towards his global environment (neoliberal economy and politics, consumerism). Therefore, Marčelo Brajnović's visual world, only seemingly figurative and classical, is very specific and unique in its expression that tackles a variety of archetypal, cultural and human topics.

By the end of the 20th century Marčelo abandoned the strict limits of painting and took up the approach of installation and conceptual art, however again in a specific and individual manner. In this group of works, his self-published texts, manifestos, actions and projects stand out: in them, in a specific form and from very subjectivistic points of view, he expresses his thoughts on the "Magnificent Message from the Kingdom of God", on the criticism of authority and on the role of the artist-emissary Elias chained by the norms of the society and media terror. Today rarely seen persistence led him to the only hope which is not a humiliating and dehumanized deceit, but that which Léo Ferré called "Divine Anarchy". Thus, as a man of uncompromising views and religious beliefs he was never fully in concord with his social environment. However, as an artist-painter he was benevolently accepted in his local community and artistic circles.

In spite of the fact that the Croatian history of art saw him as a surrealist, the fact that he occasionally, for short periods, accepted some associations, he was maybe the most unbound individualist his environment ever saw. But Marčelo was not that because of his



often-mentioned eccentricity or legends about his work, but because with his firm attitude he demanded a full measure of achieving and acknowledging freedom for himself as a person and artist. He was responsible only to his power, belief and will as an intact creative being who does not care about statuses and material combinations.

Still, regardless of the reputation he attained and enjoyed in the circles of his appreciators and admirers, in spite of all prizes and awards, numerous exhibitions and works in museum holdings, Marčelo Brajnović is even to the ones who truly appreciate him as artist actually another “great unknown”. Therefore, this booklet (and the exhibition) are just a modest contribution to the understanding of a wholesome and versatile personality or, as he wrote himself, “a perfect performer for all the seasons”, an artist always present here and now, never fully revealed or identified but just outlined.

Jerica Zihel



on page 22

Velika Gumila - the Bare Mountain - is situated above Rovinjsko Selo. It is an elevated plateau surrounded by shrubs and the forest in whose center is the residential, work and exhibition space of the Brajnović family. It consists of a complex of white structures, a tower and a water well. Why, when and how this unique architectural complex, the materialization of the avant-garde concept Life = Art, was built, we learn from a part of Suzana Marjančić's interview with Marčelo Brajnović in 2015.

I haven't really moved to Velika Gumila - the Bare Mountain on a whim. On 1956, after failing to graduate, I decided to run off to Paris with a friend born in France. We managed to cross the border and in Trieste people directed us to Rižana, a camp for refugees from Yugoslavia. After a few days my friend hiked to Paris. My travels took me to Restinco near Brindisi, where I spent four months, and then they moved all Croats to Bari, the San Lorenzo camp. After five months I set out to France with a friend. In short, after nine months at a camp in Rižana near Trieste, Restinco near Brindisi and San Lorenzo near Bari, I ran off to Paris. I worked at Citroën a couple of months, but during holidays I hitchhiked attempting to return to Yugoslavia. I crossed the border without any documents. The police took me to Brestanica. From Pula I had to go to Rovinj and report to the police there.

When I appeared at the door of my native home, I understood that I was not welcome. I felt deep depression and took the contempt of my community and the authorities very hard. This happened sometime at the turn of the year 1957. I tended livestock and worked in the field. Then I remembered Velika Gumila and the dry-stone wall people avoided because it was allegedly full of snakes. Gumila was a synonym for northern wind and it was a public pasture for goats, sheep and donkeys. I decided to move to Gumila. I levelled the stones and lay down on them to measure the size of my future home. I put one stone behind my head and the other next to my feet. But I also remembered that a bed had a frame, so I started to slowly push the stone beneath my feet to make some room. I also remember the chamber pot I would be keeping under the bed! Altogether, this amounted to additional 50 cm. Added to my height of 184 cm, this was 234 cm,

doubled 468 cm. I envisaged a fireplace in a corner outside of the structure. The stone wall had a foundation, so I added about 70 cm in height to this. During these building days I was visited by a professor from Reggio Emilia, so I took him to the Gumila to show him the Centre of Painting of Heaven and Earth. When I explained him everything, he started walking along the area as if he were measuring something. He stopped and said: "Marčelo, verà gente! People will come, so you must build a small entrance area where they will be able to leave their umbrellas if it rains!" Thus, the floor area doubled.

Suzana Marjanić: Marčelo Brajnović - *Performances Between Heaven and Earth*, Zarez, 2015,
www.zarez.hr/clanci/performansi-izmedju-neba-i-zemlje

 on page 23

There is a red flag on the Bare Mountain with the Tetragram inscription YHWH. This is a salute to God who is supposed to appear soon with all his might - to the biblical invocation "Raise a banner on a bare hilltop".

Marčelo Brajnović made and raised it in 1993 as an answer to this Biblical call.

 on page 10

I declare the capital of Zagreb the honorary center of painting of Heaven and Earth, April 5th, 1966 Silkscreen 1/40, 100 x 70 cm, sign. Marcello 66
 From the exhibition at the Croatian Journalists' Club, Zagreb, 1966

I humbly confess that as a young man I had a very high opinion of myself! That is why I stripped myself inside, understanding that this same "high opinion of oneself pertains to each and every person, wise or not". This "high" opinion must necessarily be confessed to others and I have amateurishly done so in the document Royal Salute to the Painters of the World in Zagreb on June 21st, 1964.

Suzana Marjanić: Marčelo Brajnović - *Performances Between Heaven and Earth*, Zarez, 2015,
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* op. a. nepoznati nazivi izlagačkih prostora.

 on page 24

Parts of perforated remains of a warplane and pilot equipment from World War II, Golo Brdo. Photo by Vlado Bugarin 2022. As "ready-made" relics were used in 2001 for Marčelo Brajnović's exhibition "War for Armageddon" at the Miroslav Kraljević Gallery in Zagreb.

How to explain on two pieces of paper to the leading world power county that the power of a just Court does not lie in the power of the Flying Fortress, nor can it be supported by NATO members. The purpose of this exhibition is only one: to clearly show to the Anglo American that by judging the war criminals multiplied innumerable in the former Yugoslavia and in the Rwanda, are actually condemn themselves! The God remembered the war crimes committed during World War II. By bombing German cities, Pula and Zadar with the Flying Fortress, the Anglo American committed pure war crimes, by its own standards!

*Fragment from a letter by Marčelo Brajnović, dated 21 December 2000 to Branko Franceschi.
<https://g-mk.hr/vijesti/marcelo-brajnovic-rat-za-harmagedon/>*

Genesis_ In November 1944, on his return from Germany, the American Flying Fortress B-29 Superfortress was forced to land on a field in Karojba (Rovinjsko Selo) in front of ten-year-old Marčelo. By miracle, as a cover for a field house, a part of the fuselage of plane has been preserved to this day (the rear right side part in the length of 4x2 meters), and from April 31, 1997 it was exhibited at the Embassy of the Kingdom of God in Golo Brdo.

An Incomplete Biography of Marčelo Brajnović

Marčelo was the oldest of six children of Anton and Eufemija Brajnović, née Pokrajac. He was born on July 22nd, 1934 in Rovinjsko Selo in Istria, where his family had a home in a house built in 1704. In his native village, Marčelo finished the first two grades of the Italian elementary school. After 1945, he continued his schooling in Croatian language and since 1948 he frequented a high school in Pula. There he found accommodation at the boarding school of St Anthony's Monastery. With the help of his peer and friend Riko Vitulić he exhibited plaster sculptures in the common room of the boarding school. After graduating from the junior school, he enrolled into the School of Applied Arts in Zagreb. Two years later, in 1953, he dropped out of school, returned to Rovinjsko Selo, and together with Zora Matić, Bruno Mascarelli and Žarko Naunović (Val di bora Group) he exhibited his works at the Cultural Center in Rovinj and at the First Film Festival in Pula, together with the festival guest Silville Pletikosa. He made a short visit to France, but soon returned to Istria. He undertook a journey to France again in 1956, but because he was confined in different Italian detention camps and the St Laurence Monastery in Bari, this journey consumed an entire year. He illegally crossed the border at Ventimiglia and was held in a detention camp again. He returned to Istria (Yugoslavia) in 1958, without any documents, and in 1959 he took up his military sea service in Boka kotorska (from where he was later moved to Maribor). He returned to Zagreb in 1960, lost the Rovinj Municipality scholarship, married artist Zvezdana Hegedušić (whom he, proposing her, promised to gift a cloud-castle), stayed in Belgrade for a short period and finished the School of Applied Arts. That same year, at the Museum of the City of Rovinj, he held his solo exhibition and made a mural at Rovinjsko Selo, at the *Bukaleta* inn (a tavern within his native house). From 1960 to 1961 he worked as a drawing teacher at the elementary school in Kanfanar. In May of 1961 his daughter Jasminka was born, his other daughter Vida in October of 1963 and his son Tomislav in May of 1965.

In Zagreb he mounted solo exhibitions at the ULUH Salon (1962 and 1964) and published the document *Royal Salute to the Painters of the World* (Zagreb, 1964). He also mounted a solo exhibition at the Croatia Journalists' Club (Zagreb, 1966) and proclaimed "The glorious City of Zagreb the honorary center of painting of Heaven and Earth".

With his wife and children (his second son Petar was born in October of 1972) he spent shorter or longer periods in different European cities with occasional returns to Rovinjsko Selo. He mounted solo exhibitions in Milan (Galleria Rho, 1968, and Piazza Duomo, 1972), Reggio Emilia (Galleria del Paiolo, 1971), in the cities Trezzano sul Naviglio, Vimercate, Sesto San Giovanni and Monza (1971), in Bologna and Finale Emilia (1972), in Sesto San Giovanni and Patumeria (1973). *

He mounted solo exhibitions in Pula (Workers' College, 1973) and Rovinj (Native Land Museum, 1976). In 1977 his works were exhibited in Berlin (Rathaus Galerie). In Croatia he displayed his works in Zagreb (Spektar Gallery, 1978) and then on two other occasions in 1979. * He also displayed his works in Rovinj (Native Land Museum, 1980 and the Eden Hotel, 1981), Labin (City Museum, 1983), Poreč (Town Gallery, 1983) and Zagreb (Josip Račić Gallery, 1985). It should also be mentioned that together with Quinto Bassani he decorated the tourist resort Monsena (today Amarin) in Rovinj. He displayed his works in Italian Prato, at the Galleria degli Artisti in 1989.

After exhibiting his drawings thematizing Goran's *The Pit* at the Native Land Museum Buzet in 1974, Marčelo left for France with his family, where they stayed from 1975 to 1977. He painted and studied The Holy Scriptures, joining Jehovah's Witnesses. He was soon promoted within his religious community (ministerial servant, elder), but because of differences in interpreting the Bible, he was expelled from Jehovah's Witnesses. He proclaimed himself Elias, the Ambassador of the Kingdom of God and on the hill Gumila above Rovinjsko Selo, where by the end of 1950s he started to build a house/studio in the shape of a tower (he fulfilled the promise to his Zvezdana), he created the Holy Mountain of Magnificence (in 1993 he tore down the tower and built the crenelation of his castle, also raising a red flag with the inscription YHWH), which became the Painting Center of Heaven and Earth, better known as the Bare Mountain - an art home where he lives and works with his wife and two sons.

He spent the period 1991-1993 in The Netherlands with his family. After his return to Golo Brdo (Bare Mountain), he worked on the project *Corpus Delicti Anglo-Americae* (1999), exhibited in Pula (Diana Gallery, 1999), Rijeka (Palah Gallery, 2000) and Zagreb (Miroslav Kraljević Gallery, 2001).

With his wife Zvezdana he participated at almost all exhibitions of the Rovinj Colony and the Grisia Street display, as well as in numerous local and international group exhibitions.

Since the beginning of the 2000s he has worked on his projects and exhibitions with his sons Petar and Tomislav. In 2001, at the O.K. Gallery in Rijeka they mounted the exhibition named *Alfa & Omega*. That same year they participated in the project *Goli Otok* (Bare Island) - *New Croatian Tourism* on Goli Otok. At the Istrian International Transdisciplinary Art festival and TransArt Laboratory (Labin Underground City XXI) in 2008, they participated with the work *Forgive them God, for they know not what they do*. Since 2007, his son Tomislav, together with Vladimir Živković, has organized projects under the name Studio Golo Brdo at the Bare Mountain, which Marčelo regularly attended. He died on April 12th, 2021 and was buried in Rovinjsko Selo.

Marčelo Brajnović has been a member of the Croatian Association of Visual Artists since 1965. At the occasion of the opening of the Culture Center at Rovinjsko Selo, the national television filmed a short feature about him. A documentary titled *Rat za Harmagedon* (War of Armageddon), directed by Zdravko Mustač, was filmed about Marčelo in 2001. In 2005, with the help of his wife and sons, he self-published the book *Rat za Harmagedon: bijela knjiga hrvatskog kralja Mihaela Babilonu Velikom* (War of Armageddon: The White Book of Croatian King Michael to Babel the Great). In 2009, Dr Ante Mihovilović from Pula graduated from the Art History Department of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb with the paper titled *Marčelo Brajnović - slikar nadrealist* (Marčelo Brajnović - a Surrealist Painter).

Publisher

Muzej - Museo Lapidarium, Novigrad-Cittanova
www.muzej-lapidarium.hr

For the publisher, edit and texts by
Jerica Ziherl

Proofreading by Stjepan Baranović
Translated by Andy Jelčić
Image Credits Vladimir Bugarin, 2022.

Design by Stanislav Habjan
Printing by Vemako, Zagreb, 2022. Print run 200
ISBN 978-953-7608-37-8

The catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition "Marčelo Brajnović: Among people – for the second time!" in the Museum-Museo Lapidarium in Novigrad-Cittanova from May 18 to June 18, 2022.

In addition to a selection of works from the collection of the Lapidarium Museum, works on exhibition (and catalogue) were borrowed from Zvezdana Brajnović, Đanino Božić, Čedo Cvitić, Gino Perković, Ivan Mihovilović, Winfried Wuensch and other private collections.

The realization of the exhibition and catalogue was made possible by the County of Istria - Administrative Department for Culture and Homeland, the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia, the City of Novigrad-Cittanova and the Tourist Board of Novigrad-Cittanova.

