

TO CARE, BY QUEER SOCIALISM

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This lecture is divided in two parts. The first part provides some insights into my own artistic practice and interests in dance and choreography. The second part will focus on the artistic research I'm engaged with at the moment, and which I carried out during my residency through TenerifeLAV program. This research is about the history of feminist-queer artistic practices in socialist Yugoslavia. Thus, throughout the lecture I will give some historical perspective on Yugoslavian socialism, and provide just few examples of practices from queer-feminist approaches that challenged such state ideology during its lifespan of 45 years (1945-1992). This research will further constitute the basis of my next dance performance in spring 2024 in Belgrade through a cooperation and co-production between Station Service for contemporary dance Belgrade, National centre for dance Bucharest, Brainstore project Sofia and APAP European dance network.

Dance and choreography with anthropology and archiving

Parallel education in anthropology and dance directed me to critically think of choreography: not only what it looks like in the performance and how it portrays/depicts certain topic - but also how it cognitively and affectively touches the spectators regarding the topic it deals with – is it communicative, hermetic, boring, entertaining, disturbing, etc. To me, the artist is an interventive social subject whose function of creativity is not only to express oneself (its depth) but also to influence the value, ideological, and other dominant systems that one recognizes in the context in which one creates. I apply choreography as an artistic tool for interpreting various social phenomena and sociopolitical aspects conditioning modes of art and knowledge production (examples: (im)possibility of public speaking, position of people with rare diseases, negative feelings - anxiety, depression, hopelessness - as public commons, the

precarious working conditions on the independent cultural and artistic scene(s), the relationship between art and politics and many other issues.

Therefore, in my artistic work I do not only diagnose problems within dominant ideologies and structures of the context, but also conceptualize the reparation (Eve Sedwig). This does not mean offering new solutions, recipes, answers, but rather a space for collective self-reflexive analysis of various social problems. That's why in my performances I seek *criticality* or a space of dialogue, polemic, two-way exchange, which I distinguish from "criticism" (i.e. of society, I. Roggoff). In these efforts, choreography serves as a lens to interpret the societal aspects by bridging the gaps between the artist, the performance, and the audience within theater/museum setting. This dynamic interplay shifts between the realms of aesthetics and social interactions, creating a space where everything displayed on the public stage can potentially influence the social context. I've conducted various experiments within theater, museum and multimedia settings, exploring different formats, including participatory and traditional dance pieces, individual and collective structures, and various authorship roles, both within and outside institutional frameworks. I've also delved into these aspects through theoretical, pedagogical, and cultural work in contexts such as the Station Service for contemporary dance and the Nomad Dance Academy.

Besides artistic practice I'm engaged in archiving and historicizing contemporary dance in the Balkan region (Ex Yugoslavia). There are three aspects through which I work at the moment. **(1) Online regional database** – as a member of a regional team for archiving and historicizing contemporary dance in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia – through regional network the Nomad Dance Academy. Our main goal is to establish a first official digital database of documents and materials related to contemporary dance practices and the various dance cultures that surround it in Ex-Yugoslavia region – keeping in mind that there still doesn't exist one single official archive for dance in any of the former countries of Yugoslavia. This database will allow theorists, researchers, students, artists, journalists of the whole region access to original documents that are missing in the processes of historicizing dance, and the region itself will also be able to be re-examined as an area of key cultural, artistic and political antagonisms or coincidences in the field of (contemporary) dance. It will be opened to

the public in November 2024, through an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. **(2) The archiving as an artistic practice and artistic work as an archive** – is another layer of archiving I'm developing. Best two examples, can be a video-dance *One, two, three, come, friend, dance with me* (2021) which examines artistic and pedagogical practices of the founders of modern dance in Yugoslavia - Maga Magazinović, and Lujko Davičo – during 1930-1945. I questioned their social and political positioning between right, nationalist, fascist, and left, socialist/communist ideologies of the time in Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The work is shaped through a format of prolonged TikTok video. The research examines mechanisms of establishment and transgenerational maintenance of the enthroned discourses on modern/contemporary dance art in our local scene and its dominant cultural policies. The second example is a dance production *Desire to make solid history will end up in failure* (2023), which gathered me with six artists – pioneers of contemporary dance in the local independent dance scene – focusing on the sustainability of their imposing careers lasting for four decades (1980-2020), turbulent in terms of socio-political changes: from socialist Yugoslavia into the neoliberal-capitalistic Republic of Serbia. This opened additional questions: how dance practices adapted to social and political circumstances in this period(s); what connections existed between the dance scene and historical events; how artists positioned themselves politically during the war and changes in the state, and how such decisions and attitudes affected their artistic work; how feminist values were expressed through dance practices and the education of artists during different periods etc. **(3) (Post)socialist dance: in search for hidden legacies** – a book I co-edit with team of Serbian anthropologist Dunja Njaradi and theoretician Milica Ivić, and Belgian anthropologist Annelies Van Assche. This book will look at dance history, practices and production in former socialist and today's (post)socialist artworld(s) across the globe – Russia, Poland, China, Cuba, Yugoslavia, etc. In this search for the 'lost' dance worlds and landscapes, the book particularly aims to raise and discuss 'uncomfortable questions' of legitimacy: what gets to be remembered as a 'legitimate' dance history (Bourdieu 1984)? What gets to be staged as a 'quality' dance practice? Which practices are 'worth' archiving and institutionalizing? What are the limits of dance studies' understanding about what dance is (and what it should be)? In view of reclaiming the Second World through dance, the book intends to recuperate the role and meaning of dance and to

offer necessary utopias for living in a world torn by multiple crises. The book will be published in May 2024 (Bloomsbery, London).

Since 2019 my artistic practice focused specifically on the discourses of care and vulnerability based on feminist-queer and anti-anthropocentric ideas from: Maria Piugh de la Bellacasa, Isabel Lorey, Bojana Kunst, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Paul B. Preciado, Cinzia Auruzza, Tithy Bhattacharya, Nancy Frazer, Karin Barad, Franco Berardi Bifo, Bruno Latour. My aim was to come up with physical and affective practices through which the public recognition of care discourse – as a form of resistance to the present pervasive and patriarchal capitalist realism – can be explored, initiated, tried out and performed. These practices of care move away from both altruism – or sacrifice for the others – and from the utilitarian care: I take care of the Earth because it 'serves' me (the Anthropos). Rather, they rest on specific conceptions of life-based relationships that intervene in an ethos of the modern (Western) identity of the Self (controller of everything else foreign to it, defining it as a social, political, biological, economic "threat"). Such critical acts of care escape the construct of political community defined by common interests, and rather seek for asymmetrical physical and social powers and abilities.

Some of those asymmetrical positions within nowadays neoliberal-capitalist and patriarchal society I artistically researched through: position of women (*How to explain pictures to a man* 2021, *Children* 2022, *Landscape of desire* 2023), position of queers (*Crystal Ball* 2021) position of immunocompromised people (*Closeness of touch* 2022); and position of non-institutional marginalized dance practices under the precarious conditions (*Constituents* 2020, *Why not?* 2022, *Desire to make solid history will end up in failure*, 2023).

Within these works I physically explored several choreographic methods and principles – kinaesthetic practices: stillness, breathing, coughing, walking, touching, spiraling; somatic practices and movements: body-mind-centering (bodily fluids); punk dance, erotic dance, exotic dance; mass gatherings from rave-clubbing gatherings, street protests, animal flocks, plant based grouping; landscape and feminist dramaturgical structures; video-audio editing as a method of choreography etc. In addition, these

methods where set somewhere between live choreographic work and the digital domain (video work and social networks). The use of digital domain – nowadays an inevitable space and condition of communication, interaction, knowledge production, and space for archiving, documenting, and storage – opened an important question about care today, for me, which is: how to touch the body that touches the screen? (Bifo) For me, the answer is – through various forms of physical, social, emotional, biotechnological, medical, economic, environmental and other (mostly invisible) vulnerabilities, framed between the digital and the live performativity, with which only when we publicly advocate that we are so different from each other, and yet the same, we crack the patriarchy and capitalism. In that regard, for the end of this part of the lecture, I preview a short video artwork – some parts made in Santa Cruz, Tenerife – called ***GAYSMURDERME***.

Care and vulnerability through queer Socialism/Communism in Yugoslavia

Keeping in mind these interests over time I've started exploring historically deeper the context within which I am producing my art, and that more than any other to my knowledge in recent history provided a space for care among asymmetrical social positions: the socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1992). Yugoslavia, meaning the "Land of the South Slavs," was a nation in Southeast and Central Europe that had a lifespan from 1918 to 1992 (as a monarchy and then as a socialist state). It faced the invasion of Germany on April 6, 1941. In 1943, a Democratic Federal Yugoslavia was declared by the Partisan army or National Liberation Movement resistance. The infrastructure of Yugoslavia was severely damaged by the occupation and liberation struggle during World War II. Even the more advanced regions of the country were predominantly rural, and the limited industrial capacity in the country had suffered significant damage or complete destruction.

The monarchy was subsequently abolished in November 1945, and the country was renamed the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, establishing a communist government and multinational, multiethnic state consisting of six Republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Macedonia). Under the leadership of the Partisan leader Josip Broz Tito, from 1944 until his death in 1980, Yugoslavia went through

several improvements. The State broke ties with Eastern block and Soviet Union (1948), pursuing the independent political position between the West and the East (but clining to the West) and transforming its economy from Soviet-type central planning socialism to social ownership. The Yugoslav economy blended market forces and state-directed planning, prioritizing worker self-governance and decentralized decision-making. Despite grappling with various obstacles, such as political instability and external influences, the Yugoslav economy made substantial strides in both growth and modernization throughout its tenure, placing significant importance on education, healthcare, and social welfare available for all citizens. Particularly womens rights and emancipation were improved:

In August 1945 women were legally declared equal to men; as early as 1951, lesbian sex was decriminalized, abortion was legalized in 1952, and the paid maternity leave and the right to divorce were socially and legally accepted by the 1950s. (Tumbas)

However, the system ultimately proved unsustainable in the face of the global economic changes of the 1980s and the political tensions that led to Yugoslav Wars (1991-1995) and the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s from pan-Slavic identity into (six) independent national identities merged with ethnicism, mysoginy, homophobia, chauvinism etc. Yet, much before Yugoslavia encountered this economic and political crises, already by 1953 the impressive advancements for women had prompted the male-dominated socialist leadership in Yugoslavia to assert that they had successfully accomplished women's liberation. Consequently, they considered further advancements of women's rights (feminism) redundant, counterproductive to the broader societal liberation, self-centered and divisive. As pointed by Jasmina Tumbas, in 1953 the Women's Antifascist Front (AFV) was dissolved, and numerous women were encouraged to return to traditional gender roles (shpere of the home). Partisan women, who were indispensable force during World War II, were suddenly left off from Yugoslav army lists and out of the history books. Same happened within the culture and arts where straight men dominated. When it comes to the queer identities, recognition and achievements, while Yugoslavia had significantly less cases of persecution even before homosexuality was decriminalized in 1977, especially if compared to Western Europe

countries, still, being gay was hardly discussed in families, especially in rural contexts, and gay life or queer culture remained mostly stigmatized and invisible, hidden etc.

Consequently, numerous feminist and queer artistic expressions and political involvements emerged in the 1970s, and 1980s, respectively, as vocal critiques of the patriarchal state policies and socialist propaganda – even though they weren't always declared as such. What brings these various methods together is their shared emphasis on the liberating political expression through performance in the realms of 1980s pop and punk music, film, performance, dance, and activist creations from underground feminist and queer (LGBTQ) scene. One of the carriers of such movements, Slovenian artist and theorist Marina Gržinić explained the period in following way:

The emergence of Slovenian punk in 1977, along with the first coming out of the gay scene in 1984 (the Magnus Festival) represented something entirely new and different behind the Iron Curtain in Europe. These two movements (punk and homosexuality) transformed us into urban entities; they opened up the possibility of conceptualising anti-authoritativeness, different sexuality, the anti-hegemonic battle against patriarchy and chauvinism, normalisation of everyday life, and the revolt against depoliticisation. [...] We stood and embraced the position of political lesbianism with the cyberfeminism and transfeminism to come. Therefore, the explicit lesbian, drag, and transsexual sequences (from blow jobs to peep-show dancing) were politically conceptualised, and the aims were political demands and visibility for homosexuals and to operate against the official heterosexist socialist reality (Gržinić in Munt:2020).

These practices illustrate one's simultaneous readiness to act in order to influence the infrastructure or the reality around, and also to accept one's own susceptibility and dependence on those infrastructures which also shape, normalize, and enable our lives. Recognizing such two-way vulnerability within the the presence of a climate of freedom and artistic exploration during Tito's Yugoslavia, encourages us to reconsider our understanding of "totalitarianism" during that era and its contemporary interpretation. This is especially evident in the works of artists originating from the former Yugoslavia, whose emancipatory feminist and queer approaches could unveil, celebrate, and critically examine the political ideology associated with the male-centric and heteronormative governance of the socialist state and its resulting effects. Furthermore, it allows us to delve into the factors that contributed to the rise of

nationalist, misogynistic, racist, and homophobic rhetoric after the breakup of Yugoslavia (and also Socialism in 1989).

Yet, when it initiates and gathers the bodies of the vulnerable, which are inevitably in relation with other bodies, vulnerability is a resistance to the powers of the centralist, patriarchal, anti-democratic order. Re-claiming this two-layered process of vulnerability today opens a space for establishing new histories of socialism observing it not as a space for idealization of the past, nor of projection for the future, but rather as a tool, and a framework, and a source, for constituting and supporting the full achievement and sustainability of socialism today, in the moment of the overall dominance of fascist politics and its intrinsic connection to patriarchal violence, occupation, colonialism, imperialism, genocides in twenty-first century Europe and beyond. It provides a space for thinking about and acting on the ways of care among our asymmetrical positions of social and physical abilities and powers and new alternatives within the contemporary conceptualizations of commonality.

Mapping some key references of queer-feminist art in the socialist Yugoslavia

Among women active in field of video, dance and art performance besides internationally famous artists like Marina Abramović and Sanja Iveković, my attention was caught by works of Vlasta Delimar, Smiljana Mandukić – as female artists who within different mediums challenged the male dominated artworld in Yugoslavia. Smiljana Mandukić was among the first female choreographers in socialist Yugoslavia who had her own dance troupe (from 1964) – Belgrade experimental ballet studio – based on various modern dance techniques. Even though she never claimed herself to be a feminist, nor she ever transparently claimed feminism in her dance works, her former students informed me (during our creative process in the dance work *Desire to make solid history will end up in failure*) that the main value of her troupe was: a woman should never be dependent on a man; She can do much more than remaining in house and bare children. It is also noteworthy to mention that such values, aesthetic, and narratives within her choreographies over time gradually became visible on various venues in Belgrade and Yugoslavia, even on national TV. The best example can be found in her work *Ćele kula* (*Ćele tower*, 1973) filmed and displayed on national TV in

1979 – marking 173 years of the First Serbian Uprising (against Ottoman Empire) placing women as main initiators of the uprising (contrary to historical interpretations).

Some much more direct message within her art practice and artwork context could be found in work of **Vlasta Delimar** – a Croatian visual and performance artist active across the whole Yugoslavia, focused her practice mostly on the sexual acts through which she questioned the gender role of women in society – transparently pointing out her sexuality, sexual desires, especially in relation to a male-dominant sexuality (works: *Ball painting* 1980, *Visual orgasm* 1981, *Tied to a tree* 1985, *I love dick* 1982, *Fucking is sad* 1986). In *Visual orgasm* Delimar displays publicly her facial expressions during orgasm, while in *Ball painting* she painted the genitalia of five prominent Croatian male artists, which was extraordinary at the time, keeping in mind that women could rarely use men's bodies in art (Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.). In the image we see Delimar holding the brush and the watercolor palette in her hand – she is the author in this lineup and she holds the power over all those „dicks“.

There were more direct queer-feminist, cyberfeminist practices in Yugoslavia, from the end of 1970s within the underground punk and queer movement. Already mentioned artist **Marina Gržinić**, in collaboration with art historian and artist Ana Smidt, created numerous video artworks that highlighted women's central role in shaping the discourse around art and culture in Slovenia. These works were integral in discussions about achieving a politically emancipated life that challenged the conventional middle-class perception of Slovenian society and reality. For example, in her collaboration with artists Aldo Ivančić, Zemira Alajbegović from Borghesia – a Slovenian electro-rock music band – they created a art-video *Cindy* as an homage to the feminist work of Cindy Sherman, focusing on video and performance as means for examining the politics of female pleasure, sexuality, etc. In the video performers „Strike poses“ that embody unknown identities and play with liberation and emancipation while expressing the exhibitionistic pleasure. Gržinić also appears as a cyborgian punk ballerina reveling her breasts, entering periodically into the lesbian eroticism with Alajbegović specifically in the setting of the kitchen and in front of the brewing pot (the

imposed space of female roles). In another scene Gržinić is looking at us (viewers), reminding us that she knows she is being watched and is in charge of her own gaze.

From 1977, some proto-drag and proto-queer practices appeared on the alternative scene in Belgrade (SKC). Such was the work of **Kosta Bunuševac** – costume designer, scenographer and performance artist who wasn't queer, but a heterosexual. Yet, from his very first performance in which he played with dance while dressed in drag, throughout 1980s Bunuševac played a lot with gender roles in his art. His most famous work *Belgrade at night* (Beograd noću) with famous avant-gard pop artist **Oliver Mandić** was shown on the national TV in 1980 and caused a scandal as the show displayed a man dressed as a woman for the first time in history of Yugoslavia. Yet, it gained enormous regional and international recognition. Similar happened in 1985 with the performance *Homo-theatre* when he exhibited a big image of a transsexual woman on the billboard of the Youth cultural centre in Belgrade with transparently revealed breasts and genitalia covered by a hand. The scandal was reported by evening news on national TV. Although scandalous, such practices opened the doors for other similar examples and practices emerging later in 1990s or postsocialist Yugoslavia, with works of choreographer Boris Čakširan, and music artist Milan Delčić Delča etc. Speaking of transsexual identities, practices, and art, throughout 1980s and 1990s in times of rising ethnic tensions, racism, homophobia, and misogyny, one of the most important advocates for trans and gay rights, was **Vjeran Miladinović – Merlinka (Marylin)**. Merlinka was the first publicly declared trans person in the history of socialist Yugoslavia. Usually cross-dressed surreal like characters from Almodovar movies, Merlinka was a known sexworker on the streets of Belgrade. The film director Želimir Žilnik was enchanted by her talent, and in 1986 Merlinka played in two of Žilnik's films: *Belgrade, Good Morning* and *Beautiful Women Pass through the City*. In 1995 she played the main role (herself) in the film *Marble Ass* – which won the Teddy Award on the Berlin film festival. As her glory rised, she was very vocal on national TV about LGBTQ+ rights and displaying publicly her clients (from everyday citizens to very famous and high class politicians). She was murdered brutally in Belgrade in 2003.

This little overview of only few examples draws a historical background and of huge field of queer-feminist practices in socialist Yugoslavia. Besides fulfilling my so far

research on care and vulnerability, these practices also mark some of the approaches I rely on within my own art practice in which I explore care and vulnerability between live choreographic performances and video artworks (like in works *Gaysmurderme*; *Closeness of touch*; *One, two, three, comrade come dance with me* etc.). What draws my attention are principles which are used as tools within the artwork – for example: how is the gaze of the performer set; what is the usage of the body (nudity, erotic, femininity, masculinity, what movements, or kind of dance, somatics), how is the video edited, what is the visual identity, what is the video quality (hd or lowfi) etc. My following explorations in this research will be focused on mapping from these historical references the artistic methodologies and principles within fields of performance, video and dance art, conceptualizing them for the upcoming dance production in May 2024.

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