

Visual Essays on Belgrade Today

Fascination with urban places in which artists live or work, or perhaps occasionally travel to, is a topic frequently found in literary works of Serbian and foreign authors, in film production, visual production, and music. Our cultural heritage boasts the *Belgrade as Inspiration to Artists* event, which was organised in Belgrade Cultural Centre's gallery for over two decades as part of the October celebrations of the World War II liberation of the former country's capital, and which every year offered to art lovers the pleasure of getting to know the "familiar" and "unfamiliar" Belgrade as seen and illustrated by contemporary visual artists, who were usually inspired by popular landscapes and recognizable historical and cultural places, seductive vistas of surroundings old and new, well-known symbols of the city. *A Room with a View* is the exhibition organised to celebrate the 60 successful and creative years during which BCC's Visual Arts Gallery has been operating in the sphere of culture in the city, the country, and the region, thus paying specific homage to traditional exhibition, from which it nevertheless differs in a revised conception based on the strategy of perceiving the city through the window of artists' homes or studios, whereby the artists observe the surrounding public spaces from their own private ones, recording them with a camera, video recorder, or smart phone while noting the impressions of landscape and moments of everydayness, reflecting critically on the social events in the neighbourhood, or simply pointing to the utopian places and landmarks of today's capital. The very choice of photography and video as the media of expression in *A Room with a View* was both challenging and creative to the exhibition participants – Marija Dragojlović, Bojan Bem, Goranka Matić, Gabriel Glid, Ivana Popov, Radoš Antonijević, Ivana Ivković, Vesna Golubović, Ljiljana Jarić, Nemanja Ladić, Dejana Vučićević, Ivan Šuletić, Milica Ružičić, Jelica Radovanović, and Dejan Anđelković, who all apply various traditional techniques in their visual and artistic practice as well as the new media, from painting and sculpture, through video and photography, to the digital image – in that the classical forms of the two media were used alongside the modified 3D formats of the photographic installation, audio-visual installation, digital image, light box, and flip book. The circumstances which positioned the artists at their windows, having them observe what their eyes can catch in the surroundings instead of what is happening in the street, have also changed the perceptions and experiences of today's city, which

the current exhibition shows through the visual essays and iconography which reflect the artists' personal artistic affinities and beliefs.

A Look into the Surroundings

The sublimation of the idea of capturing life from one's own window is a usual practice in the works of Goranka Matić and Bojan Bem, either in the documentary photographs the former famously and passionately takes in her surroundings each winter when it snows for the first time, or in the photographic sketches based on which paintings and photo projections of the former are made. In both examples, the landscapes reflect the authors' individual poetics and their specific visual aesthetic. Goranka's series titled *First Snow* features her authentic realism, coloured to a certain extent with a poetic atmosphere and constituted by the harmoniously intersected compositions of park areas and paths covered with a flurry of snow and treetops veiled in snow and inhabited by birds in the cold wintry days. The portraits of dogs from *The Mornings* series by Bojan Bem were captured in sport courts scattered among the buildings of New Belgrade in the long period between 2012 and 2019. On sunny mornings the figures of the animals were photographed from the perspective of distance, which mostly makes them seem to be the only beings in space, while sometimes the minimized figures of dogs are accompanied by their owners or a hurrying passer-by. The specific metaphysics of these photos, nurtured by the artist in his oeuvre, is subsequently transferred from the photo samples onto the canvas or, alternatively, electronic presentations.

The idea of French anthropologist Marc Augé that urban landscapes are rich with virtualities which should by certain acts be uncovered, can serve as a kind of a signpost leading to the photographs titled *Cranes* by artist Marija Dragojlović. The images of cranes taken from the apartment balcony in close proximity to the Dorćol Marina can be read as a mixture of personal iconography and spatial and temporal context. Her gaze directed upwards, the artist takes daily photos of the imposing machinery of contemporary construction industry which floats above the ground, suggestively entering and conquering the space of the upper skies. The series of photographs shows horizontal and vertical forms of the steel structure, always framed in close-up. The photos feature varying weather and visibly different conditions of the heavy machines in the heavenly heights. Those variants in which the dominant horizontal structure is

vertically upgraded with the superstructure of the cabin carried by the crane, the load lifted and other accompanying elements, introduce a certain rhythm of the shapes into the constructivist scheme of the sight, which differently articulates space and perceives the event that takes place in reality. Fascination with cranes is at this point a fresh subject in the artist's oeuvre although the sophisticated visual transformations of the machine in the vast space of the sky are brought into analogy with the images of the enchanting angelic figures on Venetian palaces, shown in the electronic form of *Serenissima*, exhibited at the Belgrade City Museum, which allows for observing both narratives as segments of a unique visual code that the artist carries across media.

Ljiljana Jarić's photography installation *Dream of Home* features the construction sites of houses, photographed in the immediate vicinity of the artist's home and viewed from the windows of two apartments, two addresses in two different cities, Belgrade and Thessaloniki, in which the artist lives thinking about the idea of home. Searching for the *genius loci* of home is a question contemplated through the frames of houses under construction, taken with the cell phone camera and exhibited in a defined order – one photo behind another, in just the same way as images are spatially perceived. Observations of the dominant sight – the houses under construction – contain images of the construction site at different stages of the building process: facades covered from the top to the street level with an impenetrable web of sacks, which offer protection from both the dust and curious glances; improvised work space for construction workers established on some of the floors at the point when finishing works are being done; the crane as the universal civilization symbol of all the construction sites in the world; night panoramas of the building under construction, perceived in visual interaction with the neighbouring house. *Dream of Home* is an intimate narrative mediated through the iconography of the house that is forever being built and never finished, as well as yet another reception of life in multiple manifestations, in situations so characteristic of the phenomenon of these times of transition.

Encounter with the photographs of Ivana Ivković bears a remarkable resemblance to Benjamin's descriptions of wandering in the capitals of Europe, which in his books he depicts as the common practice of turning from the main streets into side ones and finding in these corners of the city a multitude of the stages on which life takes place. From the second floor of the apartment in a building located in a blind alley on the hillside of Dedinje, a spot which is precisely one such corner of Belgrade, the *Leaving (only to return later)* photographs were taken

and later formatted by the author as a two-sided light box. The pictures represent a view of the barracks of the Armed Forces of Serbia, where the daily routine includes the changing of the guard, training ground exercises, get-together time, and, at the end of the day, the romantic sunset in the horizon, high above the hilltop project and the new Ada Bridge. Ivana's visual note of the surroundings thus records shifts in personal moods while looking at the familiar sight – from the feelings of melancholy, which are incited by the barracks atmosphere, to those of nostalgia, which are aroused by the glimmering light in the horizon. These feelings suggestively invite the artist, who is generally disposed towards exploration in life and art, to go beyond and conquer new spaces and geographies.

A Look into Social Reality

The records of urban images also contain landscapes by Nemanja Lađić and Milica Ružičić, which show how real life and current social issues are received in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by the lockdown and civil revolt against it. In the three-channel video – with three audio recordings – titled *Delight*, Nemanja Lađić shows a panoramic view of the neighbourhood he can see from his window, offering multiplied visual experiences of the same area, recorded with brief intervals late in the afternoon, at dusk, and at night, with appropriate light effects and adequate sound sequences: first, of a rapturous applause given by the citizens to COVID-19 hospitals' medical staff; then, of the noise made by the same people banging pots to express their dissatisfaction with the political measure of locking the city down; finally, of the glorious fireworks exploding in the sky above the familiar landscape. A valid issue of the real world is here represented through harmoniously composed visual and audio sequences in which the artist merges his professional experience of the place in a particular moment with his personal ethical stance. Milica Ružičić contextualizes life in the city during the pandemics in two works sharing the same title – *Windows*, created in the form of a video projection and a flip book. In two frames, the video shows a view from the studio, which rests on a large leafy treetop that sways in the gale; this is replaced by a view of an empty pavement, where a newspaper page turns over and over again in a uniform rhythm. This visual prelude, the calm before the storm, has its epilogue in the animation book, in which two visual segments also alternate: the first one is a speeded up recording of students marching along a New Belgrade boulevard, during the

protests motivated by the government's decision to close the dormitories due to the present epidemiological situation; the next one is an exposition of the calm morning that dawned after the disputed decision was revoked, with pigeons silently conquering the space of an empty street. The life of the city is here visualized through the specific concept of unfolding stage action, which progresses from the introduction into the story, through the dramatic action, to the lyrical crescendo in the end.

The place on the city map that is today most provoking to the professional and wider community is certainly "Belgrade Waterfront," a new project that is being built on the right bank of the Sava river, and which is critically considered in dystopian visions of their hometown by Gabriel Glid and Ivan Šuletić, each working in his own visual register. In Glid's photograph *Silent*, the eye of the camera is directed towards the demolished place, levelled to the ground in the historical ambience of the Sava amphitheatre, which the collective memory recognizes by the old building of the Railway Station and the Korunić Palace which hosts the Post Office in Savska Street. The traumatic sight of the entirely devastated space is perceived as a memory of the former landscape and the incident that took place, while it simultaneously stands as a testimony to the event that took place. The catastrophic anticipation of the demolished Savamala quarter is in the artistic perception qualified as an aesthetic metaphor of political power and the symbol of the present government. In his HD video *What Are You Looking at?* Ivan Šuletić deals with the topical issue focusing on the architectural and urbanistic perspective on the megalomaniacal waterfront project, whose spectacular visualization of the verticality of residential buildings and business towers he regards as a place of incongruity in respect of its historical surroundings, as a new city which alters the cultural and visual identity of the old city core, and, above all, as a place outside any norms dictating the humaneness of citizens' living space. The artist creates an authentic visual experience through multimedia art which reflects the aesthetics of new digital media. It all begins on the computer screen, which represents his window on the world, where he finds the photo documents to edit visually until he makes inspiring photo collages, which are subsequently combined on an assembly table with the drone visuals of the place and, finally, with the sound narrative as an important element of the new artistic project.

A Look into Privacy

In the circumstances which limit movement, life becomes a stage, and the everydayness of home an inspiring artistic theme. One such intimate story of everyday life is shown by Jelica Rađenović and Dejan Anđelković in the audio-visual projection titled *Escape from Home*, in which the couple of artists publicly communicate their privacy through two equal types of content, image and narration. In the long exposition of changing frames, the sights of the room window alternate with those of the trees below the window, covered with snow and visited by chickadees in search of food – single, in groups, or couples in love. At the same time, from the background of the room we can hear a long conversation among family members: father, mother, and daughter, about different experiences of growing up, existential topics, and the metaphysics of life. Inspiring quotes from Aristotle's oration on little birds in the sky, those harmlessly weak tiny creatures that make the world more beautiful and celebrate life, spoken during the initial frames of the video, give the occasion for the conversation conducted by the actors in the room, outside the reach of the camera. As parallel to the narration, we observe the idyllic images from the lives of birds in the outside world, and also subtly follow everything that happens in the family home, through the dialogues of closely related people, who speak of their life values, while from the background sequences of traditional bohemian songs occasionally reach us, colouring the audio-visual experience of the sights and events with wistful tones. Through a carefully thought-out combination of visual and auditory sensations from the artists' private life, the recordings made in the fashion of documentary realism are perceived as an art study with the potential of multi-layered visual and poetic interpretation.

Distinctive portraits of the city can also be found in the visual representations of the private space of home, shown in the works of Ivana Popov and Dejana Vučićević. The projection of Ivana's video titled *Tuileries* opens with a look through the window, with the window sill glistening, then goes on to present scenes from a Parisian park with birches quivering, and ends with the projection of a frame frozen on silk with a renaissance-drawing print. The multiplied frames of the video projection carry the mystery of the view-into-the-world window over into the space between reality and dream. The doubling of the past and present is the artist's recognizable poetic speech, expressed in practice through the act of transferring cinematic experience into an art video. In the web of cinematic panoramas, observed in the large plan, fragments of the identity of home in Belgrade are placed in a rhetorical dialogue with the familiar Parisian sights, thus marking a meditative note in the visual experience which presents autobiographical

elements in phantasmagorical panoramas. In Dejana Vučićević's work, the home-as-the-space-of-intimate-life theme can be followed as constant artistic inspiration in exploring the visual anthropology of the city. In the photograph titled *Disappearing*, the view from the window is directed towards the sight of a bourgeois house erected in an elite neighbourhood of Belgrade between the two world wars. Fascination with the house as a private residence, a place of secrets and historical memory, is recorded in the photograph through visual impressions of the space of comfort, dominated by the "royal" floor-to-ceiling tile stove built at the same time as the home, and by the portrait of a young woman seated in the armchair in front of the stove and dressed in an elegant tulle dress with layers reflecting the style and fashion of the era. The frame shows the intimate home scene as the space of silence, muteness, disappearance. The expert visual approach to set design and costumes allows for the visualization of private space through the iconography of memorabilia and personal objects which evoke the spirit of the past and have a special symbolical meaning of wistfulness and awe. The feeling of melancholy which pervades the ambience of privacy is in the picture accentuated by the presence of an angelic being pressed against the "warm" stove, whose eyes, despite subdued body posture and the serene facial expression, nevertheless indicate alertness.

A Singular Look

Vesna Golubović's video titled *25 Sept. 2018 from 6:52 to 7:12* certainly stands as the most singular part of the exhibition. It was made in her home by recording the rays of light coming from the outside world through the window and seizing an inside wall. Marvellous performances of the light changing from one visual state into another, were recorded by the camera during one minute. The artist's skilful ability to perceive everything more thoroughly and precisely than an unconventional motif – a little trace of light and the unpredictable effects of its adventure on the empty wall – shifts the perspective in art and life. The trace of light that the work follows shows a mystical play of energized states of shape or stain, which on the empty surface creates sophisticated experiences of sight and state, delicate as soap bubbles. Observing the reality which we face with innocent eyes, the artist introduces a novel way of presenting her fascination with light through little stories of the creation of shapes that can also be qualified as personal visual essays.

A Look at the Symbol of the City

This time we shall end the visual wandering from one city quarter to another with Radoš Antonijević's visual note titled *Avala*, which in its own artistic way interprets the former symbol of Belgrade, Ivan Meštrović's monument to the Unknown Hero, erected in the late 1920s on top of the nearby mount. Locating Avala as a popular picnic area, as well as a place exuding the history and identity of the city, this photographic diptych records the familiar landscape in two frames: in the first one, the rear-view mirror reflects a glimpse of a man's figure in the road, against the sunny ambient of the thick forest; the second features the monument recorded from a distant perspective in such fog that the silhouette of this imposing edifice can hardly be identified. The alteration in the visual plane of the panorama of Avala follows the alteration in the semiotics of the image which shows Belgrade in two different worlds of its social history.

Streets without People

Images of a city without people look ephemeral. It is a clear fact that in the majority of artistic perceptions of Belgrade today – in the panoramas, events, everyday life scenes – there are no people. Streets without people are inhabited by birds, dogs, machines... In the times marked by the pandemics, the situation has removed people from the streets and closed them in the houses, their public presence remaining evidenced merely through rare scenes in which human silhouettes are discernible from a great distance, as unidentified passers-by who at a quick pace move through the frame, juxtaposed to the space of the home. People are present in the audio sequences which follow the video projections, and in the background voice of the narrator, who takes part in the creation of visual experience. The perception of a peopleless city, suddenly devoid of all human presence, has affected the change in the spirit of the city, whose bright atmosphere and light views have been replaced by monotonous, melancholy and depressing ambiances. Whenever Walter Benjamin encountered, during his journeys to European cities, streets without people, he would observe and interpret this modern world phenomenon in his proper rhetorical style, describing them as places which reflect the feelings of urban areas dominated by man's increasing loneliness, whereas the city remains at the same time a privileged

place insofar as it offers a cure for loneliness. Putting a full stop for the time being at the artistic mapping of today's Belgrade, we shall see what happens in some future representations, when, hopefully, the times of "new normalcy" will be better and more humane.

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