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NO GRAD AND ITS SUBREALISM

Nova Gradiška, December 1991

Whenever I pay a brief visit to my small native No Grad, I say: good morning, grief. Because this town of mine smells directly of death. I would recommend it to anyone who wishes to divest himself of the benefits of living in this vale of tears, because there they will be to put an end to it all far less painfully.

These are the exact words with which I began the first instalment of my column *Art or Life* in Polet.* Nothing strange about that, except that it was written in far-off 1989, when no-one, except the greatest of visionaries, had anything to say about war, let alone lived it. Of course, these words were result of literary whim, a matter of my private way of seeing things, and contained just as much personal spleen as they did savage criticism of this native town of mine in the provinces. For this I later suffered occasionally, at least, some mild pangs of conscience.

Today, in 1991/1992, these words are no more expressive whim. Nova Gradiška really is a No Grad**. The density of death and desolation is such that you can almost cut it with a knife. But as for dying, I believe that no one has this kind of ambition any longer, because it is too easy to archive. The ideal of a wilful departure from the vale of tears has become unintelligible, to say nothing of the lack of taste.

These photographs, except the first one, came into being on December 16 and 17, 1991. I photographed the town immediately after a savage artillery barrage that our *brothers* went it for regularly twice a day at least, *bravely* firing from far off, from the Bosnian bank of the Sava. This was the morning session, and went through it in the basement belonging to friend and colleague Željko Subić.

It was the first time in this war I felt genuine fear, fear that had even a trace of panic in it. From time to time I more or less chucked myself down on the floor, awkwardly, and somewhat ashamed of myself in front of the more experienced Suba, who didn't evince any particular reaction to the explosions. But I did have time to sense this dreadful noise, these earthquakes, as shameless pornography. I was fascinated by the unreserved transparency of the intentions contained in this action, by the directness and vulgarity of its execution. I had a powerful feeling of the pornography of the destruction and killings that were taking place here, not at all far away.

Later, in the middle of the day, there was no one. Life went on here in the cellars. All the public institutions, the municipal offices, the post-office, the drug-store, were in the cellars too. The pubs stayed shut. A thick fog had descended, it had all vanished, there were no women, there was no wine.

The City was living its *no*-variant, its *sub*-realism. This was clear from its surface. It was dark. The most intensive areas of light were the white, black framed rectangular death notices swarming all over the notice boards and the posts, in the cinema display cases from which film posters had long since disappeared, on every available tree... It was appalling, this light of theirs, the sheer quantity of them. How conspicuous death was, how terribly vivacious. And who were they meant for in this wasteland?

I photographed these obituaries. Everything else around were subordinated to them, neatly putting the finishing touch to their message. I was shooting death itself, and wondering how decent it was? Framing it, thinking of composition, dealing with the technical problems, employing the necessary degree of indifference towards the tragedy, coarsely renouncing the piety it demanded.

I almost gave up the work, irrespective of the act it was only now, after three days, that I had managed to get permission to photograph from the Garda Headquarters. That were the MPs had taken me as soon I had, immediately after my arrival, snapped the zero – 0A, that's what was written on the perforation – shot, picturing the perspective of the wasteland leading from home towards the town. In the bottom right hand corner of the frame I had caught them running towards me.

Now I was going home from the town. On the way there was an abundance of subjects for me, and I browsed on them like a termite until the film was over, without making any selection. My hands were frozen, my nose was runny, I was covered in snot, but it was as my torment were my redemption for what I was doing.

I came home, and my sister and neighbours were waiting for me. One of those pornographic detonations I had been terrified of back at Željko's had ripped a pig-sty into pieces, fragments of shrapnel had pocked the southern facade of the house, the blast had thorn off the balcony door, crumpled the blind and shattered every pane of glass. In the house and the cellar (our shelter) everything was thrown about, it was chaos, a shell-fragment had gone through the kitchen wall and lodged above the sideboard. What if we had stayed at home?

I remembered, and it seemed long ago, when the treats of this kind of destruction had only been hinted at, that I had tried to imagine what it would be like if they destroyed mi house. I hadn't managed to, I simply hadn't thought it possible, I had just suggested to myself the horror of the possibility, in a rational kind of way. Now that there had been the most persuasive harbinger of it, I didn't bat an eyelid. All I felt. apart from being happy to be alive, was ill-temper at the cold that was whipping in through the shattered windows, at the mess I couldn't be bothered to clear up, annoyance that I couldn't fall asleep and forget it all, but had to cover the window with plastic. Some kind of global exasperation at the discomfort of it.

I noticed a different manifestation of the same kind of insensitivity the following day, at the neighbours, when I took a picture of them in front of their demolished house, and they were frightfully tickled about the idea of appearing in the papers, or so they imagined, perhaps even on the television. The three children caught tight hold of me, leading me from one place of interest to the next, taking the opportunity to have their picture taken at the scene of the misfortune: 'Mister, mister, come and see the hole in the garden at the Bora's, the house on the corner...'

What was it? Numbness? Callousness? Resignation?

No, it was sub-realism, a life resource. *Life that conquers death.*

Translation from Croatian to English: Graham McMaster

* weekly newspapers

**Abbreviation of the name of the city Nova Gradiška, in Croatian: No City (Grad = City)