A PARRELLEL SPACE, A COMMON SPACE:
RETHINKING SOVERIGNITY THROUGH THE WORK OF ALBAN MUJA

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Today Kosovo, like the other ex-Yugoslav provinces and republics continues to bear the marks of war, and the pangs of the transition from socialism to capitalism that shaped the 1990s. On the one hand, this recent past is visible from afar in the fraught and ever-changing lines that mark the contours of new nation-states and make old maps, old ways of seeing the world, obsolete. On the other it’s present within the landscape itself, in the Yugoslav Army General Headquarters building that after the NATO bombing of Belgrade was left in tatters, in the renaming of Lenin Street in Pristina after United States President Bill Clinton, or in the rusted signs around Dubrovnik informing tourists who stray outside of the congested medieval town of mines still scattered throughout nearby hills.

"DO NOT TOUCH UNKNOWN OBJECTS AND EXPLOSIVE REMNANTS OF WAR," these signs advise. And yet this command to “not touch” strikes a chord with the incessantly curious and unyieldingly stubborn thirteen-year-old version of myself. While now into my twenties, and with enough sense to know better, I continue to instinctively ask “why not?”, why should we not touch, or better yet why should these objects be left unknown? Of course, the sensible response is that the objects this warning refers to are dangerous, even fatal explosives. Clearly these objects are to be avoided, but what of all the other traces and vestiges that remain? What of the other “remnants of war” that shattered social fabric and political landscapes? What of the chaotic transition from communism that promised democracy yet settled for free-market capitalism, or the nationalist currents that continue to garner public support for extremist political parties continue to divide people along ethnic lines? Should these remnants, these by-products of war also be left unknown, untouched, or unquestioned?

The work of young Kosovar artists responds with an emphatic no. Active after the war in 1999 and in the thick of liminal emancipation from Serbia between ‘99-2008, artists like Alban Muja produced photographs, installations, performances, and prints that struggle to make sense of the turbulent changes in Kosovo’s political landscape as well as the changing role of individuals within a new world order and an emerging nation-state. Suspended between the border of the United States and Mexico, or affixing street signs that translate Cyrillic into its more widely understood Romanized variant, Muja appears active and engaged within the public sphere. Unlike the politicized landscape of Kosovo post 1999 Tourist City (fig.1) and Catch Me (fig. 2) are devoid of allusions to national insignia or political factions. Instead, by locating the artist and the action at the center of an otherwise simple composition, focus is placed on the interaction between an individual and the social sphere. Through unassuming actions, simple compositions, and a subdued aesthetic Catch Me and Tourist City occupy the space between national, linguistic, and ethnic divides. Capturing small acts of intervention, these photographs underscore the relationship between everyday people and their surroundings, and attest to the artist’s struggle to account for a dynamic and engaged community within the narrow confines of contemporary politics and corporate culture.

Thinking the resonance of these photographs in the context of Kosovo and also within our own context perhaps in California, or Chicago, or in the United States more broadly, will be my primary objective, but first I first need to address some preliminaries before getting that far. I will first take account of Kosovo’s recent past in order to contextualize Muja’s work alongside the history of organized resistance that welled up in response to Yugoslavia’s economic crisis in the 1970s and 1980s, and was later galvanized by Serbia’s nationalist regime between 1988-1999.

After turbulent uprisings, public protests, and increasing hostiles throughout Yugoslavia in the 1980s, in 1989 Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic responded by reinforcing centralized power and retracting the autonomy of the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina—granted by the 1974 constitution of Yugoslavia. Overnight, new mandates removed Kosovar Albanians from government positions, fired teachers or withheld pay, segregated schools between Serb and Albanian children, and systematically looted or seized Albanian property. Already critical of the faltering Yugoslav economy and growing disparity between republics, by the early ‘90s Kosovar Albanians faced increasingly dismal living standards, skyrocketing unemployment, and bereft academic systems.
Intent on independence from both Serbia, Kosovar Albanians organized a parallel government, school system, health care facilities and economic networks autonomous of the Serbian state. Parallel structures and organized non-violent protests intended to undermine the Serbian State and garner support for Kosovar independence from the international community. Through the early 90s parallel structures gained the overwhelming support of Kosovo’s Albanian population and by 1992 elections were organized in private houses throughout Kosovo and Ibrahim Rugova was elected president of the new shadow state. While Albania was the only nation to recognize the Republic of Kosovo, the illusion of independence and the creation of a parallel state, of a parallel reality, energized the population and fostered a sense of community in the wake of increasingly adverse conditions. “Oppressed but organized,” wrote Rugova in 1994, “this is the first time that [Kosovar Albanians] feel that they have a power...that they feel [like] citizens despite the occupation.” While inspiring, Rugova’s account of the parallel state is riddled with duplicity. Phrases like “oppressed but organized” or “citizens despite occupation” waver between contradictory claims—for instance, what does it mean to a citizen of an imagined state, or an occupied state? What rights, protections, or sense of belonging can this foster? – At the heels of such questions his words, while empowering resonate with a crushing negation, an unequivocal reminder of the retraction of the rights of Kosovo’s Albanian population.

“We were just the unwanted people in a desired territory.” Stated artist Albert Heta in a 2005 interview. “And every part of our society felt this.” Nonetheless parallel systems, particularly the parallel school system was effective in creating measured change and maintaining a sense of normalcy under Serb oppression. Where 370,000 students attended school in Kosovo before the 1990’s, parallel schools allowed 330,000 students to obtain an education. This was done largely through the efforts of parents and teachers who held class in school buildings after Serb students were dismissed or met in private homes, basements, and abandoned buildings. These makeshift classrooms were often without desks or equipment and consequently the education provided was meager at best. However more than providing a traditional education, Albanian writer and philosopher Shkëlzen Maliqi contended: “The parallel school system successfully preserved [the] socialization of ...students who have experienced enormous political and social shocks.” This emphasis on socialization and maintaining community was perhaps the greatest success of the parallel structures. And between 1990-1995 this emphasis on community and a hope for the future resonated deeply with students, parents, and teachers who continued to hold classes and protest in solidarity.

However by the mid 1990s there was a growing discrepancy between an imagined reality, a hope for the future, and the experience of life under occupation. LDK officials refused to negotiate with Serbia, while Serbia refused to acknowledge the LDK. The situation was what one journalist described as a "Balkan fairy tale, where both sides convinced themselves they did not need to engage in dialogue with the other." Moreover, diplomatic gridlock coupled with four years of non-violent resistance failed to attract the attention of the international community or garner actual sovereignty for Kosovo.

As Rugova’s polices and those of the LDK increasingly came under fire for lacking either dialogue or active resistance in 1996 a new organization, the Kosovo Liberation Army promised independence. This paramilitary group saw little use for non-violent resistance and instead waged guerrilla warfare against Serbs forces in Kosovo. The KLA saw violence and armed aggression as the means not only to liberate Kosovo from oppression, but also and perhaps most importantly, to attract the attention of the international community.

As violence quickly escalated into an all out war between the KLA and Serb forces, western governments started to take notice. By 1998 United States President Bill Clinton and British Prime Minister Tony Blair placed surmounting pressure on the international community to take action against the violent oppression of Kosovar Albanians by the Serbian government. On March 24, 1999 NATO launched air strikes against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—at the time constituted by
the republics of Serbia and Montenegro. After four months of sustained bombing and civilian causalities well into the hundreds, NATO forces weakened Yugoslav military infrastructure, ended Serb control over Kosovo and installed and parliamentary government currently led by Prime Minister and former KLA member Hashim Thaci.

The effect of NATO intervention and the events of the 1990s are extremely complicated and impossible adequately summarize in this brief account, however I will simply state that think Kosovo after 1999– when Muja was a student at the Pristina Academy of Art– is to confront a dense fabric of narratives and counter-narratives, traumas and violence, grave injustices and failed policies which affected or implicated all members of society. But like the duplicity of Rugova’s rhetoric, it is also to rejoice in moments hope when emancipation, sovereignty, or even freedom seemed within reach. And here I emphasize moments, because the freedom on offer to Kosovo after NATO intervention was itself convoluted, slippery and shifting.

While 1999 marked freedom from Serbia, freedom– or better yet sovereignty– for Kosovo was incessantly deferred through complicated memorandums and disagreements between the United Nations and Kosovo’s interim government. And in this way, to think Pristina after ’99 is to think of the welling up of different freedoms. It is to witness to proliferation of flags from countless nations, each boasting their own histories their agendas and ideologies. Liberated by western forces, after 1999 Pristina was transformed into an amalgam of capitalist influence and nationalist insignia set against the remnants of a socialist past. In addition to vibrant flags, banners and billboards of western politicians– who like Tony Blair– played key a role in NATO intervention proliferated throughout the city. Lenin Street was quickly renamed Bill Clinton Boulevard and its buildings swathed in the image of the former President, while a banner of local hero and former KLA leader Adem Jashari was added above the central entryway of the socialist era Palace of Sports and Youth. The explicit western, capitalist, nationalist, and even neoliberal tenor of these images coupled with their vivid, if not ostentatious appearance diversified the monotony of Pristina’s socialist landscape. Like a cheap veneer or flashy packaging these banners quickly updated the remote Southeastern European city into a pastiche of globalization, westernization, and nationalism. On the one hand, this visible change suggested that Kosovo was finally on the path to freedom. Yet on the other, the flat surface and plastic appearance Jashari, Clinton, Blair and others reduced the notion of freedom, and the hope for self-determination, to little more than a lifeless banner, a static billboard, an advertisement, or a catch phrase.

Against the violence and war of the 1990s and the subsequent spectacularization of the cityscape, the endless horizon in Catch Me or the simple action captured in Tourist City seem carefree–not exactly in a cool, detached kind of way–but rather like a breath of fresh air against a claustrophobic landscape. These photographs are not particularly striking and don’t flaunt fine grain detail, national insignia, or striking motifs. Rather through level shots, centrally framed compositions, nondescript landscapes and simple, even somewhat silly actions the photographs appear casual, like snapshots taken among friends. And oftentimes they were. Muja frequently asked friends, and passer-bys, rather than professional photographers to record these actions. Muja’s work is thus self-consciously simple and aesthetically subdued. Rather than ideology or political rhetoric, his work resonates with common, human, and everyday sensibilities where a simple gesture or the interaction of ones body within the political landscape underscores palpable points of contestation.

Catch Me does not capture Muja walking, or even running over the over border, rather he is shown leaping. His hair flies back, his legs extended as far as they can and his arms propel his body into the air, suspending him even if just for one moment above the ground. Captured in this way as Muja leaps into Mexico he appears exultant, like an athlete crossing the finish line. Or perhaps as his legs flail from under his body he just seems happy, in a genuine, uninhibited kind of way.

While lighthearted or even silly, the humor of the photograph does not undercut the politics of the gesture. Instead these two elements work in tandem. “The photo looks really happy,” states
Muja in a 2011 interview, “because I’m trying to jump from the US into Mexico. But I’m sure you can’t do the opposite.” viii Bisected by the vast horizon and cerulean sky, the artist’s body and his outstretched legs frame the international border. His body defies the static linearity and near invisibility of the fraught line. He jumps over and beyond political limitations that control the movement of people between nation-states. He parallels his own movement from the US to Mexico with the situation in Kosovo stating, “everybody can go to Kosovo, but not many people from Kosovo can go out.” ix

These point of contention– between inside and outside, between the open, convivial nature of the photograph and the closed politics of the nation-state, and between the fleshy, flailing body of the artist and the controlled movement of people between borders–give rise to a marked incongruity. It resonates with the protectionism of the nation-state and the desire for independence and sovereignty that was on the mind of everyone in ’90s Kosovo, as well as the reality of limited political freedoms and nominal change. Along these lines Muja’s title “Catch Me” playfully yet pointedly challenges the limitations of sovereignty and the confines of the nation-state.

In Tourist City a viewer’s attention is evenly divided between the site of contest, in this case, the sign reading “ulica gimnazijska”, the site of action, the city of Novi Sad, Serbia, and actor, the artist himself. Muja places a street sign written in Latin script alongside an existing sign using a Cyrillic script. The Cyrillic alphabet is used in written Serbian, however when written, Serbian like other Slavic languages (Croatian, Bosnia, Slovenian) is frequently Romanized and either alphabet can be used interchangeably. However during the wars of ‘90s the use of Cyrillic or Latin, like all else, became a politically charged and polarizing issue. Following the 1990 constitution, Serbian leaders often mandated the use of Cyrillic and frequently changed or removed signs written in Latin script. Over the course of the ’90s the naming and renaming of streets–as we saw with Bill Clinton Boulevard in Prishtina – was widespread throughout ex-Yugoslavia, as the simple change in street signs offered an easy and often superficial way of enshrining particular ideologies. However rather than removing the Cyrillic sign altogether and replacing it with its more widely understood Romanized variant, Muja places both signs beside each other. And thus either variant remains visible and accessible to someone navigating the city streets.

By displaying both signs side by side this simple action welcomes exchange or dialogue between languages and people. It underscores language as the central means of communication and orientation within the urban space and brings back the old Titos convention of using both Romanized and Cyrillic scripts in street signs around major cities and points of interest. And thus the gesture captured in the photograph appears generative, open and social. Its interest is not only the artist’s own well being but rather that of others–of people on the streets, of tourists, and so on.

It is tempting to draw a parallel between the desire for community and socialization that Shkëlzen Maliqi praised and the sociality of Muja’s work. And clear parallels do exist between Kosovo’s history of non-violent resistance and Muja’s work–for instance the artist attended parallel schools throughout the 1990s after 2000. Like parallel structures that reestablished bodies of government, school systems, and social welfare programs that were either eliminated or banned, Muja uses the same white script, the same thin outline and a similar blue hue to replicate the aesthetic of the local municipality. However the differences are also crucial. Where parallel institutions and systems of government like the LDK established counter-narratives and shadow states that to a large extent operated independent of Serb authority, Muja seeks to integrate or reconcile points of opposition. He uses action that while emphatically non-violent and thus very different from the approach of the KLA, also creates a critical relationship to the passive resistance of the LDK.

Through small, sincere acts that emphasize sociality and political activism Catch Me and Tourist City push against the different modes of political self-determination on offer to post-war Kosovo, and the tensions between contested approaches to civil resistance. Muja’s work references Kosovo’s history in the 1990s, but where key figures like Ibrahim Rugova emphatically opposed
negotiation or direct action and the KLA advocated for violent action rather than rational response, Muja's work struggles for synthesis or reconciliation. For Muja the individual or the human body becomes the means of mediation. He places himself and the physical action at the center of the composition and between points of contest. In this way he does not remain opposed to or outside of dominant systems of power. Rather he emphatically, if not outrageously transcends inscribed boundaries, dualities and points of contest visible throughout Kosovo's public sphere and broader geopolitical currents.

Nonetheless, the artist's attempts are ultimately futile and short lived. After the soaring leap in *Catch Me*, Muja presumably collapsed on the either side of the border only to be subject to that nation's bylaws. And while the signs in *Tourist City* temporarily helped orient passer-bys, Novi Sad officials removed them in a manner of hours. Against the reality of these actions, Muja's work seems somewhat naïve, like it sets its sights too high, or reaches too far, all the while offering too little in return. Yet, what is precisely important about these images is that reach, the tensions that is underscored and maintained between conflicting histories and unresolved struggles. Of course, issues of sovereignty, self-determination or political freedom are not sorted out through Muja's jump across the boarder or the installation of a street sign. But perhaps that's not the work's intent. And in fact reshaping politics have never been the domain of art—even of political art. Thus rather than a solution or a proposition, what these signs and actions represent is something like an earnest attempt, a struggle, or a counterpoint to the empty freedoms and lifeless banners of Bill Clinton, Tony Blair or Adem Jashari that flooded Pristina after '99. They represent the insistence on public action and on a government grounded in the involvement of the population within the public sphere.

Returning to our initial question, I'll ask again, how can we think the resonance of Muja’s work in the context of Kosovo and also in the context of our own experiences, here, today? What is significant in these photographs is the way in which, instead of promoting a preexisting political framework—be it capitalist, communist or some combination thereof—they set up the tone, or the potential for a community that is active yet non-violent, and that through resistance, or better yet dialogical exchange, strives for reconciliation.
Figure 1: Alban Muja, *Tourist City*, Digital Print, Novi Sad, Serbia, 2007.

Figure 2: Alban Muja, *Catch Me*, C-print, New Mexico/Mexico border. 2005. Photograph of the performance by the artist taken by Kiriko Shirobyashi.
REFERENCES


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i This is one example among many. Other warning signs throughout Croatia read: “DO NOT ENTER SUSPECTED MINE AREA,” “ADHERE TO MINE WARNING SIGNS,” etc. For more information on mines throughout Croatia see the Croatia Mine Action Center: http://www.hcr.hr/en/edukacija.asp.


iv Clark, 116.

v The 1990 constitution of Serbia did not outlaw education per se. Rather as a uniform Serbian curriculum was enforced throughout schools nationwide alternative Albanian programs were outlawed. Albanian students were segregated from Serbian students. In some cases Albanian students and teachers were allowed to use State buildings. However this was only after Serb students were dismissed. Often the heat in the buildings was turned off and materials were sparse.

vi Clark, 105.

vii Ibid., 116.


ix Ibid.