

Sabina Salamon

There is a Third Way

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The basic methodological substrate of Neli Ružić's artistic activity is the recreation of memories. It comes close to the model of cultural remembrance, where the preservation, storage, and symbolization impose themselves as the anchorages of identity. In most cases, the artist makes reference to political issues, whereby she treats her topics of individual and collective memory in terms of erasure, repetition, and remembrance, basing herself primarily on her own experience of ruptures and cultural displacement, which occurred thrice: with the social overturn in her homeland of Croatia (Yugoslavia), her departure in the late 1990s, and her unwilling return thirteen years later.¹ Detaching herself from the established truths, the artist has resorted to the immediate horizon of biographic remembrance and oral tradition. Relying on the discernment between memory and history as interpreted by Pierre Nora, she prefers memory as an everyday, living activity, which has completely disappeared from the modern, developed world in favour of history.² Thereby the negative aspect of history is that it "always stands for a problematic representation of the past" and uses the principle of rationalization (filtering and classification) in order to legitimize that past. Contrary to that, the artist considers memory, as a living activity subject to change (forgetting and recalling), to be a primordial and spontaneous act, resistant to censorship or manipulation – in other words, a perfectly human way of processing the accumulated life. It is this kind of memory that one encounters in the work of Neli Ružić, where suppressed places and unarticulated thoughts become an inspiring material to fill the gaps that history has never registered, or perhaps it has overlooked them intentionally. Thus, regardless of the fact that she uses the whole range of procedures in rendering cultural mnemotechnics – adherence to the landscape, songs, and handwork (embroidery) – she does not focus on the familiar and tested "fixed points in the past".³ Instead, she creates her own by combining imaginary and historical spaces.⁴ Landscape as a frequently occurring medium of cultural memory is thereby used in different ways, processed similarly in her videos and photographs: by overlapping stories inherited from her family (such as the one told by her father) with elements of biographic memory (landscape scenes from Mount Kozara are juxtaposed with the first war film that she saw as a child), she multiplies the fictional dimension of the narrative built on the suggestiveness of potential, imagined outcomes of events that none of the involved persons (neither the narrator nor the author) has ever witnessed.⁵ In a similar way, the photograph *Two*

1 She had to leave Mexico due to the dramatic escalation of violence and crime in the 2000s, related to drug trafficking.

2 *The Realms of Memory (Les lieux de mémoires)*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: La République, 1984).

3 Jan Assman, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

4 Assman considers placement as the primal element in all mnemotechnics, p. 44.

5 This is a typical oral history, full of personal roles, doubts, and gaps; the father tells the story burdened by his emotional role, above all remorse and regret. Even though inconsistent, the story has factual power, same as the film that the artist recalls: *The*

Mountains gives way to documentary presentation and counts on the visual coincidence of content and form (the photograph and the broken glass), established on the basis of forced repetition of the mountain motif as a place of vanishing and death. Paired with the aforementioned video *Plaque (Two Mountains)*, it creates a whole that reveals itself as a sort of statement in which the artist neutralizes ideological polarity, disentangles categorical judgments, and looks for a *third way*. In this way, the overlapping of two place names that played an important role in WWII, one of them as part of individual memory (Mosor) and the other as a collective *lieu de mémoire* (Kozara), becomes a point in which the universal and general merge with the personal. The title also conceals elements of a story that touches upon erasure as one of the artist's preferred topics ever since the early 1990s.⁶ The *great erasure*, which coincides with the onset of trauma and thus with the revision of history, first appeared in her work *Brush* (1994), which announced the topic in its various variants from the *Galeb Dry Cleaners* from the late 1990s to the *Strategies of Oblivion* (2005/2006), all of which focus on erasure on a personal level, during the artist's stay in Mexico. Neli Ružić dealt with erasure and oblivion by engaging in performative cleaning and taking the first-person role, contrary to the videos and films where she appeared as an observer and witness.⁷ This does not mean that she remained detached from her subjects, which is manifest in *Plaque (Two Mountains)*, where she holds the observer's attention not only with the texture of the video image, but also with her intensely intimate relationship with the landscape, which makes the *lieu de mémoire* – Mount Kozara as a semiotized place and the stronghold of memory – evaporate into the elegiac and tactile dimension of a landscape. In her artworks called *The Hole* and *Songs for the Future*, the landscape remains equally encoded, owing to (self-)censorship as an outcome of the selective procedure performed by memory and suppressed remembrance.⁸ Thus, both artworks use an active process of hushing and silencing – particularly manifest in the artist's later work, owing to the lack of verbalization in songs with an outspokenly symbolical background.⁹

Mistrust towards articulating history and the dominant narratives, which is characteristic of the *Breaths*, raises the issue of translatability and bridging, on territorial as well as mental or emotional level, which recurs in the work of Neli Ružić in various forms.¹⁰ *Grandparents' Bed (Cama de los abuelos)* reveals her interest in cross-generational heritage, where links with the ancestors are established through the bed as a

Battle of Kozara (1962), directed by Veljko Bulajić.

6 Deconstructing the title *Plaque (Two Mountains)* reveals that it refers to the memorial plaque with the name of her father's brother, Miljenko Ružić, who went missing on Mount Mosor, which is the subject of the father's confession. The plaque was removed in 1992 under unclear circumstances.

7 Many artworks belong to this group, including the objects *Calendar Box*, *Clouds and Flies*, *Archipelago*, *High Tide*, *Snow*, and *Wind (Alexandria)*.

8 One of the main premises proposed by Maurice Halbwachs is that the selectiveness of memory is established by means of negotiation between individual and collective. Cf. *On Collective Memory* (University of Chicago Press, 1992). The term "suppressed memory" was introduced by Michael Pollak in his article "Memory, Oblivion, Silence", originally published in *Revista Estudos Historicos*, Rio de Janeiro, 1989).

9 Each of the three figures – her friend Tanja Kolar, her father, and her son Luka – performs his or her own song as follows: *The International* as the song of the disowned, *Marjane, Marjane* from the local folklore, with references to national identity, and *Konjuh planinom*, a partisan song from WWII, dedicated to a fallen mineworker from the surroundings of Tuzla, which also inspired a war film of the same name (1966), directed by Fadil Hadžić.

10 Her preoccupation with nostalgia during the early 2000s resulted in a work called *Transferrable Borders* (2003), which consisted of four stones and some thread.

symbolical object, inscribed in tradition as a metaphor of childbearing, marriage, and family. Using this outspokenly personal and everyday story, yet nowadays completely erased from biographic and cultural memory (in the past, beds were inherited, which is no longer the case), Neli addressed the concept of family, yet proceeded to deconstruct female identity without saying it explicitly – I am inclined to make this conclusion indirectly, having noticed her permanent interest in matrilinear history.¹¹ She reconstructed her knowledge by entering the room (as a marked, holy place) and appropriating the bed from a distance, through the photograph, yet finding a way to come closer: by licking the photograph, she embodied the experience of appropriation and abolished the previously established distance, both temporal and physical. In this way, she intensified the subversive value of paradoxical distance.¹²

There are two places Neli Ružić keeps revisiting – mountains and her mother tongue – as two opposite choices between escapism and the “founding memory” of the self.

Let us return to the *Breaths*, in which she denounced the official history and the power of great narratives by embracing the anonymity of breaths: she photographed the breaths of some fifty persons whom she felt close to (from both Croatia and Mexico), during the year of 2007. Counting on their ephemeral nature and the impossibility of identifying each particular breath, she noted down their year of birth. Thus, she subverted the official notion of archive as a place of universal and trans-temporal significance, as well as a symptom of the hypertrophy of memory that we are witnessing today.¹³ In terms of documenting life, Neli’s oeuvre may be considered as a way of archiving an insurmountable quantity of data. A way of addressing both the past and the present. The background of her *Family Archive* seems to serve this purpose – to undermine, even if involuntarily, the idea of the great and the noisy.¹⁴ Wool pellets as her personal “figures of remembrance”, spawned by the washing machine, subverted the hierarchy.

Besides being proportional to the production of life, archives are also regressive. Imagine if we could turn on automatic archiving: every step forward would be immediately documented and frozen by taking a step backward. Archives tend to behave entropically: the faster time flies, the more we need memory and the archive grows proportionally. For Neli Ružić, archiving is a mimetic principle serving to revise and evaluate, an attempt at establishing an alternative order. Expecting that there is a *third way* – writing out that which did not happen, for example.

Whether as an unexpected burden or an invincible human passion, an archive has become a necessity as a way of documenting past events. Otherwise people would remain without history, memory, and background. Forever young.

11 This is indicated by artworks such as the *Reproductive System* (2001/2006) and the *Strategies of Oblivion* series (2005/2006), where thread and sewing appear as traditionally female ways of expression. In her video *Lengua materna/Mother Tongue* (2007), the artist has established a triad and a cross-generational, grandmother-mother-daughter relationship.

12 The act of licking can also be seen as an act of initiation or a critique of the logocentric Western culture, as argued, for example, by the feminist theory, where language is seen as the ideological tool of the patriarchal system of representation. This theme can be discerned in Neli Ružić’s other works as well, such as the *Songs for the Future*.

13 The artist photographed the breaths by using flash and instructing the persons to breath against glass in darkness, in order to avoid reflection. Pierre Nora has discussed the “hypertrophy of memory” in the abovementioned text, explaining it by the fact that memory has been left to the archives and other institutions of memory.

14 Nora, op. cit., pp. 7-8; Nora has argued that memory in modern times has been based on archiving the material remnants. The less it comes from the inside, the more it depends on external tools.