

Panel BK8: Post-Yugoslav Culture
Thursday, May 6, 8.00-9.30 AM EST

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***Marina Abramović—The Cleaner (Čistač):
A Spectacular Exhibition as an Example of Political Power***

The paper explores a paradoxical function of performance art vis-à-vis political populism and commodification of the artist as a brand name in a post-socialist context, as demonstrated in the recent 2019 Belgrade retrospective of *Marina Abramović's The Cleaner (Čistač)*. I argue that Abramović's self-fashioning identity continuously plays a key role in the artist's recognition, popularity, and success, contributing to the artist's (re)positionality in the international art scene, globalized art market, and public space. This specificity of Abramović 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. While asking the questions of how and why performance art in the 21st century has been shifting from less to increasingly more *mimetic* forms and lucrative business, my paper opens the conversation about the ability of performance art to maintain radicalism while addressing simultaneously global and local issues.

In September 2019, I attended the opening ceremony for invited guests of the retrospective exhibition *Marina Abramović—The Cleaner (Čistač)* that covered almost five decades of the artist's internationally recognized artistic career.¹ The last time Abramović exhibited in Belgrade was in 1975 at the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (hereafter referred to

¹ The retrospective exhibition *Marina Abramović—The Cleaner (Čistač)* was running from September 20, 2019 to January 20, 2020.

as [MoCAB]).² This exhibition represents the first institutional recognition of the artist in her home land Yugoslavia.

As a part of its European tour, *The Cleaner* was produced as a collaboration of Abramović, and the curators Lena Essling (Moderna Museet in Stockholm,), Tine Colstrup (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek) and Susanne Kleine (Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn). Different variations of this exhibition have already visited Stockholm, Humlebaek, Oslo, Bonn, Florence, and Torun since 2017. Belgrade was the last stop of the tour where the exhibits were chosen by Abramović and then curated by MoCAB's curator Dejan Sretenović. He used chronology as a leading principle of the retrospective's structure.

Belgrade's retrospective manifests a discernible gap between the retrospective as a political spectacle around Abramović outside the gallery and the retrospective as an artistic performance itself inside the gallery space. What makes Belgrade's *The Cleaner* so specific in comparison to other European cities is the state involvement in it, the usage of public money for a single exhibition in an impoverished post-socialist country, and the support of the current authorities who as a matter of fact were the very same political cadre who had taken crucial roles of power in the political events of the 1990s.

The gallery space of MOCA was reconstructed specifically for the purpose of Abramović's retrospective. This reconstruction took over a year and a half, despite the fact that the museum had previously been completely renovated in 2017, after being closed for a decade for restoration. The opening ceremony for invited guests only, local politicians and public figures, followed by a glamorous evening reception in an upscale Radisson Collection Hotel Old Mill, was organized in

² Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (MoCAB) refers to the Muzej savremene umetnosti u Beogradu.

MOCA's foyer on the evening before the official opening of the retrospective. The invited guests were people from diverse political, ideological, social, and cultural milieu. Among them were Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić, President of the National Assembly of Serbia Maja Gojković;³ then, the representatives of post-socialist business elite and local turbo-folk music industry; finally, the artists and curators from Abramović's generation, including but not limited to a renowned art historian Ješa Denegri, a famous Belgrade's fashion designer Dragana Ognjenović, and me, perhaps the only one researcher that evening with ambivalent feelings and perspective towards the opening reception. Such a standpoint came from my growing up and schooling in Serbia during the 1990s and immigrant experience after 2012.

This opulence of the opening reception reflected a paradoxical function of performance art in the 21st century vis-à-vis its original purposes. Looking back on the theory and history of performance art, Peggy Phelan reminds us that performance art was a radical, subversive, and anti-commercial artistic form that “defined itself in opposition to the commodity-based art market” in the 1970s.⁴ These characteristics of performance art were “the most politically radical aspect of live art,” according to Phelan.⁵ In the early 1970s, Abramović practiced live art in Belgrade within a gallery at the *Studentski kulturni centar (SKC)* (hereafter referred to as [SCC]) in Socialist-Yugoslavia. After leaving Yugoslavia, the artist continued within the international art scene and collaborated with German artist Ulay during the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, Abramović returned to her solo career, becoming recognized as a leading world-wide art celebrity after her record-breaking MoMA's retrospective *The Artist is Present* in 2010. In the

³ In the 1990s, Maja Gojković was one of the founders of the ultra-nationalistic right-wing Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka*, SRS) whose leader Vojislav Šešelj, was convicted of war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague. Additionally, Gojković also was Deputy Prime Minister of Yugoslavia under the regime of Slobodan Milošević.

⁴ Peggy Phelan, “Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows,” *Theatre Journal* 56, no.4, (December 2004): 570.

⁵ Peggy Phelan, “Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows,” *Theatre Journal* 56, no.4, (December 2004): 571.

second decade of the 21st century, Abramović's performance art has become a mainstream form, a lucrative business, and yet possibly still an efficient political tool in the post-socialist world. In other words, the relationship between Abramović, Serbian authorities, and the art market has become more complex and pragmatic than it was before and during the Yugoslav breakdown in the 1990s. This relationship has become a form of public spectacle in which the global tendencies of political populism and consumerism attain culturally specific local embodiment and economic confirmation.

The title of the retrospective—*The Cleaner*—identifies a dominant conception of the exhibition and Abramović's artistic methodology. It is a concept of cleaning and spiritual purification through the engagement with traces of the past, archive materials, documents, fragments, and the debris of personal and collective histories. In this regard, the artist herself says:

I wanted to name the exhibition *The Cleaner* because this term means something else for me—the cleaner of past, cleaner of memory, reminiscence, the cleaner of my own artwork towards which I need to be self-critical and to clean everything that I have not done properly and then to show to the audience only what the best is in my work.⁶

The “cleaning” concept resulted in a retrospective that encompasses 120 pieces. They were set on five floors, following Abramović's artistic trajectory from her early paintings in 1960s, drawings, photographs, objects, installations, videos, audios, films, and reperformances of some of

⁶ Marina Abramović, “Marina Abramović: Umetnost je kiseonik našeg društva, otvara svest,” *Danas*, 18. septembar 2019.
<https://www.danas.rs/kultura/marina-Abramovic-umetnost-je-kiseonik-naseg-drustva-otvara-svest/>

Abramović/Ulay works to the artist's most recent works that has contributed to her post-MoMA celebrity status.

In fact, Belgrade's *The Cleaner* demonstrates how socio-political dynamics of the current Serbian government constructed a performance spectacle around Abramović outside the gallery space in a way that overshadows what is in the gallery itself. Such dynamics shows to what extent the entire political apparatus was implicated in this single exhibition. *The Cleaner* caused many polarized reactions about Abramović and performance art, reflecting that Serbian society is still so deeply politically divided between Western neoliberalism which was implemented as a consequence of Yugoslav breakdown and nostalgia for former socialism; so, that an artistic and cultural event of first-class importance became a part of the everyday political skirmishes.

In public discourse, the retrospective was mainly discussed through pro- and contra-government viewpoints since the Serbian government invited Abramović and financially supported the retrospective by using the public money for it. These circumstances blurred the aesthetic and curatorial importance of the retrospective. On one hand, pro-government populists modishly and uncritically glorified Abramović's international fame without a clear understanding of the complexity of her work and its significance in Yugoslav art history and beyond. They discussed Abramović in the light of her position as a world celebrity and global pop-culture icon. Such a "complete euphoric mystification" of Abramović, as Branislav Dimitrijević, an art historian, defined this standpoint, is partially a consequence of the marketing campaign for the retrospective, including Abramović's inherently performative self-constructed mythology about her challenging past in Socialist-Yugoslavia from which she had to escape almost as a victim of

the political regime.⁷ Nevertheless, Abramović has not been present in the local artistic scene from the moment she voluntarily left Yugoslavia and moved to Amsterdam in order to join Ulay in 1976. On the other hand, there are still far-right/ethno-national populists and Eurosceptics in Serbian society who have denied conceptual and performance art, its aesthetics, domain, and significance in art history, forgetting that non-figurative art forms—key paradigms of aesthetic change in the last 50 years—have meanwhile been a part of the theoretical and art history conversation.

Finally, many scholars and curators (art and cultural establishment in Serbia) did not question the aesthetic significance of Abramović's artwork and its strong contribution to Yugoslav performance art and beyond. However, they did express an objection towards a politicization of the retrospective, questioning Abramović's choice to accept the invitation of the current Serbian government, given that the artist had already been invited many times before. Abramović had not accepted the invitation to exhibit in Belgrade of any of the previous governments (between 2000-2012) after the fall of the Slobodan Milošević's regime and democratic political changes that took place after 2000. Art and cultural establishment questioned Abramović's decision to step "straight into the minefield of Serbian politics" as Branislav Jakovljević precisely articulated.⁸ The skepticism therefore transpired primarily from the political instrumentalization of the event itself, its contribution to the increase of the political approval rating of the party that is currently in power, and the financial controversies related to its organization.

⁷ Asja Hafner, "Dimitrijević: 'Čistač' Marine Abramović u Beogradu propagandni čin," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 21. septembar 2019. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30175064.html>

⁸ Branislav Jakovljević, "Performance Art and Illiberal Democracy, Marina Abramović's *The Cleaner* in Belgrade," *TDR/Drama Review* 64, no 1, (Spring 2020): 183.

It needs to be said that the authorities embraced the internationally acclaimed brand-name of “Marina Abramović” for the purpose of their political marketing. To be specific, the parliamentary elections were scheduled initially for April 2020—only three months after retrospective closing. By using Abramović’s retrospective and her brand-name as a self-identifier during a full year of the election campaign, the Serbian government presented itself to a domestic and international community as progressive, pro-European Union oriented, and capable of hosting an artist of international credibility and local ancestry.⁹ Beside Nikola Tesla (an inventor), Novak Djoković (a tennis player), Emir Kusturica (a film director), Vlade Divac and Nikola Jokić (NBA players), Marina Abramović is one of the most famous names originally coming from the entire Yugoslav region. In other words, Marina Abramović’s brand-name contributed directly to increase the political rating of the party in power within local and international political spectrum. In support of this interpretation is the fact that all official materials about the retrospective, including public billboards and posters that advertised *The Cleaner*, had to include a notification that the event was primarily initiated and supported by the Serbian government. Such a political precedent has not been seen in any of the other European cities in which the exhibition was toured, no matter which institution, political party, or individual supported the event.

In this light, the conception of the retrospective itself—the *cathartic* process of cleaning through the engagement with the past—problematized the position, role, and understanding of a performance artist vis-à-vis the recent political history in the Balkans and its association with war experience of the 1990s. Abramović’s works between 1993-2005 and her artistic and personal

⁹ Serbia has officially got a status of a full Candidate for European Union accession.

relationship to the Socialist-Yugoslav past and post-socialist present in the Balkans are important aspects of her art and public presence that need to be considered in conversation about the meaning of Abramović's artistic return to Belgrade. These aspects determine not only the socio-political and economic context of Abramović's retrospective in her native city, but also generate the culturally-specific understanding of Abramović's own attitude towards the current Serbian authorities and their financial support given that the artist had already been invited many times before. Abramovic had not accepted the invitation to exhibit in Belgrade from any of the previous governments after the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime and the democratic political changes that took place after 2000. Therefore, the question that still imposes itself is why Abramović, whose aesthetic and political attitude towards recent Yugoslav past transpires from her Balkan cycle accepted the invitation of current Serbian authorities considering the fact that their members had been involved in the political and military events of the 1990s.

(Work in Progress)

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