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Performances of Memory

Collective resistance in the aftermath of violence

DIMITRA GKITSA

The public space of post-socialist Europe has been marked by contested collective memories in the aftermath of the collapse of state socialism, as well as the abrupt transition to neoliberal democracy. When the unifying socialist ideology was made redundant, nationalism became the new narrative for countries that had to redefine their national identities and borders. In many cases, national expansion resulted in violence and armed conflicts, including, for instance, the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001) that erupted in the Balkans with the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. A similar aggressive nationalism has led to another war in post-socialist Europe after Russia's full invasion of Ukraine. In the aftermath of such armed invasions and socio-political turmoil, history has been interpreted and misinterpreted by the invaders, serving their own political agendas and perpetuating national myths. The post-socialist public space is scarred by both its actual battlefields and by memory battles in the way that history is remembered or forgotten in the aftermath of violence.

Performance art practices in Eastern Europe have engaged on many occasions with aspects of collective memory and history, including its material ramifications in public spaces such as monuments, memorials and other sites 'where memory crystallizes and secretes itself' (Nora 1989: 7). More than just commemorating certain historic events, sites of memory construct their own historic narrative and knowledge frameworks in public space. Inevitably then sites of memory contain also 'tensions which may emerge around competing interests, contradictory ideologies or incompatible aesthetic sensibilities' (Clark 2011: 68). Working with memory in the visual arts then can become an entry point, not only to make sense of complex histories, but also to untangle their aftermath in the present and to uncover stories

and experiences that are not included in larger historic narratives.

Exploring the ways in which performance art intertwines with the politics of memory that is embedded in monuments and memorials of the post-socialist space, scholars have noted that live art can help us understand the socio-political changes that have occurred in the post-socialist reality (Preda 2022) and can subvert past dominant symbols to address present social struggles (Isto 2021). Moreover, performance art that makes visible unofficial memories of underrepresented communities can disturb the linearity of historic time. In fact, the very liveness and the time/space specificity and ephemerality of performance art 'blurs the boundaries between past and present, by bringing the past to and in the here and now' (Plate and Smelik 2013: 11). The embodied stories put forward with live art carry also a 'feel-ability' that 'accounts for the assumed capacity of one body's history to be felt by another' (Trezise 2014: 4). Since live art can engage both physically and emotionally with its audiences, it also carries the possibility to activate a 'social *commemoration*: rituals establishing new relations to the past event' (Widrich 2014: 34, emphasis in original). In this sense, many art performances function as a kind of independent monument of their own legacy (Widrich 2014). So, if performance art enables alternative commemorative practices, then what collective responses can it activate in the aftermath of historic trauma, violence and armed invasions? More crucially, what is the role of such performative actions within communities that have witnessed and survived past atrocities?

Thinking around the relationship between live art and the activist potentials of memory politics, this article explores two contemporary art performances that were created following

the Bosnian War (1992–5): *Što te nema* (Why are you not here?) (2006–20) by artist Aida Šehović and *Our Family Garden* (2021) by artist and activist Smirna Kulenović. These two distinct case studies use commemorative practices in the aftermath of genocidal violence. By analysing the ways in which Šehović and Kulenović employ performance practices of public mourning and collective care in their art, the article argues that these two performances function as acts of affective resistance. This affective resistance, which is predominately mobilized by women, is directed both to a past invasion, the traumatic ‘after-affects’ (Pollock 2013) of which are still unbearable, and to current memory narratives that perpetuate past violence.

MOURNING FOR A BELATED JUSTICE

During the project *Što te nema* (Why are you not here?) that took place from 2006 to 2020, contemporary artist Aida Šehović, in collaboration with the Bosnian diaspora, created a travelling and nomadic monument that comprised 8,372 cups of coffee in memory of the 8,372 Bosnian Muslims that were killed during the Srebrenica genocide in July 1995. Initially, the project started as a one-day performance in Sarajevo in 2006 and included traditional coffee cups (*čildžani*) collected by members of the Women of Srebrenica Association. Since then, the performance has been organized in public spaces of various cities across the world, bringing together the Bosnian diaspora. During the performance members of the public were invited to participate by filling the available empty cups with coffee. The performance evolved almost as a ritual. While sharing a cup of coffee, the participants sat on the floor next to one another, listening to one another’s stories and remembering those who lost their lives during the Srebrenica genocide. Elaborating on the idea behind initiating this collective performance, the artist explains:

When I was doing research about Srebrenica, what struck me the most was a story that I came across about a woman who said that she missed her husband the most when she didn’t have anybody to share coffee with. I was interested in exploring

through this work what loss means on a daily basis. How does it feel? What does genocide feel like after it has occurred? We often pay attention to such tragedies as they unfold, then we move on. But how does loss actually manifest itself in daily life? (Snodgrass and Šehović 2021)

The collective act of offering and drinking coffee is not only a crucial element of Bosnian culture but also a common part of mourning rites across the Balkans. A cup of coffee is the first thing given to guests who come to pay their respects to the deceased. However, in this case, the empty cups that wait to be filled up with coffee become a cry for a mourning that was never allowed to occur in the first place, and a demand for recognition of responsibility by those who caused the genocide.

The collapse of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s was followed by wars between diverse ethnic groups that were once united under a similar socialist identity and ideology. While new nation-states were formed, constructing their distinct national and cultural identities, old issues of xenophobia, racism and ethnic conflict were brought back to the surface. The war crimes, genocides and ethnic cleansing that took place during the Yugoslav Wars and were fuelled by Serbian nationalism – evoked to replace the ideological vacuum caused by the collapse of the socialist system – remain unaddressed to this day.¹ Drawing on the work of the feminist scholar Žarana Papić,² the Slovenian philosopher Marina Gržinić (2020) argues that, in fact, turbo-nationalist neoliberalism stems from a pseudo-amnesia that played a key role in the construction of national identity in Serbia and in Republika Srpska (Serb Republic), a Serbian political entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina that was formed after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia (2020). Rather than silencing the genocide and the war atrocities, pseudo-amnesia in recent Serbian mainstream media and political narratives glorifies and misinterprets the history, perpetuating existing nationalist narratives, and as such the social and ethnic tensions that arise from them (ibid.). To this end, the performance becomes a platform to address not only a past atrocity that was the direct outcome of military invasion but also a present national hegemony that has not allowed for a

¹ The former Yugoslavia included diverse ethnic groups and religions comprised of six republics (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia) and two autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina). The collapse of socialism brought political turmoil and the rise of militant nationalisms with the individual republics declaring independence. During this time, Serbia’s nationalist sentiments, which envisioned a ‘Greater Serbia’ having under its occupation the former Yugoslav republics, resulted in a series of ethnic wars. The military invasions, ethnic cleansing and massacres, particularly in Kosovo (1999 and 2004) and in Bosnia (for instance, the Srebrenica genocide), remain even nowadays unaddressed without full responsibility being taken by the Serbian authorities.

² Papić coined the term ‘turbo-fascism’ to theorize the rise of neoliberal nationalisms that appeared in the Balkans after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia (2002). Papić’s conceptual enquiry was developed in response to Slobodan Milošević’s regime in the 1990s, which generated xenophobic, racist and misogynistic media and mainstream political narratives. Such narratives not only fuelled but also justified Serbia’s invasion in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo.

proper acknowledgement and recognition of its crimes. The performance, therefore, highlights the fact that those who were left behind are still expecting an official apology, a commemoration and belated justice.

Who gets to tell the history and for whom? Whose lives are rendered worthy of mourning and by whom? *Što te nema* as a performative action created the time and the space needed to mourn in public. Mourning is an act of remembering. But it is also the very process of acknowledging loss. In this sense, I would argue that *Što te nema* borrows a commemorative practice similar to protests and demonstrations that have been mobilized by women and that have employed public mourning as a strategy to make visible past atrocities. For instance, the political and ethical importance of mourning has become particularly apparent during the non-violent performative protests of Women in Black (Žene u Crnom) who were formed in Serbia in October 1991 as a direct reaction against the rise of Serbia's nationalism and aggressive politics that were a catalyst in fuelling the Yugoslav Wars.³

Dressed in black, a sign of mourning, Women in Black (fig. 1) organize silent protests and vigils, usually at rush hour in public spaces, to protest past and present wars as well as the violence of homophobia, racism and misogyny in contemporary Serbian society. Their current protests of public mourning operate as an invasion of public spaces of power that have not allowed minority voices to be heard or experiences to be represented. Analysing Women in Black's protests, and their practice of public mourning, the anthropologist Athena Athanasiou observes that in fact the very act of appearing in the public sphere and allowing for a public mourning to happen is a political act that disturbs dominant narratives. Athanasiou notes that

[t]he performative work of reflective and agonistic mourning turns a 'common place' of national memory into a disturbing heterotopia that de-normalises the way in which the nation *takes place* as the exclusive sharing of a common space and time (including a common space and time for proper mourning). (Athanasiou 2017: 71, emphasis in original)



Mourning, part of broader gender norms typically performed by women, is subverted by Women in Black into an agonistic protest that, within the conservative and post-war national(istic) society, aims at re-inscribing in the realms of public memory those subjectivities that have been forgotten, or worse, completely erased (Athanasiou 2017). In an earlier conversation with Judith Butler, this type of recognition is inevitably related to the very life and death struggles. Butler and Athanasiou suggest that 'prevailing norms decide who will count as a human or as a subject of rights, then we can see that those who remain unrecognized are subject to precarity' (2013: 88–9). For Women in Black in Serbia, the performative protest is indeed a plea for recognition – a recognition that goes against dominant narratives that are based on forgetting and omitting from the public space past acts of atrocity, as is the case, for instance, with the Srebrenica genocide that has not been fully addressed and acknowledged by Serbia. In response to this reality, Women in Black protests generate a counter-memory that is as live as the bodies who continue to remember, to commemorate and to speak of an invisibility and an absence.

Public mourning has been utilized worldwide in many protests and activist practices. From the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, an association of women who started organizing weekly public vigils in 1982 to shed light on those who had

■ Figure 1. Women in Black public protest Srebrenica – *Ime Genocida* (Srebrenica – The Name of Genocide), 10 July 2022, Belgrade, Serbia. Courtesy of Women in Black Archive

³ Women in Black in Serbia (Žene u Crnom) are part of the international Women in Black, a feminist and antimilitary global movement. It was first formed in Jerusalem, in January 1988 when Palestinian and Israeli women marched into the West Bank to protest the occupation. Dressed in black they would organize vigils on a weekly basis. Their protest practices spread across the world and, since then, they have grown to become a global feminist network and an alliance of solidarity.

disappeared during the military dictatorship in Argentina, and the Mothers of Mothers of Srebrenica who were founded in 2002 to seek justice for victims of the Srebrenica massacre, to the 2008 riots in Athens that erupted when a 16-year-old student was shot by police, the agonistic performativity of grief interweaves with a common fight for truth and freedom in the aftermath of violence (Milstein 2017). Similar to the above activist practices that use the politics of grief to protest past atrocities, the collective mourning that was allowed to manifest during *Što te nema* becomes an affective political and ethical action. The performance involved participants who were dislocated from the initial place of atrocity, engaging with Bosnians who live abroad and who belong perhaps to what Marianne Hirsch has identified as the ‘generation of postmemory’ (2008). By situating the ‘post’ before memory, Hirsch highlights the critical relationship that the second generation carries to traumatic events that preceded their birth of individual memory (ibid.). Although those in the ‘generation of postmemory’ have not witnessed the immediate atrocities of the war, they were nevertheless affected by the trauma that was transmitted to them. As such, engaging with the past becomes more than anything a need and a demand of the present. Yet *Što te nema* did not function simply as a platform for an ephemeral commemoration. When the performance returned to its initial place in Srebrenica in 2020, and reflecting on the counter-narratives that appeared during the different gatherings across the world, the artist decided to turn the collected coffee cups into a permanent installation. The installation will function as a material archive of the live performances and perhaps as an alternative memorial that will facilitate the continuation of ongoing conversations.

HEALING FOR A POSSIBLE FUTURE

The traces of past atrocities remain to haunt present temporalities and spaces, calling for justice and social reparation. And yet, the act of remembering is never just about the lives of those who belong to the past. Reparation and justice are also needed to be able to imagine a

future. The critical connection between past and future becomes especially apparent during *Our Family Garden* (2021), a collective and ritualistic performance that was initiated by activist and contemporary artist Smirna Kulenović. The performance took place with the participation of more than 100 women and girls of all ages. Wearing red dresses, a colour that inevitably brings connotations of the bloodshed in the Bosnian War (1992–5), during the performance women and girls planted seeds of calendula flowers together while commemorating the relatives they had lost during the wars (fig. 2).



While *Što te nema* revolved around a collective practice of mourning, *Our Family Garden* aimed at healing and bringing life back to places that were hit during the war. The choice to plant specifically calendula flowers was as important as the choice of the location where they were planted. Calendula is considered in many cultures and traditions a medicinal flower with healing properties. Nearly 1,000 calendula seeds were planted on the borders between the Republic of Srpska (Serb Republic) and the

■ Figure 2. Smirna Kulenović, *Our Family Garden II, Participative Performance*, 2021. Photo by Ajla Salkić. Courtesy of the artist

Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first was a self-proclaimed state and territory in Bosnia that was under the governmental control of Serbia during the Bosnian War. The latter was an area that played a crucial role during both the armed conflicts between Serbia and Bosnia and between Bosnia and Croatia. Its official recognition as a federation in 1994 ended the Croat–Bosnian War.⁴ The border between these two territories in Bosnia was an area that was hit the most during the war. The location of the performance thus becomes a liminal space that accumulates all the visible and invisible traumas of the war. The soil is an archive that bears witness to the atrocities of the wars. Nearly thirty years after the Bosnian War, nature still carries visible scars from the bombings. In addition to human lives, the war also destroyed the local ecosystem. In a sense, the natural environment, including all non-human-agents that are part of it, carries its own memories. What does it mean then to heal nature from its violent past? In what ways is a collective art performance capable of healing? More crucially, how can the act of collective remembering allow for such a healing to *take place*?

Burial and mourning rites in many traditions worldwide, and especially in the Balkans, have been performed predominately by women. From singing or creating lament songs that were passed from mothers to daughters, from taking immediate care of the body of the deceased, to having to be dressed in black during the mourning period, funerary practices have always been a female labour. More than just expressing or processing grief and pain, such funeral practices have allowed women to maintain their significance within strict patriarchal societies in the Balkans (Spiri 2020). In *Our Family Garden*, women also undertake the task of healing. However, the healing process here is not only directed towards human life and the traumatic memories that it carries, but also towards healing nature after the environmental destructions of the war. Perhaps such a reciprocal act of healing together with non-human, or more-than-human agents, is an inevitable strategy to sustain and continue life in the aftermath of loss and collective trauma, providing ‘the ontological ground on which

everything humans relate with exists: myriad doings – everything we do – and of ontological entities that compose a world – selves, bodies, environment’ (Bellacasa 2017: 69–70). I would argue that in this case, a ritual of collective healing is, inevitably, an act of performing care. Collective care is ‘needed to create, hold together, and sustain life’ (70). Collective acts of care remind us of the inevitable interdependence and inter-relation that we have, both towards each other and towards the ecosystem that surrounds us.

Caring for an *other* and for whatever constitutes an environment that is needed to sustain life, more than just repairing a past, is also an act of preserving the present and securing a possible future. In fact, the very question of memory is ‘a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow’ (Derrida 1996: 36). In the case of *Our Family Garden*, collective commemoration is employed as a strategy both to remember those who are no longer in the present and to heal a traumatic past for those who are yet to come. Writing on the politics of mourning and questioning how certain lives and forms of grief receive wide recognition, whereas other lives are rendered invisible and ‘ungrievable’, Butler (2004) points out that mourning is also a realization of the inevitable bonds that all lives have with one another:

When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. It is not as if an ‘I’ exists independently over here and then simply loses a ‘you’ over there, especially if the attachment to ‘you’ is part of what composes who ‘I’ am. (Butler 2004: 22)

What connects the past with the future through the practice of mourning is the recognition that life itself – including both human and non-human life – is vulnerable, and, as such, it needs to be ‘taken care of’. It stands then, that collective commemorative practices are

⁴ The Croat-Bosnian War (1992–4), also known as a ‘war within a war’, was part of the broader Bosnian War (1992–5) that started when Bosnia declared its independence in 1992 following a referendum. This was the most brutal conflict of the Yugoslav Wars, causing the loss of hundreds of thousands lives.

antagonistic, not only in the sense that they uncover or speak of a violent past, but they also become a vital reminder of the politics of care. All life is vulnerable. Similarly, all life is also susceptible to present or future acts of invasion. The very politics of memory, then, interweaves with the politics of care. Caring for the past means also creating the necessary solidarity to save a possible future.

COLLECTIVE BODIES IN AFFECTIVE RESISTANCE

The performance studies scholar Amelia Jones has written that live art, which positioned the body in the centre of art practice, was able to destroy 'the pretensions of objectivity on which the various institutions and discourses of Euro-American art based their authority' (2008: 154). This also applies to the case of Eastern European performance art. The controlled art production during socialist regimes, as well as the dismantled art institutions after the collapse of socialism, meant that the live body was one of the main domains that allowed experimentation and critique of dominant perceptions (Badovinac 1999; Bryzgel 2017). Similarly, I would argue that the works analysed in this article not only challenge the ways in which collective memories are established and presented in the public domain by those in power but also they generate spaces and social gatherings for alternative commemorative practices.

Although female bodies were systemic targets and victims of sexualized violence during the war, women's experiences also were excluded and made invisible in the post-war peace processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina (McLeod 2019). In fact, gender-based violence continued in the post-conflict patriarchal society (Kostovicova *et al.* 2020). Yet the Yugoslav wars also brought a crucial shift in the sense that women started organizing collectively by establishing feminist organizations and mobilizing together in public spaces. Such acts of resistance, which challenge past and existing patriarchal structures and demand visibility and recognizability of the atrocities that took place during the war, are the direct outcomes of the changing roles that women had to undertake

in the aftermath of 'widespread displacement, the loss or absence of male family members, and a decrease in economic capacities and resources' (Berry 2018: 154). Collective memory has become a fundamental element of women's mobilization and activism in post-war Bosnia. For instance, the representation of women as widows and mothers mourning for their lost sons and husbands in public spaces was pertinent in the establishment of Srebrenica as a memorial space (Jacobs 2017). Similarly, the performances analysed in this article are also part of an existing movement of resistance that is mobilized in the public space by women who employ collective commemoration and mourning as an act of resistance.

Performances of memory, and the collective bodies that perform them, constitute another act of affective resistance to past invasions in the sense that they call for a belated justice and they make visible present powers that perpetuate erasure of certain violent events from public space. They are collective performances that appear in public space as counter-actions and agonistic tensions with established institutions, official constructions and articulations of memory in the public sphere. Chantal Mouffe reminds us that confrontation is at the core of practising democracy and '[e]very order is therefore susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices' (2013: 2). Thus, resistance is an inevitable answer to aggressive, actual, territorial or even conceptual invasions. Resistance is also a reaction to the ways in which past violent invasions are (mis)translated or (mis)interpreted in their retrospective political and social realities.

Since trauma cannot be fully representable, performances of memory appear *après-coup*, or in the 'after-affect' of historic trauma to use Griselda Pollock's term (2013), precisely to demand space in the representation of history and the ways in which such history is remembered and forgotten, used and abused. *Što te nema* and *Our Family Garden* are affective performative acts because, although they are not able to change broader formal and hegemonic commemorative practices, they can still offer glitches for alternative memories to appear in the public domain, demanding justice and

recognition in the aftermath of past violence. In addition to producing embodied ‘forms of sociality’ (Trezise 2014), which is needed for the appearance of counter-narratives, affect creates the space to heal and to care for a generation that comes in the aftermath of a traumatic invasion. The collective memories that appear in the performance become a form of alternative knowledge production when it comes to reading the past. Precisely because ‘memory as mediator between performance and performativity operates on a mixture of temporalities’ (Bal 2000: 108), memory can also bring the past and the present, as well as the past and the future, into temporal proximity with one another.

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