

The Fates Of Katalin Ladik

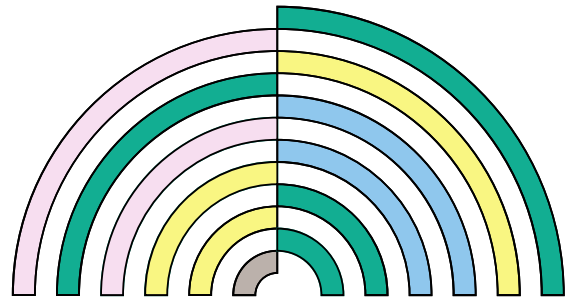
Irena Haiduk

There are many markers, but the best place to look is in small towns. Usually they host an inter-city bus station, flanked by a row of service kiosks for the waiting people: a bakery, an all-day café/bar, and a newsstand. Right there, magazines, newspapers and comics hang on a line, clipped by clothing pins. Lines of neatly stacked cigarette packs insulate the kiosk's glass walls. A low, horizontal window is at shoulder height, so that you can see and hear the clerk before placing money on the tray. Pornography is fully out, and by that I mean naked bodies of women and girls, scarlet nails pressing into their bowling ball tits. The cock is always absent from the cover. Inside the pages it is never alone. The magazines fade and buckle over time, waiting for teenage boys and truck drivers. The rest ignore them, like dog shit, and avoid eye contact.

But this is the place to look. Not at the porn itself, but at the fact of it being there, on the newsstands of the small-town bus stops. If you live in a minor language (not English, German, or French), porn means peace. When bodies on the covers start to deform to pictures of lined up corpses and mass graves, smoke, uniformed men, flag flying tanks, the sound of war follows, like a late film effect, closer and closer until the gunfire is within earshot. If you live in a minor language, like Serbo-Croatian or Hungarian, the newsstand is an oracle, and you have to be attuned to all kinds of slight shifts, to be able to decide the best time to flee.

To Katalin Ladik this moment was highly legible. She decided to be a poet very early, in her teens, after starting her acting career on Radio Novi Sad, where she performed in ensemble radio plays in Hungarian, for the Hungarian-speaking public of Vojvodina, Yugoslavia. This country, the second iteration of Yugoslavia ("yug" or "jug" meaning "south" in most Slavic languages, and "slav," from "slovo" meaning "letter," marking people who speak the same language), was an artwork, held together by a spell cast by a powerful magus Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980) after World War II. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) consisted of six newly defined republics spanning the Balkans from the Adriatic Sea all the way to the Alps: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia (with autonomous regions Vojvodina and Kosovo) and Slovenia. Strong magic was necessary to create this world from debris and rubble. It required a loss of memory charm, a forgetting, so that friends and enemies could live together, in a wonderland built from only what they shared. The spell worked.

Katalin Ladik felt it work, she was three years old at this founding. One night, she fell asleep in Újvidék, Magyar Királyság, and woke up in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia, without moving an inch. Changing countries while staying in place happened for centuries to people living in this stretch of the Danube, where conquest defined ever-shifting borders between empires. Since the 1500s, the city was known by many names left by the Ottomans (Varadin), the Habsburg Monarchy (Ratzen Stadt), the Austrian Empire (Neoplanta), the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Neusatz), the Kingdom of Serbia (Нови Сад), the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (Novi Sad), Hungary (Újvidék), SFR Yugoslavia (Нови Сад, Novi Sad, Újvidék), FR Yugoslavia (Нови Сад, Novi Sad, Újvidék), and by the Republic of Serbia where it stands as Нови Сад, Novi Sad, and Újvidék today.



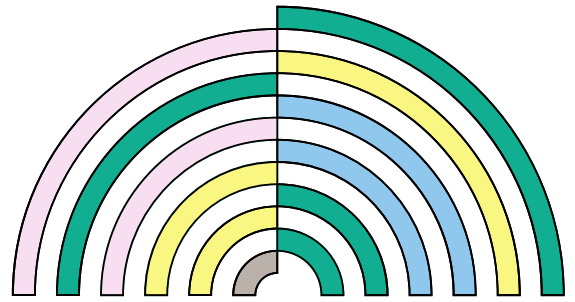
Unlike the rest of the Balkans, peoples living in Vojvodina, north of the Sava and Danube rivers, went through both the Ottoman occupation, where the ban on writing and representational images evolved an array of oral techniques, and Cartesian systems instilled western ways of knowing, brought in by the Habsburgs. Five hundred years of amalgamated West-European and Balkan mythologies, aesthetics, and politics primed this place for further entanglement. Here, prophecy and reason still stand on top of one another. Binaries have no jurisdiction in a vertigo of perpetual coming together and coming apart. What spins out of this vortex provides the only way to stay sane: the third way.

The enchantment of Yugoslavia was greater than yes or no, true or false, on or off, 0 or 1, the east or the west, Warsaw or NATO. This phase, a once-in-a-world scenario, begot non-alignment. Together with Egypt, Ghana, India, and Indonesia, SFR Yugoslavia became the founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a cultural and economic allegiance, advocating for a “third way” against the Cold War power bloc: imperialism, (neo)colonialism, racism, and all forms of aggression, occupation, domination, interference, and hegemony. The spell, nourished by temporary stability, traveled far finding those who knew that there was a way beyond what was on offer.

This is where Katalin Ladik learned to speak Hungarian and Serbo-Croatian, and where she, after deciding to become a poet, was informed by an oracle she would die at the age of 37. At this moment her life acquired the dimension of an epic, a ballad about a woman destined to make a world with art, a task no constraint could extinguish. This frame of finitude, outside of regular flows of time and standardized motivations for living, required compression, speed, and an economy of extraordinary efficiency. Katalin Ladik finished two acting schools, studied economy, worked in the bank, had a long career as an radio play actress, married, had a son, divorced, published her first book of poetry, then a second book with an accompanying record, started performing her poetry, expanded into sculpture, performance, photography, married again, traveled, found her people, notoriety, respect, divorced her second husband, toured the Balkans, Europe and beyond, she was filmed, recorded, interviewed, studied, quoted, celebrated, honored, defamed with charges of immoral conduct by the communist party, harassed for years, rescued by artists with higher party standing, more books, more exhibitions, happenings, letters, married again, raised her son, buried her husbands, wrote her autobiography, part one and two.

Much of Katalin Ladik’s early work camouflaged as harmless, undetectable to those concerned with the major. Her art, like the rest of her, could not be categorized, and it thrived in a place like Yugoslavia, where most activity of this kind was permitted, even supported. Katalin Ladik, like many others, was left in peace for a great while, and allowed to do her work.

Picture this: *Shaman Poem V* (1970) in Zagreb, Ladik mid-channeling, bending her minimally costumed body (a long strip of fur held up by a wide leather belt), surrounded by ceremonial props, such as goc (sheepskin drum), gajde (traditional Balkan bagpipes), gusle (a single string bow instrument used for performing epic poetry), a chair, and a candles atop thin cylinder candelabra stands. The score is in her hands and scattered on the floor, she is



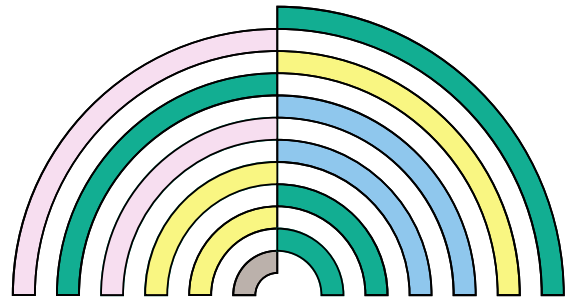
reading, doing a reading, like an oracle reads. Her body is in perfect proportion to desires of everyone around her, she moves in shapes that demonstrate its agility, its beauty, its power to attract those who were, are and will be present. Her nipples are not big, they are wide and light but contract to dark tight raspberries on cue. Dusan Makavejev is sitting transfixed in the first row, the charge of this event echo in his future films. Mladen Stilinovic is in the back, standing up with arms crossed, straining his neck to see it all. Imagine that: the black and white photograph, so fitting to how the Eastern European socialist domain is imagined, has colors under the grayscale film. Makavejev's top and trousers are mid cobalt blue, Stilinovic's sweater is an outrageous lemon yellow. Ladik's hair is Cleopatra black, the eyeliner is turquoise-black, her eyes are purple, her mouth warm coral. The sound pulsing in the picture is almost audible from the center of the performance: it is all Ladik. It issues from the most economical studio of all: the mouth.

Katalin Ladik's top lip is flat and fully arched from both sides, shaped as a two-part bridge. The parts closer to the nose are higher than the corners and the bottom lip is a bit fuller, a long horizontal bean nestled under the arc of the top lip. Katalin Ladik's speaking voice is an alto only when she exhales or is about to take a pause. On the inhale, it is a deep grounded base, a pitch where all words return and where her laughter ramps up. Her speech is constantly shifting pitch from alto to base, making curves on a surface with both polished and rough parts.

The bottom corners of her lower lip pull downward every time her voice hits the base. When she is reading or channeling her mouth assumes all possible shapes, the lips pull over or away from the teeth or they close tight to make more sounds. This instrument, like her awareness of everything it can do, is truly open, her lips mold auxiliary tongues, her throat, diaphragm, and lungs protract into limbs. The shapeshifting is a symptom of the multi-lingual, that, for Ladik, never requires the purgatory of translation to make contact. For those who do not speak Hungarian, the material simply expands into sound, already resistant to demands of interpretation and categorization. What is offered, body to body, is the arousal of being open to mixing limbs, tongues, sharing skins.

Play powers Katalin Ladik's way with language. Her body is an instrument of play and to play. This labor is pure eros, pure desire, and pure courage, because it unfolds in public. Sounds issue in Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, and elemental phonic groups. Katalin Ladik's body processes them, their forms and categories, their addressers and addressees, to constitute an archaic space-time. This otherworldly Babylonian ability can only be called a spell.

A spell is a deed made from sound, an agent (agency), an actor (act) traveling toward those who will absorb it and carry it further until it is carried out. Everything encountered on the way—attached, released, and incorporated—passes through inanimate and animate bodies, smoke, dust, goo, and fluids. Once a spell is cast, it cannot be denied, vibration can't be shut out. Spells are slow, they have to seduce, accumulate, and need time to work.



For Katalin Ladik, incantation and enunciation are not a matter of individual concern. Her voice must pass through others. It needs others. Katalin Ladik's work, in all its forms, has a deep awareness of how to host. It hosts itself by being open to heterogeneity, to spontaneity and improvisation. If we think the Balkans as a zone where this kind of entanglement is modeled at the most fundamental level (either by being forcefully inscribed or voluntarily accepted), it's no surprise that it is volatile, unstable, fluid. This place is in a perpetual state of making itself.

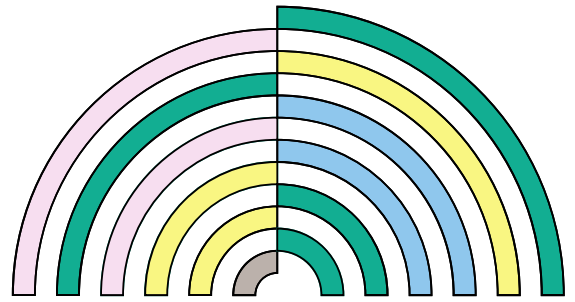
To be a host in the Balkans, in perpetual state of occupation by others, requires both intimate knowledge and reversal of the values of the occupying force. The occupier wants to conquer, to own, to have, to grow, amass, and acquire. To exist here you must turn possession on its head and become a host, become possessed—become host to a demon. To be possessed requires a loss of control. Let the unknown live inside you and do its work so that you may become another self, made from all of those who possessed you.

The host is an amalgam. Its home is made from things it already has, what is already available, not what can be acquired. To work with what you have is a sign of the economy of constraint. This is the domain of the home and the domestic, and in Ladik's enterprise it answers to its Greek name: "oikos" meaning "home," "nemein" meaning "to manage." Economizing requires virtuosity, imagination and extraordinary will.

Yugoslavia had no support for single mothers when Katalin Ladik became one. Still, women could earn enough to support themselves. Katalin Ladik always had a full-time job. To make art, there could be no alienation between the different kinds of labors in her life. Ladik managed by sorcery, by sourcing from what was available, what surrounded her: the domestic and the occupational, private and public, personal and common. The sewing machine, the clothing pattern, her son's kraft paper, wiring from switchboards and tape decks at the radio station, her underwear, her organs, her skin, her muscle, epic songs, lyric songs, wailing songs (narikace), electronics, folklore, gusle, gajde, candles, her hair, her eyelashes, her eyes, her ears, her mouth, tongues—an economy of materials.

These abilities and props are highly portable, like the traditional vests that are sewn over with rows of silver and gold coins, made by Balkan women, worn as currency as they ran from Ottoman retaliation. This clothing constitutes a different kind of adornment, enabling movement at the speed of someone being chased or running out of time. In Katalin Ladik's scenography, these kinds of necessities carry easily, but things are not what you think they are not—they are not ready-mades. They enable setting up a home quickly, anywhere, for a ritual of transformation. This studio hosts history-making as the history of making. To be present, to witness something being made is political in a world that alienates e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g: people, places, and things from their own bodies, histories, thoughts, interests.

The host needs a place to stay put and wait in readiness, to prepare and make a place for others. Since this staying put cannot be tied to one location, the need for a fixed place is fulfilled by the score. Whether dormant or in full use, the score is a solid aggregate. It models a home the host will build, made from cuttings. This collage technique and its performance



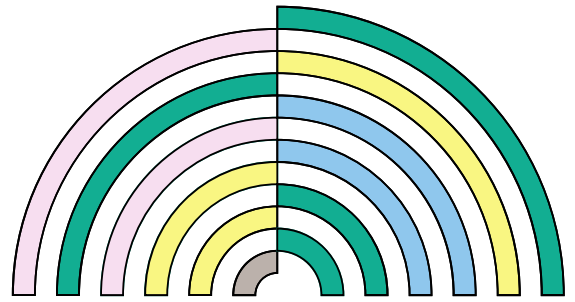
is a living cutting, like one made from an adult plant to make another generation of the species. In this sense, the openness of Katalin Ladik's score has something to do with (re)producing generations from a singular source whose variable nature expresses as use frees up different environments, weather, props, identities, and witnesses. The score is fixed, but it never reads the same. The spell is not the score, it is a free interaction between the stable form of the score's and the instability of its use.

What Katalin Ladik orchestrates as the shaman, the androgen, the angel, the poet, the animal, the child, the mother, the composer radiates by a lack of aboutness. There is no space for critical distance available to anyone witnessing Katalin Ladik's making, your presence implicates you. Katalin Ladik performs the score, takes it in, with everything that surrounds her, absorbs it back and forth, inhales and exhales, ingests and returns. In this kind of (re)production no stable reference holds, as Katalin Ladik's gives birth through her mouth. This instability stimulates both sound and language to construct a sonorous house, shimmering with vibration of what is arriving, appearing, in the process of making itself, in full view. In this foreground, another kind of image is constructed. The sonorous room is a camera—in the original sense of the word, as a room inside a house. It loads images slowly, rendering and accumulating over time, like learning, weaving, reading, cutting, pasting, telling, singing across two mountains, acquiring experimental rights, scanning the radio. Katalin Ladik's camera is a home for language-based image-making. By "language," I mean embodied forms of communication that condition listening, absorption, and presence into active and intentional construction of images.

To take time to construct an image is radical in a time characterized by such a ravenous demand for images. Katalin Ladik's "camera" models an image ecology of sense equality. To shrink our eyes and out them back into their sockets, to blink and close our lids again, to return the sense of smell from the eye to the nose, taste to the mouth, touch to skin, hearing to the ears, this is what Ladik is offering today, the ability to take our bodies back. This proposition may seem destabilizing since our haptics prepare us for living in high-resolution images only, our world soon being impossible to physically inhabit. To be intentionally in one's body today is to insist on the possibility of living in five senses.

Katalin Ladik's work arrives just in time, to bring the wisdom of those who survived outside of representation, who make living images that nobody can own and everyone can use. The spell says: read me, hear me, be with me, stay with me, feel pleasure arrive, eros, feel your senses start to cook together, feel everything act, regardless of what it is, see everything take part. This is the kind of art that gives power by giving up power. To take time with it is to get time.

In 1980, the magus Tito died. Katalin Ladik was in New York when it happened, where I live now. She was offered to stay, to bring her son, to get a job. Nobody here could understand why she refused; this country being made from many who live outside their mother tongue. Ladik could not. She explained that she lives in language, and that language is a place, more than a home. She had to be in language, practice it, keep drawing from it. It furnishes her



studio, inscribes her scores, erects her sonorous room. She returned to Нови Сад, Novi Sad, Újvidék.

Over the next ten years, the magus' spell weakened—the memory charm especially—and many remembered only what divided them. In 1991, the covers on the newsstands of small-town bus stops started to deform from naked bodies of women and girls, scarlet nails pressing into their bowling ball tits, into gray and dark red corpses, smoke, and uniformed men. Yugoslav passports dropped in mobility rankings from Swiss (welcome everywhere) to Iranian (nobody can leave) and the sound of artillery drew closer. In 1992, the sound of gunfire was within earshot. This is when Katalin Ladik decided to leave. She moved to Budapest, Hungary, for a while. The war almost skipped a generation, war is something that requires waiting of all kinds. In 2006, Katalin Ladik could finally return to Нови Сад, Novi Sad and Újvidék. She lives there, in Budapest, and on the island of Hvar, Croatia.

Yugoslavia's uniqueness, its histories, values, economies, generations of integration, productions and artforms are now a historical fact. The half century long demonstration of the third way is evidence of the possibility of another way of life, which continues to find those unsatisfied by the binary, by the choices on offer. When you visit Zagreb, Ljubljana, Skopje, Prishtina, Belgrade, Sarajevo, Novi Sad, Podgorica, do it on a clear night. You may notice a shimmer of unfamiliar form, buried in the aesthetics of privatization and Western secondary markets. It is the shimmer of the sonorous house, the sound of history and history of making, casting its spell. Katalin Ladik lives there, hosting her Fates. Seduced by what issues from Katalin Ladik's mouth, they let her live past 37. Spellbound, they only wish to keep listening.

Excerpt from the monograph accompanying the exhibition with contributions by Bal-Blanc, P., Diederichsen, D., Folkerts, H., Haiduk, I., Janevski, A., Kürti, E., Ladik, K., Latimer, Q., Panchia, B., Roelstraete, D., Sutton, G., Theurer, S. J., Thorsen-Nagel, P. and de la Torre, M. Edited by Hendrik Folkerts, co-produced by Haus der Kunst München, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Ludwig Forum, Aachen and Muzeum Susch, Engadin. Published by Skira Verlag.