Document généré le 11 oct. 2024 23:22

RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne
Canadian Art Review

Bojana Videkanić, *Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, 320 pp., 60 b&w illus., $39.95 (paper) ISBN 9780773559462

Nikolas Drosos

Volume 46, numéro 1, 2021

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078074ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1078074ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)
1918-4778 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Drosos, N. (2021). Compte rendu de [Bojana Videkanić, *Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, 320 pp., 60 b&w illus., $39.95 (paper) ISBN 9780773559462]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, *46*(1), 114–116. https://doi.org/10.7202/1078074ar

Tous droits réservés © UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada), 2021

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

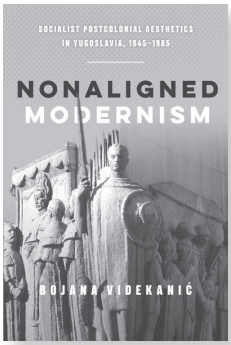
Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

Bojana Videkanić
Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985
Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019

320 pp. 60 b&w illus.
$39.95 (paper) ISBN 9780773559462

Nikolas Drosos



Postwar Yugoslavia occupied a singular position within the geopolitics of the Cold War: it was a socialist country that lay outside Moscow's orbit while having access to both Cold War camps, and it was the sole European member of the Nonaligned Movement (NAM), which was mostly comprised of countries from the Global South. The bold decision by Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito to break with Stalin and to gradually embrace nonalignment as a guiding principle for Yugoslavia's foreign policy paid off: a country at risk of marginalization within either Cold War bloc succeeded in assuming a position of leadership within a broad association of countries. Bojana Videkanić's art history of postwar Yugoslavia, *Nonaligned Modernism*, seeks to perform a similar move: by stressing Yugoslavia's fundamental difference from both Soviet and Western models of artistic production, it argues for the country's central place within the burgeoning art historical field of "global modernism," which seeks to rid the study of twentieth-century art of its longstanding North Atlantic bias.

Hence a term in the book's subtitle that is not often associated with the art histories of the region: *postcolonial*. Postcolonial discourse has occasionally (and, one could argue, unconvincingly) been used to describe the status of Eastern European countries that had been previously in the Soviet sphere of influence and were "decolonized" in 1989–91.[1] Videkanić's argument is in sharp distinction from this line of thinking. Rather than viewing state socialism as a quasi-colonial system, she argues that socialist Yugoslavia and its culture were always already post-colonial—culturally closer to recently decolonized countries in Africa and Asia than to its European neighbours.

The argument unfolds over four chapters, which follow a loosely chronological order. The first chapter, "From Socialist Realism to Alternative Yugoslav Aesthetic, 1945–1954," focuses on the brief interlude in Yugoslav art history when Socialist Realism was a viable option for artists. The author analyzes the Yugoslav art system in the early postwar years in a detailed account that privileges institutional structures, such as artists' unions, associations, and schools, over individual actors. This approach, taken from social art history and conveyed from a bird's-eye view, is perhaps the defining method of the book. It, along with the author's stated political commitment to reclaim (and, quite often, openly praise) the cultural politics of Yugoslavia, leads to book's privileging of official art.

This is a welcome and historically accurate corrective vis-à-vis the excessive focus on "underground" or unofficial practices that still dominate many art histories of the former socialist countries. One work in particular receives extensive examination: Boža Ilić's oil painting from 1948 entitled *Exploratory Drilling in New Belgrade*. In a compelling analysis of this and a few other works, Videkanić argues for the "hybrid" (and therefore transgressive) nature of Yugoslav Socialist Realism as a blend of elements of "orthodox," Soviet-style Socialist Realism with latent modernist elements (32, 39). While this is true, such hybridity is not entirely unique to Yugoslavia. Similar examples can be found in art produced in Soviet satellites, as well as in works by communist artists (such as Renato Guttuso, André Fougeron and others) who were active in the West, and who sought to reconcile Socialist Realism with the liberal-democratic context within which they operated. Such complexities of Western art of the time are absent from the book: whenever the "West" and its art are mentioned, they function as foils against which the "nonaligned" modernism of Yugoslavia is articulated. While the book's determined focus on the Yugoslav perspective is laudable and necessary, the contextualization of Yugoslav art in the greater international context of the time could benefit from a more nuanced discussion.

Indeed, as the book progresses, Yugoslav art is examined in increasingly transnational contexts. Chapter Two focuses on Yugoslavia's participation in the Venice Biennials of the 1950s, as constitutive of a distinct "socialist modernism" that became the official art of the country. Videkanić's focus on institutional structures leads to a focus on exhibitions, whose centrality in the story is clearly laid out: "… exhibitions, as a form of cultural diplomacy, served as mechanisms in creating and representing what Yugoslav political elites called democratic socialism" (64). Exhibition history is a major line of investigation that runs through much of this book, as it focuses on their organization, their critical reception, and their political and economic contexts. The chapter's ample archival evidence offers a detailed account of how modern art came

to be embraced by the state during the second half of the 1950s—a process that was not devoid of contradictions. The subsequent account of the 1956 exhibition of American Art, organized by MoMA in Yugoslavia, is rich in context yet it raises some questions that remain unanswered, such as the effects (if any) of the exhibition in the development of Yugoslav art.

The socialist modernism of Chapter Two is contrasted with the "nonaligned modernism" that is the focus of Chapter Three. Videkanić is clearly in favour of the latter, while characterizing the former as more "reactive" or less politicized (72). Nonaligned modernism is an appealing term, and Videkanić constructs an elaborate historical framework around it. Some of the strengths of the book are the various contextual vignettes that demonstrate the increasingly international orientation of Yugoslav culture, as well as its place in larger constellations of anti-colonialism. An example is the story of Tibor Sekelj, an esperantist and internationalist who sought to devise an experimental museum of world cultures that would be devoid of the colonial baggage of its Western parallels. Once again, institutional structures, or what Videkanić calls "cultural infrastructure" take center stage (174). Coupled with an extensive history of pre-war socialist thought in the region and its various anti-colonial engagements (as well as its own colonial past), this discussion is a valuable cultural history of socialist Yugoslavia's global orientation. It encompasses references to public demonstrations of global solidarity, the role of media networks and press agencies, the country's programs of academic exchange, its role in international organizations such as UNESCO, etc. Arguably, the intricate development of such context takes precedence over the focus on one particular "text." The *aesthetics* of nonalignment in the book's subtitle, or a "nonaligned modernism" as a distinct artistic idiom, remain somewhat elusive. If anything, a nonaligned *modernity* is foregrounded.

While the author's distance from the traditional models of Western art history that privilege a few individuals and their works is understandable (and, given the commitments of the book, appropriate), one lingering question remains: what is the agency of the artists in the shaping of this "nonaligned" aesthetic? A single work, Antun Augustinčić's *Yekatit 12: Monument to the Victims of Fascism*, erected in Addis Ababa in 1955, the work which graces the book's cover, is tasked with giving concrete form to the otherwise diffuse concept of nonaligned modernism: the author calls it "the best illustration of nonaligned modernist work" (151). An obelisk with extensive figurative reliefs, *Yekatit12* refers to a past of suffering under Italian Fascism shared by Yugoslavia and Ethiopia—hinting perhaps at a common future within the NAM. The history of the monument's erection is carefully reconstructed through archival sources, focusing on the diplomatic exchanges that resulted in its creation. This emphasis on the geopolitical underpinnings of the work succeeds in inscribing it into a larger history of the nonaligned movement, with Yugoslavia at its centre. Still, aspects of the work itself, such its content, style, and iconography, are only briefly touched upon. This is not to say that such conventional modes of art historical inquiry are indispensable; rather, a closer focus on the work's form could further strengthen its position in a center of global networks of exchange. For example, its specific brand of realism has affinities to a style that proliferated in different parts of the world at the time, and was often the preferred aesthetic of new, post-colonial states.

The fourth and final chapter returns to one of the book's preferred modes of inquiry: the study of exhibitions. It focuses on the Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts, which, since its establishment in 1955, has been arguably the best-known and most internationally oriented art institution of Yugoslavia and its successor states. The author, referring extensively to the growing literature on biennials, situates the Ljubljana Biennale within a wider network of international exhibitions established at the time, such as the biennials of São Paulo and Alexandria as well as documenta in Kassel. The hero of this story is Zoran Kržišnik, one of the Biennale's co-founders and the director of the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana. He emerges as the exemplary "nonaligned modernist," a relentlessly committed cultural worker who was able to harness political forces in Yugoslavia and abroad in order to enhance the Biennial's status and turn it into a significant meeting place for artists and politicians alike. The chapter convincingly argues that the Ljubljana Biennale embraced diversity (in nationality, gender, and race as well as style) as a guiding principle long before this was the case in other international exhibitions in the West. Such impetus for diversity also led the exhibition to go beyond the "nonaligned" political horizon and embrace works from both the Soviet bloc and the capitalist West. This is key: the author aptly points out that the Biennale pursued its agenda of nonalignment not by effacing the dominant models of Western (and perhaps Soviet) art, but by incorporating them into a space in which their hegemony could be questioned.

Such a strategy of incorporation could perhaps also strengthen *Nonaligned Modernism*, an otherwise invaluable contribution to the study of Yugoslav art and culture. While the proposed postcolonial interpretation opens up new pathways of inquiry in the field, it also raises questions about the incommensurability (due to issues of race, economics, and political processes of decolonization) of the Yugoslav model with others that are brought

in as comparisons, such as the case of Nigeria explored by Chika Okeke-Agulu.[2] On the other hand, this discussion begs a comparison to other forms of "socialist postcolonialism," such as the networks of anti-colonial artistic exchange that proliferated within the Soviet bloc at about the same time. Still, the problem of integrating national stories into greater, transnational narratives is a key challenge in the field today—a challenge that *Nonaligned Modernism* takes head-on. With its emphasis on larger socio-political forces and the institutional structures they engendered, the book offers a thorough, well-researched cultural history of a country that still deserves a more prominent place in the art histories of modernism, "global" or otherwise. ¶

Nikolas Drosos is an independent scholar based in Toronto.
—ndrosos@me.com

1. For an overview of the issue, see David Chioni Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique," *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 111–28.
2. Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

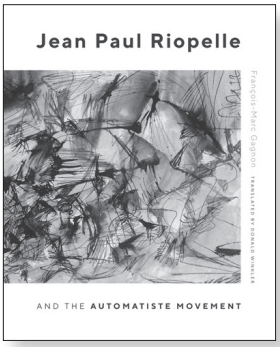
François-Marc Gagnon
Jean Paul Riopelle and the Automatiste Movement
trans. Donald Winkler
Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020

212 pp. 90 illus.
$49.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9780228001157

Ray Ellenwood

First of all, let me declare my complete lack of social distancing. All those involved in the writing and editing of this book, from the author and translator through to individuals thanked by the publisher for help with editing after François-Marc Gagnon's death in March 2019, are long-time friends of mine. When I first began my own research for a book on the Automatists in the late 1970s, Gagnon was already a well-established authority on Borduas and the movement. He was extraordinarily generous in making available his extensive files of newspaper clippings and other documents; and he was consistently, over the years, a great source of information and encouragement to me and many other scholars. In the mid-1980s, Gilles Lapointe was working as a graduate researcher with André-G. Bourassa on the writings of Borduas. I met him then, and we have often collaborated since. Lapointe has established himself as the most important successor to Gagnon, and it is no surprise that McGill-Queen's asked him to see this book through the press, with eminently qualified advice from Janine Carreau, Yseult Riopelle, and Ginette Michaud. That said, I must admit I haven't always agreed with everything my friend François-Marc wrote, and the same applies to some passages in this book.

This publication brings together several threads of enquiry that Gagnon had been following in the past thirty years, branching out from his early work more specifically on Borduas into a more general look at the Automatist movement and its participants. Having published his important *Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960): Biographie critique et analyse de l'œuvre* (Montréal: Fides, 1978, reworked, translated, and published by McGill-Queen's in 2013), he and Dennis Young also made available in the same year a bilingual edition of a selection of Borduas' writings, including *Refus global* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art, 1978). There followed many articles, catalogue publications, television appearances, along with work on a Borduas *catalogue raisonné* published on the internet through Concordia University. This focus on Borduas eventually expanded into what I consider his magnum opus: the *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois* (Montréal: Lanctôt éditeur, 1998). It was around this time he began to shift his attention more towards Riopelle. The bibliography on Riopelle was already very extensive, with biographical and critical studies by international critics such as Pierre Schneider and the well-known Quebec art historian Guy Robert. In 1999 came the first volume of an ongoing work that is undoubtedly the major source of information on Riopelle and his work: the very ambitious *Catalogue Raisonné,* edited by Yseult Riopelle (Montréal: Hibou Éditeurs, 1999). This was followed by four volumes (Vol. 2, 2004; Vol. 3, 2009; Vol. 4, 2014; Vol. 5, 2200), each covering roughly ten years of Riopelle's production, plus a special number devoted to prints (2005). Authors of critical articles in the catalogues are an international group including Michel Waldberg, Yves Michaud, David Moos, and Monique Brunet-Weinmann (who wrote two fine articles for Vols. 1 and 3). François-Marc Gagnon's quite novel approach, as discussed below, can be seen the fourth volume.



But to return to Gagnon's *Chronique du mouvement automatiste*, it was there that readers found more detail than we had seen before (one of the main contributions of Gagnon to his field of study was an astonishing attention to detail concerning exhibitions, works shown, press coverage) about Riopelle's early