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YUGOSLAVIAN SOCIALISM AND POPULAR CULTURE

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Julija Pešić is a University of Toronto researcher focused on performance art, cultural anthropology, and cultural studies. Her interdisciplinary doctoral dissertation investigates the forms and functions of the Balkans cultural tradition in the work of Marina Abramovic. She is a Belgrade-born, New York City-based performance artist, now best-known for her record-breaking 2010 MoMA retrospective. In 2017/18 and 2018/19, Julija received the Ontario Graduate Scholarship for the research project about cultural specificity and global dynamics in the performance art of Abramovic. Before immigrating to Canada, Julija completed BA honours in South Slavic Literature and MA in Dramatic Literature at the University of Belgrade with expertise in subversive humour in contemporary European theatre. Her work also comprises interaction of literature, theatre, and film.

YUGOSLAVIAN SOCIALISM AND POPULAR CULTURE

Abstract

Yugoslavian Socialism and Popular Culture investigates hybridity as an aesthetic process of fusion, interaction, and/or interference of region-specific local cultures and globally appealing elements of Western culture in performance art of Marina Abramovic. This paper is focused on two of Abramovic's artistic works *Count on Us* (2003) and *The Hero* (2001). They are particularly good examples to investigate how Abramovic intertwines the elements of socialist-Yugoslavian and popular culture; in short, elements of Yugoslav-socialist iconography and music with elements of Western popular culture. Namely, Socialist-Yugoslavian popular music was under the strong influence of American popular culture (jazz, rock and roll music, film, fashion, Disney cartoons, and comics), especially during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. I will explore why and how Abramovic refers to the local popular songs such as *Count on Us* from late 1970s by using the same title for her installation and why she brings the other local popular hit singles from the 1960s into the same installation. Furthermore, I am interested in whether a five-point star shaped by children's bodies in *Count on Us* is Abramovic's artistic self-reference to her previous work *Rhythm 5*, to the ideological context of her youth, or to her communist family background. Finally, I will explore the aesthetic, political, and ethical consequences of Abramovic's choice to integrate the Yugoslavian national anthem *Hey, Slavs* from Tito's era, and the idea of the Balkan heroism in her video *The Hero*, which she also dedicated to her father's partisan past.

Key words: performance art, Yugoslavia, Popular culture, irony, aesthetic trans-contextualization

My paper is a part of doctoral dissertation project and explores the artistic work of Marina Abramovic. She is a Yugoslav-born, New York-based performance artist, now best known for her record-breaking 2010 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) retrospective exhibition. This exhibition drew over 850,000 visitors within three months with its central event *The Artist Is Present*—a 736-hour and 30-minute live performance—in which Abramovic invited each audience member to sit opposite to her in the museum's atrium. The existing research into Abramovic's work has primarily focused on the biographical and familial background of the artist living and creating in communist Yugoslavia during

the 1970s and 1980s (Phelan, 2004), or on Abramovic's recent New York City retrospectives at the Guggenheim Museum (2005) (Spector, 2010) and the MoMA (2010) (Biesenbach, 2010; Jones, 2011). Scholars have not yet considered that the global success of Abramovic's work is a consequence of her artistic choice to bring the elements of the Balkan and Yugoslavian cultural traditions into the contemporary context of a globalized, Western art forms. This characteristic of Abramovic's art is especially significant in her post-1990s work. I argue that Abramovic's global success is a consequence of the complex interaction of specific local cultures and globally-appealing elements of Western culture in her art, particularly pronounced in her performances after the 1990s. The presence of the Balkan culture in Abramovic's work coincides with the complex and violent shifts caused by state border modifications in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, and the modes of communication, changed by the Internet. The questions of why Abramovic is by far one of the most popular living performance artists in North America today and what her position in the global market is have become even more acute after the transition from the pre-digital to the digital era. Therefore, my project examines what happens when a local culture and a global art form are put into conversation within the framework of 21st century performance art. Is the local culture used only as a departure point in the artistic practice of an artist whose work is also influenced by media and contemporary marketing in art, and who achieved a celebrity New York City pop-icon status in the first decades of the 21st century? Or, conversely, is the local culture misused in Abramovic's work, becoming mainly a marketing tool and a commodity in the era of consumerism? Addressing the public reception of Abramovic's work is one of the entry points to answer this question. In North America,

Abramovic is by far one of the most acclaimed living performance artists, both in academia and in the media. In her homeland, on the other hand, she has often been perceived as someone who capitalizes on a misused cultural background, an artist focusing only on sexuality and violence, and thus promoting a negative, stereotypical image of the Balkan culture. Therefore, my project studies the positionality of an artist who brings local traditions to a global market.

Count on Us (2003)

Count on Us (2003) is particularly good examples of an aesthetic “trans-contextualisation and transgression” (Hutcheon, 12) by which Linda Hutcheon, a Canadian theoretician of parody and postmodernism, means an aesthetic “form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion” (6). *Count on Us* represents Abramovic’s personal but ironical tribute to the idea of promised happiness and the socialist-Yugoslavian utopian dream as a concept of a better future in which she grew up, but that has never come, and does not exist anymore.

The project *Count on Us* is multiscreen video installation. It consists of five parts, projected on different screens simultaneously:

- Boy (a boy singing a love song “The Boat on the Tisa”)
- Girl (a girl singing a song of longing “Yellow Flower”)
- The Star (children making the formation of a five-point star on the ground, around a skeleton)
- Tesla Coil (Abramovic holding a bare neon light, without wires, while in front of her, running through two large copper coils are 35,000 volt of electricity)

- Chorus (a choir made up of children dressed in black, singing the hymn of the United Nations and conducted by Abramovic dressed as a skeleton)

The elements of Yugoslav-socialist iconography are visually significant in this project. First of all, a five-point star has been used as a motif in Abramovic's previous artistic work on which many scholars have already pointed out. In his essay "Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present. The Artist Was Present. The Artist Will Be Present" published in 2010, Klaus Biesenbach, an art historian and Chief Curator of Media and Performance Art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, argues that the ideological communist heritage of Yugoslavia determined Abramovic's rejection of ideology in her 1960s and 1970s aesthetics. His historiographical and biographical approach to the archival materials draws upon the analysis of four chronologically determined phases in the development of Abramovic's opus. In addition, Jovana Stokić's essay "The Art of Marina Abramovic: Leaving the Balkans, Entering the Other Side", published in 2010, sheds new light on Abramovic's work, claiming that Abramovic's subjectivity is directly related to the "Balkan ethos she grew up with: myth, heroism, sacrifice, risk, and discipline" (Stokić 23) and to her communist family background. However, Stokić does not clearly define what the term "Balkan ethos" (23) encompasses in her research. Rather, she observes Abramovic's performances from the 1970s and a few performances during and after the 1990s.

A Five-point Star

As a region-specific but also an internationally used and culturally coded symbol, a five-point star is Abramovic's aesthetic tool of self-referentiality in the video *Count on Us*. As such it is ironized, becoming a part of a new context of her artistic

practice. Namely, a five-point star was present in Abramovic's artistic practice from the very beginning of her career. For example, while exploring the limits of a human body, pain, and suffering in the performance *Rhythm 5* (1974) in Belgrade's Student Cultural Centre courtyard, Abramovic was laying down inside the blazing five-point frame star. In the performance *Thomas Lips* (1975), reperformed as *Lips of Thomas* (2005) in Guggenheim Museum in New York City, Abramovic again explored the limits of her body, pain, and suffering while cutting a five-point star (or pentagram) on her belly with a razor. A five-point star is also Abramovic's reference to her communist family background. Namely, many times, in her interviews and her own recently published in 2016 autobiography *Walk Through Walls: A Memoir*, Abramovic talked about her parents as young and vital soldiers. Both of them were Tito's partisans that took part in the National Liberation War (1940-45), the Communist Party members, and active participants in newborn socialist society in post-war Yugoslavian government. They were national heroes, strong and disciplined revolutionaries that as Communists broke off with their religious Christian Orthodox family background. Their lives and careers coincide with the history of Yugoslavia before the period of the federation breakdown as they participated actively in it. Abramovic's mother, for example, was the director of Museum of Revolution in Belgrade. Abramovic's father Vojin was a highly ranked Tito's soldier and a Communist Party member. In short, their private and public figures were closely intertwined with the history of the Yugoslavian state since they had been hierarchically highly positioned in it. However, in *Count on Us* installation, the children body formation in five-point star shape is not only Abramovic's reference to the ideologically shaped Yugoslavian context of her youth in which she was born and grew up. It is also her reference to current moment of post-Yugoslav context. In Abramovic's

post-1990s artistic practice, Socialist-Yugoslav context is ironized politically and artistically because of its civil war-history that the Balkan region has experienced during the 1990s. “After the long war period the Balkan countries were left with a completely destroyed infrastructure, economic problems... [...]. The work was made after I revised the country in 2003 and was confused with the present situation” (Abramovic 45).

“Before I left Yugoslavia in 1975, in one of my last performances, called Rhythm 5, I used a five-point star, the same one used on the Yugoslav flag. I set the star on fire and lay down in the middle of it. During the performance the fire took all the oxygen and I lost consciousness. The performance was stopped when the public realized what had happened and carried me out of the star. Shortly after that incident, I left Yugoslavia. Coming back 28 years later, I made a star out of children lying down. They were dressed in Black to symbolize the black future. I lay in the middle with a skeleton. It seemed appropriate, not only to connect past and present, but to reflect the future”. (Abramovic 45).

A Skeleton and Bones

As a symbol of death and disintegration of an individual and state body, a skeleton and bones were Abramovic’s aesthetic tool with multiple culturally coded meanings. The skeleton was commonly used in Abramovic's previous works, too. For example, in the multimedia project *Balkan Baroque* (1997), for which Abramovic won the Golden Lion for the Best Artist at the Venice Biennale in 1997, Abramovic was sitting on a pile of 1500 real cow bones, repetitively cleaning them from the traces of

real flesh and blood. In *Cleaning the Mirror I* (1995), she washed a skeleton with a metal brush, soap, and water. She brought a pile of bloody bones in her hands in order to explore physical limits of her body; in the performance *Cleaning the House* (1996), Abramovic was sitting on the pile of bones, cleaning them from meat as she did in *Balkan Baroque*.

In the video project *Count on Us*, the skeleton appears as a symbol of death and disintegration. It is used as an object attached on front side of Abramovic's black dress in the moment she conducts the choir of children. In the other video of the same installation *Count on Us*, Abramovic wears a skeleton as an attached object/the other body while she stands in the middle of five-point star formation made by children bodies. The skeleton as an object in this artwork of Abramovic speaks on many multiple levels because of its structural and functional complexity. As an aesthetic tool, it amplifies ironical effect of the United Nation hymn that children sing during the scene. In other words, the irony transpires from the incongruency between its form and content, black dressed children (as a symbol of pessimistically vision of the future) and optimistic content/meaning of the UN anthem. By doing so, Abramovic questions the past of Yugoslavia in which she was born and grow up, recent history of the civil wars during the 1990s. In addition, she interrogates the future of the contemporary global world and its institutions in the end of millennium and the very beginning of the 21st century. Finally, the project *Count on Us* is also Abramovic's artistic dialogue with various cultural models as an amalgam of genre conventions. It is shaped by different and often intertwined, but also conflicting, artistic traditions, formally and stylistically. Aesthetically speaking, Abramovic uses the process of "aesthetic trans-contextualization" (Hutcheon

12) and transgression in order to create a unique personal response to past, present, and future of the post-Yugoslav and global context.

The Hero (2001)

The 14'21" video work *The Hero* (2001) dedicates to Abramovic's father Vojin and his revolutionary past. He passed away in the same year of the performance. The title of this video refers to him because he was a renowned Yugoslavian war hero from WWII, Tito's soldier, and highly ranked a Communist Party member in new born Socialist-Yugoslavian society. *The Hero* also recalls Abramovic's personal memories—the romantic war tale about her parents and their love during the WWII. Namely, Abramovic's father Vojin found her mother Danica among a group of sick and wounded partisans. He took her to a hospital on his white horse. Mother Danica later, saved Vojin's life when he was wounded.

The Hero was filmed in Spain, but edited in Amsterdam. In it, Abramovic sits on a white horse—a symbol of epic heroism, war, purity, and strength. While a calm landscape is used as a background of the video, Abramovic, dressed in black with her hair on wind, holds a white banner—a symbol of surrender. Paradoxically, the visual contrast between her motionless body in black while sitting on white horse, the calm landscape used as a background, and Yugoslavian national anthem *Hey, Slavs* from Tito's era, create dramatical but ironical effect. Such an effect transpires from the aesthetic decontextualization of national anthem. In *The Hero*, voice of a female singer appears as non-diegetic soundtrack. Such a voice remains in aesthetic, structural, and

functional contrast with how national anthem *Hey Slavs* has been interpreted in Socialist-Yugoslavian context. Namely, the anthem *Hey Slavs* was used as the national anthem of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1943 to 1992 mainly interpreted by choirs. While symbolizing national dignity, unity, and social prosperity of the Yugoslav people, *Hey Slavs* was a type of celebration song during the official ceremonies such as government rally, public collective performances, Communist Party meetings, diplomatic ceremonies, and military parades.

In *The Hero*, Abramovic reassesses the sedimented layers of intimate, familial, national, historical, cultural and allegorical narratives. In other words, Abramovic incorporates her personal narrative about family members (father) and historical narrative about her homeland Yugoslavia into a new context of her video work. Becoming an internalized part of video, *The Hero*, the idea of partisan and heroism loses its sublime heroic meaning. By doing so, Abramovic distances herself from all layers of her past.

As many of Abramovic's previous works, *The Hero* also explores performative elements such as the notion of motionless body and time, questioning many aspects of physical endurance and mind concentration. One of the most challenging moments in this performance is that one in which Abramovic, suffering from fatigue, loses her grip on the banner that she holds. Then, she lowers the banner and rises it again. By doing so, she draws audience attention to the slightest movements of her body and horse body as well. According to a curator and art historian Phyllis Rosenzweig, *The Hero* was "first conceived as t two-part piece in which the artist faced a mirror image of herself seated on a black horse; the second image was later edited out in order to focus

on the hero aspect of the work. The original concept of the hero harks back on the early work, a 1971 double-screen film piece short in Super-8, in which two swans swim endlessly towards each other against different landscape background” (Rosenzweig 40).

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