CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN CHILDREN'S BOOK ILLUSTRATORS



Illustration Exhibition CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN CHILDREN'S BOOK ILLUSTRATORS

M.A. Senka Vlahović, Exhibition Curator

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Ilustrators:

Mladen Anđelković Tihomir Čelanović Manja Ćirić Rastko Ćirić Bojana Dimitrovski Nebojša Đuranović Aleksa Gajić Ana Grigorjev Marija Jevtić Aleksa Jovanović Stefan Katanić Marica Kicušić Kosta Milovanović Dušan Petričić Dušan Pavlić Milica Radenković Boban Savić Geto Ivica Stevanović Tanja Stevanović Luka Tilinger Jovan Ukropina David Vartabedijan Maja Veselinović Aleksandar Zolotić Dobrosav Bob Živković

MARKO THE CAT AND OTHER OLD/NEW HEROES IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS BY SERBIAN ILLUSTRATORS

In a time of intense visual communications, creative industries, multimedia, oversaturation by information, a time in which a good idea is "the most expensive" (especially if it is visual, effective and if it quickly and easily achieves its goal), illustration receives its rightful place and recognition of its value. This is made possible for illustration by the very essence of its nature - and that is its close connection with the text, i.e. verbal message, its double presence: both in popular culture and increasingly in high art as well, that is, both in applied art as well as in fine art. The relationship between the visual and verbal messages, i.e. between visual text and verbal text, has been developed in a special way through illustration for centuries back. This development has largely been based on illustrative practice, while the more serious theory has only started to pay attention to illustration in recent years, precisely because of the increased interest in illustration in the context of a time which places very clear and utilitarian demands regarding words and images and the effects that they need to achieve, in relation to the target groups oversaturated by the offer of creative content intended to raise their quality of life.

The situation is made even more delicate when all of the above is applied to a specific target group – children, more precisely – the children of the 21st century, the generations of *millennials* and now the children of *millennials*, who are growing up with multimedia content, aggressive commercials, video games, animated and interactive media, various applications, digital devices and the like. Therefore, the target group for which illustration and children's books themselves are intended, is very delicate, sensitive, incorruptible, but also impressionable, exposed to a huge content offering. How can the road to the sensitive nature of children be found in a world of multimedia, interactivity, great dynamics, oversensitivity of the senses, speed, superficiality, universal civilization crisis and incredibly rapid technological advancement? How to point the child to a beautiful and good book and aesthetically valuable, interesting, witty or educational illustrations, next to all the challenges and temptations that are being offered? And finally, how can one book with two united artists - the writer and the illustrator, find a way to the child's heart in a sea of books, in the mass-production of illustrated children's books? The answer, as I deeply believe, has, regardless of the circumstances, always been the same: by the power of the creative spirit of those who are sending the message, of those who are creating the work of art. The gifted creators, illustrators, who have enhanced their talents through education, work, and who have been recognized by the publishers, bookstores, curators, have, by reaching the youngest readers and materializing their spiritual pursuits in printed illustrations in books, in the hands of the children, achieved that type of connection, communication, synergy and unique kind of magic that occurs between the artist and the young child's soul.

"The children's book, often a large an attractive object, helps children to learn about language and life, contains visual jokes, (e.g., connected to facial expressions) and portrays key aspects of a child's emotional life. The illustration in such a book serve to amplify (as well as resonation with a child, they may also resonate with an adult reader) and to articulate aspects of life that cannot be communicated with words." (Hall 2011: 112). It is very likely that every child would agree with Lewis Carroll's Alice who says: "And what is the use of a book, without pictures or conversation?!" Nevertheless, a book with pictures, as a hybrid text, a unit comprised of visual text and verbal text, is perhaps one of the most striking examples of artistic artefacts which is, in the well-known triad - author-artwork-audience, necessarily oriented towards the third member of the triad, the youngest audience. Then again, the youngest audience, i.e. children and young people, is also a broad term. First, the age is set as a determinant to which the illustrator must adapt in order to achieve quality communication. In addressing children through art there has always been a struggle between the didactic and the aesthetic, between adapting to and indulging the sensitive percipient and the necessity of adults to impose certain values on children, including the aesthetic and artistic criteria. In the context of this exhibition, the artistic value of these illustrations surely has priority over their educational, didactic and tendentious aspects.

The collective creative spirit is like a mosaic made out of parts that represent each of the 25 Serbian illustrators of children's books, which have been published in the last 10 or so years by domestic and foreign publishers and collected at the exhibition "Contemporary Serbian Children's Book Illustrators".

These are our contemporaries, current, active or influential in the field of illustration in the Serbian publishing arena of illustrated children's books, but parallelly engaged by foreign publishers as well. Most of these artists, worthy heirs of the first Serbian professionally-oriented children's illustrator Milivoje Mauković (1851 - 1881) (Lakićević Pavićević 1994: 10), reside in Serbia or are still connected to Serbia by origin, education and professional engagements. That is why the title of the exhibition contains the wording - Serbian Illustrators, and not - Serbian Illustrations because a part of the represented illustrations at the exhibition has been published abroad. In addition to the given time frame according to which the books had to have been published within the last 10 or so years, with an emphasis on more recent artwork, but not at all costs, in some cases the final selection of books was influenced by the illustrators themselves, by the topics, connectedness or relationship with other selected works at the exhibition, a desire to create one of the possible cross-sections of illustrations done by Serbian artists that is representative, but does not intend to become a strict measure of who the best 25 Serbian illustrators for children are. The objectivity of the selection was based on the number of published books, the reputation of the publisher and the prizes won by most of the illustrators, but a personal note was also present, consciously and deliberately, as inevitable and unavoidable when the selection is made by a single person. One of the goals of this selection was to achieve a generational diversity, with an emphasis on the younger and middle generations, but also on a generation of the youngest illustrators who have shown promise by their work thus far. Also, artists who are not engaged exclusively or primarily in illustration for children, but who stood out and became noticed after certain projects, have deliberately been included in the selection.

The following illustrations are present at the exhibition: from the bards of Serbian illustration. namely professors Rastko Ćirić and Dušan Petričić, to the youngest authors whose books have been well-received in the last few years - Marica Kicušić, Tanja Stevanović, Milica Radenković, Manja Ćirić, Luka Tilinger, Stefan Katanić; through the authors of the younger and middle generation, such as Aleksa Gajić, Dušan Pavlić, Tihomir Čelanović, Aleksa Jovanović, Maja Veselinović, Aleksandar Zolotić, Kosta Milovanović, Ivica Stevanović, Ana Grigorjev, Jovana Ukropina, Bojana Dimitrovski, Mladen Anđelković, who have very serious bibliographies and prizes in their professional histories, to the "stars" among illustrators, like the witty and humorous master of Serbian illustration Bob Živković. Painters, who occasionally turn to the world of illustrations, can also be found here, as is the case with Nebojša Đuranović, as can authors who are not primarily or dominantly engaged in illustration for children, but who occasionally dabble in it, like Marija Jevtić, David Vartabedijan or Boban Savić Geto with books that can be intended for all ages. Many of them parallelly deal with comics, animations, caricatures, video games, design, which is also reflected in their work.

The thematic scope of this selection is purposefully diverse and demonstrates the ability of transformation of Serbian illustrators in dealing with various narratives, belonging both to national and world heritage or to the heritage of other nations, and universal topics, as well as their ability to adapt to the needs of the publisher and the ultimate target group - the children: from mythological and national topics related to the history and tradition of the Serbian people, through topics related to the heritage and culture of other nations and their stories, to the very modern topics related to the digital world; through lyrical, poetic, flickering motifs from the children's world of games and leisure, fairy-tale romantic images, and grotesque, frightening, dark images that serve to prepare the young child for the inevitabilities of life that will surely follow; the illustrations contain a wide variety of animals, from mythological animals through characters in fables, African and other animals that are not present in our Pannonian and Balkan surroundings, to domestic tame animals, the egregious friends of the children's world.

The motifs illustrated by Serbian illustrators range from the cult hero of Serbian children's poetry "the fearsome lion" who eats a tram, as drawn by Stefan Katanić, to Čelanović's lion with a woodpecker from a fable, through the "imaginative giraffe" drawn by Aleksa Jovanović, Masha and the Bear drawn by Ana Grigorjev - who drink tea and eat cakes, but also the aggressive bear drawn by Mladen Anđelković who frightened a boy, an old lady with wings drawn by Milica Radenković, the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 drawn by Nebojša Đuranović, the seagull drawn by Boban Savić Geto, Serbian medieval ruler Stefan Nemanja and Hercules drawn by Jovan Ukropina, the endearing cat Cicko, who came to love the winter, drawn by Bojana Dimitrovski, Marko the Cat drawn by Kosta Milovanović, but also the cat with Dušan Petričić's "household ghosts", followed by the "winged children" drawn by Aleksandar Zolotić, children of various skin colours with pets drawn by Tanja Stevanović, Bash Tchelik drawn by Rastko Ćirić, the headless horseman drawn by Ivica Stevanović, the classic Cinderella drawn by Manja Ćirić, and an entirely different princess drawn by Bob Živković jumping on a dragon's head, while the dragon drawn by Dušan Pavlić cries atop a modern building, and the dragon drawn by Aleksa Gajić smokes a pipe. The monsters, dragons and scary creatures are tamed and not always very dangerous, and the princesses are no longer so helpless. The range of these illustrations moves from grotesque and mildly horrifying to humorous, from lyrical and flickering, romantic, fairy-tale-like, to fantastic and mythological.

The exhibition includes both purely digitally produced illustrations, as well as those that were created by combining the drawings and subsequent digital colouring, but also those that were entirely created by using the traditional techniques of watercolour, gouache, drawing, graphite, drawing ink, oil on canvas, etc. The fine transitions and intertwining of techniques and styles can also be felt, as is the case, for instance, with Aleksa Jovanović, whose creations are produced entirely with the use of digital technology, even though he is a painter by education, his illustrations possess the elements of paintings, with visible movements of the digital brush, fine textures, and warmth, that radiate.

What characterizes the illustrations in the exhibition of Serbian illustrators that were created by digital means, is that they possess a liveliness, ease, spirit, charm, and overly-necessary emotions, regardless of the technology that often makes 21st-century illustrations appear cold and artificial.

What is evident in contemporary Serbian illustration presented at this exhibition is a significant influence of caricatures and comics, and lately of video games and animations that some authors are parallelly engaged in. The influence of painting is somewhat less obvious but still present. From expressive, nervous strokes, to subtle, gentle gradients, thick paste and polished surfaces, pure black-and-white to the different colour range. What is absent are some larger experiments, there are no abstract excursions, no significant toying with the form, no serious displacement from the permanent, figurative, conventional representation of the world in illustrations for children. Illustrations that are radically more innovative in terms of technique have also rarely been published. This is probably the result of the publisher's unwillingness to take major financial risks and make breakthroughs in the Serbian market. However, it is my belief that this does not have to represent a flaw, but that it is merely a fact. The illustrators have found a way to reshape their spirit in the framework of existing possibilities, to transform and channel their creativity in the desired direction, and yet remain faithful to their own selves and artistically consistent. This, in a way, is the very nature of illustrative work, to remain faithful to one's true self and yet adaptable enough to new books, new projects, new writers, editors, publishers.

A respectable Serbian children's writer, Gordana Maletić, says, on the topic of the market's influence on illustration: "It so happens that outstanding illustrators, who offer their services to different publishers in these places, are often rejected because their drawing style does not fit into the current trend. In this way, the global publishing offer, both themed and artistic, becomes harmonized. The publishing houses that cultivate their own styles and ideas, regardless of the leading trends, are truly rare. This causes picture books to look identical in the West as in the East, which at times seems absurd" (Maletić 0000: 76).

If an exhibition of non-commercial, artistically valuable children's books that were never published was to be made, or a selection of projects or student works, the potential exhibition would surely be significantly different, in any country, and Serbia as well.

Andrew Hall, Subject Leader in Illustration on the BA Graphic Design course at Central Saint Martin's College of Art & Design in London, teaches us, in his book on illustration: "A good children's book is reliant on a good story – though some illustrators do write and illustrate their own books, the majority of illustrators work with established children's authors" (Hall 2011: 113). The illustration is practically inextricably tied to the story, the word, text, regardless of whether it stands next to the illustration or the illustration exists independently, and it transfers the message exclusively in the visual language. In a time when images are used to abundantly and rapidly communicate, the skill of visual communication, in addition to the primary aesthetic and artistic values, represents a very important factor in the valuation of an illustration, and the same goes for children's illustration.

One of the first masters of visual communication, in concert with writers or without them, is Dobrosav Bob Živković. In the exhibited illustrations we see a princess jumping on a harmless dragon's head, instead of being a prisoner of a fearsome and invincible monster, while the monsters from another book are, instead of being terrifying - hilarious. Živković has managed to make the terrifying creatures helpless and humorous and to display their weaknesses and flaws. Are these not human flaws as well? "He thus confronts us with our own imperfection and with the imperfection of the world we live in, but also helps us to accept and bear this imperfection with more ease. By laughing at ourselves and others, we discover pieces of freedom and joy that we have lost in our childhoods" (Ljuštanović 2011: 81).

For Dušan Petričić, another example of the mastery of the visual narrative, the winner of the annual Canadian Children's Literature Award¹, the

¹ Dušan Petričić and writer Katie Stinson have won the tenth annual Canadian Children's Literature Award in the field of children's literature as authors of the book "The Man with a Violin". It is an award given by the TD Banking Group in cooperation with the Canadian Children's Book Centre.

world-famous designer Mirko Ilić said: "Dušan Petričić belongs to a very small group of illustrators, such as Milton Glaser, Saul Steinberg, Heinz Edelmann, George Hardie. These are illustrators with very strong conceptual ideas. Their concept is not, as in most cases, one-sided. It is a spectrum, from the narrative, abstract, symbolic, to the purely aesthetic" (Jovanović 2008: 33).

In collaboration with writer Dubravka Ugrešić, he illustrates "household ghosts", tiny, mostly invisible mythical beings. Instead of mermaids, dwarfs, witches, unicorns, these new mythological creatures are "household ghosts", because "the fruits of human imagination" (Ugrešić 2010: 4–5) have changed as a result of changing lifestyles. Petričić is the illustrator for these types of challenges, "household ghosts" are not common imagery from children's books, we do not have a previously accepted idea of how they might look like, which requires drawing skills, a highly developed imagination and their skilful use for fine and aesthetically valuable visual narration.

I would especially like to point out another two illustrators, when it comes to artistic originality and authenticity of the visual text at this exhibition: the cats drawn by Kosta Milovanović and the mouse that keeps drawing and erasing himself, drawn by Luka Tilinger. Both authors are characterized by minimalistic expression, reduced colours, with an emphasis on the story and message more than on the likeability, appeal and "pleasure in the (visual) text". Here, it is the message that is the main aspect, that requires reading, understanding and emphasizes the true skill of the modern way of transmitting visual text, akin to design, posters, quick, simple and efficient forms of communication.

In a few simple strokes and surfaces, Luka Tilinger has shown us a mouse who keeps drawing and erasing himself with an eraser and demonstrated all of his nervousness and fear in front of a cat whose presence before him is indicated only by shadow. If I erase myself, I will be saved, and if I draw myself and be what I am – a mouse – thus achieving the fullness of my identity, I could be eaten by a cat. To be or not to be. So much has been expressed with such a small number of strokes. Skilfully and smartly done.

The cats, drawn by Kosta Milovanović, strongly correspond to the narrative of the book and in the assemblages of symbols tell us the poem of the Mrnjavčević cats, Marko the tomcat and his love, a black cat, thereby alluding to the entire context related to the Serbian medieval ruling Mrnjavčević family and the fearless national hero Marko Kraljević (Mrnjavčević). So, the tomcat named Marko Mrnjavčević is a fine symbol of a modern national children's hero who aspires to his love and true purpose of life, the eternal connection of Yin and Yang - i.e. of both the mouse and the cheese in the illustration - of the body and the spirit, of this world and the other, "between the reality and a dream" (as said by the author of the book, Pop D. Đurđev, quoting the great Serbian poet Laza Kostić, and visually exemplified by the illustrator).

According to the words of Jan Uličiansky "Each national literature for children and young people has its own small hero, who against all odds manages to find his place in the big wide

world. In Slovak literature this is Janko Hraško. Jonny Pes can serve as just such an example of a small big hero." (Slovak children's book 2009: 16). The tomcat Marko Mrnjavčević is a new children's hero, but also an intertextual allusion to the mythical national hero, i.e. the spirit of a nation and its tendency for preservation through idealized mythical personalities, translated into the children's world in the collaboration of writers and illustrators. These are the new/old heroes and mythical characters adapted to the digital time, just like Živković's princess who jumps on a dragon's head and the "household ghosts" of Dušan Petričić. Some heroes in the exhibition are traditionally painted ("The Battle of Kosovo", Nebojša Duranović), and some characters from the past look like characters from animated films or comics. (Stefan Nemanja and Hercules, as drawn by Jovan Ukropina). But, whether they appear in the form of a knight, a boy, a princess or a tomcat, whether they are done in a thick paste of oil paints, digitally, in the form of comics or posters, these heroes are all still present and overly-needed as the foundation of the collective unconscious and the matrix of the preservation of humanistic values.

"The heroic act that is to be performed today is not the same as in the time of Galileo, where there was darkness then, there is now light; but also, where there was light then, there is now darkness. The modern heroic act must be an attempt to reintroduce light to the lost Atlantis of the coordinated soul" (Kembel : 330). The contemporary children's hero, tomcat Marko Mrnjavčević, through the very cover illustration of the picturebook, but also cover illustration of this entire exhibition, brings light to the modern alienated man, and the alienated child, and offers renewed love and affection as the brightest humanistic value, overly-needed in a cold, digital world. A good children's book teaches "what it means to be human" and brings about a "recognition of what the truth is" (Hall 2011: 112).

M.A. Senka Vlahović, Exhibition Curator

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Illustrator: Mladen Anđelković

Book: "Lo and Behold 2" [orig. Vidi čuda 2], Official Gazette, Belgrade, National Library "Stefan Prvovenčani" Kraljevo, Serbia 2015. (4 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Tihomir Čelanović

Book: "Famous Fables: The Woodpecker and the Lion", Luma works, London, UK 2018. (1 illustration exhibited) Another book's illustrations on the exhibition: Nikola Đuričko, "The Adventures of a Boy Named Johnny" [orig. Dogodovštine jednog Džonija], Vulkan, Belgrade, Serbia 2018. (2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Manja Ćirić Book: "Cinderella" [*orig. Pepeljuga*], Kreativni centar, Belgrade, Serbia, 2019. (2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Rastko Ćirić

Book: "Bash Tchelik : Serbian Folk Tale", The English Book, Belgrade, Serbia 2010. (2 illustration exhibited)



Illustrator: Bojana Dimitrovski Book: Dana Todorović, "The Adventures of Cicko"

Book: Dana Todorović, "The Adventures of Cicko" [orig. Cickove avanture], Kreativni centar, Belgrade, Serbia 2016. (2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Nebojša Đuranović Book: Nebojša Đuranović, "Serbian Knights in the Age of the Nemanjić Family" [orig. Srpski vitezovi u doba Nemanjića], Evro Book, Belgrade, Serbia 2018.

(1 illustration exhibited)



Illustrator: Aleksa Gajić Book: David Albahari, Siniša Banović [et al.], "Serbian Folk Fairy Tales: For the Children of the 21st Century" [orig. SRPSKE narodne bajke : za decu XXI veka], Čarobna Book, Belgrade, Serbia 2012.

(2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Ana Grigorjev Book: "Masha and the Bear" [*orig. Maša i medved*], Evro Book, Belgrade, Serbia, 2017. (1 illustration exhibited)



Illustrator: Marija Jevtić Book: Andreas Eschbach, "Aquamarine" [orig. Ak-vamarin], ProPolis Books, Belgrade, Serbia 2018. (1 illustration exhibited)



Illustrator: Aleksa Jovanović Book: Nikoleta Novak, "The Imaginative Giraffe" [orig. Maštovita žirafa], Pčelica, Čačak, Serbia 2017. (2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Stefan Katanić

Book: Dušan Radović, "Why Do Children Pick Their Noses?" [orig. Zašto deca čačkaju nos?], Booking, Belgrade, Serbia 2013. (2 illustrations exhibited) Another book's illustrations on the exhibition: Dušan Radović, "Where Is the Mistake?" [orig. Gde je greška?], Booking, Belgrade, Serbia 2015. (2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Marica Kicušić

Book: Zorica Bajin Đukanović, "Little Love Poems" [orig. Male ljubavne pesme], Kreativni centar, Belgrade, Serbia 2017. (1 illustration exhibited)



Illustrator: Kosta Milovanović

Book: Dušan Pop Đurđev, "The Mrnjavčević Cats" [orig. Mrnjavčevići], Pčelica, Čačak, Serbia 2016. (6 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Dušan Petričić

Book: Dubravka Ugrešić, "Household Ghosts" [orig. Kućni duhovi], Kreativni centar, Belgrade, Serbia, 2010. (2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Dušan Pavlić

Book: Ana Đoković, "A Terrifyingly Terrifying Story" [orig. Strašno strašna priča], Kreativna mreža, Knjiga u centru, Zagreb, Croatia 2018. (2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Milica Radenković

Book: "Serbian Folk Fairy Tales" [orig. Srpske narodne bajke], Laguna, Belgrade, Serbia 2017. (2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Boban Savić Geto

Book: Richard Bach, "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" [orig. Galeb Džonatan Livingston], Vulkan, Belgrade, Serbia, 2013. (1 illustration exhibited)



Illustrator: Ivica Stevanović

Book: "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow", Seed Media, USA 2015. (2 illustrations exhibited) Another book's illustrations on the exhibition: "Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves", Seed Media, USA 2015. (2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Tanja Stevanović Book: Emma Carlson Berne, "My pets, your pets, our pets", Cantata Learning, USA 2018. (1 illustration exhibited)



Illustrator: Luka Tilinger Book: Vule Žurić, "A Novel Without a Closet" [orig. Roman bez ormana], Official Gazette, Belgrade, Serbia 2017. (2 illustrations exhibited)

Another book's illustrations on the exhibition: Vladislava Vojnović, "Avram, Bogdan, Tread the Water" [orig. Avram, Bogdan, vodu gaze], Official Gazette, Belgrade, Serbia 2016. (2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Jovan Ukropina Book: Slobodan Staničić, "Stefan Nemanja Welcomes Son Rastko" [orig. Stefan Nemanja dobija sina Rastka], Pčelica, Čačak, Serbia 2014. (1 illustration exhibited)

Another book's illustrations on the exhibition: "Hercules in the Underworld" [orig. Herakle u podzemnom svetu], Pčelica, Čačak, Serbia 2013. (1 illustration exhibited)



Illustrator: David Vartabedijan Book: David Vartabedijan, "An Illustrated

Book: David Vartabedijan, "An Illustrated Rock'n'Roll Guide" [orig. Ilustrovani rokenrol vodič], Pčelica, Čačak, Serbia 2014. (1 illustration exhibited)



Illustrator: Maja Veselinović Book: A. S. Pushkin, "A Tale About a Fisherman

Book: A. S. Pushkin, "A Tale About a Fisherman and a Fish" [orig. Bajka o ribaru i ribici], Kreativni centar, Belgrade, Serbia 2018. (1 illustration exhibited)



Illustrator: Aleksandar Zolotić

Book: Srđan Dragojević, "Winged Children" [orig. Krilata deca], Laguna, Belgrade, Serbia 2015. (2 illustrations exhibited)



Illustrator: Dobrosav Bob Živković

Book: Ema Pongrašić, "About a Dragon Who Loved Flowers" [orig. *O zmaju koji je volio cveće*], Knjiga u centru, Zagreb, Croatia 2015. (1 illustration exhibited) Another book's illustrations on the exhibition: Zoran Penevski, "A Book of Monsters to Make You Burst Out Laughing: The First Witty Collection of Terrifying Jokes" [orig. Knjiga da pukneš od monstruma: prva duhovita zbirka strašnih viceva], Kreativni centar, Belgrade, Serbia 2013. (2 illustrations exhibited)

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