

INTRODUCTION  
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YOU WILL NOT DIE IN BED  
HORSES WILL FUCK YOU IN THE EYES

ALL CLASSIFICATIONS WILL LOSE THEIR GRIDS

*Polite art wants to live, multiply, and grow.*

There's a basic assumption throughout Euro-America that the world is basically getting better. Yes, there may be human rights reverses here and there, and persistent environmental challenges, and, of course, misfortunes and disasters of all sorts, great and small, organic and man-made, dance across our computers with an odd, synchronized sameness, and, yes, an oozing blob of the bad and the even worse seeps into every twenty-four hour news cycle, but, still, all in all, when you get down to it, humanity is getting smarter and healthier. You can't argue with statistics: more people are becoming literate every year and these people are living longer and sharing their collective wisdom with more people throughout the duration of their ever elongating lives. A better blueprint for global betterment has yet to be invented. In fact, there are, no doubt, United Nations' websites and scores of international organizations that can prove conclusively that ignorance is down and clean water access is up, that global warming, human trafficking and religious persecution will inevitably wane, and, eventually, the species will come together as one to venerate the solemn gestures of The Invisible Hand in an Inter-galactic Empire of Capitalism and Freedom.

NARRATIVE PURGATORY

*You can go to polite art, and return from it, like a tourist.*

Our access to a jacked up, transmogrifying web of technological innovation is the clearest index of our better future. Without these innovations glowing in our peripheral vision, the evidence of onrushing mass amelioration would be much less conclusive, much more disputable. Not that it *really* matters. Our casually distracted, Northern hemisphere, urban, liberal minds think without thinking: "Hey, if I can Skype simultaneously with curators in Jakarta and Lagos—for free and at any time, no less—then there *must* be adequate access to education and health care in Jakarta and Lagos, right?" In fact, soft technological self-delusion guides so much of our thinking that we don't even bother to track its contours. *It goes without saying* that "a rising tide lifts all boats" and these generally darker skinned, generally more indigent people will certainly benefit (if not now, *some-day*) from our self-reassuring technophilia. Unless, of course, they don't and the rising tide produces effects besides beneficial boatlifting, such as submerging miles of farmland along the way, etc. etc. etc. Supremely personalized, lusciously intimate, Hi-Tech invades our private sanctuaries of existential self-awareness and he informs us over and over again that even though everything looks worse and worse on all of our little screens, everything's really getting better. He says it just looks worse because humans love stories and they'll always choose a gluttonous diet of tragedy over adequate narrations of adequate lives being lived adequately.

## INSTITUTIONAL ZOMBIFICATION

*Polite art attended History's first dinner parties. The problem with History is that it rarely admits those who are not invited, or late to dinner—whatever the circumstance. History has a secret sense of bon ton. If you do arrive late, you have to know exactly what History likes, its sweet teeth and sensibilities. You must bring History a most exquisite dessert, one it will enjoy without having ever tasted it before. Bring the dessert to an open window at the dinner party. Once History smells it, the door will swing wide open.*

Disjointed, dislocated, dis-nearly-everything, Irena Haiduk's art exiles itself from the familiar folkways that shape what passes for "contemporary art" and "contemporary life" in the Global North. The official art of today—those chunks of soporific mediocrity that fill the art fairs and biennials, those elaborate manifestations of distressed vacuity that provoke piles of duly plastic-sheathed publicity—all of this official production and its accompanying trustee/curator/dealer/institutional scaffolding converts art into something that breathes only to be branded, merchandised, and promoted with a precise amount of notionally intellectual razzmatazz (and it's important to note that art industry activity now frequently takes place in countries where they wouldn't know the difference between a democratic election and a cake eating contest). Ideally, today, an artwork will exhibit just enough divergent qualities so that it can be contemplated somewhat differently in a number of slightly differing contexts, yet it should not be *too* discordant, *too* multifarious, *too* difficult to understand *as art*. At its core, Irena Haiduk's art aspires to be one long, uninterrupted, quasi-inhuman yowl that no person who cares about art can endure hearing for more than a few minutes without wishing to kill a functionary within the art industry. Haiduk's art does not aspire to be *critical*. It aspires to be *art that kills*.

## HERE COMES THE DARKNESS

*Polite art addresses life's extremes, even death, in a very polite way.*

Irena Haiduk's art comes at you simultaneously from the not so distant future and the not so distant past, and when these two temporalities smash into each other the resulting noise exactly replicates the sound of The Communist Soul collapsing, comatose, plunging through the five stages of grief toward The Pit of Decorous Art. Her art aims to rescue Art from its supporting role in culture, its service as semi-obscure divertissement for the bored rich and salaried institutional personnel. Instead, Haiduk embraces the curse that afflicts all humans: Death. Of course, to say that anything is a question of life or death is usually a prelude to hyperbolic stupidity—but not here. The fundamental deathliness of Haiduk's art is to be discovered in the art's pondering of the only two questions that have ever really mattered: *What is Human? What is Divine?* Her art makes you realize immediately that our walking-around conceptions of these categories are not only inadequate, they're so soft as to be silly. They say: that which is human is relatively weak and inconsequential and that which is divine is relatively powerful and consequential, but there's more, so much more. The Divine not only can do things that The Human cannot imagine, *The Divine can imagine things that The Human*

*cannot imagine*. It is in this space that Haiduk's art lives its perpetually challenged life: where that which we cannot imagine gets imagined.

## NEGATIVE SUBLIMITY

*Polite art creates needs that are satisfied immediately.*

Divine Imagining need not be disturbing, vexing or terrifying, I suppose, but most of the time it is, at least in Haiduk's hands. Anxiety pervades this situation. You see it in the work's mixed media character—everything gets tossed into a big, dirty pile, that is, *psychologically speaking*, and then each part plays its own idiosyncratic role in an ensuing drama of self-annihilation: singing, dancing, photographs, videos, drawings, paintings, sculptures, architecture, etc. "Nothing that is inhuman is alien to me," Haiduk's art keeps saying. Even the blandest objects and undertakings—work shoes and management projects—radiate malevolence and catastrophe here. They whisper to us in a threatening undertone in a Balkan dialect. What is the nature of this threat? It finds its essence in the human being's self-willed ignorance of its own capacity to bend the world to its desires. Haiduk's art seizes upon moments when the human creature acts at once in an absolutely bestial manner, but with absolutely rational ambitions—this combination offends every shred of our humanity. Think Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now* (and I'm not talking about the bad acting). We can excuse bestiality as something irrational and destructive, and we can lament a cold rationality that exhibits no emotional awareness or empathy, but when bestiality and rationality cohabitate, the horizon of negative sublimity opens up: a sunny spot where every soul suffers infinite injustice.

## DEATHWARE

*Polite art asks for permission, so it does not have to apologize later.*

Irena Haiduk usually doesn't hit you over the head with Evil. You just seem to find yourself wandering into the penumbra of wrongness, the vicinity of the sinister, without ever really trying. In this sense, perhaps *the* touchstone for Haiduk's art is the NATO bombing of Belgrade in 1999. In the larger scheme of things, this "incident" in the spring of Bill Clinton's penultimate year as president would barely get a perfunctory nod of recollection from most Americans. In the wake of September 11th and decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, sundry market crashes and rebounds, Obama's election and reelection, a ninety day conflict at the close of the last century is hard for anyone to remember, much less lament. However, this did turn out to be the most persistent bombing campaign in Europe since World War II, involving thousands of tons of explosives being hurled into the midst of a large civilian population, and even to this day Belgrade hasn't recovered (architecturally or psychologically). Although, by the standards of W.G. Sebald's ruminations on twentieth century mass killing from the sky, this was one of the most surgical, least invasive, and minimally destructive bombing campaigns ever undertaken; the unfolding of the event was (of course) absolutely inhuman and vile. This pairing, the union of vile innocuousness and innocuous vileness gets at the complex infrastructure subtending all of Haiduk's art. Everything in this universe has nerves and blood and feels pain and exerts its claim of pain on others.

It's as if a gelatin of extreme feeling, something like the atmosphere in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* or *Solaris*, has encased the world and nothing here can be disturbed without something disturbing happening. Though there's a robust industry that churns out curatorial labors on memory and trauma, Haiduk's art works the opposite side of the street: sometimes it's the erasure of any obvious trace of memory or trauma that is actually the most terrifying situation of all (writes an American citizen for whom the bombing of Belgrade was not the least bit memorable, nor traumatic). *Refined Schadenfreude* might be the best description for most of today's ostensibly "political art," in that it aims to allow First World nerves to be jangled, briefly and comfortably, hitting you like a refreshing, steamy ethical shower before you blow dry, deodorize, and put on your uniform for another day of service in the ongoing privatization of the world. In this sense, Irena Haiduk's political art differs in two critical aspects from most political art today: number one, it's political, and number two, it's art.

This art is a magnet that extracts psychic metal. Or as Irena Haiduk writes:

*Polite art ties you up, but it doesn't cut you.  
It cuts you, but it doesn't eviscerate you.  
It eviscerates you, but it doesn't massacre you.  
It massacres you, but it doesn't necrosodomize you.  
It necrosodomizes you, but it doesn't cannibalize you.  
It does not cannibalize you.*

# SPAWLS