



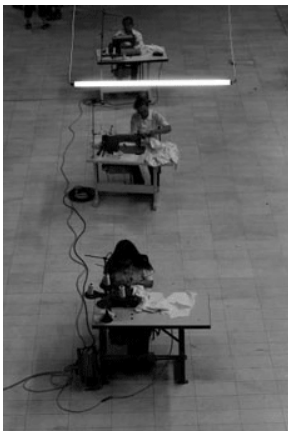
**Nada Prlja, Stefan Szczelkun**

## The return of the red bourgeoisie

*An interview with Nada Prlja*

Heavily influenced by the Black Wave or dissident Yugoslav cinema of her childhood, artist Nada Prlja considers its unique balancing act between iconoclasm and idealism, individualism and communism to be exemplary. In an interview with Stefan Szczelkun, Prlja talks about the cultural context of communist Yugoslavia and its mutation into a consumer culture — a shift that her artwork pivots on.

Nada Prlja was born in Sarajevo in the former Yugoslavia in 1971, and graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Skopje, Macedonia. She has lived and worked in London since she moved here in 1999. Her work deals with complex situations of inequality within different political, economic or religious formations. Working across media (video, installation and a wide range of material including flags and neon) her work is site-specific, as well as ideas rather than media driven. She was one of the few artists to graduate with me from the Royal College of Art in 2002 who was clearly political in her intent. Her work has progressed with a fearless determination since then. Recently I heard her give a gallery talk and tour as part of the Tate Britain's "Conversation Piece" series. Here she claimed to come from a "Red Bourgeois" background but wanted to move toward a "black communism". I was intrigued to know more.



Nada Prlja, "Workers' production line", 2008

**Stefan Szczelkun:** What is your background? I guess the short way to ask this is what jobs did your parents do? How did the family make its money?

**Nada Prlja:** My family comes from two opposite sides of society: the family from my mother's side is part of the pre-WWII bourgeoisie, the hated "aristocracy" (or the so-called "book aristocracy" — related to the fact that in pre-WWII times, only the aristocracy could be educated). With the nationalisation of private property, the family lost almost all of their assets,

property and possessions — houses, land and a factory that used to employ about 100 people in the pre-WWII period. Ironically, they did not lose their family library, as no-one had a "need" for it.

In contrast with this situation of displaced family members, victims of the nationalisation of the family's assets, my father's side of the family belongs to the post-WWII "newcomers". My grandparents (from my father's side) were part of the partisan movement; they were what was known as "first fighters" (*prvoborci* — people that joined the partisan movement at its stage of infancy). My grandfather, in particular, also achieved important recognition for his bravery and military accomplishments as a partisan leader. Fighting the Germans and Italians proved profitable... as these heroic partisan figures enjoyed considerable privileges in the post-war period. What I learned from my grandfather was the notion of bravery, a belief in idealism, and faith in a socialist society. Unfortunately, I now see these individuals — the socialist sympathisers — as the "losers". My grandfather (like many others of his generation) broke down after the disintegration of Yugoslavia; this breaking up of the country was too painful for him to recover from, it was more painful than the six bullet wounds he received in the battles of WWII. The collapse of the country for which he had fought also meant the collapse of the belief system that went with it.

My grandmother, on my mother's side, was an artist, graduating in painting from the Academy of Fine Art in Belgrade in 1942. She died young in 1952. Her paintings, inspired by Millet and mostly figurative, remained with us and were all around me as I was growing up. That was the first "push" towards my becoming an artist myself. I was good at drawing, so I grew confident that that is what I should be doing. Any other occupation would have simply been a compromise.

**SS:** Did you go to mixed class schools or private schools? What was your education like? At what point did you become interested in art?

**NP:** During my school years, in Communist Yugoslavia, there were no private schools, nor were there "religious" schools or single sex schools. They were all state schools, yet the level of schooling throughout was very high. The only thing that I disagreed with during my elementary school education, which lasts until the age of 14, was that pupils' sense of individuality was not supported. I rebelled against the uniformity, but fortunately the situation changed in my secondary school, which was a Fine Art High School in Skopje. That school supported non-conformity and that is the place where I learned to love art; it was a place attended only by people who really wanted to become artists. Morning lessons (8am to 1pm) were dedicated to art techniques, such as drawing, painting, sculpture and printmaking. The Fine Art Academy in Skopje that I attended next was a really prestigious and "posh" place to be. This was the only National Art Academy in Macedonia. It was a very competitive institution and many of those who were accepted had "connections", mostly the support of parents in influential positions. However, there was no place there for real discussion or ideas of criticism.

While I was looking for a way out of the clichés favoured by the Academy, I started to be active as an artist prior to my graduation. One of my first solo shows was "Walking on Water According to Dr. Knaipp" (1996), which was an installation organised in a public space within a public health institution. This exhibition was accepted (and still remembered) with much appreciation by my generation of curators and artists in Macedonia.

**SS:** Describe how your art education was different from how it might have been in North Western Europe. How did this give your art practice a particular identity?

**NP:** The idea of "recycling" — or looking for other sources of inspiration for creation, was really important. During our years at the Art Academy, we had a very focused history of art lessons; some of the tutors were exceptional historians. However, we were all learning from a single "Art History" book. I did not personally own a copy of this book as it was expensive to buy, so I had a photocopy of the book instead, as did numerous colleagues of mine. Tutors, as well as the students, prioritised the texts, rather than the images in this book, as a source of information. You can imagine the quality of the reproductions we were seeing; Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa", as an almost black box with three white spots — Mona Lisa's forehead, nose and mouth... What I learned by looking at those black and white photocopies, was that art is not about technical perfection, it is about composition, context, concept and the ideas it aims to convey. The photocopies led me to see the world around me from a different perspective; in relation to this in my projects, I always look for weaknesses within society and strive towards improving these issues — through the "misuse" of the art system, "misuse" of the gallery space, "misuse" of newspaper coverage (of my own projects) and many other re-appropriations of established systems.

**SS:** When did you start to question the party line? Did you feel the influence of the "Black Wave"? ("Black Wave" was what the Communist's regime censors dubbed the oppositional *Novi film* ("New Film") movement in Yugoslavia in the 1960s.)

**NP:** Questioning the party line was a part of my childhood, closely related to my family. My grandfather, being a convinced Leninist, was imprisoned by Tito's government on Goli Otok, the notorious island prison for "political undesirables". Many supporters of Lenin were arrested after Tito's famous "No" to Russia. This was happening when I was a young child. I did not discover the true reason for my grandfather's absence until much later, but I always knew that something fishy was going on with Tito and the socialist party. The story was that my grandfather had accused a lady of farting at some special public event — it was hard, even for a young child, to believe that someone could be imprisoned for that reason. As is described in Emir Kusturica's film *When Father was Away on Business* (1985), there was a number of fathers and grandfathers who went on those particular "business trips" in Yugoslavia. Many things were hidden from me during my childhood — the true reasons for my grandfather's imprisonment, his Leninism and my mother's aristocratic background. It seems that many things were simply not talked about, in order not to cross the party line and provoke suspicion.

What Dusan Makavejev's film *Parade* (1962) does is exactly contrary to the party rules; he unveils the reality of a May Day Parade in many directly controversial and sharply critical scenes. My favourite scene is one that is rather subtle, and even sublime — it is the image of a boy wrapped in the national flag. The message of this image is equivalent to the notion of breaking the iconographic rules of religious art. Jesus is rarely represented as a child; representing him like a child was considered blasphemous, especially during the Byzantine period. This is a period that became an important cultural reference for the identity of Orthodox Christians in Yugoslavia. There is a beautiful representation of the breaking of this iconographic canon, now in the Gallery of Icons in Ohrid, Macedonia, in which a small childlike Jesus is

climbing on his mother's enthroned body; the boy has his back turned towards the viewer in a very unusual position that is very human and even animal-like, rather than divine. In the same way, the nameless boy at the May Day Parade, uses the national flag to wrap and cover his body in a casual manner, holding and caressing it. This image opposes the usual use of the flag as a representation of state power. This scene shows Makavejev's respect toward human nature, against the socialist image of man as heroic, and physically and emotionally strong — a man without human weaknesses. I heard that *Parade* was not accepted by the Communist Party and that numerous scenes had to be edited out — including an image of Tito arriving in his limousine and accidentally stopping next to a scruffy gypsy fortune teller who offers to tell his "future for a dinar".

Lazar Stojanovic's diploma work, *Plastic Jesus*, made in 1971, was seen as "dangerous" by the authorities and the film was put into a "bunker" in 1973, re-emerging from censorship and only first publicly viewed in 1990. Tomislav Gotovac plays the lead role of Tom. Gotovac was one of the first performance artists in Yugoslavia whose works were crucial in the shaping of the contemporary Yugoslav art scene. The character Tom is a man who doesn't trust anyone, doesn't believe in anything; his disillusionment is clearly connected to the consequences of the Second World War and the post-war period. The most fascinating scene of the movie, for me, is when Tom is shown in the background of the room, walking around casually, dressed only in underwear, his partner approaches him and draws the red star onto his forehead using her make-up crayon. Tom moves forward and fills up the frame with his torso, rests his hands on the door frame in a position like that of a crucified Jesus, and sings the Internationale. In this scene, Lazar Stojanovic juxtaposed religious iconography with the symbols of socialist ideology, onto the figure of Tom — a non-believer in either of those two ideologies.

Archive footage shows the Nazi party, socialist party leaders, images of the holocaust, the nationalist Ustasi in Croatia and the pro-Serbian nationalistic Chetnici. All of this footage is "wrapped up" in the culture of the late '60s and early '70s, the disillusionment with existing systems, the feminist movement, the issues of "guest-workers" and their annual visits back to their native country, the censorship of TV channels and the underground business of pornography.

**SS:** Another film you mentioned before was *Innocence Unprotected* — what would you say were the key images for you in this film?

**NP:** What I find important in this film is Makavejev's representation of the famous acrobat Aleksic, who is the main actor/character in *Innocence Unprotected* (1968). Aleksic himself had made a movie entitled *Innocence Unprotected* during WWII. Makavejev finds the almost caricature-like figure of the acrobat appealing from two opposing directions. Firstly, he enjoys Aleksic's bravery and blind belief in the socialist system, shown through the successes of his acrobatic exercises — perceived as a point of national pride at a time when personal achievements could only be synonymous with national achievements. Makavejev's adoration of the absurdity and irrationality of this character's "heroic" achievements, which for him symbolises the idealism of early Yugoslavia as a socialist state, is at the same time used as a critique of that very same system/society.

I would perhaps say that I like the end of the film the most; it shows Aleksic much later in life, as a weakened older man, who despite his injuries still

maintains a strict regime of physical exercise with the aim of maintaining high spirits and a positive approach to life, as a true socialist Yugoslav. I also enjoy the scene where the film director and two other collaborators from the original film are seen walking on the roof of a building like Wenders' angels in *Wings of Desire*. They are heard discussing the bravery involved in filming during WWII. The film then cuts to the lead female character from the same original film, now as an old lady, talking about how she had won a competition for the "most beautiful legs in Yugoslavia". She is shown in an advertisement campaign in which she is shown with her legs wrapped around her head. This is a signature Makavejev editing technique, which enjoys the juxtaposition of the "serious", heroic and comic. With that image, Makavejev negates or destabilises the potentially meaningful symbolism of the preceding scene. Makavejev was sceptical of official ideology and sympathised with the everyday, flawed individuals as opposed to the idealised, communist notion of the "New Man". As Michel Ciment says, "He wanted to destroy the ideological concept of the "New Man" and exchange concepts and monuments for feelings and real lives."<sup>1</sup>

**SS:** What foreign films were significant at that time?

**NP:** At the time when I was growing up in the '80s, there were two TV channels, western *Tom and Jerry* cartoons were screened at 7.15 and with the main news at 7.30pm. The main programs would end promptly at 11 pm to be followed by nothing but "TV snow". The first late-night programme, *Black Sheep*, appeared when I was in Secondary School and was popular throughout Yugoslavia. A lot of "alternative" movies were screened in this slot. At the same time, good film reviews were transmitted on national TV during the Film Fest organised in Belgrade, which gave a valuable insight into new movies. I still remember inserts from Tarkovsky's *Stalker* and the scene towards the end of the film when the stalker's girl, leaning on the table, starts moving glasses on the table-top with her telekinetic powers. I saw this as an 11 year-old child, and such scenes left a great impression on me.

Good films were shown on TV regularly: Tarkovsky, Bergman, Pasolini... Films such as Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966) would be shown at least once a year. I also still remember rushing home at 6pm, once a week, to watch the weekly episode of Kieslowski's *Decalogue* series (1988) in the same way as we watched David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* once a week when I was at university in 1993. The first purely "entertainment" films did not start appearing on TV until much later. The socialist conception of leisure was very different from ours today; "lazy" relaxation was seen as unproductive, or even counter-productive. So that even if you are relaxing — you should be learning something.

**SS:** What was your perception of the working class in Yugoslavia?

**NP:** There was a banknote in ex-Yugoslavia popularly called "the miner". It was a banknote worth 10 *dinars* but nobody, even in the shops, would say "a loaf of bread costs 10 *dinars*" — instead, one would simply say "the loaf of bread is worth one miner". In my exhibition "Should I Stay or Should I Go" (2008), I have framed a sample of that old banknote, where I have scratched out the face of the worker ("Reference 6"). I am intrigued by this idea of workers' "invisibility" in contemporary society and a number of my recent works are based on this idea. During socialist times, images of the working class were integrated into all aspects of society. In the encyclopaedia at the time, a triple-volume, burgundy, hardbound publication, there are more than

40 pages on factories and industrial workers. Socialism was a system based on ideology and idealisation — and one of the driving forces of this code of belief was imagery glorifying the working class. Most of this was achieved through banal propaganda — like the banknote — but it worked. Now we live in an alienated world where we are not really aware of who makes the products we consume. I fear that this notion of social numbness will unfortunately become a key aspect of contemporary society.



Nada Prija, "Reference 6", 2008

The live art event entitled "Workers' Production Line" (2008), exhibited as part of my "Should I Stay or Should I Go" solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje in 2008, engaged with this idea. During the opening day of the exhibition, a group of eight factory

workers occupied a row of work tables displayed in the main gallery space. They worked on industrial sewing machines manufacturing T-shirts. I joined the end of the production line dressed in a worker's uniform. As the shirts were produced by the workers I painted a selection of slogans onto the front side of each T-shirt. The T-shirts were then displayed on a long railing for the duration of the exhibition. After the completion of the production process the machines, fabric, boxes, cables and everything was left as an installation entitled "Strike" (2008). The sewing machines, the T-shirt fabric, sewing equipment and all accompanying objects, such as boxes, fork-lifts and electrical cables, were left in the gallery to remain untouched for the duration of the exhibition. This was intended to resemble the moment of a factory's abandonment. What I intended, with this re-enactment of the "factory closure", or a strike, was to provide an opportunity for the representatives of workers' unions to alert the media, and society in general, about workers' conditions in contemporary society. The intention was to set up a situation through which the artworks' message (about the conditions of factory workers) could, through the media, be spread further than the gallery space would ever have been able to reach on its own. Furthermore, I offered all my scheduled interviews with various journalists to the representatives of the local workers' union with the intention of enabling them to spread their message about the plight of the worker, thereby giving them "a voice" and new identity, which we do not normally encounter on a daily basis in contemporary society. It gives workers a presence — by being physically present within the museum, allowing them to be seen as such — real people, people with a face and a body, people that have a history, a present and a future.



Nada Prlja, "Strike", 2008

This moment shows my fascination with the idea of "reuse"/ "re-appropriation" of all means given to the artist, and links itself to the important lesson that I have learned through not having all possible means available during my education.

**SS:** How else does your work relate to the influx of commercialism after the collapse of communism?

**NP:** Unfortunately the lack of consumerist physical objects during socialist times — or the lack of a certain variety of products (there was always only three types of soap, tooth paste, chocolates, etc., to choose from) produced a real "hunger" for the vast variety of objects, which are now readily available. Consumerism, in its most banal form, has overpowered the asceticism of socialism. The public sphere, in particular, is overpowered by this "new aesthetics" — consumerist and religious symbols are nonchalantly exposed; there is a lot of vulgarity that translates itself into media, film and music. At a time of globalisation and the development of worldwide cultural industries, the Balkan countries are struggling with their own "commodity culture" — gradually losing, in the process, their sense of identity and character. This phenomenon can be seen very clearly in "turbo-folk" culture, originating from the turbo-folk musical genre, which is a combination of traditional folk music and pop music (which in its vulgarity, as a genre shows little respect for either folk or pop music).

In order to introduce the idea of oppositional thinking, I realised, as part of my 2007 exhibition, "Globalwood", in the National Gallery of Macedonia — a project entitled "Turbo Star" (2007). This was a live art event in the form of a singing competition. It included a purpose-built backdrop to a stage, on which "new stars" of the turbo-folk musical genre were being "created" by competing in a live show/competition. They were faced with members of the cultural elite who sat as a jury: fine art historians, artists and theoreticians.



Nada Prlja, "Turbo star", 2007

Zorica Tomic, in her book *The Kiss in the Time of Cooling*, describes turbo-folk music by illustrating the way it has influenced culture and contemporary society in general. She claims that the notion of love in the Balkans today uses a model taken from soap operas that includes a fascination for the accumulation of wealth; she refers to this cultural milieu as "Phantasmagoric Hollywood". Phantasmagoric Hollywood promotes a body enhanced by plastic surgery, an emotionally cold Hollywood lifestyle, where betrayal is treated as an essential part of a dazzling consumerism. An alternative to turbo-folk is currently non-existent. During socialism there was an opposition, as represented by the Black Wave film movement. Opposition to a single-minded system was

dangerous (as exemplified by the extended ban on Lazar Stojanovic's film *Plastic Jesus* between 1973–90). Now, however, in the era of apparent democracy, there is no real cultural opposition to the mainstream "wild" consumerism and popular culture.

**SS:** How did your sign above the National Gallery of Macedonia in Skopje come about? Do you think that citizens realised it was an ironic critique of the (70m high) neon cross on the hill opposite the museum? What are the continuing problems in Balkan society that are implied by the cross and the way it was erected?



Nada Prlja, "One city, two voices", 2007

**NP:** The 70m high cross, a giant, illuminated object that dominates the whole city, was erected in 2001 at the top of Skopje's Vodno mountain without any public discussion. I juxtaposed this monumental cross with another illuminated art object, *NP* (2007), which

consists of my own initials mounted on the roof of the gallery. Both of these objects were visible from all areas of the city. With this action, I attempted to highlight the concept: "Welcome to the land where anything is possible". And were there any comments against my "occupation" of public space? No! For more than five years, there has been a significant level of criticism about the imposition of this cross (mainly on a few popular blogs) — which is why the connection between the two illuminated neon signs was clear to the citizens of the city. This phenomenon of disrespect for the city's public space is applicable to all transitional societies, and is transacted through the tyranny of certain authorities and powerful individuals who adapt public space for the erection of (self-serving) landmarks and monuments. The cross was particularly offensive in Skopje, which is a multi-ethnic city, with an orthodox Christian majority and a Muslim minority.

**SS:** The other new work of yours that was really interesting for me, is the Give to Take, Estate Agency. It is a very nice *détournement* of the grip that property prices currently have on many of us.

**NP:** In the project "Give to Take, Estate Agency" (2007), I was "selling properties" from various Balkan areas in the context of a London gallery (the Austrian Cultural Forum). I would come every day dressed and acting as an estate agent during the exhibition opening hours; the gallery space was thereby transformed into a "functioning" estate agency, with numerous framed images and descriptions of the selected properties for sale. There was a certain narrative looseness and essay-like deviation within these descriptive texts, which made this agency different from other, "proper" estate agencies. Through this project, I was interested in the misinterpretation (or redefinition) of the established economic systems, by changing the stereotypical positions of the countries within financial exchanges. My work does not ignore but rather goes along with the principles of the established market economy, searching instead for small modifications within it. These modifications are achieved by the erasure of the third party, or profiteering "middle man" — in this case, the professional estate agents.

This notion of "modification", in my eyes, is potentially more productive than the idea of "revolution" itself. In Lazar Stojanovic's *Plastic Jesus* the main

character, Tom, is asked why he doesn't make a revolution. Tom's simple answer is that revolutions inevitably involve guns, killing, the regime — all of the things that he does not like. This statement clearly reflects the position of the intelligentsia of the early '70s in Yugoslavia, and is characteristic of the Black Wave movement that has profoundly inspired my own work, and the work of my generation that started being active in the late '90s, as well as the generation of Macedonian artists before us (late '80 and early '90s).

**SS:** What other themes are you working on?

**NP:** Probably the most interesting theme for me now is the concept of displacement and migration. If we are talking again about the Black Wave Cinema, I would introduce a new name to this discussion — Zelimir Zilnik, an active film-maker and cult figure in Vojvodina. Zilnik's short film, made in 1975, was and remains my inspiration for working on this subject. One particular scene is really simple and it touches the art video genre in its approach. A static camera is placed in an unnamed/unidentified building; we see only a set of stairs, suddenly a child appears, somewhat ashamed, and climbs down the stairs to a point level with the camera. He says his name, describes his job in Germany and how much he pays in rent, again a bit ashamed, but a little more confident now. He then descends the rest of the stairs and disappears into the darkness of the hallway. The next child does the same, descending from the top floor of the building down to the level of the camera; he states his name, and continues on his way down. Then a third person appears, a plumber, earning 300 Deutsch Marks. Then another: a cleaner, 400 Deutsch Marks, etc. Eventually, one loses track of the number of people climbing up and down the stairs, saying their name and stating their job and salary. You simply observe the characters, face by face, look at their expressions, realising that they are all migrants who receive minimal wages and pay a substantial part of their earnings in rent.

In my video work, entitled "Give 'em Hell" (2008), I abruptly reveal today's situation regarding migration in the UK. During the course of several days in the summer of 2008, I positioned protest banners on the streets of London and secretly recorded the unfolding scene with a hidden camera from the opposite side of the street. The banners used in this installation are a document of a real-life scene, where a group of youngsters express their anger toward and mistrust of immigrants, by smashing the series of protest banners (the texts and slogans of which support immigration and the notion of equal human rights for all).



Nada Prija, "Give 'em hell", 2008

**SS:** You have mentioned that you come from the Red Bourgeoisie but might, in fact, be moving toward a "Return of the Black Communists". What do you mean by this?

**NP:** Now, 20 years after the collapse of communism, and at the time of an apparent collapse of capitalism, where many of its values have been put under

scrutiny — there is no political or economic system that could still be called exemplary; something to be respected or followed without reservation. I am proposing a new system, something that I would like to be a part of — I have named it "Black Communism".

Why "Black Communism"? During the time of socialism, the socio-political system was distorted and misinterpreted by people who were in a position to give orders. This is the reason for the disintegration of the system, it is not the system itself that is to blame. Looking back at communism as a system, or the idea and overall form it took — free education and healthcare for everybody, affordable housing for all, idealism, brotherhood, equality — these are all concepts I still find to be relevant and important for any political/economic arrangement.

My work as an artist supports the idea of a "critical communism", as some of the concepts with which I work come directly from communist ideals and methodologies — such as the search for unity and equality (like projects dedicated to the support of workers and the integration of minorities). So I would like to live in "Black Communism", a system that supports the idea of "the same for everybody", mutual understanding and support, but at the same time a system in which critique is welcome. Or a form of communism in which the critical approach, inherent in the Black Wave movement, would be central to the culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Ciment, "Entretien avec Dusan Makavejev", *Positif*, No. 99, November 1968, 24.

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