Guerrilla Theater:  
Intersection of political activism and institutional performance  
(View on Serbia)

Introduction

The following text presents an attempt to summarize key aspects concerning the density of relations that political performance (referred here as “guerilla theatre”, “radical street theatre”, “overtly political performance”) and political activism have built up throughout recent history of social movements. This is rather a pilot study that needs to be repeated with larger sample size and with more specified methods of research. Still, it should be noted that the subject, that remains floating in between performance study and social movement’s research, has never found its way to a broader scientific acceptance.

By guerilla theatre we refer here to acts that question or re-envision in-built social arrangements of power. This theatre happens in streets, which means that signals theatrics that take place in public by-ways with minimal limitations on access. Performance here indicates type of communicative behavior intended for public viewing. It includes but is not restricted to theatre, which usually implies presence of actors and spectators in their respective places and prearranged roles. Guerilla theatre draws people who comprise a contested reality into what its creators hope will be a changing script.

Typically theatre is understood as an art capable of carrying the audience to a reality apart from the everyday; overtly political performance strives to transport everyday reality to something more ideal. Because it aims the widest audience possible this theatre takes place in public areas and it is literally accessible to everyone. Guerilla theatre can potentially build a bridge between imagined and real action, often facilitated by happening at the places that performers intended to transform initially. Deliberately moved out of cultural spaces it suggests that society as a whole is culture, the site where symbols are forged, negotiated and challenged.

Guerilla theatre responds directly to events as they occur while professional theatre is scheduled in advance. The temporal context of guerilla theatre hides not in the duration of its act but in the extent of the struggle. The rhetoric of this struggle grasps the street as the gateway to the masses, directly or through the media. The diversity of street performances is manifested in the genres they use. Rallies, puppet shows, marches, vigils, choruses and clown shows are just some of the forms employed to capture both media and popular attention in a plethora of different contexts and circumstances. Still the impulse to perform in the street stays mainly related to performers’ desire for popular access. While the mobility of street performances enables them to seek out of diverse audiences, it still does not mean that access to a broader audience marks a real difference between performance in the street and in theatre buildings. Even though street performances indisputably influence public sphere, it is still to be proved that guerilla theatre becomes indirect channel to broad and diverse audiences through its ability to attract media attention. And more importantly, it remains uncertain whether the
radical street performances reach only those already convinced or they really own power to bring changes.

**Debate on effectiveness**

The relationship between politics and art constitutes perhaps the central debate concerning the humanities. The most recent tendency is thus to prove that any form of art is inevitably connected with politics. These claims make usage of critical and sociological thinking to offer a model of the relationship of art and politics as an exchange between people working in different but overlapping social environments. Theatrical performance is not omitted from this everlasting debate. Moreover, theatre implies a live act, an essentially evanescent and fluid communal activity, presence of actors who experience and express various emotions on stage. These mental states communicate themselves to the audience and by these means the real communication between actors and spectators happens. It is not strange then that Bertolt Brecht, the forerunner of political performance, once stated that every actor on the stage is at same time a resilient political activist. And by the stage we mean every place exposed to the public scrutiny and by actor any performer through which spectators receive the whole of the event with the force of its enunciation.

But still one mayor question remains to baffle science of culture and it concerns the nature of political performance as such, the way how it should be treated – as a social dynamic or rather a discrete phenomenon or genre. Very often the bar for measuring the success of something that is defined as overtly political performance is set excessively high. In the spirit of quantitative approach political performances are expected to achieve results that can be measured, and frequently this means they should contribute to a revolutionary change. But instead of anticipating something that is rather improbable, social science needs to understand an overtly political performance as a component within a larger social process. This tendency to pose unreachable standards for overtly political performance reveals itself in nearly every discussion that involves politics and art. Some of the questions that we have seen asked repeatedly in this broad discussion include:

- Can a performance affect society?
- Can a theatrical performance change people’s mind or more accurately their political standpoints?
- And if it can, will it move its audience to action?

This so called “debate on effectiveness” that reached attention of greater part of those scholars who have long dealt with politically engaged performance – the issue of whether any performance can have concrete political effects – is recapitulated in Baz Kershaw’s *The Political of Performance - Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*:
This is what I called, perhaps too tentatively, the paradox of cultural expansionism. How can we rescue alternative theatre from such problems? What description would acknowledge both its responsiveness and its innovative contribution to the history of post-war society, and thus justify a claim for its potential general efficacy? We must recognize that probably the issue of the alternative theatre movement’s potential general ideological efficacy in Britain, and elsewhere, will always be open to debate. (Kershaw, 255)

In order to tackle this efficacy question one should turn back to the past, to the times when theatre was powerful enough to penetrate social processes, pointing out for example, that Piscator’s plays and Brecht’s work in the Berliner Ensemble caused riots and were considered politically as dangerous to be ultimately banned by authorities. But Brecht’s influence wasn’t limited only to the western cultural sphere. As Sandra Richards argues in her essay, Brecht was readily accepted as part of the struggle for political and cultural liberation in African countries not because his work and theory imparted the inspiration of his lone genius to the struggle, but rather because his ideas resonated with traditions that acknowledged performance as an element of public life in African societies.

One may defend the effectiveness of politically engaged performance through theoretical analysis. This particular approach exploits ideas from contemporary critical theory to build a convincing argument for theatre’s ability to bring a political point to people who would not otherwise be receptive to it. Such studies offer strong arguments for power and diversity of overtly political performance.

Debate on effectiveness yields to determine what is the true propaganda capacity of performance—a performance’s direct influence over potential adherents to a cause. Also it asks those who support overtly political performance to prove a direct link between a performing act itself and a specific change in the social order. To make this demand is to apply a standard of cause and effect to a social change that characteristically involves numerous effects that may be attributed to a multitude of causes.

The realm of cultural practice is so diffuse and is composed of so many interdependent elements that the immediate impact of actions—even those as explicitly political as a presidential debate—are difficult to ascertain. In other words, though one can find empirical evidence of efficacious performance, it is wiser simply to note that the question of efficacy plagues all political activity, not just politically engaged performance. (Schlossman, 30)

The problematic of effectiveness represents a major obstacle experienced by any researcher studying politics and performance, or at least those who are trying to reestablish importance of connection between art and its social context. Perennial questions mentioned above show how hard it is to even legitimize this topic, as there is a significant portion of scientific community that objects any attention to the connection of politics and art. But even those
who support this position cannot deny that it is the politics that makes art a mere propaganda, and theatre is a weak form of propaganda in the age of broadcast.

Such objections are often grounded in the tradition that “art makes for bad politics and politics produces bad art”. This is the point when usefulness of theatre as a tool for social change is being challenged the most. As Schlossman concludes, art usually turns out to be a poor vessel for potent brew of politics. In its collision with politics, art crashes under the weight of demands and expectations that society normally does not place on its shoulders. It seems as politics becomes an acid that disintegrates the fibers of art’s aesthetic quality, weakening its greatest strength – being positioned out of the reach of daily consumption. This opinion places art above the fray of quotidian events—dealing with but transcending everyday life. Such statements themselves betray a deeply political view, tending to crop art out from its social milieu. Some of the most prominent theatre practitioners, including those working with Eugenio Barba in his Institute of Theatre Anthropology in Denmark belong to the strongest advocates of the claim that political engagement leads to an impotent art. Those who criticize overtly political content in art, support instead a tradition that defines art as the product of different, rather lone genius. According to them politics automatically diminishes aesthetic quality of a performance and renders it too topical to endure. Even if these objections are true, contemporary critical and sociological theories offer the basis for a model that allows one to explore the intersection of politics and performance as an exchange among those dedicated primarily to political work, those who see performance as their primary interest, and those who negotiate roles in both worlds.

**Symbolic interaction**

To attain a proper understanding of the way how politics and performance intertwine in productive cohesion that generate sufficient force to move its audiences to action, it is vital to scrutinize trajectory of their symbolic interaction. Symbolic interaction constitutes a broad field crossing the disciplines of sociology, psychology and to some extent anthropology. Interactionist ideas seem to be crucial as they offer tools for understanding of performance’s role in social dynamics. Studying symbolic interaction and the performance, one becomes inevitably immersed in issues of social organization. The development of interactionist approach was heavily dependent on researches implemented in the study of art, especially the effort to construct a macro-level interactionist conception of society. Work of Howard Becker was particularly important in this area. In his *Art Worlds* Becker defines art as collective activity and introduces concept of “art worlds”. Becker examines the ways in which art is created by networks of people who share mutual knowledge of conventional ways of how things should be done. Most importantly, Becker detects the mechanics of artistic creativity in conventions (Becker 29-30). Both producers and consumers of artistic works constitute members of art worlds, and conventions are those responsible for production, distribution, reception and interpretation of art. In this way Becker continues to share heritage with those
interactionists who have earlier enrooted “social worlds approach” to social organization. Social worlds tend to be generally lager, more diffuse and less hierarchical than formal organizations. Social worlds, unlike most of the formal organizations, do not establish mechanisms for defining membership and regulating activities of its members. On the contrary, they rely upon conventions – shared understandings of how things function – in order to coordinate collective activity. Conventions play key role when it comes to the terms of identity that enables participants to trace and be traced by their compatible collaborators - participants in a social world evaluate a person's degree of involvement in the world by his knowledge and use of the world's conventions. This doesn't mean that interactionists perceive social worlds as harmonious. Rather, their emphasis on the negotiation of conventions within and among social networks allows for analysis of both cooperation and power relations.

In *Art Worlds*, Becker offers a comprehensive model of social organization in the arts and elaborates the processes through which collective artistic activity is transacted and resources distributed. These premises lead Becker to some important conclusions - only because artist and audience share knowledge of and experience with the conventions invoked does the artwork produce an emotional effect (Becker 30). Becker refers here primarily to the work of Barbara H. Smith. In her *Poetic Closure* (1968) she demonstrates how poets deploy conventional means embodied in poetic forms and diction to bring poems to a clear and satisfying conclusion. Or he addresses to Gombrich's groundbreaking *Art and Illusion* (1960), where author has analyzed the visual conventions artists use to create for viewers the illusion that they are seeing a realistic depiction of some aspect of the world. All these cases legitimate Becker's position that every artistic experience emerges from the existence of body of conventions that both audience and artists use in making sense of their experience. However, it must be stressed that Becker never falls into the trap of claiming that these conventions by which a particular art world operates are unique in any way. On the contrary, he continually emphasizes that these conventions are available to participants in other social worlds as well (Becker, 46). Art world is profoundly involved in a constant exchange with the rest of society. This exchange is essentially dependent and facilitated by mutual share of existing conventions. In a word, art is a social practice that needs to take place in a definite context and cannot be considered a mere expression of individual creativity. It must be inscribed into a frame of specific models of activity whose absence would make its realization impossible. The boundary between art and everyday life becomes more and more fluid: art becomes a part of everyday life and everyday life presents itself as art form. In interactive representations the boundary between “stage” and “backstage” disappears: audience does not simply attend artistic performances: acting and interacting becomes part of the artistic creation, and during this interaction it symbolically negotiates new meanings which define every time the sense of the performance in a different way.

Symbolic interaction and more specifically negotiation of meaning offer important directions in answering perennial questions earlier mentioned in debate on effectiveness. It is at least a starting point for discussion of the relationship between political activism and political
performance. When art does not reproduce reality any more but it creates it, the consequences are the growing “hybridization” of separate realities.

Moved to the ground of social movements’ research, symbolic interaction hypothesis complements in many of its parts increased attention to the framing theory. David Snow (2004) suggest that some frames generate greater resonance for movement success and more “narrative fidelity”. But still they do not to specify in which way frames are expressed and made concrete. Johnston and Klandermans (1995) argue that process of exemplifying a frame occurs through the stories that members share, through the whole range of narratives that are perceived as relevant to the movement ideology. Dramatic images provided by these stories, deeply immersed into shared cultural soil, enable a basis of community and collective action. As well as the theatre itself, political activists narrate stories to their adherents in order to help them process their mutual experiences. As a result of this interaction, they build shared identification. Social movement is not therefore only a set of beliefs, actions and actors. It is also a stock of stories. Movement loyalty significantly depends on these personal accounts, which emphasize worthiness of extended efforts adherence invest through their support.

**Socio-historical approach**

In order to get closer to understanding of how intersection between political activism and performance behaves on micro-level, we need to apply a model of social and artistic activity to empirical cases and this means plunging into socio-historical context. Even we cannot assume that this model fits all times and cultures, socio-historical context of case study seems to be a first stop for any research of this type. Examples of the intersection of activism and performance can be traced not only in the contemporary culture, but at almost every point in history. Exchange among these two social worlds begun attracting attention of social sciences only at the moment when some of the most important social movements in United States have begun incorporating performance in its regular mobilization tactics. In her *Politics and performance: theatre, poetry, and song* (1994) Elizabeth Gunner notices that Boston Tea Party was perhaps the first recorded political performance in recent history. An example of activist engagement of performance conventions reveals why activists find performance a powerful tool. Political protests do not only represent appropriate playground for activists to try out effectiveness of performative tools in political mobilization, but also they as a whole constitutes a meta-performance (performance inside performance). Seen through the eyes of theatre protests conform to Richard Schechner’s definition of performance which marks identity, bend time and tell stories. Performances of art, rituals or ordinary life – according to Schechner – are made of “twice – behaved behaviors,” “restored behaviors,” performed actions that people train to do, that they practice and rehearse. (Schechner, 22). All protest constitutes a type of performance, whether or not participants recognize it as such. Protests do not simply happen, they are pre-arranged and choreographed events presenting a program to an audience, they frame space as “marked off” (public space becomes arena of interaction and activist/passer-by communication) they are “heightened occasions” employing display or
spectacle and they seek to reshape rather than merely reflect social reality. One can identify elements of performance in almost any political protest, but they generally turn out to be most visible in certain conventions activists use to assign symbolic meanings to their actions.

Political performances constitute a recurrent element throughout history of political activism. As it is known today guerilla theatre can trace its direct lineage no further than the years immediately after the Russian Revolution of 1917. On the first anniversary of the October Revolution Vsevolod Meyerhold produced Mayakovsky’s *Mystery Bouffe* in which he combined elements of the tent show with revolutionary poetry and put it up in the city square for an audience of several thousand. Similar theatrical performances remained popular in the workers’ state for several years. This was the beginning of a new type of agitprop theatre performed on the streets, at factory gates, markets, dockyards, playgrounds, barnyards and so on. Avowedly political in nature this theatre sought its audiences at their places of work or residence. During the grim war years, the Soviet political theatre gave overwhelming half a million performances at the front—in dug-outs, on lorries, in jungles, inside ruins of demolished buildings, on warships, inside hospitals, etc. At crucial periods in their history, guerilla theatre has appeared in several countries—in Spain during the Civil War, in Vietnam all through the forty-five year long war against Japanese, French and US troops, in Cuba immediately after the Revolution, all over Latin America and Africa during national liberation struggles.

But guerilla theatre we know today is a twentieth century phenomenon, born of the specific needs. Its arrival became imminent with the emergence of large political demonstrations opposing U.S involvement in the Vietnam War, especially at the march held in Washington DC on April 17, 1965.

Analyzing media portrayal of mentioned event, Marc Boren in *Student resistance: a history of the unruly subject* describes in detail many of theatrical elements activists employed in order to shape public’s view of the war. Some of their acts included people costumed in gas masks or death’s heads; an Uncle Sam figure on stilts; a person wearing a business suit with mask depicting the dome of Capitol building; one activist wrapped in American flag ¹wearing a TV box over his head – this last example illustrates just how escalating was “medialization” of contemporary society (Boren 167).

Using theatrical conventions in their demonstrations, political activists step into the realm of institutional performance. They do not just improve their mobilization strategies with the help of available performative devices, but they also exploit theatricality found in everyday life. As with written texts, the representations made by protesters have a politics of representation, creating meaning that has the potential to repel prevailing ideology. During the march opposing the Vietnam War, demonstrators turned they anti-war display into a carnival when they decided to walk into the streets and block traffic. Such performative demonstrations were resistant in two

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¹ protesters mocked flag, as the symbol that the ruling elite routinely used in legitimating rites
distinctive, but equally important ways – marchers expressed their disagreement with the official policy of U.S government but at the same time they entered the public sphere, imperiling something that is considered to be a sacred ground, a domain of common concern. The resistant potential of performative demonstrations and the complexity of its politics of representation become even more appealing when one considers the fact that protesters are not the only actors and spectators in demonstrations, authorities also reflect their ideological roles.

As we have already pointed out before, activists started utilizing performance intensively since the 1960s, when theater has been recognized as a central feature of grassroots political organizing. Prior to that date performance was used rather as a tool of communication then a paradigm for action. In the 1960s, activist groups such as the Yippies and WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) developed their radical concepts - including “levitating the Pentagon” demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic National Convention – intentionally exploiting conventions from the theatre world in order to express outrage and attract media attention. For many activists since the 1960s performance served as an integral part of activism.

Activists in the 1990s (for example marches against Gulf War) learned to understood real potential of performance as a powerful tool for organizing and mobilization of adherents, incorporating performances into political actions, but in slightly different way. People involved in 1990s activism, particularly those who did not participate in the movements of the 1960s, felt a sense of ambivalence toward the theatrical demonstrations of the 1960s. According to Kershaw, they valued this “usable cultural past,” but were cautious of falling in its shadow or repeating its mistakes. In addition, they felt a sense of a “usable cultural present,” appropriating models and material not only from activist traditions, but also from popular culture. Activists from 1990s decided to openly label their actions as “theatre,” indicating that they consider performance as a tool in revealing links with the worlds of institutional performance. At times activists acknowledge explicitly the use of theatrical devices as components of public actions.

There are countless examples of such performative mobilizations of people throughout the world and throughout history. Demonstrations of this kind were not intended to serve just western social movements; its usage in other cultural settings proves theatre’s unique global scope. In what is reportedly the largest public square in the world, Tiananmen Square in Beijing, a mass popular demonstration turned into a massacre (April - June 1989). The meaning of this event does not only hide in its symbolism on a political and social scale, representing how mass movements can emerge to threaten the authorities, but also how performative such occasions can become. Protestors utilized almost all theatrical elements available, such as costumes, props and for Beijing not so typical modes of behavior - music, dancing, chanted slogans and the parading of a home-made statue of a “Goddess of Democracy and Freedom”.

When participants decide to exploit the theatre in order to spread the message about what is happening, the following sense of being observed, both locally and globally, and therefore of performing, deeply affects these protests. In situations like this, there is often a line which is
crossed between such events and more artistic happenings that might be primarily motivated by aesthetic aspirations. Like the student marches in Washington D.C. in 1960s, demonstrations on Tiananmen Square severely manipulated the symbols that public spaces possess. This square is first and foremost a site for May Day military parades, where thousands of soldiers celebrate Communist dictatorship with rows of tanks and other weapons. Military parades in China are conceptualized and structured in space and time to mimic a sense of control, overlooked by giant placards of Mao Tse Tung, whose mausoleum rests in the square. The 1989 uprising, which had many other forms but was most manifest in this square in Beijing, was a performance of another kind, with few rules and another cast, led by carnivalesque subversive play. Tiananmen Square stands out because of its dimensions, its tragic denouement, and the surprise it generated by happening in what was largely perceived abroad as a nation of passive conformists. Such moments have helped shape the field of performance studies and broadened the scope of what its analytical terrain might be. Performance theorists and especially Richard Scheduler have argued how loose the boundaries are between consciously staged events and those which become theatricalized incidentally through being observed or mediatised. They also reveal how frequently devices used in performance are adopted in everyday life to heighten demands, draw focus, or simply as inevitable elements of public celebrations and community gatherings, when the fluid rules of play displace the rigid structures of government.

For the most part scholars of the early history of modern performance omitted highly theatrical street demonstrations of the 1960s from their consideration because they believed that performance should be primarily associated with the artistic community. However Richard Scheduler in the early 1970s argued that much of what was at that time called “guerilla theatre” should be characterized as a political performance. The term “guerilla theatre” was coined in the late 1960s by R. G. Davis, a member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, popular theatrical group of that time which used performance in non-theatrical public spaces to deliver political messages to a broader audience. While the majority of such theatre was devoted at that time to protests against the Vietnam War, social inequalities experienced by various minorities forced performers to broaden their interest in an area outside their original subject. In the case of two groups with particularly close relationships to something that will be later on defined as a political performance, these inequalities referred not to governmental or social practices, but to discrimination of the art world itself. The institutional favoritism toward white male artists inspired the first performative actions of both the Guerilla Girls in New York and the Chicane ASCO group in Los Angeles.

View on Serbia

In the late 1970s guerilla theatre, although never named this way, was probably the first and only opposition movement in the one-party system of former Yugoslavia. Agit-prop performances, so much popular on the eastern side of divided Europe, served no more to one ideology, least of all to Marxism. Theatre in Yugoslavia was as much a tool of the regime as of the opposition. Political performing without intention to glorify achievements of the system,
especially theatre made and done in streets addressing broader audience, was an act of self-destruction. Under the impact of so called black wave in Yugoslavian art of the time, a whole range of provocative performances arose during the late 1970s and the early 1980s; a wave which will be later called political theatre. When nothing else could be done, theatre took responsibility for questioning reality, negating dogma and giving new impulses to a society's atrophied moral sense.

But if this was a demanding task, prediction is absolutely impossible in radical situations such as war. It is not up to us to decide whether Serbia was formally in the war that burned down much of its neighbors, but intensive cultural destruction of Milosevic regime resulted in lack of any system of values especially in a climate of socio-psychosis, which meant surviving under long-term oppression filled with hatred and inflamed by nationalistic propaganda. Regime's formula for gaining loyalty by the destruction of everything existing, including culture and theatre, relied among others on theatrical means and the exceptional popularity of the theatre among so-called ordinary people. The Serbian nationalistic regime was successful in abusing all three of the main genres of street performance that theatre sociology has identified so far.

The first genre consists of so called “spontaneous manifestations” or manifestations organized under the support of agitators; these were by far the most popular and most effectively used in generating the climate for the rise of Milosevic. The most “spontaneous” part of these gatherings were organized busses by which demonstrators were taken to a predetermined place.

Even more theatrically powerful was a ritual of “second entombment”, reused several times at the very beginning of Milosevic's rule. In the course of these rituals authorities would usually perform something that could be described as a re-internment of the bones of a dead and until recently forgotten father of the nation - a spectacle that included particularly aggressive media coverage.

Finally, the third genre consisted of “celebration of heroic times” with purely ideological content, usually disguised behind cultural or religious purposes. The best-known example in ex-Yugoslavia is the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo Field (1989), event intentionally prepared to revive suppressed existential fears, traumas that will feed Serbian nationalism for years.

Theatre practitioners in Belgrade, in Serbia were spared direct exposure to the war disaster and the savage bloodshed. But still they have been continually witnessing victimization of both the whole society and each individual with hundreds of thousands of refugees pouring from Bosnia and Croatia and never defined numbers of casualties. Theatre saw the organized exhumation of patriotic clichés and myths; the contamination by pseudo-religion, history, and tradition; and what was the most hazardous for entire Serbian society - disintegration of values and priorities. Institutional theater has never actually embraced this frenzy of mass proportions; it has never taken part in stirring up the collective national trance. But neither did it do anything against all this.

Different sort of theatre activities took place in the streets. March 9th, 1991 is important date in history of political activism of modern Serbia. Three months before the beginning of the civil
war, by direct decision of Slobodan Milosevic Yugoslav army thanks were sent to against
demonstrators in Belgrade, for the first time in the history of this part of the Balkans. From that
moment on guerrilla theater was born and immediately taken over by opposition parties,
movements and different associations united in idea that war can be avoided. In contrast to the
regime which always insisted on “spontaneity” of its theatricality, guerrilla theater has never
claimed that its performances were happening spontaneously. Straight from the beginning it
was clear that their performances were planned in detail, even dramatically structured and
conceptualized and always enhanced with titles of strong symbolic meaning. As in the cases of
earlier mentioned street performances of 1960s and 1970s, public places of specific symbolic
importance were used to increase tension toward authorities and get more response from the
observers. Majority of these street performances, especially those addressed to the Serbian
president took place in front of the Serbian Assembly, depending upon where the president wa
scheduled to appear that day. During the very first months of the war the Center for Anti-War
Action and Civil League organized performance named The last Bell - a literal expression of the
protesters' demand that the last bell for the Serbian president had rung and that he must
resign. The participants were asked to bring and use anything that can produce a sharp,
clinking sound and to remain kneeling in front of the Assembly, making unbearable noise with
their chimes, sheep and cow's bells, sets of keys and mechanical alarm clocks. The performance
 gained wide public attention, especially from the side of opposition media. Authorities remained
silent.

One more performance should be mentioned at this time. At the very beginning of the war in
Bosnia, radio B-92 that will later become a symbol of the anti-Milosevic’s protests, organized an
action entitled All the President's Babies. The name of the performance was a subject of large
controversy. According to organizers it was a reference to the fact of Serbia's negative birth
rate. But it actually presented a symbolic construction referring the war atrocities. A thousand
of parents and their babies, each carrying Rowers or candles, formed a large circle around the
Assembly. Summer 1992 witnessed two months of intensive protesting in Belgrade. Students at
Belgrade University organized numerous street theatrical actions created to capture the
attention of Belgrade's citizens and media, as well to consolidate the spirit of the movement
itself. Students expressed their dissent through a popular form of organized street protest -
 thematic processions. The first one, Prisoners of Shortsightedness, was organized in support of
an opposition meeting and also to answer the charge that student protest 'must have been
organized by someone else,' not by the students themselves. The students pinned prisoners' numbers onto their shirts and walked with one hand holding their student identification cards
high in the air, the other covering their eyes.

One political performance, called Washing Up, particularly angered radical right-wing leaders.
The action took place the first few weeks of the UN sanctions, when the lack of hygienic
supplies has become the major health threat. The performance was addressed to all members
of the Serbian parliament – aiming openly at their moral dirtiness. Every student was asked to
bring his/her last hygienic supplies from home and left them in front of the Assembly. While
students were leaving these items on the front steps of the Assembly, the right-wing leader
came out of the building and started to threaten the protesters with the revolver. The students responded by pouring a rain of soap-bars at him.

Probably the most famous political performance plotted by Serbian students was *Coffee with the President*. One afternoon, students joined by many other Belgrade citizens took a long walk from the University Campus, headquarters of the protest in the city center, to the president’s residency ten kilometers away in isolated and well-guarded part of the city. The students wanted to visit president at his own home, greet his wife with flowers and have a coffee with them (a traditional sign of Balkan hospitality). At the end of their encounter they planned to deliver a list of their demands to the president - the first point was a call for his immediate resignation. The procession was stopped a few hundred meters in front of the residency by strong police squads. Later on student started to perform a theatrical replica of the same procession, called *Five O’clock Coffee*. For this event, students of fine arts made two-meter-tall rug puppets of the president and his wife, students of architecture designed a stage representing their house, and the whole procession, with flowers and the list of demands in the fore, was repeated.

Some of these performances kept living long after the protest had been definitely crushed. One of these happened in the fall of 1993, in the year when inflation, poverty and hunger hit hard almost any part of Serbian society. It was the time when some most ordinary article in the local grocery would promptly result in a kilometer-long line of hungry people. The students put an iron cage in the center of the city where a few of them, with good background in pantomime, started selling the *invisible thing*. The performance called *Fed with invisible* was intended to provoke conscientious objection and civil protest in the place of patient obedience and submission.

And it the end we should pay special attention to one group that used theatrical forms and its force with stunning determination and steadiness. This group of women, none of whom had any kind of theatrical training or previous experience, has been playing a distinctive role in Belgrade anti-war guerilla theatre. *Women in Black* was originally founded in 1988 in Israel as a pacifist, feminist peace vigil that began among both Palestinian and Israeli women, and grew throughout various war-torn countries of the world, as well as the United States. Serbian version was formed in the early 1990s, slightly before civil wars began devastating the former Yugoslavia. The group’s public protests consist of simply standing, dressed in black, in the streets in silent vigils of defiance and mourning. According to Jasmina Tesanovic in an essay *Women and Conflict: A Serbian Perspective* on the activities of the Belgrade *Women in Black*:

> The fundamental principal of international group is to protest sovereign governments entering into aggressive war on foreign territory. . . The women’s goal was also to spread the character of the movement beyond the national borders of one country and immediate zones of conflict. “Today” says Neda Bozinovic, eighty-two years old and participating in vigils since October 1991, “today, we are fighting against the global militarism that is destroying all of us.” (Tesanovic 23)
On October 9, 1998, upon their seventh anniversary of standing vigil, more than one hundred members of *Women in Black* of Belgrade wrote statements on pieces of paper:

**We Are All Women in Black!**

**I CONFESSION:**

I, Jelena, 12 years of age, confess only to life

**J’ACCUSE**

That in 1991 I was against war, and I am now

I simply confess

That I will never be loyal to these authorities and

that I love Sabahet and Mira and Vjosa and Ana

To everything you wrote

That I am loyal to non-violence, solidarity, friendship and

that I am disloyal to all forms of authoritative power,

violence, hate

That I can no longer stand it and that I can't take it any-

That I have lived two lives, one in Sarajevo and one in

Belgrade

That I did not wish for all that which happened to us, but

To all the charges, I confess that I am a traitor in every

That I am a traitor of the dominant militaristic values in

Serbian society

That I will protest against all for forms of violence, war and

Discrimination

That I sang Bosnian songs and danced Albanian dances

Throughout the whole war

That I hate war, violence and killing

I confess, but I also accuse

That violence in Kosovo cannot stop in the presence

the Serbian police. But it can with international forces

which will allow peace and the process of negotiation

That there is no way I will go to the army. Put militarism

in the trash where it belongs

That I sang Bosnian songs and danced Albanian dances

throughout the whole war

That I hate war, violence and killing

I confess, but I also accuse

That violence in Kosovo cannot stop in the presence

the Serbian police. But it can with international fore

which will allow peace and the process of negotiator
That there is no way I will go to the army. Put milit in the trash where it belongs.
That from the beginning of the peace movement I have been an active participant in all anti-war gatherings.
That I will organize yet one more anti-war campaign if you keep up this bullshit.
That I am European, a citizen of the world and that I am opponent to this regime.
That I respect the human rights of the other and that first and foremost I consider myself a citizen.
That for seven years I have plotted against this Nazi regime.
That I am bitter about the fact that the authorities in Serbia and Yugoslavia constantly wage war.
That conflicts should be resolved through negotiation.

NO PASSARAN!
That I read books, I like the theatre, I speak other languages.
I like freedom of thought.
That our life is peace and creativity and that I have been thinking about this and working on it since 1 learned it from my girlfriends.
To everything and even more To everything which is written on the panel I confess.
That of this current population you have the most principles.
Thank you!

Women of various ethnic origins and with different social and educational background, dressed in black, simple clothes, went to the main Belgrade square carrying black banners, candles, and flowers; there they stood silently for one hour and in the same grave quietness they would leave home. Since then, they have kept on standing there every Wednesday afternoon, regardless of the changes in the official Serbian policy, right-wing provocation, or meteorological conditions.

Figure 1: Women in Black at a central square in Belgrade (photo V.P.)
It is remarkable that these women, as we already said without any theatrical knowledge, understood from the beginning that silence is one of the strongest performative tools existing. The way they found to express what they think and feel and how easily they were able to communicate on any level astonishes even experienced researchers of performance. The workshops they organized in their modest premises were simply called *meetings*, and their protest in the streets was just a “standing”. Although from the technical point of view this performance was very simple form of “tableaux”, it constantly included theatrical elements that varied from one Wednesday to another. The only constants are the color of the clothing and the banners. Sometimes the women simply stand in line or in a circle, sometimes the circle is a moving one, sometimes it sways from a line to circle, then to a line again, or to a semicircle. Sometimes spectators/passers-by may respond quite roughly or aggressively; if so the women move closer together, generating composure within the group and staying quiet and in full concentration.

Women in Black also initiated some more violent actions themselves which they shaped according to the patterns described. The one that gathered the greatest number of people together took place in April 1991. Called *Black Ribbon*, it was a procession mourning the first anniversary of the war in Bosnia. Participants of the march covered with a long construction of black fabric occupied the main streets of Belgrade. The event took place in total silence. While opposition on the streets was taking over the role of theatre, Belgrade's institutional theatres stood safe behind the curtains during almost three years of war.

Lack of information about what was happening on Belgrade streets and unresponsiveness not only from the side of the Serbian government but also by the international community downgraded these acts in the eyes of the science to just a street theatre. It seems that western democracies were unable to comprehend that so many years of UN sanctions did not destroy the Serbian ruling party, but they did weaken an already fragile opposition. The sanctions have not in any way endangered the popularity of Milosevic; on the contrary, they have fortified and even expanded his power. In spite of a massive cultural devastation set out and executed by repressive regime and state media, it was again theatre, or at least theatrical elements, that on extreme occasions embodied the only method of resistance left for the opposition. It is important to conclude that these political performances have had a real, tangible effect on politically unconscious and illiterate entities in certain groups of Serbian people. But what is even more important task for further studies is to realize what made them so effective, to penetrate into the core of their interaction with the audience.
Bibliography


