

The Return of Jugoslovenka: An Unrequited Love Affair

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How to cite this article:

[Jasmina Tumbas. "The Return of Jugoslovenka: An Unrequited Love Affair." *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*. Fall 2020]

ABSTRACT:

This essay considers women's emancipation in Socialist Yugoslavia as central to the socialist project. I focus on the feminist art of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as contemporary engagements with the question of Yugoslavia. I put in conversation performance works by Sanja Iveković, Vlasta Delimar, Marina Gržinić, and Šejla Kamerić. The title of this essay, "Return of Jugoslovenka: An Unrequited Love Affair" points to how contested the position of Yugoslav women was during socialism, and how much it remains so today, albeit for very different reasons. As I show in the article, Yugoslav women in the arts embraced socialism as a political paradigm but vehemently resisted its patriarchal violence. I argue their art and work remain critical sites of feminist resistance to this day.

This essay is an excerpt from Jasmina Tumbas's forthcoming book, "I Am Jugoslovenka!" *Feminist Performance Politics During & After Yugoslav Socialism* (Manchester University Press).

Jugoslovenka, or Yugoslav woman, is a term that encompasses multiple generations of women who lived under or were born during Yugoslav socialism. Legendary folk performer Lepa Brena raised this term to cult level when she released her song “Jugoslovenka” in 1989, delivering an epic celebration of Yugoslavia’s socialist multiculturalism just a brief couple of years before the country began to disintegrate into war. In the 1990s, this pan-Slavic identity was broken up into regional identities that became the basis of the independent nations of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. This essay uses the figure of Jugoslovenka to hone in on the feminist art of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as contemporary engagements with the question of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. While the end of socialism made matters much worse for minorities in Yugoslavia, feminist performance strategies have continued to facilitate and inspire resistance against the patriarchal, nationalist, and divisive politics that motivated the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and continue to stoke ethnic divisions to this day.

My use of the term Jugoslovenka is strategic, as it offers a way to bridge women’s cultural contributions from diverse class backgrounds, cultural milieus, and eras, spanning from artists, curators, and feminist academics in the 1970s to underground performance and video artists, neofolk popular cultural figures, beauty contestants, film stars, emerging war-time contemporary women artists in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of these Jugoslovenkas might have never adopted that label for themselves. As such, this text does not offer an overview of all Jugoslovenkas and their cultural significance. The examples in my essay are limited to art and cultural production within major cities from only three of the six republics in the 1970s and 1980s (Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia), and Bosnia and the diaspora in the 1990s, because those cities became spaces that most forcefully engaged with feminist ideas in the arts. Many more Ju-

goslovenkas existed within more expanded fields of culture, such as traditional painting, sculpture, theatre, dance, photography, naïve painting, socialist realism, decorative arts, folklore costume design, or hay paintings by women artists such as Lozika Homolja in the small town of Palić, Serbia. It is my hope that the viewpoint of my analysis will encourage further analyses of wide-ranging Jugoslovenkas that challenge the ideological divide between high versus low culture in favor of more varied narrative of cultural production under Yugoslav socialism.

My categorization of these women under the umbrella term Jugoslovenka also deliberately resists categories of a fixed beginning or end time of the Yugoslav project, such as the idea of a completely extinguished or often-termed “former” Yugoslavia. Jugoslovenka is not an exclusively geographical metaphor, but instead a way to unfold shared feminist cultural experiences specific to Yugoslavia. This is important not only because many Jugoslovenkas are still alive today, but because I want to decipher the complexity of feminist resistance and the role of women in Yugoslav culture. In this way, I posit that the Yugoslav project is still palpable in historical and contemporary forms of feminist resistance.

Feminism and Yugoslav Socialism

A multinational and multiethnic state based on the promotion of the unification of South-Slav people, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1948–1992) was led by Marshal Tito (d. 1980), whose political program was instrumental in building a society that prided itself on egalitarian gender roles, freedom of expression and liberation through collective action. But women’s egalitarian roles were enmeshed in a patriarchal logic of emancipation from the very beginning: according to the ruling male establishment, women had “earned” the right to be granted equality. In 1942, Tito gave a speech

at the first national conference organized by the Antifascist Front of Women in Yugoslavia (AFW),¹ in which he stressed that women had “*passed the maturity test*” and had “*proven it by their lives, by their blood on the battlefield*” against German, Italian, and Hungarian fascists” (Batinić, 2015, p. 69). While the role of women in World War II was a key part of male Yugoslav leaders’ narrative on gender emancipation, feminist historian Chiara Bonfiglioli suggests that it was not socialism that brought women’s emancipation, but women’s emancipation that brought socialism to Yugoslavia (Bonfiglioli, 2007/2008). Feminist historian Sabrina P. Ramet has noted how all of the advances for women in Tito’s Yugoslavia were extremely beneficial, though mostly confined to “paper,” and that the communist leadership failed to implement ideas around gender equality in education (Ramet, 1995). Other feminists would object to the emphasis on women as mothers and servants for the Yugoslav state. According to Jelena Batinić, in the first two decades of the Yugoslav project the idea of the anti-fascist partisan Jugoslovenka, *partizanka*, “emerged as an eminent source of legitimacy for Tito’s Yugoslavia and a symbol of supranational Yugoslavism” (Batinić, 2015, p. 257). But by the 1960s and into the 1970s, the image of *partizanka* “was shaped by an ever-growing dose of misogyny and sexism” (Batinić, 2015, p. 257).

This intricate and paradoxical combination of emancipatory politics at the heart of socialism and the imposition of ever-expanding specter of patriarchal political leadership would drive what I call the feminist performance politics of women artists discussed in this essay. Although the stakes for women in Yugoslavia were unique to their political and social context, women globally shared the common burden of pervasive patriarchal attitudes. In this regard, it is important to elucidate how and why I use the term “feminist performance politics” in the Yugoslav context, when many of the women

performance artists in Yugoslavia explicitly rejected any association with the feminist movement or were indifferent to the actual movements of feminism in Yugoslavia. Why even bother looking at these works through a feminist lens? What is to be gained from such a reading? In her 1998 *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence*, (American) feminist writer Inga Muscio offers an astute insight about the scope of feminism:

The only dimly representational, identifying term that advocates truly authentic recognition for the actual realities of women in this world is ‘feminism.’ This is a relatively youthful word. Our actual realities, on the other hand, are rooted deep. We are born with them in our hearts.

Inherited them from our mothers.

Grandmothers

(Muscio, 2002, pp. xxiv-xxv).

Muscio suggests that feminism is merely a word that encapsulates generational struggles of female experience. One need not explicitly act as a feminist to be one. Rather, simply acknowledging the complexities of womanhood and the struggles imposed by patriarchy across generations positions one within the broad scope of feminism. This decidedly broad definition of feminism resonates deeply with my own positionality towards the question of feminism and Yugoslav nationhood. As a young immigrant woman of the Yugoslav diaspora during the breakup of the country in the early 1990s, I came of age in Germany with a working-class Yugoslav mother and spent most of my youth and adolescence working illegally as a seamstress. My grandmother, too, was a working-class woman from Yugoslavia who had spent decades in Germany as a *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker/labor mi-

grant), working in clothes washing-and-drying factories and later as a seamstress. Both of these women were matriarchs in our families, role models in their perseverance and independence from men. Neither one considered herself a feminist, nor did they participate in feminist organizing. My grandmother never went to school, and my mother never made it past high school. Yet both of them taught me more about emancipatory resistance than much of my higher education, or many of the feminist texts that I have read since. Most importantly, their teachings did not come from the academy, but from lived experiences under Yugoslav socialism, which despite its patriarchal foundation still, at its core, empowered women.

In these lived experiences, resistance is deeply tied to action more than, to my knowledge, any written doctrine. Even on the most nominal or private scale, action can have political dimensions. The site of the female body (cis or trans) is a site of resistance, because female-identified bodies are burdened with having to negotiate the political weight of patriarchal power despite (and sometimes because of) advances in gender equality. Feminist art historian and curator Jelena Petrović has argued that the figure of Jugoslovenka was “double burdened (inside and outside the home),” regardless of “the modernist and new socialist image of an independent, working woman who had all rights to decide about herself and to choose her way of life” (Petrović, 2018, p. 5). Jugoslovenkas had to confront the “survival of patriarchy in socialism” (Petrović, 2018, p. 5). Similar to the emergence of alternative feminisms like womanism in the United States, I highlight the figure of Jugoslovenka in feminist performance to move beyond U.S. and Western European contexts to a regionally specific discussion of feminist strategies —not feminist movements — in Yugoslavia.

It is also important to remember that what set Yugoslav women apart from feminists in the West was how they constituted a genera-

tion of women whose mothers bore the legacy of partisan resistance to fascism, and who helped build socialist Yugoslavia and establish its progressive laws for women's rights. Many of those women had seen their rights diminish shortly after the establishment of Yugoslavia. But progress for women, such as maternity leave, abortion rights, and literacy, was still unequivocally tied to the Yugoslav project. As such, the generation of artists and curators from the 1970s onwards had inherited the complex cultural legacy of both emancipation and traditionalism from their mothers. This was a contentious relationship that involved a deep political identification with Yugoslav principles of socialist liberation alongside an equally deep mistrust in the patriarchal ideologies that shaped and limited women's experiences in Yugoslavia.

My use of Jugoslovenka is politically charged and emphasizes feminist body-centered work, which summons bodily resistance to a set of political struggles that concern women and the implications of structural patriarchal violence in Yugoslavia. This, of course, connotes historical evocations of the term feminism, consciousness-raising efforts, and activist organizing, particularly in Western countries. My evocation of the term is certainly haunted by these ideas, but it rejects the implied coherence of such an ideology and instead focuses more on a shared impulse by these artists to confront systems of power and the ways they affected women in Yugoslavia.

Jugoslovenkas of 1970s: Feminist Leadership in Yugoslavia's New Art Practice

Jugoslovenkas were some of the most important protagonists within the "New Art Practice" in Yugoslavia during the 1970s.² Coined by Belgrade-based art historian Ješa Denegri to describe an extremely rich and wide-ranging movement of experimental art in Yugoslavia, here I single out works that exemplify new directions in

feminist performance politics as resistance to patriarchal nationalism in Yugoslavia. Feminist curator Dunja Blažević led Belgrade's Student Cultural Center (SKC) in the 1970s (1971-1979) with a political agenda that often critiqued the socialist state and its cultural policies and introduced women's leadership into art exhibitions, conferences, catalogue texts, and performances.³ She was, according to Branislav Dimitrijević, "oriented towards the idea of [the] SKC as a 'meeting point' of radical youth culture and the political establishment," and exemplified "those progressive and younger communist [e.g. socialist] officials who tried to be sensitive to the idea that the 'new society' should bring up 'new art' too" (Dimitrijević, 2006, p. 243). Branislav Jakovljević has noted that within student and activist circles, the SKC "was one of very few tangible gains made by Belgrade students in their June 1968 uprising" (Jakovljević, 2016, p. 145). In an interview with literary feminist historian Zsófia Lóránd, Blažević remembered a conflict she had with the Central Committee, when they pushed to replace the first director of the SKC, Petar Ignjatović, who had been a key protagonist in the 1968 student protests. Along with five other program directors at the SKC, Blažević "protested against the decision based on the lack of professional knowledge of those making the decision" (Lóránd, 2018, p. 93). She recalled: "So, we sent the CC representative away, we were not afraid at all" (Lóránd, 2018, p. 93).

Blažević began to organize the famous April Meetings in 1972, attracting numerous international artists, including Joseph Beuys, Gina Pane, and Ana Mendieta. The SKC quickly developed an international reputation for performance art, in large measure due to the respect garnered by Raša Todosijević, Zoran Popović, Neša Paripović, Gergelj Urkom, Marina Abramović, and Era Milivojević, artists known as the Group of Six, who Blažević supported with her curatorial leadership. Other women leaders and organizers included Bil-

jana Tomić and Bojana Pejić. During the April Meeting in 1975, Blažević, Tomić, and Pejić organized one of the first explicitly feminist events at the SKC: a dialogue called “Women in Art” that focused on the relationship between women and social change with specific emphasis on culture, revolution, and capitalism (Vesić, n.d.): One of the main points of discussion during the April Meeting happened on April 9, 1975, with the headline: “Discussion on claim: a piece of this art-ess [female artist] is so good as if it is a piece of a man.”⁴ Participants included women artists from Yugoslavia alongside visiting artists Iole de Freitas (a Brazilian based in Italy), Natalia LL (Poland), and Ulrike Rosenbach (Germany).⁵ According to Dragica Vukadinović, who began working as an assistant to Biljana Tomić at the SKC in 1971, this discussion was a catalyst for a feminist approach to art and organized more formal and designated forums for the discussion of women in art.⁶

Three years later, Blažević organized the first feminist conference in the region called *Drug-ca Žena. Žensko Pitanje. Novi Pristup?* with feminist sociologist Žarana Papić, who took the lead organizing the conference. *Drug-ca* is shorthand for “drugarica,” which translates to “female comrade” (or “comrade-ess”) in English (Bonfiglioli, 2018, p. 241). The fully translated title is “Comrade Woman. The Woman Question. A New Approach?” (Bonfiglioli, 2018, p. 241). Other organizers included Dragica Vukadinović, Jasmina Tešanović, Nada Ler-Sofronić (Lóránd, 2018, p. 32), as well as the assistant for the SKC Gallery, Pejić. The *Drug-ca Žena* conference plan states at one point:

Woman lived through her history reduced to only one activity (biological and socializing [sic] reproduction) and to one limited social space (the private domain of the family). The institution of marriage and family be-

came the exact reflection of the alienated [sic] social relation between the sexes representing thus the only and “natural” vocation, veiling all forms of her factual impotence and hindering all other possibilities.⁷

The metaphor of reproduction is therefore critical in thinking about the patriarchal construction of art and labor and the ways in which it imposes unjust limitations on women. This 1978 conference sparked feminist organizing across the different republics of Yugoslavia and internationally and raised awareness of just how much Yugoslav socialism had ignored and failed women. Jelena Vesić has noted that the conference was considered an “internal critique” of the Yugoslav system, stemming from both feminist and socialist premises” (Vesić, n.d.). “I thought that the laws of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ) were great,” Vukadinović remembers. “I wasn’t aware that the praxis was different.... During and after the conference I began to understand that the situation was not so great” (Lóránd, 2018, p. 33).

Zagreb-based Sanja Iveković was well aware of socialism’s failure to fully get past sexism and most prolifically thematized her resistance to patriarchal violence in her work. To elucidate the depth of her critique of socialist patriarchal sexism, I want to explicate moments of feminist resistance operating in one of Iveković’s works: *He Is Looking at Me All the Time*, circa 1979. Iveković has been internationally recognized as Zagreb’s most outspoken, powerful feminist artist of the generation of the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia. Like many feminists of her time, she was not an opponent of socialism per se, but rather, she was disenchanted with the patriarchal erasure of women and their agency in the Yugoslav project. She was also a woman artist who worked in a predominantly male-dominated art scene. Using her own body, performance, drawings, sculpture, collage, research-based projects, film, and participatory works, Ive-

ković aimed to unfold intricate as well as banal forms of sexism, with a sustained commitment to other women's experiences that remains unmatched to this day. In her collage, *He Is Looking at Me All the Time*, she thematized the omnipresence, threat, and invasiveness of the specter of a male president: this work featured a black and white photograph of Tito placed right above a drawing of a female figure in bed, who carries a surprised and worried facial expression, with her hands trying to cover her naked body with a much-too-short blanket that bears the hammer and sickle insignia, leaving her naked legs exposed (Fig. 1). Through the deliberate use of humor, Iveković's collage made palpable the sense of Tito as the male gaze incarnate, an omnipresent dictator who sexualizes and controls women, invades their privacy, and objectifies them, be it in the bedroom, the school, or the office, pervading public and private space alike.

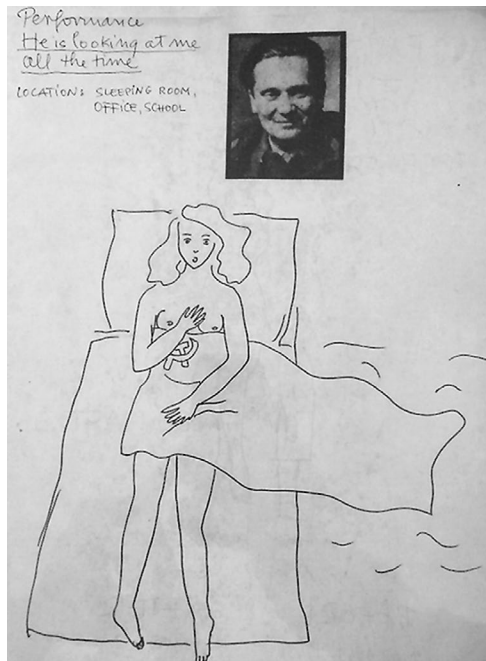


Fig. 1: Sanja Iveković, *He is Looking at Me All the Time*, circa 1979 (Drawing and Script for Performance) (Sanja Iveković, private archive)

Iveković renders this trenchant critique in the style of a cute, sweet, simple line drawing, akin to a child's private drawing. The playfulness of an otherwise sober feminist critique is methodical here, as the collage also signals a libidinal relationship between Yugoslav socialism and its women, Jugoslovenkas. What the scanty blanket signals are the shortcomings of Yugoslav socialism's promises for women: the blanket is positioned like a proletariat flag. Its horizontal use exacerbates the failings of the horizontally oriented egalitarianism of socialism, unable to protect women from patriarchal invasion and sexualization. The official state ideology, under the veneer of emancipation and gender equality, had reasserted the status of the woman as sexual object, both privately and publicly. The flag itself becomes an erotic symbol instrumentalized to sexualize women in the name of socialist ideology, which decreed that its citizens owed their bodies to the state, the revolution and their leader.

The image of the father of the people, as powerful as Tito's, was inevitably also libidinally heteronormative: a potent, domineering symbol of national masculinity—for women to desire, and for men to never fully attain. In the atmosphere of a new political promise, institutional relationships, and supposed sexual freedoms, the 1970s were an era in which male bosses asserted their discriminatory dominance over their female colleagues and employees.⁸ In fact, as is well known, many of the women artists gained access to male-dominated art exhibitions and actions through their personal relationships and marriages to men.⁹ Finally, Tito himself, charming with a smirk that was the signature of his perceived sex appeal, was a notorious womanizer and had been married numerous times. But by conceptualizing this work as a performance, Iveković also linked women's sexuality, the attractiveness of the beloved lifetime leader and its threatening power, and women's lack of privacy to an emancipatory urgency to escape the president's gaze—and most importantly—to reclaim one's body.

Jugoslovenka and Her Libidinal Command in the 1980s

Feminist literary critic Svetlana Slapšak has commented on the deep conservatism and sexism in the socialist left, noting that notorious womanizers like politician Dragoljub Mićunović frequently made comments during his public lectures about how there were “too many women wearing make-up and dressed up in his audience” (Slapšak, 2008, p. 93). The control over women’s bodies by socialist politicians and intellectuals, including Praxis leftists Mihajlo Marković, haunts the memories of many feminists. Feminist theorist Vesna Kesić remembers that Marković was overall tolerant of the new feminist movement, but, in contrast to Mićunović, requested: “Could you please look more feminine?” (Lóránd, 2018, p. 32). It is within this political context that we must understand Zagreb-based Vlasta Delimar’s performance work. Delimar became the most controversial proponent of the embodiment of women’s illicit desires as a form of opposition. While she challenged the paradigms of normative sexuality, she also paradoxically resisted alliance with feminism. In 1982, when Delimar applied to be a member of the Croatian Association of Artists in Zagreb, she was rejected. As she noted, it was a “pre-dominantly female Art Council” that made this decision.¹⁰ In fact, it was not unusual for Delimar to be rejected by feminist women, as her work openly embraced her desire for men’s bodies, masturbation, and S&M violence, and was often interlaced with images of the cross and church. Accusations of women who flaunted their sexuality as perpetrators of patriarchal misogyny were a common point of conflict in feminist circles in Yugoslavia as well as the West in the late 1970s. In this context, pornography and pornographic imagery, along with sexual liberation became divisive elements in feminist circles. As such, Delimar’s most well-known works, *Volim Kurac* [I Love Dick] from 1982, was one of the most provocative statements against her feminist contemporaries.

In my interview with Delimar, she explained: “It’s strange that women couldn’t recognize that I am on their side and that I am working on myself, not just for myself, but for women in general.”¹¹ She added: “Everybody has to fight for themselves. If you don’t learn to fight for yourself, you won’t have the strength to fight for others.”¹² In 1980, it became very clear that Delimar could not escape her own political context for the sake of self-expression, pleasure, or her art practice. When her first solo performance was scheduled for the spring of 1980 at the Student Cultural Center in the Gallery SC, it was put “on hold” for months because of Tito’s hospitalization and impending death. She remembered that it was not clear if or when he would die, and that as a young artist, she felt a bizarre intrusion of politics into her ability to make and present her work as an artist. “There was a huge hysteria then in Yugoslavia,” she noted. “Everybody was afraid of what will happen when Tito dies.” She added: “To me, that was so absurd, so senseless. As a young woman I thought: why should I care so much about this old man, this ‘deda Tito’ (grandpa Tito)? All I wanted to do is work.”¹³ Tito died on May 4, 1980, but she would have to wait a few more months “until the situation calmed down in the nation.” When she finally did her performance, she modeled like a mannequin, got undressed, and ended up nude in the gallery. A photograph of the performance shows her standing naked against the wall (Fig. 2). She decided to add words to the photograph to commemorate the circumstances of her performance. She explained: “Tito had put me through such an ordeal to do this performance, I had to add it to the work.”

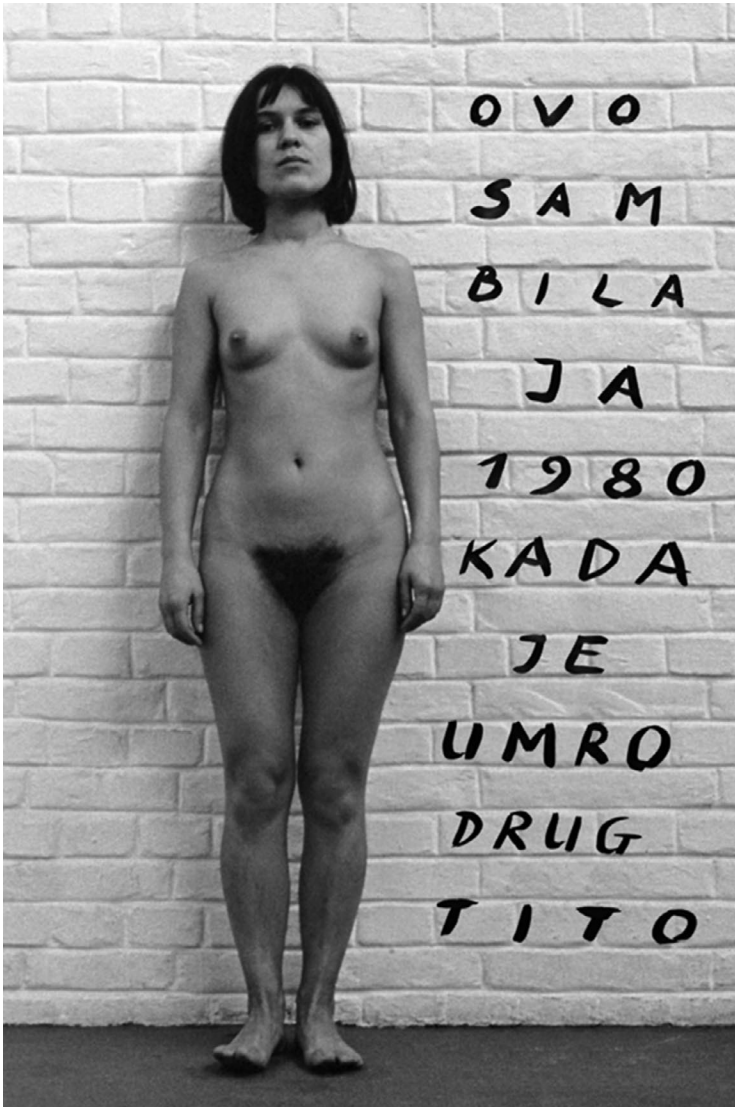


Fig. 2: Vlasta Delimar, *Ovo Sam Bila Ja 1980. Kada Je Umro Drug Tito* [This Was Me 1980, When Comrade Tito Died], 1980

Ultimately, she wrote on the photograph an inscription that translates as: “This was me in 1980 when comrade Tito died.” Despite her frustration with politics, politicians, and Tito’s inevitable meddling with her art career, her words still express a tender relationship to Yugoslavia’s leader, “comrade Tito.” Tito’s “special type of charm,” as she called it in our conversation, was very important for the ways in which Yugoslav society dealt with sexuality. Delimar took as inspiration Tito’s and other men’s narcissism and pledged that if men can be narcissists, so can she. And yet, as a woman, she pushed up against a lot of resistance to her work and the place of men in her work.

The punk, as well as gay and lesbian underground scenes in Ljubljana marked a critical turn in the arts to an aggressive embrace of questions of gender and sexuality as modes of resistance, and Delimar had her first solo show in 1985, at the Student Cultural Center in Ljubljana, ŠKUC. The show was vandalized and all of her works that included crosses were destroyed by what some suspected were “young militant Christians.”¹⁴ ŠKUC was under much more financial strain than the centers in Zagreb and Belgrade. But here, too, female leadership was key, with Marina Gržinić and Barbara Borčić as artistic directors of ŠKUC Gallery from 1982 to 1986, the most formative period for the avant-garde art scene at the time. Not only did ŠKUC Gallery present transgressive local art and performance works from Ljubljana that were rejected at every “respectable” art space, but these female curators also organized the first exhibitions in Slovenia featuring the conceptual and performance art from Belgrade and Zagreb, such as works by Delimar, Raša Todosijević, and Tomislav Gotovac, all of which confronted issues of gender, state politics, and liberation.¹⁵ The young generation of artists and musicians in Ljubljana built their art practices on these Yugoslav artists’ political works, developed a new visual language in defiance of re-

spectability politics, and expanded Yugoslavia's New Art Practice to intersect with music, video, and performance as a means to push up against prevailing norms of gender and sexuality in an unprecedented way.

As a fertile intersection of performance, music, theatre, video, and theory, underground avant-garde culture in Ljubljana produced some of the most important strides for LGBTQ subculture in the Balkan region. In fact, Gržinić has noted that the alternative culture of the 1980s skipped straight to queer cultural expression, without waiting for feminism to get there through theory.¹⁶ In 1984, the Slovenian underground band Borghesia collaborated with Gržinić in a video for their song *Cindy*, an homage to the feminist work of Cindy Sherman, featuring tableau-vivant performances by Gržinić, Zemira Alajbegović, and the openly gay and S&M fashion-wearing Borghesia frontman Aldo Ivančić (Fig. 3). Gržinić had already made work around the question of same-sex and trans desire with Aina Šmid in their 1982 *Icons of Glamour, Echoes of Death*, where one of the protagonists is a drag king who reveals a dildo between his legs. In that film, as in *Cindy*, the performers "strike poses" that embody unknown identities and play with liberation and emancipation, while expressing exhibitionistic pleasure.



Fig. 3: Marina Gržinić, *Cindy*, Tableau-vivant performances with Zemira Alajbegović for Borghesia's music video, film stills, 1984

For Gržinić, “Video becomes a conscious means for examining the politics of female pleasure” (Gržinić, 2008, p. 46). Gržinić appears as a kind of cyborgian punk ballerina in *Cindy*, wearing a white dress, which reveals her breasts, while Alajbegović and Ivancić merely wear what seem to be identical black panties. However, what stands out in this elaborate music video is the lesbian eroticism between Gržinić and Alajbegović. In one scene, we see Gržinić lying on the ground, her legs spread and Alajbegović standing right above her; in another scene, the two bare-breasted women are in the kitchen, turned towards each other, with an overflowing pot they ignore on the stove. Signifying a resistance to their imposed roles as women in the kitchen, the pot also seems to point to something brewing and overflowing in that disobedient atmosphere: their queer sexuality. At one point, Gržinić slowly turns her head towards the viewer, reminding us that she knows she is being watched, and that she is in charge of her own gaze. In another remarkable moment, Gržinić sits on the edge of the pool with spread legs, from which two small television screens with long wires protrude. The small TVs visually linked with wires to her spread legs are reminiscent of umbilical cords attached to newborns, here conduits between her body and media art. The green grassy background intensifies this cyborgian Jugoslavenka’s out-of-placeness: she defies the traditional image of a Venus in nature, and instead poses in a messy white dress with defiance and confidence linked to biomechatronic devices that make up her sexual difference. One TV is off, while the other one accentuates her female gender with an image of XXXXX chromosome. In these multiple layers of emancipatory sexuality and feminist performance in *Cindy*, the message was clear: do away with the heteronormative matrix of power and transform the domestic sphere into one of queer desire, leisure, resistance, and feminist subjectivity. Jugoslavenka is not an object submitting to the male gaze here: she embodies her own subjectivity, and she does so in defiance of normative gender roles and concomitant delimited sexual desires.

Jugoslovenka Walks into the 1990s: Yugoslav Feminist Resistance to Ethnocentrism



Fig. 4: Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, *Bilocations*, video stills, 1990

With the beginning of the 1990s, the political significance of the Yugoslav women would become pivotal in resisting male-dominated discourses of nationalism. In Gržinić and Aina Šmid's video work *Bilocations* (1990) (Fig. 4), which marks the end of the decade—just before the wars began—Gržinić and Šmid inserted the figure of the socialist woman into used footage that TV Slovenia had filmed in the South-Serbian autonomous region of Kosovo during the uprisings that followed Slobodan Milošević's abolishment of Kosovo's autonomy in 1989 and the implementation of Apartheid style measures, such as segregated schools and the removal of basic human rights for Kosovo Albanians.¹⁷ TV Slovenia did not air this material at the time; thus *Bilocations* almost uniquely bore witness to the ethnic discrimination and injustices happening to Kosovo Albanians. It is also part of an even smaller group of works (the only one to my knowledge) that centered the politics of *looking* at the conflict—the political gaze—within the agency of the socialist woman. In addition to the TV footage, Gržinić and Šmid filmed classical Ljubljana-based ballet dancer Mateja Rebolj—let's call her Jugoslovenka—on an abandoned farm and at the Astronomical Geophysical Observatory on Golovec in Ljubljana. The figure is

“bilocated”—a neologism created by the artists that they define as “the residence of the body and soul in two different places at the same time—simultaneously.”¹⁸ The film is also chromakeyed, a technique often used in newscasting because it allows the use of multiple layers on top of one another, erasing parts of various layers and allowing others to be viewed beneath and vice versa. Here, the bilocated figure of Jugoslovenka is the main subject of the chromakey technique, playing upon her dual embodiment in the following way: a) a woman-warrior, sometimes solo, sometimes tripled in chromakey, moving through landscapes and artificial videoscapes, wearing a bright red dress designed to look like a modern-day folkloristic Balkan warrior outfit or a variant of a Russian Kazachok costume; b) a fashion model lying horizontally across the screen, wearing a high-fashion modern grey suit and superimposed on scenes of conflict from Kosovo. Both iterations of the same woman, bilocated, render time and space fragmented and chaotic, while maintaining positions of visionary power.

Using a dance that imitates Japanese Noh theatre, the warrior-woman figure in red never speaks a word, but is crucial to the narrative structure of the film (Seidl, 2008, p. 267). For example, she ends up reviving what appears to be an incapacitated man lying in the forest with a ritualistic dance and a tight grip on the back of his neck, pulling him upwards and compelling him to walk, without making a sound. Here, she reminds me of the archetypal *junakinja*, a Yugoslav female-fighter who “do[es] not quail before obstacles” (quoted in Batinić, 2015, p. 65). The man recites passages from Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (1977) throughout the entire film. Jugoslovenka’s soundless, mechanical body moves through space and becomes an important marker of plot changes throughout disparate scenes. In one scene, she climbs up a ladder in a planetarium and opens up the dome for him. He, the inquisitor

who asks questions about the fate of deportees in Dachau and heart-broken lovers, ends up looking at the world through the telescope, a fantasy of optical omniscience mediated by the warrior-woman's soundless efforts and labor. Further, her journey to open up this vision and the world, has been haunted by a red sign she passed during her climb up the ladder, bearing the name of the notorious murderous Nazi doctor "Mengele." According to Gržinić, the artists had serendipitously found a Mengele tractor on the abandoned farm where they filmed *Bilocations*, which had also been the site of the farm machinery business run by relatives of the Nazi doctor (who to this day remain silent about their notorious relative).¹⁹ Male vision here is layered in meaning, interrelating genocidal violence and patriarchal gaze, facilitated by the tireless background work and help of the socialist woman. Silent as it is, her labor also implies her complicity. Gržinić and Šmid thus avoid making absolute or pure the figure of the socialist woman, instead, exhibiting Jugoslovenka's strength even as they point to her responsibility in enabling the patriarchal socialist machine.

This prophetic exposure of genocide performed in the name of patriarchal ideals and interests becomes embodied in a different but no less potent way through the figure of the fashion model in grey: the scenes of violence in Kosovo behind her are visible past the outline of her body, as well as through a round area around her left eye, erased from her face, as several other parts of her body are also effaced. The grey color of her clothes echoes the dark, industrial, polluted ground of Kosovo, accentuating the contrasting cleanliness of her guise and white skin. As the sequence goes on, every sensuous move of her hand across her body erases more of it to reveal what is happening behind her. As politicians in black suits arrive and leave in a Mercedes Benz on the streets of the uprisings in the working-class district of Kosovo, the dull grey ground is pierced by the

bright red of a tiny Mercedes Benz logo at the front of the hood of the car, which signals the nefarious branding of socialist ideology by corrupt politicians to cloak their nationalist and genocidal politics. The red color adorning the Mercedes Benz also foretells the bloody wars and bloody capitalism to come, as this was the car brand that Adolph Hitler venerated the most. Gržinić points to the grotesque collapse of the model's body with this political landscape, noting the corruption "was inserted in her eye, her intestines, and other parts of her body"; "These are pictures on the body of the former Yugoslavia," she adds, "where our memories become both psychotic and erotic."²⁰

As her bilocation illustrates, the eroticism of the socialist female body, contrasted with and connected to male-driven psychosis, is able to transform more than one reality. Bearing this weight of socialist transformation as warrior or fashion model, Jugoslovenka is fashionable and looks stunning even in a conflict zone. Her beauty and libidinal impulse, however, are anything but surface level: she is a vision and a visionary within the political landscape. To quote Gržinić once more: "The men are talking, but actually the vision of the future and the vision of history is in the head and in the body of the woman."²¹ Jugoslovenka here becomes the figure through which we can best understand what happened in the Yugoslavian underground culture of the 1980s and what followed.

But one must note here that this is not just any body of a Yugoslav woman: the context of Kosovo raises the specter of the racialized female body that would become a site of political violence in the 1990s, the stigmatized body of a Kosovo-Albanian and possibly Muslim woman. While Gržinić and Šmid did not emphasize this religious background, and the actress Rebolj was neither from Kosovo nor Muslim, *Bilocations's* Jugoslovenka today must also be seen

for how it symbolically magnifies a Muslim woman's visionary power and the centrality of her body to what was to come in the 1990s. This would become especially important for women in Bosnia and Kosovo, multi-ethnic regions whose female populations were targeted by Islamophobic Orthodox and Catholic military and paramilitary aggression during the nationalist wars using the often imposed category of Muslim identity. Under the rhetoric of divisive ethnic nationalism mobilized by the perpetrators from both Croatia and Serbia, women were labeled "Muslim, Croatian, Serbian, or Albanian" irrespective of their actual backgrounds, a label that amplified and justified (in the propaganda of the perpetrators) the sexual violence towards them.

According to Lejla Somun, the onset of the ethnically-motivated war in Sarajevo (Bosnia) was gendered, as the first victims of the siege in April 1992 were two women, Suada Dilberović and Olga Sučić, who had protested against the war (Somun, 2019). Somun adds: "Women living in bombarded cities end up being heroes of peace, while men are esteemed for the battles they win" (Somun, 2019). But some Sarajevo heroines would become famous for more than peace: for their beauty. 1993 marked the year when the legendary photos of the Miss Sarajevo contest circulated, which showed the winner, Inela Nogić, and other contestants holding up a banner stating in bold cap letters: "DON'T LET THEM KILL US." This plea for international help and support happened during the siege of Sarajevo and the celebration took place in a cellar due to constant shelling and sniper attacks. It became an international sensation when Bono wrote a song with Brian Eno, "Miss Sarajevo," featuring Luciano Pavarotti vocals and released on the U2 album *Passengers*.²²

In a 1997 *Vogue* magazine article, "Vogue's View: Armed and Glamorous," Janine di Giovanni accentuated the idea of women pre-

vailing in their beauty despite war during her experience of visiting Sarajevo when it was under siege. The subtitle, “Janine di Giovanni discovers how women find strength in stilettos, designer dresses, and midnight-blue nail polish” marks the article as a fashion piece, regardless of its heavy subject matter (di Giovanni, 1997, p. 376). Her text featured stories and images of women from diverse war-torn regions, including an insight into Miss Sarajevo winner Nogić’s life, whose “pathetic array of beauty supplies – two-year-old lipstick, broken nail files, tweezers lovingly polished, a blusher compact so worn it had a hole in the center” stood out to di Giovanni (di Giovanni, 1997, p. 376). She described in detail how Nogić put on make-up and dressed beautifully despite the shaking walls from bombings in the city:

It was midsummer of 1993, and the siege had gone on for more than a year. This city still had no running water, no electricity, no phones, no contact with the outside world... I had not bathed or washed my hair in a week. And yet Inela Nogić, seventeen years old and newly crowned as Miss Sarajevo, had awakened and, despite the shaking from incoming shells, had carefully applied make up and dressed in skintight faded Levi’s, low-cut red blouse, earrings, bracelets, and necklaces - as though she were going to an opening instead of out for walk down Sniper’s Alley (di Giovanni, 1997, p. 376).

Snipers were notorious in Sarajevo, with people going about their lives with systems of protection and routes that were never truly safe. But Sarajevo women were known to always be dressed in their best, not only to appeal to normalcy, but as a way of maintain-

ing dignity. Lejla Somun would deduce in a different context: “Women always changed their underwear and clothes before going out to the streets of Sarajevo, because the constant bombing and shelling meant that there was such a high probability of getting bombed, injured or killed.” Women remembered how they made sure to be “neat and tidy in case we ended up in the hospital emergency room” (Somun, 2019).

Bosnian artist Šejla Kamerić’s famous work, *Bosnian Girl* (2003), showed just how important it was for Yugoslav girls and women to look respectable and clean. In her self-portrait (photograph), the artist’s body was debased with a replicated graffiti written by a UNPROFOR soldier on the army barracks in Potočari, Srebrenica, from around 1994 or 1995: “No Teeth . . . ? A Mustache. . . ? Smel Like Shit [sic] . . . ? Bosnian Girl!” It is no secret how lucrative the war was for the international soldiers too, who apart from sex trafficking, had easy access to women in a precarious position during the war. As such, his words exhibited a disregard for women’s bodies, easily used and discarded, and also demonstrated what the idea of the Jugoslovenka had become in the European male imaginary just five years after Lepa Brena’s 1989 hymn: not a blonde South-East European beauty as in Brena’s video, but a besmirched, toothless woman whose racial otherness is augmented by her excessive hair growth, ridiculed in her femininity by her mustache, and above all, smelling like shit. The gorgeous photograph of Kamerić beneath the graffiti, however, unravels the strength of that prejudice. Her beauty is central to heralding her as a confident woman who survived the siege of Sarajevo and whose marked body is one surviving and living monument of Yugoslavia.

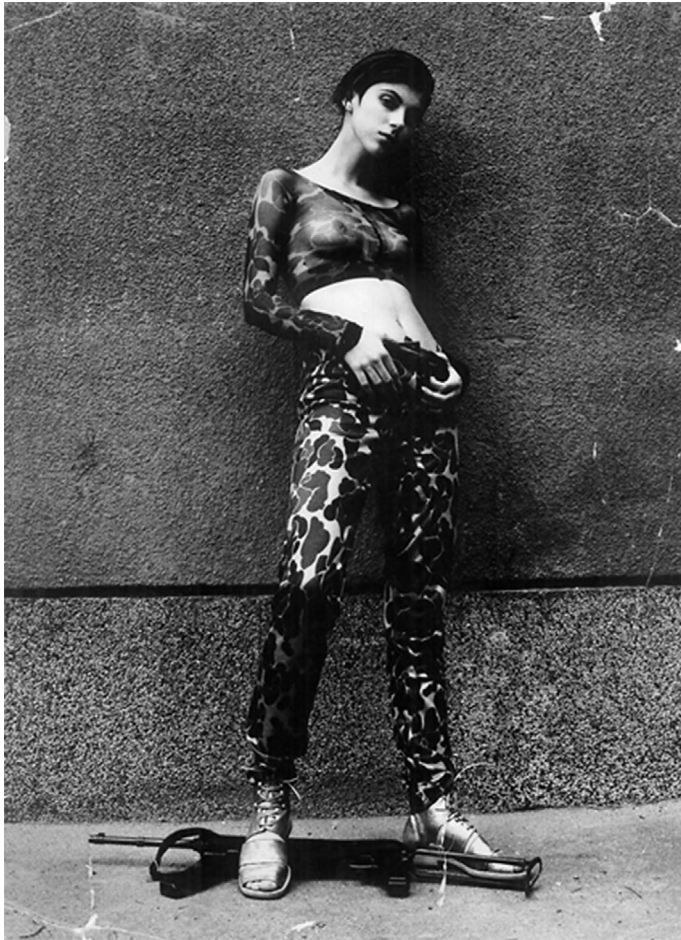


Fig. 5: Šejla Kamerić, *Behind The Scenes I*, 2019 (original photo, 1994)

Kamerić continued to use her physical beauty in her art, as well as performance works. Women performance artists are often charged with narcissism, with being too beautiful, and when they are non-white and/or non-western, with self-exoticization. The lingering sexiness, and its absurdity in the context of war, marks Yugoslav feminist performance politics, such as Kamerić photos taken in 1994 by Hannes M. Schlick for Magazine MODA Italy during the siege of Sarajevo (Fig. 5). Wearing a short and see-through camou-

flage shirt revealing her breasts, with matching pants and standing with one foot resting on a large automatic weapon, Kamerić poses like a model exposing her slender figure and bearing a melancholic and mysterious facial expression so typical for images of models. “This photo was taken during the hardest and most brutal part of my life,” Kamerić noted. She added: “But the image shows something else.”²³ At the time, Kamerić did not claim to be performing as an artist, or engaging in what is categorized as performance art proper. But her performance politics of resistance were clear nevertheless, already in 1994: her sexy body is hers; the gun is at her feet; she is dangerous; and she possesses dignity and courage. Yugoslav emancipatory resistance was equally entangled with racialized identities within the wider context of Europe, the United Nations Protection Force presence, and NATO’s surveillance, explicitly thematized in Kamerić’s *Bosnian Girl*.

Conclusion

Why is Jugoslovenka still relevant today? In recent years, new generations of historians, sociologists, theorists, literary scholars, and art historians, among others, have forged the interrelated fields of Yugoslav studies, Yugoslav histories, and Yugoslav revivals. Many of these young scholars, including myself, lived through the nationalist wars of the early 1990s as teenagers, or were scattered across the diaspora, and have faint though meaningful memories of what Yugoslavia was before the beginning of the wars. Others witnessed the disintegration of the Republic through ethnic wars with horror on-site. Crucially, celebrating socialist Yugoslavia was taboo for most of the 1990s, because individual nations (such as Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia) had forcefully declared independence from their former socialist republic and its ideas, culture, and mythology, and resented the idea of Tito’s imposed “brotherhood and unity.” But

the idea of Yugoslavia has prevailed in cultural memory and artistic discourses.

In a 2018 interview titled “I am Jugoslovenka,” Yugoslavia’s most celebrated and best-known actress, Mirjana Karanović, proclaimed:

I was born in Yugoslavia. I am a Yugoslavian. Many times after the disintegration of that country, I wondered what that meant for who I am now, especially since the formation of those new [nationalist] states [in the 1990s] came with an obligatory denunciation of any connection to that “communist prison.” Being a Yugoslavian then, or a Yugo-nostalgic today, has negative and almost derogatory implications. Today, I am called a Serb. But Yugoslavia played an important role in forming my personality, my relationship with people, towards the world around me. It is an inseparable part of my identity. ... For me, Yugoslavia was the most beautiful and most exciting country in the world ... I was endlessly proud of the fact that I lived in Yugoslavia. ... I know that country is dead forever and I’ve cried over it and have moved on. I know where I live, I’ve accepted unfriendly border guards and new stamps in my passport. And yet what I know to be true, without any doubt, is that I will continue to be a Jugoslovenka at the core of my being.²⁴ (2018, my translation)

Karanović is but one example of women from the Yugoslav generation who have remained committed to the idea of Yugoslavia. For many in the West, she is also the face of Yugoslav film and her identification as Jugoslovenka has persisted for decades, despite the negative associations with the former regime and its resistance to Serbian nationalism. The title of this essay, “Return of Jugoslovenka: An Unrequited Love Affair” points to how contested the position of Yu-

goslav women was during socialism, and how much it remains so today, albeit for very different reasons. As I have shown above, Yugoslav women in the arts embraced socialism as a political paradigm but vehemently resisted its patriarchal violence. Art historian Bojana Pejić has argued that Yugoslavia was an exceptional case of paradoxical conditions with respect to personal freedoms for women, wherein “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” went hand-in-hand with “uprooting illiteracy [for women], improving medical conditions and the child-care system,” the right to abortions, and paid maternity leave, while, at the same time, the male-dominated Communist Party propagated women’s roles as wives and mothers at home. By the 1980s, the gay and lesbian movement sprang up, an additional line of resistance, and this time not only against governmental hypocrisy, but also against socialist heteropatriarchy. This generation became one of the most important oracles of the nationalism and gendered violence to come in the 1990s, and most importantly, this generation by then already knew who was to be blamed: corrupt politicians whose ethnocentric wars ran counter to transnational feminist politics. In the 1990s, Jugoslovenkas under siege, and those in the diaspora, experienced a new level of discrimination from both the East and West; but once again, Yugoslav women like Kamberić found strength through emancipatory performance. Today, we might benefit from recognizing the strength of these generations of Yugoslav women, whose feminist performance politics were socialist, feminist, anti-nationalist, anti-capitalist, and sexually defying; an indispensable incentive to revisit socialism as a critical site for feminist resistance.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Women’s Antifascist Front of Yugoslavia was founded in 1942. It was a Yugoslav anti-fascist organization led by women partisan fighters.
- ² The term “New Art Practice” was used broadly to discuss conceptual and performance works in Yugoslavia at the time. Marijan Susovski’s 1978 exhibition, *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia 1966-1978* at the Gallery of Contemporary Art Zagreb (*Nova Umjetnička Praksa 1966-1978*) is one of the most important references in art history. See Marijan Susovski (ed.), *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia 1966-1978*. Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art Zagreb, 1978. There are slight variations in the translation and use of the term, such as “New Artistic Practice.” See “‘New Artistic Practice’ in Former Yugoslavia: From Leftist Critique of Socialist Bureaucracy to the Post-Communist Artifact in Neo-Liberal Institution Art,” in the catalogue of Prelom kolektiv and ŠKUC Gallery’s exhibition, *SKC in ŠKUC: The Case of Students’ Cultural Centre in 1970s: SKC and Political Practices of Art*. Ljubljana: ŠKUC Gallery, 2008.
- ³ Blažević served as the SKC’s gallery’s artistic director from 1971–75, and as the director of the center from 1975–79. See Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects*, 2016, p. 145.
- ⁴ Dragica Vukadinović in e-mail correspondence with the author, July 12, 2019.
- ⁵ The participants included: Gisliind Nabakowski, Katharina Sieverding, Ulrike Rosenbach, Iole de Freitas, Nicol Gravier, Natalia LL, Marina Abramović, Borka Pavićević, Nena Baljković, Irina Subotić, Ida Biard, Biljana Tomić, Jasna Tijardović, Jadranka Winterhalter and Dunja Blažević.
- ⁶ Vukadinović in e-mail correspondence with the author, July 12, 2019.

- ⁷ Comrade Woman flyer – reproduced on Tranzit, *Parallel Chronologies*: <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/woman-comrade-report.pdf>.
- ⁸ Research on the question of sexism at the workplace is burdened by the limitations of oral histories and women’s understandable hesitation to share details about the actual experiences of abuse. Rory Archer and Goran Musić discuss the significance of fieldwork and offer one case of oral history that illustrates, at least in some part, the sexual harassment at the workplace. “For example, sisters Mirjana and Gordana spoke about working in a Belgrade wood processing collective in the 1970s and 1980s. They recalled sexual harassment by managers and the trials of single parenthood in the self-managing workplace. Mirjana’s experience of joining and subsequently leaving the League of Communists reveals how some of the permutations of class and gender were experienced. As a cleaner and courier, she was encouraged to join the party in her workplace to bolster the numbers of rank and file workers. By 1985, however, Mirjana was extremely embittered by management who she believed were defrauding the collective and lying to the workers. Furthermore, she considered that her role as a party member was more of a burden than a privilege.” See Rory Archer and Goran Musić, “Approaching the socialist factory and its workforce: considerations from fieldwork in (former) Yugoslavia,” in *Labor History* 58, no. 1, 2017, pp. 57-58.
- ⁹ See Ivana Bago, “A Window and a Basement: Negotiating Hospitality at La Galerie des Locataires and Podroom - The Working Community of Artists,” in *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2-3, 2012.
- ¹⁰ Zagreb, Museum of Contemporary Art, *Vlasta Delimar: This Is I. Retrospective Exhibition 1979–2014*. Zagreb: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2014, p. 14.
- ¹¹ Delimar in conversation with the author, June 12, 2019. Translation by the author.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Zagreb, Museum of Contemporary Art, *Vlasta Delimar: This Is I*, p. 16.
- ¹⁵ Škuc Gallery, Barbara Borčić, “Artistic director of Škuc Gallery from 1982 – 1985,” <http://www.galerijaskuc.si/barbara-borcic/>.

- ¹⁶ Gržinić in conversation with the author, August 10, 2019.
- ¹⁷ Gržinić and Aina Šmid had connections to the staff at TV Slovenia, who shared the footage with them. Gržinić in conversation with the author, August 10, 2019.
- ¹⁸ Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, “Bilokacija (Bilocation)” (1990), <http://grzinic-smid.si/?p=271>.
- ¹⁹ Gržinić in e-mail correspondence with the author, Sept. 21, 2019.
- ²⁰ Gržinić, “The Video, Film, and Interactive Multimedia Art of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, 1982-2008,” p. 86.
- ²¹ Gržinić in conversation with the author, 2019.
- ²² Two years prior, Bono met aid worker Bill Carter, who during his work in Sarajevo filmed the Miss Sarajevo contest. Bono produced Carter’s documentary, which ended up with the same name as the music video, *Miss Sarajevo* (1993–95).
- ²³ Šejla Kamerić, “Behind the Scene,” Instagram post, April 24, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwopRZTBRJx/>.
- ²⁴ Mirjana Karanović, “Yubilej – Ja sam Jugoslovenka,” in *Peščanik* (December 12, 2018): <https://pescanik.net/yubilej-ja-sam-jugoslovenka/>