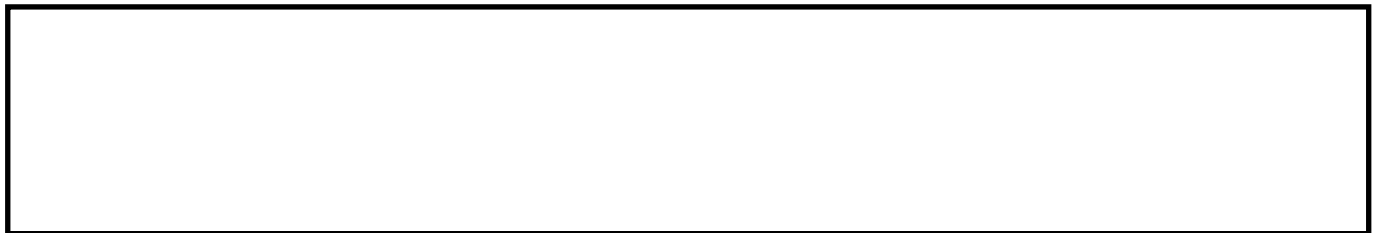


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# On utopian realism: the art of Mladen Miljanović.

BLACKWOOD, J.

2019



MLADEN MILJANOVIĆ  
**UTOPIAN  
REALISM**  
8 FEBRUARY – 14 MARCH 2019

## **On Utopian Realism**

*The Art of Mladen Miljanović by Jon Blackwood*

### **Introduction**

This essay accompanies the first solo exhibition in Scotland by Mladen Miljanović, a post-conceptual video and performance artist based in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The exhibition can be read, in one way, as a mini-retrospective; starting with the documentation of the durational performance and installation *Museum Service / Taxi*, (2010) and concluding with works which are being shown for the first time- the video piece *Sounds of Homeland* (2018/19) and the new performance *Column* (2019) which forms part of the opening night.

This exhibition, however, is so much more than a mini-retrospective. It presents work which follow lines of enquiry not just of concern to the Western Balkan region, but which scratch issues that itch contemporary politics and society in Scotland. This is work shaped by past experience of violence, conflict, division and military service; work marked by the loss of a collective past in the former Yugoslavia, and which negotiates a divided and much reduced fragmentary present; work that finds humour in the contemporary absurdities of ethnic-nationalist politics, and seeks to imagine the possibility of a better, more tolerant, unified future; this is not work made as a naïve projection, but with the full knowledge of how long it will take to achieve such a transformation in practice.

Mladen's work is marked by a natural empathy with histories of suffering and the mark left by politics on the individual. It also imbued with a deep commitment to service; that the artist must engage with contemporary social realities and engage critically with them, if it is to be of any value at all. His practice, manifested here in performance, video and documentation, is both relational and performative, inviting interactivity and engagement, and always resisting final definition, in order to provide space for the audience's response.

In this essay, we will spend some time considering the roots of Mladen's art, offer some perspectives on the work in this show, and conclude by suggesting parallels between this work and our own experiences and perspectives as an audience from another European periphery.

### **Background**

Mladen Miljanović was born in 1981 in Zenica, a large steel town around fifty kilometres north west of Sarajevo, in what was then Yugoslavia. He was one of the last generation of Yugoslav children, that was marked later by the experience of the 1992-95 Bosnian conflict. As a child, he and his family moved near to Dobož in Northern Bosnia, and from there, at the beginning of the new

century, he entered into art school after a short period of service in the military. During this military service, he became known for the quality of his drawings, and for a short period worked in a stonemason's yard as a funerary portraitist, with some success. His name was even associated with a local curse: "*I hope that Mladen will soon draw your portrait*".

His service in the army cast a long shadow over the work that followed during his period in the art academy in Banja Luka, and some of the works that can be seen here. During his third year at art school, quite by coincidence, the art academy moved to the former Vrbas military barracks, vacated by the army; the art academy is still based there today. Mladen used the space to make his first significant durational performance, *I Serve Art* (2006/7).

For 274 days, with the facility closed off to the public, Mladen isolated himself in the former barracks, using this time to explore notions of the disciplined military body, in both performance and installation; he undertook a process of "re-purposing" the space from military to the creative, and sought to try and find the intersections between the two modes of existence. Subsequent works, such as *Do You Intend to Lie to Me* (2011) and *In My Parents' Bedroom* (2016), look at the prominence of lived military experience in the everyday lives of people in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the consequences that has both on a micro and macro level.

### **Making Sense of a Lost Past**

A second key theme in the work is a critique of the present through the artefacts from a lost past. The countries that used to comprise socialist Yugoslavia have very different perspectives on that common past, and competing and irreconcilable views of recent history can only be set aside through the remnants of Yugoslav material culture, or through a nostalgic look back at well-known figures from late Yugoslav popular culture, such as the pop singer Lepa Brena (b. Fahreta Jahić, 1960), or through materials produced by factories that long ago ceased to exist in the period of post-socialist transition.

In Mladen's case, the documentation of his installation *Museum Service* at MUMOK in Vienna (2010) and the seven day performance *Taxi to Museum* (2010), a body of work that programmatically concluded with *Taxi to Berlin* (2011), used the Yugoslav-era Zastava 101 car as a metaphor for the shattering of a more liveable collective past and the impact that the persistence of those memories have in the fragmented present.

The Zastava 101 was envisaged, when it was first launched in 1971, as an all-Yugoslav car; as cheap and accessible transport for families; components for it were made in all six of the Yugoslav republics, with final assembly in Kragujevac in Serbia. The breaking apart of the federation in 1991 saw production of the car decline steeply, owing to a lack of parts from Slovenia and Croatia, which were by then at war with the rump of Yugoslavia. These three linked projects looked affectionately at a product from past times, which everyone of a certain age in Yugoslavia grew up with or around.

For this project, Mladen purchased four Zastavas in Banja Luka. These cars, declining rapidly in number, are now very cheap to buy, and unfashionable. One of them was used as the museum taxi service, and subsequently driven to Berlin; the other three were broken into component parts and re-purposed as art objects with the help of two skilled labourers from the former Yugoslavia who had moved to work in Vienna.

The project used the forms of the car not merely as a readymade, but as a means by which to focus on the role of labour. During the socialist period, the government encouraged many citizens to take up seasonal catering, healthcare or factory work abroad; the phenomenon of *gastarbeiter* (guest worker) in the economies of the former West Germany, Austria and Scandinavia was a staple in the 1960s and 1970s, in times less concerned with the process of migration.

The form of the car not only reflects on the role of labour in western economies, but also, implicitly, the invisibility of such labour and the loss of a generational memory of mechanical and construction skills. In acting as a Vienna taxi driver in his *Zastava*, the artist also sheds a light on the economic necessity of highly qualified migrants to take menial jobs in order to survive not only the traumatic process of changing country, but official indifference and hostility once accepted in a new territory. His work as a driver enabled the artist to meet directly with his audience in a very unusual manner; many of the documented conversations show far more interest in the nature of what is a very rare vehicle for Austrians, and little interest in the person driving it. This perhaps raised uncomfortable questions on the visibility, or otherwise, of non-EU citizens living and working in the EU.

## **Violent Endurance**

Mladen's 2011 video work *Do You Intend to Lie to Me?* has been exhibited widely throughout Europe since its debut at the 2011 Oktobarski salon in Belgrade, and at the Sarajevo Film Festival same year. It is a disturbing and unsettling work that has at its core the post-traumatic effects of militarism and violence in contemporary society in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The video itself was subject of a long negotiation; the artist had to engage with the Interior Minister and the Chief of Police in Republika Srpska, for permission to use disabled weapons and police uniforms. After some difficult and intimidating negotiations, the artist was offered the use of the elite anti-terrorist police unit for the making of this video. This is a group who are responsible for apprehending extremely dangerous individuals, and are paramilitary in nature.

The piece begins with the unit scrambling and flying by helicopter over the countryside of northern Bosnia, including the village where their target grew up. The beauty of that countryside—reminiscent of Highland Perthshire—seems almost an insult in the context of the ugly narrative that follows. The target of the police unit in this film is not a war criminal or mafia boss, but an artist whom Mladen refers to as his “artistic father”, Veso Sovilj (b. 1954, Zavolje, Yugoslavia). Sovilj had been Mladen's tutor at the art academy in Banja Luka and is representative of a generation of artists whose careers were destroyed by the wars of the 1990s.

We see the unit speeding towards the location where they have been told their target is likely to be—the former *Café Dialog* in Banja Luka, which used to act as an unofficial headquarters for the city's art scene. It is shocking to see the balaclava clad soldiers steaming into the café and roughly apprehending Sovilj; perhaps the most telling detail of the film is a woman passer by running away at speed as soon as she sees the presence of the militarised police in the street. The second half of the film, in the eerie greenish light of an interrogation room, sees a nervous Sovilj asked a series of barked questions, which intermingle his past as an artist with a demand that he account for his actions in the war. It is a surreal interrogation, which probes the details of the professor's artistic career as intently as his fate during the early to mid 1990s. At the end of the film, Mladen enters the interrogation room to reveal that it was he who was behind the arrest and interrogation all along— a

fact accepted by Sovilj with an equanimity that many would have found hard to come by after such an experience.

This is a film that problematizes notions of objectivity and memory, and in how we determine our own story, what we choose to remember, and what is erased. It is a narrative that implies the malign role of state actors and the coping strategies that individuals develop when faced with loss of liberty for uncertain reasons; the fragility of long-held personal truths under severe pressure. The film also reveals the consequences that individual choices can have for a life as is it shaped and developed by circumstance.

## Utopian Realism

“Over the last decades of increased precariousness, the idea of utopia has disappeared in the tumultuous transformative processes that took the reins over Eastern Europe, transforming it into a worn-out ideal, discrediting it through harsh socio-cultural realities...utopia itself seems to have become utopian- a forsaken relic of the past, a symbol of failure.”<sup>1</sup>

It's a commonplace to suggest today that no-one really believes in the future any more. We live in a post-ideological age; people at their most optimistic imagine a decline deferred rather than reversed. The notion of steady progress towards an ideal future underpinned by scientific and technological progress died with the last century. Why then the oxymoronic title of this exhibition, and grouping of ideas?

The title of course is bitterly ironic and reflects the differing “realisms” that the ordinary citizen in Bosnia-Herzegovina has been subject to. Firstly, “socialist realism” (in culture) or “actually existing socialism” (in society); the uses of art to burnish a rather disappointing reality, and to express the role of the Communist Party in terms of leading society as a whole towards the better, following closely Marxist ideas of the working classes leading the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society. Post-socialism and the gangster capitalism that obtained in the former socialist world in the 1990s has given way to Mark Fisher's notions of “capitalist realism”, deriving from the collapse of alternatives to the capitalist system; Fisher's book *Capitalist Realism* (2009) details the internalising of the discourses of late capitalism / neoliberalism, and the supposed fact that “there is no alternative” to the current organisational structures of European polities and societies.

Bosnia-Herzegovina, as a European country outwith the EU, is forced more than others to observe these kinds of pieties at multiple levels, as it seeks to join the club at some unspecified point in the future. There has long been a joke in Bosnia that the EU will collapse and disintegrate just at the point when Bosnia has completed all the required regulatory chapters, to join.

“Utopian realism” in the sense of the work presented here, is not so much then a type of realism rooted in everyday experience, but instead utilises the one remaining space where alternatives may be imagined; culture. At the same time, cultural imaginings are as hard to turn into reality as any chimerical progress towards utopia; in a society where contemporary art exists on the margins, chronically under-funded and little understood, there is a simultaneous beauty and futility in such a gesture. For many, this kind of “utopian realism” offers a kind of escape from a thoroughly dystopian daily- lived experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Naum and Petricia Mogos, “Dear Reader”, Kajet vol. 2, p.5, Bucharest, 2018

The works that tie in most closely between this duality of utopia and dystopia are *Sweet Symphony of Absurdity* (2013), first shown in the Venice Biennale of that year, and the new film *Sounds of Homeland* (2018/19). In the former, members of the Banja Luka Philharmonic orchestra are invited to play their favourite piece of music on their individual instruments, resulting in an absurd, overwritten cacophony. The metaphor again extends to the disintegration of society into an agglomeration of individuals; the loss of commons in terms of discourse, and public space; the inability to hear the other over one's own noise; the intolerance of the perspectives of the other; the impossibility of agreement.

*Sounds of Homeland* takes on this idea but develops it in an entirely new way. The origin of this film, made in collaboration with the Berlin-based Australian film-maker Greg Blakey, lies in an offensive popular song *America Made Bosnia as a State*, by the Croat folk-singer Ante Bubalo. The song is offensive to many in that it seems to offer an extreme nationalist perspective on the "artificiality" of present-day Bosnia-Herzegovina, politically divided between the three main ethnicities on its territory (Bosnian Muslim, Croat and Serb).

The strange reality here is that Bubalo's original version of the song has been altered and twisted to suit the perspectives of all three differing ethnicities on present day Bosnia; youtube not only acts as a highly problematic global memory hole but as a repository of twisted versions of our present. The differing versions of this song, performed by Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, can be found on youtube, according to the prejudices of the viewer.

Exploiting this absurdity- the re-working of the song to suit the prejudices of particular ethnic groups on the same territory- Mladen decided to approach representatives of the war veterans group from all three of the antagonists in the wars of the 1990s, in order to come together and perform their own versions of the song in one uneasy unity. Over a period of a year, having met and decided to collaborate with Blakey, Mladen pulled together veterans who were able to perform musically. In the second half of the film, in a remote part of the northern Bosnian landscape on the road between Doboje and Tuzla, Mladen brings the veterans together in an abandoned old concrete factory, where they perform a version of the song. There is an element of the earlier musical chaos in *Sweet Symphony of Absurdity*, but here there is an underlying purpose. The natural affinity of the veteran musicians, the presence of the artist both as performer and facilitator of this highly unusual scenario, and the rootedness of this experience in a visually beautiful, bleak empty landscape, hold together humour, humanity and a utopian desire for a more unified future in uneasy harmony.

## Conclusion

Mladen Miljanović's art practice works at the levels of the specific and the universal. His performance piece with a bull, *Performance without Title* (2018), derives from childhood memory, when he would regularly bring a bull home from a field after agricultural labour, in high summer. The animal, seeking to drive away the flies buzzing around his head, accidentally scratched and injured the young Mladen on several occasions with his sharp horns, and left a desire in the artist, as an adult, to work with the bull again. There is a parallel link with the Bosnian tradition of bullfighting, although this is not the origin of the piece. In the video documentation, artist and animal stand in seeming opposition, cancelling one another's energy out. There is also an implicit criticism of some contemporary performance art, and the courting of "fake danger", or the "fake real" for social media likes.

The work on display in this exhibition, however, does not require so much of an understanding or awareness of contemporary Bosnia to respond to, beyond the basic information. This is also a series of works that interrogate, critically, some urgent problematics of our time, concerning truth, belonging, and the empty contemporary narratives on borders, contemporary history, and national identity. It is a practice that seeks to use notions of military discipline, endurance, and the absurd gap between contemporary political discourse and lived reality; it is a practice that asks, what happens when the easy solutions proposed by populists run up against the nuance and complexities of our multiple individual experiences?

In the context of the problems we are all grappling with in contemporary Aberdeen, this show, originating in a very different European space, offers us some more uncomfortable realities that we are already grappling with here.

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## Further Reading

<http://www.mladenmiljanovic.com>

[https://acbgaleria.hu/muveszek/mladen\\_miljanovi.140.html?pageid=272](https://acbgaleria.hu/muveszek/mladen_miljanovi.140.html?pageid=272)  
(acb Galéria)

[www.msurs.net/biennale/info.html](http://www.msurs.net/biennale/info.html)  
(Discussion with Sarita Vujković on Venice presentation, 2013)

<https://sarajlijacult.wordpress.com/2013/06/04/mladen-miljanovic-the-garden-of-delights/>  
(Mladen Miljanović presentation at 55. Venice Biennale, 2013)

<https://vimeo.com/137080305>  
(Video Interview on Mladen's Museum Service show, MUMOK, Vienna, 2010)

<https://openair.rgu.ac.uk/handle/10059/2228>  
(Introduction to Contemporary Art in Bosnia-Herzegovina, duplex : Sarajevo, 2015)