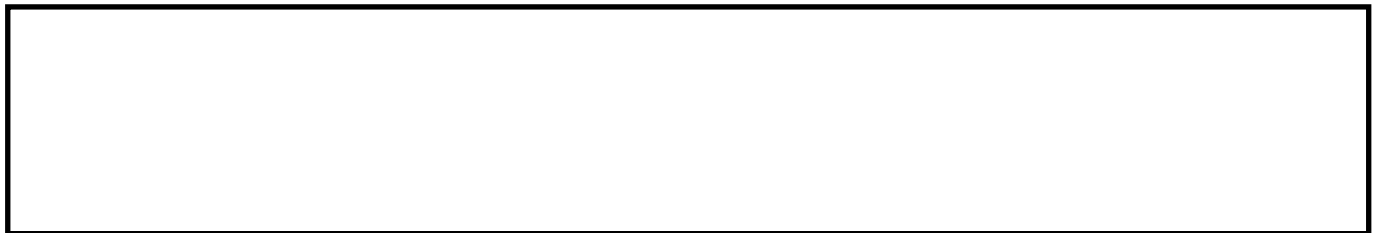


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On Women's Video Art in the context of Yugoslavia, 1969-91

Introduction

The potential of video as a technology and vehicle for communication was recognised, and its socializing role determined. The producers- the artists- in former Yugoslavia did not control the fate of these utopian desires, which were dictated rather by ideological and economic demands...video artists were essentially isolated in a ghetto from which they were unable to have a wider impact on society.¹

Written from our vantage point, the categories of 'Yugoslavia' and 'video art' are historical. Having grown up in the 1980s with video art as the most contemporary of the new art practices, and with Yugoslavia seemingly a permanent fixture on the map of Europe, it is a strange essay to have to write. But the awful dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s into squabbling fragmentary kleptocracies, and the swamping of video by the emergence of digital cultures and their attendant technologies, makes this perhaps a timely moment from which to consider the key role played by women artists and cultural workers in the emergence of video technology from the late 1960s, right through to the post-Yugoslav present.

The scope of our discussion, however, falls mainly in the late Yugoslav period (1968-91) and I would like to consider four principal case studies in the uses of video made by women in this period. After a structural consideration of the place of women artists in late Yugoslav society, and the place of video art and video technologies with this specific cultural ecosystem, we will consider the examples of Nusa and Sreco Dragan, Marina Abramović, Sanja Iveković, Dunja Blažević, and Zemira Alajbegović; in our conclusion we will consider the legacy and reflections made by contemporary artists on these pioneering careers, in the late Yugoslav period, and hint at possible future research developments in uncovering histories of video art made by women in former Yugoslav republics not covered as much in the current historiography- Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia. We should begin with a succinct overview of the development of modern and contemporary art in Yugoslavia, and the position of women as it evolved in successive generations of artists and cultural workers.

Founded during the German occupation on the 29 November 1943, the future Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was modelled to begin with on the Soviet constitution, and in the first years after the end of the Second World War, seemed set to copy the Soviet template as faithfully as countries in the Warsaw Pact. But the position of Yugoslavia in the post-war geopolitical order was determined by the 1948 *Informbiro* crisis, in which the Yugoslav leader, Josip

¹ Barbara Borčić, "Video Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism" in Miško Šuvaković and Dubravka Djurić, *Impossible Histories: Historic Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post Avant Gardes in Yugoslavia 1918-91*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., 2003, pp. 495-6

Broz Tito, broke decisively with Stalin and Soviet Russia, and determined a 'third way' course for the country he ruled absolutely; neither part of the Soviet bloc, nor the emerging Western Powers affiliated to NATO, but as a 'non-aligned' country seeking friendly relations with both sides of the Cold War divide, and using this pivotal position as a means of jockeying for a leading role amongst the countries of the developing world, emerging from the colonial era.

In cultural terms, Tito's political handbrake-turn in June 1948, brought to an end a very brief period of socialist realism in the Yugoslav context. It is also important to understand that there was never really such a thing as 'Yugoslav' art. Modern and contemporary art in the period of Yugoslavia was dominated by the three most powerful republics in the federation - Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, with art schools in the capitals of each of these republics determining the shape of certain practices; Belgrade for painting, Zagreb for sculpture, and Ljubljana for graphic art. And it was these three cities that were to play a prominent role in the development of video art in Yugoslavia from the late 1960s onwards.

'Yugoslav' art, then, was a portmanteau term for the specific progress of cultural development within each of the six republics, and two associate republics, of the federation, which had their own specific cultural histories and developmental priorities. In the context of the socialist world, and Yugoslavia's very specific position as a pivot between the two antagonists in the Cold War, the context for visual culture was markedly liberal compared with that experienced in Warsaw Pact countries. Belgrade hosted travelling exhibitions of contemporary Dutch and French art in the early 1950s, and welcomed a comprehensive show of American abstract expressionism in 1956.

In the context of the partisan struggle for the liberation of Yugoslavia from fascist occupation, women enjoyed not only equal status as full combatants on the front line, but also the promise of full equality and an end to deep-rooted, traditional patriarchy in peacetime. The research of the feminist collective CRVENA, in particular Adela Jušić and Andreja Dugandžić, into the anti-fascist women's archives in the Historical Museum of Bosnia-Herzegovina in Sarajevo, has revealed a richly layered history of the development of women's ideas and political aspirations ahead of the future peacetime development of Tito's Yugoslavia.²

Unfortunately, these aspirations remained largely unrealised in peacetime. Whilst it is true that women had much more opportunity for education and professional advancement in socialist Yugoslavia than in previous state formations, as the 1950s developed, so too did a re-formulation of patriarchy. A propaganda film of 1958, *Grad od Deset Ljeta (A City at Ten Years Old)*, discussing the development of the 'new socialist city' of Novi Travnik, presents a familiar narrative where men are engaged in construction and industrial jobs, with women returning to traditional roles in childcare and domestic labour; the film

² The archive, in the Bosnian language, can be accessed at: <http://www.afzarhiv.org/> [Accessed 24 July 2017].

even jokes about the supposed haplessness of men in the domestic context.³ Such propaganda narratives present Yugoslavia as a young, developing country aspiring to grow as quickly as possible, but is notably silent on gender equality and the roles that women and men have to play in such a modernising project.

But this short, informative, light hearted film, typical of the kind produced to reinforce the political narratives that the Yugoslav leadership wanted people to internalise, was very much part of the pre-1968 generation, of a phase of reconstruction and correction of war damage that lasted well into the following decade. The first experiments in video art were to come at the end of the 1960s, in part growing from a rich cross fertilisation between political and artistic subcultures, and the heady mix of New Left ideas which informed and sustained some aspects of the youth rebellion that swept the European continent in the summer of 1968.

This was a moment of political turbulence and subsequent sober self-examination that gripped Yugoslavia. By this stage, Tito was seventy-six; as in other countries, a younger generation had tired of hearing wartime stories and of the sacrifices made by their parents, and looked for change. Whilst, politically, this was expressed through the Croatian spring (1968-71), a loose grouping of intellectuals who wanted to look again at Croatia's status within federal Yugoslavia, and the Slovenian roads affair (1969), the idealist side of the demands for political change were articulated in the 'June events' of 1968 in Belgrade, Sarajevo and Zagreb - a student uprising against police brutality, control of intellectual discussion, and perceived failings in the system of Yugoslav self-managed socialism.⁴

Whilst it is difficult to draw a direct link between this intellectual and political atmosphere and the emergence of video art, certainly it formed an important loam from which the early engagement with the new medium developed, not to mention a renewed focus on the role of women within Yugoslav societies. An important outcome from the years of protests was the establishment of student and youth cultural centres in the major cities of the Federation, notably in Sarajevo (1969) and in Belgrade (1971), as a place for younger people to meet and develop culturally. The SKC in Belgrade was to become synonymous with the development of the 'New Art practices' in the 1970s in Yugoslavia, particularly in

³ *Grad od Deset Ljeta*, Lovćen Film, 1958, can be seen online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olHxgPMxaro> [Accessed 24 July 2017]. For a further discussion of the film in context, see Sarajevo Culture Bureau, 'On Socialist Utopia and Stojadins', 27 June 2012. <https://sarajlijacult.wordpress.com/2012/06/27/on-socialist-utopia-and-stojadins/> [Accessed 24 July 2017].

⁴ For a full account of the motivation and development of these demonstrations, see Madigan Fichter, 'Yugoslav Protest: Student Rebellions in Belgrade, Zagreb and Sarajevo, 1968', in *Slavic Review*, vol. 75, no. 1, March 2016, pp. 99-121. See also Geoffrey Swain, *Tito: A Biography* (London: IB Tauris, 2010), chap. 6, pp. 139-65.

performance art, in video and in international manifestations such as the Belgrade October salon, and the Belgrade international theatre festival- BITEF. Structurally, the development of video art in Yugoslavia proceeded slowly in its first decade. The reason for this was the prohibitive cost of camera equipment and the ready availability of video-tape. Video art, by reason of necessity, had to be made in partnership with institutions, in particular the various television stations of Yugoslavia; the relationship between video artists and national broadcasters was a close one, throughout the period. As Barbara Borčić has shown convincingly, this period came to an end - and many of the pioneers ceased making video for a period - because of a shortage of video tape and equipment, and also in frustration at being stuck on the very margins of the differing Yugoslav art worlds, working in a medium still seen as very new, and lacking comprehensive understanding or following.

Beginnings and Development of Video Art by Women in Yugoslavia

The first piece of video art made in Yugoslavia was made in Ljubljana, however. In the atmosphere of social and creative experiment described above, the creative partnership of Nuša and Sreco Dragan, which lasted from 1967-88, produced the first experiment with the new medium. Nuša Dragan (1943-2011) had graduated in sociology and psychology in the same year that this video was produced, whilst Sreco (b. 1944) emerged from Ljubljana's faculty of fine arts. Sreco Dragan also moved in the same social and creative circles as the radical avant-garde grouping OHO, who were amongst the first to experiment with performance, process and post-object art in the Yugoslav context.⁵

In the early years of video production in Yugoslavia, the mood was very much one of tentative experimentation, gradually growing in confidence. The Dragans first video work, *Belo mleko Belih prsi* [White Milk of White Breasts], 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. These techniques assumed an increasing maturity and subtlety in later works produced by the partnership, such as 1974's *Šakti is Coming* that speaks directly to emerging postmodern concerns of the image-within-the-image, and of endless repetition. The Dragan's involvement in the earliest developments of video art quickly allowed them to grow an international profile; Nuša worked at the British Film Institute in London for a period in 1972 where her knowledge of video and television techniques grew exponentially; together with Sreco, she was included

⁵ OHO (a neologism combining the Slovene words for eye and ear) existed between 1966-71. For a full history and development, see Miško Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group* (Ljubljana: Zavod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E., 2010), and also <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/oho-homepage>

in Richard Demarco's canonical exhibitions of Yugoslav art in Edinburgh, in 1973 and again in 1975.⁶

Alongside technical experimentation, the other key early function of video art was documentation. These documentary works became artworks in their own right as the event it recorded faded in the memories of those who had seen it live. In the early 1970s, performance and video were linked intimately together in Yugoslavia. A good example of the documentary link is Abramović's *Art Must be Beautiful, the Artist Must be Beautiful* first performed in 1975, at the Charlottenburg Art Festival in Copenhagen.⁷

Marina's performance is now canonical, but at the time this video allowed viewers an insight that would have been difficult for the live audience. The piece lasts for fifty minutes, in which the artist aggressively combs her hair using two large combs, clearly in pain at times from the scraping of the comb's bristles on her scalp, whilst repeating the mantra 'art must be beautiful the artist must be beautiful'.

On one level, this is an unalloyed feminist critique of patriarchy and its potential to reduce the role of the art audience and the female artist to one of passivity and consent to being observed. The performance, therefore, in its strange mixture of vigorous, self-harming physical activity and lapsing into trance-like periods of active silence, rejects fundamentally not only the gendering of art practice but also of its reception.

Yet on another level the video document of the performance gives it a life that it otherwise would not have. Moreover, the focus of the camera on the artist's head and hands allow the viewer of the video to have a psychological insight into the development of the performance and the physical struggle experienced by the performer, a close up insight that simply would not have been possible for the spectators of the live event. It is this psychological drama, and the subsequent critical interpretation and artistic re-appropriation that have given this particular work a lively timeline in its reception, and helped to grow the artist's profile substantially after her departure from Yugoslavia for the Netherlands in 1975.

However, it is perhaps the work of Sanja Iveković in video that addresses most directly the position of women in 'actually existing socialism' in 1970s Yugoslavia. This artist graduated from Zagreb's academy of Fine Arts in 1971, and quickly found herself associated with the 'New Art practices' in the Yugoslav

⁶ These exhibitions were *Eight Yugoslav Artists* in Edinburgh in August 1973, and ASPECT '75, which began in Edinburgh and toured in Northern Ireland and England during 1975/76. For more information see my essay 'Richard Demarco and the Yugoslav art world' in Euan McArthur & Arthur Watson (eds.), *Ten Dialogues: Richard Demarco and the European Avant-Garde* (Edinburgh RSA, , 2010).

⁷ A thirteen-minute excerpt from this film can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUGBAT4nvdM> (Accessed 22 May 2017)

context. In her focus on the structural position of women in Yugoslavia, the patriarchal organisation of the internal socialist 'marketplace', and her wry observations on the outworking of male political power in this decade, Iveković's work in retrospect offers the most sustained analysis of these issues, central to her practice, rather than just a part of them. Iveković stressed in an interview in 2012 that:

...I have repeatedly asked myself, what is my position in the social system, my relationship with the system of power, domination and exploitation, and how I can respond and act meaningfully as an artist...I want to be deliberately active rather than a passive 'object' of the ideological system.⁸

Moreover, as Laura Leuzzi's developing research has shown, Iveković benefitted strongly from participation in the Motovun "encounters" between Yugoslav and Italian video artists in the 1970s and through these connections 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, with the involvement of the 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.

Parallel analyses of the male domination of the role of *defining* beauty and then *acting on it socially* can be found in *Instructions no. 1* of 1976, in which the artist draws a series of mock-plastic surgery lines and marks on her face before obscuring them, or the performative action *Trokut* [Triangle] of 1979, where simulated masturbation on a balcony during a parade by Tito in Zagreb caused a hurried reaction from state forces, show a clear and focused development of a practice that has institutional critique of political power, and the exercising of that power on a gendered basis, at its core.

If the artists that we have focused on so far are widely acknowledged as pioneering profiles in Yugoslav women's video art, then we must also acknowledge the key role played by women in the dissemination and production of video. Perhaps the most important figure to acknowledge here is the curator, writer and producer Dunja Blažević.

Trained as an art historian, Blažević was a key figure at the Student Cultural Centre Art Gallery in Belgrade, where she served as director from 1971-76 and then head of programming, until 1980. In 1978 Blažević was one of the joint

⁸ Roxana Marcoci, 'Sanja Iveković', in *Flash Art*, March April 2012, accessible online at: <http://www.flashartonline.com/sanja-ivekovic/>

organisers of an international conference on feminism, entitled *Comradess Woman- Women's Questions: A New Approach* at SKC, which featured a rare meeting between western feminists and those active in the context of socialism⁹.

In this early period, she also curated exhibitions that openly queried the status of traditional art forms in the Yugoslav context and included radical calls for a change in the production and function of art in socialist society. In her text on an exhibition at SKC called *Okotobar 75- An Example of Counter-Exhibition: Statements on Artistic Autonomy, Self-Management and Self-Critique*, she stated:

Art should be changed! As long as we leave art alone and keep on transferring works of art from studios to depots and basements by means of social regulations and mechanisms, storing them, like stillborn children, for the benefit of our cultural offspring, or while we keep on creating, through the private market, ... art will remain a social appendage, something serving no useful purpose, but something it is not decent or cultured to be without.¹⁰

If this was true of painting and sculpture, then it was even more true of video art. With only a small number of practitioners, difficulty in acquiring equipment and material, and a tiny audience, what video art needed more than anything was an informed public. The logical step was to try to move examples of video art onto mainstream television, and this Blažević was able to do after a change of role in the 1980s.

As Barbara Borčić has shown,¹¹ video art began to move away from the realm of aesthetics and art criticism in Yugoslavia at the end of the 1970s, and towards the realm of the mass audiences that television could bring. Blažević's move from the world of curatorship to television production began in 1981 when she began to work for TV Belgrade; she introduced video art on her programme *Other Art* in that year, and from 1984 to 1991, her series *TV Gallery* was to produce over sixty programmes on contemporary art practices, including programmes on video. We can locate Blažević's practice as a television producer as perhaps, in the 1980s, surpassing her undoubted experience and ability as a curator and arts administrator, in influencing the taste for contemporary art amongst a popular audience, reaching those who were not immediately involved at a social or practical level in the differing art scenes around Yugoslavia.

Whilst Blažević's pioneering television began to shape new audiences for video art, in the last decade of Yugoslavia - the 1980s - the practice and aesthetics of video began to diverge. The 1974 re-draft of the Yugoslav constitution- the final version - granted full cultural autonomy to each of the six republics, allowing

⁹ For further details on this conference see Hedvig Turai, "Bojana Pejić on Gender and Feminism in Eastern European Art", in Angela Dimitrikaki, Katrin Kivimaa, Katja Kobolt *et al*, *Working with Feminism: Curating and Exhibitions in Eastern Europe*, Tallinn University Press, Tallinn, 2012, pp. 198-201

¹⁰ For further information on this exhibition visit:

<http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/tag/dunja-blazevic/>

¹¹ See Borčić, *op.cit*, p. 506

local cultures to be funded at the level of the local party cultural apparatus. Whilst in less developed republics, such as Bosnia and Macedonia, this finally allowed for the exponential growth of local scenes, for republics such as Slovenia, this was the germ of an independent set of cultural priorities that in effect were foundation blocks for independence and statehood some sixteen years later.

In the 1980s, it was Ljubljana that was to emerge as perhaps as the venue for the most radical experimental and counter-cultural currents in late Yugoslavia. Institutions such as ŠKUC and the appearance of *Neue Slowenische Kunst* [New Slovenian Art] from the city's underground have been extensively researched and written about in the last twenty years, particularly in the international profile now enjoyed the artistic collaboration, IRWIN. However perhaps less work has been done on the nature of video production in Ljubljana during this period.

The work of Zemira Alajbegović is instructive in this regard. Part of the video artists group FV, which was associated with the Disko FV nightclub in the city, Alajbegović's 1983 work *Tereza* reveals at once the confidence of an artist developing closely in collaboration with a layered and multi-perspectival video art scene, but also confident enough to make a work openly sceptical of the Slovenian political gerontocracy, and the increasing emptiness of their rituals and messages.¹²

Just four minutes, *Tereza* cuts between excerpts from performances of Slovenian pop songs, interspersed with footage of Communist politicians receiving applause and parading in public on ceremonial days. On one level, it speaks of a genuine generational conflict; between an older generation socialised under Tito's socialism and content to repeat its structures and rituals, and a younger generation for whom the slogans and practices derived from the partisan struggle had little meaning beyond empty repetition and perfunctory observation. *Tereza*, therefore, is a piece which shows the emergence of a contemporary televisual culture which bore little relation to the founding narratives of the Yugoslav state, and the coming emergence, a few years later, of a global youth culture driven by American brands such as MTV.

Alajbegović's practice, of course, did not develop in isolation. Together with Neven Korda, she produced video under the duo's pseudonym ZANK, and the duo were also involved later in the multi-media events of the Borghesia artists' group. She was able to benefit from improvements in condition for the production of video work, through the Galerija ŠKUC video production programme, and the encouragement and interest of producers and managers at Ljubljana television; and in particular, of international exhibitions and discussions of video art in the city, in 1982 and again in 1985.

¹² The work can be seen at: <http://www.e-arhiv.org/diva/index.php?opt=work&id=384> [Accessed August 2017]

Cultural decisions, taken at republic level since 1974, ironically had an unintended consequence; they encouraged local cultural scenes to think critically and independently, and without doubt played a small part in the eventual coming apart at the seams of the Yugoslav federation in the period 1989-91.

The growing acceptance of video art in the 1980s and the emergence of a television-savvy generation saw video art begin to appear consistently beyond the Belgrade-Zagreb-Ljubljana axis in Yugoslavia. The first dedicated showing of video art in Bosnia-Herzegovina was at the Olympic gallery in Sarajevo in March 1985, curated by Nermina Žildžo; this exhibition featured a range of the most prominent video practitioners from Yugoslavia alongside colleagues from the UK, USA and West Germany. Video art also featured in the canonical *Jugoslovenska Dokumenta* exhibitions in Sarajevo's Skenderija in 1987 and 1989, the biggest showings of contemporary art from Yugoslavia mounted in the federation during its history.

In Macedonia, social and creative friendships between TV producers and visual artists, according to the pattern established elsewhere in the federation, began to produce concrete results, with Dragan Abjanić, Katica Trajkovska and Iskra Dimitrova, producing their first works at the very end of Yugoslav times. The mature outworking of these early experiments did not happen until after the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation in 1991, and Macedonian independence.

Conclusion

The Bosnian artist Maja Bajević's video piece *Art Must Be National* of 2012 is a painful re-working of Marina Abramović's *Art Must Be Beautiful* discussed above. In the performance, Maja re-works the original piece, copying the physical movements of Marina in the original and merely replacing the word 'beautiful' with 'national'. The piece is painful as, in a very pungent way, it illustrates the fate of the Yugoslav idea and the consequences of its dissolution. Any chimerical notions of 'beauty' have been overwritten by a political monomania on national and ethnic identities, and the often-absurd demarcations of common language, and ideological re-writing of history, that has taken place since the end of the Yugoslav Wars of succession that lasted from 1991-99. Whilst performance has been re-enacted elsewhere in terms of re-engaging with half forgotten material, or re-interpreting it in a different cultural context, Maja Bajević's video piece is an acute summary of futility, loss and regret.

In this essay, we have discussed some of the contours of the development of contemporary visual culture in the former Yugoslavia, and the key roles that women played in its development. After an early phase of learning and technical experimentation, video art, confined to the margins of artistic avant-gardes in the 1970s, developed by means of documentation, and by focused engagement with societal and gender issues of that time. In the work of Sanja Iveković, video is used as a very sharp tool of institutional and ideological critique.

Video from the beginning in Yugoslavia had relations with unlikely bedfellows; the milieu of experimental performance, music and theatre on the one hand and the mass audience of television on the other. Yet it was this very relationship, thanks to the foresight and determination of Dunja Blažević in Belgrade and others at republican level, that brought video to a television audience in the 1980s and grew and shaped a taste for a type of art that previously had struggled to gain a profile beyond the milieu of student cultural centres and a small minority of active artists.

Although we began the essay by noting the historical nature of the medium of video, the legacy of this timeline that we have traced in this essay is still felt strongly in the work of young women artists from ex-Yugoslav countries in our time; for example Adela Jušić's work on the Bosnian war and its consequences politically and personally (*The Sniper*, 2007), Milijana Babić's video essay on the humiliations and disappointments of young women seeking employment in chronically precarious post-socialist economies (*Looking for Work*, 2013), or Jasmina Cibic's video *For Our Economy and Culture* that represented Slovenia in the 2013 Venice Biennale.

Moreover, the artists mentioned earlier in the essay are mostly still working in video as their primary activity. Nuša Dragan, continued as an independent practitioner, until her death in Ljubljana in 2011, leaving behind over forty years of video work; Dunja Blažević inspired a whole new generation of young women artists in her works as director of the Soros Center / SCCA in Sarajevo from 1996-2016; Sanja Iveković has enjoyed an unprecedented profile in the last decade with a major retrospective at MOMA and acquisitions by national galleries and institutions that had long been ignorant of her work.

It is in the persistence of these practices, in the face of the challenges mentioned, and a still-present patriarchal scepticism as to the ability of women to handle video equipment and its attendant technologies, that forms the bedrock of much contemporary video practice in the territories of ex-Yugoslavia. The richness of the work of the younger generation of video artists who have followed, the continued commitment to documentation, experimentation, institutional and social critique, and cross-disciplinary collaboration, that is the richest legacy of the early years of womens' video art discussed in this essay, and one that will endure.