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After Memory

One of the most striking formative principles of Irena Lagator's work is its evocation of process. In her far-reaching, site-specific pieces in which a compellingly poetic space is created out of delicate and fluttering threads (*What We Call Real* (2007) and other earlier site-specific pieces) there is an almost sublime transference of the material to the immaterial. Her handwork, precision and the duration of the work process link these site-specific works with earlier pieces that play with surfaces (*Witness of Time* (2001) in which the static (stone, building, ruin) stands in sharp contrast to the mobile and changeable (cloth, wind).

Also in Lagator's smaller pieces, installations such as *Limited Responsibility Society* and *Machine Error* (both 2007), there occurs multiplication of identical elements: elegant cones created by "drawing out" rolls of till receipts or discarded test prints from a photographic press. In a wider sense, this group of works also includes a distinctive "line" from Irena Lagator's opus – her books-objects. In material terms, a book is an object of accumulation: it is physically created out of pieces of paper – pages – but, more importantly, it seems to (or at least it should) be comprised of a collection of ideas conveyed by this physicality. A book itself is in essence an object of process. It is a compressed duration that can expand to the plain of consciousness.

After Memory (2007) is in essence a book. However, it does not have a handcrafted quality, at least not in the sense that can be seen in Lagator's other works. Compared, for example, to the book-object *The Society of Unlimited Responsibility* (2006) which displays a distinctive presence of the artist's signature as well as a character of process that signifies time, *After Memory* is almost "neutral". For the most part, its ingredients were produced by Lagator's material collaborators – printers, cashiers and, finally, bookbinders. We could suggest that it is a sort of a readymade Duchampian entity. Yugoslavian bank notes of 200-dinar denomination are arranged sheaf-like in three rows and bound in hard covers.

On other hand, this book-object is one of Lagator's most complex pieces. Its obvious meanings are interwoven with those that are merely implied. The iconography is dominated by images of the artist Nadežda Petrović (1873–1915) that appear both on the front and the back of the featured bank notes. On the front there are two images of Petrović – a portrait in raster format taken from a photograph and a reproduction of Meštrović's sculpture of Petrović which stands as a monument in front of a grammar school in Čačak.¹ On the back of each note is a depiction of Petrović in a nurse's uniform, also taken from a famous photograph. In addition, both sides of the bank notes feature the domes of Gračanica Monastery, of which Nadežda Petrović painted several versions in 1913.

In the West Balkans, bank notes were issued by the national banks of countries that claimed sovereignty – Serbia, Montenegro and the three Yugoslavias, as well as the war-time puppet regimes of the Germans. On all of those bank notes for a period of over a century women appeared only in allegorical form. Even the recognizable Queen Milica remained anonymous on notes printed between the two world wars, in effect assuming the role of "Yugoslavia". Namelessness was the lot of other women on the bank notes, "women from Konavle" or "harvesting women". Thus Nadežda Petrović was the first woman to gain the right to appear under her own name on a dinar-denominated bank note issued in the post-Milošević era. As bank notes and their iconography are one of the most precise markers of the condition and character of a state, this suggests that gender equality had a pretty low priority in former Yugoslavia. This was also the last series of bank notes to carry the name of Yugoslavia, a country for whose conception Nadežda Petrović energetically campaigned and ultimately sacrificed her life.²

Economic historians say that money was introduced as a medium of exchange marking the emergence of a market economy. When physical exchange became insufficient to fulfill man's commercial needs, the first primitive money appeared. This was later replaced by branded metal which, in the 7th Century AD, became minted coin, one type of money we use today. The next substantial step in the development of money happened much later with the introduction of paper bank notes. An authority such as a state would print certificates that confirmed that at any time that paper could be exchanged for a certain weight of precious metal. Since these notes had authority vested in them, their design and quality were precise indicators of the state issuing them.

¹ This bronze bust of Nadežda Petrović is considered one of the most accomplished by this prolific sculptor. Many years ago I visited the monument with a friend, the late Davor Matičević, (art historian, curator and, briefly, director of the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in the early 1990's), who gave me a detailed analysis of the sculpture. His thesis was that the surface of the sculpture, with flakes of clay painstakingly reproduced on the permanent bronze cast, gave it a specific sensuality that made this piece stand out in Meštrović's otherwise primarily epic opus. This may point to an erotic fixation of the sculptor on his model reflected in a piece of work created many years after her death.

² Nadežda Petrović died of typhoid fever as a volunteer nurse in 1915 during WWI – translator's note.

The bank notes that Irena Lagator used for *After Memory* are a special case; they have no value. At the time when the piece was created these bank notes had already been withdrawn, having ceased to be legal tender, and relegated to incineration. But even at the time when they were issued, after the October 5th, 2000, change of government in Serbia,³ they were bank notes that falsely identified themselves. They carried the name of the issuer, the People's Bank of Yugoslavia, and the hologram contained the heraldic symbols of the two-state federation, Serbia and Montenegro, that constituted the third Yugoslavia. However, at that time the dinar was legal tender only in Serbia, the larger of the two countries in a federation that would soon cease to exist. Montenegro had already introduced the German deutschmark as its official currency. This would later be replaced by the Euro. This closed the circle for Nadežda Petrović. She was the woman who appeared on the last symbol of an entity for whose conception she had served as a spiritual leader.

Even though lacking in handcrafted quality, this piece by Lagator does not lack tactility. This quality creeps in from a wholly unexpected direction – the bank notes that make this object had been used; there are indications that they have been circulated, rolled, creased, washed, counted... Just as thoughts, emotions and images transferred from author to reader create the aura of the “usual” book, the fact that countless people held these brownish notes and used them to pay for a multiplicity of everyday goods and services creates an invisible skein of fulfilled and unfulfilled desires around this object and traces labyrinthine paths between fingers, pockets, wallets and tills. The metaphysics of touch can be traced back to the oldest civilizations and found in very different shapes. Money is seemingly banal, lacking poetry, yet it creates an infinite network of humanity. Hence this piece by Irena Lagator is a kind of implosion of an imaginary community that was all too real.

Finally, for a piece of contemporary art context plays a big role in regard to the conditions of its production and the space in which it addresses its audience. *After Memory* was presented at the renowned exhibition “Memorijal Nadežde Petrović”, which in 2007, in its 24th edition, achieved international character for the first time. The collection of the Čačak gallery that organizes the show, as well as important pieces of 20th century Yugoslav art, includes many works by Nadežda Petrović. Irena Lagator's *After Memory* was exhibited in a room that reconstructed the space of the famous artist as closely as possible.⁴ The title of the piece, the title of the exhibition and, finally, the

³ These bank notes featured “the greats” from national history, and in terms of design they were a new paradigm that intended to convey the new spirit of the state and the stability of the currency. Also their issue was followed by for the time unprecedented advertising campaign, with billboards carrying slogans “New dinar for new times”.

⁴ Besides the original exhibition for which this piece was created, there is another context for its display. It is in the Museum of Money in the Bank of Serbia, where *After Memory* is part of the permanent collection. In the framework of a primarily historical exhibition, Irena Lagator's piece is the only one that speaks the language of ‘non-applied’ art. Indeed is the only foray of the language of new art into this traditional museum setting.

character of that room turned out to be a perfect match. The podium on which the book was mounted was in a central, almost altar-like position. Early Christian altars were usually placed over the tombs of martyrs, and even today it is customary to have the partial remains of a martyr's body within an altar. The real presence of the almost mythical "hero of art" Nadežda Petrović is through the paintings that surround Irena Lagator's piece, and her image is evoked through the iconography of the banknote. This establishes a "vertical connection" between two epochs, two languages of art and two women-artists; the piece becomes a medium of a personal base in tradition.