

Concerning Books

The Relay of Radicalism

What Is Partisan Art to New Art Practice in Yugoslavia?

Branislav Jakovljević



Partisan Ruptures: Self-Management, Market Reform and the Spectre of Socialist Yugoslavia. By Gal Kirn. Trans. Borut Praper. Pluto Press, 2019; 305 pp.; illustrations. \$37.00 paper, e-book available.



The Partisan Counter-Archive: Retracing the Ruptures of Art and Memory in the Yugoslav People's Liberation Struggle. By Gal Kirn. De Gruyter, 2020; 309 pp.; illustrations. \$115.99 cloth, \$25.99 paper, e-book available.



A Slow Burning Fire: The Rise of the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia. By Marko Ilić. The MIT Press, 2021; 384 pp.; illustrations. \$39.95 cloth, e-book available.

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My elementary school days in the 1970s coincided with the heyday of modernist monuments to the antifascist struggle in World War II Yugoslavia. I remember my school visiting the site of the famous Battle of Sutjeska. The valley between steep Bosnian mountains, designated as the Tjentište memorial center in 1971, is dominated by an impressive structure designed by the sculptor Miodrag Živković, which, in a profound ambiguity, resembles both outstretched wings and threatening cliffs of a deep chasm. More than by the imposing monument, I was impressed by a makeshift shrine that emerged near the site where the famous partisan war general Sava Kovačević died in battle. I vividly remember a tree trunk in which numerous visitors drove coins. Copper and tin dinars covered the surface of the dead log, some of them bent and the others driven in sideways, halfway into the cracks of the wood. This minor cult was a spontaneous outgrowth of a carefully designed civic religion that honored the events and personalities from the communist partisan struggle in Yugoslavia against Nazi and fascist invaders and their domestic collaborators. Like traditional religions, it permeated all facets of life in Yugoslavia: the calendar was sprinkled with holidays that commemorated events from the war and public spaces were dotted with memorial structures, from massive monuments such as the one at Tjentište, to small structures in villages, to memorial plaques on city buildings. Yugoslav literature produced an elaborate and complex variety of works that approached that historical period from many different perspectives, and the genre of the partisan war film was the most developed and productive in the country's film industry. As elaborate as it was, the state religion based on the partisan struggle of WWII collapsed during the nationalist wars of the 1990s, which were seen by many as a continuation of the civil war that broke out after the Nazi invasion, and a direct reversal of the socialist revolution, which was the dynamo of the antifascist struggle throughout the region. The legacy that many generations were taught to be proud of was now savagely despoiled. All too often, both the glorification and the discreditation was done by opportunists who changed their ideological skin overnight.

The tide started turning again in the early 2000s, when a new generation of the post-Yugoslav Left, mostly unburdened by the vulgar ideologization of the Yugoslav partisan struggle, started reassessing its rich legacy. The landmark book on the new approach to art that emerged within or in relation to the armed struggle of WWII communist partisans was certainly *Kako misliti partizansko umetnost?* (How to Think Partisan Art?; 2009) by Slovene poet and literary critic Miklavž Komelj. This return to the cultural wartime activities of partisans had a significant ripple effect in the region of the former Yugoslavia and beyond. The most significant response in the art world was the exhibit *Političke prakse (post)jugoslovenske umetnosti/Political Practices of (post-)Yugoslav Art*, initiated by four independent art groups and collectives from Belgrade, Novi Sad, Zagreb, and Sarajevo and curated by art historian Jelena Vesić. The show opened in Belgrade on 29 November 2009 at the Museum of Yugoslav History (formerly named Museum of 25th of May, now the Museum of Yugoslavia). There were also publications in English, such as the volume edited by Miranda Jakiša and Nikica Gilić, *Partisans in Yugoslavia: Literature, Film, and Visual Culture* (2015), and a number of books published in the region of the former Yugoslavia, such as the volume by Slovene theatre and performance studies scholar Aldo Milohnić, *Gledališče upora* (The Theater of Resistance, 2021). Probably the most ambitious English-language works of this reevaluation of the artistic legacy of Yugoslav partisans are the books by another Slovenian author, Gal Kirn. The first, *Partisan Ruptures: Self-Management, Market Reform and the Spectre of Socialist Yugoslavia* (2019), is a translation of his 2014 book *Partizanski prelomi in protivoslovja tržnega socializma v Jugoslaviji*, followed in 2020 by *The Partisan Counter-Archive: Retracing the Ruptures of Art and Memory in the Yugoslav People's Liberation Struggle*, made up of previously published (and revised) articles as well as new material.

Scholarship on partisan literature, art, and theatre had been prolific in the former Yugoslavia: there were exhibits and edited volumes on the activities of theatre and dance troupes that had been part of partisan army units; my ninth-grade literature curriculum included a book on the lyric poetry of the National Liberation Struggle. Rather than building directly on this scholarship, the books and exhibits under review here engage in a revisioning of the right-wing conservative

revisionism of the World War II communist partisan movement, which flooded all parts of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Both Komelj and Kirn are explicit about their intention to question the easy dismissal of an important part in the history of a once-united country, and of the emancipatory potential of the militant Left in Yugoslavia's successor states. Also, neither one of them claims to be making a major discovery of previously unknown work. While they explore terrain that was well-trodden over the decades between the end of World War II and the wars of the 1990s, they bring into this consideration recent theoretical works from the Left: Alain Badiou's idea of the "event" (1988) is decisive for Komelj's understanding of partisan movement, just as Louis Althusser's theorization of the "rupture" (1999) is for Kirn. That is where the similarities between the two authors end. Where Komelj carefully limits his inquiry to Slovenia, Kirn aspires to address the whole of Yugoslavia; while the first focuses on partisan poetry, the second discusses various art forms, including publications, film, dance, and sculpture. Finally, whereas Komelj adheres to clear historical boundaries of WWII in Yugoslavia (1941–1945), Kirn attempts to trace the permutations and ripples of partisan art from 1941 to the 2010s. The intention of Kirn's project is to build on the initial impulse of partisan art, which received its most powerful articulation during WWII. However, what it delivers instead is not the expansion but the dilution of the paradigm of partisan art. I'm afraid that, of the two scholarly undertakings that were initially formulated within a Slovene cultural framework, the less accomplished one reached English-speaking readers.

Kirn's main "philosophical-political thesis"—as he calls it—is that the partisan struggle represents a rupture in Althusser's sense of being contingent and unprecedented: "the politics of rupture is impossible to foresee or predict on the basis of existing social circumstances"; and further, "the politics of rupture primarily addresses self-foundation—namely, the beginning of something new, supported by nothing but the rupture itself" (2019:22, 23). This much can be said of the communist partisan struggle in Yugoslavia during World War II: having been outlawed in 1929 by the Monarchist dictatorship, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia operated clandestinely for more than a decade prior to the Nazi and fascist invasion of the country. Working against overwhelming forces and among a mostly uneducated peasant population that tended to be more conservative than the urban proletariat, the Communist Party forged the largest guerrilla force in occupied Europe, which—at different points of the war—managed to liberate and hold large swaths of territory. Both Komelj and Kirn are correct to point out that the antifascist struggle in Yugoslavia cannot be attributed solely to the Communist Party: it was a broad movement that appealed to ethnically and culturally diverse populations of Yugoslavia. Art was an important force in forging that movement. Komelj's argument that partisan art cannot be seen only as a propaganda arm of the communist guerrillas is persuasive in great part because of his sharp focus on carefully selected works of poetry produced in the heat of partisan combat.

Kirn, on the other hand, argues that the partisan struggle was just the first in a series of three "ruptures." He suggests that the other two ruptures came after the war, and locates them in the self-management of workers, devised as an alternative to Soviet-style state capitalism; and the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM). Both were pillars of socialist Yugoslavia's economy and international politics. However, neither one of these developments was as radical and as ideologically unambiguous as the first one, which leads Kirn to contradict his own hypotheses. For example, almost as soon as he makes the claim that NAM "can be seen as a continuation of 'partisan politics' by other means," he starts backpedaling by acknowledging that it "consisted of politically diverse, and even ideologically opposing states, some monarchies, other republics, some leaning toward socialism, others embracing capitalism" (90). In the end, he admits that, seen "from the perspective of anti-colonial struggle," NAM's main principle of peaceful coexistence "does not seem very partisan" (91). The rupture turns out to be a nonrupture after all. The same goes for self-management. What, according to Kirn, qualifies this economic order as the third "partisan rupture" are its origins in Yugoslavia's 1948 split from Stalin's USSR, which was properly "unimaginable" and "impossible" at the time when it happened (96). Right at the outset of his discussion of self-management, Kirn acknowledges some of its paradoxes, such as the fact that it was introduced from above, by the

Party leadership. Still, he claims that it “offered a renewal of, and experimentation with, socialist and communist thought” (101). Prone to schematization, Kirn captures numerous inconsistencies of Yugoslav self-management in two “separations,” a concept he takes over from Karl Marx, who used it to describe the relationship between capitalists and workers (141). The first separation he finds in what he calls the “class struggle from below,” in other words, strikes and work stoppages in factories, which increased during the period of “market socialism” of the 1960s (although not limited to that decade). The second separation Kirn describes as “competition between companies” or “class struggle from above,” which encompasses a wide range of problems, from erroneous investment strategies to rivalry between federal republics, often driven by nationalist sentiments barely concealed behind the façade of socialist self-management as the ruling ideology. In the end, as with the Non-Alignment Movement, Kirn concedes that “self-management cannot be seen as a definite rupture and an invention of the independent Yugoslav road to socialism” (169). So then why all the fuss with proclaiming these nonruptures as ruptures? Also, Kirn seems unwilling to address the relationship between the “rupture” and the “separation”: does the rupture generate the separation? Or does the separation undermine the rupture? We are left to wonder—or not—since either way, the Yugoslav experiment ended with the disastrous wars of the 1990s.

Kirn’s conceptual difficulties come from his lack of methodological clarity. While he claims that his project—in both books—is “political-philosophical,” and while he is careful to distance himself rhetorically from “historicism” (22, 112), he inevitably ends up working with historical material. This is especially true of his second book, which is based on a series of case studies that range from World War II to the second decade of the new millennium. Although in *The Partisan Counter-Archive* he pursues a different theoretical concept, the unresolved issues with his deployment of the theory of the “rupture” in 2019 come back to haunt his 2020 book. Kirn’s major intervention in Althusser’s theorization of “rupture” is his attempt to transform it from a singular “event” to a cascading process akin to a permanent revolution. In *Partisan Ruptures* he does that by hypothesizing a serial rupture (an initial revolutionary event followed by other events of similar significance), and in *The Partisan Counter-Archive* he theorizes the idea of paradoxical memorialization of the revolutionary rupture, understood as an event that defies any kind of social conservation (and conservatism). Kirn acknowledges the importance of Gaston Bachelard’s epistemic rupture to Althusser’s project (2019:25). Without much explanation, he proposes that—transposed to a concrete political sphere—Althusser’s theoretical postulation of the “complex nature of rupture” allows the rupture to be “not irreversible,” so that it “does not simply end after the (revolutionary) event, but rather continues indefinitely” (26). In making this claim, he contradicts his earlier statement that rupture is unprecedented, self-initiated, and unrepeatable. Still, he could be on to something here. In his article “From Bachelard to Althusser: The Concept of ‘Epistemological Break,’” Etienne Balibar explains that, for Althusser, the “rupture” is not a simple discontinuity, a “break” in an otherwise unobstructed process (historical, political, scientific, etc.). He observes that in his “outline of a concept of historical time” in *Reading Capital*, Althusser introduces the figure of “essential section [coupure] or of break [coupure]” (1978:219). Balibar’s key point is that Althusser’s “critique of the current empiricist conception of time, of which the opposition synchronic/diachronic is a simple variant” comes from his different conceptualization of time. In his reading of Althusser, Balibar opens the possibility of approaching the “essential section” not as a rupture in the sense of the interruption and derailment in the temporal flow, but in the sense of the tear *within* the current of historical time. The rupture can be seen not only as a simple discontinuity of a unified temporal flow, but as a break [coupure] that drives asunder—sections off—different social temporalities. If there is the time of the bourgeoisie and the time of the proletariat, the revolutionary break does not impose one temporal order over the other, but rearranges them.

This is where Kirn, in his second book, loses his grasp on Althusser: “the emerging political form should never become completely consolidated into an institutional form that would cover up the revolutionary rupture with the state and its ideology” (2020:26). Perhaps it should not, but it does. Had he heeded Althusser’s lesson, Kirn could have offered a more coherent and persuasive argument about self-management and artistic production. The notion of the “essential section” has

the capacity to explain the astonishing ability of the bourgeoisie to reconstitute itself under conditions that seem hostile to it. A consistently Althusserian argument would have to take into account the Marxist theory of survivals, according to which,

the new society produced by the Revolution may itself *ensure the survival, that is, the reactivation, of older elements* through both the forms of its new superstructures and specific (national and international) “circumstances.” (Althusser [1965] 1969:116)

Kirn (and, for that matter, Komelj) seems to forget that in the socialist Yugoslavia’s waning days, the conservative and nationalist forces and their revisionist ideologies did not appear out of nowhere, and that they were not ready-made imports from the neoliberal West. Instead, they were the products of the homemade elites: with very few exceptions, the nationalist leaders and ideologues who came into prominence in the early 1990s and who led Yugoslavia down the bloody path of self-destruction came from the ranks of the League of Communists. Ignoring and even actively denying the effects of the “essential section” leads Kirn to numerous contradictions, which he tries to overcome with his schematizations of history. I’ll offer two quick examples.

First, in *Partisan Ruptures*, Kirn discusses one of the “prevailing approaches to analysing socialism” (2019:110), which came from Milovan Đilas, a partisan leader during World War II and a high-ranking official after the war. Already in the early 1950s, Đilas articulated a critique of the new elites who emerged in the aftermath of both the October and the Yugoslav revolutions. Referring to Đilas’s “book” without naming it—I assume he is thinking of *The New Class*¹—Kirn proceeds to disqualify this critique of Yugoslav postrevolutionary society. This dismissal leads him, later, to assert that the critique of the “red bourgeoisie” by student protesters in 1968 came entirely in response to the new class stratification caused by the economic reforms and the turn toward market socialism that happened only three years earlier. In fact, the reconstitution of the bourgeoisie under conditions of socialism started the moment the fascist forces were defeated, if not earlier (consider the Marxist theory of survival).

Second, in *The Partisan Counter-Archive*, Kirn claims to address the National Liberation Struggle throughout Yugoslavia. In fact, most of his examples come from Slovenia. Dynamics of the partisan struggle varied widely in different parts of the country, and taking one segment to stand for all leads to serious misconceptions. The only part of the book in which he discusses cases from outside of Slovenia almost exclusively is chapter three, in which he brings together “Black wave” films from Serbia from the late 1960s and monuments to World War II battles erected in the 1970s in Bosnia, including the one with which I begin this review. This is an odd pairing, to put it mildly. Whereas the films he discusses, Želimir Žilnik’s documentary *Uprising in Jazak* (1978) and Mića Popović’s *The Tough Ones* (1968), received meager funding and even poorer distribution, the grandiose monuments that commemorated partisan battles of World War II enjoyed opulent funding and unrestricted exposure (school field trips, workers’ delegations, etc.). Discussing these two widely different forms of cultural production without any regard to socialist realism—which in some forms survived in Yugoslavia until the late 1980s, and socialist aestheticism, which came as its replacement in academic painting and sculpture—can only lead to this kind of improbable pairing.

Kirn struggles to present the “Partisan counter-archive” as a form of subversion of the very idea of the archive, and even seems to present it as an entity with its own will: “The Partisan counter-archive is interested in the dimension of the Partisan rupture’s universality and how selected artworks carried the effects of the Partisan rupture far beyond the immediacy of WWII” (2020:60). And later in the book: “The Partisan counter-archive assembles varied poetic and visual

1. The historiographic problem here is that Đilas first presented his critique in a series of 18 articles published in the communist daily *Borba* in December of 1953 and January of 1954. Some of the views from these articles he incorporated into his book *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System*, which was first published abroad, in English translation, in 1957.

representations that flout the conventions of tradition” (93). Who is “interested” here? Who does the work of selecting and “assembling”? The partisan counter-archive does not seem to be much more than the author’s idiosyncratic cabinet of curiosities.

While not one of the highest achievements of the post-Yugoslav intellectual Left, Kirn’s books epitomize the difficulties with which it has to reckon. One needs to come to terms not only with revisionism that comes from the Right, but also with the heavy mythologization of the revolutionary struggle that preceded it. It seems that Kirn’s way of addressing these layers of historical baggage is to cut through them by adopting an uncompromising ideological position. As he states in the first pages of *Partisan Ruptures*: “affirming the Yugoslavian revolution means repeating the partisan and communist gesture, i.e., continuing with the communist politics that strived for a new encounter of emancipatory thought and political practice in new circumstances” (13). This is an unimpeachable position, and as such it is open to the “beautiful soul” criticism (31) that Kirn levels against other, less orthodox, ideas on the Left.² As is evident in the book, this stance is hard to maintain in practice, even if that practice is a purely scholarly endeavor. Reaching back to the partisan liberation struggle is a way of penetrating through those layers of mythologization, ideologization, and revisionism to reach a pure kernel of an emancipatory politics. By adopting the theoretical doctrines such as “partisan rupture” and “partisan counter-archive,” Kirn skirts the theoretical challenge that the post-Yugoslav academic Left has to come to terms with in order to move forward. Namely, it is the imperative of accounting for and resolving two major problems of Yugoslav and all other 20th-century revolutions: revolutionary violence and the cult of personality. When it comes to the former, Kirn at best takes the “beautiful soul” approach; or, at worst, the patronizing approach.³ When it comes to the latter, throughout the books he takes President Tito as the key source on partisan warfare, self-management, and the politics of nonalignment, leaving unchallenged his status as a philosopher-king of undisputed authority on these and many other subjects. At some points, this veneration of Tito is baffling, as in the section subtitled “Tito’s No to Schmitt,” in which Kirn offers a critique of the theory of the partisan by the former Nazi legal scholar Carl Schmitt (2019:32). It is not clear why Schmitt is a relevant reference in this context. If the general idea is to “historicize,” then it would be more productive to explore the relationship between the Soviet doctrine of partisan warfare and the wartime practice of Yugoslav communist guerillas.⁴ However, that would make the latter much less of an autonomous historical occurrence than Kirn is ready to allow. This is part of his general tendency to adjust his historical evidence to fit his theoretical goals. In the same way he minimizes Yugoslav Communist Party ties with Moscow, he maximizes

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2. Kirn explains that, for him, the “politics of rupture” is not tied with an “unequivocally anti-state” attitude, and adds: “Not only is this trait typical of the official libertarian ideology and neoliberalism, but in a ‘leftist’ politics the position of the ‘beautiful soul’ of utopianism and anti-institutionalism is also quite frequent” (2019:31). In *The Phenomenology of Mind*, G.W.F. Hegel speaks of the “beautiful soul” as a form of conscience, exemplified in certain Romantic thinkers, which “has no concrete reality; it subsists in the contradiction between its pure self and the turn into something actual; it exists in the immediacy of this rooted and fixed opposition, an immediacy which alone is the middle term reconciling an opposition which has been intensified to its pure abstraction, and is pure being or empty nothingness” ([1807] 1931:676).
 3. Speaking of mass executions by partisan forces of collaborationists at the end of the war, he declares: “Let me clearly state that these post-war killings were war crimes and also post-war crimes for which nobody was held accountable, and for which there is absolutely no political or moral justification,” etc. (2020:216); and: “the new political [communist] authorities should have opted for a politically smarter solution and more ethical action even though it would have been much harder to implement” (2019:69). Here, he doesn’t even take into account the post-WWII expropriation of expropriators, i.e., the nationalization of private property, as a form of violence. This process was the primitive accumulation of capital by the socialist state, and the wealth that was created during that process was the prime loot that the princes of privatization were after in the 1990s and up until the very moment of this writing. Nationalism was, and still is, a way of legitimating this plunder.
 4. Croatian philosopher Boris Buden starts his very affirmative review of the Slovene edition of Komelj’s first book with a quote from Fredric Jameson: “Always historicize!” (2016:161).

the role of women in the partisan movement: while indeed there were many, it is notable that very few made it even to the middle ranks of military hierarchy, and none to the highest circles of power. In a similar vein, writing about monuments in the “counter-archive” book, he argues that “the need to commemorate and produce the monuments first came from below, from ordinary people wanting to mourn the victims or celebrate the victory over fascism” (2020:191). As *beautiful* as it sounds, Kirn provides no historical evidence to support this claim.⁵

Amazingly, despite all of these conceptual missteps and historiographic blunders the basic premise of these books persists: going back to the antifascist and revolutionary struggle of Yugoslav partisans is absolutely essential for the understanding not only of emancipatory politics but also of the progressive arts in the region of the former Yugoslavia. There are gems in Kirn’s books. For example, the story of the dancer Marta Paulin-Brina, who joined the partisans and, clad in heavy boots and soldier pants, performed modernist dances for her comrades, is simply astonishing.⁶

A much more extensive work on partisan art is Komelj’s book on poetry. He makes a powerful case that partisan lyric poetry did not serve a mere propaganda purpose, but that, at its best, it developed its unique expressive capacities inseparable from the armed struggle in which the poets were engaged. Perhaps most surprising to me was the relevance that partisan art has had for alternative and experimental art practices that emerged in post-World War II Yugoslavia. To be clear, nowhere in his two books does Kirn explore, or even mention, a possible relationship between partisan art and conceptual and performance art that emerged in Yugoslavia in the 1960s, and in some of his statements, Komelj is openly critical toward conceptual tendencies in contemporary art (2013:16). And likewise, nowhere in his book *A Slow Burning Fire: The Rise of the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia* does Marko Ilić indicate that partisan art could have been an important forerunner of conceptual and performance art in this country. All things considered, it turns out that Komelj’s and Kirn’s maneuver of moving beyond deposits of mythologization and revisionism related to partisan art shows that—with various degrees of success and perhaps despite their stated intentions—this unique form of political art forged in battle can be seen as a precursor of radical art practices of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the context of Yugoslav art, the phrase “New Art Practice” (Nova umetnička praksa) comes from the first survey exhibit of conceptual and performance art that curator Marijan Susovski organized in the Contemporary Art Gallery in Zagreb in 1978, and was subsequently used to name new conceptual and performance practices of the 1960s and 1970s. Taking a cue from this landmark exhibit, Ilić offers a detailed chronicle of radical, alternative art in Yugoslavia from the mid-1960s until the late 1980s. His approach to the subject is straightforward and logical: temporally, he organizes his material in chronological order; and spatially, he focuses on urban centers in which these activities took place. Sensitive to the social nature of New Art Practice, he makes sure to place it in a proper political, social, and economic context, especially with regard to socialist self-management. Instead of an account that focuses on individual artists and key statements, Ilić produces a chronicle that places emphasis on alternative art institutions and collectives. This veritable relay of New Art Practice through Yugoslavia starts with Zagreb’s Student Center gallery spanning from 1966 to 1973, which partially overlaps with Ilić’s account of Novi Sad’s Youth Tribune that covers the period 1969–1972; he moves to Belgrade’s Student Cultural Center 1971–1976; then back to Zagreb and the gallery and artists’ collective RZU Podroom in the years 1975–1980; and onward

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5. If anything, the opposite seems to be the case. The historical record shows that the first massive monument erected after the war was the memorial of the Batina battle (1947) on the Croatian side of the Danube to commemorate the joint military operation by the Red Army and Yugoslav partisan forces at the end of WWII. The initial design for the monument was done by the Soviets. See Vladimir Kulić’s dissertation “Land of the In-Between: Modern Architecture and the State in Socialist Yugoslavia—1945–1965” (2009). The shrine to Sava Kovačević that I saw as a kid seems to be an exception.
 6. Kirn mentions Paulin-Brina among numerous other examples of partisan arts. Milohnić offers a more nuanced discussion of her work in his book *Gledališče upora* [Theatre of Resistance] (2021).

to Ljubljana's Student Cultural Center in the 1980s (1978–1984); to conclude with Sarajevo's Zvono Gallery and the exhibit *Yugoslav Dokumenta*, which happened in 1989, as the political unraveling of the country reached the point of no return.

The signal contribution of Ilić's book is its comprehensiveness. While some of the histories that he narrates here are (too) well-known to English-speaking readers, such as the stories of Slovene *Neue Slowenische Kunst* and the Student Cultural Center in Belgrade, many of them have been barely discussed in sources outside of Yugoslavia, most notably Novi Sad's conceptual art scene, and the last hurrah of Yugoslav New Art Practice in Sarajevo at the twilight of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. This comprehensiveness is demonstrated both in the range of case studies and in the author's approach to them. Namely, Ilić relies not only on archival materials and interviews with artists but, to a greater degree than other works on the subject I have read, on the reports of these art events in the Yugoslav press. This offers a perspective not only on the ways in which the artists perceived themselves, their work, and each other, but also on how they were represented in reports that addressed nonspecialist audiences. And these portrayals were all but flattering. Despite taking place almost exclusively within the network of alternative art institutions, which received state subsidies, this was guerilla art. The support for New Art Practice was anything but secure, and the artists and the institutions that supported them worked under conditions of precarity. If Ilić's "slow burning fire" pertains to the fragile yet persistent flame of radical art practices in Yugoslavia, the recent works on partisan art such as Kirn's point to its complex and largely unexamined relationship with the great revolutionary conflagration of the 1940s.

Most scholars who have worked on New Art Practice, myself included, position these activities at the intersection of the political and economic developments at work in Yugoslavia, and the artistic innovations in the West. The renewed attention to partisan art shifts the balance between these two forces and shows this art in a new light. Both Kirn and Komelj insist on the basic fact that Yugoslav partisans were a stateless army: there was no war economy to support them, no political structures they could rely on, and they held no cities that could supply industrial and human resources. With no permanent territory under control, partisan forces could not conduct conscription. It was an all-volunteer force: only those who wanted to fight would join. The same can be said about the artists among them. When Kirn notes, almost in passing, that "anyone who had the talent or desire to become a Partisan cultural worker or artist would be taken on board" (2020:121), he is also anticipating one of the key organizing principles of New Art Practice collectives in Yugoslavia. Ilić's detailed survey shows that the participation of artists who were not professionally trained—which in the histories of individual groups and art institutions often appears as a random and exceptional occurrence—was in fact one of the defining characteristics of New Art Practice. The most prominent examples are probably the Novi Sad group KŌD, which was formed by literature and philosophy students, and Goran Đorđević, who was a student of nuclear physics when he joined the group of artists in Belgrade's Student Cultural Center. Conceptual art was the common platform shared by nonartists and artists alike: by adopting this approach to artmaking, those who attended prestigious art schools had to renounce their training and the promise of a career that came with it.

With the end of war operations, the Yugoslav partisan army became professionalized. This well-funded and robust military force claimed not only the legacy of partisan warfare, but also the legacy of partisan art. Once it became militarized, this art lost its impulse for insubordination. Imperceptibly, that spark of radicalism jumped from partisan to alternative art. Uttered by army generals and party functionaries, the word "revolution" became an ideologeme emptied of meaning. The same social structures that claimed and rendered docile the revolutionary legacy also neutralized any vital revolutionary impulse in political life. Radical art practice was in most circumstances the only area of public life that could legitimately claim revolutionary ideas and strategies of the not-so-distant past. At the time when this art practice was happening, it was almost impossible

to discern the connection between these two instances of radical art in Yugoslavia. Recent reassessments of partisan art and New Art Practice are finally making this vital connection visible.⁷

If there is a red thread that connects all the instances of New Art Practice that Ilić so carefully catalogues in *A Slow Burning Fire*, it is the inherent and spontaneous institutional critique that appears over and over again in different places and times. Be it at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb during the 1960s, the public art actions in Novi Sad in the early 1970s, or the Sarajevan group Zvono's art intervention during a soccer match in the 1980s, this art strives to question and overcome the constraints and procedures of art institutions. Ilić provides plenty of evidence of mainstream media rejecting this kind of art as hermetic and even elitist (the most excessive public condemnation was aimed at the Novi Sad group that changed its name every month (Januar [in January] and Februar [in February] in 1972). The stories about New Art Practice that Ilić skillfully recounts in this volume can be read as a series of radical responses to a growing class stratification of Yugoslav society. While adopting the formal devices of international conceptual art movements, such as the use of tautology and the deployment of live performance, this art was constantly striving to challenge and examine the very status of art in a socialist society. Komelj, more than Kirn, recognizes this same tendency in the works of partisan artists, who—in their verses, images, and performances—not only reflected on their struggle, but on the very institution of poetry and on culture in general. Komelj cites the example of the Slovene artist Nikolaj Pirnat, who in the first discussion meeting of his partisan unit's theatre club raised the question of the source of their legitimacy as artists (2009:179). According to Komelj, the decisive characteristic of partisan art was not its formal properties, which ranged from social realist, to expressionist, to surrealist, but its inherent critique of institutions:

If, in the last analysis, the “democratization” of art today can mean that anything can be art as long as it maintains its specific relation to the system of art, the partisan movement, in which the new revolutionary subjectivity was forged in the process of education (and re-education), pointedly questioned if what until a moment ago was assumed to be art, is really art. (2013:110; translation mine)

What Komelj misses is that this process of self-education through the questioning of art institutions reemerged a couple of decades later in New Art Practices, and made its rounds through Yugoslavia in a fashion similar to the efforts of the mobile guerilla forces before them. While its fire was slow burning, the flame of radical art practice was also perpetually growing and spreading, just like the partisan fighters and artists of a generation before.

Ilić's organization of his material along spatial/geographic and temporal axes is pragmatic and works well. Still, one can imagine another chapter that explores—in greater depth—the mobility, or, in other words, the relational character of New Art Practice in Yugoslavia. Saying, for example, that New Art Practice had deep relations with the doctrine of self-management, does not mean that it merely coincided with it, but that it was engaged with it in ways that were existential, artistic, and critical. Ilić is attentive to self-management as the main aspect of Yugoslavia's political economy; however, in his narrative, the political and economic events seem to run parallel to radical art practices, rather than in relation to them. Expressions such as “at the precise moment when” and “simultaneously” as well as metaphors of mirroring and echoing are indicative of this nonintersectionality between the two sets of events that he explores—artistic and socioeconomic. The author registers simultaneous developments on these two fronts and is perceptive of the analogies between them. However, he rarely engages in analyzing possible causal relations between them: there is much more to be said about the ways in which self-management informed New Art Practice, and what, in turn, they made of it. Another relational dimension is that of the collaboration

7. This makes even more significant the 2009 exhibit *Political Practices of (post-)Yugoslav Art*, which was the first and—as far as I know—only art show to draw a straight line between these two important instances of radical political art in the former Yugoslavia.

between artists from different cities and republics. There is mention in the book of exchanges between artists and institutions from different centers of culture in Yugoslavia (the exhibits of the Ljubljana-based OHO group in Zagreb, Novi Sad, and Belgrade; the visits of Belgrade artists and critics to Zagreb; installations that Zagreb's Group of Six Authors made in Belgrade, etc.), but not enough critical inquiry into what these exchanges meant, what motivated them, and what they accomplished.

On the most basic level, the representatives of New Art Practice shared a generational spirit. As the critic Ješa Denegri observed, they were the first generation of artists born in socialist Yugoslavia—after 1945 (1983:7). They came from very diverse economic backgrounds, many of them from working-class families. That was, in its own right, a significant accomplishment of the revolution that took place in the 1940s. In some significant cases, this generational relationship was quite literal: in her interviews and autobiography Marina Abramović made much of her parents, who were both decorated partisan officers. And it should be noted that Marijan—the father of Mladen and Sven Stilinović, members of the Group of Six Authors—was a pre-World War II communist and a prominent war veteran who joined the partisan movement at its very outset.⁸ All this to say that the proponents of New Art Practice had a complex personal relationship with the partisan generation. They were familiar with it on an experiential level. They had respect for its accomplishments, but they also understood very well the ways in which that struggle was instrumentalized and let down at every turn during the short and intense history of socialist Yugoslavia. Rebellious children of rebellious parents, they refused the idealizations and ideologizations of their predecessors' fight. The radicalism of their work, even if it never explicitly addressed the liberation struggle of the previous generation, exposed the rebels of yesteryear as those who became the conservative force in power. The only direct encounter between the culture of memorialization of WWII partisan struggle and New Art Practice took place in July 1970, when the members of the Novi Sad conceptualist group KÓD presented at Tjentište several installations and performances during the program Sutjeska Youth. (Unfortunately, Ilić does not discuss this important encounter between Yugoslav monumentalism and conceptualism.) The children of the partisans avoided the fate of their parents at the steep price of losing every battle they took up. Although these battles took place in the sphere of art, they often had clear political significance. Each of the groups lasted no more than a handful of years, and none of these artists, even those who succeeded abroad, became a part of cultural establishment in Yugoslavia or in the statelets that emerged after its dissolution. They did not continue the emancipatory struggle of their parents by other means. Instead, their work was defined by an effort to discover their own means and stick to them to the bitter end. This kind of historical progression is inherently resistant to theoretical schematization, however appealing and “correct” it may appear.

In the summer of 2023, as I was driving with my family from the Adriatic coast to Serbia, I found myself again, after many years, at Tjentište. As it happens, it was the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Sutjeska, a fact that was barely mentioned in the media in the region of the former Yugoslavia. We stopped and made a point of visiting the monument. As we climbed up the 331 steps, a number that symbolizes 3301 partisans who died in the battle, the wind carried to us the sounds of live rock music from the other side of the valley. We had no idea what to make of it. Once we were back in the car and drove a few hundred yards, we ran into a camping site for the rock festival “OK Fest,” which has taken place at Tjentište over the past few summers. With her New York flair, my niece observed, “That’s what they were fighting for?” While I am not sure if that is how the partisans imagined the freedom they so desired, I was glad that the site is not neglected and that it continues to live and attract young people in the most unimaginable and unpredictable ways. One thing is for sure: in some way, the partisan battle continued to resonate even in that somewhat banal popular music gathering.

8. The list doesn't end there. In the summer of 2023, Vlatko Martek, a member of Zagreb's Group of Six Authors, who Ilić discusses in his book, reminded me that other representatives of this generation, such as the renowned conceptual artist Braco Dimitrijević and the critic Jadranka Vinterhalter, came from the families of high-ranking military officers and politicians. Among their less privileged colleagues, they were known as the “golden youth” (Martek 2023).

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