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»HALFWAY TRADITION«: TRANSITION, NATION, SEX, AND DEATH IN THE WORK OF MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ AND MLADEN MILJANOVIĆ

ABSTRACT

*This article examines how the artists Marina Abramović and Mladen Miljanović apprehend the terms Balkan and Europe as frameworks for understanding the post-communist transition in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Abramović's representations of pagan sex rituals in *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005) and tombstone engravings in Miljanović's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2013) capture what I describe as "halfway traditions": cultural practices that simultaneously problematize the normative teleology of the Balkans moving away from primitivism and toward the civilization of Europe, and act as parodies of the nationalist reinvention of tradition. By highlighting "halfway tradition" as the symbol of the post-communist transitional state and a disruptive by-product of transition, Abramović and Miljanović critique ethnonationalist politics of death and sex, and articulate an "in-between" temporality that disrupts the teleology of transition.*

KEYWORDS: *Abramović, Miljanović, art, tradition, transition, nationalism*

»Polovična tradicija«: Tranzicija, narod, spol in smrt v delu Marine Abramović in Mladena Miljanovića

IZVLEČEK

Članek raziskuje, kako umetnika Marina Abramović in Mladen Miljanović dojemata in uporabljata termina Balkan in Evropa kot okvira za razumevanje postkomunistične tranzicije v državah nekdanje Jugoslavije. Reprezentacije poganskih spolnih obredov Marine Abramović v delu *Balkanska erotična epika* (2005) in nagrobne gravure v Miljanovićevem *Vrtu zemeljskih radosti* (2013) zajemajo tisto, kar sem opisal kot »polovične tradicije«: kulturne prakse, ki problematizirajo normativno teleologijo Balkana. »Polovične tradicije« se od primitivizma premikajo proti civilizaciji Evrope in hkrati delujejo kot parodija nacionalistične ponovne iznajdbe tradicije. S poudarkom na »polovičnih tradicijah« kot

simbolu postkomunistične tranzicijske države in motečemu stranskemu produktu tranzicije Abramovičeva in Miljanović kritizirata etnonacionalistične politike smrti in spolnosti ter izražata neko »vmesno« časovnost, ki moti teleologijo tranzicije.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Abramović, Miljanović, umetnost, tradicija, tranzicija, nacionalizem

1 Introduction

One way of telling the story of post-communist transition in the former Yugoslavia would be to trace the relation between the terms used to describe its geo-political space since 1989 – Yugoslavia, the former Yugoslavia, southeastern Europe, the western Balkans – and the terms used to describe the art from the region in the same period: late communist, post-communist, post-Yugoslav, Balkan art, and east art. This story would position artistic practices from the former Yugoslavia in relation to predominant ideological models of late bureaucratic communism (1980s), nationalism (1990s), and global neoliberalism (after 2000; Ramet 2006), and highlight how artists attempted to establish an opposition to the ambiguous ideological mix of post-communism, nationalism, and pseudo-neoliberal-democracy in the 1990s, only to be incorporated into the global art market under the moniker of “Balkan art” as a non-conflictual way to play out the cultural differences between the local and the global (Dedić 2009; Erjavec 2014). A key moment in this narrative would be the series of “Balkan themed” exhibitions that opened in the early 2000s – including *In Search of Balkania* (2002), *Blood and Honey: The Future’s in the Balkans* (2003), and *In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Report* (2003) – which articulated transition as an encounter between “Europe” and the “Balkans”. In their totalizing adoption of the moniker *Balkan* (Ćirić 2005), these high-profile international exhibitions established a temporal relation between the region and Europe, and continue to narrate the terms of their encounter.¹

This article examines how the artists Marina Abramović and Mladen Miljanović engage the continuing presence of the terms *Balkan* and *Europe* as the predominant frameworks for understanding art in post-communist transition in the former Yugoslavia. Abramović’s representations of pagan sex rituals in *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005) and tombstone engravings in Miljanović’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2013) capture what I describe as “halfway traditions” (Serbo-Croatian: *polutanske tradicije*): cultural practices that simultaneously problematize the normative teleology of the Balkans moving away from primitivism and toward the civilization of Europe, and act as parodies of the nationalist reinvention of tradition. Abramović and Miljanović use sex and death as symbols of tradition to position their practice between local informants and “expert” global artist ethnographers, questioning how politics of identity are inscribed into the contemporary art system. Since 1989, the international art circuit has incorporated art as cultural difference – designated with the prefix “artist from” – within the neoliberal model of pluralism. In this context, the role of the artists is to represent a “true Balkan

1. In November 2016, Istanbul’s Pera Museum opened the exhibition *Cold Front From the Balkans*, which articulates the Balkan region as a natural phenomenon (wind) blowing into Europe.

experience” and facilitate exchange between the periphery and the centre. Halfway traditions problematize this exchange by making visible the ideological, physical, and symbolic production of cultural difference in a local context as well as the reinvention of traditions for global art audiences.

2 Between the EU and the Balkans as symbolic spaces

Halfway tradition is the short circuit in the teleology of transition: the return of an ambivalent historical difference (“our” tradition, but not our tradition). Halfway traditions create images of temporal clashes that uncover the ideology of transition and create the possibility for a different experience of history. Whereas the former constitutes a critique of the normalization of neoliberal and nationalist ideologies in transition, the latter concerns galvanizing the lived experience of history.

The key to my understanding of halfway tradition as a critical agent emerges from Walter Benjamin’s formulation of the relation between images and historical time in the “dialectical image”. Elsewhere I discussed the potential of the dialectical image to serve as a critical framework for understanding the present (Čvoro 2008), and here I want to emphasize the way it produces temporal clashes and uncovers difference within history.

Benjamin’s historical time operates through the visual logic of montage. His central temporal image – the dialectical image – emerges out of a suspension between two temporalities: one that sees history as the teleology of empty homogenous time, and another that is the revolutionary freezing of history. Normative accounts of transition have framed political, social, and cultural reality in teleological terms: as “moving away from” communism and “toward” democracy; as “immature political subjects “stuck in history”. In contrast, Benjamin’s approach to understanding history juxtaposes fragments of historical experience into a constellation that reveals the underlying tensions. This constellation was intended to define the present both as the result of historical tensions *and* as the time in which these tensions can be understood. For Benjamin, historical images could be read in relation to the present, and the revolutionary potential of this moment was in understanding and seeing the historical condition.

The picture of history that emerges in these montages is realized in Benjamin’s understanding of the revolutionary power of the image. Benjamin’s historical images were the leftovers of capitalism, which became lodged in the collective consciousness as “dream images”. Dream images turned history into a commodity used for marketing capitalism. However, dream images also had the ability to produce a different picture of history by suggesting that the future is made of traces of past struggles in the present.

Benjamin’s articulation of objects as dream images suggests the potential of difference in the fabric of history to dislocate the working of capitalism by working within its structure. Dream images operate within a dual relationship to capitalism, where objects as commodities are a constituent part of capitalism, yet set apart from the narrative of its progress. According to this logic, a commodity becomes a site of capitalism, where historical difference is allowed to enter into the universal history of capital, while remaining deeply imbricated in its structure. Just as historical objects turned into commodities can never

escape the logic of capitalism – because they are a constituent part of it – so capitalism cannot escape politics of historical difference. The difference in history emerges through repetition of temporalities through objects that carried their traces.

When Benjamin conceptualizes difference within history, he envisages the practice through which the components that make up historical narratives are reordered. The point of this practice is less to reveal the existence of difference within history *per se* than to put its traces together in ways that generate different actualizations of history.

For the purposes of this argument, I take terms such as *Balkan*, *Europe*, *tradition*, and *nation* not as reflective of reality, but as symbolic operators that express the temporality of transition. Since its announcement in 1999 as one of the explicit aims for the former Yugoslavia's post-communist and post-conflict European integration process (Cohen and Lampe 2011: 81), transition has created a sense of historical inevitability about the accession from centralized economies, conflict, and nationalism toward deregulated markets, stability, and trans-national democracy, and positioned the entire region through the prism of belated modernization.

In her analysis of political discourses concerning the accession of the former Yugoslav countries to the EU, Tanja Petrović shows how the narrative of EU integration in the Balkans is presented as the only way for former Yugoslav societies to unburden themselves from historical baggage, nationalism, and other twentieth-century anchors and join the future of the international community (Petrović 2012: 10). However, rather than providing an alternative, transition and EU integration have produced new forms of nationalism: from the reconfiguration of historical timelines to provide historical continuity between the present and “authentic” national history through reburials of dead bodies (Verdery 1999), through exhibiting cultural idiosyncrasies on the international art circuit, to “traditionalization” of societies (such as post-1990 Serbia), through giving traditional names to children and the rediscovery of traditional food, music, arts, and crafts (Malešević 2005: 224).

Halfway tradition is the unwanted consequence of the production of the national past. Sociologist Ildiko Erdei articulates the formation of the halfway position in her account of subjectivities in post-communism, arguing that the transition from communism to capitalism is underpinned by an assumption that it will also involve a change from communist subjects to capitalist subjects. However, once they were decoupled from the communist way of life – such as dependence on the state for social support, belief in a better tomorrow, a cynical distance toward the system, and opposition to western values – the subjects of post-communism never successfully transitioned into becoming neo-liberal subjects and remained caught in between, seemingly taking the “worst” parts from both systems: corruption from old communist networks and cynical opportunism and exploitation from neo-liberalism (Erdei 2011: 276).

This halfway position operating between the “worst” of old and new appears in the work of Abramović and Miljanović as a parody of the ethnonationalist cult of tradition.² Abramović provides an alternative narrative of “returning to tradition” by showing forms of sexuality repressed by the Christianization of the region, and Miljanović captures the

2. As I argued elsewhere, turbo-folk music also functions as a symbol of transitional degeneration away from the “ideal” of folklore and tradition (Čvoro 2014).

self-representation of desire in commemorative practices that disturb notions of propriety about the afterlife. In different ways, Abramović and Miljanović approach sex and death as parts of the reproductive cycle of the nation at the moment of emergence of national identity and tradition as a local and global brand. However, rather than articulating this brand within an ethnically based platform, they juxtapose the production of tradition against earlier historical events.³ Through historical montage, Abramović and Miljanović reassemble the context for understanding the emergence of tradition in post-communism not as a moment of national awakening, but as an empty space filled with ideological (national) content by different groups: nationalists, neoliberals, and curators. Halfway tradition exposes the ideological struggle over this content and the consequences for the understanding of representing collective agency and historical responsibility.

3 *Balkan Erotic Epic*

Even though she created works earlier in her career about Yugoslav history and ideology (e.g., *Rhythm 5* and *Tomas Lips*), Marina Abramović's "Balkan turn" (1997–2005) coincided with the post-1990 war years, when international attention turned to the region. Abramović produced two major works, *Balkan Baroque* (1997) for the Venice Biennale that year, and *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005) after an invitation to contribute to a collection of short films titled *Destituted*, based around the theme of pornography. Whereas *Balkan Baroque* used confrontation to deal with the war – involving a performance of the artist scrubbing animal bones – *Balkan Erotic Epic* turned to a more light-hearted approach by producing a multi-channel projection of short videos about the use of sex in Balkan pagan rituals. This move led some authors to argue that Abramović "marketized Balkan ambiguity" (Avgita 2012: 8) as a cultural product based in a stereotypical view of the Balkans as a powder keg of sex, violence, and eccentricities. Abramović seemingly fused this perception of the Balkans with her own personal experience, thus constructing a highly problematic apolitical and ahistorical picture of the region. It can be argued that Abramović's universalization of the Balkan experience monopolized stereotypes of the region at an opportune moment when the Balkans came to the foreground of international interest. However, in many ways, this claim against the most easily identifiable – and by far internationally most established – "Balkan artist" overlooks the complexities and nuances in her engagement with tradition. Although *Balkan Baroque* presented a more overt critical response to nationalism within the context of the Venice Biennale,⁴ I argue

3. Their use of Christian and Serbian iconography could be read as a critique of the rise of Serbian nationalism in different contexts: Abramović in Serbia and Miljanović in Republika Srpska.
4. It is important to note that this line of argumentation overlaps with nationalist objections to Abramović's representations of the Balkans. Abramović's high international profile and living outside the Balkans (she has not lived there since 1976) were used as justification by the Yugoslav Minister of Culture at the time for her removal as the artist representing Yugoslavia in the 1997 Venice Biennale. In reality, the minister disapproved of Abramović's provocative piece *Balkan Baroque*, and she was replaced by the traditionalist landscape painter Vojo Stanić. In the end, the curator of the Venice Biennale, Germano Celant, invited Abramović to exhibit at the Italian Pavilion. A detailed account of the circumstances is available in Pejić (2002).

that *Balkan Erotic Epic* was aimed at the invention and production of tradition in "Balkan art" at the moment when this kind of work came into the global spotlight. Abramović created stereotypical narratives about Balkan epic patriarchal traditionalism and repressed pagan sexuality to problematize the geopolitics of international art that determine the Balkans as exotic cultural difference.

Balkan Erotic Epic consists of a series of short videos featuring Abramović as "the Professor": a parody of an impartial narrator-observer of Balkan otherness, informing viewers about the role of sexuality in Balkan pagan rituals, such as the practice of the husband making the sign of the cross on his wife's chest with his phallus to ensure easier child delivery. The Professor introduces footage featuring "re-enactments" of pagan fertility rituals in which bodies were used to regulate weather: Abramović dressed in folk costume massaging her breasts; a video of a group of women massaging their breasts in the field to a soundtrack of a woman singing ancient songs; a man standing in the field masturbating in the rain; a group of men lying naked face down in a field, thrusting into the soil; and women dressed in traditional folk costumes running around a field in the rain lifting their skirts and exposing their vaginas to the sky to stop the rain. In the last scene, the group of women showing their genitals to the heavens was believed to have the ability to frighten higher powers and make the rain stop. This emphasis on the mythical power of sexuality to ensure romance, fertility, healing, and agricultural fecundity is reinforced in the work through a series of short animated drawings that illustrate rituals designed to control the world through sex: one features a woman inserting a small fish into her vagina, keeping it there overnight, and then grinding it into powder and mixing into her lover's coffee to ensure his everlasting devotion to her; and another a woman touching her vagina and then touching her child's face to ward off the evil eye.

In an immediate sense, *Balkan Erotic Epic* features much that can be described as sensationalist exoticization of "Balkan otherness" by portraying its inhabitants as sex-obsessed and superstitious primitives studied by a famous artist-ethnographer. However, Abramović self-consciously undermines her authority over the narrative by switching between the position of an impartial expert and local informant that is actively participating in the production of traditions she is documenting. Furthermore, the formal composition of the work and the chosen examples of custom position the production of tradition within a specific set of historical circumstances.

The high production values and aestheticization of the work self-consciously put the subject matter through the filter of Hollywood stylization, removing it from any semblance of a genuine ethnographic record, and preventing any attempt to interpret it through a realist or documentary convention. Abramović is upfront about her research for the project and not finding any illustrations of these rituals during her archival research, and taking artistic license in visualizing (i.e., staging) them. However, if there is any ethnographic accuracy in these representations, this is because they are intentionally created against searching for any supposed authenticity. This is reinforced by the use of costumes in the work. Whereas Abramović set out to recreate pagan (pre-Christian) rituals, the garments worn by the performers are nineteenth-century Serbian folk costumes. Abramović's interest in pagan rituals and their focus on genitals is at odds with contemporary sensibilities about

tradition: symbols of sex and sexuality were steadily eradicated with the Christianization of the Balkans from the ninth century onward. In this respect, Abramović's work is a representation of the Balkans that originates in tradition and folklore, but is not located in any specific time, location, or events (Madoff 2006: 21).

However, it is precisely this temporal and historical malleability of tradition in *Balkan Erotic Epic* that connects it to the re-invention of foundational national myths in post-communism. The use of sex – and in particular heterosexual male sex – as symbolic of tradition in the work references the heteronormative phallocentrism at the core of post-communist traditionalism. As Katherine Verdery argues, a central part of post-communist nationalist gender politics is an attempt to reshape the nation against the debilitating “mothering” of communism, and to restore men to their “natural” place of symbolic authority (Verdery 1996: 80).

This is evident in the central scene of *Balkan Erotic Epic* featuring men in Serbian folk costumes standing motionless on a stage covered with a red embroidered cloth with folk patterns, with their erect penises protruding out of their trousers. The soundtrack to this scene features Olivera Katarina, a Yugoslav film icon, singing a song titled “My People Sleep a Deep and Lifeless Sleep” in Russian. The title and lyrics of the song are derived from Montenegrin Petar Petrović Njegoš's epic verse *The Mountain Wreath* (1847). The use of Njegoš' work is crucial. On the one hand, it gives the work its epic element. The Njegoš epic is widely known and studied in schools throughout the region. On the other hand, it connects the work to political history and nationalism – the poem uses the conflict between the Serbs and the Ottoman Empire as cipher to reflect on religious and national identity. Abramović talks about this scene as a reflection of phallic masculinity and national pride: “I was overwhelmed by this image because you're touching national pride, you're touching this idea of muscular energy, touching the idea of sexual energy as a cause of war, as a cause of disasters, as a cause also of love” (Carlstrom and Abramović 2006: 66). However, she also adds: “The one thing I was very surprised at, that at least I was not expecting: the image was not erotic at all . . . usually when you have male genital organs, there's always something happening: either they're making love, or they are making strip-tease or some kind of action. Here just by making them static and absolutely not moving them, you completely go somewhere else in this image. It became somehow an image of new Balkan heroes” (Carlstrom and Abramović 2006: 67).

This suggestion by Abramović that she turns the men into phallic monuments and into “new heroes” is crucial in addressing what tradition is represented in this segment. The answer speaks to the gendered terms of the production of tradition in post-communism.

The scene functions as a symbolization of the phallocentrism of nationalism in the cult of tradition. In this sense, this scene can be interpreted as an act of usurping patriarchal laws. As much as Abramović's representations have a folk tradition as their starting point, they renounce submitting to that tradition. Her works are provocative and playful interpretations of tradition through sexual functionality articulated in temporal terms, yet located outside of history. As the scene progresses, the work becomes a comical test of maintaining the erection, of holding still: a form of temporal-phallic competition between the men. In

this sense, Abramović captures the phallogocentric bonding and heteronormative binaries that underpin the production of nation and tradition. The scene suggests a historical and temporal lineage reproduced through sexual excitement without recourse to women: the singing voice of Katarina operates more as a mournful spectral presence than object of desire. The continuity of the nation is ensured through male production of culture and heroic deeds (maintaining erections).

This scene captures how *Balkan Erotic Epic* articulates halfway tradition in two main ways: as a visualization of obscenities as a social glue, and as a montage of the monstrosity of post-communist tradition.

As a visualization of the obscenities, this scene – as indeed the entire work – is a reversal of the common-sense perception of tradition: archaic social customs and exchanges are politely performed in public, whereas the sexual (obscene) symbolic nexus that underpins them only emerges in private. *Balkan Erotic Epic* reverses this relationship by staging the sexual (obscene) structure of everyday interactions, and structuring the performance of tradition around it. However, more than simply reversing the symbolic structure of tradition, in manifesting the sexual core around which tradition is structured, it also reminds one of the important role of dirty jokes (i.e., obscene humour) as a social glue. As Slavoj Žižek notes, exchanges of obscene jokes in the former Yugoslavia established a “symbolic pact” between different ethnic groups (Žižek 2002: 203). Sharing embarrassing obscene idiosyncrasies establishes a sense of solidarity. In this sense, the obscene solidarity in the work is primarily directed at the other “primitives” in the Balkans at the expense of the third party: the global art audience, which is left with the spectacle of sex-crazed exotica. This gesture reveals the underlying power relations of a “Balkan artist” performing halfway tradition on a global stage: it is idiosyncratic and confronting for entirely different geo-political reasons

This question of halfway tradition functioning as a shared resistance to global geopolitics also relates to the way it captures the context for the production of tradition in post-communism. This context is the temporality of the post-communist transitional state, described by Miško Šuvaković as a hybrid “monster” (2012: 206), made up of clashing temporalities. In this sense *Balkan Erotic Epic* shows three versions of tradition: as a realization of the tribal-blood-relations into a nineteenth-century romanticist nation-state (the power of phallus returning), as a post-communist accumulation of cultural capital through privatization of the social sphere (privatization of communal sexual practices), and as a neo-liberal branding attempting to fit cultural difference into the contemporary networks of capital (institutionalization and circulation of cultural difference). These versions of tradition move at different speeds and produce different experiences of time: fantasies about social and class structures of nineteenth-century Europe national-bourgeoisie collectivism come up against aspirations of the twenty-first century diffused structures of global neo-liberal capital. Abramović does not seek to resolve the different temporalities, but rather to mobilize historical symbols in order to question the cult of a “purer” past returning. The work shows traces of difference in history to show forms of community formation beyond the nationalist nexus.

4 The Garden of Earthly Delights

In contrast to Abramović's performances, which are loosely connected to historical events and geographical spaces, Mladen Miljanović takes historical, cultural, and geographical specificity as his departure point, which is then abstracted into a universal symbol of the historical condition in the region. Miljanović's work *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2013; see Figure 1), created for the Bosnia and Herzegovina national pavilion in the 2013 Venice Biennale, carried a heavy symbolic burden because it was the first work in a decade to represent Bosnia and Herzegovina at the international event.⁵ This was compounded by the ever-present tension within Bosnia and Herzegovina between the Muslim-majority Federation with its capital Sarajevo and the Serb-dominated Republika Srpska with its capital Banja Luka. The fact that Miljanović is based in Banja Luka presented a potentially volatile scenario, one that he engaged directly through both the title and theme of the work. The "delight" in the title counterintuitively played against expectations of a work from a country heavily burdened with nationalist tensions. It raised the question of what it means to represent Bosnia and Herzegovina through the prism of delight, two decades after the end of a bloody war and in the face of ongoing economic hardship, political corruption, and ethnic tensions. Miljanović's answer was to capture a tradition that departed from and parodied all national frames and emerged from the underside of post-communist transition.

Figure 1: *The Garden of Delights*, engraved drawings on granite, metal construction, (photo by Drago Vejnović, 2013, image courtesy of the artist).



The work features three granite panels with engraved tombstone drawings found in parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The source material was drawn from Miljanović's work as professional tombstone engraver, and he employs the method used in commercial

5. The representation of the Bosnia and Herzegovina pavilion at the Venice Biennale alternates between the Federation and Republika Srpska. Because the Federation-sponsored organization for the 2015 pavilion did not appear, 2017 will mark the second Biennale in which Bosnia and Herzegovina will be represented by Republika Srpska.

tombstone manufacture of transferring an enlarged photograph onto the stone and engraving. With this approach, Miljanović operates as an artist-ethnographer that collects and assembles an idiosyncratic local cultural form and exhibits it to an international audience. According to Miljanović, his intention was to capture the personal pleasures desires and hopes of everyday people manifested through posthumous representation (Miljanović 2012: 106).

The work's title, composition, and background are taken from Hieronymus Bosch's famous Renaissance triptych and are presented through a strikingly idiosyncratic cultural form. Instead of depicting sinners from a divine all-seeing perspective, Miljanović populates his work with images of deceased people accompanied by precious objects (cars, music instruments, and hunting gear), objects that represent their profession (shepherd, policeman, chef, pilot, and housewife), or passion in life (dancing, singing, and horse riding). The figures are also accompanied by universal symbols of love, passion, and mourning, such as birds and flowers. The figures are arranged across the three panels of Bosch's otherworldly landscape. Miljanović keeps Bosch's triptych composition of the left panel representing the Garden of Eden, the right depicting Hell, and the middle (main) panel representing humanity. The left panel shows Bosch's idyllic Garden of Eden with a fountain in the centre; however, instead of Adam and Eve Miljanović inserts an elderly couple. The right panel reproduces Bosch's scene of Hell with ominous lights and haunting building outlines, but instead of people he inserts tanks, fighter jets, and homemade brandy stills. The central and the largest panel shows figures, buildings, and vehicles carefully arranged in a *mise-en-scène*.

How can these images be understood as symbols of tradition? In an important sense, they represent a continuation of aspects of tradition (the Balkan culture of commemorating the deceased) and an important departure from it. They show evidence of what Serbian cultural anthropologist Ivan Čolović identifies as forms of populist social communication that retain aspects of tradition (and canon) but are distinctly different from that tradition (1985: 9). Čolović studied epitaphs that started appearing on graveyards in parts of Serbia in the early 1980s and argued that they played an important role in dealing with death. The epigraphs provided a form of social communication that enabled a public display of emotions; portraying and confirming belonging to a social group, place, and time, providing a meta-commentary on life and death. Miljanović's work continues this approach to tombstone art in treating death not as a solemn event, but instead commemorated through what can be described as romantic and futile attempts at symbolic immortality and control of death (Curseu and Pop-Curseu 2011: 374).

In this sense, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* represents a counterpoint to the use of dead bodies in post-communist societies for revisions of history that Katherine Verdery describes as "dead-body politics" (1999: 41). Here the intention is not to use death as a symbol of nationalist politics or revision of history, but the production of micronarratives that speak to a sense of transnational and trans-historical collectivity. The figures in Miljanović's work are not marked by national identity, but by their manifest enjoyment of everyday pleasures in life. As a medium of history, his tombstone images recall Walter Benjamin's claim that everyday objects always carry traces of a utopian dream (Čvoro 2008). The utopia in

question, rather than being represented by an imagined story about national origin or traditional forms of living, is the utopia of the everyday social sphere.⁶ Miljanović's use of collage establishes a communal scene in which individual figures – each captured in the singularity of his or her death – look like a group of friends at a social event posing for a photograph.

However, it is precisely the connection of the work to the social sphere of Yugoslavia – everyday customs and traditions – that also connects the work to the emergence of nationalism. According to Miljanović, the work is about the appearance of kitsch in the 1980s social sphere of Yugoslavia as a sign of violence that followed shortly afterwards.⁷ Miljanović sees the emergence of these engravings as a perversion of tradition and symbolic of the broader transformation of tradition into kitsch for the purposes of nationalism. This is most clearly evident in the central positioning of the Šešlije Motel on the central panel. The large building sits in the background as the focal point and pseudo-temple out of which all these figures emerge. This is the only built structure in the work, and its garish mixing of high-modernist minimalism with Chinese temple ornamentation is striking.

The specific historical context signalled by Miljanović's central positioning of the motel in Šešlije is the anarchy of uncontrolled and illegal construction in the early 1990s, which Srđan Jovanović-Weiss describes as "turbo-architecture" (2006: 39). Even though Jovanović-Weiss primarily associates turbo-architecture with the lawlessness and corruption enabled and tolerated by the Slobodan Milošević regime in Serbia – close to one million houses, hotels, banks, gas stations, and shopping centres were erected in Serbia during Milošević's rule between 1989 and 2000, most of which were built without permits – Miljanović's work suggests there is wider and earlier evidence of this phenomenon across the region. In this sense, the engravings are part of the same para-legal cultural milieu from the 1980s as turbo-folk and turbo-architecture: the hybridity and pastiche of symbolism and design in buildings like the Šešlije Motel are not the product of architecture as a discipline, or of architectural theory, but as an amalgam of systemic lawlessness and lack of regulation. Here, I highlight two aspects of turbo-architecture that relate to the production of halfway tradition.

First, both sides of the political spectrum in Serbia outright rejected the intersection of accidental postmodernism and criminality in turbo-architecture. The conservative nationalists perceived it as sign of degeneration of taste and tradition, whereas the cultural and intellectual elites identified turbo-architecture as symbol of everything that was wrong with Serbia under Milošević. Nonetheless, following Milošević's arrest and transfer to the ICTY in The Hague, turbo-architecture was paradoxically promoted as a new national style at the Venice Architecture Biennial in 2002, as proof of endurance against the 1999 Nato bombing of Serbia. In this sense, Miljanović's work marks a second appearance of this aesthetic in an international context – as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina's first

6. In this respect it is instructive to juxtapose the gathering of the deceased in *Garden* with the final scene from Miroslav Lekić's film *Nož* (The Knife, 1999). Based on the novel by Serb nationalist writer and politician Vuk Drašković, the film uses a scene of the deceased standing still in a landscape to symbolize the ongoing presence of nationalist tensions.

7. Interview with the artist, July 11th, 2016.

appearance in Venice in a decade – and in many ways its establishment as a regional aesthetic. The halfway tradition of Miljanović's transitional aesthetic in *Garden* functions as both diagnostic and symbolic of social reality.

Second, thinking about halfway tradition in *Garden* also helps position the tombstone illustrations as examples of what Boris Groys calls a post-communist paradise of symbols. Writing about the predicament of art that came in the wake of the historical collapse of communism, Groys argued that post-communist art: "appropriates from the enormous store of images, symbols, and texts that no longer belong to anyone, and that no longer circulate but merely lie quietly on the garbage heap of history as a shared legacy from the days of Communism. Post-Communist art has passed through its own end of history: not the free-market and capitalist end of history but the Socialist and Stalinist end of history" (2008: 168).

The conception of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* as a post-communism positioned between two ideological systems and populated by images that belong to both (and neither) is reinforced by the triptych structure of the work. In Miljanović's *Garden*, post-communist transition is the permanent condition between heaven and hell: the stability of communism corresponds to the idyllic left panel (with two pensioners representing that generation), whereas the perpetual violence of global capital is symbolized by tanks and alcohol production. The middle panel seems permanently captured between them, frozen in a time of transition. Yet it is precisely in this middle space that discarded historical symbols have the ability to produce a different picture of history. Groys's diagnosis of the historical condition of images recalls Walter Benjamin's conception of historical images as the leftovers of capitalism, which became lodged in the collective consciousness as "dream images" (Čvoro 2008). Dream images turned history into a commodity used for marketing capitalism. Yet, dream images also had the ability to produce a different picture of history by suggesting that the future is made of traces of past struggles in the present. Dream images operate within a dual relationship to capitalism, where objects as commodities are a constituent part of capitalism, yet set apart from the narrative of its progress. According to this logic, the commodity becomes a site of capitalism where historical difference is allowed to enter into the universal history of capital, while remaining deeply imbricated in its structure. Just as historical objects turned into commodities can never escape the logic of capitalism – because they are a constituent part of it – so capitalism cannot escape the politics of historical difference. The difference in history will emerge through repetition of temporalities through objects that carried their traces.

According to Miljanović, his reference to Bosch establishes a dialogue between artists across five hundred years of history. The linking of two historical realities at one level establishes a sense of continuity. Bosch's sinners are transformed into ordinary people with their desires.⁸ However, at another level, connecting two periods separated by five hundred years suggests a particular social structure of the past and the position of tradition within this structure. *Garden* positions the tombstones as an archaic cultural form

8. This is also evident in the exhibit that accompanied the work: a series of text messages from members of the public stating what they would like to see in the work.

symbolizing the historically frozen Balkans. Miljanović treats the cultural specificity of his work not just as a way of making explicit the complex relationship between art history and constructions of identity, but also as a form of cultural remembering. *Garden* suggests repetition of history through ritual (commemorating death), but it also symbolizes a sense of history through tombstone engravings: deceased people and their commodities act as mediums for articulating a culturally specific feeling of time. In this sense, *Garden* operates as a parody not only of the role of the international art circuit in the production of the mythologized Balkan identities and conflicts, but also of nationalist populism reinforced through the invention of tradition (through the exploitation of invented tradition). The quirky and humorous mismatch of the tradition illustrates how the international positioning of the artist dictated by the politics of national identity is already inscribed into the contemporary art system. Miljanović intentionally selects a highly idiosyncratic and archaic form of communicating with the dead to parody the vocabulary of national identity performed through the dead body. In this sense, the humorous performance of tradition problematizes national association in both local and international contexts: it looks equally curious to both audiences for different reasons. The clash between the intentionally exaggerated cultural distinctions underlying *Garden* creates a rupture in the process of identifying the work in line with any one specific national identity. These cultural distinctions offer an alternative form of knowledge about commodification of the individual in post-communist transition – one that is based on strategic updating of tradition.

5 Conclusion

In an important sense, transition is an attempt to address the promise of the future while attempting to deal with the past. The works of Abramović and Miljanović may be regarded as engendering a language of “in-between” time, by making visible fragments of the past that problematize this act of leaving the past behind. By making visible the temporality (and historicity) of traditions, they capture some of the political reality that surrounds them and the ways in which this political reality manifests itself in social relations. In establishing a dialogue between historical realities separated by centuries, Abramović and Miljanović show repetition in the production of tradition: parallels between erasure of pagan sexuality by Christianity and the erasure of communist sexuality by nationalists, and Renaissance and post-communist views of the afterlife. They capture the role of tradition in a period of political change, the role of experts in the production of tradition, and the post-communist collective body through practices of commemoration and sex: the body politic at a moment when the destruction of the social sphere and economy in post-communist countries has rendered the sexed body as the only remaining commodity.

Abramović’s pagan sex rituals and Miljanović’s tombstones recall Maria Todorova’s critique of how the Balkans are captured through a series of descriptions – semi-developed, semi-colonial, semi-civilized, semi-oriental – that describe the Balkans as an “in-between” incomplete self (Todorova 1997: 17). They take as their starting point this notion of in-betweenness and, in many ways, this position has been the fodder for the kinds of essentializing accounts that Todorova refers to. These accounts reduce the Balkans to a state of childlike

dependency and arrested development always in need of supervision and guidance. The teleology of transition in itself suggests a form of reductivism of a subject that is always striving toward something (teleology of transition) or destroying something precious (teleology of the nation). Miljanović and Abramović strategically repurpose ethnonationalist conservatism through their practices, showing how art can imagine alternative and critical counterpoints to normative historical teleologies.

The in-between position articulated by Miljanović and Abramović provides an important counterpoint to transition and nationalism as the two narratives that have dominated life in the region for over two decades. On the one hand, they parody and exaggerate the cult of tradition in ethnonationalist discourses after 1989. The rebirth of tradition is here either dislocated by providing alternative (and overlooked) traditions in Abramović's work or by insisting on halfway tradition as the only true depiction of the present state of the region. On the other hand, they equally parody the essentializing discourses around "Balkan art" that has appeared in the series of "Balkan-themed" exhibitions. These artists knowingly perform Balkan exotica and stage encounters between it and a global (and Eurocentric) notion of universalism. However, most importantly, they also parody the discourse about being caught permanently in-between. They exaggerate the Balkanist discourse in being "too Balkan" (performing the exotic identity) and "not Balkan enough" (engaging with discourses that exceed the local frame of reference) at the same time. In doing so, Miljanović and Abramović insist that halfway is a condition *not* of Balkan incompleteness, but rather a reflection of the world today.

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