

In the childish space of freedom and spontaneity, in which one feels unbound by one's own existence, identity, past deeds and misdeeds, in the suspended lightness of fantasies such as "what would have happened if..." or "if I were someone else," while standing in front of artworks by Silvio Vujičić (b. 1978 in Zagreb) I have thought more than once: "If I were an artist, I would work and research just like he does, at least with the same passion." The mutuality of recognition and closeness would be too great if he wanted to see and write as I do. Therefore, I am thankful for this invitation to walk around his art, so to say, to appropriate and document it. From the outset I apologize to those readers who expect this text to be a guiding hand for entering the visual experience: like in a street-gang prank, I will withdraw my hand before anyone manages to catch it, running my fingers through my hair, seemingly disinterested – so they should be cautious from the outset. Nothing is as it seems at the first glance. But in order to return to an appropriate tone for dealing with the problem of interpreting artistic facts (if, apart from identifying the "problem", one should observe anything about it that is not already known), I will rely on some thoughts of Mircea Eliade as noted down in his book on *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (1952):

"The man in his totality is aware of other situations over and above his historical condition; for example, he knows the state of dreaming, or of the waking dream, or of melancholy, or of detachment, or of aesthetic bliss, or of escape, etc. – and none of these states is historical, although they are as authentic and as important for human existence as man's historical existence is. Man is also aware of several temporal rhythms, and not only of historical time – his own time, his historical contemporaneity. He has only to listen to good music, to fall in love, or to pray, and he is out of the historical present, he re-enters the eternal present of love and of religion. [...] One only has to take the trouble to study the problem, to find out that, whether obtained by diffusion or spontaneously discovered, myths and rites always disclose a boundary situation of man – not only a historical situation. A boundary situation is one which man discovers in becoming conscious of his place in the universe."¹

That is the burden we must start with.

Silvio Vujičić's installation entitled *Alchemic Polyptych* (2009) consists of a freestanding two-storied wooden construction with sixteen frames, nine of them in the lower register and eleven in the upper one. This asymmetry of numbers is a result of the difference in organizing the middle zone: in the lower register, the entire width is occupied by a horizontally placed rectangle of a frames, with

¹ Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, transl. by Philip Mairet (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.), str. 33-34.

three other frames superposed to it. The outline of the installation, the contour through which the gaze embraces the whole, reveals a quotation from the history of painting. Silvio Vujičić has appropriated the frame and the compositional division of panels from the polyptych of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, work of Hubert van Eyck and his famous brother Jan.² The altarpiece was finished on June 6, 1432 and placed into the cathedral of St Bavo in Ghent (Flem. *Sint Baafskathedraal*), where it has remained to the present day, although not on the same location. For the painter, the commissioner Jodocus Vyd (Joost Vijd), one of the richest merchants of Flanders, for his wife Isabel Borluut (both of them portrayed on the external side panes of the polyptych), and for the church administrators who were in charge of placing the altarpiece into liturgical space, that distant date in a spring month of 1432 marked a successfully completed commission, owing to which the church interior obtained an exceptional piece of liturgical furniture, a lavish polyptych. It also marked the beginning of religious pilgrimage to that gem of sacral art, painted for God rather than man, as we can read on the inscription next to the Virgin's head in the *Annunciation* scene: "Ecce ancilla dñi,"³ upside down, so that it may be read from above, from the heights. The altarpiece had the power to urge the believers to strive for the most important element of late medieval spirituality: salvation of their souls. The eschatological significance of the *Ghent Altarpiece* is revealed in the open-winged position, when the centre is occupied by the horizontally placed, rectangular panel with the motif of *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, a symbolic representation of Christ's sacrifice of redemption and salvation. He is approached by the apostles, disciples, prophets, holy hermits and holy pilgrims, martyrs, and temple virgins, just judges and holy warriors. The upper register of the altarpiece retable shows a suggestive *Deisis* with figures that are proportionally larger than the other figures of the polyptych.⁴ The scene originates from Byzantine iconography and the suggestive Christ, shown as a priest and a judge, dressed in red robes with golden trimmings, with a crown at his feet and a triple tiara beset with gems on his head, shows himself to the believer as in the Last Judgment, face to face. His piercing gaze sees all human secrets

² Hubert van Eyck is also mentioned in archival documents as "meester Hubrechte de schildere" [flam. *master Hubrechte, the painter*], as well as Ubrecht, Lubert van Eyck (born in Maaseyck or Maastricht, date unknown; died in Brugge / Bruges on 18 September 1426). Jan van Eyck (born in Maaseyck or Maastricht around 1390; died in Brugge / Bruges on 9 September 1441) noted down his and his brother's name, the commissioner, and the date of completion of the altarpiece on a frame, as he did on his other pieces: "Pictor Hubertus de Eyck * maior quo nemo repertus / Incepit * pondus * q[ue] Johannes arte secundus / [Frater perfunctus] * Judoci Vijd prece fretus / Versu sexta mai * vos collocat acta tueri." On the problem of attribution and dating, cf. Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character* (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, and London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971 [1956]), vol. 1, pp. 205-246; Otto Pächt, *Van Eyck: Die Begründer der altniederländischen Malerei* [the chapter entitled *Der Genter Altar*] (Munich: Prestel, 2002 [1989]), pp. 119-170.

³ "Ecce ancilla domini" [Behold the handmaid of the Lord] *Lk* 1,38. Translation is that of the Douay-Rheims Version.

⁴ "Deisis (Gr. *deisis* 'prayer; intercession', cf. *deómai* 'I need; I pray'). A typically Byzantine iconographic motif, but likewise accepted in the West, especially in those regions where contacts with Byzantium were especially close (Italy, Venice, Istria). Deisis is an expression from the theology of the Virgin's mediation of grace and the intercession of saints with God. It is a symmetrical composition: the centre is occupied by Christ enthroned, with the Virgin to his right and St John the Baptist to his left; they address Christ in prayer, with their heads bowed and their arms raised." *Leksikon ikonografije, liturgike i simbolike zapadnog kršćanstva* [Lexicon of iconography, liturgy, and symbolism of Western Christianity], ed. by Anđelko Badurina (Zagreb: Sveučilišna naklada Liber, Kršćanska sadašnjost, and Institute for Art History, 1979), p. 200 [Branko Fučić].

and all that a believer can hope for is that the Virgin sitting to Christ's right and St John the Baptist to his left will intercede to obtain the Judge's mercy, since it is on his judgment that the eternal life depends: paradise or hell. At the time when Europe was seized by the "new devotion" (*devotio moderna*),⁵ turned towards personal experience, prayer, and the imitation of Christ, rather than understanding him as a relentless Judge, the masterpiece of Jan van Eyck brought precisely the latter image before the eyes of the believers, just as Michelangelo would do a century later with his *Last Judgement* (1541) in the Sistine Chapel, wanting to revive once again, now in the language of mannerism, the medieval vision of the moment in which man's cosmic fate resides.

For the generations to follow, the date of completion of the altarpiece, May 6, 1432, would mark the turning point in the history of Renaissance painting in northern Europe, so people continued making pilgrimages to Ghent. They were no longer amazed by the religious power and the liturgical role of the polyptych, but rather with some of its other qualities. Van Eyck's masterful brushstrokes and the layers of oil paint preserved their freshness for the new eyes, which discovered the technical perfection of the painting technique and the fact that the Flemish painter had quickly learned the lesson of his Florentine contemporary Filippo Brunelleschi about the linear perspective and understanding the image as a mirror of the reality. The convincingly structured spatial cube – the *Annunciation*, for example, a scene from the closed-wing view – was complemented by the Flemish tradition of apparently realistic depiction, which actually revealed the signs of God's presence, hidden by the outward reality. Meadows covered with symbolic flowers, house interiors in which the candles of the Old Testament have almost burnt out, since at the moment in which the Son of God was conceived it gave way to the New Testament, reflected in patens and chalices. Prayer books are turned at particular pages and the text marked in red indicates the crucial parts. The window openings are triple and there are many other symbols smuggled into the serene genre-scenery, which is not what it seems, but is rather one of the greatest mysteries in itself. The narrative opulence is equally admirable, since the scenes include both Old Testament and New Testament characters and situations, as well as those that can be fully comprehended only by those who are acquainted with the tradition and the theological accents of the time (if even by them). The *Ghent Altarpiece* shows our naked First Parents after the original sin (inviting a comparison with Masaccio's almost contemporary *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, a mural in the Brancacci chapel at Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence), while St John the Evangelist and St John the Baptist hold guard, prophets Micah and Zacharias shout their admonishing prophecies, spelled out on speech scrolls, Cain fails to offer sacrifice to Jehovah and then kills his brother Abel out of jealousy on a separate image reminiscent of a comic strip... Erythraean

⁵ "The Latin phrase means the 'new devotion' and refers to a renewal of spirituality that spread from Holland to Germany, France, and Italy in the fourteenth century. The leader of the movement was Geert de Groote, a preacher and writer who founded the Brethren of the Common Life. The classical expression of the *Devotio moderna* is found in Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*. The *Devotio moderna* is marked by a strong interior life with emphasis on contemplation, especially on the passion of Jesus." *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies*, ed. by Orlando O. Espín, James B. Nickoloff (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier Books, 2007), pp. 340-341 [Gary Macy].

Sibyl and Cumaean Sibyl have also found their place on the altarpiece, both as prophetesses predicting the birth of the Saviour, even though the latter is also known as the guide to Vergil's Aeneas through the underworld (*The Aeneid* VI), whereas according to Ovid, she lived tiresomely long and gradually grew smaller until she was only a voice preserved in a small ampoule (*Metamorphoses* XIV).

The *Ghent Altarpiece* is also a Flemish national symbol, just like Rembrandt's *Night Watch* (with the official title *The Company of Frans Banning Cocq and Willem van Ruytenburch*, 1642) is for modern Netherlands, or works by Albrecht Dürer for Austria (*Landau Altarpiece*, 1511)⁶ and Germany (*Self-Portrait in a Fur Coat*, 1500).⁷ Recognizing national identity in that work of art (owing to the power of the group, the perfect regularity of faces, the outspoken piousness, or some other interpreted feature) has secured it reproductions in schoolbooks, on postal stamps, and in details on various types of merchandise, it has inspired company and entrepreneur logos and become a symbol of the town and the region. It seems so deeply rooted in the national feeling that its disappearance would be lethal for the national identity and cause a trauma. It is therefore understandable that its fate during World War II is still being retold in trembling tones by the local tourist guides. The painting caught the eye of Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, who proclaimed it a gift to himself with the help of the French Vichy minister, Abel Bonnard. He then stored it in the Bavarian castle of Neuschwanstein, along with several thousands of other artworks stolen from all over Europe. After the German capitulation, American monuments officer Robert Posey and private Lincoln Kirsten found it in the salt mines of Altaussee near Salzburg, still packed and leaning on some cardboard boxes. The dismantled panels were returned to Belgium in a military transporter. The solemn reception of the *Ghent Altarpiece* in front of the Royal Palace (Flem. *Het Koninklijk Paleis*) in Brussels failed because the transporter was late for several hours, which is why the altarpiece had to spend its first night back in the homeland at the garage of the military headquarters, which was a painful blow to the national pride, but necessary for the safety of the artwork (and the king) in the still fiery twilight of those post-war days.⁸ It is probably for these reasons that today the altarpiece is shielded by bulletproof glass panels of a transparent box, kept in a darkened and well-secured place, again at the cathedral of St Bavo, but deprived of its liturgical role and with a somewhat diminished reception possibilities. Emptied of its historical meanings, "freed" from the purpose and the context in which it was made, the *Ghent Altarpiece* has acquired new meanings. For historians, it is the starting point in their research on painting *oltre le Alpi* and the numerous links to the art schools of the Apennine Peninsular, whereas for the Flemish people in contemporary Belgium it is a memory of the painting tradition that was later divided into the Flemish and Dutch schools as a result of the political separation of northern and southern Netherlands, a separation that still causes occasional street riots and intolerance towards French-speaking co-citizens, especially before the elections.

⁶ Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

⁷ Alte Pinakothek in Munich.

⁸ Cf. Lynn H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), pp. 347 and 408.

The abovementioned multiplicity of meaning in the *Ghent Altarpiece*, in the metamorphoses of the common *musée imaginaire*, has been exposed here in some detail in order to clarify both the literal and the conceptual framework of Vujičić's *Alchemic Polyptych*; but it was still not detailed enough.⁹ An incentive for yet another interpretation of his emptied "polyptych" can be found in an unusual study on space in painting, entitled *Working Space* (1986). In that study, Frank Stella has set the *working space* of an artist into the historical perspective of several centuries of painting experience, up to his own times. The tension between the actual surface of the panel or the wall on which the artist is painting and the illusionized space of the 15th-century painting, especially after 1500, became, according to Stella's observation, one of the basic features of research in painters:

"Out of habit, we take modern painting to begin with Jan Van Eyck. The increased use of oil paint on the portable wooden panel is seen as emphasizing a significant break with painting's medieval predecessors. At the same time, we see the beginnings of a growing mastery of representational skills as leading inevitably to the individualized idealism of the High Renaissance. But both of these notions may be a bit misleading because oil paints, wooden panels, and an expanding repertoire of representational techniques do not seem to be enough to make painting an enterprise that is spatially independent and self-contained. [...] Before 1500 the artist had to battle hard surfaces – unyielding panels and walls – trying to create space on surfaces that would have been content to stay flat. After 1500 the artist became critical of his relationship of architecture and sought to modify it, either by separation, making more use of individual portable panels and canvases, or by accommodation, creating a painted space that interacted in some meaningful, though often competitive, way with the structure."¹⁰

When reaching for the contours of the polyptych alone, Silvio Vujičić only seemingly erases the visual elements and narration from the *Ghent Altarpiece*.¹¹ Instead of a conflict with the surface, which used

⁹ I have not mentioned, for example, the role of the *Ghent Altarpiece* in shaping the Dutch schools of painting, a large number of art historians whose studies proliferate around that artwork, or the fact that two of its panels, *St John the Evangelist* and the *Just Judges*, were stolen in April 1934 and that the first was returned one month later, whereas the other has never been found, so it has been substituted by a copy.

¹⁰ Frank Stella, *Working Space* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 5-6.

¹¹ Vujičić's *Alchemic Polyptych*, or rather the quotation as the supporting structure of the installation, is not linked to the theme of spatial breakthrough of an artist through the surface, even though that breakthrough is imposed by its relation to the *Ghent Altarpiece* as a historical painting. In 1949, Lucio Fontana (born in Rosario, Argentina, 1899; died in Comabbio, Lombardy, 1968) began his research on *Spatial Concepts* (It. *Concetto spaziale*) and... pierced that canvas which had been frightening and provoked artists for centuries. He cut through the monochromatic surface and then negated the plane through the cut, reaching out for space, even though not yet in the way which would become famous later, in the art of the 1950s and 1960s. The cut of that wound was invaded by space that had been comprimated for centuries, like a ghost set free from a bottle of a black hole. In the explosion of experiments, which was later succinctly rendered in the phrase "destroy to create", it cosmically overturned numerous notions, erased the borderlines between artistic genres, and created new forms. Fontana's role in opening up spaces of spatialism, minimalism, and conceptual art, as well as using new technologies (such as neon light) presents him as "akin" to newer generations than we may notice at the first glance. Cf. Enrico Crispolti, *Lucio Fontana, Catalogo Generale* (Milan: Edizioni Electa, 1986). In the past decade (2003), a Croatian exhibition of his work was set up by Jerica Zihlerl in Novigrad. Cf. Jerica Zihlerl (ed.), *Lucio Fontana* (Novigrad: Galerija Rigo, 2003). Preface to the exhibition catalogue: Getulio Alviani.

to provoke the *old masters*, the format of individual parts (painted panels) of the winged altarpiece has been used by Vujičić as the preset form from which he has expelled the scene and chiselled out space for his work. He has not raised his work on an altar *mensa* (table), on which the polyptych of Hubert and Jan van Eyck must have stood and which is suggested to some extent by the base on which it stands today at St Bavo's cathedral. The *Alchemic Polyptych* is set on the floor, grounded and close to the observer's level. Besides, Vujičić has doubled the "altar" wings, thus adapting the frame to his *concetto*, his idea, the different experience and purpose of his artwork. He has taken an entirely new and rather personal way, but he has not abandoned entirely the dialogue with the original – the *Ghent Altarpiece*.

At the London exhibition called *Encounters: New Art from Old* (National Gallery, 2000), British sculptor Anthony Caro (b. 1924 in New Malden, Surrey) had a similar encounter with the Sienese master Duccio di Buoninsegna (attested activity from 1278 – d. 1318-1319). He "borrowed" the illusionist architecture from his *Annunciation*¹² and made it a starting point for creating a series of sculptures (equally without a base) – *Duccio Variation 1-7*¹³ – in which he gradually moved away from the painting. The procedure that he used for his prelude to Duccio's theme was explained in the following way:

"The first variation comes ... closely from the painting, the second comes both from the picture and Variation One and so on... The painting is the taking-off point, like the original theme in a set of musical variations. Eventually the process developed into a dialogue between independent pieces [...]." ¹⁴

Gradual alienation from the model, the initial incentive, the fusion of one's own thoughts that rely on the original at first, only to be gradually transformed into independent research, likewise mark the relationship between the *Alchemic* and the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Encounters between contemporary artists and the painting tradition have no predictable outcome or dramaturgy. Braco Dimitrijević (b. 1948 in Sarajevo), for example, has appropriated the works of *old masters* and modernist artists directly, transposing them into his own work. They become the centre of a series of three-dimensional still lifes, installations called *Triptychos Post Historicus*, which in the period from 1975-1976, when Dimitrijević began a series of exhibitions until Venice 2009, already counted some five hundred pieces.¹⁵ Caro seems closer to Vujičić than Dimitrijević; in other words, an alchemic prelude to the theme seems closer to him than appropriation, regardless of the fact that this procedure has meanwhile become an obligatory segment of artistic practice, including his own.

¹² Tempera on wood, 43 x 44 cm. Cf. Richard Morphet (ed.), *Encounters: New Art from Old* (London: National Gallery Company Limited, 2000), p. 68.

¹³ Various organic (wood) and inorganic materials (plexiglass, steel, glass, etc.) for various sculptures. The height is around 165 cm, while the width varies (from 122-206 cm); the depth ranges from ca. 80 to ca. 120 cm. Cf. Richard Morphet (ed.), op. cit., pp. 69-79.

¹⁴ Richard Morphet (ed.), op. cit., p. 71.

¹⁵ The second edition is currently prepared: Braco Dimitrijević, *Triptychos Post Historicus* (Philadelphia, PA: Slought Foundation and University of Pennsylvania, in print), [1976].

By doubling the wings of the frame in his “polyptych”, Silvio Vujičić has retained the form of a liturgical object. In its historical role, polyptych used to offer a change of scenes according to the liturgical year, which is why it often had double wings with scenes for various holidays; an example is the *Isenheim Altarpiece* by Matthias Grünewald. At the first glance, Vujičić presents his *Alchemic Polyptych* as a familiar and significant form,¹⁶ but after this predetermined starting point he proceeds as an alchemist who appropriates the dimensions of the altarpiece and inscribes fragments of his own identity. How does he do that? He has observed the official rules for repeating and copying works of art, even though quoting the frame of the altarpiece did not comply him to do that. He then decreased the height, width, and depth of the frame in a carefully chosen ratio of thirteen percent, retaining the proportions of individual pieces. The selected number could have been random or purely pragmatic, dependent on the height of the atelier or exhibition space, but in fact it has a very intimate meaning. Thirteen is the sum (or multiplication and sum) of events that are important to Vujičić, expressed in dates, or of his numeric identification numbers (such as the fiscal number or the student number); sometimes he also encountered it in dates linked to Jan van Eyck and the *Ghent Altarpiece*. That, of course, remains hidden when facing his work for the first time and is revealed only owing to the artist’s willingness to explain his choice. This information may seem marginal if we are not dedicated numerologists, but it should be noted that, in his encounter with Van Eyck, Vujičić on the one hand acts as a researcher interested in the artistic, stylistic, iconographic, and technical features of the *old master*, yet on the other hand inserts his own personality on each and every step, even if it is a “minor” aspect such as the catalogue description: “dimensions: 304,5 x 400 cm.”¹⁷ While analysing further his relation to the model, Vujičić does not strip the liturgical vestments off the *Ghent Altarpiece* as his model, but quite on the contrary, draws upon himself a suspicion about the possible meanings of quoting the frame of the polyptych, about the relationship between this new content and the borrowing. Even an observer who is unacquainted with the austere portraits of the commissioner, the mayor of Ghent, Jodicus Vyd (Joos Vijd; Joost Vijdt), and his wife Isabel (Lysbette) Borluut – in the same way as Vujičić or the art historians – an observer who does not especially care about that masterpiece of the early Renaissance, who remains cold before the iconographic pedantries in the Mystic Lamb or the Cumean Sibyl turned into a voice from the ampoule, so that he forgets all of these quickly, an observer who perhaps knew nothing so far about the *Ghent Altarpiece* as an object of the collector’s greed of Reichsmarschall Göring – even such an observer will recognize the artist’s choice of the polyptych, one of the most frequent solutions for altars in the early Middle Ages, as the

¹⁶ Still without the clear lines and without paint, only with a frame, the artist has created a hint at some “significant form,” as Clive Bell (1914) defined the link between artworks: “These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call ‘Significant Form’; and ‘Significant Form’ is the one quality common to all works of visual art. [...] Therefore, when I speak of significant form, I mean a combination of lines and colours (counting white and black as colours) that moves me aesthetically.” Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1914), the chapter on “The Aesthetic Hypothesis,” pp. 3-37 (5).

¹⁷ The dimensions of Jan van Eyck’s polyptych are 350 x 461 cm (wings open) / 223 cm (wings closed).

framework of his installation. That is to say, even a moderately interested or informed observer from the first decade of the 21st century will know that he or she is standing before an artwork that has – paraphrasing Clive Bell’s “significant form” (1914) – a “liturgical form”. That initial impression, which Vujičić is counting upon, has another characteristic: liturgy includes ritual prescriptions, gestures, walking, utterances, vestments, and objects, as well as a particular space. By bringing the *Alchemic Polyptych* into the newly opened Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, which will supposedly be its first setting, Vujičić will impart to that space the status of a pilgrimage site in which a *simulacrum* of liturgy is taking place, a ritual movement caused by the dense concentration of artworks in one place. The magnetism of international galleries, museums, and collections, with crowded buses and charter planes streaming towards them, reminds of the attraction of historical relic treasuries with international reputation, as the sources of supernatural powers that attracted numerous pilgrims. In that sense, art and religion are defined as comparable experiences:

“Art and Religion are, then, two roads by which men escape from circumstance to ecstasy. Between aesthetic and religious rapture there is a family alliance.”¹⁸

Nevertheless, Silvio Vujičić does not envision the *Alchemic Polyptych* in the representative part of the exhibition space, the one that would – if we continue our *simulacrum* analogy – correspond to the sanctuary, the chapel, or at least the nave of a church. On the contrary, he sees it placed near the museum shop, that inevitable niche of contemporary exhibition and collectors’ venues, which has with time become rather important. The location of museum shops is intentional; they are usually situated at the end of the tour and before the exit. In that dramatic moment of leaving the “temple of culture,” they offer to the visitor, still ecstatic from the encounter with sublime works of art, souvenirs that are meant to prolong that feeling. Weeks or months after the visit to the museum, the owner of reproductions on oversized calendars for the year to follow, postcards, fridge magnets, or notebook covers will still wonder, now cold-blooded and cold-hearted, about what on earth made him or her buy these useless objects. Vujičić’s installation next to the museum shop is meant to dismantle that ecstasy, while the liturgical *simulacrum* of his quoted frame is meant to function like a pointing finger: “Here!” – meaning that the ritual is happening there, that the sacred space and blessedness are to be found on that spot. Without any sermonizing, didactic or moral intentions – since it is not the artist’s practice – about turning the shopping malls into spaces of Sunday family ritual, Vujičić has managed to create a crack of embarrassment, which the observer needs in order to start wondering what an artwork resembling an altarpiece is doing in the museum shop.

Even though “retaining” only the contours of an altarpiece, the artist is commenting upon the iconographic narration of his model. The upper registry of the *Ghent Altarpiece* shows the inhabitants of the Heavenly Jerusalem: Christ, the Virgin, John the Baptist, and the angels, while the side panels

¹⁸ Clive Bell, op. cit., chapter on “Art and Religion,” pp. 75-94 (94).

contain the images of the first parents, Adam and Eve. Vujičić has left this *piano nobile* empty in his *Alchemic Polyptych*, using the power of silence that fills the frames. In the lower registry of the “polyptych”, he has exhibited cotton T-shirts, introducing the element of pop-culture into the installation. The T-shirt has come into use in the 1950s, at the instigation of Florida tourist companies, becoming in the 1960s an inevitable item in the wardrobe of rock musicians and their audiences, and in the 1980s that of rebels and various politically engaged groups. The possibility of simply converting a T-shirt into a billboard with a message to the world, which turns the person carrying the inscription, symbol, or image into an ambulant messenger (divulging his or her personal truths, favourite characters, or anything that is felt close enough to be worn on one’s body and mediated to others), has transformed the once despised undergarment into an object of cult. Vujičić has used industrially produced T-shirts, only slightly changing their cut (transforming the collars), but he has significantly changed the texture of the fabric, giving it a worn out and used appearance. In this way, he has imparted time to these anonymous T-shirts with no history. The opposition of new and worn-out, that is, the change in the texture, has been triggered by a chemical procedure that skips the time that would normally be needed for the inscription of bodily imprints, wearing and washing. Before exhibiting them in the lower registry of his installation, Vujičić has given the T-shirts that worn-out and used appearance by using enzymes, organic catalysers that facilitate chemical processes without actually wearing out the T-shirts.¹⁹ He has done it for alchemic rather than conceptual reasons, out of a temptation of tracking the metamorphosis, of changing things and being amazed at the procedures that can produce such an effect. Besides, the qualities of garments obtained through alchemic transformation are aesthetically more attractive to him than the initial forms, as he once wrote (2009):

“Perhaps I select certain processes primarily because of the original / superficial appearance. [...] The very fact that the fabric is treated with enzymes that also serve to obtain medicines such as penicillin should not be neglected...”²⁰

Instead of Dorian Gray, meaning the new industrial T-shirts, the spectator is facing their aged version (T-shirts altered by enzymes) and the entire procedure has taken place in several laboratory moments.

With respect to the *Ghent Altarpiece*, that is, after analyzing its figures, their iconography, and the chromatic choices for particular protagonists, Vujičić has decided on further procedures. Reflections about the painting technique that is more than five hundred years old (but was a novelty at the time) and the visual elements that Van Eyck accentuated while shaping individual characters, triggered the exceptional analysis with which Vujičić approached his research, selected the technology, structured the order of procedures, and assessed the correspondence between their

¹⁹ The *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Human and Veterinary Medicine* explains the term “enzyme” in the following way: “Organic matter of complex, protein-like structure, which triggers and accelerates various chemical processes in living organisms, remaining unchanged itself. Certain enzymes dissolve only specific organic matter.” Ivo Padovan (ed. in chief), Hrvoje Gomerčić, Nada Čikeš, Teodor Dürigrl, Sergej Forenbacher, Slavko Cvetnić (ed.), *Enciklopedijski rječnik humanog i veterinarskog medicinskog nazivlja* (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts and Miroslav Krleža Lexicographic Institute, 2006), p. 426.

²⁰ From an e-letter on *enzymes*_, 23 August 2009 (1:13 p.m.).

capacity and the desired result. Such an approach shows that the artist's *procédé* may be more important for understanding his poetics and his intention than the outcome itself. German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans (b. in 1968 at Remscheid near Düsseldorf) has shown similar enthusiasm in observing the transformation capacities of photographic alchemy and the instability of its procedures, as well as the photograph as an object rather than its traditional visual values. In his study entitled "A Pulse within the System: Wolfgang Tillmans and Photoconceptualism" (2006), Dominic Molon has written the following:

"This intensive focus on the materiality of the photographic image is matched by Tillman's equally considered emphasis on process."²¹

When the artistic procedure becomes the focus of the artist's attention, the exhibited object is only a testimony of the moment in which he or she stopped working on it and left it to the Other. This moment of finishing an artwork is not certain, much less predictable. Vujičić once (2009) revealed his attitude towards the object after that crucial moment:

"When the garment is finished, for me it dies. There is that moment when it is completed, materialized, and the next moment it is dead. It means nothing more to me."²²

An artwork lives only as long as it is connected to the artist by an umbilical cord. What the spectator encounters is the *résumé* of that research, of experiences, intellectual and alchemic experiments. It is not dead, but the "descendants of darkness", of the artist's intimacy, continue their lives with the Other, in dialogue with the observer.

Vujičić's artworks from the past decade are a presentiment rather than a complete revelation of the complexity of procedures resulting in objects that are shown to the public. From the final result of tortured fabrics (*E.A. 1/I S.V. Menswear shop #1*, 2004.) or those burned entirely, annihilated by a touch of the magic stick of chemical reactions (*Apparitions*, 2008.), only a forensic expert could reconstruct the procedure. In pieces of garments, such as sleeves hanging limp from the canvas like some puppet character, waiting for an arm that would bring them to life by entering the canvas (*No Title / Sleeve*, 2003) or garments constrained in a wax capsule lighted in neon (*There's a place around the corner where your dead friends live*, 2006.), or garments with "limbs" tied like convicts (*Showroom*, 2008), the cuts, stings, and seams remain hidden, since few people have patience, knowledge, and motivation to dismember the procedure. If analyzed, however, they largely surpass the succinct name they are given in the catalogue of "materials and techniques", which is vast anyway.

Even if a pedant might venture an autopsy of the procedures, of the invisible tension of the working process, the poisonous agents (for Vujičić can hardly resist their deadly quality) which are the mandatory ingredients of certain pigments, and the time during which an object was exposed to dye or other substances remain unfathomable. The *concetto* and the process are more complex and more

²¹ Dominic Molon, "A Pulse Within the System: Wolfgang Tillmans and Photoconceptualism," in: Amy Teschner, Kamilah Foreman (ed.), *Wolfgang Tillmans. The US Tour Catalogue* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; Los Angeles: Hammer Museum; New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 39.

²² From an e-letter on *introspective*_, 27 June 2009 (11:53 p.m.).

important than the end result, the presented object, even in case of the very personal *Perfume* (2006) created from one's own selected bodily fluids. The choreography of movements in the laboratory, in a Kenneth-Anger-like²³ catwalk (*Exposed to Virus and Fashion*, 2006) or a self-ironic performance (*Private – Public Striptease*, 2004) nevertheless reveal the many hours spent in their making, the investment. The assiduousness with which Vujičić approaches his work is even more evident in the precise arrangement of light and the carefully planned use of achromatic tones (black and white) in an opus where colour features only sporadically, as a constrained and closely watched intruder. In his knowledge of the technology of materials and organic matter (*Under the Daisies*, 2005), minerals and metals (*Chrystal*, 2007), Vujičić finds space and challenge for his artistic expression. However, in the assessment of the technological level and his quality as a designer, he has mildly pushed the scales (2005) in order to avoid misunderstanding:

“My art is a hybrid between textile design and visual arts, but I would not give priority to design [...]”²⁴

Encouraged by this attitude, we may understand the T-shirts exhibited in the frames of the lower registry of the “polyptych” as a garment void of characters, the *vacuum* of a membrane that has been left behind after the reflexive transformation of the altarpiece into a wardrobe, liturgy into obsession, ritual into shopping. When looking for a reference (among those used acrobatically by art historians) for Vujičić's procedures of quoting the frame and transforming the visual content, the changes of context in which the *simulacrum* of polyptych is situated, and the aestheticization of garments, the essay of Gilles Deleuze entitled *Plato and the Simulacrum* (1983; 1990) may seem a particularly useful tool for understanding the *Alchemic Polyptych*:

“The copy is an image endowed with resemblance, the *simulacrum* is an image without resemblance. The catechism, so much inspired by Platonism, has familiarized us with this notion. God made man in his image and resemblance. Through sin, however, man lost his resemblance while maintaining the image. We have become simulacra. We have forsaken moral existence in order to enter into aesthetic existence.”²⁵

And even though the *Alchemic Polyptych* will eventually find other locations, new exhibition contexts, and fresh audiences, its first location next to the museum shop is closer in character to the popular pilgrimage destination of Avenue Mall, the shopping mall on the other side of the crossroad, than to the Museum of Contemporary Art; and that fact will remain inscribed in the conception, the idea, the *conchetto* of this artwork.

²³ *Scorpio Rising*, USA 1964.

²⁴ Trpimir Matasović, *Društvo kao Darkroom* [Society as a darkroom], interview with Silvio Vujičić on the occasion of winning the Rector's Award of Zagreb University for the academic year 2003/2004 and the *Pilot04* project at the Studio of the Museum of Contemporary Art, in: *Zarez: dvotjednik za kulturna i društvena zbivanja* 148 (Zagreb: Druga strana, 10 February 2005).

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, “Plato and the Simulacrum,” in: *The Logic of the Sense*, transl. by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 253-266 (257). The English translation was first published in 1969, but in a supplement from 1990 (ed. by Constantin V. Boundas) it was published in *October* 27 (Winter 1983), pp. 45-56, translated by Rosalind Krauss.

Through the selection and the procedure that correlate the years of 2009 and 1432, undressing the polyptych of Hubert and Jan van Eyck from the church's interior and redressing it in the space of a museum shop turned exhibition space, which begins to resemble a showroom, Silvio Vujičić has created a simulacrum in a poetic sense of the word, an occasion for experiencing the betrayed resemblance. An analogous installation was that of his *Wire Hangers* (2008), in which he arranged a row of wire hangers on a high bar, thus turning them into a procession of invisible suits in a gallery space, the emperor's new clothes multiplied by a hundred. In the *Alchemic Polyptych*, the garments hanging in the lower registry act as a group of invisible protagonists, a cast skin of runaway figures, surprised or terrified by the new context and the new role. Splashes of dye on the T-shirts, which remain as the chromatic traces of Vujičić's dialogue with Van Eyck's characters, reveal perhaps most manifestly the artist's exploratory urge. He knows the iconography of colours in Christian art and their meanings, collected anthropologically through the centuries of cultural history, and therefore the pigments he is using in his *Alchemic Polyptych* are not synthetic, but come close – as far as possible – to those documented by the painting tradition and the history of colouring fabric. By appropriating the semantic and allegorical value²⁶ in the trace of dye on the T-shirts in the lower register of the *Alchemic Polyptych*, Vujičić points to the iconography of garments in the upper registry of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. In the same way in which Van Eyck used pigments in painting, Vujičić crumbles the pigments and creates textile dye: some blue has dripped down from the Virgin's cloak, as the symbol of royal dignity, and appeared on Vujičić's "polyptych" as indigo, one of the first pigments in creating dye for garments. In his *Craftsman's Handbook (Il libro dell'arte)*, Van Eyck's Italian contemporary Cennino Cennini²⁷ recommended azurite or ultramarine for painting the Virgin's cloak, but in the nineteenth chapter he also gave the alchemic (his term) recipe on how to prepare indigo:

“How you should tint paper with an indigo tint. [...] Take the number of sheets mentioned above; take half an ounce of white lead, and the size of two beans of Bagdad indigo. And grind them together thoroughly, for thorough grinding will not spoil the tint.”²⁸

The imperial robe covering the austere central figure of the *Ghent Altarpiece* – Christ as a priest and a judge – has been documented on the central T-shirt of the *Alchemic Polyptych* by the presence of cochineal, a deep carmine pigment called after the insects from which it is derived: parasites from the genus of scale lice (Spanish: *Cochinilla*; Latin: *Dactylopius coccus*) feeding on the cacti called opuncia. These Mexico lice arrived to the palette of pigments in the same colonial luggage that once unloaded the potato, corn, and turkey into European kitchens. From the cloak of St John the Baptist some green has dripped onto a T-shirt in the *Alchemic Polyptych*. That colour symbolizes renewal

²⁶ “Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery.” Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (London, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 54.

²⁷ He was born, same as Arnolfo di Cambio, in Colle di Val d'Elsa (Tuscany) around 1370 and died around 1425.

²⁸ Cennino D'Andrea Cennini, *The Craftsman's Handbbook. The Italian "Il Libro dell'Arte"*. Transl. by Daniel V. Thompson, Jr. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1933, by Yale University Press).

(after the death of sin or the winter death of nature), while the pigment, traditionally derived from a vegetal source, namely mirth, is expectedly unstable and changeable, just like its iconography in the cultural history – from healthy nature to aliens, the “little green people.” Crushed oak or ash bark as the basis of brown hues, pomegranate bark for yellow, oak-gall for black... from Vujičić’s atelier (mind, knowledge, work) colours stream like from Paracelsus’s laboratory and his investigation of the history of the palette and the procedures of its application on various materials is summarized in these drops on the T-shirts. Each of them identifies a figure or a group of figures from Ghent. In this way, the individual is supplemented by the global: saints from Christian history have been divested of their precious paraments, by which we distinguish them from one another and from the historical personalities on paintings, and documented as stains of dye on modern garments, everyday and banal T-shirts worn by millions of anonymous people.

The frame of the *Alchemic Polyptych* with its assembly of “stained” T-shirts is made of oak, the traditional material of Dutch *old masters*, but painted in white. The white enhances the *simulacrum* of a sacred liturgical object. In the central field of the lower registry, which corresponds to the *Adoration of the Magic Lamb* on the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Vujičić has actualized the metaphor of the “true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world” from the Gospel of John (*John* 1, 9) through the neon lighting placed between Christ the Judge and his symbolic representation as the Mystical Lamb, which is the place that is lighted on the Ghent painting by a halo around the dove of the Holy Ghost. In this white neon light one can also recognize a chromatic choice, since it encompasses the palette of green, red, blue, and all the other chromatic values, seemingly absent, but actually compressed.

The installation of Silvio Vujičić has achieved a boundary situation in the sense in which it was used by Mircea Eliade, as the “one which man discovers in becoming conscious of his place in the universe.”²⁹ The expectation of sanctity, liturgy, and spiritual experience, as well as the discovery of the aestheticized, supplemented by the moral and/or religious that Vujičić subversively offers to the observer of his artwork, brings back the primordial quality of experience and the sense of oneself. Or at least raises doubts about it. The questions of emptiness and fullness, suggested by Silvio Vujičić, transform the aestheticized experience of the *Alchemic Polyptych* and the apparently twisted mirror into the only existence that we have deserved, the only experience that we are ready to accept.

²⁹ Mircea Eliade, op. cit., p. 34.