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OUR ART IS OUR STRUGGLE! OUR WORKS, OUR VOICE!¹ TRANSFORMATIVE ART PRACTICES IN THE CURRENT STUDENT PROTESTS: THE CASE OF THE "STUUDENTI" EXHIBITIONS

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the transformative role of student-led artistic practices within the ongoing student movement and recent protests in Serbia, focusing on two exhibitions titled "stUUdenti". Drawing on Jacques Rancière's concept of aesthetic experience, the study explores the exhibitions' content, organization, and social context to understand how collective art practices operate as forms of resistance, social critique, and community building. Research findings indicate that these practices disrupt traditional hierarchies within the art system, foster participatory engagement, and produce new social relations through embodied gestures, collective silences, and performative interventions. The exhibitions show how art can function as a tool for social transformation by merging aesthetic experience with activism, emphasizing care, vulnerability, and mutual empowerment. By foregrounding the intersections of art, activism, and social engagement, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of art's role in facilitating societal change and fostering collaborative, community-oriented cultural practices.

KEYWORDS

student art, performative gestures, participatory art, endurance, care, collective art, aesthetic experience, activism, social transformation, student blockades in Serbia

Introduction

At the end of December 2024 and in February 2025, students organized two exhibitions in Belgrade under the title "stUUdenti". Apart from simply indicating that the exhibitions were self-organized and self-authorized by students, the double "U" also indicates the University of Arts in Belgrade (Univerzitet Umetnosti), which is composed of four faculties: the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, the Faculty of Music, the Faculty of Fine Arts, and the Faculty of Applied Arts.

¹ The first statement is taken from the introductory text of the first exhibition, while the second represents one of the slogans presented at the second exhibition.



These two exhibitions constitute not only the first initiatives in three decades to be fully conceptualized, prepared, and realized through the collaboration of students from all four faculties, but also articulate a critique of the still dominant institutional logic and hierarchical relations that shape both the artistic field and the educational system. The aim of this essay is to explore alternative formats of work organization and interdisciplinary collaboration within the art exhibition format, using these two exhibitions as case studies, and to examine the results of such an approach and its influence on the dominant values and criteria of art institutions. Through the modes of production, representation, and relations established, the exhibitions propose alternative frameworks for understanding artistic production, the logic of collaborative and collective practices, potential of self-organized educational process and their respective function within broader social movements. Conceived as a two-part series, the exhibitions form a coherent conceptual continuum, with the second display elaborating and extending the premises established by the first.

It is important to briefly reflect on the social context from which these two exhibitions emerged. After the collapse of the canopy at the newly renovated public train station in Novi Sad, which killed 16 people on November 1, 2024, a significant social movement emerged, led by students across Serbia. Students organized the longest faculty blockades in the country's history, with all major Serbian universities being occupied for over ten months. Through mass protests, nationwide marches, the blockades of key traffic junctions and highways, and collective public commemorative 16-minute silences, students have also initiated a widespread process of social transformation, mobilizing diverse social groups, from university professors and teachers to medical workers, farmers, artists, and many others, to self-organize, identify problems within their respective fields, and articulate possible alternatives. While the main criticism of the movement targets state corruption as well as the lack of responsibility and accountability of public institutions, the student movement itself demonstrates a new logic of organization and decision-making. Faculty forums, the plenums, serve as the main decision-making body within the student movement, where all students can participate and where topics are discussed and analyzed before collective decisions are made.

Students themselves reflect on the plenums as their primary format of organization. Milica Pendić, a student at the Faculty of Philology, stated: "We knew we wanted direct democracy because it proved to be what works best for all of us, since we all have equal rights and we can all participate" (Hronologija pobune 2024). Davud Delimedac, a student at the Faculty of Political Sciences, described the plenums as a practical lesson in democratic participation, noting that: "students are currently giving a lesson in democracy to those before them and, most likely, to those who will come after. The systems we established at our faculties, plenum-based systems of direct democracy, where all students have the right to participate, where everyone is invited, including those who disagree, those who are for or against, and the discussions and debates that take place in the plenum, as well as the proposals and decisions that are directly

implemented, restore young people’s trust in the political process itself” (Utišak nedelje, December 15, 2024). Sanja Milosavljević, a student at the Faculty of Physics, articulated the affective and political significance of this experience, stating that: “this is the first time that all of us feel that we can contribute to change and that our voices are actually being heard” (Hronologija pobude 2024).

The urge for the right to be heard, for a space in which their voices would matter, led students into the field of self-organization. It prompted them to physically occupy their faculties with their own bodies and collectively inhabit the spaces of the blocked institutions. They engaged in the self-organization of communal life, including the coordination of food and donations from citizens, procurement of necessary supplies, management of hygiene and safety, leisure, self-education, and recreation. It also led them into intensive conversations and negotiations, ongoing dialogues, exchanges, and mutual empowerment as the main form of organisation, which subsequently translated into actions in the public sphere. Strengthened and motivated by the experience of togetherness and solidarity, the students took to the streets, organized mass protests and actions in front of the institutions they addressed, demanding justice, truth, accountability, freedom, and security. This sustained act of resistance and transformation is captured within one installation set by the students of the Faculty of Fine Arts in the faculty’s Gallery Windows facing the main pedestrian street in Belgrade. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Students Have Risen! 2024. Display in the Gallery Windows of the Faculty of Fine Arts Belgrade. Personal archive.

The gallery window is, in fact, almost entirely empty. Behind the glass stands a single school chair, slightly turned toward the street. On the white backdrop at the rear of the window, the words *STUDENTI SU USTALI!* (“THE STUDENTS HAVE RISEN!”) are written in black capital letters. That is all. In natural daylight, the scene further accentuates the material presence of the window itself: its somewhat worn and rustic, dirty-white frame and the familiar, scuffed school chair with a small wooden seat and backrest mounted on a metal structure. What confronts the viewer is the trace of an already performed gesture, an empty chair marking the students’ decision to rise. By employing minimal means available, the students construct a situation that succeeds in fixing the gesture of rebellion, recreating and articulating it in the full richness of its movement. The gesture of rising, of taking action, of shifting one’s perspective, of stepping beyond the given frame, is thus transformed into an artistic act *par excellence*, one endowed with profound social effects.

Whether we, as citizens, took part in some of the protests, participated in collective commemorative silences on public squares, joined students in their marches across country, prepared food for them and our fellow citizens, hosted students in our homes across country, joined newly formed local self-organized assemblies in our neighborhoods, or we took action within our own professional field together with our colleagues, took part or even just witnessed any of the public actions or protests, we became immersed in an intensive process of social transformation. It came to shape the daily experience of citizens throughout the country, with yet uncertain results. This experience is the main subject of both exhibitions, defined and articulated from the position of self-representation of art students. As indicated in the introductory text printed on the flyers available in the gallery space for the first exhibition: “the works are our testimony to the tragedy and violence that triggered the blockades, as well as our view on why we will not give up the fight for a better tomorrow. Our art is our struggle”.

Social transformation as an aesthetic experience

The very statement ‘Our art is our struggle’ advocates the dissolution of the boundary between art and life, a principle that has been central to the avant-garde throughout history. Art historian Benjamin Buchloh defines avant-garde practice as one characterized by a “continually renewed struggle over the definition of cultural meaning, the discovery and representation of new audiences, and the development of new strategies to counteract and develop resistance against the tendency of the ideological apparatuses of the culture industry to occupy and control all practices and all spaces of representation” (Buchloh 1984: 21).

The struggle against imposed canons and norms through which alternatives to a dominantly constructed reality are articulated, both within the art system and within everyday life, unfolds continuously within artistic practice. These are practices that enter a dynamic arena of contestation, testing their position in direct relation to the phenomena they oppose, whether the critique is

directed at authorities, dominant ideologies, social norms, alienation, established conventions of the art system and art education, or pressures on freedom of expression and action. In the literature, those works of recent history are often described using such terms as relational, dialogical, interventionist, participatory, community-based art, or, more broadly, socially engaged art (Lacy 1994; Bourriaud 2002; Billing, Lind, and Nilsson 2007; Kester 2004; Jackson 2011; Bishop 2012). Art historian Claire Bishop has described this growing artistic interest, emerging since the early 1990s, in the social domain, specifically in collective action, collaboration, and direct engagement, as the ‘social turn’ in art, contemporary avant-garde within which “artists (are) using social situations to produce dematerialized, anti-market, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life” (Bishop, 2006: 179). Art historian Grant H. Kester is emphasizing “sociopolitical relationships” as a new artistic material replacing traditional canvas, paint and marble, moving the focus from “formal conditions of the objects” to aesthetic experience which has a potential to “challenge conventional perceptions” and “systems of knowledge” (Kester 2004: 3).

It is exactly this rupture in the dominant regimes of perception which introduces the aesthetic experience as a crucial notion in defining a new vocabulary and criteria related to the widely expanded field of artistic action, work, and labor. In this context, the work of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière is of exceptional significance. He introduced the concept of the aesthetic regime of art, which allows the category of the aesthetic to extend beyond traditional notions of beauty and taste into the broader field of experience (Rancière 2010). For Rancière, the aesthetic criterion is, on the one hand, linked to the artistic status of the work as an autonomous field of experience, a domain that is not subject to rational or moral judgment. On the other hand, it is also linked to the productive potential of dissensus, which stimulates debate and encourages the continuous reassessment of dominant hierarchical structures. By recognizing the field of experience as a domain of artistic realization, Rancière enables a departure from purely formal analyses of the visual aspects of the work of art, which have often limited interpretations of dematerialized or post-medium artistic practices. Furthermore, the principle of dissensus, which Rancière links to the redistribution of the sensible, challenges dominant frameworks that define the organization of power, the distribution of functions and places, the visible and the invisible, and speech and noise. It thus becomes a crucial element of aesthetic experience, making previously unseen or unheard perspectives perceptible. In contrast to the dominant regime, which he terms the “police”, Rancière envisions a politics that, through the principle of dissensus and contestation, opens up new forms of subjectivation within the distribution of the sensible, reshaping the established framework of the police order. In this sense, dissensus constitutes the foundation of politics, and the relationship between art and politics is established precisely through dissensual practice, which reconfigures the sensible and “invents new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said and what can be done” (Rancière 2010: 149).

Rancière's elaboration of aesthetic experience complements the revolutionary potential of art as developed by Walter Benjamin in his influential essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin 1968). By analyzing changes in the nature of the work of art induced by technological developments, particularly print, photography, and film, Benjamin challenges traditional canons of authenticity, eternal value, mystery, and genius. The decline of aura and the criterion of authenticity shift the function of art from the domain of ritual to the domain of politics (Benjamin 1968: 239). Moreover, the mass accessibility of art through reproductions and film democratizes perception, producing new habits among what Benjamin calls the "distracted audience". He identifies two modes of mobilizing this new potential: one aims to organize perception through control and spectacle, aestheticizing politics, while the other seeks to induce critical reflection through empowerment and active participation, politicizing art. The latter, which Benjamin associates with communism, aims to reorganize social relations, whereas the former, exemplified by Fascism, leaves the property structure intact. Exhibitions "stUudenti" perform this role of politicizing art, offering a testing ground for new collaborative ways of art production, empowering active participation, and offering critical reflection. Revisiting Benjamin in the contemporary context of intensified technological development becomes even more relevant.

New digital tools enabled mobilization on an unprecedented scale. It enabled a "boom in cooperation, where the 'tactical media' blending of new technology, art and activism has helped to give political protests a new face" (Lind 2007: 20). It also reaffirmed the questions of the function and role of art, its mode of production, reception and distribution. The 'social turn' (Bishop 2006) or 'collaborative turn' (Lind, 2007) in the artistic practice is once again challenging the structural issues of the dominant hegemonies, property, and social relations, entering the arena of what Chantal Mouffe defines as 'agonistic' struggle within the public space as a "battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted" (Mouffe 2007: 3). It is exactly on this terrain of agonistic struggle where Mouffe positions critical artistic practice as one which "foments dissent," "makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure or obliterate," "giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony" (Mouffe, 2007: 4-5). Furthermore, through its dissensual practice, art enables the constitution of an alternative.

This transformative potential of contemporary art practice can be connected to the transformative model of resistance defined by theorist Nancy Fraser in her analysis of the condition of postsocialism. The characteristic of this condition by Fraser can be identified by the lack of a credible progressive alternative to the dominant order, the separation of a cultural politics of recognition from a social politics of redistribution, and the consolidation of economic liberalism, which leads to aggressive commercialization and a drastic increase in material inequality (Fraser 1997). The dichotomy between the recognition and acknowledgment of differences as a response to cultural domination on the one hand, and economic redistribution as a response to economic

exploitation on the other, has made cohesive action within struggles for a more just society impossible. In this context, Fraser identifies affirmative and transformative models of resistance. The affirmative model functions as a corrective to the outcomes of unjust social relations and supports the aforementioned dichotomy, while the transformative model entails changing the very framework that generates social relations. It incorporates both the struggle against cultural or symbolic injustice as well as against socioeconomic injustice. As Benjamin would suggest, it affects the property structure and establishes new social relations (Benjamin 1968). In this way, the transformative model unifies both ethical and aesthetic criteria, dismantling existing mechanisms of representation that dominate the logic of identity production, while simultaneously striving to establish new relations of production that would lead to a more just economic distribution.

So how can this transformative measure be translated into the domain of the still dominant art institution and its capitalist logic, which relies on glorifying the figure of the author/artist, mystifying artistic labor, and fetishizing the art object as key tools for maintaining control over artistic production (Praznik 2021). Some of the strategies employed by students and presented within the exhibitions “stUUdenti” offer an insight into recent attempts to disrupt established hierarchies, to claim new arenas of action, to develop alternative modes of production and distribution, to shift the role of the audience, and to foster new forms of collective experience.

Nothing to celebrate

The first exhibition was organized at the Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts. It lasted for only a few days at the end of December 2024, just before the New Year holidays, which are traditionally celebrated in the city’s streets and squares with various public concerts and open-air markets. Partly hidden by the city’s stage for New Year’s cover bands and numerous festivities placed right in front of the faculty building, the students installed two large banners on the façade with the message “Nothing to celebrate” (Figure 2).

After making their way past the numerous barriers installed by the city administration to finally step into the gallery, the visitors are welcomed by host students introducing the display carefully shaped for sharing the experience of the first month of the blockades. The series of collages, objects, and installations build a unique environment through which visitors are gradually navigated to engage with different aspects of the social struggle represented by the students.

At the gallery entrance, a collage of posters created within the protests introduces some of the main students’ messages. Diverse in design, they reveal the absence of a unified visual identity, reflecting a wide range of approaches. The posters do not indicate which student group created them or their faculty affiliation; the focus remains entirely on the collective messages the students aim to convey:



Figure 2. Nothing To Celebrate, 2024. Front facade of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Belgrade. Personal archive.

freedom but / if not now, when? / new now / one cannot be a great artist without being a humble human / change is now / students against corruption / student – above all a human / crime – and where is the punishment? / say no to the rotten system / the trap / the burden of our actions / blockade / until when / until demands are met / truth cannot wait / art is the highest form of hope / students (Figure 3).

Further on the visitors encounter a series of installations: a metal sculpture resembling a bent spine and displayed on a pedestal in the traditional manner of institutional fetishization of art objects; a map reconstructing numerous protests and events taking place in the period from the fall of the canopy to the start of the exhibition with a small mirror placed at its end; a group of old wooden painter's easels bound together with fine threads and placed in the far corner of the space; an installation recreating a stereotypical domestic environment usually associated with pensioners (Figure 4), with details such as an armchair, old television sets, a wooden chest of drawers, lamps, rugs, newspapers scattered on the floor and a wall display of a series of framed photographs, reminiscent of family portraits or tapestries, jet documenting students' street actions and communal life within the faculty blockades, with one



Figure 3. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive

of the photographs featuring a student holding banner reading “Don’t lie to my grandfather”; a cardboard silhouette of a human figure composed of front pages, headlines and various articles from regime daily newspapers in Serbia; a two coat racks, one draped in a suit, shirt, tie, and business shoes, the other in a black hoodie, jacket, and running shoes, holding hands with an empty sleeve (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive



Figure 5. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

And while one part of the gallery is densely filled with content, the other part is clear with just a few minimal interventions. On a tall, narrow pedestal rest fragments of a broken rod (Figure 6), and on the wall, emphasized by direct lighting, a small segment of hardened mortar in a circular shape is displayed (Figure 7). Constructive elements, evidence material, a murder weapon, aesthetic objects, or a ready-made? Once again, the students leave the space open for interpretation. While the construction material, through its placement and a simple Duchamp-like procedure, is transformed into ready-made art objects, the students' collective technique leaves no signature. So, the authority of decision on what art is, the nomination of object, experience, or situation, the magic of transformation, the skill and power to change perspective, is shared with us: the audience. The aura of the work is displaced from the materiality of the object before us into the experience of the person observing. From the fetishized status of a material object and the authority of an author, to the experience, critical reflection and action of an audience.



Figure 6. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive



Figure 7. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

Our position as audience and participants, and our experience, being material shaped by the students' collective public interventions, is further emphasized by a three-channel video and sound installation in the adjacent room. Before entering, we pass through a large canvas dividing the two rooms, on which the students' messages from protest banners are once again recreated, introducing the authentic street aesthetics of the student protests (Figure 8):

/students against corruption / this city is not for sale / the state belongs to the children / when injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty / if we don't stop, we are done / mom, I'm fine / only the corrupt think anyone can be bought / who if not us? / together we are stronger / ...



Figure 8. Exhibition stUudenti, Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

Upon entering, the three screens of the video installation immerse us in the experience of collective acts of 15 and later 16 minutes silences, commemorating the victims of the canopy collapse in Novi Sad. The installation depicts the protest of students, farmers, and citizens at Slavija Square on December 22, which gathered an impressive number of people (Figure 9). A drone shot capturing thousands of mobile phone lights held by citizens became an iconic image of the protests. The collection of drone footage soon expanded to include mass protests in front of the Constitutional Court, the National Television, the Ministry of Education, as well as mass protests in Novi Sad, Kragujevac,

Novi Pazar, and Niš, culminating in the largest protest in Belgrade's history on March 15. The installation evokes the experience of embodied presence in shared, prolonged collective silences in public spaces, a distinctive feature of the students' protests. The experience of collective stillness transforms the moment through the simple act of standing together in collective grief, freedom, and silence. This opportunity to pause together, to interrupt routine with our bodies, to cut through the noise, to transform the sonic environment of the city, to be simultaneously 'the one and the many' (Kester 2011), to hear the creak of a window in a nearby building, barking dogs, the buzzing of a drone overhead, birdsong, notifications on mobile phones, distant footsteps, and the breathing of those beside us, the possibility of intervening in reality through collective action, represents an important gesture inducing an experience of change.

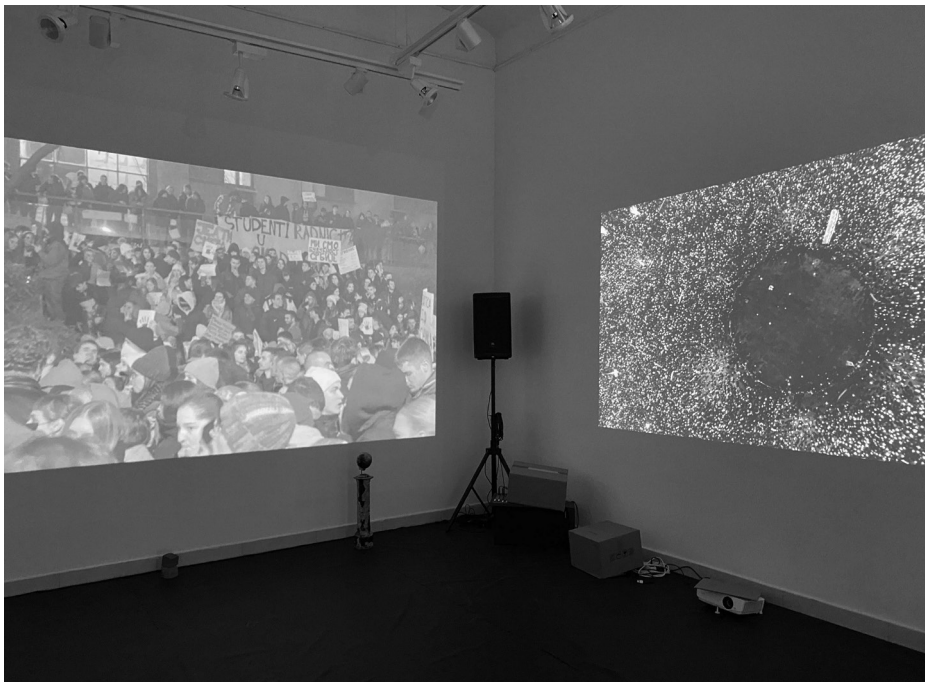


Figure 9. Exhibition "stUUdenti", Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts, 2024. Exhibition view. Personal archive

Comparing the collective gestures of the students' protests with performance art tactics of endurance, physical effort, objectification, and radical engagement, art historian Jasmina Čubrilo offers a valuable early contribution toward an understanding of the artistic potential of students' collective public actions: "Protests like the student-led protest in Serbia, with its vulnerable yet persistent bodies in mourning and transformation, are (bare) life itself which, through the repetition of gestures and actions, as well as through images and documentation, critically re-signifies existing relations and concepts, tending

to create new routines as well as new and more immediate agencies” (Čubrilo 2025: 32). These new immediate agencies also evoke new social relations which are being generated through collective experience, the experience of redistribution of power, generating new trajectories of what can be seen, said or done (Rancière 2010: 149). It creates a rupture in the police regime or an interval, as defined by Judith Butler: “in which the assembled bodies articulate a new time and space for the popular will, not a single identical will, not a unitary will, but one that is characterized as an alliance of distinct and adjacent bodies whose action and whose inaction demand a different future” (Butler 2015: 75). In their video installation, students are emphasizing, recalling, repeating, and representing this experience as a collective act and gesture of transformation, shared and experienced by both students and citizens.

The students employed another collective form of engaging the audience: choral singing. The students’ choir became a recognizable feature of many public actions and protests, and it was performing both at the opening and closing of the exhibition. Apart from the international student anthem *Gaudeamus Igitur*, the repertoire included a number of Yugoslav children’s songs: *Lako je prutu*, *Deca su ukras sveta* (poet Ljubivoje Ršumović), and *Zakleo se bumbar* (composer Mirko Šouc). At first glance, it may seem that the students are asserting their right to youth, to childhood, to naivety and play. The repertoire certainly suggests this, but it also goes a step further. Through a repertoire recognizable across generations, the students demonstrate almost nurturing care for the audience. They claim the space of childhood, freedom, and play equally for themselves and society as a whole. Reflecting on the choir performance at the opening of the exhibition, the author Saša Savanović comments: “They desire a different world, a world of justice, security, peace, a world of freedom, which is also a caring world and a world of clear boundaries (ethical, not territorial). A childlike world and a world for children, for all children. In this regard, they are not alone” (Savanović 2024).

After singing within the gallery space, the choir went out onto the main pedestrian street and, with their student index books raised in their hands, performed again, engaging accidental passers-by (Figure 10). The choir’s performance recalls numerous actions of self-organized choirs initiated by the Škart art collective in Serbia over the past two decades (Horkeškart, Proba, Hor-Ruk). Performing in the streets, within various public actions, open rehearsals, protests, and events, these choirs have been reviving a specific anti-fascist and Yugoslav repertoire while at the same time they “advocate singing as a form of activism and its potential to foster people’s social and political engagement” (Hofman 2025). The links with a particular artistic tradition, primarily that of self-organized artistic groups and collectives operating within the independent cultural scene in Serbia over the past three decades, become even more evident in the second segment of the exhibition “stUUdenti”, organised in February 2025 at the Kula (Tower) Gallery in Belgrade.



Figure 10. Choir of Students in blockade, December 2024. Photo by Luka Knežević Strika

The Way Students Organise

At this point, it is important to introduce the organisational and decision-making logic implemented in the design and production of exhibitions by art students. Through interviews and conversations with students who were members of the exhibition team, I learned more about the practical aspects of exhibition production: how many students took part, how the idea of a collaborative project involving all faculties of the University of Arts emerged, how decisions were made, what challenges were faced during the process, and how these challenges were addressed. Two main elements stand out in the students' reflections. First, and, as it appears, the most significant aspect for those involved, is the fact that these exhibitions offered students an experience of collaboration with peers from other art faculties: an opportunity to share and exchange skills, ideas, and knowledge, and to work collectively.

The idea for the exhibition emerged through the participation of students from all four art faculties at a joint Mega Plenum (as the students refer to it) of the University of Arts in blockade. Artist Vuk Mandušić, a student at the Faculty of Fine Arts, recalls:

“We, at the University of Arts, connected through plenums because we did not have that experience within our studies. We did not feel that we were truly together as part of the University of Arts. It made no sense to me that there was no collaboration between the faculties within the University of Arts. For example, wouldn't it be great if, during our studies, we had the opportunity to take an elective course at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts or the Faculty of Applied

Arts? The possibility of interdisciplinary collaboration is very important for progress in our work”.

The production logic of the exhibitions adopted the plenum as the main tool of student organisation and decision-making within the broader student movement. The idea for a collective exhibition was discussed at the Mega Plenum, approved by a majority vote, after which an exhibition working group was formed. Information was then sent to all students at the University of Arts, inviting those interested to join the group and take part in the exhibition-making process. Vuk Mandušić recalls:

“At certain points, the working group reached around 100 members, but most of the time it consisted of about 60 to 70 people. Around 20 people were most actively involved in the preparations, with approximately 40 participating occasionally, but most of us took part in some form. We held in-person meetings. Initially, we brainstormed together, proposing ideas and voting on each one; the ideas that were approved would be implemented. Often, one idea would merge with another, giving rise to a third concept, which happened quite frequently. I am glad that no single person stood behind any individual work, there were always multiple contributors.”

Artist Pavle Jakšić, a student at the Faculty of Fine Arts, reflects:

“I don’t remember at all who did what, which idea belonged to whom, who intervened where, or who said what; I have absolutely no idea, and I think that is a good thing. I believe a collective has truly emerged. After all this time, what stands out to me is precisely the networking itself, although it has yet to produce tangible or concrete results, it is this very process that, in my view, represents the most significant outcome of the entire endeavour.”

Both artists confirm that differences of opinion existed throughout the process, but that the group consistently pursued ideas that were approved through voting. Vuk adds:

“Patience proved essential to the creative process. This was the first time I had worked with so many people simultaneously on a single idea. From this experience, I learned the value of both organisation and patience. It was an undertaking I had not imagined I could be part of, and I was genuinely surprised by how much we were able to achieve together.”

The production was supported by numerous in-kind contributions from various organizations, including printing houses providing free printing services, faculties supplying production materials, and support from citizens. This logic of planning, organising, and creating collectively, radically democratised the process of art production, enabling all interested participants to take part on equal terms and engage in decision-making. It functioned as an exercise in collective creativity, in which tolerance, negotiation, discussion, and compromise, together with individual contributions to a collective endeavor, prevailed. Discussions with students made it clear that suspending the need for individual recognition can at times be frustrating. Nevertheless, the decision to act as a collective remained consistent across both exhibitions.

On Endurance and Care

While the first exhibition was organized within the building of the Faculty of Fine Arts, for the second installment the students left their everyday environment, the space they inhabited, occupied, and controlled, and entered one of the city's prominent galleries, claiming mainstream exhibition venues as equally adequate spaces for their specific artistic practice. Once again, acting as an interdisciplinary collective of students from all four faculties of the University of Arts, without individual authorisations or signatures, they shaped the exhibition display using the vertical tower structure of the gallery. A series of site-specific installations and ready-made interventions are intended both to share their experience and to encourage further audience engagement. The exhibition is structured across three floors, with a gradual dramaturgy starting from the first floor, representing the reality of life during the blockades and ongoing protests, toward the second floor which situates the current student protests within a broader historical tradition of student struggle, culminating on the top floor, dedicated entirely to an immersive audience experience.

One of the first works visitors encounter on the first floor is a video installation presenting footage documenting numerous cases of violence which students are exposed to in the streets. Public gatherings of people, pausing the regular movements of the city, are high-risk performative actions. Without police protection, the assembled bodies are exposed to unpredictable acts of aggression, protected solely by students wearing yellow vests and forming a live barrier while stopping traffic. In doing so, they demonstrate vulnerability recognized by Jasmina Čubrilo (2025) as an important feature of performative students' actions. It represents what Judith Butler would call interdependency and vulnerability of the bodies as a form of mobilization, resistance, and political exercise of an alternative. Claiming the right to stop what is supposed to be "normal life" under the dominant oppressive regime, these collective interventions shape the form of collective agency while remaining vulnerable at the same time. As Butler writes, "vulnerability may be a function of openness, that is, of being open to a world that is not fully known or predictable" (Butler 2015: 149). It is precisely the risk of this openness that the students are willing to take, securing the safety for others who take part, and the scenes of their bodies being struck by cars, again and again, unfold in their full disturbing reality. Such raw, unpolished video material requires no editing, aesthetic refinement, or formalization, and all it needs is a video projector, a laptop on the floor, and a cable stretched to the nearest power socket (Figure 11). The very fact that students are projecting this footage as a video piece within the gallery setting instructs us to the territories of their artistic action, which is not within the domain of representation but within the domain of social relations, mobilization and transformation. This form of action implies responsibility, unpredictability, interdependency, vulnerability, and risk.



Figure 11. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

In another corner of the room, in contrast to their public function as creators and organizers of the protest events and actions, the students are offering an insight into a space inaccessible to anyone who is not a student, a space reserved only for them, for their daily activities and their shared life. This is the space of blocked faculties, which they recreate employing, once again, a tactic of the ‘ready-made’. Inflatable mattresses, a pump, sleeping bags, crumpled bedding, and personal belongings (water, a toothbrush, deodorant, a laptop,

stickers, small notes) (Figure 12). On the wall above the mattresses hangs a series of photographs of different beddings, like imprints of their sleepers. These empty, multicolored beddings form a kind of morning portrait of the student movement, as if once again declaring: the students have risen!



Figure 12. Exhibition “stUudenti”, Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

Placed on the table next to it is a notebook filled with comments, photographs, and records of life during the blockade. We are invited to leaf through it freely and peek into the students’ diary entries:

“In situations like this, you realize that there are people who will help you. You understand the importance of community and solidarity, you don’t expect it, but you receive it unconditionally, because everyone knows you are doing the right thing.”

“Dear diary, we’ve been working on the new exhibition for a long time. It’s really stressful, but also exciting. We’re learning to solve problems together, to collaborate, and to trust each other.”

“Maybe sleeping at the faculty isn’t such a bad idea. In my own bedroom, I don’t have such a nice view from the window. December 23.”

“It’s already the seventh day I wake up at the faculty. I miss my bed. I miss my mom. I miss my dog.”

“During this blockade, I’ve fallen in love seven times already. Maybe the problem is me, but everyone is so cute when they’re fighting for our demands” (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Exhibition “stUudenti”, Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

The second floor highlights inter-generational connections and relationships, engaging with history, tradition, and continuity while asserting the conscious choice of their own tradition. At its center is a triptych – collage linking three major student movements: the Yugoslav student protests of 1968, the student protests in Serbia in 1996/1997, and the current student movement (Figure 14). Documentary photographs of street actions, student forums, blockades, and protests, along with newspaper clippings from each movement, are collaged

around a central core, within which the demands of each protest are listed. It is within this core that students trace the continuity and tradition of their struggle, as a lineage they inherit, know, and preserve. The history of the fight for democratization, social equality, and institutional accountability unfolds in roughly thirty-year cycles, yielding new articulations and renewed collective sentiment.



Figure 14. Exhibition “stUUdenti”, Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

On the floor, in the corner of the room, stands a screen displaying a video of a student’s index book (“certificate of courage” as they call it), whose pages turn in a continuous loop. The “exams” section is filled with a list of the major protest actions the students had organized up to the time of the exhibition. With confidence, they declare self-organization and self-education as the highest principles of learning, requiring no external validation or confirmation.

In the niche of the mezzanine leading to the top level of the tower, students have created a site-specific installation reminiscent of a children’s playground (Figure 15). The floor is covered with sand, with numerous colorful whistles hanging on the treads above. By combining sand as a material associated with play, as well as modeling and construction, with the symbolic sound

of rebellion, the students have created the representation of a gentle social laboratory. Once again, they direct us toward the playful and tender nature of their struggle. Johan Huizinga described play as a voluntary, out of the ordinary and temporary activity, which is free, which creates its own rules and order, its own play-community that sustains the duration of play, that employs imagination, entails tension and uncertainty, and radiates into life outside the play: “to dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure tension – these are the essence of the play spirit” (Huizinga 1955: 51). He also points to the generative nature of play as a cultural phenomenon, one that precedes culture and is able to “impart meaning to the action” (Huizinga 1955: 1). As such, play can serve as a testing ground for new cultural practices and institutions. It seems that this playful potential, situated outside normative “seriousness”, ironically represented by the hanger dressed in a business suit in the previous exhibition, is precisely what the students seek to provoke in visitors.



Figure 15. Exhibition “stUudenti”, Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

After exposing the audience to the daily routine of protests and blockades, the risks students take, the tradition of their struggle, and the potential of playfulness within the collective actions of rebellion, we arrive at the final level, in which we find an immersive environment that occupies all our senses. The sound filling the space resonates through our bodies. White woolen threads hang down from the ceiling, falling over us, on our heads, shoulders, and backs. We touch and move them as we walk, encountering subtly embroidered messages attached to the woolen threads: *you are the heart of Serbia; without you we are nothing, with you we are everything; well-done colleagues; we will not give up; utopia; you are art; we are in this together; bravo, my mom says we nailed it; we are marking history; solidarity; art is struggle* (Figure 16 and Figure 16a).



Figure 16. Exhibition “stUudenti”, Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.



Figure 16a. Exhibition “stUudenti”, Gallery Kula Cetinjska, 2025. Exhibition view. Personal archive.

Artist Katarina Vundać, a student at the Faculty of Applied Arts, offers a further explanation of the origin of the messages: “These messages were written in the guest book at our last exhibition at the Faculty of Fine Arts. This level is dedicated to the future, somewhat utopian” (Janković 2025).

In fact, these are messages of encouragement and support for the students, left by the visitors, which they return to the audience in a new poetic form, crafted through handiwork. The focus on the sensory experience of the audience is further emphasized by several mirrors leaning against the walls, so that as we move through the space, we occasionally see our own reflection or that of other visitors. With accessible materials and minimal interventions, the students create an environment of comfort, care, gentle touch, and subtle

sensory stimulation. Once again, the students guide us to slow down, reflect, contemplate, and experience embodied perception within this safe environment. Just as they protect public collective silences with their exposed, vulnerable bodies, creating a safe space for us to pause in shared grief, within the gallery setting they design a space that nurtures contemplation using different simple means, once again focusing on touch, craft, body and sound, evoking the notion of care.

The care ethic, as implied by artist Elena Cologni, “allows us to step out of the dominant social, political and cultural system of understanding society and relations, and look at the peripheral (not the central) instead: the circular (not the linear) thinking, the quiet (not the loud) voices in society as strengths (not weaknesses). Care Ethics teaches and trains us not to get tempted to compete by adopting the same strategies, which have damaged our society and environment, but to try different avenues instead” (Cologni 2024: 2). This passage on care ethics can be applied to the strategies students employ both within the process of self-organization as well as in the mobilization of citizens to engage, join, support and initiate their own struggle for the transformation of society.

Conclusion

The work on the transformation of society and existing relations is where students of the art faculties situate their practice as a form of art. Through these two exhibitions, and by employing diverse skills, they point to some of the main characteristics of their work from a position of self-representation. Acting together as a collective of art students from all four faculties of the University of Arts, they transcend disciplinary boundaries and challenge the traditional notion of authorship. New relations are demonstrated in the ways students organize art production, replacing the authority of the “genius” author with a collective decision shaped through debate, discussion, and ultimately voting. Furthermore, they open the field of art to fellow students from other faculties, as well as to citizens with whom they share the work of social change.

Consciously or unconsciously, they establish a continuity with a specific experience of artistic practice that has developed over the past decades on the independent scene, one that continuously questions the position of the author and hierarchies within artistic practices and production models; expands the field of artistic work into the realms of community, public space, and social relations; and reintroduces forgotten or neglected skills, tools, and formats such as choirs, handicrafts, workshops, pedagogical practice, processes, research, actions or networking. This is a tradition of radical departure from the still-dominant norms of the art system which assume relations of power, excellence, domination, hierarchy, and exclusivity. It is a radical break from the understanding of artistic work as an isolated activity inspired solely by an individual artist, as well as a radical break from the traditional art curricula still dominating art education in Serbia.

Aesthetic experience is being introduced through the process of mobilization, self-organization, through learning by doing, acting together, engaging in dialog and exchange, and articulating the voices of those previously excluded from public debate. It emerges through practices of mutual empowerment, play, collective creativity, organizing mass public actions and protests and employing distinctive gestures such as collective public silences, blockades, and marches. All of these collective acts presume endurance, risk, care, and togetherness in the process of shaping new communities. They also imply a process with an uncertain outcome, one created in resistance to speed and efficiency as imposed values, while claiming the right to mistakes and to an extended duration of time.

These practices demand hope and what theorists of the avant-garde would call *optimal projections*, as a vision of the future and the choice of possible variants in overcoming imposed perceptions of reality² (Sretenović 2020: 52). Finally, with these two exhibitions, students are claiming the field of art as an important aspect of the struggle, one which can offer the tools, strategies, knowledge, and skills for the aesthetic experience of social change to be fully understood and comprehended in its transformative, open, unfinished, unfixed, unpredictable, free and dynamic character.

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2 The term was invented by Aleksandar Flaker and taken from Sretenović (2020: 52).

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Milica Pekić

„Naša umetnost je naša borba! Naša dela, naš glas!”³

Transformativne umetničke prakse u aktuelnim studentskim protestima: slučaj izložbi ‘stUudenti’

Apstrakt

Tekst istražuje transformativnu ulogu studentskih umetničkih praksi unutar aktuelnog studentskog pokreta i širih protesta u Srbiji, sa fokusom na dve izložbe pod nazivom „stUudenti”. Kroz analizu sadržaja, organizacione strukture i društvenog konteksta izložbi, oslanjajući se na koncept estetskog iskustva Jacquesa Rancièrea, istražuje se potencijal kolektivnih umetničkih praksi kao oblika otpora, društvene kritike i izgradnje zajednice. Studija ukazuje

3 Prva izjava je preuzeta iz uvodnog teksta prve izložbe, dok druga predstavlja jedan od slogana sa druge izložbe.

da ove prakse narušavaju tradicionalne hijerarhije unutar umetničkog sistema, podstiču participaciju i kreiraju nove društvene odnose kroz telesne gestove, kolektivne tišine i druge performativne intervencije. Spajanjem estetskog iskustva i aktivizma, uz naglašavanje brige, ranjivosti i uzajamnog osnaživanja, izložbe demonstriraju ulogu umetnosti u procesu društvene transformacije. Tekst se fokusira na presek umetnosti, aktivizma i društvenog angažmana kako bi doprineo dubljem razumevanju odnosa umetnosti i društvenih promena, kao i potencijala umetnosti u razvoju kolaborativnih kulturnih praksi usmerenih ka izgradnji zajednice.

Ključne reči: studentska umetnost, performativni gestovi, participativna umetnost, izdržljivost, briga, kolektivna umetnost, estetsko iskustvo, aktivizam, društvena transformacija, studentske blokade u Srbiji