

Uncertain Memories

The work of Renata Poljak combines the media of photography, video, film and installation. By using strong metaphorical imagery, the artist delves into political, economic and social phenomena, occurring in Croatia and Europe since the early 1990s. 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), comprises of a photograph, two projections and one video on a monitor—shown separately, but corresponding conceptually. The projection *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 character of Boshko Buha, played by Kojundzic when he was fifteen years old, was his first and last film act. Later 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 a 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 an apartment. Nevertheless, the interview is scripted and directed as much as the film; Kojundzic, this time playing himself (at age of 48), gives contradictory answers to Poljak's questions, reflecting in completely opposite ways on his childhood memories of the Boshko Buha character (first saying that he was ashamed and later that he was proud of starring in this role); his personal views on Yugoslav history and his own participation in the Croatian War; and complex consequences of transition from Socialism to Capitalism. The video re-enacts the current division and clashes of opinions in Croatian society regarding the

living conditions *before* and *after* the War that brought a radical shift in the system of values and blurring and rewriting of different segments of history.

This collage of discordant short narratives structurally but also metaphorically corresponds to the video *Staging Actors/ Staging Beliefs (Daily News Dnevnik)*, for which Poljak, with minimal editing, appropriated Croatian TV prime time daily news footage, featuring Kojundzic as the news speaker delivering local and international news. Here, the reports on local politics, economics, urgent social and religious issues, sports and weather are all delivered in a consistent impartial mass media formula, documenting the history of mid 1990s in Croatia and the world in a fragmented and restrained way.

The third part of Poljak's complex work— the video projection *Staging Actors/ Staging Beliefs (Homage to Slavko Stimac)*— refers to another popular film from Yugoslavia; this time, a 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 as it was widely screened as an educational tool, presenting children with the value of collaborative efforts. The main character was played by Slavko Štimac, undoubtedly one of the biggest stars of the Yugoslav cinema, who was prominently featured in numerous films, growing up along with his audiences. However, after the breakup of Yugoslavia, the career of this actor completely fell apart- in Poljak's words, "One cannot be a famous Yugoslav actor when the country does not exist any more. The country is gone, so 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. As a complement to the projection, a photograph entitled *Staging Actors/ Staging Beliefs (Set photograph)* reveals a place where the footage was taken—a historical theater setting, completely devoid of people. Here, as if a silence of the snow falling reverberates through lavishly decorated and entrancingly lit sitting areas, captured by a camera in an aberrant, dreamlike composition.

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 two parts 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 and the related photograph shot in the theater, Poljak emphasizes the powerful imagery as a space for contemplation.

Autobiographical references are also directly present in much earlier work by Poljak - a single channel video *Memories (Tito, tata)* (1999). The video initially captures the artist compulsively writing and uttering *tito* and *tata*- the words similar in spelling and sound. While the first word was in fact the name of the charismatic Yugoslav President for Life, the second word means *daddy* in Croatian language. The rhythm of this repetitive action transforms into a pop song to which the artist eventually starts to dance. This activity can be read as a metaphorical escape from the authoritative father figures in both public and personal realms, but also can refer to an erasure of the past that so often happens through the noise of popular culture and mass media.

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 delving on entanglement of real and fictional, which is, as much as in Tarkovsky's oeuvre, an ongoing investigation of remembrance mechanisms and a quest for (self-)identity.

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