

## DOCUMENTS FROM THE ARCHIVE OF IVAN PETROVIĆ

Ivan Petrović's project *Documents* (1997–2008) consists of parts from 12 different series of photographs. Although reminiscent of a retrospective installation, this auto-curatorial project does not have the usual goal to represent the author's previous work. *Documents* were thus far presented in four variants and each subsequent will imply not only different photographs, but also their changeable combinations with already exhibited shots. The project includes photographs from the following Petrović's works: *Hog Butchering* (1997–98), *Trains* (1997–99), *City Dump* (1998), *Bivolje* (1998–99), *Personal Stories* (1998), *Café Grizzly* (1998–2000), *Vitak 1999* (1999), *Photo Album* (2001), *Registering* (2001), *Portraits* (2001–), *Students* (2006–) and *Suspicious Behavior* (2008–).<sup>1</sup> *Documents* are a dynamic compilation of these works, but likewise a testing ground for raising a number of questions. Petrović problematizes the phenomenon of archive while at the same time opening a discussion on photographic truth, namely questioning photography as a testimony.

Although single photograph remains the foundation for every photographic project, it is an "incomplete and fragmentary speech"<sup>2</sup> that becomes understandable only in a certain context. This context can be different institutions or texts (title, explanation), but in the sense of art, a single photograph functions especially well in the context of other photographs. Instead of insisting on already formed series, Petrović leaves his archive open in a way that constantly places it in the center of attention. In *Documents*, a single photograph is treated like a changeable and inconsistent artifact of the photograph archive and its meaning is coded in relation with other photographs. Although because of this the significance of a single photograph can be challenged, the reasons that lie behind the selection of each shot are equally important as the concept in which it takes place.

There is probably no need to emphasize the ambivalence of photograph as a document – the question of photographic truth has been one of the most frequent subjects concerning this medium, especially from the appearance of digital picture. However, whether we are talking about a carefully directed scene or a random snapshot, the camera always records whatever it was in front of the lens in a certain interval of time. In that sense, each exhibition of photographs is an exhibition of documents, however false and incomplete. Nevertheless, the title of Petrović's work does not presuppose only this commonplace of interpreting

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<sup>1</sup> Photographs from the series *City Dump* and *Photo Album* are not included in the present installation.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Sekula uses this expression for photographs with no reference whatsoever to the meanings that different contexts read into a photograph. Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive", in: Liz Wells (ed.), *The Photography Reader*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 445.

photographs through documents. Although the presented photographs are documents of his visual experience, by a specific act of choice they become an inconstant medium of his archive.

Archive in the context of art is most often discussed as a discourse that is revised through appropriation, interpretation or reconfiguration. With its double role of art medium and archive material, photograph is frequently in the center of artistic exploration of this discourse.<sup>3</sup> The camera is an “archiving machine” and we could say that every photograph is a priori an archive object.<sup>4</sup> As opposed to generating archive from discovered material, which is what Petrović does in the project *Pictures* (2003–), in *Documents* he problematizes an archive that he himself made in the period of twelve years.<sup>5</sup> Although this, partly curatorial, position is always present in the creation of photographic work, it is especially emphasized in *Documents*. This project is a result of an exploration of Petrović’s archive, but also of two others, one of which is official and non-photographic (*Registering*), and the other private (*Photo Album*). The principle of selection, that accompanies through different phases the creation of every photographic piece, is in this work perceived as universal.

Perhaps the main criterion for the selection of these photographs was the fact that they mostly represent events and situations in which the author in some way took part. Although photographer’s presence is understood, his relation towards the situation in which he works determines a great deal the look and possible meaning of the shots that he makes. Therefore, it could be said that *Documents* represent a view on different aspects of life in Serbia during the period from 1997 to 2008. This photographic view is sometimes more, and sometimes less critically directed, but it always deals with futile differentiation between “collective history” and “private memory”. Photography always moves between these two notions and prevents their easy demarcation.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the shots from Petrović’s archive document, sometimes explicitly, some of the key questions of the Serbian society in the period during which they emerged. However, although it is possible to read into these photographs certain things on what life was like in the given period, the criticism of “collective history” has been carried out much more subtly. Here we cannot see the stressful ending of one ideology and savage beginning of another, as we would perhaps feel that we could in reportage photographs of some events. *Documents* are not a social-political statement, but testify on a certain state of things and in this sense touch upon the disturbing truths of Serbian everyday life.

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<sup>3</sup> “Atlas” of Gerhard Richter and “Les archives de C. B.” of Christian Boltanski are some of the most famous examples.

<sup>4</sup> Okwui Enwezor, “Archive Fever, Photography between History and Monument”, in: Enwezor, *Archive Fever – Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, International Center of Photography, Steidl, New York, 2008, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> The work *Pictures* is based on the use of photographic material (negatives and diapositives) found on the street.

<sup>6</sup> David Company, “Survey”, in: Company (ed.), *Art and Photography*, Phaidon, London, 2003, p. 22.

The earliest photographs from *Documents*, shots from the series *Hog Butchering*, *Personal Stories* and *Bivolje*, are related to Petrović's hometown – Kruševac and its surroundings. In the series *Bivolje* (housing project in the Kruševac municipality) and *Hog Butchering*, Petrović approaches the subjects that are defined by the environment in which he belongs, and which, according to his own words, he often saw as “dramatic and tense”. *Personal Stories* emerged when Petrović's acquaintances retold their experiences while looking at the camera lens. These photographs function as an inverted variant of a nonexistent documentary film. In them was used a limitation of photographic medium (lack of sound) in order to make something that could be called a “research portrait”. Likewise dramatic are photographs from the series *Café Grizzly*, developed in a café-club in Kruševac with the same name, and they in many ways remind of the shots that Arthur Fellig Weegee made at the New York Bowery. These visual notes that emerged in 1999, describe a terrifying combination of tense social-political circumstances and fun. In many ways more critically directed than the rest of the photographs in *Documents*, they speak of social circumstances at least as much as the shots from the series *Vitak 1999*.

During the NATO bombing, Petrović, as a member of the reserve force of the Yugoslav Army, was in the position in the locality Vitak. Although he did not take part in the open military confrontation, the very fact that he took pictures in a military base in Kosovo seems disturbing enough. Although uniforms and weapons are very much present in them, these photographs remind of a private photo album. The models are mostly soldiers-reservists that, like Petrović, found themselves in those circumstances against their will. The absurdity of the military endeavor can perhaps best be seen in much more dreary shots that do not feature people. Thus, a seemingly banal black and white landscape with bare land (# 6) or an overgrown doghouse (# 5) look shocking though they do not portray the war circumstances explicitly.

Studio photographs from the series *Registering* (2001) represent objects from the depot of the Municipal Misdemeanor Court in Kruševac and interrupt the mostly closed chain of portraits in *Documents*. Here we are dealing with material, most often circumstantial evidence confiscated after fights or during raids. Photographs from *Registering* symbolically speak of violence as a social condition and although none of the presented objects were used to commit murder, they look sinister enough for the observer to think the worst. This series of shots, from all those represented in *Documents*, speaks most directly on photography as an archive medium. Shot frontally with diffuse lighting and simple central composition, the photographs look like official court documents.<sup>7</sup> Together with the photographs from the other series, these evidences of unknown violations of law attain a new meaning. *Documents* are in this way punctuated by a concrete fragment of an immense field of everyday violence.

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<sup>7</sup> Size of the objects, which for the needs of precise documentation would probably be specially defined with a reference, has been equalized in these photographs.

In *Suspicious Behavior*, Petrović deals with a local problem with potentially major consequences – lack of perspective for young people. The photographs represent teenagers that are growing in an environment full of misunderstanding. Their “problematic” behavior is often an attempt to step out of the routine atmosphere of general state of apathy. It is ironic that the representation of a lack of activity could be the definition of these photographs. Similar can be said for the series *Students* as well, in which Petrović does not represent student’s protests or their going out, but portraits of young people in everyday situations.

Above all, *Documents* can be thought of as an installation of portrait photographs, and although there are differences between the included series, they are all centered on the portrait of man. This certainly has to do with Petrović’s attitude on emphasizing “personal history as opposed to official statistics”. Nevertheless, however much each photograph is an incomplete visual information, portrait photograph is especially problematic in this sense. Lack of knowledge on the person whose image we look at is a major semantic obstacle, and the context in which the photograph is placed directly dictates our reading of the picture. As it was already noticed, by looking at photographs we mostly cannot deduce who is a criminal, and who is a hero, unless we receive these information in some other way. Although individual Petrović’s portraits are in this sense typically photographically mute, in the framework of *Documents* they become crucial parts of the puzzle of their meaning.

From its beginnings, photography has been immersed in ideologically polarized reality and it is almost impossible to avoid its nature of political artifact. The period during which *Documents* emerged implies well-known traumatic events in Serbia. In this sense, each photograph that appeared in the country can connote them. Nonetheless, although some of the photographs from *Documents* (series *Vitak 1999* and *Photo Album*) clearly raise a question of political testimony, the greater part of Petrović’s archive does not openly portray the major problems of Serbian society. Unless we recognize the caustic ambivalence of these photographs as an indicator of dangerous circumstances in which they appeared.

*Documents* are an unusual photographic project because in them the usual method of archive research has been inverted. Instead of a critical reading of the hidden structure of official archive as the key part of ideological apparatus, Petrović turns towards reexamining his own photographic archive. In rereading, he treats a series of photographs in a way in which individual photographs are usually treated. Paradoxically, the basic project unit – an individual photograph – becomes a variable whose meaning depends not only on the mother series, but also on all the other photographs in the exhibition. Since every installation of *Documents* is different, different are also the relations that are made between the photographs and in this sense, we could talk about different exhibitions. However, although they will look different, these exhibitions will not significantly differ, because they will all still speak, or remain silent, on the open and changeable meaning of photography.

## DOKUMENTI IZ ARHIVE IVANA PETROVIĆA

Rad Ivana Petrovića *Dokumenti* (1997–2008) sastoji se od delova 12 različitih serija fotografija. Iako podseća na retrospektivnu postavku, ovaj autokustoski projekat nema za cilj uobičajenu reprezentaciju autorovog dosadašnjeg opusa. *Dokumenti* su do sada predstavljeni u četiri varijante i svaka naredna će podrazumevati ne samo različite fotografije, već i njihove promenljive kombinacije sa već izloženim snimcima. U projektu učestvuju fotografije iz Petrovićevih radova: *Svinjokolj* (1997–'98), *Vozovi* (1997–'99), *Deponija* (1998), *Bivolje* (1998–'99), *Lične priče* (1998), *Café Grizzly* (1998–2000) *Vitak 1999* (1999), *Fotoalbum* (2001), *Evidentiranje* (2001), *Portreti* (2001–), *Studenti* (2006–) i *Sumnjivo ponašanje* (2008–).<sup>8</sup> *Dokumenti* su dinamična kompilacija ovih radova, ali i poligon za postavljanje mnogih pitanja. Petrović problematizuje fenomen arhive dok istovremeno otvara raspravu o fotografskoj istini, odnosno dovodi u pitanje fotografiju kao svedočanstvo.

Iako pojedinačna fotografija ostaje osnova za svaki fotografski projekat, ona je nepotpun i fragmentaran govor<sup>9</sup> koji postaje razumljiv samo u određenom kontekstu. Ovaj kontekst mogu biti različite institucije ili tekstovi (naslov, objašnjenje), ali u smislu umetnosti pojedinačna fotografija naročito dobro funkcioniše u kontekstu drugih fotografija. Umesto insistiranja na formiranim serijama, Petrović ostavlja svoju arhivu otvorenom na način koji je uvek iznova stavlja u centar pažnje. U *Dokumentima*, pojedinačna fotografija je tretirana kao promenljiv i nestalan artefakt fotografske arhive i njeno značenje je kodirano u odnosu sa drugim fotografijama. Iako se zbog ovoga značaj pojedinačne fotografije može osporiti, razlozi koji stoje iza izbora svakog snimka podjednako su važni kao i koncept u kome on učestvuje.

Verovatno nema potrebe za naglašavanjem ambivalentnosti fotografije kao dokumenta – pitanje fotografske istine jedno je od najčešćih tema u vezi sa ovim medijem, naročito od pojave digitalne slike. Ipak, bilo da se radi o pažljivo režiranoj sceni ili o slučajnom snepšotu, fotografski aparat uvek snima ono što je u određenom vremenskom intervalu bilo ispred objektiva. U tom smislu, svaka izložba fotografija jeste izložba dokumenata, koliko god lažnih ili nepotpunih. Ipak, naziv Petrovićevog rada ne pretpostavlja samo ovo opšte mesto tumačenja fotografije preko dokumenta. Iako su predstavljene fotografije dokumenti njegovog vizuelnog iskustva, specifičnim činom izbora one postaju nestalan medij njegove arhive.

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<sup>8</sup> Fotografije iz serija *Deponija* i *Fotoalbum* nisu uključene u aktuelnu postavku.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Sekula koristi ovaj izraz za fotografije uopšte misleći na značenja koje različiti konteksti učitavaju u fotografiju. Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive", in: Liz Wells (ed.), *The Photography Reader*, Routledge, London, 2003, 445.

O arhivi u kontekstu umetnosti najčešće se govori kao o diskursu koji se preispituje kroz aproprijaciju, interpretaciju ili rekonfiguraciju. Sa svojom dvostrukom ulogom umetničkog medija i arhivske građe, fotografija se često nalazi u centru umetničkog istraživanja ovog diskursa.<sup>10</sup> Fotografski aparat je "mašina za arhiviranje" i možemo reći da je svaka fotografija *a priori* arhivski objekt.<sup>11</sup> Za razliku od generisanja arhive od pronađenog materijala, čime se Petrović bavi u projektu *Slike* (2003–), u *Dokumentima* on problematizuje arhivu koju je sam napravio tokom dvanaest godina.<sup>12</sup> Iako je ova, delimično kustoska pozicija uvek prisutna u stvaranju fotografskog rada, ona je u *Dokumentima* posebno istaknuta. Ovaj projekat je rezultat istraživanja Petrovićeve arhive, ali i dve druge, od kojih je jedna zvanična i nefotografska (*Evidentiranje*), a druga privatna (*Fotoalbum*). Princip odabira, koji kroz različite faze prati stvaranje svakog fotografskog rada, u ovom radu je shvaćen kao univerzalan.

Možda je glavni kriterijum za izbor ovih fotografija bila činjenica da one uglavnom predstavljaju događaje i situacije u kojima je autor na različite načine učestvovao. Iako se prisustvo fotografa podrazumeva, njegov odnos prema situaciji u kojoj radi u velikoj meri određuje izgled i moguće značenje snimaka koje pravi. Dakle, može se reći da *Dokumenti* predstavljaju jedan pogled na različite aspekte života u Srbiji tokom perioda od 1997. do 2008. godine. Ovaj fotografski pogled je nekada više, a nekada manje kritički usmeren, ali on se uvek bavi uzaludnim razlikovanjem "kolektivne istorije" i "privatnog pamćenja". Fotografija se uvek kreće između ova dva pojma i sprečava njihovo lako razgraničavanje.<sup>13</sup> Tako snimci iz Petrovićeve arhive dokumentuju, ponekad eksplicitno, neka od ključnih pitanja srpskog društva u periodu tokom koga su nastali. Ipak, iako je na ovim fotografijama moguće pročitati nešto od toga kako se živelo u Srbiji u datom periodu, kritika "kolektivne istorije" sprovedena je na mnogo suptilniji način. Ovde ne možemo da vidimo stresni kraj jedne ideologije i divlji početak druge, kao što bi možda mislili da možemo u reportažnim fotografijama nekih događaja. *Dokumenti* nisu društveno-politička izjava, ali svedoče o određenom stanju stvari i u tom smislu dotiču uznemirujuće istine srpske svakodnevice.

Najranije fotografije iz *Dokumenata*, snimci iz serija *Svinjokolj*, *Lične priče* i *Bivolje* vezane su za Petrovićev rodni kraj – Kruševac i okolinu. U serijama *Bivolje* (naselje u opštini Kruševac) i *Svinjokolj* Petrović pristupa temama koje su definisane okruženjem kome pripada, a koje je, kako sam kaže često video kao "dramatično i napeto". *Lične priče* su nastale tako što su Petrovićevi poznanici prepričavali svoje doživljaje gledajući u objektiv fotografskog aparata. Ove fotografije funkcionišu kao izvrnuta varijanta nepostojećeg dokumentarnog filma. U njima je iskorišćeno ograničenje fotografskog medija (nedostatak zvuka) za pravljenje nečega što bi se moglo nazvati "istraživačkim portretom". Dramatične su i fotografije iz serije *Café Grizzly*, nastale u istoimenom kafe-klubu u Kruševcu i one po mnogo čemu podsećaju na snimke koje je Artur Felig Vidži (Arthur Felig Weegee) pravio u njujorškom Boveriju. Ove

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<sup>10</sup> "Atlas" Gerharda Rihtera (Gerhard Richter) i "Les archives de C.B." Kristijana Boltanskog (Christian Boltanski) su neki od najpoznatijih primera.

<sup>11</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever, Photography between History and Monument", in: Enwezor, *Archive Fever – Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, International Center of Photography, Steidl, New York, 2008, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Rad *Slike* baziran je na upotrebi fotografskog materijala (negativi i dijapozitivi) pronađenog na ulici.

<sup>13</sup> David Company, "Survey", in: Company (ed.), *Art and Photography*, 22.

vizuelne beleške nastale 1999 godine, opisuju zastrašujuću kombinaciju napetih društveno-političkih okolnosti i zabave. Po mnogo čemu više kritički usmerene od ostalih fotografija u *Dokumentima*, one govore o društvenim okolnostima bar koliko i snimci iz serije *Vitak 1999*.

Petrović je za vreme NATO bombardovanja kao pripadnik rezervnog sastava Vojske Jugoslavije bio na položaju u mestu Vitak. Iako nije učestvovao u otvorenom vojnom sukobu, sama činjenica da je fotografisao u vojnoj bazi na Kosovu dovoljno je uznemirujuća. Iako su uniforme i oružije veoma prisutni na njima, ove fotografije podsećaju na privatni foto-album. Modeli su uglavnom vojnici-rezervisti koji su, kao i Petrović, dospeli u te okolnosti protiv svoje volje. Besmisao vojnog poduhvata se možda najbolje vidi na mnogo sumornijim snimcima na kojima nisu predstavljeni ljudi. Tako naizgled banalni crno-beli pejzaž sa ogoljenom zemljom (# 6) ili kućica za psa zarasla u travu (# 5) izgledaju potresno iako ne prikazuju eksplicitno ratne okolnosti.

Studijske fotografije iz serije *Evidentiranje* (2001) predstavljaju predmete iz depoa Opštinskog prekršajnog tužilaštva u Kruševcu i prekidaju uglavnom zatvoren niz portreta u *Dokumentima*. Ovde se radi o materijalnim, najčešće posrednim dokazima zaplenjenim posle tuča ili prilikom racija. Fotografije iz *Evidentiranja* simbolički govore o nasilju kao društvenom stanju i iako nijedan od predstavljenih predmeta nije upotrebljen za ubistvo, oni izgledaju dovoljno zlokobno da posmatrač pomisli na najgore. Ova serija snimaka, od svih predstavljenih u *Dokumentima*, najdirektnije govori o fotografiji kao mediju arhive. Frontalno snimljene sa difuznim osvetljenjem i jednostavnom centralnom kompozicijom, fotografije izgledaju kao zvanični sudski dokumenti.<sup>14</sup> Zajedno sa fotografijama iz drugih serija, ovi dokazi o nepoznatim povredama zakona dobijaju novi smisao. *Dokumenti* su na taj način punktirani konkretnim fragmentom nepreglednog polja svakodnevnog nasilja.

U *Sumnjivom ponašanju*, Petrović se bavi lokalnim problemom sa potencijalno velikim posledicama – nedostatkom perspektive za mlade ljude. Fotografije predstavljaju tinejdžere koji odrastaju u okruženju punom nerazumevanja. Njihovo "problematično" ponašanje često je pokušaj istupanja iz ustaljene atmosfere opšteg stanja apatije. Ironično je što predstavljanje odsustva aktivnosti može da bude definicija ovih fotografija. Slično se može reći i za seriju *Studenti* u kojoj Petrović ne predstavlja studentske proteste ili izlaske, već portrete mladih ljudi u svakodnevnim situacijama.

Povrh svega, o *Dokumentima* se može razmišljati kao o postavci portretnih fotografija i mada u serijama koje su uključene postoje razlike, sve su one centrirane oko fotografije čoveka. Ovo svakako ima veze sa Petrovićevim stavom o isticanju "lične istorije nasuprot zvanične statistike". Ipak, koliko god da je svaka fotografija nedorečena vizuelna informacija, portretna fotografija je u ovom smislu naročito problematična. Fotografija je kroz portret ponovo ustanovila i ograničila teren Drugog.<sup>15</sup> Nedostatak znanja o osobi čiji lik gledamo je velika značenjska prepreka, a kontekst u kome se fotografija nalazi direktno diktira naše

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<sup>14</sup> Veličina predmeta, koja bi za potrebe precizne dokumentacije verovatno bila posebno definisana referencom, na ovim fotografijama je izjednačena.

<sup>15</sup> Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive", in: Richard Bolton (ed.), *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1989, 345.

čitanje slike. Kao što je već primećeno, gledajući fotografije uglavnom ne možemo da zaključimo ko je zločinac, a ko heroj, osim ako te informacije ne dobijemo drugim putem. Iako su pojedinačni Petrovićevi portreti u tom smislu tipično fotografski nemi, unutar *Dokumenata* oni postaju ključni delovi slagalice njihovog značenja.

Fotografija je od svojih početaka utopljena u ideološki polarizovanu realnost i gotovo je nemoguće izbeći njenu prirodu političkog artefakta. Period u kome su *Dokumenti* nastajali podrazumeva poznate traumatične događaje u Srbiji. U tom smislu, svaka fotografija koja je nastala u zemlji može da ih konotira. Ipak, iako neke od fotografija iz *Dokumenata* (serije *Vitak 1999* i *Fotoalbum*) jasno postavljaju pitanje političkog svedočanstva, veći deo Petrovićeve arhive otvoreno ne prikazuje velike probleme srpskog društva. Osim ako ne prepoznamo kaustičnu ambivalenciju ovih fotografija kao naznaku opasnih okolnosti u kojima su nastale.

*Dokumenti* su neobičan fotografski projekat jer je u njima uobičajeni metod istraživanja arhive izokrenut. Umesto kritičkog čitanja skrivene strukture zvanične arhive kao ključnog dela ideološkog aparata, Petrović se okreće preispitivanju sopstvene fotografske arhive. U ponovljenom čitanju, on seriju fotografija tretira na način na koji se uobičajeno tretiraju pojedinačne fotografije. Paradoksalno, osnovna jedinica projekta – pojedinačna fotografija, postaje varijabla čije značenje ne zavisi samo od matične serije, već i od svih fotografija na izložbi. Pošto se svaka postavka *Dokumenata* razlikuje, razlikuju se i odnosi koji se prave između fotografija i u tom smislu se može govoriti o različitim izložbama. Ipak, iako će izgledati drugačije, ove izložbe se neće značajno razlikovati, jer će sve i dalje govoriti, ili ćutati, o otvorenom i promenljivom značenju fotografije.

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Campany, David, (ed.), *Art and Photography*, Phaidon, London, 2003.

Enwezor, Okwui, "Archive Fever, Photography between History and Monument", in: Enwezor, *Archive Fever – Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, International Center of Photography, Steidl, New York, 2008.

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