

Deana Petrović

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# FOUNDRY OF POEMS

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Gallery Podroom  
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# THE DEAD ONES WERE NOT EVEN BORN

Workers kneeling and wearing diapers, then workers falling from the facades of high-rise construction sites of luxury residential and business complexes, workers poisoned by various fumes or limbs cut off during work accidents, are just some of the images that illustrate the working conditions and production processes typical of the local reality in the previous two decades. Despite multiple criticisms appointed by individuals or organizations responsible for monitoring the state of human and labor rights, the economic tiger, as the Serbian nation is seen by the state leaders, is progressing unstoppably, voraciously devouring everything on its way to complete domination.

However, if we were to believe for a moment that poetic justice is possible, the narrative would be redirected in a completely unusual, some would say morbid, direction. The death of workers and factories would finally mark their power to stalk, persecute and finally penetrate the current social system. Then the formidable symphony of cranes, drills, poured concrete mixed with the blood, sweat and song of the workers would redirect people's thoughts to what is ethically essential, solidary, emancipatory and of collective importance.

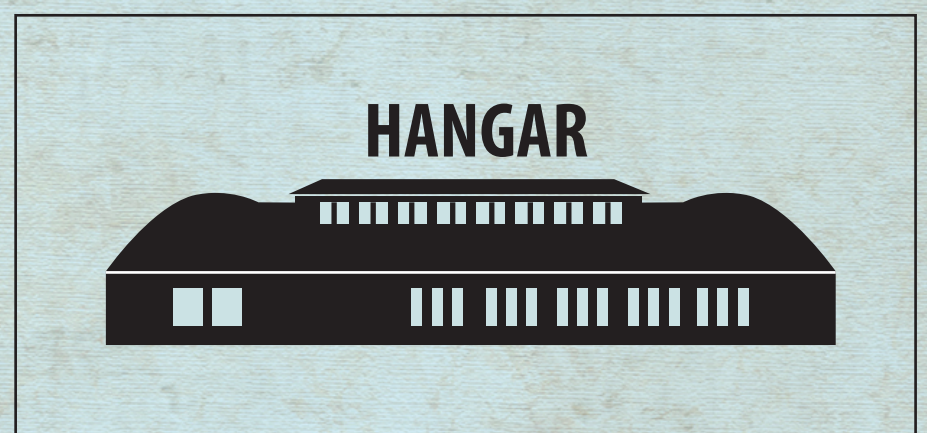


Simply said, the political Imaginarium of the current social order is fueled by constant progress and innovation without caring about the true reality of those lost, worn-out minds and bodies that go into irretrievable darkness and death. The multiple consequences of bankruptcy proceedings, the sale of state-owned companies, and mass layoffs have torn away hope, (political) imagination, and human dignity from those ranked lowest on the labor ladder.

In such conditions, factories as engines of social progress from past times have become ruins that mark not only economic but also ideological transition. Those empty spaces, stripped of meaning, subject to the manipulations of the city or republican authorities, have been reduced to "immobility" as well as the workers, their former users.

## THE IMAGE

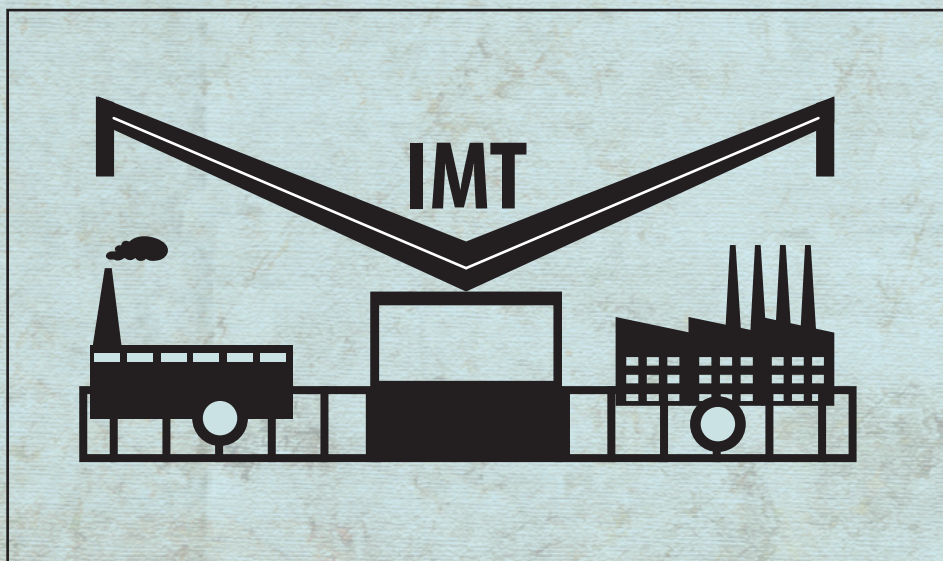
*"They have their factories,  
big mines and great works,  
merits, medals,  
hippodromes and bees,  
I don't have any of that."*





An abandoned hangar filled with images of workers-poets, their voices and rhythmic noise similar to industrial production. The whole atmosphere is complemented by the almost menacing presence of the drone. The unique ambience colored by intense audio-visual sequences not only implies sensory integration, but also evokes a sentiment that permeates the entire body.

This is what some kind of newspaper caption might look like, perhaps an excerpt from a never-written art review, of an immersive audio-video installation Foundry of Poems by Deana Petrović, which the public could have seen and experienced seven years ago. Woven from videos of Yugoslav factories, construction sites, and youth labor actions taken from television, museum, and film archives, this work foregrounds the thought ecstasy of workers whose poetry examines the deep existential questions of working-class life and the position of workers as individuals in the production chain.



Despite the passage of time and various socio-political changes, and the fact that it did not experience its reprise (whether in an abandoned industrial or gallery space), let alone the well-deserved interpretation of the professional public, Foundry of Poems is re-established in a new edition reformulated in relation to the gallery context. However, beyond the re-presentation, far more important is the fact that this work manifests itself as a kind of phantasmatic performance saturated with complex and critically intoned messages. Like apparitions, the workers-poets appear before us practically stripped to the essence

of their being; they point a finger at what is unspeakable in the modern moment or, on the other hand, has been completely abolished, namely articulated thoughts or poetic truths that make the blood run cold.

## II IDEOLOGY

*"When you run out  
of Real Material, masons,  
use my bones:  
add just a little ember,  
magnet,  
a little curse,  
light,  
my beloved,  
my tired ones,  
when you run out of  
Real Material,  
use my  
bones!"*

The image/s here do not only have an aesthetic value. More precisely, they become a foreground for ideological positioning in the field of visual arts. Beyond the framework of Yugonostalgia<sup>2</sup>, the Foundry of Poems creates an autonomous space suitable for the critical articulation of the meaning and importance of labor from the socialist past against its contemporary implications. The corpus of ideas or rather ideals on which Yugoslav socialism was based represent an inspiration for further imagining the possibility of organizing work



outside the capitalist model, which undoubtedly makes the worker an alienated individual<sup>3</sup> despite the change in the paradigm of work itself and the means of production.

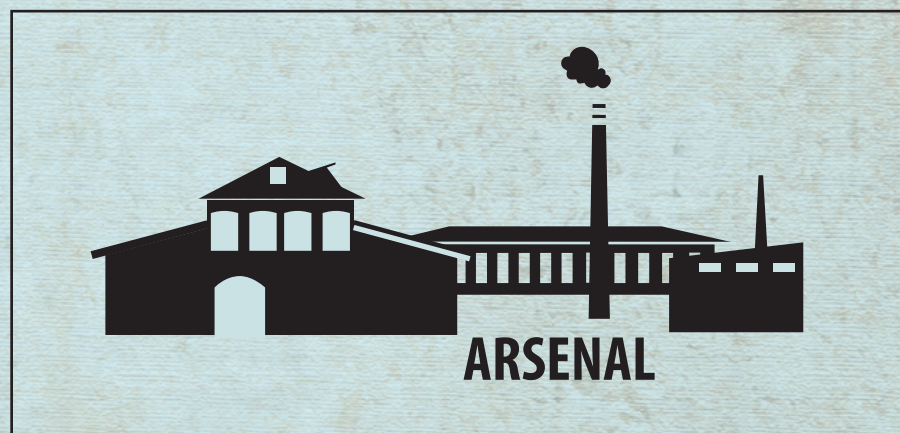
Here it is convenient to recall that shortly after breaking with the Soviet ideological discourse in 1948, the Yugoslav economy shifted towards workers' self-management, which, therefore, implies the maximum share of workers in the process of work organization, production methods, etc. In relation to the principle of eight hours of work, eight hours of culture and eight hours of rest, entire factory circles were organized, which in some cases included kindergartens, hair salons, parks, and even an exhibition pavilion<sup>4</sup>. Socialist development meant the modernization of the entire spectrum of social relations, which leads to the assumption that if workers are provided with good and quality working conditions, they are given the possibility of emancipation.

### III POETRY

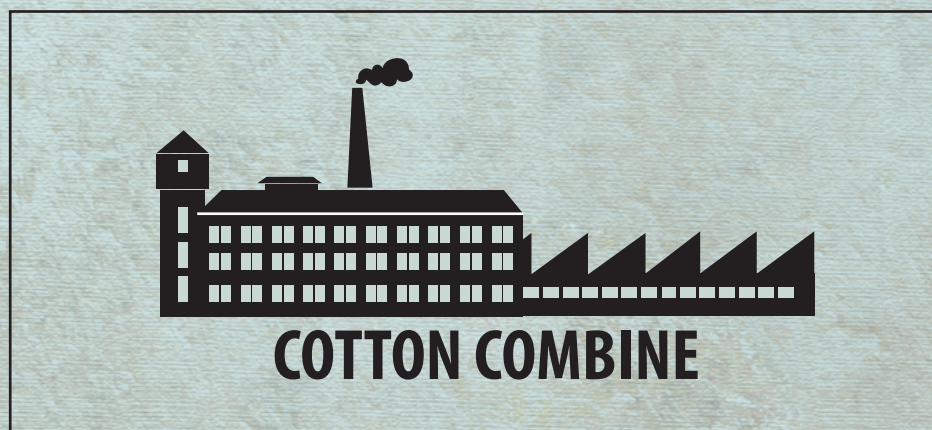
*"At the entrance  
to the construction site.  
The fire. Armed with a flower,  
she keeps watch.  
The dead can't go in.  
Life is the ticket."*

From a contemporary perspective, the factory as an ideal working (but in a certain way also private) space where the worker feels comfortable, first of all dignified, seems like a utopia. The depth of the workers' philosophy, which implies high thought ranges and the relevance of the workers' thought, that is, the

class, was supported by the wider public at the time. Although the stated claim can be relativized, and reduced to the comment that such an affirmation is a consequence of the programmatic orientation of the one-party system such was the Yugoslav one, the Foundry of Poems by Deane Petrović sheds new light on the one-sided thought tunnel suitable for historical revisionism that is very popular in recent political discourse.



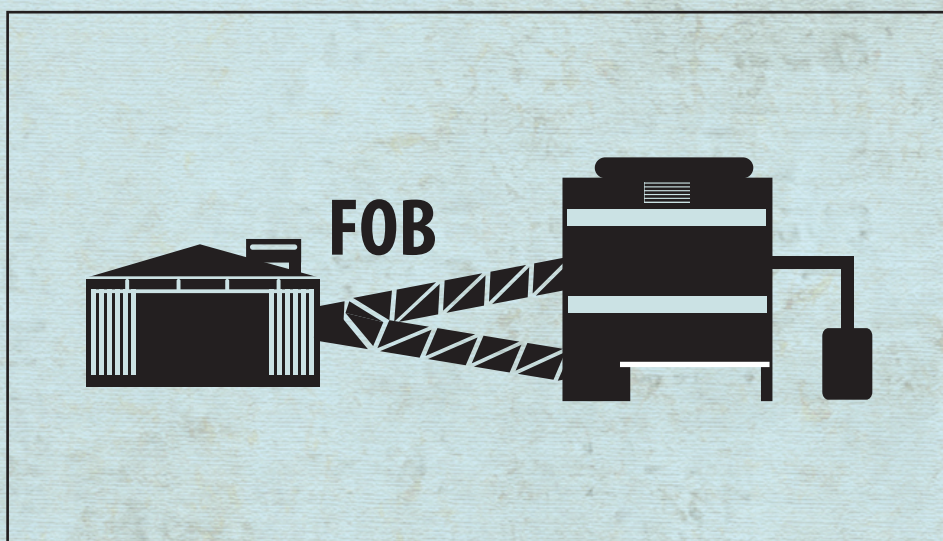
This is exactly where all the tenacity, creative charge and philosophical affinity of the workers embodied in the lyrics of their poems comes into play. Whether it is the poetry of Brana Petrović or Bogdan Arambašić, two of the most prominent poets and protagonists of the Foundry of Poems, or the contributions of other anonymous workers, a unique approach to the chosen medium, and the skill of stringing verses sum up the mentioned emancipatory efforts of the working class. Thus, reflecting on his work experience, then the machines and materials he is directed to, the worker constructs his own worldview devoid of the pathos that is stereotypically expected of him. Words are an extension of his deeds with the help of which he creates a completely new mental space devoid of the automated process of factory production; in this way he achieves his own freedom.





## IV DEATH

In a kind of state of exception<sup>5</sup> that characterizes the Serbian reality, workers experience their ultimate social death. Despite multiple attempts at mass strikes, the workers' collective body, unfortunately, fails to attract the attention of employers and the general public or enter into more specific fronts of solidarity with other, equally marginalized social groups. Constantly sabotaged, abandoned and condemned to fend for themselves, workers sink into abysses of melancholy deepened by poverty and physical and mental decay.



In that liminal space between life and death, they exist as ghosts, or as Cynthia Cruz puts it, filled with the death drive, trapped in the realm between two deaths, the subject of the working class is a specter, an undead, that haunts<sup>6</sup>. Here we inevitably arrive at a necropolitical perspective<sup>7</sup>, thanks to which we can better develop a social imagination according to which dead workers become alive, and like apparitions, zombies or ghosts stalk the existing order. Despite the constant instrumentalization and media normalization of death, the question of what happens after the disappearance of a human being continues to occupy civilization. Hence the idea of what follows after the death of a social system or ideology such as capitalism (if such a thing is even possible to imagine).

## V THE GHOST REBELLION

*"From the picnic  
the dead are coming drunk.*

*The kitchen manager  
feeds the hangman  
with his own meat.*

*Behind the barracks,  
the sulfur evaporates, the fatal  
mercury, the copper alloy of  
the tiger and the owl,  
without question rushes  
into the verses!"*

If the cause of the global breakdown was exactly the rebellion of the ghosts, perhaps the conditions for new forms of sociality would be created. However, as we call for a fairer tomorrow, in the local context a new reality lurks around the corner bringing to the cannibal menu new implications caused by the sale of social property and natural resources. In the past few years, foreign workers shared the same fate with disenfranchised Serbian workers has been shared by foreign workers who are a direct consequence of the neo-colonial pursuits of global companies (but also of Serbia's foreign policy orientation). The racial issue is connected to the class, since the labor force largely includes workers who arrived from the countries of South and East Asia, primarily India, Bangladesh, Nepal and China. New opportunities marked not only other employers and goals to be fulfilled, but also the organization of work characterized by maximum exploitation and neglect of basic human rights<sup>9</sup>.



Similar to Kafka's dystopian short story written at the dawn of World War I, Serbia became a penal colony. Deprived of a shred of dignity, basic means for a bare existence in the form of food, water and a home<sup>10</sup>, domestic workers can only be realized in death through solidarity with, as John Berger poetically suggests, foreign workers who sleep in basements as if in a grave<sup>11</sup>.

Therefore, whether they are symbolically or really dead<sup>12</sup>, the workers of all countries should unite in the fight for supremacy, whatever it may be, for their better tomorrow. All that ash, loose earth, ore, shavings, flour, chemical fumes and sweat will become the new elements of construction. The memory of better working days will become the fuel for boiler rooms filled with clear thoughts and voices that no one can silence, songs that cannot be reached.



## VI ANOTHER POETIC PARAGRAPH INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

On that line of imagination, Deana Petrović's Foundry of Poems marks the beginning of the end of a saga of fighting workers-ghosts to whom the factories ultimately belong. All the layers of this work that can be talked about, which concern the concept of memory, the relationship to industrial heritage and the museologicalization of the image of the worker, only make it more complex, but they cannot in any way match the intense emotional states that it evokes.

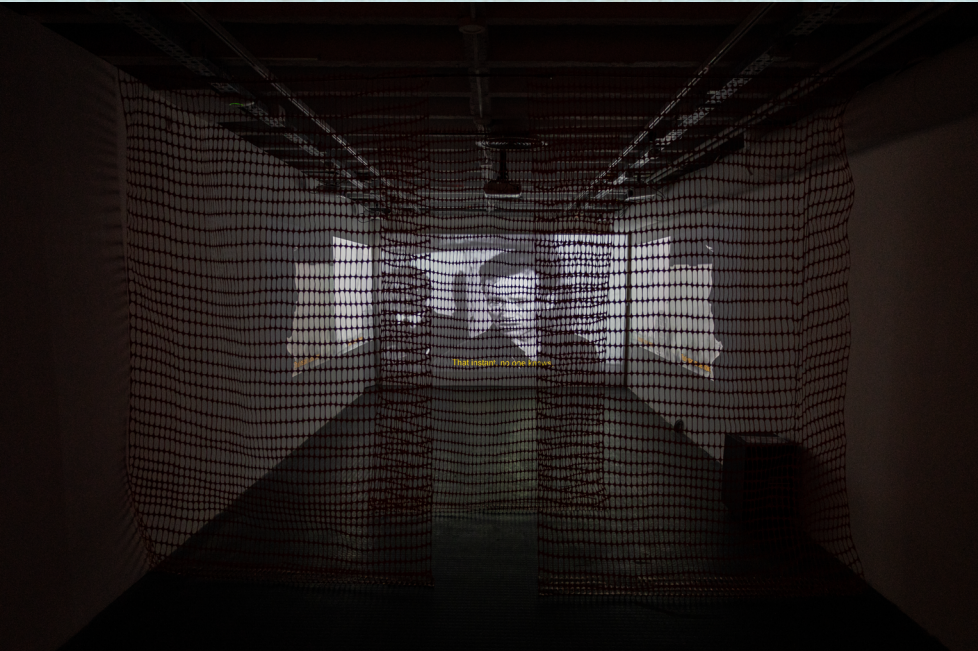
Finally, this hybrid text, like death itself, does not have its predefined end. In an attempt to express the various perceptions that come to him in the rapture of the interpretation of the Foundry of Poems, the author himself gradually fades, disappears, plunges into speculative disappearance while the thought of the mentioned Branislav Petrović flickers - cannibals ate all the people, only people remained.

Vladimir Bjeličić  
Art historian









### Short biography:

Deana Petrović completed interdisciplinary doctoral studies in Digital Arts at the University of Belgrade in 2018. For many years she taught at the Academy of Arts in Belgrade, Department of Photography and Design. Her works were showcased at numerous festivals and exhibitions in the country and abroad, and through her PHD thesis Petrović explored the hybridity of space through mapped immersive projections in an abandoned industrial space.

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## Endnotes:

1 Referring to the continuity of dealing with marginal social groups (primarily workers) in the films of Želimir Žilnik, in her text *The Paradigm of the Fragility of the Workers' Issue in (Post-)Socialist Yugoslavia*, Branka Čurčić refers to the absolute "immobility" of workers as political actors in contemporary Serbian society, where on top of that, the attempt to defend the basic rights of workers and their (self-)organization attempts is viewed with disbelief and sincere astonishment as a foreign, never-before-seen situation."

2 (...) most often, the character of Yugonostalgia does not imply a sentimental longing for the actually existing socialist order - with its self-managing organization of work, social ownership of the means of production, collectivism and egalitarian spirit, etc. In fact, it is a nostalgia for an imagined society of a hybrid type that for the purposes of my argument could be called consumer socialism - a nostalgia for a process of post-socialist transition in which all the advantages of a socialist system should be maintained while liberal prioritization seems to favor personal wealth and happiness. imperceptibly introduced. - taken from: Branislav Dimitrijević, *IN-BETWEEN UTOPIA AND NOSTALGIA or how the Worker Became Invisible on the Path from Shock-Worker to Consumer*, The Nostalgia on the Move Conference, Museum of Yugoslavia, 2017

3 At the end of the 19th century, Karl Marx claimed that alienation from the self is actually a condition that distances a person from humanity. The worker inevitably loses the ability to determine his life and destiny when he is deprived of the right to think (or imagine) himself as the director of his own actions. Although the worker is an autonomous, self-realized human being, as an economic subject that worker is goal-directed and redirected to activities dictated by the bourgeoisie.

4 "The factory must not be gray, colorless, repulsive, it must have its own flower, fragrance, soul and heart." She should lure the worker," said Dragan Nikolić, former director of the First May - taken from Serbia and the economy: "Prvi May" Pirot, a fairy tale with an unhappy ending (<https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-64433889>)

5 According to the German philosopher and jurist Karl Schmidt, the state of exception is similar to a state of emergency, but it implies the power of the sovereign to overcome the rule of law in the name of the public good. In his review of Agamben's interpretation of the term, writer and critic Leland de la Durantay claims: "The State of Exception is a book about life. It is not about life in some banal or fictional sense. It is an honest and erudite analysis of the ethical, legal and ontological coordinates through which Western culture has developed and defined the concept of life - the essence of life and its limits. - taken from: Leland de la Durantay - Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction, Stanford University Press, 2009

6 The death drive drives the working-class subject further and further into death, which is also the origin. The death drive is moving toward a new beginning, while at the same time pushing us in the direction of death. Melancholia, too, is an unconscious desire to return to our origins, while simultaneously also revulsion, a parallel desire to stay away. We are without a home in the world and we are without a home in our psyche and body. A ghost within a ghost, dead but still living. - taken from: Cynthia Cruz, *The Melancholia of Class: A Manifesto for the Working Class*, Watkins Media, 2021

7 As Akile Mbembe claims, necropolitics is the theory of the walking dead, that is, a way of analyzing how "modern forms of submission of life to the power of death" force some bodies to remain in various states between life and death.

8 The United Trade Unions of Serbia "Sloga" announced that more and more tragedies at the workplace across the country show that the state, despite the Law on Occupational Safety and Health, is not capable of institutionally implementing measures to protect workers, control and sanction employers and responsible persons in companies and firms where tragedies happen. - taken from: Labor rights in Serbia: Closer to Africa and Asia than the EU (<https://vreme.com/ekonomija/radnicka-prava-u-srbiji-blize-africi-i-aziji-nego-eu/>)

9 Achille Mbembe argues that in the economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to enable the murderous functions of the state. In contemporary philosophical thought and European political practice and imaginary, the colony represents a place where sovereignty essentially consists in the exercise of power outside the law (*ab legibus solutus*) and where "peace" is more likely to take the form of "war without end."

10 Having lost its roots, the working class has no home and is removed from discourse. The working class is symbolically dead. Just like the living dead, members of the working class are also neither dead nor truly alive. - taken from: Cynthia Cruz - *The Melancholia of Class: A Manifesto for the Working Class*, Watkins Media, 2021

11 John Berger and Jean Mohr - *The Seventh Man: a book in pictures and words about the experience of foreign workers in Europe*, Fabrika knjiga, 2018

12 The treatment of the working class in this stolen country is perhaps best illustrated by the example from the Aster textile factory in Nis. There, at the beginning of March, a worker fell ill due to heart problems, she asked to leave work to go to the infirmary located right next to the factory. The superiors did not allow her, the woman collapsed, so the ambulance transported her to the Clinical Center. She died there, diagnosis - acute heart attack. She was 39 years old. - taken from: *The Progressives are not interested in workers, but only in warriors* (<https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2023/9/28/naprednjake-ne-zanimaju-radnici-vec-samo-ratnici>)

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