

Laura Hoptman, "Notime like the present: Mangelos's noart then and now" in *mangelos nos. 1 to 9 1/2*, catalogue published on the occasion of the exhibition *Mangelos no. 1 to 9 1/2*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, 2003



Dimitrije Bašičević, who called himself Mangelos, was an artist of his time. Coming to artistic maturity in the centre of Europe immediately after the Second World War,<sup>1</sup> he died in 1987, two years shy of the second part of the set of enormous political changes that bookend the modern history of that region. Despite the seeming impossibility of encompassing the aftermath of a materially and culturally annihilating war, followed by half a decade of an Utopian Socialist experiment and subsequently, its dramatic disappearance, Mangelos's work, like an extended geometrical proof, provides an argument that is a perfect and complete artifact of the period in which it was created. Interestingly and importantly though, situating Mangelos production in its moment does not in any way imply that his work can only be considered retrospectively; on the contrary, seen today, fifteen years after the death of the artist, the work looks peculiarly contemporary.

Mangelos's production, which includes paintings, artist's books and sculptures might vary in terms of medium, but it is holistic in its conception, centring around forty year series of contentions – both assertions and negations – that he came to call manifestos. Enormously diverse in subject – ranging from evolution, to the notion of style, to a manifesto on

manifestos –, they seem to converge around a single tension, between the sheer beauty of rational thought and the overwhelming evidence that unadulterated rationalism produces monsters. Writ large as a kind of caption for the picture of postwar Europe, this paradox is also, in aesthetic terms, an argument that pits formal concerns against content. However much it is a battle in Mangelos's oeuvre, it is one that is never won, and it is important to note at the outset that all evidence points to the fact that Mangelos himself did not seek its resolution.

Mangelos espoused Hegel's idea that art as a form is no longer adequate for expressing truth. He had equal trouble though with content, for which the burden of recent history was too great. "History is something", he wrote in "Nostory no. 09", "that was not like that" implying that representation ex post facto was an impossibility. The collapse of content, like a floor under bombardment, was expressed through the monochrome, which in Mangelos's oeuvre are pictures of content, literally obliterated, rather than representations of fields of colour or texture. His earliest works, called *Paysages de la guerre*, are black monochromes. Flags of mourning, they are also in themselves, evidence of the fruit of destruction, holes in the

Homage à Pythagora, 1953



Négation de la peinture (Der Blue Boy), m. 5 (1951-1956)



fabric of reality. After the war, Mangelos's black monochromes were followed by *Tabulae rasae*<sup>2</sup> – black boards from which the equation had been erased, crystallized moments when there is no answer, because, to paraphrase Marcel Duchamp, there was no question. "Art does not stem from a concept but from a state," wrote Mangelos about these works, "then the state in which these metamorphoses of death were created could be seen as a certain loosening of the pressure from the triumph of war; from the emptiness of despair something like thoughts began to emerge."<sup>3</sup>

The emblematic potency of blackness aside, these early monochromatic forays also indicate a struggle to leave the notion of representation behind in favour of the non-referential object. Like Piero Manzoni's late fifties experiments with a colourless or "achromatic" surface which could be translated on to any support – from canvas to rabbit pelt to cotton balls to loaves of bread – and still be absent of metaphor, Mangelos's zone of no content could be adhered to anything in the world, and even to the world itself, as in the series of world models, or globes that he transformed in the last decades of his life. With their information entirely obliterated by coats of black, white, red or gold, the globes serve as supports

for Mangelos's manifestos in precisely the same way his obliterated book pages and prints, wood panels and canvases are. Manzoni famously wrote in *Libera Dimensione*, a manifesto of his own, "It is not a question of shaping things, nor of articulating messages (and one can't resort to extraneous interventions, para-scientific mechanisms, psychoanalytic intimacies, graphic compositions, ethnographical fantasies, etc...). For are not fantasizing, abstraction and self-expression empty fictions? There is nothing to be said: there is only to be, to live."<sup>4</sup> The notion that a work of art should no longer depict, but rather be, elegantly describes the impulse behind Mangelos's monochromatic experiments. On the definition of the notion of "noart," a concept developed in conjunction with that of his "nostories", Mangelos wrote "The most philosophical / and most theoretical / explanation of noart / is / noart".<sup>5</sup> For Mangelos, as for Manzoni, an object could very well be, in its very being, its own negation; what it could not do was attempt to describe the state of non-being. Mangelos obliterates the validity of metaphor from a slightly different angle in his *Manifesto on Aesthetic*:

aesthetic feelings were never relevant.  
relevant were primary feelings.

G (Gl.letter), 1978



for that reason aesthetic approach  
to an art work  
is only one of possible  
incorrect approaches.<sup>6</sup>

If Manzoni challenged his theses against metaphor with more and more difficult surfaces, Mangelos interrupted his surfaces with language, letters, phrases, mottos, aphorisms, and sometimes entire manifestos written in Croatian, Serbian, French, English and German as well as Glagolitic, the first Slavic alphabet, used since the ninth century. Just as the single colour surface did not present information, but negated it, the difficult trick was to present writing which would negate its own meaning. One painting proclaims, "Am begin war es kein Wort" (in the beginning there was no word). The blasphemous religious allusion aside (many of Mangelos's works in the fifties made hay with Christian doxa, from blacked out bibles to a work belligerently titled *Non Credo*), these are non-manifestos, proclaiming no truths, asserting no beliefs, building no systems. In these works, phrases, words and letters impose order on the blank absurdity of unarticulated monochromatic surfaces, but they do not necessarily impose

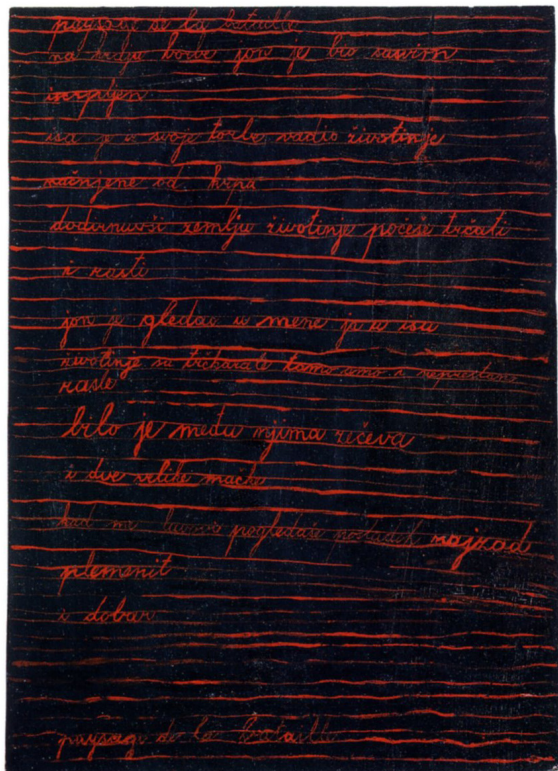
Energie, 1977



a specific meaning. Letters and words are a code system, deployed according to the elements of rational thought,<sup>7</sup> as a means of communication, yes, but also as the means by which non-communication is expressed. It is Mangelos's clear intention to break the code system, destroy the symbol and call into question the possibility of communication altogether. After all, who reads Glagolitic?

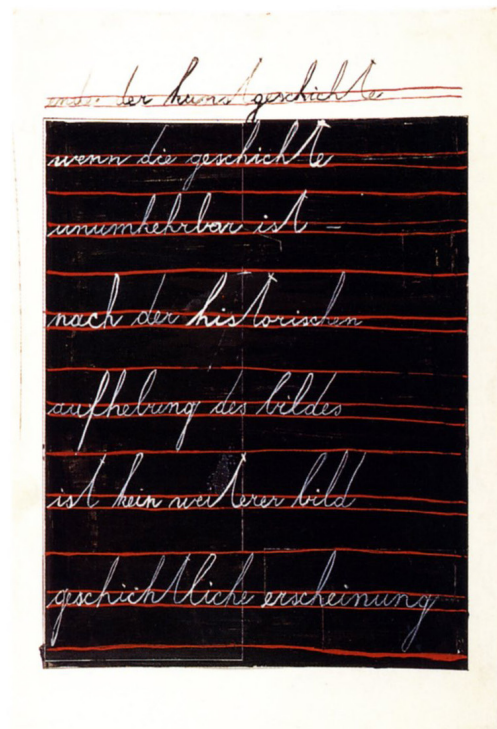
The discussion so far has concentrated on Mangelos's war against metaphor, on his negation of content (in the spirit of the artist let us call it "nocontent") as the only logical content available for a work of art. It remains to examine Mangelos's views on art as a form in itself. An art historian, critic and curator, that he made art at all was not revealed until his participation in the early sixties with Gorgona, a group whose collective art practice coalesced around the notion of the dematerialised object. Mangelos's clandestine creativity as well as his open participation in a group espousing neo avant-garde notions of "antiart" might have to do with his complex and contentious view of artmaking as a practice. When Mangelos said that "letters and words are a means of communication" he added that "in the logical system of thought, so is art." If the content of his work made clear his scepticism concern-

Paysage de la bataille, 1960



paysage de la bataille  
when the battle was over non was  
completely exhausted  
from his bag isa  
took animals made of cloth  
touching the ground the animals  
started to run and grow  
jon looked at me i looked at isa  
the animals run to and fro  
and kept growing  
among them there were rabbits  
and two large cats  
when the lions looked at me  
i finally became  
noble and good

Ende der Kunstgeschichte, m.8 (1971-1977)



ing the concept of communication through both art and language, it is through an interrogation of form that his views on logic itself, and structures that it creates (language and art amongst them), become clear.

As Branka Stipančić has noted, it is significant that Pythagoras is a reoccurring touchstone for Mangelos.<sup>8</sup> Solid, elegant, and practical, the Pythagorean theorem physically represents the possibility of an inexorable truth, scientifically provable. Logic embodied by system fascinated Mangelos as well. Discovering that in nature cells renew themselves every seven years in human beings, he divided his own life into seven-year periods, proclaiming that a new Mangelos would arise at the end of each cycle. Willing to map his own life by a biologically determined system, he divided civilization (including the history of art) into two distinct periods bifurcated by the invention of the machine. Art, like philosophy, he posited in his *Altamira Manifesto*, is based on "naïve metaphorical thinking," which in turn is the product of a time of non-stand-

Mane tekelfares, 1987



Mangelos concluded, belong to the same era of "manual technology" which ended once and for all with the triumph of "social functionality"<sup>9</sup> over emotion, form over content. These ideas appear at a moment in which questions of form as a weapon to vanquish metaphor dominated the aesthetic discourse in Europe and in the United States, when Enrico Baj, Manzoni and others published their screed *Against Style*, when Sartre wrote about "écriture blanche," to describe a literature drained of emotion, and Roland Barthes described the uninflected work of Alain Robbe-Grillet as "writing degree zero." Mangelos's strategy was to use logical systems – from alphabets to manifestos – to replace metaphor as both the purpose and the structure of the art form. As he wrote in the beautifully and redundantly titled *Manifesto of manifesto[s]*,

dear friends  
dear fiends

this statement is not a manifest claim that the experiments  
carried out during long years  
being entirely successful  
because they were not

but another route has been discovered  
instead of following the line of meaning  
the thinking process proceeds  
along the line of function  
*corresponding to other processes of life*  
this is the framework for my manifestos (...) <sup>10</sup>

But just as his achievement of "nocontent" gives meaning to Mangelos's monochromatic activities, the achievement of the super rationality of the structure of the manifesto<sup>11</sup> is a brilliant example of rationality turned against itself. If earlier work was invested in negation, from that negation rose an assertion. Just as meaning arose from non-meaning, the notion of the manifesto – the functional thinking process made manifest in a structure closely related to a geometric proof – can stand as an intellectual weapon against formalism. There is, however, an important distinction between Mangelos manifestos and mathematical theorems; as Mangelos makes clear by his confession in his *Manifesto of manifesto[s]* that his experiments in rationality were often unsuccessful, his manifestos are arguments built with no expectation that they provide any sort of solution.<sup>12</sup> They are pure form, presented physically on objects, or more precisely, perhaps, *as* objects. That they don't *function*, in any sense of the term, reveals their affinity with the artist's books that contain no information, and globes that display no geography. Taking logic for its own sake, Mangelos has rendered the notion of the manifesto, as well as the notion of form, as an end unto itself, patently and gloriously absurd. "Pas plus / les problèmes / de la forme", he wrote in 1961.<sup>13</sup>

philosophie d'absurdité

with the absurd on the philosophical level  
*the question of purpose in general*  
*was raised for the first time. it was the first*  
(unintentional) attack on the way of thinking

Just as the ultimate code of communication might be that which is most unreadable, the ultimate form that which can not be constructed, for Mangelos, rationality taken to its apotheosis might very well be the absurd, which serves to "open" the "question of meaning," not by description (metaphorical or formal) but by a kind of no-description, ultimately creating a kind of nomeaning, a neologism distinct from the term "meaningless" in the way that Mangelosian "noart" is distinct from no art at all. Nomeaning, like "noart," implies a dissolution of received ideas, a questioning of definitions, hierarchies and, ultimately, of values. Its function as a negation notwithstanding, it exists as entity, embodied perhaps by Mangelos's entire project, which taken together is the orderly enactment of the unravelling of the entire philosophical structure of the twentieth century.

I began this essay with the assertion of the contemporaneity of Mangelos's oeuvre, even though it can also be said that there are few artists whose work proves to be so much of its time. By virtue of their use of found materials put together with rough technique, Mangelos's objects had the look of historical objects from the moment they were created. The lengthy period of time that elapsed between the creation of

the first works (immediately after the Second World War) and their first exhibition twenty-five years later, only adds to their Methusalan aura. What makes Mangelos's work seem vital to this moment early in the twenty first century is not based on its form, nor really on its content. In the manifesto *On gap no.*

3 Mangelos wrote:

looking from the 19<sup>th</sup> century marx still saw  
art within society.

in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a gap could still be seen  
between them.

from the 21<sup>st</sup> century society is seen  
but not art.

Mangelos accurately predicted his own death many decades before it occurred, but he refused to predict what the art of the twenty first century would be like. He did however, provide a dangerous example of art as a mode of constant, struggling inquiry, one that challenges artists (and for that matter, all producers of culture) to rethink not just their work, but the purpose behind it. The beginning of this millennium has been marked by a sense of unravelling of structures and reinterpretation of narratives that has, in turn, sparked a revival of interest in finding newer and easier answers to ever more complex problems. The relevance of this destabilizing work to a moment which itself is marked by a kind of international searching for stability is unquestionable; it is merely up to those who see it, to make something useful of its difficult lessons.

1) Yet, it must be noted that, although Mangelos began making objects in the 1940s, he did not consider his work art, as such until a later time.

2) Branka Stipančić, "Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos", in *Biblioteka Opus*, 3, Galerije grada Zagreba, Zagreb, 1990, p. 13.

3) As quoted by Stipančić, p. 13.

4) Piero Manzoni, "Libera Dimensione...". See Germano Celant et. al., *Piero Manzoni*, Serpentine Gallery and Phaidon Press, London, 1999.

5) "Explanation of noart" manifesto as quoted by Stipančić, op. cit., p. 16.

6) All translations of manifestos into English are taken from Stipančić, op. cit. unless otherwise noted.

7) Branka Stipančić, quoting Mangelos, op. cit., p. 15. Mangelos's quote reads "I wanted to fight the irrational part contained in the picture. believing that by means of the letter which is an element of rational thought I shall abolish it."

8) See Stipančić, op. cit., p. 14. Mangelos's *Hommage to Pythagoras* (1959) is a well-known example.

9) See Mangelos, "Altamira Manifesto," op. cit.

10) This translation was taken from *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for East and Central European Art Since the 1950s*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2002, p. 80.

11) Igor Zabel has described it as "super-Wittgensteinian" rationality. See Igor Zabel, *2000+ Arteast: The Art of Eastern Europe*, Folio Verlag, Wien-Bolzano / Vienna, 2000, p. 139.

12) Despite Zabel's contention, in this he is closer to Kierkegaard than to Wittgenstein.

13) Mangelos, "Exercices", 1961. See Stipančić, op. cit., p. 52.