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*Neli Ružić*

*Published in Exhibition catalogue Neli Ružić, Shadows of the Future, 2016  
Museum of Fine Arts, Split and Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rijeka*

Neli Ružić has developed a body of work that requires a particular viewership. The artist has stated that she “was born in a country that no longer exists”. This fact, added to her voluntary exile in Mexico City for more than a decade and her recent return to her homeland Croatia, is what constitutes the core of her artistic practice.

When Ružić arrived to Mexico City, she began looking for family traces: clothes, books, photographs and passports. These intimate objects, as any personal archive, became her only possibility to connect with her past. Yet, Ružić did not use these objects as relics or shrines; instead, she soon began to remove their essence one by one. Her family albums were carefully wiped out, books were scratched, texts were erased and images were obliterated (*Passport, Clouds and Flies, Wind (Alexandria)*, 2005). However, these acts of erasing were not impetuous and hysterical but meticulous and painstaking. The artist knew that each deletion was an entropic gesture: an action that could not be repaired. And as such, every intervention into her personal archive had a twofold purpose: on the one hand it was an attempt to forget and consign to oblivion affects and emotions to endure distance, on the other, to find new traces between memory and loss. The artist soon discovered that the acts of removing, canceling and eliminating meant a metaphor of estrangement, and that her archive was not only a personal place of sensibility but also the embodiment of a collective political history. The more residues

and detritus were produced by these erasures, the more the connection to her past and country became significant to question and deconstruct new tropes such as identity and nationhood.

The theorist Ariella Azoulay once stated that photographs do not belong to anyone. Yet, a childhood image had been impressed in her memory for several years; a “phantasm” image of something she didn’t even experience, but that she imagined through an account told by her mother<sup>1</sup>. In the same manner, Ružić intends to understand the power that images, documents and testimonies have in her memory; particularly those, which were imposed by the media and education. The artist thus belongs to what Marianne Hirsh has denominated as the second generation or ‘postmemory’, which “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created.”<sup>2</sup>

As émigré, Ružić left her country at the end of the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, when ethnic cleansing went hand in hand with language ‘purification’. On the other hand, when she arrived to Mexico, the artist had to learn a new language and set aside her native tongue. Both experiences meant that she was involuntarily placed between silence and translation, a position that she began exploring with works such as *Mountains (Mother Tongue)*, 2005 and *Mother Tongue*, 2007. In the first one, the artist writes on a blackboard ‘native tongue’ in Croatian and then erases it to form a mountain on the bottom with the detritus. On the second one, Ružić writes ‘native tongue’ in Spanish with her own tongue over a vaporous mirror.

The result of these confrontations between memory and forgetfulness led her to history itself as context and language as a tool to subvert meanings. The artist realized that the impossibility to

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1 Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*, New York: Zone Books, 2008.

2 Hirsch, Marianne. "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile." *Poetics Today, Creativity and Exile: European/American Perspectives II* 17.4 (1996): 659-86. Web. 23 Nov. 2009. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1773218>>

speak was not only a consequence of a geographical displacement, but it also implied that the collective history of her country had been silenced and erased. And so instead of removing images and archives, Ružić began to utter the political narratives that were excluded and omitted through real testimonies. With the work *The Hole (Midwife, Myth, Silence)* (with Marie-Christine Camus) 2011, the artist focuses on the year of 1943, when there were several acts of violence between the members of the Yugoslavian resistance (the partisans) and the dominant regimes, specifically Italy. On the island of Šolta, seven people suspected of collaborating with the fascists were cast into a pit known as *Rudine*. The 'hole' is the subject of many accounts, which range from the alleged innocence of the victims, to the ruthless methods used by the partisans to hide the bodies. *Rudine* was investigated, but the bodies were never removed from it. Instead, it was transformed into a memorial more than two decades ago.

*The Hole* was the point of departure to realize that landscape was a powerful archive for political memories. Moreover, that history had to be uttered and exposed through language. Consequently, Ružić has coalesced her personal history with that of society through the relationship between language and landscape. Yet, she does not simply narrate and describe her experience, but has wisely transmitted the behaviors of an inherited system envisioned to forget and repair identity. As a result, in her last works the artist has selected chants and songs that epitomize the transformation of Croatian society and has engaged her own family (father and son) to perform these songs through humming and by playing melodies without lyrics.

Ružić has thus perceptively put together the pieces of a country that no longer exists with those of a present place, which has been constructed through many voices, countless silences and several nostalgias for the future.