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Selling the Otherness – the Stereotyped Image of the Balkan in Serbian Art of the Early 2000s

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Abstract
The image of countries once constituting Yugoslavia, imposed by the West, was affected during the period of the dissolution in the 90s. This region was soon (again) perceived as a barbarian space, exotic and far away from civilized Europe, while the search for identity, the crash of value systems, and inflation influenced life within parted territories. Due to political circumstances, the art scene in Serbia was completely isolated, while simultaneously, the idea of art was standardized and shaped by the perspective of economically powerful Western countries. In this paper we will follow the generation of Serbian contemporary artists starting their career at the very beginning of the 21st century when the country finally stopped being in isolation. To become visible in the West, Serbian artists appropriated the image of *exotic Other* from the Balkans and played with it. Combining constitutive elements of Western art institutions with traditional Balkan cultural elements, these artists created *an image the West wanted to buy*. We will finally analyze if, when criticizing through the appropriation of the imposed gaze in their work, Serbian contemporary artists really succeeded in moving away from the Western image of the Balkans or simply supported it more.

Keywords: Balkan image, contemporary art world, otherness, West, Yugoslavia, dissolution

Introduction

The dissolution of Yugoslavia left behind not only a crisis of identity for the countries once constituting it but also war, isolation from the West, inflation, and a crash of socio-cultural life. This also meant that the image of the progressive, modernized country that Socialist Yugoslavia

reached in the West reverted to one of the barbarian spaces, far from civilized Europe, although physically being on this same small continent. Due to political circumstances, the art scene in Serbia in the 1990s was completely closed and separated from the West, where simultaneously, the idea of Art was standardized and shaped following the perspective of politically and economically powerful ones – the Western countries. This idea was stressed through media and famous international art events. Looking back at the specific context of the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, it is possible to recognize tendencies in Serbian contemporary art today, particularly for this one decade just after the end of political isolation and dissolution of Socialist Yugoslavia. However, this distinctive art production is highly influenced by the Western perception, interest, and particular gaze on the *Balkans*. This is why, in the beginning, we need to explain a specific, wider context in which the Serbian contemporary art at the very beginning of this century is created and come back later to specific examples. Some similar notions and characteristics could be recognized in the art production within the whole region, but in this paper, we will concentrate just on several works from Serbia belonging to a particular socio-political context after the isolation period.[1]

Balkanism in the Art World

The year 1997 could be recognized as an important starting point for sociocultural, political, and, some, critical for this article, events in the art world. On the one hand, the notion of *Balkanism* as a specific space is entering Europe's front doors through the book *Imagining the Balkans*, published by Oxford University Press and written by academic Maria Todorova. Inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Todorova recognizes *Balkanism* as another colorful and multi-layered phenomenon contrary to the homogeneous Western system. However, unlike the Orient, which is the total opposite of (Western) Europe, the Balkan is Other within, an area that is in that same European space but is exoticized and subordinated.[2] Coming out during the period of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and written in English, this book was comprehended through a particular key response to the stigmatization of the post-communist countries affected by conflict. Another study, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*, published by Yale University Press soon after, in 1998 by Serbian author Vesna Goldsworthy, confirms the position of *the Other* living in the Balkans. Examining cultural stereotypes in literature and film as well as political exploitation of the Balkans, she stresses that this space had never been fully accepted as part of Europe but always confined to its margins, somewhere close to the Orient. Moreover, "in the region itself the Balkans are always thought to be elsewhere, to the south-east

[1] It is important to keep in mind that after the dispute between the socialist leader of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, and Stalin (the Soviet Union) in 1948, and until the beginning of the 90s, when it came to international relations, Yugoslavia was at moments much closer to the *West* than the *East*. Even after the normalization of relations with the Soviet Union in the 50s and the renewal of cooperation between the Yugoslav and Soviet Communist parties in 1956, the *Eastern* countries occasionally denied Yugoslavia the right to be perceived as a country building socialism. The Yugoslav position certainly implied constant attempts to find a balance in the complicated international relations. However, Yugoslavia stayed more open to the Western world than the conservative socialist countries from the region and, therefore, more adaptable to the art scene beyond the Iron Curtain. Consequently, a big contrast succeeded at the moment of the end of the Cold War as well as the dissolution of the Socialist Yugoslavia, particularly for artists living in the *Third Yugoslavia* (finally being constituted of Serbia and Montenegro with Kosovo and Vojvodina) under the block and in complete isolation from the Western countries.

[2] Todorova, Maria. 1997. *Imagining the Balkans.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

of wherever one is", writes Goldsworthy[3], and thus a process of Balkanization became equivalent to an identification with *the Other*, or, even worse, with the dark side of an incomplete self.[4] Starting as well from the concept of *Orient* as *the Other*, Milica Bakić Hayden writes on *Nesting Orientalisms* in the case of former Yugoslavia. With the destruction of this neutralizing framework, traditional dichotomies such as east/west and their nesting variants (Europe/Asia, Europe/Balkans, Christians/Muslims) were revalorized and became rather oppositions than simply differences, argues Bakić Hayden already in 1995.[5]

The Western visual art world was, on the other hand, at that time, already a well-developed system made up of well-visited art institutions such as Biennials, Documenta, and other international exhibitions, as well as well-known super-star curators and contemporary artists, responding to the constituted relations, manners of expression, exposition, and themes. Some artists from the Balkans who moved to Western Europe during the second half of the twentieth century already functioned within this system, and on the other hand, the whole generation of contemporary artists who lived under the sanctions and in isolation was completely unknown and their works were never represented out of local scenes. While Bosnian artist Mladen Stilinović was issuing the position of *the Other* within the homogeneous Western art *language* through the famous and still often appropriated work: *An artist who cannot speak English is NO artist* (1992) during the Yugoslav crisis[6] in the year 1997, Serbian performing artist, living already for a while abroad, Marina Abramović is questioning, for the first time so prominently and openly in the visual art world, the Balkan identity from the perspective of the Yugoslav war period. Actually, appearing as a pioneer who introduces the theme of the Balkans to the international audience with the performance *Balkan Baroque* at the Venice Biennale exhibition, Abramović uses artistic strategies that include a strong biographical narrative, a studiously staged set of allegorically charged self-presentation and the transfer of an authentic Balkan myth, historically constructed within Western perception.[7] First, Abramović was supposed to represent the work in the Yugoslav pavilion, but eventually, due to the provocative topic and technical and production requirements, she took part in the Biennial exhibition as a *nomad* in the central exhibition in Giardini. Sitting on an enormous pile of beef bones and washing them one by one persuasively, Abramović bases the work on the metaphor of cleaning one's conscience and shows the impossibility of scrubbing the blood from the bones: "You can't wash the blood from your hands as you can't wash the shame from the war."[8] The installation includes three video projections that convey themes of violence, trauma, and personal family history contrasted with the collective identity. For four days, the artist was sitting and scrubbing away at 1,500 fresh beef bones while singing folk songs and weeping. Her white dress became increasingly stained, and the smell of blood, bones, and worms was leaving a high impression on the audience. Abramović won the main prize, a Golden Lion, for the installation and performance.

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[3] Goldsworthy, Vesna. 1998. *Inventing Ruritania: The imperialism of the imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
[4] Ćirić, Maja. 2009. Constructions of the Balkan as the other in contemporary art practices. *Remont Art Files* 1, 29-41.
[5] Bakić-Hayden, Milica. 1995. Nesting Orientalisms: The case of Former Yugoslavia. *Slavic Review* 54(4), 917-931.
[6] Lukić, Neva. 2021. Eksploatacija živog. *Fantom Slobode* 3, 135-152.
[7] Bogdanović, Ana. 2014. *Constructing the Balkans in Marina Abramović's performance practice*. Second International Conference of Art History Students Proceedings. Zagreb: Art History Students' Association of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, 202-210.
[8] Abramović, Marina (dir.). 1997. *Marina Abramović. Balkan Baroque. 1997* (accessed: 1 April 2023).

However, it was not until the 2000s and after the 5th of October, when the regime of Slobodan Milošević in Yugoslavia was finally put down, that the local Serbian artists started presenting their work in the Western art world. This period is marked on the one hand with the final withdrawal of sanctions imposed by the West on Serbia, but on the other hand by several big exhibitions on Balkan art curated by well-known Western curators and mostly held in countries where many Gastarbeiters worked. Without the ambition to analyse these closer, we will name here just a few of the most prominent curatorial projects based on the already explained gaze of the West to the Balkans, which was, on those occasions, further imposed, creating a specific context for the art creation. Namely, the beginning of this contextualization was marked by the exhibition *After the Wall – Art and Culture in postcommunist Europe*, conceived by Bojana Pejić and David Elliott at the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm in 1999-2000, shortly after which a series of author's exhibitions by curators of prestigious professional international reputation will follow, such as: *Auf der Suche nach Balkanien* (*In search of Balkania*), curated by: Roger Conover, Eda Čufer, Peter Weibel in Neue Gallerie Graz, 2002, *Blut und Honig – Die Zukunft ist am Balkan* (*Blood and Honey – Future's in the Balkans*) by Harald Szeemann in Klosterneuburg near Vienna in 2003, *In der Schluchten des Balkans – eine Reportage* (*In the Gorges of Balkans – A Report*), by René Block in Kunsthalle Fridericianum Kassel, Germany in 2003. From their very names, it is immediately noticeable that these exhibitions have the concept of the Balkans, which we discussed previously, as a common determinant. Works of art exposed were created by Bulgarian, Romanian, Albanian, Slovenian, Croatian, Greek, Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Turkish artists embracing the wider geographical notion of the Balkans. However, in this paper, we will concentrate on the Serbian art of the early 2000s as a particular niche of 'Balkan art' created as a response to the (longer existing) imposed Western gaze, as well as a reaction to particular political circumstances during 1990s and period of conflict and isolation. As art historian Jerko Denegri suggested, this term, although burdened with old and recent negative stereotypes, should by no means be considered inappropriate in advance; the only question is where and why exactly, at the beginning of the 2000s, such a contextualization of contemporary Serbian art is emerging? He noted that rather than primarily artistic reasons, there were certain political reasons and interests of cultural institutions and individuals for the use of this term in connection with the mentioned exhibitions, thanks to which the term was suddenly introduced into circulation. A positive consequence of these exhibitions worth highlighting, Denegri argued, is the fact that they gave a significant number of artists from this area a chance to perform on the international art scene not long after the previously unbearable imposed isolation.[9] However, while it is by now many times shown that a particular Balkan art does not, and has never existed[10], these curatorial projects are signs of which an interpretation is formed and conducted by the curator as an intermediary. Mobilization of the regional artistic world, as well as provocation of numerous theoretical reviews that followed, were not transcendental but materialized constructions of the Balkans as an *unknown Other*.[11]

[9] Denegri. Ješa. 2009. Symptoms of Serbian art scene after year 2000. Remont Art Files 1, 10-17.
[10] Amiel, Diane. 2007. Specifically Balkan art. Does it exist? *Third Text* 21(2), 137–144;
Voinea, Raluca. 2007. Geographically Defined Exhibitions. *Third Text* 21(2), 145-151.
[11] Ćirić, *Constructions of the Balkan*, 30.

Focusing on these same foreign curatorial concepts constructed on the we/them and center/periphery relations, theoretician Boris Buden draws an important conclusion about the artistic decision to take part in this image construction:

> *Artists know that the Balkans do not mean destiny or the cultural community to which they necessarily belong, nor does it label the art they create. The Balkans is primarily a technical term that describes their relationship to the global art market dominated by the West, which sets certain rules of behaviour and acceptability. Even if the myths about the Balkans are not true, the Balkan artists have to play along in one way or another if they want to be interpreted at all. Institutionally, they are placed in an artistic context, but are often depicted in an exotic (political) context that some of them consider inappropriate or even offensive.*[12]

Referring to the success of artists who exhibited in these large-scale settings, Miško Šuvaković also argues that Balkan art is a product that sells. Works made to *look Balkan* however, "are not meaningless themselves, as they document a real response on the part of artists to the challenging demands coming from cultural and curatorial bureaucracies, local and global alike. Analyzing works shown in the international exhibitions in the Balkans, he concludes: "Therefore, unstable, open, melancholic, intelligent, ecstatic, provocative, partly corrupt, as well as good works have also been presented".[13]

Agreeing with Bojana Pejić, it is also important to stress that, as some of the artworks displayed within these large-scale contemporary art exhibitions reveal, what the artists have in common is also a shared self-stigmatization and self-colonialization. "Balkanism is the repository of all that is disgusting, deploring, Oriental, 'anti-progressive' in the self-perceptions of would-be Europeans […]". However, this does not mean that all artistic production is influenced by this discourse. Some artists challenge the Westernized 'Balkan image' by instilling critical references in their work.[14] Yet, following different examples later in this text, we will question if this critical position is clear and effective enough or if it, on the contrary, just contributes to the already constructed and imposed image.

Being in line with the analyses by now and following the generation of Serbian artists mostly starting their career just after the break-up of Yugoslavia and the decrease of all value systems and succeeding in exhibiting their work on the mentioned and other international exhibitions with similar topics, we can recognize particular themes as well as motives and media of expression which correspond to each other. In the context of the given arguments, in the following chapters of this paper, we will analyze selected relevant artworks that deal with the perception of the *Balkan* as an isolated, exoticized, unknown territory, chaos – a cacophony revealing cultural and societal contrasts in which there is a constant search for a unifying identity; a space of origin defining artists who are in a constant search of distinguishing, recognizable individual identity to be presented to the *West*.

The Image of the *Balkan Other*

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[12] Buden, Boris. 2003. Jebe lud zbunjenog. *Zarez* 107, 10-11.
[13] Šuvaković, Miško. *Serbia as a symptom of the Balkans: Internationalism and globalization* (accessed: 21 March 2023).
[14] Pejić, Bojana. 2003. *Lecture: Balkan for Beginners. A (Theoretical) Picture Show. Symposium the Reinvention of the Balkans: Geopolitics, Art and Culture in South-East Europe. Kassel: Documenta Halle* (accessed: 1 April 2023).

The stereotyped Balkan image is easy to comprehend through the analyses of the work *Balkan Souvenirs* by Ana Adamović, a series of postcards and photos made in Albania, which the artist visited for the first time in 2003:

> *Until that moment I didn't know almost anyone who has ever been in the country, or, anyone who know a lot about it for that matter, even though flight from Belgrade to Tirana takes less than an hour. Actually, it seemed that Albania has always been something of a non-existing land for me: I could have recognized it on the map, but I was not completely sure in its real existence. (One of the reasons for such attitude must be a very long and almost total isolation of the country). Arriving to Albania with those thoughts, I started realizing that this must be how people coming from the West are thinking about the Balkans as a whole,*

she concluded.[15] We could agree upon the fact that curator René Block had probably started from the same point when coneptualizing the above-mentioned exhibition *In the Gorges of the Balkans – a Report* and borrowing Karl May's *Oriental Odyssey*. However, even trying to deconstruct the German novelist's prejudiced approach toward a place to which he never traveled by embarking on a journey through the Balkans, the curator did not stress in the first place that perceptions of the region can start changing. As curator, Maria Hlavajova points out, "the East cannot really be considered as the *former East* unless this challenges the West to rearticulate itself, despite its economic superiority, as the *former West*," Buden concludes by reflecting on this issue. The work *Balkan Souvenirs* is, similarly, a visual research of the Balkans as a territory that can't be easily defined, taking a Western perception of the Balkans as a point of departure. "At the same time, from a very personal point of view, it is dealing with the fact that Balkan is a place with which people living there are often scared to be identified while trying to understand reasons for such a fear", Adamović noted. She took photos with a plastic camera, succeeding in the transformation of objects and places into dream-like images, thus reflecting the image of the Balkans constructed in the Western world – the one of exoticization, romanticization, and othering.[16]

The isolated territory and the need of artists to migrate to the West in order to be recognized, as well as the political situation and the possibility of Serbia joining the European Union (EU) (which looked almost close at the moment of the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević's regime) on the one hand, and the EU politics toward the non-EU citizens on the other, are issued through a critical art project: *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* by Tanja Ostojić, which she started in 2000 and exhibited partially at the show *In Search of Balkania* in 2002. The project began when Ostojić published an advertisement with the above title and a photo of her naked with a shaved head, reminding her "rather on a concentration camp than on marriage photos"[17]. Surprisingly, she exchanged over 500 letters with several interested candidates around the world. After six months of correspondence with a German resident, she organized the first meeting with him in the form of a public performance in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade. A month later, they were married, but this was not the end of the artistic project and particular research on the administrative and social conditions Serbian (and other non-EU)

[15] Adamović, Ana. *Balkan Souvenirs 2003-2008* (accessed: 1 April 2023).
[16] Adamović, *Balkan Souvenirs*.
[17] Ostojić, Tanja. 2012. *Looking for a husband with EU passport*. Belgrade: Goethe Institute (accessed 3 March 2023).

citizens live in. After the expiry of a three-year residence permit, instead of gaining permanent residence permission, she was granted only a two-year residence permit. After that, the couple divorced, organizing a *Divorce Party* during the opening of the exhibition *Integration Project Office* at *Gallery 35* in Berlin in 2005.[18]

Images of the Balkan Rhythm

One of the characteristic strategies in Serbian artists' work is the questioning of the collective identity and the crash of values systems during the period of the 1990s, through the use of particular music styles within their works, mainly turbo-folk and techno music.

During the *Wiener Festwoche* (*Vienna Festival Week*) in *Künstlerhaus*, 2001, the Serbian contemporary artist Milica Tomić brought a turbo-folk[19] singer, Dragana Mirković, to perform in front of the high-contemporary art, mostly Austrian audience who were not acquainted with this genre. On the other hand, as Tomić suggested, this was the first time that the invisible population of Gasterbaiters in Vienna entered a high-culture institution and became acquainted with contemporary art. At that moment, Vienna was home to 150,000 ex-Yugoslavs who are a minority population in Austria. As artists stressed, they were completely invisible to the Austrian public; they were excluded, and they excluded themselves. The turbo-folk singer went out on a stage stating in fluent English: "This is contemporary art," and then started singing hits of mass culture musical style that combines oriental and the new techno music, a style born in Yugoslavia during its dissolution and often recognized as characteristic of the Milošević's regime. Importantly, Dragana Mirković was not exhibited as a representation, i.e., an icon of pop culture, as is usually the case when *high art* deals with *low art,* but was included in the project by making a part of her usual performance, which, from the perspective of the history of modern artistic procedures, Branislav Dimitrijević considers, is the moment performance art came closest to the status of the ready-made concept. However, the main focus of Milica Tomić's project was not the re-evaluation of artistic procedures but rather the opening of a debate about a phenomenon that has gained a high place not only in cultural but also in political and even ideological discussions in recent Yugoslav history. This phenomenon is called turbo-folk due to the way the musical rhythm is programmed, and it represents the Serbian local response to the global phenomenon of the fusion of various musical genres that come from different parts of the world. As the artist explains, Dragana Mirković is the biggest star of turbo-folk during and after the wars in ex-Yugoslavia, "she is the biggest in her genre, while turbo-folk is, in my opinion, our most authentic contribution to globalism. In other words, turbo-folk opened the way for globalism to enter isolated, excluded Serbia."[20] These posed issues and collaboration with the same singer, Tomić

[18] Museum of Yugoslavia. *Gender and visa regimes: Presentation of the artist Tanja Ostojić* (accessed: 22 April 2023).

[19] Turbo-folk is a type of the *novokomponovana narodna muzika (newly composed folk music),* a genre of popular music that originated and developed in the period between the sixties and the nineties of the last century, on the foundations of folk melodies in all republics of the former Yugoslavia except Slovenia. The music was characterized by ever-increasing deviations from the original, with the ever-widening use of electric instruments and reliance on folklore motifs from the entire Balkan region, Turkey, and even the Middle East. Texts used in songs were very basic and responded to the low taste of the masses. In the mid-1980s, newly composed folk music began to move from the traditional restaurant - *kafana* – environment to *folkoteka* places similar to discotheques where only this type of music was played. Finally, the turbo-folk of the nineties brought to this music fast rhythms and exclusively electric instruments, with the obligatory synthesizer and plenty of effects and was immensely popular due to media promotion, particularly clothing, fashion and lifestyle. In Serbia particularly, it is also bonded to the period of Milošević's rulership, which we will analyse further in the text.

[20] Dimitrijević, Branislav. 2001. "Ovo je savremena umetnost". *Vreme*, 21 June 2001.

continues in her video installation *Alone* (2001) represented on the exhibition *In the Gorges of Balkan – A Report*.

Chronologically, a bit later and inverse as was the case with other artists living already abroad for a while and building their careers in the Western art world but basing its work on the same occupation with the identity (re)construction during and just after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, a Serbian artist based in Germany, Aleksandra Domanović created an art-research video work: *Turbo Sculpture* (2010-2013). Again, already in the title itself, the author refers to the emblematic emergence of turbo-folk music and the entire culture, which is accompanied by *turbo-architecture, turbo-urbanism, turbo-television,* and aesthetics of clothing, and even monumental heritage, during the era of war destruction and the collapse of the value system. The term *turbo-folk*, notes Domanović in the film itself, was coined by the Montenegrin musician and songwriter Antonije Pušić – Rambo Amadeus, referring to the local tradition of combining electronic music with a strong rhythm and neo-folk music. Although at that moment ironically, Pušić terminologically determines the phenomenon that actually unites two contradictory concepts – turbo – which evokes the image of modern, industrial, and technological progress, and folk – a symbol of tradition and rural conservatism, which will remain emblematic during the war years. As cultural theoretician Milena Dragićević Šešić stresses, the deafening noise of war destruction could only be overcome by the deafening noise of turbo-folk.[21] Appropriating the name itself now in the context of monumental heritage, Aleksandra Domanović, in her art-research project, starts from the idea behind the pseudonym of the author of this coin: "The hybrid of Stallone and Mozart proved to be an ironic forerunner of the fascination of the post-war former Yugoslavia Western pop cultural figures."[22] Following the emergence of instrumentalization and exploitation of *turbo*-culture by ruling minorities, Aleksandra Domanović focuses on a particularly interesting phenomenon of the creation of monuments dedicated to Western icons of consumerist society, non-Yugoslav media personalities, including United States President George Bush, at the time of the collapse of the ruling ideology, an identity crisis and socio-economic degradation.

In the same period, the same artist produced the two-channel video installation 19:30,[23] consisting of two completely separate units connected by the idea of specific forms of social connection, especially during the 1990s and the time of the collapse of the socialist idea of *brotherhood and unity*. In the first segment of the installation, Domanović shows the announcement song of the regionally well-known *daily news at half past seven* from 1958 until the present day, which was broadcast in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. She contrasts these animated logos and the accompanying music with documentary footage of rave parties that were particularly popular in the nineties and with remixed techno music produced by contemporary DJs using exactly the audio archive records of daily headlines.

> *The project combines two different experiences of cohesion: watching the evening dailies together at 19:30, which was almost a ritual during the war, and techno music, which brought together countless young people from the region at raves in the 1990s, creating a*

[21] *Sav taj folk*. Sav taj FOLK / All that Folk | Dokumentarac o turbo-folku | Ceo serijal (accessed: 21 March 2023).
[22] Domanović, Aleksandra (dir.) 2010. *Turbo Sculpture, 2010-2013* (accessed: 23 March 2023).
[23] Domanović, Aleksandra (dir.) 2010. *19:30* (accessed: 23 March 2023).

> *limited space-time frame in which tolerance and coexistence of different nationalities seemed possible.*[24]

Mixing these two components, Domanović develops a layered play of memories of historical and personal events and of a country that no longer exists, ultimately causing viewers a feeling of hopelessness and loss after intense events, even a physical feeling of nausea when reminiscing among the generations to which the artist belongs.

The artist Vladimir Nikolić juxtaposes the same techno rhythm and association with rave parties with the ritual of religious crossing in the video performance *Rhythm* (2001). Criticizing the close bond of the Church as an institution to the rulership of Slobodan Milošević but posing a much wider and universal issue of multireligious and multi-ethnic society which is, due to socio-political circumstances at that moment in search of the even rhythm and common identity.

> *In the approach to the work itself, I decided on a broader context, that is, the issue of shaping the individual through ritual. The work also refers to the DJ culture of the 90's and the phenomenon of rave events, in which the masses are put into a state of collective trance with basic rhythms, as in pagan rituals,*

explains the artist.[25] As Branislav Dimitrijević suggested, what is, in fact striking in video work *Rhythm* from 2001 is that: "[…] it brings its viewers back to one of the first ideological formulas, which was written in the 18th Century by Blaise Pascal: 'Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe'. Ideology is in material practices; it resides in bodies and their rituals, and Nikolić renders these rituals redundant."[26]

The constant and perplexing search for a collective image within a society full of contrasts and the persuasive look for the path to the West from the isolated, exoticized *Serbia in the Balkans* finally gets one more (complex) dimension when it comes to the individual identity of an artist within the contemporary art world.

In Search of International Artist Image

Often in conversation with art history, contemporary artists are analysing their individual positions in the constituted art system. However, one more element to consider is the origin of the artist and the consequent (non)availability of the Western art system. It is already recognized that the self-portrait genre served *Balkan* artists many times. "Self-portrait is the favourite form in which these artists address the issue of identity. Seeking their *I* and what it signifies, the artists choose their own faces as a starting point. Their identity is by no means reduced to a mere narcissistic regression or a pure communication with the Other."[27] As art critic and curator Diane Amiel contributes, the search for an answer to the question *Who am I?* warrants a continuous opening up of the subject to its own identity. "Embedded in different political and geographical environments, these works constitute a study of the relationships that the *I* establishes with its pasts, its memories, its new social setting, new languages, and new cultures, as well as with the Other […]."[28] Thus, these portraits could be regarded as pretexts for the inclusion of politics in

[24] Maschewski, Isa. 2012. *Aleksandra Domanovic: Dare* (accessed: 12 February 2023).
[25] Nikolić, Vladimir. 2022. Interview with the artist.
[26] Dimitrijević, Branislav. East art map: A (re)construction of the history of art in Eastern Europe (accessed: 12 February 2023).
[27] Amiel, *Specifically Balkan Art,* 140.
[28] Amiel, *Specifically Balkan Art,* 140.

the reflections of these Balkan artists, to use their bodies and their lives as a starting point for the questioning of the structural and social modifications that the area was undergoing at the turn of the century.

In this period, the above-mentioned artist Milica Tomić is moving from painting to another media of expression – a video performance, appearing in front of the audience personally, while many other artists as well decide to use the new, in the artworld at that time already common media such as film, performance and therefore a video performance – to tackle very individual doubts and identity marks.

Starting his career with another work from the same period, the author of *Rhythm* (2001) exhibits a *Crossroad Puzzle* with his own image in the catalog of the show *In the Gorges of Balkans – a Report*.

> *To be a great artist… not popular, but great. One that could become a chapter in primary school textbooks - that was my ambition after I graduated from the academy of fine arts. I thought it was fair to declare my yearning at the very beginning of my career, to plead guilty, instead of hiding this ambition behind years and years of hard work, and who knows how many art works in the future. Entering books and media was impossible, because I was nobody, and I had done nothing yet. Crossword Puzzle was an obvious solution [...].*[29]

Continuing to think generally on the role and visibility of the artist, or to be more precise, being in dialogue with art history but not being particularly burdened with the geopolitical context he is coming from, Nikolić also produced the work *How to Become a Great Artist* in the same year. It is important to state that, even when it was not the artists' message, the general socio-cultural and exhibition context and, at that time, the popular theme of *Balkanism* in the West influenced the comprehension of many artists' work. Writing on another early work of Nikolić, curators of the exhibition *Imaginary Balkans* where it was exposed to stress:

> *Nikolić's work 'Autoportrait', the series of pairs of photos in which a portrait of the artist mimics 'facial expressions' of old cars produced in Socialist times, playfully comments on the post-communist situation in which ownership of a (Western) car has become one of the strongest symbols of a male identity.*[30]

Contrary, Nikolić comments on this: "It was just a children's play they read through the same key/perspective as everything else".[31]

However, the conscious use of the context of his origins and the open criticism of the Western gaze toward the Balkans burdened with the notion of many old, even barbarian traditions, is visible in another particular dialogue of Nikolić with all these issues, as well as with the contemporary art institution. This artist writes a letter to Milica Milošević, the *last alive* dirge singer living in the small town of Kolašin in the North of Montenegro, inviting her to travel with him to Ruan, France, and visit the grave of one of the greatest artists in modern history – Marcell

[29] Nikolić, Vladimir. 2001. *Crossword puzzle* (accessed: 2 March 2022).
[30] Beban, Breda. 2002. *Imaginary Balkans*. Site Gallery: Sheffield.
[31] Nikolić, *Interview with the artist*.

Duchamp.[32] As described, he paid a dirge singer to create a song of lamentation to mourn Duchamp while he just stood next to the grave, saddened and completely mute. *Narikača*, or the dirge singer, is, as Nikolić suggests, a typical profile of an *artist* who was suitable in that situation for the Western market – a documentarian of anti-modern, traditional, primitive, everything that is actually the antithesis of Europe. He just explained briefly who Duchamp was and how important he is in modern art history.

> *She improvised everything else on the spot, and that, by the way, is her model of work, as she explained to me. I just asked her to somehow mention art when she laments. And she did it. It is, in fact, the same situation that happened at the contemporary art exhibitions at that time, which then dealt with our climate. Very little was said about art there. Those exhibitions of contemporary art looked like settings of some ethnographic museum, and in that sense Narikača was a true profile of the artist they wanted to hear.*[33]

Taking an open position of a critique, in the same interview with Aleksandra Ćuk, Vladimir Nikolić explains as well that *they* did not want to hear him but someone who fits the description of a sought-after contemporary artist from the Balkans, so he found *Narikača* to match that expectation.

Conclusion

Even if tendentiously criticizing the context and *Balkan art* as a phenomenon constructed by the West due to socio-political circumstances, not artistic features, it seems like Serbian artists leaned on the imposed gaze and followed the expectations of the art market in order to become visible, integrated, and recognized in the global art world. Definitely, this position influenced the local Serbian contemporary art production in the early 2000s. Even if we think about the response of artists to the phenomenon of Balkanism, we cannot avoid the fact that a number of non-western parts of the globe acted in terms of their Otherness, using the mechanism Edward Said termed Orientalism (1978) through human sciences, literature, and visual arts. Thinking of the relations center-periphery, we could agree with Bojana Pejić's thoughts on the lecture *Balkan for Beginners. A (Theoretical) Picture Show*. As she argues, we should not recognize just a Western gaze on the Balkans but rather something one could more appropriately call home-grown Balkanism, "which describes practices 'we' use for manufacturing an image/concept of ourselves, presumably without anybody´s (read Western) assistance".[34] While outsiders may tend to perceive the homemade Balkanism as a unanimous expression of the *Other*, in the region itself, there are many different *others*, which *we* like to position in a hierarchical order. This implies that there is always an*other* who appears to be more *other* than we are. Consequently, we could agree with the statement that "Even though a homemade Balkan image or rather images produced in 'our' literature, theory, film, print media, and 'our' works of art are often believed to transport our 'authentic' Balkan selves to the rest of the world, these images may turn out to be just as stereotypical as Western *Balkanism*." On the other hand, as Boris Buden sharply noted:

> *Even if the myths about the Balkans are not true, the Balkan artists have to play along in one way or another them if they want to be interpreted at all. Institutionally, they are placed*

[32] Vijesti. 2012. Narikača iz Kolašina ožalila Dišana. *Vijesti,* 31 January 2012.
[33] Ćuk, Aleksandra. 2018. Dvostruko stanje slike. Intervju – vizuelni umetnik Vladimir Nikolić, *Vreme*, 10 January 2018.
[34] Pejić, *Lecture: Balkan for Beginners*.

> *in an artistic context, but are often depicted in an exotic (political) context that some of them consider inappropriate or even offensive.*[35]

Also, as we could already see above, until around 2000, the term *Balkan art* was hardly ever used, and when used, it was a derogatory term, standing for non-modernity, a bellicose spirit, warlike practices, and cultural backwardness. The main issue in discussions after the Western exhibitions on *Balkan art*, as Pejić wittily highlighted, was: "[…] how can artists negotiate their individual artistic strategies by going beyond the discourse of 'fixed' cultural identities, given that identity, artistic included, is forever a work-in-progress".[36] The image that the Balkans produced of itself is actually the reflection of the brand 'Balkans' copyrighted by Western discourse.[37] "It is the mirror effect that Boris Groys describes when he refers to Moscow architecture in the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Its seemingly nationalist character is actually an example of 'the East' reflecting Western expectations of 'otherness and confirming them by artificially simulating its cultural identity'."[38]

Rather than Balkan art, in Serbia in the early 2000s, we could recognize artistic reactions to the socio-cultural and political circumstances and, therefore, topics unique for the period, while media and art production are completely the same as the usual ones on the global art market. The Balkans is an inherently stereotypical concept that was finally only to survive, never mind if artists tended to criticize it in their work or just took advantage of the already imposed image by the West. In the context of Serbian art, it is bound to the period of Slobodan Milošević's regime and the decrease and crash of all the existing value systems. The brand *Balkans,* however, was on many occasions sold as a product for immediate financial exploitation.

Today, most of the mentioned Serbian contemporary artists have moved away from *Balkanism* as a phenomenon thematized in their work. Nor are international exhibitions on *Balkan art*, a political and ideological construct rather than a particular art differentiated from any other, still organized. Yet, in a globalized world, it seems that the search for unique, distinctive, and even exotic images will not stop, being imposed by the gaze of the *Other* or traced from the inner perspective, from the local scenes and individual artists.

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[35] Buden, *Jebe lud zbunjenog*, 11.

[36] Pejić, *Lecture: Balkan for Beginners.*

[37] We could compare the emergence of 'the Balkan art' as the strategy of 'othering' and 'self-description' to the emergence of 'East art' in the early 1990s. As Miklavž Komelj explains, 'East art' is the common name for some artistic practices on the geographical axis (former) Soviet Union – (former)Yugoslavia (especially Slovenia), in the space that should represent the legacy of the 'East' from the geopolitical division created after of the Cold War. What unites the art of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union is that, in retrospect, they acted out the fiction that they belonged to the same 'totalitarian' system, Komelj argues. That fiction was needed during the distribution of geopolitical powers in Europe after the victory of the West. However, structural connections between these artistic practices are created at the exact moment when, from a Western perspective, artists declare themselves as 'Eastern' and accuse the society they live in of being 'totalitarian'. The tendency for 'Eastern art' in the new global art system to preserve the awareness of the vital potential of the multi-decade experience of the 'East' can have an extremely reactionary role: to turn the social-transformative project of communism into an object of aesthetic contemplation, which we offer on the new capitalist market, he stresses. See: Komelj, Miklavž. 2012. *The function of the signifier "Totalitarianism" in the constitution of the "East art" field*, in *Retracing images: Visual culture after Yugoslavia*, edited by Šuber, Daniel and Slobodan Karamanić. Leiden: Brill, 55-80.

[38] Avgita, Louisa. 2007. The Balkans does not exist. *Third Text* 21(2), 215–221.

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