

Contexts, Traces, Inspiration: Three Statements of Working Principles from the Former Yugoslav Space

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Abstract

Three statements of working principles are shared to illuminate traces from Socialist Yugoslavia transformed into the practices and values of a regional network project for dance, a collective of independent artists and a museum symposium. Each statement of principles proposes collective methods of organising and perspectives on working generatively. Their contextualisation is undertaken in a deliberately partial way, following Tim Ingold's proposition to observe ever emerging differences, and as an affirmative ethical practice of remaining open to transformation, following Rosi Braidotti.

Keywords: working principles, Former Yugoslav space, creative methods, collectives

This text approaches the question of what happened and what happens to some of the legacies, tropes and practices particular to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1963–92)^[1] after it “officially” ended by considering how these appeared and were transformed by cultural workers and projects in the region in the 2000s and 2010s. To do this, three texts outlining working principles are presented and discussed: from the *Druga Scena*, an arts collective and network in Belgrade, Serbia, written around 2005; from a regional dance development project between Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Slovenia, North Macedonia and Bulgaria^[2] called the Nomad Dance Academy, published in 2011; and from a symposium provocation held at the Museum of Yugoslavia, also in Belgrade, on ideas for a “Non-Aligned Museum” in 2016.



The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia or SFRY (1963–1992) consisted of six socialist republics, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia, and two autonomous provinces, Kosovo and Vojvodina. Photo: [Web](#). Accessed 12 June 2021

Several points in the three texts are related to the legacies of SFRY worthy of further exploration: self-organisation and non-aligned modes of operation. Firstly, I present a brief note on contextualisation; then, I elaborate upon these tropes as they are not necessarily “general knowledge” to those beyond the former Yugoslav space;^[3] thirdly, I present the three texts, followed by a return to what contextualisation can open by way of a conclusion.

Unfinished Traces

Contextualization is deliberately partial, decidedly not impartial, and a practice of tracing contingencies of considerations. Following Tim Ingold, embedding things in a context implies an already completed socialization. Disinterring something from “a context” requires seeing connections between things that are not neutral and thus is contingent on perceiving the world as one of ever-emergent differences, rather than diversity (Ingold 161). Ingold observes that diversity is being different and that becoming different is differentiation (162). I propose contextualisation as contingent, unfinished and as an affirmative ethical practice, following Rosi Braidotti (247–48). As an affirmative practice,

contextualisation may be undertaken in such a way that affirms the possibility of moving beyond suffering and struggle, thus keeping contexts, people and practices open to becoming.

The commonalities between the authors of the working principles are that they were born in SFRY and lived through its dissolution and wars. Struggles of different kinds appear in the former Yugoslav countries, characterised through state violence, and what is succinctly referred to as state capture (Horvat and Štikis; Burchardt and Kirn; Perry and Keil; Bieber and Brentin).

A further commonality between the authors is that they navigated the dissolution of SFRY and, by the mid-2000s to mid-2010s when these texts were written, have worked in the long wake of dramatic as well as more subtle changes to everyday life. As I argue, this has cultivated ways of seeing and working in art and culture that orientate towards a possibility of becoming and differentiation, as evidenced through the working principles. The principles of work, then, may be supportive or inspiring for others elsewhere facing similarly important ethical questions of how to work and how to work together.

Care is needed not to glorify elements of Socialist Yugoslavia at the expense of acknowledging its violent dissolution and the problems of totalitarianism during SFRY (Djilas). Yet, approaching these working principles without some understanding of the practices and values underpinning life in SFRY would fail to appreciate the influences of these on their authors. Whilst efforts in the former republics have been made by governments to distance themselves from Yugoslav Socialism as the way of organising social and political life, the traces of such legacies nevertheless endure.

By no means am I the first to note the movement of traces and legacies from Socialist Yugoslavia into artistic and cultural work, though often such commentary arises from practitioners emerging from that context, and less often from a U.K.-based cultural worker attempting to understand the influences on approaches to practice. The three statements perform a collaborative paradigm, related to the legacy of Yugoslav Socialism, understood through various tropes including Yugoslav Worker Self-Management. Each helps to illuminate what theorist and member of the *Druga Scena* Jelena Vesić argues as being the unofficial or unexpected “elsewhere” of Socialist Yugoslav principles in the field of art and artists’ collectives (122). Yugoslav Worker Self-Management is transformed and referenced by the *Druga Scena* and NDA as “self-organisation,” in which co-owning the means of production in order to take better care of processes, people and outcomes entails collective and individual work.

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was established in 1961 with SFRY as a founding member^[4] and is explicitly referenced in the statement from the Non-Aligned Museum. The principles and purpose of the NAM were, and remain, to promote economic and cultural cooperation between members as well as support their sovereignty, and to oppose colonialism, imperialism, racism, occupation, domination and interference by any nation. Recalling NAM in 2016 for an approach to museum cooperation evokes alternative ways of working to enliven the possibility of non-hierarchical cooperation and independence. NDA echoes elements of the NAM in its decentralised, itinerant methods

of meeting and production, as does the self-organised *Druga Scena* by appearing in the interstices in Belgrade in the 2000s in a period of new models for public cultural funding possibilities, NGO support and rapid privatisation of state assets.

Introduction to the Three Texts

The texts were written in the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, in the long wake of the dissolution of SFRY. Their perspectives as witnesses of major societal changes, new opportunities and challenges are pertinent for artists and practitioners working in similarly confronting times and contexts. The three texts impel a sense of cooperation and individuality in cultural production and creation.

The first text of principles is by the *Druga Scena*, which translates as the Second or Other or Another Scene (Teorija koja Hoda 16–18, 75–79). With an emphasis on autonomy and solidarity, the *Druga Scena* was founded in 2005 as a self-organised initiative and as an informal network of eight independent cultural organisations and groups in Belgrade (Vujanović and Šuvaković 16). The *Druga Scena* understood itself as an informal network or platform. Members saw their activities and their value as the process of linking theory, art and culture with various forms of Left-wing activism, and was specifically a politically Leftist organisation (Cvetković).



NAM Logo. Photo: Web/Wikipedia. Accessed 12 June 2021

Druga scena

INICIJATIVA BEOGRADSKÉ NEZAVISNE SAMOORGANIZOVANE SCENE SAVREMENE UMETNOSTI, TEORIJE, KULTURE, MEDIJA I AKTIVIZMA, KOJA OKUPLJA FORMALNE ORGANIZACIJE, NEFORMALNE GRUPE I POJEDINCE/KE

ČLANOV/CE NAČELA I ORGANIZACIJA RADA

// članovi/ce

Druga scena [website](#), members list

One of its earliest challenges was to gain the use of a space where collectives and artists could be based, host and pass through, and this was achieved in 2007 with the opening of *Magacin*, at 4–8 Kraljevića Marka, Belgrade. NDA member and *Druga Scena* member *Stanica*, which translates as “Station,” was amongst five other independent cultural associations that won a competition organised by the Belgrade Youth Cultural Centre with the project of *Magacin*, the biggest joint project of the *Druga Scena*. As *Stanica* co-founder Marijana Cvetković put it, the goal of getting a space for the independent scene was fulfilled. *Magacin* continues as a place for meetings and discussions, becoming a

platform that reflects and draws attention to certain events, giving space to public opinion about them. Putting a date on the end of the *Druga Scena* is not easy. In 2018, Cvetković stated it has stopped existing and has all but died out, except for a mailing list that still persists between members. “It had its life, but it stays as a reference” for the independent scenes and associations (Cvetković), enduring through its effect and social relations.



Kulturni centar Magacin. Photo: [Web/source unknown](#)

The second text shares the Nomad Dance Academy (NDA) principles from 2011 (Alfirević et al 9). NDA began in conversation in 2005 and more formally in 2007. It is structured through self-organisation, decentralisation and principles of sociality. According to NDA, Slovenia member and Stanica co-founder Dragana Alfirević, NDA views its activity and itself within its surroundings in a holistic way, and its work is in the fields of dance practice, art education, theory and research, publishing, festivals and platforms, advocacy and policy work (“Endurance” 87). The participation of small organisations in the formation and sustainability of NDA is connected to, amongst other things, the interest taken in contemporary dance practices in the 2000s and opportunities opened up by the dissolution of the USSR and SFRY, in which culture and art were given value and importance by bodies such as the Swiss Cultural Programme, the European Commission and the Creative Europe programmes, as well as various foreign policy agents such as the British Council and Goethe Institut.



Gathering at NDA *Pleskavica* festival, 2011, Tabor, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Photo: Sunčan Stone

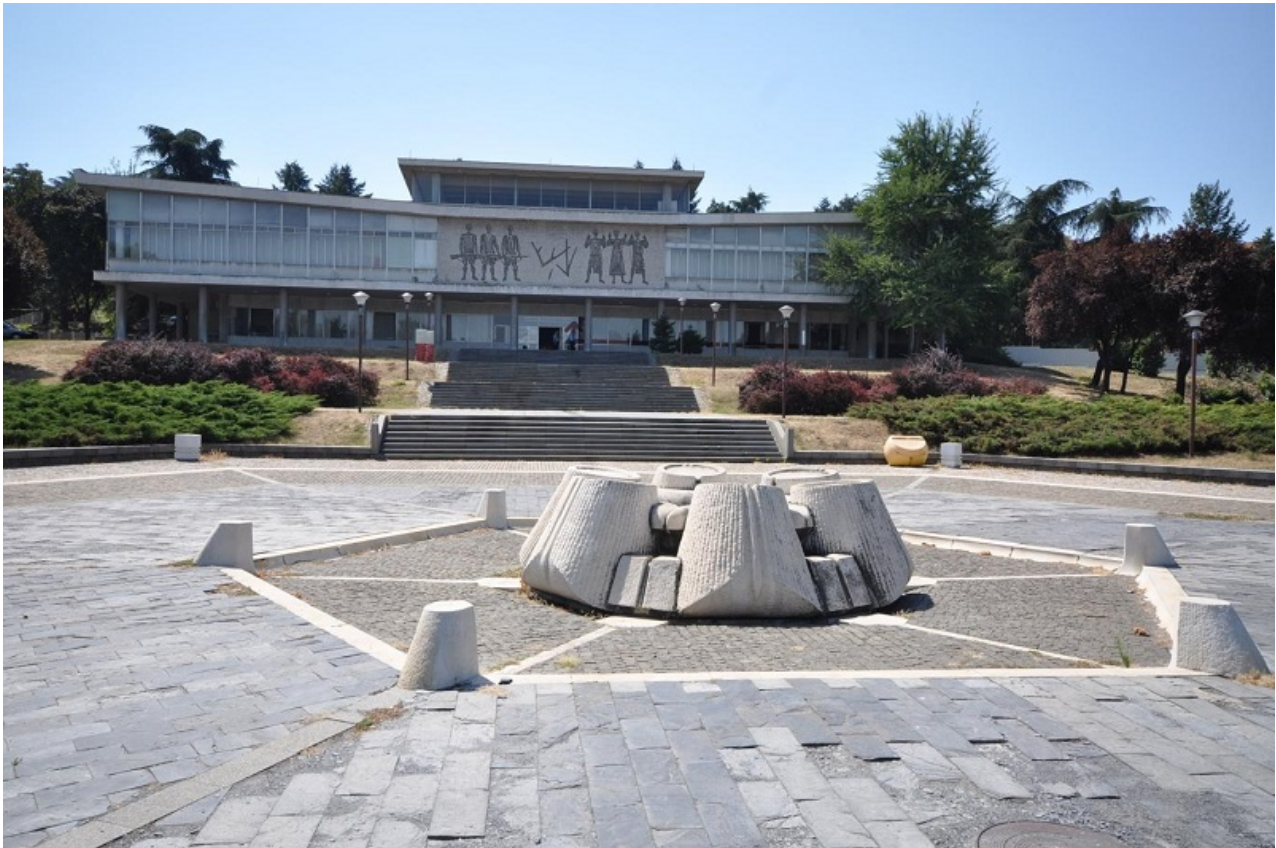
NDA was the result of what it refers to as a bottom-up process of small scenes of individuals in six Balkan countries who were interested in contemporary dance. Artists and arts organisations in Serbia, Slovenia, BiH, Croatia, North Macedonia and Bulgaria actively cooperated for mutual benefit and exchange. This was especially important at a time in the mid-2000s, when the leaders of these newly formed nation states were less inclined towards any sort of regional cooperation, yet it was happening anyway at the level of artistic exchange. Such imperatives were appearing from the ground up and recognised and supported by international development and platforms such as the Balkan Express and Theorum network.

NDA endures with no one leader to represent it, nor central base, nor email address, nor website, nor bank account. Nevertheless, NDA remains devoted to producing and sharing knowledge, and making it accessible. It operates with no substantial or continuous support from any state or private funds, or by the art market “since what we do for the most part is not marketable in a classical sense” (Alfirević, “Endurance” 88). Alfirević argues that NDA “attempts to unforget” (87) and to bring forward a new understanding of the public realm that was once normal in SFRY. Resistant to what she argues as an oversimplification of “audience development,” NDA directs its work to indirectly tackle the question of the “overall privatization of the public” (87) that has become familiar in the former Yugoslav space and across Europe, in terms of public assets and infrastructure as well as hyperindividualization. The generation of artists who founded NDA are well-attuned to not only observing the changes to how the state viewed citizens as co-owners and inculcated a sense of shared responsibility for “the public.” They lived a structuration of life in which hierarchy was symbolised by the figure of Tito, yet more horizontal in the everyday. They could see the problems in the everyday and in working life of the transformation to multi-party liberal democracies with market capitalism increasing competition and incentivizing cooperation. The principles from 2011 are taken from one of several NDA publications and are less explicit about the connection to Socialist Yugoslavia than a statement in 2018 by Alfirević:

We ourselves are the owners of the processes, products and the results of our work, and whoever comes in touch and works within this frame is also the owner of their own processes and results, just as much as we are. In these terms we do inherit, question and actualise the idea of self-management. (Alfirević, “Endurance” 91–92)

Here, Alfirević observes how NDA questioned and carried forward Yugoslav Worker Self-Management through the context of a network for dance. Becoming more explicit about the influences on principles illustrates how contextualisation undertaken by those from within a project shows different degrees of transparency. The first document in 2011 operated as more of a review of progress and reflection on the future, aimed at a general readership as well as funders and stakeholders of the project. The statement in 2018 shows a shift in what had become important to underline. The working principles were the result of exploring creation, education and presentation of dance and choreography, and a range of formats. After three years of providing a nomadic educational platform, NDA continued and continues to develop different kinds of projects, exchanges, performances, publications and events in decentralised ways that affirm endurance and sociality.

The third text is from an international symposium held on the 7 and 8 November 2016 at the Museum of Yugoslavia, entitled the “Non-Aligned Museum,” convened by one of the museum’s curators Katarina Živanović, and Nikola Krstović, Centre for Museology and Heritology of the Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade.^[5] This symposium was held on the 55th anniversary of the first gathering of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade, the then capital of SFRY. Panellists reflected upon Global South, Yugoslav, Indian, Serbian and Belgrade cultural and politics histories. As an audience to this gathering, it was personal, poignant, full of debate and disagreement. In raising up the Non-Aligned Movement as a potential resource for museum cooperation, NAM was disinterred from “context” through debate and curation as a way to think and affirm its principles and values for the future. It would not be easy to find this text unless you were there in 2016 or already involved in museology. I think it is important to share this example from museum discourse, partly to favour speaking across artistic disciplinary borders that are more operable when permeable, and partly because my attendance at the symposium produced a new contingency that shapes me as a kind of conduit.



Museum of Yugoslavia. Photo: Jorge Láscar

Principles of the *Druga Scena* (Other/Second Scene)

Members of the *Druga Scena* saw their activities and the symbolic value they had in the following ways:

The process of connecting theory, art and culture with various forms of left cultural and political activism.

A public good of general social importance, and not as an opportunity to make a profit and other individual private interests, insisting on the creation and preservation of public space and the public sphere as a collective social good governed by the state, the market and political parties.

Critical reflection of society as a whole and commitment to/advocating for the repoliticization of arts and culture.

Struggle for the improvement of autonomous; that is, independent self-organized scene at the local, regional and international levels, as well as its position within wider cultural production.

Cultural policy that critically intervenes in the dominant state-market concepts, such as: national culture, cultural industries and the establishment of market criteria in the field of culture and education.

Operation in the field of cultural policy through the exercise of pressure and dialogue with the relevant institutions on issues of organization, support and (re) presentation of autonomous; that is independent culture and art.

The fight for free access to content in the field of art and culture and for communication between institutions, authors and users, through free licenses and protocols that are not privately owned.

Opposition to mixing political parties in education, culture and art.

Critical and proactive opposition to institutionalized fascism, racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, neo-conservatism, nationalism, neo-liberal capitalism, a market postmodern cynicism in culture, as well as all other forms of violence against human community.

Combating all forms of structural and individual discrimination; as well as the struggle to improve the social situation of workers in culture.

Nomad Dance Academy

The Principle of Balance: the balance between regional and local levels, between different parts of the programme, between artistic and managerial aspects of the NDA, in financial matters, and so on.

The Principle of Invitation: we have chosen to invite rather than select people, because we believe that inviting is much better suited to the formats of our work. Each member of the Decision-Making Board may invite one new member every three years.

The Principle of Empty Space: every decision or segment of the project must leave some empty space, for new initiatives and ideas—an unknown territory for us to investigate.

The Rule of Three: a practical rule for solving practical issues: three members of the Artistic Board, three members of the Coordination Office, the main bodies in the structure, three main lines in the programme. Every position comes with a three-year term.

The Non-Aligned Museum Proclamation

The Non-Aligned Museum is not independent, neutral and uncommitted. It does not advocate escaping, stepping back and overlooking things. It is not elusive. It does not conform to the dichotomies: We/others, the West/ the Third World, experts/audience, public/private, traditional/contemporary.

The Non-Aligned Museum is not just a museum originating from the non-aligned countries, or a museum safeguarding the heritage of the Non-Aligned Movement; it is above all a creative platform based on the values promoted by this movement.

The Non-Aligned Museum insists on respecting civil liberties, dignity and solidarity, the right to become involved and the right to be uninvolved.

The Non-Aligned Museum is not original, it stems from past experiences and reflects the challenging present.

The Non-Aligned Museum is based on peaceful coexistence of different opinions and becoming open to diversity; it upholds the right to think differently, for as long as we think!

Contexts, Politics, Inspiration

These working principles outline ways for approaching cultural work collectively. Not only this, they also highlight the perspective of (some) artists, cultural workers and institutions to make a critical commentary on their context, whilst making a new one within it. This situates the work of the *Druga Scena* and of NDA more specifically as part of the counter-culture to state cultural institutions and organisations at the times of their emergence. These cultural workers resist foreclosing on their projects, or what Ingold might see as full socialisation, through practices of sociality that keep open the way ahead. Whether in the very localised occasion of the *Druga Scena* or the regional project of NDA, the scope for transverse connections advocated for in these texts demonstrates the generative, optimistic qualities of self-organised and non-aligned culture and the hope for its continuation. This echoes the cosmopolitan outlook found in the vision for SFRY in which working through local collaboration and international friends and colleagues was equally important.

As pointed out previously, Worker Self-Management in SFRY meant citizens were encultured to be co-owners and co-creators of the state. As a proposition and way of relating to each other, and to place, it remains compelling through the degree of agency it assumes to be possible. These principles similarly extend a sense of possibility for working in culture generatively and with shared responsibility for interwoven contexts. These co-authored texts decentralise the impression or importance of a single voice, which might appear to caution against individual leaders, and central administration for all the monopolies of power such organisation of people and labour can establish.

Talking about, or from, the Former Yugoslav space as a geographic and geopolitical region and imaginary, and the artists and art emerging from or displaced by it, produces a frequent and easy gloss: everything is so complicated and so political. Choreographer Igor Koruga expressed to me in 2018 that everything was political about working in dance in Serbia, but that he wished it didn't have to be so. But, at the same time, Koruga was also appalled at the apolitical stance in dance-making elsewhere (2018). As if a seemingly stable politics can afford apolitical existence.

Yet, to speak about the former Yugoslav space only through the politics affecting conditions for art-making and for cultural production risks reducing the creative labour of living and working to simply responding to new opportunities, or crises, or policy directives. As texts developed out of observation, reflection, necessity and relationships to institutions of different kinds, the authors of these three texts affirm planning and deliberate adaptation, rather than responding impulsively or unquestioningly. These working principles support the question of how to respond when change appears or is needed from within each organisation/collective, and how to make a new context in an existing one. Though written for and from their members' use, such unintended guidance perhaps provides greater alloy in the wakes of other transformations elsewhere.

Endnotes

[1] The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia or SFRY (1963–92) consisted of six socialist republics: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia, and two autonomous provinces, Kosovo and Vojvodina.

[2] Bulgaria from 1949–90 was a satellite state of the Soviet Union and member of the Warsaw Pact, with a different application of Communist principles to SFRY.

[3] The “former Yugoslav space” rather than, for example, ex-Yugoslavia, Western Balkans, or post-socialism indicates elements of SFRY as an enduring, diverse cultural imaginary that was as much a geopolitical project as a place. Whilst the experiences of people born there, or emplaced, nevertheless share some similarities to communist regimes of the USSR, particular differences, such as how Yugoslav Self-Management operated or its particular forms of cosmopolitanism, show significant differences. Deliberate differentiation between the USSR and SFRY is made because Yugoslav Socialism cannot be adequately conflated with Soviet Communism in the generalised notion of “Eastern Europe” that tends to be perpetuated in Western European discourses. It is also my deliberate choice to resist reproducing the stipulated term Western Balkans to refer to Serbia, BiH, Montenegro and North Macedonia that casts a divide between the EU and the non-EU countries of Europe, which although important, is not the only transnational institution to structure conceptions of people, artists and cultural practices. Müller offers an extensive critique on how “post-socialism” is lacking analytic use. Such terms do little to articulate nuanced experiences. SFRY was not only about land, but questions of what sustains a meaningful life.

[4] The Non-Aligned Movement was formed by and for the majority of the global South in the 1950s as an alternative forum to the power blocs of the West and the Soviet Union, and on principles discussed at the Bandung Conference, Indonesia, in 1955 Akhil Gupta’s discussion on NAM and the European Community as non-national collectives and imagined communities illuminates dynamics of how post-coloniality and late capitalism reinscribe space, place and identity (1992). See pages 64–65, in particular, for the formation of NAM after the meeting at Bandung.

[5] Professor Nataša Mišković moderated a panel with Budimir Lončar, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Professor Mridula Mukherjee, PhD teaching Modern Indian History at Jawaharlal Nehru University. Marija Đorđević moderated a panel with Wayne Modest, PhD, Head of the Research Centre for Material Culture at the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands, Aleksandra Momčilović, Curator, Museum of Yugoslav History, Emilia Epštajn, Curator, Museum of African Art, and Mila Turajlić, Documentary Director. Dr Ana Sladojević moderated a panel with Simon Njami, PhD, independent curator, lecturer, art critic and essayist, Anders Kreuger, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp (M_HKA) and one of the editors of the art journal *Afterall*, Bojana Piškur, PhD, senior curator at Moderna Galerija / Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana (MG+MSUM), Jelena Vesić, PhD, art and culture theorist, and Vladimir Jerić Vlidi, art and culture theorist (both Druga Scena members).

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Photo: Mira Loew