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Performance and Protest: Questions on Art and Life

Abstract: The paper addresses the critical potential of the body in performance art and in political protest, examining the relationship between an art form that aims to be indistinguishable from life and a socio-political practice that uses (appropriates) the performance art tactics, methods, and themes to articulate itself. The central problem our research addresses is related to the question of how various performance features, procedures, or techniques (for example, endurance, exposure, objectification, limits of individual agency) contribute to the articulation of protest practices, and whether these articulations turn political protest into a new kind of ‘live art’ that is more like life than art ever was.

Keywords: body; performance art; political protest; performativity; live art; Serbia.

The paper discusses the critical potential of the body in performance art, examining its persistence and, analogously, its enduring presence throughout artistic practices across generations and the implications of its ability to continuously provoke whatever context it is related to. Structurally, the paper follows the circular pattern of concentric movement similar to the patterns created by knots on a tree or ripples from a stone tossed into water. Gradually converging, these circles collect fragments of various facets of body potentiality to express resistance to political, ideological, social, cultural power and hegemony, and embrace them into the central currents. The core of this circular pattern is the amalgam (“cluster”) of the ideas and processes that preceded and culminated in the year 1968 and continued to be a driving force and relevant agent to the present day,¹ with the most recent, outer circle represented by the ongoing student and civil protests throughout Serbia that started in December 2024. The aim of this paper is not to map and systemize the relations between examples of performance art from different decades of the 20th and 21st centuries in Serbia, nor to interpret those relations as a “repetition with differences”. Instead, it aims to discuss the effects of usage of the body by female performance artists (Marina Abramović, Tanja Ostojić, Ivana Ivković) as a continuously critical (re-)examination of the same problems and paradigms: objectification (within gendered voyeuristic

¹ Maja Stanković, “Art Is What Makes Life More Interesting than Art,” *Zbornik Seminara za studije moderne umetnosti Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu* 14 (2018): 130.

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viewing structures), “bringing objective and subjective self together”;² limits of individual agency, presentness, vulnerability, control and endurance in specific time-related geopolitical, social, economic and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the paper problematizes how female performance artists from the powerful performative margin of the local and/or marginalized art scene, using their bodies, operate and negotiate with art world network and recognized institutional frameworks, as well as with late capitalist, post-socialist and neoliberal commodification of all aspects of everyday life, particularly focusing their critical acts on the issues of the institutionalization of the art and the artist through the art market’s commodification and, consequently, cultural fetishization. It also refers to the shift from a live presence of a single performer and immediacy via the artist’s own body, through temporary and occasional formed communities of participants who produce social relations and share environment to the recent, outsourced model of performance, characterized by its collective body of nonprofessionals or specialists in other fields who, guided by artist’s directions, accept to be present and perform at a particular time and a particular place on an artist’s behalf.³ Ultimately, the paper reconsiders how an art form that is epitome of blurring the boundary between itself and life, due to political and social circumstances and challenges, becomes lived experience, i.e., life itself, and particularly how performance art as influenced by protest practices of the 1960s and 1970s provides models for contemporary political activism and protest (“provides a paradigm for social action”⁴) and becomes “vehicle for social change”⁵.

Gesturing, expressive, activist, and delegated bodies

The uncanny capacity of the body, its ever-present and almost brutally apparent vulnerability, no matter whether it is naked or dressed, made performance art become a controversial and powerful personal, cultural, and social experience. Performance is situated in a liminal space – between presentation and representation, being and doing, autobiography and fiction, private life and public practices of exposure and production, reality and its symbolization, life itself and its interpretation (or spectacularization), frequently obfuscating demarcation lines and generating ambiguities. The performance artist principally treated his or her body in unconventional ways in order to express psychophysical, social, political, and cultural experiences and needs, and to demonstrate the effects of its oppression on his or her body.⁶ The artist’s body is simultaneously an (art) object and the body of a subject that performs artwork. It

² Cindy Nemser, “Subject–Object: Body Art,” *Art Magazine* 46.1 (September – October 1971): 42.

³ Claire Bishop, “Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity,” *October* 140 (May 2012): 91.

⁴ Kristine Stiles, “Performance and Its Objects,” *Arts Magazine* 65 (November 1990): 47.

⁵ Robyn Brentano, “Outside the Frame: Performance, Art, and Life,” in *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object, a Survey of the History of Performance Art in the USA since 1970*, ed. Robyn Brentano and Olivia Georgia (Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994), 31.

⁶ Kristine Stiles, “Performance,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 75–77; 95.

serves as cause, site, and medium of perpetual cultural self-transformation. In the occasion where the naked body is involved in the performance, the self-transformation process goes from the nature of givenness of the flesh to the culture symbolization and construction, and back again.

During the 1960s and 1970s artists and critics proposed many terms for their specific strategy for the activation of the body as a form and medium in the domain of art – happenings, Fluxus, actions, events, ceremonies, demonstrations, situations, activities, body art, artist's theatre, kinetic theatre, bodily expressions. In the 1970s, the term 'performance' began to circulate among art critics, curators, and artists as a generic name for these actions that express corporeal circumstances within their psychological and cultural settings, as well as for the creation of live and in the particular space-time frame, visual representations of human social and political agency. Later, this term will include video mediation, such as video performances and installations, as well as reenactments, delegated bodies, evolving and expanding to the various forms of participation, constructive social engagements and projects that will shift the focus from individualism and individual, here-and-now presence to the community and the idea of communal. Hence, we can single out three possible trajectories, each of them belonging to a different period and context, and follow the processes of their alteration from singularity towards multitude, from an art form that converses the motif of depicted figure into actual body towards participating bodies, from art gesture and expression back to the vulnerability and versatility of real life, from self-determining individualism to various models of collectivity, from passive and discrete aesthetic experience to resistance, endurance, activism. By dissolving boundaries between art and life, all these alterations deconstruct artistic hierarchies, transgress passive sensibilities, foster an engaged and active interpretation of art, and critically address issues of art as both a form of representation and a means of aestheticizing power.

The first trajectory of bold challenging the body's limits and strong emphasizing the body as the site of the personal as political, starts in the pioneering days of performance in the 1970s. During this period, the artists involved in performance art were primarily women that adopted various counter-cultural positions of social movements and political associations. Confronting aesthetic modernism with their flesh, women created powerful statements of female defined subject positions and agency. This refocusing of the attention from traditional, modernist and mass media forms of figuration (that is, from representation, subduing and objectification of the female body) to the actual body, and from the abstract modernist sublime to the base materialism ("bassesse") of the flesh, not only "revalidated the timeless subject matter to the body";⁷ but made visible all aspects of the body and life that were ignored by art and culture up to that point. This engagement with the material conditions and limits of the body – which include discomfort, pain, boldness, daring, endurance – created

⁷ Stiles, "Performance," 86.

the narcissist and heroic body, or evoked “universal empathy”,⁸ or strictly referred to female experiences based on biological specificities. Distinctions along gender lines as well as differences between feminist and non-feminist performance are often difficult to determine. Not only do the differences between men’s and women’s performances remain elusive,⁹ but the feminist agenda behind the performance art can also be vague, indeterminate, uncertain or ambiguous.

Through the exploration of her body’s ability to perform beyond pain, vulnerability, and intentionality,¹⁰ and by controlling the limits of objecthood throughout this process,¹¹ Marina Abramović performs an extraordinary and heroic figure who overcomes great and dangerous challenges and transforms into the same “narcissistic” and “Artist as hero”¹² extraordinary mythic figure that male artists have performed. Moreover, the context of her family upbringing in the new stoic post-revolutionary and socialist society and culture that praised the idealistic, heroic, and sacrificial acts, as well as the rigorousness and self-discipline provided another model of (masculinized) role model hero, which she also questioned. In addition to challenging the gender matrix of the 1970s art world, Abramović’s “heroic figure” also addressed the ideal

⁸ Tracey Warr, “Sleeper,” *Performance Research* 1.2 (1996): 3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Marina Abramović was always very explicit about her performances: “I didn’t accept the body’s limits.” See: Klaus Biesenbach, “Interview,” in *Marina Abramović*, ed. Kristine Stiles, Klaus Biesenbach, and Chrissie Iles. (Phaidon Press, 2008), 17. “I was never interested in shocking. What I was interested in was experiencing the physical and mental limits of the human body and mind. I wanted to experience these limits together with the public. I could never do this alone.” See: Kristine Stiles, “Cloud with Its Shadow Marina Abramović (2008),” in *Concerning Consequences, Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma*, by Kristine Stiles (The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 230. Ulay explained many years later in an interview with Linda Montano: “So the whole notion of being an object became a very obvious thing in our work, in all of our performances – to make yourself an object. [...] If you make a mistake and fall, at that very moment you are an object. [...] You see, it’s the noninvolvement of self, of consciousness, of decision, of realization.” Linda Montano, “Interview with Marina Abramović and Ulay,” in *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, by Linda Montano (University of California, 2000), 330.

¹¹ This aspect in her work was emphasized on various occasions either in her statements that follow her performances or in her interviews. For example, Abramović acknowledged her authorial role and took all the responsibility for creating the *Rhythm 10* performance: “I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility”; later, she asserted that she finished the performance at exactly the previously appointed time: “After six hours, at 2 in the morning, I stopped, because this was exactly my decision: six hours. I started walking to the public and everybody ran [sic] away and never actually confronted me.” See: Marina Abramović, “Body Art,” in *Marina Abramović*, by Marina Abramović (Charta, 2002), 30. Likewise, she expressed frustration for the disruption of her *Rhythm 5* performance when Radomir Damjanović Damnjan (Joseph Beuys or anonymous doctor) brought her out from the blazing star after noticing that she had lost consciousness due to an elevated carbon monoxide concentration, perhaps saving her life. See: Marina Abramović, *Sur la Voie* (Musée national d’art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1990), 30; Marija Đorđević, “Publika može da ubije, intervju sa Marinom,” *Politika*, October 30, 2004. Marina Abramović risked her life in the *Rhythm 5*, 1974 performance, posted December 8, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6z7hOOWQNZg>.

¹² See: Lucy Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth,” *Art in America* 64, no.3 (May/June, 1976), 75; Warr, “Sleeper,” 3; Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (Routledge, 1997), 25, 31, 37, 76; Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 46; Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 33, 39.

ideological body of the socialist Yugoslavia, which was modeled by revolutionary principles, expectations, and needs that reorganized gender differences and endorsed gender equality but remained gender uncertain, masculinized by its very phallogocentric symbolic order prototype. Ritual character, minimalized and intense movements, gestures, and expressions that involve pain and danger (as a way “to actually understand how the mind and body work”), and consequently violence and suffering as well, by challenging “universal empathy”, produced a kind of decontextualized and universal quality that made it possible for Marina Abramović to overcome the gap between the local and international art worlds.

Two decades later, Tanja Ostojić paraphrases the enduring body of the 1970s in her performance *Personal Space*¹³ (see illustration 1). The performance was a part of the homonymous project that, beside performance, encompasses a series of black and white photographs and a sculpture. The square as the key motif of the project referring to Malevich's Suprematist composition *White on White* (circa 1918) and its conceptual framework, reflected the legacy of the avant-garde. The square appears as ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ of the hair on the head, as a square of black-dyed hair that has been separated from the rest of the hair, as a square of pubic hair that is shaped on the triangle of the mons pubis, as a square of marble dust that Tanja Ostojić stands on during the performance, as a parallelepiped sculpture base with a carved square that is “inscribed” on top (filled with unfixed marble dust that was created during the carving process), and as a square format of the photographs. Furthermore, the photographs record four positions of the face and body (each offset by 90° from the previous one): facing forward, left and right profile, and the back of the head, so that each of the four series of photographs has a square layout.¹⁴ White (and) square as Malevich's ultimate finale of his transformation “in the zero of form and through zero” his achieving the “creation, that is, Suprematism, the new painterly realism – nonobjective creation” he announced in 1915,¹⁵ in Ostojić's project became essential to challenging the notions of autonomous art and introspective artistic position, as well as the emphasis on aesthetic issues that constituted the local paradigm of art. There are two crucial aspects of this performance and project: body and relationality. With historical examples of body art this performance shares (over)exposure of the enduring body and questioning its objectification within voyeuristic viewing structures. By physically separating herself from the public and clearly defining the boundaries between her space and public space (inside/outside, internal/external), shaving her body, covering it with marble dust, and adopting an almost monumental posture in the middle of

¹³ Performance *Personal Space* was performed six times: Yugoslav Biennale of Young Artists, Konkordija, Vršac, Yugoslavia, 1996; Hollywood Leather Venue, London, UK, 1997; Manifesta 2, Musée d'Histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg, Luxembourg, 1998; Skin, Deste Foundation, Athens, Greece, 1999; Digital Media Festival, MKC, Maribor, Slovenia, 2000; Utopia, Rogaland Kunstmuseum, Stavanger, Norway, 2000.

In terms of its duration there are two performance variants: of 120 and of 60 minutes, with and without the music score written by Vladimir Radonjić.

¹⁴ See: Jasmina Čubrilo, “Etre une artiste,” *ProFemina* 21–22 (2000): 270–71.

¹⁵ Kazimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism [1915],” in *Russian Art of the Avant-garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*, ed. John E. Bowlt (The Viking Press, 1976), 133.

that white and incredibly delicate space made of fine and microscopic tiny particles, Ostojić simultaneously redefined this control over the objectification and vulnerability of the female performer's body. The space between her body inside the square and the public outside the square produced the emptiness, i.e., a complete interruption of any possible interrelation she provoked and fostered by her 'square' hairstyles using them as a starting point for everyday conversations during the months before she performed *Personal Space* for the first time in Vršac. In this performance, Ostojić retains the basic relationality - objecthood as precondition of subjecthood,¹⁶ but she distances herself from any kind of interaction with the audience, by placing the actual limits (marble dust) as well as symbolic ones (herself as art object) by which she 'protects' herself of any kind of physical closeness with audiences and places her body not just as a viewed object, but as a seeing subject as well. There is nothing heroic regarding her body – standstill, isolated, petrified body that makes no noise. The performance was the central piece of the whole project that mediated between relationality and heteronomy of art in her 'hairstyles' works and reflection on the aesthetic issues and autonomy presented in her 1996 white marble abstract sculpture. It represented all the perplexity produced by her artistic education as well as by than ongoing debates on the nature of an artwork and its symbolic value in the context of 'closed society' of isolated and under UN sanctions post-Yugoslav and post-socialist state.¹⁷ However, her performance *Private Space* gained international attention from the identity politics perspective: as an example of a gender and post-socialist critique of the ethno-nationalistic paradigm and of that "raging macho-nationalism of a regime that had forcefully imposed uniformity on public discourse in Serbia".¹⁸ After this project, Tanja Ostojić completely turned to performance as a medium for institutional critique, exposing the gender, sexual, and geopolitical power structures of the art world (*Strategies of Success/Curators Series*, 2001–2003),¹⁹ and to a contextual, participatory, and collaborative art practice that often blurs the distinction between her art and her private, ordinary, everyday life, critically questioning various aspects of alternative, marginal, and invisible positions in a globalized world produced by biopolitics, consequently never reaching blockbuster status, hovering over various niche positions (lectures, resident's programs, thematic exhibitions, publications) (see illustration 2). Since her projects in the last two and a half decades create a line between artwork and her lived experience difficult to draw, it is reasonable to conclude that her bodily endurance as a feature of her performances through time entirely became a living act of enduring in these precarious times.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham University Press, 2005), 70–78, 87; Lara Shalson, *Performing Endurance, Art and Politics Since 1960* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) 18–19.

¹⁷ Zoran Erić, "Personal Space – Public Body," *Artefact* (2003) <https://tanjaostojic.com/personal-space/>.

¹⁸ Iva Glišić and Biljana Purić, "Art as a Living Archive: Post 1989 Performance Art in Serbia and Russia," *Third Text* 157 (March 2019): 223.

¹⁹ The project *Strategies of Success* consists of the following performances: *I'll Be Your Angel* (2001), *Be My Guest* (2001), *Sofa for the Curator* (2002), *Vacation With Curator* (2003) and *Politics of Queer Curatorial Positions* (2003). See: <https://tanjaostojic.com/artworks/>.

In her hybrid art practice of site-specific delegated performances: *In Him We Trust Trilogy* (*Lines, Rows, Columns* (2016), *Babylon the Great* (2017), *In Him We Trust* (2020)), *I Only Want To Love Me* (2020), *Monument: No One is Lost* (2021–2022), *Monument: The School of Athens* (2023), and *Monument of Trust* (2024), Ivana Ivković has introduced the nude or semi-nude male bodies as a collective body, and performative medium, objectifying the body of the *other* – that is a male layperson, coming from various and disparate socioeconomic backgrounds, without any previous stage experience. Her projects are organizationally and production-wise tremendously demanding, carried out in collaboration with diverse authors (curators, composers, playwrights, directors of photography, editors, sound designers) and performers (whose numbers range from fourteen to over forty, and some of them have been involved in more than one performance/project). They go beyond the ‘standard’ form of performance and contextual, participatory, and collaborative art practices, expanding them by using the language of theater, television, and digital media just to open art to “immersive experiences and tactile, auditory, and corporal affects”.²⁰ From the feminist perspective, Ivković examines the gender experiences, deconstructing the existing heteronormative models produced and normalized by contemporary patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism, emphasizing the fluidity of gender, uncovering and coming to terms with the sensitivity of the *other*. She recruits male bodies as a performative tool to question gender prejudices, and given social roles, which turn men into pillars of stability and put them in a position of power. These bodies in Ivković’s projects became objectified by their role as participators,²¹ as well as by the gaze of the audience; nude or semi-nude they became exposed, vulnerable, powerless, and even lost in the quiet, sometimes murmuring, and minimalist choreography – completely the reverse of the stereotypical expectations of the masculine body. With delegating performing and relocating the authorship to collective *others*, Ivković outsourced not only authenticity on her “performers to supply this more vividly, without the disruptive filter of celebrity”,²² she outsourced the physicality and materiality of performance. Now, the outsourced bodies are the enduring ones; they experience the hardness of the floor/ground (*Lines, Rows, Columns, Only Want To Love Me*), or coldness and even freezing conditions (*Monument: No One is Lost – Afterpiece*, performed in front of the Humboldt Forum Museum in Berlin), being squeezed in enclosed space (*Only Want To Love Me*), and they were exposed for hours in a theater (*In Him We Trust*),

²⁰ Ivana Ivković, “Artist Statement,” from *Portfolio*, n.pag. see: <https://ivanaivkovic.com/>.

²¹ Kaitavouri makes the distinction between ‘participator’ and ‘participant’ – ‘participator’ refers to a position and participant to an individual. Just as Foucault’s ‘author function’ is a position constructed within the discourse and conditioned by society, the participator’s function is constructed in the work and structured as a set of societal relations; in addition to structural and social aspects, it has a discursive and institutional dimension. Participator is descriptive of a more general behavior of a person and does not refer to a specific event or individual. It is a function that includes potential for participation built into the project. On the other hand, ‘participant’ embodies individuals who take part in specific events and art projects. In practice, participator is a function and a way in which the participant can be positioned in a work and actualized by a participant. See: Kaija Kaitavuori, *The Participator in Contemporary Art* (I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2018), 11.

²² Bishop, “Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity,” 110.

gallery or museum space (*Babylon the Great*), or urban square (*Monument: No One is Lost – Afterpiece* in Berlin (see illustration 3), *Monument: The School of Athens* in Athens in front of the Academy of Athens and the University of Athens (see illustration 4)).²³ Since all of her projects were focused on the subtle and complex interplay of deeply personal narratives and contemplative and introspective questioning, blending her “experiences of frequent travels and an enduring nomadic life”²⁴ she used as a means of exchange, the starting point of each one of them is mutual trust cherished by all the actors involved in the projects. Therefore, performances come as a finale of a gradual trust-building based on the open process of exiting the personal, sharing and revealing oneself, shaping the collective conceived as a network of many distinct singularities who resisting dominant system and authority (even that of artist), multiple and plural (see illustration 5). Although Ivković’s delegated performances are always structured according to the oculocentric Western painting tradition, similar to Vanesa Beercroft’s *tableau vivant*, they never result in cold and hyperreal displaying of (half)nudes that resemble advertisements or fashion photography. Beercroft’s ‘girls’, standing for hours in silence, painful immobility on high heels, and physical and psychological agony²⁵ with unfocused look in their eyes, made an impression of being not ‘present’ but ‘an image’. As “living paintings”, Beercroft’s installations or delegated performances just reproduce heteronormative voyeuristic rhetoric of uninhibited observation that structures actual mass media imagery. Ivković’s delegated situations not only decolonize the masculine sensitivity, opening it to a more fluid, all-embracing, and sharing collective experience, including the audience, but they also situate painting into the expanded field of “tactile, auditory, and corporal affects” and “unstable sensory experiences” that deal with the intertwining of intimate stories with contemporary political and cultural as well as historical circumstances specific to the places and areas where performances take place.²⁶

²³ For the description of abovementioned projects see: Ivana Ivković, *Portfolio*, <https://ivanaivkovic.com/>; <https://www.eugster-belgrade.com/artists/ivana-ivkovic/?section=exhibitions>.

²⁴ Ivković, *Portfolio*, n. pag.

²⁵ Hard conditions for performers included bleaching of hair and eyebrows, waxing of pubic hair, body painted, swollen feet and bruised legs from endless waiting and standing, etc. See: Julie Steinmetz, Heather Cassils, and Clover Leary, “Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31.3 (2006): 1–30.

²⁶ These would relate to the limits of male identity and the gender issue, which is always linked to national and religious issues in the Balkan region; in Germany, where stories about colonialism, the Holocaust, and the current migrant crisis are the main focus; and in nations like Greece and Portugal, the dominant theme is the oppressive relationship between the center of Europe and its periphery, particularly in light of the roles that these territories have played in the history of the Western civilization, as well as the existence of double standards in the experience of the European identity.

From performing endurance to enduring as performative: bodies in protest

Marina Abramović introduced the concrete and material body, Tanja Ostojić started with materiality that owes to sculptural tradition only to model it, paraphrasing Joseph Beuys' suggestion, in the discursive and activist body, and Ivana Ivković, exempting her own body, made a way for not just one (somebody's) body but for a collective body of other in the very expanded field of painting. All three artists re-examined lived experiences, physicality and meaning of bodies in contemporary culture. Their artistic practices have several characteristics in common: the body as a medium for communication and provocation, its physical vulnerability, limits of exposure, pain and stamina, as well as the endurance and structure of behavior, its gesture and action and their ritualistic and uncertain aspects. Abramović's 'heroic,' Ostojić's monumental and relational, and Ivković's outsourced collective body formed from a multitude of relational and contingent subjects serve as indexes of the three temporally differentiated but conceptually interrelated paradigms in contemporary art and do not disjoint them as much as complement each other.

All these characteristics can be noticed in expressing the protest against corruption, conveying grief for the 16 people killed in the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad, and representing civil disobedience against the government's disregard for public demands for accountability.²⁷ This brings up several questions (and

²⁷ On November 1, 2024, a newly renovated concrete and glass canopy at the Novi Sad railway station collapsed, killing sixteen people, including two children. The disaster raised immediate and painful questions about the institutional failure, corruption and responsibility. In the immediate wake of the tragedy, students responded first by organizing public candlelit vigils and moments of silence for the victims, first in front of the railway station and in the streets of Novi Sad and very soon in the streets of towns all around Serbia. Weeks later, members of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) physically assaulted a small group of peacefully protesting students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade during a one-minute silence for the victims. This act of violence triggered a wave of solidarity from other students, who disrupted lectures at their universities, marking the true beginning of the large-scale protests. The wave of civic action expanded through the winter – student protesters blocked universities, bridges, and roads, not out of rage but in remembrance and demanding accountability for the corruption that led to the tragedy, and were joined by farmers, veterans, lawyers, and citizens in general. Large gatherings took place across Serbia in cities like Novi Sad, Niš, Kragujevac, and Novi Pazar, drawing people from all regions. The momentum built toward 15 of March 2025, when more than 300,000 people, according to the Archive of Public Gatherings (Arhiv javnih skupova, <https://javniskupovi.org/index.php/2025/02/>, accessed April 12, 2025), an NGO that counts people at protests (or 107,000 people, according to the Serbian Interior Ministry estimation), filled the streets of Belgrade in what is widely believed to be the largest protest in Serbia's history. In the months that followed, the challenge became how to lead this protest into sustained pressure for change.

For a brief overview of the largest and ongoing student-led protests in Serbia's modern history, see: Aleksandar Ivković, "Political Tensions in Serbia Keep Rising after the Novi Sad Tragedy," November 30, 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/11/30/political-tensions-in-serbia-keep-rising-after-the-novi-sad-tragedy/>;

Guy De Launey, "Serbia's Largest-Ever Rally Sees 325,000 Protest Against Government," March 16, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2g8v32q30o>; Paul Millar, "Serbia's Student-Led Protesters Wanted Accountability. Now They're Calling for Elections," August 15, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20250815-serbia-student-protesters-wanted-accountability-now-they-calling-for-elections-vucic>; Breza Race Maksimovic and Srđa Popovic, "How Serbian Students Created the Largest Protest Movement in

not necessarily in this particular case). Do the protesters intentionally and knowingly take certain components of performance art, implying that performance art serves as a model for political activism? Or, does this capacity of performance art to be “vehicle for social change” come from the fact that early performances “were both influenced by protest practices and at times aimed to function as a form of political activism itself”?²⁸ Furthermore, are these ‘similarities’ logical, given the broader conceptualization of performance as “vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated [...] behavior”²⁹ that suggests performance is a kind of everyday activity that has been around for as long as humans?

The main issue here is the relationship between life and art, particularly how life can become art and how art can subsequently become life. Both the performance art and protest practices, especially those based on passive resistance (as is the case with ongoing student and civil protests in Serbia), have much in common: physical efforts, endurance,³⁰ objectification, “*possibility* for radical engagement that can transform the way we think about meaning and subjectivity”.³¹ The collective act of first 15 and then 16 minutes of silence held in public by stopping the traffic at traffic roundabouts, crossroads, and highways, followed by students’ organized marching, biking, and running, initially between Serbian cities and later biking from Novi Sad to Strasbourg and the headquarters of the Council of Europe and other European institutions in April 2025, as well as the ultramarathon relay run from Belgrade to Brussels and the European Parliament in May 2025 were manifestations of enduring bodies/collective body in protest (see illustrations 6, 7, and 8). Additionally, this collective body in protest was exposed to the danger of being beaten, hit by a car, or even subjected to a kind of a sonic device for crowd control.³² Thus, the analogies with Abramović’s performance *Rhythm 0*, or with her ultimate collaboration with Ulay in *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk*, or with the silence she introduced as a method in her collective performance in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade

Decades,” August 2025, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-serbian-students-created-the-largest-protest-movement-in-decades/>; Aleksandar Ivković, “One Man, One State: Vučić and Serbia’s Student Protests,” August 18, 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/08/18/one-man-one-state-vucic-and-serbias-student-protests/>; Bojan Elek and Balša Božović, “Winter of Serbian Discontent Turned into Summer of Civic Disobedience,” September 4, 2025, <https://rs.boell.org/en/2025/09/04/winter-serbian-discontent-turned-summer-civic-disobedience>; Raul Gallego Abellan, *Wake up, Serbia! Pumpaj: The Student Uprising, Point of No Return* (documentary film), 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3t4EiRYzHM&t=320s>.

²⁸ Shalson, *Performing Endurance, Art and Politics Since 1960*, 79.

²⁹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003), 2–3.

³⁰ Lara Shalson takes the endurance in performance art to inform her reading of the Greensboro Lunch Counter Sit-in nonviolent protest actions from February to July 1960, primarily in the Woolworth store, comparing problems of objectification and questions of how bodies occupy space and the ambivalences that circulate around them with those produced by Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964) and Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* (1974). See: Shalson, *Performing Endurance, Art and Politics Since 1960*, 81–92.

³¹ Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, 14. (Jones’ emphases).

³² European Court of Human Rights, <https://www.echr.coe.int/w/interim-measure-granted-concerning-serbia>, accessed September 20, 2025.

in September 2019 on the occasion of opening of her retrospective with which she concluded her lecture and with the public as performers,³³ as well as the 24- and 72-hour student blockades of the bridges and roads with Abramović's *The House with the Ocean View* or *The Artist is Present*, were imposed by themselves. It is possible to continue this series of comparisons with Ostojić's motionless posture in *Personal Space* and with her creation of various and temporary collectives around specific identities, bare life, or aging issues, as well as with Ivković's sensible transitions that take place in liminal spaces, creating multitude in the Hardt and Negri sense, as the form of political subjectivity capable of realizing democracy for what it truly is, namely the rule of everyone by everyone with the right for disobedience and the right for difference as fundamental rights.³⁴

However, behind these associative equations between performance and political protest lies another problem – do political protests simply appropriate and/or emulate techniques and tactics of a performance art and performing arts (theatre, dance) or they become a new form of 'live art'?³⁵ Performances as well as protests consist of "a wide range of behaviors, subjects, and agents, spanning from individual bodies to protest bodies".³⁶ Additionally, the protests typically base their actions more on dance and theater than on performance art, even though many people informally perceive protest actions as performances. The line that distinguishes performance art from political protest is the line of differentiation between performance and performativity in terms of Judith Butler's explanation of performance as a conscious act by a pre-existing subject and performativity as a process where repeated actions and discourse construct and solidify the very idea of a subject.³⁷ There are differences in how the term performativity is understood and interpreted in contemporary writings on art as a result of its roots in both philosophy of language and gender studies. As James Loxley points out, it seems that it is the rather the concept of performativity than the term itself that has been transplanted since neither of its "usages has yet managed to displace or entirely accommodate itself to the other".³⁸

³³ Ivan Šuletić, "Kolektivno telo društva u celini," *Radar*, February 2, 2025, <https://radar.nova.rs/drustvo/ivan-suletic-radar-autorski-tekst-blokada/>.

³⁴ Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin Press, 2004), 340.

³⁵ The term 'Live Art' came into usage in the UK in the mid-1980s as a response by arts professionals to experimental art practices that expanded or escaped the classifications in use. It is a contested category for performance practices and approaches that were not quite performance art, or dance, or theatre, i.e., for work that didn't fit into any of the categories on offer. 'Live Art' was an attempt to acknowledge the diversity of live-based arts practices, so it is wider and more comprehensive than the term 'performance art'. See: Maria Chatzichristodoulou, (ed), *Live Art in the UK, Contemporary Performances of Precarity* (Bloomsbury, Methuen Drama, 2020), 1–15.

³⁶ Marcela A. Fuentes, "Performance, Politics, and Protest," in *What is Performance Studies*, ed. Diana Taylor and Marcos Steuarnagel (Duke University Press, Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics at New York University and HemiPress, 2015), <https://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/wips/table-of-contents-eng>.

³⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (Routledge, 1993), 234–41.

³⁸ James Loxley, *Performativity* (Routledge, 2007), 140.

Protests' choreography or protesters' behavior in the case of student-led protests in Serbia 2024/2025 evolves through the repetition of gestures and actions, becoming a citational practice that continuously constructs political subjects.³⁹ Not only does the daily repetition of the 15–16 minutes of silence, which can begin at the precise moment the canopy collapses or at any other time in accordance with the protest schedule, express grief, but these silent standings also pose a challenge to the legal and governmental system, turning them into political mourning. Mourning is a way people perform rituals to express grief, acknowledge loss, and enact their relationship to the departed. The performativity of mourning involves the citationality of the ritualized acts that give form to grief, according to Butler, opening them to potential subversion and transformation.⁴⁰

In conclusion, if the performance art blurs the boundaries between art and life, inclining to become “indistinguishable from life at the level of both production and reception”,⁴¹ protests like student-led protest in Serbia, with its vulnerable, but persist bodies in mourning and transforming are (bare) life itself that, through repetition of gestures and actions as well as by images/documentation, critically re-signifies the existing relations and concepts, tending to create new routines as well as new and more immediate agencies.

³⁹ In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler sees the potential for subversion in Derrida's characterizations of the citational sign, and she moves in her own theory from performativity to citationality, since rethinking performativity through citationality is deemed useful for radical democratic theory.

⁴⁰ Butler re-envisioning melancholia and mourning as sources of personal transformation that have profound social and political consequences. See: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1999), 73–84; 108–109. She asserts social vulnerability of our bodies-as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed and she concludes: “To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself. The disorientation of grief-‘Who have I become?’ or, indeed, ‘What is left of me?’ ‘What is it in the Other that I have lost?’- posits the ‘I’ in the mode of unknowingness”. See: Judith Butler, *Precarious Life, The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso 2004), 30.

⁴¹ Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance*, 54.



Photography #1: Tanja Ostojić: *Personal Space* (1996), 120 minute performance, Biennale of Young Artists, Vršac, Yugoslavia Photo: Saša Gajin, copyright: T. Ostojić.



Photography #2: "Protest Scarves Against Turkey's Retreat from the Istanbul Convention", 2021. İstiklal Street, Istanbul, September 9, 2021. A collective performance and public action in the frame of Tanja Ostojić's *Mis(s)placed Women?* workshop, with the participation of: Arzu Yayıntaş, Bahar Seki, Gülhatun Yıldırım, Gizem Yılmaz, Nazlı Durak, Persefoni Myrtsou, Vanessa Ponte, Sabbi Senior, Selma Hekim and Tanja Ostojić. Photo: K. Kaygusuz, copyright: T. Ostojić.



Photography #3: Ivana Ivković, *Monument: No One Is Lost, Afterpiece*, Humboldt Forum Museum, Berlin, 2022, photo credit: Hue Hale.



Photography #4: Ivana Ivković, *Monument: No One Is Lost, The School of Athens*, 2023, Academy of Athens and the University of Athens, photo credit: Nefeli Papaioannou, ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen).



Photography #5: Ivana Ivković, *The Base of Trust*, 2024, Non Canonico Gallery, Belgrade, photo credit: Filip Koludrović, Ivana Ivković.



Photography #6: 16 minutes of silence, Slavija Square, Belgrade, Jun 28, 2025; photo credit: Archive of Public Gatherings [Arhiv javnih skupova]



Photography #7: 16 minutes of silence, Slavija Square, Belgrade, Jun 28, 2025; photo credit: Archive of Public Gatherings [Arhiv javnih skupova]



Photography #8: 16 minutes of silence, Slavija Square, Belgrade, Jun 28, 2025; photo credit: Archive of Public Gatherings [Arhiv javnih skupova]

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