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Astrid Wege After Memory

“History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.” (Walter Benjamin)¹

The question in which forms, rituals and images, history and the past are envisioned is an idea which has long been at the centre of historical, political and philosophical sciences. The knowledge that individual and collective memory is volatile, erratic and discontinuous and a basically (re)constructive act, that is, it is something that emerges as a consequence of people’s present wishes and possibilities, is a recurrent topos of international contemporary art; the same would apply to the question as to how the past affects perceptions of the present as well as the presumption that moments of imagination in their relation to the past play a certain part in concepts of the present and the future.

After Memory/Nach der Erinnerung is the name Irena Lagator has given her objet d’art which consists of 1800 old and new dinar banknotes bound together in rows of three per page to form a book. Having been introduced as the official currency in 1997, the 200-dinar banknote bears the image of Nadežda Petrović, one of the most influential artists in the Balkans at the turn of the XIX to XX century, a fact which served Irena Lagator as a starting point for her work. *After Memory* was created in 2007 on the occasion of the 24th Nadežda Petrović Memorial in Čačak in Central Serbia with the intention of generating the reconstructive treatment of the past against the background of the Memorial’s history, at the same time connecting it with the social and political present, and naturally, with its host land.² Founded in 1960, the Nadežda Petrović Memorial is not only the oldest art biennale in former Yugoslavia, but also in itself a ceremony of

¹ Walter Benjamin, „Über den Begriff der Geschichte“, in: Walter Benjamin, *Illuminationen*. Ausgewählte Schriften I, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1977, p. 258.

² 24th Nadežda Petrović Memorial, *Transforming Memory. The Politics of Images*, featuring Fikret Atay, Yael Bartana, Michael Blum, Mariana Castillo Deball, Mounir Fatmi, Ghazel, Irena Kelečević, Irena Lagator, Monument Group (Milica Tomić, Branimir Stojanović, Nebiosja Milikić), Moataz Nasr, Sean Snyder, Milica Topalović, Florin Tudor & Mona Vatamanu, Urtica (Violeta Vojvodić, Eduard Balaz, Daniel Stevanovic) and Luca Vitone, curated by Astrid Wege and Miodrag Krkobabić, September 22nd - November 4th 2007, Čačak.

remembrance dedicated to the prominent bearer of its name, who was committed to active politics and promoted the idea of Yugoslavian cultural unity alongside her work as an artist.

Irena Lagator's *After Memory* can be read as a homage to the artist Nadežda Petrović – and avoids at the same time hagiographic interpretations. *After Memory* can be comprehended as a book that is constantly challenged by a variety of semantic resonances including economical, museological, gender-specific as well as national history-related ones. By using 200-dinar notes as a core material for her book object, Irena Lagator focuses attention both to the status attributed to Nadežda Petrović as well as to her popular reception. Petrović was the first woman to be portrayed, not as an allegory, but as an individual on a former Yugoslavian banknote, which indicates her significance as a person of national importance.

She is shown as a portrait, as a bust holding a painter's pallet and as a nurse dressed in army uniform during the First World War. Her international significance as an artist is thus treated with the same importance as her role as a nurse serving in the army, which led to her early death from typhoid fever in 1915. As a result of the emphasis laid on that part of her biography, she has to some extent become a national hero.

Lagator, however, neither intends to merely duplicate that specific reception – although its significance is even intensified by the aura surrounding her book which she displays on a pedestal in the middle of the Nadežda Petrović room in Čačak Museum. Nor does she mean to reveal some “other” kind of interpretation of Petrović's life and work. What *After Memory* does, is to draw attention to the purpose behind collective ceremonies, rituals and monuments serving the construction of (national) identity; it enables reflection on those institutional structures responsible for that construction and on individual, sometimes oppositional, reactions to it. As Aleida Assmann has pointed out in her book on the culture of remembrance and the role history plays in politics published in 2006, it is not only the ontological status that is crucial to the creation of collective self-perception, “but the potential influence emanating from construed and acquired historical experiences. Alongside the question “what happened and how did it come about?”, and, as a consequence, “questions regarding aftermath, imaginative interpretations and acquisition of history”, we are increasingly asking “how did people experience certain events and how are they remembered?”³

By presenting her art object in a historical room amidst the artist's original paintings, Lagator blends the perception and portrayal of an artist, who occupies the status of a national icon in Serbia, with that particular nation's recent history and the traditional role of the museum as a place where objects regarded worthy of being preserved are preserved because they represent history – the same as a book represents a place of accumulation, of order and as a storage place for ideas. *After Memory* sets the scene for a complex re-assessment of values. For the prefabricated bank notes displayed by Lagator

³ Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*. Munich. 2006, p. 41.

in her book object – the serial repetition of Nadežda Petrović’s image generates a kind of equalising effect – are the actual waste products of national, economic and financial history. For instance, the later name “Yugoslavia”, that name having become obsolete after Montenegro declared independence from Serbia in 2007, is missing on the new bank notes; that empty space documents the collapse of the Yugoslav federation and the difficulties Serbia had to deal with after the war, at the same time underlining the significance of an independent monetary system for national identity.

Those bank notes that once served as an object and vehicle of collective and individual wishes, projections, fantasies and stories are now relicts of the past. Still bearing traces of their former owners, they have been devaluated and fallen prey to official destruction. Lagator’s book object saves those worthless bank notes from destruction; having been transformed into a work of art, they survive as a historical document and gain new significance and value, not only in art, but also within the economic system. *After Memory*, which will be passed on to the Serbian National Bank Museum of Money when the exhibition is over, reveals mechanisms of value loss and value enhancement whilst it acts as a time capsule in which different time levels merge into one another. As a kind of “non-place” – a heterotopical place – *After Memory* breaks with familiar time structures and therefore makes the process of historical change, remembrance, and inevitably oblivion, comprehensible. If, as Walter Benjamin writes, history is “the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now “, then it is certainly omnipresent in Irena Lagator’s *After Memory*. That idea is conveyed by the smell and texture of the bank notes, by turning over the pages and finally, by practical experience, that, as Rosalind Krauss put it by quoting Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the subject of observation constitutes itself, as does history, in the act of perception, “temporarily, from one moment to the next.”⁴

⁴ Rosalind Krauss, “Die kulturelle Logik des spätkapitalistischen Museums”, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, Vol. 2, No. 6, June 1992, p. 136.