

► RETURNING HOME

On a picture postcard that a Czech tourist at the end of the nineteenth century sent from Jajce to Prague it says: 'Dear friend, I am writing to you from the city that has at its very center the prettiest waterfall in the whole Empire!' At that time Bosnia and the Czech Republic were parts of the same country, the great Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. And Jajce not only had the prettiest waterfall, but the whole picturesque town seemed to be out of a fairy tale or an Arabian Nights story. How could it not be, with two beautiful rivers, with two lakes, with the waterfall, with medieval churches, with mosques from the classical period of Ottoman architecture? This is the birthplace of Aldin Popaja, and this is the city to which he has dedicated the works of art that we are discussing; but first some biographical details about the artist. Somewhat before the war, on the day on which his mother learned that he had passed the entrance examination to the Academy of Fine Arts in Sarajevo, she invited several neighbors in to celebrate. When Aldin came home, the ladies from the neighborhood were sitting and chatting over coffee. He greeted them, and the oldest woman asked him: 'Well now, son, what school you have registered at?' 'The Fine Art Academy, grandma.' 'And couldn't you have gotten in anywhere better, son?' came the question.

A little after that Bosnia and Hercegovina were attacked. After being wounded at the front and the fall of Jajce, he went to Travnik as a refugee with his whole family. Travnik was overflowing with refugees, among them many refugees from Jajce. One day, his friend's parents, former neighbors from Jajce, called on him with an unusual request. They asked him to break their son's arm. Of course, that was so that their son wouldn't be sent to the front. Aldin asked: 'Why me?' 'Well, you are an artist and you know human anatomy well.' They wanted him to break his arm, but in such a way that there wouldn't be permanent consequences. And the fact that Aldin had only passed the entrance exam didn't discourage them; they didn't have anyone more professional available.

He did break the arm! When he told me about that I said to him: 'What luck to have such friends! If an artist, in a certain state of mind, cuts off his own ear, that I can still imagine, but to break his friend's arm, and in the presence of his mother and father...' 'Think whatever you will about it, but they're grateful to me to this very day. The whole family! And with good reason. It is nowhere near as simple as it looks. It was quite a strain. For a human being is a strange creature. You hit him casually and you can kill him, but when you do your best to only break him arm, you can scarcely manage to.'

With that broken arm an artistic adventure begins. To be sure, if we were to turn back a bit farther into the past, we could say that it began a lot sooner, on that day when Aldin came home crying from his first day of elementary school and told his mother: 'I want a different teacher! What kind of a teacher is she if she can't even draw a rabbit!'

In the midst of war in Bosnia and Hercegovina he needed to go the hundred or so kilometers from Travnik to Sarajevo, and not just go to Sarajevo, but what was worse, to enter Sarajevo surrounded and besieged. At that time, you could enter Sarajevo only one way, through an eight hundred meter long tunnel. That tunnel was described to me most graphically by a young musician, Damir, at that time a seventeen-year-old, whose father somehow managed to arrange for him to leave besieged Sarajevo. 'My father took me to the tunnel entrance. By way of things I had only a small gym bag and a flute. There was a platoon of soldiers in camouflage uniforms who were going on some special mission. We set off, the platoon of sol-

diers and me at the rear. The entrance was still relatively wide, and the water only to our ankles. But with every step the tunnel became narrower and lower. The water level rose, the height of the ceiling decreased. Where the tunnel was smallest, the water was somewhere between our knees and waist, and the ceiling was so low that we had to walk bent over. The soldiers held their weapons above the water, and I held up my flute!' Thus Damir got out of besieged Sarajevo with his flute, and with a lot of luck got to Zagreb, from where he went on to Prague and enrolled in the Musical Academy. Through the same tunnel, but in the opposite direction, Aldin Popaja went to study; in Sarajevo he studied at the Fine Arts Academy, where he also lived, since he had no family there and the dormitories no longer existed. He settled in a study room on the top floor; above him was only the huge dome that rose above the whole academy building. On the second night, when he still had not gotten used to things, he went up to bed. He found the room, of course, without a problem, but he could not find the light switch. He went through the great corridor and one after another turned on and off the light switches until he finally found the right one. The shelling of Sarajevo was in full force at that time. He put a pillow over his head and tried to fall asleep. He tossed and turned, trying to sleep. And then he heard an uproar in the academy building, and after that someone pounded on the door with his fists and screamed: 'Aldin, stupid, why did you light up the dome, do you know this is a blackout, and can't you hear that they are shelling us?' It was the doorman, who later told him, 'The dome was only lit up like that when they were making postcards of Sarajevo.' After a year he left Sarajevo by the same tunnel through which he entered and continued his studies at the Prague Fine Arts Academy. As we see, from one Fine Arts Academy to the other Aldin Popaja was led along the same path: through the tunnel.

During his first postwar visit to his native town, Popaja took a series of photographs in the bombed-out town which formed the point of departure for a whole series of his works. On one of the graphics from the **Jajce** series we see a rainy street from the viewpoint of a front-seat passenger, through the windshield, over the wipers. At the side on the sidewalks random passers-by are 'caught'; next to the sidewalk are buildings. At the end of the street, that is, in the central part of the graphic is a mosque. It's nothing unusual, we would say, if the mosque were not sharply distinguished from the rest of the picture. In fact, it is not a mosque; it is the outline of a mosque indicated with a few skillful strokes. In the place where it once stood there is now emptiness recorded by the camera lens. On a photocopy of the photograph the master has printed only what isn't there, only what is lacking. In contrast to the black and white underlay, the mosque is executed in color. This contrast gives it the color of a dream, the color of unreality; it is there, but seems not to be there. Or more precisely, it isn't there, but seems to be there.

Another picture from the same series, a picture with the title **Brother**, is likewise based on a quite ordinary photograph: a young man who is standing in front of a house. The artist's intervention is quite unexpected and appears to go in just the opposite direction from the previous graphic. On this photograph there is no empty space; no places are lacking, but instead what we already see is multiplied: in several places in the garden in front of the house there are outlines of the brother. Thus the brother is multiplied, or to use an expression that was only later to become fashionable in connection with a scientific advance in genetics, the brother is cloned. These two pictures give a precise formulation of Popaja's pictorial world. What was destroyed, he builds anew, and what was not destroyed he tries to save from destruction and death, to make indestructible and immortal. What follows after this comes from the clear conception and from this already recognizable style. His native town, family, and family home – exposed to wartime chaos – this is the thematic framework in which Aldin Popaja operates. New works do not exclude the earlier ones, they only broaden them. With maximum clarity of pictorial expression, Popaja delights us above all with his sense for the architecture of artistic elements.

Two series of constructions from 1997 entitled **City Landmarks I** and **City Landmarks II** are a kind of transfer of the themes that are worked out in the *Jajce* series of graphics into three-dimensional space. In this series he introduces questions of urbicide in the literal meaning of the word. The term *urbicide* had already been used by art critics in talking about Popaja's creations. Already in the *Jajce* series of graphics he raises questions of urbicide, that were to be worked out more extensively in later works. Urbicide is a term that means the destruction/killing of a city itself. If we started to enumerate the cities destroyed from ancient times to the present we would come up with an infinite series. Therefore it is better here to quote Adam Zagajewski - from a poem that he dedicated to his native city Lvov - which sums up that infinite series in one distich: 'Why must every city become Jerusalem / and every man a Jew?' The destruction of a city represents also the destruction of tolerance, which is both the precondition and the fruit of the urban way of life.

A Happy Bosnian Family is a construction that offers viewers an unusual pictorial experience with a deep semantic level: it not only simulates the interior of the family home, but it reveals the atmosphere of a specific Bosnian family, and takes the viewer not only through space (the family home) but also through time (the family history). The work presents a simplified construction of a family house. The work/family house, the pictures arranged in it, and the photocopies of family photographs are placed so that the viewer gets the impression of going through a real family house. Thus, the entry into the work itself represents entry into the circle of this family par excellence. All at once, at the moment when the viewer steps into the work, s/he is surrounded by innumerable pairs of eyes from the pictures and photographs and feels the unease of an intruder who has entered a deeply intimate world. The floor plan of this work hints at the floor plan of some Paleolithic dwelling: four walls and two entries that would have to represent a house. There is no happy family without a family home. A natural part of the family home, a space that is inseparable from family life, is the garden. The large family portrait, which is the only one placed on the exterior wall, seems to welcome viewers of the exhibition into the garden of the family home. Five individual portraits are placed in the interior of the work.

After entry into the interior of the work, the wall that stays behind the viewers' back is distinguished from the other walls in that there is not a single picture on it. It is entirely wallpapered with photocopies of photographs. Its appearance presages what awaits the viewer on making the rounds of the rest of the exhibit, that is, the exterior walls. Any family is unthinkable without family photos, or to put it more elegantly, without a family album. But as we know, a good part of the endless multitude of family photos does not end up neatly placed in photo albums but gets tossed without any order into shoe boxes and shirt boxes, put away in the attic or basement. To cover the whole surface of a structure of 130 square meters took about three thousand photocopies of family photographs, which were not pasted up either in chronological or any other order but were pasted up as if they had been taken without looking out of these various boxes. Thus the walls of the exhibit constitute a certain kind of collage, created from fragments of family history. Each of the photographs hints at a certain moment or event in life, and thus arranged one next to another on such a huge surface, they attain a certain narrative power. Tvrtko Kulenović writes in his essay *Landscapes of Maturity*: 'Susan Sontag says that photographs pierce deeper into memory than film because they show a clearly defined slice of time and not its flow.' In painting, however, we have something different; paintings are not a slice of time but rather are blotters that soak up whatever time the artist could bring along with him and in his spirit. A picture is a window into the depths of time; in that stopped instant it freezes the time not only of the painter's life but of all the lives that he inherited. Every picture is a search for lost time, a search for places and faces lost in time. But hundreds of photographs, pasted one next to another, present a stream, a continuity, become dynamic. And the art of film arose as

the art of moving photographs. The dynamic aspects of photography, the dynamic aspects of a documentary black and white film about a family, contrast with the static nature of pictures which, with their hyperrealism, in fact imitate photography and in a certain way take over its role. And with their intense colors the pictures contrast with the monochromaticism of photography. Only after looking through the pictures does the viewer notice that among a large number of ordinary, normal family photographs there are war photographs that have been unobtrusively placed in the exhibit. Their number is neither very great nor very small. Although war represents a specially significant period in the life of the family, or a kind of concentrated or intensified time, the proportion of wartime photographs is subordinated to real time or time measured by the calendar in the life of the family, and not to the subjective experience of war, which has no end. It is not only that one who has lived through war knows that a war never ends, but in addition he feels that the war has been going on forever. Or that before the war nothing existed. Such a feeling is subjective, but inevitable and natural, and therefore in Popaja's work hyperrealism is strictly controlled, also by the calendar measuring of time. This particular family survived the war but was left without the family home (temporarily as time would tell). The construction had to be large enough for a whole family to live in it. The size of the exhibit creates a new and worthy space for the members of the family, offers them a new home, a new roof over their heads, hence shelter and safety. The portraits too play this role; for what is portrait painting if not embalming (Danilo Kiš's expression), or immortalizing. Here, and not in some artistic megalomania, lurks the real reason for the great size of the exhibit. In addition, the absolutely simplified nature of the expression controls the size of the exhibit. The simplicity, the stripped-down nature of the exhibit, and the ordinary and easily grasped documentary nature of the photographs, as well as the hyperrealism of the pictures - in short the maximally reduced form - all have the job of making it easier for the viewer to understand one complicated family history. The size and shape of the exhibit demand physical activity of the viewer, who is forced to go round it, to move within it and around it, to collaborate; it could be said that the viewer in a way plays the role of a mobile camera.

On the one hand the exhibit offers us, exposes the intimacy of one family, and on the other hand it attempts to return to it what was taken away. This is a 'Happy Bosnian Family', since it survived. This exhibit is one great photo album, memento, illustrated book of family history, a family encyclopedia, if you will - all that at once. And even more; a new home from which no one can drive them out any more.

Likewise the monumental construction **Waterfall** represents an attempt to return and renew in an artistic way that which in reality was destroyed. The term urbicide in this case is not broad enough. The waterfall surpasses the content of this term. The annihilation of sacred buildings and cultural landmarks in Bosnia and Hercegovina was talked about. The destruction of a waterfall was kept in silence, probably because there is nothing to compare it to. People don't like to talk about things they can't compare with anything. Human madness knows no bounds. People like Popaja bring back hope when they show us by their works that human imagination and creativity likewise know no bounds. After all, there was nothing else left for him to do; how can an artist oppose the chaos of war and total destruction but by means of constructive, artistic organization. Popaja's works present a unified pictorial document about one town. He has returned the destroyed parts to the body of his town, endowed it with a new waterfall, a waterfall that does not have to be in the center of town. Any spectator in any of the galleries of the world, when he turns the handle of the mechanism mounted on the *Waterfall* and moves the plastic that rustles to simulate the rushing of water, resurrects the old good spirit of Jajce.