

At the Court of the Transition King

Hey Pal! How do I get to town from here? And he said: Well just take a right where they're going to build that new shopping mall, go straight past where they're going to put in the freeway, take a left at what's going to be the new sports center, and keep going until you hit the place where they're thinking of building that drive-in bank. You can't miss it.

Laurie Anderson, Big Science

Reflecting on people's inconsiderateness and about the birth of a hybrid pseudourban context, the artist has found connections and interlacing of family relations, the architectural urbicide that is taking place in Split and its surroundings, and the violence at football stadiums which finally led to the incident reported in the "crime section" of the daily newspaper. These reflections are brought to life through a 17-minute film entitled "Great Expectations" and a series of photographs "Croatia, Summer 2004". One of the most compositionally impressive photographs is the one depicting the artist on the terrace of her family home. The body's gesture and position of the head indicate a person enjoying the view, but instead of a view over an open sea what appears in front of Renata Poljak's eyes is the roof of her uncle's newly built house. However, the mainstay of the work is not just the offensive architecture, even though it was the inspiration for the entire project, but above all the research of the causes that resulted in the urbicide of the coast, and which led the author to explore family relations and to analyse the transformation of war brutality into a new form of socially acceptable violence. The author notes ten years of observing architectural arrogance: "I noticed how following the war violence, a new type of mentality was born. Violence, once 'justified' during the war, took on a new form in architecture. A mentality saturated with tourism, greed, unscrupulousness and denial of all tradition is the continuation of the violence and reflection of the new taste that has appeared in post-war Croatia, and which is directly mirrored in the houses of the "newly rich." Through the prism of her own family's story, Renata Poljak warns of the creation of a new morality that is becoming collectively accepted. Using the private experience through a social context is also a continuation of the author's artistic work to date, during which time she has analysed the emergence of generally acceptable social norms through her video works, articulating personal experience on a background of a wider social context.

The photographs “Croatia, Summer 2004” show the most varied examples of new, “transitional” architecture, a phenomenon affecting not only Split and its surroundings, but one which has spread along the entire Dalmatian and Istrian coast. But this occurrence is not solely the product of the globalisation processes of the 90s. The extensive research that was carried out by two journalists Tomić and Paunović, points to the fact that the roots of the authentic anti-style, e.g. the architecture of Split, in some cases should be searched for in an earlier time, in the golden era of self-government. In the article “Proletarians from Sirobuja”, Tomić explains how Sirobuja, a district in Split, sprung up during the 1980s when construction workers, instead of receiving state-subsidized flats or housing loans, were given worker credits in building materials. Consequently, these unplanned houses suddenly sprang up overnight. The entire settlement, about 1000 houses stretching out on both sides of the main highway from Split to Omiš, was built illegally. Such cases were once accepted as a type of social venting, but thanks to the great expectations of the “Croatian state-building project” of the 90s, “the resourcefulness of the masses” has taken on completely new dimensions, as Renata Poljak has recorded with her camera and lens.

In the film “Great Expectations”, the panning of the camera shows how houses built in the building tradition of the area began to metastasize in the mid-90s. The panoramic panning of the camera captures the new “largest houses in the village”, the protruding armoured fittings, the concrete blocks decorated with rows of turrets and serially produced balustrades defining the new apartment floors. This is why a photograph entitled “Zimmer” from the “Croatia, Summer 2004” series is paradigmatic: on top of a tall cypress that rises above the apartment unit there hangs a sign offering apartments to let. The housing conglomerates seen in the film, only half-plastered, with untidy house lots which most often lean against the one-time authentic “home hearth”, with the “Apartments” sign have become the trademark of Croatian tourism, or the local variant of the global phenomenon of cementing the Mediterranean. Even in the domestic qualm between profit and preservation of the land, money prevailed. This is why the series of photographs “Croatia, Summer 2004” is a projection of local “civilization” that reflects the present system of values, a view on the post-war mentality of the resourceful kings who rose above all laws.

It seems that guilt is the key concept revealed by the film as the artist points to the root of the problem through the use of numerous female voices that justify violent behaviour and support the distorted system of family values. The blame lies in the newly arisen system of values and in the great expectations of numerous “kings”, (“good, but naive people”, as a female voice says in one of the scenes, justifying both a multi-storey building that obstructs one’s view and violence at the stadium), who have waited long for a Croatian state, and when they finally had one, it brought, among other things, corruption and inequality in the eyes of the law, encouraging their greed and avarice. The kings are to blame because in the transitional euphoria of gaining profit they forgot that the hatred stemmed from the war was bringing up their children who can only direct their anger at fans of the opposing football team. Or more precisely, “Great Expectations” is a film which, through an intimate family story, narrates a “Croatian state-building project” infected by capitalism and finally swallowed by the flame of post-war injustices and the avarice of “the giants of our generation”, and on whose ashes the transition kings have built their concrete courts.

Leila Topić