

Dispersed memories and transitional justice



Suzana Vukic

Sometimes life offers us some wonderful, unexpected opportunities. Before the end of 2011, the incredible Toronto artists and husband-and-wife team Diane Misaljevic and Allan Kosmajac, both of Bosnian heritage, contacted me regarding a writing project they thought might interest me. It focused on an art installation that they produced, in collaboration with the Canadian Centre for International Justice, in Toronto in October, 2010, titled *Fragments and Sightings*.

This installation was done in two parts. The first one, *Fragments* (which ended up being the main focus of my work), involved the participation of hundreds of individuals of different backgrounds who survived war, genocide, atrocities and other human rights violations. For *Fragments*, these individuals were asked to lend out artifacts connected to this difficult period in their lives. These were displayed in wooden boxes spread out in Toronto's Lamport Stadium; it was part of the city's *Nuit Blanche* festival.

Diane suggested the possibility of me co-authoring a book chapter with Australian

artist and academic, Fayen d'Evie. Currently, this chapter is tentatively titled *Dispersed and Displaced Memories in Public Art: Diaspora and Extraterritorial Witnessing and Memorialising*. It will be included in a book titled *The Art of Transitional Justice*, put together by editors Olivera Simic, Lecturer of the Griffith Law School at Griffith University in Australia, and Peter D. Rush, Faculty Member of the Melbourne Law School at the University of Melbourne. The book is slated to be published by Springer Press in late 2012 or in 2013 (pending successful editing and revision processes).

A state or society can use methods of transitional justice to address past human rights abuses and work towards reconciliation and healing for victims and survivors. This can be done in a variety of ways. This book will examine the role of art in transitional justice. In our chapter, we explore how large scale public art installations engage diaspora communities in the reconciliation process, using the example of the *Fragments* installation. What are the experiences of individuals who participate in this type of installation (known in artistic circles as "trauma art")? One would expect posi-

tive outcomes. But are there negative ones as well? Are survivors able to cope with reminders of a difficult past?

I interviewed six of the installation's participants for this work. Four of them were Bosniak survivors of war - including people who I already knew and worked with previously. I interviewed a Chilean man who escaped the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, and a Rwandan woman who escaped genocide. I also interviewed the artists.

My main focus throughout January and February was on interviewing people, setting up interviews and transcribing them. By the time I was done, I had an estimated 80 pages of interview transcripts.

While the interviews focused on participants' experience of the art installation (lending out a cherished item, observing it in the installation), the subject of wartime suffering did surface.

It can be difficult to bear witness to these experiences. But it's also uplifting, even joyful, to know that a person who has lived through some of life's most horrific experiences can survive and tell the world all about it. There's a beauty that comes through in the survivor's voices, and in the

artifacts that are shared with the world. Some of these items were so precious to survivors that it wasn't feasible to just simply hand them over for the installation; instead, a photograph or photocopy of the object would have to suffice. This could be a family photograph. Or a message sent out by a concentration camp survivor to family members via the International Red Cross, letting them know that he was alive and had survived some of the worst horrors of the Bosnian war.

It can also include a school photograph of a child in a school building that had been bombed, and which she barely survived. Or an adorable little girl's dress - one worn by a child as she was ethnically cleansed out of her hometown, along with her family; her mother had sown gold and currency into the hem of that dress before they escaped.

I'm certain that these type of art installations are an excellent way of educating viewers on what it means to live through war and suffering. That's why it's a shame to think that with recent budget cuts affecting the world of art and culture, it will be increasingly difficult for artists to produce these type of art installations.

Comments? suzana.vukic28@gmail.com