

Untitled (Croatian Pavilion), 2022

A conversation with Elena Filipovic

Tomo Savić-Gecan
Venice Biennale 2022
Croatian Pavilion

On the occasion of artist Tomo Savić- Gecan's representation of Croatia at the 59th International Art Exhibition — La Biennale di Venezia with his palimpsestic project *Untitled (Croatian Pavilion)*, 2022, Curator of the Pavilion Elena Filipovic engages in conversation with CURA. New Media Special Projects Editor Giulia Colletti.

Since its first iterations, Savić-Gecan's practice comments on the vicious and insidious potential misuse of technologies but also on the consequences of the increase in mechanisms to manipulate and control through news stream and data tracking. Given that we are controlled, it is not by technology but by the logo- and visual-centric strategies adopted to play a pivotal role in extracting profit from us. *Untitled (Croatian Pavilion)* is a fugitive commentary on how to acknowledge to be part of someone else's strategy and to re-learn how to shift the scheme.

Editor's note: Savić-Gecan never circulates any visual representations of his artworks, but instead has always come up with a concise sentence describing each of his projects as its 'image'. The one below is the image related to *Untitled (Croatian Pavilion)*.

Every day for the duration of the 59th edition of the Venice Biennale of Art, the lead story from a different, randomly selected global news source provides the data that feeds an artificial intelligence algorithm, which in turn prescribes the time, location, duration, movements, and thoughts of a group of five performers in the city of Venice to constitute Tomo Savić-Gecan's *Untitled* (Croatian Pavilion), 2022.

GC: In your essay, you point that «[Tomo Savić-Gecan's] works are called *Untitled*, followed by the year of their making, no matter that he at times makes more than one work in a year. The artist's decisions about seemingly negligible 'management' aspects of the artwork—including its titling and reproduction, but also its commodification and afterlife, which he tightly constrains if not altogether denies—hardly make the critic or historian's task easy.» He does this in a paradoxical time, when we tend at once to store, archive, and label any fact, occurrence, detail but we often struggle to trace data back due to the information overload. How do you interpret the notion of “untitled” embraced by Tomo Savić-Gecan?

EF: It's interesting that you pit his admittedly austere titling protocol against the context of our moment, when we are indeed in an information overload, but also, specifically, in a clickbait overload. For the latter, sensationalist headlines, spectacular, attention grabbing soundbytes, and the reduction of complexity to something sexy and “sellable” is the norm. What place is there for rigorous conceptualism in this context? The 1970s might have seemed like the last moment when this was possible. Yet, from the start of his practice, Tomo has been extremely interested in expanding certain conceptual legacies for the present, and I think immediately of the resonance in his work of the dematerialized practices of the Gorgona group in the former Yugoslavia or Michael Asher in the US. For his part, Tomo insists on the reduction of certain aspects around the work (say, documentation and titling) and, on the other hand, in leaving the piece itself as open as possible to interpretation. A title often predetermines the reading of an artwork, which can be good or bad, depending on the artist's intention. By reducing his titles to nothing, effectively, except the uniform declaration that they bear no title, and the year of their making, he allows the work to be filled and interpreted with every projection we might put upon it.

Within an oeuvre like his that is systematically posing questions about the nature of an artwork and our experience of it, it's logical that he would also address the role of the title in that experience. And by simultaneously refusing to allow an image to stand in the place of the artwork, he further entrenches the artwork in its experience (or in the experience of the idea of it, which is also an experience), rather than in any one, partial, visual record of it. In doing so, his art is also the diametrical opposite of the art that circulates so well in an Instagram selfie.

GC: Despite being an advertising company, not a reliable information source, Google Search plays the role, as Safiya Umoja Noble states, that was traditionally fulfilled by philosophy and religion. It is a machine that regulates our dialogue with the world by substituting "vague" metaphysical presuppositions with strictly formalized and universally applicable rules of access. According to these rules, every question has to be formulated as one key word or a combination of key words. What kind of buzzwords have you encountered the most?

EF: In the period when the algorithm that drove Tomo Savić-Gecan's Untitled (Croatian Pavilion) was being programmed, Russia invaded Ukraine, which is what most Western news sources and social media overwhelmingly focused on for months on end. And one easily understands why: what is happening, still, is a shocking and catastrophic show of force. But, as it happens, simultaneously, the United States bombed in Somalia (again), and air strikes continued unabated in Syria and Yemen, the climate crisis reached new heights, right wing pro-life fundamentalists were actively laying new groundwork for abortion rights in the US to be dismantled, gun violence rose, and any number of scandals around the world raged. These were all eclipsed in the news cycle and social media outlets, and you start to see that one war is deemed to be more "worthy" of outrage and attention than another, one people (as it happens: white, Western, European) are deemed more "threatened" than another, one catastrophe taken to be more vital than another. More than buzzwords like "war" or "invasion," it was instructive to witness to what extent the complexity of our contemporary political and social landscape was being directed by algorithmically-driven "feeds" that celebrated the demonstrative posting blue and yellow as some kind of surrogate for meaningful questioning or engagement of some sort. The particularity of Tomo's project is that it puts its finger on exactly these paradoxes. By focusing on randomly selected lead news stories from one news source from around the world each day, and making it the catalyst for his performances, one could literally see in the articles how much the news focus and the interpretation of events remained varied across a wide political and geographic spectrum. But one could also see how much certain regions and news sources doubled down on certain issues, not swaying from a topic for long stretches, although much else was happening simultaneously. His project invited me to look at the news each day, but not from my own regular news source but from a source in Luanda one day and in Tripoli another because that is where the algorithm and in turn the performers were getting their instructions from each day.

GC: The scale of imperceptible, invisible, and unobtrusive shifts in Tomo's works, seems to be inversely proportional to the very observable effects on the environment due to the climate crisis by now. How far the absolute threshold needs to be stretched and stressed to provoke a reaction in us?

EF: If one takes *Untitled (Croatian Pavilion)* as an example, to observe it is to witness something like the evocations of Judson Dance Theater's dance everyday or, say, the secret language of a sports team's hand codes. Discreet, unobtrusive, the opposite of the spectacular, you are right there. Conversely, they sometimes so discreetly insinuate themselves into the audiences and spaces to which they are sent that you might stand before them and not notice them at all. But, having seen them or not, the fact that you know about the piece, as you read this interview, or come across the catalogue, or read about it online, might prompt you to ask: Who controls whom?

Who or what decides? And what does a news item or the technologies that circulate it tell us about perception, power, and the interests of the corporations or nation-states behind them? Whatever is happening in the world at any given moment, global networked information flows penetrate practically every aspect of our daily lives. And yet, as we know all too well, there is no such thing as "neutral" news, no such thing as unbiased reporting.

We also now know that algorithmically driven systems effectively guarantee the burial of objective facts under an avalanche of rumor, emotion, and disinformation, even as our response to these is mined and monetized. In the catalogue and press material for the project I ventured that in context of this total

condition, *Untitled (Croatian Pavilion)* is an artwork conceived in and for a "post-truth" era. And in that sense, it does what any great artwork can do: it doesn't claim to change the world, but it can and should and does help us look at it more clearly, all the better to raise questions about the systems that control us and the people and powers that control those very systems.

Elena Filipovic

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GC: Where does haphazardness stand in a system, which in fact is a finite sequence of rigorous instructions and causal actions?

Have the AI given instructions polarized the five performers' both actions and intentions? If so, how?

EF: If one speaks of haphazardness, there is, first of all, the randomness of the selection of the news article, then, once it is processed and converted into instructions for action, there is the interpretation of the dancers, which has a level of freedom specifically built into it. While the AI directs where and when and for how long the piece is performed, and even selects the specific entry and exit pattern for the performers (randomly, as casual visitors, or as a group), it offers only loose parameters for their gestures and thoughts. What happens within these parameters is not wholly determined: partly as a result of the human factor (never free of slippages or "mistakes") and partly by design (built as the program is with a modicum of freedom for the taking). It also anticipates that the dancers might walk into the same pavilion on two different days, but where the audience is congregated will be different, and so in turn, the performers can and will need to adapt to that. In the "construction" of the protocols for the project—for which Tomo involved the technologist Tomislav Pokrajčić and the choreographer Irma Omerzo—I found this creation of this margin for individual interpretation on the part of each dancer really interesting and important. They are not robots, not machines merely executing acts, but they are controlled to some extent. Of course, one might read the modicum of personal freedom built in as the piece's insistent hope, which leaves open the door, if only a crack, for some autonomy and even minute acts of sabotage by its human agents. Alternately, it could be read as a scathing analysis of our reality, which deludes us into thinking we operate within parameters of our own devising. In that sense, Tomo really did image something that would act as a commentary on our contemporary condition.

GC: What's the room for your agency in Untitled (Croatian Pavilion)?

EF: The question you are asking has larger implications, it asks what agency a curator has in most artistic production, actually. I would say that I try to be, where there is the need for it or the desire for it on the part of the artist, a kind of sparring partner to the ideas they generate. And Tomo and I have actually worked together on a number of projects over the last 15 years, so you could say we almost have a vocabulary together, which obviously makes collaborating on such an ambitious project a bit easier. Tomo called me about a year and a half ago and asked if I would agree to submit a proposal for the pavilion with him. From the start, we shared the conviction that in the present moment it was imperative to have an absolutely radical project, and indeed even to try to dispose of the bricks and mortar of the physical pavilion, in an age when the 19th century notion of the "national" in a national pavilion needs to be pressed.

GC: As there is no such thing as "neutral" news, what algorithm bias have you spotted over the process?

EF: Vladan Joler, an author who contributed to the pavilion's catalogue, points out—and this is something that others have been saying as well—there is also no such thing as a "neutral" algorithm. As is becoming increasingly clear, predictive policing algorithms are racist and last year Twitter created a much-vaunted image cropping algorithm that is racist too, but also ageist and ableist. By electing to use an algorithm and the news, Tomo quite decisively created a project that tackles exactly these issues of presupposed neutrality, of bias, of the myriad ways in which the technologies that we increasingly rely on actually further entrench us in the supremacist logics that have for too long divided cultures. In the case of his algorithm, we knew very well that no matter how well-meaning or careful the humans who worked on the tool that "reads" the news, their human biases, their fallible human decisions, and their personal human classifications would be inevitably brought into the statistical model. To give you a very concrete example, instead of classifying migration as a crisis and refugees as a social burden, which are some of the specific understandings of migration that the humans built into Tomo's algorithm, what if those training the AI had searched articles for indicators of how migration might solve problems associated with an aging population, or the lack of laborers in certain segments of the economy? The outcome would have been quite different.

GC: Can you expand on Vladan Joler's diagrammatic dissection of the project?

EF: It was great to be able to make visible the intricate workings of a system that remains so crucial to the project but remains totally behind the scenes. More than it being a technical illustration of the artificial intelligence behind Tomo's project, how it processes data and translates it into the code that drives the performers, I found it particularly interesting because it makes points to the incredible complexity of other algorithmic systems that are increasingly behind the scenes of our daily life.

GC: How do the invisible structures and protocols that subtend the supposed neutrality of art exhibition spaces affect the work?

EF: Tomo's practice for several decades now which is to say, from the very start of his work as an artist, has been fervently questioning the institutional sites in which he shows — how we perceive them, how their power emanates, how audiences are directed, how bodies can be controlled. Additionally, and this is also connected to the above, he has asked how an art experience is created and where is located — often separating the aesthetic experience from the (white cube) sites where you typically encounter it or revealing aspects of the white cube that went otherwise unnoticed. Sometimes, over the years, that took the form of barricading entrances or mechanizing ordinary looking walls, creating small scale disruptions of the everyday in the form of escalators that stopped moving or public pools whose temperatures modulated (seemingly inexplicably, but actually controlled by the movement of visitors in an exhibition space) or exhibition space humidity levels that rise and fall according to data culled from somewhere else. So, in that way, what he ended up proposing for Venice with Untitled (Croatian Pavilion) is both perfectly in line with what he has been thinking about and doing for decades and yet taken to its most chilling logical conclusion.

GC: In your text you brilliantly state;
«Algorithmically driven systems effectively guarantee the burial of objective facts under an avalanche of rumor, emotion, and disinformation [...]» On the flip side, in the digital age we experience an inability of the system to forget, despite our internetnesia. How to navigate the contemporary inability to recollect and the right to forget?

EF: I know what you mean. To start with a personal anecdote, a rather silly one, there is a picture of me that I particularly detest and it appeared somewhere on the Internet and then got picked up and used by a site or two when they needed a picture of me and didn't bother to ask me directly for one and, because it was recirculated, it, in turn, circulated even more because others thought that if it appeared so many times then I must be "approved." And now it feels like it would be virtually impossible to scrub it from the internet, although I might want to.
Cry me a river, right? I know in the grand scheme of things it's nothing, but it demonstrates in nutshell how the Internet doesn't quickly enough forget what you might want it to. Despite this experience first-hand, I'm not sure what you describe as the "inability of the system to forget" is actually the case for all things. I think those that are invested in making these systems want to give us the impression that they are forever and will remember forever, but just as the 8-track cassette tape seemed like it was a durable and universal way to listen to music, technology so quickly becomes outmoded, and, in many cases, the things recorded on any particular technological form are in danger of being lost. How many websites that we used regularly just ten years ago are now defunct? How many links (with so much content once on them) are dead? Where has all this gone? I know there are active projects to archive the Internet, but what an inexhaustible task that is...and at a certain point, how will be able to actually find what we are looking for when any search might come up with countless hits. More is sometimes not more.

GC: I am truly appreciative of the exchange we had about the project, which personally stroke a few chords on the transformation of life into big data and the new digital epistemic regime we are globally experiencing while speaking. Prior saying goodbye for now, I would provocatively like to ask you how do you interpret Tomo's unwillingness to give us an interview?

EF: Since almost the beginning of his practice, already in the late 1990s, Tomo has had a rigorous conceptual practice that, for instance, refuses to use installation views or documentation of his artworks/actions/events (for me, it is interesting that one is never quite sure how to classify them). And, alongside this, he refuses to release artist's statements or conduct interviews. If he did, he reasons, these would be taken as an authoritative reading on his work, as somehow more definitive or accurate than someone else speaking on the work (this is so often the case, where an artist's words are trotted out as an almost biblical truth). He thus lets others speak instead, with their inevitable biases or interests or layer of interpretation being at least transparent.



Elena Filipovic and Tomo Savic-Gecan
Photo by Jasenko Rasol

Croatian Pavilion 2022

Untitled

Tomo Savić-Gecan

curated by Elena Filipovic

La Biennale di Venezia 2022