
Impossible Histories is the first detailed English language study of the avant-garde arts in Yugoslavia. The term “Yugoslavia,” it represents a very ambiguous and volatile geographical, cultural, political and economical concept. While it refers to a country that does not exist anymore, “Yugoslavia” also marks a geographical and cultural space in Southeastern Europe, a space with a shared vocabulary of artistic and design practices.

The book focuses on cultural production—mainly in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia—spanning a time period of more than seventy years; a time period that began with the formation of Yugoslavia in 1918, and ended with its violent dissolution in 1991. Although this time frame bears a specific regional significance, it also reflects major global events: the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires in 1918 and the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991. Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković, the editors of the volume, take these historical parallels as no coincidence—their commentaries clearly resonate with the idea that art practices are inseparable from their historical contexts. They frame this argument through definitions of geo-political and geo-aesthetic identities of artistic practices. Furthermore, the book is built on a historical paradox: the country that disappeared through violent civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and NATO interventions, was the space for free exchange of ideas about modern art and design. This is just one of many “impossibilities” that are outlined in Impossible Histories.

The anthology combines scholarly essays with primary documents, many of which are published for the first time in the English language. Impossible Histories begins with two introductions, framing the historical and political context of Yugoslav art. It continues with sixteen scholarly essays and twenty-five primary documents on Yugoslav avant-gardes. With more than six hundred pages of text and unique black and white and color reproductions, the book is an encyclopedic source for this subject matter.

Impossible Histories is divided into four parts. Part I focuses on literary practices which radically shaped artistic production. Part II brings together seven essays on visual art and architecture. Part III deals with “Art in Motion”—theater, film, video art and music—including pop and rock music and phenomena like the group Laibach and Goran Bregović (composer for many of Emir Kusturica’s movies). With its twenty-five primary documents on the Yugoslav avant-garde, Part IV (Manifestoes) is an extremely valuable part of the book. It includes texts such as Rhythm 10, 5, 2, 4, 0, an early work (1974) by Marina Abramović, now an internationally recognized Serbian artist.

In her essay “Radical Poetic Practices,” Dubravka Djurić discusses the origin of radical avant-garde literary movements in Yugoslavia. These movements started with two brothers—Branko Ve Poljanski and Ljubomir Micić—whose identities speak about the Balkan ethnic complexities: they are both Serbs born in Croatia, who practiced in both Serbia and Croatia, and, in the case of Ve Poljanski, in Slovenia. Like other avant-garde movements of the time, such as the Berlin Dada group, the Zenitism movement of Micić was born from the traumas of the First World War. He published the avant-garde journal Zenit, which many authors in Impossible Histories refer to as one of the key avant-garde publications in Yugoslavia (Miško Šuvaković, Aleš Erjavec, Dubravka Djurić, Sonja Briski Uzelac and others). The journal had a very broad international perspective. Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International was first published in Zenit outside Russia, and El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg agreed on the publication of a Russian edition of Zenit in 1922.

But according to Djurić, Zenit was also a specific reaction to the conservatism of language. This reaction radically defined Zenitism and other avant-garde movements that followed. In Southeastern Europe, the language is considered a sacred and crucial part of national identities of small Balkan nations. Serbs, Croats and Slovenes often relied on great world powers—politically, economically, institutionally and culturally—leaving the domain of language as one of the very few independent elements of a national identity. Djurić asserts that it is precisely this autonomy of language and its association with the nineteenth century nation building that became the main target of the modernist avant-gardes in Yugoslavia.

Djurić’s essay continues with analysis of post World War II radical movements in poetry and in particular their visual vocabulary. Her essay also provides an important critical perspective. Many scholars of Serbian and Yugoslav modern art movements idolized the purity of form and radicalism of the early avant-gardes. Without being too polemical on the modernism vs. post-modernism issue, Djurić argues that most of the literary movements were male-only, even macho in character. By extending the post-modern critique of the modern genius here, Djurić positions her essay and the volume itself into a much broader discussion about gender and identity.

The contribution of Impossible Histories is manifold. At the very least, this book provides a healthy scrutiny of sometimes parochial cultural spaces of the Balkan nation-states (read: counter-Balkanization). It also
provides a broader (European and global) theoretical perspective for the origin and reception of the avant-garde movements in Yugoslavia, or what we know today as Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Republic of Srpska, Vojvodina, Kosovo and Metohija, Šumadija, etc. While this volume brings together divergent geographical spaces, it also successfully morphs other boundaries, namely those between visual arts, design, performance, and literature. At its most, the book provides a unique resource for readers outside ex-Yugoslavia. Through its powerful historical narratives, Impossible Histories maps out an emergent language of social criticism. It demonstrates a painful link between art and politics—both their alliance and artistic defiance to political hegemony. Furthermore, the book maps out an historical and social struggle of the avant-garde in both capitalist and communist Yugoslavia. This complicated set of relationships transcends the regional character of the book, providing an interesting perspective on the cultural politics of the avant-gardes.

Impossible Histories is a very detailed anthology, one that provides—in addition to its critical and scholarly aspect—numerous historical data. While this comprehensiveness is one the book’s great assets, it occasionally represents a predicament to the reader. It is not easy to navigate through an ocean of names of Yugoslav artists, journals, and places—most of which are unfamiliar to the Western ear and mind. Having (even) more illustrations would definitely help one navigate the text much easier. However, even as is, this book represents a very important contribution to the field. With its witty essays and important primary documents, Impossible Histories is an invaluable archive of Yugoslav art. In a country disintegrated and destroyed by many wars and violent changes, the appearance of such scholarly archives is of utmost importance. This archive is well organized and presented, which is the result of volume editors’ intensive labor. Furthermore, we should also be grateful to Roger Conover, editor of the books on visual culture at the MIT Press, who not only commissioned the work, but went to Serbia during its greatest hardships to help with the production of this outstanding volume.

This book continues MIT Press’ excellent series on Eastern European art and architecture, in particular Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s, Laura Hoptman and Tomas Pospiszyl, eds., (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2002), and Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930, Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, eds., (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2002). Contextually, it builds upon the work of Ljiljana Blagojević in Modernism in Serbia: The Elusive Margins of Belgrade Architecture, 1919–1941 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and the Harvard Design School, 2003). All of these books resonate with painful historical reminders that Eastern Europe is a unique, borderland space, a place in-between East and West; a place where war traumas and ethnic conflicts were intertwined with artistic production and its social criticism. Impossible Histories serves as an important reminder that our histories both enable us and trap us at the same time.