

The (Imagined) Diaries of One Who Disappeared

in *Blackout*, ed. Alona Pardo. Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art. November 2003. pp. 4-15.

Whose voice sounds through a work of art? Regardless of how profoundly Barthes' (1968) and Foucault's (1969) respective pronouncements of the death of the author¹ have echoed through the consciousness of critic and viewer, she or he unwittingly 'hears' in the work viewed the voice of an intentionality, and thereby conjures up the presence of a creator. Who, or what, however, is evoked by whispered interpretations in the gallery or authoritative statements in the pages of catalogues? Can we know what an artist 'meant' in producing an art work? Does an assertion, even one as stentorian as a statement in a catalogue or a 'reading' in an art historical text, speak with any authority beyond that which its speech act produces for it? I ask these questions in the wake of my preparations for writing a short piece introducing Predrag Pajdic's most recent work – *Blackout* - to the residents of a city from which he exiled himself in the second half of the eighties. While looking at images and texts in catalogues, viewing past and recent works in original and reproduced forms, and talking with friends and colleagues of the artist, I've repeatedly been struck by the way his work seems to call upon its audiences to 'speak', either interpreting its meaning, answering queries it appears to pose, or – in inner speech – positioning themselves in the place from whence the artist looks. Pajdic's art seems to me ventriloquistic, but whose voice does it 'throw'?

One might begin to answer this by noting that in much of Pajdic's art absence serves as a pretext for (others') assertions of presence. From the effaced facial detail of the *Angel of A Classical Blueprint* (2000) and the Doge in numbers one, four and five of *Sinners, Saints and Lovers* (2001) through the blurred and unreadable visages of the Kalemegdan monuments in *Hero* (2003) to the unpopulated yet pullulating garden of *Garden* (2003), audiences are brought into the presence of voids or the traces of incomplete erasures which mutely demand filling or restoration. The 'activism' such work calls for is not, of course,

1

Barthes, Roland. 1977. "The Death of the Author" in *Image-Music-Text*. (trans.) Stephen Heath. London: Fontana. pp. 142–148 (original: 'La mort de l'auteur', *Mantéla V*, 1968) and Foucault, Michel. 1979. "What is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structural Criticism*. (ed. and trans.) Josué Harari. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 141–160 (original: *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie* LXIII, 1969).

exceptional; since the teens of the last century modernist (and later post-modernist) work has insisted that the viewer play an active role in drawing out a work's meaning through thinking about and deconstructing the processes of art-making. Modernist art highlights dominant traditions through violating their principles, and Alona Pardo, in her introduction to Predrag Pajdic, places the use of erasure in Pajdic's *A Classical Blueprint* within this antithetical tradition: "Does...deliberate absence point to a markedly self-aware emptiness inherent in the classical tradition that favoured idealised form over realism or expression?" (London 2003: 3). Foregrounding emptied spaces – especially emptied spaces surrounded by elaborated detail – forces the observer to think about what has been taken out, and why.

However, in subsequent work the void seems to be sketched in by the artist himself, and this filling makes the viewer retell the artist, imagining and identifying a life beyond the confines of the canvas. Thus in the later numbers of the Doge series in *Sinners, Saints and Lovers* the monumental austerity of the initial elaborately-dressed figure is displaced by the intimate vitality of a different figure which has not only taken the Doge's place but as well donned his trappings. In *Techno Fever* (2001-2002) that same figure, now nude, dances through a number of drawings and roles before actually being named. The revelation of Darius as both model and work would seem, as does the title -- Private and Confidential -- of the catalogue for a recent show at London's Catto Gallery, to suggest the 'coming out' of a much more personal and confessional artist. This emergence seems to be prefigured by the way the works site us in the place of the artist as he gazes upon his model. This siting 'warms' the works, interposing between the interpreting eye and the immaculate draughtsmanship of the work a *frisson* of passion. Whose passion is this? The intimacy and engagement of these 'private' works soothe us into believing that it must be that of Pajdic who, like a pupa fighting free of the elaborate strands which till now have simultaneously hidden and protected it, is on the verge of revealing his imago in its full and human presence.

Just, however, as we thought we were to witness the artist's self-exposure, Pajdic imposes *Blackout*. What, here, is being blacked out? 'Blackout', according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, means

"(v.t.) 'to obliterate, obscure (windows, etc.) to prevent any light from being seen from outside,..., (v.i.) undergo blackout...(n) blacking out or being blacked out, period when obscuring of lights is compulsory, sudden darkening of theatre stage, loss of radio reception through fading or jamming, temporary complete loss of consciousness or

memory..." (1976: 101).

There is an ambivalence in the term; it means, on the one hand, preventing light from being seen from the outside (regardless of how bright it is inside) while, on the other, it signifies a darkening, an obscuring, an erasing of the space of operation, even of consciousness. These are clearly two very different things. Which definition applies to Pajdic's Belgrade show?

The catalogue description says that the blacking out of the gallery is meant "firstly to render the exhibition space pitch black and secondly to serve as a metaphor for the personal and collective amnesia of the Serbian people as they try to forget the past". The first element is credible; as the show depends on light boxes and other modes of projection to cast images, the darkness of the space is necessary. The second assertion raises questions. Is Serbia experiencing a blackout? Does Pajdic see himself, a long-term expatriate, as an emissary of light coming to that shadow zone to provide its benighted dwellers with bright images of the outside? Is Pajdic extolling the virtues of Former Yugoslavia to awaken Yugo-nostalgia in the hearts of a people who've just struggled free of the miasma of Milošević's reign? Elements of each of these may be true (all, I suppose, of one or the other *might* be true) but the answers the exhibits give are far from unequivocal. If the show extols to a darkened Serbia the virtues of life in the West, then why are all the visual and aural images (except for the single vantage looped in *Garden* and the final interviews in *Why I Left*) either of contemporary Serbia or Former Yugoslavia? If it's an exercise in promoting Yugo-nostalgia (and it is true that the anthems, the speeches, the cinema clips and even "Lapis-Lazuli" by Bebi Dol will drag everyone over thirty back into the past, even if only for an uncomfortably comfortable moment), its evocation of the past is shadowed by terror ("it's good, it's good").

Perhaps, then, we should look to another imaging of 'blackout'. It's indisputably light *outside* the gallery, whether from late November and early December's wintry sun or from the streetlamps hanging above the buzz of Belgrade's night-life. *Inside*, behind the sixteen blinds that seal the gallery off, eclipse reigns, and what little light there is leaks from the illuminated shards of Serbia's past and present which make up the exhibition. This seems an inversion of the earlier works. There a plenitude of detail surrounded a muted space; here figuration is encased in darkness. There classical references were offered transparently to all who would visit an art gallery; here allusions and citations speak intimately to an ex-Yugoslavian audience. In *A Classical Blueprint* and *Sinners, Saints and Lovers* pieces were found, in the full light of day, to have been cut from the fabric of a

common heritage; in *Blackout* we encounter, in a space from which any external light source has been banished, not the holes left behind when bits of the real are excised but fragments of a very specific history floating uncannily free of the support of any context. The sounds that float through the gallery – the catchingly familiar yet disquietingly different rendition of “Lapis-Lazuli”; the repetition of ‘it’s good, it’s good’ sliding from assertion to fearful doubt before being silenced by a shot and starting again; the crackling recordings of childrens’ anthems and Tito’s speeches; the confident yet oddly wounded voices of Pajdic’s family and friends explaining to him/themselves/us why he left – accentuate the temporal and spatial unmooring of the blacked out room.

We could read *Blackout* as Pajdic’s own psycho-drama – the staging of a man’s experience of returning from exile to a homeland only recognizable in dribs and unconnected drabs. In that case the blackout would be his own, brought on by the disconnections and distancings expatriation entails. This may, of course, have been Pajdic’s intention, and one might find confirmation of this in his story of bemusement and confusion at re-encountering the stone heads of Kalemegdan only to discover a wholly different pantheon than that which he recalled seeing during his childhood wanderings in the park. Stepping into the darkened space of the Salon seems more, however, than simply an opportunity to ‘experience’ the psychic disorientation and discontinuities of one who left and (temporarily) came back; the shards of time set out here are pieces not only of Pajdic’s life but also of the lives of those who stayed behind, and of others who left for other places and other reasons. *Blackout* may stage an exile’s return, but the exile evoked is one which as well afflicts those who remained and watched the ground shift beneath their feet. The ‘repetition’ of *Lapis-Lazuli* (amplified by Bebi Dol’s own ‘return’), the presence of the unfocussable visages of the heros of the state, and the spectral return of Tito and the child choirs which welcomed him long ago provide simultaneously a *frisson* of familiarity and the deep chill of the *unheimlich*.

Within the darkened Salon we stumble like amnesiacs brought up against objects and persons we know we’ve known but are unable to render familiar. Their separation from everyday contexts – their escape from the memory theatres wherein we are used to comfortably stage our encounters with our pasts – make them seem strange and force us to attempt to ‘re-place’ them. The various devices work us differently. The anomalous faces of the statues in *Hero* challenge those who gaze on them to recognise them, to fix upon them familiar names and visages, to associate them with the feelings of homeland and *patria* they have been variously meant -- over the past half a century -- to arouse. The difficulty of so

doing, accentuated by the seemingly distant and archaic voices of Tito and the celebratory choirs, emphasizes the fact that what was home no longer is and what is home is not the home of our memories. *Lapis-Lazuli* is perhaps a more personal defamiliarization. Second only to smell, music takes us back to the moments in which it first entered us. This song evokes '83 and the scenes -- personal and collective -- which it accompanied and yet, through the vehicle of its 're-mastering', simultaneously pushes them into the irrecoverable past of a distant country. Time and broken dreams leach in to our perceptions, and Bebi Dol's telling of her life since the early eighties powerfully reiterates that disjunction of expectation and experience.

In one sense the technique of Pajdic's artwork in *Blackout* can be seen as analogous to that of *ostranenie* ('making strange') which the Soviet theorist Shklovskij placed at the heart of a Futurist poetics. Victor Erlich, analysing that revolutionary aesthetics, writes that "Rather than translating the unfamiliar into the terms of the familiar, the poetic image 'makes strange' the habitual by presenting it in a novel light, by placing it in an unexpected context....By tearing the object out of its habitual context, by bringing together disparate notions, the poet gives a *coup de grâce* to the verbal cliché and to the stock responses attendant upon it and forces us into heightened awareness of things and their sensory texture. The act of creative deformation restores sharpness to our perception, giving 'density' to the world around us"².

In *Blackout* however we are not so much forced to look again at the 'texture' of the things which populate our world, both contemporary and remembered, but to look with a new and disquieting attention on the ways our lives have been organised, and reorganised, around them. Pajdic's work provokes its audiences to make strange their own assumptions, to think again about the continuities they assume hold their lives together, and to assess the degree to which what they took to be home has become a place of exile.

That said, I want to argue that Pajdic's work is deeply autobiographical. To make that assertion I have, however, to return to the question with which I opened this essay – 'Whose voice sounds through a work of art?'. I think the best way of approaching that query again, having now looked through a number of Pajdic's aesthetic statements, is to examine what strikes me as the core work of *Blackout* -- the thirty-five minute video

2

entitled *Why I Left*. Simply put this is a series of seventeen brief interviews (nine in Serbia and in Serbo-Croatian, eight in Britain and in English) with persons who knew and know Pajdic. The speakers, addressing an unseen and unspeaking presence behind the camera, talk about why they think Pajdic left Yugoslavia. The reasons given vary considerably and, as one listens, one begins to recognize that more and more people are less telling Pajdic's story than using Pajdic's leaving as a way of speaking of their own lives, expectations, dissatisfactions and (often unrealized) strategies of self-redemption. The enigma of Pajdic's leaving elicits explanations, but these supposed tales of the artist become the self-tellings of persons who, speaking into that absence, voice themselves.

To whom, however, do they speak? We might assume that Pajdic is himself behind the camera (except for in the filming of one of the seventeen interviews, which will be discussed below), but the use of the pronomial is oddly unfixed. Some interviewees speak seemingly directly to the camera of 'you' having left, others speak in the third person of a 'he', while still others use 'you' as though addressing – in inner speech, letter writing or prayer – an intimate yet absent interlocutor. The effect is quite disconcerting, and only becomes more so when, in the tenth interview, a figure who appears to be Pajdic says to the camera "I think that you left the country for the same reasons I did". The imago of the artist seems to have emerged, but it has done so clandestinely, leaving the 'I' of the artist's *Why I Left* unoccupied. Here we, sited behind the camera, are addressed in the place of the artist just as, throughout Pajdic's impressive and stimulating corpus, works of art cause us to speak ourselves through them.