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**Working *with* the Specter(s):
Art Collectives in the Post-socialist and Post-conflict Balkan Space**

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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” 1936.

Introduction

The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s brought forward a new social and political reality (the transition from state socialist to neoliberal democracy), in which populations had to adhere to abruptly, and a generalized condition of crisis in the Balkans: a crisis of national identity, financial crisis, political instability and corruption, ethnic tensions which resulted in wars. The culmination of this violent crisis was particularly the military interventions in Kosovo (1999 and 2004), the insurgency conflict in North Macedonia (specifically the Battle of Tetovo in 2001) as well as the Srebrenica genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995).¹ During these years, the historical past was misused and abused, serving as a vocabulary that would build national fantasies, which in their turn perpetuated existing disputes and conflicts. The current

¹ Although the conflicts took place in the Balkans, they involved many international bodies such as the United Nations. The peak of this international involvement was the NATO bombings in 1999, a 78-day operation that resulted to the deaths of Kosovar Albanian refugees, Serbian civilians, and the destruction of multiple public and private buildings.

post-socialist² and post-conflict Balkan space consists of an accumulation of traumas still present and very much alive in the collective memory of its people. In fact, national and ethnic tensions keep prolonging because responsibilities of the past have not been fully addressed in the present. With the collapse of socialism, the previous unifying Yugoslav identity became redundant, and the newly formed countries nervously rushed to establish their distinct borders and nation states. The previous commonalities were quickly erased from the public discourse or replaced with anti-communist propaganda that advocated for the complete erasure of the socialist past. How can we reclaim spaces that have been defined and shaped by their violent and turbulent past? In what ways can the multiple difficult memories of the historical past be transformed into an affective knowledge that is able to in/form present social struggles?

Thinking through the above questions, this chapter focuses on the art practices of Kontekst Kolektiv (Serbia) and Kooperacija (North Macedonia). Analyzing their collective interventionist approach to the socialist past, this chapter argues that in the Balkans' turbulent post-socialist and post-conflict public space, collective art practices can offer significant affective power to reclaim the past and transform it into a subversive potentiality. In these collaborative art instances, the memory becomes malleable and can be revisited and questioned. Memory can receive new interpretations and articulations and form the point of reference for creating new emancipatory conditions in the present. This chapter aims to identify such affective emancipatory and, in some cases, antagonistic moments that reside in the collective workings of memory. The chapter proposes a collective practice of working *with* the past that serves as an act of both remembering previous commonalities lost and generating a belated justice in the aftermath of wars. This is a process of affective knowledge production.

² I use the term 'post-socialism' when I refer to the reality *after* the collapse of state socialism as a historic and political reality that defined East European societies. The terms 'post-communism' and 'anti-communist' also appear in this chapter in reference to how communism has been articulated as an ideology and discourse in recent debates that are related both to the former Eastern Bloc as well as to broader philosophical and political debates.

Affect is that which is sensed before it can be conceptualized through linguistic or cognitive codes. Affect has been described as “an impression that is not clear or distinct,”³ and yet, “a gut feeling has its own intelligence.”⁴ Scholars have emphasized that affect is not just about emotions. More crucially, affect is the ability *to affect* and *be affected*,⁵ which can lead to an alternative process of knowledge production that escapes and goes beyond the dominant, hierarchical and hegemonic frameworks we use to read the world and our roles. In this aspect, affect has been described as “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion.”⁶ Affective experiences carry a powerful potentiality, or as Massumi writes, the possibility of “what the thing can become without ceasing to be itself.”⁷ This relates to the writings of Deleuze, who describes affect as a *process of becoming* when our bodies interact *with* something else. Deleuze writes that “a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality.”⁸

From the above, it can be argued that affective interactions with art contain similar transformative potentialities. This is not about art capturing or representing emotions. On the contrary, this is about art practice as the potential to produce alternative modes of *becoming* and *being* in the present. This process is not easy or smooth, especially when we speak about the geopolitical specificity of the Balkan space, a space which lingers between its difficult past and the new set of precarity brought forward by neoliberal democracy. Here, affective encounters can be messy, challenging, agonistic and antagonistic. In this aspect, Chantal Mouffe has pointed out that there is no distinction between politics and the arts since “artistic

³ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017) 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J Seigworth (Eds), *The Affect Theory Reader* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011) 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷ Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992) 38.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, “Ethology: Spinoza and Us” in *Incorporations*. Eds Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Zone Books, 1992) 625.

practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order, or in its challenging, and this is why they necessarily have a political dimension.”⁹ Since art is a priori part of the political, activist art practices function as counter-hegemonic interventions that “can contribute to unsettling the dominant hegemony.”¹⁰ The appearance of these interventions in the public space is inevitably antagonistic as they aim to make visible the invisible, speak about the unspoken, and create grounds for those who might not have a presence in the public space. Similarly, how the collective art practices analyzed in this chapter work *with* the memory of the socialist past is an affective antagonistic strategy to operate in a post-socialist and post-conflict space. In this process, which is also a process of alternative knowledge production, moments from the socialist past are rendered once again contemporary.

The lost horizon and the specter that returns

At first sight, post-communism signifies a temporality after a situation or a lived experience. In this general understanding, the temporal point of the *after* could be pinned to 1989, a year transformed into a complex signifier reflecting a diverse range of hopes and desires, ideologies, and a dialectic that found its ground through articulations of collective trauma. The label post-communism functions as an umbrella term to describe a new reality imposed after the breakdown of the Soviet-type governing system and the transition to neoliberal democracy. However, the ambivalence at the core of the lived experiences prevents a definition embedded in strict chronological or historical terms. The answer to the question “what is the post-communist condition?” has been defined by the impossibility of detecting a *when*. Even if we are to accept 1989 as the landmark that triggered the beginning, detecting its endings becomes

⁹ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London; New York: Verso, 2013) 91.

¹⁰ Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*.

an almost impossible task.

The two most famous and widely known writings that were published shortly before the revolutions that erupted in late 1989 in Eastern Europe, attempting to portray the post-communist shift, were conservative Francis Fukuyama's article *The End of History* (1989) and Zbigniew Brzezinski's book *The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (1989). Both these accounts of the post-communist condition as the end of history or the grand failure describe the breakdown of a teleological system and its replacement by another, which was global and universal. The breakdown of the Eastern Bloc suggested that there could be no other discourse on progress beyond the progress already provided by Western democracies and the neoliberal, global economy promoted by them. This was articulated through the public rhetoric of transition, which became another form of ideology and discourse. Transition as a term describes a series of political, economic, and institutional reformations that would 'cure' the suffering economies of the East and lead them to democracy. Transition and democracy became nuanced and ideological terms. The philosopher Boris Buden notes that transition, although in its original meaning was "nothing more than an interval between two different regimes," in the case of Eastern Europe came to be a particular ideology he calls "transitology."¹¹ Here, the final suffix *-logos* connotes a particular discourse around which the whole way of understanding, being, living, and reacting with and within the world was shifted and dictated. The ideology of transition came to articulate its grounds through public discourses appearing after the revolutions, claiming that no obstacles were standing in the way of democracy. Thus, adjusting to externally imposed changes was effective and inevitable. During this process, as Anthony Gardner points out, the "reappropriation of democracy from the grip of imperialism has risked buttressing and legitimizing the very politics it seeks to challenge."¹²

¹¹ Boris Buden, "Children of Postcommunism" *Radical Philosophy*. 159 (2010): 18.

¹² Anthony Gardner, *Politically Unbecoming: Postsocialist Art against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015) 11.

The philosopher Louis Althusser fittingly remarks that ideology does not exist in the “world of ideas” but rather, “it exists in institutions and the practices specific to them,”¹³ including that of families, education, and infrastructures of everyday life. What comes with ideology is also the construction of subjectivity—in this case, a subjectivity that is precisely collective exactly because it finds its resonance within a generalized and common condition. Likewise, the transition was not just a suddenly imposed ideology but also a reformation of subjectivity and its identity. The socialist past was “externalized, de-internationalized, and portrayed as the sum of the traumas to which a foreign power subjected one’s own identity, which now requires therapy, so, that said identity can become intact again.”¹⁴ The ideology of transition gave birth to a post-socialist subjectivity, which, nurtured by the anti-communist rhetoric of the past, was understood as malfunctioning, confused, and immature. This subjectivity had to undergo ideological detoxification from the past to catch up with Western progress.

Post-socialism, highlighted by the fall and failure of communism—both as a project in Eastern Europe and as a potential alternative within broader circles amongst Marxist thinkers and activists—is linked with the loss of a utopian horizon. The end of grand narratives means finding new ways of floating in flux, in transit and being unable to navigate towards a *horizontal* future. Two major losses marked the time-space after 1989, as the philosopher Peter Osborne observes: “communism as the horizon of historical communism [...] and ‘revolution’, as a horizon of expectation of revolution has been dissolving in advanced capitalist and colonial societies.”¹⁵ In addition, the loss of these horizons, Osborne observes, did not lead to a generalized loss but took place concomitantly with the restitution of capitalism as a “horizon of endless accumulation [...], politically coded in economic terms as the progressive freedom

¹³ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2014) 208.

¹⁴ Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008) 171.

¹⁵ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or not at all: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013) 209.

of ever-greater consumption.”¹⁶ This observation reminds us that communism has never only been about the countries that came to experience state socialism but that it also remains a modality that fuels current movements. A similar approach is also proposed by Zygmunt Bauman, who, in his study on postmodernism, notes that communism was “modernity in its most determined mood and most decisive posture [...] purified of the last shred of the chaotic, the irrational, the spontaneous, the unpredictable.”¹⁷ Indeed, modernism in the Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia was accompanied by mass Fordist production and consumption, cultural homogeneity, industrial development, corporate state, and a unifying ideology that shaped technological and cultural production. So, if Bauman was right in arguing that communism was the epitome of modernity, then the crisis of communism signals a generalized crisis of modernity. Post-communism thus becomes a condition somewhat similar to postmodernism. The so-called failure of communism confirms the faith lost in grand narratives and its replacement with free-floating signifiers, decentralization of state power, intensification of gender, class, and racial divisions, as well as social inequalities.

Ernesto Laclau analyzed the notion of the horizon as a social imaginary that is the basis of any social order and formation. Here, the horizon is understood as a unifying signifier, and for Laclau, every historical period has its horizon/unifying signifier; natural order for the Renaissance, reason for the Enlightenment, science for positivism, and the “higher forms of consciousness and social organization, holding the promise of limitless future” for modernity.¹⁸ The horizon for Laclau is an empty signifier, an impossible object, that unifies a totality (or the universal) and crystallizes the populist collective will (also, a synonym to the horizon) of particularities. He notes that,

[w]hile in the case of a ground we have a “superhard” transcendental by which to each unit of the signifier will correspond one and only one signified, in the case of a horizon that strict correlation between the two orders is broken. In a

¹⁶ Ibid., 210.

¹⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1991) 166–167.

¹⁸ Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London; New York: Verso, 1990) 3.

horizon the signifier signifies something different from its usual signified—i.e. it signifies the ultimate impossibility on which the process of signification is based.¹⁹

Despite being an empty locus, a horizon is a point in which society symbolizes and signifies its very grounds—as such, losing the ability to imagine a horizon means living in a groundless present that lacks unifying signifiers and symbols.

More than anything, the insistence on the vocabulary of loss or failure that comes with the post-communist condition signifies the loss of common ground. The loss destabilizes the sense of time and space. Having a horizon means navigating within a calculable and predictable space where a beginning anticipates its precise destination and *telos* from the start. Here, as seen on the distant horizon, the future can be predictable, calculable, possible, and thus, managed. Losing the horizon means finding new ways to navigate a time/space that is no longer linear and predictable, a time/space that has lost its ability to imagine a future and thus is more uncertain and precarious than ever. This also means a time/space that demands different ways of managing and articulating the present. This is where the rhetoric of crisis starts to appear, becoming the ultimate way through which new forms of precarity and inequalities are constituted and legitimized.

How is one to continue living at the “end of history”? What structures of conviviality can be produced in this always-in-transition stage? The Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist Mladen Dolar offers a different view of the concept of ideology and writes that “the subject emerges where ideology fails,”²⁰ meaning that subjectivity is formed in moments and spaces of resistance and crisis. More precisely, the actual act of resistance to the given condition is the very moment of subjectivity. In this aspect, subjectivity becomes and receives forms from

¹⁹ Ernesto Laclau, “Horizon, Ground, and Lived Experience” in *On Horizons: A Critical Reader Contemporary Art*. Eds Maria Hlavajova, Simon Sheikh, and Jill Winder (Utrecht; Rotterdam: BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Post Editions, 2011) 107.

²⁰ Mladen Dolar, “Beyond Interpellation” *Qui Parle*. 6.2 (1993): 78, Accessed 3 April 2021. Available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20685977>.

within a failed interpellation. Post-socialist subjects are not only limited to defining or revising their identity through their past state socialism but, more crucially, to collectively raise questions about the fragile structures of justice within the current reality.

In a society that has lost its secure ground and the ability to imagine a future, collective memory provides the method to remember previous revolutionary moments and the knowledge to activate similar moments according to the present needs. The specters of the socialist past keep returning precisely because the promises of neoliberal democracy were not actualized. The following section of this chapter analyses how collective art practices work with the past's specters to become a strategy to remember hope *after* or *beyond* trauma. In this case, the memory of hope, or in other words, the memory of activism (earlier struggles and collective experiences informing new sets of collective movements in the present), becomes in a sense a knowledge that is produced, reproduced, and then re-activated as a strategy to operate within a reality that has lost its ability to create new vocabularies of social and political emancipation.

Re-enacting the specter(s): Kontekst Kolektiv

Kontekst Kolektiv (hereafter Kontekst) officially started operating with a gallery space in 2006 in Serbia, led by the curators Vida Knežević and Ivana Marjanović. They were later joined by Marko Miletić and held regular collaborations with other curators and artists. The gallery's formation was a project initiated as a part of the Youth Forum of the municipality-owned Stari Grad Cultural Center. The gallery space was approached by the collective as a platform and project space for autonomous education and research in the field of contemporary visual arts. The public program of the gallery adapted an activist character as an overall attempt to politicize local cultural production. Following a short period of functioning as a non-profit organization within the framework of the Stari Grad Cultural Center, the Cultural Institution

Parobrod, founded by the municipality in 2010, took over the space and Kontekst lost its gallery. This highlighted a rupture with the local authority, reflecting the control of local cultural policies over independent art production. With the closure of their actual space, the collective engaged in nomadic research and public programs that addressed the precarious conditions of working in the arts in Serbia and the constant struggle for visibility and autonomy.

In 2012, the collective participated in *Oktobar XXX: Exposition – Symposium – Performance*, a project reflecting on an archive of publications by critics, curators, and artists from *Oktobar 75* on the concept of self-managed art as a response to Yugoslav socialist state politics. It was curated by Jelena Vesić, primarily taking the form of a re-enactment of the 1975 exhibition *Oktobar 75*.²¹ The project invited artists, thinkers, curators, and cultural workers to develop critical responses to the workers' self-management system. Initiated in the late 1950s, the workers' self-management system introduced a new socio-economic governing system in Yugoslavia in which workers had direct participation in production. Reflecting on this past, Kontekst produced a performance called *A sketch for the possibility of art against neoliberal capitalism* (2012). In this performance, Kontekst engaged with critical reading, interpretation, and re-enactment of Mirko Kujačić's *My Manifesto (Moj Manifest)*, a text written in 1932, followed by a performance/happening.²² Re-enacting and re-reading this past work was deeply connected to the collective's project *Kontekst, Struggle for autonomous space* (2011), which

²¹ October Salon (*Oktobarski Salon*) was founded in the 1960s by the City of Belgrade, remaining since then a reference point in the visual arts. The *Oktobar 75* exhibition became a landmark because artists directly addressed the status of their labour in the sphere of the political and social conditions in Yugoslavia.

²² Mirko Kujačić was a leading figure of the Yugoslav avant-garde. In 1932, Kujačić, appearing at his own solo exhibition at the Cvijeta Zuzorić Art Pavilion in Belgrade and dressed in a worker's uniform, delivered a performance/happening. Analysing bourgeois art and the tendency of 'art for art's sake,' Kujačić expressed his intention to abandon individual artistic subjectivity in favour of an art that would ultimately serve social justice and the vulnerable members of society. During the performance, he read his manifesto, which was a declaration "for unlimited collective discipline, for a battle against consecrated ideals, against tradition, against 'eternal beauty', against individualistic thinking, against pure art." See Sonja Birski Uzelac, "Visual Arts in the Avant-gardes between the two Wars," in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia*, eds. Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003) 164. Mirko Kujačić was also a founding-member of the artistic group Life (1935–1940). This group of fine artists initiated a boycott of Cvijeta Zuzorić Art Pavilion, a private association and the only source to which artists could turn for support or loans.

coincided with the closing of their gallery space in the Stari Grad Cultural Centre. During the performative reading, the collective used as an entry point the work of Mirko Kujačić and the political context of that time to reflect on alternative modes of production that could take place in the current capitalist reality.

Here, art practice becomes connected to social practice. As Nikola Dedić points out with regard to contemporary collective infrastructure in the former Yugoslavia, “contemporary artistic practices that begin by re-examining the Yugoslav heritage reject a romanticist and nostalgic return to the ‘good old days and insist on a politicization of not only art but also all segments of depoliticized everyday life.”²³ I find it crucial to address here two subversive and affective potentialities that are brought forward when working with the ghosts of the socialist past in the specific context of the former Yugoslavia: the first is the opportunity of creating spectral interconnectivity with past subjectivities, their struggles and victories, an element that appears to be especially crucial in the current divided post-socialist condition; the second is an inherent, and almost forgotten knowledge that stems from a previous experience, or a previous generation of artists who employed self-organization as a strategy for gaining autonomy. Here, the spectral knowledge of the past works as an activist counter-memory to address all the complex struggles of the current neoliberal post-socialist condition.

In a similar approach, Kontekst’s audio-visual installation, *On Solidarity: Why It Is Important to Reflect on the Student Protests of the 1930s* (2012) was the result of two years of research carried out in Belgrade and Zagreb. This video juxtaposed the student protests which were taking place at that time in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Novi Sad with the student protests that took place in Yugoslavia between the two World Wars. The project was based on research on the organizational structures of student protests and how they incorporated the

²³ Nikola Dedić, “Yugoslavia in Post-Yugoslav Artistic Practices: Or, Art as...” in *Post-Yugoslav Constellations: Archive, Memory, and Trauma in Contemporary Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian*. Eds Vlad Beronja and Stign Varvaet (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016) 173, Available: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110431575-010>.

principles of direct democracy. The main goal of the audio-visual installation was to bring into the present a part of the forgotten history of the revolutionary student movement in the former Yugoslavia and relate that history to current struggles for autonomy and public-funded universities. At the same time, this work emphasized interconnectedness and practices of solidarity that go beyond student protests. However, what exactly does it mean to re-enact an omitted history of the past, bringing into conversation its spectral revolutionary subjectivities with a current present?

Derrida's writing is a helpful methodological tool here for understanding what is entailed by specters. In his book *Specters of Marx* (1994), written shortly after Fukuyama was declaring the end of history, Derrida turns to the figure of the specter to address pronouncements of the death of Marxism. Relevant to this conversation is that a specter is not just dead and not just alive either. It is this 'not just' which makes the specter useful for Derrida to develop what he calls a philosophy of 'hauntology.'²⁴ This spectral in-between existence is a useful metaphor to understand the tactics of working in the arts with what has remained semi-alive and semi-dead in the post-socialist space. The ethical challenge that appears when considering the spectral, as Derrida insists, is "to learn to live with the ghosts" and, instead of abandoning or exorcising the ghost, to stay and be "with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise and better. No, not better, but more *justly*. But with them."²⁵ Derrida clarifies at the beginning of his text that the reason he starts speaking of, about, and *with* ghosts, or in other words about all the

²⁴ Derrida's specter is a deconstructive figure drifting in between life and death, presence and absence, past and future, and making concrete knowledge structures unstable. More interestingly, remembering Sigmund Freud's three traumas that disturbed and decentralized the narcissism of the anthropocentric cogito (the psychological trauma arriving with the discovery of the unconscious; the biological trauma occurring with the Darwinian findings; the cosmological trauma coming with the Copernican revolution), Derrida detects a fourth trauma that came with Marxism. The term 'hauntology' brings together ontology and haunting. As such, it is located within the very discourse of being. In this case, however, being is disturbed, disjointed, and receives an almost absent presence. Hauntology is a critical, and a somewhat cynical, playful, and deconstructive entry to rethink ontology and ethics.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Trans. Peggy Kamuf (London; New York: Routledge, 1994) xviii.

“certain *others*,” is “in the name of justice.”²⁶

In a similar aspect, and coming from a sociological context, Avery Gordon notices that the ghost imports a “charged strangeness”²⁷ which destabilizes and challenges the lines of social activity, common grounds, and knowledge. Spectral subjects from the past urge the unspoken and hidden chapters in the narration of history to reveal the power relations that constitute the historical event. In this sense, the ghost is always the symptom of an absence, highlighting what is missing from a current moment and reality. The unspoken historical moments, or the lives and deaths of the others hitherto ignored, can become indicators of understanding the injustices and failures of the past and accepting responsibility for the inherited past. It occurs then that working *with* the specters is not just about dealing with the unfinished business of the past but also about something yet to come, perhaps a belated justice. Although not carrying a specific idea or concrete anticipation, this promise implies that the yet to come is achieved only by being open to accepting others and comprehending the limits of the standards with which we read the world. As Gordon points out, haunting receives a paradoxically positive meaning as it “harbours the violence, the witchcraft and denial that made it, and the exile of our longing, the utopian.”²⁸

Artworks that re-enact and bring back forgotten histories of struggles can inform current actions. This means building connections with past, present, and future subjectivities that can overcome current borders, nations, and the rhetoric of nationalism and xenophobia that followed the Yugoslav wars. As two of Kontekst’s founding members, Knežević and Marjanović, emphasize, “working in the post-Yugoslav space means re-establishing those never entirely broken ties of movements across what once was Yugoslavia, such as the leftist,

²⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

²⁷ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 68, online, Internet, 3 Apr. 2021. , Available: <https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/ghostly-matters>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

artistic, feminist, gay, and lesbian and later queer factions, that played a crucial role in 1990's anti-war movement."²⁹ These common struggles, and in some cases common victories that were achieved in different moments within the frameworks of Yugoslavia, are in danger of being forgotten amidst ideological battles and nationalist imaginaries that generate rhetoric of differences and otherness.³⁰

Interconnectivity was also evident in the exhibition *Exception – Contemporary art scene of Pristina*³¹ organized in 2008 by Kontekst. The exhibition aimed to showcase emerging artists from Kosovo in Belgrade to build dialogue and connections between the two countries.³² This is a characteristic example of working with art exhibitions which aim to establish new cultural communications that could overcome the current national and ethnic conflicts. The exhibition was forced to close prior to opening after a group of Serbian nationalists attacked the gallery space and destroyed Dren Maliqi's artwork *Face to Face* (2003).³³ The police then claimed that they could not guarantee the safety of the curators or the public. Such intimidations, during which exhibitions are forced to shut down before even making their official appearance to the public, actually make the violent and nationalistic disputes in the post-socialist space more apparent. Past commonalities are erased and expelled from the public domain in such disputes.

²⁹ Vida Knežević, Ivana Marjanović, and Kontekst Collective, "Spaces of New Social and Art Criticism and their Re-Conditioning: A few Theses from the Post-Yugoslav Context" in *Spaces for Criticism: Shifts in Contemporary Art Discourses*. Eds Thijs Lijster et al. (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2015) 60.

³⁰ Marjanović in her PhD thesis, *Staging the Politics of Interconnectedness between Queer, Anti-fascism and No Borders Politics* (2017), emphasizes the politics of interconnectivity in the post-Yugoslav context. Focusing on the QueerBeograd festival, Marjanović identifies the trans-national and interconnected history of social movements in both socialist and post-socialist Yugoslavia.

³¹ The artists participating in the exhibition were Artan Balaj, Jakup Ferri, Driton Hajredini, Flaka Haliti, Fitore Isufi Koj, Dren Maliqi, Alban Muja, Vigan Nimani, Nurhan Qehaja, Alketa Xhafa, and Lulzim Zeqiri.

³² Relations between the two countries still remain tense (with conflicts starting in the 1980s and escalating with Serbia's armed invasion of Kosovo in 1998–1999). When the former Yugoslavia was dissolving in 1989, Kosovo sought its independence. However, the ethnic tensions are also deeply rooted in contested histories. The common rhetoric used by nationalist Serbian media and political figures in the 1980s and 1990s to justify claims over land, and in particular the military invasion, was that it was a re-articulation of the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. The battle was presented as a heroic resistance against the Ottoman expansion. Becoming a historical myth, it fueled an aggressive nationalism which asserted that the Kosovo was the 'birthplace' of Serbia. In February 2008 Kosovo declared its independence without Serbian recognition.

³³ This artwork depicted Andy Warhol's image of Elvis Presley together with the controversial figure of Adem Jashari, one of the founders of the Kosovo Liberation Army who is considered to be a freedom fighter by Albanians and a national icon in Kosovo, whereas in Serbia he is considered a war criminal and terrorist.

As such, one of the specters brought forward by re-inserting and re-activating the socialist past is this reminder of interconnectivity; simultaneously, we witness the current impossibilities for the actualization of such interconnected and trans-national dialogues between the countries that were once part of Yugoslavia.

Re-enacting the specters of the socialist past is a way of taking responsibility for the inherited past by embracing its ghosts and transforming the spectral. In this process, history becomes an active modality, which does not remain in paralysis but is revisited, reconsidered, and in some ways reactivated in creating the grounds for justice by giving new space for all spectral subjectivities to appear. This is the nature of responsibility that comes when working with the specters. Working in the post-socialist condition not only calls for the re-activation of those previously experienced moments and the re-establishing of forgotten interconnectivity that was experienced in the common political reality. It also means forming collaborations and working *with* each other to survive the current conditions of precarity. Working *with* becomes a political choice. Knežević and Marjanović highlight,

Working with tries to abandon the top-down relationships in art worlds that are the outcome of professionalization, experts' authority and symbolic capital accumulation, often reproduced by all sides that take part. That means rejecting some of the existing codes of communication (also in critical spaces), such as exclusiveness, arrogance and careerism.³⁴

The above statement confronts the individualization, commodification of the arts, and the policies imposed during the transition, leading to privatization and the disappearance of the public and common space. At the same time, there is also an urgent need to produce and create art that is a pivotal part of social life and integral to building a collective consensus. Within these frameworks, it is also interesting to consider that two of Kontekst's members, Knežević and Miletić, have also co-founded the magazine *Mašina*, which serves as a platform for

³⁴ Knežević, Marjanović, and Kontekst Collective, "Spaces of New Social and Art Criticism and their Re-Conditioning: A few Theses from the Post-Yugoslav Context" 65.

producing critiques standing outside the dominant neo-liberal ideologies and the Social Center ‘Oktobar’ (*Društveni Centar ‘Oktobar’*). This social center, which became the permanent base of Kontekst, the Center for Politics of Emancipation (*Centar za Politike Emancipacije*), established in Belgrade in 2011, and the self-sustained *Oktobar* became a meeting place for a network of activists from Serbia and abroad who organized regular public events and round-table discussions. Such actions manifest collaboration as a constant practice; it is considered a tactic that exists, persists, and evolves despite the conditions of precarity. When collaborations become the fundamental process of working, we also shift to a model in which the main outcome of production (instead of concrete or tangible art objects) is that of affective knowledge, an in-between social space within the cracks of a trembling socio-political reality. This social knowledge that critically reflects upon the present conditions is co-produced by the artists-activists or curators who initiate the social event and the participants who become part of that social meeting. As a result of this process, malleable forms of collaboration produce alternative possibilities for social interaction and critical reflection.

‘Working *with*’ is a political action that means engaging and activating everything which remains in a society that has undergone a transformation and is dealing with unresolved trauma. This includes working with the past, working with experiences that transcend borders, and working as a strategy to build instances and spaces of autonomy. Of course, the preposition ‘with’ here, rather than consisting of common subjects, includes individual elements and approaches that come together under a common purpose. As Bojana Cvejić notes in her essay on collectivity: “‘we’ as ‘with’ want to push for a bit of violence. For the desire in persisting in a process whereby irreducible and not desirable and manageable differences are productive for new configurations of working, a process whereby no overarching conception should provide

safety to prior self-regulation.”³⁵ Remaining in a dialogue with Jean-Luc Nancy’s ideas of the community as an eternal repetition of different constellations of singularities whose meaning in being in time and in space is not predetermined, but rather it is always done and undone,³⁶ Cvejić reminds us that the use of the preposition ‘with’ is not unifying, but is the point of a conscious and political decision to co-exist in solidarity and to recognize a commonality within and through the differences that exist. Cvejić identifies this element of working with power for experimental collaboration between authors. Working *with* spectrality and remaining within the interconnections built *with* current, past, and future subjectivities, and their knowledge of organizing and sustaining autonomy structures, provide political nuance. Here, historical events are not only associated with the responsibility to keep the spectral modalities but, more importantly, the hidden chapters that appear through counter-memories work as spectrality that allow for forgotten interconnectivity to re-appear in the current precarious and in-conflict space.

Reclaiming the Present: Kooperacija

Kooperacija’s³⁷ first show, *800 Revolutions per Minute* (2012), took place in a privately-owned laundromat (fig. 1). Amongst the exhibited works was the installation *24 Revolutions per Second* (2012) by Filip Jovanovski, one of the founding members of Kooperacija. The installation included found objects, such as books, paintings and busts positioned on top of four laundry machines. The phrase “History substitutes for our gaze, a world more in harmony with our desires,”³⁸ written with white letters on a red wall, which accompanied the installation,

³⁵ Bojana Cvejić, “Collectivity? You Mean Collaboration” *Artists as Producers*. (2005), Available: http://republicart.net/disc/aap/cvejic01_en.htm.

³⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

³⁷ Kooperacija’s founding artists were Gjorgje Jovanovik, Filip Jovanovski, Igor Toshevski, Nikola Uzunovski and the artist collaboration OPA (Obsessive Possessive Aggression) that was founded in 2001 by the visual artists Slobodanka Stevceska and Denis Saraginovski. From the beginning, there were many other artists that participated in the different public events and exhibitions organised. The initiative was brought together by a younger generation of artists as well as artists of a previous generation who experienced state socialism and its subsequent fall and transition.

³⁸ The title paraphrases André Bazin’s quote that, “the cinema substitutes for our gaze a world more in harmony with our desires” (as quoted in Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Le Mépris*, 1963). One could also connect here cinema’s

became a direct response to how history has been interpreted and abused, serving political and social ideals and desires. The phrase was positioned next to archives, books, paintings, and busts on top of four laundry machines. The other artworks were placed in the space to appear as organic parts of the laundry. In a way, it was as if the laundry machines had become part of the whole exhibition space. The initial motivation for using such an unconventional space highlighted the collective need for alternative spaces for socialization and communication. Kooperacija's practice, nomadic and financially sustained by its members, is a unique example of the struggles for autonomy and social power in the arts in that specific region of the former Yugoslavia. There are two crucial elements to consider regarding Kooperacija's practice: self-organization as a response or intervention towards the existing institutional infrastructure and art as activism.

The points stressed above were even more vivid during Kooperacija's exhibition, *Where is Everybody* (2013), which was a direct response to the aftermath of the violent intervention of security forces in the North Macedonian Parliament in December 2013 as well as the imposed government measures proposing penalties for journalists for their critical work and freedom of speech. The exhibition took place in an empty 150 square meter office for rent and former newspaper offices in Skopje (fig. 2). The exhibition lasted only one night, with no electricity in the space due to unpaid bills. The artists were responsible for choosing the ways they wished to exhibit their work in dialogue with the circumstances and features of the space. Given a map of the space, the audience would search for the artworks through the vast corridors while bumping into each other in total darkness. These conditions became a metaphor for the contemporary society in North Macedonia, its politics and policies. The lived precarity and the ephemerality that characterizes the post-socialist society came to be incorporated within the

ability to manipulate the gaze with the ways that history itself and its narratives, rather than being a manifestation of actual events and truths, becomes a rhetoric that drives and satisfies certain collective imaginations and desires.

exhibition space. This exhibition was an activist gesture: “We started to develop the contemporary art scene by ourselves, in our way. This way of doing something, parallel to institutions, properly and professionally, as far as we were able, is a kind of protest,” notes Slobodanka Stevceska from the OPA group and member of Kooperacija.³⁹ However, what exactly does it mean to have an exhibition that lasts just one night, as though it were a political happening or a protest? In answering this question, it is crucial to consider the link between space—space as an exhibition and a situation that affects the nature of artworks, but also space as a platform of social interaction—and the urgency to emerge collectively in such a space. The artists who founded and ran Kooperacija organized exhibitions in empty spaces of everyday life that they occupied temporarily and not in formal galleries precisely because access to such spaces is difficult for precarious artists and cultural workers.

Kooperacija’s actions coincided with the project ‘Skopje 2014’, endorsed by the previous ethno-nationalist government, which aimed to re-build and re-brand the city center by erasing buildings and monuments related to the socialist past and replacing them with new monuments that would create linearity of history while promoting the country’s candidacy to join the European Union. This attempt to homogenize history gave rise to new tensions between the diverse local ethnic communities whose own memories and historical narratives are not being included or represented in the newly restructured public space. Here, questions on who owns the public space, and its histories, are crucial. OPA’s *Keep calm and eat chocolate* (2012-2013), presented during the exhibition *EPP (Economic Propaganda Program)*, which took place in a shop and dealt with pop culture and kitsch, is a sarcastic and humorous response to the new fusion aesthetic seen in the political, and ideological symbols adopted by the government. For this artwork, the artists replicated chocolate figurines that resembled existing souvenirs of newly built monuments in Skopje (fig. 3). This parodic gesture emphasized the production of

³⁹ Jon Blackwood, *Critical Art in Contemporary Macedonia* (Skopje: Mala Galerija, 2016) 176.

monuments (a direct response to the growth of monumental public art). At the same time, it raised questions about how history is being produced and constructed, leaving behind unresolved and undiscussed pasts. The performative action of displaying and ‘selling’ these souvenirs within a shop connotes ideas about how monumental history becomes a product that can be commodified and exchanged within the loop of financial capitalism.

The element of collective memory was even more intense during Kooperacija’s project *Strategies of Remembering #1*, held inside the home of the North Macedonian art critic Nebojsa Vilic. Organizing a public art event in a private house creates the conditions in which personal and collective memories can collide, as the past experience of socialist communality meets the reality of the present capitalist system’s idealization of individuality. Yet, in this exhibition, the boundaries between these elements became blurry: Igor Tosevski’s *Sonata for KG* (2012), which included a series of photographs placed on a piano, and Gjorgje Jovanovik’s painting *Corrupted Minds* (2011), which resembled the visual aesthetics of a poster, as well as Slavica Janeslieva’s performance during which she was peeling apples whilst sitting in an armchair facing a television, are all fragments that have been incorporated in the mundane domestic environment. Although very distinct from each other, these artworks create a space of heterotopia, an alternative actual space that blurs distinctions between private and public.⁴⁰ The collective art strategy of blurring public and private fits with the initial purpose that guided Kooperacija’s activities. They write in their collective statement:

Kooperacija is temporary collaboration [...]. Kooperacija is a walk-through Skopje’s alleys. Kooperacija is a call for participation. Kooperacija is hanging around. Kooperacija is solitude. Kooperacija is an event. Kooperacija is erasing the borders. Kooperacija is resetting. Kooperacija is exchange of experience.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault introduces the term ‘heterotopias’ to speak about actual sites that juxtapose in single space multiple incompatible elements. Although etymologically linked to the term ‘utopia’ (a space which only exists in the realm of imagination) heterotopias occupy actual spaces in the margins of our urban and social life functioning as “counter-sites” in between conventional sites. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias” *Architecture, Movement, Continuité*. 5 (1984): 46–49.

Kooperacija is a declaration of the free citizen. Kooperacija stands for freedom of expression.⁴¹

In the citation above, it becomes apparent that the formation of a collective in this instance is a direct activist response to a certain political reality. Kooperacija dissolved in 2016, perhaps having served a temporary need fulfilled through their work together. Art collectives are constantly in motion and flux, appearing as conscious responses to specific realities. More than direct responses, their constantly shifting nature manifests the very precarious conditions in which they operate.

The rapid urban transformations in post-socialist cities such as Skopje and Belgrade, characterized by a constant re-writing of their history simultaneously with the eradication of their public spaces, could be described as manifestations of what Žarana Papić has called turbo-fascism. Papić proposed this term to conceptualize the hegemonic neoliberal nationalisms in the Balkans after the collapse of state socialism and precisely Serbia's racist attitude towards its ethnic and marginalized minorities during Milosevic's regime. Papić used the prefix 'turbo'⁴² to emphasize that these recent nationalisms put in fusion the "rural and urban, pre-modern and post-modern, pop culture and heroines, real and virtual, mystical and 'normal'".⁴³ These are all unrelated cultural elements, transformed into symbols when employed within specific hate and xenophobic rhetoric that perpetuates the dispute in the ex-Yugoslav space. Through the homogenization of distinct cultural and historical elements, "populist sentiments", to use Papić's expression, can gain ground. Papić insists that turbo-fascism "demands and relies on this culture of the normality of fascism that had been structurally constituted well before all the killings in the wars started."⁴⁴ In this process, representations of the past have been

⁴¹ "за кооперација / about," Apr. 2012, Accessed 3 Apr. 2021, Available online: <https://kooperacija.wordpress.com/за-кооперација/>.

⁴² Papić borrows the prefix 'turbo' from the term 'turbo-folk', a subgenre of contemporary popular music that was developed in Serbia in the 1980s and 1990s and quickly expanded in other regions of the Balkans.

⁴³ Žarana Papić, "Europe after 1989: Ethnic Wars, the Fascination of Social Life and Body Politics in Serbia" *Filozofski Vestnik*. XXIII.2 (2002): 191–204, 199.

⁴⁴ Papić, "Europe after 1989: Ethnic Wars, the Fascination of Social Life and Body Politics in Serbia."

constructed and re-constructed through a position of selective legitimization or de-legitimization of both collective and personal memories, serving nationalistic and oppressive narratives. The construction of a new past and the misinterpretation of history occurred in the aftermath of collective amnesia promoted during a transition in the 1990s. As Marina Gržinić has argued, turbo-fascism and turbo-nationalism in the Balkan space are based on a pseudo-amnesia which does not silence the genocide of the 1990s. Instead, it glorifies it, misusing the historical past.⁴⁵ This reality makes even more apparent the vital need to reclaim the past, both the socialist and its post-socialist reality. Reclaiming the past means actually working with that difficult and contested past in order to generate new spaces of affective knowledge production whilst challenging myths about the socialist past and the capitalist present.

Conclusion

Kooperacija's and Kontekst's work is an affective political strategy that offers something valuable to the domain of art activism. In such art practices, the past is being re-discovered and re-introduced in public discourses through counter-memories that create spaces for alternative knowledge production. Keeping close to, and working *with*, spectrality in the post-socialist space means building interconnectivity, a reminder of a previous commonality that expands and goes beyond the current borders, both actual and metaphoric. At the same time, working *with* such spectral interconnections in collectives and founding spaces for sociality, no matter how ephemeral or spontaneous, becomes a contemporary strategy for autonomy outside or against state institutions that serve their governments' politics. Yet, even within unsustainable, ephemeral, or precarious operating conditions, such collective practices progress, maintain and produce alternative arts infrastructures.

⁴⁵ Marina Gržinić, "Introduction: burdened by the past, rethinking the future. Eleven theses on Memory, History, and Life" *Opposing Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Turbo-Nationalism: Rethinking the Past for new Conviviality*. Eds Marina Gržinić, Jovita Pristovšek, and Sophie Uitz (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2020) 10.

The art projects discussed in this chapter bring art to the core of everyday sociability. Art practice becomes a tactic of taking ownership over the meaning of history by asking ‘where are we going from *here*?’ and transforming it into a type of collective political action that is possible at present. Such a practice of transforming history into a strategy of disobedience is about enunciating an offer of affection to memories that remain, experiences that insist and persist, and traumas that are not communicated throughout time and generations. History, chronology, and time as past, present, and future do exist, but they are made up of gaps, injustices, disappearances, and acts of omission and pseudo-amnesia. Suppose time and historical moments appear to be something fabricated, constructed by knowledge systems and shifting rather than pre-existing. In that case, it means that they can also receive different forms of antagonistic interventions and disobedience. The most affective and effective way to achieve this is through the field of art that can still operate in a sphere of relative autonomy and in which forms of collectivity and collaborative experimentations can be actualized.

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Images



Fig.1: Kooperacija, *800 Revolutions per Minute* (2012), exhibition view. Courtesy of Denis Saraginovski.



Fig. 2: Kooperacija, *Where is Everybody* (2013), exhibition view. Courtesy of Denis Saraginovski.



Fig. 3: Kooperacija, *EPP (Economic Propaganda Program)* (2013), exhibition view. Courtesy of Denis Saraginovski.