

YET TO BE TITLED
2012
Lana Čmajčanin
Three-channel video installation
19'39 and 5'38"

"It's a poor sort of memory that can only look backwards"
(The White Queen – Through the Looking Glass)

"There is no need to be afraid of the past. It's gone."
(Anonymous)

Throning high above Tirana's main square, up on the facade of the National History Museum, the mosaic *The Albanians* (completed in 1981) counts amongst the most prominent features of the Albanian capital. Made in the manner of Socialist Realism, the spectacular scene is characterized by an excess of strength, courage and decisiveness, lead by a heroine in traditional clothes and equipped with a gun. It essentially depicts a group of 13 heroic figures in their allegorical strive toward the future, whilst some of them seem to protect the group against an invisible 'behind'. Alluding to prototypical characters from more than 2000 years of Albanian history, already on a descriptive level myth and history, past and present merge into one.

The Albanians is also one of the few architectural remains of the country's Communist past still to be found in the public space. Albeit apparent efforts to preserve the mosaic, the 'original' driving force of the mosaic – a red star – has gone missing. Dismantled in the 1990s, the today vacant spot seems keen to nurture a less polemic reading and alternative form of 'co-habitation'; however transcending the 13 figures into rebels without a cause.

Familiar to this iconography since her childhood and yet detached from it – Yugoslavia withdrew its diplomatic mission from Albania as early as in 1950 – artist Lana Čmajčanin defined the (in)famous mosaic as an opportunity to initiate a "mnemonic digging". At the core of her piece *Yet to be titled* (2012) lied an urgent quest for re-interpretation. How to integrate a legend of failed promises into the everyday life? Which elements of its storyline could still be considered animate, comforting, or disconcerting in the public eye? And how to salvage from such a distorted representation a personal positioning toward the current state, that is, the state of tomorrow?

Visible even from a far distance due to its gigantic size, but discretely neglected for its undesired political connotations, Čmajčanin's first "mnemonic digging" confronted the artist with an unexpected conflict. Launching first informal conversations with inhabitants of the city, it seemed that the mosaic was above all paired with indifference. Although looking "loud", the mosaic designated a site of muteness, as if under the spell of a hidden *damnatio memoriae*. For the work that followed, it became clear that unlike *deconstructing* a historical myth, *Yet to be titled* was to attempt a *construction* from scratch in the first place, with the mosaic as a close and effective undercurrent.

Composed in two parts, the first video element of *Yet to be titled* presents a sequence of 13 interviews, for which the artist went back to 're-interview' local acquaintances on their personal viewpoints of the mosaic. Split into three separate frames, the faces of the interviewees appear to float horizontally through the video without ever explicitly meeting or 'touching' each other.

Instead of creating a virtual dialogue, the singular, hermetic quality of the interviews pulls the focus on the *act of speaking* itself; leading out of the documentary context right into a *performative* situation.

This split screen presentation is accompanied by a second video element of the work – responding to the 'Socialist Realism' aesthetic of the mosaic with a collective, 'socially realistic' re-enactment. Displayed in slow-motion, the 13 interviewees – now actors – enter the scene one by one, carefully seeking their position and balance in their attributed roles. Devoid any tools and costumes, with empty hands on an empty field, but also *without sound*, the pantomime performers gradually walk into a 'fictitious historical image' that – unmasked as an autonomous production in its own right - can no longer be fictionalized.

As with the original mosaic (in which the mimics equal facades), it remains invisible to the eye if and at which point the performers depart from their roles or subvert them – the video frame only allows for a glimpse at the outer, gestic expression. Restrained to merely project upon the participants a potential experience, the slow-pace building of the scene yet stirs an unexpected confrontation with time and the (re-)construction of history: whilst several thousand years of history are reduced here to a little more than 5 minutes, it feels as if history has rarely endured so 'long'.

Screened simultaneously, the two video strands of *Yet to be titled* stir a dithering assembly. As the eye shifts from the recorded interviews to the mute re-enactment, from text to image, one becomes increasingly immersed in the idea to witness here a 'real-time' building of history – each uttered word from the interviews seems to affect a new physical movement on the neighboring screen. The personal memories and meandering thoughts of the interviewees turn into a text- and image-producing machine, deprived of their initial innocence to act as mere commentaries. In doing so, Čmajčanin intelligibly lays bare an important contingency of the past within the present and conversely. As the 're-enactment' shows, history, perhaps, is neither to be found in the 'original' nor the 're-enacted' 13-figure constellation, but the result of a curious dialectic, in which history becomes continuously affected and remodeled by the very same texts it produces about itself.

It comes to no surprise that in *Yet to be titled* the "real" mosaic is nowhere to be seen. Through the words and acts of the participants, we learn that the 13 figures reminiscent of the entire history of the country are actually composed by "ten men and three women", that their "hands are huge"; a scene "full of weapons", or that the core of the mosaic acts as a triple symbol of "war, labor and tradition" whilst "nobody is looking at the future". Putting the emphasis on a different element of the mosaic each time, the interviews disclose an infinite number of access points to the image, that finds itself all of a sudden "untitled". Its future title, perhaps, still dwells somewhere on the expanded field that *Yet to be titled* sets out to map impatiently; that is somewhere between the 5 minute live-performance and the 2000 years construct, between the mosaic and the installation – waiting to provide the lady in the centre (of both) images with a tool.

By Sonja Lau, Berlin/Maastricht