A FEDERATION OF INTERESTS

The emergence of conceptual art in Yugoslavia coincided with the period of dismantling of a socialist market economy and return to a conservative form of socialism under the guise of a better and improved self-management introduced by a new constitution in 1974 and the Law of Associated Labor in 1976. According to official histories of Yugoslav self-management, alongside with nationalism, centralism, and “leftist deviations,” “the tendency toward increasing strength and independence of techno-managerial social forces” was perceived as one of greatest threats to Yugoslav socialism. Dušan Bilandžić and Stipe Tonković, the official historians of Yugoslav self-management, write that if “until the early 1960s the dominant position in the society was held by political structures,” then “especially after the 1965 economic reform, social processes started working in favor of ‘technocrats’ and ‘managers.’ It is important to note that they sought their legitimization in the very concept of self-management” (1974:162). Here, if professionalization of management is recognized as being the main problem, then the solution would be its return under the reign of political structures. The path to this solution did not lead back to a centralization of government, but toward a certain polycentrism, which came with a decentralization of the country’s political and economic structure. Not surprisingly, Bilandžić and Tonković indicate 1971 as a watershed year (166). That year, they explain, constitutional amendments established republics as centers of sovereignty, while the federation held only those “rights” that were agreed upon by all republics (155). This effectively meant abdication of the idea of the self-managing subject, and the first step back toward traditional notions of subjectivity and sovereignty, which are based on property rather than on labor. This called for the rigorous dismantling of all aspects of integral self-management in Yugoslavia. That was accomplished with Yugoslavia’s last constitution, proclaimed on February 21, 1974.

The constitution of 1974 has been heavily criticized, especially in Serbia,
for its unjust and unequal political and territorial organization of the federation.¹ Most histories of Yugoslavia’s demise point to this legal document as the main cause of the political strife that ended in the series of wars in the 1990s. According to conventional criticism, the 1974 constitution was an attempt by the aging rulers of the Yugoslav League of Communists to consolidate its grip on power. It was criticized for serving local leaderships of the Yugoslav republics, thus effectively turning the Yugoslav federation into a confederation. In addition, many observers were quick to note that the cumbersome “delegate system” established through this constitution, which was heralded as a decisive step toward direct democracy, in fact displaced real decision-making from the bicameral federal parliament and put it in the hands of the closed offices of Party leadership.² While correct on many points, this kind of criticism ignores the significance of the constitution for the reorganization of the national economy, especially of self-management. In fact, the largest part of the 1974 constitution is dedicated to self-management, not to the territorial organization of Yugoslavia. Similarly, while it made small (but in some cases nevertheless significant) interventions in the status of republics and autonomous regions, it made the most detailed and substantial changes in the very structure of self-management.

Yugoslavia’s 1974 constitution not only provided the new framework for the political and territorial organization of the federation and for the reorganization of factories and other institutions of employment; it also tried to legislate the deep crisis that came into the open in June 1968, and it did so by removing the worker from the position of Yugoslavia’s foundational political subject. This displacement of the worker from the place of the political subject is indicated in the name of the basic production unit of the Yugoslav self-managing economy: the Basic Organization of Associated Labor (Osnovna organizacija udruženog rada or OOUR), not the Basic Organization of Associated Laborers (Osnovna organizacija udruženih radnika). The possibility of political subjectivity and agency is thus already removed on the level of language. The authors of the constitution were counting on the power of political interpellation to keep the workers from “associating” into viable economic and political organizations. June ’68 showed not only that a new form of community—or, in Blanchot’s words, a new form of communism—in Yugoslavia was necessary, but also that it was possible.

In the doctrine of associated labor, the notion of subjectivity acquires a double valence. The subject is at the same time a revolutionary subject and an economic subject. This double status of the subject is fully realized in the
working class (as the subject who carries out the social revolution) and more specifically in the worker (as owner of the means of production). Workers’ political subjectivity is defined by a clearly defined set of rights that include, to name just some, the right to work with socially owned means of production, to “associate” one’s labor with other workers, to organize production and income, and to participate in management and decision-making. As Slovene economist Aleksander Bajt explains, the entire theoretical doctrine of self-management is based on conflation of the subject of decision and the subject of work (Bajt 1988:153). If as an ideological operation, “associated labor” foreclosed the political potential of self-management to catalyze the emergence of spontaneous community, then as a legal practice, it tried to invent a norm for all economic, political, and cultural relationships. Each Basic Organization of Associated Labor was presumably an autonomous unit that could be integrated into a Complex Organization of Associated Labor (Složena organizacija udruženog rada, or SOUR), which were, in turn, coordinated within regions and republics, while the republics synchronized their decisions on the federal level.

This rhapsody of associations and unifications, however, is not limitless. If engineers of associated labor had, as one of their goals, to prevent any potential for integral self-management, another goal was to secure the Party’s control of top management. These two goals are reflected in the dual structure of management in OOURs and SOURs: collective management in the hands of workers’ councils and personal management in the hands of the director. This structure was in place prior to the 1974 constitution, but in it the manager was, ideally, a facilitator rather than decision-maker. The new constitution enshrined the company director in Article 103: “In every organization of associated labour there shall be a business board and/or an individual business executive in charge of the organization of associated labour” (*The Constitution* 1974:138). Clear and simple enough. However, this is precisely where the poetry of ideology steps in. As we have seen, what sets apart the constitution of 1974 from other similar legal documents is its authors’ attention to language. On the one hand, it was marked by linguistic invention (“association of labor and means,” “self-managing contracts,” “past labor,” etc.), and on the other, linguistic renovation. The most significant example of the latter is the term for the company manager. “The individual business executive” is too bland a phrase to render the expression *inkosni poslovni organ* from the original text of the constitution (*Ustav 1974:31*). This phrase is the punctum that binds a legal document with the larger, and largely unspoken, ideological fabric that gives the laws their form and power and is protected by them at the same time. Why *inkosni or-
What does this say other than “individual business executive”? The word *inokosni* is an archaism that in ethnographic literature mostly designates a form of family organization in rural areas in the lands of the southern Slavs. As turn-of-the-twentieth-century legal ethnographer Valtazar Bogišić explains, up until mid-nineteen century, in most of these areas the common form of family organization was a rural cooperative (zadruga) comprising several brothers, their wives, and their children. An exception from this form of family organization was *inokoština*, or what we would call today a nuclear family consisting only of a married couple and their children (Bogišić 1986:222). The word fell into semioblivion with industrialization, which brought the demise of traditional rural cooperatives in the late nineteenth century. By transferring *inokosni* from a preindustrial economy to a society that aspired to join the postindustrial world, the authors of the constitution wanted to point to the tradition of cooperative forms of organization in the region that became Yugoslavia. However, the discourse of ideology always goes beyond the speakers’ intention. The word *inokosni* designates a family unit that is not common: in the Serbian Dictionary (*Rečnik srpskog narodnog jezika*) Vuk Karadžić translates the root word *ino* as *aliud*, “other,” and *inokosan* as “single” (einzeln) and “without other related heads of families” (ohne andere Verwandte Familienhäupter) ([1852] 1969:232). While this rendering still contains the reference to family structure, in Vuk Karadžić and Đuro Daničić’s translation of the Old Testament, this word appears in pure adjectival form. For example, in Isaiah 49:21 the people who forget their Lord are compared to a woman without kin: “ko mi ih rodi, jer bijah sirota i inokusna.” The King James rendering of the same passage is “Who hath begotten me these, seeing I have lost my children, and am desolate, a captive.” In short, *inokosnost* designates otherness and desolation, and accordingly represents perhaps the oldest expression of psychic and social alienation in Serbian and Croatian language(s). By dusting off this ancient expression, the ideology of associated labor has enshrined alienation in the very constitution of Yugoslavia. And indeed: alienated from a self-managing structure of governance, company directors became the Party’s main power mechanism for exerting its control over the economy.³

That the introduction of OOURs, SIZs (Samoupravne interesne zajednice, Self-Managing Communities of Interest), and other organizational units was an attempt at further decentralization without really doing so is clear from investment patterns before and after 1974. Starting from the well-established rule that centralized economies use high levels of investment to stimulate growth, Bajt observed that Yugoslavia was no exception in the immediate post–World War II period. From 1965 to 1974 investments...
were significantly decreased, only to shoot up, in the period from the adoption of the new constitution (1974) to the beginning of the debt service crisis (1980), to levels that exceeded the era of centralized planning (1947–53): “It is obvious that the state is responsible for this upsurge, since it is simply impossible that this kind of investment rate can be the result of free decision-making of economic subjects” (Bajt 1988, 162). In many ways, the overhaul of self-management that took place in the mid-1970s represented an attempt to go back to a centralized economy, while keeping the appearance of economic and political liberalism that would make this economy (and ideology) appear safe and attractive to international moneylenders. If we take this into consideration, it comes as no surprise that the system of “associated labor” quickly declined into hypernormativization. The 1976 Law of Associated Labor had 976 articles, deemed excessive by most legal experts. That was just the beginning: by the early 1980s the hyperproduction of legal norms led to the implementation of some 2.5 million “self-managing general regulations” and almost 2 million “self-management agreements” (Jovanov 1983:86). Sociologist Neca Jovanov wrote in the early 1980s that “legal norms . . . especially those regulating behavior in general, and especially that of participants in self-management, are multiplying to such an extent that there is no real social space for any action of self-managing workers” (89). In addition to their regular employment, workers were required to participate in the meetings of workers’ councils, which had little real power and served to legitimize decisions made in Party circles. As Jovanov wrote, instead of transferring power from state institutions down to the citizens, self-management was, through this hyperregulation, turned into an “expanded self-reproduction” of the state apparatus (91). This excessive reliance on self-managing “agreements” and “regulations” prompted some analysts to proclaim the post-1974 economic system a “contractual socialism,” as opposed to the “market socialism” of the previous period (Mencinger 1987:401). The constitution of 1974 and Law of Associated Labor ushered Yugoslav self-management into its last phase, in which all of political, economic, and theoretical gains made over previous three decades were obliterated. During this period, the core idea of self-management was transformed beyond recognition and defeated. For the sake of conceptual clarity, in this chapter I will treat associated labor as a period-specific aberration of self-management, which represents a much broader set of ideas and practices. We can say that associated labor represents a specific ideologization of self-management in Yugoslavia, and that as such it deeply marks a decadent phase in which Party leadership
tried to stage a conservative turn under the thin veil of progressive politics. Associated labor is the name of that flimsy ideological cover.

One of the paradoxes of Yugoslav politics of the 1970s that contemporary readers may find most mind-boggling is that this conservative turn, which resulted in a foreclosure of the revolutionary potential of self-management, did not mend Yugoslavia's ties with the USSR and the Eastern bloc. Precisely the opposite: it led to ever closer ties with Western governments and financial institutions. In other words, the conservative turn in Yugoslavia during the 1970s paralleled the conservative backlash that followed 1968 in the West, except that it followed a different ideological pattern.

During the 1970s the USSR, that island in the worldwide moment of 1968, entered an era of slow but steady stagnation; its satellite states in Eastern Europe, badly shaken by that same moment, entered a period of "normalization" marked by oppression. Unlike the rest of socialist Europe, Yugoslavia was going through a very dynamic period in which it was trying to address challenges that emerged from the student revolt and its aftermath; and unlike the United States and Western Europe, it was trying to reconcile two kinds of neoconservatism: internal (socialist), which came from the Yugoslav leadership and the rank-and-file old-guard Party members, many of whom returned from semiretirement back into active political life; and external (liberal-capitalist), which came from the West, on which Yugoslav economy was becoming increasingly dependent. Deregulation of international money markets in the late 1960s and early 1970s had a direct impact on Yugoslavia. As in the past, the money kept coming from the West, but this time it was not in the form of war reparations, aid, or low-interest credits, but in the form of commercial loans. Susan Woodward makes a well-substantiated argument that socialist Yugoslavia, throughout its history, had remained extremely vulnerable to global political and economic trends. She concludes: "The dynamic of public policy was driven neither by electoral competition between political parties representing labor or capital at home, nor by a domestic business cycle, but rather by the federal response to international events" (1995:256). The overhaul of the Yugoslav economic and political system, epitomized in the 1974 constitution, was a two-pronged response to this two-headed neoconservatism: retrograde socialism at home, and neoliberalism abroad.

Answering the challenge of retrograde socialism, Yugoslav authorities resorted to measures that were characterized by repression against a critical minority and gratification of the masses. The former resulted in a cam-
campaign against progressive intellectuals (shutting down the journal *Praxis* and the Korčula Summer School in 1974, removing eight professors from Belgrade University in 1975, etc.) and artists (cracking down on “the dark wave” in film, censoring books and theater performances). At the same time, the general population was inducted into a culture of socialist consumerism that had all the external features of prosperity: factories and department stores were popping up almost daily across the country, and employment was on the upswing. Socialist consumerism was not limited to tangible goods, but to a significant degree included cultural consumption as well. It was the golden age of festivals, which ranged from alternative theater to film and classical music; of World War II film spectacles; and of pop culture that easily flowed into socialist culture. On a more fundamental political level, the authors of the Yugoslav constitution repositioned the League of Communists of Yugoslavia away from the realm of politics proper into the very fabric of society. Writing at the crest of the 1974 constitutional reforms, Edvard Kardelj pointed out that the LCY was not a “classical political party that rules over society” because it promoted the “development of a new kind of democracy”: a “self-managing socialist democracy” (1977:34). Once the new constitution shifted it from an organizational principle of industrial democracy to the fundamental premise of state ideology, self-management began to conflate society and state, two interwoven but discrete and often opposed forms of social composition (and became associated labor). Well-intentioned critics pointed out the paradox: the ideologues of associated labor presented it both as a continuation of the political revolution and as a normative system. In other words, it was both a process and a structure. Following this fundamental paradox, the Party was an agent of the process and of the order, or in other words, both the reformer and the conserver of state institutions. Kardelj’s statements—such as the one proclaiming that the LCY and the Socialist Alliance were not “mediators between man and power, man and organs of self-management, man and the assembly, in the way that political parties in a classical parliamentary system are,” but were instead “first and foremost the factor that shapes social consciousness”—clearly indicate that the Party did not position itself at the top of the social system (as it did in other Soviet-style states in Eastern Europe), but instead wedged itself between various “decentralized” institutions: republics and communes, communes and enterprises, sociopolitical organizations and state institutions, and so on. (32). In short, starting from the Stalinist model of an axis of power positioned at the center of society, it transformed itself into a flowing and decentered medium: a universal mediator of all social exchanges, or a currency. By the end of the
The response to external neoconservatism was more subtle, and it was folded in with economic reform that came together with and was inseparable from constitutional reform. That associated labor was both a process and an order meant that Yugoslavia was perpetually in a state of transition, a process that was manifested in a series of reforms that seemed to dismantle one mechanism of state socialism after another, but could never get rid of all of them for the simple reason that it was also generating them. Historically, when it came to the organization of work, Yugoslav self-management did not introduce radically new work methods and technologies, and its track record in improving working conditions was very uneven. Its most significant departure from industrial capitalism and étatist socialism was the expansion of workers’ participation in decision-making. The empowerment of workers was one currency that was subject to careful regulation. (For example, in various periods of the development of self-management, workers’ councils had more or less say on wages, employment, investments, etc.). The other currency closely related to it was labor, which was positioned at the very center of ideological and political discourses. If productivity in the Yugoslav self-managing economy was, at best, erratic and highly dependent on capital import, the one area in which it certainly distinguished itself was the production of a discourse about work. Still, this kind of discourse was not the exclusive property of Yugoslav self-management. As early as the 1930s period of industrialization in the Soviet Union, labor entered ideological discourse through its aestheticization. The Yugoslav turn to self-management in the wake of 1948 split with Soviet Union was motivated, in part, by an attempt to emancipate labor from its ideologization, which was so evident in the political economy of socialist realism. The idea of integral self-management, or self-management that was not managed by the Party, was a logical and unavoidable consequence of this emancipatory move. Suppression of spontaneous self-management required positing a social bond even more fundamental than labor and class solidarity. What was unique for the Yugoslav ideology of associated labor was the discovery and promotion of interest as the core value that associates subjects into a viable society.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Kardelj’s entire elaboration of associated labor rests on the notion of interest. His promotion of interest as a central component of a productive economy is the result of a dual effort. On the one hand, interest is a form of disalienation. It is in the personal in-
terest of the worker to take control of her labor power. In that sense, in Kardelj’s theory of the emancipation of the working class, interest has a role similar to that of class consciousness in the writing of Lukács. Kardelj’s elevation of interest as one of the pillars of the revised self-management in the 1970s can be seen as a return to the classical works of Marx and Engels, who in The Communist Manifesto used precisely this idea to set the Communists apart from other “working-class parties” (Marx and Engels 1962:22). On the other hand, Kardelj posits interest as a solution for the problem created by socialism’s removal of financial motivation for labor from the economic system. In a Stalinist economy, gain and profit are replaced by other goals; labor is presented in terms of every individual’s ethical responsibility to the proletarian class (Dobrenko 2007:177). It is precisely through this labor of representation (of labor) that socialist realism became an instrumental part of a command economy. In rejecting the Soviet political economy, Yugoslav self-management rejected this external motivation for labor and returned the power back to the individual worker.

Kardelj recognizes the importance of interest in all facets of associated labor. For example, centralized planning was one of the first aspects of the command economy that self-management had to do away with. According to the new notion of “social planning,” a plan is an “expression of the need for the coordination and harmonization of workers’ interests” (Kardelj 1979:60). Likewise, interest is the central term of his definition of self-management (that is, associated labor): “The system of socialist self-management is not only a form of democratic rule by workers over conditions and means of production, but also the starting point of self-managing in the transformation of the entire society on the basis of the leading role of the interest of the working class” (1977:11). It is lodged at the very center of the tautological relation between the working class and progress: “The working class’s historical interests are the moving force of the general societal progress,” and because of that, it is necessary to give that process a direction that will “secure the leading position of these interests” (22). Interest is not only the main motivator of the working class, but also of every individual. The “workingman’s interest” is broader than the “material conditions of life” and includes cultural, spiritual, and other needs (12). It is at the very center of Kardelj’s theorization of labor:

A worker’s true goal and interest is to distribute newly formed value in “pure income” in such a way that it secures the growth of his own living, social, and cultural standard, but also to secure the necessary conditions for the growth of the productivity of his own labor, that
is, the development of techniques and technologies for his own labor and creativity. . . . Motivation to struggle for income, then, essentially differs from the motivation to struggle for profit. (27)

According to Kardelj, under conditions of associated labor, interest is not a spur that drives one individual against another, but instead a mortar that bonds them together into a sustainable community. Interest is not something that is external to work, nor is it an abstract value. Theoreticians of Yugoslav self-management put it at the center of the very definition of labor as a mode of human behavior. In his elaboration on the main tenets of Kardeljian self-management, the sociologist Eugen Pusić explains that “men fulfill their interests in their natural environment” by means of “all kinds of activities, which can be defined as behaviors to which an individual attaches certain meanings.” Therefore, “We will call labor any activity that is intentionally and specially aimed at attaining certain interests” (1968:68). In this way, performance (broadly construed) in Yugoslav self-management is inherently tied to self-interest. Post-1974 theorizations of associated labor placed interest, and not some other value traditionally associated with proletarian struggle, such as solidarity or equality, at the very core of the ideology of “associated labor.” In doing so, they moved self-management away from the modernist project of emancipation of labor in order to bring it closer to the neoliberal idea of its randomization and deregulation.

In his important early work, Knowledge and Human Interests (1968), Habermas places Marx within the tradition of European Enlightenment. At the very source of this history is Immanuel Kant’s idea of disinterested thought. Here, explains Habermas, “The concept of ‘interest’ is not meant to imply a naturalistic reduction of transcendental-logic properties to empirical ones,” but precisely the opposite, “to prevent just such reduction” ([1968] 1971:196). According to this schema, in his critique of idealist philosophy, Marx is still not erroneously reducing labor to pure empiricism. If “Kant takes formal logic in order to derive the categories of the understanding from the table of judgments,” and if “Fichte and Hegel take transcendental logic in order to reconstruct respectively the act of absolute ego from pure apperception and the dialectical movement of the absolute notion,” then Marx’s synthesis in the materialist sense “takes place in the medium of labor rather than thought” so that “the substratum in which it leaves its residue is the system of social labor and not a connection of symbols” (38). This substitution of labor for thought and economy for logic does not take Marx outside of the enlightenment project, but expands the
basic premise of this very project: “Self-consciousness is not an ultimate representation that might be able to accompany all other representations: it is an action that goes back inside itself and thus in its own accomplishment simultaneously makes itself transparent—an act that becomes transparent to itself in the course of its own achievement” (38). This transparency of consciousness to itself comes from its detachment from interest, and as such constitutes the ground for any claim of scientific objectivity.

It is precisely this ideal of disinterested critique that Habermas sees as being under assault at the end of modernity. In his 1980 address “Modernity versus Postmodernity” he summarizes his analysis of the Enlightenment from *Knowledge and Human Interests* and other subsequent works by asserting that “the project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic” (1981:9). Following in the footsteps of the Frankfurt School’s analysis of the history of the Enlightenment, Habermas concludes that “the 20th century has shattered” this ideal (9). He recognizes the crisis of the modernist project in a “climate” that has engulfed “more or less the entire Western world,” which “furthers capitalist modernization processes as well as trends critical of cultural modernism” (13). Indeed, it is “the post-modernism of neoconservatives” that embraces and promotes “technical progress, capitalist growth and rational administration” and at the same time promotes “a politics of defusing the explosive content of cultural modernism” (13). In *Knowledge and Human Interests* Habermas objects to Marx’s privileging of instrumental over communicative action. The varied importance that Marx attaches to these two fundamental modes of human action ultimately results in his sophisticated analysis of labor as a form of self-consciousness and at the same time in his reduction of politics to class struggle: “Marx conceives institutional framework as an ordering of interests that are immediate functions of the system of social labor according to the relation of social rewards and imposed obligations. Institutions derive their force from perpetuating a distribution of rewards and obligations that is rooted in force and distorted according to class structure” (1971:277). As a result, the notion of interest remains fairly undeveloped in Marx, and it remains attached to the idea of class struggle and class interest of the proletariat. This clearly does not give Kardelj enough material for his insertion of the notion of interest into the very core of the Yugoslav ideology of associated labor. If, following Castoriadis, we agree that the real socialism of the Soviet model was nothing more than state capitalism, then Yugoslav post-1974 socialism can be seen as an attempt to take state capitalism past
the industrial age and to follow capitalism in its passage into a postindustrial society. Furthermore, it was this endemic political neoconservatism that introduced Yugoslavia to political postmodernism even before the arrival of its cultural counterpart.

The ideologeme of interest demands a deeper alignment of the projected ideological order with past economic formations. As Albert Hirschman explains in his important work *The Passions and the Interests*, the emergence of capitalism was made possible not only by changes in industry and trade, but also by a massive reassessment of values in the Western world. In the course of the seventeenth century a “curious change” occurred in which the feudal idea of elevating glory over riches was called into question and eventually overturned. The medieval hierarchy of passions was gradually eclipsed by the perspective that one passion counteracted another. In this new taxonomy of passions Hirschman recognizes a moral foundation of the new social order. This new taxonomy of lesser and graver passions led to a new doctrine, according to which “one set of passions, hitherto known variously as greed, avarice, or love of lucre, could be usefully employed to oppose and bridle such other passions as ambition, lust for power, or sexual lust” (1977:41). This doctrine based on manipulating an individual’s private passions is easily translatable into a principle of “engineering social progress” (26). Long before the recognition of the market, the “invisible hand” was that of interests. According to Hirschman, from the early political economy of James Steuart’s *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* (1767) to Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1776) the doctrine of interests traversed a path from a bold new proposition to generally accepted truth. The evolution of the word brought a “semantic drift” in which the meaning of “interest” shifted from avarice as an individual passion to an economic sense of concern, aspiration, and advantage. “Injection of an element of calculating efficiency” into human behavior helped this idea, as Hirschman writes, “survive and prosper both as a major tenet of nineteenth century liberalism and as a central construct of economic theory” (1977:19). And furthermore, “From France and England the idea traveled to America where it was used by the Founding Fathers as an important intellectual tool for the purposes of constitutional engineering” (28). It is precisely as this kind of ideological tool that we find “interest” in the work of the mastermind of the last Yugoslav constitution.

The idea of interest provided Kardelj with the means to address one glaring weakness that self-management brought to Yugoslav statecraft. Self-management was impulsive; it worked in the times of crisis and great emotional charge, but it was notoriously difficult to maintain the high level
of engagement from day to day, or, in theatrical terms, from night to night. The great social upheavals that shook Yugoslavia at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s showed, furthermore, that the “Diderot dilemma” cuts both ways. Self-management was promoted as an alternative to Stalinism and as a less repressive way on the part of the state to control the society. Because of its potential for universal equality and empowerment of the subject, as an idea self-management was inherently opposed to the state. The history of socialist Yugoslavia is a history of a self-managing society slipping away from the control of the state, and the state’s attempts to regain its control over society. In the mid-1970s, “interest” became a very effective tool in this struggle. Ideologues of associated labor used it in the same way as the statesmen in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the new economy of passions, avarice is useful because of its universality and insatiability. As a perfect example of this attitude Hirschman brings up Hume’s observation that “avarice, or desire for gain, is a universal passion which operates at all times, in all places, and upon all persons” (54). Unlike other appetites, the passion for accumulating money seems unquenchable, and in that sense it introduces an unusual sense of constancy in the market-world torn apart by conflicting and destructive urges. It was not only its ability to increase the total wealth in a society that made the passion for acquisition a useful tool for statecraft; it was its capacity to promote behavior that is at once engaged and obedient. In his early writings on political economy, James Steuart noted that if a “people [were] to become quite disinterested,” then “there would be no possibility of governing them” (in Hirschman 1977:50). It is not at all surprising, then, that the notion of interest resurfaces in Michel Foucault’s work on governability from the 1970s.

Outlining the differences between the three systems—legal, disciplinary, and security—Foucault writes that “the law prohibits and discipline prescribes, and the essential function of the security, without prohibiting or prescribing, but possibly making use of some instruments of prescription and prohibition, is to respond to a reality in such a way that this response cancels out the reality to which it responds—nullifies, or limits, checks, or regulates it” (Foucault [2004] 2007:47). This “cancelation” of reality is accomplished through discourse. For example, a security society doesn’t conceptualize labor as pragmatically as a disciplinary society does—as a set of “best actions for achieving a particular result” (57)—but as a relationship between discourse and body, and institutions and assemblages of multiplicities. Crucially, security societies transform the notion of discourse as much as they do the body and its actions. In a security society, the discourse
does not consist of legal decrees, scientific propositions, or political decisions, but includes all of the information, calculation, and anticipations that go into the regulation of society. Discourse is not external to power, but inherent to it; it is not its representation, but its mode of operation. Foucault argues that in security societies economy is no longer a science of regulation and distribution, but of the collection of information, the creation of statistical averages, and estimation based on this data. In this reckoning, “There is at least one invariant that means that the population taken as a whole has one and only one mainspring of action. This is desire” (Foucault [2004] 2007:72). In security societies, desire receives a new elaboration:

*Desire is the pursuit of the individual's interest.* In his desire the individual may well be deceived regarding his personal interest, but there is something that does not deceive, which is that the spontaneous, or at any rate both spontaneous and regulated play of desire will in fact allow the production of an interest, of something favorable for the population. The production of the collective interest through the play of desire is what distinguishes both the naturalness of population and the possible artificiality of the means one adopts to manage it. (73; emphasis added)

It is via interest, and not via more or less superficial features of a market economy, that Yugoslavia joined the broad spectrum of security societies that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. As a result, the art of governing in Yugoslavia involved an equal measure of the sovereign’s firm control and of predicting and calculating contingencies. In order to regain balance and stability in the late 1970s, Yugoslav authorities employed repressive measures limited to intellectuals and artists (disciplinary modality) while promoting consumerist behavior among the general population (security modality).

Conceptual centrality of interest for the new doctrine of associated labor was fortified through the establishment of Self-Managing Communities of Interest (Samoupravne interesne zajednice, or SIZs). The institution of the SIZ addressed the question of funding for segments of the economy that were not directly engaged in material production, and previously were funded by ministries through taxes and the redistribution of funds. According to this new funding scheme, there were five kinds of SIZs, in charge of education, science, welfare, health, and culture respectively. Kardelj spoke of them as an integral part of the “social exchange of labor”
through which “working people” could exercise control over spending in all kinds of nonproducing areas, and, even more important, as a “self-managing integration of interests” (1977:30). What is important here is not only funding, but also the taxonomy of labor. In his elaboration of the “self-managing integration of interests” Kardelj speaks of forms of “immaterial production” that don’t represent just “spending but also [are] an integral part of social labor”; according to him, the purpose of Self-Managing Communities of Interest is to mediate between “productive and so-called non-productive labor” (31).

In a very similar fashion, neoliberal capitalism will, in its infinite adaptations, undertake an informalization of labor. Boltanski and Chiapello suggest that the emergence of post-Taylorist business enterprise in industrialized societies coincided with the rise of service industries and the specific forms of labor prevalent among them. This comes down to the very organization of the workplace: “Given that what matters most is intangible, impalpable, informal—a term that characterizes both relations and the rules of the game, which are invented as one goes along—the most appropriate organizational mechanisms are thus likewise interpersonal,” observe Boltanski and Chiapello (2005:118). Here work is organized through interpersonal relationships, rather than through its relationship to the object of labor. What Boltanski and Chiapello describe without naming it is the security mechanism at the very heart of neoliberal capitalism. In ridding itself of the disciplinary techniques of the Fordist factory line, capitalism is not giving up on its primary objectives of growth and expansion. The room for this growth is no longer geographical, as it was at the height of imperialism, or demographic, as in the decades of mass industrialization, but “interpersonal” and behavioral. The introduction of Self-Managing Communities of Interest as a way of regulating “immaterial production” preceded by almost three decades the critics of neoliberal capitalism and their recognition of the emergence of this kind of labor.12

It would be a crude oversimplification to say that ideologues of associated labor were ahead of their time, and that they anticipated the future development of labor organizing. Rather than a vanguard of flexible capitalism, Yugoslav self-management, which over three decades made a full circle from direct command economy to self-management to indirect command economy (associated labor), was something like its side-guard. It developed separately from, and in relative synchrony with, security societies of the West. In its own marginal and skewed way, Yugoslavia participated in transformations that shaped capitalism over the second half of the twentieth century—up to and including her own demise.
Between 1971 and 1973, a member of the Belgrade group of six conceptual artists, Zoran Popović, produced a series of works under the common title *Axioms*. It consisted of basic geometrical figures (circle, diagonal line, cross, square, point, vertical line, crossed diagonal lines), executed in linocut and other techniques, including performance. This is his description of his action at the exhibit *Axioms* he held at the SKC in 1972:

The room in which I perform is in complete darkness. When the audience is ready, with the beginning of first sounds, which are selected especially for this occasion, small bulbs attached to the tips of my fingers slowly come on. The sound that accompanies the performance of *Axioms* is very intense, and it seems to fill the entire room. It has the purpose of an instant inclusion of spectators. It is asynchronous with the performer’s movements. At the end, the bulbs attached to my fingertips are slowly turned off. The basic idea is that this kind of presentation, which affects the senses powerfully, leaves no room in the spectator for creation of any other kind of images except those that are in front of him or her. During the performance, any narrativity is strictly circumvented, and so is any pictorial interpretation, that is, any analogism. (Popović 1983:37)

In his sophisticated elaboration of *Axioms*, Popović suggests that because of their “‘metalinguistic’ structure” these “geometrical diagrams” are “as much critical, as they are aesthetic,” that is, that they are “as ideologically manipulative as they are equivocally self-reflexive” (1983:25). If that is the case with the whole series, then performance additionally enhances the signifying potential contained in this structure. It is here, perhaps more than anywhere else, that Deleuze’s insistence on the “unbridled manual power” of the diagram comes into prominence. “Being manual,” writes Deleuze, the diagram “must be reinjected into the visual whole, in which it deploys consequences that go beyond it. The essential point about the diagram is that it is made in order for something to emerge from it, and if nothing emerges from it, it fails” (2003:128). So what emerges from *Axioms*? In the very least, a certain number of lines. Depending on the medium, these lines are produced by scratches on a surface (linocut), or by traces on paper. In performance, they are produced by hand gestures. These gestures are made visible by attaching light sources to tips of the performer’s fingers. This underlines the manual nature of gestures and
their proximity to labor. Now, attempts to give labor an inspectable form have their own place in the history of scientific management.

Chronophotography, the very same technique Popović used in his performance of *Axioms*, was used early in the twentieth century by Frank and Lillian Gilbreth in their time-motion studies. These early followers of F. W. Taylor also resembled Popović in their use of different media. While he used lithography, photography, performance, and other forms to reproduce the same set of geometric figures, they were using various methods in an attempt to achieve reproducibility of gestures. Placing a laborer in front of a black background divided in a Muybridge-inspired grid, they would first take the motion study photographs by attaching small bulbs to workers’ fingertips. Then they would use these images, which they called “cyclegraphs,” to create three-dimensional wire models. The purpose of creating these casts of bodily gesture was to train workers to perform their tasks in the most efficient way. This takes scientific management to an extreme, and at the same time represents the most literal example of disciplinary techniques in their striving to produce a docile body. Here this docility reaches the point of the complete negation of a worker’s subjectivity. As Sharon Corwin points out, these “models function as abstract representations of labor in which the worker is wholly excised from the act of work, leaving only a reified trace of labor in its most efficient form” (2003:146). Therefore, *Axioms* is placed at the intersection of two kinds of abstraction that in many ways defined modernism: nonfigural painting in art and systematization of labor in industrial production. Insofar as it pointed to the quiet transition to an indirect command economy that was happening in Yugoslavia exactly at the time when he was working on *Axioms*, Popović’s early conceptual work was much more politically incisive than he might have anticipated or intended.

Having spent 1974–75 in New York City, Popović and his (then) girlfriend Jasna Tijardović established a living link between the Belgrade conceptual art scene at the SKC and the New York conceptual art of the mid-1970s. Early in they stay, they got in touch with the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, who offered to let them stay in his loft on Bond Street in SoHo. This gave them open access to New York conceptual art scene, in which they, Popović asserts, participated as equals. Only a few months after their arrival in New York, Tijardović and Popović published their article “A Note on Art in Yugoslavia” in the inaugural issue of the journal *The Fox*, a platform for ideas that emerged from the radical left wing of the New York conceptual art scene.14 According to Popović, they directly participated in the creation of the intellectual “climate” that led to the launching of this
journal. It was a two-way street: on the one hand, during their stay in New York in 1974–75 this couple actively participated in debates with the radical wing of the Art & Language group, which, claims Popović, “at the last moment corrected many of their naïve political positions, and helped them get rid of many political illusions”; and on the other, he saw this collaboration as the “practical beginning” of his “work on ‘artistic action of direct political speech’” (Popović 1989:28). In Popović’s artistic activities, this direct political speech of the work of art “stripped of its exclusive self-reflexivity” culminates in his piece Worker, Typographer Miodrag Popović: On Life, Work, Leisure (Radnik, tipomašinista Miodrag Popović: o životu, o radu, o slobodnom vremenu). The group of conceptual artists gathered in the SKC engaged in “direct political speech” in Oktobar ’75, an art event that was isolated in its attempt to address directly the massive turn in Yugoslav politics of the mid-1970s.

Even though in Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972, Lucy Lippard enthusiastically announced that “by 1970 . . . Yugoslavia had also kicked in” as part of the worldwide progression of postobject art, its development was by no means imitative of or analogous to that in United States or Western Europe (Lippard 1973:xix). Conceptual art in Yugoslavia was highly specific for its social environment, and in that sense, it differed significantly in its content, if not in its form, from similar movements in the capitalist West and in the socialist East. In the United States and Europe conceptual art was driven, in part, by artists’ opposition to the institution of art as it was deeply implicated within the structures of advanced capitalist societies. They saw dematerialization of art as its de commodification. Their critique of institutions was first and foremost ideological, not aesthetic. Unlike in countries of postindustrial capitalism, in Yugoslavia the shift “from art object to the subject of the artist” was not taking place within an art market dominated by art dealers, galleries, and private art museums (Denegri 2007:102; emphasis added). At the same time, in distinction from conceptual art in the USSR and other countries of real socialism, where artists presented their works in private apartments and studios, in Yugoslavia this kind of art was shown in public art museums and galleries. In other words, it was taking place within the culture of socialist aestheticism established on the basis of the tacit agreement between artists and authorities to uphold the boundaries between the political and the aesthetic. When, for example, Prvoslav Ralić insisted on the separation of artistic practice from artistic discourse, where the former was beyond and the latter well within the realm of ideological criticism by the Party, he spoke from the well-established positions of socialist aestheti-
Dematerialization of art in Yugoslavia meant, first and foremost, its stepping out from the realm of the aesthetic. In doing so, it exposed the ideological function of the seemingly politically neutral mainstream art.

More difficult than understanding the differences of general political and economic context in Yugoslavia and other countries that produced significant conceptual artworks, is recognizing the differences in the conceptualization of the very idea of an “art institution” that was subjected to this critique. We need go no further than comparing, for example, artistic statements like Guerrilla Art Action Group’s (GAAG) “A call for immediate resignation of all of the rockefellers from the board of trustees of the museum of modern art” (1969) and Raša Todosijević’s “Edinburgh Statement: Who Profits from Art, and Who Gains from It Honestly?” (1975). One of Art Workers’ Coalition (ARW) splinter groups, GAAG distributed their pamphlet in a guerrilla action performed in New York’s Museum of Modern Art on November 19, 1969. Without warning, they ripped each other’s clothes and exploded concealed bags of fake blood, then fell on the floor playing dead among scattered leaflets in which they accused the Rockefellers on MOMA’s board of trustees of using “art as a disguise” and as a “cover for their brutal involvement in all spheres of the war machine” (GAAG in Alberro and Stimson 2009:86). This and other actions organized by GAAG reflect, in a radicalized form, ARW’s engagement in a wide spectrum of social questions such as the struggle against racism and sexism, antiwar protests, and the struggle for artists’ rights. As Julia Bryan-Wilson recognizes, artists gathered in ARW, GAAG, and other similar groups active in New York and Los Angeles were aware of “how their art circulated” and of “its symbolical and ideological ‘use’ that challenged previous claims of autonomy” (2009:17). Todosijević’s statement, first published in English translation in the catalog of Richard Demarco’s gallery show of Yugoslav artists and subsequently in several Serbian editions, speaks about the position of art in a society in which modernist autonomy of art was abolished during the period of socialist realism, never to be fully restored. Here the artist is not a small entrepreneur competing with other “small businesses” in a market, but a “worker” fully integrated in a vast symbolic economy of social conformism. Todosijević’s statement is a long list of institutions that “profit from art.” It begins with “factories, which produce materials” and, from there, moves on to their workers, to galleries (nonprofit and otherwise), to other cultural institutions and all of their employees (from experts to janitors), to media, bookstores, antique shops, banks . . . all the way to “cheap politicians who have, in this ‘mysterious way,’ through relatives, friends and connections, seized at a sinecure, brainwashing artists and
making enough money for two life times through this nonsensical business” (1975:n.p.). In his contribution to *New Art Practice* exhibition catalog, art critic Ješa Denegri amplified Todosijević’s point by asserting that “the representatives of the new artistic conceptions have revealed . . . the appalling internal configuration of ‘art systems’ in Yugoslavia, bringing in an unprecedented way into the open the symptoms which bespoke of, among other things, the outmoded methods of artistic training, the inertia within galleries and other institutions in charge of exhibiting art, of a vast majority of critics out of touch with new developments, and finally, of concealed but verifiable existence of a specific market mechanism which is different from that in the West, but is no less powerful and ruinous in its own way” (Denegri 1978:13). In other words, like no other group of artists before them, the representatives of “new art practice” uncovered the conditions of socialist aestheticism in Yugoslavia and its mechanism that deeply implicated—to use ARW terminology—art workers in a system of backward and corrupt institutions.

Like that of dematerialization, the discourse of expansion (April Meetings were subtitled Festivals of Expanded Media) took on new meanings and applications once it was taken out of the context of the American counterculture of the late 1960s and transposed to the cultural context of socialist Yugoslavia. Texts published in April Meetings bulletins outline the transformation of “expanded media” from a convenient art historical category into a critical term at the boundary between arts and politics. In their program notes about the festival, the organizers of the first April Meeting (1972) used the phrase “expanded media” to indicate their intention to depart from medium-specificity in the arts: “Expanded medium is the term that encompasses a very broad range of creation, research, and thinking within interdisciplinary regions of traditionally compartmentalized arts, and we use it in its most inclusive sense” (*Bilten* 1972:1). In their use of the term at this early stage, the festival organizers already departed from Gene Youngblood’s New Agey arguments for “expanded cinema” as a broadening of consciousness that would go “beyond mere political revolution” (1970:52). A specifically Yugoslav politicization of this label is recognizable in the statements by the former Mediala member Vladan Radovanović, who, in the roundtable discussion held at the second April Meeting (1973), suggested that “since expanded media is not an art movement or a style in art, it encompasses not only various currents and styles, but also something that is still art but at the same time tends toward non-art” and that, in its constellation of meanings, this term should include the “expansion of attitude toward the artistic and toward the medium” (in Zečević 1974:n.p.).
Constitutional changes in Yugoslavia in the early 1970s radically altered the meaning of “nonart,” that is, the everyday into which art was expanding. It was no longer an amorphous, more or less utilitarian existence, but everydayness was held together (and pulled apart) by a vast network of agreements and regulations.

Yugoslav contractual socialism was an attempt to reconcile a postrevolutionary society, which produced a new figure of the charismatic leader, with the tradition of contractual democracies that significantly curtailed the power of the sovereign. In the United States and Western Europe, conceptual art engaged precisely this political texture of Western democracies. In his much-discussed essay “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” Benjamin Buchloh called attention to the shift from aesthetic to institutional discourse in post-object art:

Beginning with the readymade, the work of art had become the ultimate subject of a legal definition and the result of institutional validation. In the absence of any specifically visual qualities and due to the manifest lack of any (artistic) manual competence as a criterion of distinction, all the traditional criteria of aesthetic judgment—of taste and of connoisseurship—have been programmatically voided. The result of this is that the definition of the aesthetic becomes on the one hand a matter of linguistic convention and on the other the function of both a legal contract and an institutional discourse (a discourse of power rather than taste). (1990:118)

Instead of using art institutions of Yugoslav “contractual socialism” to legitimize their own practices, conceptual artists used these institutions as a critical platform within which they strove to develop modalities of self-organization that were radically opposed to the increased ossification of self-management. Much of this struggle took place within the Student Cultural Center. In 1976, The Fox published Jasna Tijardović’s report on the situation in the SKC, “The ‘Liquidation’ of Art: Self-Management or Self-Protection.” Even though most readers of The Fox were unacquainted with the social and political situation in Yugoslavia, it is clear from Tijardović’s text that by 1975, the SKC found itself caught between two concepts of self-management: one imposed on it from without through the funding structure of SIZs, and one resisting from within, constituted mostly by artists and theoreticians who spontaneously gathered around this institution and were active in shaping its identity from the very beginning. “The Gallery
[within the SKC] wants to be socially justified, which means it is not neutral. It wants to adapt to society, to the aim of this society—self-management. The same is true of certain artists/collaborators (of whom I am one): we too are devoted to self-management, and to socially useful work—but in the form of art”; and “Self-management was supposed to teach me to work and act independently—without fear; more free; free, without self-censorship” (Tijardović 1976:98, 99). While Buchloh complained that conceptual art “in its bureaucratic rigor and deadpan devotion to the static collection of factual information, came to refuse any transcendental dimension whatsoever,” Tijardović snapped at arguments for the “liquidation of art” justified by discourses of dematerialization (Buchloh 1990:141):

The term “transcendence” or “liquidation” is too imitative—it comes from politics. This is an unhealthy, masculine idea. It reveals the extent to which repressive forces are stored up and the extent to which they can appear as a distorted form—in this case the idea of “transcending” art reminds me too much of the transcendence and liquidation of people. . . . Art (as a whole) is being disarmed because (certain) art questioned the bureaucratic, financial power of the SCC; essentially art isn’t the issue at all. (Tijardović 1976:99)18

Tijardović article exposes a deep rupture between the integral and self-management of interests. They both derive from the experience of 1968. However, whereas the first form of self-management stands for independence, freedom, and absence of fear and self-censorship, the second one promotes interdependence, institutionalized socialization (however paradoxical it may seem), and, ultimately, full assimilation of art into social practices. It is easy to recognize in the latter one Žarko Papić’s argument for a “withering away” of art as a discrete activity within a self-managed society. In turn, Papić proposed this idea with the hindsight afforded by the events that were taking place in the SKC at the time of his writing.19 Namely, in the fall of 1975, the group of artists and curators gathered around the SKC organized one of its boldest actions to date. Instead of running its traditional “Oktobar” event, they decided to publish a series of statements on art and Yugoslav society. So instead of hosting performances, discussions, and art installations, as they had over the previous four years, that October the SKC released a mimeographed publication, Oktobar ’75.

This collection of statements, ranging from one to nine pages in length, by eleven artists and art critics (Dunja Blažević, Raša Todosijević, Jasna Tijardović, Ješa Denegri, Goran Đorđević, Zoran Popović, Dragica
Fig. 26. The Cover of *Oktobar ’75*. Courtesy of Student Cultural Center, Belgrade.
Vukadinović, Slavko Timotijević, Bojana Pejić, Vladimir Gudac, and Nena Baljković is a radical implementation of the conceptual art premise of transforming the artwork from an object to a mental process and a theoretical proposition. Furthermore, considering that each of these statements engaged, in one way or another, the question of art and society, this dematerialization of art was all but ideologically neutral and insensitive to anything specific to the local cultural scene. In fact, Oktobar ’75 stands in radical opposition not only to the socialist aestheticist privileging of the object, but also to its demand for artists to remain mere object-makers and not engage in any political debates, or discursive production of any kind.

In Oktobar ’75 the artwork is identified with discourse. It would be wrong to assume that by embracing discourse as a mode of artistic expression, the organizers of Oktobar ’75 automatically renounced all media, for the fifty-odd-page mimeographed booklet printed on rough paper belonged fully to the new culture of contractual socialism that was emerging at that very moment. The most widespread medium of that culture bespoke the annihilation of the self-managing subject through hypernormativization. That medium was not the newspaper, or radio, or even television. It was the mimeograph. As an example, Jovanov cites that the printed materials for a single session of a federal committee of a union branch could weigh over two kilos and contain as many as 476 pages (1983:48). Documents mimeographed on cheap paper flooded meetings in Basic Organizations of Associated Labor and Communal Associations (Mesne zajednice), principalities (opštine), and sociopolitical organizations (socio-političke organizacije). This textual overproduction was a palpable manifestation of the shift of emphasis from workers’ direct decision-making to legalistic regulation of behavior, or in other words, from economic to legal ownership over the means of production. Oktobar ’75 pointedly suggested that the last opportunity for setting self-management on the right track was expiring right in front of the drowsy Yugoslav population. Afterward there were other manifestations in the SKC and elsewhere that addressed both progressive politics and progressive art: in 1978 (the unmentioned and unmentionable tenth anniversary of June 1968!) a performance meeting was organized at the SKC; also, the same year the SKC hosted the first feminist conference in Yugoslavia, “Comrade Woman: The Women’s Question—A New Approach?” (“Drugarica žena. Žensko pitanje—Novi pristup?”). Still, Oktobar ’75 was the last public action that questioned self-management and art in such an urgent manner.

Although they never mentioned 1968 explicitly, artists and critics who participated in Oktobar ’75 made a powerful statement of their refusal to
reduce its legacy to an aesthetic experience, or even worse, to a “lifestyle.” Regardless of their mutual differences, they argued for a politicization of art and its potential as a critical and corrective mechanism in relation to dominant ideological discourses of the day. That is already present in the questioning of the relationship between artists and institutions that figures prominently in several contributions. Their attempts to understand the SIZ as a still new and unknown funding body suggests that this concern is neither general nor abstract. For example, in her contribution “Art as a Form of Proprietary Consciousness” (“Umetnost kao oblik svojinske svesti”), Dunja Blažević, the artistic director of SKC Gallery, writes that the SIZ represents a “completely original” and “essentially new” “nonproprietary” relationship between art and society. This innovative form of funding of the arts asks for new art forms, for “it would be extremely comical and nonsensical to try to build self-management using political means borrowed from a feudal or bourgeois structure, as much as it would be impossible to make the art of a new society on the level of ideas and means of the above-mentioned structures” (1975:3). In a tone that foreshadows her article in The Fox, Tijardović asked pointedly: “If we accepted Marxism as ideology, if we are developing self-management and through it associated labor and exchange of labor, and if we see in the SIZ a possibility of an equitable relation between base and superstructure, how in all of this functions the model of universal art and, as its component, the model of monumental tragicalness?” (1). Here Tijardović takes the “monumental tragicalness” as an example of a pathos-laden style as a shared linguistic property of artistic practice and art criticism in Yugoslavia at that time. Indeed, the question of language emerged as a dominant theme in most statements gathered in Oktobar ’75. Raša Todosijević opens his text “Art and Revolution,” the longest in the collection, by setting up a direct relationship between politics and language in artistic production: “The complex politics of artistic engagement takes place through internal criticism of linguistic procedures, and not on the plane of external presentation of fixed values” (1). Consequently, the problem of art’s alienation is inseparable from its language: “Unclear artistic concept is the first precondition for alienation of the artwork. Such work is not capable of resisting random interpretations and abuses,” and further:

Alienation of art comes from two directions: ideology and its politics tolerate only practical application of art, significantly ignoring demands of its internal practice. Conversely, art is naturally concerned with its own language, and it’s not surprising that it resists any in-
stratalization. As long as there exists this categorical breach in the understanding of art’s function, the problem of alienation will persist. Any society that strives toward dogmatic stabilization of its own mechanism and its own values asks for an unchanging and undialectical idea of art. That is why our critics and artists are unable to understand the identity or linguistic position of “art for art’s sake” and “art” known as socialist realism. (8)

The concern with alienation is not limited to Todosijević’s contribution, but constitutes a distinct thread that runs through several texts published in *Oktobar ’75*. In the title of his contribution, “Art as a Form of Religious Consciousness,” Goran Đorđević already indicates that, far from being immune from alienation, art represents one of its main instruments. Approaching this question from a distinctly art historical perspective, and addressing the position of art in the industrialized West, Denegri points to the specific mechanisms of the art industry: “This basically alienated position of contemporary art gives to its otherwise very resilient organism a possibility of permanent regeneration, considering that in the nature of artistic labor survives an awareness of a real danger of final and definitive degradation that art does not accept as its sole destiny” (3). It seems that the participants in *Oktobar ’75* agree that, if art has a unique insight into the ossification of language into a commodity object, then it also has a unique responsibility to refuse the separation of labor and language. Young art critic Bojana Pejić broadened this interrogation of the politics of the signifier to include work in both senses of that word:

Ideologically and practically [our society] wants to prove that it made a step in the direction of overcoming the differences between the two kinds of labor. Art, finally, has the accepted legal status alongside all other social developments. However, now that it can exist without restrictions, this very same art, which claims to have been oppressed in the course of history, comes up with the same problems with which it was dealing in the past. It is that very art which is still obsessed with the results of its efforts (objects), and not with that which is immanent to artistic creation: the process. It is as if it was paying back the society; it pays its debt in the material (tactile, visible) form. It again stays at the level of the phenomenal. (3)

In the political economy of socialist aestheticism, in which the main consumers of high art are national museums, factories, and sociopolitical insti-
tutions, an art object is commodifiable insofar as it is not engaging in reflection on the nature of the circulation in which it participates. *Oktober* '75 made explicit that conceptual art produced in the SKC and other institutions in Yugoslavia never entered this economy. Furthermore, it proclaimed this exclusion the very content of this art event. Namely, by stripping itself of objectness and aestheticism in order to turn itself into discourse, art proclaimed its ability to join, on an equal footing, political discourse. Mimeographing only underlines this claim for art’s thorough politicization: like labor, it is a process, and furthermore, true to the principles of associated labor, it is both contractual and discursive. Precisely because of this formal identity with ideological discourse, this art becomes unassimilable and impossible to appropriate. For the first time in the history of socialist Yugoslavia, instead of providing an ersatz commentary on the perils of alienation, artists engaged social issues by alienating themselves both from mainstream art and from the society that condoned it.

Like European modernism from which it drew, socialist aestheticism valued innovation and originality. Art critic Ješa Denegri correctly recognized that it was precisely for this reason that post-1968 Yugoslav artists insisted not so much on the new as on the different or the *other* ([1980] 2007:92). While appropriating Michel Tapié’s catchphrase “une esthétique autre,” which in the 1950s referred to Art Informel, Denegri deploys it in a completely different way in his writings about radical artistic practices in the Yugoslavia of the 1970s. In his important article “Art around ‘68: The Other Line,” Denegri identified *otherness* as the central feature of this art. While proto-conceptual, conceptual, and performance art in Yugoslavia shared some other properties, such as propensity for collective work (from Gorgona in Zagreb and Mediala in Belgrade, to the informal group of six artists in Belgrade, to OHO in Ljubljana and the Group of Six Authors in Zagreb), artistic nomadism, and openness toward ideas coming from theoretical discourses (KÔD and (∃ in Novi Sad, Grupa 143 in Belgrade), their main characteristic, argues Denegri, was their “separateness,” which was either “imposed from without or sought after by the artists themselves” (88). This separateness pertained both to the content of the artwork and its positioning vis-à-vis art institutions. On the one hand, “the status of an artistic operation was contained . . . in the transfer of conceptualization and realization of the artwork from visual and morphological to a conceptual (mental) plane of its formation and reception” (90); on the other hand, while few of these artists argued for total abandonment of traditional art forms in favor of innovation, they all “insisted on the difference (‘otherness’) in the way in which they used and applied (seemingly) traditional art procedures” (91).
Denegri argued for “the other line” in a series of articles he published in the 1970s and 1980s, and he gave a précis of this long argument in the catalog for a survey exhibit he curated in Sarajevo as the twilight of this “line” and of the country in which it was forged was clearly approaching. In his program notes for *Yugoslav Documenta ’89* (*Jugoslavenska dokumenta ’89*), he wrote that the other line refers to

...a cluster of developments within contemporary art in Yugoslav cultural space, developments that differ or are intentionally separate from the main currents in this culture, in order to establish a distinct zone that has as its most fundamental characteristic a demand for radicalization of the idea of art, and following on that, radicalization of artistic behavior. The set of phenomena here understood as the other line is not a clearly identifiable artistic language, but more of a mentality, a way certain artists or artistic groups responded to the existing cultural and social conditions. It is, in fact, a way of circumventing integration into these conditions in order to search for and adopt an independent and unique artistic, which is to say, existential position. ([1989] 2007:97)

Denegri is very clear in identifying (art) historical, sociological, and conceptual aspects of the “other” line, but leaves its ideological content insufficiently examined. Which idea of “otherness” did the “other line” rely on and promote? And further, in relation to what politics is the “other line” “separate” and “other”? If the idea of something alien is strongly implied in “otherness,” then how does the “other line” relate to the discourse of alienation in Yugoslav humanist Marxism?

**DID SOMEBODY SAY ALIENATION?**

Just as much as with Tapié, the idea of the “other line” resonates with Max Horkheimer and other critical theory philosophers’ reflections on “totally” or “entirely Other.” Even though Denegri does not reference the founder of the Frankfurt School, in “Art around ’68: The Other Line” he takes Marcuse’s discussion of the desublimation of culture from *An Essay on Liberation* as one of the fundamental theoretical premises for his argument about the other line. Looking more specifically at the Yugoslav situation, the chronological and terminological proximity of humanist Marxist philosophy and the new art practice lead Denegri to hypothesize a dual valence in the last
word of this phrase. He writes that while the term “practice” refers to “processes, operations, doings, undertakings, performances, and developments of artistic actions and behaviors,” in “domestic context” it is also “reminiscent of the philosophical concept of *praxis*, which could point to the meaning of activism, efficacy, social critique, and political engagement” (Denegri 1996:23). However, the relationship between the new artistic practice and Praxis philosophy in Yugoslavia was much more complex, and it by no means can be reduced to semantic proximity of keywords that associated with these two distinct phenomena. On the one hand, even though the journal *Praxis* and the Korčula Summer School coincided with the period of emergence of new art in Yugoslavia, their participants showed little interest in art, and no interest whatsoever in new artistic practice. On the other hand, artists, critics, art historians, and philosophers associated with new art in Yugoslavia kept a distance from the brand of Marxist humanism advocated by the Praxis school. Far from being its expression, the new artistic practice offered an alternative to, and even a critique of, Praxis philosophy.

If, aesthetically, the new art practice in Yugoslavia was positioned as the other line in relation to the dominant socialist aestheticism in culture, then politically this group of artists was no less “other” to the Yugoslav brand of critical theory. Many of them were participants and witnesses of the student movement of the late 1960s in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana, and they instantly recognized how easily the political and cultural establishment appropriated Marcuse-inspired ideas about art as the “kingdom of freedom,” of play, and of “erotization” of labor. In fact, this brand of politicized art is one of the main targets of Todosijević’s wrath in “Art and Revolution,” the text he contributed to *Oktobar ‘75*. Going straight to the point, he argues that the “political strategy of the so-called Engaged Art and Protest Art is more than miserable. The ceremonial and easily exploitable strategy of Protest Art is shaky for one reason only: it uses an already existing language that, as such, belongs to the hierarchy of values of politics it is protesting against” (2). Todosijević unmistakably recognized some of the shared values of the Yugoslav establishment and its critics who came from the position of humanist Marxism:

Art is an inherent part of the critique of social practice; therefore, it is a revolutionary mechanism aimed at its qualitative change. However, this phrase is nonsensical and useless if it comes without a proper understanding of art’s function in that role. Most existing declarations, proclaimed in the name of humanism and freedom of creativity, are so random and dialectically undeveloped that
This insistence on the linguistic properties of art points simultaneously in two directions. First, the political relevance of art comes from its nature as a signifying practice, and only as such it can engage with other social practices. Second, precisely because of that, revolutionary politics is inseparable from the revolutionarization of artistic language. In that sense, Denegri is completely justified in his assertion, which he stated on multiple occasions, that concrete and visual poetry was a “catalyzer” for the emergence of new art practices in Yugoslavia. However, as it turned out, it was formative not only for the development of new art practices but also for new critical practices that played a major role in the dethroning of humanist Marxist philosophy as the indisputable alternative to the ideologized Marxism of the Yugoslav establishment.

While being an important platform for the exchange of ideas with reformist Marxists from both East and West, through its editorial and curatorial decisions in Praxis and the Korčula Summer School, Yugoslav humanist Marxists also filtered out some prominent new ideas that started emerging in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, while tolerating Sartre and keeping closely in touch with French Marxists such as Lucien Goldmann, Henri Lefebvre, and Kostas Axelos, they ignored or actively excluded much of the French Marxist theory of the period. In his reminiscences on the first years of Praxis, Kangrga relates an anecdote about a fifty-page article the journal editors received in 1965 from an unknown French Marxist philosopher. “I wrote a devastating review and concluded my evaluation of the article by stating that it is below the level of Praxis publications because it was written from the positivist-Stalinist positions” (2001:19). The name of the author was Louis Althusser, and Kangrga leaves little doubt that the article he submitted was one of his most celebrated works, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”: “Afterward, Althusser published that article in the Parisian procommunist journal La Pensée, and—in a development that is not only symptomatic but also characteristic of so-called Western Marxism—it was precisely on the strength of that essay that Althusser became the ‘star’ and one of the most important and most illustrative representatives of that Stalinist-oriented Marxism in Europe and the world” (19).
with the Soviet diamat “philosophers”: their theorization of alienation, or the lack thereof. However, while the two coincide in their devaluing of Marx’s *Early Writings*, they differ diametrically in everything else. While Soviet diamat Marxists deny or explain away the notion of alienation, in the above-mentioned article Althusser describes it as an effect of ideology, not as its cause or its main feature, as Praxis philosophers saw it. Specifically, Althusser writes that Marx’s position in *Early Writings* is “false” because “it seeks and finds a cause for the imaginary transposition and distortion of men’s real conditions of existence, in short, for the alienation in the imaginary of the representation of men’s conditions of existence.” He argues that, following Feuerbach, young Marx sees these conditions as being “dominated by the essence of alienated society” while overlooking that “it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that ‘men’ ‘represent themselves’ in ideology, but above all it is their relation to these conditions of existence which is represented to them there” ([1970] 1971:154). This repositioning of alienation demands a more rigorous interrogation of the question of the subject, a challenge that Yugoslav humanist Marxists were unprepared and unwilling to take up.

From its beginnings in the 1950s, Yugoslav Praxis philosophy has been at odds with the philosophical and ideological establishment in Yugoslavia. At the same time, precisely because of this more or less open opposition to dogmatic Marxism, it has built a reputation both at home and abroad as a progressive and creative branch of Marxist thought. Humanist and dogmatic Marxism in Yugoslavia formed an uneasy partnership in which they validated one another: the first by opposing officialdom, and the second by tolerating this kind of opposition. An unofficial historian and former member of the Praxis school, Božidar Jakšić, points out that even in its heyday, the Praxis group went through periods of crisis marked by political “campaigns” against its members. In 1966, Edvard Kardelj published a book, *Notes on Our Social Critique* (*Beleške o našoj društvenoj kritici*), in which he objected to “contemporary Yugoslav intelligentsia” for its “abstract humanism” and its “confusion of Marxism with metaphysical subjectivism,” alleging that “as a class it is more inclined to conservatism than to progress” (in Jakšić 1989:256). With the turn in Yugoslav post-1968 politics, the Praxis group gradually lost its support, until the funding both for the journal and for the summer school ceased in 1974. While scholars from Zagreb University associated with the Praxis school kept their posts, their colleagues in Belgrade were forced out of work through an unprecedented legal action by the Parliament of Serbia. This was accompanied by attempts to discredit Praxis philosophers that came from scholars close to the politi-
cal establishment, such as Živojin Denić, who in his book *Marx and the Yugoslav “Holy Family”* (Marks i jugoslovenska “Sveta porodica”) attacks Praxis philosophers’ writings on alienation from a Stalinist position (which by then even diehard diamat philosophers had given up) that it was Marx’s minor interest in his early writings, and abandoned in his mature works. These kinds of ideologically inspired and anachronistic critiques could not inflict any philosophical damage to Praxis philosophy in Yugoslavia. What they inadvertently accomplished was to conceal the critique of this philosophy that emerged in the aftermath of the social movements of the late 1960s. The true outcome of 1968 in Yugoslav philosophy was not the intensification of the conflict between dogmatic and humanist Marxism, but precisely their ideological proximity, which is best exemplified in their shared neglect of the theory of the subject, which resulted in a largely mechanical and predictive critique of alienation. As Yugoslav humanist Marxist’s critique of ideology was limited by the idea of the subject to which the political establishment also subscribed, all they could do is point to the internal inconsistencies of state ideology, leaving its deep conservatism well beyond the reach of their critique.

Zagorka Pešić-Golubović’s short article “What Is the Meaning of Alienation?,” published in the international edition of *Praxis* in 1966, conveniently encapsulates the basic idea of alienation that permeates the vast literature on this subject that the Praxis group produced in the 1970s and 1980s. In line with the Praxis group tradition of keeping a check on the main terms of their theoretical endeavor, Pešić-Golubović wrote this text in response to the paper “Alienation Revisited” that young American philosopher John Lachs presented in the 1965 session of the Korčula Summer School (subsequently published in international *Praxis* in 1966), in which he offered a rough sketch of Marxist and psychiatric uses of this term. Pešić-Golubović reprimanded her young colleague, warning him that as a philosophical and sociological category, alienation should not be confused with its uses in medical pathology. Here, as in most other theorizations of alienation by Praxis group members, the idea of the subject is circumvented by invocation of the hazy concept of “human nature.” Pešić-Golubović explains that Marx’s “concept of human nature” “contains at the same time both the general presuppositions of the human race (as the potentialities of single individuals) and the historically determined limits for the realization of these potentialities” (1966:358). In a somewhat mechanistic way, she concludes that “the philosophical meaning of alienation is that it expresses the conflict between man’s historically originated (but still enduring) anthropological structures and the concrete historical social conditions in which he lives” (359). Here,
the “human race” and “anthropology” are blanket terms that camouflage the gap that the neglect of the theory of the subject opens up in the very center of this critique of alienation. They unmistakably point to basic operations that, as Julia Kristeva argued in “The Subject in Process,” support the idea of a unitary subject in traditional Marxism. The first operation is “the anthropomorphization or rather the subjectal unification of the Hegelian dialectic in the form of human unity, the man of desire, the man of lack,” which “turns into the notion of the proletariat as the way towards total mastery and the absence of human conflict,” and the second is close to what Pešić-Golubović identifies as the idea of “historicity,”

the direct and exclusive anchoring of man in the state or more generally in the social machine and in social relations which are regulated by need and suffering among men. In the machine of social conflicts and contradictions, of production and class, man remains an untouchable unity, in conflict with others but never with “himself,” and in this sense, man remains neutral, an oppressed or oppressive subject, exploiter or exploited, but never a subject in process corresponding to the objective process which was brought to light by dialectical materialism, in nature and society. (Kristeva [1973] 1998:136)

One important legacy of 1968 in Yugoslavia was the diversification of Marxist theory. While often (mis)understood as an affirmation and continuation of Praxis philosophy, 1968 was an opening for the forms of critical thinking previously absent from Yugoslav Marxism. One important channel that introduced French structuralist Marxism to Yugoslavia was the journal Ideje, which in its first year of publication already featured Althusser’s “Lenin and Philosophy.”29 This scholarly periodical, self-described as a “Yugoslav student journal,” was the first outside Slovenia to open its pages to a young philosopher and a staunch supporter of structuralism, Slavoj Žižek. While later he became one of the most prominent advocates of Lacanian psychoanalysis, at the outset of his career, in the early 1970s, Žižek gave the highest praise to the authors gathered in the journal Tel Quel, in whose texts, as he wrote, “all the talk about signifying practice, about writing/reading that produces sense while having no inherent sense and no desire to ‘express’ it, aims at estrangement of the ideological presumption of language as a means of communication, of expression, carrier of meaning, sign that tells us something, etc., and to demonstrate the genesis of this presumptiveness in the economy of the Symbolic order. This is the step that is perhaps even more difficult than Marx’s” (1974:520). Kristeva-
va’s reframing of Lacan’s theory of the subject was instrumental for young Žižek’s theorization of signifying practice.

In his first Ideje article “Enjoyment-Labor-Speech” — published in 1972, the same year as his first book, The Pain of Difference (Bolećina razlike) — Žižek was already arguing for a recasting and expanding of the very notion of practice in Marxist philosophy.30 Taking as his starting point the notion of speech in Husserlian and, especially, Heideggerian phenomenology, Žižek argues that the concept of labor, and therefore practice, operative in critical theory is “naive” in its exclusion of speech (1972:38). He explains the absence of a discussion of speech in Marx’s early writings (that most cherished intellectual source of Praxis philosophy) by the German philosopher’s assumption of language as inherent to human practice: “Since ‘animal also produces,’ that is still not man’s specificity; production becomes universal only with a relation, that is to say, speech” (33). Žižek expands on this idea his article “Marxism/Structuralism: An Attempt at Demarcation,” which was featured in the important anthology Marxism—Structuralism: History, Structure, published two years later by the journal Delo. Here he draws more directly on authors close to Tel Quel, primarily Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, to argue for the vitality of textual production for the reinvigoration of Marxist theory. According to Žižek, the capacity of speech to generate an unproductive “excess of meaning” that remains beyond the reach of capitalist economization of life becomes especially assertive in poetry. In this

new understanding of “poetry,” which is not seen as a “departure” from “ordinary” language, or as an “all-encompassing” code that includes both “common” and all other languages, or as an hypo-code of a general language, but as a “potential infinity of codes — the languages of poetry are literally all languages (in plural, not a universal Language! ) — it is an irreducible multitude of codes that are incessantly transforming each other, the speech that in its own process of enunciation always changes its own code: “poetry” is the only speech from which productivity was not repressed. To attain the place of the “proletariat” repressed by the Symbolic order means attaining the place of the inherent productivity of the signifying practice that is manifested in “poetry” (we put this word in parentheses because it is not a “separate region” but a “primary destructivity” of language itself). (1974:522)

Žižek’s work of the early 1970s was decisively informed by the broad understanding of language he acquired through his engagement with new
artistic practices such as experimental poetry and performance, evident in his early publications, which came on the cusp of the momentous events of 1968. Early in 1967 he published two articles on the work of the Slovene experimental poet Aleš Kermauner in the culture section of the student weekly *Tribuna*. Like Kermauner, Žižek was affiliated with the Slovene experimental art group OHO. The group’s name is a portmanteau word comprising Slovene words oko (eye) and uho (ear). As the group members put it in their publications from that period: OKO + UHO = OHO (Šuvaković 2010:29). This wordplay in the group’s name already speaks of its members’ interest in experimentation at the intersection between poetry and visual arts. The group was founded in the early 1960s by Marko Pogačnik and Iztok Geister, who were in 1966 joined by an American, David Nez. By the late 1960s the OHO group evolved into OHO Katalog, a broad and loosely organized group of young poets, artists, and theoreticians. Žižek was said to have belonged to the outer circles of the group. During the period between 1967 and 1971, the core OHO members Milenko Matanović, Marko Pogačnik, Andraž Šalamun, Tomaž Šalamun, and David Nez produced a number of installations, visual artworks, and performances in Ljubljana, Zagreb, Novi Sad, and Belgrade. At the very outset of this period, in November 1967, Žižek published in *Tribuna* a short, two-part article entitled “Hoopoe” (“Smrdokavra”). The structure of the article, if not its content, points to the two-sided nature of culture in Yugoslavia. The heading of the first section, “Introduction,” is followed by a parenthetical explanation “Theory of Reflection,” a direct reference to Plekhanov’s principle at the heart of the post–World War II aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism in Soviet Union. However, that this could be read also as a reference to contemporary performance and its intense focus on the subject (theory of reflection as theory of mirroring) is suggested by the heading of the second section, “Theory of Happenings (Based on A. Kaprow).” Both sections consist of text so densely packed with wordplay and neologisms that it becomes hermetic and nearly impenetrable to the reader. This is the English approximation of the second part, “Theory of Happenings”:

3. Approach (of a “pop art exhibition”). The “I” approaches the article. The happening is directed into the exhibited article, which is not there just like that, but in order to be there just like that. The article is arbitrary and determined (i.e., eliminated from the environment) by this arbitrariness. The I’s choice is not arbitrary; the “I” is limited precisely by this arbitrariness.

2. Entry (of a “pop-art of the street”). The “I” enters the article. The
happening is directed into an arbitrary article, which is there just like that. But the “I” itself is not arbitrary because it enters arbitrariness.

1. We tread in the same (“happening”). The “I” (source) is arbitrary. A happening is happening: delirium. There is snow outside and water inside.

A happening is at the same time an entry and an approach because it is the treading of both. (Žižek 1967b:11)

Here young Žižek investigates the relationship between the self (“I”), the sign (“article”), and the artwork. The countdown (3, 2, 1) indicates a certain reduction, but the reduction of what? Perhaps of the representational nature of the work of art? From “pop-art exhibition” to “pop-art of the street” to “happening,” the relationship between the self and the signifying form changes, until in the last instance it turns into a “delirium.” “Cartesianische meditations,” another experimental text Žižek wrote at this time and published two years later in the OHO Katalog publication Pericarežeracirep, further reinforces his view of happenings as an antirepresentational art form.

What does the object (obiacere, to throw before) throw itself before? Before the subject (subjacere, to throw under). The object is posited by the subject and throws itself before it. The subject therefore “recognizes” itself in it. The composition is essentially masturbatory.

What if this what is nothing? In the light of the world the object throws itself before, it pushes forward into appearance. Space is a free pace of objects pacing in the arbitrariness of selection. Of the dasein. Being is in appearance: the object peers through being. The object throws itself before being and nothing-s it.

The essence of the world is in nothing-ing being, which is this nothing itself: the light-ing en-lightens the world into an arbitrary entity (object), which is being. The presence of an arbitrary entity is (pr)essence. An arbitrary entity is selected in a ritual. The street advertizes the heard (what is given to the ear) and de-lights the ear. The street advertizes the seen (what is given to the eye) and de-lights the eye. Constant-ly moving com-positions (roles): clamour, laughter, melody, noise, cry. Ritual takes place at train stations, on roofs, walls, clothes, fences, cars. (Žižek 1969:n.p.)

Žižek’s involvement with experimental writing carries over to some of his early theoretical texts. For example, his essay “Marxism/Structuralism”
starts with a paragraph labeled zero, in which the author announces that his goal is to “designate the place of the theory of writing within the very field of Marxism, in that way identifying the zero degree of structuralism’s encounter with Marxism as our very location” (1974:500). Here, perhaps less assertively than in “Hoopoe” and “Cartesianische meditations” but certainly no less engagingly, the prose text becomes an intricate web of references that produce a surplus of meaning: “zero” is the starting numerical of the paragraph, but also the Barthesian “zero degree” of writing; at the same time it designates the author/subject as a Lacanian empty set. . . . Žižek’s interest in experimental poetry may have led him to the early work of Julia Kristeva, whose psychoanalytic reading of the literary avant-garde in Revolution in Poetic Language looms large in her early writings. While in his other articles from this period, such as “Hermeneutic Circle in Structuralism” (“Hermeneutički krug u strukturalizmu,” 1973) and “Exercises in Xenophilia” (“Vježbe iz ksenofilije,” 1973) he turns more directly to Lacan, in his book Sign/Signifier/Writing (Znak/Označitelj/Pismo, 1976) he summons him and other representatives of “French theory” to mount a massive critique of the Frankfurt School brand of Marxism.

Like his early theoretical essays, Sign/Signifier/Writing is deeply marked by Žižek’s experience with experimental poetry. Here his approach to the nondiscursive “syntax” is not limited, as in Lacan, to algorithms and diagrams, but pertains to complex arrangements of bodies, actions, objects, images, and discursive signs that in his experimental prose he designated as “happenings” and “rituals.” This notion of the “text” asks for a certain strategy of reading that Žižek names the “rebus procedure.” He points to Sigmund Freud’s work on dreams as its source: “In rebus, we should replace each element separately by a different syllable . . . ;” therefore, “it is important not to miss the meaning of Freud’s directions: the passage from interpretation ‘en masse’ to interpretation ‘en detail’ is in fact the passage from imaginary field of the signified, that is ‘the connectedness of ideas’ or ‘things,’ to the signified, the autonomous connectedness of its elements” (Žižek 1976:26). The unconscious does not discriminate between words and images, images and things, shapes and spaces, and if it is structured like language, it is so only in the basic structure of the sign, and not in the sequencing of signs into linear narratives.35 This open recognition of Freudian reading protocols leaves obscured and unacknowledged other, less theoretical and more poetic and performative sources of Žižek’s “rebus procedure.” It is not difficult to recognize theses from “Theory of Happenings” in his elaboration of nonarbitrariness of the sign as one of the basic premises of this procedure. “The only solution to the dispute around arbi-
trariness or nonarbitraryness of the sign is the incursion of the very dimension of the sign into the field of signifying differentiation” (30). The rebus procedure excludes arbitrariness precisely because the signifier is the sensory aspect of the sign: sensory because it is perceptible, but also because this perception involves not only vision, but also other bodily senses.

One important line of argumentation in *Sign/Signifier/Writing* is that the exclusion of the “rebus procedure” leads to a misunderstanding of the very process of subject formation. The passage from the conjoined relation with the mother into an imagined unity (the Imaginary) in which the infant fills the mother’s lack (phalos), with respect to their separation involves the integration of this lack into the functioning subject. “The Third, which the infant and the mother unsuccessfully seek in each other, turns out to be the object a, lack-in-another, the lack which is opened up by the Symbolic” (113). Žižek emphasizes that the importance of a Lacanian understanding of subject formation is not in establishing its genesis according to which the Oedipal structure, the structure marked by lack and castration, follows—in a temporal and successive fashion—the “anal” pre-Oedipal phase. In *Sign/Signifier/Writing*, he argues that Lacan shows how loss and repression (the integration of lack) retroactively inform that which preceded them. This “pre-repression,” marked by a, is the fact of subject formation. “What remains is the abyss of this fact, and any search for its cause is in vain”; and further: “Because of its groundlessness, it is impossible to establish/mediate socially the ‘fact’ of pre-repression (for example, as ‘internalization of social repression’)” (113). Žižek takes this understanding of the subject as the starting point for his critique of the theory of alienation, championed by the Frankfurt School.

We will recall that Marcuse’s theorization of alienation is based on the posteriority of repression. The assertion that a “non-repressive civilization is impossible” inherently places the subject in opposition to repression and opens the possibility of a nonrepressed subject (Marcuse 1955:17). In modern society, it is precisely work that becomes the instrument of this repression: “labor time, which is the largest part of the individual’s life time, is painful time, for alienated labor is absence of gratification, negation of the pleasure principle. Libido is diverted for socially useful performances” (45). Instead of being part of the larger labor of signification, performance is instead, in Marcuse’s schema, narrowed down to enforced labor as a means of choice for the repressive civilization. Emphasizing its primacy, Marcuse gives it the name of “surplus-repression,” which he describes in terms of a reality principle specific to modern civilization as a “performance principle, in order,” as he explains, “to emphasize that under its rule society
is stratified according to the competitive economic performances of its members” (44). The performance principle as a form of alienation is, then, inherently opposed to the pleasure principle. What Žižek objects to in this “vulgar reading of Freud” is Marcuse’s neglect of the “pre-repression,” that is, the participation of repression in the very structure of pleasure. “In other words, culture’s no, the instantiation of the (Name of) the Father, is not the result of the transformation of the organism ‘from the subject-object of pleasure to the subject-object of labor,’ that is to say, the appearance of the subject to whom is opposed an ‘adversarial and scarce environment.’” Žižek asserts that before “repression,” enforced by the rule of reality principle, comes a “pre-repression at the very subject-object of pleasure” (Žižek 1976:155). To a certain degree, alienation is constitutive of the subject, and not only enforced from without. The production of social alienation is not an imposition of something “foreign” onto a “human nature” but an appropriation of an alienating potential that is dormant in the subject. Or, as Žižek puts it elsewhere in the book, “In its very core desire itself is ‘culture,’ symbolic production, ‘desire of the Other’ and not a sublimation of a natural substrate” (294). Ultimately, his charge against critical theory is its failure to observe the distinction between the irrationality of the “managed world” and the irrationality (contradiction) of the desire.

If one constant in Žižek’s early writing is his claim for the necessity of structuralist theory for the recovery of Marxist theory from the “breakdown” it suffered precisely at the moment of its “Renaissance” in the first decades of the twentieth century, the other is his argument against critical theory as a brand of Marxism that emerged precisely from this defeat (298). In his article “Enjoyment-Labor-Speech” he asserts that “the provision of ‘praxis philosophy’ is the society,” which it understands as a “totality of social praxis” based on labor “in its universality as a social work,” from which this philosophy excludes “speech” or, in other words, signifying practice (1972:39). Along the way, Žižek made a number of hints to the Yugoslav Praxis school to indicate, without ever naming it specifically, that it is not exempt from his critique of critical theory. So in “Marxism/Structuralism” he, almost in passing, points to structuralism’s encounter with critical theory’s “ideological premise of speech as a means of communication” as a “demystification of that which bourgeoisie pompously calls creativity” (1974:520). And in Sign/Signifier/Writing he points to the very basis of Yugoslav humanist Marxists’ critique of Soviet doctrine in philosophy: “A gap opens up in otherwise justified critique of diaẗs ontologism/objectivism from the position of ‘praxis philosophy’ because this critique too hastily finishes with the problem of nature by designating it a ‘social category’ . . . . i.e. by
looking at it in its social mediation and its inclusion into totality of the social subject” (306). In short, Yugoslav Praxis philosophy was not spared Žižek’s objection to the critical theory in general, that the “gap” and the “abyss” at its center marked the absence of the critique of the subject.

The introduction of psychoanalysis, or more precisely its structuralist variant, into Marxist theory reveals the limits of the theoretical reach of “praxis philosophy in all of its variants” (Žižek 1976:305; emphasis added). Its limit is the limit of the enlightenment project:

The dialectic of the Enlightenment demonstrates that the basic position of Marxism as “philosophy of praxis” is not sufficient for theoretical explanation of “administered world” and for its practical challenge, that is, for the unique reflective/practical “engagement” with this historical reality because the very foundation from which it contests the alienation of the existing [society] still contains an unreflected Enlightenment position of mastery that has that very “administered world” as its historical truth and its realization. (305)

In other words, Žižek reproaches Praxis philosophy for its commitment to preserving the transcendental subject, while trying to mount a critique of the “world” this subject produced. Because of its commitment to the idea of the Enlightenment, critical theory limits praxis to productive (labor) while neglecting signifying practice (text). For critical theory philosophers, charges Žižek, “violating the limit of enlightenment means stepping into madness,” so that the horror of that violation has a double significance: “Alongside preserving a rational-critical position it maintains a distance toward the ‘masses’ that threaten to ‘speak’” (323). Following Kristeva, Žižek contends that precisely through this schizoid and poetic speech, signifying practice joins productive practice to establish properly Marxist categories of praxis and of the proletariat. Here he touches on the category of the interest that was, as we have seen, fundamental to the ideology of associated labor that was reaching its completion in Yugoslavia at the very moment of this writing: “The very historical interest of the proletariat from which the classical Marxism speaks and on which it counts is marked by the traces of mastery and repression of the nameless desire of the masses. The ‘masses’ truly begin to ‘speak’ only through radicalization of the position of the proletariat of production into the position of the proletariat of signifying practice” (324). What is at stake here is not only the expansion and revision of the idea of revolutionary subject that was lost with the wreckage of Marxism that came in the moment of its renaissance, but the
revision of the idea of practice as being both revolutionary and signifying, or, more precisely, of being revolutionary precisely because it signifies. Criticizing Marcuse’s reductive reading of Marx’s parable about the “kingdom of necessity” and “kingdom of freedom” in which he assigns politics and seriousness to the former and art and play to the latter, Žižek proposes that “the double abolition of the kingdom of necessity should be reinterpreted as abolition of alienated labor and abolition of labor itself” (328). He backpedals almost instantly by adding that this is not to say that “we should ‘stop producing,’ but that we enter into the process of production as new subjects” (329). However, this makes things even worse. In the light of the developments that ensued only a few years after their publication, these words lose their meaning of a call for new emancipatory politics and become a dark premonition of the aphanisis of the subject.

We are entering the final round. It’s a spiral: in the beginning, everything seems light, ironic, and playful. By the time we get out of the final bed in its path, at the end of the next section, it will become clear that the “production of the new subject” amounts to its eradication. That awareness informs the radical artistic practice of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia’s final decade.

THE STRANGE

When I first walked into the SKC in Belgrade, a wide-eyed teenager in the early eighties, I stumbled into Happy New Gallery on the ground floor. I don’t recall which show was on display at that time, but I remember a postcard on sale that immediately caught my attention. It featured a color photograph of the SKC facade facing Marshal Tito Street (Ulica Maršala Tita) with a long banner suspended underneath the row of windows with a large handwritten slogan that read “THIS IS NOT MY WORLD” (“OVO NIJE MOJ SVIJET”). This was the work of Croatian artist Željko Jerman, who made and displayed the banner in the spring of 1976, during the sixth April Meeting. It was one of several actions that Jerman performed together with five other young artists from Zagreb who collectively participated in that year’s April Meeting: Boris Demur, brothers Sven and Mladen Stilinović, Vlado Martek, and Fedor Vučemilović. They were members of a loosely organized group of artists who started working together in the early 1970s. From the very beginning they set themselves apart from the first generation of conceptual artists in Zagreb and beyond through their approach to the artistic media, the way they produced and exhibited their work, and
their engagement with the politics of the day. Jerman, Demur, the Stilinović brothers, Martek, and Vučemilović started exhibiting collectively as a group of friends in 1975, without having a manifesto or a program that would frame their activities. They participated in a landmark survey exhibit, *New Art Practice*, and as the exhibit curator Marijan Susovski testified later, Nena Baljković’s article about the group had no title because the group itself was nameless. Before the catalog went into print, the curator and the author of the text decided on a descriptive title that stuck as the group’s name: The Group of Six Authors (Grupa šestorice autora) (Susovski 1998:12).

Performed less than a year after *Oktobar ’75*, the Group of Six Authors’ actions in the 1976 April Meeting speak tellingly about the differences between them and the generation of conceptual artists that immediately preceded them. Demur performed the action *Fact* (*Činjenica*), in which he wrote the word “fact” on the pavement next to the SKC, on a panel placed in front of the building, and in the gallery. On April 5, Jerman wore a shirt that said, “This is my youth,” which he then hung in the gallery. *Raw Art* (*Sirova umjetnost*), another action he performed on this occasion, is even more characteristic of the Group of Six Authors: “Make a mixture for noodles. Water is boiling in the heat-resistant glass. I show the audience a small piece of the mixture on a spoon, then throw it into the boiling water. It changes its shape, swells, becomes a noodle, and I pronounce these changes to be an aesthetic value. Cooked noodles are offered to spectators to eat. However, the water does not boil. I said: there is no art, the water won’t boil, you can eat raw art” (Šimičić 1998:250). Mladen Stilinović took fifty pictures of a clock showing different times in succession and placed them on the floor inside the SKC, spaced so that walking from one photograph to another at normal pace takes exactly the same time as shown in the pictures; a spectator/walker who stops to observe the work automatically falls behind. Martek performed an action of public writing by inscribing a slogan on a poster, “The Situation of Expanded Art Expands.” Sven Stilinović performed an action with toilet paper, and Vučemilović offered his camera to passers-by in front of the SKC to take pictures of him, and then exhibited them in the gallery window. Disregard for boundaries between artistic genres (use of writing as a painterly procedure, of photography as a public action, etc.); a comparable indifference for gallery conventions (exhibition-action, or art exhibit without previously prepared artworks); use of nonartistic and perishable materials (dough, toilet paper, chalk, markers); a tendency to display the works not only outside of the protective gallery walls, but in lowly places and situations that make the work even more perish-
able (pavements, walls, windows, floors); randomization and deskilling of
the artistic techniques, either through deployment of aleatory procedures
or the exposure of the process of art making; direct address of the audience
either through the artist’s presence or through messages written on various
materials: all of this speaks about an intentional degradation of the work of
art, its radical integration into the fabric of the everyday, and, ultimately,
depriving artists of any exclusive position that the society assigns to them.
The work of the Group of Six Authors is poor, but without any pretense of
profundity and pathos; it is as communicable and everyday as any street
advertisement, and just as difficult to accept as a work of art. In short, it
fully embraces the condition of nonart.

And here, the “non” is more important than “art.” Consider, again, Jer-
man’s “This is not my world.” The postcard hides as much as it reveals:
for example, it doesn’t show the material from which the banner was made
and with which the slogan is written; also, it remains silent about the pro-
cess of its making and the way it was presented to the audience. At the
same time, all of these elements are as significant as the phenomenal as-
pects of the work that the postcard captures. Trained as a commercial pho-
tographer, Jerman started working on art photography but soon turned to
crude photographic procedures. Giving up a camera altogether, he turned
to “elementary photography” and worked directly on photographic paper.
For example, in the Group of Six Authors’ first public exhibit-action, which
they performed on May 11, 1975, on the bank of the river Sava in Zagreb,
Jerman spent an hour lying on a large sheet of undeveloped photo paper,
thus making an imprint of his body on the paper produced by the sunlight.
The following year in the April Meeting, he again used large sheets of pho-
tographic paper that he laid down on the sidewalk next to the SKC, and
then wrote the slogan “This is not my world” in hypo. As an elementary
photograph, the banner could be read as a denial of its photographic na-
ture. Along the same lines, it echoes Magritte’s famous painting Treason of
Images, which shows a pipe with the inscription underneath that reads
“This is not a pipe” (Ceci n’est pas une pipe). In Jerman’s case, this denial
pertains not only to the treacherous image, but to the work as such: since it
was hung underneath the windows of SKC Gallery, it could refer to the
“world” of galleries, museums, and institutional art in general. Taking an
artwork out of an institutional setting exposes it to a number of contingen-
cies, which in this case played out very effectively. According to some wit-
nesses’ accounts, the banner stayed on the facade for a very short period of
time because “it had to be taken down at the insistence of some people
form the management of the SKC” (Šimičić 1998:250). The political career
of Jerman’s piece went through another sharp turn after the SKC published it as a postcard. In this way, as a permanent object aimed at circulation, it could address more viewers than in its original condition. At the same time, through this very circulation it joined a different medium, that of kitschy tourist souvenirs that reference a particular location (“Greetings from . . .”). By rejecting its own location, this image becomes an antipostcard of sorts. We could go on enumerating possible meanings contained in Jerman’s polyvalent piece, but what emerges as paramount is its gesture of renunciation.

This gesture that ranges from the work of art, to society, to, at its extreme, self-renunciation of the artist, belongs to that form of “affirmative negativity” and “productive dissolution” which Kristeva identified as expulsion (la rejet). Drawing from Georges Bataille’s notion of expenditure and from Freud’s work on psychic negation, Kristeva explains that “what we call expulsion is nothing other than the logical mode of this permanent aggressivity, and the possibility of its being positioned, and thus renewed. Though destructive, a ‘death drive,’ expulsion is also the mechanism of relaunching, of tension, of life; tending towards a state of equilibrium, inertia, and death, expulsion perpetuates tension and therefore life” ([1973] 1998:144). The Group of Six Authors’ associations of art with that which is unproductive and useless include the way they present their art (on streets and city squares, sea beaches and riverbanks, where it gets “spent” and literally washed away), the media in which they produce it (ordinary plastic bags, newspapers, and other everyday objects that easily get categorized as trash), and the figure of the artist as an outsider who is not integrated in any way in the (still functioning) institutions of the political economy of socialist aestheticism. However, their gesture of rejection goes beyond this obvious connotation of waste to engage in linguistic procedures that, as Kristeva has it, show expulsion as a “path from object to sign” (145). On the one hand, the use of everyday consumer products as art material points to expulsion as a way of reconstituting “real objects” and “the creation of new objects; in this sense it reinvents the real and re-semiotizes it” (147). On the other hand, the Group of Six Authors’ poetic practice points to the other side of this semiotization. Let’s first hear Kristeva:

If expulsion includes the moment of “excorporation,” or “expectoration” (in Artaud’s words), or of “excretion” (in Bataille’s words), this motor discharge or corporeal spasm invest themselves [sic] in an already separated other, in language. Expulsion reintroduces and deploys within language the very mechanism whereby separation of
words from things is produced, and it has no other way of doing this than opening out, dislocating and readjusting the vocal register. ([1973] 1998:147)

This register, as it were, has its own phonetics. Annette Michaelson identifies it with the moment in language acquisition in which “velar sign k and its twin g” detach “themselves and in opposition to the dental sound d and its twin t. Dada and kaka or caca, then, are linked in the paradigm of the secondary stage of language formation” (1988:23). Addressing, like Kristeva, the avant-garde of the first decades of the twentieth century, Michaelson finds the phoneme ka resonating in poetic experiments across Europe, which prompts her to conclude that “grammar and genitality are both subsumed in the delighted insistence on the body as text to be ambivalently read as it is polymorphously enjoyed” (17). An expulsatory tendency is recognizable in Mladen Stilinović’s early visual-poetic works, or writingpainting (pismoslikarstvo) as he came to call them, such as Hand of Bread (1974, 1975), which consists of a simple and nonsensical inscription in Croatian “ruka kruha” on “poor” surfaces such as a plastic bag or a piece of white paper.

This trace of kak doesn’t mean that those members of the Group of Six Authors who have been involved more extensively in poetic practice, Mladen Stilinović and Vlado Martek in particular, limited their writerly activity to nonsense poetry, or even that this kind of poetic practice occupied a prominent place in their work. Quite the contrary, the same way they resemiotized discarded objects, they engaged in resemiotization of ossified forms of everyday public discourse. This is particularly relevant for Martek’s “prepoetry,” which is an attempt to find a fundamental condition for poetry in the same way primary painting and elementary photography do for their media, and to expand poetic production beyond writing in the narrow sense of the word. The simplest form of prepoetry consists in establishing a juxtaposition between the object and the word: the word “table” on a table, “book” on a book . . . until a wrong word disrupts the series: “comb” on a table, for example. Martek explains that by “taking things for granted, we actually lose them. My prepoetry is actually an injection of life into poetry, its reanimation. In that way, I fulfill my desire to keep killing poetry and resuscitate it at the same time” (Martek [1996] 2011:154). This practice of poetry carries over to Martek’s “placard poetry” and “action poetry”: for example, he made posters with the inscriptions “Read Mayakovski’s Poems” and “Read Miljković’s Poems” and pasted them in public places reserved for political placards, also, in art exhibition openings he
distributed cookies with the inscription “Lie to the state” on them and flyers with a message “Artists, take up arms” (Stipančić 1998:102). His self-published chapbooks from the later 1970s feature similar poems-slogans: “Death to the state—freedom to art,” “Down with the exploiters of anarchy,” “State, I shall disfigure you with art,” and “I am in love with the state, long live adultery” (102). “Death to the state—freedom to art” pointedly echoes the most frequently used political slogan in post–World War II Yugoslavia, “Death to fascism—freedom to the people” (“Smrt fašizmu—sloboda narodu”). This is not only an ironic variation—or a derivative—of a well-known slogan, but estrangement of an important political idea stripped of its value through ideological instrumentalization.

Similarly, in his installations and writingpaintings, Mladen Stilinović collected and exhibited fragments of political discourse emptied of meaning (if they had any to begin with) through repetitive usage. In his 1981 installation Submit for Public Debate (Staviti na javnu raspravu), he arranged five rows of chairs in a way similar to how they were set up in worker council meetings. Instead of a customary dais, the chairs were facing a wall on which he hung cardboard posters with inscriptions containing phrases such as “concrete measures,” “important factors,” and “common interests” (Stilinović [2005] 2011:169). This revaluation of political discourse as artistic material was also prominent in Stilinović’s solo show Sing! (Pjevaj!), held in Zagreb’s Modern Art Gallery in the fall of 1980. It consisted of a series of “reflections”: on work, color, language and society, and money. Reflections on work demonstrate the paradoxical position of work in Yugoslav ideology of associated labor. Stilinović’s handwritten notes exhibited in this show are riddles addressing the position of work and workers in Yugoslav society. “I work for two” (“Radim za dvojicu”) is a phrase used commonly to describe an exceptional effort but also the ratio between productive workers and bureaucrats in Yugoslavia, while here, additionally, it may refer to an artist’s work, which always addresses both the artist and the spectator. “Work cannot not exist” (“Rad ne može ne postojati”) points to work as a negation in both phenomenology and Marxist philosophy. The reference to phenomenology is underlined in a variation of this work, in which this slogan is crossed out in the similar way in which Derrida, following Heidegger, puts the word “being” “under erasure.” And if the deconstructionist strategy of placing a concept “under erasure” still leaves its linguistic representation visible, in his writingpaintings Stilinović often juxtaposes the absence (erasure) of the concept and its linguistic designation. Probably the best example of this approach is his piece Work Plan (Plan rada, 1974): it is a piece of paper with the phrase “Work Plan” at the head,
followed by a column of numbers one through five with no items next to them. The photographs comprising the installation *Artist at Work*, which show Stilinović asleep, seem to wrap up the artist’s reflections on work’s necessary absence.

This engagement with artistic process as labor that decrees the position of the artist not as exceptional, but instead as deeply integrated into social fabric, was not limited to Stilinović and the Group of Six Authors. Stilinović dedicated the artist book version of *Artist at Work*—a set of photographs bound together with a thread into a crude booklet—to Neša Paripović, the member of the conceptual art circle at the Belgrade SKC who was known for his reluctance to produce artworks, which was often associated with “laziness.” More to the point, Goran Đorđević tried to organize an international artists’ strike. In 1979, he sent an invitation to a large group of artists in several different countries to boycott art institutions. The short circular letter read, in part: “As a protest against the art system’s unbroken repression of the artist and alienation from the results of his practice, it would be very important to demonstrate the possibility of coordinating activities independent from art institutions, and organize an international strike of artists. This strike should represent a boycott of the art system in a period of . . . months” (1980a:43). The invitation leaves the exact dates and dura-

Fig. 27. Mladen Stilinović: *Artist at Work*, 1978. Photograph courtesy of the artist.
tion to be determined later and asks recipients to spread the word. Some forty artists responded, most of them expressing their reservations about the possibility of organizing such a complex international action. Even though the boycott didn’t happen, a number of artists and critics responded to Đorđević, including Sol LeWitt, Daniel Buren, Vito Acconci, Stefan Morawski, and Carolee Schneemann. All of this points to the other, more politically overt meaning of the idea of refusal, which was articulated with particular urgency by the Italian workerist movement.

As Italian theorist from the “Autonomia” group Franco “Bifo” Berardi points out, there were three distinct tendencies in interpretations of alienation in the 1960s, the first being “humanistic,” which emphasized the continuity of Marx’s thought with the Hegel of The Phenomenology of Spirit, where the “missing link” was Marx’s Early Writings; the second tendency Berardi identifies as “structuralist,” noting that it called for a rereading of Capital, while emphasizing Marx’s “epistemological rupture” with Hegel; while the third tendency, which underscored the importance of Grundrisse “while maintaining conceptual links with phenomenology,” he associated with theorists on the radical left in Italy, such as Mario Tronti, Raniero Panzieri, and Toni Negri, who published in magazines Classe operaia (Working Class) and Potere operaio (Working Power) (Berardi 2009:35). Berardi observes that “workerist” theoreticians replaced the word “alienation” with “estrangement” in their arguments in which they claimed that the position of workers in rapidly industrializing Italy of the 1960s was that of “estrangement, situating itself outside the logic and general interest of capitalist society.” To the point, “The concept of estrangement implies an intentionality that is determined by an estranged behavior” (46). Estranged from what, and how? The answer that the influential “workerist” theorist Mario Tronti offered in his pamphlet “Struggle against Labor!” is painfully straightforward: separation from capitalism through refusal of labor. Going against the grain of leftist critiques of capitalism dominant in the 1960s, such as that of Henri Lefebvre or the Situationist International, Tronti argued that “it is true that Trennung, separation, division is the normal relation in [capitalist] society.”

Yet it is also true that keeping together what is divided is the real power of capital; it has run its course, and it will continue to follow what is left of its future. Keeping the working class inside itself and against itself, and on its basis impose on society the laws of its very development—this is the life of capital, and for this reason there is no life other than this. ([1966] 2012:36)
The only course that industrial workers can take against this monolithic totality of capital is the abolition of labor itself. In a vertiginous turn, Tronti suggests that the working class can destroy the work of capital by fighting itself, that is, its own subjugation to the economism of labor. The direction of emancipation is not toward the outside, but inward; not a leap into disalienation, but burrowing into it. He asks for “the organization of alienation,” which is “one of those miracles of organization that are possible only from a worker’s point of view” (Tronti in Matarrese 2012:10). The meaning of estrangement is this radical separation from capitalist society through an abolition of labor.

In their work, the members of the Group of Six Authors bring together two meanings of alienation: the Brechtian V- effect (Verfremdungseffekt), as an artistic strategy of making unfamiliar that which is familiar, and Marx’s estrangement (Entfremdung), which, as Berardi put it, “refers to the confrontation between the consciousness and the scene of exteriority, and to the creation of an autonomous consciousness based on the refusal of its own dependence on work” (Berardi 2009:23). This confluence of the artistic and the political, in which art refuses to become the means of politics and instead takes politics as its medium, is perhaps best exemplified in Stilinović’s On Work (O radu, 1980–84). It consists of nine cardboard panels covered with red paper. On each of them is pasted a newspaper photograph taken in high-level Party meetings. Juxtaposed with the photographs are phrases cut from newspaper titles, such as “Affirmation of Work and Self-Management” (“Afirmacija rada i samoupravljanja”), “Stakhanovite work” (“Udarnički rad”), “Validating through Work Only” (“Dokazivanje samo radom”). This use of politicales is often seen as ironic, especially since it came at the point of a pronounced economic crisis in Yugoslavia during the early 1980s. However, there is more to it than plain irony and political satire. The meaning of refusal on the part of the most radical art in Yugoslavia of that time was in resistance against the social aphanisis or “annihilation” and “fading” of the subject. Both psychoanalytically and politically, refusal is inseparable from the assertion of the subject. Kristeva leaves no doubt that “the concept of expulsion should apply to the practice of the subject, in this case a signifying practice which supposes an ‘experience of limits’ on the part of the subject” ([1973] 1998: 139). Berardi is no less adamant in his assertion that the workerists saw the proletariat “no longer as a passive object of alienation, but instead as the active subject of a refusal capable of building a community starting out from its estrangement from the interests of capitalistic society” (23). This double movement of expulsion/refusal is hinged on an active rejection of the notion of alienation as the loss of some uniquely human “nature.”
In Yugoslav context, this movement was caught in the scissors of the official Marxism and its critics, both of which subscribed precisely to this idea of alienation. While in his early publications Žižek offered a rigorous critique of “praxis philosophy in all of its variants,” he was not interested in providing a consistent alternative to its theory of alienation. While some workerist ideas found their way to Italy’s eastern neighbor—not surprisingly, through articles published in Ideje—the dynamics of work and capital in Yugoslavia were radically different than in the society from which these ideas originated. At the same time, various post-Praxis critiques of alienation never cohered into a unified theory, even if they were published in the same journal. One such isolated engagement with the subject of alienation was Vladimir Gligorov’s essay “On the Strange” (“O stranom”). Even though published on the pages of the same journal that published reports from Italy and Žižek’s early essays, neither one of them explicitly engaged with one another. Gligorov takes his reflections on ideas of the strange and estrangement away from the well-trod path of Marxist humanist theory of alienation and engages in considerations of strangeness, distance, and subjectivity instead. He begins by asserting that “the strange is tied with the ambition of subjectivity” and that “the strange here stands only as the negative that is always appearing when there is an ambition to prove and establish subjectivity,” and concludes with an assertion that the society based on interest is a lethal threat to the subject: “The society is no longer comprised of mutually connected subjects on the path of realization of a certain goal, but the set of norms, institutions, roles, etc. within which the man finds his place, pushes forward, and finds his way about. Therefore, the society itself becomes the new space of strangeness” (Gligorov 1974:134). This space of strangeness forecloses any collective action: “The subject emerges simultaneously with the strange. This dividedness makes possible an awareness of the strange and the relationship between the subject and the strange in general. This very formation of both the strange and the subject has its source in violence.” In the final analysis, Gligorov hypothesizes that “it is possible to strive toward subjectivity of an individual limited only by his aloneness” (134). This indicates a turn from class to individual interests and from collectivity to the atomization of a society that marked post-1968 politics and culture in Yugoslavia. As we have seen, this shift is also recognizable in the theoretical transformation of the status of alienation. What was the broader meaning of this turn from “human nature” to the theory of the subject? How did it relate to massive social processes in the final ideological mutation of Yugoslav self-management and in political economy of associated labor?
MONEY AS THE MEDIUM

In a section from *One-Way Street* entitled “A Tour through the German Inflation,” Walter Benjamin observed that “it is impossible to remain in a large German city, where hunger forces the most wretched to live on the banknotes with which passers-by seek to cover an exposure that wounds them” (1996:452). The image, then, of the society engulfed by inflation is that of a cityscape dotted with rips that are patched over with worthless money. All mending is in vain: each cover is just another wound that widens as the banknote that is supposed to hold things together disintegrates. Stilinović’s collages from the early 1980s paint a similar picture. With the debt crisis, a whole new area of ephemerality opened up: that of the money devaluated by inflation. The repertoire of “poor media”—elementary photography, prepoetry, primary painting—now expanded to include shoddy currency: money not as a value, but as an object that is eroding in its owners’ hands without them being able to do anything about it.

A comparison chart published in *Ekonomska Politika* in January 1990 placed Yugoslavia among the countries with highest debt and highest inflation in the world: the monthly inflation rate in Argentina reached 32% in June 1985, in Bolivia it came up to 66% in August 1985, and in Yugoslavia the monthly inflation rate for December 1989 reached 59%, which translated to an annual inflation rate of 2,733%, commonly used as a threshold figure of hyperinflation. Historically, inflation has been one of the most persistent problems plaguing the Yugoslav economy. As early as the mid-1960s, Slovene-born British economist Ljubo Sirc warned that the Yugoslav economic performance was suffering from inflation caused by systemic deficiencies. Skeptical of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) support for Yugoslavia’s dynamic growth at the expense of higher inflation, which it expressed in the “Economic Survey of the SFR of Yugoslavia” for 1965, Sirc cautioned that inflation in Yugoslavia was the result of deep flaws in its economic and political structure. In addition to Benjamin Ward’s “Illyrian model” of wage increases, he also called attention to the emission of primary money through loosely controlled credits issued to enterprises (Sirc 1966:9). If the establishment of self-management in Yugoslavia in the early 1950s can be seen as a displacement of democratization from politics to industry, its unraveling in the 1980s was driven by the politicization of the economy.

In the late 1970s, Yugoslav associated labor had something in common with military juntas in Chile and Argentina, the Mexican *democratura*, and, for that matter, Poland’s “real socialism”: an easy access to loans from a
booming transnational private banking sector. In their research on the debt crisis of the 1980s, Stephany Griffith-Jones and Osvaldo Sunkel point to the expansion of private investment in international capital markets as one of its primary causes. They observed that, whereas it was nonexistent in the 1940s, the proportion of external finance coming to debtor countries from private sources increased in the period 1961–65 to 39.8%, and that by 1978 it had skyrocketed to 92.7% (1986:61). They suggest that this turnaround was facilitated by several factors, most prominent among them the deregulation of international banking and the predominance of the Eurodollar in the 1970s. One of the most significant outcomes of deregulation was the relaxing of oversight of the borrowers’ use of these funds. In other words, the privatization and deregulation of international financial structures resulted in the separation of lending and management. In most Latin American debtor countries, this led to a vast increase in dubious investments, capital flight, and military spending. In their analysis of the 1970s borrowing spree in Latin America, Griffith-Jones and Sunkel point out that “governments and entrepreneurs have had great freedom to obtain and allocate vast quantities of external resources, but this increased freedom has not necessarily been to the advantage of the countries receiving that plentiful inflow of private capital” (66). In the case of Yugoslavia, changes in international banking coincided with the internal transformation of self-management imposed by the new constitution of 1974. Yugoslavia, for the most part, resisted many economic and political anomalies that were syphoning funds from Latin American and other developing countries. Indeed, it was very much committed to a development policy, diversification of the production system, and social justice. However, the implementation of reforms in the aftermath of the 1974 constitution resulted in a number of economic and organizational idiosyncrasies that contributed to its indebtedness. In a striking similarity to the international financial markets, during this period the Yugoslav economy went through a deregulation of sorts. Instead of being privatized, however, it was fragmented into republics, into communes, and finally into individual enterprises (OOURs). In his analysis of the debt crisis in Yugoslavia during the 1980s, David A. Dyker cites abandonment of the federal balance of payments and its republicization as one of the most striking examples of Yugoslavia’s organizational “peculiarities” (1990:118). Instead of being managed on the federal level, investment and borrowing decisions were made on the level of the republics. This led to endemic duplication of capacities on all levels: from republics, each of which had almost the same set of industries, to communities and enterprises overburdened with administration. This, along with
a decrease in labor productivity and the “Illyrian model” of wage formation, led to financing growth from borrowing and Yugoslavia’s plunge into what Griffith-Jones and Sunkel describe as the “financial fools’ paradise” of 1970s international private lending (66). In Yugoslavia, this heavy borrowing was used to finance a new ideological conservatism. This marriage of foreign capital and homegrown politics resulted in an ideology of debt as a specific facet of associated labor: socialist consumerism went hand in hand with a piety toward the revolutionary past, and common citizens’ “indebtedness” to World War II communist guerillas, President Tito, People’s Heroes, and so on. In the early 1980s, as high Party functionaries such as Edvard Kardelj, Vladimir Bakarić, and Tito himself passed away, this ideology acquired an increasingly melancholic tone. The mournful tenor of late socialism sounded the tipping point at which the culture of socialist baroque reached its completion and began to decline.

Stilinović’s work 88 Roses for Comrade Tito (88 ruža za druga Tita, 1991) captures the complexity of the ideology of debt like no other work that comes from Yugoslavia during that period. One of the prominent examples of Stilinović’s “works with money,” this piece replicates the commemorative bill issued in the 1980s that features Tito’s portrait, with designation of monetary value consisting of 88 zeros. This is not just a catchy visual pun referencing hyperinflation. The “88 roses” from the title refer to Tito’s age at the time of his death and even more to the cult of Tito that emerged in the aftermath of his passing. The number 88 was the final piece of this ideological edifice, before it crumbled down at the end of the decade. Accordingly, this work also belongs to the larger theme of mourning that runs through Stilinović’s works of that period. In To the Fallen Comrades (1981) he painted twelve crosses on a ten-dinar bill, and on several occasions he exhibited banknotes with a black mourning ribbon tinted into its upper right corner, as was the custom with photographs of recently departed high-level politicians displayed in shop windows across Yugoslavia.46 Here, money appears as an integral part of funeral rites, together with other kitschy accouterments; money as mourning, but also mourned money: all those banknotes are stacked with zeroes that speak of the inevitability of loss that permeates inflationary economics. The melancholy logic of inflation turns on its head the capitalist principle of money’s self-reproducibility. Writing at the tail end of this period and on the other side of the globe, Peggy Phelan summed up this principle in capitalism’s laconic imperative that “money is supposed to be reproductive: spend money to make money, multiply paper and multiply power” (Phelan 1991:131). The logic of inflation turns this imperative upside down: the more paper, the less wealth
and less power. Here time does not mean accrual, but waste: the more money you have, the less value you end up with, so that, paradoxically, accumulation ends in zero and in a total loss. Stilinović captures this close interlacing of empty reproduction and death in his series of picturewritings entitled Images—Graveyards (Slike—groblja, 1982). Here each image has a black background with constellations of yellow, white, or red crosses and the inscriptions “Interest rate,” “Inflation,” “Production Assurance,” and “Market” painted on them.

Stilinović produced his first work with money as early as 1973 in his artist’s book They Told Me Told You (Govorili su mi su ti), in which he made a collage with a two-dinar coin pasted on a page and the inscription “Spit that out” (“Pljuni to iz usta”) (Stilinović and Stipančić 2008:103). As the inflation in Yugoslavia picked up in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, banknotes appeared with an ever greater frequency in the work of the Group of Six Authors. For example, in June 1976 Martek performed the action Tearing Banknotes (Drapanje novca) on the beach in the seaside village of Mošćenička Draga, and in 1980 Sven Stilinović made the piece Marx-Stilinović, in which the photograph of the artist lying down with his face covered with coins is juxtaposed with a handwritten quote from Marx. By that time, banknotes were a regular feature in his brother’s work: Mladen Stilinović used them as a surface for drawing (Double Offense, Similarities and Differences, 1980), made collages from torn banknotes (To Hans Arp, 1980), hung paper money from a gallery ceiling while covering the floor with coins (Money Environment, 1980), and used them as a writing surface: in Time Is Money (Vrijeme je novac) he wrote, “I am in a hurry” (“žurim”) on a ten-dinar bill, and he added a zero to another ten-dinar bill in the work entitled, simply, 0 (1980).

The use of actual bills gave Stilinović an opportunity to compose visual essays on the subject of money itself. Most often commented on is his collage Sing! (Pjevaj!), which consists of a black-and-white photograph of the artist with a real one-hundred-dinar bill pasted on his forehead and the inscription “Sing!” underneath. The first association a Yugoslav beholder would get from this image is to the custom from smoky roadside taverns, where drunken guests usually tip musicians by spitting on a bill and pasting it on their foreheads, while making a song request or simply ordering: “Sing!” This gesture of reward and humiliation inevitably points to the relationship between artists and their patrons. But this does not exhaust the range of possible readings offered by this image. If the patron state sees art only in terms of hired labor, then artists also see their work as something to be sold or hired out for a fee. The artist is no longer an activist and a public
thinker, not even a worker, but Homo economicus, someone who has money on his mind—and quite literally so. Stilinović also used a one-hundred-dinar banknote in his piece *Surplus Value* (*Višak vrijednosti*, 1980), in which he inscribed the phrase “Višak vrijednosti” across the bill, with the last syllable (“ti”) running over its edge, thus literally indicating an excess or a surplus. I already mentioned his piece *Time Is Money* (*Vrijeme je novac*), in which he inscribed the phrase “I am in a hurry” on a ten-dinar bill. In a different work with the same title, he wrote the phrase “vrijeme je novac” on a piece of paper and pasted a coin above each letter. This series of shiny one-dinar coins that correspond neatly to the letters below them can be seen as a literalization of Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of linguistic value. In *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure suggested that the value of a sign, like that of a coin, is composed of its property to be exchanged for a “dissimilar thing,” “the value of which is to be determined” (goods, commodities) and for “similar things that can be compared with the thing of which the value is to be determined” (other currencies) (Saussure [1916] 1959:115). However oblique, this connection to Saussurian semiotics is not at all accidental. In statements on his money pieces, Stilinović gives a prominent place to Italian linguist Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, who took the correspondence between linguistics and economy way beyond Saussure’s initial idea. In *Language as Work and Trade*, Rossi-Landi writes that “as distinct from use-value, the ‘value’ of a word can be taken to be its position within the language, just as the ‘value’ of a commodity is its position within the market” ([1968] 1983:56). The position of an individual word within language is determined by its circulation, that is, by its capacity to engage in multiple exchanges. For Rossi-Landi, the source of linguistic alienation is the same as the source of alienation of labor: just as the commodity status of the object of exchange objectifies the production worker, the discursive status of the word objectifies the linguistic worker. The irony of linguistics is that, like economics, it can’t set itself apart from its own ideological setting, so that it actively participates in the process of alienation it tries to describe (and even criticize). It takes the words and messages in themselves, so that we lose contact with the human and historical reality that brings into being these words and messages as these words and these messages. Then the consequences of what we may well call the fetish character of words and messages unfold before us, incomprehensible to our eyes. This fetish character lies in the fact that the production and exchange of words and messages at a certain point becomes so regular and systematic that it seems to be something that no longer requires a
work felt to be particular and personal. Then the words and messages, which are, in reality, the products of sign-work, take on the appearance of autonomous existence. (78)

While he takes the correspondence between sign and commodity as one of the major instances of “nonverbal language,” Rossi-Landi recognizes that the analogy between language and economy has its limits. Some of them are obvious, such as the status of private property, which can be said to be nonexistent in the case of the former. The loss of linguistic value comes from the limited use of a word, its restricted communicability. This is in strict opposition to the loss of monetary value that comes from its hyperproduction and unlimited circulation. Linguistic value, then, is tied to the speaker as a reproducer. The moment the “linguistic worker” fails to reproduce verbal models that are approved and accepted by the society that “employs him,” “the price he must pay consists in nothing less and nothing more than expulsion from the linguistic society” (64). In economic terms, the expulsion—and coincidence with Kristeva’s writing on the subject is anything but incidental—means poverty; in linguistic terms, it is marked by either madness or poetry. The specific contribution of postconceptual art in Yugoslavia, which the Group of Six Authors and Goran Đorđević explored from different directions, was in approaching economic poverty linguistically. In his collages and writingpaintings, Stilinović takes an object below the threshold of symbolization, and, conversely, he isolates “messages” that have been thoroughly fetishized. This poverty is completely different from “poor art” strategies that emerged from Art Informel. The difference in the status of “found” writing in Šejka’s action Declaration and Stilinović’s installation Submit for Public Debate is that the former is an integral part of a large explanatory mechanism, an entire pseudometaphysical system that lends value to the ephemeral act, while the latter rejects any such elaboration and instead lays bare the mechanism of ideological (d)evaluation of language within political discourse. Similarly, whereas Gattin degrades the canvas to the level of a piece of charred fabric and in doing so infuses it with painterly symbolism, Stilinović always uses recognizable commodities in order to designate their loss of capacity to engage in the chain of exchanges: from newspapers, to broken pencils, to plates, to food (bread, cakes), to that ultimate commodity: money. Ultimately, autre art of the 1950s produced works that eventually could be appropriated by the very political economy from which it was exiled. The strategies of strangeness and refusal that radical Yugoslav artists of the late 1970s and early 1980s espoused can be seen as the politics of the last resort: an attempt to make a
distinct and legible statement that is resistant to appropriation by art institutions and to persecution by political institutions: a work of art that is as lowly as a one-dinar coin battered by inflation, but still validated by its symbolic status as “money.” Still, “rebuses” involving banknotes as ready-made elements could not fully capture the experiential dimension of inflation. Hence, in the “Reflections of Money” segment of his 1980 show Sing! Stilinović exhibited the following writingpainting: “1/31/1980 at six o’clock in the morning I’m listening to the radio—a report on the exchange rates by the Zagreb Economic Bank” (1980:n.p.).

By the late 1970s, the banking system was much more prominent in Yugoslav power structures than workers’ councils, unions, or other socio-political organizations. After 1968, all of them were reduced from potentially autonomous workers’ organizations to mere conduits of the Party’s decisions. The power of the banks came from their place at the intersection between producers of real economic value (factories, agriculture, and other producing branches of national economy) and political institutions that were in charge of the distribution of funds. Sociologist Neca Jovanov argues that by the late 1970s, the Yugoslav banking system was used for the “expropriation of the lion’s share of income created in productive industries” (1983:63). Yugoslavia, Jovanov claimed, became a country with an unusually high number of investment banks, which, although meant to provide service to “associated labor,” were de facto exerting total dominance over it. Since, unlike other socialist states, Yugoslavia did not have a class of professional politicians (nomenklatura), the banking system was an important instrument for the degradation of Yugoslav workers from actual into nominal self-managers and decision-makers. The horizontal connections among workers were powerfully opposed by what Susan Woodward correctly recognized as the “vertical links of monetary control and economic interest in Kardelj’s political system,” which “ran on two tracks: the Communist party, and the parliamentary and conciliar representation of economic interest” (1995:352). The first track consisted of the members of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, which, to use Woodward’s phrase, was gradually transformed into a “craft union of managers and politicians” (325). The second was the system of delegates, which, according to the constitution, was supposed to ensure an unobstructed flow of industrial into political democracy. A reverse process was established in practice: if banks (and communities, republics, etc.) had workers’ delegates on their boards, these delegates were quickly assimilated—with the crucial aid of the “craft union”—into a class of interest brokers. These two “columns” of power were harmonized through monetary flows facilitated by
the banking system, which reaped huge benefits from this intermediary position. Jovanov points to the fact that, since the late 1960s, manufacturing industries in Yugoslavia had been on average barely breaking even, while banks and other intermediary institutions (SIZs) were regularly reporting large surpluses (1983:68).

This apparent inequality in income distribution resulted in a wave of worker unrest in the 1980s. Strikes were not a new phenomenon in Yugoslavia. In his book on workers’ strikes in Yugoslavia, Jovanov writes that in the decade between 1958 and 1969 there were some 2,000 recorded strikes in Yugoslavia. With the debt crisis of the 1980s, this number increased significantly: in the first year of the crisis (between 1982 and 1983) the number of work stoppages and strikes rose by 80%, and by 1987 there were 1,570 strikes involving 365,000 workers (Woodward 1995:353). Most often, the strikes were triggered by late or insufficient wages. Jovanov finds a deeper cause of the strikes in the “suppression of workers and their influence from the entire institutional structure of economic and political power” (1983:178). The main features of workers’ strikes in Yugoslavia remained unchanged over decades: they were short (rarely longer than a day) and limited to industry and mining; further, they were aimed at factory management and never at larger political structures, which explains their local nature (there were no general strikes even in the darkest days of the crisis in the 1980s), and, importantly, they had a very high rate of success (180).

The firms’ directors tried to find (and mostly succeeded in finding) ways to quickly satisfy workers’ demands in order to avoid admonishment from their higher-ranking Party bosses. However, all of this hardly gets close to explaining the apparent paradox of workers’ unrest (strike, work stoppage) in the system of self-management, where the means of production are supposedly in workers’ hands.

During the 1980s, a number of Yugoslav economists pointed to the ways structural weaknesses and outright faults were built into the system of associated labor. Jože Mencinger, for example, argued that, in order to remove one of the major sources of instability, Yugoslav authorities needed to redefine “social property” from “a concept that does not include provisions for vested claims of the workers to a concept that would include such provisions and would in fact change social property into collective property” (1987:403). What this means is that the concept of “social ownership,” which the 1974 constitution transformed into the abstract legal category of the “association of labor and means of production” (“udruživanje rada i sredstava”), made income earned from labor, not from ownership, legal and socially acceptable. This had the effect of diminishing workers’ con-
cern for the very property they used and operated. It is not surprising, then, that the decrease of labor productivity was a constant feature of Yugoslav economic performance after 1976. Mencinger warned that “if the existing concept of social property is retained, inflationary investment financing can be only substituted by limiting rather than increasing the rights of workers to decide on income distribution and/or by taxing wages and collecting funds for equalizing ex ante savings with investment” (403). In other words, after 1974 the right to determine wages was the only decision left to workers in the system of associated labor. The concept of social ownership quickly deteriorated from a mechanism for emancipation of workers into an indirect instrument of Party control over the economy. The typical strike in Yugoslavia, in which the workers would stage a brief work stoppage or in the worst case walk out of the factory, thus forcing management to meet their demands in very short time, can be seen as a perverse transposition of the Illyrian model of state syndicalism into the late socialism of associated labor.

Paradoxically, it was precisely its efficacy that limited the strike’s potential as a weapon in the workers’ struggle in Yugoslavia of the 1980s. Because of its brevity, pragmatism, and local nature, the strike never evolved into a situation in which the workers would congeal into a class that has political, not only economic, demands. Much deeper, more corrosive, and harder for management to engage with was the passive resistance of the workers. This refusal to work can be traced back to the concept of hidden unemployment, which plagued the Yugoslav economy during post-World War II industrialization. For the same reason that strikes were efficient, layoffs were an unpopular measure and almost never used to increase productivity. As Woodward argues, the very concept of employment in Yugoslavia was highly politicized, which makes it hard to determine the number of unemployed at any point. “In contrast to the standard measure in developed capitalist economies, where the rate [of unemployment] is a proportion of the total population of the potential labor force,” in Yugoslavia “it was the unemployed portion of the social-sector employment pool—those currently employed in the public sector with rights to self-management and those formally registered as seeking work” (196). In other words, employment was not tied to the needs of enterprises, but to the needs of political institutions, which created “unemployment hidden in the workplace” (198). The workplace was not a place of work, but of formal employment. In the absence of a labor market, which made job loss almost impossible, avoidance of work reached the status of an unwritten right. The debt crisis and inflation justified it and gave it a meaning of silent protest, which mush-
roomed to massive proportions. Slovene sociologists Veljko Rus and Frane Adam, who studied Yugoslav industry in the 1980s, called this form of passive resistance a “white strike” (1989:217). If work stoppage requires minimal organization and shared responsibility among those who initiate it, the “white strike” asks for no organization and no responsibility whatsoever. It corresponds closely to the idea of refusal that Tronti spoke about in his call for abolishment of labor: “As workers were looking for a single response to capitalist production and the official workers’ movement, the response could only be this: a specific form of self-organization, entirely carried out within the working class itself, based on the spontaneity of passivity; an organization without organization, which meant workers’ organization without bourgeois institutionalization” ([1966] 2012:38). All we need to do is replace “capitalism” with “associated labor” and this statement will hold true for Yugoslavia, all the way to the last phrase about institutionalization. Unlike in capitalist economies, in Yugoslavia passivity was fully institutionalized and integrated into the doctrine of associated labor. In a tacit agreement characteristic of the political economy of socialist aestheticism, “Actual power holders (management) were incapable of overcoming passive resistance,” while at the same time actors of passive resistance could not modify the management. “In that way, immobilization and self-obstruction are built into power structure” (Rus and Adam 1989:219). This led Rus and Adam to conclude that while the “Yugoslav self-managing system, of course, is not totalitarian,” in the long run “it is doomed to stagnation” because of “the high level of resistance and entropy” (220). Empirical research on workers’ attitudes in Slovenia that Rus and Vladimir Arzenšek discuss in their sociological study Labor as a Destiny and as Freedom: Division of Labor and Alienation (Rad kao sudbina i kao sloboda: Podjela i alijenacija rada) supports their theses about the sense of disempowerment and “anomie” among production workers (1984:399). Stilinović summed up the vicious circle of the political economy of (late) Yugoslav socialism in his 1981 slogan “Work is a disease—Karl Marx,” to which he later added Martek’s aphorism, “Work is a shame.”

At the outset of the debt crisis, the Yugoslav federal government tried to improve the country’s import-export ratio through short-term measures such as rationing consumer goods. In 1982, Prime Minister Milka Planinc resorted to issuing special coupons for purchasing imported consumer goods such as detergent, sugar, coffee, and cooking oil. Gasoline was rationed by a special regulation that permitted owners of personal vehicles to use their cars on alternate days, determined by their odd or even registration numbers. Finally, in the fall and winter of 1984 the government tried to
increase the country’s exports of electricity, which resulted in massive power outages throughout Yugoslavia. These austerity measures made but a dent in Yugoslavia’s foreign debt, and their real, and perhaps intended, effect was to demonstrate to international financial bodies the seriousness of the Yugoslav government in tackling the country’s economic problems. Their unintended effect was the creation of a texture of economic existence entirely new to Yugoslav citizens, best exemplified in the emergence of a language of scarcity. The Zagreb-based sociolinguist Ivo Žanić observed that, during the period of austerity measures, from 1982 to 1984, “the terminology of shopping disappeared from everyday language to make room for the jargon of the hunt” (1986:8). What was once a routine and forgettable activity of making a quick visit to a nearby grocery store, all of a sudden turned into an endeavor steeped in uncertainty and anxiety. Shoppers were no longer purchasing meat and cooking oil or pumping gas, but “finding meat,” “catching cooking oil,” and “hunting for gasoline” (8). In some respects, the modes of production and reception reverted to nineteenth-century practices. (My record player idle, I remember going overboard with high school literature assignments that included the volumes of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy, which I enjoyed by candlelight, the way these books were encountered by many of their first readers).

Government-induced shortages during the first half of the 1980s did not stop the inflation. Instead, they induced the atmosphere of “white strike” in the entire population. This, in turn, justified an internalization of guilt that Žanić identified in his discourse analysis of inflation. As the inflation accelerated, there was an almost ritualistic repetition of culpability in public statements about the failing economy: “We all carry our share of responsibility for this” (in Žanić 1986:37); “we relaxed too much . . . took loans abroad without much good judgment, and did not rely enough on our own sources” (59). Žanić cites a study that the Belgrade-based Institute for Social Studies did on a representative sample of 4,500 Yugoslavs working in socially owned enterprises, according to which a third of the participants selected the option “We are all responsible” as their answer to the question about accountability for the Yugoslav economic crisis (41). This collective guilt was perceived as a summation of accumulated errors: inflation, reported a daily newspaper from Split, Croatia, is a “synonym for all our troubles and the result of all the mistakes we made” (in Žanić 1986:57). A commentator in Ekonomika, a Belgrade magazine, pointed to confusion of the Yugoslav economy’s systemic weaknesses for the wrongdoings of politicians. According to some “experts” and their “economic theories,” this commentator wrote, “the main responsibility for inflation rests with its
main victim: the working class. It is they who ‘eat’ accumulation; it is they who don’t achieve the desired level of productivity; it is they who are not sufficiently motivated for work” (36). Indeed, one of the most significant effects of inflation—economically, experientially, and politically—is the disappearance of work. If ideology of associated labor replaced workers with an abstract category, the hyperinflation completely marginalized them as social agents. 33 Žanić has observed that “mythological thinking” sees inflation as an enemy that “challenges the community to a duel” rather than “giving it a creative impulse” (1986:212). More significantly, “work as a category has no place in the rhetoric of crisis,” in which ratnik (warrior) takes the place of radnik (worker). “The worker [radnik] subsists at the margin of history, while the warrior [ratnik] exists at its very center, actively participating in its creation” (235). Inflation created a situation in which the “working class as the ruling class hardly makes ends meet. It introduced a grand leveling into economic life, because when the prices run wild, earning based on labor productivity becomes a dead letter. . . . When the industrious and the indolent, qualified and unqualified, have similar incomes, the motivation for work disappears, productivity declines, the production goes down, and waste goes up, and in that way every aspect of economic life deteriorates” (105). If the purpose of inflationary financing was to sustain the illusion of decision-making by laborers, its ultimate effect was the destruction of labor itself. The full meaning of the politicization of the economy in Yugoslavia of the 1980s: together with the very concept of associated labor, ideological uses of macroeconomics abolished the worker as the political subject.

POSTCONCEPTUALIST POLITICS

In college at the time of the hyperinflation of the late 1980s, I remember a professor recommending Stefan Zweig’s autobiography, The World of Yesterday (1943), when I asked for help with literary representations of inflation. And I also remember being charmed by Zweig’s prose while at the same time being disappointed with the way he spoke about German hyperinflation in 1923. Literary reports on the financial chaos in the Weimar Republic, such as those by Zweig and Elias Canetti, were shaped by that which came after. Zweig saw in it a foreboding of the doom that came with Hitler’s rise to power: “Nothing ever embittered German people so much—it is important to remember this—nothing made them so furious with hate and so ripe for Hitler as the inflation” ([1942] 1943:315). More
perceptively, but still misleading when it comes to Yugoslavia’s galloping inflation in the 1980s, Canetti in his psychological analysis of German hyperinflation in 1923 pointed out that this economic disturbance resulted in a loss of self-appreciation: “A man who has been accustomed to rely on [money] cannot help feeling its degradation as his own. He has identified himself with it for too long and his confidence in it has been like his confidence in himself. Not only is everything visibly shaken during an inflation, nothing remaining certain or unchanged even for an hour, but also each man, as a person, becomes less” ([1960] 1962:187). This depreciated sense of self-worth is a lasting effect of inflation, Canetti argued. In order to shake it off, worthless survivors of inflation (it is always survived by almost everyone: inflation ruins livelihoods while sparing lives) have to find someone even less valuable then themselves. This explanation of economic and ethical disasters in Weimar are just as convenient and just as misleading as analogies between the short-lived German republic of the 1920s and Yugoslavia’s last decade. However, unlike in Weimar, in which the economic collapse led to the rise of totalitarianism, in Yugoslavia, the inflationary spikes of the late 1980s and the 1990s were closely entwined with larger political developments. In other words, the war was not the consequence of economic catastrophe: they were two sides of the same disaster, which fed into one another. In the 1980s, this doomsday mechanism was still obscured by the spectacle of the decay of Yugoslavia’s ideological edifice. It was economic, not humanist Marxist or nationalistic discourse that produced the first trenchant criticisms of Yugoslav socialism; and likewise, it was not the triumph of capitalism, but the breakdown of the Yugoslav political economy that hollowed out the idea of self-management.

Risking a sweeping generalization, one can submit that if the 1970s were the decade of expansion (of media, art, politics), the 1980s were the decade of proliferation (of images, slogans, commodities... banknotes). This, of course, was not limited to Yugoslavia. Reflecting back on the 1980s, Elinor Fuchs recalled the flood of new scholarly topics and disciplines in the United States (“hermeneutics, semiotics, reception theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstruction, post-Marxism, postmodernism, feminism, the new historicism...” and here we can add performance studies) which she described as “the 1980s theoretical inflation” (1996:142). In itself, proliferation of theoretical discourses was often seen as one of the principal characteristics of postmodernism. Most of the high hitters of postmodern theory were translated and published in Yugoslavia in a fairly timely manner. However, because of this country’s “peculiarities,” a relatively minor text eclipsed more celebrated (and deserving) writings on this subject. The case
in point is Charles Newman’s long essay “The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation,” originally published in the journal *Salmagundi*, where it created some controversy.\(^5\) Sections of Newman’s essay were translated and published in *Delo*, one of the leading literary journals in Yugoslavia; and furthermore, the journal adopted this title for a series of four thematic volumes, each some five hundred pages long, dedicated to postmodernism. In “The Post-modern Aura,” Newman claimed that “the Post-Modern era represents only the last phase in a century of inflation,” and that it can be regarded “in terms of climax inflation—not only of wealth, but of people, ideas, methods, and expectations—the increasing power and pervasiveness of the communications industry, the reckless growth of the academy, the incessant changing of hands and intrinsic devaluation of all received ideas” (Newman 1984:6). In this essay dedicated primarily to American post–World War II literature, Newman uses inflation as a frame to bring together the “cultural” and “political” strands of postmodern theory. Whereas the former was concerned with a general shift in post-1968 art characterized by the alleged demise of the avant-garde and its withdrawal from direct political action, the latter was occupied with the crisis of capitalism in the 1970s and the epistemological, economic, and political changes that came with it.

Most theorists who wrote about postmodernism recognized that these two areas fed into each other: literary, cultural, and art-historical interpretations saw the “postmodern turn” in terms of openness, plurality, and the abandonment of imperatives imposed on art by other societal institutions; at the same time, a broader cultural and political critique emphasized that this openness and plurality came from the neoconservative triumph and that it represented a reversal of the modernist egalitarian ideal that was finally exhausted in the counterculture of the 1960s. In his landmark work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard explains the crisis of revolutionary politics—which historiography identified as one of the main properties of modernism almost by fiat—in terms of a change in the very concept of power: “No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of the sender, addressee, or referent” ([1979] 1984:15). In his no less influential *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* Fredric Jameson recognized in the “universal surrender” to “market ideology” “a virtual delirium of the consumption of the very idea of the consumption: in the postmodern, indeed, it is the very idea of the market that is consumed with the most prodigious gratification” (1991:269). There is a certain homology between the conservative turn in postindus-
trial societies and in still-industrializing Yugoslavia that took place in the 
1970s. As I suggested earlier, in Yugoslavia this turn was more complex 
because it required a balancing act between pressures coming from deregul-
ated international money markets and the old guard’s imperative to main-
tain political monopoly at home.

If associated labor was a political economy, it was a fatally schizo-
phrenic one: following the international markets, the economy was trying 
to find its unique path to deregulation, while the politics sought its legiti-
macy in revolutionary action, that hallmark of modernism. With great pre-
cision and stealth, the symptom of this untenable situation broke out as 
soon as 1976, the same year in which the Law of Associated Labor was in-
augurated (and only two years after the new constitution), in the polemic 
that followed the publication of Danilo Kiš’s A Tomb for Boris Davidović 
(Grobnica za Borisa Davidovića). Initially acclaimed by critics and literary 
scholars, the book incited several prominent writers and critics to accuse 
the author of plagiarism. A heated polemic that followed shook the very 
foundations of socialist aestheticism in Yugoslav literature.\textsuperscript{56} Kiš and his 
defenders made a case for the use of citation and documentary materials as 
literary devices, both of which came to be recognized as staple strategies of 
postmodernist literature. The deeper political significance of the “Kiš af-
fair,” as it came to be known, was that it wrested creativity away from the 
notion of authenticity, thus divorcing what the Party ideologues saw as the 
foundational principles of socialist self-management.\textsuperscript{57} Coming from a 
completely different background and having no formal connection to this 
literary affair, in his work of the late 1970s and early 1980s Goran Đorđevich 
engaged in a comprehensive and unsparing extrication of the modernist 
tangle of authenticity and creativity. His actions such as the (failed) inter-
national artists’ strike and his contribution to De Appel’s gallery project 
Works and Words, held in Amsterdam in the fall of 1979, were, in his words, 

tries “to find the most distant position in relation to everything that 
was considered the most radical and the most avant-garde in art” and to 
“depart as far as possible from ‘New Art’ while still remaining on the ter-

rain of art” (Đorđević 2003:164). But what did it mean, in the Yugoslavia of 
the late 1970s and early 1980s, to assume a position more radical than rad-
cal art, and more subversive than “new artistic practice?”

At first, it may seem surprising that this radicalization of artistic prac-
tice led Đorđević back to conventional media of drawing and easel paint-
ing, albeit in a highly unconventional way. Beginning in 1979, he made a 
series of copies in pencil on paper of some of the landmark works of con-
ceptual and postminimalist art from internationally recognized artists such
as Joseph Kosuth, Daniel Buren, and Carl Andre. The following year, he organized his first exhibition of copies, held in the SKC and entitled *Against Art (Protiv umetnosti)*, which included the above-mentioned drawings and his own doodles and sketches of his own amateurish painting *The Harbingers of the Apocalypse (Vesnici apokaliipse)*, which he had made in 1969 while still a freshmen in electrical engineering at the University of Priština. After the exhibit, which lasted only a week, he started making copies of *The Harbingers of the Apocalypse*, a painting he was ashamed of and deemed worthless. He also invited other Yugoslav and international artists such as Mel Ramsden, Raša Todosijević, Zoran Popović, Braco Dimitrijević, and Lawrence Weiner to make their own copies of this painting. The only rule was that all contributors to the exhibit had to make their copies as exactly as possible, and in traditional painterly media. He started exhibiting copies of this painting in his New Belgrade apartment. *Against Art* and *The Harbingers of the Apocalypse* were the first in a series of Đorđević’s actions in the 1980s, involving different objects and different media, but always focusing on the act of copying. In 1983, he staged a public session in which he copied a Mondrian in Belgrade’s National Museum; the following year he published in the academic journal *Theoria* four copies of *The Harbingers* under the title “Philosophical Tractatus on Nonsense” (“Filozofski traktat o be-smislu”); and in 1985 he staged *The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10*, again in his apartment. Đorđević’s copy-works were more or less public experiments in the cultural and semantic position of the copy and were focused on undermining notions of both creativity and authenticity. Even more radically, whereas the “new artistic practice” of the 1970s tried to destabilize traditional art by opting for impermanent media, most importantly performance—thereby potentially turning the artist him- or herself into a commodifiable art medium—Đorđević’s acts of copying employed traditional media (painting, drawing) to undermine the author as the solid center of all traditional arts, as well as the institutions and industries that are associated with them. Đorđević’s razor-sharp focus on the copy pointed beyond art in the narrow sense to underline its relationship with such building blocks of a functioning economy as reproduction, proliferation, and exchange. Through his production and theorization of copies, Đorđević investigated the relationship between art and authenticity much more explicitly than Kiš and the debate his book engendered, or, for that matter, any other artist in Yugoslavia until that point. Even though he never directly addressed inflation, the relationship of Đorđević’s work to this endemic feature of the Yugoslav economy is striking.

As it turned out, *Oktobar ’75* was a watershed moment in the history of
the SKC and of conceptual art in Belgrade. This event was followed by a change in the curatorial staff of SKC Gallery and in artistic directorship of the SKC in general. This was a result of pressures from the state institutions that provided funding for the SKC, but also of internal rivalries. Art historian Branislav Dimitrijević recognized three distinct factions or “conceptual tendencies” within the SKC’s curatorial staff of the mid-1970s. He named the first tendency “emancipatory or manipulative, depending on the angle from which it is viewed” (Dimitrijević 2003:151). According to him, the main proponent of this faction was Dunja Blažević, the artistic director of the gallery. Dimitrijević holds that this “tendency” was hoping that the SKC could become the meeting place between the “youth culture” (“especially its left radical manifestations”) and the political establishment, “especially young and forward-looking socialist leaders who recognized that the new times should support new art” (151).60 The second “tendency” was epitomized in Biljana Tomić, an art historian who replaced Blažević at the helm of the SKC’s gallery. Dimitrijević writes that this faction wanted the SKC to facilitate an encounter between an “autonomous artistic process and possible recognition of that process within the framework of a newly constituted community.” Markedly less political than the first faction, the artistic practices the second one supported ranged “from internationally relevant non-institutional uplift of new art to ghettoization and white kitsch” (151).61 Finally, the third faction worked toward making the SKC a “living site within urban life, a part of a total urban culture that goes beyond the autonomy of art and engages with a broader pop-culture environment” (151). The proponent of this tendency was Slavko Timotijević, a longtime art director of Happy New Gallery, which worked within the SKC and was distinct from its main gallery. Dimitrijević writes that the change in the artistic leadership of SKC Gallery in 1976, in which Tomić replaced Blažević as the artistic director, marked the moment of the SKC’s rejection of a “radical left (even Maoist) critique of culture and art” and the beginning of “depoliticization of artistic practice in the SKC” (150).62 The change in the SKC was symptomatic of a larger realignment of alternative art in Belgrade and in Yugoslavia. While Đorđević moved away from “new art practice,” Dunja Blažević moved on to mass media in her work on television. She saw this as a natural continuation of the “democratization of art” attempted by the “new artistic practice” (2010:157). Starting in 1981, she collaborated with Television Belgrade (the only TV station in Serbia at that time) on the art programs Other Art (Druga umetnost) and TV Gallery (TV Galerija), which brought the latest artistic explorations to the largest spectatorship imaginable, the television audience. Although both Other Art and TV Gallery were broadcast in late-
night slots and had low ratings, they represented an “expansion” of video into the medium of television, thus constituting a rare instance of art television, nearly unimaginable in competitive and commercial TV. If in her curatorial work Blažević went from a relatively isolated and marginal art institution to a still marginal position in television, her new medium (TV) had a much wider reach than the old one (gallery). It was through programs such as Friday at 22, which hosted Blažević’s TV Gallery, that the new work, previously limited to the SKC, reached a wider audience.

In the meantime, student cultural centers across Yugoslavia (the SKC in Belgrade, Ljubljana’s ŠKUC, and the Student Center in Zagreb) became hubs for the alternative music scene, which set itself in direct opposition to the pop mainstream. It can be said that in the first decade of its existence, the SKC traversed the arc from being Belgrade’s version of the ICA to its CBGB: whereas in the 1970s the likes of Joseph Beuys, Gina Pane, and Simone Forti performed there, in the 1980s it saw performances by Angelic Upstarts, The Pixies, and the entire range of bands from the exploding postpunk scene in Yugoslavia. Student centers were not only concert venues, but active facilitators of collaboration between musicians, visual artists, theoreticians, and film directors. Their collaborations extended to the music videos, record covers, and alternative magazines that were shaping youth culture across Yugoslavia. As Lidija Merenik writes, the new wave in Yugoslavia was an “urban and generational art dialect” that adopted an “antagonized, hostile, unpopular, and alternative attitude of passive resistance” (1995:24). If average Yugoslav television viewers saw the iconography and language of bands as impenetrable if not outright hostile, they could easily recognize the attitude Merenik is talking about. If the first wave of British and New York punk made little impact on Yugoslav youth, then the second wave (also known as the new wave or postpunk) coincided with the onset of the crisis. It arrived with an already established repertory of behaviors, attitudes, tonalities, and images that could respond to the atmosphere of hopelessness that was becoming pervasive in a Yugoslavia gripped by debt crisis, government-imposed restrictions, and ever-accelerating inflation. As Dick Hebdige recognized already in his 1979 book Subculture: The Meaning of Style, “In punk, alienation assumed an almost tangible quality. It could almost be grasped. It gave itself up to the cameras in ‘blankness,’ the removal of expression (see any photograph of any punk group), the refusal to speak and be positioned” (1979:28). If up-beat pop tunes and watered-down hippie attitudes shared with the official ideology a promise of an ersatz disalienation, the establishment now had to recon with the youth culture that openly glorified alienation. Who could
imagine a postpunk band in a Youth Day performance? For the first time since the late 1960s, youth culture was beginning to coalesce into a cultural (if not political) force clearly opposed to socialist aestheticist officialdom. The most insidious were those projects that didn’t limit themselves to the music scene, but instead presented themselves as more complex multimedia initiatives. For example, in 1980–81, the Belgrade youth journal *Vidici* became a platform for the launching of Dečaci (The Boys), which started as a media project masterminded by the photographer Dragan Papić and ended as one of the most successful new wave groups, Idoli (The Idols). Their first record was issued in the spring of 1980 in an issue of *Vidici* dedicated, significantly, to antipsychiatry.

In sharp distinction from the previous two generations of rock musicians in Yugoslavia, who based their acts almost entirely on the impersonation of models coming from Western culture—from covers of foreign hits in the 1960s to idealization of prog-rock guitar virtuosos in the 1970s—the new wave bands of the early 1980s found an unexpected object of identification at home. Instead of trying to be “cutting edge” by emulating the style of contemporary British and American punk rockers, Dečaci/Idoli turned toward the past and took up the look of Yugoslav pop singers from the 1950s. In Slovenia, the postpunk group Laibach went even further back, into the 1940s and the “totalitarian styles” of Nazism and socialist realism. With their public image of a slightly strange but not threatening bunch of adolescents, Idoli quickly took off as one of most popular new wave bands in Yugoslavia; conversely, with its sound of industrial rock and image consisting of quasi-totalitarian iconography Laibach remained limited to the alternative concert circuit and rarely appeared in the mass media. At the same time, while in Belgrade the collaboration between new wave bands with alternative youth institutions was short-lived and limited in its reach, in Ljubljana this kind of synergy produced lasting cultural and political effects.

**THE USE-VALUE OF POSTMODERNISM**

By now, Laibach’s rise from Ljubljana’s industrial suburb of Trbovlje is almost the stuff of legend. No less significant than the emergence of the band in 1981 was its ability to establish connections with other like-minded artists and theoreticians from their generation. Their most significant collaborators have been the art group Irwin, which was founded in 1983 under the name Rrose Irwin Sélay, an obvious reference to Marcel Duchamp’s pseudonym. Soon thereafter the group’s members condensed the
title to R Irwin S, and in 1984 it was further shortened to Irwin. This coincided with the establishment of Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), an association of Slovene art groups that brought together Irwin, Laibach, and Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater. In Irwin’s key statement from that time, “Retro Principle” (1984), the group professes its commitment to “retro” aesthetics and artistic eclecticism, which turns l’art pour l’art (art for art) into l’art de l’art (art from art). Because of this, the group claimed, the “retro principle makes use of tradition in a direct and indirect way (quoted in original purity). Due to the current interest in it, even a complete identification (a quotation) acquires a historically specific productive character” (New Collectivism 1991:111). What this meant for the artistic practice not only of Irwin, but also of Laibach and of Neue Slowenische Kunst in general, was the ability to freely choose various images and “language models” from the past and to emphasize the ideological content of these images through their juxtaposition. While Irwin and Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater used “quotations” from high modernism and the avant-garde (Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and even Edward Ruscha), Laibach and New Collectivism (Novi kolektivizm), a design group consisting of members from all “branches” of the NSK, became known for their investigation of the dark side of twentieth-century modernism, primarily the visual art of the Nazi era in Germany and socialist realist art from Slovenia and beyond. One of their most provocative strategies from the mid- and late 1980s consisted in collapsing these two kinds of art into a paradigmatic image of “totalitarian art.” The most famous instances of this kind of juxtaposition were Laibach’s performances and New Collectivism’s design of the 1987 Youth Day poster.

“The stuff of legend” that comes from detailed scholarly and journalistic renderings of Laibach’s history removes the initial mystique that followed the group—and the entire NSK—throughout the 1980s. Consider the opening of an article about the NSK published in the high-circulation Croatian newsmagazine Start, one of the first in-depth reports about the group outside of Slovenia:

A 28-year old man, who a few days earlier introduced himself to me in Ljubljana as “Laibach’s collaborator,” met me late at night at the train station in Trbovlje. As I learned later, he was a legitimate group member, one of four from its current lineup. He was one of two “Laibachites” who grew up in Trbovlje and one of three members of the mysterious art movement called Neue Slowenische Kunst who live in that unpretty place.
I had already memorized the first of ten points of the Covenant, an internal statute of sorts that prescribes the rules of conduct and behavior for the members of Neue Sloweniche Kunst: “LAIBACH works as a team (collective spirit), according to the principle of industrial production and totalitarianism, which means that the individual does not speak; the organization does. Our work is industrial, our language political.”

They agreed to meet with me as a journalist under the condition that I am not going to reveal their names. (1986:51)

Like the first-generation British punks who incorporated Nazi symbols into their aesthetics of ugliness, Laibach was initially perceived as menacing. However, this sense of threat came just as much from the group’s principle of negation of its members’ individual identity as it did from the iconography they employed. If their appearance was merely offensive, the principle of anonymity was threatening. No alternative group or movement in Yugoslavia has ever even considered contesting the state’s monopoly on violence. Neither did the NSK; however, it was the first group to challenge the state’s monopoly on secrecy. The NSK’s elaborate internal bylaws that lacked individual signatories, and their principle of distancing from the public even in situations of live performance, successfully mimicked the performance of institutions in a corporate state. The real challenge that the NSK posed to Slovene and Yugoslav socialism was not on a symbolic, but on an organizational level. As it turned out, the responses that the republic and the federation offered to this parainstitutional appearance of the NSK were diametrically different. The NSK became a litmus test of tolerance for Yugoslav socialism, as federal and republican reactions to the group were consistent with their responses to the crisis.

Whereas in the mid-1980s the federal government became identified with repressive institutions (the army, secret police) and measures (restrictions), Slovenia became the beacon of liberalizing initiatives, most of them spearheaded by the Union of Socialist Youth of Slovenia (Zveza socialistične mladine Slovenije, or ZSMS). In the brief period spanning 1985–86, ZSMS launched a number of proposals for changes previously deemed unmentionable in Yugoslavia, such as a demand for abolishment of compulsory military service, special status for political prisoners, abolishment of the “crime of speech” (notorious regulation 133 of the criminal code), a ban of arms exports, abolishment of death penalty . . . and withering away of the Youth Relay and Youth Day spectacle. ZSMS saw the NSK’s activities as part of the legitimate progression of demands from freedom of expression.
to freedom of organization. Marina Gržinić, who was the director of Ljubljana’s Student Cultural Center (ŠKUC) during this decisive period in the 1980s, explained this situation of institutional regrouping as an attempt “to overcome the countercultural discourse, the mentality and the attitude toward institutions in general. We were striving for the formation of our institutions and communicative networks” (1992:43). The ZSMS and ŠKUC lifted the NSK from its status of quasi-institution to the position of an autonomous member of the emerging network of alternative institutions.

As the economic crisis intensified, Yugoslavia’s “permanent nucleus of identity” quickly eroded. By the mid-1980s, all that was left of the “performance state” was an empty shell of baroque socialism exemplified in the expensive ritual of the Youth Baton relay race (by then, parts of its itinerary were traversed in black Mercedes sedans), and lavish stadium spectacles. General dissatisfaction with Youth Day festivities, which increased after an especially kitschy stadium performance in 1983, first turned into an open protest in Slovenia. In 1986, a group of students from Ljubljana’s Art School dragged a huge wooden log to the city center and performed a public action of carving a gigantic Youth Baton, while activists collected signatures on a petition for the abolishment of Youth Day festivities. Shortly thereafter, on the occasion of the Youth Day, ZSMS awarded its annual prize to the NSK. The following year, it was Slovenia’s turn to host the start of the Youth Relay, and according to custom, the local ZSMS union had the honor of proposing design solutions for the poster and the baton. Contrary to most subsequent accounts of the “poster affair,” it was the design of the baton, not of the poster, that initially drew most criticisms from federal institutions in charge of organizing the Youth Day festival in 1987. Printed media across the country reported that the meeting of the Federal Committee for Youth Day Celebration held on February 25 lasted three hours, and most of that time was spent on terse debates about proposed festivities in Slovenia and the design of the baton.

In accordance with the Yugoslav market socialism’s “permanent nucleus of identity,” the emphasis in Youth Day celebrations has always been on movement and circulation. In sharp contrast with this traditional festival of mobility, New Collectivism (Novi kolektivizem, NK) and Slovene youth organizations proposed that, after departing from the mountain of Triglav, the Youth Baton “rest” for a week at Lake Bohinj. The design of the baton placed an even greater emphasis on stasis. On February 27, Belgrade daily Politika published a special report on the design of the baton, which cites Roman Uranjek’s explanation of its symbolism. Instead of the standard variation on the staff-like shape, NK proposed a cone-shaped struc-
ture that consisted of eight parts, symbolizing Yugoslavia’s six republics and two autonomous regions. The cone was supposed to be placed on top of a special casing that would house a videotape with recorded messages from Yugoslavia’s youth. Obviously playing on the excessive allegorization of numbers in Youth Day celebrations, NK proposed that the cone should be 37 centimeters high in commemoration of Tito’s ascendance to the helm of Communist Party of Yugoslavia in 1937. That is not all: according to NK’s design, the whole structure was supposed to be mounted on four pillars fastened to a marble base in the shape of Yugoslavia. The purpose of the VHS tape was to bring technologies of the 1980s to this public ritual and replace a scroll with a written messages that was traditionally placed inside cylindrical Youth Batons.

The committee squarely rejected the proposed design, objecting that it
was impossible for a single person to carry this sculptural “baton” while running, and that it would be extremely difficult for multiple runners to carry the structure simultaneously. Missing the NK’s point about stagnation, some of the committee members objected that the proposed structure resembled a stool more than a baton, and once descriptions and images of this design reached the media, there were speculations that the cone resembled a pharaoh’s pyramid more than Yugoslavia (Tijanić 1987:12). The shift of emphasis among the critics from the performative to the symbolic dimension of the NK’s proposal happened almost instantly once *Oslobodenje* published on the cover page of its weekend issue on February 27, 1987, the news about the obscene source for one of the proposed Youth Day posters.

To a certain degree, the “poster affair” obscured the prominence of performance in the NSK’s work in this pivotal period of its history, which ranged from Laibach’s concerts to Irwin’s exhibition openings, and which culminated in the theatrical production of Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater’s *Baptism under Triglav*. Theater director Dragan Živadinov saw the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater as a project limited in time to four years: as was the custom with NSK projects, the establishment of this theater was proclaimed in “The Founding Act,” which indicated October 13, 1983, as its starting date and announced its planned self-destruction in 1987 (1991:162). The first year of Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater’s existence was marked as an “underground” period. In one of its “above ground” actions, the group published “The First Sisters Letter,” which opens with a thinly veiled denunciation of the theatrical concepts of Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook, whose ideas shaped European theater of the 1970s: “Theater does not exist between the *Spectator* and *Actor*” and “Theater is not an empty space”; instead, “Theater is a *State*” (163). Continuing in the same vein, “The First Sisters Letter” elaborates on the relationship between theater and state: “The formal tendency of the *State* is stability and power, while in terms of content every state is basically disorganized. The Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater proclaims this relation as a fundamental, all-embracing and eternal Aesthetic issue. . . . The Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater is apolitical. The only truly Aesthetic vision of the *State* is the vision of the impossible State” (1991:163). The Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater’s first production, *Retrograde Event Hinkemann*, was performed in a private apartment in Ljubljana in January 1984. In May of the following year, they opened their second production, *Retrograde Event Marija Nablocka*. Both of these productions were performed in small spaces and for limited audiences: in *Hinkemann*, the members of the group met individual spectators in previously arranged
locations in the city and then escorted them to an apartment where the performance was taking place, and in Marija Nablocka the spectators were positioned beneath the stage floor with their heads protruding through small openings, so that the entire performance was happening above and around them.

In February 1986, the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater produced their third “Retrograde Event,” Baptism under Triglav (Krst pri Savici), a multimedia spectacle and the largest production of the NSK ever. Unlike the previous two productions, Baptism under Triglav was performed in the largest and flashiest indoor venue in Slovenia available at that time, the Great Hall of the Congress and Cultural Center Cankarjev Dom in Ljubljana. Directed by Živadinov, designed by Irwin, and with music by Laibach, this monumental production relied on ample support from the Republic of Slovenia, whose aspiration toward full statehood was debated with an ever-increasing openness. The choice of the subject closely matched the political situation of the day. Baptism under Triglav was loosely based on a long poem of the same title by the nineteenth-century Slovene Romantic poet France Prešeren. Reworked by one of the leading Slovene modernist writers, Dominik Smole, it focused on the imagined historical baptism of the Slovene tribes upon their arrival to the upper Balkans. As announced in “The Third Sisters Letter,” instead of being “based on a drama text,” this spectacle “expressed itself with the language of fine arts attractions,” which consisted of “sixty-two paintings” (1991:176). The stage images that served as both a backdrop and an active stage element in performance with seventy actors and dancers (and, at one point, ten German shepherds), were theatrical restagings of the painterly avant-garde’s iconic images, such as Vladimir Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International and elements of Kazimir Malevich’s suprematism (triangle, cross, circle), with Oskar Schlemmer’s Pole Dance, originally performed at the Bauhaus—all of this juxtaposed with dancers in Laibach-style uniforms and made-up symbols of Slovene national art, such as deer antlers.

By 1986 Slovene authorities recognized that they could build up the profile of their republic as a beacon of democratization in Yugoslavia by embracing and supporting alternative culture. As Slovene sociologist of alternative movements Gregor Tomc put it somewhat crudely, “If the relation of top LSY [League of Socialist Youth] officials to the punk subculture was more or less limited to declarations of intent, it was for the simple reason that punks were of no ‘use value’ to them. Laibach, however, became a love at the first sight for the official youths” (1994:126). The same recognition carried over to the League of Communists of Slovenia, which
resulted in an ambivalent mainstreaming of the NSK in the mid-1980s. The state invested heavily in *Baptism under Triglav*, and as a result, this “retrograde event” was by far the most expensive theater spectacle produced in Yugoslavia to date. The cost of this production was some 30 million dinars (over $75,000), an astronomical sum at a time when the country was deep in economic crisis and inflation (Hudelist 1986:48). Whereas some postmodern theorists explained the “return to painting” of the 1980s by transformation of the status of the image in relation to other media, in *Baptism under Triglav* the image was literally transformed through its transposition from easel to stage and from the pages of art history to live performance. This transformation of the image vitally depended on the infusion of capital by the state: the cost of a stage scene that “reproduced” a painting by Wassily Kandinsky was three million dinars, and of Ed Ruscha’s gas station painting some five million (Hudelist 1986:50).

While in Slovenia the postmodern art scene was clustered under the umbrella of the NSK, which enabled artists to position themselves in relation to art institutions and, ultimately, the state, in Serbia the situation was much more dispersed and unhinged. In the former, the ideological boundaries of the group were carefully negotiated among its members; in the latter, there was no such coordinated group positioning, so what was considered “postmodern art” ranged from the sophisticated and radical leftist interventions of Goran Đorđević, to the work of artists who advocated conservative political ideas, such as Dragoš Kalajić. Finally, if in Slovenia the mainstreaming of postmodernism was temporary and theatrical, in Serbia it had no time limitations and was primarily literary. The publication in 1984 of Milorad Pavić’s *Dictionary of the Khazars* (*Hazarski rečnik*) marked the enthroning of postmodernism as the leading literary style in Serbia. Like *Baptism under Triglav*, *Dictionary of the Khazars* revolves around the theme of conversion. Further, as much as Živadinov’s production is a theatrical spectacle, Pavić’s novel is a literary one. Quickly translated into a number of languages, the novel captivated international publishers and readers with its formal inventiveness and intricate textual and paratextual games. Unlike Živadinov in *Baptism under Triglav*, Pavić was not drawing on the legacy of the avant-garde painting, but on baroque literature. In line with the baroque strategy of ambiguity, the drama of conversion in his novel does not concern directly the Serbs (as it does the Slovenes in *Baptism under Triglav*), but the tribe of Khazars; and unlike in Prešeren’s Romantic work, this drama doesn’t just affirm a national identity, but warns against the deadly threat of its loss. As Andrew Wachtel correctly observed, by the early 1990s Pavić’s equivocations about the Khazars’ symbolism in his
book could no longer hide his increased identification with the Serbian national movement, in which he was “playing an important role in providing intellectual support for the Milošević regime through his activities in the Serbian Academy of Sciences” (1997:639). The last and the most grandiose project of the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater remained unperformed: it was supposed to be the 1987 Artistic Event Youth Day, an open-air festival on Lake Bohinj that, were it performed, would have involved the making of an artificial island that supports a cone much like the one from the NK’s baton. In a published statement, the group declared that the relationship between theater and state announced in the “First Letter” had now reached the level of “state creativity:”

The artistic event of youth day, which was dedicated to the celebration of the Yugoslav youth, is the last theatrical project of the scipion nasice sisters theater. With this project, the observation of the relation between the theater and the state and the theater as a state has achieved its climax. That is why the artistic event of youth day is also an act of self-destruction of the scipion nasice sisters theater as a state institution and state. (1991:180)

Faithful to their performance of bureaucracy, Novi Kolektivizem marked this statement as “Document B2, 1987.” It is followed by “Document D2, 1987,” which declares simply: “the artistic event of youth day was also abolished by the socialist republic of Yugoslavia” (181). This and similar proclamations led some to believe that the Youth Day festival “was not held again after 1987” (Monroe 2005:98). That is simply not true: the organizers scrambled to get new designs for the poster and baton in time for the Youth Day spectacle in May 1987, a tired blend of recycled choreographies and slogans spiced up by performances of some of the most popular Yugoslav pop singers. The last Youth Day spectacle took place the following year, on May 25, 1988. It was the first Youth Day performance without a Youth Baton and without the participation of army units and elementary school children. The aim of the organizers was to turn the Youth Day event into “primarily a theatrical, artistic experience,” reducing its political symbolism to date only (Ast 1988:23). The event, entitled Socialism according to Human Measure (Socijalizam po meri čoveka), was directed by Paolo Magelli, an Italian director who worked mostly in Yugoslavia, where he had built the profile of a cutting-edge theater maker. He put together a creative team of theater professionals who worked together with some one
thousand high-school youths from Zagreb, Sarajevo, Skopje, Pančevo, and Belgrade. A long disclaimer an actress and an actor read at the opening of Magelli’s “choreodrama” reflected a short-lived hope that the political economy of socialist aestheticism, including the subsidies for a wide range of professional and amateur theaters, would somehow outlive the state that created them in the first place and survive simply as an aestheticism:

We dedicate this performance to all heralds of good news; we dedicate it to the theater and to our spiritual keen: to Meyerhold, Kandinsky, Malevich, Chagall, Mayakovsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Stroheim, Toller, Horváth, and all great artists who believed in the new; we dedicate it to birth, life, love, home; we dedicate it to simple and eternal elements. We hope that in the future years this occasion will bring us Pina Bausch, Robert Wilson, Maurice Béjart, Šparemblek, Roland Petit, and other true artists, who will make something completely different while opening the same field of true aesthetic enjoyment. This is an open invitation to all of European intelligence. Let this become this big world’s big performance.

Next year, the Youth Day was no more. In the summer of 1989, the group that put together stadium spectacles in 1985 and 1986 (Žarko Ćigoja, Rado man Kanjevac, Jugoslav Ćosić, and Slobodan Vujović) was hired to produce the celebration of the six hundredth anniversary of the Kosovo Field battle, which Slobodan Milošević, already an undisputed ruler of Serbia, used as a platform to announce his ambitions, which went beyond the borders of his native republic (Leposavić 2005:178). Does one need a better proof that Živadinov’s claim about theater and state was not a gimmick, and that the only way to make sure that the state doesn’t absorb the theater was for the latter to self-destroy?

This brings into question Žižek’s “overidentification” thesis, which became the definitive theoretical reading of the NSK’s political performances of the 1980s. Repeated on many occasions and in many forms, this formulation from his article “Why Are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?” sums up the thesis: ‘Laibach ‘frustrates’ the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over identification with it—by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency” (Žižek [1993] 2003:49). Here Žižek strategically circumvents his own analysis of ideology from the same period, in which he argues that the “‘ideological’ is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence” and that “‘ide-
ological’ is not the ‘false consciousness’ of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by ‘false consciousness’” (1989:21). In other words, ideology owes its efficacy to its ability to conceal itself within an order of things that it presents as “natural,” historically inevitable, just, and even enjoyable. It “works” precisely because it constitutes a blind spot in the consciousness of its subjects. This “eternal” order becomes visible only at the moment when it starts disintegrating; ideology becomes perceptible, that is to say distant and alien, once its smooth mirror surface begins to crack under the weight of its own contradictions. By 1987 and the peak of the NSK, the ideological facade of Yugoslav socialism was badly scarred by years of political and economic crisis. The very fact that it could be presented as totalitarian was actually a sign of the emergence of a new ideological order that was as invisible as it was effective, and which could be glimpsed precisely in Laibach’s concerts. The structuring absence of this ideological matrix was not contained in silences hidden beneath the surface, but precisely in the most assertive and “visible”—that is to say audible—aspect of Laibach’s performances.

In his book on Laibach, Alexei Monroe offers a variation of Žižek’s overidentification thesis by asserting that the band “produced ideological tone pictures of a series of regimes, rendering audible the presence of the state in the sphere of music and vice versa, denying in advance the possibility of politically neutral music (of any genre)” (2005:203). In order to support the idea of the “audibility” of ideology, Monroe turns to Jacques Attali’s book Noise. Even more than that: he presents the relationship between Laibach and Attali not only as that of mere complementarity, but of programmatic identification: “Attali and Laibach share the same basic thesis: that music (as a reflection of political power) can function as a regime in itself. Laibach ‘sample’ Attali’s book Noise as they do so many other theorists and politicians” (203). Monroe doesn’t offer any examples of this direct quotation, so that at the very least this argument speaks of how he hears Laibach. What is “audible” in Laibach is a “new form of socialization” that Attali started developing in Noise: The Political Economy of Music and completed in the 1980s—the very time of the “sampling” that Monroe talks about—during the time he served as one of President François Mitterrand’s top advisors. In Noise, Attali takes “composition” as a broad metaphor for a new kind of social organization, “a network within which a different kind of music and different social relations can arise. A music produced by each individual for himself, for pleasure outside of meaning, usage and exchange” ([1977] 1985:137). If this sounds like yet another program of disalienation, it is: “by subverting objects,” the new composition “heralds a new form of the col-
lective imaginary, a reconciliation between work and play.” In this way “music becomes the superfluous, the unfinished, the relational” (141; emphasis added). Noise can be said to constitute an overture to the book Attali published the following year, The New French Economy (La nouvelle économie française, 1978). Here he argued that, dominated by consumers, capitalism in the information age generates new contradictions that can be addressed only through new organizational strategies. According to him, “communal life” is at the center of capitalism’s crisis, and as such holds the potential to respond to it (1978:169). The solution to the crisis, proposes Attali, lies in establishing a “relational socialist society” by granting demands for “networks” (169). The new model of “relational jobs” and relational society replaces the old model of “fixed jobs” and industrial society. Although they pronounce the Mitterrand years as the triumph of the “third spirit” of capitalism in France, Boltanski and Chiapello never take into consideration the ideas of one of his prominent advisors; and similarly, even though they spend a lot of time on “critiques” of capitalism in the 1970s, they don’t even mention one of their most unorthodox sources, such as French biologist Henri Atlan’s theory of noise.

In the aftermath of 1968, proponents of autogestion looked far beyond art for alternative models of organization. One such source was Atlan’s theory, which he outlined in his 1972 article “Noise as a Principle of Self-Organization.” Here, “noise” stands for the ability of natural organisms to incorporate “parasitic and random phenomena” (Atlan 2011:96). According to Atlan, self-organizing configurations produce greater variety and, over time, increase their own complexity. He argues that an attention to noise brings a “shift in the notion of information, from something transmitted in a channel of communication to something contained in an organizing system” (102). Obviously, these properties of self-organization have a special significance for social configurations. In Atlan’s words: “The quantity of information that is measured no longer signifies a lost quantity of information at all, but rather an augmentation of variety in the entirety of the system or, as one says, a diminution of redundancy” (102). In Noise, Attali puts forward an idea of noise formally similar to Atlan’s, but with a diametrically opposite ideological valence. Whereas for Atlan noise is a redundancy within a certain social or biological system, Attali speaks of noise in quite a literal sense as a property of modern music (be it Jimi Hendrix or Arnold Schoenberg) and of politics in general: “Any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form. . . . And since noise is the source of power, power is always listened to with fascination” (6). In both cases, the “noise” stands for that which
came to be identified as “live,” the key property of performance. In his book Attali succeeded in recasting the live from a phenomenon of plurality to a phenomenon of volume. In other words, where Atlant sees noise in terms of species, Attali sees it in terms of degree. This is not only a question of the definition of “noise” or “performance,” but of the ways in which late capitalism comes to terms with the live.

It is not surprising that Monroe places Attali’s theory of noise side by side (and within) Laibach’s “totalitarian” performances, or that Boltanski and Chiapello skirt both him and Atlant while talking about processes in which they were deeply implicated. Atlant-Attali is one particularly striking instance of two very different discourses coming in close proximity, which makes it possible for metadiscourses such as that of Boltanski and Chiapello to treat them almost interchangeably. This is relevant for the discussion of the ways in which modernist ideas are circulated, “sampled,” and retrofitted into unrecognizability. To track just one of these genealogies, Attali’s “relational socialism” stands out as an unacknowledged source of Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics.” What is usually seen as a single historical “line” of socially engaged art that goes from the avant-garde to conceptual art of the late twentieth century, to socially engaged art of the 2000s, in fact comprises two distinct and even mutually opposed strands of artistic and political practices. To take the Atlant-Attali intersection as a starting point and look backward from there, Atlant’s investigation of chance procedures points back to Dada experiments, while Attali’s emphasis on sound recalls bruitism and the Italian Futurists as the main proponents and users of this technique; and looking forward, Atlant’s notion of noise as chance points to the principle of self-organization and, ultimately, autogestion, while Attali ties “noise” to relationality, the principle of flexibility, and ultimately, neoliberalism.

If the crisis of 1968 was initiated by industrial capitalism’s excessive reliance on an ego-centered subject it presumed was completely adapted to hierarchical structures, what came out of this crisis was a recognition that social relationships need not be ordered top-down, but also laterally, diagonally, in all possible directions. A short period after 1968 witnessed the emergence of a number of psychoanalytic, economic, political, organizational, and artistic visions that attempted to look beyond the autonomous, discrete, and fortified subject, which was often criticized as an ideological illusion. Each in their own way, they understood that intersubjectivity is not established on a presumed sovereignty of the subject, but on complementarity that comes from its decenteredness, insufficiency, and incoherence. The disaster that capitalism inflicts on the subject is not in imposing a
structure that is alien to it, but in appropriating its foundational property of compensatory sociality. What Attali’s and other similar revisions accomplished was effectively to turn the idea of self-organization on its head: from self-management as a nonhierarchical principle of a society based on universal equality to the management of the self as a means of survival within postindustrial society in which individual flexibility comes together with an unquestionable rigidity of hierarchies.

THE MANAGEMENT OF THE SELF

As paradoxical as it may seem at the first sight, Irwin and the NSK were the last Yugoslav art movements. At least, that is how Irwin positioned itself in a diagram Retroavantgarde, which was included in Irwin’s 1997 exhibit in Vienna’s Kunsthalle.

In a gesture of mirroring Alfred H. Barr’s diagram on the cover of the catalog for the exhibit Cubism and Abstract Art held at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1936, Irwin places a twentieth-century timeline on the vertical axis. Whereas Barr starts his chronology of the emergence of abstract art at the top of the image with 1890 and ends at the bottom with 1935, Irwin starts at the bottom with 1900 and ends with the year 2000 at the top. In the diagram, Yugoslav Dadaist group Zenit occupies the point of origin. Next to Zenit, which was active in Zagreb and Belgrade between the world wars, is Mangelos, the pseudonym of Zagreb-based art historian and artist Dimitrije Bašičević, a member of the Gorgona group and one of the most remarkable representatives of proto-conceptual art in Yugoslavia. The central axis marked as “Roots” is topped with a triangular structure with Mladen Stilinović at its bottom corner, thus connecting the Zenitism-Mangelos line with the triangle. Two side limbs, indicated by dotted lines, point to the 1970s and the conceptual artist Braco Dimitrijević (on the right-hand side of the diagram) and Laibach Kunst, which references the first public statement that this group made in 1981. Finally, the two upper corners of the triangle, equidistant in relation to the axis Zenitism-Stilinović, are occupied by Irwin and “Malevich, Belgrade 1986.” The former are, of course, the authors of the diagram. But what about the latter?

This was the same Malevich who signed a letter published in the September 1986 issue of Art in America. In this communication to the journal, Malevich expressed his dismay over his recent popularity with American painters such as David Diao, whose painting of the only surviving photograph from The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10 (Petrograd, December 17,
1915–January 19, 1916), was featured in the March issue of the same journal. “Malevich” went on to inform *Art in America* readers that he remounted the same exhibition exactly seventy years later, from December 17, 1985 to January 19, 1986, in a private apartment in Belgrade. The letter concluded with a question: “I know that for most of you this letter will come as a great surprise, since it is generally believed that I died in 1935! I know . . . Suetin’s coffin . . . the great burial procession along the streets of Leningrad . . . the Black Square on the grave . . . Yes, there are many people thinking that I died. But did I?” (*Art in America* 1986:9). The letter is accompanied with a tiny photograph from the Belgrade “remount” of *The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10*, which literally inverses Diao’s procedure: while he painted a photograph of a painting, this was a photograph of paintings of paintings.

Finally, the signature—“Kazimir Malevich. Belgrade, Yugoslavia”—seemed to suggest that not only was the great modernist painter alive, but that he had moved from the former capital of Russia to the capital of Yugoslavia.

The Belgrade remount of *The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10* was arranged in a small room of a private apartment located on 106 Third Boulevard in New Belgrade. The apartment belonged to conceptual artist Goran Đorđević. Asked some seventeen years later if Malevich was his pseudonym, Đorđević

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Fig. 29. Irwin: *Retroavantgarde*. Mixed media, 120 × 200 cm, 1996. Courtesy Galerija Gregor Podnar Berlin.
vehemently replied that it wasn’t: “That was not my alternative name of any kind. Not a part of my biography. Importantly, I don’t think Malevich was ever anywhere as a person. It is more reminiscent of a character from a story, as Benjamin would put it” (Đorđević 2003:175). But which Benjamin? And where? While Đorđević is clear that the “Malevich” of the *Art in America* letter is not his nom de plume, he admits that it was “well known” that he was “involved in some way” in this exhibition as well as in other similar actions, such as a lecture “Mondrian ’63–’96” that a Walter Benjamin held in Ljubljana’s Cankarjev Dom gallery in June 1986. On this occasion, the lecturer recounted an incident in which, during a visit to a National Museum, he encountered two identical paintings by Piet Mondrian.

Suddenly, we feel that the earth beneath us has begun to shake. We quickly look at the wall. It, too, is shaking. We are struck by the thought: earthquake! . . . But what is happening to our painting? It is completely still—it is actually floating in its nonexistent space, as though what is happening around it does not concern it. . . . Still shaken by the previous dramatic events, we make ourselves a cup of coffee, sit on the floor, light a cigarette; and when we think about everything that has happened, our eyes accidentally, almost absent-mindedly, flow off to the wall where we have placed the painting. In an almost empty and half-lit room, on a wall, which once was white, two Mondrian’s [sic] are hung: an original and a copy. (in Gržinić 2000:82)

The situation described here pointedly resembles another public performance in which Đorđević was involved very directly. In 1983 he held a public painting session during which he copied the painting by Piet Mondrian that is exhibited in Belgrade’s National Museum (Narodni muzej). This session was documented in photographs that were published, not at all accidentally, alongside two major interviews in which Đorđević discussed his work. The photograph published in 1985 shows the situation depicted in the lecture: Mondrian’s *Composition 2* (1929) displayed on a museum wall next to Pablo Picasso’s canvas *Head of a Woman* (1909), and right in front of it an easel with a copy of *Composition 2*.

At first sight, the procedure of replicating an already existing painting resembles the technique of appropriation, which in the 1980s became one of the most representative characteristics of American postmodern painting. Đorđević was very well acquainted with the art scene of the 1980s, especially in New York, where he spent the years 1982 to 1984 on a Fulbright
stipend. During this time, he participated in several group shows, including the exhibit *Artists Call*, held in January 1984 at Judson Memorial Church. This show, organized in protest against U.S. involvement in El Salvador and Central and South America, featured several emerging appropriation artists, such as Walker Evans and Sherrie Levine. Đorđević participated in this exhibit with five copies of Malevich’s paintings made on cardboard.\(^80\) Asked about the difference between appropriation art and his work on copies, Đorđević suggested that “appropriation is, basically, an extension of pop art,” that is to say, appropriation artists such as Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince were engaging in “copying of other paintings primarily on the level of iconography.” He explained further: “They used the procedure of copying *implicitly*, so to speak, and did not see, or did not want to see, the true potential of the copy and its, essentially, subversive potential” (2003:169).\(^81\) A copy does not only reproduce, it brings into question the ontological and institutional status of that which it replicates:

The subject of the artist’s interest was the copy itself and its relation to the original. What we have before us, therefore, are two paintings, which are the same, but with two completely different ideas hidden
behind them. We see in the original what its idea is, but we could not say the same for the copy. This means that the copy contains the idea of its ideal, as well as its own idea: the idea of the copy. Hence it follows, paradoxically, although seemingly truly, that the copy can be multilayered in its meanings and more complex than its original. (in Gržinić 2000:82)

In 1984, Irwin organized the exhibit Back to the USA in Ljubljana’s ŠKUC, in which were displayed copies of paintings from a blockbuster art show of the same name that was touring Europe at that time—and which Yugoslav art institutions had no means of hosting. Alongside copies of paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Julian Schnabel, and other representatives of American art of the 1980s was a “considerably enlarged copy of the copy of Đorđević’s The Harbingers of the Apocalypse, done in the style of a graffiti painting by Jonathan Borofsky at the end of the 1970s” (Gržinić 2000:72). Gržinić explains that at that time Đorđević had already started working on his replicas of The Harbingers of the Apocalypse and had asked Borofsky and others to make a copy of his painting (the works that ended up in the exhibit in his apartment in 1980). Also, this was not the first time that a copy (of a copy) of The Harbingers was shown in Ljubljana: after Đorđević’s apartment, The Harbingers of the Apocalypse copy collection was shown in Berlin’s Museum für Sub-Kultur, Expanded Media gallery in Zagreb, and in Ljubljana’s ŠKUC. Upon his return from the United States, Đorđević worked on a series of paintings in which he reproduced depictions of abstract art in magazine cartoons, which he exhibited a show entitled Scenes of Modern Art (Prizori moderne umetnosti), mounted in 1985 in the SKC’s Happy Gallery and Ljubljana’s ŠKUC. This was, as he put it, “the last exhibit of the author Goran Đorđević,” and it was followed by projects such as The Last Futurist Exhibition and Benjamin’s lecture.

Đorđević’s exit from the art scene involved a rejection of conceptual art and of institutions that validated this kind of work as art, or, for that matter, any art since the advent of modernity. The latter is important for this discussion because it is tied up with the production and validation of art within a specific historical and political formation called the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. What could it mean for someone who was in some, even marginal, way engaged in art production in Yugoslavia in its final decade, to renounce art institutions, even the most experimental ones, such as the SKC? At the very basic level, Đorđević’s shift from the public space of the gallery to the private space of his apartment can be read as a critical comment on Yugoslav society. In the 1960s and 1970s, the main dif-
ference between the institutional position of alternative art in Yugoslavia and in other socialist countries was that in Yugoslavia it was produced and received in public art spaces, whereas elsewhere in Eastern Europe it was made and seen clandestinely, in private apartments and studios. By removing his art from the public into the private sphere, Đorđević seemed to assert that art as an institution, and Yugoslav ideology in general, had moved back in time, or even worse, that structurally it had never been different from totalitarian societies of the Soviet kind. But the artist’s intervention doesn’t stop at a mere comment on the political and social issues of the day. He goes further to renounce not only “the institution of art” as an abstract social entity, but all of its central categories, including the work of art and the artist him- or herself. Đorđević indicated his comprehensive refusal of the art already in the note printed on the card that accompanied his 1980 exhibit Against Art: “The work of art expresses, among other things, an attitude toward art. The works on display in this exhibit are not the works of art. They are only attitudes about art; or more precisely, attitudes against art. I think it is the last moment for art to decisively remove its manicured mask of freedom and humanism and reveal its true face: that of a faithful and obedient servant” (in Đorđević 2014:13). The decisive moment in this renunciation came four years later, in the interview he gave to art historian Slobodan Mijušković, in which the (former) artist established a direct causal relationship between the copy and the question of authorship: “If there are attributes characteristic for modern art, then they are the new, the original, the authentic, the imaginative. And copying is a direct opposite of all of that: it repeats, reproduces, is imitative, sterile, and unimaginative” (1985:9). Once initiated, the refusal doesn’t stop at a single artistic action or even a series of events. It is not a project. In the final analysis, by denying the properties of uniqueness, distinctiveness, and ingenuity it questions not only the artist, but the modernist idea of the subject.

By leaving behind art institutions and his authorial “self,” Đorđević joins the debate about the “death” of the author that started in the late 1960s and peaked in the mid-1980s (this timeline fits very precisely his own biography from the moment of “entering” art to stepping away from it).83 Consider, for example, Gilles Deleuze’s mini-tract “The Powers of the False” from Cinema 2: The Time-Image, published in 1985, in which he observed that “there is no unique forger, and, if the forger reveals something, it is the existence behind him of another forger. . . . The truthful man will form a part of the chain, at one end like an artist, at another, the nth power of the false” ([1985] 1989:134). This is because “the power of the false cannot be separated from an irreducible multiplicity. ‘I is another’ (‘Je est un autre’)
has replaced Ego=Ego” (133). In Rimbaud’s cry we find the seed of an alternative autre art, a truly subversive second line, which rejects the idea of the artist as a personification of the self-identity of the modernist subject. But, to speak of the destruction of the myth of the unitary figure of master author is one thing, to do it is another. The article “On Copy”—first published in 2013, but which Đorđević nonetheless frequently already references already in his 2003 interview—presents the copy’s destabilization of the work of art, including the very notion of authorship. The starting premise of this article is that the modernist definition of the author as “an exceptional and unique individual” precludes the authorial status of a copyist. “The maker of a copy could not be an author. Furthermore, in a copy we still see only the original and its author, while the maker of the copy completely disappears” (2013:22). This makes the copy—a supposedly worthless object—as a stand-in not only of the “original” and its author, but also of the author of the copy itself. By his or her participation in the art market, the artist at least partially (at most, completely) renounces his or her position as a discrete subject endowed with intentionality. An artwork stands in for an artist in the same way a copy replaces the original. What acts here is the object, not the object-maker. A copy is not contained either in the first iteration (the “original”) or in its repetition: it is a figural and material form of negation. Whereas “new art practices”—and performance more than any other among them—appear to resist media while actually never ceasing to be one, a copy thrives on media (of any kind, especially traditional) but maintains its own ambivalence as an art medium. The price is its exile at the distant margins of art, in the netherworld occupied by kitsch and forgeries: in nonart.

The direct political consequence of the refusal of authorship is a demystification of art through its deskilling. In his 2003 interview, Đorđević makes this point in a deadpan way: “When in 1983 I held a public session of copying Mondrian, I brought my easel, set it up in front of the painting, and started copying. From the point of view of the common reasons for copying—the acquisition of painterly technique—this was a complete idiocy. Even a museum guard approached me and asked why didn’t I choose some more complex painting to copy” (168). Translated into the language of Marxist theory, if the modernist work of art preserves a certain premodern idea of the touch of the producer and as such epitomizes the “living” or “concrete” labor as the source of political subjectivity, then copies belong to the realm of “dead” and “abstract” labor, deprived of authenticity and productivity. In other words, within capitalist conditions of production, nonart is tied up with nonwork. Following this logic, Đorđević’s
turn to the production of copies not only demystifies art as a form of production endemic for capitalism, but also points to its role in the political economy in which unskilled factory work is depreciated to the point of ethical condemnation. By giving up art in favor of copies, Đorđević recasts himself, a former artist, to the position of a nonartist or an unqualified mass worker of the kind Tronti spoke about. Đorđević’s attributes of the copy—repetitiveness, passivity, unimaginativeness—exactly match Tronti’s program for the organization of alienation in an act of refusal.

In the case under consideration here, this refusal of art and art institutions, including their prince, the artist, took place within a paradoxical ideological order of associated labor that was, as we have seen, defined by simultaneous (museum-like) enshrinement of the worker as the political subject, which came hand in hand with the (copy-like) economic depreciation of this same subject. Đorđević’s withdrawal from art was entirely different from Vasilije Popović’s exit from the theater in the 1950s and Ivo Gattin’s from painting in the 1960s. The case of the director of Waiting for Godot is clear: disappointed with the ideological hypocrisies of theater as an institution, he merely opted for a medium that gave him more autonomy while not questioning the overall meaning of art in Yugoslavia. Gattin was certainly more consistent in his refusal: instead of changing registers, he went silent upon exhaustion of the expressive possibilities of art-making techniques he explored to their very limit. The key difference between these early refusals and Đorđević’s gesture of stepping out from the art world in the 1980s is that the latter illuminated the meaning and the stakes involved in ideological (un-)suturing. If, politically, the principle of suturing can be said to designate a particular way in which the subject ties itself to the chain of ideological signifiers, then the last Youth Day spectacle in 1988 represents a glaring example of a false unsuturing: by asking for complete aesthetic autonomy and purity of the work of art—to the point, a mass performance—while maintaining its economic dependence on the state, Magelli and company did not break away from the ideological signifying chain, but tried to redefine the suture in seemingly apolitical terms. That makes the final Youth Day spectacle the failed masterpiece of socialist aestheticism. Đorđević understood very well that every act of artistic representation amounts to a certain staging of the subject. His turn to copies gives a special pertinence to Miller’s point about the meaning of repetition in the process of (ideological) suturing. We can put it this way: if “the definition of the subject comes down to the possibility of one signifier more,” then “repetition itself is produced by the vanishing of the subject,” or we can add, its *aphanisis* ([1966] 1978:33). Seen in the context of Yugoslavia’s wan-
ing days, Đorđević great project of the refusal of author status is deeply political. His work is not about disintegration of the narrative called the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. Instead, it is fundamentally informed by the insight into the conditional nature of institutions commonly deemed eternal, such as homeland, identity, artist, and artwork. In 1988, he adopted the pseudonym Adrian Kovacs, and under this name he joined Jedinstvo, an amateur art society. Until 1991, Kovacs participated in Jedinstvo’s collective exhibits with his black-and-white self-portraits, still lifes, and copies of Cézanne. His vanishing from the Belgrade art scene went almost unnoticed, drowned in tens of thousands lost to death, impoverishment, depression, and exile.