

Ismar Cirkinagic
Line of the Horizon

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Ismar Cirkinagic, *Line of the Horizon*, 2017. Video still

OVERGADEN.

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Fragmentary Conflict Zones

By Camilla Jalving

The image on the screen disappears while I am talking to Ismar Cirkinagic via a bad Skype connection to Bosnia. It is always a bit awkward when that happens. When you are left looking at yourself and it feels as if you are talking to your own reflection. But in many ways it also seems highly appropriate that the image disappears right then, in the midst of our conversation about his exhibition *Line of the Horizon* at Overgaden Institute of Contemporary Art. Because the exhibition is precisely about showing everything we can only imagine. An exhibition suspended between visibility and invisibility. Between reality and imagining. Between what we dream of and what is actually there. At the time of writing that suspension is very concrete, since at this stage the exhibition only exists as words and a concept: as three video projections, a soundtrack, and an unknown number of ruin fragments from places ravaged by war and conflict, all of which are soon to be assembled in the lower galleries at Overgaden. But that is not the only reason. It is also because that is precisely where the exhibition, like the rest of Ismar Cirkinagic's art, is located – between the physical and the imagined.

FROM PHOTOGRAPHY TO INSTALLATION

It all began with a photograph the artist stumbled across and decided to 're-enact'. The photograph was taken by the war photographer Don McCullin, and is of a small boy in a hospital that has been bombed during the 1982 Palestinian refugee camp massacres at Sabra and Shatila in Beirut. The boy has almost certainly experienced the worst atrocities and witnessed the most appalling events, but this is not what the photograph shows. It just shows him sitting on the ground with pieces of rubble laid out in a row in front of him. Neatly, as if they were pieces of Lego. Neatly, as if to create order in the midst of chaos. Neatly, like the row of ruin fragments that are to be part of the exhibition at Overgaden, as Ismar tells me when we talk about what he is creating. Ismar Cirkinagic, born in 1973 in Prijedor in Bosnia-Herzegovina, arrived in Denmark after his own experience of war in 1992. In that sense, the conscious 're-enactment' of the photograph through the straight line of ruin fragments has a self-biographical element. It is linked to his personal experience of war and his need to create order out of chaos, putting himself in the boy's place to make a performative gesture of re-enactment in Overgaden's galleries.

RUINOUS READYMADES

The ruin fragments constitute the central, sculptural element of the installation. They are real remnants of real buildings that have been attacked during real wars and conflicts. At the same time they are *readymades*, a visual echo of the materiality of the land art of the 1960s

and the stark idioms of minimalism. "It's important that they are real ruin fragments," Ismar says repeatedly as we talk. He already has one from Croatia – from a secret airfield that was bombed in 1995. Another fragment is from the building housing Serbian TV's headquarters, which was hit by a NATO missile in 1999. He might also be able to get hold of a couple of fragments from a building in Ukraine that was hit by a Russian missile. I try to imagine his stockpile of fragments. Try to understand why it is important that they are real. Could any ruin fragment not symbolise war, conflict, terrorism? Art history is full of art depicting the horror of war through representation. But Ismar Cirkinagic is doing something else. With the row of real ruin fragments he goes beyond representation, installing the materiality of war right here in the middle of the room. *War presents* itself rather than being *represented*. Which is why it's important that the fragments are real. Because it is here – in reality – that they have their 'thing-power', to use the American political scientist Jane Bennett's term for "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."¹

THE MEANING OF MATERIALITY

This use of readymades is central to the art practice of Ismar Cirkinagic. Like his earlier work *Herbarium* from 2007. The work is comprised of a series of picture frames with dried flowers accompanied by a text. At first glance it is what the title implies: a classical herbarium. Which it is, but the difference here is that the flowers were plucked from mass graves, and the accompanying texts provide not details of botanical typology, but the names of the mass graves and the number of recovered bodies. Like the ruin fragments, this work also transcends the logic of representation by inserting a materiality that not only *looks like* but *is* what it says it is: this *is* the flower from the mass grave. At a purely visual level it makes no difference, but for the meaning and impact of the work it makes all the difference, as materiality and meaning fuse to create an affective short-circuit by rupturing the comfortable distance of representation.

THE SOUND OF FREEDOM

A soundtrack comprises another element in *Line of the Horizon*, telling the story of an imaginary meeting between a real and a fictional figure – the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader and Comrade Ogilvy from George Orwell's novel *1984*. In real life, on July 9th 1975 Bas Jan Ader set off from Cape Cod on the east coast of America to cross the Atlantic in the smallest boat to date. The crossing was part of the work *In Search of the Miraculous*, which according to his plan would be completed when he reached Holland on the other side

of the ocean. But in real life he never got that far. In April 1976 the wreck of his boat was discovered close to the coast of Ireland. In Ismar Cirkinagic's narrative, Bas Jan Ader is still alive somewhere on the Atlantic. As is Comrade Ogilvy, whose plane has crashed and who now intends to meet his death at the bottom of the sea like a true war hero. An absurd dialogue takes place, an encounter between Bas Jan Ader's and Ogilvy's understandings of freedom. Authoritarian, controlling Ogilvy – the product of a totalitarian regime – versus the idealistic, freedom-loving Bas Jan Ader – the product of democratic thinking. Their lines are partly sampled from Isaiah Berlin's 1958 essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*. One of Berlin's key points is that the freedom of one individual always encroaches on the freedom of another. The soundtrack therefore offers no fictional reconciliation between the two world views. On the contrary. Bas Jan Ader's voyage ends suddenly on the 25th day - the day he fishes Ogilvy out of the water because he feels ethically compelled to do so. By way of thanks, Ogilvy calls his rescuer's freedom into question. Because how can he be free if he is controlled by ethical standards? Something Ogilvy himself is entirely free of, which he demonstrates by taking the liberty of ending Bas Jan Ader's life (and thereby providing an entirely new solution to the artist's mysterious disappearance). The illusion is shattered. The conflict continues. The romantic artist disappears at the bottom of the sea while Ogilvy pursues martyrdom.

IMAGES OF LONGING

The soundtrack meets another element: video projections of a sunset, a moon and a view of the ocean. In themselves clichéd images, but also visual references to the photography of Bas Jan Ader, where the sea and sunset appear again and again as images of longing and the dream of elsewhere. They can be seen as fixed points for the narrative of the soundtrack. As screens for projection. Or precisely as clichéd images that by virtue of their visual predictability dismantle the entire staged discussion of freedom. Dismantle idealism, ideology and romantic longing, bringing us back to materiality. The rubble. The concrete traces of conflict.

A FRAGMENTARY WHOLE

Back to the beginning. The image disappears as I talk to Ismar. He describes and describes and I think I can imagine the installation. I have described its individual elements here. But I am not sure we should necessarily try to understand them as a coherent whole. It might be better to let them stand side by side. Like fragmentary conflict zones with different materialities that occasionally collide when the discussion of freedom touches on the ruinous traces of a fight for freedom then circles

to pull my gaze towards sunsets and distant horizons. I think it is here, through associative movements – back and forth – that *Line of the Horizon* creates its own horizon and the space for me to create my own story. I think. Because I cannot see it. Yet.

¹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010, p. 6

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CV

Ismar Cirkinagic (b. 1973) graduated from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2006. Cirkinagic was born in Prijedor, Bosnia-Herzegovina, but came to Denmark from Bosnia as a refugee from the war in 1992. Memory and socio-political contexts are constant themes in his art, and the tragic history of war in his country of birth has been the focus of several of his earlier art projects. Internationally he has exhibited at the Metropolitan Arts Centre, Belfast (2016) and the Liverpool Biennial (2012), as well as at numerous museums and art centres in Denmark, including Nikolaj Kunsthal, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Brandts, Kunsthal Aarhus, Sorø Kunstmuseum, HEART Museum of Contemporary Art, and Esbjerg Art Museum.

THANK YOU

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UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 16 June 2017 Overgaden presents *The Cloud Document* by Pia Rönicke and *Peter and the Danish Defence* by Peter Voss-Knude.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: overgaden.org

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