

SMB Territory

Photography

I was walking by the barracks every day and I wondered: "What's it like in there?" Military is not obligatory for women, so I wasn't threatened by it. That's why you could say that all about barracks represents a challenge.

I was attracted by those military facilities and their distance and unavailability. My desire to go where ever I want put the camera in my hands and brought me here - in the army - a place reserved for "the stronger sex".

The realization of the work represents some sort of an action, an entry into a military facility, recording of it all, and the photos themselves are a final document.

My work is an attempt to give clothes to previously generated mental images. Before I stepped into the barracks' interiors I had a mental representation of how could it look. A place where a man's sense of order, symmetry and place comes in its naked form. "Yes, sir!" is in every corner. Interiors are really something. Many people were there. They spent a significant amount of time in there, actually. They slept there, they ate there, spilt their sweat, blood and tears, gained their memories... Still the coldness of walls gives an impression of emptiness. Like no one has ever been there. Everything is awfully cold. Walls are just dead witnesses of the space they surround.

PHOTOGRAPHY NOT ALLOWED

No moment is more important than any other moment...

Susan Sontag

One of the first visual associations we have with our former armed forces, as well as our former country, is a sign showing a camera crossed out with a diagonal line. The sign has been often accompanied by the phrase '*It is strictly forbidden to take pictures and to film!*' In a cycle of photographs created by the young female photographer Jelena Vladušić from Novi Sad, the aforementioned prohibition is a starting point in her attempt to disclose some complex interactions between space, time, politics, ideologies, myths ... A distant echo of the might and power once linked to 'the fourth largest armed forces in the world' is discretely confronted, on these photos, as in a two-sided mirror, with some nostalgic scenes of what has remained today of the former Army.

These photos were taken in the barracks of the former Yugoslav People's Army in Bačka Topola, Sremska Mitrovica, Sombor and Novi Sad between December 2007 and April 2008. These barracks, which are bereft of any ideology now, actually appear as portraits of some spaces from the past; i.e. the spaces whose implicit contents, and even meanings, of our collective memory were eradicated many years ago. These *only boys' clubs*, which have been re-contextualised, and thus liberated from numerous layers of different (mainly macho) myths and taboos, are mere exteriors and interiors today. Although it may seem paradoxical at first glance, they draw our attention with their semantic emptiness. At the same time, non-sentimental visual (voyeuristic) experience of the woman who has found herself (thanks to a special permission of the Ministry of Defence, of course) in those "exclusively" men's domains, results in meticulous visual (social) essays on space itself; more precisely, on the space in which one enters different meanings and which is bereft of (former) meanings; on the space where different types of energy circulate or, even, where there is absence of the aforementioned things.

Finally, let me get a bit personal. Namely, since I was in the Army in 1990, and I spent 60 days on a so-called military training right there, in one of the barracks – I shall finish my attempt to put Jelena's photos in a context with a question: Is the very image dependent (in terms of its contents), and to what extent, upon its observer?

By Nebojša Milenković







