LEXICON OF TANJAS OSTOJIĆ
AND FEMINISM IN TRANSITION

ABSTRACT: The text examines artist Tanja Ostojić's interdisciplinary research project entitled Lexicon of Tanjas Ostojić, in the light of feminist materialist theories, participatory art, and socio-political analysis of the former Yugoslav region. Tanja Ostojić decided to frame her project around the lives of women who share her first and last name. Ostojić's name-sisters became her collaborators as the work turned into a large-scale, long-term project involving 33 women and their personal histories. The women all share a mutual connection to the Yugoslav region that has directly or indirectly shaped their lives through its turbulent recent history. Artist's intent was to use the stories encountered by collaborating with her name-sisters as a foil to uncover and highlight the connecting personal narratives following Yugoslav wars of succession in the 1990s and in doing so point to the detrimental legacies of war and transition on women's lives. In this article, author's main argument borrows from Karen Barad's discursive-material ontology to point out that Lexicon activates a form of material feminism which functions intra-actively, in other words, in both its form and content the work recognizes that women's lives are continuously constituted and re-constituted through multiple linguistic and material formations, or through complex relationships between humans, non-humans, and various discursive and material contexts. In using materialist feminist analysis, the author argues that Lexicon gives primacy to women's agency and proposes a sustained, growing forms of resistance to the forms of post-socialist exploitation.

KEY WORDS: Tanja Ostojic, Contemporary Serbian Art, Participatory Art, Materialist Feminism, Post-transition, Former Yugoslavia.

APSTRAKT: Tekst analizira interdisciplinarni istraživački projekat umetnice Tanje Ostojić pod naslovom Lexicon of Tanjas Ostojić, u okviru feminističko-materijalističke teorije, participativne umetnosti, i društveno-političke analize regiona bivše Jugoslavije. Tanja Ostojić je zasnovala svoj projekat na istraživanju života žena koje dele njeno ime i prezime. Ostojić je u toku sedam godina pronašla...
I wanted to find out, among other things, whether access to education and employment, and working conditions had changed after the workers’ self-governance and Yugoslavian socialism vanished, and especially with migration, if and how this has influenced the position of women in families and in societies that have been transformed.

~Tanja Ostojić “Transformative Encounters: On some of the aspects of the project from the author’s perspective”
succession in the 1990s and in doing so point to the detrimental legacies of war and transition on women’s lives. As the artist notes, “the crises and transition to a new economic system, and the pride that these women take in their work, their access to education, as well as the history of Yugoslavia, and related identities,” are all crucial to the project’s trajectory and meaning (Ostojić, 2018: 19). The project’s uniqueness therefore lays not only in its social engagement, but also in its methodological form of personal sociological research that reveals startling narratives of post-socialist transition, and the predicament that women from the region find themselves in. Artist’s initial interest was to find out how women sharing her first and last name fared after the fall of Yugoslavia and socialist self-management system. In the course of her research it became clear that the stories of this particular group of women were representative of a larger, and more encompassing changes pertaining to women’s education, migration, economic status, gender roles, conditions of labour, sexuality, domestic violence etc. As a result, artist’s work grew, becoming broader in scope in order to accommodate what Ostojić saw as an important yet under-investigated topic in contemporary art and mainstream culture of the region—discussion of gender in connection to economy, culture, religion and politics. Lexicon therefore uncovers a constellation of large socio-political and economic matrices that have developed after 1990 which had direct ramifications, not just for the women in Lexicon, but also all women from the region. In other words, Tanjas’ lives reveal a general deterioration and drastic shifts in the lives of women who have been impacted by the rise of capitalism, nationalism, xenophobia, sexism, religious intolerance and more generally, conservatism. Tanja Ostojic (the artist) writes:

In conversation with my cousins, neighbours, and friends and following what was going on in society, I had an impression that the new national states, new religious identity, wars, transition, and poverty in the region were a huge step back for what were, in large part, emancipated Yugoslavian women, and I was very curious to find out more about this via this research project (Ostojić, 2018: 15).

What Lexicon aims to provide is a cross-section of a society and a much-needed feminist cultural and political critique of the state of affairs in the region. I discuss Lexicon in the light of current shift towards participatory and socially-engaged art and cultural work, and as a political and sociological study of the multifaceted narratives of women’s status in the post-socialist transition. Equally significant for my analysis of the post-Yugoslav gender space, is its interconnectivity with global issues of gender, race and class. As Lexicon continually highlights through its use of geography of migration end exploitation, post-Yugoslav space functions on the margins of a much larger system which further complicates the work that artist Ostojić and her namesakes open up. Western forms of neoliberal exploitation are equally invested in deterioration of women’s rights; former Yugoslavia is but a symptom of that larger structure. This analysis therefore takes into consideration various movable parts which are articulated through the formal and conceptual character of Lexicon in order to show that post-socialist, post-Yugoslav, post-industrial social matrix has been
detrimental to women’s political, cultural and social agency. The crux of the argument borrows from Karen Barad’s discursive-material ontology to point out that *Lexicon* activates a form of material feminism which functions intra-actively; in other words, in both its form and content the work recognizes that women’s lives are continuously constituted and re-constituted through multiple linguistic and material formations, or through complex relationships between humans, non-humans (in the broadest sense of the term), and various material contexts. In using a particular feminist methodology, *Lexicon* gives primacy to women’s agency and proposes a sustained, growing forms of resistance by privileging close social interaction, non-instrumentalized forms of labor, leisure, sharing, economy of care and equitable distribution of income.

### Setting the Stage: Formal and Visual Methodologies

*Lexicon* developed in several stages: academic research, creative and education workshops, development and pedagogical activities, and finally presentations, exhibitions and public engagement activities. Each stage took place in various parts of the world (Germany, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Slovenia, Montenegro), with Tanja’s travelling to meet each other, work on collaborative projects, present their stories, or lead public events. At times, the work developed in an organic manner (such as for example when Tanja (the artist) accidentally found out about her name-sister prompting her to conceptualize the project in the first place) (Ostojic, 2018: 129), whereas it was carefully planned and staged at other times. From the beginning the artist understood that her role was that of a facilitator and organizer, of someone who could navigate the often complicated bureaucratic artistic and academic worlds, who had the privilege to apply for funding, and flexibility to travel. Her role was to begin necessary research, gather travel funds, and continue to advocate for the project with the institutions that were to participate in creation and presentation of the work. In contrast to more standard artistic practices in which an artist conceptualizes a project, claims it as their own, and then finds participants, Tanja decided to transform the roles in the project, choosing to situate herself as a participant, serving more as a social and research connector/facilitator, rather than an artist managing at the helm. Project’s final title *Lexicon of Tanjas Ostojić* is a testament to this co-authorial

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2 The richness and complexity of this project is also reflected in the difficulties a writer finds herself in when trying to properly acknowledge all the women (Tanjas) who worked on the project. Even though the project was initiated by Tanja Ostojić, and artist from Berlin, it quickly became obvious to her, that the project is of course not her own. The project was a large collaboration between all the women who participated in larger or smaller measure according to their own wiliness, ability to travel and commitment to the project. Determining how to refer to each woman therefore became a bit of a quandary as both Tanja the artist, and I had to use multiple ways to acknowledge particular women. I have attempted to acknowledge, or differentiate between women, either via their profession (Something that Tanja the artist has noted happened during the course of the project, or by where they come from). My own use of the qualifiers such as ‘the artist’ while clumsy was a convenient way to address the need to differentiate between collaborators.
methodology as each Tanja was equally acknowledged as the author. In her personal account of one of the project's stages Tanja (the artist) recounts:

At the next stage, I signed individual contracts with each of the Embroidered Lexicon of Tanjas Ostojić workshop participants and with Vahida Ramujkić (who led those workshops together with me). It is about the shared authorship and the collective ownership of the artwork that we have created together. That means that each of us has the right to propose and request the joint artwork to be exhibited where they wish, and that in the case of sales, each of us will get a part of the income, depending how many embroideries one has contributed and of what complexity (Ostojic, 2018: 18).

Though the project was only recently ended, some of its main methodological traits have been established. It is participatory and collaborative in nature—meaning all women who are willing to work with Tanja Ostojić (project's initiator) have a complete say in what the topics of research are, what kind of work is produced, what their level of involvement is, and how they wish to be publicly represented. It is based in auto-biographical and auto-ethnographic methodologies, forms of cultural activism which are all weaved into artistic production. The creative work that the women have completed so far serves as a form of self-representation—or taking back their agency (something that many women lost in the post-socialist transition)––but also a form of witnessing about larger circumstances of the post-Yugoslav socio-political space, and most importantly, it reveals a significant deterioration in women's rights. Lexicon is therefore embedded in feminist epistemology and multidisciplinary cultural activism producing visually compelling women's stories. Here I wish to further elaborate the three methodological approaches that speak to Lexicon's transformative and innovative nature. The first are the interviews with all the Tanjas which represent the heart of the project, the second are creative workshops organized at different stages of Lexicon's realization, and finally, public presentations and discussions which took place at the latter stage of the project.

One of the crucial components of Lexicon's methodology are the interviews which Tanja Ostojić (the artist) decided to conduct fairly early on in the process. As part of her initial research phase, and while completing a research fellowship at the Graduate School at the University of Arts Berlin, Tanja realized that she will have to create a method for all the women to share their experiences in an easily accessible and somewhat unified way. Together with Tanja Ostojić, the mathematics teacher living in Germany and the first woman she met in person, the artist developed a standardized interview questioner that became one of the key tools in constructing the narrative which drives the project's main objective—representing women's stories. The interview allowed each woman to recount her own story in her own way and on her own terms, and share it with others; it also became a way for all the Tanjas to get to know each other, in most of cases even before they physically met. The interviews were first shared amongst the group, they then became a part of the Lexicon exhibition curated in 2017 in Belgrade Serbia, to finally structure the very heart of the book Lexicon of Tanjas Ostojić published in early 2018.
As the project evolved, Tanja Ostojić (the artist) worked, “hard to make it possible for women to travel as well, to become familiar with art, and to have an opportunity to meet each other.” (Ostojic, 2018: 12). Several workshops were organized as a result. Three of the workshops were conducted in collaboration with Vahida Ramujkic, a visual artist who has developed a particular art form she labels ‘documentary embroidery’. The artist defines it as “a technique intended for the documentation of social reality, which I developed in 2008 with Aviv Kruglanski. As its name suggests, it is a documentary technique which is founded in the traditional technique of embroidery employed in a new context.” (Vahida Rajmukic in Ostojic, 2018: 13) Individual embroideries done by each woman during the workshops were subsequently assembled into a larger tapestry that serves as a platform for showcasing dialogs between different perspectives and reflections on the socio-political circumstances in the former Yugoslavia. (Fig. 1) Some embroideries express intimate short stories in a visual form, such as the one listing the number of moves that particular Tanja had in her life; or seemingly disparate words such as, “emotions, work, law, knowledge, family, war” juxtaposed with an image of what appears to be a man standing on a boat, and a representation of the medieval Kastle fortress in the Bosnian city of Banja Luka. Others express more general observations and elements of popular culture of the former Yugoslavia, such as the expression “Das ist Walter” with a statement “we are watching you!” (Fig. 2) The statement borrows from a famous Yugoslav partisan movie in which a German Standartenführer von Dietrich addresses his subordinates commenting that the partisan guerilla fighter Vladimir Peric (AKA Walter) who they were attempting to capture (the key film plot) is actually not one person, but the entire city of Sarajevo.3 As a well-known pop culture trope, the expression “Das ist Walter” signals defiance of Yugoslav people towards a stronger and more powerful enemy—in this case Germans. Translated into the contemporary movement, it serves as a way of expressing an existing anger towards economic, social, political and cultural destruction that started in the 1990s and still continues today. When looking at the tapestries as a whole, we see that they project a series of statements which read the current socio-political

3 Walter Defends Sarajevo, or Walter brani Sarajevo in the original, is a 1972 film directed by Bosnian director Hajrudin Krvavac. The film belongs to the genre of the so-called partisan film. These richly-produced spectacles were often some of the highest-grossing box-office hits across the country and abroad. In fact, due to its wide-international distribution, Walter Defends Sarajevo became one of the most-watched war films of all time. [Pavle Levi. 2007. Disintegration in Frames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema. Stanford University Press.] Walter Defends Sarajevo also became an iconic film because of its plot that presented the story of the real-life Partisan resistance fighter Vladimir Peric, and played with the mythology of the Yugoslav president Tito whose Communist alias before and during WWII was Walter. The film’s message, however, of unity and defiance, its emphasis on the parallels between Walter, the man, and the city and its people, were particularly resonating with Yugoslav’s multi-ethnic, multi-lingual peoples. Most importantly, the film perfectly encapsulated a sentiment of a small nation whose people successfully defied a much more powerful and dangerous enemy. The film’s final scene in which German officer von Dietrich stands on a hill overlooking Sarajevo asking “Sehen Sie diese Stadt? Das ist Walter! “Do you see that city? That’s Walter!” was turned into a cult piece of monolog that found its way into multiple pop culture forms and references, and is still used today.
situation against the grain, and in anti-reactionary terms. Rajmukić observes that, “set in the wider context of the multidisciplinary project Lexicon of Tanja Ostojić, the tapestry evolves a fine narration and reflects on the position of female identity and migration within a complex and nuanced representation of post-Yugoslav geographies.” (Vahida Rajmukic in Ostojic, 2018: 12–13) This intimate and specific narration is contrary to the ways in which people’s opinions are projected and packaged by the current political and economic elites (corrupt nationalists, kleptocrats, post-1990s oligarchs,) and their media outlets (a slew of privately owned and state-owned newspapers, TV and radio stations, and news websites.4 Women’s statements represent a form of reclaiming the public space for those voices that are silenced by the lack of access to various public fora in which opinions are usually expressed.

Participatory Aesthetic and Tanja Ostojić’s Material Feminism

Tanja Ostojić (the artist) is no stranger to collaborative, participatory forms of art. Throughout her career she has engaged in various forms of what some theorists such as Nicolas Bourriaud, Claire Bishop, or Grant Kester have variously called ‘relational aesthetic’ ‘socially-oriented art projects’ or ‘dialogic art.’5 Ostojić’s work, however, stands aside from usual examples of these practices, as she continuously brings to the surface more difficult and complicated questions that such practices open up, questions which are not normally part and parcel of participatory art: such as who can claim authorship over the work, what kind of power relations are enacted within the production and exhibition of participatory art.

4 While the question of political and economic hijacking of political and media discourses is a broad and complex subject, it will suffice to mention that the democratic processes that were supposedly enacted since the 1990s, were never really implemented. Nationalist and subsequently neo-liberal political narratives served to further the domination of the new elites which use and package populism in order to win elections. Various media outlets are highly concentrated and as such serve the needs of their owners and offer uniform ways of reading political, social and economic situation in the region thus creating a general apathy and political exhaustion. On the contrary, real stories about the ways in which everyday lives of people in the Balkans are impacted by various nationalist, kleptocratic polices are never represented in the public sphere. For more see: Tamara Vukov. 2013. Seven Theses on Neobalkanism and NGO-isation in Transitional Serbia. NGO-isation and its Discontents: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects. Edited by Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor. (London: Zed Books); Andrej Grubacic. 2010. Don’t Mourn, Balkanize! Essays After Yugoslavia. (PM Press); Jelena Džankić and Soeren Keil. 2017. State-sponsored Populism and the Rise of Populist Governance: The Case of Montenegro. Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, 19:4, 403–418; Aleksandar Matković. 2917. The open violence of the Balkan Labour reforms: an interview with Aleksandar Matković. LeftEast. September 4, 2017. http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/balkan-labour-reforms/

5 For more see: Claire Bishop. 2012. Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and Politics of Spectatorship. London & New York: Verso; Nicolas Bourriaud. 2002. Relational Aesthetics. Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods, trns. Paris: la presse du reel; Grant Kester. 2005. Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialog in Socially-Engaged Art. Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985. Edited by Zoya Kucor and Simon Leung. New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing.
art, and who benefits from the discourses that are ultimately produced about the work in academic and artistic texts. In her work this attitude is exemplified by her continued insistence on co-authorship, equal participation (each woman is equally represented as per her wishes,) and acknowledgment of collaboration in production of discourse around the work (as for example in Tanjas Ostojić’s group exhibitions, book, and public programming and outreach activities). To clarify both Ostojić’s own work, and especially the project in question, I will attempt to briefly define what is meant by socially engaged practices and how they might illuminate Lexicon’s uniqueness as a feminist take on participatory aesthetics. In Relational Aesthetics, now one of the most often cited and contested texts on socially engaged art, Nicolas Bourriaud defines socially engaged art as “the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.” (Bourriaud, 2002: 12) In other words, art is imagined as a form of direct social engagement rather than a removed, autonomous aesthetic work, and therefore becomes “a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum.” (Bourriaud, 2002: 14) According to this definition, instead of creating material objects, artists create social relations, they create opportunities for interaction between creators, audiences, and cultural and social stakeholders. Claire Bishop criticizes Bourriaud’s overly optimistic views of the scope of relational aesthetics, and asks—if the aim of such art is to produce relations, “then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?” (Bishop, 2012: 20) Bishop’s poignant question is also one of the reasons why there is a great deal of criticism around socially engaged art, its merits, aims, and ethical and moral claims. In Artificial Hells, Bishop argues that the one of the critical points of weakness in both how artists theorize their work, and discourses around socially engaged art, are that they are “dominated by ethical judgments on working procedures and intentionality. Art and the aesthetic are denigrated as merely visual, superfluous, academic—less important than concrete outcomes, or the proposition of a ‘model’ or prototype for social relations.” (Bishop, 2012: 22) Such socially-engaged projects, however, are continuously compared to other art projects, “rather than to similar (but non-art) projects in the social sphere (Bishop, 2012: 22–23). The position between the artistic and the social is therefore problematized yet remains unresolved as the artwork paradoxically stays safely within the realm of the artistic, and at the same time “become largely exempt from art criticism.” (Bishop, 2012: 23) Through her analysis of Jeremy Deller’s The Battle of Orgreave, Bishop proposes another reading of socially engaged projects. She suggests that more successful projects problematize “what we mean today when we refer to a work of art as political.” (Bishop, 2012: 35) In other words, such projects play a multifaceted role, pointing to both the artistic and the social, but also to everything in-between—failures, paradoxes, negations and dissensus, that arise out of the propositions of the given project.

Lexicon exists in a multifaceted realm as it seeks to engage alternative methods of making and thinking as a form of political feminist methodology—it gives equal weight to emotional and social relations as it does to making of
things. Here I would like to employ materialist feminist strategy in order to analyze the project. What material feminism allows is to look at ambiguity, failure, tension and dissent, as ways for thinking about beyond purely discursive or material, in other words, away from dualisms and towards what Karen Barad calls non-dualistic “material-discursive practices.” (Barad, 2008: 125) Such practices seek to foreground materiality, or material conditions of thought and of politics in order to account for the complexity of the ways in which humans interact with the world (Barad, 2008: 128). What does this means in terms of artistic practices such as those represented in Lexicon? It means that in order to fully understand the reach and intent of the Lexicon, we also need to account for its materiality as well as its discursive reality. In material feminist intervention the idea of feminism is reassessed in the light of a new understanding of materiality. Materiality is not discussed in discursive terms, but rather in dynamic terms in which bodies are intimately intertwined with political, social, natural, human, and inanimate world. As such, “nature is more than a passive social construction,” it is an “agentic force” which “interacts with and changes the other elements in the mix” (human and non-human alike) (Alaimo, Hekman, 2007: 7). In other words, “feminist theorists of the body want definitions of human corporeality that can account for how the discursive and material interact in the constitution of bodies.” (Alaimo, Hekman, 2007: 7). If nature, human, political and bodily each co-exists as active agents in intra-active relationships,6 to use Barad’s term, then materiality of such a situation will open possibilities of failure, dissent, uncertainty and complexity as innate and constitutional forces in socially engaged artwork. As Barad argues both nature and non-human have agency, and act outside of human will which inevitably leads to situations outside human control.

We see this operating in Lexicon, as the project was constituted as a form of complex negotiation without promise of success—meaning that when the artist initiated the project she did not know if any of the strategies and connections will actually work, nor that her name-sisters will be ready to share and participate. Likewise, there were no guarantees that the project will actually succeed in its aim to both create bonds between participants (Tanjas) and at the same time tell their stories. Instead of evading uncertainty for the sake of the project’s success, Tanja Ostojić (the artist) embraced “methodology of chance” in both how she approached initial research by using diary format as a tool, and how she used moments of pure coincidence during the later stages of the project. In the book about the Lexicon the artist recounts one of such chance encounter which informed the narrative of the project,

6 Karen Barad created the term intra-action in order to replace the term interaction (a term which is predicated on separated, individual objects or subjects effecting one another). Unlike interaction, Barad’s intra-action understands relationships of objects, humans, non-humans, nature etc. not through individualized interactions, but rather as complex and intertwined dynamism of forces. Intra-action also challenges the traditional ontological dualism of object-subject relationship through which a person using an apparatus, or an apparatus itself are separated from one another. In intra-action therefore there can be no objective way of measuring or removing oneself from all other connections—to other humans, non-humans, things, apparatuses, or nature itself. See: Karen Barad, 2008.
Today I witnessed a conversation between two cleaning women inside the ladies’ toilets at Belgrade Airport. The first one was sitting inside the toilet cabin, she was smoking and complaining. The second one was listening to her carefully and commenting occasionally whilst standing and leaning over a mop. The second woman responded proudly that privately she is sewing T-shirts for a boutique at a woman’s home. The first one said: ‘Bravo! Lucky you!’ ‘And God knows that I get tired, too’, adds the second woman. ‘Here I work for 12 hours, eight hours I’m sewing, and I have a lot of work at home as well. But what shall I do? I need money’...This story regarding her daughter’s temporary job might normally be disappointing, as one would hope for her to develop a medical career based on the diploma that she worked so hard to earn in such harsh conditions, but under such conditions I could understand the happiness of that mother, and of the cleaning woman who had an extra one Euro-job for a boutique too... (Ostojic, 2018: 20).

The artist recorded and embraced what she heard and witnessed treating the anecdotes, casual conversations and everyday life occurrences, such as for example notations about the weather during a particular visit to a site, notes about music she heard, occasional comments by people around her, notes about the appearance of a landscape etc. In artist’s view such personal accounts were fused with qualitative research methodologies to create a complex dialog between the public and the private, between various parties inside and outside the research, ultimately taking the project into new, and often unplanned dimensions often outside of artist’s and collaborators’ control. Ostojić (the artist) writes that through such methodology she,

... felt somehow liberated from the political struggle and academic market behind the terms *praxis-based research* and *artistic research*, as I did not have an obligation to deliver something according to any particular academic standards, and did not receive a particular title for the project. That was liberating, as I could orient myself particularly towards the ethics and the methodology of chance, enabling me to embrace the diversities that I met on my way. (Ostojic, 2018: 21)

The methodology of chance was further employed through the interviews conducted with all Tanjas. Each interview became a moment in which women found out about each other, but also entered a dialog through which the stories that they heard about others’ lives prompted them to share their own, sometimes forgotten or repressed, memories and experiences. Creative workshops served a similar role; as women discovered new information about each other they could then immediately share and embroider into the work that was collectively made. In short, *Lexicon*’s methodology was to include all aspects of women’s subjective experience, of their perceptions, feelings, natural, cultural, and political opinions as part of its overall structure, and as a valid methodology of assessing and critiquing socio-political context.
Another way in which the project is an example of materialist feminism is through its activation of some well-established feminist artistic methodologies—such as privileging of the so-called women’s work by integrating forms of art, craft and design methodologies, forms of intimacy and community-building outside of professionalized forms of interaction based on casual conversation, leisure and pleasure activities—together with concepts of chance, serendipity and risk which inherently make the project prone to uncertainty. These methodologies seek to blur the boundaries between professional and non-professional creative labor, and use institution of art against itself. Where this becomes obvious is through the way that Tanja Ostojić (the artist) negotiated with different art institutions and art professionals to integrate the experiences, knowledge and expertise of each Tanja into activities associated with the project. The artist recounts how she negotiated with museums and funding agencies to pay professional fees, travel, accommodation, and meals for Tanjas who came to give tours, participate in meetings, public presentations, and events. Purposefully using her ‘cultural capital’ as a professional artist with an international career, the artist actively used the structure of art institutions and discourses in order to benefit those who are normally not included in such discourses (other Tanjas who are non-professional artists). At the same time, her gesture of reversal of power and agency, serves to critique existing hierarchies within the art world. In her analysis of the project Suzana Milevska argues that:

in the context of this project, such a circle [staged ecological economical circle] is formed around the re-distribution of grants and the delegated role of an artist to the found/invited participants who accept the invitation, not only to attend different events, but also gradually to produce content and design different formats. In this particular context, the artist enables a certain recuperation strategy—a knowledge platform that is unstable and open, with many lose and entangled ends that need to be connected or disentangled. (Milevska in Ostojic, 2018: 151)

Project’s instability and openness is precisely its strength, as is its long-term (over six years) collaborative nature. In an age of instant and fleeting connections and encounters via digital communication, Lexicon’s long duration runs counter to the social media logic. It demands commitment from all the participants, as its many heterogeneous trajectories can only develop in all their instability, by giving time to chance serendipity and accident to unfold. Relationships need time, and recuperation and removal from the capitalist economic forces demands strategies which will run counter to it as they are inherently unstable and unmanageable. I would argue that Lexicon is an example of what Karen Barad terms intra-action, or a form of agency borne out of dynamism of variable forces in which all actors (inanimate objects, humans, socio-political forces etc.) are in constant exchange and diffusion, influencing each other and working inseparably (Barad, 2008: 123). Intra-actions are ultimately uncontrollable, and a way to reassert agency—in the case of Lexicon the agency is asserted through its privileging of intimate, small acts of solidarity, of its emphasis on creating familial networks of friendship and care, as well as collaborative, open-ended acts of making which worked inside and against artistic discourses.
Lexicon’s other important element is its emphasis on ethical collaboration elaborated by Tanja Ostojić (the artist) in the following terms,

For me, the ethical line of the project development at all stages remained a crucial one. I tried to avoid some of the exploitative traps associated with participatory art, and particularly regarding the position of power of sociological/anthropological researchers that can be problematic. By investing a lot of time and trying to balance fairly what I asked of the participants, and what I had to offer, and staying uncompromising in those terms, were some of the guiding strategies during the project’s development. In order to be able to deal with ethical dilemmas of research conducted on living participants, at the earliest stage I defined an Ethical Code,7 which related to the entire project.8

Ostojić made sure that each of the participants in the workshops and production of artworks had signed a contract which ensured that the authorship of the work is shared, and that the potential profits of the sales of the work were also shared. This careful crafting of the relationship between Tanja (the artist) and other Tanjas, is closely connected to the very findings of this research—meaning that the new forms of socio-political organization and life in the societies of the so-called transition, or post-socialist societies, are full of various exploitative situations in which more often than not it is the women who take the largest brunt of inequality, exploitation, violence, and suffering.

The position and status of women, as Ostojić herself poignantly demonstrates, has significantly deteriorated in the post-socialist times. Tanjas’ interviews reveal some of these tensions. Tanja Ostojić born in Subotica, a mechanical engineer who could only find work as a travel agent, offered that she feels, “burdened to the maximum, not physically but mentally, because I work a lot and also have to take care of my child... I wonder if everything is all right, that she goes home well, if she had lunch or not, what she’ll wear tomorrow...” (Ostojic, 2018: 55) Tanja Ostojić-Guteša, a mechanical engineer from Sremska Mitrovica points out the deterioration in status of women,

Equality does not exist at the workplace either. For instance, on the occasion of choosing candidates for certain positions, a man will always have priority over a woman, based on the belief that woman will give

7 The Ethical Code is as follows:
- Participants have the right to step out of the project at any time.
- Nothing will be published without their knowledge or consent.
- Participants have the right to take back certain information or censor parts that they do not wish to be accessible to the public.
- Participants can/will get all material produced in the project according to their own use.
- In the case of public events participants could additionally decide, for example, whether they are willing to take part in it or not; which questions they might be ready to answer and which not; what facts can be disclosed about them and which should stay secret; if they want to be filmed, photographed, or not, etc. (Ostojic, 2018: 17.)

8 Ibid.
birth have maternity leave, call in sick because of her children’s illness... In politics and generally in public life, women are a tiny minority. We have fought for equality and still we don't have it. Instead, we have ourselves a double-burden. (Ostojic, 2018: 71)

Prioritizing of women’s stories, accounts, and analyses as well as ethical collaboration creates a physical manifestation of counter-narrative to that which exists in the society at large in the former Yugoslavia. Suzana Milevska notes that through the mechanisms embedded in the project, Tanja Ostojić (the artist) produces art through reverse recuperation, or “through a solidarity that encourages and ignites various encounters,” enabling rhizomatic relations through which other name-sisters are also empowered. (Milevska in Ostojic, 2018: 151) This reversal therefore both witnesses to the negative social processes, and offers models of social recuperation.

**Socio‐Economic Contexts of Lexicon**

It has been more than twenty-five years since the breakup of Yugoslavia, and researchers have been asking these questions: what has changed in the status of women, how have the wars, economic instability, forced migration, lack of social supports and general rise in patriarchy and sexism contributed to the changes in women’s lives.9 Lexicon of Tanjas Ostojić provides some answers by offering intimate stories of the women who have been directly impacted by these changes. Within the group of thirty-three women we see a breakdown of several generations, (from women who were born in the 1950s to Tanja Ostojić who was born in 2001), of varied ethnics, educational levels, professional status, as well as, marital status. Some women in the group had to flee the war in Croatia and Bosnia, have lost their loved ones, and ended up living in precarious refugee conditions. Others were lucky in that they did not directly experience war and associated destruction, but have experienced the economic and social breakdown that followed in the years of transition to wild capitalism of the 2000s. The stories that women were willing to share are heavily weighted by socio-economic conditions because of which many of the women in the group were forced to cede their dreams and desires, and in some cases their chosen professional field because of the lack of job opportunities, and general economic depression. This is also the reason why many of them were forced to migrate to other parts of the former Yugoslavia, or to move to the West altogether. Another important element of their stories is the fact that a number of Tanjas have expressed anxiety and stress over employment and family financial situation, with only one or two

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9 For example: Sabrina P. Ramet ed., 1999. *Gender and Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States*, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press); Nikolić-Ristanović, Vesna. 2002. *Social Change, Gender and Violence: Post-Communist and War Affected Societies*. (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers); Marina Blagojević. 2007. *Knowledge Production at the Semiperiphery: A Gender Perspective*. (Beograd: Institut za kriminološka i sociološka istraživanja); Dubravka Žarkov, 2003. *Feminism and the Disintegration of Yugoslavia: On the Politics of Gender and Ethnicity*. *Social Development Issues*, 1–19.
who were happy with their position. What *Lexicon* project therefore reveals is the lack of opportunities for women, something that is significantly changed from the socialist period, and a shift in power—seen here in the often overwhelming feelings of stress over fight for survival of the immediate and extended family. For example, when Tanja Ostojić, a hairdresser from Banja Luka, is asked if she is satisfied with her job at a store she shares:

No, I am not, but I don't have any choice. I work seven hours a day for 300KM a month [approximately $150Euros]. My husband and I don't have to pay electricity or accommodation: he works at a petrol station, and my in-laws help us, and still we struggle to make ends meet. We are all women at work, and our boss is the owner's spouse, it is their family business. My plan is to try to go back to my old profession [hairdressing] even though it is difficult to open hairdressing salon. You must get a loan from the bank, and I don't know how I could pay it back with such a low salary.

When answering the question “what are your greatest wishes” Tanja responds by saying:

To have a few hundred marks [approx. 100 Euros] for myself. I cannot stand to work for someone else for such a low salary in unbearable conditions, like not being allowed to sit down sometimes while working. It is really humiliating. I want to try on my own so that one day, I won't have any regrets.

*Lexicon* is therefore a project embedded in the structures of economic, political and social transformation at play in the period of post-socialist transition. As I stated earlier, the transition has most significantly impacted women and their livelihoods. More recent research into the economy and social shifts across the region of the former Yugoslavia backs up women's concerns and experiences. For instance, in a 2016 report on conditions and practices in shoe industries across East and South Eastern Europe, Christa Luginbuhl and Bettina Musiolek comment on what they term ‘wild zones’ of industrial manufacturing situated at the outskirts of EU in which workers from largely (but not exclusively) non-EU countries are exploited through the structures of neo-liberal open market economy and its local versions (Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia). Women's labor is especially highlighted as women in these precarious working conditions find themselves in poverty even though they are employed full time. The authors state:

Women predominantly find themselves unable to escape conditions of poverty with hardly any job alternatives. Poverty wages exert structural, economic violence upon workers, specifically women. Dependency is the key word here, not only for the production country as a whole and the suppliers domiciled there but mostly for the thousands of women forced to stay at their workplace no matter how bad the labour conditions are. Poverty wages also result in poverty related coping strategies that double and triple the burden, especially on women. (Luginbuhl, Musiolek, 2016: 5)
Of course this is only one in many such examples across former Yugoslav territories as most jobs are precarious, low-paid and in essence exploitative in nature. These kinds of economic relations have been brought on by a two-pronged shift in economic and political policies and subsequent circumstances created by such policies. On the one hand there have been many waves of bankruptcies of large socialist-era industries (hundreds of major state-owned corporations in different economic fields of manufacturing which created stable opportunities for both women and men). On the other hand, the economic situation also deteriorated due to related but parallel move by international private corporations to either buy out the bankrupt industries, or more recently open up the so-called ‘free zones’ of production in partnership with local governments. The ‘free zones’ are proven to be the most perilous for workers, local economies and ecology, as they benefit corporate entities, and not the local stakeholders—workers in particular. (Sreckovic, 2015) Various regional governments justify enormous tax breaks, lack of legal oversight, rampant labour exploitation, trade deficits, and production externalities such as ecological destruction, by arguing that the open zones are overall positive for the state and its citizens. (Sreckovic, 2017) This could not be further from the truth as numerous recent reports show. In fact negative impacts are overwhelming, and perilous for the economy, social life and wellbeing of the host countries. In his report on the free zones in Serbia, Milenko Sreckovic calls the free zones forms of “corporate imperialism,” linking them to overall trends elsewhere in the world (Africa, South and Latin America, Asia) to:

help the capital owners to maximize their profits with no major obligations to those who earn these profits for them. Under the sweet-sounding titles of “liberalisation”, relieving, flexibilization and so on, the old drama of injustice, exploitation and social crisis is being played out, only on slightly changed, strictly parcelled stage, and with even more perfidious whisperings behind the scene. (Sreckovic, 2015: 114)

*Lexicon of Tanjas Ostojić* in part shows the other side of this story and such difficult economic circumstances through the personal encounters with the women who are living this reality. The artist Tanja Ostojić was therefore able to tap into a larger social concern which in her cultural activist work takes on a guise of series of interventions via everyday actions, collaborative work that counters the alienated, removed, and violent work demanded by the new conditions of labour brought on by, as Sreckovic aptly names, “corporate imperialism.” The project is therefore important because it both reveals the invisible plight of women (the decline of gender equality, pay equity, professional opportunities, rampant economic exploitation, and silencing of women’s voices through the rise of

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10 See: Milenko Srečković. 2016. Zelen(ašk) a ekonomija, Politika, 24.02.2016; Milenko Srečković. 2015. Korporativni imperijalizam. 2014. Slobodna zona eksploatacije. Mašina-proizvodnja društvene kritike. masina.rs Decembar, 30; Ana Vragolovic. 2017. Lanac izrabljivanja u Benettonovim pogonima: Kako Benetton sudjeluje u ekspoataciji i egzodusu u Slavoniji. Radnički portal: O klasnoj borbi i radničkom organiziranju. 23. Srpnja; Marko Risović. 2017. Radni logori pod staklenim zvonom liberalizma. Mreža za izgradnju mira, 23.03, 2017.
patriarchy, and decline reproductive rights etc.) and because of its methodology which foregrounds personal stories and values non-alienated\textsuperscript{11} forms of labour.

*Lexicon* can also be linked to recent work of theorists such as Jonathan Crary, Mark Fisher and Silvia Federici, who each in their own work point to the post-fordist forms of exploitation we find not just in the developing countries such as Serbia or Bosnia-Herzegovina, but also in the West. In the 2013 book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*, Crary diagnoses the stakes in transformation of human life under late capitalism by pointing out that capitalism is structured under certain phenomena, one of which he describes as the lack of sleep and culture of constant production. He observes:

One of the conditions [of late capitalism] can be characterized as a generalized inscription of human life into duration without breaks, defined by a principle of continuous functioning. It is a time that no longer passes, beyond the clock time...A 24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness. (Crary, 2013: 8–9)

What Crary signals is a move towards marketization and enclosure, or conquest if you will, of human sensory apparatus, mind and creativity. In other words, accumulation of capital demands new spaces to conquer and these new spaces are found outside of the material world (which has largely been defeated by the free market) towards the virtual and ephemeral worlds of the human mind and digital spaces. New forms of exploitation follow such reterritorialization\textsuperscript{12} of the mind in which our very neurons are used as raw material for capital valorization. In fact, we could argue that this type of enclosure of what used to be the commons of our bodies, can be termed neurocapitalism.

Parallel to Crary’s analysis of the 24/7 precarious, sped-up culture of labour, is a much more important analysis of the role of women’s labour in the context of late capitalism. The clearest analysis of the links between women’s labour and late capitalism is found in the work of Silvia Federici who first diagnoses the current neo-liberal economic and political forms and then offers a feminist critique. When discussing the link between limits of global exploitation of resources, current wars, and labour Federici states:

War is on the global agenda precisely because the new phase of capitalist expansionism requires the destruction of any economic activity not subordinated to the logic of accumulation, and this is necessarily a violent process. Corporate capital cannot extend its reach over the

\textsuperscript{11} By non-alienated forms of labour, I mean labour that is not exploitative, that is properly remunerated, credited, that values individual human effort, creativity and contributions, it also encompasses labour practices that are not see as goal-oriented, but are done for their own sake, and/or for pleasure. This is particularly visible in the way in which Tanjas Ostojic use collaborative, workshop activities as a form of both socializing and of making.

\textsuperscript{12} Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. 1983. *Anti-Œdipus Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane. London and New York: Continuum.
planet’s resources from the fields to the seas and forests to people’s labour, and our very genetic pools without generating an intense resistance worldwide. Moreover, it is in the nature of the present capitalist crisis that no mediations are possible, and that development planning in the Third World gives way to war. (Federici, 2001)

The key element in Federici’s critique of capitalism, or what she calls “the new Primitive Accumulation” is its exploitation of women’s labour. At the same time, women, their work, and rights are also the key to resisting the spread of such exploitation. Federici further states:

Today, in the face of a new process of Primitive Accumulation, women are the main social force standing in the way of a complete commercialization of nature. Women are the subsistence farmers of the world. In Africa, they produce 80 percent of the food people consume, despite the attempts made by the “World Bank and other agencies to convince them to divert their activities to cash-cropping. Refusal to be without access to land has been so strong that, in the towns, many women have taken over plots in public lands, planted corn and cassava in vacant lots, in this process changing the urban landscape of African cities and breaking down the separation between town and country. In India too, women have restored degraded forests, guarded trees, joined hands to chase away the loggers, and made blockades against mining operations and the construction of dams. (Federici, 2012: 265–266)

Consequently, exploitation of women’s labour as well as women’s rights and struggles are at the core of contemporary struggles against new forms of corporate imperialism. This realization is also at the core of Tanja Ostojić’s collaborative project as it directly speaks to the kinds of frameworks under which new forms of social relations and resistance can happen.

*Lexicon* proposes such new relations on several levels: first, as discussed earlier, it seeks to go beyond the usual artistic structure in which the artist as author engages a community in an interactive, quasi-collaborative way all the while retaining her autonomy and ownership over the concept (and later on the promotion, historization and sale) of the work; secondly, the forms of communicative visual action employed in the project are collaborative in nature, and more importantly, speak to and employ what are traditionally-considered to be women’s materials and techniques (embroidery, pottery, making of use objects such as totes, T-Shirts, and household fabrics); and finally, the work’s main structure was social/communal and developing over a long period of time (seven years)—in particular, women’s encounters took place in various workshops, group discussions, travels, gatherings, interviews, and also very much social situations which emphasized care, community, and sharing over aesthetic, conceptual production of meaning.

While *Lexicon* seems to be a part and parcel of what is termed socially-engaged art practices, its extended chronological commitment, and commitment to actual, as opposed to forced or artificially enacted social relations we often
find in socially-engaged artwork, it is very much outside of the popular
contemporary artistic forms. Women’s commitments to each other, friendships
and support that took place (and are ongoing) in the Lexicon contravene
oppressive and exploitative forms of labour encountered on the margins of
the Western world. While the factories in the region of the former Yugoslavia
demand complete surrender of one’s life to the assembly line (in the form of no
breaks, seven-day work week, no vacations, and perilous work conditions) in
which there can be no human contact, the women who are part of the Lexicon
project were paid to come to various events (like talks, tours, presentations, book
launches, vacations, etc.,) in which their emotional, intellectual and physical
labour produced real results in the form of collaborative project that represented
and highlighted their dreams, needs and wants. More importantly, in a structure
of production that does not allow for social encounter or interaction (for variety
of reasons one of the most important ones being a lack of leisure time), Lexicon
afforded women time and space to meet each other and create an emotionally
supportive community over the years that they worked together. All these
elements of the project, therefore enact transformational relationships of kinship
and love, rather than alienation and competition. Feminist interventions into the
aesthetic and political spheres have to take into consideration the ways in which
reproduction of labour takes place, what kinds of commonalities, externalities
and outcomes are created and how are various supposedly ‘progressive’ projects
in fact reactionary. Tanjas Ostojić propose that contemporary feminism in the
region of the former Yugoslavia has to heed Silvia Federici’s argument that the
task of contemporary feminism:

is powerfully expressed by Maria Mies when she points out that
the production of commons requires first a profound transformation
in our everyday life, in order to recombine what the social division of
labor in capitalism has separated. For the distancing of production from
reproduction and consumption leads us to ignore the conditions under
which what we eat or wear, or work with, have been produced, their social
and environmental cost, and the fate of the population on whom the waste
we produce is unloaded. (Federici, 2012: 268)

This is exactly what Lexicon proposes, a radical re-thinking of the everyday,
of what we consider to be our everyday and how we use it, and with that re-
assertion of female agency in the region where that agency has been progressively
eroding since the 1990s.

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Figure 1. Tanja Ostojic, Lexicon of Tanjas Ostojic, embroidery on canvas, 2017.
Figure 2. Tanja Ostojic, Lexicon of Tanjas Ostojic, embroidery on canvas, 2017.