

Amani Maihoub

International Doctoral Program in Culture Studies - Lisbon Consortium, Universidade Católica Portuguesa & Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen

The Importance of Being Otherwise: The Politics and Aesthetic of the Serbian Cultural Underground

This PhD research project examines how renegade theoreticians and practitioners of the arts in Serbia, in response to the maelstrom of social and political changes in October 2000 and thereafter, dismantle the neoliberal ideology of the state apparatus and propose new critical alliances between the creative economy and progressive politics, both in their choice of topics and in their methods of work. The circumstances surrounding the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and the ongoing, simultaneous integration and disintegration processes across a multitude of public engagement and knowledge flow networks are pertinent to this discussion. Since fighting erupted and the ensuing gradual dissolution of Yugoslavia into independent nation-states—whose leaders were keen on eroding the common Yugoslav socialist past, artists and thinkers have responded to the need for a bottom-up approach to memory that entails dismantling the official historiographies of the events of the war decade. Local art historians and theoreticians have documented these emerging issues and struggles and published essays, reviews, and interviews with artists and curators. It is worth noting that the proliferation of radical mobilizations outside established political structures and prescribed institutional channels remains, in great part, under-researched and unnoticed to the outside world. This doctoral dissertation aims to both complement and supplement existing scholarship. It is not my purpose to produce a survey of contemporary underground cultures in Serbia, but rather to scrutinize a pioneering and internationally reputed group from the independent scene in the field of contemporary performing arts theory and practice: Walking Theory (TkH).

The nineties of the last century witnessed the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars, the rise of religious and ethnic nationalism, and the unfolding of a geography of broken bonds and degeneration—a time of political, economic, social, and moral crises in the Balkans. The common geocultural space that the former Yugoslav countries once shared has been broken in a series of pernicious conflicts—and further with the establishment of new nation-states and the European Union (EU) membership negotiations. The relationship of nostalgic reckoning

and the civic imagination in this geopolitical context and the challenges for artists and intellectuals in such turbulent sociopolitical climate have intrigued me. As a graduate student at the University of Arts in Belgrade in 2012, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork among visual and performing artists, art historians, curators, and arts managers in Belgrade and Zagreb. I investigated how individuals and groups from the so-called independent culture and contemporary art scenes in Serbia and the countries of the former Yugoslavia negotiate their legitimacy in their cultural landscapes. On the one hand, while counterculture embraces transnational registers of subjectivity and clings to a utopian demand for political and aesthetic autonomy from the mainstream, reinforcing conservative, nationhood-affirming modes of production is still to some extent a dominant strategy in the cultural politics of development in the countries of the region. On the other hand, most international and EU funding programs further a system underground artists and thinkers, who project a socialism rooted in their unique sociohistorical context and improved with democracy, do not want to install. It is my view that contemporary performing arts and cultural policy and management cooperation platforms in the region of the former Yugoslavia are but one strategy for appropriating the disrupted biography of a shared past into the culture of dissidence of the independent sector (e.g. multimedia art, urban interventions, interdisciplinary projects, networking platforms) today. This dissertation takes the multidimensional and pluralistic perspective of new regionalism as its point of departure to place the emphasis on the manifold and contingent processes of region formation that have produced and reproduced the former Yugoslavia. My discussion of *Deschooling Classroom (o^o)*, a project that unfolds in a series of workshops, lectures, and debates that investigate the relationship between self-management, politics, and cultural production (Walking Theory organized the project in partnership with the nonprofit organization Kontrapunkt from Skopje between 2009 and 2012, with the support of the Swiss Cultural Program in the Western Balkans) demonstrates how Yugoslavia is re-membered, as it were, through cross-border public engagement and knowledge flow networks.