

Ana Dević

Bones, Muscles, and Connective Tissue: Tales of Collectivity

01/07

Failure, mishap, and defeat cannot be excluded from the program of those who are dissatisfied with the inventory of the past and the present, but everyone tends to fall down differently, in a direction in which they walked.

– Radoslav Putar, “new tendencies 1,” 1961

To the whole, we oppose the parts. As parts taken out of their whole or a togetherness of

several wholes that is of ourselves, individuals being in common.

Communism – this word again.

when I say we, I am counting you in
when I say we, I am talking about you too
and also you

when I say we, I am speaking from this space

We were one and more than one before.

– Marko Gutić Mižimakov, Karen Nhea Nielsen, and LilySlava8 & AmpersandG8,
Thank You for Being Here with Me, 2020

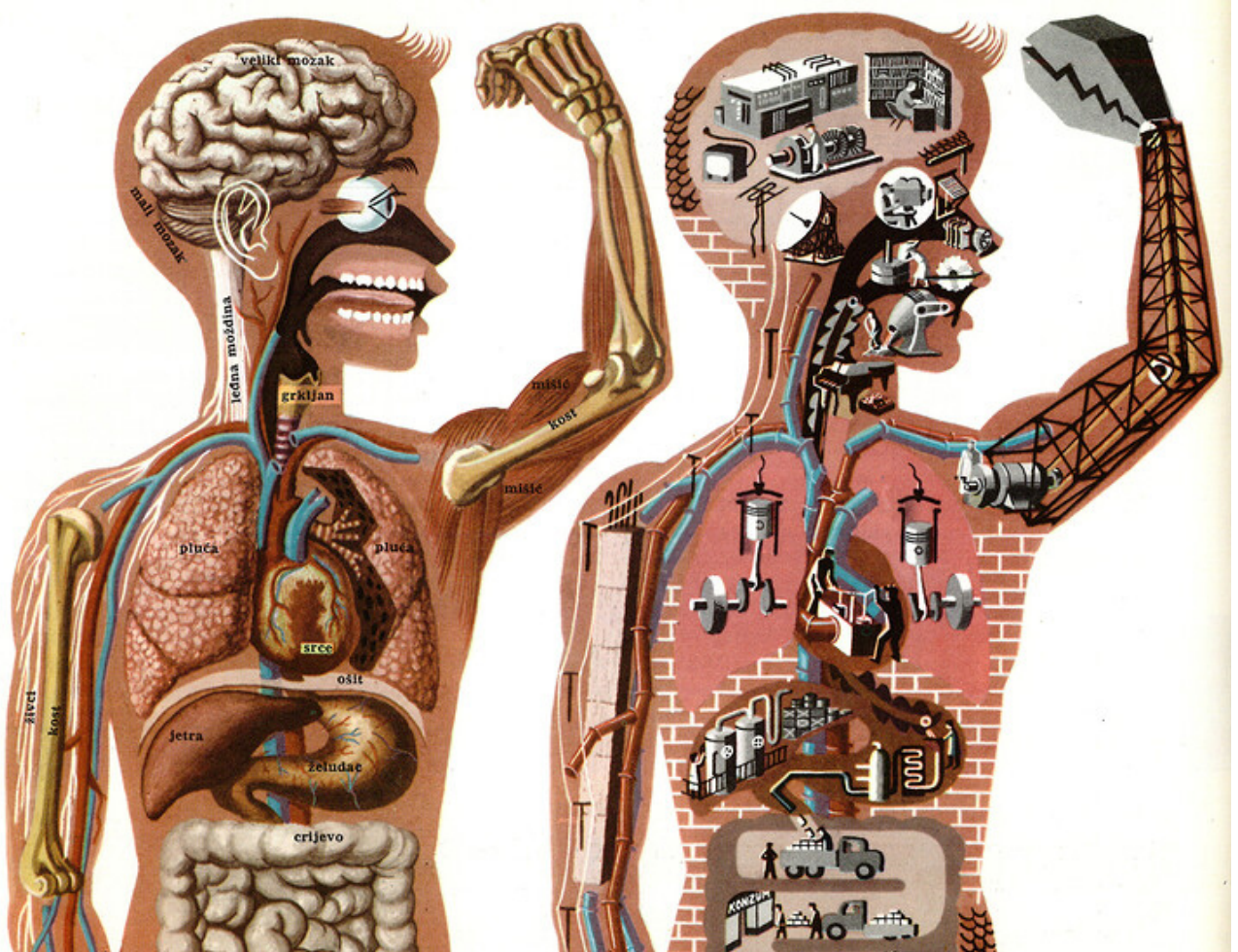
Old utopias have sobered up. Our collective body is tired and fragmented. How can it be recovered, reconstructed? One way, I think, is to approach the collective body as one might an actual body: through metaphors of the collective’s bones, muscles, and connective tissues. In this essay I trace examples of collective practices from WWII to the contemporary moment in the post-Yugoslav context, where collectivity is no longer defined by the essentialist determinism that communist ideology used to supposedly fostered the “inherent collectivism” of the “East.” I follow a specific line of forms and structures of artistic production – separate from mainstream discourses – that sought to redefine art’s social position, its role as a medium of social relations. I highlight paradigm shifts and trace the methodological and political connections between different generations that shared similar problems.

Ancestral Bones: Anti-fascist Partisan Struggle

The Yugoslav partisan anti-fascist struggle during WWII was a foundational act in forming the new, postwar, socialist society. The Yugoslav People’s Liberation Struggle (NOB)¹ was characterized by a massive response from cultural workers, who employed artistic production as agitation and propaganda, but also as educational empowerment.

Through the visual articulation of war

e-flux journal #119 — June 2021 Ana Dević
Bones, Muscles, and Connective Tissue: Tales of Collectivity



The World Around Us: An Encyclopaedia for Children and Youth (detail), 1960. Published in Zagreb, Croatia. Scan provided by author.

trauma, partisan art, with its participatory and activist character, involved heterogeneous artistic production, disseminated through partisan exhibitions and congresses of cultural workers during the war.

In the collective body of the Yugoslav region, the historical anti-fascist partisan struggle functions as the bones. In the upright human body, bones are the support structure, the scaffolding. Protecting and supporting the body, bones are the most permanent part of the body, its invisible infrastructure, its foundation, and this is the role played by the historical partisan struggle in the Yugoslav collective body.

The partisan legacy can be also considered a kind of “ancestral knowledge”: transmitted not only through official history, but also through cultural and social osmosis, directly, peer to peer. The partisans’ transformative knowledge accumulated in the bones of the collective body of postwar generations. The groundbreaking historical experience of political and cultural revolution achieved through this struggle was assimilated by the generations that followed.

Emancipatory artistic projects today still draw inspiration from the legacy of the social institutions established through the partisan struggle – free health care, education, and housing. The diverse cultural practices that accompanied the partisan struggle, many of which were collectivist and anonymous, played an integral role in constructing the new identity of socialist Yugoslavia.

The heterogeneity of partisan art – which sought, according to poet and writer Miklavž Komelj, to construct a new “revolutionary subjectivity” – reconfigured the boundaries between art and society. Komelj describes partisan cultural production “as a breakthrough through the impossible, ... a structural change, ... a discontinuation, caused by revolution in the field of art.”²

Yugoslav partisan art can to some extent be seen as an actualization of leftist cultural ideas circulating in the 1920s (e.g., the Dadaist magazine *Zenit*, the Belgrade surrealist groups) and the 1930s. It also created an entirely new cultural situation: a melting pot that mixed high culture and popular culture, bringing together a wide range of participants from different classes, generations, and genres who would not cross paths in normal circumstances.

The association of artists called Zemlja (Earth) was active from 1929 until 1935, when their work was officially banned.³ They initially came together to oppose and reflect on the effects of the economic crisis of 1929 and the growing threat of fascism. They exhibited in Zagreb, Paris, and Belgrade. In addition to educated artists, Zemlja included peasants and

workers. In the group’s 1929 manifesto, a fervent polemic about art and revolution, they called for urgent collectivization and the fusion of life and art. The group continued its radical artistic activity into the 1930s, and then in the 1940s several members became partisan militants. With this shift, art and life became one. Zemlja members Marijan Detoni, Franjo Mraz, and Antun Augustinčić fought alongside numerous younger artists; one of them, Vlado Kristl, later joined the group EXAT 51, which included painters and architects. In 1950s, EXAT 51 developed an experimental artistic synthesis of art and architecture. In addition to members of Zemlja, a circle of Belgrade surrealists also joined the partisan struggle. Poet and writer Koča Popović became the commander of the First Proletarian Brigade and was later made the chief of the general staff of the Yugoslav National Army. As Komelj notes, “Never before or after has a Surrealist poet had such an influential post in a Socialist revolution.”⁴

If the partisan struggle constitutes the bones of the Yugoslav collective body, we can also say that bones play a “revolutionary” role in the body, by enabling *movement*. The project of building socialist Yugoslavia through partisan struggle redefined the classes and introduced class mobility, based on the idea of social progress. Bones are also the locus of muscle production, since stem cells from bone marrow can be used to generate more muscle. From a different perspective, bones also symbolize the necropolitics of armed struggle and war – think mass graves and ossuaries. Marked by the tension between utopia and grim reality, the partisan struggle shaped future generations and helped construct the beginning of the Yugoslav collective body.

Muscles Moving and Hanging Around Together

Ideological disputes on the left seemed to be temporarily silenced during WWII, when all hands were on deck. But in the postwar year, the debates resumed. This period also witnessed a surge in artistic collectivity focused on the task of rebuilding society. If the partisan struggle built the bones of the collective body, the postwar years built the musculature.

The aforementioned EXAT 51 group was active in Zagreb from 1950 to 1956.⁵ The group positioned itself against “outdated ideas and types of production within the field of visual arts,” and aligned itself with the “social reality and social forces aspiring to attain progress within all fields of human activity.”⁶ Its strategy was based on the re-actualization of historical avant-garde movements, predominantly from the constructivist tradition. Although EXAT 51

members each signed their works individually, the group acted collectively to build a platform dedicated to the synthesis of all artistic forms and the abolition of the boundary between fine and applied art. It should be remembered that in early 1950s Yugoslavia, abstract art was considered controversial by official ideology. Following the publication of its first manifesto in 1951, the group and its work received harsh criticism.

Despite this criticism, EXAT 51 remained active, publishing texts and designing Yugoslav pavilions at world expos – like the yearly expo of the Croatian Association of Applied Arts in Zagreb. This latter example in particular shows the group's commitment to fusing art and life. Although EXAT's abstract artistic language is the opposite of the figurative directness of Zemlja and other partisan artists, the work of both groups illustrates, in different ways, what a synthesis between art and life can look like.

This way of looking at these art collectives is influenced by art historian Ješa Denegri's concept of "the other line." He describes this as a "mentality, and a reaction of certain artists and artists' groups to the existing cultural and social circumstances. It was, in fact, a way of shrinking back from being integrated into those

very circumstances and, thus, of searching for an independent artistic attitude."⁷

In the 1960s and '70s many groups withdrew from the political arena in order to produce alternative spaces of togetherness and collective determination, as happened in many other parts of the world during this time. Artist groups like Gorgona, OHO, and the Group of Six Artists were informal collectives that searched for more poetic and anti-systemic approaches to producing art, often at the margins of society and the official art system. These groups were concerned with creating refuges from common spaces and examining their own internal relations on a micro scale. If the partisan artists were the bones of the collective body, and the 1950s artist the muscles, the groups of the 1960s and '70s zeroed in on individual parts of that body.

The Gorgona group was active in Zagreb from 1959 to 1966. It consisted of artists and cultural workers who shared affinities but not a stylistic program.⁸ The group's activities were shaped by principles of anti-art, dematerialization, humor, and irony. Instead of a fixed program or manifesto, Gorgona's work involved transient and processual formats such as mail art, artistic walks in nature, and self-

04/07



IRWIN, *NSK Panorama*, 1997.
Photo: Michael Shuster.

organized exhibitions. Between 1961 and 1966 the group also published the anti-magazine *Gorgona*, which lasted for eleven issues, and which included collaborations with Op artist Victor Vasarely, playwright Harold Pinter, and conceptual artist Dieter Rot.

In 1966, when the members of *Gorgona* voted to terminate the group, another group came together in Ljubljana: OHO.⁹ Though OHO was only a loose collective, its founding gesture is considered to be the publication of its manifesto in 1966. Whereas *Gorgona* ironically deployed the bureaucratic language of socialism to examine collective dynamics within society, OHO's "telepathic Intercontinental group projects" (at one point there were two members based in the US) explored micro-relations within the group itself. OHO worked with what they called "reisms" – conceptual strategies that blended the ideas of Fluxus, land art, and body art. OHO members created artist books, objects, and situations that they claimed were "liberated from primary functions."¹⁰ As for the group's name, the website *Monoskop* explains its origin: "The term 'OHO' refers to the observation of forms (with the eye, 'oko', and ear, 'uho') in their immediate presence, and is also an exclamation of astonishment, said Marko Pogačnik, the group's leader: 'Because when we uncover the essence of a thing, that is when we exclaim 'oho.'"¹¹

In the 1980s, with the impending disintegration of Yugoslavia, art collectives turned again to the realm of politics, engaging in intense discussions about the political implications of artistic production. IRWIN proposed the "retro principle" concept, which highlights the emancipatory effects of repetition – the restaging or reconstruction of historical avant-garde narratives.¹² Rather than embracing the postmodernism that was all the rage at the time, IRWIN turned back to conceptualism – a part of the collective body of the past.

IRWIN employed strategies of self-historicization and historical reappropriation to question the relations between art objects, exhibitions, museums, collectives, and states. The group constructed its self-narrative around a refusal to take up passive and powerless artistic positions. The larger collective that IRWIN helped found, Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), created innovative (para)institutional forms that paralleled and counterbalanced existing social and state institutions. This was not just about the appropriation or mimicry of existing social forms; it was about creating a space of autonomous action. One such (para)institution, *NSK STATE IN TIME* (created by the groups IRWIN, Laibach, and the Noordung Cosmocinetic Cabinet), functions as "an abstract organism, a

suprematist body, installed in a real social and political space as a sculpture comprising the concrete body warmth, spirit and work of its members. NSK confers the status of a state not to territory but to mind, whose borders are in a state of flux, in accordance with the movements and changes of its symbolic and physical collective body."¹³

By the 1970s and '80s, as the collective body disintegrated, artists began to see the cultural production and revolutionary activity of the partisans as anachronistic, as something better left in the past. After a series of officially organized exhibitions of partisan art, some even regarded the work as merely serving the interest of reproducing the state. However, by the 2000s, a younger generation recuperated this history. After the breakup of Yugoslavia and the emergence of neoliberal capitalism, the history and collective values of the partisan struggle became relevant again.

The Group of Six Artists,¹⁴ active in Zagreb from 1975 to 1984, introduced the tactic of the "exhibition action" to bypassed mainstream art institutions. Exhibition actions took place in alternative locations – on the grass, in the street – where the group showed their works and projected slides and films on the outside walls of houses. Group member Mladen Stilinović once pointed out the difference between the groups of the seventies, which sought joy in collective work, and the groups of today. The collectives from the past dissolved when the enjoyment started to fade, whereas today, this enjoyment has given way to the attempt to bureaucratize pleasure through administrative structures and organizational protocols.

For decades these collectives were dominated by men. But beginning in the 2000s, many new female-dominated collectives formed, focused particularly on curatorial practices: BLOK; Institute for Duration, Location, and Variables (Delve); Kontejner (Bureau for Contemporary Artistic Practice); and WHW, among others. Numerous other independent groups and collectives came together in the former Yugoslavia in the 2000s: BADco., kuda.org, Prelom, How to Think Partisan Art?, Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić, KURS. Many of these groups looked to the emancipatory projects of socialist Yugoslavia to inform their own ideas about collectivity, socially engaged art, and progressive exhibition practices. Self-organized and extra-institutional, these collectives positioned themselves in opposition to the representational model that dominated local culture.

The most important muscle of the collective body is the heart. In the former Yugoslavia, recent years have brought new challenges that

threaten the very core – the heart – of many collective initiatives and groups. There is a growing fatigue with collective work, stemming from the pressure to sustain productivity in precarious labor conditions. Working as a collective body over the long term is made even more difficult by ongoing economic and political crises, from cuts to cultural funding to the rise of right-wing politics.

This breakdown in the historical continuity of the collective body is examined in the performance *The Labour of Panic* (2020) by the Zagreb collective BADco.¹⁵ The work can be seen as a metaphor for the collective body's struggle to survive amidst hostile conditions – not only austerity and nationalist politics, but Covid-19 and the ecological crisis. Since its formation in 2000, and until its recent dissolution after twenty years of working together, BADco. explored the protocols of performing, presenting, and observing. *The Labour of Panic* is the third part of their *Trilogy of Labour, Utopias and Impossibilities* (2018–20). It reflects on the uncertainty around beginnings and endings. As the group has stated, “To allow something to end and something new to begin, the infrastructural space itself must allow the possibility of change. That is the terrain where one outlines the contours and excavates the remains of that which cannot come to be and that which may yet occur.”¹⁶ Performed outdoors at night in extreme conditions – harsh wind, heat, mosquitos – *The Labour of Panic* shows how the collective body confronts external catastrophes and internal turmoil.



Neža Knez, Danilo Milovanović, Toni Poljanec, and Luka Erdani, *Y?* (still), 2019–ongoing. Multimedia. Photo: Toni Poljanec. Project updates: <https://www.facebook.com/goyugoproject/>.

Future: Connective Tissue

For more than a half century, the Yugoslav collective body performed enormous ideological and metabolic work, and became exhausted.

Rescued from the dustbin of history, it was turned into an “ur” collective body that neoliberal capitalism and the twenty-first century tore limb from limb – dismembering the collective body. Everyone took a piece – museums, galleries, archives, books. Where that collective body once stood is now an empty stage – which also means that new beginnings are possible. How can we build our collective body anew?

In addition to bones and muscle, the collective body is held together by connective tissue – ligaments, fascia, blood vessels, and so forth, linking all the parts of the body. This connective tissue plays a crucial role in the care of the body.

The generation of artists born in the early 1990s, when the former Yugoslavia was riven by genocidal nationalist wars, will probably be the last generation to be touched by the legacy of socialism – not through personal memory, but through remnants and traces of socialist architecture, history, and political values.

Y? (2019–ongoing), a project by artists Neža Knez, Danilo Milovanović, Toni Poljanec, and Luka Erdani, uses a literal remnant of the Yugoslav past – the Yugo car – to map new geopolitical terrains. In the 1980s, the Yugo was produced in the same factory that, a decade later, would produce arms used in the Yugoslav civil war. In its heyday the car was imported into Reagan’s America and, due to its extremely cheap price, sold in massive numbers. At the same time, the American media denounced it as communist and proclaimed it to be “the worst car in history.”¹⁷ The artists behind *Y?* drove a Yugo from the city in Serbia where the factory was located, through Europe, to the UK, and then took it by boat to New York, meeting with Yugoslav expats along the way. Travelling this route in a car named after a country that no longer exists was a poignant symbol of unfulfilled narratives of progress and modernization.

A series of collective performances spearheaded by Marko Gutić Mižimakov shows how collaborations that are loosely organized can still be affectively intense.¹⁸ The project centers on interactions between performers and their digital counterparts – kitschy animated figures called “affective clones.” This cloning points to the need to duplicate ourselves in order to fulfill the requirements imposed on us by capital. The project thus addresses the reality of precarious labor conditions, but also solidarity between human and transhuman communities, by creating an interspace where we can be (with) others.

The partisan art of the WWII period contributed to imagining a world that did not yet

exist. The new generation of artists has inherited fragments of this emancipatory past, which they use to sketch out a new vision of collectivity. Like the body's connective tissue, this new collectivity is flexible and fluid, but no less intense. Even within conditions of social and ecological collapse, the desire for collectivity continues to drive the formation of creative and affective communities inside and outside the art field. The tissue that connects body parts is the softest tissue, but also the most resilient.

×

07/07

e-flux journal #119 — June 2021 Ana Dević
Bones, Muscles, and Connective Tissue: Tales of Collectivity

- 1 This abbreviation, used in domestic and international scholarship, comes from the Serbo-Croatian phrase for "People's Liberation Struggle": *Narodnooslobodilačka borba*.
- 2 Miklavž Komelj, "Partisan Art Obliquely," in *Art As Resistance to Fascism* (Museum of Yugoslav History, 2015), 34–35, 19.
- 3 One of the most recent explorations of Zemlja, by curatorial collective BLOK from Zagreb, traced ties between the group and the Communist Party. See also the work of art historian Petar Prelog https://www.ipu.hr/content/zivot-umjetnosti/ZU_99-2016_028-039_Prelog.pdf.
- 4 Komelj, "Partisan Art Obliquely," 29.
- 5 The painters and architects who comprised the group were Vlado Kristl, Božidar Rašica, Ivan Picelj, Aleksandar Srnec, Vjenceslav Richter, Bernardo Bernardi, Zdravko Bregovac, Zvonimir Radić, and Vladimir Zaharović.
- 6 From the "EXAT 51 Manifesto."
- 7 Ješa Denegri, "The Reason for 'The Other Line,'" *Jugoslovenska dokumenta* (1989). Exhibition catalogue <https://www.avantgarde-museum.com/hr/jesa-denegri-the-reason-for-the-other-line-english-no6584/>.
- 8 Gorgona included sculptor Ivan Kožarić; the painters Josip Vaništa, Marijan Jevšovar, Julije Knifer, and Đuro Seder; the architect Miljenko Horvat; the art historians Radoslav Putar and Matko Meštrović; and the art historian, curator, and artist Dimitrije Bašicević (Mangelos).
- 9 Marko Pogačnik, Iztok Geister, Matjaž Hanžek, and Drago Dellabernardina. They were later joined by, among others, David Nez and Milenko Matanović.
- 10 The quote comes from Branka Stipančić. For more information, see <https://www.kontakt-collecti on.org/objects/421/oho-editi ons-dreja-rotar;jsessionid=CE8D0E597A86009BD8430C3F31CFCD14>.
- 11 See <https://monoskop.org/OHO>.
- 12 In 1983, IRWIN was formed in Ljubljana by the artists Dušan Mandič, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Roman Uranjek, and Borut Vogeltnik. In 1984, the group cofounded a larger collective known as Neue
- Slowenische Kunst (NSK), which was based on the "retro-avant-garde principle," an extension of the "retro principle." NSK acted as the fine arts wing of IRWIN, collaborating with the musical group Laibach and the Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater.
- 13 Eda Čufer and IRWIN, "NSK STATE IN TIME," [irwin-nsk.org, 1992 https://www.irwin-nsk.org/te xts/nsk-state-in-time/](https://www.irwin-nsk.org/te xts/nsk-state-in-time/).
- 14 Boris Demur, Željko Jerman, Vlado Martek, Mladen Stlinović, Sven Stlinović, and Fedor Vučemilović.
- 15 Ivana Ivković, Pravdan Devlahović, Ana Kreitmeyer, Tomislav Medak, Goran Sergej Pristaš, Nikola Pristaš, and Zrinka Užbinec.
- 16 See <https://rijeka2020.eu/en/program/dopolavoro/kazaliste/badco-trilogy/the-labour-of-pa nic-badco-hr/>.
- 17 See <https://www.caranddriver.com/features/a21082360/a-quick-history-of-the-yugo-the-wors t-car-in-history/>.
- 18 The series includes the following performance pieces: *Affective Clones & Whatever They Want* (Ana Jelušić, Ivana Rončević, Ana3, AnaG8, Ivana2 and IvanaG8, Marko2 and MarkoG8), 2018; *Iz tužnog u ono koje se kreće* (From Sad to Moving), (Nika Pečarina, MarQ2, and MitchG8), 2019; *Thank You for Being Here with Me* (Karen Nhea Nielsen, LilySlava8, and AmpersandG8), 2020; and *Performing Sites for Affective Clones* (Marko Gutić Mižimakov in collaboration with Lana Hosni, Sonja Pregrad, Nika Pečarina and Acurata2, LanAcurataG8, Svetlana3, Ona6, MarQ8.1 and MitchG8), 2021.