

## **I Will Never Talk about the War Again by Jelena Petrović**

The work *I Will Never Talk about the War Again* by Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić was made in 2011, when it was also included in the *Perpetuum Mobile* collection of Living Archive, during its first edition in Zagreb.[1] As one of the works of art contributed to this archive, which was grounded in contemporary art, feminism and the post-Yugoslav space, the work became its integral part, an attempt and challenge to politically (re)articulate these overlapping, conflicting and rebounding grounds. What the archive and this work had in common was a point of rupture, or at least an attempt at disrupting the linear trajectories of historical violence and identity/identifying stigmatization, epitomized in expressly brutal yet covert mechanisms of maintaining the social power of different elite groups, be they ethno-nationalistic, militant, class-based, patriarchal, administrative, or of any other kind. During this Zagreb based event, as a member of the Red Min(e)d team and co-initiator of Living Archive, I touched on this video performance many times, always briefly and fleetingly, though with a different sentiment each time, as if mirroring the ebb and flow of emotions evident in the voices and faces of the artists: from anger to some vague pleasure, from an avowed acceptance to utter silence, from wish to reality, until I finally watched the entire performance in order to bend these affective turns towards a complete politically articulated meaning. The video performance at that moment became an image with red background, against which the two artists, whose work had for years already been intensely focused on the war, its traumatic experiences and (in)human forms, now faced one another, faced themselves, faced everyone. It was precisely that frozen and muted image that became the point of rupture or, paradoxically, that which connects and creates what is shared: neither the subject nor the object, but affective engagement and abject confrontation[2] with the war that everlastingly rages among and around us, because of what we, individually or collectively, are or are not, or ultimately (don't) accept to be.

This video performance produced in collaboration by Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić has been displayed at numerous exhibitions, and served twice as the source for the very titles of exhibitions: on one occasion the exhibition title was taken from this work verbatim (*I Will Never Talk about the War Again*, exhibitions in Färgfabriken and Stockholm in 2011, and Maribor in 2012, curator Vladan Jeremić), while on the other it was somewhat altered (*I want to speak about the war*, Zagreb 2014, from the *Voyage to Europe* series of exhibitions, curators Mia David and Zorana Đaković Minniti). Positioned in the very focus of an exhibition, and thus politically marked together with the artists who perform and the reasons why they perform, the work itself becomes a trigger for the curators' positioning in relation to the work, as well as a signifier of the context in which it is presented to the audience, media and the politics of place. The range of these political significations is broad: they could be engaged, passive, observational, identifying, forensic, diagnostic or independent from any meaning the artists had in mind when they created the work; they are in any case ambivalent and not finally determined despite the intention to make them such, as it actually remains unclear on behalf of what the work speaks once placed in the exhibition epicenter. The politics of memory and forgetting, trauma and crime, human empathy and ethics, attempts to overcome everything, pack it up and leave behind – all these possibly explain why the war is spoken about and against, but not on whose behalf it is done. It is a question that still remains open or perhaps rather closed, much like the one preceding it: What do we actually speak about when we speak about “the” war?

As selector of the 2014 Zagreb Film Mutations: Festival of Invisible Cinema 08 Parallel Film, Marina Gržinić included this video performance in the program, along with several previous works by the same artists, with a view to showing that the war machinery “regulates gaze, affects and life”[3] in its ever more intensive forms of militant colonialism. According to her, this work carries in itself an obsessive performative statement “that exposes the circularity conditioning the social, economic and political texture of Bosnia and Herzegovina today,”[4] the texture which is nearly 20 years after the so-called Dayton Agreement still necropolitically subjected to peace. What Gržinić actually speaks about here is the never-terminated war, the war waged by different means that continuously drags Bosnia and Herzegovina deeper into poverty and oblivion. She also sees the repetition of this performative statement as an answer to all the manifest, governing and arbitrary discourses on the war – an answer produced by means of all the emotions available for resisting this regulatory necropolitical process. Such an answer perhaps best describes what kind of war we speak of today, and against what the reiterated negation of Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić is raised.

On the other hand, the Resolution 827 exhibition (SMBA, Amsterdam 2015, curators Zoran Erić, Jelle Bouwhuis and Joram Kraaijeveld), which this text is in effect occasioned by, regards the work of these two artists, through the lens of the consequences of the war, as one of the exhibition's underlying perspectives. According to Zoran Erić, the work is "a metaphor for the position of the traumatized subject that cannot depart from trauma's need to act by repetition, while it also poignantly depicts the rhetoric of nationalist parties that need to remind citizens of the war in order to maintain their power positions and nurture nationalist feelings towards the 'other,' or the enemy." [5] In other words, the work explores the ambivalence of meaning inherent in the very act of the repetition of the statement in the historically contextualized political reality of the post-Yugoslav space, as well as possibilities to determine the perspectives of the act's significance from the position of the traumatized subject, which stands in contrast to the positions of power that determine who "the other" actually is. The position of inability to talk about the war outside the given frameworks of nationalistic narratives and simultaneous rejection of the positions of power perhaps open up the space for the discussions with the aim to diagnose the present – the discussions that have occasionally been held in the past on certain margins of society. It also, however, overlooks the affective turn in which this state of abjection becomes pervasive and indicative of a need to politically articulate the demand to "banish" the war and its consequences from our everyday lives, in the most basic existential meaning of social relations and economic state of society on the whole (even if that may merely be a social utopia).

The mentioned exhibitions named after this work – *I Will Never Talk about the War Again* – play upon the linguistic potential of this statement, the meaning of which is in both contexts emptied and, if we follow the terminology of semiotics, functions as the signifier. In the case of the first exhibition, an arbitrary meaning is attached to the given signifier, providing an answer to the central question posed by the exhibition: "Can contemporary artistic practice really give innovative form and find a language with which it is possible to speak politically about individual and collective war and post-war experiences?" [6] Thus the work itself is placed within the context of the personal and emotional, in which any talk about the war is rendered pointless precisely due to its shocking brutality: "the two artists promise each other not to talk about the war anymore, repeating the same sentence over and over. The work is an emotional statement on the fact that more than fifteen years after the Dayton Peace Agreement the war remains a central experience in the divided country." [7] In the second exhibition, the altered statement *I want to speak about the war* is reduced to an inverted signifier, upon which the same motivational meaning is built, which in this case serves to bring the vicious circle of the wars waged in this region throughout history to the same level, and answer the question posed by the curators in relation to this work: "Why is it important to speak about the war? (Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić's work)." [8] Talk is thus positioned as a political place of power, the will to truth, social practice and an artistic event which tries to illuminate the great historical (un)truths and unravel them on the *Voyage to Europe* (title of a series of exhibitions organized to mark the World War I centenary).

Still, a question remains: what is actually the repetitive statement of this work? It is the speech which, even when refusing to talk about the war, in fact communicates its essence and its symptoms still present today in their various manifestations. Furthermore, what needs to be noted when interpreting this work, and bearing in mind the feminist position of the artists, is that this is the talk which does not accept patriarchal labels of apolitical and private when originating from emotional and personal perspective, or the label of incapability when refusing to be made. Here, the position of the artists is clear: it is one of personal experience which shows that talking about the war, as well as the war itself, are still all around us, permeating our everyday lives. Their reiteration: *I will never talk about the war again*, reintroduces affect into the political which has been rendered faceless, manipulative and oriented towards administration and economy of war, maintenance of trauma and relativization of crimes, psychologisation of the politics of coping and reconciliation, and all those legal and human rights regulations and scientifically guaranteed remedies which are constitutional for the surviving and renamed national elites and interethnic imaginary communities, rather than for the society and community in which we live our everyday existence. At least, this applies to the society as perceived by the artists, one that serves as a backdrop for talking about the war, liberated and free from all of the above mentioned. The politics of this repetitive speech act: *I will never talk about the war again*, is simultaneously the politics of affect and politics of hope, not merely the position of the victims unable to face their trauma and the war. Thereby, at this point, the personal becomes political, neither declarative in terms of the decision not to talk about the war anymore, nor confessional in terms of articulating powerlessness, as it might seem at first if one

takes into account all the circumstances and usual identifiers, and simultaneously excludes the feminist principle of the personal creating affect and resistance, and demanding a politically articulated answer to the question: On behalf of what do we speak when we speak about the war? Therefore, at the conclusion of the statement accompanying the work by Lana Čmajčanin and Adela Jušić, we read a series of questions, simultaneously provocative, subversive and open: Is it possible not to talk about the war? Why do we do it and when will it stop? Will we stop? Should we stop?, where these questions underlie the two artists' performative act of subjectifying repetition.

Finally, there is a series of questions introduced by the work itself and its perception within different contexts and exhibitions, which forces us to decide on the concrete war we are talking about. What does that war mean or entail today? Does it in fact still go on? Who has the right (not) to talk about the war? What does Dadaistic rebelliousness of this work involve as it reiterates and affects the sentence which opposes everything else just like any other statement containing personal pronoun I? How does the subject that, confronted with the object, rejects itself and wishes to be transformed and through a repetitive pattern comes to resemble the abject, the very thing which in this process of political subjectivization shapes and integrates us into an acting social community through the politics of affect which drives and carries us, not letting us stop, but instead makes us search for the thing which represents this war today, in order to defeat it?[9] The artists personally and emotionally oppose systematic mechanisms of power, which in turn pacify, regulate and fuel that very war for the benefit of various but always profitable elites. They oppose and at the same time negate, as they articulate their political agenda as a demand, in fact the demand of Antigone as read by Judith Butler and other feminists: the destruction of the violent order of hegemonic and patriarchal power in the name of freedom. Or this is perhaps also, when interpreted more liberally, the rebellion against patriarchal, regulatory, state principles which do not allow the war to be "interred" as a means of establishing social order – the same rebellion in which Antigone persists at any cost, refusing to admit her act as the cause for guilt.

In any case, the affective drive which in this work propels us towards the red background of the freeze frame concluding the work, the background which undulates before our eyes and makes the impossible possible, is created in this very abject and is characterized by its own dual time: "a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth." [10] It is up to us to choose what we will reach for in this talk which refuses to address the war. Through their repetition, the artists simultaneously oblige and subvert the rules of patriarchy, for they are aware that no one ever even asked women to express their political opinion publically, let alone to politically, socially or economically position themselves in relation to the war and what it meant to them in its utter brutality and criminality. In brief: after the World War II, Yugoslav women fought out their freedom and right to equality, labor and independence, due to the activity of the Women's Antifascist Front, but soon encountered the oppression of the ideologically adjusted patriarchy embodied in the concept of modern socialist family. It involved the survival of the privatized forms of unpaid and invisible women's work and patriarchally structured distribution of power, and consequently, violence. At the very same location of this common Yugoslav state, the next (un)named and (un)finished war assumed and still assumes women's complete and now entirely transparent re-traditionalization within the transitional, neoliberal and ethno-nationalist reproductive processes of the modern society and everyday life. This is precisely the everyday life which Lana and Adela designate in the statement of their work as the locus of political talk, of the need and reasons to claim: I will never talk about the war again. This talk was created to propel the changes in these newly emerged social situations, political circumstances and economic conditions, not to establish peace at any cost; and it was the women who eventually paid the greatest toll for it in these newly created post-Yugoslav states (feminization of poverty, abolishment of social rights, flexibilization of labor, perpetual exploitation, structural and manifold violence, among many things).

Talking about the war therefore does not entail the victim's testimony, but rather a political act, and the negation in this speech implies refusal to accept the assigned roles and official narratives. Refusal to talk about the war is a lesson in discontent, affective rebellion and return to the beginning, to the phase of taking up the position of (not) speaking about the (non)war, the position which is always one of power, in order to politically rearticulate the questions: Who speaks and on whose behalf? Why are the locations of speaking about the war abolished? By and to whom and were they delegated? This very position of speech which contains nothing but the mere negation allows for a transgression of the inverse empty signifier into the field of performance art. If we now perceive this work in the context of the artists' entire

oeuvre, it testifies of the engaged action which predominantly involves the demand for an actual change, rather than reaction to the social reality in which we live, as it demonstrates what we in fact talk about when we do (not) talk about the (non)war. The answer to the crucial question imposed by contextualizing this work within the exhibition lies actually in the politics of affect and politics of hope, presented to us through the works of these artists and feminists as the future loci of the common political articulation. In other words, when the artists attempt to answer the question of whether we can talk about the war, they seem to suggest that revolution maybe the thing that we should rather talk about.

Translated by Tijana Parezanović and Milan Marković

[1] The first edition of Living Archive, a project developed over several years by the feminist curatorial team Red Min(e)d Bring In Take Out, took place in Zagreb between 13 and 16 October 2011. For more information please visit: <https://bringintakeout.wordpress.com/la-editions/zagreb/> (Accessed on 10 August 2015)

[2] According to Julia Kristeva, the concept of abjection has a complex meaning which, importantly, still remains undefined. The term abject refers to what is repulsive, liminal and unacceptable to the subject, though at the same time constitutive, and thus bearing emancipatory potential in a political sense. Among other things, Kristeva stresses that all repetitive instances of facing the abject are simultaneously accompanied by the feelings of loss and gain. Performative repetition of abjection causes a series of affects that represent more than mere emotions, since they express both the positive and the negative, interconnected in the process of constituting the subject. Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (trans. by Leon S. Roudiez), New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

[3] Marina Gržinić, *Politicizing and rewriting counter histories: for a new politics of empowerment and interventions*, text written for *Film mutations: The Festival of Invisible Cinema*, 2014. <https://adelajusic.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/here.pdf> (Accessed on 10 August 2015)

[4] Ibid.

[5] Zoran Erić, *Fragments of Resolution*, Newsletter No. 141 — Global Collaborations, 2015. <http://www.smba.nl/static/en/exhibitions/resolution-827/smba-nieuwsbrief-141.pdf> (Accessed on 12 August 2015)

[6] Vladan Jeremić, from the exhibition catalog: *I WILL NEVER TALK ABOUT THE WAR AGAIN*, Färgfabriken, Stockholm, 2011. <https://adelajusic.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/catalogue.pdf> (Accessed on 12 August 2015)

[7] Ibid.

[8] Zorana Đaković Minitti and Mia David, announcement of the exhibition *Voyage to Europe: I want to speak about the war*, 2014. <http://www.kcb.org.rs/OProgramima/Projekti/Projektinajave/tabid/1092/AnnID/2867/language/sr-Latn-CS/Default.aspx> (Accessed on 12 August 2015)

[9] Grupa Spomenik (Monument Group) which has since 2002 dealt with (in)ability of talking about the war, founded a translation platform in 2010 to address this issue, naming it after a text by Catherine Hass: *Qu' appelle t-on une guerre? Enquete sur le nom de guerre aujourd'hui*. The project was first presented at the first Biennial of Contemporary Art (No Network "Time Machine" Biennial, D0 ARK Underground) held in Konjic, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2011, which actually uncovered the (administrative) mechanisms of perpetuating the war using different means. The question: What does the name war stand for today?, testifies of this current state of war, its permanence and necessity, the purpose of which, as it is emphasized by Catharina Hass, is not the achievement of peace. Read more in: *Catherina Hass: Qu' appelle t-on une guerre? Enquete sur le nom de guerre aujourd'hui*, Universite Paris 8, Paris, 2001 (PhD Thesis); *The Project Biennial D-0 ARK Underground, Bosnia and Herzegovina*, ed. by Bařak řenova, Association Biennial of Contemporary Art, Sarajevo, 2013.

[10] Kristeva, *ibid.*, p. 9