

tranzicija triptychs

Tamara Vukov

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TIME AND TIME AGAIN

In 1992, at the height of Western euphoria over the fall of East European socialist states, Aijaz Ahmad wrote that Mikhail Gorbachev's belief in the Soviet Union's painless reintegration into common European space through the unilateral dissolving of existing socialist organization of production was "unmindful of the obvious fact that the [Soviet's] global position rested directly on that international social organization."¹ It quickly became apparent that socialism, with its economic, political, and social structures, was the system that kept late 20th century capitalism at bay. With socialism's passing, the Eastern European region was thrown into a new era of neoliberal capitalism, euphemistically termed 'transition.' In the West's parlance the word signalled a transition from socialism to capitalism, promising a brighter, more prosperous future within the framework of a new democratic, capitalist Eastern Europe. Of course, as is the case with most neoliberal euphemisms, the actual process of transition was the exact opposite, bringing brutal devastation, not just to economy but to all spheres of life. Subordinated, defeated, and 'brought to heel,' the former socialist countries were easy pickings for various local thugs-turned-oligarchs, international corporations, NGOs, political manipulators, spokespersons,

religious leaders, nationalists, and mainstays of the 'democratic international order': the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank. These processes were uneven across the region, with some countries paying a higher price of transition. Yugoslavia was one of the countries that paid a steep price, with war preceding economic and social devastation.

It is these processes that are so powerfully elaborated in Tamara Vukov's video installation *tranzicija triptychs* (2023). The visual and conceptual backbone of the installation is a circle, consisting of four sets of video triptychs, a floor projection, and a music score. In her visual palimpsest, Vukov weaves a complex temporal and spatial narrative about multiple, ongoing processes of economic, political and social extraction, redistribution, and destruction, told through the history of Jugoremedija Zrenjanin, a once successful pharmaceutical factory producing antibiotics, blood plasma replacements, pain medication and more. Jugoremedija's fate, however, is not unique; it is paradigmatic of the entire Yugoslav socialist economy, with tens of thousands of factories and millions of workers sacrificed to the gods of transition. The process of *tranzicija* to which Vukov introduces us is a spiralling out, or escalation, of capitalist destruction which has pushed the region back into the 19th century.

While the triptych is a ubiquitous visual form in art history, in *tranzicija* it functions slightly differently. Vukov chooses similar views of a chosen subject in each trio of images. For example, as the camera weaves in and out of Jugoremedija's empty corridors, factory floors, and offices in "Triptych 3: Empty Factory," we see three almost identical shots of blue vertical blinds which simultaneously reveal and obstruct the view of the outside. This repetition serves multiple purposes. In the simplest reading, it underscores the image's importance. However, the very thing that highlights its importance also disrupts our perception of linear time (something that traditional film and video usually reinforce as part of storytelling), as each image is the same yet different. This creates asynchronous events which evoke a sense of parallel time. Finally, the repetition also suggests a spiral, as the region reversed to a pre-socialist state of complete economic and social dependency. At the centre of this spiral is

Jugoremedija, a desublimated space which served a purpose in funneling capital from local to international hands, yet is now discarded as an empty shell. It is this spiralling of time in both the formal and conceptual sense that speaks most clearly to the idea of transition as a repeated traumatic event.

The process of filming and postproduction is another very important aspect of this installation and of the forthcoming feature film. Over the last eighteen years, Vukov has closely collaborated with Jugoremedija workers who fought for the factory, sacrificing their livelihoods in the process. The fact that it took many years to produce the project highlights the artist's political and ethical commitment. Vukov approaches it not as a purely formal question, but as a political one, herself holding to the principles of self-managed socialism employed by the workers in their struggle to save the factory.² The artist is not a removed observer but an active participant in unfolding of events. Vukov's involvement is born out of her collaborative methodology. She regularly screened various versions of the film to the workers. In turn, the workers had a hand in shaping the project, providing feedback, access, and including Vukov as one of the participants in their struggle. Due to the changing circumstances of the fight for the factory, the project changed over the years, resulting in a transformation of the narrative and its premises. In short, the project's form and content were subordinated to the needs of the community out of which it arose.

The length of the process is a testament to Vukov's political commitment to the film as a tool of political struggle, both of which are never easy, linear, or instantaneous. Currently, the workers have lost their fight as Jugoremedija was stolen from them through the state's criminal manipulation of the legal system and various financial 'instruments'. To international NGOs, academics, and media, the empty dilapidated factory and the fate of its workers are no longer considered newsworthy or attractive. By contrast, Vukov persists, relentlessly filming the aftermath of the destruction of the factory that is now reflected in foreclosures, debt collection, and fights against repossessions of people's homes. Her approach avoids the objectification and instrumentalization shown by many artists and academics who pay lip service to the

primacy of subjects of their work, presenting themselves as political activists, only to parachute into political hot zones to extract aesthetic and professional benefits and leave. *tranzicija* is antithetical to that. The project's shifting, provisional nature parallels the shifting nature of political struggle as a protracted, painful process of workers' fights for their lives. *tranzicija*'s unflinching insight and continued commitment to community and collaboration echoes the guerilla filmmaking of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino who addressed the devolving political and social situation in Argentina. Much like the two Argentinians, Vukov keeps form and content firmly intertwined, but is interdisciplinary and more poetic. Her project's formal qualities balance between recording harsh realities of 21st century capitalist destruction and the heroic stories of the people. It is precisely the people's stories brought to us by Vukov in this careful and complex installation that carry the promise of an unfinished, ongoing struggle for socialism. Instead of reading the work as depicting the failure of Yugoslavia's socialist project, we should read it as a promise, a spark of political life that carries with it a potential of future utopia.

—Bojana Videkanić

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1. Aijaz Ahmad, "Three Words Theory," *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, (London, New York: Verso Books, 2008), p. 311.
 2. Self-management was one of the main innovations of Yugoslav socialism. The entire system was based on social ownership of the means of production, but unlike in other socialist countries, the workers had a direct say in the functioning of companies via workers' councils.