

Performing Archive 2018

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Title: **Materialising Site**



Figure 1: Poster *Protestator* (anonymous)

Illustration with the title *Hasta La Vista Comunista* is of Arnold Schwarzenegger as his film character "Terminator" on a motorbike, holding a student ID

The Serbian uprising in '96/'97 was an attempt to overthrow dictatorship of then president Milosevic after he annulled elections because of the victory of the opposition party. Ashamed by the unsuccessful outcome of their protest, the people of the capital Belgrade, where protesters reached 200,000 daily, have never produced an archive of photos, banners and graffiti, which emerged during these demonstrations. Scarce information on the Internet and inability of the media to reveal the data gathered during the protest has left the public without full account of the uprising. My project is that archive - a website of images, leaflets, badges, flags, vouchers, cartoons, crochets, poems etc, an online record of elucidated protest available to participants, scholars and the public (<https://www.kulturklammer.org/nm>). It is a pedagogical tool and a scene from which to interrogate archival discipline and question the success of any storage as a platform to capture the past.



Figure 2: Protest crowd (anonymous)
A young man shouting in the crowd of protesters



Figure 3: Poster interpretation of *The Scream* (anonymous)
A banner with illustrated Munch's painting *The Scream*, a portrait of a man screaming

Visual essay here (to be read alongside browsing the above mentioned online map) addresses historical condition of the uprising, using it as an elusive material that challenges archival processes and is a joy to engage with. It is pointing at the problem with indexing that intrinsically adopts power. However, when subject of the archive is the opposition to authority, like political protests are, it becomes difficult to create, manage and navigate it. The monumentalisation of events that occurs in every archive with the attempt to capture them fixes those events even though they are anything but stable affairs.

'The facts'

In municipal elections on the 17th November 1996, in almost all cities in Serbia the opposition coalition *Zajedno*¹ ("Together") won. The results were overruled through a blatant intervention by the government in civil service and judicial institutions. Hundreds of thousands of citizens reacted by coming out on the streets. There were mass anti-war and anti-regime protests in Serbia during the conflicts in the 90s, but ruthless police action stopped demonstrations and the country sunk into wars, nationalist euphoria and economic ruin. Political opposition - tired, disillusioned, preoccupied with everyday survival and emigration of the young and educated - appeared non-existent.

But the electoral results in 1996, set off overt dissent that lasted for three months. The coordinators were *Zajedno* coalition and student councils of Serbian universities. The participants ranged from committed peace-activists to ardent nationalists. They affirmed the idea of Belgrade as the world city as well as the capital of Serbia that belongs to its residents.

Their visual and textual references – pictures and statements on banners, coupons and graffiti in the street, were of a democratic nature and they demonstrated a desire to be accepted as such – modern European instead of 'trigger happy' nation which was painted by global media. Protestors wanted to be taken as members of civil society by partaking in peaceful movement and opposing the violence executed on the orders of the Serbian regime. An illustration of such a desire was a banner designed by Slavisa Savic and carried at the front of the walking procession, stating "Belgrade is the world" – not some crazy place where leaders do what they want and everybody follows.



Figure 4: Banner *Belgrade is the World* (anonymous)

Street photograph of the protestors' procession behind the banner stating *Belgrade is the World*

The 'civilised behaviour' that was exterminated by Milosevic's followers re-appeared in the 'liberated spaces' (Spasic and Pavicevic, 1997a) as observed by Lazic (1999) and the non-violent character of the protest inserted it into democratic resistance. Those who were

¹ *Zajedno* political coalition was set up in 1996 and it consisted of Serbian Movement for Change, Democratic Party, Citizens Alliance of Serbia, Serbian Democratic Party and Democratic Centre

constantly critical of the regime emphasized the importance of cosmopolitanism and celebrated communal identity.

Protesters' accessories gave rise to a petty trade in postcards, badges, whistles, raincoats, hats, plastic trumpets and other souvenirs that were insignia of an international protestor's identity. They are now objects of the protest's archive described here.

The purpose of the archive



Figure 5: Poster *Arms against robbers* (anonymous)

An illustration of a whistle, balloons, trumpets, a siren, music notes with text Arms against Robbers

“All human artefacts and practices have extension in time, whether or not they have extension in space. Their freight of past is essential to their meaning”, claims Segal (2013:6), but the sole encounter between the researchers and the sought object is what makes research matter.

However, Serbian researcher must assure that the Balkans' cultural past is more knowable to both historic and artistic research, so the clichés of Balkan-ness are diminished. Furthermore, they should reveal the impact of their imposition as an imperial act, as a Western interpretation of the East and a dissemination of that framing worldwide.

Collection, ordering and cataloguing are inherently violent ways of obtaining knowledge. In this project, I lend its power to the East by using classification to place the protest at the centre of the national narrative and so, liberate the artefacts from the outskirts of local as well as global knowledge about Serbia and the Balkans that is confined by violence, conflict and war. In a way, I am Balkanising taxonomy and reorganising the order with which the region has been depicted by the West and rewriting its story from the East.

Even though the most obvious selection process in the archive is that of typifying the text and images to follow the path of assortment, this process is an attempt to apply and devise a method of representation. Therefore, the rhizomatic structure (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972) of my archive tries to defy linearity in terms of the gathering, chronology and systematisation of its objects. A bulk of its material is also corrupted by local interpretations at the time it has been confided to me because people are not indifferent to history. So I can only make yet another story from those versions of it.

Through engaging in this revision of history with fragments I could access, I made archiving an arts practice. By following the dynamic of the protest itself in my archive artwork, I have tried to capture, but also continue it. As Pyzik states:

“...art has long tended to aestheticise politics; the weakness of modernism is that it’s too non-committal, always working to efface its own traces; what the left needs is an engaged political art that can practice what it preaches – a ‘powerful aesthetic of protest.’”

Pyzik, A. 2014

My networked archive is a practice of actualization, reproduction, interpretation and re-impression (Derrida, 1995). The method of archiving is therefore, a process of creation which produces continuity of cultural tradition, but simultaneously changes this practice - just like daily procession walk by the protesters became architectural planning. As protester Slavisa said to me in an interview:

“That walk is in my view the best tourist tour, the city can never be seen from that angle ... when you walk in the middle of the George Washington Street, only then can you realise that architecture - that is a completely different city...”

Savic, S. 2007²

Performative cartography

Theatrical status of the artefacts carries a sentimental attachment to them and a desire that they perform the past. Many badly shot images, ripped posters and blurred placards have a greater meaning in my archive than being just pieces of paper and fabric. Due to their contextual and historical value, they are evidence through which the archivist and the public encounter the event, forging a life to it again and sharing this time in Belgrade history.

I compiled the archive as a platform for meeting of different voices, which have been quieted or dissolved into the noise of con/temporary political pressures. The purpose of it was to develop the storage of cultural memory, a prototype for encouragement of archive as activism. Via digital re-enactment, evaluation of the past is now jointly discussed by people in the present with an urge to find a direction of the future.



Figure 6: Poster *No Passaran* (anonymous)

A photograph of a young man whose arms are tied up with a rope. He turned his back to a television screen featuring Milošević. The black banner over young man’s eyes reads Students’ Protest 96.

² Savic, S. in interview 2007

However, one had to search deeply for the meaning of protest paraphernalia on the street. For example, fancy dress and disguise greatly contributed to celebratory atmosphere of the protest as part of its spirit of defiance. There were masks, handcuffs and teddy bears, life-size puppets of Milosevic and his wife which also appeared as dummies and cartoon characters, in slogans, poems and panels.

The narratives and artefacts created during the protest were social products that engaged others through the patterned, though improvised, practice. Whistles, trumpets, bells and pans were sold as weapons complete with a license to carry arms and you could also obtain a license to access various parts of the city. Many artefacts were distributed freely. The most interesting was the presence of flags raised to show alliance with the countries where many left to due to the government's actions and behaviours (Canada, UK, Germany), to make that government angry (USA) or to perform the role of the alleged foreign mercenaries the protesters were called as on regime's television channels.

Graffiti were on the walls, but also on banners, that carried them through the city, making the thoughts realised on paper just before they moved onto/from the concrete of the streets. This visual catharsis delivered by ordinary people drew references from cultural heritage and encouraged participation in political struggle.

My archive objects are holding in their variety a plethora of historical possibilities for how the event developed. Furthermore, heterogeneous sources - analogue and digital archives, institutional and personal accounts are vehicles for histories from when they emerge. We need to question them when considering their artefacts as 'evidence' or we can accept those methodologies in them, like my archive, as an interpretation of history. Furthermore, digital cultural forms do not just replace or succeed analogue ones as Van Dijck (2007) accentuated – showbox full of photographs provides the viewer a different experience than the scans of them on the computer monitor... New technologies are influenced by remediation and merged with the representational strategies of older forms.



Figure 6: Milosevic's coffin (anonymous)
The group of students carry red coffin with a star on its lid made up of Yugoslav flag



Figure 7: Milosevic's wife Mira (anonymous)
Student carry an effigy of Milosevic's wife Mira

Artistic work with databases, archives and displays is a media performance where data collection takes place beyond conscious ordering. In urge to inform the world about their unique experience on the streets, demonstrators in unity sent a different picture of Belgrade around the globe by radio, television and Internet. This city as a place, a dot on the map that keeps escaping, moving, disappearing and getting inscribed itself has been engraved in the archive via Foucault's (1986) concept of heterotopia as layered, 'impossible space' where opposites coexist. The idea of accumulating everything about the protest for the archive in order to constitute a place of all times that is itself outside of time is a project that he sees as belonging to modernity, to western culture of the nineteenth century. I use the same technique to reverse the gaze and offer a view of protest from the East to the West for a change.

Protest was an event with a city as its stage. Its archive attempts to use its artefacts in the same way – spill them through its compartments, allowing the objects to inhabit it, so they win the space, like the citizens re-claimed Belgrade during the demonstrations. The temporality of both conditions (physical and virtual) is what connects them – protest unexpectedly flashes through piles of objects of archivist's memory and global history too, as we suddenly come across its artefacts while browsing the net. There – online, the archive collector is again a part of the protest community. So, the longing to gather the artefacts was a desire for re-constructing the community, more than the rebuilding an event of protest. The aim was to reach out and communicate with people who were once together on the streets.

Archive as a political practice

The virtual demonstration of the archive draws on the elusive nature of memory, hence this protest collection can never claim to be a historical resource. My archive is an artwork, a creative podium of an event from history whose objects from photographs to newsletters are also art pieces. The archive highlights its own false existence, but directs to the truth. That truth is always the only one we've got, even though it is just a point of view.

“When you police a boundary... you believe in it... By contrast, when you study a boundary, it is put at risk, denaturalized, perhaps modified, perhaps maintained for strategic, not essentializing reasons.”

Bal, M. 2003:264

The question that the protest archive poses is why insist on the boundary and who or what is invested in such assertion? Building a path from the East to the West and back is policing a boundary, but going around both and arriving at the beginning of the journey might be scoping and scrapping for the understanding of the intricacies that each of those parts of the world carry in their history and culture.

The act of constructing the protest archive and its analysis contributes to the narrowing of the vacuum of knowledge existent about Belgrade protest and about artworks that criticize the regime on its own territory. My practice is relying on formats used then and tries to continue the legacy of revolt through keeping its medium and aesthetic alive.

Its function now is to rebel against the regime of popular representation of Belgrade and Serbia in Western circuits. As Todorova (1997:59) reveals: “In the face of a persistent hegemonic discourse from the West, continuously disparaging about the Balkans, which sends out messages about the politicization of essentialized cultural differences, it is hardly realistic to expect the Balkans to create a liberal, tolerant, all-embracing identity celebrating ambiguity and a negation of essentialism”. Still, the protesters cried in solidarity for a new social contract different to the one delivered to them by the state and later on, the Western world.

The protesters created an early democratic society – inclusive, transparent, free in speech, but it was not sustained beyond protest, not only because of the (de)pressing representation of the Balkans in the West, but because of the economic state which does not allow for these values to be upheld by constantly focusing solely on survival.



Figure 8: Slavisa Savic and Milos Miljatovic (anonymous)

Two young man in winter jackets and hats carry a banner stating I Love You Too, each with different illustrations of hearts – one has 6 small ones forming a flower and the other is 1 heart cut by an axe.

The archive attempted here is a political apparatus, not just because it is created around the political activity, but the choices that are made to collect artefacts, the format and methodology of gathering data are political decisions. I am seizing this archive and its associated collective consciousness as a tool for resistance in countering dominant histories with different narratives. This is done because the archive is not simply a place to amass memory, but a site that can render the history of the present more visible, which can uproot the authority of the past to question that present. What has been written about the Balkans can be interrogated in the archive. It is in perpetuated renewal and tautness within which the past and present come together and hopefully, influence each other so a better Serbia is found.

My archive contains historical accounts and empirical tropes of memory – my own and those of my research contributors. It is up to archive users to find their own ‘fact’ in it. As every archive is an artwork due to the processes of its creation that I deem inevitable for its establishment and maintenance, mine is not looking to be part of the archival science, but the art world. It is more interested in how to transfer the experience of the protest via its artefacts than weave its historical narrative. By selecting, placing and making visible the objects in the archive, I draft, edit and curate it just like an artwork, so it is never a reflection of the reality, but a representation and subjective interpretation of it.

Reflection

If politics is the art of the possible (Bismarck, 1867) there is hope within power, because there is no exit from the realm of possibility (Appadurai, 2010); the possible cannot be exhausted. Politics is art precisely because it reflects the imaginative. Resistance emerges as a reaction to politics and Belgrade protest testifies to this. Its slowness, duration and persistence depicted a potential to change - one can observe the developments of revolutions and track the ability and disability of political acts in relation to the imaginary of those states for which the uprising became a real event developed precisely because of the possible. We imagine ourselves in the future and only then we are prompted to act.

This research is precisely about a desire for possible, but unable to build a successful archive, even though I denote and use it as a practice, a display, a method, a tool, a platform, a text, a map, an image, a resource, a repository, a laboratory, a gallery, a museum, a classroom, a paradigm, a stage, an activism, a story, a network, an object, an artwork, a product, a diary, a technology, a narrative, a database, a memory, a connection, a relation, a bridge and a passage to the people, to the place, to the belonging, to the past, to the present and to the future.

Since the protest, I created a community around the archive, a group of optimists, activists and enthusiasts in order to revive Belgrade's collective spirit and hearten its consideration in the current governance wrapped up in blame culture. What else can I propose to Serbia from the West apart from building up its reputation, the value that could sadly invite a desire for even stronger exploitation?

I offer an online package for capturing the past that could shift the official narratives into only one possibility among others. That archive is a map of a failed revolution in Serbia under Milosevic, but it reveals the accomplishment of academics, artists and citizens buried under the war stories...

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