

Mladen Miljanović

REALTIME MONUMENT

13 January – 11 February 2023

MMC KIBLA/KiBela

Mladen Miljanović exhibited his work for the first time to the Maribor public in 2019 at KIBLA PORTAL as a part of the group exhibition Tense Present. At that time, Miljanović, who is considered one of the most internationally renowned and established artists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, presented his interdisciplinary project Didactic Wall (2019). The project consists of a manual for overcoming natural and artificial obstacles for 'people on the move'/refugees, as well as large granite slabs engraved with didactic drawings of survival strategies taken from military manuals. With each new work, Miljanović's artistic practice further confirms his own rule that art can be, and must be, a critique of destructive policies, unethical rules and immoral values, however, he never resorts to empty moralizing. Indeed, his artistic practice is strongly influenced by his own experience of growing up during and after the war in a destroyed, impoverished, ethnically and territorially divided environment in an internationally isolated country, as well as by his primary military education and his first work experience, as Miljanović worked in a small stonemason's workshop engraving hyperrealistic portraits of the deceased on the tombstones before enrolling at the Academy of Fine Arts in Banja Luka. The war and its aftermath, the knowledge acquired in the military school and the stonemason's workshop thus constitute the field of reference of his artistic practice. Today, he combines his basic training as a painter with new media and conceptual strategies into pluralistic, engaged and subversive approaches to contemporary art, considering art as a tool rather than a »goal«.

This time, in the KiBela, a space for art, Miljanović is presenting new works created in the last three years. The exhibition Realtime Monument is the result of several years of research and was originally conceived for the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade (2021). The atmospheric installation opens up to the viewer through thoughtful scenography and handmade sculptures. This time, Miljanović has made imaginative and conceptually sophisticated use of the architecturally specific design of the gallery space, with its primary form being reminiscent of a three-nave church and transformed it into a hybrid space in which the atmosphere of a sacred space and a commercial shop intertwine, alluding to funeral and cemetery paraphernalia fairs.

In this exhibition, the artist focuses on complex interconnected socio-political concepts, processes and rituals, such as memorial practices, the culture of remembrance, commemorative rituals, the representation of death and its media articulation, as well as the position and function of new media devices in the aforementioned context. In particular, in the light of the global epidemic, through the prism of today's media-saturated world, the artist focuses on exploring the media representation of death in the form of raw statistics, diagrams and graphs, strategies of necropolitics and the ways in which the pandemic has transformed our visual perception of reality. With the exhibition in question, Miljanović interrogates the symbolism of death, its commodification within the capitalist system, and the ways in which

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representations and images of life become »extensions of death«, with the assumption that when life ends, the image or representation in the form of a monument lives on. The author embeds these research questions in the local cultural, political and historical narrative of the Balkans or the countries of the former Yugoslavia, while bringing it, at the same time, into dialogue with the global context.

Miljanović has been dealing with monuments and practices of commemoration in his artistic practice for a long time, in such works as: *Garden of Delight* (2013), a drawing on granite slabs made for the National Pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the 55th Venice Biennale, and the video work *Draft of a 20 Minute Monument* (2019), in which nine disabled people and war veterans sit for 20 minutes on a pile of discarded stones. According to Miljanović himself, he was led to address this topic primarily by the wild, unregulated erection of monuments to manipulate politico-religious-nationalist narratives in the aftermath of the war in the 1990s in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, and the lack of public critical discourse on the topic.¹ As mentioned above, however, Miljanović's personal experience of making tombstones has shaped him the most on a formal level.²

Upon entering the exhibition space, at first glance, the objects exhibited on pedestals appear to be ready-made media and communication devices such as smartphones, laptops, tablets and televisions, but when we look at them closely it becomes clear that these are granite, hyper-realistic, handmade sculptures. In fact, Miljanović has created multi-layered objects charged with meaning out of black granite, clearly referring to the aesthetics and typology of tombstones. For Miljanović, the screen in this case is not the medium through which he immortalizes death, but the carrier of the message, creating a new type of memorial, which is stripped of the temporal dimension of the past or the temporal distance, which in his opinion contributes significantly to the distortion and manipulation of processes of remembering, and creates a memorial in real time, a sculpture that commemorates a traumatic event for the time of its duration. In this way, the »realtime monument« intervenes directly in the present and the event it commemorates, ascribing to the viewer, and the act of viewing, an active participatory position within a politically and ideologically oriented reality. The »realtime monument« thus becomes a witness of performative participation in the real event itself.³

Two new works round off the exhibition. *The Realtime Monument* (2022) is based on data of confirmed deaths of people infected with Covid-19 recorded by the World Health Organization (WHO) from 1 January 2020, when the first Covid-19 victim was registered in China, to 31 December 2022. The different saturation levels of the machine-engraved black dots show

¹ In the countries of the former Yugoslavia, after the war, in the 1990s, alongside the rise of mainly nationalist and divisive monuments, there was also a phenomenon of erecting monuments to icons of contemporary popular culture, such as the Bruce Lee Memorial in Mostar and the Rocky Balboa Memorial in Zitišt, i.e. to personalities who have no obvious connection to the local environment. This phenomenon was problematized in the video essay *Turbo Sculpture* (2010) by artist Aleksandra Domanović, who coined the term as a logical continuation of post-war Eastern European genres such as »turbo television«, »turbo folk music« and »turbo architecture«, which are based on the exaggerated, random and uncritical merging of the local and the global. This issue is particularly relevant in the context of the juxtaposition of this post-Yugoslav, transitional culture of commemoration and monument-building with that of socialist Yugoslavia, where modernist partisan monuments functioned in a unifying way and with the intention of collective empowerment.

² In the village of Osječani, where the artist worked in a stonemason's workshop in the late 1990s, people came up with a slander »may Mladen make you a portrait«, which predicted or wished for the death of an individual in a humorous or even malicious way.

³ Miljanović, Mladen. »Introduction to the Realtime Monument« in *Realtime Monument*, exhibition catalogue at the Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade (2021), ed. Blanuša, Mišela and Miljanović, Mladen. Belgrade, 2022.

the fluctuation of the data on a monthly basis - each black dot represents the death of one person. The resulting abstract image, which is of course reminiscent of the »digital snow« that appears on the screen when a device is destroyed or malfunctions, further potentiates the visualization of death. The video *Death ON/OFF Screen* (2022) is composed of footage found online and includes parts of a long and shocking speech by a reality show star from Šipovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, who verbally attacks other family members at his father's funeral, an adaptation of a cult turbo folk song by the well-known singer Stoja, who wishes her ex-lover dead, and short clips of people violently destroying digital devices such as televisions, computers, telephones and the like out of anger and frustration. Although at first glance the recordings do not seem to have much in common, Miljanović very thoughtfully connects and lucidly formulates these rituals, in one way or another related to death or physical destruction, into a new multi-layered audio-visual narrative, which intertwines local political, ideological and cultural specificities of the concept of death in the Balkans, while translating the artwork on a universal level and attributing to it a kind of liturgical function, both on its own and in the context of the exhibition.

As in his previous works and exhibitions mentioned above, Miljanović proves himself to be an extremely subtle observer of today's society and its political, ideological, cultural, social and economic antagonisms and transformations, triggered by the logic of late capitalism. Miljanović's artistic excellence is manifested precisely in his exceptional and innovative ability to appropriate content and form, and to translate them dialogically on a universal level.

- Živa Kleindienst

BIOGRAPHY

Website



Mladen Miljanović was born in Zenica (Yugoslavia) in 1981. He completed secondary school in Dobož. After secondary school, he attended the Reserve Officer Military School where he earned the rank of sergeant. As a sergeant, he trained 30 privates. After completing the military term, he worked in a stonemason workshop producing tombstones. After a few years of working with tombstones, he enrolled at the Academy of Arts in Banja Luka. Currently, he is living in Banja Luka where he teaches New media art at the Academy of Arts, University of Banja Luka. He is one of defining figures of the regional art scene. At the early stage of his practice Mladen was included in the international selection of artists under 33 Younger Than Jesus - Artist Directory by New Museum curators Laura Hoptman and Massimiliano Gioni. He participated at the 55th Venice Biennale, 15th Busan Video Biennale and most recently 13th Cairo Biennale among other group shows. His solo shows and projects were among others shown at MUMOK in Vienna, Gallery MC in New York, ACB Gallery in Budapest, A+A Gallery in Venice, Neue Galerie Graz and Salon of the Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade. He is the recipient of regional and international awards for artistic practice such as: 30th Nadežda Petrović Memorial Award 2020, Čačak (RS); White Aphroide Award 2019, ACE KIBLA, Maribor (SI); Henkel Art Award 2009, Vienna (AT); Zvono Award 2007, SCCA Sarajevo (BiH); Award of the Museum of Contemporary Art Republic of Srpska, 2006, Banja Luka (BiH).