

In my End is my Beginning
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis
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“Cronotopes” in the Aftermath of Displacement: Traumatic Memory in Šejla Kamerić’s Body Poetic

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Abstract This paper seeks to examine the artistic practice of Šejla Kamerić as a phenomenon emerging from a ‘cultural apocalypse’ as the dissolution of presence in the wake of war. The artist survived the siege of Sarajevo, and her artistic language is characterised by the presence of ‘after-images’. The artist’s use of the body as evidence serves to restore her deferred presence, which emerges in the interplay of diverse spatial and temporal dimensions through the deployment of visual strategies. In particular, the analysis seeks to comprehend the role of the body as a ‘chronotope’ as the material dimension in which time is embodied into space.

Keywords Body. Presence. Trauma. Memory. Cronotope.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Body as Evidence. Anachronistic Memory in After-Images. – 3 Cronotope: I Survived with the Body, with the Space, with Sarajevo. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

On 18 April 2024, during the inaugural days of the Biennale, a tattered white flag, hoisted at half-mast, was installed on a red pylon at the centre of Campo Santo Stefano. This isolated element evokes a reenactment of the surrounding space [fig. 1]. The structure simultaneously exhibits rigidity and movement, as well as a state of both

stability and dissolution.¹ The formal aspects enacted in this system evoke the key to understanding the relationship between space, time, body, and memory. The rigidity of the flag, as a shroud draped over a dead body denied from the gaze, in terms of sense and meaning production, relates to the actual aspect of an absent body.

As stated by Pollock:

Reading works of art that may be shaped by trauma [...] It involves acute attention to the aesthetic and formal movements of that which symbolization is attempting to touch, to connect with and transform while registering that there is always another dimension, not available for symbolization but not, therefore, entirely beyond its negative referencing. (2013, 23)

Rather than believing that the trauma preceded the artwork, it could be argued that it is:

only being revealed by it for the first time as an event when it was spoken or represented as a memory in the process of artmaking. (114)

Evoking also the official exclusion of the artist from her participation in the national pavilion, the sculpture can be viewed as an ‘after-image’ – taking up Pollock’s studies (2013) on this subject matter – of the artist’s body, making an absence present. Interaction and isolation, as well as presence and absence are indeed negotiated in this installation. As Kamezić processes her body as both a semiotic marker and a sculpture, her entire being seems to be present as standing there, radiating a compelling force of will and determination with minimal gesture. The formalisation of time and constructive dimension of space in the installation are pertinent to our semiotic discourse on the formal relationship with the body. Moreover, faced with this frozen figure, we are confronted with the ‘chronotopic’ operation that the body undergoes. The process of fixation, herein shown by the material choice, presents us with a dual challenge: on the one hand, it confronts us with the formal aspects of the work, and on the other, it invites us to engage with a deeper discourse on the significance of the space-time dimension.

¹ Upon its initial appearance, the installation initiated a psychodynamic interaction with the viewers. Kamezić posits communication and empathy as the foundational communicative mechanism between herself, her subjects, and spectators. <https://re-image-europe.eu/community/22005/>.



Figure 1 Šejla Kamečić, *Cease*. 2024. Sculpture in fiberglass, 13 m. Curated by Giulia Foscarini. UNA / UNLESS, Campo Santo Stefano, Venice. Image courtesy of Šejla Kamečić Studio. © Sasha Vajd

This paper sets out to examine the phenomenon of cultural, socio-political and identitarian trauma in the context of displacement, through the concept of “cultural apocalypse” as developed by de Martino (2002, 219): “come rischio antropologico permanente” (as a permanent anthropological risk; De Martino 2023, 38). This concept, explored as both a dimension of ‘crisis’ and a potential recovery of presence, addresses urgent questions pertinent to the contemporary world. Crisis posits the potential ‘collapse’ of the “being-there” (the Heideggerian *Dasein*) (De Martino 2023, 100) - that is the presence, historically and culturally rooted - because of the erosion of

historical and cultural frameworks (2023, XIV). This condition of being registers the loss of the ‘settled’ world that is defined as a “cultural concept” (297). As stated by De Martino:

come orizzonte degli utilizzabili [...] e come sistema di rinvii che riceve senso e orientamento dallo strumento-limite [...], cioè dal corpo. (2002, 571)²

Therefore, in his anthropology the question of “cultural homelands” are the “phenomenological rootedness of settling that gives a horizon to presence and mutually founds world” (Louis Zinn 2023, XV). The experience of displacement in the aftermath of war uproots the presence through the collapse of the familiar horizon. This unsettling historical condition induces a disruption in the being-there, in spatial-temporal frames of reference and structures of identity; in other words the “*Dasein* is torn away from its historical continuity” (100). In this liminal condition, women artists play a pivotal role in reconstructing a counter-history of the I-World relationship and reconnecting with a lost context through their bodies. This reconquest of presence takes place precisely through the body. It serves as a *cronotopo* (Bachtin 1979, 232) in which time assumes spatial characteristics and is condensed into portions of space through embodiment. The liminal zone of the body registers the ‘crisis’ – as the rupture in presence as well as its reintegration – becoming a post-apocalyptic territory of resistance in a state of exception (Agamben 1995).

The objective is to examine the visual representation of this crepuscular moment through the artistic practice of Šejla Kamerić. The visual strategies of presence and absence are negotiated through bodies and in space. The relationship between the visible and the invisible is fundamental to the construction of the discourse on crisis and trauma, without providing a reading that is solely thematic. Kamerić’s work addresses these issues exploring how her personal experiences align with the collective memory. The artist survived the siege of Sarajevo, and her artistic language is shaped by this traumatic event and its incomprehensible aftermath. *Cease* well captures the loss of presence in ‘critical’ times. Nonetheless it signals the impulse of presence that transcends a situation, – what De Martino calls *imperativo doveroso* (quoted in De Martino 2023, 310), – through which the artist asserts her ethical practice as a duty-to-be and regains the sense of intersubjective value, peace, and hope.

² “A horizon of things, a system of spatial and temporal reference” that experience “sense and orientation from the body (De Martino 2023, 294-5).

2 Body as Evidence. Anachronistic Memory in After-Images

The public art project *Cease* was curated by Giulia Foscari and commissioned by the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art Sarajevo.³ The title already carries an *ethos* of engagement, which runs throughout the politics and poetics of Šejla Kamerić.⁴ From a distance, the outline of a flag is drawn by the hue of white in slight contrast with the sky [fig. 2]. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes evident that the flag is rigid, and the apparent movement is merely the result of open slits in the figure. The white colour and its unyielding materiality evoke the image of a shroud over a body.⁵ A corporeal

3 The artist was initially invited to represent the Bosnia and Herzegovina Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale. However, at the last moment, her work was censored. The Bosnian nationalist government opted instead for the Stjepan Skoko's innocuous urban monuments *The Measures of the Sea*, which were more aligned with the principles of political fairness (<https://www.zetatielle.com/biennale-venezia-larte-anne-ga-tra-censura-politica-e-polemiche/>; <https://www.artribune.com/arti-vi-sive/2024/04/opera-censurata-sejla-kameric-biennale-venezia/>). In an interview conducted by the author on 6 September 2024, Šejla Kamerić elucidated the evolution of the project in relation to, and subsequently in opposition to, the concept of the national pavilion. As she commenced a discussion with the curator Giulia Foscari regarding the potential locations for the realisation of her artistic project, she came to recognise that it would be the public domain that would offer the optimal conduit through which her artistic message could be conveyed. The concept of a public project situated within an existing space would represent a moment of reflection on the present, a contemplation of despair, but, overall, a sign of hope. This intervention within a social space aligns with her notion of art as a vehicle for communication and the artist as a ‘corrective of society’. *Šejla Kamerić: Being a Social Corrective, in Conversation with Marko Milovanovic* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-80-QpovxoE,0:52>).

4 As will be discussed subsequently, the installation constitutes a striking, yet minimal, presence within the context of a public space. The artwork situates its core at the very gesture that positioned it there. It could be proposed, drawing upon the conceptual framework put forth by Agamben, that the work belongs to the domain of ethics and politics, rather than being confined to the realm of aesthetic (Agamben 1996, 51). About the politics of installations, Groys (2009) has argued: “the installation is material par excellence, since it is spatial – and being in the space is the most general definition of being material. The installation transforms the empty, neutral, public space into an individual artwork – and it invites the visitor to experience this space as the holistic, totalizing space of an artwork”. In this instance case the artist elected to address the wars occurring in our immediate vicinity. Indeed, the project is also dedicated to the victims of all conflicts, assuming a universal meaning. She postulated, as stated in an interview with the author (6 September 2024), that the public domain remarked by the flagpole would serve as optimal conduit for the dissemination of her artistic message.

5 The sculpture-flag is made of white fiberglass. It could be argued that this motif becomes a *pathos formula* – taking up Warburg’s concept – retaining memory. Indeed, the form is in dialogue with the connotational level. However, an interval between the two occurs that visually and spatially employs the past and the present, the personal and the collective history, seeking a form of presence and absence. Kristeva speaks of ‘after-affect’ defining the *pathos formula* as “psychic representation of energy displacements caused by external or internal traumas” (Kristeva 1992 quoted in Pollock 2013, 62), as “the gestural and representational mnemonic formulations of intense and affective states” (244). As suggested by Pollock, Warburg’s work may elucidate our understanding



Figure 2
Šejla Kamerić, *Cease*. 2024.
Sculpture in fiberglass, 13 m.
Curated by Giulia Foscarei,
UNA / UNLESS,
Campo Santo Stefano, Venice.
Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio,
© Sasha Vajd

from gradually takes shape. The drape became a rigid material, scattered in shreds, which seems to indicate a kind of ‘formal surrender’.⁶ Instead, the sign goes beyond the traditional meaning of the symbol.⁷ If the fragmentation clearly evokes something traumatic in the figurative, what is of particular interest is its residual nature which signals a ‘beyond sense’ that transcends the narrative and thematic

of contemporary *pathos formula* in relation, also, to the bodiless presence (245). The contribution of Pollock is one of the most relevant on the question of trauma in aesthetic and feminist art. Her studies will be referenced on several occasions in this text.

6 The reference is to the work by Fabio Mauri *La resa* (2002) realised for the exhibition *Arte in memoria* (16 October-30 November 2002, Sinagoga di Stommeln, Ostia Antica; 17 October-30 November, Centrale Montemartini di Roma, a cura di A. Zevi). <https://www.fabiomauri.com/opere/installazioni/la-resa.html>. In a text written by Mauri on 19 September 2002 on the occasion of the exhibition the artist discusses the title of his work. <https://tinyurl.com/5b8dd85z>.

7 During times where the world is being torn apart by wars, *Cease* serves a trans-historical memory of the victims of all conflicts. Nevertheless, the artwork’s essence is not a mere expression of despair; rather, it is an impassioned plea for hope. In the interview conducted by the author (6 September 2004), the artist elucidates that the installation is concerned with a phenomenon that transcends the mere experience of suffering. Instead, it activates a mechanism of memory that tries to overcome it. Indeed, occupying a vacant place and filling the void are ones of Kamerić’s main themes.

level of ‘legibility’. This calls for an alternative aesthetic discourse that extends the scope of a mere mimetic representation and examine how the work actually exploits the temporal relationships that the double-faced traumatic structure re-presents. Moreover, as in a dispositive of the space of enunciation, both the symbolic layer and the textual invocation of a necessary *Cease* is revealed in the aesthetic formulation. In general, this installation discloses the artist’s linguistic research made of the residues of personal and collective traumas.⁸ As stated by Lyotard:

by working towards a phrasing – not merely linguistic, but gestural [...] – a touching or encountering of some affective elements capable of shifting us both subjectively and collectively that do not arrive at containing event in a finite form. (1990; 1999, quoted in Pollock 2013, 27)

The sculpture explores the square through form, relationality, and emptiness, entangling different temporalities in a textual structure played with filled and unfilled spaces, silences and echoes. Having survived the Siege of Sarajevo at the age of only 17, Kamerić’s gesture offers poignant social commentary that invites reflection against war as a form of deep commitment with post-conflicts traumas. Given her own experience of the psychological and physical devastation that war can bring, her ‘imperative’ opposes the deadly project of a conflict with no return. In the installation, as in Kamerić’s wider artistic practice, past and present, personal and collective memory are intertwined to a significant extent.⁹ Her research constructs a politics of memory as a mode of resistance distinctively in relation to women’s struggles.¹⁰ Across the surface of her works, and her body as well, she deals with the questions pertinent to her identity, namely issue relating to stereotypes and borders. Investigating the phenomenon of identitarian self-construction and representation, she challenges marginalized conditions of women and constructs a

8 The gravity of her themes often contrasts with her distinctive aesthetic approach and choice of delicate materials.

9 As stated by Seidl: “The traces of the Balkan wars and the Srebrenica massacre of 1995 remains anchored in the people’s collective memory” (2010). The artist merges “Aesthetics and history in a way that reveals a dichotomy between visual manipulation in mass media [...] and the actual events” (Seidl 2010). Her work also considers the relationship between formal expression and its significance, employing traditional materials and crafts to challenge the residual influence of male dominance in cultural production (Seidl 2010).

10 As it will be discussed in greater detail later, this happens in her photographic series *Behind the Scenes* (1994).

counter-hegemonic discourse (Merewether).¹¹ Furthermore, her artistic language, shaped by the necessity to survive and the impulse to create, juxtaposes texts and images. For example, in *Bosnian Girl* (2003) it is precisely at the collision between these disparate linguistic forms – namely, the written language all over the photography of the body – that the articulation of trauma becomes manifest (Trakilović 2023, 82) [fig. 3].

Indeed, photographic works facilitate the recollection of past experiences, serving as a proof of identity and translating material evidence in visual strategies. The regimes of social, political and identitarian oppression, in which she must struggle to exist, are visually recreated in layered works, where personal and non-official narratives embody and challenge stereotypes. This emerges, for example, in the photographic series *Behind the Scenes*.¹² The underlying process discloses her vision on the body both as evidence of a traumatic past and a territory of negotiation. The photographic works are imbued with an ‘afterwardness’ as they are reanimated through a temporal delay. In *Behind the Scenes II* she is embracing a young soldier of the ARBIH (Bosnian government defence forces), carrying an automatic rifle; the barely visible words, handwritten all over the photograph, reveal her own testimonies of that time (Pejić 2023, 77) [fig. 4].¹³

In *Behind the Scenes I* the artist is stepping on a machine gun meaning ceasefire (Pejić 2023, 76). This body gesture connects to the installation, not merely because of the same meaning, but through

11 Her practice is constituted above all self-portraits and textile works embedded with diverse memories and temporalities. In Cixous’s feminist writing theory, the act of writing is regarded as a form of subversion against patriarchal structures. In the artist’s case, her works relate to the identitarian inscriptions on female bodies, and the body itself becomes a critical means of rewriting history. For example, in *Bosnian Girl* (2003) the artist examines her body as an open entity which incorporates alterity, specifically the language of a sentence pronounced by a Dutch soldier is written all over her body: “No teeth...? A mustache...? Smel [sic] like shit...? BOSNIAN GIRL!” (Trakilović 2023). <https://sejla-kamerica.com/writings/representing-the-self-improperly-by-milica-trakilovic/>. This work also was conceived as a public art project and disseminated in the form of posters, postcards and advertisements in various print media (Jurišić 2013, 115).

12 The black-and-white photographs were taken in 1994 by Hannes M. Schlick for magazine *Moda Italy* during the siege of Sarajevo. The images represent the young artist as a model, wearing high fashion military clothing (Trakilović 2023, 82). In this series is clear how her poetics wants to create alternative spaces of understanding the politics of power in conflicts that oppressed primarily women. <https://tanjawagner.com/works/sejla-kamerica-behind-the-scenes-2019/>.

13 The artist wrote these words over the photographs: “This photo was taken during the hardest and most brutal part of my life. But the image shows something else. We try to imply deception in which our mind constantly functions. The culture we live in gives us the guidelines – points of understanding or total misunderstanding. I wonder what exactly do we see and what do we want to see from the vastness of images that are being imposed on us on an everyday basis” (Pejić 2023, 77).

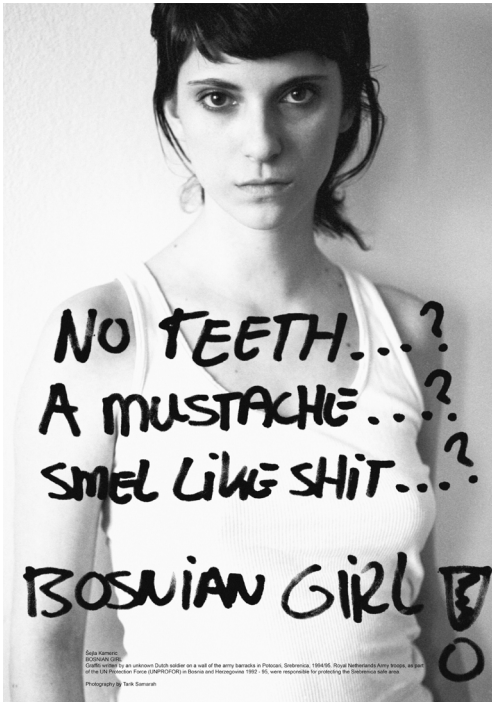


Figure 3

Šejla Kamerić, *Bosnian Girl*, 2003. Public project: posters, billboards, magazine ads, postcards. Black-and-white photograph, Dimensions variable. Photo Tarik Samarah; image courtesy of Sejla Kamerić Studio, © SejlaKameric.com 2024

the formal composition.¹⁴ The verticality of the sculpture resumes the position of the artist's body, as opposed to the horizontal axis of the laying weapon [fig. 5].¹⁵

The linguistic method, central to her visual practice, lies in the possibility of looking at the shreds of reality and examines their intelligibility (Pejić 2023, 76).¹⁶ Therefore, her practice is an “*afterward*

¹⁴ In this case the original photograph was reproduced in oversized dimensions (250 × 180 cm).

¹⁵ Kamerić's practice evolves into new media but continue to process this trauma resonating upon the urge to move forward. The *fil rouge* is about archiving the past and speak up for it. What she experienced in the siege was isolation and something very prominent in her works are presence and absence, as well as the exploration of female condition.

¹⁶ In accordance with Benjamins theory, the impact of the past on the present, and vice versa, represents the fundamental tenet of her poetics. Kamerić proposed that reclaiming past events is analogous to archiving and reactivating them through the lens of her traumatic memory (Pejić 2023, 76). The collective trauma of the Siege of Sarajevo persists in “*afterwardness*”, operating in a manner analogous to Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*. The “*ashes*”, as previously mentioned, represent the traumatic vestiges of Sarajevo under siege that resurface in the present (76).

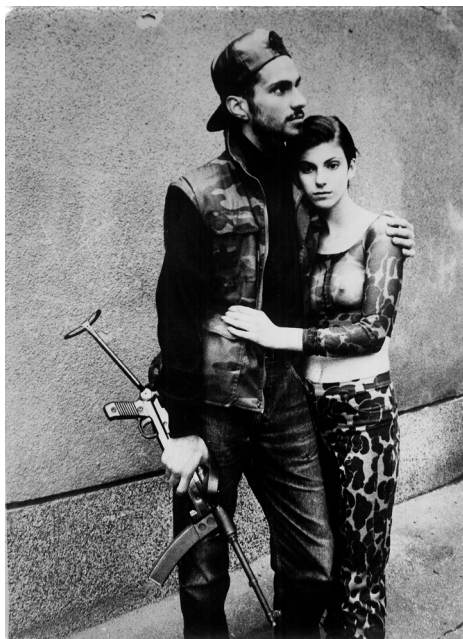


Figure 4 *Behind the scenes II*. 2019. Graphite pencil handwritten text on c-print, 55 × 40 cm, 64 × 48.5 cm (framed). Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio, © ŠejlaKameric.com 2024

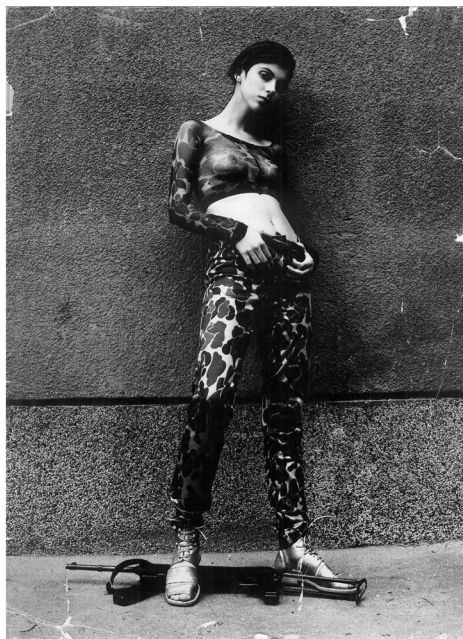


Figure 5 Šejla Kamerić, *Behind the scenes I*. 2019. Wallpaper photo, 250 × 180 cm. Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio, © ŠejlaKameric.com 2024

working through”, which means that the traces of trauma, “lie dormant [...] and are therefore marked by with ‘afterwardness’”, reanimated in the present moment of the work (76).¹⁷

Shifting to works that relate to strategies of re-presence, in non-representational ways, she ‘defers’ her presence to material residues of past events – as it happens in her photographic installation *June is Everywhere* (77) [fig. 6].

As stated by Pollock:

The concept of *after-image* enables us to recognize that formalization produces an image as a dense network created to carry subjective significance, which acquires its urgency from the ‘truthfulness’ of the self who made it through formal research and from the resonances its affects have for those who encounter *their own histories*. (2013, 92)

¹⁷ This echoes Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (Pejić 2023, 76). Cf. Pollock 2013.



Figure 6 Šejla Kamerić, *June is June Everywhere*. 2013. Installation. Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio, © SejlaKameric.com 2024

The wall scarred with bullet holes is both an index (indexical reference) of their impact and a memorial reference to the artist's survival in the past [fig. 7]. An analogous mechanism is exemplified in the installation *Cease*, where the symbolic body of the flag is a reference to self-representation, however not mimetically, but in a way that presence defers to an object.¹⁸ While we may agree on the time (2024) and the place (Venice) where the artwork appeared, the traces of trauma are in a particular place (Sarajevo) and time (during the Siege). As the layers of meaning unfold, the site-specific installation connects with her past, re-enacting a temporal delay in its material structure which inherently articulates a complex evocation of meaning.¹⁹ It is here, therefore, imperative to emphasise the distinctive characteristic of Benjamin's dialectical image that involves a collision between different temporalities (Mengoni 2012, 50).²⁰ The

18 The idea of the solid flag as a gesture of self-representation, whereby becoming a 'symbolic' body, was discussed with the artist during an interview with the author (6 September 2024).

19 Her artistic practice speaks about what she experienced in a universal way that even who didn't have the experience can understand the point of being segregated and forced to migrate. The work encapsulates a specific moment, which is indeed universal, when we are confronted with the ongoing conflict within our own borders.

20 This idea of 'collision' emerges as a central characteristic of the reception process. As stated by Silvia Burini, in her afterword of Lotman's writings, "this posed the question as dialogue between the historical context and the contemporary text" (Burini 1998, 140; Author's

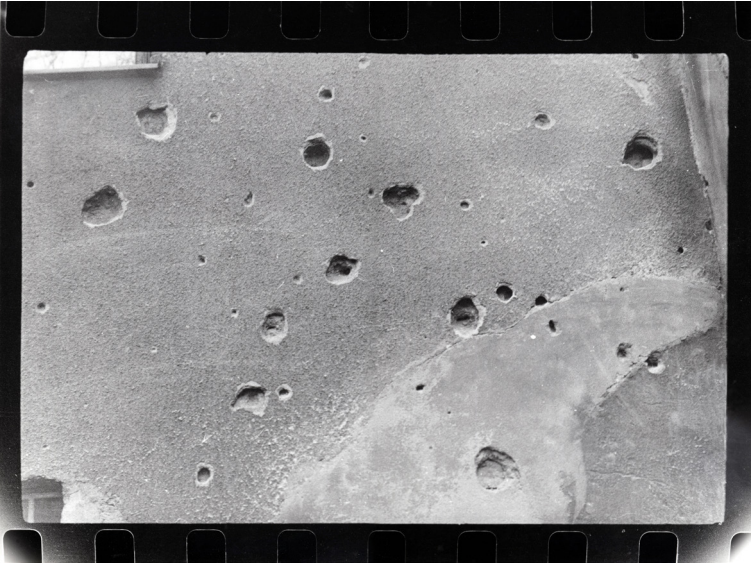


Figure 7 Šejla Kamerić. *June is June Everywhere*. 2013. Installation. Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio, © SejlaKameric.com 2024

anachronism of the dialectical image (*dialektisches Bild*) has a cognitive and heuristic value exercised from the perspective of the present moment.²¹ Benjamin’s historical dialectic rests on an image-based epistemology and a dialogical model in which the ‘legibility’ of history appears through it.

It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather [dialectical] image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation [...] image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation to the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. (Benjamin 1982 quoted in Mengoni 2012, 47; Author’s transl.)

transl.). The productive trait of collision within an artistic text is transmitted through memory and conscience (Lotman 1998, 40). Lotman’s concept of culture as non-hereditary memory underlines the continuous process of self-interpretation. As stated by Lotman “The process of recombination entails the analysis of the underlying essence” (1994, 82; Author’s transl.).

21 This reflection was developed by Benjamin in a variety of parts within the *Passagen-Werk* (1982) and found his theory on historical epistemology (Mengoni 2012, 45).

Accordingly, the dialectical image is not constrained by the linear progression of historical events (determined history), but rather serves as a means of beholding the moment of awakening and contestation. The reading of the dialectical image provides a means of seeing the past and the present as intertwined and mutually influenced. However, the ‘legibility’ of the image refers also to the body, as a personal archive of memory. It is therefore important to emphasise that the concept of the dialectical image relates also to consciousness (cultural and personal), as a dynamic, open system. This reconnects with the cultural semiotic discourse, which attributes a pivotal role to anachronistic relations within the dynamic of culture. To illustrate, Lotman’s (1993) contributions to the field of cultural semiotics, particularly his insights into the temporal dimensions of memory – and their inherent role in dynamics of cultural process – when considered in dialogue with the spatial characteristic of culture, will prove invaluable in shaping our discourse on the interconnections between space and memory as articulated by Kamberić.²² The semiotic mechanism of the artistic text depends on its articulation of meaning, which is produced in relation to the external context, memory, space, and the various temporal layers involved (Lotman 1993, 25). As stated by Lotman:

In time, a text is perceived as still-image *sui generis* an artificially freeze moment between past and future. [...] The past lets itself be grasped in two of its manifestations: the direct memory of the text, embodied in the internal structure, [...] in the immanent struggle with its internal synchronism; and externally, as a correlation with the extratextual memory. The spectator, placing himself with his thoughts in that present time, [...] is as if turning his gaze to the past. (25; Author’s transl.)

This statement is replete with methodological and theoretical implications: the single text must be read within a contextual framework. The installation *Cease*, in addition to the memory inscribed and embodied in the internal structure of the text and of the event which has created it, activate its mechanism also on what might be termed

22 The ‘semiosphere’ is characterised by heterogeneity and has a complex diachronic aspect, given that it encompasses the complex system of memory and cannot function without. The dialogue between different times constitutes the intrinsic nature of culture. Lotman’s (1998) writings on the semiotic of art contain the most interesting elaborations on this (23-37). The artist conceives art as a means of communication within cultural sphere and society at large. This allows us to better situate the discussion of her oeuvre within framework of a semiotic analysis of artistic texts. Therefore, there is an inherent quality in Kamberić’s work that challenges traditional notions of confined space, particularly in terms of political and social aspects. This concept is also closely intertwined with the notion of the body poetics, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this article. This discourse helps us posit the idea of body as a ‘chronotope’.

the ‘extratextual memory’, a temporal memory that creates interrelations from the artwork-system to a contextual reality (Lotman 1993, 25; Mengoni 2012, 50). Thus, the ‘readability’ of the artistic text is shaped by a cultural system, which continuously enhanced it by new sensibilities (Mengoni 2012, 48-9).

The idea of the body as evidence, as a relic, returns in her poetics in relation to the process of collecting and archiving traces of traumatic realities. In this sense *Cease* appears also an ‘after-image’ of a past event, with scars still visible in its structure. The body is a central element, not thematically referenced, which dialogues with the plastic aspects in a ‘deferred’ way. In other words, the status of this artwork is contingent upon its “sensible residue” (Subrizi 2012, 138; Author’s transl.). This concept provides a useful point of reference and is linked to what Lyotard (2008) called the “figural opaque” (quoted in Subrizi 2012, 139; Author’s transl.). The invisibility of an image turned in a field of vision is constituted by a complex interplay between memory and affectivity, by what we see and what we do not see, which project our gaze at other aspects of what we see. It is not that the artist has left the body outside this intervention, but, as Marin has argued (2001), that she has worked with different layers of visibility about presence and absence (quoted in Subrizi 2012, 140). In this sense her work can be approached through the lens of a semiotic analysis as a long-term creative structuring that only afterward produced narratable and retroactive understanding of her traumatic experiences, visually seeking the intervals that register rupture and delivers meaning.

In the shift from photography to film to installation, her engagement with physic and psychic dimensions of memory emerges. *Cease* is what remains of a real, truthful, and decisive gesture. It gains the centre of the scene through a radical outcome as the only possible hope in crisis. The non-presence of the artist in the national pavilion is radicalised in this fractured ‘after-presence’. The flag traces, signifies, and substantiates a transhistorical meaning that she constructed in a paradoxical mode of presence, embodying the meaning of crisis that pervades also the artistic world.

Taking up what Greimas (1996) has argued, the discourse is not inscribed in the artwork itself, however it is a process in action which gives rise to a series of questions between image, subject, and reality (quoted in Subrizi 2012, 140).²³ Furthermore, the perception of the work, as proposed by Fontanille, necessitates to “reconsider in

23 The testimonial significance of the aesthetic form opens a possibility of beyond meaning in figurativeness (Greimas 1986). As Mengoni stated: “it could be argued that a potential connection can be made with the field of semiotic thought that has investigated the possibilities of this ‘beyond-sense’ (*oultre-sens*)” (Mengoni 2024, 76; Author’s transl.). In considering the ‘aesthetic of fracture’ as explored by Greimas (1986), figurative art can be viewed as a revelation of a “beyond-sense” (quoted in Mengoni 2024, 76; Author’s transl.).

particular the role occupied by the body in semiosis” (quoted in Subrizi 2012, 142; Author’s transl.).

The installation is concerned with both spatial and temporal dimensions, disrupting the sequence of events and prompting a reimagining of historical narratives. In addition, the Benjaminian concept of the ‘dialectical image’ can be observed in this fragment of reality, in this singular date which evokes a tension between the dual perspective of personal and collective memory. Thus, the installation serves also as a dispositive which activates the vision and opens an anachronistic process which traverses different levels of textuality (Subrizi 2012, 156). If the logic of the visible is understood as the process of articulation that the eye is compelled to undertake where no predisposed image exists (156), then the sense of the work resides in the crisis of the present moment in relation to the past. Meaning is produced at the liminal point between the aforementioned ‘formal surrender’ and the structure of re-presence of the body.²⁴

This sculptural object overall functions as a linguistic figure which dislocates the meaning to another place, within a specific cultural context. Thus, *Cease* is a spatial structure of embodiment where the present and the past are condensed, and it semiotically operates as this dialectical condensation produces knowledge. Kamezić’s practice understands historical fragments as remains of an ‘explosion’ fixed in visual narratives whose meaning release in a constellation between past and present.²⁵ The present is capable of revealing a new meaning in the encounter with the past (Mengoni 2012, 25).

3 Cronotope: I Survived with the Body, with the Space, with Sarajevo

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Kamezić’s artistic practice relates to the idea of body as evidence, as trace, but also as a territory of negotiation through space. In *Cease* the artist has effectively streamlined the artistic process, distilling complex memories and emotions into a straightforward form that, even if it does not explicitly thematize the body, it opens a semiotic perspective to explore its presence in absence.²⁶ That is, the frozen flag restores the artist’s corporeal presence in a spatial mark.²⁷ In this paragraph the pres-

²⁴ The body is substituted by a non-figurative and minimalistic sculptural element.

²⁵ The term ‘explosion’ refers to Lotman’s (1993) understanding of the dynamics of culture.

²⁶ This is part of the artist’s reflection itself, as stated during the interview with the author (6 September 2024).

²⁷ This reflection was discussed with the artist during the interview (6 September 2024).

ence would be analysed from a spatial perspective, erasing the distance between artist, work, and context. The flag makes space in the sense that it belongs to the place in which it appeared and opens a “vasteness” (Heidegger 1984, 27; Author’s transl.). It becomes the boundary necessary to perceive her historical existence and narration. In this sense, the space of art is making space also in memory.

The sculpture, functioning as a semiotic marker, facilitates to interpret the time-space-body relationships and opens a path to analyse the structures of spatialization and embodiment of time. The body, as a repository of spatial-temporal memories, is the medium through which the most profound and enduring marks of history are inscribed. Looking at the personal story of Kamerić, the significance of her artistic action unequivocally delivers the deepest engagement with her own life.

If space and body are the building elements which constituted the artist’s work, the intriguing aspect of *Cease* is the function in space as the substitute for a ‘deferred body’. In this sense the ‘embodiment’ of time in spatial concretizations (cronotope) gains relevance for a deeper understanding of the role of the body in relation to this object. Thus, the body can be seen through Bachtin’s “chronotope” (1979, 231).²⁸ Time, both personal and historical, assume spatial aspects and this encounter happens in bodies, always in dialogue with others (Bachtin 1979, 397).

The body serves as the initial point of contact with the external world, orienting itself within it and writing stories of resistance. During the interview conducted by the author the artist stated: “I survived with my body, I survived with the space (Sarajevo)” (Sejla, 6 September 2024). And this illuminates the central argument of this paper. That is, the space constitutes an integral element of time and memory in her practice, despite her reluctance to be defined by it and its militarized borders. In displacement, dislocation implies also separation from culturally constructed spatial-temporal frames, thereby occurring a double ‘cronothopical arrest’ (Peeren 2006, 69). The ‘cronotope’, as the time-space unity in arts, can serve to analyse this dimension, related to displacement of bodies, as configured in

28 In 1908, Minkowski coined this concept and its definition as a four-dimensional space, comprising three spatial coordinates and time. This notion was subsequently adopted by Bachtin, who employed it to illustrate the interconnection between space and time within a narrative. A ‘chronotope’ can in fact be the precise time-space unit in which a narrative is set or it could be a generic place (for example a street) which is connected to a specific idea of time. Generally, it is a place where time and space are condensed. A whole imbued with meaning and concrete form. In this context, time becomes a tangible and perceptible entity, imbued with artistic significance. Space, too, undergoes a transformation, becoming a dynamic and integral component of the temporal continuum, intertwined with the intricate tapestry of history.

Kamerić’s artistic works.²⁹ Indeed, the ‘cronotophe’ assumes a semi-otic relevance as a “dispositivo dello spazio enunciazionale” through which the cultural process can be analysed in art (Migliore 2013, 1).

Bodies in relation to space emerge also in her film *1365 Days Without Red* where the overlapping of physical and mental territory occurs through the shots. Ghostly presence of people moving in the streets spatially renders temporal layers of memory. The film’s narrative coordinates evoke a traumatic past that is persistently re-emergent. The passing of time, as a loop of identical days, is translated in the recurrence of movements through the reticular streets of the city. Consequently, the spatial movements materialise the eternal return of time.

Moreover, the image of a fixed ‘body’ in motion – extracted from her film – establishes a *fil rouge* that encompasses throughout her works, crystallizing a sentiment of spatial-temporal fixity and eternal returning into a form [fig. 8].

The idea of “history as standstill” (Mitchell 2011, 62) emerges in this filmic shot. Frozen figures, as moving in endless repetition, constitute a particular form that reveals the process that manifests trauma in a narrative distilled to its essential elements.

The bodies of people running through horizontal axes and their shadows leaving erratic marks on the streets effectively convey a traumatic memory.³⁰ In the performative character of space, in relation to bodies, the past gradually seems to lighten, thereby bringing

29 The concept of chronotope, which arises in the context of natural phenomena, is transferred to the domain of literature with an explicit purpose. The term ‘chronotope’ is used to describe the significant interconnection between spatial and temporal relationships that literature has embraced artistically. The term is used in the mathematical sciences and is based on the concept of relativity (Einstein). Our interest lies not in the specific meaning attributed to it in the theory of relativity, but rather in its transfer to the theory of literature as a metaphor (although this is not a complete transfer). Our focus is on the fact that this term expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space) (Bachtin 1979, 231). A substantial portion of the book *Estetica e Romanzo* is devoted to the concept of the chronotope. In the chapter entitled “Le forme del tempo e del cronotopo nel romanzo. Saggi di poetica storica” and constitutes a separate investigation, from 1937-38, which Bachtin completed in 1973 with a series of ‘Remarks’ (Migliore 2013, 2). Cf. Bachtin 1979, 231-405.

30 The siege of Sarajevo lasted 1,395 days. From 1992 to 1996, thousands of citizens had to cross streets threatened by snipers everyday: to go to work, to buy food, to visit a relative. The citizens wore dark colours, for fear of alerting the snipers watching from the hills above with their movements. The film was screened for the first time at the 2019 *Luogo e Segni* (Place and Signs) show at the Punta della Dogana in Venice. The project was developed by Šejla Kamerić and Anri Sala in collaboration with Ari Benjamin Meyers. The artists choose not to depict the tragedy of war head-on. Only the mad, hesitant running of the protagonist, constantly exposed to danger, suggests the hardship of daily life. Shot in 2011 in a city that is now at peace, the film recreates in the present the traumas of a past that have left their mark on the body and emotions forever. <https://lesoeuvres.pinaultcollection.com/en/artwork/1395-days-without-red>. “The fear of the populace transmuted into absurd relay races at the crossroads, rubbernecking in the shadow of buildings, the same feelings of solitary, hopeless exposure, the shuffled herding at street corners.



Figure 8 Šejla Kamerić, *1365 Days Without Red*. 2011. Still from HD video, colour, 5.1 sound. 63 min. Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio, © ŠejlaKameric.com 2024

the situation into sharper focus. The filmic form structures also a temporal dimension of latency, thereby manifesting this concept of memory in the space-body relationship. The protagonist's erratic and perilous gait, a consequence of their constant exposure to danger, serves to illustrate the challenges and difficulties inherent to the daily struggle for survival in a scenario which appears to perform the 'autopsy' of a city [fig. 9]. From the body as a territory to the territory as a body. The ghostly presence of people evokes death, yet simultaneously illuminates something about life. Indeed, the spectral silhouette of the protagonists, inside the field of vision, recalls the artist's shadow photographed by Milomir Kovačević [fig. 10].

Through the ruins of Sarajevo, the bodiless outline of the girl is drawn by light from outside the visual field and projected into a street (Wagner 2009).

As Wagner stated:

the shadow is the only living thing in the photo. The light falling through the door drawing the outlines of Kamerić on the asphalt creates the brightest spot in the picture, almost a picture within a picture, framed by the door opening. It is like a projection cast

The two films become a stereoscopic view of the same thing. Or is it the same thing?" (Searle 2011). <https://www.artangel.org.uk/artwork/1395-days-without-red-sk/>.



Figure 9 Šejla Kamerić, *1365 Days Without Red*. 2011. Still from HD video, colour, 5.1 sound. 63 min. Image courtesy of Šejla Kamerić Studio, © ŠejlaKameric.com 2024

onto this scene of death from a distance, an image from some other, imaginary world. (2009)

The idea of the body as embodiment of ‘bare life’ may be even more applicable in this particular case.³¹ The shadow of the body is the

31 Aftermath of war and displacement disrupt time-space relations to a reality and the ‘visibility’ of bodies through which that recovery of the presence is mediated. Indeed, diasporic situations are characterised by a condition ‘in-between’ which interrupts the present and enlightens the past (Bhabha 1994, quoted in Demos 2013, 9 and in Rogoff 2000, 8), thereby configuring a liminal condition of existence. Thus, the concept of “double conscience” (Du Bois quoted in Rogoff 2000, 6) defines also the question of identity as a continuous and dialectical process of negotiation. The body itself becomes an object of scrutiny in the context of the struggle for what Benjamin designated as “bare life” (quoted in Pollock 2013, 145). As Agamben stated: “Il bios giace [...] nella zoè come, nella definizione heideggeriana del Dasein, l’essenza giace (liegt) nell’esistenza” (Agamben 2018, 168). It could be argued that this liminality is embodied in Kamerić’s artistic language, where time-time condensed into bodies. Moreover, the question of being a woman entails facing primarily the crisis to not be recognized as a person in the world, and coping with the alienation and the struggle to participate in patriarchal society, because “the humanity of a woman is at odds” (de Beauvoir [1949] 1997, quoted in Pollock 2013, 147). Thus, art even more becomes an urgent project of existence (Pollock 2013, 147). This concerns to be able to speak up in society with new languages, even if not verbal ones, that are deeply linked with reality. Kamerić’s language serves to established herself as a woman, as both an ‘alienated’ and a diasporic subject, dislocated and relocated within complex geopolitical and social contexts. Clement and Kristeva on the matter of the female body as a liminal zone, biologically



Figure 10 Milomir Kovacevic, *The Shadow of Šejla Kamerić*. 1993. Photograph, silver print, 40 × 50 cm. Sarajevo. Image courtesy of Milomir Kovacevic, © Milomir Kovacevic

testimony of her own survival. Thus, hers would be always a posthumous statement. This links to the functioning of memory (after-memory) and language (after-image) as she testifies an original and irreplaceable event that she survived that can only be ‘re-presented’ in memory. It has argued that the body is the territory, and vice versa, where history and memory are re-activated. The struggle for presence defers to different locations (Sarajevo, Venice). As aforesaid, the city of Sarajevo is the original zone of the apocalypse. The territory is imbued with a temporal quality that is closely associated with memory. Sarajevo is not merely a physical space but also a psychic time, a traumatic memory sets in space. Also in this sense, time assumes spatiality and becomes the fourth dimension of space, embodying it in material structures. And the body is always where these constructions take form and the territory where the traumatic memory are translated into space.

4 Conclusion

This paper has undertaken the investigation of Kamerić’s artistic practice through a selected yet multifaceted corpus. In general, her artistic practice demonstrates a gradual emergence of traumatic reality, imprinted upon the body, while simultaneously embracing continuous aesthetic transformation. Indeed, the artist’s presence is re-enacted in the inner articulation of her works, through the evocations of different temporal layers. *Cease* functions as a semiotic marker, thereby initiating a discourse on the ‘legibility’ of her practice in relation to crisis and trauma. In questioning the plastic relationships (*latu sensu*), it emerges a two-time structure and a distinctive mode of deferred presence, which formally produces sense in relation to an absent body. Moreover, both the fixation of the flag and the still images from the film re-enact those spatial-temporal relationships in a ‘chronotopical’ mechanism.

The artist registers crisis in culture and history, but also the meaning of making and relating memory in crisis. The latency and ‘after-images’ were subjected through a semiotic analysis, thereby elucidating this mechanism from a constellation of texts in dialogue with diverse conceptual frameworks. In this paper, the analysis has proceeded in an anachronistic way. From the aforesaid ‘deferred strategy of presence’ in *Cease* (2024), to the strategy of self-representation in the artist’s photographic works (*Bosnian Girl*, 2003; *Behind the Scenes I, II*, 1994-2019), to the visualization of traumatic memory in the film (365

and culturally rooted: “The human body, and, even more dramatically, the body of a woman, is a strange intersection between zoo and bios, physiology and narration, genetics and biography” (Clement, Kristeva 2001, 14).

Days Without Red, 2011). Finally, it looks at that ‘burning image’ from Sarajevo (*The Shadow of Šejla Kamerić*, 1993). At the nexus of life and art her work is a segment of life detached from the context of the individual biography and a piece of art that is removed from the neutrality of aesthetic principles (Agamben 1996, 65; Author’s transl.).

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