

FEATURED REVIEWS

Jasmina Tumbas. *“I am Jugoslovenka!”: Feminist Performance Politics during and after Yugoslav Socialism.*

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“I am Jugoslovenka!” declares the cover of Jasmina Tumbas’s book, the bright pink letters superimposed over an image of Bosnian artist Šejla Kamerić. Leaning against a wall, Kamerić has an assault rifle at her feet. Posing like a model, she is wearing a see-through mesh top and pants, both in a camouflage print. It is a provocative and complicated image of (weaponized) beauty, performance politics, and resistance. The use of the word “Jugoslovenka” (in any of the following: Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, Macedonian, Slovenian) is part of this resistance—the intentional resistance to translation. Tumbas eschews the English variant—“I am a Yugoslav woman”—drawing attention to Jugoslovenka as a context-specific rather than a free-floating figure.

In Tumbas’s study, Jugoslovenkas are “women artists, curators, theorists, historians, singers, beauty queens, snipers, and activists” (35). Or, in terms that readers might recognize: Esma Redžepova, Lepa Brena, Women in Black, Sanja Iveković, and Tanja Ostojić, to name a few. What makes a Jugoslovenka is the production of “feminist body-centered work, which summons bodily resistance to a set of political issues that concern women” (13). Various Jugoslovenkas across space and time are united by “emancipatory strength” and the manner in which that strength finds expression in their art (2). This definition allows Tumbas to place figures across a spectrum of professions, political convictions, and ideological orientations into conversation. It also frees Tumbas from adhering to theoretical consistency in the use of the word feminist. The female performers under study hold conflicting views of feminism as a practice or movement, while some outright reject the term itself. If Tumbas were to apply a wholesale feminist lens to this broad range of artists, it would be both inaccurate and anachronistic. Instead, Tumbas’s idea of Jugoslovenka pins individual performers, artists, or activists to a specific place and time as “embodied subject[s],” rather than approaching them through “[a] political idea of gender” (23).

A Jugoslovenka can only emerge from a very specific historical milieu: the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945–92), a country “where new trends in avant-garde art and film flourished while Marxist maxims held sway, antifascist ideology reigned in tandem with sex and rock and roll, and women enjoyed more legal rights and social mobility” than in any other east European and some western countries (1). The legacy of the Yugoslav socialist context is what sets Jugoslovenkas apart. The country was established as a result of partisan victory over fascism (an armed struggle in which many women participated) and

the subsequent social changes included extensive provision of laws for women's rights, such as maternity leave, abortion, and literacy. However, Tumbas is clear-eyed on the complexity of this past: the progressive nature of Yugoslav socialism unfolded in a social and cultural context of patriarchal traditionalism.

This is the central paradox of the history of socialist Yugoslavia (and the post-Yugoslav states). It is a country both progressive and conservative at the same time, and extensive sections of Tumbas's introduction are devoted to contextualizing this contradiction. The book begins by laying out the social climate governing gender norms in the post-1945 decades, which were characterized by prevailing misogynist and sexist attitudes despite the liberatory discourse of post-war politics. "Socialism was treated," writes Tumbas, "as if it could absorb feminism and dissolve gender difference for the purpose of higher political goals" (22). However, "socialist culture [was] steeped in bourgeois morality, with all its taboos and constraints" (Jelena Vesić cited in Tumbas, 22). This combination of progressive socialist ideas, cultural paternalism, and "patriarchal political leadership" drove what Tumbas calls "feminist performance politics" (12). Her book "offers a feminist critique of socialism" while, at the same time, demonstrating how women "became the most important defenders of the legacy of leftist progressivism" after the collapse of Yugoslavia and the political project of state socialism (236).

The study of Jugoslovenkas begins in the avant-garde scene of the 1970s and loosely proceeds chronologically through the history of art and music production, ending in the present post-Yugoslav moment. Ch. 1, "Jugoslovenka's body under patriarchal socialism," excavates "the unrecognized ways in which women's concepts of gender, body, and sexuality played out" in the works of female artists in the sphere of experimental artistic practice in Belgrade in the 1970s (46). The bulk of this chapter focuses on figures who have thus far been marginally discussed in Yugoslav art history but who played a crucial role in leading and shaping new currents in cultural practice. Tumbas engages not only with understudied artists (such as Rada Čupić and Breda Beban) but also with the production of art, analyzing the role of arts management and administration as an integral part of feminist performance. A central figure who emerges from this time period is Dunja Blažević, the first female director of Studentski Kulturni Centar (SKC) in Belgrade.

The second chapter zeroes in on "[the] feminist performance strategies" of Marina Abramović, Lepa Brena, and Esma Redžepova, who became "iconic in [their] ability to transport political ideology on an international scale" (114). All three performers, Tumbas demonstrates, were in tension with and sometimes in overt opposition to socialist Yugoslavia. To Tumbas's credit, she spends the majority of the chapter on Lepa Brena and Esma Redžepova, carefully parsing the sexist attitudes that affected the perception and reception of them as musical professionals. The chapter is also a nuanced reading of Redžepova as a Romani musician and her struggle with entrenched racism in Yugoslav society towards the Roma minority.

"Queer Jugoslovenka" (Ch. 3) discusses LGBT subcultures in Yugoslavia with a focus on video and photographic works, providing an account of the "struggle for lesbian representation" in activist and intellectual discourses in the 1980s (163). In Ch. 4, "Jugoslovenka in a sea of avant-garde machismo," Tumbas questions why Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK)—which she describes as a movement creating the most "provocative, transgressive, innovative and influential art"—omitted gender in their deconstruction of western art practices (196). As a response, Tumbas's chapter analyzes the contributions of Eda Čufer, a dramatist and only woman member of the NSK. "The last generation of Jugoslovenkas" (Ch. 5) begins with an analysis of female activism throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, particularly the work of Women in Black (established in Belgrade in 1991) and the march by Kosovo Albanian women to the besieged town of Drenica in 1998. Tumbas considers why activist work by women is often made invisible and relegated to the sidelines of protest history, noting that (in the context of these two cases) the protests went against the dominant militaristic, nationalist discourse (250). The chapter ends by highlighting alternative

modes of 1990s feminist performance: photographs of and art by women who “weaponize their beauty” in order to assert their dignity and resistance (255). This includes a discussion of the Miss Sarajevo beauty pageant that took place in 1993, as well as the art work of Šejla Kamerić.

Each chapter engages with an artistically diverse group: Tumbas does not adhere to genres, nor does she prescribe to distinctions between high culture and mass culture, facilitating comparisons between such radically different figures as Marina Abramović and Lepa Brena. Equally idiosyncratic—and one could say irreverent—is Tumbas’s approach to academic discourse. She is just as likely to quote RuPaul as she is Judith Butler. The range of Tumbas’s research is impressive: archival material and excerpts from interviews that Tumbas conducted with the artists themselves are combined with detailed interpretations of individual works of art. Her excavation of subcultural magazines, posters, and ephemera is particularly important, especially in the writing of histories of queer subjectivities. It becomes clear that the history of Jugoslovenkas is not only unwritten, but also culturally hidden. Tumbas’s work is a much needed corrective to this.

Because of the breadth of this topic, there is insufficient room for Tumbas to delve deeply into some of the artworks. On occasion, it would be welcome for Tumbas to sit with a thought rather than jumping to a different artwork that requires additional exposition, sometimes delaying the articulation or continuation of the argument for several pages. The scope of the book also creates problems of balance across the chapters—the first chapter runs close to seventy pages, which is twice as long as some of the others.

On the whole, it is an important contribution to the field. This book is the first of its kind to engage visual arts in addressing the questions of gender in Yugoslavia and after. If gender has been a neglected field of inquiry in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav studies, then a study of gender from the perspective of art history is even more marginalized. *I am Jugoslovenka* is, because of this, a deeply political book: a historical study embedded with questions about the future of feminist cultural practices in the region.

Alessandro Stanziani. *Tensions of Social History: Sources, Data, Actors and Models in Global Perspective.*

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Among the various genres of historical exploration, global history is among the most complicated in terms of evidence, conceptualization, and methodology. Writing comparative or parallel studies on subjects like war or empire have a clear focus as well as a global reach and may be quite difficult to do in terms of their complex narratives and multiple sources. Yet the same rules of evidence apply as with other fields of exploration. Archival materials,