



Renata Poljak, *Ruta and the Monument*, 2007, still from two-channel video installation.

## RENATA POLJAK *Split, Croatia*

### ARTIST IN RESIDENCE | SEPTEMBER 27 – DECEMBER 13, 2008 | ART IN GENERAL

Art in General resident artist **RENATA POLJAK** is a Paris-based video artist originally from Split, Croatia. Her work explores the dramatic political upheaval and violence the Balkan region has undergone since the early 1990s, and the ramifications of those changes in the lives of émigrés throughout Western Europe. Poljak's videos and installations often combine staged and even fantastical situations with documentation of real-life misunderstandings and misuses of power.

Her filmic explorations meld autobiographical incidents—her experience as a woman in the former Yugoslavia and in France, for example—and scenarios reflecting the social and political consequences of Croatia's move from socialism to free market capitalism. With subjects ranging from the memorialization of the Holocaust to the trauma of post-civil war Serbio-Croatian relations, Poljak's work investigates how transitional political and economic moments can reignite brutal social customs with deleterious effects for women and ethnic or religious minorities.

—Eva Díaz, Curator

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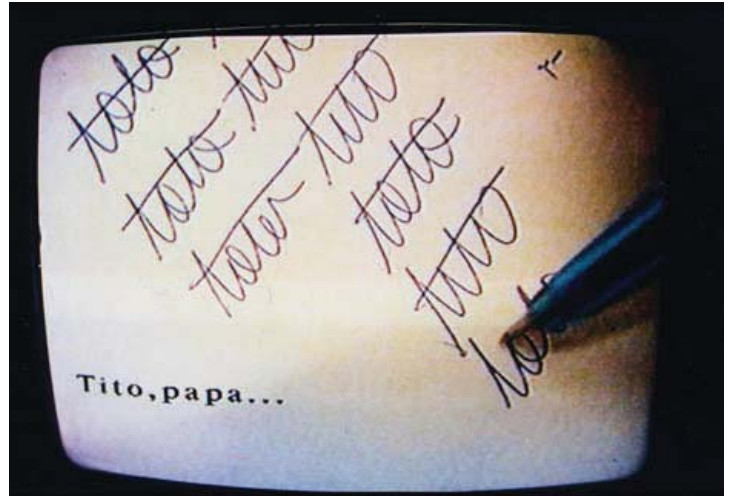
ART IN GENERAL'S ONGOING ARTIST IN RESIDENCY PROGRAM IS DESIGNED TO GIVE ARTISTS THE OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE NEW WORK ON SITE, ALLOWING THE PUBLIC TO INTERACT WITH ARTISTS WHILE EXPERIENCING A WORK IN PROGRESS.

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Renata Poljak, *Ruta and the Monument*, 2007, still from two-channel video installation.



Renata Poljak, *Memories (Tito, tata)*, 1999, video still.

## LIKE GOING UNDERWATER

In a *Spiegel* interview from May 2005, Peter Eisenman described what he observed when *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (2005) was complete: “I watched people walk into it for the first time and it is amazing how those heads disappear—like going underwater.” In *Ruta and the Monument* (2007), a two-channel video installation currently on view at Art in General, Croatian artist Renata Poljak simultaneously realizes and critiques the disorienting experience Eisenman’s memorial creates for its participants by juxtaposing a video that follows a group tour of this Berlin monument with one that stages the fantasy of a fifteen-year-old girl named Ruta before she is transported to her death in a Nazi camp.

Ruta appears in the preface to Miljenko Jergovic’s 2006 novel *Ruta Tannenbaum* as a young Jewish princess who tries to make herself invisible. By the time she is taken away by “tour guides,” her foot is all that remains. Loaded into a cattle wagon, Ruta believes she is on her way to India, and a cow licking her foot suggests the pleasure she takes in this fantasy. For Poljak, the image of a girl’s foot, the last fragment of her body, subverts contemporary efforts to make the Holocaust a consumable spectacle that the tour of Eisenman’s monument exemplifies.

Though they both take their point of departure from the Holocaust, the videos seem to take place in different worlds, and Poljak’s distinct visual renditions of each scenario dramatize the disjunctions between them. The details of the tour—Poljak’s seemingly unstylized camera work, the cheery tourists in winter parkas, and the grey cement of the monument rising into the rows of buildings stacked against the sky—evoke a bland normality. In contrast, the portrayal of Ruta’s elegantly posed foot in the second video is perverse. With blue-green sea water, a dress of thick white lace, and a long red tongue coming in from out of the frame, Poljak has carefully composed a bright underwater still-life that portrays the erotic dimensions of Ruta’s fantasy. By compressing the story of Ruta into an ambiguous emblem floating endlessly and pleasurably before her impending death, and setting it in relation to a scene in which the Holocaust is literally cemented into place, Poljak reveals how closely aligned fantasy and femininity are in the imagination of memory. In so doing, *Ruta and the Monument* shows both have been repressed from the solid business of memory and monument production.

The narrator of *Ruta Tannenbaum* articulates the common perception that Princess Ruta is stupid and superfluous. A mean-spirited misogyny informs these judgments, and Ruta’s youthful femininity, fanciful imagination, and high self-regard disqualify her from the roles frequently assigned to women in historical crises: heroic mother, helpless victim, or militant martyr. Poljak’s portrayal of Ruta’s foot dramatically emphasizes her sensual pleasure; it underscores—but also celebrates—the girl’s *uselessness*, and makes it clear that Ruta’s body is not proper to the project of mourning the Holocaust. Yet Ruta’s absurd impropriety actually makes her story all the more solemn. The fantasy gives her unforeseen death an undeniable weight and seriousness, which makes the tour’s strange combination of the silly and the literal all the more unsettling.

When the huckster-like British guide announces the title of the monument, he hears a laugh, and this gives him an opportunity to stress the fact that there were no Jews murdered at this site. “This plot of land,” he states forcefully, “has nothing to do with the Holocaust. No Jews were killed here, no Jews sent to extermination camps from this spot.” Ruta’s story also pivots on a literal-minded concept of place, but she resists the tour guide’s unquestioned emphasis on the actual “plot of land” as the truth. Her hope to travel to India is mocked as a silly and arrogant flight of fancy. Implicit is a judgment that Ruta is not attentive to the actualities of her place: both the site where she will die and the position in culture she should occupy.

The tour guide repeatedly states, “It is easy to get lost inside the monument,” but getting lost is not as easy as he claims. Poljak’s camera follows him as he walks a straight and assured line from one end of the monument to another. After arriving on the other side, he tells the tourists about the proposals that were not chosen. He has a real disdain for the proposal to build a huge fish tank the size of the square and fill it with blood, which he proclaims “an absolutely insane idea,” echoing the voices that dismiss Ruta. While the tour guide’s mockery of “the world’s leading architects” disregards the star architect phenomenon, he unwittingly reproduces the arrogance he ridicules. This arrogance comes to the surface most forcefully when he alludes to the fact that a Jewish man once claimed Eisenman’s monument has nothing to do with the Holocaust. The tour guide dismisses the

man's claim without offering any counterevidence. With a cavalier simplicity he states, "Personally, I think it does," as if his saying so made it true.

Poljak's choice to place Ruta's foot under water is crucial to understanding its subversion of historical certainty. In *Volatile Bodies* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz goes beyond the well-worn idea that women signify a gap in patriarchal power, and contends that women have been construed to represent "seepage" and "liquidity." This accounts for "the metaphors of uncontrollability" that haunt representations of women and the anxiety that surrounds the "undecidability" of the female body's limits.<sup>1</sup> Interpreted through Grosz's formulation, *Ruta and the Monument* mimics a cultural logic that links fluidity to femininity while subsequently repressing both. Placed in the context of the Holocaust, Poljak's piece also asks us to recall what often remains invisible in the production of monuments: the feminization of the murdered Jewish body.

Poljak's work often uses imagery of water to render the difficulties and possibilities of destabilizing cultural order. *Skok/Jump* (2000) takes place on an elevated diving board that overlooks the sea. At the top Poljak wears a bathing suit and a bright blue swim cap. Her face is heavily made up, and she paces back and forth frantically, repeating, in mantric loops, variations on the statement: "Shall I jump or not... If I jump all my makeup will be removed," until her face seems to bounce from the screen in an anxious and sweaty blur. Clearly something more than makeup is in danger if she jumps into the water. What makes *Skok/Jump* compelling is that the character's manic resistance to disorder ends up producing the dripping face she feared.

The ambiguities of complicity are at the heart of Poljak's work. In *Memories (Tito, tata)* (1999), Poljak repeats the names "Tito" (Josip Broz Tito, the post-World War II President of Yugoslavia) with "tata" (the Croatian word for "father"), while obsessively writing them on a piece of paper and then excising them until they lose their connection to politicians, history, and fathers and become lines of blue ink and abstract sounds. In the next scene, viewers see the camera circling around Poljak dancing to house music, and they might wonder whether the patriarchal power of "Tito, tata" has disappeared, or has become inscribed as an erotic identification. Does her animated dance celebrate, mock, or sustain the slippage between fathers and political figures?

Both *Skok/Jump* and *Memories (Tito, tata)* deploy Poljak's own body to complex effect, and indeed the female body is a crucial element of Poljak's work on memory. And when we think about *Memories (Tito, tata)* in relation to one of its predecessors, Sanja Iveković's *Triangle* (1979), an infamous performance piece in which the Croatian artist simulated masturbation on her apartment balcony when Tito's motorcade passed below, we see that Poljak has taken feminist art's relationship to the body in an increasingly sophisticated direction. While Iveković used the naked female body as a weapon of raw and sexualized confrontation, Poljak begins *Memories (Tito, tata)* with the image of writing, which frames the image of herself dancing and singing "Tito, tata." The shift from writing to dancing highlights the body as an unpredictable site of pleasure that might be resistant to predictable scripts of patriarchy's dominance over women.

Poljak deploys the fluidity of film and video to provoke questions in locations where unquestioned formulations reign supreme. She came of age when Yugoslavia fragmented along ethnic and nationalist lines, and her work creates subtle



Renata Poljak, *Skok/Jump*, 2000, video still.

yet probing insights into the ways in which maintaining the memory of ethnic identities, and then making them neatly correspond to the imaginary force field of the nation, requires naturalized yet strictly policed gender codes. Poljak's voice narrates the film *Great Expectations* (2005), and she explains that during the nineties there was "a great awakening of Christianity among the Croats and great hatred towards anything different, especially nationally different." By depicting young, aggressive soccer fans circling in cars, yelling in unison, and waving huge Croatian flags, Poljak restages an incident in which a man was burnt to death in his car. The film contends that entitlements bestowed upon masculinity are at the core of Croatian nationalism, and both are maintained though a violent denial of difference. The sound of crackling flames runs throughout *Great Expectations*, and suggests that what the film depicts—a grandfather's desire for a male heir, the craze to transform the Croatian coastline into a maze of condominiums—is implicated in the immolation of the innocent passerby.

"Come on, skinhead?... what does he know? He just got a little confused." The women's voices in *Great Expectations* celebrate patriarchal privilege and, in turn, both deny and subtly support the violence it wields. The film's opening scene depicts an old woman throwing open window shutters to shout "a king is born," a declaration that seems to echo ancient myths of origin. Ultimately the film argues that privileging masculinity, and making it the proclamation from which the story of the nation begins, produces a concept of time in which the crimes of history burn away into abstractions and propel capitalist expansion forward. Questions about accountability can only be posed on the sly, which is one way to describe Poljak's deceptively simple cinematic compositions. At the end of *Great Expectations*, the camera pans across the Adriatic coast, and Poljak tells us about her cousin's transformation from a skinhead to a business tyrant; her family's impatience with her questions; and their participation in Croatia's rapid and insatiable real estate boom. Poljak's voice and the image of the sea are the film's compelling remainders; they fall outside the unquestioned certainty that the spaces of history are for sale. For Poljak, the real spaces of history are like Ruta's foot. They are not offered up as easily consumable experiences, whether as memorials or beachfront property, but resist manipulation and persist as fantastical remainders.

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 204.

**RENATA POLJAK** BORN IN 1974, SPLIT, CROATIA. LIVES AND WORKS IN PARIS, FRANCE.

Renata Poljak was born in Split, Croatia. She received her undergraduate degree from the Arts Academy in Split, and her post-graduate degree from the École Régionale des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, France. She has been awarded residencies in San Francisco, Vienna, and Paris. Poljak's work is shown internationally and has received numerous awards, including the Golden Black Box Short Award at the Balkan Black Box Festival in Berlin, and the Annual Award of Women's Art Center Electra in Zagreb, Croatia.



Renata Poljak, *The View*, 2004, C-print, 60 by 40 inches.



Founded in 1981 in Lower Manhattan, Art in General is a nonprofit organization that assists artists with the production and presentation of new work. It changes in response to the needs of artists and informs and engages the public about their work. In 26 years, the organization has emerged as one of the New York City's leading nonprofits devoted to supporting and stimulating the creation of contemporary art, providing an environment in which artists can exhibit unconventional work and exchange ideas with their peers. Art in General has exhibited the work of nearly 5,000 artists working across a wide range of media.

General support of Art in General is provided by General Tools Manufacturing LLC; Abraham and Lillian Rosenberg Foundation; Starry Night Fund of Tides Foundation; New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency; Carnegie Corporation of New York; New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; Jerome Foundation; Miller-Sweezy Charitable Trust; Lily Auchincloss Foundation; Bloomberg; Altria Group, Inc.; Cowles Charitable Trust; ConEdison; College Art Association; the NYU Community Fund; Foundation for Contemporary Arts; and by individuals.

