

Carlos E. Palacios

Neli Ružić: the Ghostly Threads of History and Time

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

I once wrote about *The Red Forest*, a 2012 video by Neli Ružić. It said that this work was an allegorical record that recurred to the phantasmagoric conception of the ideological loads that history entails; in that case, her family history and the intense political history of her country of origin.

However, a broader look at her work and the works collected in this exhibition gives an account of the recurring presence of this rhetorical figure - the ghost - in her complete body of work. As we well know, ghosts embody the past and are invisibly present in our lives. Their corporeity is immaterial and they appear occasionally in a spectral way, this is like shadows.

Precisely this image of the phantom shadow is very clearly in her work *Snow* of 2005. It is a photograph intervened with corrector pen in which two characters walk on fringes. The whole landscape is snowy as it reveals the title of the work and is black and white. In the same way the figures are covered by a thick coat that protects them from the cold winter. One is totally dark, a black shadow that walks towards the compositional center of the photograph and the other, thanks to the effect of the corrector, is totally white.

It is very curious that Ružić has chosen an intensely snowy landscape because it is a work done in Mexico, where the artist lived for many years and is not characterized by marked seasons or intense snow, but quite the opposite. Why did she choose a snowstorm as the subject of this piece? One might think that it was caused by the nostalgia for her native country; however *Snow* is not based precisely on this sensation of estrangement. In reality it is an allegorical image that is instituted from the idea of migration and displacement. The photograph was taken in Split during the postwar period, where snowfalls are very atypical as they are in Mexico.

This coincidence does not seem casual and certainly reinforces the idea of Ružić moving to the American country. As in the photograph, the artist unfolds two opposite characters: one emotional part of Ružić remained in Croatia, while the other was active in Mexico. This feeling about the past as an active, potentially creative memory navigates over much of her production. However, the artist does not speculate about the memory as nostalgia from its formal representation, but thanks to a strategy of emancipation of any sterile sentimentality, nostalgia becomes a reflexive theme, more linked to the symbolic construction of a transverse place between time and history, which makes present a phantasmagoria that interweaves the past and our present.

A key piece of her "Mexican" production, instituted from the figure of a political phantasmagoria is *Passport*, 2005. In it the artist uses a Yugoslav passport to invalidate it, removing the photograph and covering with pen corrector the data that gives her identity, such as her name, her address or her date of birth. The passport becomes a ghostlike object like the figure that walks in *Snow*. It does not reflect anybody in particular, and above all it does not have any identity, since the passport is of a country that only exists in the memory or in history, which is the same thing. With *Passport* Ružić recalls the violent grammar in Croatia of the nineties, the idea of "erasing" everything connected with the former Yugoslavia, pointing out how the past of individuals was also erased from history.

For Ružić, as I pointed out at the beginning of these lines, her family history and that of her country are intertwined and confused, like a tangled skin of thread. It is precisely with this material that the artist performs several works over nine years, between 2001 and 2010. It is no coincidence that the thread is in turn a very useful resource to explain the narratives of history, it is not a coincidence that when a series of connected events have coherence it is named the "thread of history".

I would like to emphasize a group of works made with threads because they clearly describe the links between her family history and her country as an inherited memory. The 2001 seminal pieces entitled *Snow Red* and *Reproductive System* respectively; *Third Time* in 2007 and finally *Family Archive*, carried out between 2005 and 2010. In all the works the approach to history shows the rhetorical and conceptual potential that the artist gives to the textile material. In the first two, Neli Ružić uses photographic material from the family archive and intervenes it by sewing it and embroidering it. In both images the artist appears herself. In *Snow Red*, allusions and

deconstruction are evident in the two political spheres that define the cultural context of her childhood, such as communism and religion, totally intertwined by a thread that sutures the images of the own artist as a child. In *Reproductive System*, a photograph shows the artist's mother sewing her dress while she is smiling at the camera. Over her childlike dress, Ružić embroidered the female reproductive tract that rises to the chest, as if connected to the digestive tract. It is a suggestive and symbolic form and in turn is an instantiated piece marked by gender politics. An intelligent composition of the work, the mother seems to be finishing the "real" embroidery made in red thread by Ružić herself directly on the photo. The work is a statement of connections and the meaning of the intergenerational transmission of gender conditionality.

This piece undoubtedly establishes a line of work on the threads that connect the family and which are concretized in *Family Archive*: an installation that joins the strands in the form of small balls (a few microscopic skeins) that remain after laundry. In relation to its title it is a proposal loaded with humor: somehow the washing machine gathers the members of the family through their respective clothes and what remains of that overlapping "family" meeting is kept in the filter of the washing machine. Each tangle of fiber contains geography of connections and in this way, relatives are knotted, never better said. Those knots are nothing more than small family trees that are being archived.

The third work that I will cite based on this material is *Third Time* of 2007. It consists of two identical watches whose center is a tangle of black threads. It is a hermetic but poetic conceptual work which I would like to see it from an archetypal look on time, another of the great thematic scenarios of Ružić: Third time is nothing more than the non-representational figuration of Las parcas, those personifications of destiny. Three spinners who, according to mythology, are responsible for carrying our human destinies through the thread of life. One of the fates cut it with a pair of scissors: it is the moment of death. But there are more coincidences between "Las parcas" and Ružić's work. The myth tells that they spun white wool and intermingled threads of gold and threads of black wool. The golden threads meant the happy moments in the life of the people and the black wool, the sad periods. It is a story about the passing of time and its vicissitudes, like the watches of Ružić whose center is composed exclusively of black wool: Should we add that *Third Time* is a work on nostalgia without being nostalgic?

Finally, another work based on the thread as a historical construction is *Capullo (coast of the island)* of 2007. It consists of 73.1 kilometers of nylon thread, gathered in illuminated cocoon. The

amount of material corresponds to the length of the perimeter of Šolta: the island of Ružić's family. In that piece the rationalistic dimensions of the geographic become a utopian and portable place.

It is precisely from this transverse and cyclical place between time, geography as a place of memory and history, both individual and collective, from which the artistic work of Neli Ružić stands. Her works can be seen as mechanisms to make present a phantasmagoria that interweaves the past and our time and that makes us think of our personal histories as the end of a thread, that comes from a warp composed by other collective stories and above all from our memories: the great builders of fiction. They are works that make present a phantasmagoria that interweaves the past and our time and embodies the idea of a transgenerational community: a transverse place between time and history.