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All That Is Solid Melts Into Smoke

Igor Grubić's project for the Croatian Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale, *Traces of Disappearing (In Three Acts)* (2006–19), is thirteen years in the making. It consists of three inter-related photo essays and an animated film, set in a specially commissioned *mise-en-scène* by designer Rihards Funts.[1] The project started in 2006 when the artist began documenting post-war, transitional reality in Croatia, particularly the fundamental shift from socialism to capitalism, from a central, state-planned to a free market economy. It explores how this shift has affected changes in habitation, the urban fabric, public space and social relations. It traces the effects of privatization, gentrification and financial speculation, documents the violent transition from industry to post-industry, and the sweeping away of past traditions, ideologies, former certainties and belief systems in the wake of globalization and neo-liberal capital.

1
The scenography created especially for the project by Rihards Funts makes direct reference to the materials, forms and colour palette of factory architecture.

Grubić began the series by photographing one settlement where several homeless people built makeshift shelters

to live in. He decided to follow one particular person that interested him — a "poor King," as the artist called him — because of his practical and creative approach to life, and his inventive way of configuring his surroundings. The result of this is the photo-series *Wild House*, the first of the three chapters or “Acts”. It looks, on the one hand, into the living conditions of communities that exist at the margin of mainstream society and disenfranchised people living in “states of exception” and, on the other, demonstrates how deprivation and lack of material means fosters creative approaches to the practice of everyday life. It also examines changes in public space with the increasing privatisation of property, the consolidation of corporate capital in the country and its physical establishment in place and space.

The second part of the photo-series *Filigree Sidewalk* (Act II) examines changes into traditional vocations and local handcrafts — such as filigree craftsmen, tailors, barbers, furriers — highlighting which professions survive, adapt, or change and which ones become obsolete with the times. Grubić shows how these changes are inextricably linked with the tide of gentrification, and the advent of the service industry and leisure economy. Finally, *Deconstruction of the Factory* (Act III) presents a series of defunct factories — a significant architectural heritage encapsulating an important chapter in the history of work and architecture. These are monumental reminders of the transition from industry to post-industry, of changing conditions of work, of the devalorisation of the blue-collar workers and their gradual disempowerment in the face of hyper-capitalism today. Similarly the factories are

potent signifiers of the transition from a period defined by specific ideologies, political beliefs and values (socialism) to one characterised by post-ideology, post-politics and generalised political apathy (in the period we currently call "late capitalism").

Grubić’s project for the Biennale expands his already significant contribution into socially committed documentary work, and the preservation of the memory of Croatia’s architectural history, work and culture. He deploys both video and photography — in this case in the form of the photo-essay — to connect artistic practice with social engagement and political change. As in many of his previous works, here too Grubić produces and modifies his work over long periods of time, and develops it in series based on long-term research, so that its meaning and gravity emerges from the entirety of the corpus.

Though the work is largely documentary in nature, Grubić does not adopt the position of the dispassionate journalist documenting events at a distance but immerses himself in the communities and the situations he engages with. At the same time he leaves room for the imagination, for introspection — and even for some fiction. He configures his photographic installations combining different modes of photography, film and text, while also providing a new space in which contemporary art can reconnect with real life and those aspects of it that are often invisible, marginalized or hidden. While mindful of global changes, and subtly suggesting them in his practice, Grubić nevertheless roots his work in a decidedly Croatian and post-socialist context.

At the same time, *Traces of Disappearing* sits firmly within the tradition of socially committed documentary work and the humanist dimension of documentary photography, as we know it from photographers like August Sander, Walker Evans, Lewis Hines, Dorothea Lange, whose work brought the socially invisible and disenfranchised to public attention; or

Eugène Atget who documented the old Paris disappearing with modernisation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By contrast, however, the human condition in *Traces of Disappearing* is never depicted directly but, rather, implied by absence; tellingly, there isn't a single human being in any of the photos. Similarly, while there is so much happening *around* and *behind* the image, there is little action in the photograph itself. Hence, it almost functions as a kind of epitaph or mourning — not only of the photographic moment in the Barthian understanding of it (that is, the sense that every photograph contains the element of death and it always indicates that "what has been")[2], but of whole ways of life, which are slowly disappearing.

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Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (The Noonday Press, 1988), 93.

In *Wild House*, for example, his methodology is more akin to the classic journalistic tradition of uncovering personal stories in order to illuminate societal ills and inequalities. The series almost sits uncomfortably within the context of the rarefied art world whose collective apotheosis, elitism and sense of entitlement manifest themselves in Venice during the opening days of the Biennale. On the other hand, in both *Filigree Sidewalk* and *Deconstruction of the Factory* the emphasis falls on repetition and seriality. The latter is the result of a long-term study, which places the subject matter within a wider context, unlike photojournalistic images grounded in one "dramatic" moment, which present a momentary, one-sided image of reality.

If anything, Grubić is closest to Allan Sekula's analytical, critical documentary style and its total absence of overstatement or spectacularisation, straddling a territory between "art photography" and documentary photography from a radical

leftist perspective. Upon a first reading, Grubić's images appear dry, dispassionate, even distanced and there is a conscious eschewal of anything dramatic. In that sense, his photography adopts the same kind of approach as Sekula's "anti-photojournalism"[3] — photography that is not based on a "defining" moment or aspirations towards "truth," but demands to be treated also as a language. As Rachel Lee writes, "a photograph itself can never be 'neutral' or 'impartial,' and thus, the prevalent perception of photography as a universal language capable of showing 'the essence' of the depicted scene or moment is misleading."[4] Sekula criticised "avant-garde, modernist works, and more importantly the photographic discourse around such works as limiting the possibility of meaning and too removed from the world."[5] He pointed out that due to the lack of explanation for contexts, which often characterises photojournalistic works, "the human experience is often attributed to the person of the photographer," rather than the "reality" of what is depicted.[6] Sekula, in contrast, worked cumulatively and through multiplication, hence "his work [...] reveals multiple layers of settings and circumstances (which include the social and political backgrounds) underneath the appearances of the images."[7] Similarly, Grubić's photographs are also presented as part of a series and are the result of a long-term study and direct engagement with his subjects. In contrast to Sekula, however, he does not treat photography simply as a critical language devoid of empathic elements. Grubić refuses to remove himself from what he documents, and this becomes apparent in the highly subjective accompanying text which is an integral component of the project, where the connections between photographic image and text are emphasized and it becomes clear that they are inter-dependent.

3
The tenets of anti-journalism include "no flash, no telephoto lens, no gas mask, no auto-focus, no press pass and no pressure to grab at all costs the one defining image of dramatic violence." Cited in Nikos Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics, Art, Place, And The Everyday* (Institute of Network Cultures, 2010), 17.

4
Rachel Lee, *Allan Sekula: Photography Against Illusion And Towards Critical Realism*, 2019, https://www.academia.edu/37457050/Allan_Sekula_Photography_Against_Illusion_and_Towards_Critical_Realism.

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(ibid)

6
(ibid)

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(ibid)

In that sense, his project sits firmly within the genre of the photo essay, the birth of which can be dated with the launch of LIFE magazine in 1936. LIFE had as its goal "to make information on complex topics available to everybody — not just the elite of educated readers, to help people to make more intelligent decisions and to show them how the world really is [...] By openly taking a point of view, the photo essay of LIFE turned objective information into emotional experience."[8] The origins of this type of photography go back to the work of W. Eugene Smith (1918–78), regarded by many as the "father" of the photo essay; his 1948 series *Country Doctor* (for LIFE) is considered the first extended editorial photo essay. Smith described his methodology as "working 'like a playwright' [...] who must know what went on before the curtain went up, and have some idea of what will happen when the curtain goes down"[9] — meaning that the photographer is aware of and takes into account the invisible dynamics that lie outside the image frame, something that Grubić is also mindful of.

Of his contemporaries, he is closest to such artists as Armin Linke or Taryn Simon, who deploy photography in a conceptual manner and who also work in a comprehensive and often encyclopaedic manner — where each image falls into place as part of a broader story. Linke continuously explores places that are on the brink of historical transformation due to globalization and is also interested in understanding what lies hidden beneath the surface of the physical world. Working in an inter-disciplinary manner, and with different actors from different fields, he is also interested in the production of narratives on multiple levels. Taryn Simon's photographs, on the other hand, are heavily text-dependent. Carefully worded texts, which are the result of years of investigation, accompany most of her photographs. Integral to her practice is an ex-

8
Catharina Graf, *The Birth Of The Photo Essay: The First Issues Of LIFE And LOOK*, (Unpublished Paper held at: Summer School "Raumgeflechte / Spatial Relations", University of Zurich - June 10, 2014 Sektion II: "Photographs on Pages"), https://www.academia.edu/7916898/The_birth_of_the_photo_essay_The_first_issues_of_LIFE_and_LOOK.

9
Laura Havlin, "W. Eugene Smith: Master Of The Photo Essay • Magnum Photos", *Magnum Photos*, 2019, https://www.magnumphotos.com/theory-and-practice/w-eugene-smith-master-of-the-photo-essay/.

ploration "of intertextuality through the use of literary documentation as an extension of the photographic medium, enhancing its documentary value."[10] The same can be said of Grubić's use of text, which also becomes an inseparable part of the work.

10
Jung Joon Lee, "Photography's Intertextuality", *Afterimage*, vol 35, no. 1 (2007): 28.

Though the explanatory text that unfolds together with the photographic flow is perhaps a response to the limitations of photography, and its — by definition — fragmentary view of reality, it also has another more important function. Through the text — in which the words are Grubić's own — he records not only what he sees but also what he "feels." The poignancy of his photo-essay lies in the fact that he is not a clinical observer of reality but someone emotionally invested in the world manifesting itself in front of his eyes. As the stories unfold, the seeming objectivity of the images dissolves giving way to a very personal, highly politicised, subjective and often fiery narrative. In this body of work, as in his previous projects, Grubić assumes a very specific political stance, one that is grounded in workers' history and working class, left-wing political struggles but also in human empathy, solidarity and compassion. Thus the images negotiate the reality of the "here-and-how" while the text transports us into the realm of agonism but also of imagination, functioning as a bridge between a ruined past and a possible new future and uniting poetics, politics and social reality.

This "bridge" between social reality and the realm of the imagination, the political and the personal can also be found in *How Steel was Tempered,* a poetic, captivating short animated film made with images from the same factory locations as in the photo-essay chapter *Deconstruction of the Factory.* The

story focuses on a father-son relationship to talk about social, political and generational shifts. The two main protagonists are animated characters, but they inhabit the real world of the abandoned factories. As Aleksandra Sekulić writes, quite beautifully, "Over the desolate factory halls which fuse into a single post-apocalyptic space, a father, his son and their dog take us through the production plants and the (film) archive, leading us to an unexpected gesture of reigniting the factory furnace. From the dispersion of a former community of workers to a migrant search for survival, to connecting generations which have nothing but the present in common, to the gesture of reigniting the flame, we are led by our imagination. The characters in Grubić's film are imaginary, animated on actual frontlines of ruin, and so their gesture is what art makes of real devastation, thus this film offers a manifest, a task for art to open new horizons in the very places riddled by the trauma of their closing."[11] With very simple but poignant means, and an utter absence of language, the film movingly talks about the coming of age, of familial bonds, of generational differences and shifts, but also about the prospects of fruitful future relationships based on shared social space and collaborative working.

In this sense, Grubić's work is reflective of the continuing post-socialist condition in which his generation, in particular, as well as those older than himself are still struggling to come to terms with the collapse of the old order and the certainties that came with it[12]; as well as having to deal with the fact of being "fast-forwarded" into history, having to "catch-up" up with capitalism and global markets, with Europe and with the West. The transition was all the more painful and disappointing because the members of this society (young and old) possessed a strong sense of collective enthusiasm and genuine belief

11
Aleksandra Sekulić and Dejan Vasić, "Uzemljenje" (Grounding), *Beton*, no. 200 (2018), http://www.elektrobeton.net/mikser/uzemljenje/.

12
Svetlana Alexievich's riveting book *Second-Hand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (Random House, 2017), which was the result of ten years of research and interviews with people throughout the Soviet Union who were adults when it collapsed, explains the shock, trauma and confusion that was a result of this, and the difficulty of coming to terms with the new reality and social as well as economic order. Though former Yugoslavia was not part of the Soviet bloc, the experience of its collapse was not dissimilar.

that they were building a new country under socialism. By contrast, the younger generation faces historical amnesia, revisionism and a nationalist re-writing of history, which whitewashes second world war collaborationism and a dark fascist legacy (not to mention the vilification of socialism and the blind embrace of capitalism, by contrast).

Like many former socialist countries, the former Yugoslavia has also had to deal with a society that fell apart and is being re-assembled in a "post-historical" light; as such it has also become the locus of political and economic restructuring, identity renegotiation, and global reintegration. The trauma that this brings with it, particularly in older generations and those who could not adapt to the new conditions or simply fell through the new society, is still ongoing. This process of post-socialist "normalisation" has been described as "returning to a 'zero point' of history before the narrative of capitalist growth (supported by the development of the nation-state) was disrupted by 'socialist episodes'. In this sense, it appears that the question of socialist heritage today is bringing back the divisions between East and West albeit articulated in historico-temporal terms: as the former East erases periods of (Communist) history from its cultural capital in order to catch up to the former West — itself a repetition of the erasure of Capitalism enacted by Communism in the twentieth century — it is increasingly confronted with constantly living in the present between erased past and an uncertain future."[13] This reality deeply impacted artists of Grubić's generation, who are still negotiating the uneasy tension between past and present and who have yet still to find their place in the re-defined global context.

As Boris Groys writes, "For Eastern European artists, to move on means, in fact, to go back — back to a national cultural identity

13
Uros Cvoro, "The Afterlife Of Abandoned Monuments: Remembering The Socialist Heritage Of Former Yugoslavia In The Work Of Igor Grubić And David Maljković)"in *Transitional Aesthetics: Contemporary Art At The Edge Of Europe*, ed. Uros Cvoro (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

before it was allegedly repressed and distorted by communism [...] post-Socialist countries [...] have to go back [...] to the period before World War II. But they still lose several decades — and, in terms of cultural capital, this is not such a negligible amount of time [...] today the old line between the West and the East re-emerges in a different form. The West is not supposed to subtract certain periods of its cultural history from its cultural capital (maybe the only exclusion here is the German art of the Nazi era) [...] Under these conditions only art is able to maintain the memory of the hybrid, national communisms of an earlier time. And it is precisely this memory that constitutes the main cultural capital of contemporary Eastern European artists and writers."[14]

14
Boris Groys, "NSK: From Hybrid Socialism To Universal State", *E-Flux Journal*, no. 67 (2015), E-Flux, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/67/60709/nsk-from-hybrid-socialism-to-universal-state/.

15
Antonio Gramsci, "Risorgimento and in the National Structure," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geo rey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 276.

There is an implicit allusion to all of this in a large part of Grubić's practice, as well as a suggestion of the state of "in-betweenness" that still persists within this ongoing process of "normalization". Hence, *Traces of Disappearing* and *How Steel was Tempered* are both grounded in the current historical condition of uncertainty, of being poised between two worlds where the old one has collapsed and the new one is violently coming into being. It is a time of crisis because the failure of historical utopias is now a fact, but also one of uncomfortable transition; where the new world has not entirely come into being yet. Antonio Gramsci himself defined the idea of crisis — which (in this case) is not only post-socialist but also a broader European one — as precisely that situation where "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" and added that, "in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."[15] These symptoms, one could say, are the result of hyper-capitalism and unregulated economic development, which, as we know, are having radical effects on the environment, society as well as human life.

It is important to contextualise the project for Venice into Grubić's broader practice. Grubić emerged in the 1990s as an autonomous, independent artist who had not benefitted from institutional or state support and was part of no established cultural networks. His early actions in public space were influenced by the Croatian artists' collective Group of Six[16] — and were conducted guerrilla-style. The most famous of these is *Black Peristyle* (1998), which also catapulted him into the Croatian media. In *Black Peristyle*, he painted a large "black spot" in the courtyard of the Palace of Diocletian in Split as a reference to *Red Peristyle* (1968), another legendary intervention in the same place by an anonymous artist group wishing to make a reference to the omnipotence of communism at the time. Grubić's *Black Peristyle* — which is also analysed in further detail in the text by WHW that follows — was created as a reaction to the suppression of critical practices at the time, the passivity of the Croatian intellectual sphere, and the rise of nationalist rhetoric and support for folkloric "national" art. *366 liberation rituals* (2008-9) were a series of interventions in public space — one a day for a whole year, plus one extra. These consisted of small or modest actions like "correcting" graffiti with fascist or nationalist elements, spreading agit-prop stickers in public space, adding a red five-pointed star on Christmas trees; to more ambitious, visible and provocative actions such as erecting banners on monuments in public space and colouring red the water in the fountain in front of the Croatian National Bank on the occasion of George Bush's official visit to Zagreb as a protest against the war in Iraq, US foreign policy, and extreme security measures imposed on citizens.

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The Group of Six Artists (Grupa šestorice autora) was a Croatian artist collective founded in 1975 by the Mladen, Sven Stilinović, Fedor Vučemilović, Boris Demur, Vlado Martek and Željko Jerman in Zagreb. They performed their pieces in the open and public space as a reaction to the norms and rules defined by local art institutions.

Apart from interventions in public space, Grubić has also worked with disenfranchised communities and groups of people

facing social challenges. In *Angels With Dirty Faces* (2006) he worked with miners from the Kolubara mine in Serbia who played a major role in overthrowing the Milošević regime in Serbia, after organising a mass strike. Grubić "commemorated" the miners in a series of photographs where they are portrayed as angels (by posing in front of a background on which wings were drawn in chalk). In *Velvet Underground* (2002), he worked with a number of prisoners from Lepoglava prison, conversing with them and collecting stories about their childhood, about their hopes and aspirations when they were children. He linked these stories to photographs in which he himself posed in front of prison cells dressed in costumes of cartoon characters, linking innocent, childhood fantasy and hope for the future with hard reality and interrogating what went wrong in the process. Finally, in the film *East Side Story* (2006-8) he addressed the verbal and physical abuse of participants in the 2001 Belgrade and 2002 Zagreb Gay Pride parades, by organised neo-Nazi gangs. The film juxtaposes original footage from the violent episodes with the re-enactment of these scenes performed by professional dancers in the same places.

In all of these projects Grubić opened up new space for artistic engagement with social and political issues, a space in which contemporary art can reconnect with real life and in which reality, imagination, documentation and critique blend in and out of each other. As Lauren Berlant writes in her book *Cruel Optimism*, "Intensely political seasons spawn reveries of a different immediacy. People imagine alternative

environments where authenticity trumps ideology, truths cannot be concealed, and communication feels intimate, face-to-face."[17] Many of Grubić's projects can be seen within this light, including *Traces of Disappearing* and *How Steel was Tempered*.

As an artist with a long-term engagement in activism and politics, Grubić is well aware of the politics of representation, especially of disenfranchised communities, and his photographic gaze is respectful and not exploitative. His work does not succumb to what Tirdad Zolgadr has termed "pornography" — the exploitation of voyeuristic aspects of looking at the impoverished or disenfranchised.[18] In contrast to many so-called socially engaged artists who "use" the poor and disenchanted as subject matter or artists who, on the other hand, enter such communities armed with good intentions but little understanding of identity politics and individual sensitivities, Grubić's relationship with the subjects he engages with is very often invisible. As Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača perceptively note in their text on Grubić, "When he works with certain social groups, such as prisoners or miners, he doesn't use strategies (common in similar participatory projects and in community art) of joining forces with those groups with the goal of advancing their social rights or existence, but with the goal of advancing their consciousness and belief in their own worth and in the possibility of spiritual revolution."[19]

Though the artist's practice stems from an interest in human beings and human relations, it goes beyond the social and speaks of symbolic acts of redemption and "rapprochement" as well as of intimacy, poetry but also play. Grubić suggests that perhaps we are most fully human when we engage

17 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Duke University Press, 2011), 223.

18 Tirdad Zolghadr, "Poornography", *Frieze* (2006), http://sulki-min.com/unitednations-plaza/readingroom/Zolghadr_Poornography.pdf.

19 Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača, *Igor Grubić: 366 Liberation Rituals*, (Delve | Institute For Duration, Location And Variables; Galerija Miroslav Kraljević, 2009).

the imagination and open up a space for a new social imaginary that makes room for social relations based on reciprocity, solidarity, and care; quite the opposite of the neo-liberal negation of "society" and Randian "atomisation" which have claimed our times. Indeed, as Laurent Berlant has pointed out in her critique of dystopic political narratives and their perpetuation of a permanent state of crisis and fear, there does exist "a better sensorial world right here, right now, more intimate and secure and just as real as the world made by the media's anxiogenic sensationalist analysis. This vision locates the desire for the political in an alternative commons in the present that the senses confirm and circulate as though without mediation."[20] It is this world that Grubić points to. At the same time, his practice is rooted in the exercise of civil disobedience, oppositional tactics, and acts of resistance to the hegemony of established powers, all with a view to creating alternative articulations of social space.

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Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Duke University Press, 2011), 224.

Grubić's project for Venice is noteworthy as it bridges art, politics and humanist values. Whereas so many artists working in the domain of the socio-political are often wary of expressing any form of sentimentality or emotion, Grubić does not shy away from exposing his own sensibilities. He thus combines "hard" critique on the one hand with "soft" ruminations on the other. In contrast to many pseudo-intellectual, conceptually detached and emotionally sterile research-based projects, Grubić's work for Venice possesses both intellectual astuteness and genuine so-called "heart and soul." Beyond the highly personal, local perspectives it

proffers, the scope of the work is also ecumenical, analysing as it does the changes engendered by globalisation, privatisation and the consolidation of neo-liberalism. In a sense, his project might sit uncomfortably within the context of the Venice Biennale, and its ultra-competitive milieu which has led to a dominant trend whereby many national pavilions are based on spectacular or monumental gestures in their efforts to attract attention amongst the plethora — maybe even inflation — of projects. As such, *Traces of Disappearing* belongs less to this "exclusive" art world and more to the real world and its tangible concerns. At the same time, the project is extremely relevant within the context of Venice, a city that has sold its soul to the devil of rampant profiteering; a city that is being hollowed[21] out by the effects of uncontrolled tourism, the service industry, and corruption. Being positioned decidedly against such practices, the work both aims to create a site of symbolic resistance to the hegemony of established powers — be they economic or cultural — as well as an interrogating the cultural meanings and repercussions of these acts of power. Finally, *Traces of Disappearing* highlights the new situations that are coming to replace the old, while subtly inviting us to think about future ways of imagining and inhabiting our world.

21
The population in Venice has been in dramatic decline, particularly in recent years; from 164,000 in the 1930s, to 120,000 three decades ago, to just under 55,000 currently. At the same time it is literally invaded by 20,000,000 tourists a year, a veritable assault on the city, which has also contributed to the radical alteration of its physiognomy and the fact that it has become radically commercially-driven. Almost everything in the city is geared towards and revolves around tourism. Inhabitants are being driven out due to high prices and the disappearance of daily amenities. The cultural world that descends to Venice for the Biennale (art, architecture, cinema, dance, theatre) also contributes to this pathology. Indicatively, the space that the Croatian Pavilion is located in is a former wood workshop, which has now been re-configured as a cultural space.

See: Enrico Tantucci, "Venice: a city at a cultural crossroads", *The Art Newspaper*, (May 2018), https://www.theartnewspaper.com/analysis/venice-a-city-at-a-cultural-crossroads.