

L.A.E. XXI:
Exhibition Project
UNDERGROUND CITY XXI (UC XXI)
CONSTITUTION / SUBPOLIS / ANTI-BABYLON

L.A.E. was founded in 1991, during the war in Croatia, and on the seventieth anniversary (2021 marked the centenary) of the establishment of one of the first people's self-governments in the world known as the Labin Republic. The founders of L.A.E take this local event, which was globally relevant in a socio-political sense, as their historical, civilisational, ethical and aesthetic origin. L.A.E.'s activities begin with the avant-garde understanding of the artist as a free agent in the creative transformation of reality; therefore, their work on the experimental interweaving of artistic disciplines - visual arts, multimedia, music and theatre - includes the production of cultural events and participation in the transformation of the community.

Their community work has become a model for the protection and successful transformation of industrial heritage into self-sustaining cultural industry and thus a rare - if not unique - example of achieving an *avant-garde ethos* of fusing everyday life with art. The ultimate creative goal of L.A.E. is to establish an underground city in Labin's abandoned coal mines, as a symbolic opposition to the extinction of life on the planet's surface. Despite its dystopian content, this concept has become the backbone of the development strategy of the Labin region.

In the artistic field, L.A.E. developed a recognisable aesthetic code based on the transformation and unification of mining's historical visual identity with contemporary derivatives of the epochal Futurist Manifesto, which advocates machine aesthetics, the unifying of high and popular art, the direct involvement of artists in changing reality and the enriching of art with modern technologies. L.A.E. opens their manifesto with advocating equality between ethical and aesthetic engagement, while their principles and formalism serve as a design for the total transformation of reality, based on visions, transgression, hybridity, provocation and myth.

Their artistic work, together with their activism, has managed to preserve the original appearance of the industrial zone of Labin. Thanks to them, instead of some atrocious shopping mall, the city of Labin now has a protected cultural zone. The exhibition and club spaces run by L.A.E. are in the centre of this zone, and above it is the proud symbol of Labin - the Schacht (the steel winding tower of the mine, with the L.A.E. logo perched at its tip as its integral part. L.A.E. has on several occasions successfully engaged the citizens of Labin to prevent the demolition of the Schacht, so it could eventually serve as an elevator to the future Underground City.

It didn't happen overnight, and it wasn't easy. L.A.E. was persecuted and censored for promoting transgression, hybrid identities, eroticism, and general evasion of the proscribed rules of civil and religious moral conduct.

1.

The exhibition "Underground City XXI" is conceived as a sequence of three multimedia installations (Constitution / Subpolis / Anti-Babylon) that represent the relation between the narrative on the necessity of change and the salvation of modern civilization, which was developed exactly 30 years ago by the art collective Labin Art Express, and the current state of affairs.

Installation #1 (outdoor or large indoor entrance area):

The first installation named CONSTITUTION with its size, mass and content, evokes the oppressive dystopian atmosphere at the core of the project. It consists of two same monumental, 4 x 4 x 1 m large, L.A.E. logo that are standing opposite each other (like reflection in the mirror), while the audience enter

the interior of the exhibition space between them. The L.A.E. logo is based on the traditional mining symbol - a crossed hammer and a pick – which in their adapted version flirts with the symbols of totalitarian regimes that marked the 20th century. Behind the highest point of the symbol the heads of Cerberus, guardian of the entrance to the underworld, emerge in rows of three, so the form of the whole suggests a hybrid being, an ominous combination of machine and animal, which oversees the path to the bowels of the earth.

Installation #2:

The second installation, named SUBPOLIS, is a scene of baptism by fire. A lump of coal weighing 70 kilograms is suspended on the ceiling by steel chains hanging 150 - 170 cm above the ground, evoking the mining history of the project. A monumental projection of the L.A.E. symbol in flames will stand right behind it, while the audience will have to pass through it on the way to the central installation. The 'baptism' will be made by projecting a video of the burning symbol on a medium made of densely suspended polyester fibres, which will function as a screen that simultaneously allows people to pass through it to the central installation.

Installation #3 (requires a space height of at least 5 m):

Having been 'baptised' by fire, the audience will enter the central installation with the iconic name ANTI-BABYLON. In the depths of the space the audience will encounter seven or more vertical projections displaying the world's largest skyscrapers turned upside down. These skyscrapers, as symbols of the success and strength of the world of corporate neoliberal capitalism, will assume the function of drills aimed towards the bowels of the planet. Gradually, they will become overlaid by coils of magma that will 'drip' onto physical piles of coal set under the projections, thereby triggering a flames at their tips. A voice coming through the speakers will alternately recite the L.A.E. manifesto and the myth of The Underground City. At the opening of the exhibition/installation, Metal Guru (Dean Zahtila, Damir Stojnić, Massimo Savić), an artistic faction of L.A.E., performs a ritual reading of The L.A.E. Manifesto and set the piles of coal alight (a recording of the performance available [here](#)).

All three installations were first exhibited during the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of L.A.E. in March and April 2021 in DKC Lamparna, the home base and main exhibition space of L.A.E. The production of the project can be adapted according to the features of the exhibiting space. These technical interventions will not alter the content or the coherence of the piece, which functions as a narrative intervention in the critique of civilisation, in which L.A.E. suggestively united historical, personal, mythical, poetic and alchemical sources and translated them into the visual language of a multimedia installation:

2.

The story begins in 1921 when 5.000 miners from all over Europe working in the Labin coal mine initiated a strike that evolved into an armed rebellion, the occupation of the mine, and the establishment of what became known as the Labin Republic. The rebellion was ruthlessly suppressed after four weeks by the Italian fascist army of Mussolini. There were hundreds of dead and wounded miners, while some of them fled into one of the abandoned mine tunnels and disappeared forever.

Seventy years later (1991) (in the early days of the war in the ex-Yugoslavia), mysterious and strange pale creatures, the descendants of disappeared miners, emerged from the Labin coal mine. These underground beings, innocent as a new born baby, possessing a totally clean untouched soul, decided to explore the "overground" modern world and civilisation.

Living without any moral judgment of either this world or their own actions, they were childlike in playing with power, love, sex, drugs, violence, religion, as well as with other issues of good and evil, while simply reproducing what they saw on the TV screens and in their everyday life, but pushing the limits to the extreme. Their unrestrained, honest and clear life energy, as well as their logic and philosophy of life, lured people in growing numbers and they became their followers, which started to pose a threat to the Political/Financial/Religious oligarchy. Therefore, these underground beings were soon accused of crimes

including: sexual and spiritual abuse, black magic & vampirism, abuse of drugs and weapons and the “disintegration of human culture”, although they were just trying to be humans. Faced with excommunication and legal prosecution by the moral/justice system, they commenced a process of purification: the only way out of the trap they found themselves in was to return to the underground of Istria and to establish a subpolis - UNDERGROUND CITY XXI.

They turned the Tower of Babel upside-down and remade it into a drill with which they wormed through the bowels of the Earth, liquefying it, their navigation risky, determined by the temperature, since their ship-city was heated by veins of magma and the arteries of Earth's subterranean heart. Down below there are no national borders. One moves more freely beneath the Earth than on its surface. They abolished writing and reduced their language to the telepathic incantation of the sacred vibrations of vowels produced by their sanctified meta-diaphragms: a, e, i, o, u, and om(mmm)! While seemingly depriving themselves, they, in fact, restored to communication its richness and subtlety, to which language and writing served as an impotent surrogate. After eliminating the barrier of language, the ineffable penetrated their consciousness like a river torrent. Due to this, as well as the city's gravity, they gradually began to change. They would quickly tire of the sun. The sphere in the sky was irreversibly replaced by the sphere of molten nickel in the Earth's core.

The inhabitants had bred a special species of butterfly, a mutated “acherontia atropos”, for the production of black honey, as well as huge fireflies which flew everywhere, illuminating the areas within the city with a phosphorescent blue and green glow. Torches were used as well; there was, after all, no shortage of fire. They implemented a special kind of optics using window panes in order to extract the light from the heart of the Earth, collecting and modifying its rays for the absolutely necessary process of anti-photosynthesis. The plants were a pale green colour and full of nectar. Their bodies adopted a completely different metabolic system as they ate them. They began to feel and see inconceivable things: those plants produced elements far more potent than those of psychotropic plants that grow on the surface. It was always the sun within the heart of the Earth which inspired extrasensory perception – unlike the sun which hangs from the sky and stimulates the lower senses – and they touched its very source. They began to intuit and foresee without error. They became inspired by the incomparable visions to which they had been exposed. The moulds of their former senses simply disintegrated and their aural bodies erupted, shedding their bodily mantles and entangling the city with the tentacles of blinding light with which they could touch everything around them and pluck at the strings of space-time. By transforming into octopus-like illuminations of ether, they entered a state of non-existence while the motions of their city caused the heart of the Earth to grow freely - a process which their new bodies already anticipated - outlining the hermeneutics of the future development of the planetary bloodstream of magma. The surface world was strewn with eruptions.

The Earth as we have previously known it is shedding its skin. Fire and water may soon strip the fragile layer of human organic life from its surface. The reproachful and harrowing contractions of her womb reach us from the darkest, deepest places of the Earth. We have arrogantly built high towers, piercing the stillness of the unblemished sky, which was once un-disturbed by no line other than the horizon. The ancient saying axiom states: as above, so below, and vice versa. Human stalagmites of concrete, iron, and glass will soon become sunken stalactites for which the sky will not provide a vault. Volcanoes erupt and the seas rise. We have eroded the atmosphere and the sun is becoming hotter and hotter, while the universe is becoming relentlessly colder. For a civilisation without content, would become desert-like. We have come to ask ourselves in a panic: how great is the patience of an ocean? How much longer will a volcano or a subterranean fault wish to refrain? Indeed, once we built ever higher up to approach the divine, transcendent, and immanent primordial source of Existence. But we also conquered the heights so that the Demiurge of Profit could force its way into the heavenly pantheon and become the One God. Well, if the God of this world is profit, then we are his fallen angels, and we are building the Tower of Anti-Babylon, which has a spiral plan: a symbolic drill that targets the eighth “horizon” (horizontal level) of the of the mine, heart of the future Underground City of the 21st century. By building downwards, instead of upwards, we may initiate the establishment of a single language, or uncover the memory of the mythical proto-language which, supposedly, was once spoken by all those that inhabited the Earth. The inverted towers of the surface world are signposts to the sun in the bowels of the earth and the cradle of a new civilisation formed along the “shores” of the Subterranean.

The creative output of L.A.E. makes numerous references to coal, which was, historically, the foundation of the industrial revolution and the material basis of the development of modern world. It also evokes the mythical as a primordial response of human beings to the deepest questions of the origin and purpose of existence; myth offers us the spiritual basis of our civilisation.

In terms of cosmogonic and visionary aspects L.A.E.'s successful 30 year involvement in the art scene, but also in the life of the local community, is based on a detailed alternative cosmogony and a vision of a future civilisation established under the leadership of noble heroes who, ennobled by their long exile in the underworld, return to the above-ground world, destroyed by unethical and morally corrupt human enterprise. The trauma of the vast disappointment in modern civilisation will once again precipitate their return to the underworld, where they will establish a civilisation in which the now neglected human intuitive and predictive abilities will develop with optimism. Human, plant and animal species, illuminated by the splendor of the earth's core, will take a different path.

L.A.E. found inspiration for both its form and content in a phantasmagoric universe that connects the avant-garde settings of futurism with the nightmarish soundscapes and imagery of industrial and dark industrial-gothic music and aesthetics, as well as in the belief in the ability to create art where it is lacking. They found the creative light in the darkness of the provincial abandoned mines and embraced it to the extreme, literally dedicating their entire lives to it. L.A.E. is an example of how to answer the alarming questions posed by one's immediate social environment at the right time. By doing so they have made a unique and sincere contribution to the global need for the transformation of society, as evidenced in practice by a series of internationally and regionally relevant cultural projects centred on the visionary management of industrial cultural heritage.

The international success of their artistic endeavours, along with the commitment to the preservation of local mining heritage has earned them an influential position in the local and regional community, and their successfully implemented constructive iconoclasm has proved in practice that myth, as a conscious transmission of a certain dream, can become reality.

Branko Franceschi, 2021