

PARALLEL WORLD: THE ARCHITECTURE OF SURVIVAL



This exhibition features the work of **Boja Vasic** and **Vessna Perunovich**. It is a visual survey that examines the social phenomena surrounding what the artists call "*forced nomads*."

Including an actual-size shelter constructed in the gallery space, a split-screen video projection showing children striking kung-fu poses alongside a tour of the village in the twilight, and a series of digitally altered photos of shanty-homes in the village (blurred to symbolize the insecurity of the future), this exhibition addresses Modern Fuel's interest in presenting multi-disciplinary work and culturally diverse perspectives. In conjunction with this exhibition, Modern Fuel is holding a forum on April 12th that will explore the theme of **Parallel Worlds**.

Image: Vessna Perunovich and Boja Vasic, The Architecture of Survival (House No. 81), c-print photograph, 2005.
Essay by Erin Morton

Forced Nomads and Modern Travel: Vagabonds, Tourists and the Architecture of Survival

Nowadays we are all on the move. —Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* [T]he very significance of geographical location at all scales begins to be questioned. We become nomads—who are always in touch. —Michael Bededikt, "On Cyberspace and Virtual Reality" As a consequence of the late-modern world, Zygmunt Bauman suggests, one cannot stay put for very long—certainly, "[o]ne cannot 'stay put' in [the] moving sands" associated with a postmodern context (Bauman, 78). And yet historically speaking and for a prolonged period in modern European intellectual traditions, such movement has not been seen as such an essential feature of the human condition. "On the contrary," Ning Wang notes, "the sedentary state is perceived to be a characteristic of civilization" (1). Mobility and movement, while considered important in terms of transferring knowledge, technologies, and communication, has also been associated with human tragedy in modern civil society—calling to mind histories of colonialism, war, and environmental or industrial disasters.

Parallel World, Boja Vasic and Vessna Perunovich's exhibition at Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre, depicts people who, like others who exist outside of the modern social order of travel, are participating in movement more akin to pre-modern ideas of human tragedy, thereby articulating the artists' paradoxical notion of the "forced nomad." Travel as a modern social action, then, conceptually associated with Vasic and Perunovich's exhibition, might be considered as a way to examine the late-modern relationship between globalization and what Bauman calls its "human consequences." In other words, "to tour or not to tour" can no longer be taken for granted as simply a necessary component to a middle-class contemporary lifestyle (Wang, vii).

It might also be read in relation to the kind of distancing that is implicit in mobility and movement—whether this is distance in time (towards a sense of authenticity, heritage or primitiveness), in space (novelty, difference, architectural environments), or in culture and way of life (the ethnic, the exotic, the unusual, the Other). Just as the birth of the modern age was signaled by the advent of travel by choice—travel, that is, unassociated with the tragedy of colonial civilizing missions—tourism was in turn a consequence of modernity (Wang, 2). Tourism as a social "necessity," no longer a luxury available exclusively to élites, has in the context of neoliberal globalization made travel available for mass consumption.

As Wang argues, in the neoliberal post-War West/global North freedom of movement is considered to be a basic political and social right, in line, for example, with freedom of expression and association; "to travel or not to travel" has consequently become a social question" (13). And so, in this context, what becomes of contemporary visual artists Boja Vasic and Vessna Perunovich's notion of "forced nomads"? What is their human consequence when it comes to our current globalized episteme, so infused as it is with news reports about refugees, diasporas, fugitives, exiles, asylum seekers, and myriad forms of displaced persons? Can we understand forced nomads in relation to Bauman's suggestion that "[t]he vagabond is the alter ego of the tourist" (94)? Evidently, as Bauman puts it, "[i]n a restless world, tourism is the only acceptable, human form of restlessness" (94).

In Parallel World, Vasic and Perunovich's most recent installation of their photographic series *The Architecture of Survival*, such restlessness becomes a means to investigate the historically construed binaries between the vagabond (nomadic, transitory, uncivilized, ungovernable) and the tourist (normally sedentary, settled, modern, compliant). Vasic and Perunovich's installation consists of a series of photographs of a makeshift village settled on the periphery of downtown Belgrade, a community originally built and settled by Serbian refugees from Kosovo and now largely occupied by Roma families (a people conventionally and disparagingly known as Gypsies).

Digitally altered in order to create a blurred exposure, these photographic images of shanty houses and their occupants graciously reveal the precariousness of Belgrade's Roma community who, despite being composed of active, self-sufficient, working people living in the city for twenty years or more, remain marginalized in the crudest of living conditions (see Kemeny 2007). The photos occupy the walls of the gallery space and provide the context for the performative component of the Parallel World installation, in which Vasic and Perunovich construct a life-sized shelter built from found material. The structure houses a split-screen looped video projection of, on the right, some of the community's children playfully displaying kung-fu and bodybuilder poses and, on the left, village residents alongside their homes.

The notion of a parallel world seems fitting here and it might be easily read as a display of *joie-de-vivre* despite abject marginality. And yet it is worth probing this limiting analysis, in order to move beyond Bauman's vagabond-tourist dichotomy—pointing to the notion of travel itself as a complicated and messy terrain that is not so easily divided along these lines. In fact, as Bauman himself points out, "in the traveling society, tourism and vagrancy are two faces of the same coin. ... The line which divides them is tenuous and not always clearly drawn. One can easily cross it without noticing" (96).

We can read this visually through Vasic and Perunovich's photographs, which all display a common feature in the homes they depict: a large painted house number on the front of each dwelling, ironically indicating a determined community organization, structure, and relative permanence to these residences, despite the fact that the houses are numbered according to the schedule of their pending demolition. Who is traveling where in this context? In this case,

it would seem, Vasic and Perunovich's camera lens replicates the photographic eye of the modern travel experience—it is they who are travelling visitors here.

Are Vasic and Perunovich travel photographers in this context, image-makers who are imposing their view on the scenes they capture, or do they operate as illustrators—a process that Carol Crawshaw and John Urry have described as “translating the experiences, memories and mental images of travelers into visual, material ones which can be stored away and brought out again at any time” (189)? Clearly, while Vasic and Perunovich are not seeking the common tourist goal of reassurance—generally expressed by way of a photographic souvenir of a known site in order to confirm one's presence there, or that a landmark in fact does look the way it is supposed to—their photos do share a snapshot quality of mainstream tourist imagery (see Taylor, 240). Operating as oppositional photographers in this sense, Vasic and Perunovich might be regarded as travelers recreating the modern tourist photograph by using it to unsettle the viewer and highlight social inequalities by employing known visual tropes such as humour, irony and confrontation (see Taylor, 242).

As John Taylor points out, these kinds of image-makers have aims that might “alter the signs of what tourists expect. ... Quite unlike tourists, they are engaged in critiques of tourism, of heritage, and of certain failings or disasters of nationalism. They are concerned with the inequalities that stem from political choices, often feeding on xenophobia, racism, and class antagonisms” (242). It is in this sense that one might consider these images of forced nomads, those people formally on the move by consequence of violence and political aggression but who now occupy a somewhat liminal space between the perceived boundaries of the primitive and the modern, the uncivilized and the developed, the vagabond and the tourist.

Works Cited: Bauman, Zygmunt. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998. Benedikt, Michael. “On Cyberspace and Virtual Reality.” In *Man and Information Technology*. Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences International Symposium. Stockholm: IVA, 1995. Crawshaw, Carol and John Urry. “Tourism and the Photographic Eye.” In *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory*. Eds. Chris Rojek and John Urry. London and New York: Routledge, 1997. 176-195. Kemeny, Marika. “The Spirit of Serbia's Roma People Shines in Glendon Exhibit.” *Y File: York's Daily Bulletin*. 31 October 2007, <http://www.yorku.ca/yfile/archive/index.asp?Article=9341>, accessed 1 March 2008. Taylor, John. *A Dream of England: Landscape, Photography and the Tourist's Imagination*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, Manchester 1994. Wang, Ning. *Tourism and Modernity: A Sociological Analysis*. Amsterdam: Pergamon, 2000.

Parallel World Photos

Bios

Erin Morton is a PhD candidate and a teaching fellow in the Department of Art at Queen's University. Her current research examines visual cultural production in Atlantic Canada, outlining the way it offers new opportunities for bureaucrats and businesses to promote the region as a place where distinct aesthetic practices exist outside of modernity—processes that encourage tourism through a complex heritage industry that remains bounded to an antimodern understanding of the region and the people who live there.

Boja Vasic is a Toronto based media artist and photographer. His work has been shown at the 8th Havana Biennial in Cuba, VI Yugoslav Biennial of Youth Vrsac in Serbia, XIII and XIV International Art Biennial of Vila Nova de Cerveira in Portugal, and at the Liverpool Biennial, Independents. His video installations and photo based works have been exhibited at artist-run centres across Canada.

Vessna Perunovich is a Toronto based visual artist who works in a wide range of mediums including drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, video and performance. She has exhibited widely across Canada, as well as internationally. Some of the most recent exhibitions include: *Sound Proof*, at the E:vent Gallery, London UK (2008),

Transitory Places at the Occurrence Gallery, Montreal Quebec (2008), and the International Liverpool Biennial, UK (2007).