

YUGOSLAVIA WITH STRINGS ATTACHED

BORIS KRALJ'S *MY BELGRADE* (2011) AND
DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ AND DAVOR KONJIKUŠIĆ'S
THERE'S NOTHING HERE! (2020)

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In recent years, we have seen an explosion of interest in the monumental sculpture and architecture of Yugoslavia, a socialist federation that collapsed in a series of nationalist wars in the 1990s and has since been reintegrated—piece by piece—into globalized market capitalism. Largely decontextualized and exoticized images of Yugoslav modernist structures—frequently homogenized under the signifier of brutalism—circulate globally in the forms of exhibitions, photography books, and digital reproductions on the web and social media, as “ruin porn” and “click bait.” As Vladimir Kulić has argued, these photographic representations have been generating a new kind of Orientalism by stripping socialist architecture of its social and political context and presenting it as artifacts of an alien and incomprehensible ideological “other,” in line with the dominant Cold War image of Europe’s East.¹ In many ways, a 2019 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980*, which was curated by Kulić, represents both a critical response to and a stark depar-

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1 Vladimir Kulić, “Orientalizing Socialism: Architecture, Media, and the Representations of Eastern Europe,” *Architectural Histories* 6, no. 1 (2018): 7, <http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.273>.

ture from this trend, exacerbated by context collapse on social media and the internet. The exhibition came at a time when architectural canons of modernism were being expanded beyond Western Europe and North America to encompass the former Second World and the Global South, where modernism, as in socialist Yugoslavia, was frequently aligned with decolonial and emancipatory political projects. In line with this, the curators of the show critically situated the achievements of Yugoslav socialist architecture within the utopian aspirations of the socialist state to forge a secular, multicultural, and classless society following the liberation of the country from brutal fascist occupation during the Second World War.² In contrast to the rest of socialist Europe, in Yugoslavia, modernism in architecture and the arts had already acquired legitimacy in the immediate postwar period, shortly after the multinational federation, headed by Josip Broz Tito, broke off relations with the Soviet Bloc in 1948 and charted an independent path to state socialism—the so-called “Third Way,” characterized by experimentation with workers’ self-management and nonalignment in foreign policy, which brought the country into political, economic, and cultural orbit with the recently decolonized nations of the Global South. Here, Yugoslavia’s embrace of architectural modernism—with both its functional and expressive potentials—was seen as an extension of the state’s commitment to an experimental and emancipatory social project and as an emblem of the state’s disruptive cultural and geopolitical position in the Cold War.

Despite this scholarly edge and careful contextualization, however, the blockbuster exhibition has received criticism for its overly cool and institutional approach to architectural heritage that for many in the region and in the Yugoslav diaspora remains a collective and emotionally charged object of nostalgia and traumatic loss. Most notably, in her text for the 2020 photo-essay *There’s Nothing Here!*, the preeminent Yugoslav writer in self-exile and fierce critic of ethno-nationalism, Dubravka Ugrešić, describes the exhibition as “some sort of lavish tomb, where flashes of my former life are being projected onto the wall.”³ She continues:

2 Marino Stierli and Vladimir Kulić, *Towards a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 7–8.

3 Dubravka Ugrešić and Davor Konjikušić, *Tu nema ničega!* (Zagreb: Multimedijalni Institut, 2020), 48. This and subsequent quotations are taken from the English-language version published in *The Age of Skin*, trans. Ellen Elias Bursać (Rochester, NY: Open Letter Press, 2020), 216.

Information about the current state of the masterpieces of Yugoslav modernist architecture is muted. The fact that nothing is left standing today but abandoned, devastated ruins of many of the hotels and monuments described in the show, is not exactly concealed, but it is certainly not in the spotlight. The curators were, apparently, reluctant to broach the *befores* and *afters*. That would have been a different story, a story that would have come with strings attached.⁴

As Ugrešić indicates—and as the exhibition, especially in its catalog, indeed acknowledges⁵—many of the antifascist monuments were destroyed or damaged during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s by nationalist forces, while numerous functional structures, like hotels and public buildings, lie abandoned and ruined as victims of transition-era privatization schemes, as post-Yugoslav successor states continue to distance themselves from the socialist legacy and its material remains. Ugrešić's evocation of the tomb, however, points to a broader worry about the impulse to historicize and musealize socialist material heritage that is evident in the MoMA show: that this impulse would safely consign such heritage to the past and strip it of its power as an artifact of resistance in the post-socialist present.

Bearing this critique of historicism in mind, I turn to Boris Kralj's photo-diary *My Belgrade* (2011) and the aforementioned photo-essay, *There's Nothing Here! (Tu nema ničega!)*, (2020) by Dubravka Ugrešić and Davor Konjikušić, to examine how architectural photography can more fully capture the continued political and affective charge of the socialist built environment after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Both of these projects should be situated within the broader set of contemporary photographic mediations of the receding Yugoslav past through its material—most commonly, architectural—remains.⁶ These projects range

4 Ugrešić, 216–17. This cutting comment, I suggest, was aimed not so much at the discursive framing of Yugoslav architectural modernism by the curators of the exhibition but at Valentin Jeck's photographs, which were overwhelmingly used in both the MoMA show and the exhibition catalog. In their stark and sleek minimalism, Jeck's photographs recall Jan Kempenaers's *Spomenik* (2010), a series of wide-angle photographs depicting Yugoslav memorial sculpture (the titular *spomeniks*), one of the first visual projects to draw international attention to this heritage, even as they became objects of pointed critique in the academic and critical discourses in the region.

5 Stierli and Kulić, 7–8. See also Andre Herscher, "Architecture, Destruction, and the Destruction of Yugoslavia," in Stierli and Kulić, 112–17.

6 In this context, it would be remiss not to mention Vesna Pavlović's and Bojan Mrdenović's work. Pavlović, in particular, has sustained a photographic and archival practice that has centered around the material remains of socialist modernity in Yugoslavia for over three decades. See Vesna Pavlović, *Stagecraft* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2021).

from modes of decontextualized aestheticization to more critical engagements with the legacy of socialist modernism, such as the MoMA exhibition, which foregrounds both the social history that gave rise to this heritage and its shifting and increasingly threatened status within the post-socialist present. In contrast to MoMA's "detached" and globalizing institutional lens, however, I argue that *My Belgrade* and *There's Nothing Here!* offer a more situated vision of socialist architectural modernism "with strings attached," to use Ugrešić's apt phrase from the same essay. Here, the metaphor of "strings" should be understood more broadly: not only as anchoring Yugoslav architectural heritage in lived experience and a unique aesthetic vision, but also figuring it as a politically charged site of traumatic inscription and politicized—even militant—mourning in the wake of socialism's collapse at the end of the 20th century. The photographic record of socialism's material remains thus becomes a powerful site of ideological alterity, reparative imagination, and critique of the normative force of neoliberal progress, which cannot conceive of a future beyond the ethno-national state and the inevitability of market capitalism. This dialectical recuperation of the material traces of the past, both textual and visual—which can be cited, reproduced, reclaimed, and reconfigured in the present moment—should resonate with Walter Benjamin's critique of historical progress as automatic, inevitable, and guaranteed "progression through a homogenous, empty time."⁷ By presenting competing and antagonistic temporalities in text and image, where the socialist past collides and clashes with the capitalist now, *My Belgrade* and *There's Nothing Here!*, I argue, disrupt the homogeneity and inevitability of the post-socialist present and open it up to different ideological and material possibilities.

FLEETING TRACES OF SOCIALIST MODERNITY:

BORIS KRALJ'S *MY BELGRADE* (2011)

My Belgrade is a photo-diary by the Berlin-based photographer Boris Kralj featuring a stirring sequence of color photographs depicting Belgrade's changing cityscape in the span of eight years (2003–11). Kralj grew up in the Yugoslav *Gastarbeiter* diaspora in West Germany, where affective attachments to the parents' socialist and multicultural homeland were fostered from an early age, often through frequent visits to

7 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2006), 395.

the country.⁸ Given his ethnically mixed background—itsself a product of the socialist state’s commitment to multiculturalism embodied in the Titoist slogan of “Brotherhood and Unity”—Kralj insists on identifying as a Yugoslav, rather than a Serb or a Croat, even after the country’s violent dissolution in the 1990s. Framed autobiographically as a personal diary, *My Belgrade* stages a photographic elegy for the former country and its complex identity that is gradually passing into a position of non-normativity, if not risking disappearing altogether. The book thus foregrounds a diasporic, intimate, and spectral Yugoslavia situated between the past, present, and future, arresting the quickly vanishing traces of the diasporic “homeland”—brutalist high-rises, socialist-era company logos and consumer brands, street signage, and melancholy human figures—as they flit by amidst Belgrade’s post-socialist and postwar urban landscape. As Kralj states in the interview that prefaces his collection of photographs:

After the war there, I had the impression that a lot had changed within the people. They were bitter and there was great despair in the air. My relatives are scattered throughout former Yugoslavia, and all of them were separated due to war. Yet when I travelled to Belgrade again, the positive memories came back: I walked through the city and [was] always reminded of the country I knew as a child. I thought, this city is magic, it really has this old Yugoslav spirit in the place and faces of the people. It was really really [sic] very strong, like a flashback. I was confused and obsessed at the same time.⁹

Kralj’s renewed encounter with Belgrade and its socialist past evokes what Svetlana Boym has termed “diasporic intimacy” with Yugoslavia’s scattered collective, an intimacy that “isn’t opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but is constituted by it.”¹⁰ Occasioned by Kralj’s desire to

8 Yugoslavia signed agreements about exporting its surplus workforce, first with Austria in 1966 and then with West Germany in 1968, to address economic underdevelopment and the growing problem of unemployment. By 1971, the number of Yugoslavs living in Europe had reached 600,000—a significant number, given that the total population of Yugoslavia at the time was just over 20 million. Guest workers (*Gastarbeiter* or *gastarbajteri*, as they are known in the former Yugoslavia) had a prominent presence in the Yugoslav popular imagination, and many of them, like Kralj’s family, maintained strong bonds with the homeland. See Brigitte Le Normand, “The Gastarbajteri as a Transnational Yugoslav Working Class,” in *Social Inequalities and Discontent in Yugoslav Socialism*, ed. Rory Archer, Igor Duda, and Paul Stubbs (London: Routledge, 2016), 38–58.

9 Boris Kralj, *My Belgrade* (Lindlar, Germany: Die Neue Sachlichkeit, 2011), 15.

10 Svetlana Boym, *The Off-Modern* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 79.

photographically document and preserve the last traces of the nonexistent country, the photo-diary vividly registers temporalities and modes of being together as a multinational, socialist collective that are still visible on Belgrade streets. These traces, objects, and architectural structures not only recall personal memories but also reactivate alternative collective imaginaries of Yugoslavia's socialist modernity materialized in Belgrade's transitional urban landscape—imaginaries that require cultural decoding and defy easy translation across linguistic and national borders.

In this sense, *My Belgrade* deploys the urban palimpsest as a “surface” feature that needs to be rendered discursive and that is potentially generative of dialogue about the loss of Yugoslavia as a cultural and political space more broadly. As Kralj states: “I’m not sad about the old times, instead I would prefer to provoke an exchange of thoughts and history about Yugoslavia.”¹¹ Indeed, the turn of the millennium in Serbia, when Kralj’s photographs of Belgrade were taken, is marked by monumental social and political shifts in the aftermath of the 1999 NATO military intervention, which effectively ended the Yugoslav Wars. These changes promised to bring “normalcy” after a decade of armed conflict and international isolation by reintegrating Serbia into the global flows of capital through (neo)liberal governance, privatization of property and state infrastructure, and aggressive promotion of consumer culture and Serbian national identity.¹² Kralj’s images of the Yugoslav past are fleeting, fragile, and fragmentary because they were captured by Kralj’s lens at the moment of their transformation and potential disappearance, when the remains of what Susan Buck-Morss has termed the socialist “mass utopia” encountered the ascendant and privatized “dreamworlds” of capitalist consumerism.¹³ Rather than retrieving a singular and authentic national origin or homeland, these photographs make room for ambiguous and unidealized representations of the past that invite historical interpretation, confronting the viewer with the contradictions, open wounds, and ambiguities of Yugoslav collective experience.

11 Kralj, *My Belgrade*, 17.

12 As Branislav Dimitrijević has noted, this “fantasy” of normalization “was quintessential for the paradigmatic sociopolitical shifts in Europe after 1989 when the Yugoslav wars symptomized a radical version of the so-called ‘transition’ from the socialist to the capitalist realm.” See Branislav Dimitrijević, “Vesna Pavlović: The Photographic Staging of the Nonperformative,” in Pavlović, *Stagecraft*, 6.

13 Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), especially 66–69.



Boris Kralj, *My Belgrade*, 2011. © Boris Kralj.
Image courtesy of Boris Kralj.

Exemplary, in this respect, are the two shots of the iconic Genex Tower in New Belgrade, one of which appears on the cover of the book and the other much later in the sequence, forming a distant visual rhyme across the collection. The cover image is taken at a low angle from the ground, with the towers rising against the gray, atmospheric background; like most of the photograph sequence, it floats in a white frame. The view is situated and emotionally colored, evoking Kralj's memory of childhood trips to Yugoslavia from West Germany and recalling the country's thwarted aspirations to metropolitan, socialist modernity. As Kralj recalls: "When we drove through New Belgrade, with all its grey high-rise buildings, I thought I was in New York. I pressed my face against the car window. There are some incredible brutalist buildings there that I could always look at: the Genex Tower for example, which you pass when you enter Belgrade from the west."¹⁴ The second shot of the tower, however, departs from this nostalgic representation, complicating the initial memory by situating the same architectural object more firmly in the post-socialist now. In this photograph, the right tower is plastered over with a monumental advertisement for the Maxi multinational supermarket chain, with the Serbian slogan "*deo vašeg sveta*" (part of your world). The ad is accompanied by an image of a woman pushing a cart full of groceries with a man "flying" atop of it, literally bursting out of the concrete

14 Boris Kralj, "My Belgrade: Looking for the Traces of a Vanished Country," *Calvert Journal*, last modified May 5, 2015, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/4024/photography-post-soviet-city-boris-kralj-my-belgrade-yugoslavia>.

socialist façade into the projected utopia of capitalist abundance. This transitional image of consumerist *jouissance*, however, belies the antithetical scenes that both follow and precede it in Kralj's photographic sequence: ruins of the NATO bombing; empty socialist storefronts and kiosks; and crumbling logos of factories bearing names of Yugoslavia's revolutionary legacy—industries that have been liquidated in privatization, resulting in massive layoffs. These images of hollowed socialist infrastructure, emptied of the living collective that gave them meaning and purpose, unwittingly catalog the devastation wrought by the capitalist restructuring of Belgrade and the region more broadly. Here, nostalgia is not wedded to an anodyne consumer aesthetic or a restoration of a seamless national identity; rather, it signals the presence of pain that cannot be commodified, as well as a collective disenchantment with the cultures of capitalist consumption.¹⁵ At the same time, Kralj's nostalgia is reparative—it asks us to imagine what it would mean to once again collectively occupy these empty sites, to imagine them as alternative social imaginaries of production and consumption in the capitalist present.¹⁶

Examining similar iterations of the “Benjaminian tradition of documenting urban neighborhoods as an archive of global economics,” such as Zoe Leonard's photographs of disappearing New York City storefronts, Ann Cvetkovich notes a distinctly “queer sensibility about loss and marginality,” which could be applied to Kralj's work as well.¹⁷ According to Cvetkovich, these photo-based “archives of feelings” constitute new and experimental forms of documenting trauma and loss “motivated by the demands placed on the archive by subaltern histories, such as slavery and diaspora.”¹⁸ “The act of photographing,” Cvetkovich

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- 15 For capitalist cultural forms in socialist Yugoslavia and the affective and collective relations to them in post-socialism, see Dijana Jelača, Maša Kolanović, and Danijela Lugiarić, “Introduction: Cultural Capitalism the (Post)Yugoslav Way,” in *The Cultural Life of Capitalism in Yugoslavia: (Post)Socialism and Its Other* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1–20.
- 16 As Branislav Dimitrijević has pointed out, these capitalist images of enchantment had become dominant cultural forms already in late socialism, a period marked by both economic and ideological crisis in Yugoslavia, as the country increasingly shifted toward free market capitalism. In many ways, I am indebted to Dimitrijević's book for my analysis of consumerist imaginaries in Kralj's work. See Branislav Dimitrijević, *Potrošeni socijalizam: Kultura, konzumerizam i društvena imaginacija u Jugoslaviji, 1950–1974* (Belgrade: Fabrika knjiga, 2016).
- 17 Ann Cvetkovich, “Photographic Objects as Queer Archival Practice,” in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 238. For Cvetkovich, “archives of feelings” challenge the dominant documentary modes of historical writing by recording marginal, ephemeral, and intimate histories that remain excluded from public and institutional archives.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 281.



Boris Kralj, *My Belgrade*, 2011. © Boris Kralj. Image courtesy of Boris Kralj.

writes, “serves as a method of both collecting and archiving, as does the mode of display,” which can transpose the street into the museum, gallery, or a book.¹⁹ In *My Belgrade*, the city’s and the photographer’s “queerness” is most legible in the campy and outrageous graffiti that periodically enters the photographer’s frame and in the presence of Yugoslav cultural objects that could be coded as queer. Here, Kralj’s diasporic intimacy “can be approached only through indirection and intimation, through stories and secrets. They are often told in foreign or accented language that demands and defies precise translation.”²⁰ An illustrative example is Kralj’s photograph of the street flea market that juxtaposes, within a single frame, LP record covers of Madonna and of Lepa Brena—a famous pop folk diva, who embodied the media image of “Jugoslovenka,” or the Yugoslav woman, in late socialism and continues to be an emotionally charged figure of “Yugonostalgia” after the country’s collapse.²¹ While this “found” visual poem invites multiple

19 Ibid., 284.

20 Boym, 79.

21 For more on Lepa Brena and Yugoslav identity, see Jasmina Tumbas, “Marina Abramović, Lepa Brena, and Esmā Redžepova,” in *I am Jugoslovenka!»: Feminist Performance Politics during and after Yugoslav Socialism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2022).

readings, establishing suggestive analogies and translations between Western and Yugoslav popular culture, I read it here as an object of queer attachment to symbols of powerful and disruptive femininity that punctuates the book's sequence through introduction of a local camp and queer subtext. The image additionally relates to Kralj's other archival project, inspired by *My Belgrade*, featuring video stills of Yugoslav pop folk divas, taken from VHS tapes he found in his parents' basement. For Kralj, these divas represent the "music that connected the guest workers in Germany to their homeland," but they are also ambivalent objects of camp fascination for Kralj: "These women lure me and scare me and evoke my Yugoslav spirit."²² Indeed, Lepa Brena was a symbol not only of "neo-folk" culture, associated with the Yugoslav working classes, but also, like Madonna, a figure of queer appropriation and identification even in the socialist period, when queer subcultures constituted a largely invisible and unofficial cultural underground. Revealing Kralj's diasporic intimacy with the codes of Yugoslavia's subcultures, Lepa Brena's presence in the photographer's "archive of feelings" suggests how the remaining socialist imaginaries of gender can be queered in the present, disclosing a Yugoslav collective that is (and always has been) heterogeneous and permeated with sexual difference. The book thus implies that we should read Yugoslavia's socialist and multiethnic history alongside its queer traces as signifiers of the country's—and Belgrade's—continued spatial and temporal alterity.

By imbuing the city's disappearing socialist past with emotional weight and depth, Kralj's project is reflective of the broader phenomenon of Yugonostalgia, a continued affective and collective attachment to the former Yugoslavia mediated by a wider archive of socialist popular culture.²³ While (Yugo)nostalgia has been criticized by scholars as a form of depoliticized escapism into the perceived comfort and security of the past or for its susceptibility to commodification, others, like Mitja

22 Anastasiia Fedorova, "Miss Universe: Photographing the Ghostly Sirens of a Lost World," *Calvert Journal*, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/5278/miss-yuniverse-boris-kralj-80s-music-videos-vhs>.

23 For English-language scholarship, see Nicole Lindstrom, "Yugonostalgia: Reflective and Restorative Nostalgia in the Former Yugoslavia," *East Central Europe* 32, no. 1–2 (2005): 227–37; Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, eds., *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); Aleksandar Bošković, "Yugonostalgia and Yugoslav Cultural Memory: Lexicon of YU Mythology," *Slavic Review* 72, no. 1 (2013): 54–78; Maja Maksimović, "Unattainable Past, Unsatisfying Present—Yugonostalgia: An Omen of a Better Future?," *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 6 (2017): 1066–81.



Boris Kralj, *My Belgrade*, 2011. © Boris Kralj. Image courtesy of Boris Kralj.

Velikonja and Tanja Petrović, have stressed its active political role—“its capacity to intervene in the present, to ‘unsettle’ and create fractures in normalized narratives.”²⁴ Accordingly, Petrović insists that “Yugonostalgia, as a specific configuration of affect and emotions, is a productive analytical category and an important means of mobilizing the socialist legacy in the political negotiations over the present and the future.”²⁵ *My Belgrade* intimates how Yugonostalgia can (also) be a queer feeling—just as Yugoslavia can be a queer object—insofar as Kralj’s photographs bring into view alternative modes of being and living with difference that remain obscured by the still painful and visible wartime wounds. Against the impulse to pathologize Yugonostalgia as an excessively affective approach to the past or as a depoliticized consumerist aesthetic, I want to emphasize its role in the constructions of individual, affective, and political memories outside of the institutional frameworks of the dominant culture. One way to do that would be to apply a distinctly queer lens to Yugonostalgia, even when that queerness is discern-

24 Tanja Petrović, *Yuropa: Jugoslovensko nasleđe i politike budućnosti u postjugoslovenskim društvima* (Belgrade: Fabrika Knjiga, 2012), 191. This and subsequent translations are mine. See also Mitja Velikonja, *Titostalgia: A Study of Nostalgia for Josip Broz Tito* (Ljubljana: Mironovni Inštitut, 2008).

25 Petrović, 191.

ible only as a subtext, a sensibility, or a stray orientation in space and time. From such a skewed angle, we might also venture to read the failure of the Yugoslav project, despite (and because of) the scope of its tragedy, as a queer failure, a “history of alternative political formations” that, as Jack Halberstam points out, “allows us to access traditions of political action that, while not necessarily successful in the sense of becoming dominant, do offer models of contestation, rupture, and discontinuity for the political present.”²⁶

In this sense, Kralj’s Yugoslavia is a sliding and complex photographic signifier. Situated between text and image, diasporic and local perspectives, and the past and present, the book opens up wayward routes and “queer” angles of vision that resist the seamless narration of Yugoslav historical experience. Photographs of old socialist brands, logos, and urban signs begin to assemble an intimate and affective geography of Belgrade as a former capital of Yugoslavia, shoring up socialist ruins to reassemble a fragmented and heterogeneous Yugoslav collective. Kralj writes, “I started taking photographs because I was always reminded of my upbringing. It’s more a feeling that I get when I think of Belgrade—my childhood and my ‘other side,’ rather than a capital city. Belgrade is the capital city of Serbia, but it’s also a synonym for Yugoslavia.”²⁷ Indeed, the former country is recollected metonymically through its remaining fragments, many bearing the name of the former country and its revolutionary legacy, such as “books in a flea market with a picture of Dubrovnik or Tito on the cover, or logos with old Yugoslav names: Yugotours, Yugoelktro, Yugo Spedition . . . the Yugoslav Drama Theater, which is still called that even though it is in Serbia and people don’t think of themselves as Yugoslavs anymore.”²⁸ These hieroglyphs of socialist modernity recur across the discontinuous and visually fragmented space of the city as a *punctum*, an element in the photographic image “which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces” the viewer.²⁹ As both a graphic signifier and a photographic *punctum*, the country’s name occasions the “‘prick’ that arouses desire in photography, as the penetrating hole made possible by the camera, as an exquisite wound that

26 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 19.

27 Kralj, *My Belgrade*, 14.

28 *Ibid.*, 15.

29 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 26.



Boris Kralj. *My Belgrade*, 2011. © Boris Kralj. Image courtesy of Boris Kralj.

writing cannot fully heal.”³⁰ As such, these photographic fragments of a socialist modernity suggest a painful loss of the social and political context that once made them legible, but also disclose a possibility of their recuperation and reconfiguration in the present. Foregrounding a reparative and affective rather than a historicist approach to the past, the book—I propose—invites the viewer to “suture” a wounded and fragmented Yugoslav space, visually recomposing and reassembling the disappearing socialist collective and Kralj’s former self within a broader multiplicity of urban signs.

Kralj’s camera lens stages the diasporic intimacy with Yugoslavia as a “love at last sight,” a faithfulness to an object that he knows is about to disappear, but that can be arrested photographically and lovingly—and therefore shared with others and preserved for posterity. Exemplary, in this respect, is the photograph of a passing red Yugo Skala 55C, taken by Kralj in Belgrade traffic from the passenger seat of a car, one of the first images to appear in the sequence. In the photograph, the Yugo’s iconic shape and red color, bearing the name of the vanished socialist country, flit by on the streets of Belgrade against the bright yellow background of a city bus. The image poignantly captures the book’s affective center—

30 Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu, “Introduction,” in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 4–5.

the ex-country's name—that repeats and shifts across the space of the image sequence in the form of visual and textual rhymes. The bright, saturated red of this “comradely” object gives it an emotional charge while also calling up the socialist state's utopian aspirations to a socialist modernity that would overcome class differences and produce material abundance for all. Moreover, it suggests other memories that congregate around it, memories that are visually foregrounded in the repetition of other homologous textual and visual traces of Yugoslav multinational and revolutionary history, whose symbols are apt to get lost in the semiotic chaos of the transition and the increasing homogenization of Belgrade's urban texture. To invoke Walter Benjamin's concept of history, Yugoslavia emerges in the contemporary Serbian capital photographically and materialistically “as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability,”³¹ revealing the present moment as heterogeneous, filled with the fleeting fragments of the past and opening up their unused potentialities. The camera freezes a temporal moment in a complex standstill and spells out an alternative urban script, allowing the viewer to inhabit the city queerly—out of step with the linear, normative time of historical progress that has consigned Yugoslavia's socialist modernity to a dustbin. We can thus read the fleeting red Yugo as a queer object—one that is encountered, in the words of Sarah Ahmed, “as slipping away, as threatening to become out of reach.”³² After its historical disappearance, Yugoslavia becomes not only a lost ideological and cultural space but also an increasingly non-normative spatial and temporal orientation, one that “risk[s] departure from the straight and narrow, makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer.”³³ Kralj's *flâneur* foregrounds precisely such a queer lens, which refuses to affectively align with the spatial and temporal regime of the Serbian nation-state and globalized capitalism. The former country and its identity thus emerge in Kralj's photographs as a series of about-to-be-defunct presences, charged signifiers that are again inscribed with oppositional identifications and queer feelings in the post-socialist present.

31 Benjamin, 390.

32 Sarah Ahmed, “Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 566.

33 *Ibid.*, 554.

POST-SOCIALIST TRAUMASCAPES: DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ AND DAVOR KONJIKUŠIĆ'S *THERE'S NOTHING HERE!* (2020)

Dubravka Ugrešić's essay "There's Nothing Here!" is an explicit response to the 2019 MoMA exhibition and was originally included in her 2020 collection of essays *The Age of Skin*. The Croatian edition, which will be my focus here, was accompanied by a striking series of photographs by Davor Konjikušić and masterfully designed by Damir Gamulin as a free-standing artist's book.³⁴ The essay reflects on the ruins left in the wake of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s through a series of prose fragments centered around Ugrešić's stay in the Croatian-Bosnian borderlands, a region laden with the traumatic history of ethnic cleansing and currently the site of the European Union's heavily policed border. The "nothing" of the title is evocative, on the one hand, of the nationalist devastation of antifascist monuments—in the first place, of Vojin Bakić's *Monument to the Uprising of the People of Kordun and Banija*, a masterpiece of socialist modernist architecture that now lies abandoned in ruin. But even more pointedly, this "nothing" signifies a social and symbolic void—a discursive silence around the effects of ethno-nationalist violence in the former Yugoslavia, which captures not only the inability to address the atrocities and destruction committed by the Croatian and Serbian nationalist forces during the 1990s wars but also the contemporary extension of this racialized violence toward non-European "others." Ingeniously, the essay takes its central motto from a Syrian refugee, who, after being chased away from Croatia's border, ironically repeats the words of his detractors that, indeed, "there's nothing here" for him.

Following Ugrešić's footsteps, Konjikušić shot the photographs that accompany the essay in the winters of 2018 and 2019 on the territory of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. While functioning as a form of documentation, the photographs visually unroll the essay's palimpsestic layers and key motifs through the individual framing of images and double-page spreads, as well as through their overall layout and sequence. Thematically, the photographs foreground the eerie atmosphere of emptiness and vacancy evoked by Ugrešić's text, employing a cold and frequently ironical lens that exposes the transformation of the

34 Davor Konjikušić is a scholar of photography and a practicing photographer whose work addresses the history of photography in Yugoslavia, the transformation of socialist landscapes, and the contemporary migrant crisis in the Balkans. He is the author of a monumental monograph on Partisan photography, *Red Light: Yugoslav Partisan Photography and Social Movement 1941–1945*, ed. Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

Yugoslav “concrete utopia” into what Maria Tumarkin has called traumascapes—places that “catalyze and shape remembering and reliving of traumatic events.”³⁵ In contrast to *My Belgrade*, Konjikušić’s photographs in *There’s Nothing Here!* are more textually scaffolded by Ugrešić’s essay and, I would argue, draw their critical force and situated perspective from a powerful textual source. My subsequent analysis will therefore address the essay in conjunction with its photographic supplement, since they exist in a close dialogue with each other. In contrast to Kralj, however, Ugrešić and Konjikušić aim to move beyond nostalgia in order to provide a symptomatic and diagnostic account of post-socialism in text and image, shot through with traumatic affect and pointed irony. Exceeding the national frame, the photo-essay shows how the increasingly global post-socialist condition is marked by a static, empty time of the nation-state and by new forms of territorial control and spatial organization that have appeared on the ruins of the Cold War.

Ugrešić weaves her textual palimpsest around visits to the regional spas (*toplice*), using them as a defamiliarizing literary device to explore larger cultural, ideological, and economic configurations of post-socialism in the former Yugoslavia. Once embodying the egalitarian aspirations of the communist utopia for universal healthcare, these wellness centers have been turned into exclusive resorts for wealthy foreigners who are catered to by the local staff. As Ugrešić ironically puts it, “Postcommunist Europe sees itself as a swanky wellness center frequented by an assortment of rich men who have nothing better to do than satisfy the fantasies of the locals and adopt them once and for all.”³⁶ Here, the hopes of post-socialist democratization have been cynically transformed into a desire to attract foreign capital, consigning the region to a dependent semi-periphery. Accompanying these economic and structural shifts is a pervasive cultural and historical amnesia, which Ugrešić most closely observes during her visit to Topusko, a spa town in the Croatian borderlands that is deeply marked by the nationalist violence of the Yugoslav Wars. It is here that the emptiness, foregrounded in the “nothing” of the title, reveals itself fully in its multiple forms, perhaps most forcefully as a memorial, traumatic void in the post-socialist landscape. Significantly, for Ugrešić, this void is also symbolic; it pervades the local discourse in Croatia as a marked, traumatic

35 Maria Tumarkin, *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), 12.

36 Ugrešić, 183.

absence. Thus, when the writer asks the spa staff and the locals about the surrounding Yugoslav antifascist memorials or the refugee detention center just across the Bosnian border—both prominent markers of the regional landscape—she is symptomatically met with the same deadpan answer, that there’s nothing here, as if they had lost the capacity to symbolize and narrate experience, both past and present.

Currently one of the most economically depressed parts of Croatia, the Kordun and Banija region, where Topusko is located, is a place marked by multiple erasures of both its revolutionary and traumatic past. The most recent erasure that Ugrešić evokes in the essay is the forceful expulsion of the Serbian population by the Croatian forces during Operation Storm in 1995, which territorially reintegrated the separatist Republic of Srpska Krajina into the newly independent Croatia while depopulating the region.³⁷ Part of this process also involved the nationalist devastation of Yugoslav antifascist monuments, a prominent feature on the region’s landscape during Yugoslavia’s existence, commemorating the country’s revolutionary foundations and postwar utopian and multicultural aspirations in steel and stone. For Ugrešić, these multiple histories converge around the visit to Vojin Bakić’s *Monument to the Uprising of the People of Kordun and Banija*, an antifascist memorial completed in 1981—a futuristic, spiral structure made of reinforced concrete and covered with steel plates. What Ugrešić eventually encounters at the site of the monument is a spectacle of ruin and devastation: “an immense whale carcass: the gnawed protruding bones, the rot, the disgorged internal organs, everything removable had been stripped away.”³⁸ The sight is overwhelming and clearly traumatizing—evoking an image of the country’s unburied corpse and accompanied by the inability to fully communicate and transmit this experience, as well as the uncertain, dystopian future that it presages: “I was shaken by an eerie presentiment, my heart sank for a moment at the prospect of something to come, although beyond that something stood nothing, no image, no thought, no sense.”³⁹ Significantly, only the mute, surrounding nature joins in the mourning for the devastated monument, foregrounding the trenchant absence of a commemorative community and a palpable, meaningless void in place of the once future-oriented Yugoslav “concrete utopia.”

37 The military operation resulted in the expulsion of more than 20,000 Serbs.

38 Ugrešić, 195.

39 Ibid., 194–95.

While evoking the language of individual trauma, however, Ugrešić moves beyond its psychological commonplaces of overwhelming experience, memorial flashback, and paralyzing silence, all of which have defined trauma theory in the last twenty years.⁴⁰ Instead, the essay frames trauma not only as a psychological but also as a boarder cultural condition that needs to be rendered discursive, a marked silence that becomes a privileged site of political contestation and rigorous, critical diagnosis. Thus, rather than nostalgically dwelling on the loss, the text goes on to describe the ascendance of ethno-nationalist ideologies that have tried to “fill” the traumatic void—both material and symbolic—at the site of the destroyed Yugoslav project. According to Ugrešić, the post-socialist transition inaugurated not only a new aesthetic regime—replacing the abstract and universalizing language of socialist modernism with a kitschy, retrograde, and jingoistic monumentalism—but also new, troubling social and cultural forms. The essay describes these emerging forms in vivid detail, ranging from neo-fascist youth rallies in Croatia and Serbia, which attract ultra-nationalists from neighboring countries into a paradoxical transnational alliance, to local, self-appointed militias guarding Croatia’s border with the EU from Middle Eastern migrants seeking asylum in Western Europe. Here, wartime trauma and continuous effects of racialized violence extend beyond the nation-state, where they are increasingly shaped by transnational and global configurations and ideological frameworks, such as the US-led wars in the Middle East and the EU immigration policy.⁴¹ In this sense, Ugrešić’s text resonates with emerging critical approaches to cultural trauma, which, in opposition to individual or psychological trauma, “stands for a symbolic act of naming, designating value to, and narrativizing [the traumatic] event in the public sphere.”⁴² Such an approach strives to shift away from the psychological transference of traumatic affect through a cultural text in favor of critical and socially engaged analysis. According to Kit Messham-Muir and Uroš Čvoro, “cultural trauma is thus produced across the body politic, expressed specifically in the social realm, mediated and composed of images and narratives.

40 For an excellent survey of trauma theory in the humanities since the 1990s, see Kit Messham-Muir and Uroš Čvoro, “After Aftershock: The Affect-Trauma Paradigm One Generation after 9/11,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 20, no. 1 (2020): 125–40.

41 See Catherine Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-conflict, Post-colonial?* (Manchester University Press, 2018), especially 122–65.

42 Messham-Muir and Čvoro, 135.



Davor Konjikušić. *Tu nema ničega! (There's Nothing Here!)*, 2020.
© Davor Konjikušić. Image courtesy of Davor Konjikušić.

As a social process, it is *political* rather than *psychological*.⁴³ In “There’s Nothing Here!,” Ugrešić not only voices her own traumatic response to the loss of Yugoslavia as a unique cultural and political space but also narrates the aftereffects of the racialized violence that caused this trauma in the first place, putting it into a critical, global perspective.

Konjikušić photographs intensify the pointed irony of Ugrešić’s text while indirectly evoking traumatic affect through representations of emptiness and marked absence. Immersed in a subdued, gray-and-blue color palette and punctuated by blank pages, the images evoke a melancholy atmosphere that permeates the landscapes and architectural interiors of the post-Yugoslav borderlands. The sequence moves from dispassionate and largely depopulated images of regional socialist-era hotels, now turned into luxury wellness centers, to the recently erected ethno-nationalist architectural complexes, what Ugrešić in her essay calls “the new, massive, triumphalist ‘furniture’” of the post-socialist transition.⁴⁴ Tellingly, Bakić’s antifascist memorial, the

43 Messham-Muir and Čvoro, 135–36.

44 Ugrešić, 198.

most spectacular remnant of the Yugoslav socialist project, is pushed somewhat in the background. In fact, it appears only a couple times in the sequence. The first is a wide shot showing the entire monument in its deserted setting, embraced by the surrounding nature. However, the monumental scale and romantic spectacle of the ruin are minimized by the comparatively small scale of the image and its low placement on the page. The second shot, appearing on a two-image spread, shows an overhead shot of the monument's interior—a magnificent spiral staircase evoking the progressive movement of the Partisan revolution, which has now been abandoned and hollowed out. The monument's empty shell is moreover contrasted with a deadpan close-up of two boiled hotdogs and a dollop of mustard on a white plate. The suggestion here is that the “spiral,” collective, and transcendent movement of the revolution toward a classless utopia has been transformed into a static, self-enclosed, and atomized society, “a dose of post-communist human despair,” to borrow a phrase from Ugrešić, perfectly embodied in the memoryless visitors to the spas in the vicinity of the monument.⁴⁵ In this sense, Konjikušić's sequence of images relies not so much on linear narrative movement, but on the jarring, ironic juxtapositions that are a defining mark of Ugrešić's essay as well. Here, ironic juxtaposition is a means to engage not just the affective but also the cognitive and diagnostic—that is to say, the socially critical—capacities in the viewer and reader, to try to make sense of “this palimpsest—cobbed together from elements of post-communism.”⁴⁶

Besides this montage effect, Konjikušić also cleverly employs blank pages and two-page spreads to foreground the essay's polemical and political force. The marked silence, the “nothing here” of Ugrešić's text, is captured in the layout of the blank pages that punctuate the images in the sequence, showing the post-socialist palimpsest as a play of absence and presence, destruction and re-creation on the same site. While these “present absences” can be read in the affective key, as a *punctum* in Barthes's sense of the term, they also show how landscapes are shaped and constructed by ideology. Indeed, as Mariusz Czepczyński has argued, it is precisely as palimpsests that post-socialist landscapes “reveal, represent, and symbolize the relationships of power and control

45 Ibid., 182.

46 Ibid., 214.



Davor Konjikušić. *Tu nema ničega! (There's Nothing Here!)*, 2020. © Davor Konjikušić. Image courtesy of Davor Konjikušić.

out of which they emerged.”⁴⁷ Like Ugrešić, Konjikušić wants to formally index the erasure of socialist landscapes and the construction of new spatial and signifying systems by ascendant post-socialist ideologies. The latter, in particular, are captured by two prominent two-page spreads, emphasizing their scale and power. The first is an image of the barbed wire fence on the Schengen Croatian-Slovene border, erected to keep the migrants fleeing conflicts in the Middle East out of the EU. The fence appears in the middle of the sequence and is immediately followed by another two-page spread, of the exclusive “Afrodita” wellness center, the image centered on a fountain with a replica of a classical statue, which here is additionally suggestive of a European racial ideal. The viewer is thus forced to contend with the close geographical and semantic proximity of these two phenomena: the violent exclusion of racialized migrants from Europe, on the one hand, and the commercial appeal of classical, Eurocentric beauty standards, on the other. Unlike Kralj’s photo-diary, Konjikušić’s photographs are thus affectively subdued and largely free of nostalgia. Instead, they open up ways of thinking about architecture and landscape as manifestations of contemporary political power within and beyond the nation-state.

47 Mariusz Czepczyński, *Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities: Representation of Powers and Needs* (New York: Ashgate, 2008), 14.

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The fates of the Yugoslav socialist built environment and the material, social, and ideological infrastructure that had supported it in its ascendancy in the mid-20th century merit consideration beyond the power of the photographic representations that bring them to contemporary visibility. Nevertheless, such representations perform the important function of unearthing and reactivating the past's lost potentialities in the wake of the ethno-nationalist revisionism, historical amnesia, and capitalist triumphalism that swept the former Yugoslav region—and the formerly socialist countries more broadly—at the end of the 20th century, and that continue to do so into the present. These historical cataclysms have created the conditions for the rise of corrupt post-socialist and corporatist political elites, who keep expropriating what is left of the socialist commons in the service of private capital, while skimming the profits. As an illustrative example, and in place of a conclusion, I will mention only one: the Belgrade waterfront “urban renewal” project, initiated in 2014 and spearheaded by the Serbian president and “strongman” Aleksandar Vučić, through illegal and semi-legal tailoring of urban zoning laws and the razing of entire neighborhoods under the cover of night. Sold to the public as a revitalization of the Sava Amphitheater and funded by Emirati investors, the project spawned a “private city” within the city, composed of high-rises featuring luxury apartments, five-star hotels, and the biggest shopping mall in the region—most of which are unaffordable, inaccessible, and unwanted by Belgrade's residents. The waterfront redevelopment, however, also triggered anti-neoliberal and environmental protests and grassroots organizing—most notably, *Ne Davimo Beograd* (Do Not Let Belgrade Drown), which is just one of the citizen initiatives in the region that are fighting to regain the urban commons as a living legacy of socialist Yugoslavia. Indeed, the strings that tie these oppositional collectives together are also made up of memories of past gains and struggles that could have been realized—and that may still be won in the future.