Geographies of loss

Testimony, Art and the Afterlife of Batajnica's Disappeared Objects

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Deze rubriek wil inzicht bieden in de soms problematische processen van herinneringsconstructie overall ter wereld. In plaats van te focussen op de gebeurtenissen zelf, onderzoeken auteurs in het Herinneringslabo hoe een collectieve herinnering ontstaat en wordt gecultiveerd, en bestuderen ze de sociopolitieke gevolgen van het herinneringswerk in een bepaalde regio.

– ‘Batajnica 2001, Archeological Excavation Report’, 45cm x 56cm, ink-wash on paper, 2015.

GEOGRAPHIES OF LOSS

TESTIMONY, ART AND THE AFTERLIFE OF BATAJNICA’S DISAPPEARED OBJECTS

The fact of the matter is that although this is a crime scene, few people actually care or want to know what has happened here.

(de León 2015, 26)

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At first glance, the 20-minute drive from the Nikola Tesla airport into Belgrade, the cosmopolitan capital of Serbia, seems typical. The fields and buildings you pass on your way into the city are no different than those you find near other airports in the region. So, when you catch sight of an exit on the highway that reads “Batajnica”, there is no reason to give it any more thought than any other exit. As you enter the city limits, Belgrade carries on with its daily tasks. Locals are walking in the streets on a cold November morning, smoking in the cafes, catching up with their friends. There are clear signs of post-socialist capitalism everywhere as the main shopping street, Knez Mihailova, is filled with Western brands. The American “Black Friday” is advertised in several window shops. Belgrade is a place looking toward the future rather than the past. A first-time visitor may never find out, need never know, about the crime scene that lies fallow between the airport and the city center.

WHAT HAPPENED IN BATAJNICA

Yet what lies between the airport and downtown Belgrade is a suburb called “Batajnica” which, in the end, may be one of the most interesting sites to explore in this area. It is “a lively little town/village in Serbia”, as described by one YouTube video.¹ However, Batajnica is also the location of a hideous crime scene that has been the subject of dispute, mystery, and shame in Serbia for nearly twenty years now.

As the millennium wound down and Yugoslavia had mostly been divided into many smaller countries, Serbia still fought to maintain control over the small territory of Kosovo. During this struggle, in 1998, hundreds of Kosovars were murdered and thrown into mass graves in the region. A year later, fearful of NATO threats of potential bombings in the attempt to stop the Kosovo war and the ethnic cleansing of the Kosovar Albanians,² Serbian authorities decided to quickly move the bodies from mass graves in Kosovo to several different areas near Belgrade. Later, in June 2001, the largest mass grave of approximately 800 to 1000 bodies and their personal objects was discovered on the training grounds of special anti-terrorist units of the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs in the town of Batajnica,

a suburb of Belgrade just 20 kilometers from the city center. Under the supervision of the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia), the Serbian police identified the bodies and recorded the objects found with them in the graves. In addition, several officials from the Serbian police were sent to The Hague for trial. In 2011 Vlastimir Đorđević was sentenced to 27 years prison for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed against civilians of Albanian nationality in Kosovo. The Batajnica case was officially closed and the military grounds where the graves were discovered became nearly impossible to access.

Parallel to the conclusion of the trial in 2011, the violent events were erased from public discourse in Serbia. The lack of conversation has allowed the public to ignore the crimes, and later to forget about them completely. In this brief essay, I discuss how Serbian artist Vladimir Miladinović’s work intervenes in the attempted public erasure of these, and other, war crimes. His art is an attempt to counter a discourse typical of contemporary transitional ideologies which prefer to close the door on the past, rather than encourage reflection on it. “Few people today can recount the specific details of what happened in Batajnica”, the artist confirms.³ By providing an afterlife to a series of lost items from the mass graves of Batajnica, his project *Free Objects* offers, as I will argue, an unconventional, yet effective testimony.

(1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LjyMkNaRFQ> (accessed 18 January 2017).

(2) NATO bombed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 24 May to 10 June 1999.

(3) Personal interview with Vladimir Miladinović on 20 October 2016.

... FREE OBJECTS

Serbian artist Miladinović has been working for nearly a decade on the topic of war and post-war trauma, using archives about the 1990s war in former Yugoslavia. Nikola Dedić characterizes him as follows:

Miladinović probes the ways in which media and institutions in post-Yugoslav societies create public space and shape collective memory; he opens the questions of war propaganda, manipulation, historical responsibility and intellectual engagement. (Dedić 2015)

As an artist, he has delved into extremely controversial subjects about his homeland, subjects that most people in the region would rather ignore or forget.

Miladinović's most well-known project to date is called *Rendered History*. In this work, he uses a tracing technique to redraw numerous documents, including newspapers in different languages (Serbian, English, German, Spanish) that focus on key dates and events of the wars that he believes have suffered from "the denial and erasure of war crimes within the current transition ideologies" (Dedić 2015). The research for this greater project eventually led him to look specifically into war crimes that occurred in Kosovo in 1998-1999. When consulting the ICTY archive in Belgrade a few years ago, Miladinović discovered an official list of 410 objects that were found in the mass graves on the Batajnica 2 site during exhumation, between June 2001 and November 2002. Miladinović explains on his blogsite that the list was created by the faculty of medicine at the University of Belgrade in September 2001:

[H]undreds of items were listed as having been found on bodies or in their immediate vicinity. These were mostly small personal items, but the list also contains body parts and missiles of different calibers. After the forensic examination, all items were listed and the final document was stored in an archive.⁴

(4) <http://vladimirmiladinovic.blogspot.com/> (accessed 1 February 2018).

KOSO-2212-KOSO-2220-ET/Translation

ITEMS COLLECTED DURING EXHUMATION AT THE BATAJNICA 2 SITE

No.	Case ID No.	Description	Collected by
1.	2BA-001	Hair	JČMENICA
2.	2BA-001	Pierre Henry wrist watch with leather strapband and a clothes label	JČMENICA
3.	2BA-002	Hair	BARALIĆ
4.	2BA-002	Public hair	BARALIĆ
5.	2BA-002	Pencil, two sets of beads, car key with keychain, coins, a bag of tobacco, cigarette paper, wooden cigarette holder, plastic lighter, wrapper of Flonigam	BARALIĆ
6.	2BA-004	Hair	JČMENICA
7.	2BA-005	Part of a projectile	JČMENICA
8.	2BA-005	A projectile from the left thigh	JČMENICA
9.	2BA-006	Hair	BARALIĆ
10.	2BA-006	Messner Anker wristwatch found near the head	BARALIĆ
11.	2BA-006	Messner Anker wristwatch found near the head	BARALIĆ
12.	2BA-007	Projectile	JČMENICA
13.	2BA-008	Metal foreign bodies from the right thigh (2 pcs)	BARALIĆ
14.	2BA-010	Hair	BARALIĆ
15.	2BA-010	Projectile from the right upper arm	BARALIĆ
16.	2BA-010	Two projectiles from the left upper arm	BARALIĆ
17.	2BA-010	Projectile in the projection of the 12 th rib	BARALIĆ
18.	2BA-010	Cigarette holder, metal lighter, plastic lighter, comb, key on a string, writing pad, pocket mirror, newspaper text	BARALIĆ
19.	2BA-011	Part of a projectile	JČMENICA
20.	2BA-011	Hair	BARALIĆ
21.	2BA-011	A projectile adjacent to the spine	BARALIĆ
22.	2BA-014	Hair	JČMENICA
23.	2BA-016	Watch wristband (metal)	BARALIĆ
24.	2BA-016	Metal insert for footwear	BARALIĆ
25.	2BA-016	Hair	BARALIĆ
26.	2BA-018	A projectile from the clothes	BARALIĆ
27.	2BA-018	A projectile from the chest cavity	BARALIĆ
28.	2BA-018	A lucky charm, piece of paper with notes, bus ticket, bicycle tyre valve sealing caps	BARALIĆ
29.	2BA-020	Hair	JČMENICA
30.	2BA-021	Wristwatch	BARALIĆ
31.	2BA-022	Hair	JČMENICA
32.	2BA-022	Wedding band of yellow metal	JČMENICA
33.	2BA-022	Projectile	JČMENICA
34.	2BA-023	Watch, cigarette holder and matches	BARALIĆ
35.	2BA-024	Projectile	BARALIĆ
36.	2BA-025	Sharp wristwatch	JČMENICA
37.	2BA-025	Hair	JČMENICA

OTPT03302/66c

© Vladimir Miladinović

The bodies were found, identified and returned to the families, but the catalogued objects have disappeared and only survive in the form of a bureaucratic list kept in the ICTY archive. They have become mere effects that, in the aftermath of the violence, exist only in their absence. In his struggle against obliteration, Miladinović copied the eleven pages long list, creating a series called *Free Objects*, after the official name of the original document. The artwork, he claims on his blogspot, "questions what happened to these objects. Even though there is evidence that the objects were subsequently destroyed, we cannot exclude the possibility that some survived." Miladinović suggests here that the items have most likely been given away or sold in local markets. No one knows for sure. The question then remains how to witness an event – how to create a testimony – if that event is not only silenced in the public debate, but its material traces are wiped out. In this context of *absence*, can art (re-)create a discourse and an (art) object that somehow testify to the traumatic event?

... Free Objects,
Series of 11
drawings, 56cm
x 76cm each, ink-
wash on paper,
2016.

KOSO-2212-KOSO-2220-ET/Translation

411.	2BA-P-03	Belt buckle found in sector 6	NIKOLIĆ
412.	2BA-P-04	Wristwatch found in sector 6	NIKOLIĆ
413.	2BA-P-05	Metal plate with the inscription "Esmaina Ljazi 30.05.80 Tirane"	NIKOLIĆ
414.	2BA-P-06	Acrylic denture from sector 1 along side D	NIKOLIĆ
415.	2BA-P-07	Part of a card with the inscription "delegate of the Socialist Party of Serbia" found in sector 15ob	NIKOLIĆ
416.	2BA-P-08	Chain from a keychain from sector 8	NIKOLIĆ
417.	2BA-P-09	Personal hygiene set from sector 8	NIKOLIĆ
418.	2BA-P-10	Seiko 5 wristwatch	NIKOLIĆ
419.	2BA-P-13	Lower denture	NIKOLIĆ
420.	2BA-P-14	Watch	NIKOLIĆ
421.	2BA-P-15	Watch	NIKOLIĆ
422.	2BA-P-16	Watch from sector 17	NIKOLIĆ
423.	2BA-P-17	Watch and pocket-knife from sector 18	NIKOLIĆ
424.	2BA-P-18	Watch from the bottom of the hole	NIKOLIĆ
425.	2BA-P-19	Watch from the bottom of the hole	NIKOLIĆ
426.	2BA-P-20	Sharp watch	NIKOLIĆ
427.	2BA-P-21	Sharp watch	NIKOLIĆ
428.	2BA-P-22	Seiko 5 watch	NIKOLIĆ
429.	2BA-P-23	Aviator's watch	NIKOLIĆ
430.	2BA-P-24	Cigarette holder	NIKOLIĆ
431.	2BA-sector 9	Part of a metal prostheses	NIKOLIĆ
432.	SECTOR 1-V	Projectile	BARALIĆ
433.	SECTOR 11	Watch	NIKOLIĆ
434.	SG-28	Calculator and screwdriver	NIKOLIĆ
435.	SG-37	Wallet and pocket-knife	NIKOLIĆ
436.	SG-38	Tobacco box	NIKOLIĆ
437.	SG-39	Handkerchief, dentures and ballpoint pen	NIKOLIĆ

In Belgrade,
19 September 2001

Items handed over by
/signed/
Prof. Dušan DUNJIĆ

Took possession of items:
/signed/
Judge Milan DILPARIĆ

/Stamp:/ Republic of Serbia, Faculty of Medicine of the University of Belgrade,
14th OJ /Organisational Unit/ Institute for Forensic Medicine, Belgrade/

OTPT03302/66c

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© Vladimir Miladinović

ART AS TESTIMONY

The answer to this question may depend on what kind of art we are referring to. Susan Schuppli writes that, “[i]f history is to be invoked it generally comes in the form of memorials and cemeteries – markers that designate the official geographies of loss” (Schuppli 2014, 306-307). We have predetermined types of art, such as memorials and monuments, that most often stand in for the absence of physical proof or even the living witness. These “markers”, however, are nowhere to be found in Batajnica. The absence of any memorial object today, original or artistic, calls for an alternative discursive space that challenges the significant silence of the community. So to what extent does Miladinović’s work provide just that?

Holocaust theorist Shoshana Felman wrote aptly in the 1990s that “testimony is the [...] discursive mode par excellence of our times, and that our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony” (Felman 1999, 4). In the foreword to their seminal work, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Felman and Laub investigate the relation between “narrative and history, between art and

memory, between speech and survival” (Felman & Laub 1999, xiii). Felman suggests that

contemporary works of art use testimony both as the subject of their drama and as the medium of their literature transmission. [...] They] instruct us in the ways in which testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times – our relation to the traumas of contemporary history: the Second World War, the Holocaust, the nuclear bomb, and other war atrocities. [...] Testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference. (Felman 1999, 4)

Although Felman is referring primarily to literature here, the key idea that I want to extract from this passage is the following: testimonial works of art are comprised of “bits and pieces of a memory” that do not yet, or cannot ever, fully understand the event itself. Testimony is about the lack of assimilation, it reflects the limits of our knowledge. In this sense, Felman’s remarks remind us that “geographies of loss” (Schuppli), which usually take the physical form of memorials and monuments, can also be rendered through a more theoretical and abstract conduit, such as visual art.

Is Miladinović’s work a testimony, then? I believe so. *Free Objects* is in fact the only testimonial to the disappeared objects that is publically accessible.⁵ Lists of exhumed objects created by forensic specialists are normally regarded by the ICTY and other such institutions as “sacred trash”⁶ – items revered enough to be filed away forever and forgotten once the case is closed and the archive sealed. Miladinović’s art resurrects the closed archive, thus challenging the ways in which the recent past is remembered (or not remembered) in Ser-

bia, and constructing a type of memory that counters “official memory”. It is therefore a testament to silence, absence, and loss.

Miladinović’s creative technique, moreover, is designed to reflect the process of forgetting and remembering, and to question the status of the list. Instead of using the official documents, the artist chose to rewrite the entire list containing hundreds of items, word by word, letter by letter, very slowly and carefully. This performative act is the body of the work. In the second stage of the performance, the exhibition visitor reads the list and considers not only the process of its creation, but his or her relationship to the violent past.

Miladinović’s artwork does not engage with the event directly, but through a specific representation of it that we could call a “description without place”, after Wallace Stevens.⁷ *Free Objects* reconstructs detailed, meticulous bureaucratic descriptions of missing objects that were discovered in a place that is now deemed off-limits by the authorities. Through its specific form – a painstakingly hand-made copy –, the artwork proposes a critical reflection on the neatness of that description. Contrary to Felman’s definition of testimony as being “composed of bits and pieces” of memory and speaking of “acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge”, the list creates the illusion of comprehensiveness. It is intended to organize, institutionalize and eventually contain the chaotic violence it refers to. The best way to testify to an event might indeed be to confront its chaos, its messiness, its lack of clarity. To speak to what is not present, but absent.

To conclude, I would like to return to the words of Jason de Léon who emphasizes that “[t]here is no easy way to represent violence” (de Léon 2015, 17). We can now add that there is no easy way to represent the *absence* of violence either; or better yet, violence that has been actively forgotten, erased, deleted from public memory. As Miladinović attempts to give an afterlife to the catalogued objects from the mass grave, he is grappling with issues similar to those encountered by

de Léon, a forensic anthropologist who works on the missing border crossers in the Sonoran Desert near the U.S./Mexico frontier. “The fact of the matter is that although this is a crime scene, few people actually care or want to know what has happened here”, affirms the latter (de Léon 2015, 26).

In the end, Miladinović does not believe that he can directly represent the violence of Batajnica in his art. Nor does he consider his work to be the answer to the inability of his countrymen to engage in any kind of public discourse about what happened during the 1990s in Kosovo, and other parts of the former Yugoslavia. Rather, his art proposes an alternative “geography of loss” testifying to the absence of discourse and memory markers in Batajnica. ■

I want to thank Vladimir Miladinović for his insightful suggestions while I was writing this essay and for our continued collaboration.

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– *Free Objects*, Exhibition view ‘RESOLUTION 827’,
Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, 2015.

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(5) The series is frequently on display in galleries, in the artist’s studio and on his website.

(6) See the very interesting book about the Cairo Geniza: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/29/books/review/book-review-sacred-trash-the-lost-and-found-world-of-the-cairo-geniza-by-adina-hoffman-and-peter-cole.html>

(7) Stevens, Wallace, “Description without Place.” 1945. https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Stevens_Description.pdf

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LEARN MORE

- Website of the Batajnica Memorial Project, a virtual memorial space: <http://www.batajnicamemorialinitiative.org/en>.
- Website of Vladimir Miladinović: <http://vladimirmiladinovic.blogspot.com/>