

Ivan Petrović – SALT AND LIGHT

Contemporary photography abounds in paradoxes arising from its relationship to other arts, as well as the fact that, like the readymade¹, it is almost always intriguing and ambiguous. It selects and captures objects from reality, signifying², naming and renaming them, changing their contexts and distributing them as new entities – hybrids composed of reality and memory (memories), i.e. specific histories. This new entity is directed by the author's programme inputs that determine its meaning. The intriguing quality of contemporary photography originates in its nature as a two-way communicator which, like the top plate of the obelisk in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, reacts depending on how much we, as recipients, are able to penetrate the contexts and meanings we are presented with as more or less open or concealed. And its ambiguity, unlike in painting and similar art disciplines primarily based on manual skills, comes from the fact that it was founded on the civilizational platforms of technical cultures as an expression of social necessity, which at first determined its technical and socio-political character and only afterwards its artistic character. The next paradox lies in the fact that photography lacks a progressive lineage of styles generating its previous experiences, which might help perfect the language of its art. Rather, we can talk, in general, about the course of civilization or, more specifically, the course of technical improvement on the one hand, and, on the other, about the spectrum of genres which, one by one, developed their own histories. Or (but) we can also talk about the different phenomena that photographers engage themselves in successively or sporadically. In spite of the absence of a rectilinear development and of the improvement of artistic discourse through the perfecting of stylistic formulations, photographic experiences continue to pile up and become accessible and well organized, in some virtual *cloud* of civilization and its communication networks.

The relationship between photography and the other disciplines of art, especially painting, is conditioned by a number of factors, the speed of image production and the possibility

¹ Except for photograms and similar laboratory constructions, photography operates exclusively with ready-made objects, which are captured from reality with the simplest mechanical operation – one press of the shutter button – one single click. In contemporary photography, the taken contents are almost always improved and renamed, even when it comes to tautology, taking into account, firstly, the histories that are already embedded in these objects and, secondly, the memories of those who are in operational or consumer relationship with photography.

² Since photography operates with ready-made, existing objects of reality, by isolating them and placing them in the focus of observation and consideration, it marks these objects as a new and specific constellation defined by authorship.

of their reproduction being the crucial ones. This is the cause of permanent tension, due to painting's shaken hegemony in the coordinated system of art. This relationship is also disturbed by the inability to overcome differences between the manual and the technical, between the production of the aesthetic as opposed to the production of discourses, and between the unique as opposed to the multiplicable. All these differences originate in the very nature of the media. However, it seems that the historical avant-gardes, from Dadaism to Conceptual Art, did not have an antagonistic attitude towards photography, and therefore not towards reality³ either; on the contrary, they established a tremendously interactive, mutually stimulating and very harmonious relationship. This has to a great extent determined the character and status of photography today as an independent artistic discipline.

The collection of topics Ivan Petrović investigates in his photo series *Salt and Light* is characterized by the complexity of a long-term research project. Thus, it becomes difficult to use standard patterns for its identification and analysis, both because of the evolution of the essence of photography and its capacities, and because of the author's programme inputs, thanks to which contemporary photography is – contemporary. Considering the author's systematic and long-term explorations of the topics of rural life, which can be recognized in some of his earlier series, *Exemplary Photographs* and *Works in the Field*, the project *Salt and Light* also consists of a documentary arrangement of scenes for social, cultural or political reasons – more precisely, archival memories. Therefore, a more cautious analyst, reacting to such preconceptions, might conclude that this project covers exactly as wide a range of different contexts as is necessary to express the author's intentions.

The work *Salt and Light* consists of photographs that Petrović started taking in 2014, with the intention of thematizing life in Serbian villages, and developing a complex mosaic picture of the current situation in Serbia outside the cities and towns. The predominant motifs in this work are landscapes devoid of people and scenes with people doing work in the field or garden. In the authorial sense, Ivan Petrović has developed a very characteristic procedure here. He has captured or created the scenes, with or without people, as already static, frozen pictures, and, with some transcendental technique, set them against the magic of the *decisive moment* as a new and different world. Deprived of sentimental reminiscence and romanticist fantasies about the beauty of life in the countryside, the work *Salt and Light* is characterized by documentary and chronological sensibility, with the intention of diagnosing the state of affairs, speaking in both real and metaphorical terms, related to the country's fundamental resources. Thus, the author intends to define the present cultural and living model in the village of our times, not without including the necessary flashbacks that each observer adds on the basis of their own knowledge of the

³ It is known that all avant-gardes aspired to identification with life, that is, art = life and life = art. And photography, by definition, deals with life.

village, or the necessary assumptions about the future that associatively arise from the dominant emptiness of social reality.

The key to understanding this project lies in its title. Ivan Petrović contextualizes his work with the syntagm *SALT AND LIGHT* – a title which is not explicitly supported by any visible elements in the photographs, but metaphorically defines the essence of the problem it denotes. The meaning of the title Petrović has chosen as the motto and starting point for the subject of his work, unlike the ritual and biblical meaning of the syntagm *bread and salt* to which it relates, signifies the very specific economic situation of Serbian villages in the period prior to electrification until almost the end of socialism. In the same way, it also signifies the new and perhaps even worse situation in the era of the capitalist liberalization of the economy and centralization of power, which, it should be underlined, is not capable of perceiving the periphery as an autochthonous entity. *Salt and light* were the only two things that the Serbian peasant used to buy, that is, pay for with money, whereby light meant expenditure for petroleum, later for electricity, which is still mainly used in villages for lighting – that is, *light*. *Salt* has always been known to be a necessary seasoning and preservative. Bearing in mind that such an unchanging situation has conditioned all the circumstances of village life and its development, as well as, of course, the outward appearance of the village, Petrović is using this title to point to the long-term state of affairs in villages and the social atrophy that necessarily resulted from the lack of normal and sustainable development. In fact, he is pointing to a life process that is dying out, even though the village, land and food constitute the most vital resources in economic, political and social terms. Therefore, in a statement made about his project, Petrović pointed out that “one of the main issues in *Salt and Light* refers to the control of food production as a type of political freedom”. The socio-political aspects of the project are an essential part of the author’s programme input, by which the character of the messages and the sensibility of the selected scenes are defined. And we are being reminded that today, in the era of sweeping digitalization, somewhere in the background, in the deepest layer of these photographs conceived and realized within an analog camera approach, a petroleum lamp can be seen to emerge, offering hardly enough light to read newspaper.

When considering the artistic contexts of this project, i.e. its sensibility, it is necessary to take into account all aspects of modern techniques and procedures, from the advanced documentary discourse to the contemporary experiences of constituting a work, which, as the author indicates, is not finalized at the moment of its physical creation, but is created in the public space of knowledge and meanings.

Although when Ivan Petrović started on *Salt and Light*, he was energized by his awareness of the instability of the local periphery and the need to engage the social and even political capacities of photography in order to point out the specific conditions and processes that

arise from this⁴, there is no way of denying the fact that this work is also an organic consequence of his entire opus and his engagement in photography. And it is the answer to the question of what is the nature of Petrović's engagement in photography which will determine the framework and sensibility of the project *Salt and Light*, its connection with previous projects, as well as the general strategy and sensibility of the author.

The common elements in Petrović's engagement with photography are the principles of work and operational procedures that stand as constants, around which programmes with more or less socio-political or artistic, but always photographic ambitions, are constituted. The basic principle of his work lies in the inseparable trinity: searching, recording, appropriating. Searching represents a life commitment; recording is a process of recognition and transcendental experience that arises from the synthesis of the personal and the external world; while appropriating is an act of selection and adoption, and the process of defining the character of what is appropriated. At the end of that journey, there are always two things to be found: first, the archive, as a protected treasury and a permanent habitat of personal and public histories, and second, the gallery, as one of the places where works are constituted in public space.

The theme of rural situations fits well into the general sensibility of Petrović's opus and a line of research into a complex set of topics that consist of: people – landscapes – emptiness. Or more precisely, it fits well into his need to observe and record – to search for the code of aesthetics outside the usual matrices, and collect scenes into his protected treasury, the archive, as a permanent habitat on which a history can be based. Clearly following the historical path of documentarism along post-conceptual line, and in keeping with the current situation in Serbia, Ivan Petrović also contextualizes his work with other contents besides the self-referential. Representing people, landscapes and states of mind, he talks about an intriguing emptiness. And, therefore, I am sure that anyone who delves deeply into the character of the messages emerging from the scenes in Ivan's photographs will surely come to the conclusion that, as a matter of fact, they carry with them definite political intonation.

⁴ Ivan Petrović is interested in conditions, processes, phenomena and contexts in Serbia. And when such a broad engagement is placed in the centre of the coordinate system, it becomes clear that his work finds references along both the vertical and horizontal axes.

Ivan Petrović – SO I SVETLO

Savremena fotografija prepuna je paradoksa koji proizilaze iz njenog odnosa prema drugim umetnostima, kao i činjenice da je ona, kao (i) *readymade*⁵, gotovo uvek intrigantna i višeznačna. Ona izdvaja i preuzima objekte stvarnosti, označava ih⁶, imenuje i preimenuje, menja im kontekste i distribuira kao nov entitet – hibrid sastavljen od stvarnosti i sećanja (uspomena), odnosno specifičnih istorija. Taj novi entitet usmeravan je programskim inputima autora koji mu određuju smisao. Intrigantnost savremene fotografije proizilazi iz njene prirode dvosmernog komunikatora koji, poput gornje ploče obeliska iz *Odiseje 2001*, reaguje zavisno od toga koliko smo mi, kao korisnici, sposobni da prodremo u kontekste i značenja koji nam se nude, manje ili više otvoreno, manje ili više skriveno. A njena višeznačnost, za razliku od slikarstva i sličnih disciplina koje su primarno zasnovane na manuelnim veštinama, proističe iz činjenice da je nastala na civilizacijskim platformama tehničkih kultura kao izraz društvene potrebe, što je od početka odredilo njen tehnički i socio-politički karakter, a tek naknadno i umetnički. Sledeći paradoks je da fotografija nema razvojnu liniju stilova koji generiraju prethodna iskustva da bi usavršili jezik umetnosti, već se pre može govoriti, generalno, o liniji razvoja civilizacije i, specifično, liniji tehničkog usavršavanja s jedne strane, te o spektru žanrova koji, svaki za sebe, razvijaju svoju istoriju, sa druge strane. Ili (ali) se pak može govoriti i o fenomenima koje fotografi sukcesivno ili sporadično obrađuju. No, bez obzira na odsustvo pravolinijskog razvoja i unapređenja umetničkog govora putem unapređivanja stilskih formulacija, fotografska iskustva se slažu, dostupna i pregledna, u nekom virtuelnom *oblaku* civilizacije i njenim komunikacijskim mrežama.

Odnos između fotografije i drugih disciplina umetnosti, posebno slikarstva, uslovljen je mnogim faktorima, od kojih je brzina proizvodnje slika i mogućnost njihovog umnožavanja od presudnog značaja, što zbog ugroženosti, pre svega, hegemonije slikarstva u koordinatnom sistemu umetnosti izaziva permanentnu napetost. Ovaj odnos remeti i nesposobnost

⁵ Osim fotograma i sličnih laboratorijskih konstrukcija, fotografija operiše isključivo gotovim objektima, koje preuzima najjednostavnijom mehaničkom operacijom – jednim pritiskom na dugme okidača – jednim klikom. U savremenoj fotografiji, preuzeti sadržaji su gotovo uvek unapređeni i preimenovani, čak i kada se radi o tautologiji, pri čemu se računa, prvo, na istorije koje su već ugrađene u preuzete objekte i, drugo, na sećanja, odnosno uspomene onih koji su u operativnom ili konzumerskom odnosu sa fotografijom.

⁶ S obzirom na to da operiše gotovim, postojećim objektima stvarnosti, fotografija ih, samim tim što ih je izdvojila i stavila u fokus posmatranja a time i razmatranja, označava kao novu, izdvojenju i posebnu konstelaciju definisanu autorstvom.

prevazilaženja razlika između manuelnog i tehničkog, proizvodnje estetskog nasuprot proizvodnji diskursa, te unikatnog u odnosu na umnoženo. Sve su to razlike koje potiču iz same prirode medija. Međutim, čini se da istorijske avangarde, od dadaizma do konceptualne umetnosti, nemaju antagonistički stav prema fotografiji, a time ni prema stvarnosti,⁷ već naprotiv stoje u veoma interaktivnom, međusobno podsticajnom i vrlo harmoničnom odnosu. To će u dobroj meri odrediti karakter i status fotografije danas kao nezavisne umetničke discipline.

Korpus tema koje Ivan Petrović razrađuje u serijalu *So i svetlo* ima složenost dugotrajnog istraživačkog projekta pa se teško mogu koristiti standardni obrasci identifikacije i analize, kako zbog evolucije samog bića fotografije i njenih kapaciteta, tako i zbog programskih inputa autora, zahvaljujući čemu savremena fotografija i jeste savremena. S obzirom na sistematično i dugotrajno bavljenje temom ruralnog života, koje se može prepoznati i u ranijim Petrovićevim serijalima *Uzorne fotografije* i *Radovi u polju*, u projektu *So i svetlo* takođe je prisutno dokumentarističko slaganje prizora iz socijalnih, kulturnih ili političkih razloga – za arhivske memorije. Stoga bi oprezniji analitičar, reagujući na ovakve primisli, zaključio da ovaj projekat obuhvata upravo onoliko širok dijapazon različitih konteksta koliko je potrebno da se izraze autorove namere.

Rad *So i svetlo* sadrži fotografije čije je snimanje Petrović započeo 2014. godine s namerom da tematizuje život u selima, razvijajući složenu mozaičku sliku aktuelnog stanja u Srbiji izvan gradova i varošica. Preovladavajući motivi u ovom radu su pejzaži bez prisustva ljudi i motivi sa ljudima kada obavljaju poslove u polju ili okućnici. U autorskom smislu, Ivan Petrović razvija veoma karakterističan postupak. On preuzima ili stvara scene, sa ljudima ili bez njih, kao već statične, zamrznute prizore i nekakvom transcendentalnom tehnikom suprotstavlja ih magiji *odlučujućeg trenutka* kao jedan novi i drugačiji svet. Lišen sentimentalne reminiscencije i romantičarskih fantazmi o lepoti života na selu, u radu *So i svetlo* korišćen je dokumentaristički i hroničarski senzibilitet, s namerom da se dijagnosticira presek stanja, govoreći u realnom i metaforičkom smislu, fundamentalnih resursa ove zemlje. Time autor želi da definiše aktuelni kulturni i životni obrazac na selu karakterističan za ovo vreme, s nužnim flešbekovima koje svaki posmatrač pridodaje na osnovu sopstvenog poznavanja sela. Kao, uostalom, i sa nužnim pretpostavkama budućnosti koje asocijativno proizilaze iz dominantne praznine društvene stvarnosti.

Ključ za razumevanje ovog projekta nalazi se u naslovu. Ivan Petrović kontekstualizuje svoj rad sintagmom *SO I SVETLO*; nazivom koji na fotografijama nije eksplicitno podržan vidljivim elementima, ali koji metaforički definiše suštinu problema na koje nam ukazuje. Smisao naslova koji je Petrović izabrao kao moto i polaznu tačku za temu o kojoj govori, za razliku od ritualnog i biblijskog značenja sintagme *hleb i so* na koju asocira, označava veoma konkretnu ekonomsku

⁷ Poznato je da su sve avangarde težile ka identifikaciji sa životom, odnosno da je umetnost=život a život=umetnost. A fotografija se, po definiciji, bavi životom.

situaciju srpskog sela u periodu od doba pre elektrifikacije pa gotovo do kraja socijalizma. Kao i novu, možda još goru situaciju, u eri kapitalističke liberalizacije ekonomije i centralizovanja njene moći, a koja, važno je reći, nije sposobna da percipira periferiju kao autohtoni entitet. *So i svetlo* bile su jedine dve stvari koje je srpski seljak kupovao, odnosno plaćao novcem, pri čemu svetlo označava izdatak za petrolej, kasnije za struju, koja se u selima uglavnom koristi za rasvetu – dakle, **svetlo**. Za **so** se zna da je neophodan način. Shvatajući da je takva, nepromenljiva situacija uslovlila sve okolnosti u životu, razvoju i naravno izgledu sela, Petrović ovim naslovom ukazuje na dugotrajno stanje na selu i društvenu atrofiju koja nužno proističe iz nedostatka normalnog i održivog razvoja. Zapravo, na životni proces koji se gasi, iako su selo, zemlja i hrana u ekonomskom, političkom i društvenom smislu vitalni resursi. Zato, u izjavi povodom ovog projekta, Petrović ističe da se „jedno od glavnih pitanja koja usvaja rad *So i svetlo* odnosi na kontrolu proizvodnje hrane kao vrste političke slobode“. Socio-politički aspekti projekta su neophodni deo programskog inputa, čime se definiše karakter poruka i senzibilitet izabраниh kadrova. I podseća da danas, u eri razmahnute digitalizacije, negde u pozadini, u najdubljem sloju ovih fotografija, zamišljenih i realizovanih u analognom pristupu, čilji petrolejska lampa uz koju se jedva mogu pročitati novine.

Kada se razmatraju umetnički konteksti ovog projekta, dakle senzibilitet, potrebno je uzeti u obzir sve aspekte savremenih tehnika i procedura, od unapređenog dokumentarističkog diskursa do savremenih iskustava konstituisanja dela, koje po rečima autora nije gotovo onog trenutka kada je fizički nastalo, već nastaje u javnom prostoru znanja i značenja.

Iako je Ivan Petrović započeo projekat *So i svetlo* podstaknut saznanjima o nestabilnosti lokalne periferije i potrebom da angažuje društvene, pa i političke kapacitete fotografije kako bi ukazao na specifična stanja i procese koji iz toga proizilaze⁸, ne može se poreći činjenica da ovaj rad nije nastao kao organska posledica celokupnog Petrovićevog, teško je reći samo opusa, već bavljenja fotografijom. A odgovor na pitanje kako se Petrović *bavi fotografijom* odrediće okvire i senzibilitet projekta *So i svetlo*, vezu s prethodnim ciklusima, pa i opštu strategiju i senzibilitet autora.

Opšta mesta u Petrovićevom bavljenju fotografijom su principi rada i operativne procedure koje stoje kao konstante oko kojih se konstituišu programi s manje ili više socio-političkim ili umetničkim, ali uvek fotografskim ambicijama. Osnovni princip njegovog rada leži u nerazdvoživom trojstvu: traganje, beleženje, prisvajanje, pri čemu je traganje – životno opredeljenje, beleženje – proces prepoznavanja i transcendentno iskustvo koje nastaje iz spoja ličnog i spoljašnjeg sveta, dok je apropiacija – čin izbora, prisvajanja i definisanja karaktera prisvojenog. Na kraju tog puta uvek stoje dve stvari: prvo, arhiv, kao zaštićeni trezor i trajni habitat ličnih i javnih istorija, i drugo, galerija, kao jedno od mesta konstituisanja dela u javnom prostoru.

⁸ Ivan Petrović se bavi stanjima, procesima, fenomenima i kontekstima u Srbiji. A kada se takvo bavljenje postavi u centar koordinatnog sistema, onda je jasno da njegovo delo pronalazi reference i po vertikalnoj i po horizontalnoj osi.

Tematika ruralnih situacija uklopila se u senzibilitet Petrovićevog opusa i liniju istraživanja kompleksa tema koje čine ljudi – predeli – praznina. Zapravo, u njegovu potrebu da gleda i beleži – da traga za kodom estetike izvan uobičajenih matrica i skuplja prizore u svoj zaštićeni trezor, arhiv, kao trajno stanište na kome se bazira istorija. Jasno sledeći istorijsku liniju dokumentarizma na postkonceptualnim osnovama, Ivan Petrović, shodno aktuelnoj situaciji u Srbiji, kontekstualizuje svoj rad i drugim sadržajima osim onim autoreferentnim. Predstavljajući ljude, predele i stanja, on govori o intrigantnoj praznini. I, stoga, siguran sam da će svako ko se bude udubio u karakter poruka koje proističu iz prizora na Ivanovim fotografijama sigurno doći do zaključka da su one, uzgred, jasno politički intonirane.