

Zdenka Badovinac
**Editorial: “The
Collective
Body”**

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e-flux journal #119 — June 2021 Zdenka Badovinac
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The Covid-19 pandemic has attacked not only our individual bodies, but our collective body as well. Through thirteen contributions by writers who are mostly from former socialist countries where the space of freedom is contracting once again, this special issue of *e-flux journal* asks what this collective body actually means, and what it has become.

These changes are not only happening in Europe’s former socialist countries. Something similar is also occurring in Greece and Turkey, where two essays in the issue originate. This is not to say that all is well elsewhere, that democracy is thriving in Western Europe and North America, for example. On the contrary, we see similar processes throughout the world – heightened surveillance through digital technology, expanding capitalism, hatred towards those who are other or different, populist movements growing stronger, an increasing number of authoritarian leaders.

What distinguishes the East and South of Europe from the economically powerful West is, among other things, the fact that these countries have failed to build a modern system of public institutions where experienced leaders have the deciding vote. They lack the long tradition of strong democratic mechanisms that should offer protection from the capriciousness of whoever is in power. At the same time, the various governments that have come to power since the fall of socialism have shown no interest in socialism’s democratic roots, which were very much alive in some places. Today, these countries are dominated by a brutal pact between neoliberalism and authoritarianism, with no end in sight. In this formation, collaborators from the Second World War are given legitimacy while socialism and its symbols are demonized. And, like everywhere else in the world today, the people in these countries are being brainwashed by a bombardment of information, important and trivial, true and fake, that they no longer even react to, let alone take a position on.

Despite the growing absence of clear discernment and reflection, resistance is building in the streets. The protests during the pandemic have not only been a way to stand up to power; they have also been massive cultural events. We now witness a return of the old Eastern European methods of inserting politics into every pore of public life – including public institutions, their staffing, and their content. When corruption, nationalism, and the power of institutional religion are all on the rise, when patriarchal values are again prevailing and anti-immigrant policies are sowing fear, and when governments are minimizing environmental problems, we also see a growing number of



Marta Popivoda, *Yugoslavia: How Ideology Moved Our Collective Body* (still), 2013. Documentary, 61 minutes. Co-written by Ana Vujanovic, it deals with the question of how ideology performs itself in public space through mass performances and counter-demonstrations using footage from Yugoslavia.

resistance movements organizing, which give birth to an alternative collective body.

To give readers a better sense of the voice of difference in this part of the world, I invited only women to write for this issue. Women, after all, are at the heart of many of the protests taking place throughout Central-Eastern and Southern Europe. They are victims of the new authoritarian pressures, but also important agents of transformation. These writers portray a climate of division between the memory of the great social ideas that once guided and connected us in a collective body, and the twin forces of nationalism and neoliberalism that each, in its own way, tears what we once called society into pieces.

In order to speak of a society, there must be a prevailing sense of comradeship and mutual solidarity among people. Otherwise, we can only speak of private interests. People are social beings, and today, when we spend most of our time isolated in our homes, what we miss most of all is the touch and immediate closeness of others. But our isolation is being preyed upon by those who want to make money off us, who exploit our pain to bolster their power. The women assembled in this issue write about how our collective body is shaped not only by our desire for closeness and care for others, but also by our fears, our disappointments, and our subordination. Especially today, when authoritarian politicians try to unite us under various populist movements and again attack international solidarity with ideas about “the national body” and “traditional identities,” we need to stand up for the collective body in its constant process of emergence and transformation.

Two contributions in the issue explicitly remind us of this. Ana Dević reflects on the use of bone, muscle, and connective tissue as metaphors for the collective body in former Yugoslavia. She positions the anti-fascist partisan struggle as the bones on which the muscle of postwar collective artistic practices grew. The connective tissue is the fluid, non-formalized collective body that is resilient in response to the present crisis. Iskra Geshoska also writes about “tissue power” – the kind that can join various singularities into a new collective body that emerges from our uncertainty and instability, and our fear of death. Fear, she writes, is what gives us the strongest sense of presence, and a responsive awareness of this fear can unite us in our common struggle.

Care is a term that has circulated widely in the art world over the past year. In contemporary discourse, “care” stands somewhere between ethics and politics, and mediates between the micro and macro spheres of life. The term also

reflects a difficulty in demarcating the boundary between ethics and politics today. Even our most private acts of care for others can be both ethical and political. Giving aid to others can compensate for failings in public systems of health, education, culture, elder care, child care, and so on, but also point to different ways that those public services can function. A number of our contributors address several dimensions of the question of care. Liana Fokianaki examines genealogies of self-care and the different, even conflicting, approaches to it, contrasting individualistic “self-betterment” with a self-care that benefits others. Fokianaki argues that self-care needs to move away from the neoliberal approach and the legacies of the heteronormative, white Western Enlightenment in order to become a radical political act.

Care is essential for our survival, but it can also become an instrument in the hands of those who increasingly curtail our space of freedom. Isolation, for example, is one form of caring for the health of the collective body, and Oxana Timofeeva compares techniques of isolation used in different historical periods to deal with leprosy, bubonic plague, and Covid. Timofeeva finds that measures taken to ensure the health and safety of the population can at the same time intensify a kind of obsessive neurosis in the psychological and physical well-being of the collective body. Similarly, Ivana Bago looks at the militaristic methods used to defend collective immunity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such defense mechanisms create a situation that Bago compares to autoimmune diseases, whereby a person reacts self-destructively to isolation, and to contemporary life in general, with growing dependencies on comfort, convenience, and pharmaceutical products.

Protests against the new authoritarian regimes have spread through all of Central-Eastern and Southern Europe. Protest and care for one’s family and friends are creating new communities – of angry, poor, and otherwise marginalized people. Art is playing a key role in the formation of the new collective body, as Agata Adamiecka-Sitek finds in the current protests in Poland. Women are at the center of these protests, and are, along with other protesters, creating a “community of anger” as a new collective subject. Even before the situation in Poland worsened, the space of freedom in Turkey had already contracted significantly. The country’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has long kept a tight rein on artists and cultural workers, who have now also been severely hit by the pandemic. Neylan Bağcıoğlu, Merve Elveren, Gökem İmrek, Saliha Yavuz, and the Omuz Dictionary Group write about how artists and others in the cultural field have responded to

deteriorating conditions by joining together in the informal Omuz network (*omuz* in Turkish means “shoulder”). Omuz is working to broaden mutual solidarity into a wider network that actively connects micro and macro politics. Nikolett Erőss discusses examples of long-term collaboration between artists and various unprivileged groups in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary: people living on the edge of society with no basic income or access to public services, women in rural areas, and Roma communities. One of the most important art and culture initiatives in Hungary today – and one that lacks stable working conditions – is OFF-Biennale Budapest, which provides a platform for all these efforts.

Artists and other cultural workers today, focused largely on their own local communities, often forget that the distribution of care takes place on the global level, and that geopolitics still plays an important role. Ana Vujanović writes that the collective body is wounded and cannot be healed until everyone – all groups and all regions – gain equal access to care. It is only when connections and exclusions in the wider international distribution of care are made more visible that we can reimagine our future collectivity. Azra Akšamija has developed a set of ethical and creative principles influenced by various local traditions and experiences of collectivity in her five-year collaboration with displaced Syrians in Jordanian refugee camps, where she worked together with Jordanians and Palestinians from the host community as well as with international researchers in her Future Heritage Lab.

The combination of the pandemic and the new authoritarianisms has not only affected the existential working conditions of artists and cultural workers, but has also intensified political and social pressure on the content of their work, which must contend with new priorities as well as the suppression of critical thought and ideas. Jela Krečič notes that Janez Janša, the authoritarian prime minister of Slovenia, recently stated that he expects to see more “state-building culture” during the time of the pandemic. Krečič discusses two concrete cases of so-called cancel culture: one from populist Eastern Europe, and the other from the liberal art world in the United States. For Krečič, cancel culture destroys a crucial social bond, an inclusiveness in which both agreement and disagreement can coexist.

The collective body exists in an eternal state of emergence and transformation. Its disintegration and new resurrection are dependent on current social configurations and our relation to the surrounding world. In her essay, Bojana Piškur advises us to take nature as our model, arguing that the forest ecosystem

requires that all trees are healthy and mutually supportive: no individual tree is ever more successful than the forest as a whole. For both Piškur and Djordje Balmazović – who made illustrations, specially for the essay, of this healthy interdependence of all living beings – the forest functions as a utopian socialist community. Raluca Voinea exposes the illusion that the idyllic countryside can save us from our psychoses and restore our connection to the social fabric. Referring to artists such as Alexandra Pirici, she proposes that plants can teach us about how to move and grow together without stepping on each other.

All of the contributors to this special issue of *e-flux journal* imagine a new kind of collective body, shaped not by nationalism, populism, media manipulation, or fake news, but by a critical stance towards the present conditions of work and life. These conditions began to worsen with the global economic crisis of 2008. The new autocrats exploited this crisis to launch a new critique of the “rotting West” and its financial and social institutions, and successfully initiated a return to the past – to religion, nationalism, and the illusory strength of national economies. They have also minimized the significance of planetary problems, of environmental crisis and climate change, and in some cases even deny that the pandemic exists. But the lesson of Covid for the entire world, and not just for our leaders, is that the interests of capital have interfered too greatly with nature. Indeed, one of the underlying causes of the pandemic is the destruction of forests – the plant world that the contributions from Bojana Piškur and Raluca Voinea urge us to learn from.

In parallel with our interference in nature’s ecosystems, we are also destroying our social ecosystems. Much has been written about these issues, and most of our contributors are no longer content to merely describe the situation. Most of them are putting themselves at risk through their activism, their participation in protests, their care for others and for nature, and their efforts to raise awareness about the importance of care and solidarity. The paths leading to the new collective body arise from everywhere, and together they form a living tissue that connects us, in all of our differences, but most importantly, in our desire to remain connected in these uncertain times.

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Translated from the Slovene by Rawley Grau.

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