Citizen Action

Political Performance after Yugoslavia

Adair Rounthwaite

Marta Popivoda’s film Yugoslavia, How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body (2013) samples media footage to analyze the public performances that defined Yugoslav statehood from 1945 through its dissolution in 1991–1992. The flow of images shows masses of bodies moving in formation, from the amazingly precise coordination of group gymnastics to the seething anger of protests and riots. Over the images, Popivoda layers an introspective voiceover reflecting on the formation of her own political subjecthood as someone born in Belgrade in 1982.

I’m juxtaposing three memories. My grandparents used to recall that back in those days of utopia, those who bitched about the collective were sentenced to a silent room, because of the collective’s fear that bitching voices would disintegrate it into millions of atoms. For my parents, it seems to be a naïve and primitive, nondemocratic collective. Today, everyone can speak, even bitch, but it’s meaningless, because there is no collective to be threatened. (Popivoda 2013)

At the film’s end, a text appears: “This film is dedicated to our communist and antifascist grandparents, who built a socialist society, and to the new leftist scene in Belgrade, so it may become a historical necessity.” Popivoda’s description of bitching, combined with the film’s dedication,

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poses the question of the relationship between different kinds of collectivity. On the one hand, she casts the collectivity of the Yugoslav and subsequently the Serbian state as points of disidentification for herself and her family, and on the other, she highlights belonging to chosen collectives of political solidarity. This framing gives us two different perspectives from which to view Yugoslavia: first, Yugoslavia as problematic framework of the nondemocratic collective; and second, Yugoslavia as the product of an emancipatory impulse that Belgrade’s activist scene hopes to bear forward into the future.

Certain performance practices of the past two decades articulate a tension between forms of solidarity and political imagination inherent in the Yugoslav project, on the one hand, and the nation-states that have run parallel or subsequent to the historical unfolding of that project, on the other (the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia up to 1991–92, and then the successor states to which Yugoslavia’s disintegration gave rise). These performance practices concern the concrete activities that constitute the subject as a citizen in the successor states. The artists mine those performances of citizenship for ways in which citizens can push back against the definition of what constitutes their agency within the framework of the ethno-nationalist nation-state. Slovenian theorist Rastko Močnik labels the political modus operandi of the successor states “post-socialist neofascism,” in which the nation operates as an “identitary community” organized around the ideology of national culture that indexes belonging (Močnik 2016:610–12). In this context some artists are producing work that calls into question the legitimacy of national communities: Grupa Spomenik (the Monument Group) engages in art as a political activity in order to ask how the wars of the 1990s in Yugoslav territory might be responsibly commemorated. Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša, three artists who changed their name to that of the xenophobic Slovenian former prime minister, carry out a performance at the Berlin Holocaust memorial with which they interrogate the terms of their own entry, as Slovenian citizens, into the European Union. Artist Slaven Tolj repeatedly rams his head against the wall of a gallery in an attempt to destroy a family heirloom with fascist associations, and also plants a forest of dead trees on the site of a 1941 mass execution by Croatia’s fascist Ustaša regime.

Across these practices, commemoration emerges as a paradigmatic performance of citizenship in two ways: First, commemoration is an urgent political and intellectual issue in the former Yugoslav territories, where it concerns not only the wars of the 1990s but also the genocide committed during World War II (see for example Jurlina 2014; Pavlaković 2013; Rädle 2015). Second, as Mechtild Widrich demonstrates and as I discuss below, commemoration necessarily addresses a public audience; it is not a private act (Widrich 2014:167). As such, commemoration highlights the extent to which citizenship needs an audience, both in the sense that citizenship involves the public performance of certain rights and responsibilities, and in that the spectatorship of public performances of nationhood shapes the subject as a citizen. If Europe has a tradition of national theatre as an expression of the voice of the people and a locus for cultivating citizenship, the practices that I address here might be understood as forms of national theatre that seek to problematize the nation and the types of belonging citizenship compels and forbids, and to activate new constellations of performance and spectatorship.1

Key questions raised by these artists in their interrogations of the citizen include: How can we understand the relationship between the citizen and the nation when the nation is compar-

1. This is not to downplay the political role of actual national theatres in this region. Particularly important in this respect has been the outspokenly radical artistic program pursued by Marin Blažević, director of the Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka. He collaborated in that venture with Oliver Frljić during the latter’s tenure there as artistic director from 2014 to 2016, when Blažević was head dramaturge.

Figure 1. (previous page) Slaven Tolj, Ledena kiša (Freezing Rain). Temporary memorial at Dorščina Memorial Park, Zagreb, under the auspices of Virtualni muzej Dorščina, 2014. (Photo by Darko Šimićić)
atively new and thus always defined temporally relative to another state? In this context, does ethical commemoration necessitate an address to the state’s borders and to what lies beyond them? In what ways are both the state’s control of its population and the subject’s possibility for resistance grounded in the body? What does genocide destroy, and how can citizens of a state that has committed genocide exercise agency without perpetuating genocide’s logic?

A central stake of the performances discussed here is a critique of the potential commodification of memory culture in postconflict states. Though diverse in their tactics and affective tones, the works all seek to make the materiality of the monument dialogical or process-based. They do so in order to displace the role of the static monument as inviting identification with an imaginary, nostalgic nation. Instead, the artists’ various substitutes for and additions to the monument ask viewers to take responsibility for the act of locating themselves relationally in the present. Importantly, this critique of commodification doesn’t polarize mainstream culture and experimental art practice, but reflects an awareness in the region of the former Yugoslavia of how even Yugoslavia’s heritage of conceptual art has become commodified (Dević 2014:78).

As historians of this region have established, Yugoslavia constituted a networked cultural space with substantial traffic among its republics, particularly the major cities of Zagreb, Belgrade, and Ljubljana (Denegri 2006). The period following the breakup of the country in 1991–1992 and the ongoing tumult of the 1990s saw the fragmentation of Yugoslavia’s art history among the successor states to ideologically enable the construction of new national art histories (Ilić 2015:16–17). In the past decade, however, historians, curators, and artists have begun the project of constructing a new Yugoslav art history. This work aims not only to strengthen historical connections among practices in the region, both before and after the war, but more ambitiously to use Yugoslavia’s particular history of communist, antifascist struggle in order to connect with art practices in other places engaged in resistance against the global capitalist order. Important in these conversations are considerations of how art practices critically navigate—or fail to navigate—the successor states’ imperatives of ethnonationalist nation-building (Vesić 2009). Concerning art production after the 1990s, we should understand this work as situated relative to at least two national histories: of Yugoslavia and of the particular successor state the practice addresses, while paying attention to how that double contextualization problematizes the concept of a national art history as such. The former Yugoslavia’s historical circumstances demonstrate that a national art history can’t be sustained as a singular framework. At the same time, it is not possible to dispense with national frameworks, because so much creative work in the region post-1990s engages with them explicitly.

The artists I study here—unlike Popivoda, who comes from a younger generation—all had adult experiences both of socialist Yugoslavia and of the wars. In choosing artists from across three of the biggest republics, I attempt to identify a strand of artistic practice characteristic of the broad post-Yugoslav space. But this also, somewhat ironically, reenacts an approach historically taken in Yugoslav culture and politics of recruiting representatives or participants po ključu (by key) from across the republics in order to generate a representation of national unity. Simultaneous to considering these artists from this broad perspective, it is important to keep in view the different trajectories that each successor state has followed since the 1990s. Of particular importance is that Slovenia and Croatia are European Union member states (joining in 2004 and 2013 respectively), while Serbia lies just beyond the EU’s borders, though European integration and control are pressing issues for many artists both inside and outside the EU.

Finally, I want to emphasize that while the performances here address atrocities in the history of

2. See for example the approach taken in Bago and Majača (2012). The lectures and discussions held in 2015 in Budapest at the Former West event “There Is a Crack in the Museum of History: Is that How the Future Gets In?” also pay particular attention to the Yugoslav context within a larger discussion of contemporary fascism and the relationship between art and culture in current antifascist struggle. For video footage see Former West (2015).
Yugoslavia, including in some cases the wars of the 1990s, none of them are simply determined by that history. This is important to keep in mind because, as Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača have argued, the traumatic past of the region (and in particular of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is also outside the EU) has functioned as part of the branding of its art and cultural production “by the ‘stable’ and ‘well-ordered’ Western democracies, apt to humanitarian exoticism and fetishization of the ‘suffering of others’” (Bago and Majača 2010). Paramount to moving beyond that exoticization is the recognition that post-Yugoslav critical practices tend to deal with the wars of the 1990s not as isolated to the Balkans, but as components in a historically deeper and globally wider network of events that implicate the inhabitants of Western democracies throughout the 20th century and up to the present.

Performing Citizenship in a Postsocialist Context

Critical theorists addressing the post-Yugoslav situation use the term postsocialism but in a way that is deeply suspicious of the ideology of “transition” to capitalism that the term implies in more mainstream media and political discourse. Boris Buden has written scathingly about the ideological infantilization of postcommunist societies and their inhabitants, whom politicians and the media portray as children in need of assistance. Buden argues that in treating postcommunist nations as if they are in the early phases of development, Western societies foreclose the possibility of emancipatory action and conflate democracy with capitalism, cynically offering up their own status quo as the goal towards which transition must move (2010:18–20). In their volume Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics after Yugoslavia (2015), Srecko Horvat and Igor Štiks take a similarly critical approach towards liberal political and academic discourses of transition. Horvat and Štiks argue that the never-ending period of transition engineered by the EU along with the World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund accelerated privatization and deregulation while aiming to minimize the role of the state. This created conditions in which public works, lands, and services could be pillaged by the same political elites who had managed the so-called interethnic conflict, ultimately delegitimizing both the EU and the candidate countries’ political classes (Horvat and Štiks 2015:5–6, 10). Horvat and Štiks’s work as well as Buden’s reflects a frequent move in critiques of postsocialism to problematize the role of Europe and to give the lie to its promises of economic bounty and freedom of movement.

The EU treaty defines citizenship in the union as following from citizenship in a member state, meaning that for each individual, EU citizenship is anchored to the terms in which citizenship is defined within their “home” country. Writing in the journal of the Belgrade-based theory collective Teorija koja Hoda (TkH), or Walking Theory, Janelle Reinelt argues that both republican and liberal models of citizenship are in danger of replacing concrete participation with the mediatized performance of political power, ultimately foreclosing the inclusivity that citizenship promises (2011:102). Reinelt sees a potential response to that foreclosure in the way that citizenship connects the political arena and performance, via citizenship’s aspects of role-playing, performing, representation, and social agency (98). Identity politics must continue to play a role in political theatre, Reinelt argues, to avoid the production of a neoliberal subject whose interests and specificity are masked (104).

Reinelt connects theatre and citizenship specifically via the concrete acts of representation that bring citizens into being. TkH editorial collective members Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović, in a 2012 roundtable on precarity with Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Isabell Lorey, and Jasbir Puar, express concern about the way in which discourses on performance’s “imma-
terial” nature can obscure conditions of labor and hamper resistance to inequalities (Puar 2012:175). The power of the citizen as a figure in performance lies in the ability to draw attention to the detailed material processes by which bodies become knitted together with national ideology. The practices I discuss here take the body—the object of biopolitical control exercised by the state and by unified Europe—as the area of visible action.

Grupa Spomenik

Grupa Spomenik, or the Monument Group, created in 2006, produces public space for a political and critical-ideological discussion of the wars in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and their consequences (Tomić 2017). Grupa Spomenik evolved out of a forum that responded in 2002 to the competition announced by the city of Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, for designs commemorating “the fallen fighters and victims of the 1990–1999 wars (including those killed in the NATO bombing)” (Grupa Spomenik n.d.). Grupa Spomenik calls itself a “New Yugoslav” collective, making explicit the appropriation of Yugoslavia’s history to assert an intervention in the present reality of the successor states. Grupa Spomenik’s work focuses on the question of how to speak publicly about genocide as a global phenomenon and in particular about the wars of the 1990s in the former territories of Yugoslavia. Theatre historian Branislav Jakovljević, an occasional collaborator with the group, in conversation with founding member Milica Tomić, has stated that Grupa Spomenik, along with Tomić’s related initiative Četiri lica Omarske (Four Faces of Omarska), is among the few initiatives in the area of the former Yugoslavia, artistic or otherwise, that insist on addressing the atrocities of the 1990s. Moreover, Grupa Spomenik does so outside of the point of view of specific ethnicities or national elites, in order to open the possibility of a common ground for memorialization (in SHC [2011] 2014).

Grupa Spomenik is a shifting collection of collaborators. Among its most consistent members are Milica Tomić, an artist; Branimir Stojanović, who pursues a practice located between philosophy, art, and psychoanalysis; activist and writer Nebojša Milikić, a cofounder involved from 2002 to 2007; Dr. Damir Arsenijević, founder of the Psychoanalytic Seminar Tuzla in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who joined in 2008; Jasmina Husanović, chair of Cultural Studies at the University of Tuzla; and Pavle Levi, a professor of film and media at Stanford University. The seeds of their activity began in November 2002, when a group of artists and theorists led by Tomić were meeting under the name Razgovor o umetničkom delu (Discussion of an Artwork). To one meeting of the group, Milikić brought the city of Belgrade’s memorial competition announcement, which led to a discussion of it among approximately 50 people present (Tomić 2019). Razgovor o umetničkom delu functioned as a forum not just for exchange among cultural practitioners, but also with other groups of diverse political orientation, including veterans’ organizations and an association of parents whose children were killed in the NATO bombings. In their discussion of the city competition, participants recognized the importance of the Serbian state’s acknowledgement of the relationship between politics and art, but ultimately found the terms of the competition unacceptable. They called for its cancellation, demanding that the city replace it with a public discussion open to all interested participants in the territory of the former Yugoslavia (Vreme 2003).

One of the group’s key objections to the call was the leveling of different dead into a single category of victims. In a 2010 text, Grupa Spomenik argues that the monument’s title inaugurated a series of renamings “that competed with each other as they attempted to describe the reality they pertained to: instead of Yugoslavia, the former Yugoslavia; instead of war victims, a failed description: all the victims of the wars, including the victims of the NATO bombing campaign” (Monument Group 2010:199). They point out that in this context, “fallen fighters” was not a generic term for dead combatants but was associated with the communist Partisan struggle against fascism during World War II. Lea David elaborates on how the slippage between categories of victims held a strategic political value for the Serbian government (2014). After the fall of Slobodan Milošević in 2000 and his extradition to the Hague Tribunal to stand trial
for war crimes, when Serbians were optimistic for a quick entrance into the EU, the proposed monument seemed poised to enact a delicate political choreography, dancing between commemorating the victims of the war and acknowledging Serbia’s culpability. Politicians found themselves cornered between international observers who wanted to see Serbia acknowledge its role in the genocide and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo, and who would read such an acknowledgement into the proposed monument, and the mainstream Serbian public itself. For the latter, the inclusion of those killed in the US-led NATO bombing in retaliation for Serbian aggression in Kosovo would indicate that the monument would commemorate Serbian victimhood.

These kinds of slippage, in which political revisionism enables commemoration to entrench epistemological and corporeal violence, are the primary target of Grupa Spomenik’s critique. The group as such came together in 2006 after Razgovor o umetničkom delu disintegrated in 2003 due to political disagreement. The newly formed group decided to end all dialogue with Belgrade’s Municipal Assembly and establish an organization that they considered a monument in and of itself, with each public discussion of the wars of the 1990s functioning to help build the monument (Tomić 2017). Note that while the group’s name is usually translated in English as simply Monument Group, its connotation in Serbian is more like Monument/Group or Monument-Group—a monument that is a group and a group that is a monument. Eventually in 2012, the city’s municipal assembly, after much prevarication and various changes to the memorial’s title, erected a nonfigurative monument designed by students of the architecture faculty. That monument continues to be the subject of controversy.

Grupa Spomenik’s work is difficult to describe at a concrete level because it takes so many forms. In some instances, it resembles recognizable forms of contemporary art, such as Politics of Memory—Monument of Transformation at the 2007 Prague Biennale. For this venue, the group created what they called a “participatory object” or “distributive monument,” which was reminiscent of the stacks of paper of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Their Politics of Memory was made out of copies of the publication Politics of Memory, which was composed of transcriptions of conversations among the group about the politics of commemoration and the evolution of their work together. They presented the booklets in brown cardboard shipping boxes, piled together on a wooden pallet on the gallery floor, with the tops open so that viewers could take copies of the publication. Placed together, the boxes effectively created a minimalist sculpture, while at the same time asserting an unadorned, pragmatic aesthetic geared towards the expedient distribution of information. In a parallel to Grupa Spomenik’s assertion of the group itself as a mon-

4. For atrocities committed in Kosovo after the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Milošević was indicted in 1999 for war crimes by the United Nations’ International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. His trial began in 2002. On 11 March 2006, while the trial was still going on, Milošević was found dead in his cell. An autopsy determined that he died of natural causes (UN ICTY n.d.).

5. On the topic of revisionism, see group member Damir Arsenijević’s critique (2007) of the way that a supposedly liberal, pro–civil society attitude in the political sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina can enact historical revisionism. Arsenijević argues that such revisionism disavows the history of both Yugoslavia and socialism, in effect promoting the further ethnic division of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

6. See Pandurević (2012) about an incident in which the mayor of Belgrade was prevented from laying a wreath on the monument by a group of family members of the dead, who objected to the monument’s aesthetic abstraction and its lack of religious imagery or victims’ names.

7. Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–1996) was a Cuban-born, New York–based artist whose work of the late 1980s and 1990s mediated powerfully on questions of love, activism, and loss in the context of the AIDS crisis. Gonzalez-Torres created numerous works using everyday objects such as posters and foil-wrapped candies placed in stacks or piles in the gallery. Viewers could take these items with them, thereby enacting a kind of commemoration, and the host art institution would subsequently replenish the work, creating an endless cycle of depletion and regeneration. For more on Gonzalez-Torres see Ault (2006).
In other situations, Grupa Spomenik presents its work in the form of lectures or collective discussions concerning the legacy of atrocity and the political subjects to which it gives rise in the present. In 2012, for the exhibition *Grupa Spomenik: Yugoslavia Studies*, curated in Zagreb by Bago and Majača, the group made their first major show into an opportunity to work with the public on editing and producing a book about their practice. The gallery space was organized with various signs hung from the ceiling, including “Alienation,” “Production,” “Media Interface,” “Interpellation,” and “Collectivization,” with information about the group’s projects, screens with video footage of earlier dialogues, and blackboards to facilitate collective work and discussion. The signs created spatialized stations that encouraged participants to physically navigate the themes of the group’s work, stressing the connection between the planned book and the process of dialogue with the public.

The group has also performed lectures and discussions as part of its project *Mathemes of Reassociation*, which addresses the forensic exhumations conducted by the International Commission of Missing Persons (ICMP) of victims killed in the 1995 Srebrenica genocide. The ICMP undertakes what is referred to as the “reassociation” of bodies through forensic assembly of fragments often scattered across multiple mass graves. Once 70 percent of a corpse has been recovered, it is buried in accordance with Islamic religious tradition. Each body is assigned a number to enable reassociation, with different parts of the number coding information such as where certain fragments were found. Grupa Spomenik’s project adopts these identification case codes as “mathemes,” precisely as a way of calling into question the logic of forensic science and its counting of victims. The matheme, Jacques Lacan’s term for a

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8. This show was organized in the framework of the project *WEIYTH: Where Everything Is Yet to Happen: Exposures* (see Delve 2012).

9. The Srebrenica genocide was a large-scale massacre in July 1995 during the Bosnian War, which took place in and around the town of Srebrenica, a UN-designated “safe haven.” Over 8,000 Bosniaks, mainly men and boys, were executed by the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska, under the command of Ratko Mladić and with participation from the Scorpions, a Serbian paramilitary unit. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia unanimously ruled the massacre a genocide in 2004 (Taylor 2015).
A mathematical formula capable of expressing conceptual contents or sets of relations and stressing the infinity of possible contents (Lacan 1999), here becomes Grupa Spomenik’s tool for mapping the relations that enable genocide and returning subjectivity to victims (Grupa Spomenik 2009). The group engages the matheme as an attempt to perform a critique that can speak the truth about genocide and communicate that truth across time. In particular, the group uses the matheme to critique how the practice of systematic Islamic interment of the bodies assigns a religious identity to many people who saw themselves as secular Yugoslavs, reinscribing in retrospect an ethnically Muslim subjectivity, which was the erasure the genocide itself enacted (Monument Group 2011:64). In this respect, the group posits, the logic of recovery from genocide may itself be genocidal, wholly inadequate to the politics of emancipation (57). In the performance Pythagorean Lecture: The Irreducible Surplus Matter, for the 2009 Performance Studies international (PSi) conference in Zagreb, the group stressed that mapping the logic of genocide may involve stepping back from a focus on the body as a privileged witness. In this performance, a group of performers behind a curtain delivered a lecture expounding the group’s thesis on the identity politics of genocide. The voices emanating from behind the curtain discussed the subject of genocide, but because the speech was delivered alternately by different performers, it became hard to pin to a particular identity. The empty stage between the curtain and the audience stood as a void where the body was absent, but also as a space of openness or potential, marking the yet-to-emerge quality of the public discourse the group advocates. The group describes this “bracketing” of the body as a witness to trauma, in which the body is replaced by the matheme, as a strategy for mapping relations (58).

A hallmark of Grupa Spomenik’s approach is the careful attention it brings to material processes of how history gets produced, including the detailed mechanics of interpretation and editing and the ideological function of those operations. Essential to the group’s work is its systematic analysis of a given site paying attention to individual images and objects as well as to far-reaching transhistorical and transnational relationships. We can see this attention to making history and to the networked quality of atrocity in “Living Death Camps” (2014), published as a research dossier in Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth. In “Living Death Camps,” the group collaborated with a forensic archeologist to investigate two sites of atrocity that are now inhabited. Through noninvasive archeological surveys of Belgrade’s Staro Sajmište (Old Fairground) and a concentration camp from the Bosnian War in the Omarska mine, the dossier analyzes the conceptual connection linking these different genocides; the work investigates the possibilities for responsible government, community, and corporate stewardship of the sites (Forensic Architecture and Grupa Spomenik 2014).

10. This performance was the basis for the published text “Artist’s Intervention: Matheme” (Monument Group 2011).
The idea of citizenship is key to Grupa Spomenik’s work in the sense that their critique of the Islamicization of the Yugoslav Muslim subject underscores the continuity between the logic of the 1990s genocide and the status of national belonging in the ethnically identified successor states. Neither strategy, the group points out, can accommodate the idea of a citizen-subject who is ethnically different. Instead, in order to accord that person rights, the authorities recode difference as religious. The fact that the ICMP follows this logic of necessary religionization shows how perceptions of the Balkans are still characterized by ethnic division and by a lack of willingness on the part of the international community to see these countries as modern nation-states in which citizenship (at least conceptually) provides rights and protections regardless of identity. Whereas the Islamic interment of excavated remains seeks to link the murdered bodies to a specific religion, Grupa Spomenik prefers instead to see the bones as an unassimilable remainder of genocide (Monument Group 2011:72). The group’s psychoanalytically informed understanding of the subject arises from their attention to the roles of the unconscious and affect as both are implicated with attempts to commemorate, attempts that occur between social actors with their own investments in politics, identity, and power.

Grupa Spomenik’s work is part of a longer 20th-century history of artists’ attempts to find alternatives to the commemorative monument that, as Mechtild Widrich explains, address both the subject’s personal relationship to history and collective national responsibility for past atrocity (2014:144). While in some instances, such as the performance at PSi, the group insists on the bracketing of the body relative to genocide, they also perform versions of a politically empowered, secular post-Yugoslav subject through their presence in the public sphere as producers, researchers, and advocates. Activities such as Tomić’s advocacy for family members of victims of the Omarska camp, her writing concerning the legacy of violence in the former Yugoslavia, Arsenijević’s scholarly work, and the group’s public lectures are all acts in which they not only theorize but actively substantiate an ethically responsible public discussion of atrocity. In doing so, they draw attention not only to their agency but also to its limitations.

Widrich stresses the extent to which commemoration always involves performance in the public sphere:

11. Widrich looks in particular at the trajectory of contemporary commemoration in Germany, including at the staging of questions of nationality in the 1976 German pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and in the creation of the Berlin Denkmal, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (2005).
Commemoration is always a public act, not a private call to remembrance, a gesture that may be performed alone, but is in principle accessible to others, not a feeling or an internal representation. Commemoration is not memory in the sense of personal remembering, however powerful and necessary this may be. For it is this public nature of commemoration that makes it politically relevant. The commemorator shows others that she commemorates. (2014:167)

Grupa Spomenik’s activities as vocal and active citizens, combined with their work on excavating the ways in which Serbia has limited who can be citizens, underscore the extent to which the kind of public showing Widrich describes depends on privilege. Not only are some afforded less power to step into the public sphere and show, but Grupa Spomenik illustrates that in the case of post-1990s Serbia, the mainstream definition of the citizen who is able to commemorate actually forms a point of conceptual continuity with the atrocities that demand commemoration. This makes the violation that atrocity creates constitutive of the public sphere, but also renders it something that this public sphere must continually repress. Grupa Spomenik reintroduces into public debate that repressed material. It also focuses attention on the intersection of ideology and the material body, breaking the conceptual chain that binds citizenship rights to particular ethnic bodies. This concern with how to undermine the nation-state’s attempt to anchor citizenship rights to forms of identification based in the body is also the target of critiques from Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša.

Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša

In 2007, the artists Emil Hrvatin, Davide Grassi, and Žiga Kariž legally changed their names to that of the Slovenian Prime Minister, Janez Janša. Prior to changing their names, the three artists became members of the conservative SDS (Slovenian Democratic Party). Janša, leader of the SDS, was Minister of Defense during Slovenia’s breakaway from Yugoslavia in 1991. He was Prime Minister of Slovenia from 2004 to 2008 and again from 2012 to 2013. The pro-business SDS has enjoyed the support of the Catholic Church. Former Prime Minister Janša is known for nationalist rhetoric and xenophobia, particularly against people from other former Yugoslav states. Ironically, the former PM’s legal first name is actually the typically Croatian Ivan, from which he distanced himself by adopting the Slovenian name Janez. Janša was a strong advocate for Slovenia’s integration into the EU and NATO. In 2008, a Finnish television documentary accused Janša of accepting bribes from the Finnish company Patria in exchange for a military contract. Janša responded by suing the filmmaker who produced the documentary; he also exerted pressure through diplomatic channels. Finally, in 2013 Janša was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison. He served six months in 2014. His conviction was overturned by Slovenia’s Constitutional Court in 2015. In a 30 July 2007 letter they wrote Janša, the three artists quoted his own words from promotional materials sent by the party: “For us, there are no boundaries between our work, our art, and our lives, and in this respect, we believe we are no different from you. We live for what we create, and with your permission, we would like to quote here the words from the letter you sent us when we joined SDS: ‘The more we are, the faster we will reach the goal!’” (in Janša, Janša, and Janša 2008a:9).

The three artists all have independent practices that developed before and have continued since the name change. In fact, they stress that each undertook the name change individually (one Janez Janša changed his name back to Žiga Kariž at the end of 2008; in 2017 Kariž again changed his name to Janez Janša). They explicitly deny that the act of the name change was an artwork, instead asserting “personal reasons” when asked about their motives (Badovinac 2008:59). But as Aldo Milohnić points out, “personal reasons” itself should be read as a conceptual stance, in the sense that it activates several associations: it evokes the words of politicians who want to justify abrupt resignations without explaining them; emphasizes the artists’ status as “free” subjects able to avail themselves of civil liberties; and also provides a reason for the name change that is technically acceptable from the perspective of the state (2008:124–25). Whether
or not we choose to refer to the name change as an artwork, it establishes a framework of meaning that enables the subsequent individual and collaborative projects of the artists.

Jela Krečič argues convincingly that the “JJJ project” doesn’t exist outside of the media. The JJJ project uses the media as its medium, parasitically making media the space of artistic performance and thereby implicating the media’s agents as collaborators (Krečič 2008:117–18). The media in a country like Slovenia, which has just two million inhabitants, are vulnerable to appropriation. For a national media to create sufficient content in and for such a small pool of potential readers, there is a proportionately much greater likelihood of everyday encounters between average persons and journalists than in large countries. Thus, more opportunities for the exploitation of those encounters—by any number of agents, for various political ends.

Throughout what one Janez Janša referred to as the “permanent reality show” of their lives and interaction with the media, their personal documents including identity cards, bankcards, and passports bearing the name Janez Janša act like anchors in the bureaucratic reality of the name-change action. The artists exhibited their valid passports from 4 to 25 October 2008 at the Steierischer Herbst festival in Graz, Austria, alongside other framed documentation of the project. Sandwiched between plexiglass making both sides visible, the objects compelled fascination because of their status as things with tangible agency to allow bodies to move across borders, an agency that was temporarily arrested for the sake of the exhibition. The passports on display became a very concrete point of conflict between contemporary art display and the mundane administrative details of the artists’ lives (they couldn’t travel for the period of the show) (Kreft 2008:152). While some Slovenian critics, such as Zdenka Badovinac, see the artists’ occupation of media space as subversive, toying with questions of privacy and the fragile state of Slovenia’s fledgling democracy, others have been very critical of their approach. Marina Gržinič accused the Janez Janša artists of engaging in media exhibitionism with which they create a conformist apologia for Slovenia’s current political situation. Gržinič is critical in particular of the

12. I adopt here Amelia Jones’s shorthand “JJJ project” as a way of referring to the name change and its associated activities (2008:31–49).
artists spending money on personal documentation that reflects their name change, which she argues stands in offensively stark contrast to Europe’s *sans-papiers* who lack documentation and the citizenship privileges it affords.13

Whether the project is deemed a productive subversion or conformist reproduction depends on a given critic’s intuitive or affective relation to the work. This is additionally complex within Slovenia’s very small national art world, where practitioners often know each other personally—for example, one of the Janez Janšas was on the editorial board of the magazine that published Gržinič’s critique. But critics, despite their disagreements about the project, agree that the subject it addresses is one constituted within the administrative and technological apparatuses of the state.14 Miško Šuvakovič points this out in his discussion of Janša, Janša, and Janša’s reenactment of art collective OHO’s 1968 action *Mount Triglav*, in which three artists posed with their heads sticking out of a giant canvas cape, in imitation of Slovenia’s “three heads” mountain. The action had been previously reenacted in 2004 by members of the group IRWIN, whose work performs an “overidentification” with Slovenian national symbols and narratives. Šuvakovič argues that whereas OHO artists are ludic actors, and IRWIN artists are professional creators of visual art in a more conventional sense, the Janšas are subjects within a performative life praxis, which operates relative to the biopower of the postsocialist transitional state (2008:73).

Important to the project concerning the operation of biopower in Slovenia specifically is the country’s xenophobic drive to produce ethnically pure citizens in a context where, Badovinac notes, cultural participation from people who are not ethnically Slovenian is still the exception rather than the norm (Badovinac 2008:56). The three artists named Janša each originally had a name that indicated a particular ethnic or national identity: Slovenian Žiga Kariž, Italian-born Davide Grassi, and Croatian Emil Hrvatin (whose original last name literally means “Croat”). The name change erases the differences, transforming those identities into a unified ethnic Slovenianness, at the same time as it destabilizes the name’s ability to act as a guarantor of ethnic difference, thereby underscoring the impossibility of an ethnically pure nation. Janša, Janša, and Janša have also addressed the Slovenian drive to produce an ethnically pure population in 2007 act of signing “Janez Janša” in rocks near the location in the village of Ambrus where the Roma Strojan family was forcibly evicted from their home by the Slovenian government in 2006, an eviction that Prime Minister Janša supported.

The links among naming, ethnicity, and citizenship rights are central to Janša, Janša, and Janša’s 2008 collective performance, *Signature Event Context* (see aksioma 2014). This performance was the artists’ second joint appearance, and their first international event (Caronia 2008:136). It consisted of walks by the three artists through the corridors of Berlin’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (2005), designed by architect Peter Eisenman. Each artist started from a different, preplanned location. While walking, each wore a microphone and camera focused on his face and carried a GPS that transmitted the path of his peregrinations, carefully planned to trace the name Janez Janša to a website that could be viewed by visitors (fig. 8). Over the duration of the performance, each artist rhythmically repeated the phrase, “I am Janez Janša” in Slovenian: “Jaz sem Janez Janša, jaz sem Janez Janša...” Viewers watching the performance from the website heard the artists’ overlapping chants and saw their faces on the left-hand side of the screen. A box in the upper right documented the exact location of each of the artists, and the viewer was able to observe their movements as neon green lines sketched their paths on an aerial view of the monument, labeled on the screen as “Context.” Whereas witness-

13. See Gržinič (2008), and Krečič’s discussion of this debate in NAME Readymade (2008:184). The artists, in an interview with Lev Kreft, state that they place themselves in the position of *sans-papiers* in order to point out the difficulties undocumented people face (Kreft 2008:165).

14. Blaž Lukan argues that the project functions to penetrate the frame of biopolitics (2008:26).
ing the performance live might leave viewers with nothing more than a glimpse of an eccentric or preoccupied gentleman making his way briskly through the monument, viewing it online was experienced as a series of disjunctions: between the different information displays; between the nonsynchronous chanting of the three artists; and between the views of the artists’ faces, which made it clear the performance was happening at night, while the aerial image of the monument was taken during the daytime, with the nighttime walk traced on it in real time.

This work was scheduled to take place as part of Transmediale in Berlin in 2008, but was canceled by the organizers for reasons cited by the director Stephen Kovats as “juridical and legislative” and by curator Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez as “personal curatorial and ethical convictions” (in Janša, Janša, and Janša 2008b). Two days after the festival opened, the ban was reversed (Janša 2017). In this work, the artists moved from the periphery of Europe to a site that is the symbolic heart of the contemporary European definition of the human subject: a site that foregrounds the subject of human dignity through commemorating its genocidal violation. Blaž Lukan writes that the artists’ name change reaches into the “traumatic core of the Slovenian state and its transition,” and indeed, Signature Event Context is their work that most directly addresses that transition and the concatenated forms of historical trauma that define the citizen-subject of the new state (2008:16).

The performance takes its name from Jacques Derrida’s 1972 essay, which addresses J.L. Austin’s theory of the performative. Amelia Jones argues that the artists, referencing Derrida’s discussion of the empirical non-presence of the signer, “enacted themselves as traces in a haunted space,” each “mark[ing] his ‘presence’ but as an other” through naming himself as Janša (Jones 2008:48). Alongside this concern with identity in difference, important in terms of Slovenia’s transitional situation, is the question Derrida poses about context: “are the conditions [les réquisits] of a context ever absolutely determinable?” ([1972] 1988:2). Signature Event Context addresses different trajectories of movement across nested contexts that range from the monument itself at the micro level, to the European Union as a whole. The performance thus shares formal and conceptual common ground with Grupa Spomenik’s attempts to make visible how national and global power relationships come to bear on particular instances of commemoration. Through making these wider connections, both groups raise questions about how physical presence at a given monument can provide access to the history it addresses.
monument as a site to perform commemoration in the plentiful field of individual experience, Janša, Janša, and Janša perform themselves as technologized avatars, whose individual experience of walking the Denkmal is at odds with the meaning it inscribes in virtual and real space.

In inscribing the Janša name in the Denkmal, the performance brings another layer to the artists’ critique of the politics of ethnicity, this time in the wider context of the European Union. The artists’ travel to Germany as passport-holding EU citizens and their assertion of the right to enact the performance claims mobility across what Aihwa Ong in 1999 described as various zones of “graduated sovereignty” (1999:7). Ong uses the term to indicate the intersection of zones of control that do not necessarily follow national borders but that often contain ethnically marked class groupings, each with different rights and obligations. Across these zones, the logic of capitalist accumulation and travel favors the power and mobility of subjects who can respond “fluidly and opportunistically” to changing sociopolitical conditions (6).

Slovenia became a member of the internally borderless Schengen area in 2007 when it gained EU membership, a year before the Janšas’ Berlin performance. During the time of the performance, Slovenia held the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union.

In *Signature Event Context*, the artists enact their privilege of moving through the Schengen area to travel to Berlin, but their inscription of the name Janez Janša also marks the residual ethnic definition of different kinds of subjects, even within the supposedly egalitarian EU.15 Janez Janša is a name that to many Germans sounds foreign, generically Eastern European, and thus connotes residence or ethnic origin in the Eastern periphery of the EU. From a German perspective, the name signifies an ethnic identity, but, as discussed above, within the “JJJ project” the name enacts an erasure of legible difference among ethnically diverse regional neighbors. The work thus performs the dehumanizing inscription of the political and ethnic name by which the artists can enter as citizens into fortress Europe. In doing so, it reframes as politically relevant for Europe Derrida’s question about the condition of possibility of the performative:

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15. Krečič points out that the JJJ project enacts multiple crossings, not only across national borders but also between the media and art, and the personal and public sphere, and that it mobilizes these different crossings as a way of speaking about territory and regional relations (2008:186–87).
“Would a performative utterance be possible if a citational doubling [doublure] did not come to split and dissociate from itself the pure singularity of the event?” ([1972] 1988:17). *Signature Event Context* emphasizes the constraint posed by the citation of power necessary for the EU subject to speak in the public sphere, highlighting the ways in which the possibility of performing an EU identity remains tethered to an ethnic understanding of the subject in specific national contexts where the definition of the subject may be shaped by xenophobia. It is unsurprising that the *Transmediale* organizers found the performance controversial enough initially to cancel it. It displaces the openness of subjective experience that is the Denkmal’s central mode of commemoration with a network of constraints that underscore how Europe has not yet rid itself of the ethnically defined citizen. Ultimately, it proposes nothing less than a critique of the monument as one that enshrines the commemoration of the Holocaust as part of a normative political framework that even now covertly operates to control the movement and separation of populations.

In the work of both Grupa Spomenik and Janša, Janša, and Janša there is a critique of the persistent ethnicization of the citizen. Both projects attempt to open the figure of the citizen, defined within a set of violent and exclusionary constraints, into a freer and more empowered subject. They do so by alternately bracketing the body and in other moments drawing attention to the irreplaceable, embodied nature of particular subjects. Slaven Tölj, my last example, is equally concerned with the violent forces that define the citizen but pursues his critique differently: through invasive strain on the very bones and tissues of his own body.

**Slaven Tölj**

Slaven Tölj is important for the Croatian art scene not only because of his artwork but also because of the roles he has had in various arts organizations. Tölj is currently the director of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka. In 1988, upon returning from studying in Sarajevo to his native Dubrovnik, he created his own gallery as a way of fostering community in this city that was so important historically yet marginal to Yugoslav contemporary culture. The gallery’s success eventually brought support from the city that enabled
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him to cofound Art Workshop Lazarati/Club Otok (Island), a multimedia center—the only in Dalmatia to work continuously during the war (Pintar 2001:189–90). Janka Vukmir expands on the name of Club Otok to theorize the island as an essential concept for understanding Tölj’s work. Here “island” refers both to Dubrovnik as physically and culturally isolated during the early part of the war and to the island as a model for rearranging the critical discourse that cast Dubrovnik as marginal: “We were looking for marginality, but that presupposes a knowledge of the centre. [...] If we try to define just one centre, a centre surrounded by all these margins, it becomes surrounded from all sides and therefore is an island” (Vukmir 1997). In this view, Dubrovnik stands as an isolated territory problematizing the idea of the border and its associated discursive categories.

Whereas Grupa Spomenik and Janša, Janša, and Janša explore the limits of performance as an interdisciplinary practice, Tölj pursues a more classic body art practice, a tradition that is strong in this region. Tölj’s performances from the 1990s, works that respond to the war and his experiences serving in the Croatian army, are well known. I focus on two performances from the early 2000s: Globalization (2001) and Nature & Society (2002), connecting these to an outdoor installation he created in Zagreb’s Dotrščina memorial park in 2014. Globalization and Nature & Society deploy different imagery but are connected by Tölj’s willingness to do violence to his own body, and by how they address the postsocialist transition. In Globalization, performed at Exit Art in New York, Tölj sat on a folding chair at a small table with an ashtray and a large silver tumbler, and drank a liter each of Russian vodka and Jack Daniels whiskey. The artist reported feeling fine right afterward, but when he stood up he collapsed; he woke up three days later in a hospital (Bryzgel n.d.). For Nature & Society the next year in Zagreb, Tölj used a pair of deer antlers that he collected from his grandfather’s house after his death. His grandfather had originally obtained the antlers from a package of official gifts intended for Mussolini (Tölj 2018). Naked and holding the antlers to his head, Tölj charged repeatedly into the gallery wall, stopping only when the antlers broke, leaving gouges in the wall and damaging his spine. Throughout the performance, a blank slide was projected on the wall, casting a high-contrast shadow of Tölj’s figure wearing the antlers as he charged. Similarly, Globalization was starkly lit with a round spotlight on Tölj as in a solo theatrical performance or even stand-up comedy.

Figure 9. Slaven Tölj, Globalization. Exit Art, New York, 2001. (Photo by Slaven Tölj / galerie michaela stock)

16. Among the most widely known are the works of Marina Abramović and Raša Todosijević from the 1970s.

17. One of Tölj’s best-known performances during the war was a work of 1993, Valencia-Dubrovnik-Valencia, created upon his arrival in Valencia for the Youth Biennale after serving in the army. Tölj sewed a black button, a traditional Dalmatian symbol of mourning, onto his shirt, and then onto 11 more layers of clothes which he progressively removed, ending by sewing it onto his bare chest (Bryzgel n.d.).

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Bago and Majača describe their invitation to Tolj to perform as part of a project in Banja Luka, to which he responded with a simple poster recounting a banal event that he experienced in that city. They write that this act conveys “his pessimism and feeling of the futility and impossibility of the artist to truly act and communicate” in a way that ultimately “throws light on the very power of speech” (2009:38). This statement speaks broadly to Tolj’s performance oeuvre as a whole. His work highlights the power of communication precisely by presenting barriers in the communication process, rendering the act of performance itself as something that pushes beyond verbal content to relate differently to the audience. In this context, “communication” is never generic or neutral, but concerns specific genres and the types of speech they make possible. In Nature & Society, the blank slide projection on the wall, which we can read to address the frameworks of knowledge production in the academic disciplines of art history or film, gives way to the shadow of a monstrous man-beast and to the gouges in the wall, a kind of writing, illegible except in reference to the performance. Globalization, which starts as an opportunity to address the audience, disintegrates into an act of seeming machismo that renders the artist unconscious, temporarily (and potentially permanently, depending on the degree of alcohol poisoning) unavailable as a partner in dialogue.

Both performances explore the agency and mobility inherent in objects as opposed to human bodies. Russian vodka and US whiskey are not only associated with the “East” and “West” respectively, but are commodities evocative of the duty-free shops of airports and the consumable tokens of national culture to be purchased there. Tolj’s performance comments on globalization by turning his body into an inert object at the mercy of the deeply inequitable United States medical system even as it temporarily makes it impossible for him to return to his own country, due to his stay in the hospital to treat alcohol poisoning. In Nature & Society, the antlers refer to Tolj’s family’s fascist history. The antlers themselves only appear to be grafted to Tolj’s body in the shadow, but their destruction actually impacts his body in a very real and painful way. Amy Bryzgel quotes Tolj saying that the performance achieved a “cleans[ing of] his family history”—but that comes only through the sacrifice of the artist’s spine (Bryzgel n.d.). If the horns are a symbol of European nationalist-fascism (and they have functioned as such also
in the work of Tolj’s Slovenian colleagues in the IRWIN group), Nature & Society presents a citizen-subject unable to convert the symbol into empowerment, instead using it to damage his own body.

In 2014, Tolj won a competition for a “temporary memorial intervention” organized by the Virtual Museum Dotrščina. The Virtual Museum is a project initiated by urbanist Saša Šimpraga to address the memorial park built on the site of the mass executions held in Zagreb by Croatia’s fascist Ustaša regime in 1941. The project has the basic goal of returning the site to cultural memory, and marking its importance in the antifascist struggle. It was initially funded by the EU through the Active European Remembrance/Europe for Citizens program, and later garnered other forms of local funding (Banjeglav and Šimpraga 2012:23–24). Tolj’s work, Ledena kiša (Freezing Rain), involved the transportation of twelve beech trees that had been broken during unusual ice storms of February 2014 in Gorski Kotar, a mountainous forested region in western Croatia. Tolj “planted” the broken trees at the entrance to the park in an open greenspace, creating a dead forest. Silva Kalcic; in her text “A person is not a tree” (the title of which quotes famous Yugoslav writer Meša Selimović), argues that Freezing Rain evokes both the destroyed body and a broken community. She sees the work as a critique of the sanitization of nature and of the loss of historical memory accompanied by historical revisionism in the transitional and post-transitional periods (Kalčić 2015).

Whereas Grupa Spomenik demands the replacement of the sculptural monument with dialogue as a different kind of remembering, Freezing Rain activates historical memory by presenting a sculptural monument that will disintegrate. Typically, living trees and plants at commemorative sites create a neutral, timeless backdrop against which to reflect on the event commemorated. Tolj instead presented visitors with trees that were broken and destroyed in a particular recent event, and therefore disrupted the commemorative function. Moreover, the work is a monument that will disappear into the ground at Dotrščina, just like the bodies of the victims buried in the mass graves. The beech tree is native to this region, and if we read the tree as a metaphor for the nation, the work stresses that the function of the commemorative park is not to make beech trees grow. Rather, Freezing Rain frames the park as a place for connecting visitors to a temporarily unfolding practice of remembrance that must be painfully undertaken anew in every successive present—like Tolj repeatedly smashing his head against the wall.

Commemoration in Multiple Iterations

Despite the fact that Freezing Rain does not deal on a material level with the bodily remains of the victims of genocide, the work overlaps conceptually with Grupa Spomenik’s detailed engagement with the forensic excavation of sites of atrocity. Both draw attention to the different timeframes involved in genocide and its commemoration, including the moment of the murders, the decomposition of bodies, and the performance of commemoration. The works attempt to disrupt the spectacularization in the viewer’s imagination of any of these stages, and instead stress how events unfold through the material interactions of agents in a given situation. Moreover, all the artists discussed here emphasize that the enactment of subjecthood through commemoration is iterative. Grupa Spomenik does this in their ongoing series of discussions and interest in the endless flexibility of the matheme for expressing different kinds of relationships. The Janšas do it with their manic verbal and written reinscription of their name. Tolj manifests it in banging his head repeatedly against the wall or taking sip after sip until he passes out. The effect of this emphasis on iteration is to highlight the investment in a particular subject position that accompanies any act of commemoration. That subject position isn’t static but always in dialogue with its surrounding circumstances.

Throughout this interrogation of the relationship between subjectivity and commemoration, citizenship appears as a particularly powerful concept from which to demand new forms of commemoration that better enable collective freedom. In the postsocialist present in the former Yugoslavia, leftist cultural practitioners understand global capitalism as the key impediment to achieving that freedom. Milica Tomić stressed this in a May 2017 interview in which she
emphasizes the importance of the Yugoslav experience of the 1990s as a critical tool for understanding the current global situation, in which supposed ethnonationalist divisions disguise a war of capitalist interests: “Under the pretext of delusional national interest an economic war is being waged. We are the dark avant-garde of changes that are taking place globally today” (in Konjikušić 2017). Tomić explains that though her insistence on Yugoslavia as a critical framework has been perceived as militant, archaic, and nostalgic, its value lies in its potential to offer Yugoslavia not as something that concerns national belonging, but rather, in Viktor Ivančić’s formulation, as an idea that generates the specter of emancipation and engagement. Popivoda’s discussion of “bitching” with which I opened this article offers the historical Yugoslav subject evoked by contemporary critical practices not as a docile adherent of the system, but rather as someone who exercises critical thought and independent agency in both socialist and post-socialist contexts. By emphasizing solidarity across difference, and critical independence that is compatible with participation in historically specific and imperfect projects, these artworks are strong examples of contemporary global activism and cultural production.

References


Tolj, Slaven. 2018. Personal correspondence with author, 8 March.


