

## YUGOSLAVIA AS WORLD HISTORY THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SELF-MANAGED ART

IVANA BAGO

Jakovljević, Branislav. *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016.

Medosch, Armin. *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961–1978)*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.

And so will the most skeptical spirits among us say  
that history owes its contemporary popularity merely  
to the situation of crisis.

— BRANKO PETRANOVIĆ<sup>1</sup>

In 1995 Susan Woodward published *Socialist Unemployment: The Political Economy of Yugoslavia, 1945–1990*, presenting research initiated in the 1980s and intended as an alternative explanation of Yugoslavia's rising unemployment. By the time Woodward finished her manuscript the country had fallen apart, and the book had become an alternative etiology of Yugoslavia's demise. Its account of the country's staggering rates of unemployment and dependence on international loans disturbed the prevailing journalistic and academic fascination with the wartime violence of the

1 Branko Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije 1918–1988* [The History of Yugoslavia 1918–1988] (Belgrade: Nolit, 1988). My translation.

1990s.<sup>2</sup> A “new exceptionalism,” Woodward writes in her preface, one “of ancient ethnic hatreds and a Balkan culture of blood revenge, replaced the fame of Yugoslavia’s ‘third way,’” thus vindicating scholarship that claimed that “Yugoslav politics was always about the national question and ethnic conflict.”<sup>3</sup>

About fifteen years later, when the fledgling post-Yugoslav nation-states seemed to have finally satisfied their nationalist obsession and were now ready to embark on the European path of “stabilization and association,” students at the Zagreb Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences occupied the university and organized a “Plenum.”

Proclaimed in April 2009 as a protest against the commodification of education in Croatia, the university blockade was among the earliest signs of the growing global unrest, which, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, demonstrated a worldwide readiness to claim alternatives to what had already seemed a fully entrenched neoliberal consensus.<sup>4</sup> In the post-Yugoslav region, this new political, intellectual, and artistic energy was directed at countering the ideology of “new exceptionalism” (including its key premise, anticommunism) and revisiting instead the history of socialist self-management and Non-Alignment as singular Yugoslav solutions to the economic, geopolitical, and cultural questions of the 20th century. Not surprisingly, among the variety of public lectures and actions organized during and following the occupation, the Zagreb students initiated a reading group gathered around Woodward’s book.<sup>5</sup>

This circuitous, lost-and-found reception history encapsulates the framework in which I propose to understand publications like the two under review here: Branislav Jakovljević’s *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91* and Armin Medosch’s *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961–1978)*, both released in 2016 by major North

---

2 Susan L. Woodward, *Socialist Unemployment: The Political Economy of Yugoslavia, 1945–1990* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

3 Woodward, xiv. With this comment about scholarly trends in the preface, Woodward simultaneously predicts the marginal status of her own book.

4 The crisis was a catalyst that created synergy among diverse pockets of resistance, including Iceland in 2008–11, the University of California in 2009, Iran in 2009, Greece in 2010–11, and Spain, Occupy Wall Street, and the Arab Spring in 2011.

5 See “Kružok: *Socialist Unemployment—The Political Economy of Yugoslavia 1945–1990*,” slobodnifilozofski.com, March 12, 2012, <http://slobodnifilozofski.com/2012/03/kruzok-socialist-unemployment-politica.html>.

American academic presses. I cite the latter fact in order to highlight the distance between the ideological and economic infrastructures supporting the production and circulation of these two books from that of the self-organized *kružoks* at Zagreb University, with which, as I hope to show, they nonetheless share a central commitment. Both the books and the *kružoks* reconsider the history of Yugoslavia and they do so by taking on the question of political economy, thus partaking in the broader cultural and academic trends of the last decade, marked by an increased prominence of Marxist thought. Itself a sign of crisis, this (re)turn indicates that the post-1989 regime of the end of history has reached a dead end, and that history—or even History—is returning, not in the guise of a new revolutionary spirit (as Alain Badiou professed in the midst of the Arab Spring),<sup>6</sup> but rather as a renewed search for world- or globe-historical totalization.<sup>7</sup>

As I will argue, the intersection of this renewed search for grand narratives—no longer oriented toward the future, but toward the past—and the signifier “Yugoslavia” is where Medosch and Jakovljević position their own (art) historicizing operations, in the process exposing “Yugoslavia” as a particular (art) history and a world-historical category.<sup>8</sup> Informed by a synergy between academic inquiry and the personal-and-political, both of these studies (re)turn to Yugoslavia to find something that had been lost, a ruptured history that never saw its future and whose interrupted course must now be historicized, explained, and perhaps even rationalized in order to provide at least some grounding for the futureless (perhaps even apocalyptic) present moment—as if the recourse to historical understanding were essential to developing new strategies of resistance.<sup>9</sup>

---

6 Alain Badiou. *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2012).

7 The currency of concepts such as the “anthropocene,” “capitalocene,” “coloniality” (no longer simply “colonialism”), or even “cosmism” and “ancestrality” suggests a shift from the postmodern, post-1989, global spatialization of time (in Fredric Jameson’s terms) to the “deep” temporalization of the globe, a temporalization aimed at historicizing (the catastrophe of) the now by identifying its singular origin (the human, capital, colonialism, or even the Big Bang).

8 I use the term “world-historical” not only to refer to the book’s contribution to global (art) histories or world-system analyses (Immanuel Wallerstein), but also to point to the way in which they endow global narratives with a certain teleology.

9 Armin Medosch, who sadly died in 2017 at the age of 55, was a media art curator, artist, and writer based in Vienna whose research on New Tendencies was motivated by a search for forgotten precedents of a materialist and politically progressive media art, which he pursued in his own artistic and curatorial work in opposition to the “institutionalization of media art” in the age of “informational capitalism.” Armin Medosch, “Automation,

Medosch's *New Tendencies* is structured around the five Zagreb exhibitions that held together an otherwise loosely connected, decidedly international network of artists, artist groups, manifestos, and theoretical propositions ("New Tendencies," hereafter NT), anchored in advocating for the scientification and democraticization of art. For readers familiar with the existing research on NT, in particular that of Jerko Denegri,<sup>10</sup> Medosch's contribution will not significantly alter the consensus on the movement's most important moments: its beginning with a chance encounter between Brazilian artist Almir Mavignier and Yugoslav art critic Matko Meštrović in Zagreb in 1961; the first exhibition, conceived in opposition to Informel and the other forms of lyrical abstraction that had dominated the 1950s; the attempt, in 1963, to consolidate the movement by rejecting its own "lyrical" members (Group Zero, for example) in favor of an explicitly politicized program for art's scientification, presented by artists such as François Morellet, Group GRAV, and the Zagreb organizers; the end of NT as a unified movement in 1965, brought about by its absorption into the mainstream art scene and the art market; the introduction, in 1968, of the computer as a central theme, which further alienated NT from progressive political currents defined at the time by the anti-establishment and anti-rational stance of the Yugoslav 1968; and NT's final exhibition in 1973, which retrospectively juxtaposed "constructive visual research" and "computer-visual research" with post-1968 "Conceptual art." Besides providing a more comprehensive political, economic, technological, and art historical context for this narrative, Medosch's key intervention is to situate NT at the center of one of the key transformations of the 20th century: the transition from the techno-economic paradigm of Keynesian Fordism to that of the post-Fordist information society.

---

Cybernation and the Art of New Tendencies (1961–1973)" (PhD diss., Goldsmiths University of London, 2012). Soon after graduating in dramaturgy from Belgrade in 1991 (the same year that Yugoslavia's disintegration entered the stage of open warfare), Branislav Jakovljević emigrated to the United States where he now teaches theater and performance studies at Stanford University. It is from the distance of North American academia that he returns, in *Alienation Effects*, to what conditioned his displacement in the first place: the slow disintegration of Yugoslavia's socialist self-management. Once justly famed, but today, as he himself states in the afterword to his book, "wiped out without a trace" by the "aggressive imposition of free-market fundamentalism." Jakovljević, 289.

- 10 Jerko Denegri, *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i nove tendencije* (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2000), translated as Jerko Denegri, *Constructive Approach Art: Exat 51 and New Tendencies* (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2004).

It is not by accident, Medosch argues, that the neo-avant-garde artists and groups that had come to form NT (among them GRAV, Group N, Group T, Zero, Nul, and Equipo 57) appeared precisely in the midst of the European postwar “economic miracle” (in France, Germany, northern Italy, and the Netherlands). Medosch sees their embrace of technology, industrial materials, seriality, geometric forms, and the ethos of collective work as an attempt to come to terms with mass industrial production from a leftist or utopian perspective. The author polemicizes against both their contemporaneous and present-day critics who take for granted the Situationists’ denunciation of NT as an example of technocratic, affirmative, or merely reformist culture, and argues that such a view, which at the same time canonizes the Situationist International as the “patron saint of political art,” is both wrong and “possible only after 1968 and a change in the understanding of science and technology.”<sup>11</sup> This is one of the reasons why the book’s major gambit is to insist, despite the ideological and aesthetic differences among NT’s protagonists in its different phases, on its vision of a “cybernetic socialism” grounded in the “claim by the artistic left on an optimistic technological civilization.”<sup>12</sup>

While this vision was articulated within (and as a response to) the paradigm of mass industrial production, it also presaged some of the key tenets of the information society and its “emerging logic of codes and networks.”<sup>13</sup> Medosch elaborates on both the liberating and oppressive aspects of NT’s anticipation of the future: the insistence on transforming art into collective visual research demystified art; the use of interactive, mobile objects encouraged audience participation; and the privileging of the idea over its material realization undermined the commodity status of art. At the same time, precisely through notions such as “programmed art,” which already during the early, pre-computer phase envisioned a separation between the idea (or code) and its materialization, NT contributed “to the fetishization of intellectual labor” and positioned art as a sort of “planning department” of cyber-

---

11 Medosch, 139. In particular, Medosch polemicizes with Jelena Stojanović and her “opposition between ‘rationalist’ artists such as New Tendencies and supposedly irrationalist Situationists.” By contrast, Medosch argues that despite the Situationist critique of NT, the two movements should not be placed in a bipolar opposition. Instead, he writes, “both groups can be understood as formulating an advanced response to the challenge posed by automation in society.”

12 Medosch, 4.

13 Medosch, 65.

netic society.<sup>14</sup> While this tendency to glorify technology was initially moderated by “a critical consciousness and social engagement among the artists,” the organizers’ introduction of the computer as a central theme in 1968, coupled with their embrace of the ultrarational “information aesthetics” of Abraham Moles and the 1968 exhibition jury’s decision to award projects by companies such as Bells Labs, should be read, Medosch argues, as symptoms of a “technological unconscious”—that is, a technophilia that forgets technology’s socioeconomic basis.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, then, to teleological accounts that valorize NT from the perspective of the “computer’s arrival in art,”<sup>16</sup> Medosch prioritizes the earlier (pre-1965) constructivist phase, in whose politicized approach to technology he nonetheless detects analogies with present-day egalitarian practices that advocate for a digital commons. While the movement’s radically defined program of art’s demystification and social engagement thus helped lay the ground for the planetary watershed moment of 1968, NT did not become the “art of the revolution.”<sup>17</sup> Medosch explores this irony in the central part of the book, and concludes that with the antirationalist, antisystemic bent of the global 1968 rebellions, NT’s cybernetic-socialist utopia became history as Conceptual art took over as the new critical paradigm.<sup>18</sup>

While NT may not have become the “art of 1968,” the irony that Medosch does not note is that, after 1968, its radical program of “visual research” became “art.” The final, 1973 exhibition clearly revealed the outlines of this evolution by historicizing the movement as a progression from “constructive visual research” to “computer visual research” and, finally, “Conceptual art,” a new phenomenon that the curators attempted to place in continuity with the constructivist and computer-based forms of “data processing.”<sup>19</sup> Medosch rightly highlights the landmark place of this exhibition, given that it revealed the historical

---

14 Medosch, 92.

15 Medosch, 144–45.

16 Margit Rosen, ed., *A Little-Known Story about a Movement, a Magazine, and the Computer’s Arrival in Art: New Tendencies and Bit International, 1961–1973* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

17 Medosch, 165.

18 Medosch, 165.

19 Radoslav Putar, introductory text in *Tendencies 5: Constructive Visual Research. Computer Visual Research. Conceptual Art* (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art), exhibition catalog, n.p. Putar writes: “The exhibition of works representative of ‘conceptual art’ (or: research) should not be diametrically opposed to constructivism and to computer

evolution of NT as a blueprint for the historical shift toward the dematerialization of art and a new, post-Fordist economy based on information. However, what about the symptomatic, “nominal” shift that this last exhibition marked, a shift from constructive and computer *visual research* to Conceptual *art*, whose ramifications are left undiscussed and are even annulled by Medosch’s convenient renaming of all three sections of the exhibition as “art”: “constructive art, computer art, and Conceptual art.”<sup>20</sup> Does not this shift, besides pointing to the dematerialization of art and economy in the wake of 1968, also signal the transition from the neo-avant-garde rejection of “art” (in the name of “visual research”) to art’s post-1968 return (as “Conceptual art”)?

By embodying this shift, I would argue, the last NT exhibition emerges as an illustration of Peter Bürger’s equally “post-1968” theory of the inability of the avant-garde—and, by extension, the neo-avant-garde—to overcome the (relative) autonomy of art within the conditions of bourgeois, capitalist society.<sup>21</sup> Medosch’s own engagement with Bürger is regrettably minimal: in the introduction, he states that in referring to New Tendencies he adopts Bürger’s terminology, the neo-avant-garde, while rejecting the idea of the neo-avant-garde’s secondary, imitative nature.<sup>22</sup> With this, however, Medosch misses the opportunity to discuss the broader implications of the adopted terminology, and instead joins a whole line of (weak) misreadings of Bürger’s *Theory*, which, epitomized by Hal Foster’s identification

---

research before the debate even begins.” Putar, n.p. (I modified the existing translation to match the Serbo-Croatian original, I.B.). The anxiety about the name and novelty of “Conceptual art” and about the “debate” that it is bound to begin is evident also in Putar’s attempt to place the term in scare quotes and then to rename it in brackets: “Conceptual art’ (or: research).”

20 Medosch, 12, 222.

21 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Bürger argues that the failure of the historical avant-garde to merge art and life nonetheless resulted in the laying bare of “the institution of art,” or more precisely, of art as institution, which Bürger saw as an obstacle to the social impact of art in bourgeois society. The neo-/post-avant-garde (Bürger’s terminology varies) attempt to repeat the attack on art, he claimed, could only repeat this initial failure, albeit with new and expanded means, as art could no longer deny its autonomy and pretend it had direct impact on society; Bürger, 57. Although he makes no reference to Conceptual art as an example of the neo-avant-garde, Bürger writes his critique of the (neo-) avant-garde from the place of post-1968 disillusionment. In the “Postscript to the Second German Edition,” he argues that his book arose from of a “historical constellation of problems that emerged after the events of May 1968 and the failure of the student movement in the early seventies.”

22 Medosch, 2.



of Bürger's alleged "fear of the neo-avant-garde,"<sup>23</sup> assert the neo-avant-garde's novelty and authenticity, while ignoring (fearing?) the fact that Bürger's claim was not to deny the possibility of ongoing innovation, but to state, as the avant-garde's historical lesson, art's inability to overcome its social limits without at the same time transforming its social (capitalist, bourgeois) basis.<sup>24</sup> This finally brings me to the place of Yugoslavia in the history of NT, because socialist Yugoslavia presented precisely the promise of a transformed base, one in which NT could anchor its own promise to transform art.

Medosch's effort to restore from amnesia NT's "politics of form," encapsulated by the "dreamworlds of cybernetic socialism," to a great extent depends on the alignment of these two promises and on the fact that NT's institutional, curatorial, and ideological base was a state-sponsored institution in self-managed, non-aligned Yugoslavia.<sup>25</sup> Yugoslavia's claim to autonomy in a world divided by the Cold War is also the source for Medosch's characterization of NT as what he calls "non-aligned modernism," a specific, "peripheral" claim to modernity. While he presents this non-aligned modernism as an international phenomenon, Yugoslavia stands firmly as its anchor.<sup>26</sup> The book reconstructs Yugoslav historical avant-gardes, as well as postwar developments propelled by the 1948 break with the Soviet Union, as a precondition for the sustained effort by Zagreb critics and curators to promote, support, theorize, and hold together NT as a movement. It also gives due credit to the aesthetic, theoretical, and ideological contributions of Yugoslav participants, some of whom, such as the critic Matko Meštrović and the artist Vjenceslav Richter, explicitly related the goals of constructive visual research to the goals of socialism and self-management. Medosch's study must be seen, therefore, as part of a

---

23 Hal Foster, "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde," in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 1–34.

24 Ironically, however, Medosch's analysis itself confirms the neo-avant-garde's repetition (which is not the same thing as imitation) of the avant-garde's failure, since the book cites the desire to abolish art (and the artist) among the key postulates that united NT, just as it historicizes the movement's 1965 dissipation as a consequence of its absorption into mainstream art and the art market.

25 Medosch, 18. For European artists who, as Medosch writes, wanted to "replace the notion of art with a praxis of visual research" but found no institutional support and thus continued to depend on the art market (137), Yugoslavia—specifically, the dedication of Zagreb's Gallery of Contemporary Art to the NT project—represented some hope to ground this vision in social, and socialist, practice.

26 Medosch, 7, 106, 137–138.



broad challenge to the post-1989 paradigm of “Eastern European art,” which has relied on the opposition between the totalitarian socialist state, on the one hand, and the suffering, resisting artist, on the other.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to artists such as Marina Abramović or Mladen Stiljanić, who dominated the first phase of the rediscovery of “art under socialism,” NT is evidence of an “art of constructive approach,” as Jerko Denegri called it—that is, an art that saw itself as a force in the building of self-managed socialism.<sup>28</sup>

It must be noted that this reaffirmation of socialism, and of Yugoslavia, comes at the price of a certain level of reification that stems from an informational-capitalist unconscious that informs Medosch’s narrative—namely, from his insistence on an original conceptual apparatus. Terms such as *visual structuralism*, *politics of form*, *technological unconscious*, *dreamworlds of cybernetic socialism*, *peripheral yet nonderivative modernities*, and *non-aligned modernism* accumulate rather too easily throughout Medosch’s book, yet they remain only cursorily theorized. Such evocative phrases contribute to a sense that Medosch’s book partakes in the ongoing “rediscovery” of a host of alternative, cosmopolitan, unfinished, socialist, perverse (etc.) modernisms and modernities, which are to be integrated into the global-academic contemporaneity.<sup>29</sup> Because of this, and despite the nuanced (and unspectacular) picture that the book gives of the position of the socialist, non-aligned Yugoslavia within the Cold War divide, Yugoslavia ultimately emerges from Medosch’s study as more of a dreamworld than an actual history,

---

27 Irwin, ed., *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London: Afterall, 2006). *East Art Map* not only totalizes art in Eastern Europe by coupling the visual image of the completely darkened map of Eastern Europe with the book’s stated mission to illuminate and comprehend “art as a whole [created] during socialist times” (Irwin, “General Introduction,” in *East Art Map*, 11, my emphasis), it also includes a foreword by Charles Esche in which he describes *East Art Map* as a “guidebook on how, as an artist, to steer a path through totalitarian and post-totalitarian societies”; Charles Esche, “Foreword,” in *East Art Map*, 10. Even Piotr Piotrowski, who contributed greatly to diversifying the understanding of Eastern European art and revealing specific constellations in different countries, perpetuated this trend with his book on *Art and Democracy in Post-Communism*, where freedom of speech is used as a measuring rod for judging the freedom of art in different post-communist countries, which are then diagnosed to still remain more or less imprisoned by the ghosts of the communist mentality; Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012).

28 New Tendencies, interestingly, did not feature in projects such as *East Art Map*.

29 Or, as the promotional slogan of the European Union’s enlargement campaign for the Western Balkans would say of this relation between difference and integration: “So similar, so different, so European [or, for our purposes here, so modern]!”).

a universal signifier for a set of unrealized fantasies (rather than struggles) of the 20th century: cyber-socialist, self-managed, (non)artistic, and non-aligned. This is also evident in the uneven way in which Medosch applies his key analytic framework, political economy, to the Yugoslav and socialist context: during the transformations that led, in the West, from a Fordist to a post-Fordist production model, the Yugoslav and Eastern Bloc economies seem to have been locked in a standstill, which means that the failure of Yugoslav self-management (and of Czechoslovak socialism) is ultimately explained by purely political factors, such as the failure of Yugoslav (and Czechoslovak) political leadership to reform itself following the liberalizing pressures of 1968.

However, such criticism should not obscure Medosch's central accomplishment: the audacity with which he presents the global transition from Fordism to post-Fordism as the world-historical key to grasping the particular history of an art movement (NT), while presenting the history of this art movement itself as world-historical—that is, as capable of crystallizing the “whole story” of global political and economic transformation. Both NT and Yugoslavia are thus at the center of a heroic battle to arrest the currents of world history (a neoliberal regeneration of capitalism with the aid of technology and the Cold War) and redirect them toward a non-aligned, socialist-cybernetic future. Needless to say, both struggles fail.

It is indeed in the genre of tragic romance that both Medosch's *New Tendencies* and Jakovljević's *Alienation Effects* ultimately narrate their histories: in both cases, 1968 serves as the temporal, and Yugoslavia as the spatial, coordinate of the worldly reversal from (socialist) romance to (global-capitalist) tragedy.<sup>30</sup> In its extensive engagement with Yugoslav and European political, economic, and intellectual historiography, and its avoidance of easily formulated concepts—even of compact scholarly arguments—Jakovljević's story of revolutionary failure results in a veritable *staging* of history. This staging, as I will elaborate, is both chronological and dramaturgic: the three chapters of his book, organized around the three-fold periodization of Yugoslav self-management, constitute three Yugoslav and world-historical acts. “Bodywriting” (1945–63) traces the transition from a

---

30 In viewing these art historical accounts through the lens of narrative genres, I am leaning on Hayden White's “metahistorical” analysis. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

planned economy to self-management or, in Jakovljević's reading, from the political economy of "socialist realism" to that of "socialist aestheticism," and is juxtaposed with contemporaneous Western Marxist investments in the critique of alienation; "Syntactical Performances" (1963–74) narrates further economic decentralization and the eruption of a crisis in the form of workers' strikes and the 1968 student rebellions, which are brought into relation with the global 1968; and finally, "Disalienation Defects" (1974–89) identifies conservative reforms that defeated the project of self-management, corresponding with the global neoliberal and postmodern turn. Composed scene by scene, these chapters-as-acts make it possible to read the book as a performance of the very history it narrates.<sup>31</sup>

The central plot of this three-fold structure reads something like this: following the state of "siege" in which newly founded socialist Yugoslavia finds itself upon expulsion from the Cominform in 1948, its economy is forced to turn westward, and its leadership is under pressure to reinvent itself, which it does by claiming an authentic, anti-Stalinist path to socialism, defined as "workers' self-management." Unlike Soviet-style "socialist realism,"<sup>32</sup> in which the aestheticization of labor, embodied by the Soviet shock-worker (i.e., the worker awarded for exceptional labor performance), is itself a sufficient reward for labor, in self-management, the worker is a subject defined by economic interest, and the success of her performance depends on the level of disalienation that she is able to achieve by participating in a company's decision-making process. However, for the worker's interest not to fully degenerate into self-interest, an "additional element"—a socialist market—is needed, and it is here that performance as an extra-economic force plays a crucial part.<sup>33</sup> For Jakovljević, the annual Youth Day mass performances staged in President Tito's honor are the epitome of the workings of what he sees as the "capillary" Yugoslav socialist "market," as it itself brings together a network of "capillary performances" or "carefully calibrated diagrams" from the fields of art, business, diplomacy, and a host of

---

31 Surely this must have something to do with the fact that Jakovljević is both a theater dramaturge and a performance scholar.

32 Following Evgenii Dobrenko, Jakovljević does not see Socialist Realism as a style but rather as a political economy. Evgenii Aleksandrovich Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

33 Jakovljević, 64.

Yugoslav sociopolitical organizations.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, The Youth Day reveals Yugoslavia's "socialist baroque," a form of ruling-through-participation by which the postrevolutionary Yugoslav state kept society's revolutionary energy in check.<sup>35</sup> The persistence of the "socialist baroque," embodied by the Youth Day performance, and the attempts to counter or dismantle it through, among other things, artistic performance, inform the central conflict of Jakovljević's book. However, this does not really amount to an opposition between art and the state, because, as Jakovljević shows, the key paradox of Yugoslav self-management is precisely the fact that the ideological program of the state (self-management as a kind of accelerationist instantiation of the communist vision of the "withering away of the state") was itself the primary counterforce to the state's tendency to keep this "socialist baroque" alive.

Thus, although Yugoslav ideologues never truly abandoned the doctrinaire dialectical materialism of their Soviet mentors, the fact that they embraced the political program of workers' disalienation through self-management brought them into an ideological alliance with their own artistic and critical avant-garde epitomized by the philosophical journal *Praxis* (1964–74).<sup>36</sup> The work of the *Praxis* philosophers evolved in close exchange with Western revisionist Marxism and the latter's interest in the early Marx's theory of alienation, as advocated in particular by Henri Lefebvre, whose theory of *autogestion* was, in turn, greatly inspired by Yugoslav self-management.<sup>37</sup> Post-1948 Yugoslavia became, then, an instance not of "really existing Socialism," but of something I am tempted to call (echoing the prominent presence of Western, and in particular French, critical and social theory in Jakovljević's book) "a really existing New Left." Of course, the issue was precisely the "realization" of self-management, which also makes for

---

34 Jakovljević, 82. Youth Day thus embodied not the party hierarchy (as in Soviet mass ceremonies), but instead the "layered nature of Yugoslav culture" whereby residues of "socialist realism"—from which, Jakovljević claims, Yugoslavia never fully transitioned—coexisted with the departure from the planned economy and the emerging political economy of socialist aestheticism (82).

35 Jakovljević derives the concept of "socialist baroque" from José Maravall's theory of the baroque not as a style, but as a postrevolutionary "historical structure" by which the state keeps the revolutionary energies of society in check. Jakovljević, 73.

36 Jakovljević, 119–20.

37 In other words, "if self-management offers a mechanism for political and economic emancipation, Yugoslav ideologues were trying to legislate that emancipation, while thinkers on the French left were calling for its implementation." Jakovljević, 6–7.

the central conflict of the book: the Yugoslav “June 1968,” when students, artists, and intellectuals denounced the gap between the state’s program and their own lived reality, calling for “integral self-management.” In order to explore the analogies between the aftermath of 1968 both in Yugoslavia and globally, Jakovljević engages in a dialogue with the (French) sociological thesis that places the cooptation of 1968 artistic and social critique at the root of the “new spirit of capitalism.”<sup>38</sup>

Following a different path, we thus arrive at much the same end point as with Medosch’s *New Tendencies*: a post-1968 world in which a conservative political-economic shift signals the dissipation of revolutionary energies, and a point of no return. From this moment on, Yugoslavia—whose self-management entered its final, conservative phase of so-called “associated labor,” accompanied by hyperinflation, hyperbureaucratization, and the destruction of the worker as a political subject—is no longer the carrier of a universal promise or a really existing alternative. Along the same lines, Jakovljević outlines how the post-modern turn (incarnated, in Yugoslavia, by Slavoj Žižek’s Althusserian/Lacanian critique of humanist *Praxis* philosophy) dethroned alienation as a valid theoretical and political problem. At the same time, (artistic) performance ceased to be a potential solution to this problem. Passing through Herbert Marcuse’s denunciation of the “performance principle”—society as industrial efficacy—the Brechtian “homeopathic” idea of performative alienation (*Verfremdungseffekt*) as a means to fight social alienation collapsed by the late 1970s into what Lyotard identified as the computer-like “performativity” of a society conceived as a “system.”<sup>39</sup> The epilogue to these 20th-century struggles (with which the book, in fact, opens) declares the ultimate political impotence of the contemporary artistic performance of disalienation, as evidenced by Nicolas Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics” of the 1990s as well as by the so-called “social turn” in art, which exposes a society collapsed into “sociality.”<sup>40</sup>

All of the above is merely the setup for a whole array of “capillary performances” that Jakovljević orchestrates in his “syntactical diagram”

---

38 See Jakovljević, chapter 2 (“Syntactical Performances”). The referenced sociological thesis is Luc Boltanski’s and Eve Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).

39 Jakovljević, 22.

40 Jakovljević, 26–27.

of the rise and fall of Yugoslav self-management, in which artistic performance plays only one, though exceptional, part.<sup>41</sup> Artistic performances constitute “microperformances” that are positioned in each chapter in relation to one large-scale performance, which could be a performance of the state (the Youth Day) or of those who challenge the state performance, as did the student protests in June 1968 in Belgrade. Although Jakovljević does not theoretically define the exact place of artistic performance in Yugoslav self-management, it could perhaps be said that, just like the 1968 rebellions, art both goes against and aligns with the state to the extent that the state itself both propels and undermines the true implementation of self-management.

Such an answer can be inferred from Jakovljević’s masterful analysis of the “*Godot* affair,” in which “an experimental theater production [Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*] was first rejected [in 1954] and then cautiously permitted [in 1956] to become quickly and fully integrated into institutionalized culture.”<sup>42</sup> Embodying the paradox of a battle lost precisely because it was won, *Waiting for Godot* appears as the premonition of a protracted, unstable (and, according to Jakovljević, never completed) shift from the political economy of “socialist realism” to what Yugoslav literary critic Sveta Lukić described as the “socialist-aestheticist” compromise between art and the state. However, a clandestine performance, in 1954, of the same play—with the same director and cast—serves as an example of what Jakovljević calls the “undercommons” to this socialist-baroque compromise.<sup>43</sup> Staged in an artist studio inside the Italian pavilion of a former international fair complex turned World War II concentration camp the clandestine performance of *Waiting for Godot*—in Jakovljević’s captivating reading,

---

41 In adopting such a broad view of performance, Jakovljević is following in the footsteps of Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London: Routledge, 2001), who in turn reactivated Marcuse’s writing on the “performance principle.” The “diagram of labor,” “capillary performances,” and “syntactical performances” are terms that Jakovljević uses to describe, respectively, the initial, planned economy of the postwar state, the structure of self-management and Youth Day, and artistic performances of the 1970s. By describing the book as a “syntactical diagram,” I am combining and applying these terms to describe the structure of Jakovljević’s book, which arranges a set of state and artistic performances into a downward-spiraling diagram of labor in Yugoslav self-management.

42 Jakovljević, 94.

43 Jakovljević himself does not refer to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s concept of the “undercommons,” although his concept resonates with the way they theorize the “undercommons.” Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013).

based on published memoirs—turns into an involuntary performance of the incarcerated slave labor of the former death camp. The constraints on the performance—limited space; the lights, heat, and power temporarily went out; and the actors were “drenched with sweat” so the words “came soaked out from [their] mouths”<sup>44</sup>—reveal the work of art as a labor of reflection on “art’s multiple Others (labor, imprisonment, commerce)” and on artistic performance itself as the Other of (operative, familiar) labor.<sup>45</sup>

It might be said, then, that just like the mass performance of the Youth Day, artistic performance in Yugoslavia functioned both as a demonstration of the workings of Yugoslav self-management and as its model. As a demonstration, and contrary to the representative aims of Youth Day, artistic performances revealed self-management’s cracks. As a model for self-management, they pushed the state to reform itself in art’s image, and become more self-managed, more inclusive of the “battles of opinions.”<sup>46</sup> This simultaneous radical distance and proximity between artistic and state performance, is also the result of Jakovljević’s insistence on viewing Yugoslav socialist aestheticism not as a style—prevalent in the 1950s and then supplanted by the more progressive New Art Practice of the 1960s and 1970s—but as the dominant layer in the political economy of Yugoslav self-management, of which even the “New Art Practices” in venues such as the Belgrade Student Cultural Center were an integral part.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, Jakovljević does not give up on the idea of “radical art” and its exceptional difference or “otherness,” a status that he ascribes to the post-Conceptual practices that accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslav

---

44 Ljuba Tadić and Bata Paskaljević, cited in Jakovljević, 101.

45 Jakovljević, 107, 108.

46 A phrase through which the Yugoslav Party leaders relinquished control over aesthetic matters.

47 For an established account of socialist modernism and socialist aestheticism that places them in opposition to the New Art Practice of the 1960s and 1970s, see Jerko Denegri, “Inside or Outside ‘Socialist Modernism’? Radical Views on the Yugoslav Art Scene,” in *Impossible Histories: Historic Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991*, ed. Dubravka Djurić and Misko Suvaković (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 170–208. Jakovljević’s account of the proximity between alternative art and the state, including the emphasis on performance, is close to Jelena Vesić’s reading of SKC as a performative “institution-in-movement” whose “ambivalent combination of horizontal and vertical forms of organization” challenged the distinction between official and alternative culture. Jelena Vesić, “SKC (Student Cultural Centre) as a Site of Performative (Self-) Production: October 75—Institution, Self-Organization, First-Person Speech, Collectivization,” *Život umjetnosti* 91 (2012): 30–53.



self-management in 1974. These practices, such as Mladen Stilinović's works that took fetishized symbols and objects such as money, bread, and newspapers in order to take them "below the threshold of symbolization" renounced not only the art object, but any participation at the level of the symbolic economy of the state that attempted to suture the disintegration of self-management through the hyperproduction of ideological discourse.<sup>48</sup> However, rather than constituting an outright rejection of the already disintegrating system, the examples Jakovljević discusses read more like its uncanny double.<sup>49</sup> In the ultimate transmutation of this doubling, the foremost embodiment of the state's socialist baroque, the Youth Day performance, adopted in its final, 1988 incarnation the form of an avant-garde spectacle celebrating universal aesthetic autonomy.<sup>50</sup> Here the state becomes art, or theater, fulfilling as it were the prophecies of the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) movement.<sup>51</sup>

As I noted earlier, Jakovljević's book itself becomes a kind of performance that both organizes and mirrors the structure of Yugoslav market socialism: instead of what could be called a centralized "socialist realist" "scripturalization" gathered around a singular "argument,"<sup>52</sup> *Alienation Effects* establishes commerce between a whole set of "capillary performances" from the fields of Yugoslav and international economy, sociology, art, performance, and philosophy. Just as in Jakovljević's theory of "syntactical performances," in which the corporeal and the discursive do not merge into a readable unit but rather stand "next to each other,"<sup>53</sup> the individual performances (art, state,

---

48 Jakovljević, 252.

49 Among these examples is Goran Đorđević's obsessive production of copies and his eradication of the artist-subject, which Jakovljević's innovative reading juxtaposes with soaring inflation rates and the eradication of the worker-subject. See Jakovljević, 184–86, 278–86.

50 "We dedicate [this performance] to the theater and to our spiritual kin: to Meyerhold, Kandinsky, Malevich, Chagall, Mayakovsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Stroheim, Toller, Horváth, and all great artists who believed in the new. . . . This is an open invitation to all of European intelligence. Let this become this big world's big performance." Cited in Jakovljević, 273.

51 Composed of a number of artistic groups, NSK was a Slovenian art movement founded in the 1980s, which based its work on an appropriation of the symbols and discourse of the totalitarian state. Following the scandal surrounding their Nazi-"inspired" design of the poster for the Youth Relay, a statewide relay that preceded the Youth Day performance (see Jakovljević, 33–38), NSK's subgroup Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater planned an unrealized performance that would have shown that the "relationship between theater and state" had reached the level of "state creativity"; Jakovljević, 273.

52 With the term "scripturalization," Jakovljević refers to central planning in the political economy of socialist realism. Jakovljević, 46.

53 Jakovljević, 160.

economy, theory) the author discusses form a nonhierarchical syntax that allows them to retain their validity as separate acts. Like Yugoslav self-management itself, they constitute a sort of “diagram” resulting in a downward spiral that is dramaturgically intensified both by the occasional use of first-person narrative (recalling the author’s personal Yugoslav experiences) and by its opposite, the warnings of an omniscient narrator: “We are entering the final round. It’s a spiral”; and at the very end, in the Afterword: “This is where the bottom falls off; where the big fracture yawns to swallow people, images, performances. . . .”<sup>54</sup> What bottom, one might ask? Perhaps the one where we have been standing all along, ever since the first act: the cement floor carrying the weight of the bodies of the *Godot* performers and audience, laboring and sweating at the world-exhibition/concentration-camp/artist-studio complex—a bottom that, by the time of the final dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1991 war, could no longer hold.

While the original (art) historical, theoretical, and methodological contributions of *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91* extend far beyond the boundaries of area studies, for the field of Yugoslav Studies, the book is a truly unprecedented event. Over the past decade, both Yugoslav art and history have become the subjects of increased scholarly interest, yet this is the first monograph that attempts to tell, or rather theorize, the whole story.<sup>55</sup> Although the book’s self-proclaimed agenda is less ambitious,<sup>56</sup> I would propose that *Alienation Effects* is best described as a history/theory of “Yugoslavia, 1945–91,” told as a dialectic of performance and self-management, a dialectic that arises as an effect of alienation. Since the book reveals alienation to be a universally exchanged code for capitalist exploitation—between Marx’s early writings, the Yugoslav Communist leadership, Yugoslav philosophers and artists,

---

54 Jakovljević, 237, 287.

55 By this, I mean that the theoretical and hermeneutic scope of *Alienation Effects* is comprehensive, while its narrative scope is limited, as the author himself acknowledges, by the biases evident in the material he discusses, which is predominantly situated in Belgrade and Zagreb. Of course, the mostly canonical selection of social and artistic phenomena has consequences for Jakovljević’s theoretical and interpretive conclusions, but given the violent destruction of the Yugoslav canon, its reconstruction is a necessary step in confronting its hegemonic, anti-Yugoslav counterpart.

56 One of Jakovljević’s aims is to demonstrate that the identity of a form (performance) does not guarantee the identity of its “ideological content,” which can only be gauged by attending to the form’s situatedness in “different social contexts.” Jakovljević, 27.

and Western Marxists—the Yugoslav formula of “performance and self-management” is only a particular instantiation of this universal “alienation effect.” With its reconstruction of the historical, aesthetic, and theoretical links and resonances between Yugoslavia and the world (albeit mostly a Western world), the book’s underlying operation is precisely the activation of the historiographical and theoretical commerce between the particular (Yugoslav) and the universal (world- and globe-historical). The overarching narrative of this activation is the defeat of the project of proletarian revolution, globally marked by the defeat of 1968.

True, the commerce Jakovljević activates comes with its challenges, but it nonetheless amounts to an (art) historical methodology that radically disturbs the conventional distinction between content and context (a methodology explicitly declared, although executed less radically, in Medosch’s *New Tendencies*, where art remains at the center of the story). Jakovljević’s method should, at the same time, be seen as pointing to wider trends and similar attempts at world-historical reconstruction in an age of crisis, as evidenced, for example, by the analogies between both *New Tendencies* and *Alienation Effects* and Jaleh Mansoor’s *Marshall Plan Modernism* (2016), which establishes a relation between postwar Italian art and “Marshall-Plan era capital.”<sup>57</sup> All three books challenge art history with the question of *what* its true object is, or should be. Does the uncovering of the “political unconscious” of the art form (Fredric Jameson’s methodological framework, taken up by both Mansoor and Medosch) serve to illuminate art, or is the study of art one way to shed light on the intricate currents of history and, in turn, the historical crisis of the present? Does insisting, despite the instability of art history’s “what,” on the exceptionality of art—which in all three books appears as a figure that, at the very least, *sees* farther than all other social practices, hegemonic or critical—also serve to safeguard the exceptionality of art history’s object, and of the discipline itself?<sup>58</sup>

Also, *where* is art history’s object? Each in their own way, *New Tendencies*, *Alienation Effects*, and *Marshall Plan Modernism* reconstruct

---

57 Jaleh Mansoor, *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

58 It should be noted that neither Jakovljević nor Medosch is an art historian, although their books present significant contributions to art historical scholarship, with which they are also in conversation.

the global history of the second half of the 20th century in order to locate their object in Yugoslavia, while this very world-historical reconstruction constantly pushes the studies' objects beyond their established locations. This is not simply a problem of transnational (or global, or interdisciplinary) scholarly methodology, but a true crisis of "area" (as well as disciplinary) specialization to which Mansoor also points, by stating that global capitalism unveils the naiveté of social art history's idea of "context." This crisis, both productive and disorienting, is especially palpable in Jakovljević's book, which its author describes variously as an investigation of the specificity of Yugoslav performance; of the disintegration of Yugoslav self-management; and "of the theoretical no-man's land between performance principle and performativity."<sup>59</sup> The coupling of this "no-man's land" and an actual land, Yugoslavia, results in the strange mirroring of (mainly French and German) theory and Yugoslav (art) history. Together with other recurring connections between Yugoslavia and France (1968, the new spirit of capitalism, *Waiting for Godot*, Gina Pane) this creates a disorienting sense that half of the Cold War world—the "Eastern European" half—almost completely disappeared from the (Yugoslav) view following the events of 1948. At the same time, while Jakovljević insists that Yugoslav Conceptual art was "highly specific" in comparison with that of Western Europe and the United States, his selective citing of examples that demonstrate differences between Yugoslavia and Western Europe (among them Western Conceptual art's ideological critique versus an aesthetic critique in Yugoslavia) is ultimately unconvincing, since it reveals a desire for "specificity" rather more than evidence of it, and thus emerges as another sign of the crisis of writing (global) art histories.<sup>60</sup>

*New Tendencies* and *Alienation Effects* help consolidate an entirely new object, "Yugoslav art," as something that is distinct both from the post-1989 canon of "Eastern European art" and from the national(ist) historiographies typical of not only the post-Yugoslav, but also the

---

59 Jakovljević, 22.

60 Jakovljević, 214. Just as one could name a number of examples that challenge Jakovljević's claim to "specificity," the example of a Yugoslav Informel painter whose work Jakovljević discusses and who burnt his canvases with an industrial torch could challenge Mansoor's claim to exceptionality, as much as it would complicate—although by no means negate—Medosch's opposition between Informel's subjective expression and NT's anonymous, industrial art (Jakovljević, 109–12).

Yugoslav, period.<sup>61</sup> If, in the first postsocialist decades, the artist's performing body, trapped behind the Iron Curtain, stood as a sign of "art under socialism," Yugoslav art now displaces that sign with the image of "haunting" futurist-socialist-modernist World War II monuments that are, interestingly, absent from Jakovljević's book.<sup>62</sup> The "fame of the Yugoslav 'third way'" thus reveals its generative potential again, at a time when self-management seems able to inspire a present-day search for new forms of solidarity and direct democracy, and when the idea of non-alignment informs current quests for political, economic, and intellectual decolonization.

This again brings us to the questions of reification, exoticization, the ambivalent nature of nostalgia, and the contemporary artistic and political market in which histories are exchanged as currencies of one or another type of singularity. Both *New Tendencies* and *Alienation Effects* attempt to distance themselves from the traditional view of "Yugoslav exceptionalism" by showing to what extent Yugoslav history was a "specific" (a word on which Jakovljević insists, as opposed to exceptional) way to attempt, and fail, to find alternatives to the postwar world system and to the consolidation of neoliberal capitalism. As I have

---

61 The relation between the political economy of art and the national question (itself an integral part of the "capillary" structure of Yugoslav self-management, but addressed only marginally in Jakovljević's book) is indeed an issue that still awaits exploration. For one of the earliest post-Yugoslav historicizations of Yugoslav art, see Jelena Vesić and Zorana Dojic, eds., *Political Practices of (Post-)Yugoslav Art: Retrospective 01* (Belgrade: Prelom Kolektiv, 2010).

62 The photogenic status of these monuments was confirmed even by the *National Geographic* magazine and, more recently, by advertisements of the exhibition of Yugoslav architecture at the New York Museum of Modern Art. Christine Blau, "Haunting Relics of a Country That No Longer Exists," *nationalgeographic.com*, 28 August, 2017, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/destinations/europe/former-yugoslavia-monuments>; *Towards a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980, e-flux Journal* announcement, July 12, 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/206971/toward-a-concrete-utopia-architecture-in-yugoslavia-1948-1980/>. The most recent example of this photogenic "craze" is a *Guardian* photo-essay (in fact, just photographs by Donald Niebyl, coupled with the names and locations of the monuments) called "Crazy Concrete: Yugoslavia's war memorials—in pictures," <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2018/oct/24/donald-niebyl-crazy-concrete-yugoslavias-war-memorials-in-pictures-spmenik-tito>. Even the traditional hubs of the consolidation (and exoticization) of *East Art Map*, such as Ljubljana's Gallery of Modern Art, have recently turned to exploring the Yugoslav "heritage" (The Heritage of 1989. Case Study: The Second Yugoslav Documents Exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art, Ljubljana, April 26–September 17, 2017), and a private collection of Eastern European art was presented under the alluring heading of "Non-Aligned Modernity" (FM Centre for Contemporary Art, Milan, October 26–December 23, 2016).

already noted, both books only partially succeed here, but then what would it mean to succeed, and what kind of ideological and scholarly purity would such a success presuppose—as if one possessed the correct answer in advance? While they remain remarkable contributions to the study of postwar artistic, economic, and intellectual histories, the two studies here under review also lead us to sites of crisis in both life and scholarship, and they reveal (world) history as a place where these crises meet. Perhaps Yugoslavia does have a “specific,” or even exceptional, potential to reach those sites, because, while any particular history can be situated in a universal historical context, the methods employed by Medosch and Jakovljević suggest that a narrative account of art histories anchored in the Yugoslav post-1948 claim to autonomy necessitates not simply a reconstruction of Yugoslavia’s position at the crossroads of the First, Second, and Third Worlds, but precisely a reconstruction of the tension between the country’s claim to autonomy and its ultimate dependence on world history and the political economy of global capitalism. Within this juxtaposition, “Yugoslavia” emerges simultaneously as a particular history *and* as a world-historical signifier for unanswered questions from the past. These include the question of the nation and nationalism, which, while only cursorily addressed in these studies, aggressively poses itself today not as an alternative to the question of political economy, but its integral part.