

# TERRA SYMPOSIUM

Slobodan Kojic's Masterpiece

MARC LEUTHOLD



Sculpture Garden at Terra Studio

Artist Slobodan Kojic began *Terra Sculpture Symposium* 39 years ago in a vacant brick factory. Kojic – a major artist – represented all of Yugoslavia at the Venice Biennale exhibition in 1999. Inviting six sculptors last year and similar numbers in previous years, Kojic's team built the world's largest terracotta sculpture collection – now housed in the Terra Museum.

Serbia, part of former Yugoslavia, and like most Eastern European countries is home to many symposia. Most of these were founded during the Communist period that generously supported artists and symposia. Artists were thereby afforded rare and prized opportunities to travel, interact and exchange information and ideas with foreign artists. In Serbia there is the 55-year-old symposium at Arandjelovac – which is called the *Marble and Sound Symposium*, but which also features ceramics. There is also the *Mixed Media Symposium*, the Jalovik Art Colony of 42 years duration. And there is *Terra Symposium*, now in its 39th iteration in

Kikinda, Serbia. The material underpinnings of *Terra symposium* are the vast clay pits and huge famous Toza Markovic roof tile factory – which at one point created the majority of roof tiles in the region.

When you walk near the clay pits, the earth is clay, the mud is clay. It requires very little additional materials to be used for ceramic production. It was an unusual experience to be making art from this clay that one would find under foot. The original Toza Markovic factory building was built in the 1890s. By the early 1980s, this original factory was empty and falling into ruin after enormous new facilities were constructed. Kikinda's native son, Slobodan Kojic, had the idea to begin a symposium using the old factory as a studio. Kojic's father was a judge but Kojic became one of the most important artists in all of Yugoslavia in following his artistic proclivities – inherited from other relatives. Kojic's terracotta sculptures are mostly non-objective and expressionistic. Kojic has also worked in marbles and bronze. His ground-breaking work is not

decorative or functional and he developed a technique for building large scale sculptures suitable for public spaces. He is to the former Yugoslavia what Carlo Zauli is to Italy and Peter Voulkos is to the United States.

Beginning in 1982, Kojic invited artists who work in sculptural media to create art at his *Terra Symposia*. Velimir Vukicevic was the first ceramist to be invited. The artists work for one month in residence to produce the work. The following spring, the works are fired, and in July they have an exhibition of the prior year's works just as the next symposium begins. The exhibition is in the *Terra Gallery* in the centre of the City. The large sculptures are placed outdoors in the nearby central plaza of the City, and everything is documented in a catalogue published each year.

In addition to the 1890s factory (the studio) and the Gallery, there is also a museum. The Museum was originally an indoor riding ring that was built for the military. It is the second largest room in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. In



Branislav Nolic and Milan Ramaji working on smoke for factory chimney sculpture

Ljubisa Nolic and Terra staff moving Milan Ramaji sculpture



disrepair, Kojic rescued and renovated it in the spirit of the *Arsenale* complex of the Venice Biennale campus. Now named the *Terra Museum*, it houses hundreds of sculptures from the past 38 symposia. As mentioned, the invited artists typically do not have experience working in clay. Therefore, the artists work with Terra staff expert technicians. For the year 2020, six artists were invited. The Symposium was almost cancelled but a few weeks before July 1st, the starting date of each Symposium, Terra received approval from the government to conduct the Symposium. It was surprising to receive their invitation last year (since I am a ceramist) and even more surprising that they did not cancel the Symposium. A few weeks before July, when they shared the news that the Symposium would not be cancelled, I immediately agreed to come. Having been trapped in New York City during Corona times, I was happy to escape to have an opportunity to create with other artists in this highly regarded Symposium.

The artists invited to the Symposium were Slobodan Dane Stojanovic, Mirjana Blagojev, Branislav Nolic, Tamara Sekulic, Nicolae Moldovan. Dane, the eldest of the group, was an academy trained sculptor/professor who had sought to come to Terra for over 20 years. He came



Mirjana Blagojev working on one of her large sculptures



Nikolae Moldovan in Terra studio

Milan Ramaji Terra expert working on Slobodan Dane Stojanovic sculpture



Mirjana Blagojev with Terra kiln



with a maquette of an abstraction of a bird, and Milan Ramaji, an artist and the leading technician, built Dane's sculpture almost entirely himself. Meanwhile Dane created a series of abstract sculptures and realistic portraits of Kojic, Milan and me. The tone of social interaction was jocular and so we teased him of creating art Jeff Koons style – hands off. Tamara Sekulic, an art teacher in her early 30s, earned a master's degree

from Croatia's leading Art academy and has created several public art projects and carved wood sculptures. Nicolae Moldovan is from Romania and is a professor at the leading art academy in Bucharest. Unusual for Terra, he is a ceramist. He had great facility with the clay and created his minimalist style works almost entirely on his own.

Master technician Ljubisa Nikolic taught me how to build an understorey

of perhaps 10 cm directly on the polished concrete floor. This substructure is covered with paper. On top of this, the artists or a technician constructs the sculpture – all on the floor. After the drying period of 6 months, the works are fork-lifted and/or hoisted with a crane into the enormous, pristine custom-built electric kiln with a hydraulic door that rises to the roof at the touch of a button.

The remaining artists included Bran-



Slobodan Kojic with Terra sculpture by Marc Leuthold

islav Nolic, a painter and sculptor. His works were highly creative. Some of his works were large scale environmental ephemera that involved creating representational imagery by selectively cutting hay in a huge field or gathering huge crowds of people and clustering them to also create imagery. In another project, he invited and assisted a homeless man into a gallery to create a self-built shelter in the space. That project resulted in a friendship where Nolic provided support for the man's family for many years. Nolic has a dry sense of humour and together he and I initiated an extra project where we created ironic tile awards for all the staff and artists. It was a "Golden Award" series inspired by Serbian art associations' annual achievement awards. The laughter and warmth of the award ceremony on the last day helped us avoid feeling sad about the end of the Symposium. Serbian humour, likely due to tough times, tends to be ironic. One of my favourite Serbian jokes briefly goes as follows: A young man visits his grandmother in deep distress. She asks what's wrong and he says he has let her down by becoming a junkie (or "narco"). Grandmother responds, "Is that all? I thought you were going to say that you are hungry!" The sense of Serbian hospitality, reflected in the plentiful meals, was palpable.

The Symposium is perhaps the masterpiece of its founder Kojic. It was begun in the prosperous Tito years but continued without interruption even during the years of war and economic catastrophe of the 1990s. Kojic was confronted with serious threats of closure but through courage and bluff and tenacious determination, he persevered. In recent years, he has raised funds to completely renovate the large factory space for the Sympo-

sium studio. He also renovated the Museum building. Its collection is the largest terra-cotta sculpture collection in the world. And recently he oversaw a handsome book, which must weight ten kilos, documenting the Symposia and artists.

Kojic leads a dedicated staff that meets every need. The artists are guests in a comfortable elegant old hotel where they eat breakfast and dinner. Lunch was served at the studio. We artists rode bikes to and from the studio. Every other day, Kojic showed up around lunch time and encouraged us not to work so hard. And so, we would visit with him and listen to fascinating stories. Kojic, though strong and opinionated (he teased me for being a ceramist) was kind and jovial – inspirational. Kojic is an accomplished artist who developed the large-scale terracotta construction technique that is the cornerstone of the Symposium. Kojic's exhibition record is impressive but during politically challenging times, he refused to exhibit at all. One exception was that under duress, he agreed to gather a group of artists to

represent all of Yugoslavia at the Venice Biennale of 1999. His friends' work was inside the Yugoslav Pavilion and his large terracotta sculpture was placed outside in front of the building.

The artists invited to the 39th Symposium worked hard every day. Moldovan created an enormous perfect oval juxtaposed with a contrasting curved wall. As mentioned, Dane created a huge eagle abstraction. It was a very difficult construction project because it had two huge separate legs supporting a large body and a cantilevered head and beak. Nolic created the largest sculpture, a 3-metre-tall factory chimney with smoke – in tribute to Toza Markovic, the factory that inadvertently gave rise to the Symposium. Tamara created an over two-metre tall totem that referenced nature and the need for humanity to be more attentive to the environment. Mirjana Blagojev created large terracotta boxes that will contain reflective surfaces that suggest infinite spaces – in defiance to the cubic forms. As a ceramist, it was an honour to be invited to create art among these talented artists. Any guest of this Symposium will always remember the kindness, generosity and warmth of the Terra Symposium people who sheltered and supported us during the Pandemic of 2020.

#### MARC LEUTHOLD

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Symposiasts 2020 – Tamara Sekulic, Marc Leuthold, Branislav Nolic, Mirjana Blagojev, Slobodan Dane Stojanovic, Nicolae Moldovan

