

Post-Yugoslav Art in the “Gorges of the Balkans”

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There are few art projects from the 1990s that are as controversial and widely recognised as Marina Abramović’s *Balkan Baroque*. First presented at the Italian Pavilion of the 1997 Venice Biennale, the performance consisted of an act of “self-purification”, in which the artist scrubbed the last residues of blood and tissue from over 1,500 cow bones with a metal brush and soap, for six hours a day, over four consecutive days.¹ All the while, a three-screen video installation behind the artist played a chilling story about the creation of “wolf-rats” in the Balkans: animals that, when placed under unbearable conditions, are driven to kill and eat each other. A metaphorical act of mourning for the atrocities committed in the Bosnian wars, Abramović’s project was, perhaps unsurprisingly, mired in contention from its conception. Nevertheless, it went on to secure widespread acclaim, and even won the Biennale’s highest honour, the Golden Lion. Some twenty years on, it continues to attract the attention of international audiences. Narrating Yugoslavia’s disintegration through a ritualistic act of “scrubbing clean to the bone”, it presents a far more seductive alternative to accounts based on issues of self-determination, minority rights, the balance between large and small states, and the role of institutions.

Given the captivating charm of the *Balkan Baroque*, it is not surprising that accounts of art produced in the post-Yugoslav space during this traumatic decade have followed a similar line of analysis, favouring such things as identity, displacement, post-war trauma and reconciliation. This article, in contrast, aims to provide a more nuanced picture of art practices produced in the region during the 1990s. I examine how an older generation, previously working through Yugoslavia’s state-financed cultural institutions, responded to a period of conflict, political instability and economic misery. Through a selection of case studies from Belgrade, Sarajevo and Pristina, I focus on how individuals and collectives navigated through the shifting realities of a violent and uncertain period of transition from post-socialist, post-conflict and post-partition societies into free-market economies and liberal democracies.

Of course, there are no straightforward answers to the terrible events that underpinned the Yugoslav wars and, given the countless academic articles, books and documentaries on the subject, the contribution of this article is, in many respects, modest. Yet, however modest a contribution it might seem, a reconsideration of art produced in this decade is warranted, not least because of the worrisome rise of nationalism and xenophobic currents taking place in Europe today. Proposing that the Balkans and Europe should be understood as linked, this article ultimately aims to de-centre the

¹ This research was supported by the Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship. I am grateful to Nikola Džafić, Lelja Hodžić, the Kuma International Summer School, and Shkelzen Maliqi, for their valuable insights. For a thorough analysis of *Balkan Baroque* and the controversies surrounding the project, refer to B. Pejić, ‘Balkan for Beginners,’ *New Moment* 7, Spring 1997; reprinted in ed. *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*. Ed. L. Hoptman, T. Pospiszył, M. Braun and C. Tarica. New York and Cambridge, MA: Museum of Modern Art and MIT Press, 2002, pp. 325-9.

Western Balkans by exploring their becoming through interactions with cultural spaces beyond the Balkans To this end, I conclude by considering the deeper significance of a series of exhibitions staged in Western European cities at the beginning of the 2000s, which plunged post-Yugoslav art deep into the “Gorges of the Balkans.”²

Creating without a Purpose

In the wake of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, Yugoslavia was better placed to make a smooth transition to a free market economy than any other socialist country. It had, after all, been moving to full global economic integration since its expulsion from the Communist Information Bureau in 1948. But after a decade of political crisis and economic policies deepening the fissures between the country’s richer and less developed republics, the Yugoslav project could no longer sustain its promises regarding living standards, social security and national rights. By 1989, the path to disintegration had fully commenced and was moving at a dizzying pace: a shock therapy programme of economic reform backed by the International Monetary Fund, multiparty elections in the six republics that formed the federation, and the declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia.³ Two years later, in 1991, the federation had ceased to exist, and a brutal ethnic conflict was being waged in Croatia with the goal of creating new ethnically pure states.

Rapidly, the post-1989 confidence regarding the victory of Western-style liberal democracy was replaced by a sobering view of a future wrought by ethnic conflict. In April 1992, a year that was set to mark a milestone in European Unity with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, the Yugoslav conflict had spread to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and was beginning to test the resolve of the West’s commitment to a vision of a Europe “whole and free”. Yet in spite of representing a monumental challenge to the United Nations and NATO, the Yugoslav conflict quickly came to be viewed as inevitable.⁴ Consisting of several conflicts which evolved over time, and which required different actions to prevent a decline into territorial war and ethnic violence, the Yugoslav crisis was from the outset treated as *sui generis*.⁵

Whereas international security organisations had declared the Yugoslav wars to be the result of partition and nationalism endemic to the Balkans, audiences in Western Europe preferred the argument that the country’s demise was an eruption of “ethnic hatreds” between “south Slavic nations”. The most famous iteration of this account was Robert Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts*, first

² This being the title of Rene Block’s exhibition ‘In den schluchten des Balkan,’ staged at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel in 2003. See Ed. R. Block, *Die Balkan-Trilogie*, Munich: Schreiber, 2007.

³ For a focused summary of the international community’s response to the Yugoslav crisis, see S. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War*. Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995.

⁴ See E. Vulliamy, *The War is Dead, Long Live the War. Bosnia: The Reckoning*. London: The Bodley Head, 2012, p. xxxi.

⁵ See S. Woodward, ‘The West and the International Organisations,’ *Yugoslavia and After: A Study in Fragmentation*. Ed. D. A. Dyker and I. Vejvoda, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 155-172.

published in 1993.⁶ Self-defined as a “journey through history”, Kaplan’s book described the Balkans as a “landscape of atrocities”, and as a miserably passive terrain for the clash of empires. It also inferred that more bloodshed was inevitable.⁷ On the final page of *Balkan Ghosts*, Kaplan stated that “concluding ethnic histories, inflamed by the living death of communism, had made the Balkan sky so foul that now, sadly, a storm was required to clear it.”⁸ Natural occurrences beyond man’s control, storms can’t be prevented, nor would they need to be if they were what was required to clear a “foul sky”.

In many ways, Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts* foreshadowed Abramović’s disturbing tale of the Balkan “wolf-rats”. Cloaked in a romanticising, literary rhetoric, his account of the “Balkans” set the foundations for the “ethnic hatreds” thesis, and shaped widespread popular opinion, including the views of Bill Clinton.⁹ Yet, contrary to popular belief, this “Balkan” metamorphosis did not strictly occur through ideas circulating in Western Europe and America. Instead, this cultural shift of identification emerged in Yugoslavia itself, and most notably in Milošević’s Serbia. In the same year that *Balkan Ghosts* was published, for example, Belgrade’s Museum of Contemporary Art’s director was forcibly removed from his position, and replaced with a new board of directors, which began to promote the ideology of the Serbian national programme.¹⁰ Once a stronghold for neo-avant-garde practices in Yugoslavia, in the summer of 1994 the museum inaugurated its new orientation with an exhibition called “Balkan Origins in Twentieth Century Painting”.¹¹ Evading any references to Yugoslavia’s diverse contemporary art scenes, the exhibition aimed to provide a historical overview of Serbian art in the 20th century. Figurative painting was used to best illustrate topics that had received the most coverage in Serbia at that time, including, in the words of the art historians Branislava Anđelković and Branislav Dimitrijević, “Orthodox Christianity in the form of traditions of ‘fantastic’ painting [...] national myths in the forms of erotic and pornographic clichés, ethnic symbolism.”¹²

Such episodes in Belgrade’s contemporary art scene offer a view of how the “Balkan” metamorphosis emerged inside of Milošević’s Serbia. Yet they do so in a way that reveals the extent to which Serbia’s nationalist cultural elites secured and sustained power by eliminating all meaningful alternatives, including in the art world itself. As is well known today, on assuming the position of the republic’s first communist President in December 1990, Milošević spared little time in securing his

⁶ R. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993.

⁷ Ibid, p.xxvii.

⁸ Ibid, p. 287.

⁹ See M. T. Kaufman, ‘The Dangers of Letting a President Read,’ *The New York Times*, 22 May 1999, available online: <<https://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/22/books/the-dangers-of-letting-a-president-read.html>>

¹⁰ See M. Thompson, *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina*. London: ARTICLE 19, International Centre Against Censorship, 1994 and B. Magaš, *The Destruction of Yugoslavia: Tracing the Breakup, 1980-92*, London: Verso Books, 1993.

¹¹ D. Djorić, ‘Mlada Obračanja Balkanskim istočnicima [Youth addressing Balkan sources],’ in *Balkanski istočnici srpskog slikarstva 20. veka [The Balkan Sources of 20th Century Serbian Painting]*. Belgrade: Muzej savremene umetnosti, 1994.

¹² B. Anđelković and B. Dimitrijević ‘The Final Decade: Art, Society, Trauma and Normality,’ *On Normality. Art in Serbia 1989-2001*. Ed. B. Anđelković, B. Dimitrijević, D. Sretenović. Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001, p. 19.

grip over a media industry that was once amongst the most diverse in the socialist world. Over the course of ten years, his regime essentially oversaw Serbia's transition into a semi-authoritarian state in which political opposition was hampered, independent media silenced, and competitive elections were stolen. A newly consolidated state-run media played an integral part in persuading audiences both at home and abroad that the alternative to national states was no longer viable, fuelling nationalist forces not only during the run up to the war, but also during actual war operations.¹³ It was this oppressive climate, together with a lack of political opposition powerful enough to resist the Socialist Party of Serbia, that led to a major de-politicisation of art at the time. As the renowned conceptual artist Bálint Szombathy put it:

Today there is a WAR going on [...] in Serbia, where the authorities, except for a few last remaining cultural artistic strongholds, have destroyed all the cells of differently minded creators; the natural human inclination towards rebellion has almost been buried. An entire decade may pass before certain historical artistic documents see the light of day, for people are simply afraid of publicity.¹⁴

Szombathy's statement attests to the stultifying impact of the Milošević political campaign on "differently-minded" forms of cultural engagement in Serbia during the 1990s. Yet, in spite of this apparently all-encompassing political control in Belgrade, there were a handful of attempts to at least reclaim the streets as spaces for free thought. A year before the Museum of Contemporary Art exhumed its "Balkan Sources", for instance, a newly established art collective called *Led Art* [Ice Art] made a striking entrance on Belgrade's counter-cultural scene. One evening in May 1993, the group parked a giant refrigerated truck donated to them by a state-owned agricultural company outside of Belgrade's Youth House.¹⁵ The apparently inconspicuous vehicle had been transformed into an exhibition space. Repurposed as a mobile gallery, the vehicle's dark and cavernous trailer, framed by weathered sheets of corrugated steel, became a site for the display of a range of bizarre objects cast in large, melting blocks of ice.

Outside, a huge crowd gathered around the truck, waiting to be allowed inside. Before entering the space, each visitor was offered a large military coat to keep warm. Inside, they were greeted by such items as an old Yugoslav flag, perched in a corner, and pitched in a giant barrel filled with lard. Unlike the other objects on display, the fatty substance refused to freeze under the trailer's chilling temperatures. A work made by the pioneering conceptual artist Raša Todosijević, "Gott liebt die

¹³ For useful summary of these processes, see S. Woodward, 'War: Building States from Nations,' *Masters of the Universe?: Nato's Balkan Crusade*. Ed. T. Ali. London: Verso Books, 2000, pp. 203-71 and J. Dragović-Soso, *Saviours of the Nation? Serbia's Intellectual Opposition and the Revival of Nationalism*. London: Hurst & Company, 2002.

¹⁴ B. Szombathy, 'Danas je RAT! [Today there is a WAR going on!].' *Projeka't 5*, Novi Sad, August 1995, pp. 101-103, translation from Ed. B. Anđelković, *On Normality. Art in Serbia 1989-2001*, p. 39.

¹⁵ Ed. V. Grginčević, *Led art: Dokumenti vremena, 1993-2003*. Belgrade: Samizdat B92, 2004.

Serben”, made explicit reference to the fascist dimensions of Serbian nationalism.¹⁶ Composed of the national flag of a country that had ceased to exist, stuck in a container filled with the most basic of food ingredients, the work’s title referred to a God who supposedly loved the Serbs, in a society where nationalist tendencies were, and still remain, strongly connected to the authority of the Orthodox Church. Through its German title, the work also referred to the dark legacies of European fascism, and undermined the pretence that the virus of nationalism was only found in the Balkans.¹⁷ It was a stance echoed by the independent and youth-oriented Radio B92’s live broadcast of the event blasted through loudspeakers installed on the roof of the truck. The radio commentary announced that the unusual occurrence of ice in May was the result of a “micro cataclysm which usually doesn’t last long, but remains long in the memories of those who experience it”, and that these kinds of changes are “caused by the world’s disorders, leading to a break in the lower parts of the atmosphere.”¹⁸

Founded by the visual artist Nikola Džafo, *Led Art* used “freezing” as a fitting metaphor for Serbia’s political and cultural life. Parked outside of Belgrade’s Youth House – a previous stronghold for daring and experimental performances and rock concerts, now brought under state control – the refrigerated truck sent out a clear message regarding the group’s stance on the status of “official”, state-financed cultural institutions, while creating a self-organised cultural space. On another, deeper level, their first action was also a reflection on the absurdity of living a seemingly normal everyday life in Belgrade, while war was raging only a few hundred kilometres away in neighbouring Bosnia. Offering visitors army coats to protect themselves against the truck’s chilling temperatures, the action implied that everyone, no matter how seemingly uninvolved, was implicated in the Yugoslav wars.

Of course, everyone was involved, even if unwillingly. Under the new class of smugglers and state-sanctioned militias, simply purchasing petrol or exchanging notes was an act of compliance. This is why such actions as *Led Art* called for forms of self-preservation in a time understood to be Serbia’s social, political and economic “ice age”. At a time when massive numbers of the youth had fled the country or were living underground in order to avoid compulsory military service, freezing was intended to transform Belgrade’s streets into a space of political cleansing. As the group declared in a statement in 1993: “Refusing to participate in the destruction, slaughter, plunder, silence, we are moving out of conventional spaces. Rejecting the conformist way of thought and trodden path, we are living and creating without a purpose. We are finding a new way. A way in between.”

Amongst other initiatives in Belgrade, *Led Art* organised a parallel cultural life that formed a part of Serbia’s anti-war civic scene. This scene emerged in a climate of sanctions, systemic crisis and

¹⁶ S. Jestrović, *Performance, Space, Utopia: Cities of War, Cities of Exile*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. See also D. Sretenović, ‘Umetnost kao društvena praksa’ [Art as social practice], in *Hvala Raši Todosijeviću [Thank you Raša Todosijević]*. Belgrade: Muzej savremene umetnosti, 2002.

¹⁷ P. F. Lytle, ‘U.S. Policy Toward the Demise of Yugoslavia: The “Virus of Nationalism,”’ *East European Politics and Societies* 6.3, Fall 1992, pp. 303-318.

¹⁸ Radio B-92, ‘Meteorološki izveštaj’ [Meteorological Report], in Ed. V. Grginčević, *Led Art: Dokumenti Vremena, 1993-2003*, p. 33.

political transformation, but it is often dismissed as escapist.¹⁹ To an extent, these criticisms seem fair; after all, *Led Art*'s projects were not always direct in their opposition to the regime. But at the same time, these accounts disregard how initiatives like *Led Art* preserved a spirit of resistance at a time when the regime's consolidation of control had driven the majority of Belgrade's population to complete resignation and apathy. At a time when the regime had taken full advantage of the Serbian population's growing passivity, these initiatives were attempts to galvanise a population that, faced with massive hyperinflation, were more likely to worry about lines for food and shortages than about wars in neighbouring countries.²⁰

In other words, although these anti-war initiatives were not always overtly anti-regime, they were ostensibly politicised. But few had substantial impacts beyond their immediate surroundings and familiar audiences, in spite of *Led Art*'s attempts to avoid self-marginalisation by travelling to cities outside of Belgrade because, as the world looked on in shock as Milošević aided Bosnia's breakaway Serbs and fuelled ethnic conflict, little attention was paid to the Serbian regime's assault on the republic's network of political and cultural institutions. For some observers, it was the prevalence of such misunderstandings that allowed Western European and American governments to not support domestic alternatives to Milošević, leaving an active, but undoubtedly flawed, political opposition unsupported throughout most of the 1990s.²¹ All the while, much of the Serbian population began to blame the UN-imposed sanctions for the crippling economic catastrophe at home.

Refusing to Play Victim

Meanwhile, war continued to rage on in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. An insistence on equating all "sides" as equally culpable, known as the doctrine of "moral equivalence", ensured that no party could be held accountable, and justified a policy of non-intervention.²² To this day, the role of the international community before, during and after the war remains controversial, with accusations ranging from crippling the Bosnian military by enforcing an arms embargo in the early days of the war, and of being complicit in the slaughter of civilians through the poorly established UN "safe" areas, to the failure to protect refugees and deliver necessary human aid. The siege of the capital, Sarajevo, which lasted for almost four years, represented one of the most dramatic examples of the campaign to destroy the resistance of citizens still committed to multi-ethnic coexistence, and for many was seen as emblematic of the UN's failure to intervene successfully in the Bosnian war. At

¹⁹ For art historian Lidija Merenik this form of engagement equated to a form of 'active escapism', or a means of survival through the 'creation of a parallel fictional reality and entirely personal histories which, on the other hand, would never have come into being if they had not been occasioned by the very same existential reality which sometimes managed to outdo even fiction', See L. Merenik, 'No Wave,' *Art in Yugoslavia 1990-1995*, Belgrade: Centar za savremenu umetnost, 1996.

²⁰ For a sociological perspective on rising apathy in Belgrade, refer to E. Gordy, *The Culture of Power in Serbia: Nationalism and the Destruction of Alternatives*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1999.

²¹ For a detailed consideration of how foreign intervention often impeded Serbia's 'transition' to democracy, consult M. Spoerri, *Engineering Revolution: The Paradox of Democracy Promotion in Serbia*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

²² For a well-researched exposition of how the British government in particular sought to minimise the crisis and avoid action, see B. Simms, *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia*. London: Penguin Books, 2001.

the time, one Western diplomat summarised this stance of calculated neutrality through one simple, but striking indictment: “The Europe of Maastricht did not hear the calls for help from the Europe of Sarajevo.”²³

There was one public intellectual, however, who famously attempted to bridge the gap between these two seemingly distant and disconnected “Europes”. Susan Sontag heard the calls for help from Sarajevo, and in July 1993 made her second trip to the besieged city to stage a production of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Sontag’s visit stemmed from her determination to assemble an international community advocating NATO intervention, which in turn was based on her appreciation of Bosnia’s secular multiculturalism.²⁴ As one of the most well-known cultural gestures that took place during the siege, Sontag’s visit focussed an important spotlight on the besieged city, while raising difficult questions about the political role of artists and intellectuals. But much like the media representations of the siege, this focus came at the expense of the city’s cultural complexity: neglecting what Bosnia’s much vaunted “secular multiculturalism” could mean for the potential futures of Sarajevo, the republic and the region itself.

Although clearly well-intentioned, staging a production of *Godot* in the besieged city carried the risk of reproducing the image of Sarajevo as a helpless victim of “Balkan” multiculturalism.²⁵ While Sontag viewed the staging of the play in besieged Sarajevo to be an expression of normality, it was in fact one of several cultural initiatives that took place in a city reduced to bare existence, including the printing of hundreds of books, the organisation of over a hundred concerts, a hundred solo shows and group exhibitions organised in various locations, many of which were mere ruins. Some of the most well-known of these took place over the first year of the siege in the demolished Obala Art Centre, and culminated in the “Witnesses of Existence” group exhibition in March 1993. Inside the ruined space, artists were invited by the gallery’s director, Mirsad Purivatra, to produce works made from ready-made objects found in the immediate environment, including rubble, bullets, shrapnel and even the remains of a blown up car. Prior to the war, the majority of the participating artists had worked largely with conventional media – mostly painting and sculpture – and were preoccupied almost exclusively with formalist issues. Faced with the systematic shelling and destruction of their city, they were pushed to completely rethink their work approaches: a forced shift that was particularly evident in the influential painter Edo Numankdadić’s solo exhibition in the Obala space, which first opened on 3 February 1993.

At the exhibition’s opening, Numankadić and his wife brought the kitchen table from their apartment, along with some of the artist’s recent paintings and personal belongings, and installed them in the ruins and debris of the Obala space. Performed by an artist who before the siege had

²³ Fernando Gentilini, quoted in T. Petrović, *A Long Way Home: Representations of the Western Balkans in Political and Media Discourses*. Ljubljana: Mirovni Inštitut, 2009, p. 9.

²⁴ S. Sontag, ‘Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo,’ *Performing Arts Journal* 16.2, May 1994, pp. 87-106.

²⁵ For an analysis of the significance of Sontag’s trip to Sarajevo, consult K. Kotecki, ‘The Future of Europe,’ *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 18.5, 2016, pp. 651-668.

worked only with analytical and processual painting, the final installation was as much a powerful conceptual gesture as it was a striking record of life under the siege. Some of the objects displayed on the kitchen table, such as a box of tuna with noodles, spoke to the inadequate response of the international community, which reacted to the daily shelling of civilians in Sarajevo with delayed humanitarian aid. Others testify to everyday life in the besieged city at a time when Sarajevo only had a black-market economy, such as a tattered and empty packet of cigarettes.²⁶ Perhaps the most distinctive object is the book on the table by the Croatian writer Radovan Ivšić, who spent his life resisting both right- and left-wing totalitarianisms. Placed beside these other everyday items and against the backdrop of Numankadić's paintings, it unsettled the cultural underpinnings of Bosnia's much vaunted cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. In a besieged city that represented less a military target than it did a mockery of national exclusiveness, it provided insight into the cultural foundation on which Sarajevo built its resistance to a brutal attack on the idea of mixed communities.

A simple installation of everyday objects and personal belongings, Numankadić's work countered the dehumanising portrayal of the conflict by the media, and the familiar image of civilians as what Sontag described as "haulers of water or passive recipients of 'humanitarian aid.'"²⁷ Yet, in spite of their subtler critical dimensions, many of the works shown at *Witnesses* have almost exclusively been analysed according to their "lack of bitterness and rancour" and their "refusal to speak to the stuff of abstractions, concerning identity, the ethnic, the national," as one contemporary critic put it.²⁸ Much like the perspectives on Belgrade's alternative cultural scenes, these interpretations were limiting in the sense that they overlooked the complex political, social and cultural climate in which the exhibition was mounted. As the art historian Asja Mandić has argued in her incisive account of the "Culture of Critical Resistance in Sarajevo", these projects were organised at a time when the entire city was "functioning as one big concentration camp, where its citizens were deprived of their basic human rights, such as the freedom of movement, and of essential needs, such as water, food and electricity."²⁹ For her, organising an exhibition under these circumstances was a political act. Attending the event similarly served as a gesture of resistance, working to preserve a sense of solidarity and sustain a strong, dignified identity in the face of destruction.

In other words, though lacking an explicit political commentary, such initiatives as *Witnesses* helped people to withstand the siege by maintaining a thriving cultural life, and challenged the depoliticising view of Bosnians as powerless victims. Moreover, by rejecting stereotypes of victimhood, the cultural events that took place in Sarajevo during the siege resisted the warped power dynamics that the renowned philosopher Alain Badiou criticized in his 1993 *Ethics* as the "ethical

²⁶ S. Sontag, 'Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo', p. 91.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ J. Murphy, 'Witnesses of Existence,' *Third Text* 9:31, 1995, p. 79.

²⁹ A. Mandić, 'The Formation of a Culture of Critical Resistance in Sarajevo: Exhibitions in/ on Ruins,' *Third Text* 25:6, 2011, pp. 725-35.

ideology of the West.”³⁰ Badiou’s critique was in part inspired by the Bosnian war. In particular, he emphasised that “Western ethical ideology” splits humanity into two groups: “on the side of the victims, the haggard animals on the televised screens” and on the side of the “benefactors, conscience and the imperative to intervene.”³¹ For Badiou, this dynamic presented an incisive question: “why does this splitting always assign the same roles on the same sides?”³² Instead of seeing the barbarity of the situation in terms of the ethical ideology of human rights, he concluded that “in fact we are always dealing with a political situation, one that calls for a political thought-practice, one that is peopled by their own authentic actors.”³³

In many ways, Badiou’s indictment of the “Western ethical ideology” raised critical issues surrounding the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina following the war. It foreshadowed the question of ethnicity, which became, for many analysts, the key means of de-politicising the rebuilding of society in Bosnia. In 1995, just months after the war’s worst atrocities were committed in the Srebrenica genocide, a ceasefire was called, followed by US-brokered negotiations in Dayton, Ohio. A result of external negotiations, but essentially brokered around three constituent peoples – Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs – the Dayton Peace Accord was designed to end the war and avoid the need for an invasion by external forces. But, ultimately conceived as a power-sharing mechanism, Dayton did little to provide accountability or basic functionality.³⁴ By institutionalising ethnicity, the agreement prevented citizens from acting together politically, and from becoming self-determining subjects. Partitioning Bosnia more or less along the front lines of the war, and into two entities, it reproduced wartime ethnic cleavages in the post-war period. In short, it segregated combatant groups into self-governing territories, which undermined the central government, ensured successive electoral victories of ultra-nationalists, and placed state resources at the disposal of ethnic leaderships who had obvious incentives to perpetuate the conflict.

Just days after the signing of the Dayton Agreement, on 21 and 22 November 1995, the Slovenian collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), launched their “State in Time” embassy project at Sarajevo’s National Theatre, distributing NSK passports free of charge to Sarajevo’s citizens.³⁵ Aware of the cynical politics of international administration that governed the Dayton settlement, NSK’s musical voice, the notorious punk group Laibach, also played two concerts at the city’s

³⁰ A. Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. London: Verso, 2012, p. 13.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Six years later, Slavoj Žižek would similarly conclude that, through the language of universal human rights, humanitarian and ethnic justifications of interventions deprived women and men of their ‘political identity’; in short, it robbed them of their ability to throw off their ‘helplessness, to get a hold on themselves as a sovereign and independent political subject. See S. Žižek, *NATO as the Left Hand of God?*. Arkzin, Zagreb, June 1999. Also available online: <<https://www.lacan.com/zizek-nato.htm>>

³⁴ For local perspectives on the contemporary significance of Dayton, see D. Arsenjović, *Unbriable Bosnia and Herzegovina – The Fight for the Commons*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2015. For an analysis of Dayton in relation to the broader political situation in the Balkans today, see J. Mujanović, *Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in the Balkans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

³⁵ The NSK ‘State in Time’ was founded in 1991 as a response to Slovenia’s independence and the subsequent wars in the former Yugoslavia. The NSK State in Time issues passports as a ‘confirmation of temporal space’, granted to any person, regardless of their citizenship or nationality.

National Theatre. Insisting that Sarajevo did not need a humanitarian concert, Laibach performed songs from their recently released “NATO” album, which condemned Western military involvement in the former Yugoslavia, and its escalation in the name of humanitarian intervention.³⁶ The album’s sleeve even included an obituary for NATO as “an alliance designed to prevent aggression or repel it,” and declared dead NATO’s “indefinite duration” of “seeking to promote stability, security and well-being in the North Atlantic area.” In the album’s song “War”, Laibach took the lyrics and tune of Edwin Starr’s originally pacifist song, which includes the famous line “War . . . What is it good for? Absolutely nothing!” and replaced the responses with a list of concepts that provide the grounds for war (mobilisation, science, religion and domination), along with a list of international media companies and broadcasters reaping profits from the war. In the album’s penultimate track, 2525, Laibach grieved over the destruction of territory and diplomacy through the Wars of the 1990s, with an apocalyptic, and somewhat prescient, forecast that “in the year 1999, war destroys the last skyline.”

Beyond Laibach’s clearly polemical, even inflammatory, criticism of Western intervention during the Yugoslav Wars, their gesture of performing in the recently liberated Sarajevo carried another significance: it provided a poignant example of how united the Yugoslav cultural space once was. Whereas Dayton assumed that the federation’s multiple ethnicities were essentially “untrained” in living together, and that they subsequently needed to be tutored in this pursuit by US and EU professionals who knew better, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Yugoslavia more broadly, the notion of multiculturalism was far older than the one which the modern liberal capitalist discourse ascribed to it. If, as Slavoj Žižek famously argued, liberal multiculturalism serves as the ideology of multinational capital, allowing multinational capital to ply its trade across the globe in the diverse cultures it must “respect” in order to work effectively, in the former Yugoslavia, it included vital forms of cultural collaboration that existed beyond the borders of the republic, the nation-state, and even beyond language.³⁷ The significance of this multiculturalism becomes quite clear when considering one modest, but nevertheless significant event that took place in Belgrade in 1997, on the eve of the war in Kosovo.

Contaminating Cultures

As the wars in Croatia and Bosnia were drawing to a close in 1995, the situation in Kosovo was deteriorating. As early as 1989, Milošević had deprived Kosovo of its constitutional autonomy and placed it under martial law.³⁸ This process began with the revival of the myth of the Kosovo Battle on

³⁶ See A. Gardner, *Politically Unbecoming: Postsocialist Art Against Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 135, and M. Mohar, ‘Why Neue Slowenische Kunst in German?’, *E-flux* 57, September 2014, < <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/57/60403/why-neue-slowenische-kunst-in-german/> >

³⁷ See S. Žižek, ‘Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,’ *New Left Review* I/ 225, September-October 1997.

³⁸ First granted in 1974, though the Kosovo were never fully reconciled in Yugoslavia, in the sense that it had the status of an autonomous province in Serbia. For more information, see J. A. Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War*.

the occasion of its 600th anniversary at the Gazimestan monument, just outside of Pristina, in 1989, and continued throughout the 1990s, with more than 100,000 Albanians being removed from institutional positions. In short, a system of de facto apartheid emerged in Kosovo. Lacking the weapons to challenge Serb forces, Albanians maintained a pacifist profile, and fostered forms of “non-violent resistance” under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova.³⁹ In spite of highly unfavourable circumstances, crucial forms of self-organisation in politics, education, health care and culture enabled Kosovo Albanians to construct a “parallel” society, and these models extended even to art production.⁴⁰

Unsurprisingly, the Kosovo alternative art scene developed in complete isolation from its Serbian counterpart. Because of the State of Emergency forcibly imposed on Kosovo, and the subsequent creation of alternative social, political and cultural systems, Albanian artists refused to show their work in Serbia. Nor were there many opportunities to do so while civil rights were being violated in Kosovo. But in 1997, as the Serbian government began to prepare for a campaign of ethnic cleansing of Kosovo’s entire Albanian population, one of Belgrade’s only state-independent cultural institutions, the Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju (Centre for Cultural Decontamination), offered a gesture of support to Kosovo’s emerging artists, by showing their work in an exhibition called “Përtej”.⁴¹

Belgrade’s Centre for Cultural Decontamination was founded in 1995, with the self-declared aim of “reviving the liberal spirit of artists and public discourse under the impossible conditions of war, economics, politics and the heavily suppressed human spirit in the last decade of Yugoslavia.”⁴² In one early press release, the centre publicised its aim of challenging an “atmosphere that had been contaminated by orchestrated nationalism, hatred and destruction.”⁴³ In the case of Përtej, the Albanian word for “beyond”, or “on the other side”, showing the work of young Albanian artists from Kosovo in Belgrade was a “contamination” in the sense that it showed the works of individuals widely believed to be enemies of the Serbian nation. Yet, highlighting forms of mutuality between cultures that shared a history and lived in a common state throughout much of the twentieth century, the exhibition was as much a “decontamination” of the histories being rewritten as nationalist mythomanias by the intellectual and cultural elites of Yugoslavia’s newly formed nation-states. In the words of one of the exhibitors, Sokol Beqiri, Përtej was intended to show, in Belgrade, of all places, that:

Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1999 and B. Magaš, *The Destruction of Yugoslavia*. For more information on how the Kosovo question manifested itself in Serbian culture, see J. Vesić, Politics of Display and Troubles with National Representation in Contemporary Art, *Red Thread*, 1-3, 2009-2011: A selection, pp. 8-17.

³⁹ M. Salla, ‘Kosovo, Non-Violence and the Break-up of Yugoslavia’, *Security Dialogue* 26:4, 1995, pp. 427-438.

⁴⁰ For more information on Kosovo’s art scene in the 1990s, refer to S. Maliqi, ‘How Art Modernised in Kosovo: Artists in Search of Originality,’ *Kosovo 2.0* #6, Balkart Fall/ Winter 2013, pp. 24-35 and S. Boynik, ‘Cultural Roots of Contemporary Art in Kosovo’, Ed. Radical Education Collective, *New Public Spaces: Dissensual Political and Artistic Practices in the Post-Yugoslav Context*. Jan Van Eyck Akademie, Maastricht, 2009, pp. 212-220. See also Ed. K. Schendl, *Notes on Contemporary Art in Kosovo*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019.

⁴¹ Ed. Kosovo 2.0, *Case Study Përtej*, Belgrade/ Pristina: Centar za kulturnu dekontaminaciju and Kosovo 2.0, 2018.

⁴² S. Jovanović-Weiss and V. Kulić, ‘Nationalism and Catharsis: The Center for Cultural Decontamination, Belgrade’, *Cabinet Magazine* 2, Spring 2001, < <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/2/culturaldecontamination.php>>

⁴³ Ibid.

Despite everything that was happening there, artists were still working in Pristina and trying to behave responsibly, first of all towards their art and towards others, towards the part of Belgrade which did not agree with the essentially primitive and destructive policy of Milošević.⁴⁴

For all those involved in the organisation of Përtej, “behaving responsibly” meant refusing to simply become representatives of their nations, and rejecting the false promises of national homogeneity. It was a powerful uniting force that was captured in one particular work displayed in the exhibition, Soqol Beqiri’s *Fluturon, Fluturon [It Flies, It Files]*. A series of unsettling, barrel-shaped objects suspended from the ceiling, made of weathered, wooden planks, and capped with aluminium cones, for many visitors these objects bore a resemblance to bullets, bombs and grenades. Traditional, dated and even kitsch in their use of materials, these objects were thoroughly contemporary in their resonance, and colloquially came to be known as the “ethno-bombs”. Although merely suggestive, Beqiri’s work seemed to evoke the militarisation of culture deployed by nationalist elites throughout the post-Yugoslav space, to persuade one nationality that they were under threat from another, and that they were, as political scientist Susan Woodward has argued:

Being cheated economically by other nations (in federal taxations or in jobs) or being overcome biologically (by the higher Muslim and Albanian birth rates) and warnings of plots by other groups to create states that would expel citizens from their homes played on a local inclination to conspiracy theories and on growing economic insecurity and rapidly shifting, uncertain political conditions.⁴⁵

Above all, Përtej was supposed to introduce Belgrade audiences to an unknown, young and vibrant artistic community in Kosovo that had emerged from the most difficult of political circumstances, and to foster common ground between two warring nations. For the artists and curators involved, this meant fostering networks of communication when contact in all other aspects of life had disappeared, but a communication that fundamentally acknowledged the particularities of the Kosovo alternative art scene. As a campaign against the falsities of ethnic homogeneity, it is striking that the exhibition received no criticism in Belgrade. Due to the scale of the exhibition, the visibility of the venue, and the demographic of its audiences, it went unnoticed by Belgrade’s nationalist cultural and intellectual elites. Yet its exhibitors were branded “traitors” by the professors at Pristina’s Art Faculty in local newspapers.⁴⁶ Although this detail seems irrelevant, it offers an important insight into the cultural

⁴⁴ S. Beqiri quoted in Ed. B. Anđelković, *On Normality. Art in Serbia 1989-2001*, p. 371.

⁴⁵ S. Woodward, ‘Building States from Nations,’ p. 206.

⁴⁶ As Shkelzen Maliqi recalled, ‘some comments and malicious “criticism” were [sic] published in the papers and QIK’s [The Bulletin of the Qendra Informative të Kosovës (Kosovo Information Centre)] bulletin, insinuating and asking questions like: Why is an exhibition of Kosovar art being organized in Belgrade when Serbian repression is reaching its peak? Is that not even more evidence of servility towards Belgrade?’ See *Sokol Beqiri in Retrospektivë = Retrospective/ Sokol Beqiri*. Pristina: National Gallery of Kosovo, 2015, p. 127.

significance of nationalism in the entire post-Yugoslav space, and into what could be understood as the question of joint, but unequal political responsibilities in the Yugoslav conflict.

The accusation of betrayal levelled against the artists participating in *Përtej* reveals how nationalism had gripped the entire post-Yugoslav space, and highlights how, although the quantitative differences in the regions nationalisms were certainly significant, with Serbian nationalism being the strongest and bearing a central role in unleashing the war, they were not significant enough to justify a qualitative distinction between Serbian nationalism and other nationalisms, and to subsequently support one side over the other. After all, as Badiou argued, all combatants were concerned with their own selfish, nationalist goals, and there was very little political reason, outside “victimising rhetorics”, to prefer a “Kosovar (or Croat, or Albanian, or Slovene, or Muslim-Bosnian) nationalist to the Serb nationalist.”⁴⁷ This is why, Badiou concluded with a reference to the Yugoslav wars, the “people of the region, regardless of their ‘ethnicity’ or ‘nationality’ should:

Fight hard and long against all nationalisms. [...] It is time to restore lustre to the principles that governed the classic epoch of national liberation: it is only by relying on its own strengths that a people can regulate its own affairs by political means. And, in this way, small peoples will be able to act independently of the Great Powers.”⁴⁸

Of course, Badiou’s conclusion carries its own conceptual risk of depoliticising the deeper significance of the Serb aggression in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, and glosses over the complex circumstances that set off the Yugoslav wars in the first place. And seen through the worrisome developments taking place today in the region, it also seems somewhat idealistic. Nevertheless, it might in fact provide a strong vantage point through which to consider the wider significance of the case studies presented in this article, which, in contrast to much of the news coverage in newspapers and on television that triggers emotional reflexes, may serve as the basis for a more rigorous analysis of the post-Yugoslav space in the 1990s, along with its fate in the following decade.

Back to the Balkans

Although seemingly marginal in their reach and impact, the cultural initiatives presented here provide a small glimpse into how in Belgrade, Sarajevo and Pristina, artists and cultural workers continued to reject the false promises of nationalist elites, while choosing to simultaneously act outside the interests of what Badiou described as the interests of the “Great Powers”. Moreover, by standing their own ground, the art projects considered here provided a subtle, albeit timely reflection on the mutually cynical relationship between the passive international community and the opportunistic

⁴⁷ S. Žižek, *From Myth to Symptom: The Case of Kosovo*. Pristina: Kolektivi Materializmi Dialektik, 2013, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁸ A. Badiou, ‘Le Sainte-Alliance et ses serviteurs’, *Le Monde*, 20 May 1999, translation from D. Plavšić, ‘Did Somebody Say Ethnic Partition? A Critique of Žižek on Kosovo and the Balkans (Part 3),’ *LeftEast*, 16 June 2014, <<http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/critique-of-zizek-on-kosovo-and-the-balkans-3/>>

nationalist elites in fuelling Yugoslavia's collapse.⁴⁹ In their refusal to take sides, their resistance to the assimilating game of Western compassion, and their attempts to foster forms of transnational solidarity and cultural exchange, they underscored Slavoj Žižek's famous argument in his essay "Against the Double Blackmail", which was published in 1999 and also exhibited at London's Cubitt Gallery in the same year.⁵⁰ Written in response to NATO's bombardment of Serbia, Žižek proposed that the choice between the Milošević regime and the NATO forces was ultimately a false one:

When the West fights Milošević, it is NOT fighting its enemy, one of the last points of resistance against the liberal-democratic New World Order; it is, rather, fighting its own creature, a monster that grew as the result of the compromises and inconsistencies of the Western politics itself.⁵¹

Arguably, the most radical aspect of this position is its refusal to accept what is fundamentally a false choice. For Žižek, NATO did not topple a proud regime defending its people; it was, rather, fighting a force that grew out of its own defects. And while the Milošević regime had ambitions for a greater, nationalist, Serbian Yugoslavia, it left the whole region destitute, defeated and vengeful. The Serbian position, then, was by no means an alternative to the dominant neo-liberal ideologies; rather, the neo-racist nationalist regime and the "New World Order" were "two sides of the same coin".⁵² Žižek concluded his text by proposing that the only radical option was to refuse the "double blackmail" altogether, and to focus on how to:

build TRANSNATIONAL political movements and institutions strong enough to seriously constraint the unlimited rule of the capital, and to render visible and politically relevant the fact that the local fundamentalist resistances against the New World Order, from Milosević to le Pen and the extreme Right in Europe, are part of it?⁵³

When Žižek first made this statement, the post-Cold War self-confidence of Western Europe and America was at its peak. By 2000, the country once known as Yugoslavia had "withered away", a war had ended, and the new millennium had ushered in a strong belief that what would happen in the region would be dependent on the will of Brussels and Washington. In line with the deeply entrenched image of the freshly termed "Western Balkans" as a region in urgent need of supervision, a new series of "democratising" processes were initiated, along with new exclusion mechanisms through the European Union's accession process. At precisely the same time, the cultural spectre of the "Balkans"

⁴⁹ Recent scholarship that has passionately addressed this relationship includes J. Mušanović, *Hunger and Fury*; A. Hamza and S. Žižek, *From Myth to Symptom: The Case of Kosovo*. Pristina: Kolektivi Materializmi Dialektik, 2013; ed. S. Horvat and I. Štikš, *Welcome to the Desert of post-Socialism*. London: Verso Books, 2015.

⁵⁰ S. Žižek, 'Against the Double Blackmail,' *Third Text* 49, Summer 1999, pp. 39-50.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 50.

was resuscitated through a string of exhibitions staged in Germany and Austria.⁵⁴ With these exhibitions, Post-Yugoslav art was misplaced alongside art from Albania, Romania and Turkey, and swept aside in favour of an emotionally charged realm of life in a land of eternal suffering and historical uncertainties.

Since these exhibitions, a whole new series of politically correct terms for the geographic entity that was formerly Yugoslavia have emerged, while the region continues to be kept at a safe distance from the EU project and its growing discontents. Yet the consequences of failures in the former Yugoslavia are still with us today, highlighting the inabilities of societies in Western Europe and America to exist in forms that are inclusive, egalitarian and that foster solidarity. Twenty years after the Yugoslav wars, Europe even seems like a continent pulling itself apart, with member states resenting their memberships, and ten years of economic and political instability setting North against South, East against West, and citizens against institutions.⁵⁵ All the while, the Balkan “label” continues to exist, whether as the Western Balkan route, the “Greek Balkans”, or a space subject to conditional enlargement, and in urgent need of supervision. In spite of almost three decades of international presence in the region, including the cultural support of Western European and American foundations, countless policy summits and cultural exchanges, the Balkans continue to be viewed in terms of nationalist fragmentation, economic precariousness and social backwardness. For as long as that image remains, the region’s art will be expected to be nothing less than “Balkan Baroque”.

⁵⁴ These exhibitions were Harold Szeeman’s ‘Blood and Honey – Future’s in the Balkans’ (Sammlung Essl, Vienna, 2000); Roger Conover and Eda Cufer’s ‘In Search of Balkania’ (Neue Galerie, Graz, 2002); and René Block’s ‘In the Gorges of the Balkans. A Report’ (Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, 2003). Largely ignoring the thriving alternative art scenes that existed in the region, they worked to reassert borders and hierarchies between regions of Europe, and mirrored parallel political processes that established new prejudices against the ‘Balkan’ populations. For a focused analysis of the significance of these shows, see *Third Text*’s special issue on the Balkans, edited by Louisa Avgita and Juliet Steyn: *Third Text* 21, Issue 2: The Balkans, March 2007. More recent efforts to counter the ‘balkanising’ approach to post-Yugoslav art include an exhibition called ‘Cross-Border Experience – If you’re Trapped in the Dream of the Other, you’re Fucked’ at the Škuc Gallery in Ljubljana in October 2011, along with *Springerlin*’s recently published special issue on ‘Post-Yugoslavia,’ see *Springerlin* 1, 2019.

⁵⁵ For writer Igor Štiks, these recent political processes might suggest that in the two decades that the European Union has committed itself to ‘Europeanising the Balkans’, it has effectively ‘Balkanised’ itself. See I. Štiks, ‘While “Europeanising” the Balkans, the EU “Balkanised” itself’, *Al-Jazeera* .13 November 2018, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/europeanising-balkans-eu-balkanised-181113090929281.html>>