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Stolen Shadows

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Exploring one's attitude towards personal and social history or the multiple layers of memory registers – these issues are in the focus of Neli Ružić's artistic practice. The exhibition *Shadows of the Future* is conceived as a link bridging the timespan of some ten years, in which the artist's work has been significantly marked by the experience of migration. Her life between Mexico and Croatia, Ružić's homeland to which she returned in 2012, has allowed the artist to take a look at things from a distance in order to grasp personal and social change. The dominant politics of oblivion, and the negation or reinterpretation of historical narratives, have been transformed into an art form by using a very intimate and measured artistic expression. The selection of artworks included in the exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts offers an overview of very personal, familial, and cross-generational readings, as well as public interventions that indicate the neuralgic points of our modern time and environment.

Within the past two years, Neli Ružić has realized two projects in public space with the corresponding videos: *Stolen Future* (2015) and *Black Flags* (2016). In terms of subject matter, both of them deal with the active relationship between the past and the present.

Black Flags, an intervention in the public space of Bosanska Street, is a reinterpretation and a sort of re-enactment of the seminal painting of Ljubo Babić with the same title, which is part of the Museum's permanent collection. The painting dates from 1918 and belongs to a series of artworks with similar motifs, produced during Babić's expressionist phase.¹ Explaining the relationship between Ljubo Babić and Miroslav Krleža, Radovan Ivančević has emphasized the flag motif as one of the crucial links: "Regardless of how one may understand the term – as a funerary banner or a red revolutionary flag, a national tricolour or a sign of political affiliation – the flag suited the individual style of both men owing to its directness and expressive impact, as a visual or verbal motif, attracting them with its symbolism and ideology, reflecting their profound need to interpret, speak out, respond."² This clarity and power of the said painting, as well as the necessity to find a motif that would "speak" clearly of the social environment, induced Neli to appropriate the painting. The extraordinary spatial quality with which Babić constructed the scene was here

¹ More details on the Museum's painting and Babić's oeuvre in: Ivanka Reberski, "Slikarstvo" [Painting], in: *Ljubo Babić – antologija*, exhibition catalogue (Zagreb: Modern Gallery, 2010/2011).

² Radovan Ivančević, "Bilješke o Ljubi Babiću" [Notes on Ljubo Babić], *Život umjetnosti* 29/30 (1980), p. 35.

transposed into the street in an almost staging procedure. By installing seven black flags along the small street in Split, the artist created a space of estrangement, in which the everyday activities of a modern city still went on uninterrupted. The altered contexts of time and medium opened up new possibilities for interpreting the original artwork – Babić's 1918 was a year marked by significant historical events: the end of World War I and, in the local context, the replacement of one political regime through another. Almost a hundred years later, Ružić saw the contemporary moment on both global and local levels as a series of occasions for raising black flags.

Her decision to install her work in a city street has to do with the complex debate on contemporary art in public space.³ However, for reasons of brevity we must here simplify the reasons why art should “step out” of museums and galleries, and reduce them to two main aspects: the specificity of place and the inclusion of a wider audience. The choice of Bosanska Street as the site of intervention was linked to the street's role as one of the most frequented communication lines at the very edge of Diocletian's Palace, which illustrated well the current socio-economic reality of Split (commercialization of public space, gentrification problems, and so on). On the other hand, the street represented a strong emotional link between the artist and her personal past.⁴ One should also keep in mind that the flag is a public symbol and by bringing it back to the street, Neli Ružić restored it to its natural setting, bringing art back to life. Her specific attitude towards the public sphere is manifest in a three-channel video based on the materials shot during the intervention. The passers-by, originally playing the role of spectators, come into the focus of attention. By overlapping various layers of the moving image, Ružić has altered both the perception of time needed to pass through the street and its spatial determinants. In this new situation, the flags appear almost static, contrasted with the fading human figures that are undoubtedly related to the shadows from the exhibition's title. The moment of passing, of being in a particular place at a particular time, has thus become an almost immaterial category, yet remains recorded as a specific archived moment. It is as if the artist managed to reverse the logic of creation seen in her series titled *Breaths (20th Century)*, in which she focused on the materialization of the “evasive” (breath): in *Black Flags* she practically dissolved the material existence of the body in time and space.

Reflecting on the strategy of alternating media as employed by Neli Ružić – from appropriating motifs from a modernist painting to intervening in public space and further to a video installation – and of considering the present moment in an active relation to the past and the future, one necessarily addresses the question of relationship between an artwork and its context. The oeuvre

³ The complexity of art in public space in the contemporary moment has been defined by tectonic changes in the very notion of public, resulting in various formats of artistic activity in the field.

⁴ In the context of her oeuvre, it is interesting to recall that in 1996 she organized an exhibition titled *Bosanska 2* in the same street, erasing the boundaries between private and public.

of Neli Ružić is an example of post-auratic art free of topographic boundaries or the concepts of authenticity and novelty.⁵ She uses liberal transposition of artworks across formats and contexts as a tool in understanding the determinants of contemporary life as it is.

Stolen Future (2015) is a video that comes close to the *Black Flags* in its method and working process. It resulted from an artistic intervention in December 2014, which Neli Ružić performed in the context of the *Motel Trogir* project.⁶ It was part of the civic campaign for the preservation of modernist architecture, in this case the *Sljeme* motel in Trogir, built in 1965 and designed by the famous Croatian architect Ivan Vitić. By applying light effects to the recognizable cubic bungalows of the motel, Neli Ružić visually activated a badly devastated place using a minimum of means. Reacting to the utopian modernist architecture, the artist created an almost heterotopic place, accentuating the intangible space between the past purpose, the current state of entropy, and the future that had been lost, perhaps forever.⁷ With regard to the systems of remembrance that Neli Ružić has addressed throughout her oeuvre, *Stolen Future* referred to her earlier works collected under the common denominator of *Strategies of Oblivion*. Starting from an intimate area of exploring her own memory codes, she investigated the methods of intentional oblivion, erasure, negation, and complete deconstruction, creating new structures (the future) from the remnants of the process (rests of an eraser, school chalk, thread pulled out from fabric). In case of *Stolen Future*, all these strategies are present, only in the context of social history. Using a powerful visual gesture, the artist took the remnants of modernist legacy after intentional to build a new future, even if artificial.

Secretaria de memoria (2012) and *Ministry of Memory* (2015) continue Neli's research on the relations of memory politicization. The first was a digital intervention in a photograph, produced in Mexico. The artist exchanged the plate on the building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with that of the Ministry of Memory. The artwork resulted from a personal experience that she had when applying for the citizenship, which inevitably caused a questioning of her own identity by defining her personal memory and her attitude towards the institutionalization of her actual situation. *Ministry of Memory* (2015) resulted from the new context of living in Croatia. The official plate of a

⁵ Boris Groys has elaborated the notion of post-auratic art radicalizing Walter Benjamin's argument on the loss of aura in the work of art. Groys' theory is crucial in understanding the re-politicization of art and its position in the age of biopolitics. Cf. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in: *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969); Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation (2004), in: Catalogue to Documenta 11 (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), pp. 108-114.

⁶ More on the project at <http://motelrogir.tumblr.com/>.

⁷ I have interpreted the video *Stolen Future* as a heterotopia in terms of its capacity to be different and identical, real and unreal at the same time. The artwork refers to the transitional form between utopia and heterotopia, which Foucault described through the analogy of mirror as the "placeless place". He elaborated the notion of heterotopia in 1967, at first in his lecture for the *Cercle d'études architecturales*, published in 1984 in the journal *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* under the title "Des espaces autres".

non-existing ministry spoke loudly of the artist's awareness of the power system that proclaimed knowledge (history) as objective even though it is always ideologically biased.⁸

Lately we have been witnessing an increased interest in the nature of memory, both in the everyday public discourse and in the academic or artistic circles. Memory has been obviously threatened in the modern society and, as argued by theoreticians Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz, the reasons for this situation include the strong politicization of memory and the fact that organic memory has been destroyed by the new media technologies.⁹ In this context, the activity of contemporary artists such as Neli Ružić has gained particular importance as it encourages us to consider all aspects of modern human identity, on both the personal and the social level.

⁸ In most of his work, Michel Foucault wrote on the ways in which institutions produced the dominant paradigms of knowledge and how they related to the hierarchy of power. Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

⁹ *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 1-9.