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Demarco and Yugoslavia in the 1970s

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During the Cold War period, relations between the UK and Yugoslavia were couched entirely in the frames of politics, economics or military history; in the later years of socialist Yugoslavia, from the later seventies onwards, links were also developed through state-run tourism, and the international components of youth work brigades, who helped to complete major infrastructure projects. Art was little considered, in the context of the UK, much less so than it had been during the period of Royal Yugoslavia (1918–41), when the Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović (1883–1962) developed a significant international following from the period of the First World War, through to the middle 1930s. Following the end of the second world war, very little was known in the UK of contemporary art in Yugoslavia from the late 1940s through to the early 1970s.

The fluctuating contours of the cultural relationship between the UK and Yugoslavia are perhaps for another essay, however. In this text we will focus on the pioneering nine-day trip taken by Richard Demarco to Yugoslavia in December 1972, and its consequences not only for the international profile of Yugoslav art, but also for relations between Yugoslav artists and cultural ecologies in neighbouring countries. The details of Demarco's nine-day trip, organized by the Yugoslav Federal Institute of Culture, Education & Science, can be found in a fascinating typewritten account in the Demarco Archive. Reflecting on what seems to have been an exhausting itinerary, Demarco reflected that:

> I realized I had merely scratched the surface of the art world in Yugoslavia, though I had been on four all night journeys by train, one jet flight, and I had visited five cities in nine days, and had been in twenty studios and met fifty-one artists, and twenty-five art critics and gallery directors ... .[1]

In order for us to understand the impact that this initial exhaustive trip would have had, it is firstly necessary to try and chart the cultural geography of Yugoslavia in the early 1970s, and the relationship between the Yugoslav art world and the rest of Europe.

Ever since the *Informbiro* period of 1948, when Yugoslavia had been expelled from the COMINFORM group of socialist countries, the country's leader, Josip Broz Tito, had sought to differentiate his country's politics and culture from elsewhere in the Communist world.[2] Economically, this meant a Yugoslav variant of Marxism described as 'self-managed socialism', whereas, in terms

of visual culture, what came to be known as "socialist aestheticism" was hegemonic, from the mid 1950s.

The break with Stalinist orthodoxy had three important consequences for the development of post-war Yugoslav art. Firstly, Yugoslav citizens had unprecedented access to touring exhibitions of Western art in the 1950s. In 1952, a survey exhibition of the latest trends in French art toured Belgrade, Skopje, Zagreb and Ljubljana; the following year, a contemporary Dutch exhibition, including a representative sample of the work of De Stijl, toured the same cities with the exception of Ljubljana. The canonical exhibition, however, in the development of Yugoslav art, and reflecting the unique profile that the country enjoyed in post war geopolitics, was the 1956 show 'Contemporary Art of the USA' which included all the prominent Abstract Expressionist painters. It will be apparent, then, that whilst Yugoslavia developed its own kind of Communist government, culturally it was just as interested in developments in the capitalist world.

Yugoslavia's independence from the Soviet model of Communist development, after 1948, also sealed the fate of a budding Yugoslav 'socialist realism'. This style, focusing on the achievements of the working class, and the leading role played in society by the Communist Party, was hegemonic in art academies and teaching institutions elsewhere in Eastern Europe. By contrast, as Miško Šuvaković and others have shown, 'socialist aestheticism' emerged in painting and sculpture in the 50s and 60s, as a form of modernist response to the ideological strictures of socialist realism. This particular form has been described as: '... aestheticized, nondogmatic, ideologically neutral, and artistically independent expression and presentation'.[3]

The third consequence follows on logically. In Yugoslavia, Modernism was not a subversive or counter-revolutionary force, but instead was stripped of its ideological content, and its practice fully sanctioned by the cultural and political authorities. As a result, a pleasant, unchallenging, formally modernist series of paintings and sculptures gained official recognition as the 1960s developed, which eschewed politics in return for official tolerance. Examples of such work can be found across Yugoslavia's successor republics, and the contemporary cultural response to this legacy is mixed, to say the least.

In response, younger artists turned away from this 'official' modernism as encouraged by the cultural authorities, and began in a variety of ways to explore new media and new possibilities for self-expression.

It is also critical to keep in mind that there was never any such thing as 'Yugoslav' art, or a recognisable 'Yugoslav' style, either during the period we are considering here. With this in mind, each challenge to socialist aestheticism took on distinctly local flavours, in each republican capital.[4] Groups such as the Slovenian *reist*, process art group OHO in Kralj and Ljubljana, contributed alongside the emergent conceptualists, performance artists and video artists, of the newly established Students Cultural Centre (SKC) in Belgrade, whilst, in Zagreb, the series of 'New Tendencies exhibitions' that ran from 1961–1973, showing the work of *informel* grouping 'Gorgona' and, later, the conceptual interventions of artists such as Goran Trbuljak and Braco Dimitirijević, added a further layer to the complex set of interrelationships and local differentiation that made up the practice of contemporary art across Yugoslavia. These differing manifestations of conceptualism, anti-art, anti- modernism, performance

and installation began to be understood in Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1970s as 'New Art Practice'. The critic Bojana Pejić summarises the implications ably:

> The New Art Practice was a *constellation* which inserted itself into the 'body' of Yugoslav communist society and involved, at first, artists from Novi Sad, Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade, and later Sarajevo, as well as art critics and museum and gallery curators belonging to the younger generation. The major characteristic of the New Art Practice was its contentious consciousness, which was otherwise central to the cultural climate after 1968.[5]

The emergence of the New Art Practice(s), ultimately, led to a subtle differentiation in Yugoslav cultural policy as the 1970s developed. The various artists and 'scenes' associated with new conceptual strategies, with video and performance, tended to be given a great deal of international prominence – with Demarco's two Edinburgh exhibitions in 1973 (Figure 1) and 1975 forming part of that overall international presentation. Domestically, however, major state-owned exhibiting spaces, with access controlled through local artists' unions, tended to favour more those artists whose work in painting, sculpture and graphics had a bigger audience and accorded more with the political self-perception of the Yugoslav space. Painters such as Lazar Vujaklija, or sculptors such as Antun Augustinićić and Dušan D amonja tended to have a much bigger following with local audiences.

Demarco's first encounter, then, with the Yugoslav art world, came just as the first challenges to the orthodoxies of socialist aestheticism were gaining traction. Two centres of activity were critical in providing a space for this new alternative to develop; firstly, the series of international theatre exhibitions in Belgrade, known as BITEF, from 1968 onwards, and also the newly commissioned Students' Cultural Centre in Belgrade, where many of the 'New Art Practice' figures were based early in their career, and which acted as a central node of ideas and cultural exchange, for other counter-hegemonic art scenes around the Federation.

Figure 1: *Rhythm 10*, performance by Marina Abramović for the RDG at Melville College, Edinburgh. Eight Yugoslav Artists, 19 August 1973. Edinburgh Arts 1973.

The freelance curator and critic, Biljana Tomić, organised the visual components of the BITEF exhibitions. In addition to providing exposure for emergent conceptual artists in Yugoslavia, such as "OHO", she also invited significant European practitioners to Belgrade, amongst them Jannis Kounellis, and Michelangelo Pistoletto. Tomić also intervened at the SKC, alongside Dunja Blažević, in programming a series of performance art festivals called *April Meeting: Extended Media* that lasted from 1972–77, with Gina Pane, John Baldessari, and Joseph Beuys amongst the artists to visit Belgrade in that period. The effect of the BITEF and SKC programmes was to give international exposure to the new developments in art in Yugoslavia, whilst providing homegrown artists with exposure and contacts in a fast- developing European conceptual and performance scene.

Demarco did visit the SKC on his first day in Belgrade, on 5 December 1972,

where he encountered Biljana Tomić, Raša Todosijević and Zoran Popović, amongst others. In his report, he noted that these two artists '... seemed to make a team and were not afraid to experiment most courageously in film and into activities which questioned the nature of exhibitions'.[6] He also noted the role that the SKC had played in introducing Beuys to Belgrade audiences.

However, it would be wrong to see this first trip to Yugoslavia as focusing only on the 'New Art Practices'. Demarco's itinerary, drawn up by Yugoslav officials, saw him encountering a remarkable cross section of artists and curators, from the painter and mosaicist Gligor Ćemerski in Skopje, to Radoslav Putar and the Croatian naïve artist Ivan Lacković in Zagreb. Demarco also spent time in Sarajevo, where he met Curator of the Art Gallery of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Azra Begicì, and Ljubljana, where he was photographed in the studio of the Dragans.

In all, he was exposed to the full spectrum of art practice across differing centres in the country, from socialist aestheticism, through nai¨ve art, large-scale public sculpture, and emergent conceptual, performance and video practices. He also noted, with approval, the practice of allocating the top floor of any newly built tower block for space as artist's studios and apartments, which he had encountered both in New Belgrade and Skopje.

A good example of the myriad impressions the Scots-Italian cultural broker must have had of visual culture in Yugoslavia can be found in a photograph in the Demarco archive. The architect Iskra Grabul (Figure 2) is shown in her studio alongside a maquette for the extraordinary *Makedonium* building, subsequently erected at Kruševo in south Macedonia by August 1974. This was an outworking of a drawing and discussion process that had probably begun in late 1971, between the artists and architects involved in the building; Iskra, her husband, the architect Jordan Grabul, the monumental fresco painter Borko Lazeski, who was responsible for the building's stained glass, and Petar Mazev, who designed biomorphic sculpted reliefs for the interior. As the canonical MOMA exhibition *Towards a Concrete Utopia* of 2018–19 demonstrated, Yugoslavia's cultural actors had an extraordinary freedom in opening up both the built environment and range of monumental sculpture in Yugoslavia, from the middle 1960s until the early 1980s- remarkably inventive and daring three dimensional forms that deserve much better treatment than their contemporary de-politicised & exoticised presentation in Western photo books and projects.

For all the remarkable diversity of this first foray into unfamiliar cultural milieus, Demarco's opening exhibition back in Edinburgh, *Eight Yugoslav Artists*, in August 1973, was based entirely on the New Art Practices' that he had seen on the first day of his trip, at the SKC in Belgrade. A document in the Demarco archive, dated 28 December 1972, shows an initial proposal for an exhibition of seventy artists from six different urban centres, that was submitted for consideration to the Yugoslav Federal Institute; presumably, the sheer logistical and travel implications of this early proposal, and subsequent negotiation, saw this ambitious idea whittled down to a much more coherent grouping of mainly Belgrade artists.[7] Of the eight chosen to be shown at Melville College in August 1973, only Ljubljana's Nuša and Srećo Dragan were based elsewhere. Radomir Damnjanović-Damnjan was by that time living in Milan, and Gergelj 'Gera' Urkom

Figure 2: Iskra Grabul, co-designer with Jordan Grabul of the Ilinden Monument, Krushevo, Macedonia, with a maquette of the monument in her studio in Belgrade, Serbia (then Yugoslavia), December 1972. Photographed by Richard Demarco during a visit to Yugoslavia in preparation for the exhibition *Eight Yugoslav Artists*, at the RDG in August–September 1973.

in London, but both these artists had deep roots in Belgrade's contemporary art scene.

However, all of the selected artists in the first Edinburgh show had worked together closely in an intense period of collaboration and exhibition from summer 1972 onwards. The art writer and historian Jasna Tijardović chronicled the significance of the exhibitions BITEF 6, in September 1972, and 'October '72' at SKC in Belgrade; Demarco's visit coincided with this latter show's end, and a hybrid of it mutated into the *Eight Yugoslav Artists* show of August 1973.

The evening featured the debut performance of Abramović's iconic *Rhythm 10*, with ten knives. This is a piece in which the artist plays the Russian game of "five-finger- fillet". She rhythmically stabs the space between the fingers of her splayed hand, accidentally cutting herself in the process. Every time she stabs herself, the knife changes, until all ten have been used. The artist then listens to a recording of the first round of ten knives, and attempts to repeat the injuries inflicted on herself, so that, in her own words, 'the mistakes of time past and time present can be synchronized'.[8]

Paripović, Popović, Todosijević and Gergelj Urkom performed simultaneously alongside Abramović, with Urkom giving a version of his performance piece *Upholstering a Chair*. The documentary photographs show Joseph Beuys amongst an attentive and interested audience. The simultaneity of the performance would have left a very powerful impression of the closeness of these artists, their temporary suppression of individual identity in a group endeavour, and their navigation of different routes of physical privation and practical humour, in a constant and urgent interrogative development.

The Edinburgh show was also significant for the first showing of the work of Nuša & Srećo Dragan outside of the Yugoslav context. The duo had produced the first video work in the Yugoslav context, *Belo mleko Belih prsi* [White Milk of White Breasts], which appeared in 1969. In actual fact, this work is a still image of a woman's breast, with a bead of milk visible; playing across this image

is a sequence of changing, edited graphic signs. This video piece stands at a turning point, between the traditional still image, and the coming new techniques of editing, cutting and mixing. Nuša had worked at the British Film Institute in London for a period in 1972 where her knowledge of video and television techniques grew exponentially. The piece shown in Edinburgh in 1973, *Project Communication of Gastronomy*, was a mix of still photography, film and happening-style experience, an assured and striking synthesis of contemporary forms and ideas.

Following the conclusion of the 1973 exhibition, Demarco's mind turned towards the realization of the much more ambitious, broadly based exhibition, which he had first suggested to the Federal Institute of Culture in December 1972. He was to return to Yugoslavia regularly in the next three years, meeting up with Marina Abramović and Raša Todosijević during a visit to various studios in Zagreb and Belgrade in 1974; he was back for a brief meeting with both these artists at Motovun in Istria, in the Summer of 1975, during an Edinburgh Arts tour.

Motovun, as Laura Leuzzi, and Branka Benčić have shown in different essays,[9] was a key location for cross-fertilisation of emergent video art form and production between Italy and Yugoslavia. The link between Motovun and Demarco's work can perhaps be found most directly in the early work of Sanja Iveković, who was able to have some of her work produced in the Italian context, bypassing the limitations of Yugoslav conditions for production.

A good example of Iveković's 1970s work is *Make Up Make Down*, a nine-minute video made first in black and white in 1976, produced by Galleria del Cavallino in Italy, and later transferred to colour in 1978. The subject of the work is the private, intimate moment of applying make-up. The artist is not visible in the film, but the focus is rather on the make-up products, and how Iveković interacts with them during the process. The work speaks to a broader narrative of the commodification of identity and desire, and through a pitiless examination of those processes, inviting broader analysis of the rituals that women engage in before presenting a public persona.

By the time Iveković was showing this work at Motovun in 1976, the touring run of the exhibition of the remarkable *ASPECT '75* exhibition was well under way. Whereas *Eight Yugoslav Artists* had only managed to give a brief snapshot of one contemporary art scene in Belgrade, *ASPECT '75*, in every sense, gave as full a picture as was possible then of art practice in Yugoslavia, from Croatian naïve painting and 'socialist aestheticism' through to performance and video. Forty-eight artists participated, whilst the range of introductory essays reads almost as a who's who of significant Yugoslav curators of the mid 1970s. This is still a well-remembered generation of colleagues one of whom, Marijan Susovski (Figure 3), then Director of the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, was significant in developing links between Yugoslav video artists and their counterparts in Austria and Italy in the middle 1970s, as well as encouraging the developing career of Braco Dimitrijević. In his essay, director of the Galleries of the City of Zagreb, Radoslav Putar, makes direct reference to the video work of Ivekovicì and the ideas of Dimitrijević and Goran Trbuljak; the Ljubljana critic Aleksander Bassin discusses the video work of the Dragans, and it's complicated emergence from the milieu of the Slovenian *avant-garde* in the late 1960s.

The catalogue, featuring a blown-up image of a Yugoslav passport with its

iconic coat of arms in gold, still stands today, thirty-five years later, as one of the few informative sources in English on experimental Yugoslav art in the post war period. When the exhibition opened at Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery in August 1975, it was quickly clear that this was a profound and carefully chosen survey of art in Yugoslavia, which well reflected Demarco's lively and sensitive awareness of the differing artistic scenes and how they worked (or didn't work) together. His surveying of the Yugoslav art world, which reached far beyond the central Ljubljana–Zagreb–Belgrade axis, was a near unique phenomenon amongst Western curators and art historians at this period. Other than the major survey exhibition, "4,000 years of Yugoslav art" held in Paris in 1971, no other exhibition in Western Europe matched the ambition of the Edinburgh exhibition during this decade. Further, it was the only significant survey exhibition of Yugoslav art in the UK during the entire existence of the federation (1918–91).

ASPECT '75, which toured after the closure of the Fruitmarket show to five other venues in 1975–76,[10] proved to be a survey of an art world on the point of changing profoundly, again. Looking through some of the exhibitors' biographies in the catalogue, we see that Gergelj Urkom had left Belgrade for London; Braco Dimitrijević was on the point of leaving Zagreb behind; and, by the time that the tour had finished, Marina Abramović had left Belgrade for Amsterdam, stating that it was becoming increasingly difficult to make the kind of work that she wanted to make in the Yugoslav context. Of the Belgrade grouping, only Todosijević continued a focus on performance and body art, whilst Paripović spent the second half of the decade experimenting with video art, encouraged by the pioneering work of Dunja Blažević, as head of programming at SKC in Belgrade (1976–81) and later as the initiator of "TV Gallery" on Yugoslav Television from 1981 onwards. Other artists who took part in the show – most notably Sanja Iveković – was later to come to the attention of the Yugoslav authorities for the content of her work.[11]

Figure 3: Marijan Susovski and Marina Abramović in Abramović's studio, Belgrade, Serbia (then Yugoslavia), showing documentation of her performance *Rhythm 10*, 1974. Photographed during a visit to Yugoslavia in preparation for *Aspects '75* (49 Yugoslavian artists, shown at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 29 September – 25 October 1975).

In our days, even with the new and unpleasant realities of travel during Covid times, international travel for artists and curators, pursuing opportunities and installing shows, is taken for granted. Fifty years ago, during Demarco's first visit to Yugoslavia, such itineraries were very rare, and his journey around Yugoslavia and subsequent building and enhancing relationships made there, were nothing short of unique. Demarco's work in making links not only between Yugoslavia and the UK in terms of contemporary art, as well as his (indirect) role in helping to grow connections between Yugoslav contemporary artists, galleries and producers in Italy, were to leave a significant mark.

Demarco is also one of the few remaining links to an extremely lively trans-European set of artistic exchanges; sadly, of the generation of directors and critics who contributed to his *ASPECT '75* catalogue, only the Serbian critic Ješa Denegri remains alive.

It is best perhaps to finish with a

Figure 4: Richard Demarco visiting Macedonians at Summerhall on 7 October 2017. [Photo courtesy Jon Blackwood.]

short anecdote. When I was curating an exhibition of contemporary art from Macedonia at Summerhall in Edinburgh in October 2017 (Figure 4), our guests from Skopje were perhaps most delighted by meeting Richard Demarco at an afternoon seminar to discuss the themes of the show. Many of his memories of Skopje in December 1972 – of the newly commissioned Museum of Contemporary Art, of the old exhibiting (and still active) spaces at Daut Pasha Hamam, which he visited, mapped on carefully to the experiences and lived realities of this generation of artists whose careers developed long after his visit. The touching continuity between the impresario's memories and the experiences of successive generations of artists is, I believe, very rare to find, and speaks of a legacy of enormous significance.

Endnotes

1. 'Richard Demarco's Report on his visit to Yugoslavia', unpublished typescript, Demarco Archive. http://www.demarco-archive.ac.uk
2. 'Informbiro' is the term used to describe the period 1948–55 in Yugoslav history, when the country broke with the Soviet Union and stood apart from the Communist world, in addition to enjoying a strengthening of relations with Western Europe, and the United States. The Informbiro period came to an end with the signing of a joint declaration in Belgrade, by Tito and Khrushchev, in June 1955. Formally, however, Yugoslavia remained aloof from Eastern bloc political formations such as the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON.
3. Miško Šuvaković, 'Impossible Histories', in Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (eds.), *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant Gardes, and Post Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–91* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT Press, 2003), p. 10.
4. In the Communist period, from 1945, Yugoslavia was officially a federation of six socialist republics – Slovenia (Ljubljana), Croatia (Zagreb), Bosnia-Hercegovina (Sarajevo), Montenegro (Titograd), Serbia (Belgrade, also the federal capital) and Macedonia (Skopje), and two autonomous regions, Kosovo (Pristina) and Vojvodina (Novi Sad). Each republic and autonomous region had a local art scene based in their capital city, although at the time of Demarco's visit, it was thought that Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade were the main centres of interest. Seen in this context, his decision to also visit Skopje and Sarajevo, and express disappointment at lacking the time to visit Novi Sad, shows a real ambition to challenge the received view of art in Yugoslavia.
5. Bojana Pejić, 'Body based Art: Serbia and Montenegro' in *Body and East from the 1960s to the Present* (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 1998).
6. Richard Demarco, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
7. Demarco initially requested that artists from Ljubljana, Zagreb, Belgrade, Sarajevo, Skopje, and Novi Sad, submit work for exhibition in Edinburgh, with an unspecified number of the seventy names travelling. Such a proposal was clearly unrealistic given that only eight months were available between Demarco's trip to Yugoslavia, and the opening of the exhibition in August 1973. The final list of exhibitors was: Marina Abramović, Radomir Damnjan, Nuša & Sreco Dragan, Nesa Paripović, Zoran Popović, Rasa Todosijević and Gergely Urkom.

8. Marina Abramović, *The Artist Body* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1998) p. 56. A fragment of a 1999 performance of *Rhythm 10* can be seen online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9-HVwEbdCo
9. See Leuzzi, L (2018), "The Fourth Motovun Encounter A Platform for Artistic Experimentation", accessible here: https://amp.issuu.com/fundacjaarton1/docs/arton_book_revisiting_heritage_-_pd/84, and Benčić, Branka (2016), "Motovun Meeting 1976 : The First Video Art Workship in Croatia", CINEMANIAC 2016, Pula. Accessible here: cinemaniac-thinkfilm.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/booklet_essay.pdf
10. These were: Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, November-December 1975; Turnpike Gallery, Leigh, January–February 1976; Ulster Museum, Belfast, March–April 1976; University of Sussex, April–May 1976, the tour finishing with an exhibition at the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow.
11. Iveković, notoriously, did a performance entitled *Triangle* in 1979, when she simulated masturbation on the balcony of her Zagreb flat, as President Tito's official limousine and honour guard passed by on the road below. The performance was broken up by the authorities.