

## TRANSNATIONAL MEMORIES AND A POST-YUGOSLAV WRITER

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If you had no name  
If you had no history  
If you had no books  
If you had no family

If it were only you  
Naked on the grass  
Who would you be then?<sup>1</sup>

Where was I born? In Yugoslavia? In the  
former Yugoslavia? In Croatia? Shit! Do I  
have any biography?<sup>2</sup>

Memory betrays everybody, especially  
those who we knew best. It is an ally of  
oblivion, it is an ally of death.<sup>3</sup>

Dubravka Ugrešić's book *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (*Musej bezuvjetne predaje*) is a study of the (auto)biography and memory of an Eastern European academic who fled the 1990s war in Yugoslavia and lives in exile in Berlin. It tellingly begins with a

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Vega, "Freezing", in CD: *Philip Glass: Songs from Liquid Days*, Philip Glass, Sony, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Ministry of Pain*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, New York: HarperCollins, 2005, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth, New York: New Directions, 1999, 50.

description of the stomach contents of a walrus named Roland who died in the Berlin Zoo in 1961. Bubi, Ugrešić's Croatian protagonist, tells us about a glass case next to the live walrus exhibit that contains everything found in Roland's stomach, including such ephemera as a "pink cigarette lighter", "sunglasses", "a child's plastic water pistol", "a beer-bottle opener", and a set of keys. Roland is absent, but trapped eternally behind the glass display case are the contents of his stomach. Ugrešić alludes to how these arbitrary objects do not function as symbols of Roland's time frolicking in the zoo, but, perhaps more importantly, show the random remains that are only peripheral to his existence. Roland's afterlife is a haphazard collection of kitsch that serves as a sideshow display of macabre *memento mori* for the intrigued visitor to contemplate. It is this moment of contemplation, the marked distance between viewer and object, that seems to intrigue Ugrešić as she emphasizes that this act of observation is also a search for signification, albeit a synthetic and arbitrary one. Ugrešić writes:

The visitor stands in front of the unusual display, more enchanted than horrified, as before archeological exhibits. The visitor knows that their museum-display fate has been determined by chance (Roland's whimsical appetite) but still cannot resist the poetic thought that with time the objects have acquired some subtler, secret connections. Caught up in this thought, the visitor then tries to establish semantic coordinates, to reconstruct the historical context (it occurs to him, for instance, that Roland died one week after the Berlin Wall was erected), and so on and so forth.<sup>4</sup>

Through these items, the zoo visitor attempts to make connections with his or her own history (personal or collective), including a semantic connection to the Berlin Wall, so with time these bits and pieces become a cultural stand-in for collective memories built upon what Roland could swallow but could not digest. As his life-narrative becomes entwined with that of the onlooker's, his personal history incorporates what Jacob Emery calls "strong metaphors of digestion and assimilation".<sup>5</sup> Roland is now nothing more than a record of what

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Emery, "Guides to Berlin", *Comparative Literature*, LIV/4 (Fall 2002), 293. Emery writes: "Strong metaphors of digestion and assimilation run through the

his body could not assimilate – foreign objects that are not quite accepted, not fully processed nor wholly rejected. Roland has become what Jacques Rancière refers to as a “spectacle of surplus”;<sup>6</sup> zoo visitors are less interested in the mundane life of a walrus than in how the objects in his stomach help them piece together personal and collective memories.

Roland’s existential plight draws attention to the struggle for truth that continues between history and biography in contemporary memory studies. “Memoriaphilia”, the name for the obsession with memory studies that is widespread through many fields including sociology, anthropology, religious studies and the arts, now extends to overarching concepts such as “nostalgia”, “ostalgia”, “received memory”, and “postmemory”. Although not all concepts dealing with memory have become linked to the terrain of contemporary writers from the Balkans, I am interested in how discourses of memory create a conversation between Ugrešić’s narrator’s present, “East European trauma”, and a shared traumatic past through transgenerational and transnational cultural productions including texts, art installations, painting, performance and photographs.<sup>7</sup>

Coming into print when the ink was barely dry on the Dayton Peace Accords, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is an examination of memory and exile reflected in multiple cultural productions, and it grapples with the question of how a Yugoslavian in a post-Yugoslav world can write about the traumatic present through a traumatic communal past. Ugrešić’s central character is a Croatian exile who has lost her home, friends and job – she lives out of her suitcase the shattered life of the exile. Ugrešić not only invokes blood relations, namely the protagonist’s mother, but also her new friends in her present artistic circle in Berlin as well as generations of Eastern European writers and artists who have the same family effect – they pass down the trauma of life in exile through writing and art to new generations. The book becomes a portrait of a Chagallesque landscape filled with multiple layers of traumatic remembrance focused on post-

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supplementary stomachs of text and display, processed in a way that the narrator herself is incapable of performing organically.”

<sup>6</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott, New York and London: Verso, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 38.

World War II Eastern European Communism and the struggles of a family of artists and writers with its representation. These works of art created by an exile community drawn mainly from Eastern Europeans, which include an art installation of street signs, a disappearing photograph, and the paintings and installations of the Russian artist Ilya Kabakov, are used in Ugrešić's attempt to make connections between past and present traumas in Eastern Europe.

One of the central questions *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* addresses is: *Was ist Kunst?* What is art and how does it function as a discourse about the relationship between the past and the present in Eastern Europe? Ugrešić answers this in myriad ways including through the structure of the novel, which is set up like an art museum in ruins: it combines pieces of memory brought together to be displayed, but the memories are presented in diaries, dialogues and aphorisms rather than in display cases. Made up of vignettes rather than formal chapters the text includes the journal of the narrator's alienated and lonely mother, a dream-like section about friends who are visited by the Benjaminian angel of history, journalistic accounts of the Holocaust, reflections on the Yugoslav civil war, and numerous references to photographs. Both "personal and aphoristic",<sup>8</sup> *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* also acts as a *memento mori* – memories of death and displacement fragilely strung and held together by various artistic conceptions and manifestations. Moreover, this textual museum *cum* memory book also marks the subtle shift from a post-national-based discourse that focuses only on the author's/protagonist's recent break with her home country to a transnational discourse about memory and exile in the twentieth-century history of greater Eastern Europe. Ugrešić examines the struggle to come to terms with what it means to move through these different layers of historical memory via the lens of an exile living at the Eastern European ground zero – post-1989 Berlin.

Petar Ramadanović writes, "Ugresic does not simply speak about certain events in the Balkans but also addresses what has happened to telling, to the 'present', to memory, and to the way being is, or rather,

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Eder, "Books of the Times; Treating Exile as a Separate Country", 9 November 1999: <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/09/books/books-of-the-times-treating-exile-as-a-separate-country.html?pagewanted=2&src=pm>.

is not there in historical terms”.<sup>9</sup> This essay considers Ugrešić’s unusual method of “telling” as it examines how *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* moves through exilic art to better understand the relationship between past and present memory in the context of post-World War II Eastern Europe. I ask: what is the function of memory in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, and how does Ugrešić create a conversation between the past and the recent traumatic present through artistic production? To what extent does Ugrešić’s exiled narrator come to terms with the ruins of a collective Eastern European past amidst the ruins of post-1989 Berlin? How does Ugrešić navigate the shift from the focus on a post-national discourse consumed with the tragedy of Yugoslavia to a transnational narrative that creates a tapestry of shared twentieth-century traumas?

#### **The past in the present and “le devoir de mémoire”**

In her book about Yugoslav refugees living in the Netherlands in the mid-1990s, *The Ministry of Pain* (2004), Ugrešić’s protagonist – a literature professor living in exile – reflects:

Confronting the recent past was pure torture, looking into an unknown future – discomfoting .... Even the most basic questions gave me pause. Where was I born? In Yugoslavia? In the former Yugoslavia? In Croatia? Shit! Do I have any biography?<sup>10</sup>

These questions about the confusion among memory, biography and national identity reflect a significant theme that is threaded throughout Ugrešić’s work and perhaps most profoundly in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, in which Ugrešić endeavors to “illuminate ... the retrieval and construction of cultural memory in Eastern Europe in general, and in Yugoslavia in particular, after 1989”.<sup>11</sup> Here, she

<sup>9</sup> Petar Ramadanović, “Simonides on the Balkans”, in *Balkans as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, eds Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić, Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2005, 353. Ramadanović makes references to Dubravka Ugrešić’s article “The Confiscations of Memory”, trans. Celia Hawkesworth, *New Left Review*, CCXVIII (July-August 1996), 39.

<sup>10</sup> Ugrešić, *The Ministry of Pain*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Monica Popescu, “Imaging the Past: Cultural Memory in Dubravka Ugrešić’s *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*”, *Studies in the Novel*, XXXIX/3 (Fall 2007), 336.

asks: what is the past in the present and the present in the past as read through cultural memory?

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries cultural memory is a highly sought-after commodity – power often lying with those who control it – and with the breakdown of the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, there was an attempt to question and reconfigure the concept and application of memory as a viable way to access the past. In the midst of a crisis of memory artists and writers were the voices at the center of this questioning of historical truth. In her essay “Imaging the Past: Cultural Memory in Dubravka Ugrešić’s *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*”, Monica Popescu discusses how these epistemological questions affected intellectuals in the public sphere:

The collapse of European socialist regimes revealed a widespread skepticism of communist historiographic methods, which combined Marxism with totalitarian practices. Many East European scholars cautiously opened their research towards a postmodern approach regarding historical truth, the subjective intrusion of the researcher, and a potential blurring of lines between historical narrative and literary text.<sup>12</sup>

Memory, as a discourse, was placed on center stage as former Soviet states and other countries affected by Communism and Socialism began to take a close look at the official, state-regulated history they had been living under for decades. Many creative writers and artists began to experiment with new methods of representing the events and memories of them that had occurred since the mid-twentieth century.

In post-Tito Yugoslavia, nationalism was at the center of many of these discussions. The need arose to step back and untangle the layers of the historical narrative and to interrogate the blurred border between “historical narrative and literary text” that Popescu writes about. During his rule, Marshall Tito kept Yugoslavia at a political distance from most of the Soviet bloc and therefore outside of the “Soviet Orbit”,<sup>13</sup> leaving “The literatures of Yugoslavia [to be] written

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

in relative freedom”.<sup>14</sup> Yet, at the same time, writers were not able to escape living under a prescribed historical narrative that had been carefully crafted to maintain the *status quo* of a unified “Yugoslavia”. As a result, the only taboo subject in the region was nationalism, as Tito attempted to squelch all of the violent identity politics that surfaced immediately following the Second World War and continued until his death and to create a supranational state that fit all of the trappings of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community”.<sup>15</sup>

Ugrešić is one of these writers who grew up in Tito’s Yugoslavia and, after his death, watched the fracturing of a “unified country” and the retailoring of history by Tito’s former general Franjo Tuđman, the Bosnian-Serb.<sup>16</sup> Her world as she knew it no longer existed as Ugrešić realized that the “Yugoslavian heritage she had grown up with – a pan-slavian communality, held together by the firm Titoist hand – was suddenly gone”.<sup>17</sup> All things “Yugoslavian” seemed to take on the opposite meaning:

Yugoslavia (a country in which Croatian citizens had lived for some fifty years!) became a prohibited word, and the terms *Yugoslav*, *Yugonostalgic* or *Yugo-zombie* are synonymous with national traitor. The old symbols – flags, coats of arms, the names of streets, schools, squares – have been removed and replaced by new ones; the language and its name have been changed ....<sup>18</sup>

The post-Yugoslav condition became synonymous with a surrendering of the past to the present and to the acceptance that the nation she once knew was now a “foreign place”. Ugrešić writes:

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<sup>14</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth, University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1998, 36.

<sup>15</sup> See Popescu, “Imaging the Past”, 338. See also Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia*, Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, “The Souvenirs of Communism: Home as Marketplace or Deletion of the Past”, *The Hedgehog Review*, VII/3 (Fall 2005), 29. Also see Stephenie Young, “Yugonostalgia and the Post-National Narrative”, in *The New Order of War*, ed. Bob Brecher, New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2010, 89-110, for a more detailed discussion of the re-tailoring of history in post-Yugoslavia.

<sup>17</sup> M.A. Orthofer, “The Museum of Unconditional Surrender, Dubravka Ugrešić”, *The Complete Review*: <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/ugresicd/museum.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 78.

Such an abrupt transformation of values, occurring in many spheres of everyday, cultural, political and ideological life has generated confusion in the head of many citizens: bad has suddenly become good, left has suddenly become right. In this re-evaluation the blotting out of one's personal life, one's identity, a kind of amnesia, an unconscious or conscious lie have become a protective reaction which enables one quickly to adopt a new identity.<sup>19</sup>

In the confusion of identity, the erasure of the past for the sake of the present became a struggle to understand the relationship between memory, identity and national belonging or perhaps un-belonging. Former Yugoslavians scrambled to forget the past and find a new identity that fit the new national configurations.

The question of identity and cultural memory within the confines of national allegiance has become an ever-present topology in Ugrešić's work. For example, in her article, "Zagreb, Autumn 1992", she highlights the general confusion about nationalism and fidelity in a personal story she tells about lining up for an ID card. When asked her nationality Ugrešić answered "anational" and "undetermined".

"Anational", I replied.

"There's no such thing!" She bellowed.

"Don't you have some heading for ... 'other'?"

"No! Just tell me what you are and stop making a nuisance of yourself!" said the clerk addressing the queue this time, exactly as prescribed in Soviet handbooks of totalitarian etiquette.

"She must be Serbian, and she's afraid to say so", commented someone behind me.

"Are you Serbian?" asked the clerk.

She was urged by the clerk and customers to pick an identity, some suggesting that she choose "Croatian" or even "Gypsy" because the latter was one of the most accepted groups at the time, but Ugrešić emphatically replied: "I am – others! ... O-T-H-E-R-S!"<sup>20</sup> To Ugrešić, identity seemed up for grabs and it did not matter what you chose as long as you belonged to some currently accepted group. Even the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>20</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, "Zagreb, Autumn 1992", trans. Celia Hawkesworth, *Granta*, XLII (Winter 1992), 241.



usually peripheralized “gypsies” (more correctly referred to as Roma) that she mentions were acceptable at this point, and this is a group that continues to exist in a contested historical position in Eastern European national narratives. What this shows is that by 1992 the war in Yugoslavia had begun and Tito’s carefully constructed past was to be erased and replaced with another historical memory to be collectively manipulated and in turn make way for the next stage – post-Yugoslavia where the past in the present and the present in the past were to be separated by a proverbial wall.

Ugrešić’s work and its intense focus on narratives of remembrance can be better understood through the lens of contemporary memory studies, which has played a significant role in the interpretation of history and biography since World War II, especially in European literature. Although they tend to focus more directly on Holocaust studies, both Eva Hoffman’s conceptualization of “received memory” and Marianne Hirsch’s conception of “postmemory” speak to Ugrešić’s work, especially in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, because they present attempts to think through present and past trauma interchangeably and focus on the consideration of how these memory narratives are linked inter- or trans-generationally. Although they do not specifically address writing from the late twentieth century, or the Balkans, they support a reconsideration of what the concept of generational memory means for an exile in Eastern Europe living with the ghosts of past traumas.

More specifically, Hirsch’s concept “postmemory” is “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection”.<sup>21</sup> It “describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right”.<sup>22</sup> Postmemory is especially relevant and powerful for Hirsch because it takes into consideration the role of imagination and creation in recollection, and her work rigorously questions these boundaries or limits between the real and imaginative worlds. Although Hirsch

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<sup>21</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1997, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, *Poetics Today*, XXIX/1 (Spring 2008), 103.

initially wrote of postmemory primarily in relation to the children of Holocaust survivors who grew up in the narratives of an experience not their own (also known as second-generation survivors), she acknowledges that this concept might “function to describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events or experiences” that move beyond these confines.<sup>23</sup> This reaches not only to traumatic events but also to the notion of “family” and “generation”. Hirsch affirms that the discussion of postmemory can be extended into artistic and cultural productions beyond the borders of Holocaust discourse to writing that examines trauma and memory on multiple levels and re-scribes the concept of family to include ties beyond the confines of blood relations.

Hoffman adds to Hirsch’s discussion as she attempts to find the meeting point between present traumatic experience and past traumatic experience, which she calls “received” memories. Received memories are the inheritance of a traumatic past that is passed down to us, creating descendants to whom Hoffman refers as “receptacle[s] of historical legacy” who are clearly linked to larger history, and these receptacles carry forward the burden of “inescapable facts” and “inescapable knowledge”.<sup>24</sup> In her book, *After Such Knowledge*, Hoffman details that it was not until her own experience of shock during 9/11 in the US that she started to better understand what her received memory of her family’s traumatic past during the Second World War meant to her. She writes:

As it transpired, September 11, 2001, did not turn out to be September 1, 1939. But whatever the twenty-first-century date will come to stand for, however it will be understood, the apocalyptic, silent images of that day ... delivered their own instant mega-information. The information concerned many things; but one of them had to do with the witnessing of catastrophe *in medias res*. I had grown up with the subliminal expectation of catastrophe, and the received “memory” of mass death in my very bones. And yet expectation is not the same as reality, received knowledge not the same as the direct kind .... I understood palpably what I had until then known only imaginatively:

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<sup>23</sup> Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*, New York: Public Affairs, 2004, x.

what it is like to have your entire world shaken at its very foundations  
.....<sup>25</sup>

At the same time that Hoffman distinguishes between the “terror of terrorism” and the “horrors of the Holocaust”, two very different events that she is not necessarily comparing, she also weaves them into her own personal history, underscoring that the former has helped her to “understand palpably” what it means to experience tragedy *in medias res*. This is something she felt she could never even begin to understand before. Thus, this self-reflective moment not only allows Hoffman to reconsider her relationship to her ancestral received memory but sets into motion a poignant rumination on the relationship between received memory and second-generation memory that mingles with traumatic events in the recent past. She writes: “For, like some newly introduced bit of code that travels backwards through an entire text, the opening salvo of the twenty-first century seemed also to insert itself into the past and add its own information to my reading of my generation’s story, and history.”<sup>26</sup> Hoffman highlights the entangled worlds of memory and how each new layer of experience shifts, for her, the relationship between “received” knowledge and “direct” knowledge, further complicating the role of past memory in the present.

The work of Hoffman and Hirsch intersects at many points, and both writers struggle with what Hirsch refers to as “le devoir de mémoire”. They both confront our “duty to the past”, to memory, and to the issues of naming the past in the present and unraveling complex emotional stories that have unfolded over many generations. As a memory work, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* endeavors to consider the concepts of postmemory and received memory through the artistic production of an Eastern European exilic community. It is what Hirsch refers to as a “postmemorial work” that “strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 237-38.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

expression”.<sup>27</sup> For Ugrešić’s protagonist, this arises through the intergenerational memories of her own family, and through her reflections on the artistic productions of her extended family – the received or transgenerational memories of the exiles who struggle with the subjects of narrative, identity and *le devoir de mémoire*: the unconscious duty to interrogate and represent in some fashion the multi-layered connections of traumatic memories that are received, translated and passed on from one generation to the next.

### **Received memories: art, *byt* and trash**

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the narrator visits her close friend Richard in his studio in Berlin, an artist whose work she says “expresses love between incompatible materials, marries unconnectable things”<sup>28</sup> and “... whose studio is like a Walrus’s stomach”.<sup>29</sup> Looking over his collections of trash and kitsch, the narrator says contemplatively, “I’d like to be able to do that”, and Richard replies, “I don’t know how it’s done with words”.<sup>30</sup> Yet Ugrešić’s novel is just that: a “marriage” of seemingly “incompatible” materials – a postmodern (auto)biography, one that explores how art acts as a mirror of everyday experience for the Yugoslav exile living in the transnational melting pot of post-1989 Berlin. To what extent does art, widely construed, address the received memories of an ongoing traumatic Eastern European experience? These concerns are foregrounded in the novel as we follow the narrator around the artistic haunts of her present life in Berlin and her pre-exile life in Yugoslavia. The functionality of artistic production, including her own writing, is on trial as a witness who may or may not help to elucidate the murky traumatic history and collective memories of the Eastern European refugee at the end of the twentieth century.

Among the ruins of an anachronistic Berlin the narrator resembles a door-to-door census taker who must collect all data available in answer to her question: *Was ist Kunst?* What she finds is that behind

<sup>27</sup> Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, 111: “le devoir de mémoire” is translated as “the duty of memory”.

<sup>28</sup> Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 165.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 166. This observation comes from Bridget Rawding’s essay, “The Secret Connection of Things: Memory, Image and Text in Dubravka Ugrešić’s *Museum of Unconditional Surrender*”, unpublished working paper, Fall 2011.

the doors of the artists is a confusion of answers that leads to a Borgesian encyclopedia of aphorisms. For example, an anonymous colleague tells her, “Art is an endeavour to defend the wholeness of the world, the secret connection between all things .... Only true art can assume a secret connection between the nail on my wife’s little finger and the earthquake in Kobe.”<sup>31</sup> Her friend Sissel says, “I don’t know .... An artistic act is always some sort of alteration in the world.”<sup>32</sup> Another answers “I don’t know. I always write my poems about something else, so as not to write about the first thing ....”<sup>33</sup> She even asks the mailman, who is quick to answer, “The word itself tells you”, as he whimsically draws an arrow pointing at the stamp on a letter he is delivering to her.<sup>34</sup> As she continues her search, these wide-ranging answers lead to more questions about how to make connections between art and memory in Eastern Europe.

Yet at the beginning of this confused search to make a connection between art and memory the narrator, in a rumination on the unfortunate state of the modern-day exile, comes upon Kira, who is described simply as one who “smiles the pale smile of a convalescent”, but who sets the tone for the rest of the novel when she almost apologetically admits in Russian, “‘Nanizivat’, ya lyublyu nanizivat” (“‘Threading.’ I like threading things”).<sup>35</sup> Threading is what Ugrešić’s narrator does as she weaves her way through artistic creations that thread together seemingly incompatible elements taken from everyday life – referred to as “*byt*” in the novel. *Byt* is a complex Russian word that can be loosely translated as “everyday life”, and this concept meanders through the collage-like novel as Ugrešić confronts various manifestations of memory through art. *Byt* is what she uses to weave together memories with some hope that these cultural productions loosely connected through a transgenerational lineage will strengthen the slight thread of memory that links the traumatic Eastern Europe past with its violent present in Yugoslavia. She carries the burden of the duty of memory, as she wanders through the *byt* present in the artistic labyrinth of Berlin, where she observes

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 162, 167.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

artists who work with found objects such as old Soviet photo albums. Such items are used to create Duchamp-like art installations that include exhibits such as an “enchanted wood” of rakes and a collection of old soup cans aptly titled *World Soup*.<sup>36</sup>

The relationship between art, memory and *byt* is foregrounded in the story of the narrator’s artist friend Richard, whom she cryptically introduces in the following way: “Richard Wentworth, an English artist. Any similarity between Richard and himself is intended and accidental.”<sup>37</sup> Richard, who is a thinly veiled version of the British sculpture artist who was living in Berlin in the early 1990s, is famous for the juxtaposition of unlike elements in his work. He takes the notion of *byt* to extremes because he uses the everyday in his work, echoing the avant-garde ready-made of the early twentieth-century Dadaists. Identity is at issue in Richard’s studio which, as noted earlier, is “like a walrus’s stomach” – full of kitsch. This includes an obsession with collecting everyday household items such as chairs, plates, light bulbs, photographs, baskets, cages, hammers, and old containers and creating installations with these objects that he believes “have their own biography”.<sup>38</sup> He takes leftovers from society and puts them in a new context. Even words are collected. The narrator, as someone who is also a word collector, notes that Richard’s “car is stuck all over with little pieces of paper with German words written on them with the articles *der*, *die*, *das* heavily underlined”.<sup>39</sup> He creates meaning out of excess, urban trash, and neither time nor space remains hermetically sealed from Richard, who manipulates the biography of each object.

Richard’s art highlights how seemingly disparate objects can be collected, threaded together, and recontextualized to create new narratives. He takes the discarded objects of others, the memories of others, their biographies, and creates new objects, contexts, memories. His sophisticated trash collection is a postmodern commentary on sorting through received memories, rewriting them, and investing them with a new transgenerational community of memory. It seems

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-66.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

almost natural to the narrator that he do this in the ruins of Berlin, which he sees as a treasure trove of creative possibility:

Berlin streets are so full of messages. Berlin is the most attractive rubbish heap in the world. Berlin is the world capital of rubbish. I sense the smell of decay at every corner. Here the whole global digestive process is so terribly and painfully obvious. The flea-markets ... the Berlin flea-markets are the most intoxicating and most terrible image of an open digestive tract that I have yet seen.<sup>40</sup>

Although Richard is only living abroad, not as an exile, his work still speaks to the exile's experience. His description of Berlin as a repository of "messages" reiterates that trash and (auto)biographical material collected from the everyday excess of society are not so different. Yet, although the narrator sees its potential for representing the haphazard, chaotic and unpredictable nature of biographical experience, "The nature of 'trash', (auto)biographical material, is not, it seems, all that straightforward after all".<sup>41</sup> And it is to Richard that the narrator, who is struggling with her own attempt to work through her experience as an exile, says:

Everything's muddled up, Richard ... I write about one thing in order to write about something else, just as I recall something that never happened in order to remember what did happen. It's all somehow going in the wrong direction ....

Richard answers, "Just keep going. This is Berlin, the wrong direction is the right direction here."<sup>42</sup> To construct memories is to confront chaos, confusion, and the ruins of one's life amongst the ruins of a city that is struggling to find its place in the "New Europe" just as the exile struggles to find her own place and to write her own narrative.

As the narrator threads her way through the abstruse exilic art world of the everyday in Berlin, her own art therapy process, she calls attention to the work of Moscow artist and "voluntary exile"<sup>43</sup> Ilya

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>43</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, 310. Kabakov was born in Soviet Russia and left permanently in 1992.

Kabakov as another way of accessing a possible answer to the question of *Was ist Kunst?* and its relationship to received memory. The ironic “uncrowned king of rubbish”,<sup>44</sup> Kabakov is well known for his “total installation” projects that became the focus of his work, especially after he permanently left his homeland of Russia in 1992.<sup>45</sup> Kabakov is a multi-media artist who often uses trash as the main subject of his art works and is interested in *byt*. His work “anchored in the chaos of the everyday, *byt*, Kabakov transcribes a grandiose, transmedia (auto)biography of triviality”.<sup>46</sup> His creations are a lively conversation with Soviet propaganda, memory, and Eastern European trauma more generally, and he strives to “make sense of reality ... by painting scenes from everyday life, exactly as they had been recorded long ago in newspaper photographs, in volumes of photographs about the Soviet Union, cinema posters; scenes, that is, which had already been articulated iconographically in the consciousness of consumers as typical, Soviet”.<sup>47</sup> Irony is the most important tool with which he critiques the paradoxes of life under Soviet rule and its attempt to control individual and collective memory through consumerism and propaganda.

Underlying the narrator’s attraction to Kabakov’s art is her ever-present struggle to coalesce received memories with present trauma. Yet, if received memory is “*distinct* from the recall of contemporary witnesses and participants” as something which is inter- or transgenerational, then how is one to conceptualize the experience of those who were born with the inherited traumatic memories of the past, such as the Holocaust or Communism, only to face new ones specific to their own generation?<sup>48</sup> In what ways can the past inform the continuous present as the thread between received knowledge and direct knowledge is solidified through contemporary events? The narrator searches for further answers to this in the work of Kabakov, whose artistic life is informed by his own past experiences under Communism and its subsequent aftermath. Her search draws her to

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<sup>44</sup> Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 37

<sup>45</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 386.

<sup>46</sup> Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 36.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, 106.



Kabakov's life albums, which are a collection of found objects, trash, from many different lives. Ugrešić writes:

The albums entitled *My Life*, which are of course compiled by Kabakov's little anonymous author, reveal the kitsch of a personal life measured in postcards from summer holidays, newspaper cuttings, messages, notes, sketches, photographs, letters, certificates, personal documents. Kabakov shapes his (auto)biography measured in 'rubbish', the grotesque (or tragic) character of which is increased by the absence of the personal.<sup>49</sup>

Kabakov collects remainders of the past, seemingly incompatible objects, into a notebook of many lives which is ironically titled *My Life*. The question of whose life this is immediately rises to the surface as he entangles the collective and the individual sense of self through a purposeful erasure of the personal. A strong commentator of Soviet culture, Kabakov underscores the fluid nature of received memory that is neither personal nor individual. Memory, received or otherwise, is circumspect. For him, a collection of a personal life is anything but cohesive. Rather, it is a random collection whose meaning is as questionable and dynamic as the stomach contents of Roland the walrus.

This layering of past memories with the present and its circumspect position in the narrative of twentieth-century Eastern Europe is emphasized when Ugrešić's narrator describes a 1994 concert put on by Kabakov where he read on stage "sentences spoken by the anonymous participants in the marathon which took place in the communal kitchen". Essentially, it was a stage performance of an older project entitled *You've got something boiling, Ol'ga Georgievna!* and presented a combination of reading with a background of Soviet kitsch from the "typical Soviet repertoire: sickly sweet tunes, patriotic and military songs, classical music, Swan Lake of course".<sup>50</sup> Bringing together a theatrical symphony of what Milan Kundera refers to as "totalitarian kitsch",<sup>51</sup> all of this was accompanied by the occasional "banging of pots, spoons, forks, and

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<sup>49</sup> Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 36.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, New York: HarperCollins, 1984, 252ff.

black and white slides of authentic Moscow ‘communal kitchens’ projected at the back of the stage”.<sup>52</sup> The narrator comments on the unexplained upsurge of feelings that this performance provoked:

I was deeply moved by Kabakov’s performance on the Berlin stage. And I cannot say for certain what it was that provoked that emotion. “Communal kitchens” were not part of my everyday reality. And yet, I wept. What is more, I felt that I had an exclusive right to those tears. Be that as it may, Kabakov’s performance pulled a thread of undefined sadness in me, that of a shared “East European trauma”.

It is compelling that she admits to her confusion over her reaction to Kabakov’s performance. What could a Croatian have in common with “communal kitchens” in Soviet Russia? She discovers that she may be more interconnected with this history than she previously believed. Her friend V.K. answers her emotive response by saying, “Traumas acquired in the formative years are never forgotten .... Some people call that nostalgia.” Yet, this is more than nostalgia; Kabakov’s work stirs the layers of received memories with her present experiences as a refugee from the war in Yugoslavia, carefully protected by a thin veil of nostalgia.

The threading of memories through *byt* in the art that she finds around her, such as that of Richard and Kabakov, and ultimately in Ugrešić’s own story, engages in a conversation about what the duty of memory is and whether there is a true duty in the first place. The idea of the everyday shifts with the narrator’s exploration of the concept. For example, her view of her own everyday – ““Communal kitchens’ were not part of my everyday reality” – is seismically shifted when she watches Kabakov’s performance. Even if the pragmatic answer is that memory itself is subjective and elusive, Ugrešić’s narrator persists as she seeks to untangle the chaotic layers of memory and use her experience of displacement and exile as a way to understand her role as an inheritor of the past who must survive as an exiled body in the present. Thus, there seems to be a duty to memory, to archive the past in the present and the present in the past, that urges these artists and writers to continue their work. The novel’s narrator moves through descriptions of visual art to reflect on her recent traumatic experience

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<sup>52</sup> Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 37.

with her own relationship to nation and on the collective memory of Yugoslavia and how she is inextricably linked to the traumas of the twentieth century and what she refers to as a “shared ‘East European trauma’”.<sup>53</sup> Art does not necessarily hold the answer to her questions but rather acts as a place from which to begin her search.

Hirsch writes: “The growth of memory culture may, indeed, be a symptom of a need for inclusion in a collective membrane forged by a shared inheritance of multiple traumatic histories and the individual and social responsibility we feel toward a persistent and traumatic past.”<sup>54</sup> This is the duty of memory. Ugrešić responds to this growth that Hirsch writes about as her narrator struggles to write about her present, to somehow represent the experience of watching the slow and deliberate destruction of the Yugoslavia that she was born into, and her subsequent entrance into the exilic world of Berlin where artists and writers from many different cultures come together. This collage-like chronicle reinforces to the reader that the book form is also an institutional space whose function is to organize memories into something that surpasses time and space – a chronological and, ideally, readable event. As with Hoffman, who brings together her received memories with her own traumatic experiences of 9/11, the present trauma helps Ugrešić’s narrator to work through a communal Eastern European trauma. By asking *Was ist Kunst?* Ugrešić not only confronts the demons of representation but does so through a combination of her own artistic creation – a memory novel of sorts that weaves its way through the numerous attempts at representing a predominantly Eastern European traumatic experience in the second half of the twentieth century – and through interrogation and observation of the other artists around her.

### **Memory, exile and the transnational narrative**

Joseph Brodsky once wrote: “Memory betrays everybody, especially those who we knew best. It is an ally of oblivion, it is an ally of death.”<sup>55</sup> Hirsch might answer that while this may be true, the expansion of interest in the subject of memory is about the need to understand the shared experience of traumatic history and our

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>54</sup> Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, 111.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 50.

personal responsibility to the past – even if the betrayal of memory is always present.<sup>56</sup> Somewhere between Brodsky and Hirsch is *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, where the past and the present create layers of received memories of a collective Eastern European experience. Through art such as Kabakov’s installations, the narrator seeks to better understand her multiple roles as a Croatian, a writer, and an exile. Received memories appear through the *byt* to demonstrate how people, places and objects that seem incompatible or disconnected are actually intricately linked as narratives of exile and history in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century.

Ugrešić emphasizes that the relationship between art and memory is a tenuous one. This role of art as representation is in question in *The Future of the Image* by Jacques Rancière, in which he interrogates the question of what art can represent and asks “under what conditions might it be said that certain events cannot be represented ... What precisely is being said when it is maintained that certain entities, events or situations cannot be represented by artistic means?” For Rancière, the term “unrepresentable” has become an “inflated” catchall for a “constellation of allied notions: the Unrepresentable, the unthinkable, the untreatable, the irredeemable”.<sup>57</sup> Art is incapable of creating a “material presentation” that is commensurate with what is “brought before our eyes”:

It says that a thing cannot be represented by artistic means on account of the very nature of those means .... the latter is characterized by its surplus of presence which betrays the singularity of the event or situation, recalcitrant as it is to any plenary material representation .... They cannot adapt to the surplus of presence and subtraction of existence peculiar to it, and which in Platonic terms define its character as simulacrum.<sup>58</sup>

If artistic representation is a simulacrum “characterized by its surplus of presence” and this surplus “betrays the singularity of the event or situation”, then art is an attempt to create a representation of something that is singular and therefore unrepeatable, yet in this

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<sup>56</sup> Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, 111.

<sup>57</sup> Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 109.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

attempt is where the “perfectly compatible” worlds of “truth” and “fiction” come together:

To investigate something that has disappeared, an event whose traces have been erased, to find witnesses and make them speak of the materiality of the event without cancelling its enigma, is a form of investigation which certainly cannot be assimilated to the representative logic of verisimilitude .... On the other hand, it is perfectly compatible with the relationship between the truth of an event and the fictional invention specific to the aesthetic regime in the arts.<sup>59</sup>

To Rancière an event seen through artistic representation rests in a crevasse between what is the originary truth of an event (if that exists) and the fiction that is invented to represent that already-disappeared origin. This artistic act creates a surplus of presence where the art is an addition, and excess, to the event that is inevitably a betrayer, just as Brodsky says that memory itself is a betrayer.

Rancière’s concern about art’s inability to represent what has “disappeared” and “been erased” that inevitably leads to a surplus of presence harks back to two moments in *The Museum* that frame the text and underscore Bubi’s search to create a narrative from supposed disassociated fragments of art and life, a search that parallels her experience as an exile from former Yugoslavia.

The first is Roland the Walrus, whose stomach has been emptied of its contents not to merely show the experiences of the lifetime – what Roland ate; what people threw away or lost; who passed through the zoo – but to show what haphazard collection of kitsch was maintained. In death Roland becomes a surplus and it is up to the viewers at the zoo to create their own narratives about Roland. Roland becomes a way of reading the narrator’s role as an exile:

I Am the Walrus is the leitmotiv of Ugresic’s narrator/alter ego, Bubi. Exiled out of a polar remove, Bubi lives not in a zoo but an equivalent: the museum of the title. Exile reality, no longer nourished by roots, is a collection of orphan sensations, artifacts and memories.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>60</sup> Eder, “Books of the Times; Treating Exile as a Separate Country”.

Ugrešić's book, then, is an expansion on the unfortunate situation of Roland. She writes: "The chapters and fragments which follow should be read in a similar way."<sup>61</sup> To her it is up to the reader to make the connections on his or her own accord – and not to question whether the novel is autobiographical or hypothetical.

The second moment is in the last section of the text, aptly titled "*Wo bin ich?*" (Where Am I?), where the narrator visits the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin which, she writes, is "devoted to things". With fellow exiles Zoran and Mira, Bubi views "things" that represent East Germany such as souvenirs from Vietnam made out of fragments of American airplanes, baby food, a light bulb, and a blender. In another corner of the museum are "things" from West Germany in the Fifties such as posters for Coca-Cola, a Volkswagen, and a Phillips television. While at the Deutsches Historisches Museum, fellow exile Zoran says, "We'll never have a museum like this" and another, Mira, answers, "How could we when the country has disappeared". Zoran answers: "That's why we're all walking museum pieces."<sup>62</sup> Ugrešić's book and her exiled characters are paralleled with museums – they all are an amalgamation of surplus products from the past that are on view, if you will, to be read and analyzed by viewers and readers of the future. Like the many museums that fill the streets of Berlin, the exiles are a blend of disordered moments of traumatic history, people for whom "time-places start to blur, fuse and confuse".<sup>63</sup> Yet this blurring of boundaries, this assemblage illustrates how Ugrešić attempts to create a book that performs the experience of the exile who lives in between worlds and for whom borders are slippery. To underscore this, much of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is dedicated to the voices of others and these quotations "usher in an enormous amount of the speech of others: as if the narrator has lost her ability to formulate any statement unless it is endowed with someone else's authority or at

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<sup>61</sup> Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, xi.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>63</sup> Dimitar Kambourov, "Exile or Exodus: D. Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and Iliya Troyanov's *The World Is Big and Salvation Lurks Around the Corner*", in *Shoreless Bridges: South East European Writing in Diaspora*, ed. Elka Agoston-Nikolova, Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010, 153.

least compassionate presence; unless it is shared by – or ascribed to – someone else” leading to an exilic “polyphony” of voices.<sup>64</sup>

In her work *Nobody's Home* Ugrešić insists: “We haven’t got a global view!”<sup>65</sup> when writing about the former Yugoslavia. Yet *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* suggests the opposite because while it is a *memento mori* – “remember you must die” – to the people who grew up in Yugoslavia, to Eastern European culture in the twentieth century and to the role that memory plays in the construction of identity, it also looks to the future. Thus, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* exists to house seemingly incompatible artistic elements in order to shatter boundaries of knowledge that have carefully been set up in the discourse on memory over the last decades. As Ugrešić threads together the polyphony of voices of Eastern European experience, she also marks a vital move from a post-national to a transnational narrative. The former is a contested term pushing at the boundaries of a discourse that grapples with the narratives of those who no longer have one national identity, but are still in dialogue with nationalism. The post-national highlights the function of the state in its relation to historical discourse and points out what the state must both include and exclude to exist: this is what marks this text as one that attempts to break new literary ground. The transnational speaks to subjects beyond state delineations. Dimitar Kambourov, in his essay “Exile or Exodus”, prefers the term “exilic literature” rather than “transnational” because it confronts the issues of exile and “motivates its artistic enquiries and enables us to present it as homeless, prodigal literature”.<sup>66</sup> This point is reiterated near the end of the book when the narrator makes a visit to the actual Museum of Unconditional Surrender in Berlin (it was finally closed in 1994) upon which the title of the book is based. The museum refers to “a Soviet institution in Berlin that remains visitorless and lost in the post-Communist world”.<sup>67</sup> It is time to move on – to mark the traumatic past and try to create a new reality.

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>65</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *Nobody's Home*, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursac, Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2008, 6.

<sup>66</sup> Kambourov, “Exile or Exodus”, 152.

<sup>67</sup> The museum is where “German capitulation was signed during the night between 8 and 9 May 1945” (Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 221).

*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* then is a work of exilic literature that moves beyond the postnational narrative as it searches through the *byt* for a collective account of Eastern Europe that does not break with the past but incorporates it, in all of its chaos, into the present. It is a reminder that the exile is constantly faced with the ineffable border of his or her mortality as he or she tries to redraw and re-script that past and the border between the old life and the new one. It is also a warning that we have a duty to memory, even as it betrays us. Ugrešić's book is an homage to the challenge of reconciling the past in the present, and through it she attempts to articulate the world of a post-Yugoslav writer, transcending borders and boundaries and writing toward the future.