

## Renata Poljak: Uncertain Memories

The work of Croatian artist Renata Poljak combines the media of photography, video, film, installation and performance. By using strong metaphorical imagery, the artist delves into political, economic and social phenomena, occurring in Croatia and Europe since the early 1990s. Poljak's work investigates numerous issues of a country in transition—transformations of its various public segments, notion of social amnesia, mutable ethical values, and modified but still existing form of xenophobia and intolerance—to name just a few. The ideas and subjects of the artist's works stem from her own experiences; often they incorporate autobiographical elements and first person narration, while combining them with documentary and archival materials. The works contemplate on the concepts of remembering and forgetting, and on construction and dissemination of ideologies, histories and different political agendas. They portray the current state of uncertainty, passivity, helplessness and disorientation of the artist's generation in both intimate and social context, as well as (un)conscious tolerance of various forms of violence and chauvinism in Croatian contemporary society- resonating on much wider, even global scale.

Poljak's work in several parts, *Staging Actors/ Staging Beliefs* (2011/2012), at Occurrence is shown as a projection and an accompanying video on a monitor. The video on a monitor, *Staging Actors/ Staging Beliefs (Boshko Buha)* revolves around the persona of Ivan Kojundzic, who as a child took the main role in a popular Yugoslav feature film *Boshko Buha* (1978). Boshko Buha, the film's main character, is indeed a fascinating historical figure. At the age of fifteen, he was one of the youngest members of the communist- oriented Partisan resistance movement, which during the World War II was supported by the Allies, and fought against the Axis Powers on Yugoslav Front, while building foundations for the post- war Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. With the plot elaborating life, combat actions, bravery and heroic death in an ambush of this youngest of Partisans, who was posthumously awarded with the People's Hero of Yugoslavia title, the film gained a wide popularity. Through its continuous screenings both in theaters and on the national television, the communist ideology and belief in Yugoslav socialist system were extensively spread. However, the role of Boshko Buha was Kojundzic's first and the last film act. In the 1990's he got actively involved in the Croatian War of Independence which marked the end of Yugoslav Federation and its political agendas—the very ones Boshko Buha was fighting for—and later, during the early days of newly founded Democratic Republic of Croatia, worked as the news speaker on Croatian National Radio and Television.

Poljak's video combines selected excerpts of the original feature film and fragments of an interview she made with Kojundzic in a private, intimate setting of his apartment in Zagreb. Nevertheless, the interview is scripted and directed as much as the film; Kojundzic, this time playing himself, gives contradictory answers to Poljak's questions, reflecting in various ways on his childhood memories of the Boshko Buha character; his personal views on Yugoslav history and his role in the Croatian War in the 1990s; most

recent political, economic and social developments in Croatia, and ramifications of war and complex consequences of transition from Socialism to Capitalism.

This collage of different, often discordant short narratives metaphorically corresponds to the video projection *Staging Actors/ Staging Beliefs (Homage to Slavko Štimac)*, which refers to another popular film from Yugoslavia; this time, the widely influential children's feature film *Train in the Snow* (1976), inspired by a novel of the popular Yugoslav writer Mato Lovrak. *Train in the Snow* narrated a story of solidarity and collective responsibility of children acting together, self-organizing themselves in an effort to dig out a train stuck in the blizzard during their school trip. The movie gained a large support within the agendas of Yugoslav youth organizations; similar to *Boshko Buha*, it influenced generations of people growing up in Yugoslavia. The main character was played by Slavko Štimac, undoubtedly one of the biggest stars of the Yugoslav cinema. However, after the breakup of Yugoslavia, the career of this artist completely fell apart- in Poljak's words, "One cannot be a famous Yugoslav actor when Yugoslavia doesn't exist any more. The country is gone, the context is gone..."

In this video projection, Poljak focuses solely on the motif of snow; she arranges and shoots the fake snow falling, lit by reflectors on a theater stage. This silent, uninterrupted footage of the snow falling and gradually covering the stage, made by a steady camera, becomes a poignant, poetic metaphor for forgetting and erasing history. The work can be seen as an homage to all the actors and public personas, once embodying noble ideas, to be gradually forgotten.

In *Staging Actors/ Staging Beliefs* series, as in many other works by Poljak, personal memory and form of (auto)biography act as starting points to create a complex examination; this time, on the iconic power of cinematic images in representing and circulating ideologies and political agendas, and shaping cultural memory. While in the first part the artist investigates storytelling methods, linear narratives and intertwines past and present, collective memories and individual universes, historical facts and generated realities, through the projection of snow Poljak emphasizes this powerful imagery as a space for contemplation.

For her newest film of a documentary structure, titled *Freedom is not given* (2013), Poljak conducted series of conversations with Croatian high school students, after she showed them her video work *Staging Actors/ Staging Beliefs (Boshko Buha)*, in order to reveal their thoughts on Yugoslav and Croatian history as well as on various manifestations of contemporary forms of fascism in their immediate surroundings. Multilayered conversations about Socialist past of their country, Croatian War of Independence from the 1990s, religion, tradition, and history they have learned institutionally and from their private surroundings, intertwine with the students' views on civil rights, notion of freedom, current social, political and economic situation and their own future prospects. The discussions bring out disparate statements, bewildered views on social values as well as more or less conscious tolerance of various forms of violence and chauvinism. This is especially evident in the parts of discussion tackling nationalism

and gender equality issues- the conflictual subjects that are constantly in the focus of mass media reports and public life in today's Croatia.

The history of cinema is again both a resource and a motif in the artist's photograph titled *Uncertain Memories: This is not me* (2012). She takes up a frozen frame from Andrei Tarkovsky's documentary *Voyage in Time* (1983), made during his research trip through Italy for his feature film *Nostalgia*. This notable Soviet director captured Italian people, landscape and monuments- their history and present, while also pondering his own life and art making. The image that Poljak chose, blurry and depleted because of shooting it from the TV screen, features a little girl playing with a balloon. Over the screen a post-it is attached, with a note "This is not me." The work is a continuation of Poljak's interest in entanglement of real and fictional, which is, as much as in Tarkovsky's oeuvre, an ongoing investigation of remembrance mechanisms and quest for (self-)identity.

*Ruta and the Monument* (2007), a work conceived during Poljak's stay in the city of Berlin, is a two- channel video installation with an accompanying printed text. It is an earlier work that also juxtaposes documentary and fictitious in an effort to narrate distinctive but mutually fulfilling stories, this time revolving around the Holocaust. One part of Poljak's installation is in fact inspired by a preface of Miljenko Jergovic's 2006 novel *Ruta Tannenbaum* (reproduced and available for take away in the exhibition space)- a short story about a fifteen-year-old Jewish girl who wishes to become invisible, and daydreams about traveling to India while in a cattle wagon of a train taking her to a Nazi concentration camp. While traveling, she indulges in a sensual feeling of a cow licking her foot, affirming her pleasurable escapist imagination. Poljak lyrically staged this particular fantasy. She created a surreal video representing a small foot underneath the sea, surrounded with turquoise water, being licked by a giant red cow tongue. The slow rhythm of this scene is accompanied only by sea sounds, at moments similar to the breathing rhythm. In the other video, however, the artist follows a guided tour in Berlin, on the site of Peter Isenman's *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (2005). Her camera captures strange moments of people laughing at the guide's anecdotes related to building of this monument, quite impertinent considering the Holocaust, the monument itself and the city of Berlin. These anecdotes, becoming a reinterpretation of the particular event, witness about tourism and its fabrication of history as a part of an entertainment industry. In *Ruta and the Monument*, by confronting two completely different readings of the Holocaust, the artist once again underlines the instability of memorizing which always happens in real time while simultaneously employing both past and present, and the consequences of this process on (in)visibility and fragmentation of history.

Zeljka Himbele