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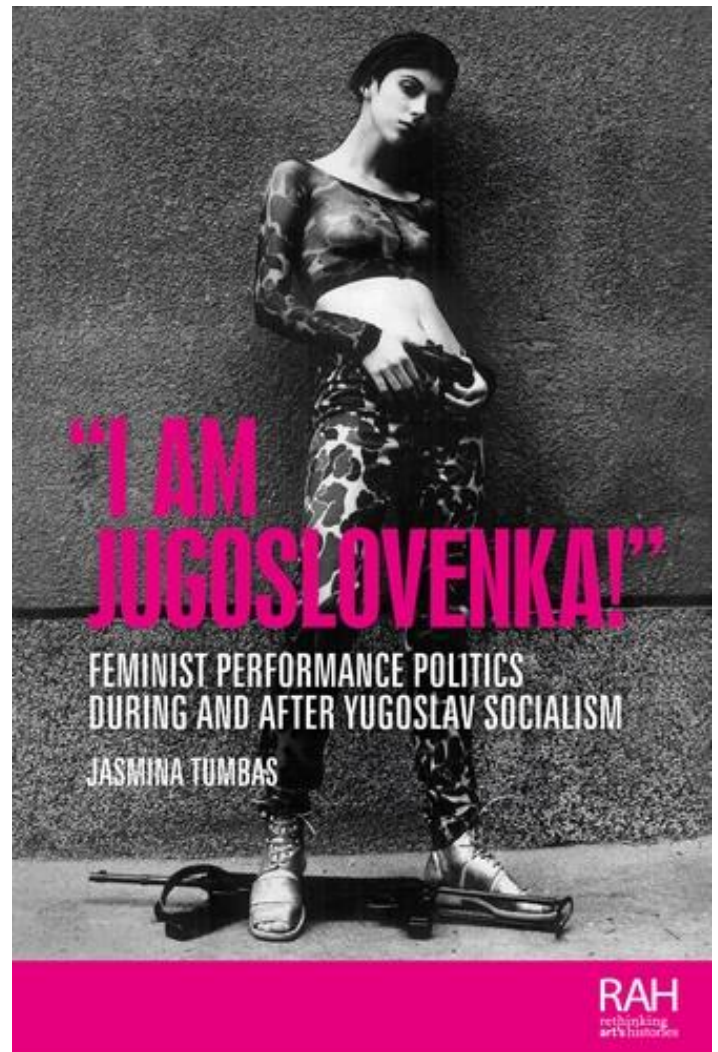
## Jasmina Tumbas: "I am Jugoslovenka!" Feminist performance politics during and after Yugoslav Socialism.

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von **Jana Dolečki**

The book *"I am Jugoslovenka!" Feminist performance politics during and after Yugoslav Socialism* was published in 2022 by Manchester United Press in the scope of their edition *Rethinking Art Histories*, hence already pointing towards its main ambition: to redefine existing positions concerning the art history of Yugoslavia. The author, Jasmina Tumbas, currently holds a position of an associate professor at the Department of Global Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Buffalo, USA. In her research, she deals with feminist and gender histories and theories of performance, body and conceptual art, activism, and film, with a focus on South Eastern Europe, especially the region of former Yugoslavia. This geographical interest 'overlaps' with her biography (something that she emphasized throughout this volume as an important part of her academic interest): born in today's Serbia, she and her family moved to Germany escaping the wartime reality of the 1990s.

The book offers a dense overview of different feminist performance politics and strategies executed by female performance artists, pop culture figures, and activist groups during and after socialist Yugoslavia. In her work, Tumbas understands performance in its widest possible sense and goes on to analyse events ranging from performance art, across political mass or activists' performances, to the presentation of women in visual culture and media. By focusing on general feminist performance politics, she points out these actions and their agents as sites of resistance in a



socialist setting, simultaneously writing an 'alternative' art history of Yugoslavia.

More interestingly, Tumbas uses the term of *Jugoslovenka* [Yugoslav women in Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian] as the main operational concept that, for her, best describes the crucial albeit paradoxical position of female emancipation during socialist Yugoslavia and beyond. More precisely, she recognizes this concept in both, works by self-declared feminists and non-feminist artists from different generations, hence proving the impossibility of it being employed as a simple narrative. Although she states that the term itself resists fixed interpretations and symbolics, she proceeds to identify those *Jugoslovenkas* as women artists, activists or pop culture figures who, in her view, shared similar approaches in subverting or deconstructing the patriarchal structures of socialist Yugoslavia.

In the introductory segment, Tumbas outlines the associations between feminism, the socialist system,

and artistic production in socialist Yugoslavia. Although she traces few 'proto-feminist' artists in the concerned region (such as the lesbian painter Nasta Rojc), she designates the emergence of women partisan fighters during WWII as the main and most radical feminist phenomenon in the modern history of Yugoslavia. As she aptly demonstrates, after WWII, the Yugoslav state fostered the emancipation of women in line with its socialist agenda – however, this was mostly done 'on paper' as in everyday life women were reduced to their traditionalist roles as reproductive agents or facilitators to male power structures. Regardless of many emancipatory achievements (right to vote, abortion rights, and paid maternal leave), women had to fight for their rights in different ways.

By introducing an international perspective, Tumbas emphasizes that, to understand the Yugoslav feminism, one has to depart from its specific cultural and political heritage. In doing so, she detects how the 'new Yugoslav feminism' was unique in its norms and concepts, and to what extent it was misunderstood by similar movements in the 'West.' In addition, she outlines her own upbringing in post-socialist Yugoslav diaspora as relevant to the understanding of how Yugoslav feminist experience is lived and learned beyond national structures. This underlines the significance of transgenerational dissemination of knowledge, and the advantage of 'lived' feminism in Yugoslavia over 'learned' feminism in academic structures. Announcing the more detailed structure of her book, Tumbas proposes few of the most relevant case studies that demonstrate how the specific position of Yugoslav feminism was actually the main interest of many female artists active in that period. For instance, she detects artistic body practices that questioned or offered new interpretations of a Yugoslav 'national body' or national symbols (such as the national flag, or president Tito). She further argues that for women artists dealing with their own or other female bodies, performance art was actually an exclusive outlet for 'penetrating' the art mainstream of that time, simultaneously providing new tactics of political emancipation.

In the first chapter of her study, Tumbas proceeds to detail practices of performance artists that operated in what she calls the 'patriarchal socialism.' She continues to define the concept of *Jugoslovenka* by detecting practices of many different female artists, proving that *Jugoslovenka* is by no means a uniform notion, nor does it belong to a homogenous assemble of women. She calls attention to women curators that shaped the feminist scene (Dunja Blažević), and detects several important exhibitions and works pivotal in interpreting a women's position in socialism. As Tumbas demonstrates, in the scope of the 'new art practice' during the 1970s and 1980s, the symbolic image of women moved away from the heroic figures of antifascist fighters, and opened up new spaces of representation – such as women's sexual emancipation. By detailing the works and reflections of Vlasta Delimar (a performance artist whose work revolves around presenting her sexualized body but who categorically denied being a feminist), Tumbas validates feminist attempts for sexual liberation during socialism since it was executed against a conservative and patriarchal setting. She frames these artistic practices with examples from their socio-political context, often residing outside the artistic field. For instance, she analyses the case of the pornographic magazine *Start* that combined raunchy visual content with theoretical texts authored by famous Yugoslav feminists, thus further proving the paradoxes of women's position in this socialist system. Most importantly, Tumbas determines how in their activities, many of the women artists active during socialist Yugoslavia were not countering socialism as a concept, but rather its oppressive patriarchal structures. As to prove this claim, she includes works of several female artists (Marina Abramović, Katalin Ladik) but focuses on the opus of Sanja Iveković, who dedicated her life to radical exposure of patriarchy within socialism.

In the second chapter, Tumbas identifies three iconic artists – Marina Abramović, Lepa Brena, and Esma Redžepova – as true *Jugoslovenkas*. Although of different professional background and international outreach<sup>[1]</sup> (Abramović as an artist and performer, Lepa Brena and Redžepova as singers), they were the

most prominent 'export products' of socialist Yugoslavia representing the complex and paradoxical nature of a *Jugoslovenka*. While Lepa Brena represented the positive vision of Yugoslavia, Abramović often emphasized the detrimental repercussions of her life under socialism and finally decided to leave the country in 1975.

Following her concept of *Jugoslovenka*, Tumbas explains her choice of these three agents of emancipation and empowerment in the context of Yugoslav experience. She provides valid arguments in the case of Abramović and Redžepova: while Abramović conceptualized her own emancipation by referring to Yugoslav state symbols or experiences (most prominently in her early works), Redžepova managed an international career as an empowered Roma artist. When discussing the pop-folk singer Lepa Brena as the central figure of this concept, Tumbas herself sees Lepa Brena's emancipatory practice in the fact that she created and managed her career despite traditional expectations and went on to represent a successful, self-made woman who broke the codes of the patriarchal setting. In addition, performing music that was dubbed as 'folk,' she somewhat empowered the popular culture and brought it to masses in highly professional formats. While I am not refuting Brena's success in exposing and then subverting the highbrow culture, in my personal view, her wider emancipatory potential seems to be somewhat unconvincing or rather far-fetched. Although she straightforwardly represents Yugoslavia via her biography and some music numbers such as the song *Ja sam Jugoslovenka!* [I am a Yugoslav woman] (after which Tumbas named her book), Brena's complex opus escapes any firm generalization. Moreover, the way media showcased Brena's music and personality (as glamourized girl-next-door whose sex appeal should also be seen as a tool in service of the larger music market) actually paved the way for representations of women during the rise of nationalism that followed in the early 1990s.

In the next chapter, Tumbas locates queer dimensions of women's emancipation in the underground art scene of Ljubljana. She identifies the Slovenian capital as an important locus of the multidisciplinary visions of LGBTQ art in former Yugoslavia. She quotes one of

the main protagonists of the scene, the artist Marina Gržinić, who argued that the alternative milieu of the 1980s in Slovenia 'skipped' the influence of the local feminist critics, and rather opted to explore queer expressions, or lesbian eroticism. She also indicates in which way the presence of lesbian topics in art came rather late when compared to the topic of homosexuality, stating how "the gay body was seen as [a] bigger 'threat' for that social order, but on the other side the lesbian body did not even exist." (p. 163) In this light, she identifies lesbian desire as an emancipatory strategy of resistance, detecting and hence validating it in visual art practices and music. Like in other chapters, Tumbas claims that queer communities in Yugoslavia were not anti-socialist *per se*, but rather working against heteronormativity and patriarchal structures, thus fighting given structures of representation. Tumbas subsequently identifies the most important queer *Jugoslovenkas* in the post-war setting, such as the figure of Merlinka from the movie *Marble Ass* by Želimir Žilnik (1995), or the works of the contemporary painter Helena Janečič.

In the fourth chapter of the book, the author expertly engages in a much-welcomed feminist reading of one of the most important art movements that originated in Yugoslavia: the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* movement (NSK). The project of NSK deployed images of extreme masculinity as a critique of the fascist and socialist iconography, using a strategy of *over-identification*. Tumbas questions this strategy in criticising NSK's single-sided representations of gender. She further elaborates how, by employing an overidentification with masculinity and sexism, the group still failed to suspend the power of patriarchy. In her wish to bring to light invisible figures of feminist emancipation, she investigates the work of Eda Čufer, a dramaturge of the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theatre group that was part of the NSK family. A theatre collective initiated by one of the most prolific theatre artists of Yugoslavia, Dragan Živadinov, the group positioned itself as following theatrical concepts of Antonin Artaud, with a special focus on criticizing the state-governed theatre system and the bourgeoisie theatre aesthetics. Although the group called themselves 'sisters' (in the sense of a religious

order), this nominal gendering was never explained by the initiators. Tumbas analyses how in their oeuvre the group 'overidentified' with the religious feminine community as to question the religious powers facilitating the rising nationalisms of the late 1980s. In her view, they managed to avoid being part of the state theatre system as they opted against the "masculinist, phallogocentric 'rise' within the patriarchal nationalist Yugoslav state theatre." (p. 216) The Sisters decided to occupy the sphere of underground not as a space opposite to the official cultural realm, but as an autonomous space open to new definitions of power, symbolics and emancipation, what Tumbas puts in dialogue with Judith Butler's concept of the lesbian phallus.

In the following chapter, the author denotes the transformations and shifts during the war and the uprise of nationalisms that Yugoslav women had to deal with in the 1990s. As new definitions were imposed on female bodies (as reproducers of the nation, care-givers, and victims), new areas for emancipation had to be fought – sometimes even literally. Outlining the socio-political context of wartime nationalist uprisings, Tumbas detects *Jugoslovenkas* who continued to fight for the rights of those marginalized by these processes – women, children, and ethnic minorities. She introduces the activist group *Žene u crnom* [Women in Black] who understood ethnic hatred as being rooted in the rule of patriarchy, and fought for transnational solidarity of women in times of war. Tumbas then focuses on the representations of femininity 'under the siege,' analysing how women fought the overtly masculine contexts of war. By describing how some women engaged in self-care as a form of defying their harsh realities, she additionally identifies a strategy against the western gaze, which addressed Balkan women as being uncivilized or dirty.

Another method of defying the misogynistic condition of wartime is detected in the phenomenon of female fighters who, in Tumbas' view, fought the logics of

docile and obedient women in need of being 'saved'. While engagement of female fighters was directed against the gendered roles of war, I would still consider its emancipatory potential as questionable. Citing the author Biljana Regodić, Tumbas herself mentions how the rise of ethnic hatred during the 1990s actually masked the patriarchal supremacy. Because most of active female combatants who fought in civil wars of the 1990s still did so along the lines of national affiliation, one could argue that they rather facilitated a certain 'vision' of power structure that was exclusionary.

In the conclusion of the volume, Tumbas provides readers with several examples of postwar and contemporary *Jugoslovenkas* who, in their art practices, share similar approaches to Yugoslav social legacy as their forerunners. By investigating works by visual artists such as Tanja Ostojić, Selma Selman and Lala Raščić, she argues how they actually prove how *Jugoslovenka* as a combination of political interest and artistic practice is not only actual but, moreover, still relevant.

"*I am Jugoslovenka!*" presents a supremely compact overview of performance politics during and after Yugoslav socialism, providing elaborated examples and visual analysis of numerous performances, events or figures that were seen as agents of female emancipation and empowerment. As Jasmina Tumbas not only expertly chooses and compiles the existing research material, but also engages in producing novel approaches and theoretical concepts that will, hopefully, initiate future interest and interpretations.

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[1] Although one could state that Lepa Brena holds the status of an international icon, this should still be reduced to diaspora communities or the neighbouring Eastern European countries.

## Autor/innen-Biografie

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Jana Dolečki is an independent theatre researcher, cultural manager, and producer currently living and working in Vienna. She completed her doctoral studies at the Vienna Institute for Theatre, Film and Media Studies on the topic of staging nationalism in Croatian institutional theatre during the wars of the 1990s. She is the co-editor of the volume *Theatre in the Context of Yugoslav Wars* (Springer International Publishing, 2018) together with Stefan Hulfeld and Senad Halilbašić.

### Publikationen:

- "Hor 29. Novembar: (Re-)Interpretationen postjugoslawischer Identitäten durch Gesangsaktivismus". In Miranda Jakiša & Katharina Tyran (eds.): *Südslawisches Wien. Zur Sichtbarkeit und Präsenz südslawischer Sprachen und Kulturen im Wien der Gegenwart*. Böhlau Verlag: Wien, 2022.
- "Theatre on the Front Lines: Ad Hoc Cabaret in Croatia, 1991–1992". In Jana Dolecki, Senad Halilbašić, Stefan Hulfeld (eds.): *Theatre in the Context of the Yugoslav Wars*. Palgrave Mcmillan. Springer International Publishing, 2018.
- "'Home, Foreign Home'. Commemorating the 50-Year Anniversary of the Signing of the Agreement on Labor Migration Between Austria and Yugoslavia." In Boris Buden, Lina Dokuzović (eds.): *They'll never walk alone*. Transversal texts: Vienna/Linz/Berlin/Zurich, 2018.

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