

The character of this thesis is presented from an artistic perspective through a series of texts, field research and personal experiences, as well as through the involvement and stories of others, of people who inhabit areas that tend to migrate, of activists and people with talents. This Master's thesis deals with the migrations of people from one area in western Serbia (Uzice, Dobrinja, Poze-ga, Jezevica). We will see how some periods overlap with other periods and territories and go through some of this region's historical migratory paradigms and contexts. Finally, we will slowly follow the story of an individual who characterizes this contemporary case, where the experiences of activists and the imagination of future activities combine, where people who live in surrounding villages talk about their Symbiocene with and within the environment. In this way, we will try to figure out and reflect on the devastating consequences of multinational companies' imminent plans to open new lithium ore mines, utterly changing this entire area and its habitat.

POST-APOCALYPTIC LANDSCAPES

Written component master thesis

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Abstract

The **migration part** of this research tries to examine historical paradigms and contexts in which other people lived, shared experiences and understandings, including large and collective movements in Yugoslavia both during and after its disintegration. Individual artistic and activist progress is later combined in an artistic concept that is reflected through my artworks that tend to migrate, and therefore the individual intertwines with the collective.

The **departing from home** part tends to describe reflection through the self. By becoming an object of study, the artist becomes a medium through which his personal life is transmitted on the social, political and philosophical levels, affecting his existential and social life. We see images of the past and the future intertwined and correlated with the reality that surrounds him.

The **stories of others** section at the end of the writing reflects the cases of individuals whom I have met and whose lives are being affected by the idea of no future without economic growth, no future without sacrifice, and no future without jobs.

The thesis examines cases from west, northwest and east Serbia where multinational companies intend to open mines in the near future. Large areas are becoming affected by these decisions from the government, which affect all activists in the surrounding villages, their lives and the lives of their closest ones.

Introduction

I have been researching metaphors of body language, manifestations of self-reflection, and images of post-apocalyptic landscapes for quite a long time. Somehow it all fits together with the language I was using to describe the reality that surrounded me: the language of activism, video art and performance. I always tried to write down my personal experiences and thoughts during the long days of exploring, observing or simply doing something, and writing notes and essays became woven into my daily life. I wrote poems, I drew ideas and concepts, and I imagined artistic practices. After developing my practice over time and including knowledge about the things I was interested in over years of thinking not only about contemporary matters and things around me but also about how I feel about the things I am doing, it became a self-reflective understanding of my mind and what I knew about the outside world. I was recording processes in which political, economic and philosophical discourses characterized my research or I characterized them. This is the cross-dual identity paradox, where everything influences everything, *alles miteinander verbunden*, where the subject is at the same time the object.

Documentation is something I haven't had time to contemplate. It usually came to me as a question of life and death, memory and knowl-

edge, past and present, somewhat through decisions that someone makes for me, and my response to it crystallizes through the creation of an artwork or even an entrance into a new way of portraying the reality around me.

Years ago, I couldn't know for sure what my artistic practice would become. Grasping individual and collective stories, decades-old phenomena from post-Yugoslavian mythologies, extracting segments of everyday life and transforming them into a work of art – these interests went from existential, behavioral and textual to micro-political, authentic and hypothetical in an ironical sense. I have never felt close to any medium, so I use them all. This is my answer to why different channels and mediums are used in my artwork. Even before, I could tell that I became attracted to a medium simply because it explained what I thought about in the simplest way possible. So the mediums I used were there to manifest my inner unconsciousness in which I lived. There are times when I have examined symptoms and transferred them into an analysis of everyday actualities; on other days, I became a symptom. Such an approach enables my works to be presented according to their concept, a paradigm that contains theoretical and practical positions. Each of them is a story with its own dominant structure as it interacts with the nature of my expression, my feelings and my self in response to social constraints, religion, thoughts, behavior, languages and places.

In this thesis, I will present some artworks I have created over the last 2-5 years representing a reflection of different findings that correlate with my recent research, new observations from the last few months that are focused not only on me, the subject of totality. Miško Šuvaković explains this as becoming like a piece of apparatus of some higher machinery as *I am*, but more mutual, shared and combined, which I like to call *the lost piece*. It depends on one's perspective: is it machin-

ery or something more like an organism in which we all participate?¹ Secondly, I will gather some of my interests in unifying, organizing and transforming public and alternative spaces, which will be discussed in the chapter "*The Age of Renewal*."

Post-apocalyptic means that the "apocalyptic" has already happened, and we are just standing aside and watching how it resolves. Srećko Horvat sees it as something that happened in the near past, and we are living through its fragments.² For him, dialogue with the past is necessary to win the game of ecological crisis. Old, abandoned or even forgotten knowledge, customs and traditional values need to be appropriated within the contemporary capitalistic structures. The new crises we are experiencing are just reflections of past events that are still culminating and expressing themselves through our hypocritical thinking of the nature that we possess. The crisis of our identity, one might say, is not knowing or just forgetting who we really are.

The word '*crisis*,' derived from the Greek *krisis*,³ means the turning point, for better or worse, in an acute disease or fever, or an emotionally significant event or radical change of status in a person's life. Economic, social, political, ecological, or mental crises are seemingly more connected these days due to the fact that humanity has turned the planet into inhospitable terrain for every living being. Our current way of living's discontinuity with nature, accelerated production of commodities, and capitalistic desire for more impractical objects lead only to mental disharmony and social deprivation.

1 See, e.g., Miško Šuvaković, *Epistemology of Art* (Belgrade: Tkh, 2008).

2 Srećko Horvat, *After the Apocalypse* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

3 "Transforming crisis to Krisis," *Auditamos Grecia*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.auditamosgrecia.org/en/transforming-crisis-to-krisis/>.

Extraction capacities are pushing economic, ecological, political, and social risks more than ever. Humanity has a long history of these breaking points, as shown by centuries of hazardous illnesses, health issues, political and economic struggle, viruses, and wars. It often struggles and breaks into something exceptional and improved, although it often also fails and is directed toward self-deterioration like many past civilizations. In this case, many philosophers and activists are calling for a final agreement on cutting out dirty industries, pollution, accelerated deforestation, land diversion, and global warming. From an economic point of view, the power machine has never worked better; it has made its commodities accessible to almost everyone, interconnections between countries are growing, and the vast majority of people have at least some medical access. But it's not as simple as it seems; this would suggest one can see the whole picture through one crack in the prism.

The issues we want to reflect on in this text are complex on a small scale but are also quite intertwined globally. Personal and intimate stories of people and their actions are similar all over the world; their reflections on a crisis are perpetuating, which affects their collective and social sphere and their physical and mental environment. Beyond all their societal struggles and issues, their environmental concerns are among the most important to them. Between the struggle and business as usual are layers of important political questions: how far have we gone to overcome environmental issues? Are we asking the right questions? What are the radical alternatives? Is there a way to form some kind of international progressive movement that will become an alternative to what we have?

In his book *Poetry from the Future*,⁴ Srećko Horvat asserts that there

4 Srećko Horvat, *Poetry from the Future: Why a Global Liberation Movement Is Our Civilisation's Last Chance* (London: Penguin, 2019), Page 26-27.

is no point in fighting with some traditional forms of protest. He asks: *What if the real power doesn't lie in the armed vehicles of police helicopters but precisely in the untouchable space of algorithms?* This position between real and artificial is exactly what we need to understand.

Where do you ease your anger if not on the streets? I am asking you again, where do you ease your anger if you are a tree?

*As an artist, like many things I couldn't imagine before now, it seems to me we are becoming part of a new normality. In order to examine myself, by placing my body as an object of study, all others become the rats in my research. Is that what you want to say?*⁵

The preposition 'between' is often used to separate something/someone from two similar or different states, elements, events, or times. Sometimes we refer to the word when we want to differentiate an object decisively from larger entities surrounding it, trying to converge and overlay. Formally, 'between' means that there are congruent sides that don't reach common ground in particular association with one another. The term 'in between' supposes that the subject, in this case, diverges from the surrounding realities and can be gradually attached to both. Sometimes we say 'in between' when the subject is influenced or affected by someone or something. So, we can hypothetically presume that it becomes the two, it becomes a boundary in language, system or form, or it creates a connection among them.

5 From my personal notes.

Let's not be confused here. It certainly does not mean the average – the sum divided or expressed by a typical set of data. It is more a whole, a unity of exemplary results physically bound to and equally dependent on its core. During my long research into universal questions, I have found the model I am trying to establish from many directions. Where are we? Are we in a time or place? Are we certain that we are there? Where do we want to be? Who put us there? Is there any beyond, apart from the common knowledge we all carry?

Between crises, between the creation of artworks, or simply between things happening. This is the time frame I found myself most suited to exploring and to saying as much about as I can. It can be seen as a time when someone learns about their mistakes. We will follow these mistakes through the introduction of artworks created on the way between, migratory examples, and the locals from Dobrinja, Jezevica, Pozega, and Donje Nedeljice, who struggle with external intruders who disturb the preservation of their customs.

Right after the pump in Krčagovo

I passed by the green market and went in the direction of the Aleksić Bridge. The vehicles were changing at the traffic light, just as I arrived there was a red light. I turned left and at the same time I saw a person waving in my direction. They asked if they could come in. One sat in front and the other right behind my seat. They wanted to go to the town pub. I had to go around the main street because it is always closed on the weekends. I wondered why they would travel these paltry 100 meters by taxi. I will never understand... I used my new German word 'wieso', I also replied it a few times in my head so I could remember it.

So you had to go all the way through maxi down towards the bus station then along the Kej to the Hotel Zlatibor, then to turn around and park on the main street. Of course it's the weekend and the main street is closed so they should walk another 30-40 meters or so. It's not even at the exit next to the bars, but more down below.

While I was thinking about it for a few moments, I also adjusted my seat and noticed that the person from the right was staring at me.

He said: Professor, is that you? (For several months I have been working as a teacher in the city gymnasium, while also working as a taxi driver).

Then he added: I didn't know that you are working in a taxi! So how's it

going, did you earn something?

It's not about the money, I told them. I continued: this comes to me as a relaxation from everyday life. It's nice to drive and earn money at the same time, when and where I meet someone, talk to a stranger and so on.

So for how long have you been here [in the taxi]?

I confirmed by wandering my head left [and] right, hm, around six months! Although that was not true either, it is true that I worked for about a year and a half. And that was part of my plan, to collect money and run away (as what would people say).

We arrived at our destination, there was no more time to talk, 1.5 min ride. Enough time to smoke a quick cigarette for them, so they closed their windows.

They wished me a safe journey and paid 150 dinars. About 90 cents, one bottle of beer I thought if you would walk the distance, some more CO₂ in the atmosphere.

But also more money for me I said.⁶

6 From my personal notes.

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Migration

Even before the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the bloody conflicts in that civil war, people felt the need to flee from uncertainties, destruction, and insecurity. There were changes in the living environment, harsh living conditions, and immigration; some were affected by all three. During the period of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the ideology of self-management was strong, and many collectives were launched both domestically and internationally. Many bilateral agreements were signed at the time, as the country became an important member of the Non-Aligned Movement, enabling various companies from the branches of industry and economy to hire new people, who could then travel abroad. For most people, this was a possibility for a new life, but for others, it was a chance to escape misery. There were different waves in which people moved, especially in the early 1960s and the late 1970s. People went to Western Europe, sometimes via overseas routes. Like the majority, they left because of poverty, insecurity, and unemployment, which undermined the image of the Yugoslav social space that provided equal opportunities for everyone and created an idyllic image of equal rights for everyone. That picture was, of course, wrong. Later, these exact insecurities led to the implementation of some nationalist ideas that moved a very large number of people toward new questions of independent statehood and the subsequent independence of the

so-called republics of the Yugoslav space, thus starting unstoppable processes that led to bloody conflicts and major political and social changes. In this place of corruption, political and domestic violence, nationalism, and patriarchy, I was born.

[illegible]

There is nothing left of the 1990s that I remember. Some family moments, reflections on things around me, going out, traveling, maybe those things that changed me remain in my memory. Maybe the sounds of sirens, destruction, red-orange light in the sky, the sounds of whistling bombs, going to school through the woods and byways, hiding and escaping from reality. This escape was my only salvation at that time, but even today, I tend to migrate to my own imagination and play with reality and memory, considering what is left, what is still to be discovered, and other such questions. I usually don't go that deep into memories. Sometimes I'm afraid of them.

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Both during and after the war of the 1990s, people from the Balkan area were noticeably infected by outrage about the war and waited endlessly for their countries to set up a clear future empowerment program to transition from the previous communist regime to new democratic parties. Large numbers of people, including refugees and those without secure households, left their countries in search of better employment. The waves of migrations were preceded by shortages of the basic necessities of life, a lost sense of institutional existence, as well as the loss of the foundations of democracy and healthy human values. Some settled in large Western cities, others on the periphery of other countries throughout Northern European states and continental Europe.

There is a large area
the border. Walking by the empty
chance to get closer to our desti
could meet, not a single animal,
landscape from all sides. We trie
deserted land without any clue wh
empty stomach we struggle to va
thoughts we have in our minds. S
along the way but the pervading s
by the river. We knew that we can
this new obstacle for us seems in

a of land over there, just across
houses, down the road we saw our
ination. Not a single person we
only undescribably and vivid
ed to designate our path among
that will happen. Exhausted with
ainly forget and get rid of the
mell of scorched land we inhaled
silence ended up with us standing
me her for a reason, passing over
mpossible.

The war divided people, and from this division came a new vision for political parties and expectations for new democracies, stable governments, and opportunities for everyone. During this transitional period, most political parties in Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia still used the war narrative to blur the issues they were struggling with. Most of the issues were economic and political. The imbalance of power created a void between legislation and justice, which was filled by domestic and international corruption.

We certainly cannot cover all the examples of migration here, but some are worth mentioning because they are essential to create a larger picture of the problem. For instance, it's important to note the exodus happening within the countries of Saharan Africa and the significant influx of migrants not only across the Mediterranean Sea but also through Turkey and Greece. This newly created route, the so-called "Balkan route," stretches to countries such as Turkey, Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia, all the way to the borders of the European Union. However, this route is a bit less intensively traveled than it was before.

In recent years, there has been continuous emigration from the Balkans to EU Member States such as Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania. Others followed political disturbances such as the 'yellow revolution' or the so-called '**Duck Revolution**'⁷ in 2018. These were the results of

7 This refers to the revolution in Belgrade prompted by the destruction of a large part of the city for the construction of the 'Belgrade on Water' project, later called the Belgrade Waterfront. "For the last three years, the members of the Initiative 'Don't give (we) to Belgrade' made thousands of objections to strategic urban planning documents, gathered in a common front rare experts who had the courage to criticize the controversial project Belgrade on the water like the Academy of Architecture of Serbia, drew the attention of the public to the opening of the illegal Sava Nova tavern, the installation of illegal masts along Savamala, published the Initiative's newsletter in which they explained what was murky in Belgrade on the water, analyzed important documents related to this project, filed reports against illegal actions, blew the whistle,

populist parties spread across the Balkan countries. The October 5th Revolution (the fall of Milosevic), nationalistic parties and division in Bosnia, and populist governments in Croatia and Serbia are just some examples of divisions hidden under the veil of left-wing revolutions.



Protest of the initiative “We are not drowning Belgrade”, February 6, 2019.

In the Balkan region, we can clearly see the difference between the economic, existential migration of those who are motivated to travel by their economic situation and migrants forced into exile due to a political, economic, ecological, or other crisis caused by the wars in the 90s or other existential circumstances. Across the globe, there are three forms of migration, discussed in *Fractured Times* by Eric Hobsbawm:

gave a megaphone to those which no longer had a place on party-occupied televisions.” Mirko Rudić, “Ulicama žute patke,” *Vreme* 1373, April 27, 2017, <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/ulicama-zute-patke/>.

*There are three fairly diverse forms of **human mobility**. First of all, the normal national and international traffic, that is, travel for both business and pleasure – regular commuting aside; second, emigration and immigration, whether deliberate or enforced. But third, since the late twentieth century there has been a completely new phenomenon, which one might perhaps call transnationality: that is, people for whom the crossing of borders is of little importance, since their existence is not tied to any particular place or country.*⁸

My focus here is on the second one – enforced, constrained, or even unwilling migration – because my essential feelings are still attached to this form. I would argue that we can contribute to the argument by separating different forms of enforced migration and by trying to separate the time frames that led to this kind of migration. Examples include:

- Migration forced by education and knowledge due, for example, to the deterioration of the educational system through spheres of critical thinking and questioning reality. It's necessary to re-frame our affection for these and, above all, for the apparatus that leads to our relations to knowledge. One can say this concerns life itself because the objectivity of learning and truly understanding something is somehow missing. Overall analysis and evaluation tend to disappear in everyday experience. The question that arises is, are we truly living by not knowing?
- Migration forced by war and the post-war circumstances. In the Balkans, we can see how messages and memories of the past affect the future. The post-apocalypse is that relationship and its

⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2013), 21.

images that come from the past as a banner or poster of reality. They express the image from the past just as illusions generalize the view of the majority, especially in negative contexts. For example, what is important to the people is reduced to the basic needs of water, shelter, and clothing. I would rephrase these as food, homes, and commodities.

- Migration forced by enthusiasm for something better. I feel that many of us migrants living in foreign countries can relate similarly to this. Forced interest, in particular, is nothing new; advertisements, commercials, movies, and the internet have shown us what the future should look like. As such, the masses who want to take responsibility for their liberation tend to be interested in moving not for pleasure but to do the right thing for the sake of their future.

These three examples only refer to the post-war countries of the Balkans. I have experienced and discussed all three with others who went through the same things. It would be naive to rephrase them and give them new names because there are plenty of other examples related to the urge to do something. Naturally, moving is not determined by only one cause but by many causes combined. These three seem like common causes when we look into the historical background and the situations that led to them. Still, when we talk about the Balkans, we should not forget to differentiate the contrasts between the countries in the region and others in the West, which are huge. Some presumptions about freedom of speech and democratic values exist, at least in some corners of the free media, whereas this is not the case in the Balkans.

As of July 1, 2022⁹, the estimated population of the Republic of Serbia for 2021 was 6,834,326 (the estimate is based on the results of statistics on the population's natural movements and internal migration). Observed by gender, 51.3% (3,507,325) are women, and 48.7% (3,327,001) are men. This is a continuation of the depopulation trend, which means that the population growth rate, compared to the previous year, is negative and amounts to -9.4%.

When the social-political structure of Yugoslavia started to crumble during the 1980s, new artistic projects arrived to requisition and destabilize current political streams, such as the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK). This new Slovenian wave influenced artists across the globe, sparking new ways of seeking utopia and questions of identity and nationalism.

*The founders of **Neue Slowenische Kunst** have always emphasized the collective nature of their formation and works. Songs and multimedia composed by the Laibach multimedia group involved in the NSK project are always credited to the group collectively. So are the works of artists from the IRWIN visual art group, who never sign their work individually (instead, they use a stamp or certificate). Fancy an autograph? If you receive one from Laibach, it will read "Laibach" in a distinctive, naive typeface.*¹⁰

When I first read Milorad Belancic's *Death of a Painting/Image*¹¹ and then later understood the philosophy and complexity of the IRWIN

9 Statistics provided by Statistical Office of the republic of Serbia <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/180107?languageCode=en-US>

10 Agnieszka Sawala, "Stateless Passport to Utopia," 3 Seas Europe, October 17, 2022, <https://3seaseurope.com/neue-slowenische-kunst-passport-nsk-slovenia/>.

11 Milorad Belancic, *Smrt slike: Oglеди iz filozofije umetnosti* (Belgrade: Zuhra, 2007).

group and their thoughts about the image (a space which is never neutral and always within the connotation of an outer space), it made me believe that their migratory approach in their artistic practice was more like a prediction for the upcoming decades. It sounds like the IRWIN group predicted the future. Or were they the mirror reflection of the forthcoming war in Yugoslavia and its nationalistic thriving among different groups across the Balkans? We will never know. History is just trying to repeat itself.

The reality on the borders of Kosovo and Serbia is about to become a picture of the despair into which these two countries have fallen. Recent incidents with hooligans in Croatia and Bosnia have threatened to spill over into Serbia, where intolerance toward others has reached boiling point. The possibility of having a normal life is a question of having an EU passport or not. Become a migrant or drown in the burden of the times in which we live.

The impossibility of action is not just an isolated case in Serbia and other countries in the region. The impossibility of freedom of choice and solving the issues of the ecosystem and the society in which you live has become a new, unfathomable political paradigm. Multiply that with the colonialism of international companies that threaten to remove even a bit of that freedom found in the hills and fields of certain areas or corners of natural beauty looked after by the peasants and ordinary local people, and you will get a result or a choice that is not easy to deal with at all. Migration is no longer a choice or a set of circumstances; it has almost become the only way.

Home

Sorry that I don't have any particular answer on this. It's a long journey in my head, emotionally and physically...

Word HOME for me has no meaning, but I am still sad looking at someone who might be sick of nostalgia from home which I never had. I asked myself many times if Home, Kuca, Dom, Land, Heimat really exist, and why are we still constrained from the fear of losing it. I lost it years ago, or even I forgot about it. I just want to be happy every day in the different homes I create, the atmosphere and the feeling it brings with me inside or outside.

Home has to begin somewhere and to exist, I think I abandoned my home a long time ago, I didn't have enough energy to rebuild it since it was destroyed by the others before me...

I was just a tenant there...¹²

12 From my personal notes.

HOME

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Departure from Home

Fuck, we hugged, and then I went down the lower stairs. I didn't want to turn around. But when she said, "Let me splash some water," she filled that pot full of water and splashed it down in front of her so that it all poured out.¹³

Pouring water is a sign of success and luck on a future journey through the unknown. It's one of the old customs preserved among the older population. I also received an icon of Saint Nicholas. Although I don't remember exactly who gave it to me. Father or mother. I put it in my wallet. They told me he was a traveler too. The next morning, I was standing in front of Lidl. Another person was there selling some newspapers to the people passing by. It was raining.

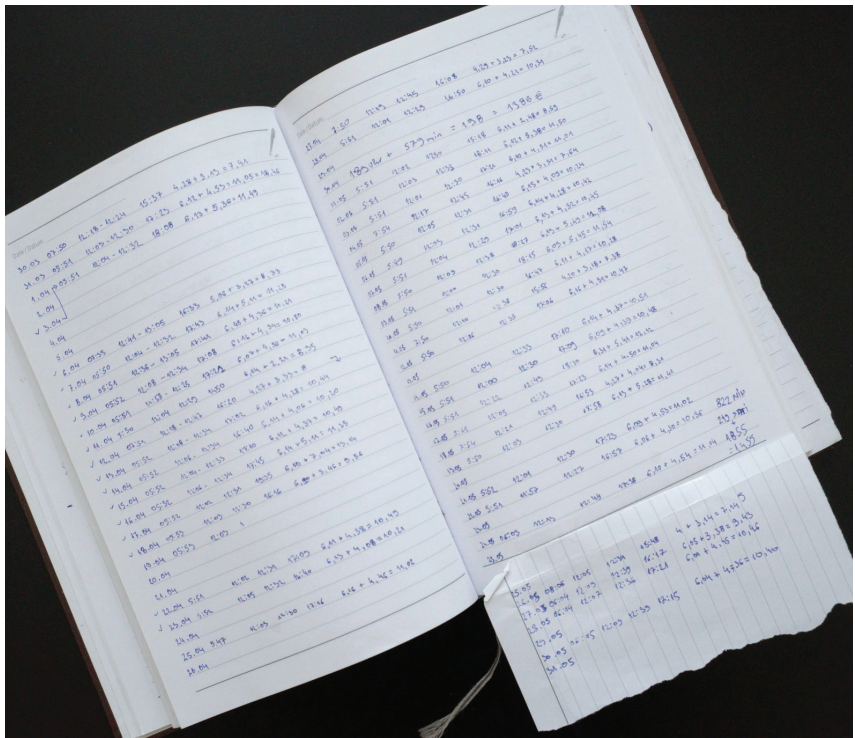
In 2018, I decided to move away from everything after spending two years as a taxi driver and curating gallery projects. For me, it was just one more step in the direction I'd been dreaming about for a long time. I packed my bag and ran to the bus station. I had this thing in my stomach, although I wasn't nervous. In a way, my gut didn't feel right. I tried to overcome this by saying that I was just excited about the whole thing. But that was a lie. I was utterly frightened.

13 From my personal notes

As someone who has traveled a lot around European countries and has personally been to Europe many times, it is never that easy due to the visa legislation for non-European travelers. I was ten years old when we first went to Greece, then Bulgaria. Some years after that, we traveled through France, Spain, and Italy, but somehow, it all disappeared from my memory. It was like another life before this big trip. I used to be part of a folk dance group, so I had the fortune to travel more than my other friends.

It was raining, but I remember the fog and the long lights from the left as we entered Vienna. It was almost 6 in the morning. Everything was wet and shiny from the lights. May 15, 2018. In the foggy distance, I remember the border and customs checks: Passports, everyone out! There was a long line toward the small shelter up front. Where are you heading? To Austria, I'm an artist, visiting museums. I was half asleep that night with my eyes open. I had strange thoughts in my mind. I remembered things from my childhood. I started questioning my new plans for Vienna when I arrived, but I was also thinking about my artwork and whether I was an artist at all.

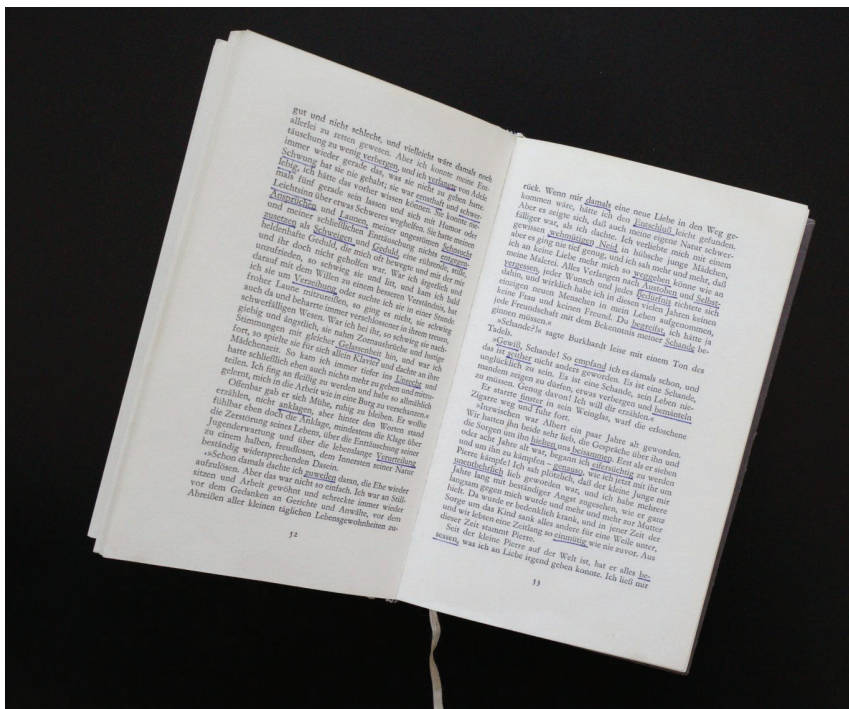
I took my bag and went from Erdberg toward the U-Bahn. I didn't bother to buy a ticket. I read on the internet they never check, but I still tried. I took my notebook just to be sure, heading to Westbahnhof. So I went to my first stay in Vienna. I was planning to stay there for a few days until I found a job and organized myself. I was telling myself I would rather have no food than go back. I had €520 with me - actually, €460 now, counting the ticket I just paid for coming here. I counted: 30 days times €10-12 makes €320, so I had €140 for the next 30 days. When I eventually found a job, I would still count the endless hours of working there.



Counting hours as an practice

Some of these habits in which I documented the reality surrounding me led to some future artworks. During the years of my artistic research, it never occurred to me to turn my written notes into an art object. The little notes that I started making after my arrival in Austria tell a story about how many hours, minutes, and seconds I worked, how much money I earned, how much rent I paid for an apartment, how much I owed or who owed me, my obligations and duties; all this is written in small letters in the pages of my notebooks. As a migrant, another step to climb was learning a new language, so I read certain books, and unfamiliar letters quickly became the object of my study, learning, and analysis. Pages and pages became a new game for me, a game I really enjoyed as I played it.

I asked questions: *Does this new context give me knowledge, or can a multitude of abstract units offer a context that leads to understanding?* This related to the underlined words from the puzzles of words I didn't understand at the time. Or even: *How do we abstract our realities, and how can we tell stories from seemingly impossible positions?* These were some of my questions during my long process of learning and questioning what I was doing. For me, abstracting reality was this uncertainty I felt from the words and knowledge I still didn't possess and how we can play with words to create new stories. The underlined words from Hermann Hesse's book *Roßhalde*, which I bought in one of the stores off Mariahilfer Strasse, are an example of that long process of learning and documenting.



An object of learning and documenting

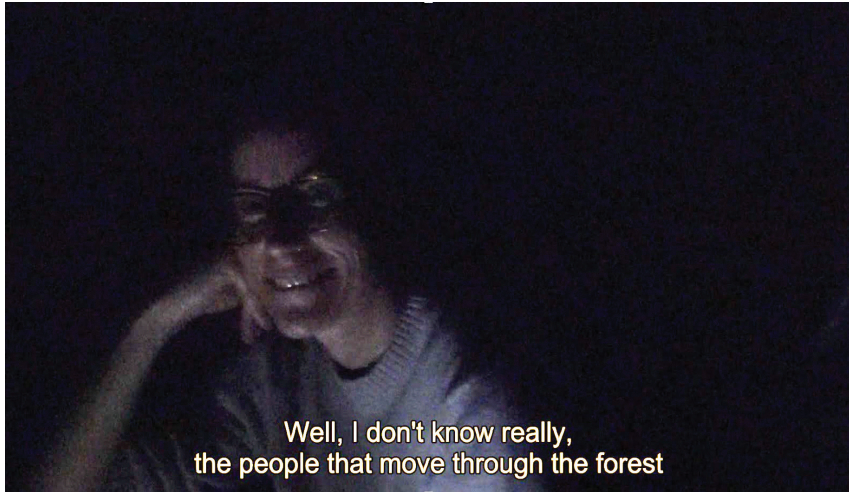
I had a constant need to document processes that led to different artistic projects. In these few years of migrating, where my artistic practice signified forms of social behaviors (sometimes I think of it not only from a personal perspective but also from the perspectives of others, my friends and colleagues; how do they interact, and who or what interferes with their individuality?), I questioned their gestures and their thoughts and incorporated them into my research. Political strategies were an important layer that added a bitter feeling by adding an understanding of the processes and combining force that made this introspective form of representation reflective. I like to think about it in a way that suggests each form of concept is a model of a medium I am using; the identity of the image is displayed in the form of texts, installations, videos, or performances. Identifying the model of presentation is a long process of obtaining a particular understanding of my life and surroundings, my status, and a potential economic, creative, or historical discourse. In the process of constructing the authentic concept of an idea or work, I am guided through the theoretical, ontological, historical, and dialectical development of different formal functions and experiences I have privileged. Post-transitional surroundings, not affiliated with a society guided by prejudices and assumptions like the one in which I grew up, can be a supreme source of countless ideas.

Since my practical approach took place in the conceptual theater of the post-war Yugoslavian space, I was guided to and addressed many members of the young generation of artists throughout the Balkans who advocated using video as a criterion for defining reality. Since I use performance as a specific object in a three-dimensional space, the installation is a construct of different appropriations and ideas or a concept that binds it all together. When shaping realities and framing artistic language through the scope of many social and spatial issues while living in a society characterized by post-truth, post-Fordism, and

phenomena of dominance, I tried to point out the life of one among many, examining situations from many perspectives, but always using a body as my language and starting position.

In the same year, 2018, I moved to Germany. We had a nice farewell party at my studio in Uzice. After working in Vienna, I collected another €500. No! That was after I bought a ticket to Hannover. But the irony was that it was all I had. I had stomach problems in the car after drinking. Same things over and over again. Hugging at the doors of an airport, my parents' unhappy faces, and an uneasy feeling in my stomach. I had no idea who Samir was. Later, I met all his friends: Sejdi Morina, Pero, Marko, and others.¹⁴

14 From my personal notes



Performance Between / video / 13:51 / 2020

In Vienna, I already understood how my research was shifting from what I was doing before toward something new. I didn't recognize what it was until I was in Germany. I was slowly documenting parts of my research. But in a new way. I was trying to examine how the language we use defines us as different but also how it can bring us closer. I questioned the interpretation of phenomena and social myths through diverse ideas influenced by ideological imperatives and how they shift traditional narratives. One of those today still affects my artworks: the question of ideology and its participation in everyday life. Can we live without ideology? This ethical ideology, the feeling of belonging to a community, a territory, is very present in Europe. Always prone to prejudices, people have this power of hidden reflections about others, especially the communities of, for example, Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats in Austria. The community among whom I live. To illustrate this feeling, I started to work on migrants. I questioned my friends about my own language, expecting them to answer me in their native language for a better understanding.

Some other artworks reflected my need to connect two realities: myself going away and my other self coming home and visiting his parents and relatives. Some experiences were shocking to me. Although, quite objectively, I tried to overcome the experiences of emotional shock I would have during these visits; as Joseph Kosuth would have said, That which expressionism in art has accustomed us has not aroused desire in me, because it only creates a bluff of emotional understanding. Just as the shocks experienced during childhood create an emotional but lasting barrier that has not yet been fully cognitively and empirically understood, so they cannot be defeated or overcome by rationale but are in some state of fetish. The fetish I tried to avoid, by signifying the importance of process in art, was to escape subjectivity; in that way, I could reflect not only on myself but also on others.



Soup video / 03:09 / FullHD / 2020

We can look at the story of departure in that way, in which I tried to represent my struggle by washing my documents so I could travel back to the EU or, in some cases, prolong my stay inside the Schengen area. As we know, Serbian citizens are not allowed to stay in the European Union for more than 90 days. This artwork consisted of three parts. In the first part, there is a series of photos of a passport that I threw in a washing machine the first day I came back home. In the second part, there is an installation of the same object. In the third part, there is a process of washing out some stuff I brought back from Germany: work clothes, shirts, and other things from my backpack.

In July 2021, during the Videopark festival in Uzice, Serbia, I performed between the Dovarje monument and the Reflektor Gallery, an old military regiment building, carrying a stone and walking with it to offer it in front of the image of Tito.



Hospitable Utopia / performance / documentation / Uzice, Serbia / July 2021

Taking the stone from the monument to the victims of the second world war, taking the stone of the earth, and carrying the memory of the victims of the long war, strongly reflected what I wanted to achieve. And maybe to prove. It may be easy to achieve, but in this country, it is very difficult to prove. As I carried the stone down the street naked, I thought about it. How the passers-by of this city will observe that numb body walking downhill with heavy steps in the hot sun and, in a way, covering part of my body with a stone, which is perhaps the most responsible for what happened to me after this performance (after this protest): the arrival of the police patrol and the writing of statements by all those present.

I somewhat suspected that my evidence was only a faint reflection and that nothing in this city would change. On the one hand, in the conversation with the curators, I mentioned the numb bodies of those people on that bare island who are naked every day and have to carry a stone in the hot sun because of their own attitude of restraint or strong opposition to the current government of the People's Liberation Republic of Yugoslavia and its commander-in-chief Josip Broz Tito. All this was mixed with the possibility that this current time is actually somehow a prison for dissenters, a prison of unfreedom and depravity, a prison of unfulfilled hopes and desires, eternal suffering and pain. That was one of the questions that I asked myself later as my thoughts drifted over the following days, whether I was in prison, in a camp. I asked: What is this world of today heading towards? Do I dare to ask, even just out of curiosity, out of interest?

How deeply I delved into the topics of local culture and tradition is perhaps most clearly reflected in my work *Circle of Hospitality*, which invites you to stretch out in a space and feel a sense of welcoming and generosity. Although the pie was spread out on the floor, it was spontaneous and sudden. There was silence. People gathered with me as we watched the thin layers of dough that gently stretched into bubbles without feeling gravity. Everything slowed down. Flour splattered in all directions and rose up above the orange light coming from the corridor. All of that somehow reminded me of when I was perhaps a small child, tall enough that my eyes were parallel to the table where my grandmother or mother used to roll out the most beautiful pieces of dough with their oily hands. And the people, the visitors, the audience, watched, with the same boyish curiosity, the long fingers holding those thin layers of dough that were about to burst from the dance happening in front of their eyes.

It's a piece of culture that he brought with him to Austria, someone said. Is this a tribute to everyone who travels and brings their recipes with them, wherever they are, a small part of the tradition that we all keep and nurture within us? The part of our heritage that is most appreciated and well-intentioned?



Video stills of the Performance 2021

I took a critical look at certain parts of the cultural tradition in order to give way to some ideas that were important or decisive to me. I made one such critical review through the prism of the works created in the forests of Gorski Kotar, the high mountains of Croatia, through which thousands of migrants find their way to the countries of Western Europe every day. Those travel directions were nothing more than a small path, barely visible to someone who happened to be in the forest for the first time. Some tracks would be almost invisible to people who do not know the forest, but not to me. I found all kinds of things there: everyday objects and items, leftover food, plastic and glass bottles, campfires, broken branches, or sometimes stacked piles of trees.





Reconstructures / interventions / objects / 2020

The critical review was based on information I received from the media, which we all have the opportunity to hear. Media and news that were by no means friendly to those people who were looking for nothing more than shelter, a hot meal, or warmth by the fire. Unfortunately, they were systematically exiled by the police, the military, and even local residents, who, on that occasion, due to insecurity and confusion, and perhaps with slightly mixed feelings, were afraid for their own existence. Images were created in the media, but various true and false stories and experiences of people who met migrants were written and told among the local population.

My work was directed in exactly that direction, toward the people living in the forest. It was addressed to them in a way to show them that they were not welcome either. Of course, my work was more directed at more accessible areas where the locals used to move, so making sculptures or obstacles in nature was a real pleasure. As such, I prevented the local population from going about their daily activities in the same way that they prevented migrants from healing their daily pains and sufferings.

All these artworks have an upward trajectory that led me to think a lot more about the things happening around me, things that I, as an individual, may not be able to influence or change. Instead, I observe the things that really concern me or the situations that affect me. The artistic projects that I have developed in these few years as an individual artist, a mirror and prism of my inner being's move toward becoming an artist with collective attitudes and reflective individuality, made me progress toward the kind of activism I possess today in which I advocate greater social awareness, mutual understanding, and support.

Linie 67B

He opened the back of his truck and told me to take the things from inside. There were some empty paper bags and a plastic chart. I packed the bags and the chart and moved toward the kebab place, where he waited for me. He had one of those lazy eyes and a strong nose, tight pants, and a white shirt. It seemed like he had some pain in his back, so he moved slowly, just trying not to show any pain to others. *Hi Milos, so es funktioniert.* He explained things to me in German, which was a new language to me, so the number of things I understood could be counted on one hand: that I could stay with him as long as I wanted, that he would give me a job, and that it wouldn't be easy work.

I didn't ask much, but I had plenty of questions that I was afraid to ask. For me, the only necessary thing was getting a decent job so I could stay here. That's what I told him. I even had a small note so I could remember it while talking to him, maybe just to impress him with my level of German at that time. *Ich brauche einen Job, damit ich hier bleiben kann.*

We moved through the metal doors in front of the big Strobl sign. We entered, and from the very first moment, I could smell the odor of rotten flesh, but it wasn't the flesh of a man – it was the flesh of fruits and vegetables. All the way to the end of the room was a hazy yel-

lowish light with folds of shadowed areas covered with pallets piled and stacked on top of each other. I was walking between the potatoes and lemons along the corridor on the left, and guys were standing on ladders, checking the quality of the products. At one point, someone looked down and said, *Hey, Tokman, are you bringing in a new employee?* I felt fulfilled, considering that I didn't know until now that I would be employed right away, but I saw a chance, a desire to achieve something, a glimmer of hope.

We climbed the stairs to the second floor, where there were lines for sorting. Numerous people were there, a lot of young people, although there was also one elderly lady. I was told to leave the cleaning brushes and paper bags for fruits in the cooler. Samir said to Tokman: *Wir haben alles, nimm was du willst.* Tokman took those bags, redistributed some of the cucumbers, avocados, peppers, and lemons in each one, took some onions, and headed for the exit. I stayed with Samir as I was told he would explain how this business worked to me.

Taking five minutes of Samir's time, I learned to sort fruits and vegetables. By taking a kilo of lemons from the top of the pallet and squeezing the ends of each one with your fingers, you could distinguish the soft, rotten lemon from a healthy, good one. After a few of those rotten remains, I thought, *How have I never smelled a rotting lemon in my life, and how bad can it smell?* Later in the day, tricolor peppers also arrived, but that's another story.

Samir took a lemon, took a knife from his pocket, and cut it in half. He took one half and squeezed it directly into the plastic bottle that he used for drinking, and he took the other half in his hands and rubbed it on his body, on his face and under his eyes, on his eyelids, and on his forehead. He was short and full of energy. Compared to me, he

seemed like a younger brother in terms of height. We were almost of the same dark complexion, with black hair, hairy arms, and the hands of a worker. Although he looked much older than me, I asked him, *Wie alt bist du?* He told me he was 23 years old. He continued with a counter question and other questions that interested him.

What I was interested in was his experience of coming to Austria. It seemed to me that we were in the same unenviable position. But it was only an illusion. At the age of 16, he traveled over four thousand kilometers in the following two years until he reached Greece, where he applied for asylum. That was how he later arrived in Austria and found any kind of work. I thought about myself and my situation, which at that moment looked and seemed much easier than his.

The daily shifts stretched endlessly, sometimes for 16 hours, and it was continuous work. In that work, there were not enough moments for discussion. Our bosses did not like it, and silence was preferred, which bothered me as a talkative person. I tried in every way to criticize such an attitude because I considered it slave-like and inappropriate for the country in which I was. But looking at my hourly wage of five euros per hour, I didn't really have the courage to change my situation. I was satisfied with my job.

Getting up at 4:30 a.m. preparing to go to work, sleepless days, none of that bothered me, but the impossible situation of getting out of the vicious circle, or the triangle, or whatever you want to call it, that moment when you become part of the disinterested crowd, the crowd that is aware that there is no way out, or maybe there is, but you don't see it or can't change certain things in life, the moment when you feel disappointed, hurt and insulted, when you realize the reality of the situation – for me, that moment was when I got on the 67B bus. That was

that moment for me. It was painful to see those same gray, blinded, deceived, tortured, tired faces of those same workers who traveled to the Grossmarkt on the same transport every morning. Someone breaks down in the sadness of that situation and tries to work on himself, read today's newspaper, or, even in that misery, find the strength to do something. I studied slowly but surely, every morning on that four-five-minute ride from Reumannplatz to Grosmarkt. I didn't want to come to terms with the situation that it didn't matter to me and that I would give in to some dream to put me to sleep or that silence would numb me.

These tired passengers are invisible to the rest of society – at least the majority. We could get to know their wishes, their forebodings, their hopes, their culture and tradition, their view of the world, what has changed them, where they come from, what their plans are, whether they have any at all, or whether they live day by day. We can get acquainted with the way in which they coped with their new situation. Wait. Did I always only want to understand myself? Observing those faces, I realized that, personally, I felt obliged to express this journey, which really became a part of my research.

The Age of Renewal

Like any other city in the western Balkans, there is a lack of cultural exchange, inclusion of cultural workers, and dissemination of knowledge in the fields of contemporary art, cinema, literature, etc. Non-funded agencies, non-governmental associations, and alternative groups were the only key actors in this field by providing and sharing adequate social networks. Governmental institutions were not efficient enough to provide support as the main bearer of cultural awareness and recognition. Quite a lot of associations were insufficiently capable of internationalizing their projects due to the absence or lack of real strategies or the sanctions during the 1990s, which reflected a situation for years to come. However, many also just crumbled under the political and bureaucratic difficulties after the democratic establishment came to power in the 2000s. Small cities on the outskirts of large centers like Zagreb, Sarajevo, and Belgrade are said not to have much to offer. However, this is questionable due to the fact that many eminent scientists, artists, historians, humanists, and educators come from rural areas. For them, the problem is actually a lack of larger environments with many other similar people who share the same values or are educated in the same disciplines.

To some extent, this was the goal of our group, which was first established in October 2016: to empower artists, cultural workers, philosophers, and other interested parties who come from these regions to become the key factor of cultural advancement. This part of Serbia has always been a detached part of a larger organism. It has always been characterized by considerable emigration toward big cities due to better work, education, health care, and the like. Through this empowerment, for a while, we tried to support those who need space to work, for whom mutual help and support are of great importance, who will flourish in a new artistic space and develop according to their needs and interests.



In 2017, the doors were opened to the first artistic studio/gallery space in an old military building in Uzice: the Reflektor Gallery. The renewal of the gallery space began as a departure from the bureaucratic and patronized political experience with which we were already very

15 Photo by Sreten Vukovic 13.11.2017 <http://www.seecult.org/vest/kritika-na-delu-predstavlja-uvuu-i-galerija-reflektor>

familiar. The goal was directed toward the occupation of space and a self-organized institutional framework on which we could work and build our community.



Members of the Reflektor Gallery: Dejan Clement, Aleksandar Dimitrijevic
and Milos Vucicevic¹⁶

In the beginning, there were three of us. Over time, the group grew into more than 40 permanent, affiliated, visiting, or residential people with whom we were constantly in contact in terms of coming up with future plans, conceptual projects, and the like. There were a lot of philosophers, theorists, artists, writers, and others. It was everything that an art center is and everything that an art center would very much like to have. I say "was" because, unfortunately, the great majority bypassed us and found themselves insecure in the new socio-political climate that has taken over Serbia. The subjugated mentality forced

16 Cvetkovic 02.09.2017 www.blic.rs - <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/srbija/kasenu-pretvorili-u-galeriju-umetnici-i-daci-spasili-ruinu-u-uzicu/g0qgm8f>

many to flee the country due to the occupation of thought, truth, and freedom of speech.

During the six months from November 2016, we managed to equip the gallery space, which would later become not only the center of contemporary art in this part of western Serbia but also the central gathering place for artists from almost all the former countries of Yugoslavia in the Western Balkans. We are still fundraising, however; unfortunately, the future ahead of us is by no means bright. New crises and cuts in the budgets of local companies and city institutions keep us on our guard from complete collapse. Recently, the persistent and money-savvy owners of foreign companies are patiently bribing the remaining spaces of this building, which we previously occupied, rearranged, and renovated into something that has become recognizable as a place of creativity.



Community members involved during the period of renewal

Our labor that inexorably exhausted our ambitions has turned into abstinence and indifference to everything that happens to us. Due to the lack of assertiveness of the local people, this area is threatened with complete decay and occupation by insufferable greedy rulers, bribed by the authorities, and by companies that have set their eyes on this 6400 square meter area.

Due to the constant need to internationalize ourselves even more and lay the foundations for future action, we decided on a new platform that would fill the gap of what we lacked, which was even greater visibility and evaluation from a large number of experts from abroad. The Videopark Festival was one choice that had far-reaching consequences for our engagement on the international stage. Many panel discussions and presentations were held, and the participation of local people increased, as did their interest in the festival. Its visibility has increased, and the festival now receives over 1,000 applications every year and has hosted over 40 artists from all over the world in the last five years.

At the Videopark Festival, topics were always closely related to specific issues on the local level that influence the bigger picture of a whole region. Topics are representations of different ways of rethinking and questioning social, economic, political, or spiritual issues, everyday life within the community, the operating system of the collective, and the reality of the individual. For three years, the themes were intended for authors questioning the post-truth society. These included the relationships between the present and the past, emotions and facts, reality and imagination, themes such as body movement, the reflection of a body in social relations, and rethinking how and when boundaries start shaping our social and artistic character, where they create new worlds, and somehow building them on the experiences of previous ones. What is it that defines us as a person? Whether they were real or imaginary boundaries, whether they were internal, psychological,

or socio-political, subversive or subliminal, they always awakened in us the urge to jump over that wire fence and enter the field of a new reality. Who can say today that they are the protagonist in the modern world? Has art experienced its truth, that is, its end?



One of the days of the Videopark Festival

In 2021, we had more than 20 artists in the residency. That year, we chose the topic of "hospitable utopia" because the shock that resulted from being locked in our homes, and the disconnection from our neighbors and friends brought a lot of sadness into our lives. The re-examination of various utopias in this area at the end of the Second World War led me to think about the specificity of space through historical sequences and various events that were an integral part of the local population from this area. The lives that we live in these marginalized areas can be very closely connected with other people who inhabit other areas. We may not share the same spaces, but we certainly live in the same utopias.

The name itself, "Hospitable Utopia," was supposed to encourage the artists to think about what "Hospitable" actually means. From the position of an artist from abroad, it was aimed to question the way in which they found themselves in it. Does that Utopia exist? In what way? Does that hospitality still shape some prejudices among locals in the city or in the villages on the slopes of Užice? On the other hand, as I have already mentioned, the turmoil of the historical and political divisions decades ago resulted in a civil war. So the idea was to research how that hospitality of the new nationalistic ideology we embraced impacted our lives. Maybe the crucial question was: What can we learn from the past? It seems that the history of the Balkans is only reserved for this region, but could the same turmoil happen somewhere else?



In 2022, we started thinking about migration and how it affects local communities, but we also questioned what would happen to us if the new state policies were implemented. Promoting mineral extraction companies would contribute to more local migration and to sacrificing

more nature, affecting locals' quality of life and making it even worse. "Migratory Anthropocene" was thus our topic for 2022. Local media was flooded with the news and the number of jobs these large companies would provide. The ministry's assertion that there were many benefits was hardly accepted by the local communities, which would have been negatively affected if the project continued. Similar projects are planned or have already been implemented in Spain, Covas do Barroso, Portugal, Bolivia, and Chile, which began extracting the world's largest lithium ore reserves several years ago. For decades, industries and technologies relating to sustainable energy, solar panels, electric vehicles, or a new green revolution have been unbalanced with the world's natural resources and the material needed for continuous production.



During the days of the residency



Another part of this topic was raising awareness among the local population by disseminating knowledge and good practices. We all know that these big industries use the same fossil fuels to start their engines and extract lithium from the ground so they can continue processing the ores for later production. One of these industries and corporations is Rio Tinto, which is well-known for the pollution caused by its process of extracting minerals. This process is quite poisonous due to its polluting mediums. They also bribe local politicians with so-called “corporate soft power” by combining governmental power with the repression of locals and by spreading fear about protesting or images of those who decide to stay and cultivate their land having no future.

Utopia and Reflection before Apocalypse

*In Yunnan they do not speak of the Fish but of the Tiger of the Mirror. Others believe that in advance of the invasion we will hear from the depths of mirrors the clatter of weapons.*¹⁷

Sometimes I think about Yunnan as the place that awaits things that should have happened but didn't. Instead, we are living inside the mirror and becoming a reflection of the world in which we live. And in the mirror, we see imprisoned shining creatures and an intimidating future. How did we transform the story and memory by emphasizing its motive that one day, they can become scary and more alarming, a myth coming through the barrier amplified by its intensity? Where did this information travel, or how long has it awaited its own emplacement? Imagined forms over the border we created as a society.

One may ask these questions and still get no answer. However, there are dozens of books explaining how different narratives are used against almost all rational dialogue that blend reality, creating a vacuum in communication that might deconstruct opposing forms. On the other hand, every battle must have good and evil. It's a prerequisite of a good and memorable story. But who talks about the battle if we can

17 José Luis Borges, "Fauna of Mirrors," *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 105-106.

dance to the sun? We are still afraid of something, we are still divided, and we are still looking around, not asking "why" but "who"? In waiting for the Messiah, we have forgotten that we can become one. What matters is the comprehensive reader, viewer, or cultural and social subject who might build the bridge on the path of understanding and responsibility. What does Tiger represent, or who might the Tiger be? Can we comprehend our consciousness influenced by the reality that surrounds us? Are we guided by schemas and doctrines? What is our motive that will drain out our anxiety? How can we picture delusion, the concept of hidden truth, opposed and evoked between different and vast facts that lie beyond the curtain? Yunnan is the place where I was born. Its location is constantly shifting away from the people who might reveal the truth. No one seems to care anymore. We all drifted from the highest peaks of the mountains into the depth of the oceans. Yunnan is a metaphor for something yet to come, unknown, or still far from our senses, untouchable but imaginable.

*This time, this time, what we feel, what we see, what we live, is the time of Horror*¹⁸

Marijana with the smile on her face

No past historical event has brought us so many ambiguities, departure relations, and uncertainties as the time in which we live now. Maybe it's too egotistical to say this, but can you imagine the future we have coming? The time when we get to know our innermost self. The

18 Marijana Trbović Petković from Loznica, Serbia, one of the activist of the organisation "We Don't give Jadar".

utopian society, a *fact* or a *lie* once created in the determination to produce and be more wealthy, suddenly disappeared under the catastrophic changes to living, existential, and environmental conditions.

*It just came to us. I was a kid. Maybe I don't remember much, but we didn't have so much plastic.*¹⁹

Dragan with raised arms and a face of despair

We bought the morning newspaper Danas. In it, there is my picture and a poster above my head saying I want culture, not dictatorship.

It's great when you want something, you feel fulfilled to do it. In 2017, we took the path of protest against the regime. Eh... now. For as long as I can remember, I've known that protests are resolved at the beginning or end of the year, not in the middle of summer when half the people are on vacation, or don't want to leave their air-conditioned homes. But there was something in the air, some freedom.

In our lives, we aren't used to changing a lot; we aren't used to changing our environment or our jobs because we lack the courage to adjust, adapt, and question things beyond what we already know. We don't question things and subjects unrelated to us, our daily routine, or our life cycles. We still haven't deciphered the global situation, the destruction of the environment, which leads to the annihilation of other people's lives and homes while essential resources are being exploited and basic existential positions are being ruined. In various countries, people experience war, their homes are destroyed, and the lives of their relatives are taken, and many of them are unable to live in such radically changing societies.

Long time ago, an image was created to explain the Balkan region, and its political and philosophical framework has been constructed and contextualized in many ways. For example, one of them is Balkanization, *the division of a multinational state into smaller ethnically homogeneous entities. The term is also used to refer to ethnic conflict within multiethnic states.*²⁰ Using appropriate language to express ourselves is not always a good idea; sometimes, certain words have a deeper meaning, or sometimes they're too superficial and simplified. We read images and listen to the media news every day; even if we don't want to, it's everywhere. *Vernacular language*²¹, according to Ivan Illich, is the model of language we learn in school and among family and friends. The one that is the most common, our mother tongue. A language of professional speakers. And yet, aren't we all familiar with the language of images? Why do we still not have an adequate system to teach us how to read visual images? Is our conversation related more profoundly than ever to images, or is this just a false notion?

20 Robert W. Pringle, s.v. "Balkanization," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified April 9, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Balkanization>.

21 Ivan Illich, *Beyond Economics and Ecology: The Radical Thought of Ivan Illich* (New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2013), 45.

In Yunnan, like everywhere else, people are automatically adapted to the images they get from the news, their memories of the past, and the future. All combine the radically constructed language of media, designed to serve the purpose of the market society. We, the audience, like those people from Jadar, Jezevica, Donja, Gornja Dobrinja, and Nedeljice, are no different, whether we are provincialized or urban. We live in a new inter-imagery hub of endless possibilities, following the script of editors or, in this case, political machinery combined with international consortiums. Companies like Rio Tinto, Sava Mining, Euro Lithium Balkan, and many others are intentionally well-entangled with the news agencies and their broadcasters on one side and local oligarchs and governmental structures on the other. To find our utopia, we need to look back. Images of the past could give us answers because Yunnan wasn't created recently and will continue to reflect the future, which is still unknown.

Post-Apocalyptic Landscapes

Edward Soja in his draft of postmodern geographies says that today it is easier to understand time than space: It is rather the space than the time, which remains hidden in its consequences, rather the making of geography, than the making of history, which makes us see the practical and theoretical world. There, we experience the sites as icons (Ground ZERO), not as representation, but as symbolic expression, which establishes a distance from the usual and centralized approach. The sociological pattern we use, in order to summarize the phenomena, is being determined by the divide of physical space and the territory of social experience.²²

In many ways, we can understand the ecological issues we are facing, like territorial, geographical, and sociological ones, like pulsating paradigms that are woven into the very core of our societal construction. What amazes me is how the architectural approach generates the image of the modern, local, specific, or global representation of different sites, symbolization, and many other aspects that help us to understand their semantics. On a global level, we see this effect on large new sites which establish streams rather than territory, consumption instead of development. Large areas are becoming more technology-driven hubs, a digital network that fundamentally challenges our relation to our surroundings.

22 Lydia Hausteine, "Global Icons," in *Present Continuous Past(s): Media Art. Strategies of Presentation, Mediation and Dissemination*, eds. Ursula Frohne, Mona Schieren, and Jean-François Guillon (Vienna: Springer, 2006), 84-85.

In local development, we have a more natural approach that results in more intermediary relations, including all sorts of forms of energy usage and traditional customs. For centuries, many civilizations arose in the Mediterranean basin, which provided suitable land for diverse agricultural cultures. Strategies that people developed in this time were somehow forgotten after the radicalization, expansionism, and progressive capitalistic utopia of the global economy in which we live. Its exploitative and extractive way leads to mass extinction and eschatological threats like climate crisis, rapid deviation of land, mass culture, droughts, etc. All of this was suddenly confronted with the new crisis yet to come: climate change.

We can examine different manifestations of the apocalypse. We can also think about the Balkans as a post-apocalyptic image shaped by memories of the past that intersect with the present. Often, these intersections were manifested by war and genocide, but they also include artistic practices that were often a precursor to future political resistance.

The Case of Bolivia

Salar de Uyuni was mostly frequented by tourists who traveled long distances and were fascinated by this natural wonder. They would strive to capture the most breathtaking photos of the magnificent landscape. The hundreds of square kilometers of salt in this area hid one secret: millions of tons of a mineral for which demand was constantly increasing, namely, lithium.

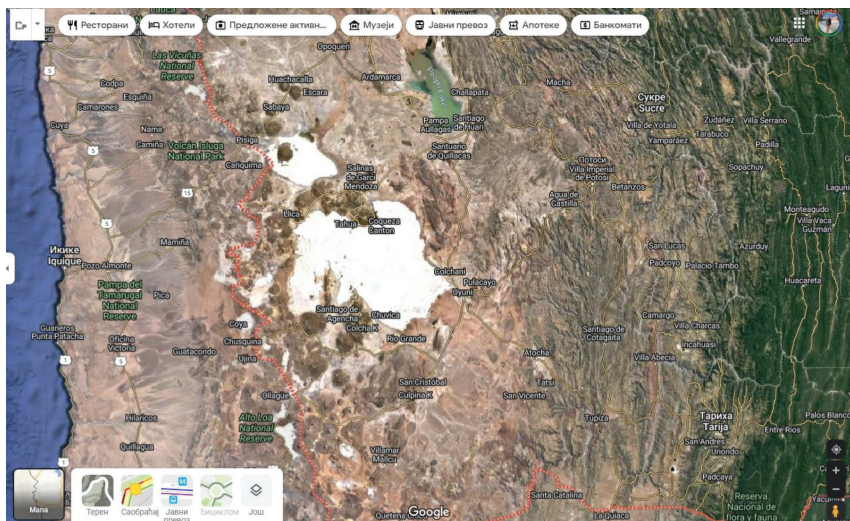


Image of Salar de Uyuni

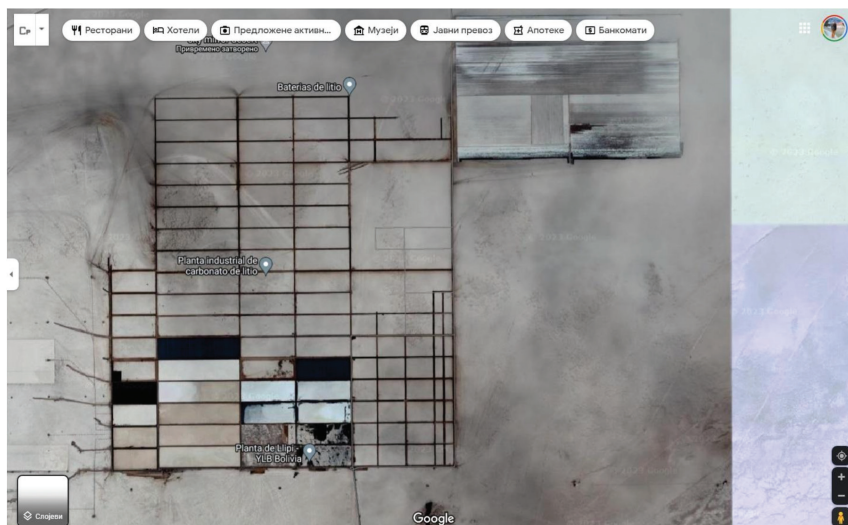


Image of Salar de Uyuni (one of the extraction fields)²³

At the end of the 1980s, a mineral was found in the salt flats of Bolivia that, by all accounts, will have a significant impact on capital investments in this region in the coming decades. New chances, secure jobs, and a better standard and quality of life have been provided for the local population.

In the years when mechanisms and methods were invented to make batteries last longer, to be of better quality, and to have a higher voltage, priority was given to lithium. Due to its composition, it has a light weight, lasts for a long time, and there is a lot of it. This made it ideal for the coming decades when a boom in products such as mobile phones, laptops, and electric cars was expected.

23 Images downloaded from <https://www.google.com/maps>

An increase in jobs was also expected after such a discovery, a true miracle that befell Bolivia and the countries surrounding this salt flat: Chile and Argentina. For countries struggling with poverty, the moment of recovery had come. You could find all this in the newspapers and on the news on the state television channels of the time. Of course, this accelerated economic growth was felt and demand for lithium grew, as did revenues, but not as suddenly as expected. In other words, wages were not raised excessively. The people who lived in the surrounding areas affected by these mines were natives, but all the money flowed into the pockets of local oligarchs who underestimated the local population.

As expected, lithium mining is a very dirty business. Therefore, in such environments, which are steeped in corruption, it is difficult to expect some degree of protection at work. Moreover, the impact of lithium extraction on the local and ecological environment is so great that its production is one of the deadliest for the local ecosystem. Just one ton of lithium requires about five hundred thousand tons of water. This contributes to even more accelerated climate change and reduced air and water quality, both locally and regionally.

Therefore, the indigenous peoples of this region only saw the destruction of their ecosystem. They wondered what would happen if production stopped one day. Everyone would forget about them, and what would remain is a dirty and poisoned environment where life would no longer be possible. Therefore, Evo Morales, the indigenous leader of the Movement for Socialism, introduced a decree that nationalized the entire production process, thus preventing illegal exploitation and diversion of funds out of the country. A lot more is now being invested in the local communities and groups that live near this mine, and the benefits provided to the people of the surrounding villages and

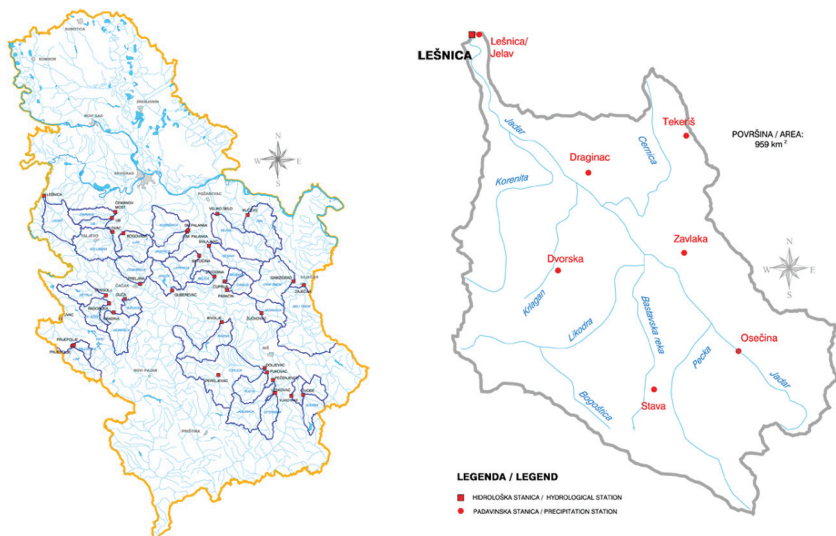
towns are improving environmental awareness and quality of life. The government of Bolivia has also started to invest a lot more resources in the issue, hoping that a disaster can be avoided by hard work and a different approach to solving these problems.

Private businesses have always promoted the story of earning opportunities and a higher standard of living, but this comes at the expense of the quality of the ecological system in which we live. The narrative created is very harmful, but it has always been suitable for some countries that do not have a clearly built system of laws that can help them prevent exploitative activities initiated from outside. The local population always sees only a small part of the profits they earn with their hands, but very little of it is wasted. Instead, it is invested in local industries that pursue modern technologies.

The Case of Serbia

Rio Tinto's "Jadar" project plans to mine lithium in the area of the Jadar river near Loznica in western Serbia. In 2004, this British-Australian company found a deposit of Jadarite, a newly discovered lithium and boron mineral, named after the area it was found by the Jadar. After the Drina, it is one of the most important rivers in the Loznica region. Mild in nature, the Jadar basin has an asymmetric shape, making it suitable for making productive sediments for the surrounding fields and the entire region. Major floods have been recorded every ten years, but since the cutting of the meander at the end of the Second World War, the floods have been milder and more controlled.

The site contains the largest known amounts of lithium in Europe and is currently the only site in the world containing lithium borate. Extraction was planned from 2026-27, or perhaps even sooner. Rio Tinto has already bought most of the land, so extraction could begin soon after obtaining the necessary permits and building the mine. As the preparations proceeded, there were several months of protests by environmental associations in 2021, after which the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, confirmed on January 20, 2022, that the government would not proceed with the plan to extract the resource. He then called for the cancellation of any such agreement and the spatial plan of the "Jadar" special purpose area.



Maps of the Republic Hydrometeorological Institute. regions of Serbia as well as a map of the region around the Jadra area and the river valley.²⁴

Weeks melted into months as information poured in from official state channels about the loss of more than one billion euros that Rio Tinto would have invested in Serbia. After the disagreement with the official rhetoric that came from the expert commissions appointed to defend Rio Tinto, academics and scientists fought to have their voices heard. As such, they continued to spread their view of the country's situation using a vast spectrum of alternative sources to disseminate their reasons for being against such an irresponsible act.

In January 2022, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić announced that there was no longer a contract with Rio Tinto. "We put an end to Rio Tinto in Serbia. It's over," Prime Minister Brnabić said, and Rio Tinto then announced that it respected the decision of the government to annul the said decree.²⁵

²⁴ <https://www.hidmet.gov.rs/latin/prognoza/hbv/index.php>

²⁵ "Serbia revokes Rio Tinto lithium mine permits following protests," BBC



Highway blockade at Sava Center November 2022²⁶

Rio Tinto tried to support such decisions of the government even though it was not in their interest. They agreed that they had a responsibility to maintain the already purchased objects in the best possible order, to try to maintain communication with the communities living near the locality, and to take care of the preservation of the environment. This was an extremely inappropriate announcement, especially since, after a few months, both the government of Serbia, albeit covertly, and the company continued their activities toward resolving the dispute.

Ultimately, all the decisions that were canceled after the protests, including the revocation of the extraction permit, the plan for the

News, January 21, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60081853>.

26 Vesna Lalić 2022 <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/godisnjica-prve-blokade-puteva-protiv-rudarenja-litijuma-sutra-okupljanje-ispred-zgrade-vlade/>

project's program and implementation, and the spatial plan for the city of Loznica, have now been reinstated again.

The Alliance of Environmental Organizations of Serbia (SEOS)²⁷, of which "Ne damo Jadar"²⁸ is a part, submitted a list of demands to the government of Serbia on September 14, the first of which refers to Rio Tinto. The issue of lithium mining in Serbia was brought up again in the fall of 2022 by politicians, less than a year after it had been formally ended, which is why environmental protection organizations are announcing new actions.

For instance, Marijana Trbović Petković, from "Ne damo Jadar," said, "We will go and protest on November 1 if the government does not fulfill our demand that Rio Tinto leave Serbia by then." I intended to visit Marijana at that time and thereby try to understand certain problems these people are facing in their struggle. I decided to visit her at the beginning of 2023.

*"There aren't many of us"*²⁹

I was preparing the cameras on the back seat of the car while my father, Miso, was driving. We didn't know exactly where we should go. The agreement was to wait in Gornje Nedeljice for the protest. I talked to Marijana days ago, but she urgently asked me to come that day. It came out of nowhere; we didn't know what was happening or who was organizing what.

27 SEOS was founded in October 2021 as a civil umbrella organization of associations focused on the fight against mining dangerous to land, water, air, and biodiversity.

28 "Ne damo Jadar" is a non-governmental association of villagers in the Jadar river valley whose activities, according to their website, are directed against lithium mines and the activities of the Rio Tinto company.

29 Zlatko Kokanovic, one of the members of "Ne damo Jadar"

We climbed up the hill, and on the way out of the valley, we saw a board with the name of the village written on it. On the right side of the road stood a dozen guys with hoods and several armored cars. Further down by a big house was a group of about 50 protesters. Holding the camera in my hands, I instantly saw Marijana even though we hadn't met before. Somehow I recognized her from some old Facebook photo. She stood firmly and shouted loudly: We won't give Jadar! We won't give our land! She was the loudest. I stood by a woman who was holding her dog on a leash.

I've been coming to protests since 2020. Look at those men in hoods over there. It's the BIA [Security Information Agency]. They monitor and record who comes and who protests with whom here. They control our lives. But not mine. I am an individual, a private person. I have my own company. They have nothing to arrest me for, to fire me, to blackmail me. And it will remain so as long as I fight for myself.

I immediately recognized the situation and realized where I was. I'd felt somewhat similar fear during the protests in 2016 and 2017. There was something in the air, a sense of insecurity. Just then, Marijana approached me:

We're glad you came to the protest, to attend this dismemberment of this dear country with us. So, do you see what they're doing to us? They brought some youths with guns to wave at us to make us fear them. Well, they won't be able to. Today is 150 years of Rio Tinto. My husband is at their office in there, and they've

all locked themselves inside out of fear and aren't coming out. Here, we also painted this board with the company's inscription for them. Well, they're here illegally. Do you understand me? This house, where their headquarters is, is an illegal building. What greater irony is there than that?

I clearly supported Marijana by nodding my head so much that everything became ironic.

It's down below the village, I'll take you to see it. Properties acquired by Rio Tinto. Empty house to house. Vacated, confiscated property. Where can this happen in the 21st century if not in Serbia? And for what? Some batteries out there, an investment for the future of what? So that some would get rich and others would be poisoned and suffocated by their ecological cars. Why cars anyway? Is this normal?

The lady who was standing next to her with her dog continued:

You know Zlatko here? He is one of the main activists here. He has hectares and hectares of fields. None of that is where they're going to mine the lithium. He cultivates his own land and feeds himself from it. But if the lithium construction works start, they will pollute this whole area here in the Jadar valley. These are kilometers of fertile land and arable land.

Marijana invited two other activists Dragan and Živko³⁰ to accompany me to those fields so that I could see them with my own eyes. We got into the car and drove in the direction of Mount Iverak. Just beyond the foot of the village, I saw abandoned houses. They were cordoned off with red and yellow ribbons. *Everything looked like a real state of war. The roofs were destroyed as if by bombs, the remains of furniture all around. Nature took over and made sure to cover it all with weeds and plants.* The signs said: "Private property."

We toured the slopes of those mountains that look down on that quiet basin of Jadar, bordered by fertile fields. As we descended, Dragan sketched out the history of this region for me, and without deviating from the subject, he didn't omit to mention the political background: bribed judges, municipal officials, lawyers, police, all those who serve the system. We walked down toward the church, and he pointed to the graves of his ancestors:

You saw all those red tapes around the hundreds of houses and buildings they bought, demolished. Now look at this cemetery here in the middle of it all. Where's the red tape? It's gone. But they aren't stupid. They know this isn't for sale. Otherwise, there would be blood. The occupation that is happening to us now is a silent occupation. They come so imperceptibly at first, so slowly. They have time, don't worry! They have patience and money. And that's how they will slowly take all of this away from us. At least, that's what they thought. But they were wrong. There aren't many of us, but we are the spark that can set everything on fire.

The Case of Dobrinja

There are six peaks, six mountains, or six circles, as she calls them. Then she pointed her finger in the direction of Papratiste and said:

Do you see that red pigment? They used to mine ore there even before the Romans. They understood the meaning of these colors in the bright silver and red soil. In the fall, when the leaves turn yellow, they actually illuminate metallic or a reddish sheen that is much more evident than the soil from the other sites. And when you climb Kablar [the highest mountain in the area], you will see circles [the peaks as they stack on top of each other, as if someone had put them cyclically on a map of the terrain]. Each peak has a special meaning, and each territory has a special way of living and constellations with nature and the environment in which these people live. Many monasteries, many untold stories. Then you have people with supernatural talents, individual alternative knowledge, villages with magnificent stories and customs. All within the circle of these six mountains that you see here from Papratiste to the horizon.

During the anti-government protests in 2019, the slogan was "Our enemy is not invisible." Shortly before that, it was "1 of the 5 million," followed by "Stop the red shirts," a response to an opposition leader

beaten on the streets the night before. Later on, the slogans shifted from present, existential, and political messages toward more ecological and futuristic ones. These issues are still existential and political, however, addressing expansionism and the progressive capitalistic utopia in which we live.

In 2021, yet another slogan was sprayed on the walls in Belgrade: “We won’t give Jadar.” This was before the big protests that stemmed from smaller towns and territorial areas and culminated in larger cities, which had their own issues: cleaner air, cleaner surroundings, clean water, more parks and trees, etc. By the end of 2021, thousands of people gathered every week to support the blockade in major streets all across Serbia. The protests had noticeably clearer goals, and they intensified until the highway was blocked in Belgrade in February, which led the president to sign an act that stated the exploitation of multinational companies was postponed until further notice. Of course, this just means until the next elections.

Descending lower into the valley, we met Aleksandar. He gladly showed us a photo of his grandfather in the royal guard of the former Kingdom of SHS (Serbs, Croats and Slovenians), riding a horse with a saber in his hand, and proudly explained to us how they used to plan an exposure with the movement of the horse and the flash from the camera to capture the moment. His wife Snezana explained that he voluntarily made this open-air café bar by the spring just for fun so that he could sit down with his friends with a cool beer, have a glass of rakia, and sit around the stone table, which was actually a wheel from an old mill.



Photo of Dragan Simović from the village Gornja Dobrinja

Sitting there like that, I asked about the spring. Marijana, a friend of Dragan, explained to me that it is a family tradition to protect (keep) those springs, and they are the only family in the area with so many springs under their watch – five of them, she said. By taking care of the water in a unique way and giving this inexhaustible gift of the earth, he preserves the community and gives a lot back to it. The gates will always be open for the one who comes to the spring after the scorching sun at noon; a person could find a bottle of brandy in the stream because Aleksandar leaves them there so that they can drink water and rakia to relieve the pain of the heat. He keeps his water running in the house, she added. He never allows it to stop. In this way, he is not the waterkeeper but uses it only as a source, so all the valves and all the pipes in the house are never closed. In that way, everything flows “with him”; nothing is held back as people are used to doing.

A new green revolution started in the spring of 2022 with the slogans “Stop lithium” and “Stop Rio Tinto,” only two months before a new presidential election in Serbia. An ongoing green movement was already active in East Serbia. People were fighting against private companies such as Zidjin, Rio Sava, and Balkan Research & Mining Co., who managed to put some pipes in rivers so they could make electricity. Some river sources had been or were under the national and first level of state protection. This, of course, did not deter companies from bribing politicians or local authorities to continue exploiting these types of resources. In these regions, people had started to use construction machines; even so, workers and company executives were always protected by the state police.

During the time we spent with the activist leader Dragan Simovic, we heard exactly how these companies still find ways to conduct research and make sure they continue with their planned exploitation.

Dragan explained that in Dobrinja, it is only possible to work by focusing on action on the ground to stop companies from bribing locals and buying their properties by educating them that there is an alternative way of sharing knowledge that takes nature and the whole ecosystem into consideration. Their goals are to work strongly within the local community if possible, keep plans for further discussions open, and lower the pressure these people encounter every day. Locals have to make tremendous efforts to deal with the companies' impact on their lives; in addition to the struggle of maintaining their households by helping each other when necessary, they must defend their territories from the hungry hands of rich companies.

Wandering uphill toward Kablar, I realized how water and soil are important for these people. If big companies come here to exploit the land, they will pollute not only this region but also entire areas downstream near the towns of Čačak and Kraljevo and all the way to the Black Sea. I couldn't bear this feeling of disappointment. It's not just about territory, this place, the knowledge, tradition, and heritage they possess - it's also the fact that they know every part of their surroundings. They know the name of every animal. When they hear a cow's bell from down the valley, they know exactly which cow is approaching just by the sound. They give names to the streams, the trees, and parts of their habitat, and they are truly part of the ecosystem in a relationship with nature. Their customs and traditions are closely related to their way of life and bound by the struggle of living of generations before them.

The area that would be covered by the mining of lithium ore extends over 15 square kilometers. It would include villages, lower, middle, and upper Dobrinja, Ježevica, Kalenići, and many other places. The area that this multinational company would own in the full expansion of their exploitation would move from Loznica toward Pozega and further to the east. There is currently investigative monitoring across almost all of western Serbia for lithium, boron, silver, and gold ores. The mining of lithium alone requires an enormous amount of water, and at the same time, reverse osmosis is used for the extraction. Using currently developed technologies, about 500,000 liters of water are needed to extract one ton of lithium. Such needs for water in local areas also affect farmers, who are thus deprived of a valuable resource for raising livestock and irrigating crops. Additionally, the toxic cocktail of chemicals used to extract lithium is capable of infiltrating nearby rivers, streams, and water supplies.

While the day was winding down and we were already tired from the journey and under the impression of the various stories of local people we'd met, we arrived in front of Dragan's house, where we were welcomed by his mother and grandmother, who were preparing lunch for the tired guests. So, sitting at the table at his home where his mother was preparing a late lunch, I took some time to talk to him about his plans for the future. He told us, "You know, before, I didn't even know what activism was or even what it meant. Yet, all of a sudden, I just became an activist."³¹

31 Milos Vucicevic "Migratory Anthropocene", Reflections #2, 04.12.2022, <https://improperwalls.com/improperdoseyouneed/migratory-anthropocene-reflections-2>



River valley in front of the Kablar mountain

Conclusion: All Apocalypses at Once

Judgement Day. All eyes are on that glorious celebration of rebirth. Nature flourishes, paradise is all around. All living beings celebrate this holiday. On the other side is a machine that cuts the surface of the earth with its teeth, crushes it and turns it into powder, takes that powder away, tempers it, and melts it into gold bars that the master's servants take and load into carts.³²

Of course, such scenes are still impossible, considering that we are in the initial phase of this disease that is eating away the future. This cancer. Maybe it's even better to say it's an auto-immune disease spreading through the body and attacking its own organs without any ability to understand what's actually happening because its consciousness is extinguished. Unfortunately, the organism is a complicated machine and depends on many other characteristics: past illnesses, the preservation of its mental and physical strength. But even when it is sick with the worst disease, there are certain processes that are important to it, and then it attacks the disease at the moment when it notices that the least danger is lurking. A society steeped in crime and corruption is likely to suffer more.

32 From my personal notes.

But there is no cure unless people start defending what belongs to them. Unfortunately, we are perhaps witnessing the last convulsions of those locals who live in these areas, areas that will eventually become empty and become the most exploited district in Southeastern Europe. Accelerated capitalism, the way of life of Western and developing countries, requires the reduction of hydrocarbons in some future period. This will cause increased production of electric cars and increased demand for lithium minerals, one of the main ingredients for making batteries for such products.



Drone Footage / Abandoned houses from Gornje Nedeljice, Srbija

The people who still live in the fields of Donja Dobrinja, Ježevica, and other villages of Western Serbia do not deserve this to happen to them. As one of them said: *Should the burden of humanity fall on our backs?* For these people, no support with words is enough, only action. And that action is understood as an action of goodwill, an action of cooperation and collaboration, an action of good neighborly relations, an action of mutual support and friendly alliance.

That is one of the things that was missing for a certain period before the fall and everything that happened afterward. People lived through apocalypses, had difficult lives, and suffered during wars. The whole system in general was off course. Economically, educationally, politically, and everything else important for basic functions, such as empathy to work, were just not there. Of course, not all of that exists today, but society has begun to take on the shape of something, some hint of a brighter future. It all started by asking a simple question. A question about the future. Nothing so clearly connects the problems of migration, wars, and ecology as the notion: What about the future? What will happen if we allow it? We always thought about tomorrow, as if, in this consumer society, there is nothing more than today and tomorrow. But we never thought as much about what comes after tomorrow.



Drone Footage / Abandoned houses from Gornje Nedeljice, Srbija

Abandoned houses and homes are a reflection of fear. The fear that is embedded in these people's bones, like the winter frost that, after a long time sledding, does not come out from under your jacket nor at home, sitting in front of the fire. But the fire is there, just waiting to be

ignited. Some already know this, and that is why they are shouting so loudly. On the other hand, they also understand that this roar might be their last. They only hope that their voice passes through the cold walls of the already abandoned homes of people who, until recently, were their neighbors, with whom they went to school, spent their days on the tree in front of the house, ran barefoot to the river, and returned home late after a long summer swim.



Drone Footage / Abandoned houses from Gornje Nedeljice, Srbija

A house with cold, heavy walls but warm memories inside, remembrances of experienced moments, is the missing key in observing and answering the question: What is home? Home is not just that cold shell, the cocoon in which we grew up, in which we learned our first steps and whispered our first words. Home is also what is outside, what we carry with us: words, deeds, traces from the past, and much more. Those walls break and pass through the bordered spaces of places we have visited or places we remember in good and bad spirits. Every heavy brick we carry with us is part of the house we created. We are the ones who build the walls, dig the foundations, but also demolish when it is necessary.

I look at the empty billboard by the side of the road. Somehow it looks lovely next to those conifers in the distance, like some mass monument of a time that will pass. Maybe it already says a lot about our future. Is this way of life, which leads precisely to this empty shell, this plain board, this foreign white surface that resists the natural, really our desire? For the sake of this natural gift that we possess, are we still striving for something that leads us nowhere?

A little further, we come across abandoned houses. I watch them through the window of my car. A little further, there is a child's doll thrown by the road and a stroller, a rotten fence, a path around a street pole, a walnut tree that splits in two, a wall with bottles at the bottom, a path that gets lost in the dense forest by the side of the road.

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