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*The black flags, the entire century*

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Everything fits into only four elements: flags, stones, suitcases and light-darkness, the century-old burden of social, political and migration weights. *Black flags (Displacements),* 2018, is the third edition of Neli Ružić’ works inspired by Ljubo Babić’ 1918 painting *The* *Black flags,* from the collection of Gallery of Fine Arts in Split (GALUM), the first two being produced in 2016. The first one, which was produced for the solo exhibition *Shadows of the Future* at the GALUM, was a result of an urban intervention in Bosanska Street in Split, in which the motif from the Babić’ painting is brought back to the real and public space by placing the flags along the street in which she lives, stressing the importance of the location because of the first-hand experience. The second one was produced as a three channel video installation, based on the aforementioned urban intervention and set up as the second version for the same name exhibition at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka the same year. All the three of them are contemporary time’s alarming warning to its witnesses, our time’s to us. We are warned about and reminded of what we already know; we have reached a turning point at which we play a significant role. Neli Ružić introduces me to the exhibition by quoting Giorgio Agamben: “The ones who can call themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity. The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This is instrumental for the understanding of the scene in question. The single-room exhibition space of SC Gallery is mostly filled with flags hanging from high ceiling to the floor creating a static, scenographical ambience. Without such intention, Ružić’ work evokes Ljubo Babić 1937’s scenography for Macbeth in which “poles are placed inside black flags and bent under soffits into arcades.”[[2]](#footnote-2) At this occasion, the flags are arranged upright using stones which keep them in place thus blocking unrest of their likely fluttering. The stones are large, rough, earth-toned, from her native island of Šolta, thus carrying rural connotations and contrasting the scene in which they appear as well as the purity of the exhibiting space. The ambience is theatrically illuminated using a reflector strong enough to dim the space between the flags; and used old suitcases are placed within the shaded fields just open enough for small amount light to peep from their interior. Is the sight really static or dynamic, do the weakness of the flags and the weight of the stones dominate or does the reference to the force of migrations in the global epoch of never greater mobility? What migrations is Neli Ružić speaking of, in the country of constant, economic, political, difficult emigrations and country that witnesses continuous exodus with half-empty suitcases? She is speaking of their persistence, continuous departures and partings that she experienced, too. She is speaking during the intense debate about the controversial upcoming migrant wave. Traces of light piercing from suitcases and reminding of different historical epochs suggest that life always finds a way. The simplicity of the sight and leanness of elements and symbols Ružić employs to communicate with the observer only stress the intensity of experience. The elements utilized in this installation are not new in her work; textile, spaces of personal territories and mobility frequently made up a symbolic whole that addresses us and almost frequently contains besides the material, an immaterial dimension, that of time. The difference or the news is perhaps the fact that this time we are not transcendentally introduced to a memory but rather anticipation, suggesting the scope of the present moment. There is no video footage suggesting that what we are watching has already happened since it has been recorded; here, the whole sight is physical and material, simply an ambience in which the author places us to participate and witness. “The history depends on witnesses. The history is not written by the protagonists, but by extras, witnesses of their actions. Without a living witness and testimony, trace, word, sign, there is no credibility, persistence of history. Thus for the future, presence, memory, testimony, determine what will - from everything that happened, that occurred in reality - will be sentenced for existence and chosen for historical duration,”[[3]](#footnote-3) reads the 1980 text *Notes on Ljubo Babić* by Radovan Ivančević. What Agamben and Ivančić, talking about something else, talk about, Neli Ružić sums up in her ambience to which she introduces us so we can witness it, because for those to whom it has still not happened, let them get struck by the beam of darkness that comes from their time. Neli Ružić is warning us, and when artists warn us, it means that our time already has its witnesses, credibility and secured history; the black flags, the entire century.

1. <https://folk.uib.no/hlils/TBLR-TOTALT-221015/TBLR-Contemp-Paris2015-27.12.15/Agamben%20Contemporary.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/147879>, Dani Hvarskoga kazališta: Građa i rasprave o hrvatskoj književnosti i kazalištu, Vol.10 No.1 Travanj 1983., *Zagrebačka scenografija - Od Babića do Tompe* (1935 - 1955), Antun Celio-Cega [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.ipu.hr/content/zivot-umjetnosti/ZU_29-30-1980_026-044_Ivancevic.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)