We are coming... strong...
unstoppable:
A Global Balkans Interview with
Belgrade Artist Milica Ružićić

INTERVIEW BY TAMARA VUKOV, GLOBAL BALKANS,
WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF IVAN ZLATIĆ, POKRET ZA SLOBODU,
AND SAŠA PERIĆ, FILMMAKER
TRANSLATION BY IRINA CERIC AND KOLE KILIBARDA, GLOBAL BALKANS
TRANSCRIPTION BY ACO POPADIĆ, KONTRAPUNKT

This interview with Belgrade artist Milica Ružićić focuses on her series of paintings on police brutality in both Serbia and globally that appear in this issue of the Journal of Radical Criminology, and which was also the centerpiece of her solo exhibition in the Belgrade Cultural Center (Kulturni Centar Beograd) in November 2010. It was conducted in Belgrade in January 2011 by Tamara Vukov for her feature-length documentary Tranzicija / Transition. Currently in post-production, the film traces the impact of the post-socialist transition to capitalism in Serbia over the course of 5 years from the perspective of those confronting the forces of neoliberal accumulation by dispossession (to cite David Harvey), particularly

1 See the black-and-white reproductions of these paintings on pages 99-115 or go to our website <http://journal.radicalcriminology.org> to see them in full (bloody, intense, living) color.
Tamara: Can you talk a bit about what do you do, your art practice?

Milica: I studied sculpture, but this is my first exhibition of paintings. That is perhaps something unusual for sculptors, for sculptors to paint, but for me it isn’t because I usually choose which medium to work with intuitively depending on the concept or idea I have. I choose the medium that will best illustrate that particular idea. This means that in addition to sculpture, I’ve also done performance, video works, photo-montages, so it was totally logical for me to choose to paint at this point as well.

Tamara: So you take a multidisciplinary approach?

Well yes, I approach the work, I don’t have one medium in which I constantly work. Depending on my conception, it depends in which medium the work will be best interpreted or read as I have imagined it. From that perspective, I understand the medium not only as a visual language but also as a weapon and tool for reading works.

Tamara: So what brought you to work with painting for this series?

Milica: Well exactly that, I started from the point that I want to paint. This time I inverted my strategy and began with the medium itself. I decided to paint because painting on canvas is a recognizable and the most traditional of artistic media. Today paintings are also popular market commodities that are used as status symbols. Then I started to think about what I wanted the theme of these paintings to be. What was it that I wanted people to look at in this context? I wanted to start from that position, to think about the image as an object for sale and to use it for my own ends, instead of running away from this aspect of its character. For a long time I though about what I wanted someone to hang on their wall and look at, and then, through a bit of research, I came upon the issue of police brutality, which I came to understand as a globally relevant topic. I was particularly interested in the universality of this problem, how it has somehow become the image of global politics today. This image isn’t hidden, we see these images in the media, but they are so frequently seen and alternated that their force becomes spent and we
quickly forget about them. I decided that I would take these images, which are evidence of police brutality, and transform those images into paintings on canvas, since paintings are objects that imply permanence. So I made a series of 16 small paintings that are 30 x 40 cm. I deliberately chose a format that could be easily commercialized, since small formats are cheaper and easier to sell. (Belgrade art critic) Jasmina Ćubrilo calls these “civic formats” since they are often found on the walls of citizens’ apartments. In spite of my efforts to turn these into commercial formats, these images weren’t easy to look at. They’re not something that someone would want to keep on the walls of their house or in their office, since these brutal scenes are unpleasant. Nevertheless, in this way they wouldn’t be forgotten. I treated these images like a document, some type of evidence, so in that sense I didn’t want to alter them or aestheticize the violence. My only intervention was to remove the background, leaving only a white canvas behind the figures in conflict. This intervention was to remove the background, leaving only a canvas behind the figures in conflict. I wanted to unify them in this way. These 16 images come from different cities around the world usually choosing protests where political will reactions to the political decisions of governments are being suppressed with police violence. That is the first segment of the exhibition.

Then I wanted to add a local story, since this is important for the local public. For this I chose a different format, the museum format of the large historical painting, which in this case was close to 3 x 2 m. The image I chose was taken during the workers / small shareholders of the Jugoremedija pharmaceutical company, who persistently and resolutely fought to save their factory in an era of bad privatizations, which continue to this day. I chose one scene from Ivan Zlatić’s documentary film “Ugovor na štetu trećem” (Contract Damaging to Third Parties) that follows this four-year struggle. The chosen scene deals with the forceful intervention of the police at the moment when judicial proceedings were still in progress to determine who actually owns the firm. At this moment, the police intervened, taking the side of the provenly corrupt director and his aggressive private security army (the so-called people in black). This intervention was in spite of the fact that the workers were the owners of the factory. This intervention in order to evict the workers from the factory. This intervention came in spite of the fact that the workers were the owners of a
greater number of shares (58%) of shares than the aforementioned director (42%) and the fact that the workers acted far more responsibly towards their factory than the director did.

In this sense, it became clear that it was necessary to re-examine for whom the police was working, whose interests it was defending. Whether they are defending the rights and freedoms of citizens or the personal interests of powerful individuals? And that’s the question that I wanted to become the main thread woven throughout this exhibition, from the small paintings of police brutality in the world to this local story.

That is, therefore, the second part of the exhibition. This large painting is framed in a large golden baroque frame modeled after museum pieces depicting historical events. Why? Because I wanted to take this small segment of modern worker struggles and in some way historicize it, i.e. to write it into historical events, so that it is recorded, remembered and retold. That was my intention, now we will see whether or not it will happen. I remain hopeful.

In the third segment of the exhibition, alongside the large painting depicting Jugoremedija, I displayed Jugoremedija’s products. After a long struggle they succeeded in introducing self-management and saving their factory from bankruptcy, even managing to adopt European standards (that were being imposed by the European Union). Not only did I want to display the pharmaceuticals they produce, but I tendentiously chose drugs that serve as painkillers, used to treat pain and injury. It’s a cynical answer to all these police beatings, a little ironic twist on the whole issue so that someone can leave the exhibition with a smile.

The fourth segment of the exhibition is the very fabric on which all these pictures were painted. These canvases were produced in a correctional home in Sombor, which means they were made by prisoners. This is why I turned one of the canvases backwards to reveal the stamp showing the origins of this canvas.

_Tamara:_ You’ve mentioned several times this large painting depicting the local situation and then these other paintings, from other events elsewhere around the globe. Let me ask you then how you see the relationship between the local and the global in this case?
Milica: I think that in the global sense these local policies seem like some type of farce. In principle the conditions are quite similar, though of course the standards differ. People are better off in some places and poorer in others, though even in rich states you’ll find many poor people. This means that these differences are often an illusion or to speak as a painter, they are gradations in chiaroscuro or shadings of light and dark. These local stories are in principle very similar, a small number of extremely rich people and a large number of poor people. That’s why I wanted to connect them in an exhibition because we can no longer look at politics simply from our own corner, without analyzing what is happening in the rest of the world.

Tamara: Can you talk a little more about your own engagement, particularly in relation to the situation in Jugoremedija?

Milica: Well I wouldn’t say I was seriously engaged there. I participated at that time in a video collective, so I happened to be there at the beginning of the Jugoremedija workers’ strike. At that time I wasn’t very disciplined, it was more impulsive, so I documented the beginnings of that struggle but I didn’t end up doing anything with the footage. In fact, they began their strike in 2003, while we as representatives of Drugacije Svet Je Moguce (DSM / Another World Is Possible) as part of the PGA (Peoples’ Global Action) meeting organized in Belgrade in 2004 paid them a visit to offer our support. That is when I was introduced to their protest and problems. At the time the situation in the entire country was tragic, all over the place these privatizations and the transition, which led to mass layoffs of workers and the closure of factories and no one knew what would happen to them. We could only hope that they would persist.

Tamara: It’s interesting that you’re taking about how in the video collective, everything was a bit impulsive, done quickly, and that you eventually came to this more deliberate way of working...

Milica: It is, I was a lot younger then so I wasn’t as disciplined. I think I’m more mature now, I hope, and I have more responsibilities, so I’ve learned to manage my time. Perhaps also because my interest in social issues has become linked to my art practice, so that these are no longer two separate areas of interest.
Tamara: Also, your choice of painting as a medium, it seems to me to constitute a strategy of recontextualization, recontextualizing these images from the media that one sees continuously in a decontextualized way...

Milica: It is, we’re saturated with these images and the problem is that this saturation pushes us not to see them anymore. Something happens and it’s in the spotlight for maybe a week. In two weeks it’s totally forgotten. I think that this media saturation is deliberate, because this is actually easier to ignore... You give everyone the freedom to say anything and then you create so much noise that it’s difficult to separate what’s important from what’s unimportant.

Tamara: One more thing, the exhibition catalogue and the text by Jasmina Ćubrilo... at one point she says how this exhibition and your approach fits with the documentary style in an eccentric way. What do you think is eccentric here in your approach to documentary?

Milica: Well, I think that she meant to say that there exists this documentary style in art and that usually it expresses itself through the medium of video or photos, and that we rarely or at least for a long time haven’t have seen it in the medium of paintings. Perhaps this combination is a little strange, with pop art, but maybe its not. Now what is eccentric, that varies, maybe in five years from now such an approach will again be quite common.

Tamara: How do you look upon the tradition of socialist realism since it also existed in this region?

Milica: At first when I was looking for models in undertaking a large painterly composition I returned to Rembrandt, who had been dear to me since childhood. I mostly took from him the experience of building a dynamic within the painting - light, movement, drama in general. However, Rembrandt painted during the baroque era, so for his style flamboyance is also important, things like hats and clothing in general. My theme is contemporary, so the clothes of the workers and the police are much closer to socialist realist scenes. Nevertheless, the difference lies in the fact that socialist realism was an artistic tendency that was dictated by the state and was concerned with an idealized representation of communist society and struggle. Since in my painting the police, as a representation of state power,
aren’t necessarily portrayed in a positive light, perhaps it is best to compare it to Russian critical realism, as represented by Repin, from whom socialist realism originates. Of course I’m totally okay with the idea that everyone can say what they associate it with, because I do not want to impose a single reading upon the audience.

**Tamara:** I was just thinking about what it is you can take from this series of paintings regarding the role of state violence in this specific historical moment, relative to other times...

**Milica:** Well, I wouldn’t like to impose a conclusion although it can probably be felt... I declare myself to be an anarchist, so for me the state is something not necessarily positive, that is why I like to criticize it. I don’t think I know the solution that would bring good for all, which is why I think that everyone must be sufficiently responsible for and interested in deciding upon their fate, instead of some police force, state, or some other structure...The police is a state apparatus, while who exactly controls this apparatus is a subject for reflection.

**Tamara:** Because as you said, before would there have been such a conflict between the police and workers in the same way?

**Milica:** I don’t know, maybe there were such conflicts, I was born at the end of that time so I can’t say exactly. When I listen to stories about that time, they are all subjective angles, sometimes matching up, sometimes conflicting, so I’m not sure what is correct there. Was that really the time of the beautiful life, or did there also then exist reasons for critique? I think that as long as a state exists, there exist reasons to critique it, since its structures are subject to abuse.

**Ivan:** You said you were an anarchist. Okay. That in your paintings there is an assumption that the state is on the wrong side. That is something that does not need to be overly explained. But still, now that you’ve commented about this event in Jugoremedija, you cannot avoid the fact that the company director Jovica Stefanović was in the end arrested and brought to justice. Do you sometimes... because I’m looking at these images and wondering why the police is always on the wrong side... do you believe that they will always be on the wrong side, on the side of the stronger party? Or can something be done maybe to change the situation; can it all be turned in some
new direction and are you participating in some type of democratization in that direction, by warning about it?

**Milica:** That is what critique is for, to fix some mistakes. Of course, I tendentiously chose those positions where the police is on the wrong side, since I think that simply this is what I wanted to bring forward as a clear problem in the organization of this system. So long as there are armed people who have a monopoly on violence and who represent the state, the abuse of this position of power will occur. It probably goes without saying that not all police officers will be bad, but there will certainly be those who will do bad things in that position, since they’re in a position that essentially allows them to do that.

**Tamara:** If we’re talking about Jasmina Ćubrilo’s text, she describes that moment of socialism’s reorganization into a capitalist system, of this so-called transition, and that state power plays a specific role in this transition ...

**Milica:** ... for this local context. It’s sort of a strange situation became the systemic changes were so sudden, from a system of relative social security we moved to a system something like, dare I say it, the “wild west”. Capitalism is understood to require stark class differences, whereas the experience of self-managing socialism taught that sudden wealth, especially during the wars of the nineties, could not be gotten honestly, that some plunder or fraud had to be involved. In fact, such people (the new rich) now function here without much interference, apparently based on the fact that such behavior is normal under capitalism. So my take on transition, at least here, is that when viewed from a critical position founded on notions of social justice and ethics, transition enacts the opposite: uncritical acceptance of the capitalist system and a Machiavellian ethic. Those generations who lived in and remember a different time are apparently supposed to either die off or to somehow acclimatize themselves, transforming into people who believe that the criminals, mafiosos and robbers of previous eras have suddenly become successful businessmen, resourceful individuals who can serve as role models for today’s children on the understanding that the ends justify the means.

**Tamara:** You’ve already mentioned that you’re not quite from that generation, but given the prominence of those themes [a
supposed or so-called yugo-nostalgia], can you comment, from your perspective, on that time, on what happened in the SFRJ?

**Milica:** Well, I’m not even certain exactly how it was, I know it more through the recollections of my parents. They told me about how we would all go to the seaside every year, how there was never a lot but always enough to live on. We never thought about whether my sister and I could both go to university; we had free education so that was a given. My parents didn’t live in fear of losing their jobs. We all had health insurance, always. Our passports allowed us to travel anywhere without problems. It seems to me that time and that country were a better place for a young person than where we are now. If I could have chosen to be born in those times, perhaps I would have; that’s my thinking, whether or not I’m actually right. As for the break-up of Yugoslavia, I don’t think we can analyze local politics outside of global influences, because global events dictate local politics. And in that regard, given the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, we had had a particular role in that divide as a buffer zone and so we also needed to fall, both because that zone was no longer necessary and because it was a successful example of an alternative which could threaten western capitalism. We also represented a potential new market for the West which could be entered into at very favorable terms, wartime sanctions and the embargo having served their purposes. And then after a few years, the long-awaited foreign investors appeared at the door, gaining access to a new market, real estate and a low-cost workforce, likewise de-valued by years of war.

**Ivan:** Aside from my disagreement with a version of the dissolution of Yugoslavia in which only external factors exist, I think that there is much that was local, and especially during wartime, local politics persisted. How else can you explain the existence of several hundred prison camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina? That is like a social cancer. That’s not something easily explainable, when every village had a prison camp. **Milica:** As a matter of principle I see no justification for any of that, I see no justification for war at all, any war. I’m speaking about that which goes along with war, for when war begins it gathers momentum and is very difficult to stop. It becomes revenge for revenge, a cycle of revenge… For me, those responsible are those who start wars, who create the conditions for the
initiation of war, who divide and fan the flames. Once a war begins, nationalism cannot be easily extinguished and it will just boil up, given the need to take sides, to determine who is with us and who is against us, to ensure that you do not stand alone, because then you are a target for everyone. I think that war is something else, it’s the outcome of the underlying fuel, which only needs a lit match to ignite the madness.

*Tamara:* To return to your large painting. To me, it seems that what you are representing is another means and type of war.

*Milica:* Well yes, it is true. Pretty much every day we are engaged in some type of civil war, or more precisely, a class war, in which the state constantly visits repression upon its citizens.

*Tamara:* All the work you’ve done to produce this painting, those three or four months. As a symbol, why is it important to you at this moment?

*Milica:* The story of Jugoremedija is especially important to because it had a positive outcome. At least for now. Their story is symbolic, a story of a revolution that must be continued. Their example demonstrates how despite lacking overt political theory and ideology, they found a way to come to collective solutions and to self-organize on-going production in their factory. That’s a great example of something that is obviously possible, that such things aren’t utopian. That’s why their story is important to me, because I want it to be remembered and their example to be talked about as much as possible. That’s why I really hope that it becomes a museum piece, because along with that painting goes the story of their struggle, which should be preserved for future generations.

*Ivan:* I have one more question. In the context of what you just described, a new generation who will read the words next to the painting and take in that message, we’ve discussed how these are people from a generation who do not remember earlier eras. But I wonder if it is realistic that this new generation will accept capitalists as businessmen or if a new type of hatred will develop because no one likes to be degraded, even if that is how they are taught. Or maybe a third possibility, and this is what would be most dangerous, in which that exploited young worker moves to redress his grievances by competing to become his boss; that this is his only goal, one completely devoid of historical experience.
Milica: I would say that it’s not either-or. I’m imagining the future now, but it’s not that hard to predict; it’s enough to go to the US and to see how it has really functioned for years, a well-developed economic system. There are those who accept this as a given, who don’t think about different starting positions; they simply think that that’s how it is, like a birth right. Certainly there will be those who rebel. Some will undoubtedly direct their rebellion to becoming one of those who do the crushing, not one who is crushed. The US will sell the American Dream of potential success, which is of course an efficient means of pacifying people, through just that promise. Actual analysis and critique of the system is left to a very few people, who may uncover other alternatives through their investigation, but their level of influence is questionable.

Ivan: Is solidarity subversive these days?

Milica: Solidarity is, I think, always subversive, but it must be widespread to be subversive enough, but if it’s there then it has immense strength.

Saša: In the composition of this painting, the colors and the overall artistic expression, did you try and depict your vision of the future, of society, some optimism or pessimism?

Milica: Well not consciously, but it was very interesting to me when during one of the tours through the exhibition, a man I didn’t know but who turned out to be an art theorist began to read symbols and allegories in the painting of which I was completely unaware, and had not consciously brought to the painting. It turned out that those were things I added on to the original video still which served as the basis for the painting. He analyzed, for example, this knot/arrangement of hands and their inter-relation, and most interesting was that this woman in the first panel, he saw as freedom on the barricades, a woman as a symbol of the revolution, in a red shirt – workers’ struggle, with hands arrayed like this, which he said represented victory or the like. So of course, there are certainly different readings of which I’m not aware, which should be inherent to any artistic work.

Saša: I wonder why this small section of the painting with many heads jammed together seems so dynamic and strong, as though from that corner comes something that will swallow everything else…
Ivan: They’re coming….
Saša: ….very strong.
Ivan: …unstoppable.
Milica: Well it may wind up like that, not just in your interpretation of this painting, but in the near future.

Technique: acrylic on canvas (made by inmates in prison @ Sombor), framed with baroque frame. | Dimensions 287x213cm | 2010.