Exploited by Images
Supplemental Text

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In Dušan Makavejev’s 1971 film, *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*, Milena, an empowered Marxist, demands: “Death to male fascism, freedom to female people.” The line is a play on the motto of the Yugoslav resistance during WWII and captures the film’s relationship between communist politics and sexuality. Makavejev, a dissident Yugoslav filmmaker, shows the potential of sexual liberation and female emancipation while juxtaposing it with traditional, patriarchal values that Yugoslavia was attempting to eliminate. Women in Yugoslavia enjoyed legislative protection and were seen as equal under the law. The Yugoslav woman had agency outside of the home and benefitted from job opportunities, free higher education, government childcare, and full reproductive rights.

This comes as no surprise as gender equity was foundational to socialism. Many early socialists saw women as naturally equal to men; according to Engels, it was the accumulation of property that took away female autonomy:

> The overthrow of the mother-right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children.

Engels saw the abolition of private property as a way towards the restoration of the “natural order.” Inspired by these ideas, the post-WWII state socialist nations made gender equity a part of their agenda. Thousands of Yugoslav women took up arms against

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the Nazis and after the war they took positions of leadership. Women such as Vida Tomšič, a Slovenian guerilla fighter who among her many posts, served as a minister for social policy and pushed reforms towards gender equity. Even during revolutionary times, before the end of Second World War, “In the name of the party, Vida Tomšič promised Yugoslav women maternity leave, kindergartens, protection from harmful labor, public services providing medical care for women and children, the legal equality of legitimate and illegitimate children, equality in education and in professional life, equal pay for equal work, passive and active voting rights and the right to abortion for social reasons”

Even as a loud feminist, Tomšič was not cast aside, but in fact participated as a member of international Yugoslav delegations. As a result of her work during WWII and imprisonment, Tomšič was canonized in Yugoslav history as a people’s hero.

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1992, the liberated female identity throughout the Balkans degraded in a few years and the hard work of women like Tomšič was forgotten. The entertainment industry became the loudspeaker for the new regime in Serbia, quickly replacing the aesthetics and values of communism with a return to traditional norms. The process of re-patriarchization, along with capitalist and neoliberal influences, created a new hyper-feminine identity for the Balkan woman devoid of any trace of the formerly emancipated Yugoslavs.

The emergence of turbo-folk, a new genre of popular music, in the early 1990s has influenced the development of cultural aesthetics as well as morals and values over the last

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three decades. Turbo-folk is characterized by combining sounds from Serbian folk music with pop, rock, and electronic music. It is important to note that prior to the Balkan conflicts, folk music was heard primarily in marginal and mostly rural spaces. However, with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, these sounds entered the mainstream. The aesthetics of turbo-folk glorify vulgarity, excess, materialism, toxic masculinity, crime, violence, and drugs. Despite being a local product, turbo-folk represented the brutal individualism of newly imported global capitalist values.

The arenas of politics and entertainment became symbiotic as politicians and entertainment industry leaders began working within the same ideological frame. Performers, who have created this genre, manage production studios and new television channels, also have political affiliations. The most notable example is that of Ceca Ražnatović, who is arguably the most famous singer in the Balkans, and also the wife of the late Arkan, a paramilitary leader, war criminal, and the “underworld boss of Slobodan Milošević’s murder squad.” In March 1999, the United Nations criminal tribunal for former Yugoslavia disclosed that they were seeking the arrest of the Serbian paramilitary leader, charging Arkan and his men for some of the worst massacres in the course of the Balkan conflict. Although Arkan was later charged with numerous war crimes in Croatia during the Balkan wars, Ceca’s music is as much a part of Zagreb’s soundscape as it is of Belgrade’s.

Thus, what can be learned from this transition in the Balkans? What do the dominant myths tell us about the position of women in this capitalist context and how does this manifest in visual culture? Why do the myths of Yugoslavia give us radically different images of femininity from the hyper-feminine and sexualized ones we see in the Balkans today? Why did capitalism also lead to re-patriarchization and neo-traditionalism? Lastly,
how do these changes in the fictive realm of myths affect the material realities of women and their place in the public sphere? In *Exploited by Images* I explore such questions and contextualize this complicated history through a video installation. Once realized, the installation will be an experience that will guide the viewer into the lives of female singers in Serbia, provide subtle yet necessary historical context, and provoke questions about the cost of an individual’s progress on marginalized groups.4

*Between Two Myths*

Analyzing our societies based on the myths that formed them and hold them together leads us to recognize the impact of media. Ideology, myths, stories, religions, all represent imagined realities we create in order to organize our societies into hierarchies that will provide us food, shelter, and safety. Each society has an origin myth; in the past these myths have defined entire civilizations. The myth of the ancient Roman Empire was the only one that mattered to the Romans, likewise the origin myth of the Aztecs was the one most important to them and was in no way influenced by the Roman myth. In Yugoslavia, the triumph over fascism is what made one’s chest full of pride. However, today we see one prevailing myth that is constantly modified and localized, but whose essence persists.

The myth of capitalism has touched every single person on this planet. Yet, this was not the case only a few decades ago when a part of the world respected a different set of values. Although the projects of state socialism in Eastern and Southern Europe are generally regarded today as failures, it is still important to study the myths and images they

4 The project was interrupted due to the COVID-19 crisis and was scheduled to be installed by the end of April 2020. The installation will take place, however, at a later date which is not yet determined.
produced. More importantly, we should look to the images that were then rapidly created with the fall of the Iron Curtain and analyze the material realities of those whose images were exploited.

According to the theory of sexual economics, after the introduction of free markets and destruction of the social welfare state in the USSR, women’s sexualities once again became commodities. Ghodsee writes:

The commodification of women’s sexuality in Russia could be observed in the dramatic increase in sex work, pornography, strategic marriages for money, and what [Temkina and Zdravomyslova] call “sponsorship,” whereby wealthy men sponsor their mistresses.

Shortly after the collapse of state socialism, Slavenka Drakulić, a Croatian journalist wrote:

We live surrounded by newly opened porno shops, porno magazines, peep shows, stripteases, unemployment, and galloping poverty. In the press they call Budapest ‘the city of love, the Bangkok of Eastern Europe.”

In Czechia, after the Velvet Revolution, the production of pornographic content soared. Today, Czech porn is known as some of the most explicit and caters to a specific following. Alongside porn, the former Communist countries also became famous for their beautiful mail order brides and “sponsored girls.” The class of sponsored girls emerged in ‘90s in Russia, with girls in their late teens and early twenties, frequenting certain clubs in Moscow hoping to catch a sponsor. Classes were created to teach hopeful girls how to act

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid, 367.
8 Ibid, 376.
and look to catch a sponsor. This was one of the many post-Soviet imports to the Balkans in
the ‘90s.

Sponsored girls were not a product of a trend, but that of necessity. By the end of the
1990s, generations of women had come of age during three wars and numerous economic
crises. Their mothers and grandmothers had benefited from state socialism of Yugoslavia
and had grown accustomed to a safety-net. However, as unemployment soared and women
were pushed back into the homes, younger women could only depend on their bodies. In
Belgrade, there is a linden tree lined street called Strahinjića Bana, where, aside from
residential buildings, cafes and black Mercedes cars parked on the street are ubiquitous.
The cafes are filled with women with long, perfectly straight chestnut colored hairdos, and
controlled movements whose large bosoms tower over the low coffee tables. They might
seem like young women anywhere in the world, perhaps more attractive and better
dressed, drinking coffee with their girlfriends on a relaxed Spring day. However, these
women are waiting to be seen and noticed, and most importantly, sponsored. Their lives are
on hold until a wealthy man, literally, picks them up.

Wealthy men in post-Communist countries are rarely the businessmen they present
themselves as. Their wealth may come from relatively honest pursuits, such as the illegal
privatizations schemes that plagued the Eastern Bloc and the Balkans, drug trafficking or
politics. In the Balkans, all of the above can coexist. Popular singers became the blueprint
for sponsored girls during the 1990s and continued into the new millennium. Like the porn
production in Czechia, the distribution of turbo-folk, a new genre of music whose
performers often resembled porn stars, soared. These performers were in some ways the
original sponsored girls, owing their fame and success to wealthy and well-connected
boyfriends or sponsors with shady backgrounds from lucrative wartime schemes. The singers and their sponsors created the nouveau riche turbo-folk class.

The ‘90s in former Yugoslavia were defined by the music of turbo-folk, dubbed by some as the soundtrack of the Balkan wars. Turbo-folk emerged as a political and cultural tool, encouraged by the Milošević regime. At the time, Serbian society was divided by those who listened to turbo-folk and supported Milošević and those who did not. Ideology could not be separated from the melismatic voices singing the songs. However, over the years, after Milošević’s demise and the establishment of an independent, private entertainment industry, turbo-folk seemed to lose its ties with politics. Not only did turbo-folk become normalized, but it became the music of choice across former Yugoslavia, acting as a reconciliatory tool among the formerly feuding peoples. It developed a new notion of “Balkaness” and gave identities to new generations born after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Although turbo-folk served as a source of pride and unity for people who had lost everything, it also amplified the regression of female agency. The dissolution of communist institutions and numerous civil wars pushed women out of the public sphere. The lack of access to resources that women like Vida Tomšič had secured created a new world for the Balkan woman; one where she is judged by patriarchal standards and where she has little agency over her life and body. Almost overnight, the empowered women of Yugoslavia turned into voiceless victims. Whether they were physically violated and raped as casualties of war, or had to face the grim realities of poverty and instability as the factories that formerly employed them in Yugoslavia were no longer operating, all Balkan women suffered the burden of living in a time of violence, transitions, and economic crises. However, some women saw a way out—singing. As turbo-folk singers in the ‘90s, they
were again able to become actors in the public sphere and have access to material resources. To do so, they adopted hyper-feminine identities aligned with patriarchal ideals. Without the institutions of state socialism to support their independence, women turned to war criminals and politicians to sponsor their careers and marry them.

History of Turbo-Folk

Turbo-folk, a genre of music that became popular during the 1990s in the Balkans, had a pivotal role in the creation of today’s Balkan nationalist ideology. Although the sounds of folk music in general were present in rural spaces during communism, they became mainstream in the disintegrated republics and were the music of choice for nationalist leaders of the nineties.

Turbo-folk expanded on a musical trend that began in the seventies, which was then defined as Newly Composed Folk Music, described as taking a “postmodern approach to folklore.” 9 This was a part of a more global phenomena that saw the rise of “world music” across the globe. Ljerka Vidić Rasmussen defines this new genre:

“Adopted were the verse-chorus-verse structure of the pop song, with an extension of the I-IV-V harmonic framework to include augmented and diminished chords. Along with occasional acoustic instruments characteristic of regional traditions (e.g. tapan and darabuka drums), new instruments were introduced: electric guitar and bass, keyboards and electronic drums. The accordion was retained by band

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musicians as the quintessential folk instrument; a material and symbolic link with music in the folk spirit.”

Although the content of NCFM is interesting to examine, more important are the cultural attitudes towards the music and how it was regarded by the communist elites. Čvoro writes: “From the outset, NCFM was seen as the antithesis to progressive modern Yugoslavia. It was seen as the domain of the uncultured, uneducated and generally backward people.” Yugoslavia, although a communist country, sought to project a liberal image and an openness to the West. It welcomed outside influences which was especially reflected in the mainstream culture of the time. For example, the 1980s in Yugoslavia were defined by rock and new wave bands, who sounded and dressed like their Western counterparts. In contrast, to align oneself with the sounds of NCFM was to openly admit one’s lack of sophistication. Vidić Rasmussen adds:

“The distinguishing stylistic trait of NCFM, however, is what is ambitiously referred to as the ‘oriental.’ This style, which is historically associated with Turkish dominance under the centuries-long Ottoman rule in the region, has evolved into a unifying framework for distinct musical practices throughout Bosnia, Macedonia, and southern Serbia. In simplest terms, the characteristics of the oriental style are richly-ornamented melodies with various trill patterns used both decoratively and structurally, and minor modes featuring augmented seconds.”

As Yugoslavia finally allowed massive migrations from rural areas into big cities that were no longer run by the Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman oppressors, it tried to discourage the culture of the peasant; the culture that was safeguarded outside of foreign influences. Communist elites did not find pride in native culture and traditions, but in Yugoslav unity and their triumph over fascism. Thus, music such as NCFM, served as a reminder of the villages where the native people of the Balkans were confined to for centuries. Whether by default or design it reminds one of the lack of opportunities and basic rights during the times of foreign rule.

NCFM provided a foundation for the development of turbo-folk that "expanded the fusion of ethno music with electronic pop that had been happening for a decade in Yugoslavia." Essentially, turbo-folk opened the door for experimentation with the sounds and patterns coming from other genres. However, the key markers such as melismatic singing and instruments such as accordion and trumpet persisted. Yet, the feature of turbo-folk that draws the most attention is its ideological context. Ivana Kronja states:

"Turbo-folk celebrated materialism, hedonism, excess and sexual innuendo during the worst years of war and sanctions against Serbia, presenting a rosy and escapist picture of reality."

The key performers of turbo-folk, such as Ceca Ražnatović, were directly linked with war and politics. Ceca’s husband, Arkan, was a leader of a paramilitary guard and was responsible for a number of war crimes. Together, Ceca, Arkan, and Slobodan Milošević

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established a hyper-nationalist and jingoist Serbian identity. Ceca and other turbo folk performers celebrated vulgarity and materialistic ideals. The once liberated Yugoslav woman became a hyper-feminine, gold-digging figure characterized by aesthetics which were commonly seen in pornographic films. The values that communist leaders rejected were celebrated and praised. While Arkan was on the battlefield ordering the mass murders of non-Serbian men and boys, performers such as Džej were singing in the clubs and on national television. Džej’s most popular song during this time was titled “Radjaj Sinove” (“Give birth to sons”).

Unlike NCFM’s existence on the margins of culture, turbo-folk took center stage. Today, the influence of turbo folk from the 1990s and early 2000s can be heard in the majority of mainstream music created in former Yugoslav countries. However, even though the sound has progressed into a more modern one and is less aligned with its rural roots, the content has remained in line with the values set by turbo-folk. Arkan and Milošević are both dead, but Ceca’s voice, and those of her copycats, continue to enchant the people and lead them into an endless cycle of parties and the “good-life” even while the people of the Balkans are still seeking a way out.

The subjects in the installation *Exploited by Images*, Sandra Afrika and Senidah, are a product of this industry, and although Sandra is more clearly aligned with turbo-folk than Senidah, they are operating within the same system. They also share their audiences in the Balkans and a festival organizer might place them in the same lineup. However, the ways in which the two women had achieved fame and approached their careers are radically different. Sandra’s path is more usual and even recalls Ceca’s rise to fame. Ceca was initially a protégé of certain male folk singers and producers and was hired to entertain Arkan’s
paramilitary guard during the Croatian war. He eventually left his wife for the then twenty-year old singer and it was not until her relationship and eventual marriage with Arkan that Ceca’s career took off.

With the development of a private entertainment industry, which until the disintegration of Yugoslavia was state controlled, Ceca and those like her monopolized television programming. The most influential players were Pink TV and Grand Productions. Pink TV was closely aligned with the regime of Slobodan Milošević, as the owner, Željko Mitrović, was a longtime friend of the Milošević family. Mitrović had amassed a great fortune in the 1990s and created Pink as a platform for folk and turbo-folk singers, fortune tellers, and Latin American soap operas. Although Pink never broadcast news, it was highly politically charged through music and entertainment. This type of programming was unknown under the highly-controlled Yugoslavian television that privileged educational content and, in entertainment, mostly showcased Western-sounding rock and pop music that had a platform.

Alongside Pink TV, Lepa Brena, a much-loved ethnically Bosnian and Muslim Yugoslav folk singer and actress, established the Grand Productions record label in Serbia. The main contribution of Grand Productions was the singing competition show that ran on Pink TV for almost two decades, called “Grand’s Stars.” Through this show, Grand and Pink found new young talent that they cultivated and used to expand the turbo-folk scene. In the early 2000s, “culture” in the region was produced by Grand and Pink.

Interestingly, it was Grand’s shows that helped maintain a sense of unity across the Balkans. Less than a decade after the wars, people from all of the former republics would come to Belgrade for a chance to compete on Grand’s Stars. Even though the tensions in the
region were still heightened, at least on TV it seemed as if everyone was getting along.

Although each country had performers who were more popular locally, there were certain singers who had regional fame. A major turning point was Dino Merlin and Željko Joksimović’s hit song “Supermen.” Merlin, a Bosnian and a Muslim, began his musical career with a band in Yugoslavia. He lost a few of his band members in the wars and launched a solo act. In the early 2000s, his career took off and in 2004 he recorded the song with Joksimović, a Serbian singer, who represented Serbia at Eurovision that same year.

Although a light pop-ballad, the lyrics of “Supermen” acknowledge the recent troubled history and the common people’s heartache. The song goes: “Ljudi se oduvijek sastaju / A mnogi još uvijek rastaju” that translates to “People have always gathered / Many are still leaving each other” pointing to the breakup of Yugoslavia that went against many people’s nature. Joksimović continues with “Ljubav se ne piše tako / Oko za oko, zub za zub” and says “This is not how you spell love / Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” again recalling the violent conflict from less than a decade before. Finally, he concludes with “Svaka mi reč stražu dobija / Svaki mi most na Drini ćuprija.” These lines are especially interesting as they recall a mutual history: “Every word puts me on guard / Every bridge is like the bridge on Drina.” Essentially, the two are attempting to rebuild the bridge, if only symbolically and if only in music.

Subjects

On a gray August day, I met Sandra Prodanović in a café set in a newly-built development in Belgrade. Sandra lives in an apartment complex that could exist in any gentrified neighborhood in the U.S. Even its name is in English—West 65—and is advertised with a
tagline of “Food. Fashion. Hedonism.” Unlike its American counterparts, this neighborhood is not surrounded by much outside of a few roads. The streets of Belgrade are always bustling with people, yet here there were only the select few. Most women were donning designer clothing and had small dogs on leashes; they were either heading to this café, a salon that Sandra later took me to, or some of the empty looking clothing stores found on the pedestrian streets of the complex.

In the few hours we spent together, it became clear that Sandra had been in the entertainment business for a long time and had no issue speaking to me with my camera turned on. She later revealed that she has been performing since she was seventeen and has over a dozen years of experience. She had just returned from Montenegro and had a fresh tan that looked even darker in contrast with the fluorescent green two-piece skirt and top set she was wearing. Like the other women in the neighborhood, Sandra also has a small dog whom she calls Afri after her stage name. Her first song is titled Afrika and because of this, the audience remembered her as Sandra Afrika. She mentioned that Afri had not had a bath recently and was a bit worried about him being on camera.

Sandra stresses that “she did not dream of becoming a famous singer as a little girl.” She noted that her first song was written by Marina Tucaković, a famous song-writer in Serbia who remains in demand. She got her start as a singer after a boyfriend at the time convinced her to record a song and film a music video. He remains as her manager although they have terminated their romantic relationship. It is likely that her manager also funded the project, as it is hard to imagine a 17-year-old in early 2000s Belgrade being able to afford that level of production. She also did not have the support of her parents, who, for a long time, protested against her provocative public persona and revealing outfits. She
credited her manager, who she allows to make all the decisions, for her success. Sandra did highlight that she has full autonomy over her appearance. Her manager/boyfriend does not meddle in this area. She used the phrase “on mi je radio o glavi” to describe his management style. It is a Serbian idiom that carries the meaning of someone being manipulative to cause harm, perhaps even casting a spell. I am unsure if Sandra was aware of the negative connotation of the idiom and it is likely she meant to say that he had full control.

When I asked her about her overall singing style and where she draws inspiration, she explained that she likes to follow trends and release catchy music that audiences will like. She does not have a distinct style, but rather reflects whatever is popular at the moment. Performing is her favorite part of the job and she is not fond of the recording and production process. Towards the end of our interview, as I was turning off the camera, she was casually talking to my friend, Sofija, who made the introduction. Sofija is a music video producer who works for Sandra’s new label. Jokingly, Sofija said that she would like to start singing in order to earn more than she does as a producer. Sandra did not register the joke and advised her to get in shape and lose weight and that she would have a good chance of becoming famous. Sofija tried to laugh it off, but Sandra replied with “why not?” to which my friend said, “well, I can’t sing!” Sandra did not see this as an issue and said, “I’m not a great singer either but look at me.”

Sofija also introduced me to a friend of hers who happens to be the latest musical sensation in the Balkans. Senidah Hajdarpašić is known as the first lady of Balkan trap, a relatively new version of popular Balkan music that has elements of trap and hip-hop. She is a few years older than Sandra, but only got her big break a year ago. Originally from
Slovenia, Senidah had been singing with her band MUFF for over a decade but had recently decided to record an album with songs in a language that she calls Balkan. The lyrics of her songs sound more Serbian than Slovenian but do not quite make sense in either languages. They merely sound like the mixture of Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian.

What caught my attention is Senidah’s appearance and aesthetic presence. Unlike Sandra Afrika and other mainstream female singers in the region, Senidah does not embody a hyper-feminine persona. Her appearance is rarely the center of attention and instead of carefully choreographed performances, Senidah enters the stage with a liberated energy and moves in ways that make the most sense to her. She’s not provocative with her sexuality, but rather commands attention with her music.

I spent some time with Senidah during a festival where she performed and talked to her extensively. Even though Senidah was about to get on stage, she showed no sign of nervousness and although most of the women in the room were aware of the presence of my camera, they still acted quite natural and forgot about it at times. Interestingly, although Senidah did not appear “unnatural,” she was certainly still performing for my camera. At times when the other women, some of whom are also singers, got a bit too carried away and relaxed, she would remind others of its presence.

After we left the festival, the women asked me to turn off the camera. Once we got to Sofija’s apartment, our conversations changed. I tried to ask Senidah a few more questions about her music and career, however, she seemed to not be in the mood to talk about it and would rather discuss random topics. I did gather that her motivation for creating a different album, the one that launched her into regional fame, stemmed from feeling suffocated in Slovenia. A country of only two million people, Slovenia is not exactly a
musician’s dream. Thus, Senidah says that she “always wanted more.” Listening to her earlier music, there is a drastic departure from the soft, electro-pop that she would sing with her band, but it was this shift that brought her fame and success. Unlike Sandra, Senidah writes and/or contributes to her own songs and lets trends and her gut guide her, instead of managers or producers. In fact, she never once mentioned anyone outside of herself when talking about her career. It is clear that her independence and ownership of her music is of extreme value to her.

When asked about her future plans and ambitions, Senidah shared with me that she is not planning to stop anytime soon. She would be open to recording songs in any language if it meant more exposure. However, for the time being, it seems that her influence is limited to the Balkans.

It was the work of Grand, Merlin, and Joksimović that paved the way for artists like Senidah. Although they do not share genres, maintaining connections across cultural lines through entertainment allowed for a sense of unity to exist. Although Senidah hails from Slovenia, the audience in all of the former republics welcomed her with open arms. Senidah has collaborated with some of the most popular regional artists like Buba Corelli and Jala Brat who are both Muslims from Sarajevo, and Coby who is from Belgrade. At the festival that I followed her to, not only did all of the aforementioned artists perform, but they were the headliners and the main drivers of the audience. And although Senidah has gained more exposure because of her collaborations with these artists, unlike the women of turbo-folk, her career does not seem to be guided by men. Admittedly, it is still mostly men who are producers, especially at her label Bassivity Music. However, she did not require a “sponsor” nor does she use her body in the same way that singers of turbo-folk did. Perhaps Senidah
is a sign of a shift in Balkan society, at least when it comes to the consumption of culture. Senidah will never be a political figure nor will she challenge ideology, however, in a society where for decades women had to dress provocatively and undergo plastic surgeries to have a chance at fame and agency, Senidah is a hopeful case.

Interestingly, it also appears that Sandra’s fame might be waning. Sandra changed her label recently in order to create music that is more on trend, as turbo-folk and provocative dancing do not seem as marketable as they once were. The audience has not responded well to her new persona as a less provocative rapper in her latest song and video. Audiences appear ready to move forward and it will be difficult for her to redefine herself and find relevance in this new age. A return to Yugoslav-style femininity is unlikely, but perhaps artists like Senidah could lead the way for a new generation of singers. Additionally, since entertainment heavily influences Balkan society, it could create spaces for a whole new generation of women.

_Treatment of Subjects_

I have approached this project critically and, while I maintain certain opinions about the performance of hyper-femininity, I do not intend to place hierarchies in the way I approach my subjects. Sandra alone cannot carry the weight of the feminist setbacks in her arena. Even as her gestures and aesthetic choices illustrate her self-value, in as much as it is possible my intention is to remain impartial and portray her life with genuine curiosity. The impetus behind this project is to explore why and how women internalize and reproduce the objectification they are exposed to in daily life, especially women in entertainment industries across the world. And, in self-reflection, to examine my own
engagement with similar behaviors as I am personally unable to perform in front of a camera without perfect lighting or camera-ready makeup.

By extension, this contradiction illustrates the challenge of the documentary—how to film marginalized subjects without objectifying, exoticizing, and judging them. The discourse I had learned growing up surrounding turbo-folk singers was always the same: these women performers are whores, trash, empty-headed gold diggers who will stop at nothing for a chance at wealth. They seek shortcuts and do not want to work hard for their keep. These statements were rarely spoken by the men around me; it was usually by women. Women like my mother, empowered feminists who do not need men's approval and validate their own superiority in the comparison. To a degree, this is what I have grown to internalize about the turbo-folk class of women and had to withhold my bias in order to present authentic images.

I specifically decided to frame Sandra in ambivalent ways, filming her as I would a dear friend. I attempted to engage in honest conversation with her, without trying to sway her in a direction to suit an agenda. Mainly because I do not have an agenda as documentary filmmakers often do but seek to deconstruct the systems in place. In an early cut of the center video of my installation, I followed Sandra's interview sequence with one of her music videos. The relationship between the images that I edited created a sense of judgement, so I decided to eliminate all of the appropriated footage and instead provide my views of the subject. I also decided not to include any other videos of her performances since I wanted the focus to remain on our interview. I felt that she was performing enough as it was and that including images of her performing on stage would destroy the rawness of the material.
When I filmed Senidah and her female entourage at the music festival, I took a slightly different approach. There was little room for an interview, but I got to be a silent observer. My camera was hanging from my neck and quietly rolling most of the time. I had the consent of everyone present to be filmed but without the camera being pointed directly at them, they did not know when exactly they were being recorded embodying the footage with a sense of authenticity and rawness. Later, I myself step out from behind the camera as the women ask me to clink my glass with them and my hand and drink quickly come in front of the lens. By this point, I had grown comfortable with the group and they with me. I also wanted to convey the comfort that exists in female-only spaces and included shots of these women in the trailer.

*Unfinished Parts*

Given the pandemic disruptions in the Spring of 2020 my installation remains incomplete. I have filmed the main parts of the project and finished a rough cut of the film. However, a significant component remains to be completed. Namely, I intend to insert a performance sequence in the middle of the film. In a studio setting, I will be standing with a large piece of plywood above my head while on my left and right sides other women will climb up sets of ladders and place plaster-cast cinder blocks on the plywood. This process will continue until I collapse under the weight of the bricks. The central channel of the installation will frame my body, while the left and right channels will show the other female performers climbing up and down the ladders with the cinder blocks. The actors will be in costume, donning neon colored club wear and I will be wearing a hyper-feminine outfit similar to the one Sandra wore during our interview.
There will be no rehearsals prior to the recording of the performance following Marina Abramović and Ulay’s code for performance: “no rehearsal, no predicted end, no repetition.” In her work, Abramović confronts the physical limitations of the body and this is my aim with this performance. In Rhythm 0, a performance work from 1974, Abramović laid out objects that can inflict pain or pleasure, from feathers to a loaded gun, on a table. She then gave permission to the audience to use the objects as they would on her naked body and turned the individual’s experience into a collective one. The performance lasted from 8PM to 2AM and, by the end, her body was covered in cuts and bleeding. Whereas Abramović was concerned with the limitations of the body, I am using the body as a way to illustrate the limitations of our ideology. I too will invite others to inflict a degree of pain onto my body, but the main difference lies in control. Once I collapse, I know with certainty that the actors will stop. Furthermore, I will be using actors and not an audience of volunteers.

Liberal feminism praises the success of individual women and sees the boardroom as the central place for liberation. However, it exploits the women who labor in obscurity beneath the lone individual woman who rises to the top. With each brick that is laid, or each million that an individual woman makes, another woman has to suffer the burden. From the hundreds of women who worked in unsafe conditions making fast-fashion clothing and lost their lives in the Rana Plaza catastrophe literally dying under the weight of bricks, to the immigrant women who work in house and child care so that other women

16 Ibid, 68.
can "have it all." In Exploited by Images, I address these issues and advocate for a feminism that recognizes anti-racism, anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism to be fundamental to gender liberation.

Abramović’s work mines masochism and extremes in relation to the body but other artists who work in this tradition operate within a different context. Kate Gilmore’s work, for example, also emerges from challenges and aggression but there is also an element of control. Gilmore forces the viewer to focus on her struggle, rather than safety. In Every Girl Loves Pink (2006), Gilmore confines herself to a corner of a gallery and forms a triangular pit with plywood. She is wearing a pink dress and buried under crumpled pink construction paper. The themes of hyper-femininity are obvious in Gilmore’s work, as she points to its oppressive aesthetics in all of her work and shows her “love [of] doing brutal things with hyperfeminine colors.” Eventually, Gilmore emerges out of the pit by stomping her heels and kicking the plywood wall. She is referring to the struggle that women face, as they have to work harder than men to receive the same rewards, all while wearing pink dresses. Like Gilmore, I wish to focus on the impact that those women have on their communities and the collective movement that gets left behind. Although I am exploring some of the same ideas, especially surrounding hyper-femininity, my focus is on how this struggle is worsened by those women who pursue the path of individual success at the cost of the group.

17 The Rana Plaza Accident was the collapse of a garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2013 that claimed the lives of over a thousand people and injured more than 2,500. This was a result of hazardous working conditions and the push for cheap labor. See more: https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/geip/WCMS_614394/lang--en/index.htm
The idea for the performance sequence described above also stemmed from a sculpture I filmed at the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade (Figure 1). It shows four women holding up a flat block. They are all dressed in different ethnic garments, representing the different peoples of Yugoslavia. It is unclear what they hold, for it is their unity that takes precedence. I wanted to contrast this by holding the plywood alone and draw attention to the importance of building unity.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**

**Installation**

Initially, this project was envisioned as a documentary film to be screened in a traditional theater setting. After months of various cuts and experiments, I came to the conclusion that, just as the themes, subjects, and relationships are multifaceted, my synthesis should
reflect them as a multi-channel installation (Figure 2). Once realized, it will include three channels, with the central screen dwarfing the other two in size, and it will be installed in a partially darkened space. The small hallways leading into the room with the screens will display the plaster-cast cinder blocks used in the performance sequence hanging on the walls.

Throughout the process of realizing this project, I became interested in concepts of artificiality, control, and monumentality. I saw similarities in the artifice of women of turbo-folk and the sculptures of women like the ones at the Museum of Yugoslavia. I wanted to bring the same sense of scale to my installation—for the viewer to feel small standing before objects, but also allow the screens to act as sculptures. An installation also creates its own space and provides a different type of immersion. It is my attempt at claiming a physical space where these narratives can live. The women and the stories shown in the film are constantly confined by the lens and restrained to their dominions.
Through the installation, I allow them to exist in a larger space other than a stage or a TV interview.

In addition, questions of materiality and the connection between the fiction of myths and the material realities they create are addressed here. I am bringing forward these ideas that inhabit the realm of the theoretical and fictional into a more palpable setting.

*Train Sequence*

I begin the main channel video with several shots of the Belgrade Center train station. It is mostly empty, and there are few clues to signify where we are in the world. When I first visited this station, it looked smaller and sparser than subway stops in Manhattan, thus I do not expect my viewer to know that it is the main train station in Serbia. This was a recent development done to replace the old train station in Belgrade, as it was interfering with the views of the now infamous Belgrade Waterfront Buildings.

Although the trains are new, the way that the station operates felt ancient. I was running late and was turned away from the ticketing counter (there were no ticketing machines) urged by the teller to run towards the train and buy the ticket on board. I ran across only to make it to the train in time for the conductor on board to tell me they only take cash, which I lacked. I had to wait for about three hours for the next train to come, waiting patiently and observing the few people around me. Above my seat the track’s

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19 The Belgrade Waterfront project is perhaps the pinnacle of corruption and capitalist interests having attracted controversy since its inception. The project was supposed to be funded and developed by Emirati’s Mohamed Alabbar, the man behind Burj Khalifa, and partially subsidized by the Serbian government. Instead, taxpayer money is being used to fund the project and Alabbar’s company will own the land and the properties. The details are still cloudy, yet it was one of the key reasons for citizen marches and protests in 2015 when it looked like perhaps the populist and authoritarian Vučić’s rule was coming to an end. Now, the towers stand over the river, with most of the high-priced apartments, starting at 150,000 euros, remaining empty. For reference, the average income in Serbia stands at about 500 euros per month.
destination matched my destination, so when a train arrived, at a track on the other side of the station, I did not expect it to be mine. But those sitting near me were prepared—an entire family, along with elderly grandparents, had gathered their belongings and jumped down and across the railroad platforms to reach the other side. I also missed that train. Finally, the last train I could catch was leaving in less than an hour but from a different station which hardly resembled a bus stop. Alas, a train finally came, and instead of the previous trains I had missed, this one most likely dated back to the 1960s and the Tito era and thus moved slowly. This incident is one of my favorite mishaps during production. Given I had spent most of the day trying to board a train, I was heading towards the country as the sun was setting. The train was mostly empty, and I sat alone in the cabin and watched the countryside from behind my lens.

Taking a train or any form of public transportation is inherently a socialist activity. Unsurprisingly, the railroad expansion was one of Tito’s biggest accomplishments. To unite the different populations in Yugoslavia but also to open the region to Western Europe, a massive railroad was constructed that allowed people to travel freely. While others in the Eastern Bloc suffered behind the Iron Curtain, Yugoslavs proudly waved their passports from their trains. In fact, trains had been such an enormous symbol of Yugoslavia that Tito’s Blue Train still lives on. Mementos from Tito’s famous trips around Yugoslavia and a scale model of the Blue Train can be found at his mausoleum. He would also deliver speeches directly from the train and had once hosted the Queen of England on a trip

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20 Josip Broz Tito was the founder and leader of communist Yugoslavia from WWII to his death in 1980. It was a time of great prosperity and growth in Yugoslavia. Tito also cemented Yugoslavia’s importance on the international stage as he created the Non-Aligned movement in 1961 as a buffer between NATO and the USSR.
around Yugoslavia. Considering this recent past, not even a century ago, and to compare it to today’s reality is to consider the lost progress of socialism due to capitalist greed.

Admittedly, war and sanctions have also taken their toll, yet as projects and developments are now guided by profit, instead of the authentic needs of citizens, it comes as no surprise that the rail system is not even a shadow of its former self.

In the film, appropriated sound bites play as we look at the Serbian countryside in the train scene. I appropriated the sound from an old documentary about Yugoslav female soldiers in WWII. I do so to establish the themes of the film and bring forth some forgotten facts, such as Tito’s insistence on gender equality in the early days of Yugoslavia. It is also important to mention that any piece of media created during communism was a part of a propaganda project. Nevertheless, these were the narratives that dominated television programming and it is why I chose to include them.

**The Buildings**

The monumental size of the Belgrade Waterfront buildings recalls Yugoslav socialist developments. Although the developments lacked the bourgeois amenities found at the Belgrade Waterfront towers, such as pools and gyms, they were known for their sense of community. The apartments were distributed to citizens according to the sizes of their family and blocks would generally be made of people who worked in certain industries. Even today, around these developments, my family will point out and say, “that was where the military families lived” or “this one was for people working at XYZ factory.” These former apartment buildings have lost their former glory and stand decrepit in the New Belgrade skylines. In the ‘90s, during times of war and crisis, similar to public housing
projects in the United States, these buildings became the source of crime and gang activity. Colloquially, the neighborhoods are called “the blocks” as a reference to criminal affiliations. Obviously, not every person from the blocks adheres to this stereotype, but rather, there are those who see it as a mark of pride. In a future cut of the film, I intend to include images of these socialist developments to provide yet another layer of history.

**The Sculptures**

The concepts I had been working with came full circle once I saw the sculptures during a visit to the Museum of Yugoslavia. The first two are a part of a series of sculptures that are personifications of the railroad and the other sculpture is referenced above. My research did not uncover the artists, but I believe they were most likely commissioned by the Communist Party.

Aesthetically, I feel that a powerful relationship is created between the sculptures and the images of women that are shown later. Given that I am concerned with the images of women in the media, I can both reference an older, Greco-Roman tradition as well as that of socialist realism. In addition, I have often felt that there is a sculptural element to hyper-femininity, due to its artifice and control.

**The Festival**

My film ends with a sequence from a music festival where Senidah was a headliner. I had intentionally slowly built up the progression of the film and intend to lengthen it in future cuts to heighten the effect of the concert. I want it to feel as if it came out of nowhere and work as a destabilizing factor. I also hope some will find relief in the music and appreciate
the dichotomy between the violent lyrics and the enjoyment of the audience. I hope to convey the feeling of the Balkans, where war and destruction came out of nowhere, but where people still manage to write songs through it all.

Initially, I was only supposed to be filming the performers, but found the backstage more interesting. The women I filmed are women of the public sphere, they are singers, TV hosts, producers, and they are on a night out. There is hardly anything special about it until you start paying attention to the music, which tells us that this festival is not like the ones in the West. This festival acknowledges the pain these people have suffered, but also the perseverance that brought them there. As you listen to the song and hear the lyrics “We are pearls from the mud / We are children of war” there is an unsettling feeling. While I was filming, I began crying as the lyrics of the song came on: “I know abroad it is better / But it is not mine” as I reflected on my place among these women. I had been neither one of them nor a complete outsider. My family is one of those that they sing about, making up more than half a million people who have left in the past twenty years. Although I had missed Serbia until that point, I then began grieving for the collective despair. For the circumstances that drove thousands out, for the generations of children that will grow up detached from their culture, away from their families and loved ones; and because this is the culture they will see when they visit and think of as Balkan.
Bibliography


