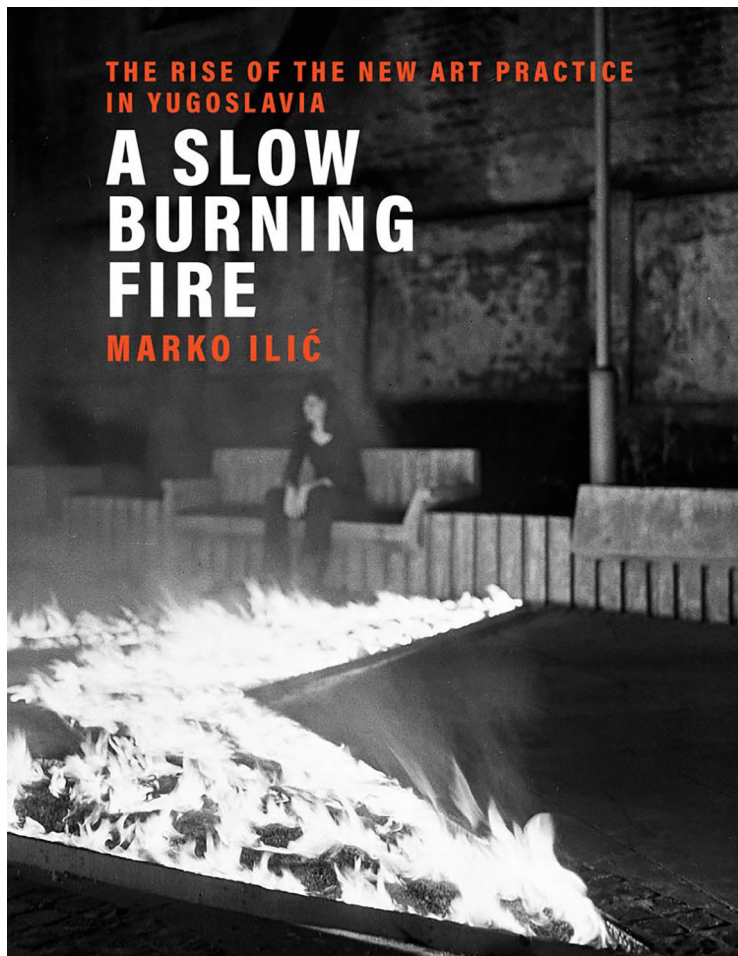


JOSCELYN JURICH

Book Review: *A Slow Burning Fire: The Rise of the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia*

A Slow Burning Fire: The Rise of the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia by Marko Ilić.
MIT Press, 2021. 384 pp./\$39.95 (hb).



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IMAGE 1. Postcard of Željko Jerman's *Ovo Nije Moj Svijet* (This is Not My World) at SKC Gallery (1976); courtesy Bojana Švertasek and the SKC Gallery, Belgrade.

A still from Marina Abramović's performance piece *Rhythm 5* (1973–74) is the compelling and apposite cover image of art historian Marko Ilić's *A Slow Burning Fire: The Rise of the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia*, a social history of the New Art Practice and related arts collectives that emerged from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s in the capitals of the federation. In the piece, described by Abramović as "the ritualization of the communist five-point star," and first performed at the Students' Cultural Center (Studentski Kulturni Centar, or SKC) in Belgrade in 1974, a large five-pointed star made out of wood and wood chips and soaked in petrol becomes a sacrificial frame.¹ Abramović sets fire to the star, transforming the wood into a red-orange blaze that creates an illuminated version of the red star that adorned the center of the Yugoslav flag, added by the Partisans after World War II. She lies inside of it, arms and legs outstretched. Yet unlike the Partisan star, a solid red, Abramović's star disintegrates as its immolation animates and red flames consume its wooden frame, and the star cannot become solid red without Abramović herself being annihilated. Her own description of the performance, which lasts over an hour and a half, explains the process:

I set fire to the star. I walk around it. I cut my hair and throw the clumps into each point of the star. I cut my toe-nails and throw the clippings into each point of the star. I walk into the star and lie down on the empty surface. Lying down, I fail to notice

1. Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 5* (1973–74/2010), Museum of Modern Art, www.moma.org/audio/playlist/243/3116.

that the flames have used up all the oxygen. I lose consciousness. The viewers do not notice, because I am supine. When a flame touches my leg and I still show no reaction, two viewers come into the star and carry me out of it. I am confronted with my physical limitations, the performance is cut short. Afterwards I wonder how I can use my body—conscious and otherwise—without disrupting the performance.²

Like much of the socially and politically concerned conceptual and performance art of the New Art Practice, Abramović's work involves the viewer in an active and crucial way as their spectatorship becomes inextricably bound with the artist's survival. In Ilić's analysis, Abramović's performance is important for its "abstract nature," "self-contained and self-concerned" with the artist's own biography as the daughter of Partisan leaders of World War II who postwar held high-ranking positions in the cultural and military spheres and who were ready, in Abramović's words, to "sacrifice their own lives for freedom and for the revolution" (143). Her performance is also significant, Ilić writes, as a refusal of "the utopian belief that 'expanded art' could actually 'democratize' society" (143). Abramović's piece is vital, too, for its broader commentary on political ritual sacrifice and self-sacrifice and the destruction and self-destruction of Yugoslavia, one of Ilić's central concerns in this meticulously researched and insightfully contextualized comparative study. The "slow burning fire" of Ilić's study centers upon, as its title states, the rise and ultimate decline of the New Art Practice, but it is also equally concerned with Yugoslavia's eventual combustion and collapse and the implications for what Ilić describes as our own global "era of annihilation" (1). In a morbid and decadent era such as ours, Ilić writes, "Yugoslavia may once again have important lessons for us" (1).

Examining processes of political decentralization and economic liberalization through an institutional history and critique of the galleries of the Students' Cultural Centers, state-funded institutions where many Yugoslav artists such as Abramović, Braco Dimitrijević, and Goran Trbuljak started their careers, as well as Zagreb's RZU Podrum (Radna Zajednica Umjetnika, Working Collective of Artists), co-founded by multimedia artists Sanja Iveković and Dalibor Martinis, Ilić seeks to reveal the ways in which the New Art Practice emerged from and critically responded to the period when Yugoslavia became increasingly enmeshed in Western capitalism and how the economic inequalities among the republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Vojvodina being the wealthier and better resourced ones and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Macedonia poorer and under-resourced, and without Students' Cultural Centers), affected artists and artistic practices. By exploring the social factors—generational, political, institutional—that allowed for the development and flourishing of the New Art Practice, Ilić seeks to break down the boundaries between and binaries of "official" and "unofficial" spheres of cultural production, between "conformist" and "nonconformist" art, and between critical art practices in the West and what he terms "dissident art" in socialist Europe (7). In this study, he also seeks to bring the Centers out of a marginal and

2. Marina Abramović, *Media Art Net*, www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/rhythm-5/images/5.

“ghettoized” position as relatively autonomous spaces that had a quite limited reach to argue that they were central in two important ways: they created the foundations for self-organized artistic projects such as the Grupa Šestorice Autora (Group of Six Authors) and RZU Podrum and brought artists from local contexts into the international art world. It is through this approach, he argues, that Yugoslav socialism reveals itself as neither a failure nor a utopia; rather, that “mastering a balance sheet of its gains and losses” (1) is central to a critical perspective not only on the New Art Practice in Yugoslavia but “to our understanding of global political and economic transformations in the second half of the 20th century” (1).

The book is organized into six chapters, each focusing on a separate cultural space in a distinct time period: Zagreb’s SC Gallery (1966–73); Zagreb’s RZU Podrum (1975–80); Novi Sad’s Youth Tribune (1968–72); Belgrade’s SKC Gallery (1971–76); Ljubljana’s Škuc Gallery (1978–84); and Sarajevo’s Zvono Café (1982–92), where the Zvono Group formed (a collective of the painters Biljana Gavranović, Sadko Hadžihasanović, Sead Čizmić, and Narcis Kantardžić; the photographer Kemal Hadžić; and the sculptor Aleksandar Saša Bukvić). They came together with the shared desire to “directly address the general public” (260) and to make art more accessible, choosing to exhibit on cafe walls and in street exhibitions rather than in galleries or museums.



IMAGE 2. Zvono Group’s exhibit on Vase Miskina Street, Sarajevo, in 1982; image courtesy Sadko Hadžihasanović.

The chapter on Sarajevo also includes brief discussions of Jusuf Hadžifejzović and the 1987 and 1989 *Jugoslovenska dokumenta* (Yugoslav Documents), large exhibitions intended to show the diversity and vibrancy of Yugoslav contemporary art and to promote

“regional” cooperation as nationalism and xenophobia were increasing. Each chapter deftly integrates Ilić’s extensive archival research and interviews with artists and curators with analysis that seeks to provoke questions about “Yugoslavia’s claims to an independent path to socialism and its ultimate collapse under the pressures of globalization, economic reform, and austerity” (14) while cautioning the reader against an interpretation of this particular social history of art primarily through “the lens of Yugoslavia’s disintegration” (118).

As Ilić acknowledges in the book’s introduction, other scholars have recognized the importance of the galleries of the Students’ Cultural Centers for generating new forms of cultural production in the period of the 1960s–80s, and have similarly contextualized them within the introduction of “self-management” (7) described by Branslav Jakovljević in *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91* (2016) as offering “a mechanism for political and economic emancipation” (6) that was



IMAGE 3. Poster for *Jugoslovenska dokumenta '89* in Sarajevo (1989); courtesy Jusuf Hadžifejzović.



IMAGE 4. Group portrait of artists participating in *Jugoslovenska dokumenta*, Sarajevo, '89 in Sarajevo (1989); photograph by Jane Štravs; courtesy Jane Štravs.

influenced by many of the artists and artistic groups described in Ilić's book. To some extent, Ilić's work is in conversation with these and other scholars of the period: his approach partly seems to engage with Armin Medosch's emphasis on the need to examine human and nonhuman networks of the period in *New Tendencies: Art at the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961–1978)* (2016) and with Jakovljević's emphasis on the ways in which Yugoslavia was a "specific" experiment—generative yet flawed—to find alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. Ilić's focus on institutions and institutional critique, networks, and the constantly shifting sociopolitical and economic circumstances of Yugoslavia during this period coupled with the vast amount of primary and secondary material that he analyzes throughout the book (begun as his doctoral dissertation) sometimes overwhelms the individual works of art and the voices of the artists and curators themselves. The last section on Yugoslavia's 1987 and 1989 *dokumenta* is one of the most significant and moving parts of the book and the images that accompany it—colorful and exuberant posters and exhibition catalogs and a group portrait of artists who participated in the 1989 *Jugoslovenska dokumenta* held in an ethnically diverse city that would face some of the most intense violence of the 1990s wars—are potent and poignant in Ilić's description, marking both "the end of a traumatic decade," and "the last phase of 'Yugoslav' art in general" (294).

Ješa Denegri described Yugoslavia's Students' Cultural Centers and self-organized collectives as "an intensive and stimulating working environment . . . in which the majority of its actors felt themselves to be simultaneously members of the narrower or broader national culture and members of the international and universal currents of

contemporary art” (297). Ilić’s book reveals their complexity, power, and significance for a radical politics beyond the nation-state and for self-management as a liberatory and potential-filled project that vigorously rejects the entwining of art and capital and socio-economic and political systems that regularly demand the type of corporeal and ideological sacrifice that Abramović’s *Rhythm 5* embodies. Perhaps these are some of the important lessons that Yugoslavia has for us. ■

JOSCELYN JURICH is a writer and PhD candidate in communications at Columbia University, where her research focuses on cultural production in conflict and post-conflict contexts, including the former Yugoslavia. Her writing and research on photography and film has appeared in *Afterimage*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, *Studies in Documentary Film*, and *Performing Human Rights: Contested Amnesia and Aesthetic Practices in the Global South*, edited by Liliana Gómez (2021).