

Historical Modernisms

Historicizing Modernism

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Historical Modernisms

Time, History and Modernist Aesthetics

Jean-Michel Rabaté and Angeliki Spiropoulou

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In memory of Hayden White



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History and active thought: The Belgrade surrealist circle's transforming praxis

Sanja Bahun

Activating thought

‘Thought is a product of matter ... Yet, thought, albeit consequential to matter, is never a passive product, a mere reflection of matter; rather, it possesses an active role ... it is working, operative, capable of transforming the material world, which, in turn, may transform thought itself ... and on *ad libitum*.’¹ So begins an ambitious philosophical treatise entitled *Outline for a Phenomenology of the Irrational* (Nacrt za jednu fenomenologiju iracionalnog), written by Koča Popović and Marko Ristić, two key members of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle (and recent philosophy graduates), published by Surrealist Publishing in Belgrade in 1931. A unique text in the history of global surrealisms, *Outline for a Phenomenology of the Irrational* tiptoes the discursive fields of Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Freud and Einstein over more than hundred pages to posit an approach to matter, history and art-making through the category of the irrational. The idea of a perpetually transformative, mutually corrective interaction of thought and matter is key to Popović and Ristić’s argumentation in this book. One such interaction dynamizes both thought and the material world from within, Popović and Ristić argue, so that they can only appear to us as one joint dialectical process; in turn, its processual and dynamic nature endows thought-assumed-as-matter with the capacity to be subversive, revolutionary and to transform history. Yet, to release this potential one must challenge another natural propensity of thought, namely, its tendency to reify itself into abstractions, categories like spirit, freedom, history, unconscious – a step which, Ristić and Popović argue, even the likes of Freud and Hegel have failed to take. In order to avoid the petrification of thought into a passive object (an abstraction),

then, we should exploit the inherent potential of thought for its own negation and self-critique, resident in the vast repositories of the unconscious. It is in eliciting and activating this negational background of thought and overriding the static positivism of the rational mode of thinking that the crucial achievement of surrealism as an enunciative mode lies. Surrealist dialectic negation, the authors argue, naturally engenders aesthetic modes and strategies of representation that are most suitable for continual rebellion and self-critique: identifying and opposing the dictates of petrified thought in each expressive act, privileging communal and participatory modes of thinking and performing over Western individualism, and using transposition, irony, simulation. The category of the irrational, always in dialectic tension with the rational, stands at the centre of this aesthetic operation in history: it is a hermeneutic and psychological point in which the world of material phenomena and the unconscious coalesce, each serving as an incessant corrective to the other.

Nibbling on the morsels of material history of the locale which engendered and conditioned these thoughts on the irrational, and engaging surrealist activities of different types, this essay zooms in on the Belgrade Surrealist Circle's efforts to dynamize the interaction between historical matter, thought and its representation and to use it for strategic political purposes. Taking as my case study one of the most influential art-practices in the liminal (and, history will prove, transient) zone of Yugoslavia will enable me to pose questions that are more capacious: How does material history turn itself into continuously active forms/represented objects? What implications may the Belgrade surrealists' mandate for active thought have for our understanding of modernism and history? And what mode of interpretation befits this vision of historically-politically engaged art?

Activating history

There have been few better vantage points for appreciating that history is not static than the region of Yugoslavia in the early twentieth century. Politically and cognitively located at the intersection of two demising empires (Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman), and between the demands of an imported notion of nation-state and the indigenous styles of political action, the region was a charged locus of political contests, cultural interpellations and dissenting practices. The legacy of interacting empires and human motions between and against those empires created intense awareness of the region's inter-positionality and the

latter shaped the regional conceptualizations of history and the manoeuvres and investments of artists that aspired to convey them. Founded in 1918, Yugoslavia constituted the first union of the South Slavs, peoples living in the territories that gained independence from colonial rule in a series of processes following the mid-nineteenth-century liberation wars. The very foundation of the country was contingent upon a historical incident that in itself came to epitomize global inter-imperial fissures.² On 28 June 1914, Gavrilo Princip, an impressionable youth whose farmer-father had participated in the Herzegovina Uprising against the Ottomans in 1875–7 and later supplemented his meagre income by transporting illegal migrants across the border between the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian Empires, assassinated the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand at Latin Bridge in Sarajevo. The event sparked the First World War, the outcome of which (among many other things) was the political possibility for a sovereign state of the South Slavs. The new state, initially named the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, operated as constitutional monarchy from 1918 to 1929, then, renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (the land of South Slavs), as absolute monarchy/dictatorship from 1929 to 1934 (the period of the most intense activity of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle), and as shaky constitutional monarchy, increasingly economically and politically dependent on the Nazi Germany from 1934 to 1945. Caught between the desire for independence and the legacy of imperial claims, and between the modernizing aspirations and an anti-modernizing political set-up, it was a highly repressive state, with a notorious impressment law and swiftly developing penitentiary system for the dissenting. In the cultural sphere, the Turks, French, Germans, Italians and Russians had battled for hegemony in the region for nearly a century; in one significant case of strategic aid, France provided shelter and schooling to more than 3,500 Serbian children in France during the First World War, including almost all future members of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle. These cultural interpellations only intensified as the new, strategically positioned, country came into being, but they were now stratified, their complex operation reflecting global political reconstellations. For one, the Soviet influence, while officially denounced, grew steadily among the members of undercover resistance organizations; and these counted in their ranks many members and associates of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle.

In 1922, the same year when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was officially ratified and internationally recognized at the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris (coincidentally, also known as the year of modernist miracles), young Marko Ristić published his first poetry, started international correspondence, and took up the editorship of *Ways*, a Belgrade-based little

magazine dedicated to contemporary literature. Over the course of following year, Ristić transformed the journal into a voice of international proto-surrealism and started conversations and text and gift exchanges with André Breton. In the years to follow, Ristić coordinated Yugoslav surrealists through a period of individual and collective art practices and publications (1922–9) and the operation of the Circle as a self-declared public organization (1929–33), and he served as a coalescing point for surrealist practices after the dissipation/banning of the Circle (post-1934). Hundreds of preserved visual artefacts, more than twenty books of poetry, prose and theory, several manifestoes, fanzines, magazines and bilingual journals, and one group exhibition/conceptual presentation came out of these endeavours. But the Circle's long-term legacy is the unique endurance, even exultation, of modernist art and development of neo-avant-gardes in post-Second World War, socialist Yugoslavia. I have traced this history in more detail elsewhere.³ Here it is important to highlight only that, while the Belgrade collective invested their energy in recognizable surrealist concerns such as the nature of poetic creation, madness, and the functioning of dreams, they also placed particular emphasis on the issues of artistic and social responsibility and the role of artist in a participation-oriented society. Not only anti-bourgeois and anti-establishment but also actively committed to a proletarian revolution, the Belgrade surrealists understood their artistic enterprise as a subversive act, 'boundless, unselfish, and moral',⁴ in the face of which the contemporaneous French surrealist activities – even at their most radical – were somewhat naïve and/or purely rhetorical. The Belgrade surrealists viewed the bourgeois society in monarchical Yugoslavia as incompetent, myopic and repressive in its racing capitalism and displaced nationalism. In turn, the Yugoslav monarchical state authorities perceived the Circle as rather a dangerous political party, at times even a terrorist organization, than an artistic grouping. The group itself dissipated upon the arrest and detention without trial of several key members in December 1932 – an incident reported in an emotionally charged article by René Crevel in *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* in May 1933; Crevel astutely likens the terror of the Yugoslav pro-fascistic government to the contemporaneous rise of Nazism in Europe.⁵

This history suggests that site-specific convergences between material history and intellectual history and the local meanings that art production acquires in each setting matter greatly when approaching global movements like surrealism. The artwork that the Belgrade Surrealist Circle produced must be understood as 'emplaced' in the historic-political context of a newly independent, oppressive state; inter-imperial position of the region; violent history of colonial rule;

both appropriation and wariness of foreign cultural influence; and cohort-specificities such as their commitment to the surrealist blend of Marxism and psychoanalysis, engagement with revolutionary organizations, multilingualism and higher-level education in disciplines of philosophy and law.⁶ It is out of this geo-cognitively hybrid terrain that the Belgrade surrealists' art emerged as a site-specific aesthetic ethnography that insists on an understanding of thought, representation and history itself as dynamic, unfinished and continuously embroiled in dialectical self-critique.

Interactive artwork, interactive history

The members of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle were mostly the merchant class youth, many of them of Jewish or Tsintsar descent, educated in France or Switzerland, and most of them living in the Belgrade neighbourhood of Dorćol and surrounding zones. Spreading around the crossroads of four major trade routes ('dört yol' means 'four roads' or 'crossroads' in Turkish), leading to, respectively, Vienna, Widdin, Istanbul and Dubrovnik, Dorćol fronts the Danube river which was for centuries the border between the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. Sited on this marker of division, the neighbourhood also positioned itself as defying the border, and, through all the legitimate and illicit commerce of goods and people that took place there, blurring the physical and cultural boundaries between the imperial zones; a hub for the placeless, homeless and transient. By the early twentieth century, the area had become an eclectic architectural composite befitting the fractured histories of peoples inhabiting it – Serbs, Turks, Jews, Armenians, Aromanians, Roma, Greeks, Germans; within a square mile one could find a synagogue, a mosque, an Orthodox Christian and a Catholic church. The early-twentieth-century architectural revamping of this terrain and, in particular, intense building of monuments in service of nation-building and bourgeois civil culture promotion provoked irritation among the Belgrade surrealists. While French surrealists found evocative potential in monuments in Paris, whose scriptural function seems to be to deaden the past and thus, paradoxically, liberate the present, the members of the Belgrade Circle found such potential in dilapidated walls, almost deprived of any outward signs of historical specificity – except that it is precisely their dilapidated, forcefully erased condition that testifies to the workings of history.

One such wall fronts a piece of conceptual engagement art called *Facing a Wall: A Simulation of the Paranoiac Delirium of Interpretation. Survey*, authored/

signed by Belgrade surrealists M(arko) R(istić), V(ane) B(or), Ž(ivanović) N(oe), M(ilan) D(edinac), D(ušan) M(atić) and R(astko) P(etrović). The collective took a frontal-view close-up photo of a dilapidated Dorćol wall and then asked its members to ‘simulate delirium’ (or simply freely associate) and develop their own artistic responses to the photograph – autobiographical, intertextual, abstract, affective – in the form of six interventions. The interventions were subsequently arranged around the incentive-photo, reproduced on two pages in the third issue of the Belgrade surrealist journal *Nadrealizam danas i ovde* (*Surrealism Today and Here*, 1932), and accompanied by Ristić’s article ‘Facing a Wall – An Explanation of the Eponymous Illustration Page’ (‘Pred jednim zidom – objašnjenje istoimene strane ilustracija’). Ristić explains that the four phases/facets of the artwork – photographing of the wall, free-associating on the photograph, materialization of the idea (interventions), and reflection about the work (that is, the article itself) – aim to elicit the traces of the unconscious and to insert and activate these in the public sphere.⁷ One may remember here both Salvador Dalí’s 1930 essay ‘The Stinking Ass’ [‘Lâne pourri’, 1930] and Breton and Paul Éluard’s *The Immaculate Conception* [*L’Immaculée conception*, 1930], but the immediate context for this installation is Ristić and Popović’s 1931 *Outline for a Phenomenology of the Irrational*. As *Outline* defines it, ‘simulation’ is a volitional, historically engaged, phenomenological activity which purports to awaken the latent content through an external, conscious impetus like a material phenomenon or an image thereof. Its result is a simulacrum which dynamizes the image/received matter and activates thought. Far from being a product of a solitary simulation of paranoid state, simulation emerges through the collaborative ‘paranoiac’ activity of the producer of the work of art and its interpreter. Being phenomenological and collaborative, such simulacra are also markedly historical, Ristić and Popović insist: they articulate the dialectical struggle between activated thought/matter and the unthought/not-yet-matter, a struggle that governs and shapes the historical subject-in-becoming.⁸

A good example of such operation in history is Vane Bor’s 1935 pair of photographs of a semi-deserted Dorćol underpass, *Milica S. Lazović as a Shadow, or Two Minutes before Crime* (*Milica S. Lazović kao senka ili dva minuta pre zločina*) and *One Minute before Murder* (*Jedan minut pre ubistva*). Capturing the perspective of someone looking down at a female (Figure 11.1) and a female and a male (Figure 11.2) figures in the white roadway below, this series of photographs was probably taken during a random walk but was carefully staged as a pair of film-frames showing a cobble-stone road on one side and the other side of a bridge. The road is demarcated by tall cement walls, creating two

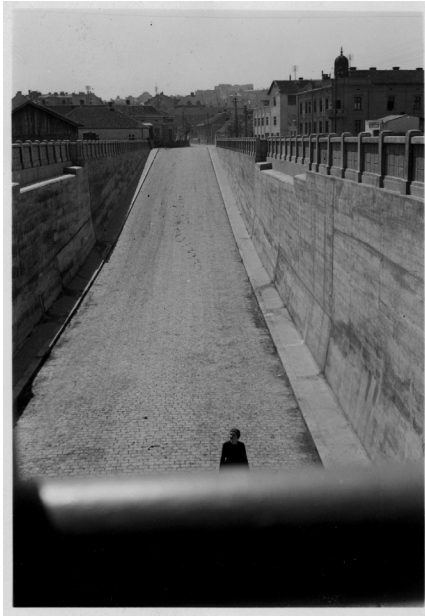


Figure 11.1 Vane Bor (Stevan Živadinović), *Milica S. Lazović as a Shadow, or Two Minutes Before Crime*, 1935, vintage photograph, 90 × 60 mm, Inv. No. M112. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade.



Figure 11.2 Vane Bor (Stevan Živadinović), *One Minute Before Murder*, 1935, vintage photograph, 87 × 62 mm, Inv. No. M111. Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade.

main compositional lines that converge towards the horizon of each image. The two horizons in Bor's photographs embody the contrasts that characterized 1930s Belgrade: in the Dubrovačka street-facing photograph (*Milica S. Lazović ...*), the horizon is a dense mixture of heterogeneous abodes – ground-level Turkish-style houses, two-floor baroque edifices, and, towards Upper Dorćol, modern buildings, all bearing witness to architectural and historical transformations of the city; in the photograph facing the Danube river-bank (*One Minute before Murder*), the horizon is ominously consumed by the unpopulated river bank and a recently constructed canal that would allow cargo ships to bring coal for the new power plant 'Power and Light' in the Lower Dorćol quay. The titular crime is oddly absent in Bor's photographs, but it looms in the surprising emptiness of urban space and the interplay of geometrical lines and shapes, darkness and light. An in situ Hellenistic necropolis with an architrave 'gate' to Hades, a temple dedicated to Greek goddess Hecate was dug up close to the location in 1935, and Bor must have been aware of this discovery. Furthermore, these photographs

remind one of Eugène Atget's snapshots of deserted Parisian streets, which Camille Recht and Walter Benjamin, respectively, linked to the scenes of crime. Unlike Atget's photographs, however, Bor's series foregrounds the human and the (possible) violation of the human, and it is oriented towards interaction. In *Milica S. Lazović ...*, the slanted-vertical occlusion that tantalizingly diminishes the view draws the viewer into an uncomfortable hermeneutic effort: the blurred bordure signals the mythic operation of bridge as passage to death but the uncanny close-up also suggests that the viewer is somehow implicated in this passage. On her way to the river (of death?) in *One Minute before Murder*, then, the girl has suddenly turned back; she looks away with a half-smile, as if interacting with someone under or on the other side of the bridge, while a passer-by is approaching her, hands in his pockets, unnoticed yet. Will someone warn her? And against what? Where is the threat situated, exactly? The careful spatial arrangement of the actants in Bor's artwork positions the viewer as not only a witness of a crime, but also, hypothetically, its perpetrator; or a rescuer.

While mythic in tenor, Bor's series also indexes some events in the region's recent history. In April 1934, less than a year before these photographs were taken, the workers constructing a twin-underpass in the immediate vicinity unearthed the skeletons of the soldiers who had unsuccessfully defended Belgrade against the Central Powers in a decisive First World War battle; on 1 May 1934 Yugoslavia signed a major trade treaty with Nazi Germany, whereupon German Foreign Minister Hermann Göring became a frequent guest in Belgrade;⁹ and, on 9 October 1934 King Alexander of Yugoslavia was assassinated, along with the French Foreign Minister, Louis Bartou, in Marseilles, France. Taken at a cusp historical moment, Bor's photographs foreground the claustrophobic enclosure of horizon-paths between two tall, bare walls, and the human's entanglement in crime. There is more than an inkling that we, too, are responsible for this unfolding of history, or, at least, the narrative of Bor's photographs. The cinematicity of the series forces the viewer to become a co-creator of this film, to supplant an edit between the two film-frames, and, importantly, imagine the dénouement of the action. Like installation *Facing a Wall*, then, Bor's photographs rely for their operation on an extraordinarily active relationship between the text, its producer(s) and its recipient(s), and they materialize the interaction between the matter, thought/affect, and articulation that Popović and Ristić keenly examined in *Outline*. This is a lesson for the interpreters of these artworks, then: as much as the exterior impetus does not deprive the artefacts in question of the quality of being a 'representation' of the unconscious flow (and thus also participants in an international surrealist conversation), so the intention to elicit the interior

affective content that binds objects and observing subjects does not take away from the artefact the quality of being a representation of a particular physical infrastructure of Belgrade, metonymically linked to the deep and contemporary history of the area.

Dialectic self-critique and unfinalizable work of art

The active relationship between the text, its producer and its recipient, and the idea of a perpetually transformative interaction of thought and matter put forward in *Outline* and articulated in *Facing a Wall* and Bor's photographs had already been conceptualized and specifically linked to the mode of self-critique in an earlier text, Marko Ristić's 1928 novel entitled *Without Measure*. The novel, written from 1926 to 1928 in Paris and Belgrade, is a fragmentary piece of prose that runs like a novel but simultaneously undermines its own generic status. The quasi-autobiographical narrator/detective follows the wanderings of a man named Roman ('roman' means the 'novel' in both Serbo-Croatian and French), strolling in and out of the supposed reality, into a hyper-reality, the collective unconscious, and from history into the mythic supra-history, and back into the current political and cultural debates. The fragmentary storyline follows the negotiation of the protagonist's passage through alternating experiences of fascination, political resentment and radicalization, all punctuated by the oblique references to specific sites in Belgrade, Paris, Vrnjačka banja and several seashore locations. While the narrative tension rises and murders, dream-murders and executions accrue, the entities of the narrator and the protagonist become progressively indistinguishable from each other until they finally transform into a writer penning a polemic response to Ivan Nevistić, a Yugoslav scholar who had previously published a critical article on the Belgrade surrealists.

Insofar as the temporal and spatial coordinates of the protagonist's actions and utterances and his bodily boundaries are blurred, or hard to 'measure', focalization is shifting (or incalculable), and the subject (narrator)-object (protagonist) relation is indeterminate (impossible to measure), Ristić's *Without Measure* might seem comparable to Breton's *Nadja*, written at the same time and during the period of intense interaction between the two writers. Yet, Ristić presents the reader with a markedly different text. He opts for a male protagonist in interaction with an assumedly male narrator, a choice that helps him avoid the objectivization of the female and the narrative distraction of love affair and

foreground, instead, the textual line of maladjustment, resentment and social revolt. The narrator-writer, involved in the story yet strategically distanced and psychologically undecided, continuously probes the quality and integrity of their own writing and is more comparable to the later developments of the role in Nouveau Roman (e.g. Alain Robbe-Grillet) than to the emphatically subjective narrator of a surrealist novel. The protagonist operates as, simultaneously, the subject of the work of art, the activity of its production, the artwork itself and its formal, generic and contextual interpretation, and is, in this respect, just like the narrator, rather a metatextual trace than an iconographically embodied being. Meanwhile, the metapoetic and intertextual games proliferate. Genres (a detective chronicle, a Gothic novel, a symbolist play a manifesto, a film script, a fairy tale, a scholarly article), narrative modes, tonalities of address and focalization all constantly shift in the text. To make the matters even more complicated, the novel consists of not only the loose plot outlined above, but also its own paratext and visuals, accrued across the three editions of the text (1928, 1962, 1986): the 1928 acknowledgements, motto and footnotes; the 1962 author's prologue and endnotes; the 1928 kabalistic pictographs and illustration from the first edition of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (*Vingt mille lieues sous les mers: Tour du monde sous-marin*, 1870), the 1962 reproduction of Max Ernst's 'Owl (A Bird in a Cage)' (owned by Ristić since 1927), the 1986 reproduction of Giorgio de Chirico's 1914 *Piazza d'Italia* and others. As contextualized by the chatty narrator in one of his copious discursive footnotes, this interaction of textual modes and formats and the exultation of the book's unfinizability is both the condition for rejuvenating the genre of the novel and a performance of a specific historical mandate: the novel should serve as 'a silent witness' to history.¹⁰

While the surrealist revolt tends to be oriented by a notion of freedom that is overarching but also abstract, the target and historical tenor of Ristić's novel are specific. It was with dismay that, in 1927, Ristić wrote from Paris to his Belgrade friends about the sudden lapse in communication between the two surrealist circles, a lack of understanding in both political and aesthetic matters. Yugoslav surrealist Milan Dedinac wrote back to Ristić: 'I cannot advise you to pass over certain differences ... Our position is immeasurably more absurd and more brutal than theirs in France ... For, just think what freedom means in our country ... and what in theirs (not to mention our impressment law!).'¹¹ In the novel written in this context, then, the search for unconditional freedom segues seamlessly in a dialectical challenge to the very notion of freedom as enshrined in, and appropriated by the philosophical discourse and moves into the pursuit

of a specific freedom (revolution). The last is addressed through the metonymic extension of leitmotifs such as revolver and 'atentat' ('assassination'), wherein the 'atentat' of 'a certain artistic convention' becomes, across three editions, inextricably linked to the past, present and future history of the region and beyond: to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in 1914; that of five Croatian MPs in the Parliament in 1928; that of King Alexander in 1934; and subsequent history of global political assassinations, especially those related to liberation struggles, for example, that of Patrice Lumumba. This expansion is not accidental. Already in the first edition of the novel Ristić suggests that the South Slavs' yearning for freedom is intensified by another kind of captivity, an incarceration in regional and global imperial inscriptions, which, parenthetically, the French group might have also unwittingly deployed. These are meticulously related in *Without Measure*: 'East, West, Catholicism, Mediterranean Culture, Europe in Danger, Balkan Man, Racial Expression, the Slavic Mission, Reslavicization – what are all those games and toys to me?' queries Ristić's narrator, 'and what is love for homeland, nurturing beauty, belief in good, and other abstractions?'¹² As an impassionate and lengthy footnote to the text at this point further explicates, it is the concept and discourse of 'racial art', whose rise and global spread we can date to 1925–30, that bother Ristić most: he deems it a doubly limited, superficial way to refer to identity through entity, entrapping us, sometimes unawares, in an imperial construction. And 'imperialism itself, including imperialism of the spirit', the footnote-voice argues, is 'the most facile form of dogmatism' (233). In the face of an abstract, or mediated notion of freedom, the narrator of Ristić's text muses, the only 'position which remains fruitful for the spirit', is 'a MORAL and REAL attitude [...]: a working, active rejection of a certain order which has proven itself as dead and artificially maintained', that is, 'a bloody dialectic'. For, 'passive resistance is insufficient' (233–34).

How, in this context, one pursues freedom relevant to one's integrity – one that would be beyond all abstraction and yet 'immanent to ... our existence' – and makes art revolutionary and resistant to the imposition of an identity in the name of (sometimes myopic) idealism, Ristić's narrator ponders.¹³ Rejecting imposed measures and demarcations, *Without Measure* itself is the answer to this question. The novel as a whole may be understood as a performative of Hegelian philosophy, compulsively explored by Ristić, a PhD student of Philosophy at Sorbonne, in the period 1922–7.¹⁴ This ambition is synopsisized in one strategic peripheral character, who describes his name, Jan, as being derived from 'Ja-Ne', meaning 'I-Not I' in Serbo-Croatian, and his existence as being shaped by dialectical tension. The same kind of dialectic, we infer, determines the very

status as an anti-novel: 'it is from the interiority of the book that its very negation erupts', the narrator reiterates (204). In line with this dialectical procedure, the first-person narration also stages a pamphlet against its own writer, framed as 'I against itself' ('This [text] is a pamphlet against myself, perpetuated for years, and in vain', 234) and enacts one of the governing principles of the Belgrade surrealist project: permanent self-critique. And the text rallies 'against the reader', that is, against the passive reader habituated into the 'logical' or 'consequential' progression of narrative and history. It is not only the bourgeois literature of the yesteryear and the obsolete political system that are targeted here. This proclamation should be understood, I suggest, as a challenge to, or a call for, a more active readerly entity, at once a co-creator and an interpreter of the novel, thus an entity which would assist in consistently activating thought. Chapter entitled 'Against the reader' opens with the assertion that the book that we are reading does not end or stop with its last page. The narrator entreats the reader to abandon 'belting' and 'belt measure-taking' (both implied in 'kaišarenje') and to continue reading even after the last word in the novel, to turn back the pages and start from the beginning or to branch out down any side routes that the book suggests (64). The textual monster's existence and shape, indeed its very coming into being, are thus conditional upon our commitment to read against the grain. The two postulates articulated by *Facing a Wall* and Bor's photographs thus shape Ristić's novel, too. The figurative space we traverse embodies the space and time of a specific historical subject-in-becoming, but this embodiment is itself subject to a condition: Roman – the protagonist and the novel itself – is figuratively constituted only through the collaboration of the producer and recipient/interpreter of the work of art.

Unsurprisingly, then, *Without Measure* also renounces its prerogatives as a text: rather, it describes itself as an 'activity', or 'being active' ['aktivitet'] (47), thus a processual entity, a dynamism at the heart of the object. The term 'aktivitet' has limited currency in colloquial Serbo-Croatian; what Ristić doubtlessly has in mind here is the specific way in which the term was used by Hegel in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (*Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*). Responding to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Hegel describes the circumstances governing the abrogation of passivity in the face of thought's propensity for reification. Because thought reifies its own content as being (a certain subject-matter, an object, *Gegenstand*), Hegel reasons, it must be receptive. Dialectically understood, then, thought-assumed-as-matter must be simultaneously an instance of active thinking, wherein 'the object [subject-matter] reverses into activity' ('der Gegenstand schlägt um in

Aktivität'; 162).¹⁵ In Ristić's reworking of this insight, an endless, committed readerly pursuit would continuously galvanize the inner capacity of thought to dynamize itself into activity and thus, in turn, co-create the activity that is the text; this dialectic activity, Ristić believes, is deeply political. Here the producer and the user of art become one, enjoined in the 'aktivitet' of endlessly co-creating and co-witnessing history, what, in a 1969 interview, Ristić (after Marx) called 'reversing, or transforming praxis' ('umwälzende Praxis'). In 1984, at the end of his life and after two published editions of the novel, Marko Ristić still treated *Without Measure* as a work in progress.

The (political) futures of Surrealism

Ristić's *Without Measure* proposes a bold vision of artwork as reliant on the (hope of) continuous writing-reading-reworking of artwork and history, thence appreciated and cognizable only in the context of an expansive temporality that multilaterally connects the past, the present and the future. While attentive to unequally paces and divergences in international modernisms, our pursuit of a more global, more multi-levelled, and more multi-sectoral account of modernism still lacks flexible temporal thinking, one that would be more profoundly attuned to the diverse handling of time – and thus also modernity – in each locale and under each circumstances. The never-ending nature of creating art and history that Ristić identifies points us in the direction of just such flexible historical thinking. It is with Ristić's mandate to capture the past but also the futurity of modernist artefacts in mind that I sketch here the future of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle's historically charged practices. These 'future perfect' snapshots of the figures and spaces we have engaged so far host further lessons for scholars of global modernisms.

Image 1: In 1937 Koča Popović joined a contingent of Yugoslav volunteers (*brigadistas yugoslavos*) in Spain, fighting besides the Republican Army in the Spanish Civil War until 1939. With the outbreak of the Second World War, he became a leading figure in the partisan movement, and the Commander of the First Proletarian Division of the Yugoslav Partisans. After the war, Popović became the Chief of the General Staff of the Yugoslav People's Army, then the Minister of Foreign Affairs – a position which he held for more than ten years – and then the Vice-President of Yugoslavia. As the Yugoslav Minister of Foreign Affairs (1953–65), Popović was instrumental in establishing the first alliance of a European country with the postcolonial South. Among Popović's diplomatic

accomplishments, one can single out the organization of the legendary 1954–5 long boat trip for the Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito, during which Tito visited one by one newly independent states in Asia and Africa, forging not only political and cultural links but also affective rapports between global communities (Tito, for one, was the first European head of state to visit independent India, and the Yugoslav Declaration was the first to bring the demands of the Algerian National Liberation Front to the United Nations); orchestration of the 1956 meeting of Yugoslav president, Indian Jawaharlal Nehru and Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser at the islands of Brijuni (Yugoslavia), widely seen as the inaugural step in the creation of the non-aligned movement; and the organization of the First Summit of Non-aligned Movement itself.

Image 2: In 1938 Marko Ristić published his long surrealist poem 'Turpituda/e: A Paranoiac-Didactic Rhapsody' ('Turpituda: paranojačko-didaktička rapsodija'), together with surrealist-expressionist artwork by Krsto Hegedušić, as an intermedial work entitled *Turpituda/e* [Turpituda]. The poem ends with the image of 'wolves sharpening their teeth' at the prospect of 'a manic fete' where the concrete and iron of financial watchtowers will spin, the earth will slide down a tangent, seas will fume, and lava will pour out of history. This prophetic imagery of war and revolution, and the visual-verbal blend of daydreaming and eroticism, did not please the authorities: the book was identified as incendiary and almost the entirety of the edition of 500 copies was confiscated and destroyed, under the Kingdom of Yugoslavia Law on the Protection of State Public Security and Order. Fewer than ten copies of the original book have survived, including the author's own copy. After the Second World War, Ristić became socialist Yugoslavia's first ambassador to France, then served as the Head of the influential Special Committee for International Cultural Exchange, and the President of the Yugoslav Permanent Delegation to UNESCO since 1952, where he worked enthusiastically on the promotion and implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He was a member of SEC (Société Européenne de Culture), a prominent cultural pan-organization set up in response to the partitioning of Europe, whose first East-West Dialogue conference in Venice in 1956 he attended alongside some key figures of mid-century international modernism – philosophers like Marice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre; writers like Stephen Spender, Giuseppe Ungaretti and Jarosław Iwaszewicz; and art historians like Mikhail Alpatov. He wrote inspiring articles in French and Serbo-Croatian on the necessity of cultural exchanges and dignity and service of translator,¹⁶ and was one of the key figures credited for the persistence of modernism in Yugoslav literatures and arts.

Image 3: It was under the same bridge that Vane Bor memorialized in his photographs that a large group of Jews and Roma from Dorćol passed in 1941, on their way to the train station or Banjica concentration camp, herded into their tragic future by German and Belgrade police. One of those few who escaped this fate was a Sephardic Jew named Oskar Davičo, an acclaimed surrealist poet and one of the foremost members of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle. Davičo was arrested in Italian-occupied Split, and then interned in the region of Parma (Italy), wherefrom he escaped just before German occupation in 1943 and joined the partisan movement. In 1945 he was the Yugoslav court reporter at the Nuremberg war crimes trials. A few years later he re-performed some of the key principles of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle in his series of poems/book-length poem *Human's Human* (*Čovekov čovek*, 1953): permanent self-critique (including the critique of ideology for which one oneself has fought), revolutionary humanism and commitment to an unrelenting pursuit of freedom – a freedom whose content always transforms in interaction between thought and matter. 'I believe in the inventiveness of the human,/who can think freedom to death,' he writes in 'Facts', the central poem in the book. Davičo visited African countries one by one as they gained independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s and subsequently published a travelogue entitled *Black on White* (1962), in which he self-consciously rejects the Orientalizing gaze and highlights his own inadequate knowledge, whilst suggesting a transhemispheric solidarity of the formerly 'downtrodden' and a commonality that, he believes, effectively circumvents Western prejudices and racialized inscriptions. With its sustained critique of racism and its poignant reflections on the author's own 'whiteness' which he now wishes to denounce, Davičo's book also targets the tone of cultural superiority that tainted some of the earlier Yugoslav travelogues of the post-war period.¹⁷

Image 4. The First Summit Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries (later known as the Non-aligned Movement [NAM]) was held in Belgrade from 1 to 6 September 1961.¹⁸ As a socialist country which had won independence through a liberation war and, since 1948, had been precariously but inventively navigating the Cold War international relations, Yugoslavia found natural allies in recently independent Asian, African and Central and South American states. Already in *Outline*, Popović and Ristić were arguing for the inevitable demise of Western individualism and the rise of an ethics and aesthetics of participation modelled on 'the communitarian practices of peoples and native communities from the Global South' and building of multilateral and multi-plane bridges between communities that challenge the

state-and-border-based thinking about human habitats.¹⁹ Twenty years later, in their positions as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Head of Foreign Cultural Exchange, respectively, Popović and Ristić were able to put these thoughts in practice. A hidden punctum of modernism and history emerges here: while the non-aligned movement was a result of increasing cooperation and brainstorming of Tito, Nehru, Nasser, Sukarno of Indonesia and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, it was philosophically and politically prepared and organized by the once-surrealist Popović and vitally aided by diplomatic and cultural exchange efforts of other members of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle, including Ristić, Davičo, Dedinac and Matić. From the movement's foundational documents onwards, the NAM named and condemned cultural imperialism, critiqued the developmentalist and linear understanding of history, and promoted what Tito called a 'resolute struggle for decolonization in the field of culture'.²⁰

The movement sparked vibrant cultural exchanges. According to some records, more than 40,000 students from the non-aligned countries studied in Yugoslavia between 1961 and 1991, often supported by Yugoslav scholarships; cultural councils were established at quick pace; architecture and urban projects exchanges proliferated; non-Western and minor languages were included in Yugoslav higher education curriculum; multilateral literary translations abounded and unique postcolonial museums like the Museum of African Art (Belgrade, 1977) and the Josip Broz Tito Art Gallery of the Non-aligned Countries in Titograd (Titograd, 1981), which acquired art solely through donations and gifts, were established, serving as models of a new type of cross-cultural cooperation and insight.²¹ Post-war international surrealist art and literature thrived and developed along South-South axis in these exchanges. Geo-historically located in Europe and involved in surrealism from the very beginning, Yugoslavia was nevertheless devoid of any imperial historical baggage and without statehood precedence. It was an openly anti-colonial cultural space with committed resources for cultural aid and exchange, and with repeatedly professed aspiration to enable rather than occlude the indigenous types and means of expression and local redefinitions of 'West-originating' artistic movements like surrealism. Positioned as such, for global surrealists, Yugoslavia served as a safe conduit, preferred partner, and an exemplary fringe redefiner/displacer of the cultural material from a 'centre'.²² For Yugoslav artists and writers, encounters with their non-aligned peers were often an opportunity to engage in self-critique and negotiate their own racial positionality as the white or the white subaltern. Scattered across different countries with histories of disruption (Yugoslavia itself being a prime example here), the archival traces

of these encounters are unfortunately scant, random, disorganized. We do have testimonies, however, that Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, Agostinho Neto and many other global South writers with surrealist strand in their poetic portfolio spent time in Yugoslavia;²³ that artists, both heirs and developers of indigenous surrealist practices, interacted and even jointly presented at international art biennales like the International Biennale in Alexandria, the São Paulo Biennial, International Graphic Art Biennial in Ljubljana, Triennale India in New Delhi and festivals of culture like those in Kinshasa, Dakar, Algiers and Lagos; and that one ‘non-aligned gift’, a Yoruba Gelede mask, features prominently in Marko Ristić’s ‘The Wall of Surrealism’ – an installation-wall in his household, methodically assembled from 1930 to 1970, now regarded as the first installation in Yugoslav art, and on permanent display at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade.

What lessons about historical modernisms does this temporally expanded look at an avant-garde collective provide in closure? One above all: there is no history that is not a human history and thus the ultimate purpose of any creative activity can only be, as Ristić claims, the ‘affirmation of the human’ (*BM* 20) – that is, a man’s or a woman’s realization as a human, always on its own (cultural, historical, individual) terms, and others’ acknowledgement of this condition. Believing in infinite creative capacities of the thinking human to transform material world, the Belgrade surrealists not only bequeathed to us some inspiring artwork but also effected a change in real history in a long span and across multiple sites – a change whose contours we have only begun to delineate. Inherent to humans as the anchoring points in the ever-lasting, mutually corrective interaction of thought and matter, the potential for transformation will be released whenever a human self-critically battles thought’s proclivity to reify itself by engaging in practices of activation, ‘aktivitets’. That such practices, as well as our tools to assess them, must remain unfinalizable and subject to permanent self-critique is an insight with which I would like to close this essay.

Notes

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- 1 Koča Popović and Marko Ristić, *Nacrt za jednu fenomenologiju iracionalnog* [Outline for a Phenomenology of the Irrational], ed. Gojko Tešić (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1985 [1931]), 7–8. For a French translation, see *Esquisse d'une phénoménologie de l'irrationnel* (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2016).
- 2 On inter-imperiality and modernism, see Laura Doyle, 'Modernist Studies and Inter-Imperiality in the Longue Durée', in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. Mark Wollaeger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 669–96. On inter-imperial contexts of the Belgrade Surrealist Circle's production, see Bahun, 'Gaps.'
- 3 Sanja Bahun-Radunović, 'The Value of the Oblique (Notes on Relational Funhouses, Historical Occlusions, and Serbian Surrealism)', in *The Avant-garde and the Margin: New Territories of Modernism*, ed. Sanja Bahun-Radunović and Marinos Pourgouris (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006), 26–52.
- 4 Marko Ristić, *Oko nadrealizma I* [Around Surrealism] (Belgrade: Clio, 2003), 166.
- 5 René Crevel, 'Des surrealistes yougoslaves sont au bain', *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* 6 (May 1933): 36–9.
- 6 On 'placedness', see Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, 'Introduction', in *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, ed. Doyle and Winkiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 1–4. The level of education and foreign language knowledge was an occasionally uncomfortable point of distinction between the Paris Centrale and the Belgrade Circle. In a 1931 letter to Ristić from Paris, Popović relates how he translated large chunks of Hegel's text from German into French to André Thirion at a meeting on previous day, apparently in an effort to introduce their *Outline* to the French group and solicit their help in publishing their own text in French. Koča Popović, letter of 6 November 1931. The Legacy of Marko Ristić, SANU Archives, Belgrade, unit of archival preservation 14882, box 2.
- 7 M(arko) R(istić), 'Pred jednim zidom – objasnjenje istoimene strane ilustracija' ('In Front of a Wall – An Explanation of the Eponymous Illustration Page'), *Nadrealizam danas i ovde* 3 (1932): 51.
- 8 Ristić and Popović, *Outline*, 49–52.
- 9 The ratification coincided with the establishment of a one-party Austrofascist state in Austria, Hitler's May Day speech at Tempelhof Air Field and the establishment of the notorious People's Court (Volksgerichtshof), empowered to mete out death sentences for high treason in Berlin, Germany.

- 10 Marko Ristić, *Bez mere* [*Without Measure*] (Belgrade: Nolit, 1986, henceforth *BM*), 91.
- 11 Milan Dedinac, letter of 15 February 1927, *The Legacy of Marko Ristić*.
- 12 *BM*, 232–3.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 233.
- 14 Ristić started his PhD study in Philosophy in 1927, but never finished it. The surviving drafts of his doctoral thesis, ‘La Métaphysique des faits divers’ (‘Metaphysics of News’), focus on the flaws of traditional metaphysics, circulation of news and the category of the dialectic moment (Ristić 1985: 243–54).
- 15 G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Metaphysik’ [‘Metaphysics’], in *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie II* [Lectures on the History of Philosophy II]. Vol. 19, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1986), 162.
- 16 Marko Ristić, ‘Dignité et Servitude du Traducteur’, *Babel* 9, no. 3 (1963): 123–4.
- 17 Oskar Davičo, *Crno na belo* [*Black on White*] (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1962), 9, 20, et passim.
- 18 The first Summit was attended by Afghanistan, Algeria, Yemen, Myanmar, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Congo, Cuba, Cyprus, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Morocco, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yugoslavia. Some historians erroneously suggest the Bandung Asian-African Conference (18–24 April 1955, Bandung, Indonesia) was an antecedent for the establishment of the non-aligned movement, but this is erroneous since nonalignment as a concept and political strategy emerged distinctly only in the period 1956–61 and some key figures in the movement like Tito and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana were not present at Bandung. For survey, see *The Non Aligned Movement and the Cold War*, ed. Nataša Mišković, Harald Fischer Tine and Nada Boškovića (London: Routledge, 2014).
- 19 Ristić and Popović, *Outline*, 116–17.
- 20 Josip Broz Tito, ‘Address to the Sixth Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-aligned Countries’, Havana, September 4, 1979 (Red Hill, A.C.T.: Embassy of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 1979), 24.
- 21 See Bojana Piškur, ‘Yugoslavia: Other Modernities, Other Histories’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2019): 131–9; Ana Sladojević, *Slike o Africi/ Images of Africa, Non-aligned Modernisms, Vol. 1* (Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2015).
- 22 On such operation, see Homi Bhabha, ‘The Third Space’, in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed., Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart 1990), 210.
- 23 Aimé Césaire first travelled to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1935, when his visit to Martinska island, off the Adriatic coast, prompted him to start writing *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (*Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, 1939).