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Abstract

As we live through the sixth mass extinction and the intensifying impacts of global warming, this contribution underscores the importance of revisiting and exploring artworks from the past as sources of inspiration and ways for addressing and responding to contemporary ecological and social challenges. Through the framework of Ewa Majewska's concept of "the weak avant-garde", the article examines the rich and diverse practice of Vojvodinian artist Bogdanka Poznanović (1930–2013), with a focus on two actions: *Cubes-Rivers* (1971) and *Rivers Transmissions* (1972). The article has two objectives. Firstly, it seeks to detect the strategies of "the weak avant-garde" within Poznanović's artistic practice that was developed within a geopolitical "periphery" and the male-dominated neo-avant-garde cultural milieu. Secondly, it aims to trace the feminist and environmental dimensions of the two case studies, emphasising the engagement with the Danube River. Majewska's notion of weakness highlights the ecological orientations of integrating non-human agencies into artistic processes, including aspects such as fostering communication, weakening the power of the human agents, reconceptualising the idea of the artwork and authorship, and creating space to cultivate more responsive relationships with "natural others", as Neimanis decribes.

Keywords: Bogdanka Poznanović, "the weak avant-garde", socialist Yugoslavia, the Danube River, Ewa Majewska, ecology, feminism

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"The Weak Avant-Garde" on the Currents of the Danube: Feminist and Environmental Aspects of Bogdanka Poznanović's Artistic Practice

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1 Introduction

The Danube River connects two natural bodies that people described as black: the Black Forest mountain range, where it originates, and the Black Sea, into which it ultimately flows.[1] Spanning ten countries in the European continent, it is known as Europe's second-longest river. Throughout history, the Danube has played multiple roles for the civilisations that shaped around it. It marked the borders of empires and later nations, provided food and fresh water, fueled industries, served as a resource for hydroelectric power and was an important site for trading. Furthermore, beyond its utilitarian functions, the Danube also occupied a prominent place in the cultural imagination, inspiring a diverse array of artworks throughout history. On 11 November 1971, Bogdanka Poznanović, together with her friends and students, stood on the shore of the Danube in Novi Sad and made her second action, descriptively titled *Cubes-Rivers*. In less than a year, she performed another action, this time titled *Rivers Transmissions.*

The article draws upon Ewa Majewska's concept of "the weak avant-garde" to examine the two actions that Poznanović made with the river, as well as the broader artistic and lived practice of the author. I will consider how the rich and diverse practice of multiple different roles and engagements that Poznanović fostered and participated in might be understood and encompassed with the concept of "the weak avant-garde". Specifically, this article has two aims. Firstly, to articulate the strategies of "the weak avant-garde" within Poznanović's artistic practice that was developed within a geopolitical "periphery" and in the male-dominated neo-avant-garde cultural

1 The research is part of the research programme "Historical Interpretations of the 20th Century" (P6-0347, Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency).

scene. This will offer an opportunity to reinterpret her contributions to art history and reevaluate her position within it. Secondly, it aims to articulate the feminist and environmental potentials of *Cubes-Rivers* and *Rivers Transmissions* by focusing on the strategy of working with the river and examining the implications and dimensions brought by this engagement. Namely, the notion of weakness offers a productive framework for rethinking the relationships these two actions generated with "natural others" (Neimanis, "Natural Others" 27). It highlights the connecting capacities of the artworks, a more inclusive approach towards authorship. It ultimately underlines Poznanović's work as a form of resistance to traditional and heroic modes of power and visibility in art and broader.

Importantly, as we live through the sixth mass extinction and the intensifying impacts of global warming – both deeply entwined with extractivist practices, many of which directly impact water systems – this contribution seeks to underscore the importance of revisiting and exploring the artworks from the past as sources of inspiration and teachers of how to address contemporary ecological and social struggles.

2 "The Weak Avant-Garde" on the Currents of the Danube

Ewa Majewska proposes the concept of "the weak avant-garde" to encompass the strategies of artistic practices from the margins that are overlooked and to reconceptualise the established narratives around the avant-garde through a feminist lens. Central to "the weak avant-garde" is its critique and redefinition of the masculine and heroic ideas traditionally associated with the art of the avant-garde (Majewska, "Feminist Art of Failure"). This approach positions peripheral and feminist arts not merely as reactive or derivative forces but as active sites of resistance that redefine the canon itself. She also notes that "the weak avant-garde" "presents itself […] as a way to use the artistic form of production to transform exclusive political agency into a type involving ordinary resistance, the common" ("Feminist Art of Failure").

Her conceptualisation of weakness builds on and, in a way, responds to Boris Groys's essay "The Weak Universalism" from 2010, in which he offered a critique of the democratisation of art achieved by avant-garde art. Groys argues that this democratisation resulted in what he terms "weak universalism". Namely, according to him, the avant-garde aimed to discover "the transcendental, repetitive, weak image" and therefore managed to only be "universally successful by producing the weakest images possible". In response, Majewska reclaims the notion of weakness, framing it not as a limitation but as a resistance strategy of the weak. She is deeply informed by queer and feminist theoretical frameworks. Drawing on thinkers such as Jack Halberstam and Renate Lorenz and their work on the notion of failure and freakiness, Majewska

enriches the concept with Sascha Scott's theory of "subtle resistance" and Jacques Rancière's theory of the "ignorant schoolmaster". She also incorporates Hal Foster's reconceptualisation of the avant-garde and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri's aspects of the "non-heroic aspects of artistic production" (Majewska, "Feminist Art of Failure").

Emphasising the idea of weakness, Majewska highlights its potential to work as a "tool to destroy masculine hegemony" and asserts that weakness, by refusing to present itself as authoritative or expert, disrupts hegemonic speech and prevents it from maintaining its consistency ("Feminist Art of Failure"). This establishes it as a subtle mechanism to destabilise dominant structures without replicating the exclusionary and hierarchical dynamics. These ideas are drawn from the analysis of the artistic practice of Polish artist Ewa Partum, whose work exemplifies artistic strategies rooted in the margins, mainly defined by gender and geopolitical periphery. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial theory, Majewska highlights how practices outside the West are often only defined in relation to it, leading to "an absence of autonomy" and the inhabitants' "neglect of the specific [...] ideas and practices within their own history" ("Towards a Weak Avant-Garde" 3). While the contexts of art production in the two socialist states share some similarities, especially in their peripheral position to the West, some crucial differences need to be acknowledged when examining the strategies of the Yugoslav neo-avant-garde through the concept of "the weak avant-garde".

Three crucial elements of Yugoslav socialism that set it apart from both capitalist Western countries and the one-party states in the Eastern Bloc are the non-aligned-movement, self-management, and brotherhood and unity (Ramet 90). Jasmina Tumbas offers a picturesque explanation of its specificities in her book "*I am Jugoslovenka!": Feminist Performance Politics During and After Yugoslav Socialism*: "Yugoslavia became a place where new trends in avant-garde art and film flourished while Marxist maxims held sway, antifascist ideology reigned in tandem with sex and rock and roll, and women enjoyed more legal rights and social mobility, including access to education and labor mobility, than in any other East European and some Western countries" (1). Besides that, the state's relationship towards neo-avant-garde practices of the 1960s and 1970s was ambivalent. While it promoted socialist modernism, the Yugoslavian regime, as Matković notes, nevertheless "provided a much higher degree of personal and artistic freedoms than was the case in most socialist states, but at the same time vigorously sanctioned anti-systemic and anti-state actions to ensure the ruling order" (205). This complex interplay of control and openness provided unique situations, varying across specific locations and formats, within which Yugoslav neo-avant-garde artists worked.

2.1 Bogdanka Poznanović's Lived Practice

Bogdanka Poznanović lived and worked in Novi Sad, the capital of the ethnically diverse autonomous province of Vojvodina in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Novi Sad was one of Yugoslavia's cultural centres, renowned for its vibrant neo-avant-garde scene. However, as Šuvaković writes, the art scene in Vojvodina, like much of Yugoslavia, had a very limited representation of female authors, and most of them and their works remained on the margins ("Ženski performans" 144). In most cases, they are excluded from the dominant narratives of Yugoslav art history and were not studied or contextualised from the perspective of gender. As Bojana Pejić wrote for the introduction to the publication accompanying the first exhibition that addressed the perspective of gender in the art from Eastern Europe (*Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*), "during state socialism, art historians were neither concerned with representations of femininity (let alone masculinity) nor were they able (or allowed?) to unmask the patriarchal matrix on which these representations relied" (17).

Poznanović's biography gathers an expansive range of artistic expressions, cultural activities, and engagements. As Sanja Kojić Mladenov observes in her book, this multiplicity of roles, alongside her gender, perhaps explains the lack of thorough analyses and historicisation of her work. This scatteredness is potentially one of the common aspects of "the weak avant-garde" practices, arising not only from artistic tendencies but also from an individual's position in society and the opportunities and constraints available to them. The omission of her practice in the canon speaks firstly to the broader issue of marginalisation within art history and its limited model for canonising, which might overlook cross-disciplinary practices. Secondly, it exposes the logic of a linear and heroic narrative of an artist genius, a myth that Linda Nochlin famously critiqued already in 1971 in her seminal essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" where she pointed to the masculine framework of the great artist as one of the systemic barriers for women in arts.

Poznanović was born in 1930 and passed away in 2013. She began her path in the arts and culture by studying painting at the Belgrade Academy of Arts. The early years of her career, up until the late 1960s, were focused on experimental painting. Afterwards, she continued with what Denegri famously termed "new art practice" (8). She was among the first in socialist Yugoslavia to engage with mail art, artistic interventions in public spaces, and artist's books. This interdisciplinarity and an immense interest in working with new formats and challenging the existing frames for artistic production can be recognised as another element of "the weak avant-garde". Namely, as many pointed out, the broad range of new formats and expressive possibilities that started to appear during this time did not have a

tradition full of male artists (as modernism had). It, therefore, offered the space for marginalised groups to break into the arts and start challenging its institution.

Interestingly, as Šuvaković observes, Poznanović was the first artist from the neo-avant-garde and conceptual art scene to be employed in 1975 as a professor in any of the Yugoslav academies for visual arts ("Ženski performans" 144). It is worth keeping in mind that the numbers of women in higher academic positions and amidst professors in universities in socialist Yugoslavia, in both science and arts, were very limited. As a teacher and professor at the Novi Sad Academy of Arts, she established the first course in Yugoslavia dedicated to new media (*Visual Studio for Intermedia Research*). As an art critic and writer, she was one of the founders and editorial board members of *Tribina mladih* and *Polja,* where she regularly wrote and reported on contemporary art. Together with her husband, Dejan Poznanović, she co-founded *Atelje DT20*, one of the key spaces for local and international artistic exchanges. For most of her life, she lived in Novi Sad, but her visits and exchanges in Italy (Venice, Ferrara, Bologna) played a very important role in her views on art.

Poznanović's artistic practice has been a subject of scholarly attention in two comprehensive studies: in Sanja Kojić Mladenov's monograph *Bogdanka Poznanović: Contact Art* from 2016 and in Miško Šuvaković's monograph *Bogdanka and Dejan Poznanović: Art, Media and Activism at the End of Modernity* from 2012 that focuses on the work of this prominent couple. These are two of the primary resources through which I am trying to understand her work, especially the two case studies. While these works importantly encompass and contextualise the rich array of activities by Poznanović, the more conceptual dimensions still seem to be underexplored. The following sections aim to address this gap by focusing on the two selected actions and addressing the question of which aspects the framework of "the weak avant-garde" brings to the forefront.

2.2 *Cubes-Rivers* and *Rivers Transmissions*

For the action *Cubes-Rivers*, Poznanović prepared seventeen styrofoam cubes, each inscribed with the name of one Yugoslav river, and placed them on the Danube's shore in a pyramid-like structure. The audience was invited to take the cubes and put them into the water. Soon, all of them were floating. They were left to the Danube's own agency, to wherever its path would take them. This action was video documented with the help of Želimir Žilnik and Dušan Ninkov and later shown in Buenos Aires. Seven months later, on 29 June 1972, she performed her next action on the Danube River, titled *Rivers Transmissions*. This time, she prepared frames and foils with the names of Yugoslav rivers that were again set afloat. Exactly one month later, she made the same action in Montreux, Switzerland, at another body of water, Lake Geneva.

When Poznanović made these two artworks with the Danube, she was not yet working at the academy. However, she was employed as a professor of painting with technology in the Department of Fine Arts at the Higher Pedagogical School in Novi Sad. As she mentions in an interview, the two actions were not well received in her local and working environment (*Vojvođanke* 305). Already after her first action, *Heart-Object,* in 1970, the daily newspaper reported that the "contagion had started" (305), and the mad reactions, especially from her colleagues and her boss at the school, about these two works became stronger. These initial controversies surrounding her actions not only underscore the resisting potentials of these works but also show an example of how the emerging feminist practices in Yugoslavia were received.

3 Feminist and Environmental Aspects of Working with the Danube River

In addressing the feminist aspects of Poznanović's work, it is important to contextualise her position regarding feminist art and artistic production in Yugoslavia at that time. Her first action performance, *Heart-Object*, was created a year before *Cubes-Rivers* in 1970 and remains one of her most well-known artworks. Art historian Nikola Dedić wrote that it is possible to read this performance "as the beginning of feminist art practices" (727). While she never explicitly identified herself as a feminist, her works have been retrospectively interpreted as early instances of feminist performance art in Yugoslavia. Miško Šuvaković situates her work within a kind of linear categorisation of feminist performance where he recognises it as the first step in the beginnings of the emergence of female identity that still lacked any discourse ("Ženski performans" 145).

Moreover, as mentioned in the beginning, her work with different mediums and new formats aligns with what Ješa Denegri famously termed "new art practice" ("*nova umjetnička praksa*") to encompass a set of new trends in arts of diverse experimental formats and strategies that were formed in Yugoslavia at the end of the 1960s and lasted until the 1980s. According to Denegri, one of the crucial features of this conglomerate is the sharp and deliberate distancing of the artists from the prevailing art production in their environments and even from the established understandings of what art is and what function it has. He connects such an attitude as one of the consequences of the radically different mindset that the younger and critical generation had (9).

Besides that, two other aspects need to be addressed in analysing the process of working with the river. Firstly, Poznanović's decision to work with the river must be contextualised within the broader neo-avant-garde tendencies to exit the four walls of enclosed art spaces, intervene in the cities and natural environments, and

merge art and life. By situating her works on the Danube's shore, she challenged the conventions and tested the open environment that emphasises the open-ended interactions between art, life and nature.

Secondly, the significant aspect of these performances and the employment of the Danube is Poznanović's interest in communication through which we can read the decision to open up processes to other influences (water). According to Kojić Mladenov, "Bogdanka Poznanović's entire action arts rested on communication" (122). This can also be observed from Poznanović's own words in an interview: "Throughout my entire career, ever since I started painting, I have been interested in the process itself, to exit the traditional and limited spaces, but above all, I've been interested in communication on planetary coordinates" (*Vojvođanke* 308). Such a processual and connective approach might be recognised as an alternative for "the patriarchal heroic strategies" (Majewska, "Towards a Weak Avant-Garde" 5) of making art, challenging dominant narratives by emphasising the connections and everyday actions. Therefore, I suggest that the strategy of fostering communication can be recognised as a strategy of "the weak avant-garde".

In the same interview, Poznanović emphasised the connecting capabilities of rivers and described them as a bloodstream (*Vojvođanke* 305), which shows the central understanding of the Danube in *Cubes-Rivers* and *Rivers Transmissions*: a symbolic facilitator of communication that transcends linguistic, national and human limitations. In this perspective, the river serves as a medium, a powerful symbol and a metaphor. Drawing from her own words on the significance of rivers, water is included in the performance as a connecting possibility, enabling and facilitating communication between distant lands and transcending human languages. By invoking the names of various rivers, Poznanović's intention may be interpreted as a desire to connect them all, creating a vast water body that would not be an obstacle or a border but a unifying element. In an interview, she describes these projects as "'[w]ater' on water" (*Vojvođanke* 305). Additionally, the works do not seem to be situated in any of the Danube's specificities, such as water pollution or the Danube's importance for the city of Novi Sad, etc. This can be observed also in the version at Lake Geneva, where she performed the same action in a different location and a different body of water. It could be said, therefore, that the river is imagined as an abstract running body and an inspiration. While it is not treated as a resource, she is nevertheless using it more as a canvas than engaging with its complexities. Consequently, following the terminology by the curator and scholar Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris, the main imaginary of the Danube River in the two works is "the imagery of the rivers as 'running' or 'flowing'" (52).

3.1 Feminist Ecologies of "the Weak Avant-Garde"

In addition to neo-avant-garde tendencies and her general interest in communication, I nevertheless aim to deepen the analysis of the aspect of working with a river as a site of connections through the environmental lens. I argue that Poznanović's two works, when approached through the concept of "the weak avant-garde", highlight this concept's ecological dimensions. While Majewska's concept challenges the traditional, heroic, genius-centred model of the artist, it also deeply aligns with ecological approaches. By resisting binary constructs – such as female/male, East/West and weak/strong – it provides a useful lens for understanding the feminist and environmental dimensions of Poznanović's artistic practice. Reflecting upon feminist interventions in the canon, Majewska writes:

> [T]hey are feminist not solely because feminist theorists and artists make them, but mainly because they stand up for what had been a feminist claim long before new avant-gardes emerged; namely, the demand to recognise reproductive labour, affect, weakness, receptiveness, care and other elements undervalued in patriarchal culture can be read as feminist, regardless of the author's declaration. ("Towards a Weak Avant-Garde" 5)

The values Majewska highlights – care, receptiveness and attention to the undervalued – are also central to ecological thought that needs to be, in its essence, anti-patriarchal. Just as "the weak avant-garde" rejects traditional power dynamics and celebrates subtlety and care, an ecological approach similarly prioritises interdependence and communication rather than domination or extraction. Besides that, exiting the binarist view of strong versus weak, or human versus nature, is central to the work of feminist environmental theorists, where the focus shifts to reciprocal relationships with the environment, challenging patriarchal and capitalist models that promote hierarchy and exploitation. Therefore, connecting the concept of weakness with ecology confronts the value of strength and power, provides the acceptance of limited knowledge and control over non-human agents, and empowers the shift from domination to receptiveness. This leads to the last question of how the employment of the Danube River "weakens" the positions of human agents and reconfigures the relationships with the environment.

Besides working with the river for its physical movements and metaphorical potentials, the bare decision to open the dramaturgy of the artwork to a non-human agency whose main feature is transgression undermines the dominance of the human subject in the artwork. Including the rhythm and temporality of the river, I argue that Poznanović created an environment to let go of the power of control. Importantly, Majewska, in her article, underlines the importance of solidarity and states "that the avant-garde of the weak offers a possibility to overcome this individualism of performance and spectatorship via a commonality of experiencing failure and weakness" ("Feminist Art

of Failure") which is the case in the collective action on the Danube's shore that can be articulated as a collective giving up on agency where the binary distinction between humans and the environment gets loosened up. To borrow Tymon Adamczewski's words, the invitation of the non-human agency to the process underlines "a position where being one among many organisms also evokes the uncanny feeling of being a part of processes that take place beyond ourselves, or of brushing against objects which are of a completely different scale than they previously seemed" (131). Namely, the collaboration with water and, therefore, the presence of another agency might serve as an immersion in the world in which humans are much more vulnerable because they lose the power of distancing themselves from it and limiting themselves from its influences.

Additionally, working with water foregrounds the unknowability between the bodies that exist differently and do not share the same space-time logic. It brings in front the question of how to relate across differences or, instead, opens up a space to practice *responsivity*: a capacity to respond to the environment and, based on Chandler and Neimanis writing, "a process of affecting and being affected" (72) which points towards a specific sensibility needed to recognise the environment around us and to respond to it. Finally, Poznanović's decision to work with water challenges traditional notions of artistic authorship. By ceding agency to the river, she destabilises the singular authority of the artist and opens up the creative process to the non-human agents, to principles of chance and uncontrolled external forces of the environment. This act of "weakening" authorship aligns with "the weak avant-garde", which seeks to dismantle hierarchical structures and empower collective, process-oriented approaches to art.

4 Conclusion

In examining two of Bogdanka Poznanović's actions alongside her broader artistic and living practices, Ewa Majewska's concept of "the weak avant-garde" provides a conceptual framework for exploring aspects that might not fit the traditional narratives of the avant-garde which filter the artworks by specific sets of expectations. "The weak avant-garde" enables a feminist perspective on political and artistic agency, emphasising resistance as a rich and diverse array of tools rather than solely heroic and powerful masculine gestures. By underlining the alternative modes of artistic production, it offers space for a more complex understanding of artistic practices.

As explored, the notion of weakness also offers a lens to connect the feminist and environmental potentials of the artworks in order to analyse the types of engagements and relationships they foster with our "natural others" and find inspirations to move towards more inclusive multispecies futures. Timothy Morton's observation that

"[t]rue planetary awareness is the creeping realisation not that 'We Are the World,' but that we aren't" (Morton 99) underscores the shift in the act of weakening one's own position. Poznanović's integration of non-human agency, such as the flow of the Danube, demonstrates a feminist and environmental approach that transcends binaries between culture and nature and the idea of the artist as a solitary genius. Instead, it embraces interdependence and collaboration.

While thinking the two case studies through a single conceptual lens risks narrowing down the analysis and overlooking other dimensions, the application of Majewska's concept hopefully offered an additional depth in revealing how actions rooted in responsivity and vulnerability serve as an alternative form of resistance, challenging traditional notions of power, agency and authorship in art.

It is equally crucial to acknowledge that, as with the interconnected and complex realities we navigate through, Poznanović did not operate in isolation, and this is not a story of a hero. Her position within the cultural and artistic landscape of socialist Yugoslavia was marked by certain privileges that afforded her the opportunity to engage in pioneering and daring activities. Nevertheless, these opportunities were neither guaranteed nor easily attained. While Poznanović was not a member of any avant-garde collective, her partnership with Dejan Poznanović represented a powerful and influential connection within the art scene of Novi Sad. In some respects, her artistic persona aligned with more traditional masculine expectations of an artist, yet she simultaneously expanded the boundaries of arts and culture, creating opportunities for others and fostering connections across generations. This duality can be understood through the lens of "weak" strategies. Namely, as already mentioned, Majewska asserts that weakness is a mode of resistance that disrupts dominant structures by offering non-exclusionary and non-hierarchical visions. Pozanović's work shows this by taking on responsible and respected roles while at the same time destabilising established norms. Ultimately, I hope this article proves Poznanović's artistic legacy as a vital and inspiring perspective that can point us to the visions towards which present and future avant-garde projects help us move.

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