

zašto ne govorim srpski (na srpskom) [Why I Don't Speak Serbian (in Serbian)]

PHIL COLLINS IN CONVERSATION WITH GER DUIJZINGS

Academy of Media Arts Cologne and

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A public conversation with Phil Collins about his video *zašto ne govorim srpski (na srpskom) [Why I don't speak Serbian (in Serbian)]*, marking the opening of the Gallery of the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in Dublin on Friday, 6 March 2009. The text follows the conversation closely, but is not a literal transcript of it. Phil Collins and Ger Duijzings edited and polished the wording and took the liberty to elaborate, fine-tune, and brush up where necessary, mainly for clarity's sake.

BIOGRAPHIES

Phil Collins is a British visual artist and filmmaker based in Berlin and Cologne where he teaches video art at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne. He has worked in socially and politically contested regions, using elements of popular culture, low budget television, and reportage style documentary to articulate his fascination with the ways in which contemporary media structure lived experience. Recent solo exhibitions include Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2013); British Film Institute, London (2011); daadgalerie, Berlin (2010); Tramway, Glasgow (2009); Dallas Museum of Art (2007); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Tate Britain, London (both 2006). His works are held in public collections such as, among others, Tate Gallery, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Ger Duijzings is Reader in the Anthropology of Eastern Europe at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies (London). He has done research on the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, and is currently conducting research on social inequality in Bucharest, Romania. He published *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo* (2000) and *History and Memory in Eastern Bosnia* (2002, in Dutch), and he is co-editor of *The New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories and Moral Claims in a Post-war Society* (2007) and *Cities Methodologies Bucharest* (2011) and editor of *Global Villages: Rural and Urban Transformations in Contemporary Bulgaria* (2013). He collaborates with artists, resulting, among other things, in *Lebensraum | Living Space* (2009), a performance and video based on his diary while working in the former Yugoslavia in 1992 (with artist Rastko Novaković).

CONVERSATION

GD: Thank you, Phil, for inviting me to this conversation, which is a great honour. I have prepared some questions, but feel free to fire back questions whenever you

wish. Let me kick off by saying that I have watched the film a number of times and that I am really touched by it. For me – having had the experience of working in the region – it is a forceful and moving statement about language, identity, and violence. It is also a film about language as violence and what unspeakable violence can do to people’s sense of being at ease with, or at home in, a language that is not their own, affecting their ability to express themselves through that language. So what I would like to talk about are these four themes – language, identity, violence, and trauma – which seem to be the ones that you explore in the film. The second part of the film is about the virtual impossibility of talking about traumatic events in your native tongue. What I would like to ask you first is whether could you tell us a bit more about how this film came about?

PC: It is a film that I wanted to make for a number of years. As is often the case with an artwork like this, you may not be able to facilitate its production until a certain moment, so it was only after about five years that I was able to produce it. I was commissioned to make a video by the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh in 2007. Interestingly, Pittsburgh has a large community of people from the former Yugoslavia, so it almost became a conversation with those ex-Yugoslav inhabitants of Pittsburgh. These were the people I was interested in and whom I reflected upon by going to Kosovo.

In 1999, I had visited Macedonia and the Albanian refugee camps near the border with Kosovo, notably Stankovec and Čegrane, which were both enormous camps constructed in a very short period around April-May 1999. They housed tens of thousands of people each. I made my first video there while I was still at college in Belfast. At the time, I was thinking much about the representations of the conflict in Northern Ireland, so I thought I could reflect on the situation and the construction of political identities and conflicts by visiting Macedonia. Later, I spent some time in Belgrade – it was around the time of Milošević’s extradition to the Hague (in June 2001) – where I made a series of photographs called *young serbs*, which led to much discussion there. They were romanticized, idyllic portraits of the ‘lost’ generation of Serbs that had grown up during the 1990s. They now found themselves without vocation and without work. Many of them had not finished college, nor had they done their military service. So, I spent quite some time in the region and was very happy to be offered an opportunity to go back.

It was a very difficult film to make for a number of reasons. Although I suspect that things may have changed now, the use of the Serbian language was taboo; Albanians would not speak Serbian even though some of them had been educated in it. After the Kosovo war (1999), the language fell completely out of use, and this is what I was trying to investigate, asking Albanians to talk about why they did not want to speak Serbian and answering this simple question in the language of ‘the enemy’. I was eager to see what reflections came out of that. I approached a number of well-known public figures, among others, the former prime minister in exile, Bujar Bukoshi, and the former communist leader Azem Vllasi.

GD: These are all Albanians. I think that needs to be clarified for members of the audience.

PC: Yes, they were all Albanians, whom I asked to explain why they refused to speak Serbian, in Serbian. In the first part of the film, people are extremely reluctant to define or even name the language. It proved very difficult to have a conversation about this, and they approached it with a great deal of hesitation.

GD: How did you nevertheless convince them to speak Serbian? It is clear from the film that they agreed to do what you asked them to do, which is something other Albanians would have perceived with suspicion or even as a provocative act. Lots of Albanians would have been critical of this. So, why did they eventually agree?

PC: It required a lot of meetings. The one thing that I did was that I had endless meetings. I hit the ground running receiving assistance from local journalists and sociologists, and we would basically work from morning to night. We would open a laptop and present previous projects in order to give people an idea of what this was about and where and how it would be shown. It was something really difficult to explain and translate to their own situation. They had doubts about whether what we were doing was worthwhile since we were not making a feature film for a huge audience. We would get to the end of the meeting and say, 'Thank you, Mr X or Y, would you agree to take part in it?', and they would reply, 'Yes, I am speaking in Albanian, aren't I?', and I would then have to say, 'No'. We would have to go back to the beginning and talk it through again. I actually thought we would lose most of our contributors. For the local researchers it was deeply uncomfortable to communicate the idea. I put them in a tricky position. I felt for them because I was asking them to sell something that was extremely painful.

GD: Was the reaction that it was a treacherous and 'pro-Serbian' thing to do?

PC: Yes, people were extremely concerned about where the film would be shown, how it would be shown, what the material would be used for, what my agenda was, etc. There was a lot of discussion about that, why I did not allow people to reflect on this in Albanian, and why I wanted them to use Serbian.

GD: The striking thing is that your interviewees are actually quite fluent in Serbian.

PC: This is something that was potentially problematic especially around the time when we filmed. On 17 February 2008, Kosovo declared its independence, and we were filming in the weeks following that event. There was much anxiety about how Serbia would respond to Kosovo's declaration of independence, what would happen in Mitrovica [a city in the north with a large Serb population], etc. Yet, somehow the mood changed, and people agreed to collaborate because Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi spoke one sentence in Serbian as part of his declaration in parliament. This was something that did not go unnoticed in Kosovo, as it was a revelation of his own fluency in the language. So much energy had gone into separation, into detaching themselves from Serbia and Yugoslavia, and creating a new identity that would not bring historical legacies and contradictions to the surface. There was a lot of

movement away from acknowledging that Kosovo had been part of Serbia or Yugoslavia. Obviously, this part of Kosovo's history had been in contradiction to the identity that was proposed at that time.

GD: I found it interesting to see that one of your interviewees [the journalist Dukagjin Gorani] put such an emphasis on the insistence to forget, that is, the insistence to forget the Serbian language, which is in fact a guarantee that you will not forget, as far as I can see. If you insist on forgetting, actual forgetting is least likely to take place. Is this something you recognized while making this film, that their fluency in speaking Serbian was not as striking or surprising as initially expected?

PC: The most surprising interview was in fact with Halil Matoshi, the other journalist, because he was least fluent and most uncomfortable speaking Serbian. He clearly had difficulties expressing himself in the language, which was even obvious to me. I speak only very basic Serbian, so I failed to understand most of what was said when we filmed. Halil speaks in the most hesitant, faltering, broken way, which points to the trauma of what he went through. Maybe you can reflect on that?

GD: Yes. It is indeed amazing to see that a person [born in 1961] who is of the same generation as the others has almost completely lost his ability to speak Serbian. I do not know his personal circumstances, but he talks about his arrest by the Serbian police [in May 1999], after which he is kept in Serbian prisons and camps for nine months, where he is apparently treated badly. He seems to be so affected that he finds it hard to pull himself together, to express himself in Serbian, and recapture a sense of integrity, even in the most elementary physical sense, and I think that is what you see in the film. The film is clearly about the physicality of speaking, about speaking as an embodied act. In his response you can discern the inability to speak the language of those who have caused direct suffering to him, leading to some kind of forced amnesia. His body seems to physically resist his attempt to speak the language of his torturers.

PC: The Serbian police arrested him on the street, they searched him, and they found Gustav Le Bon's book *Psychology of the Masses* [published in English as *The Crowd*, 1896], and they accused him of attempting to manipulate the masses. He says that he still dreams of the book that was taken away from him. So he again transposes his subjectivity of that moment in time to the present, and of course it is that slippage that is unaccountable and points to the traumatic.

GD: One of the interesting things that I seem to have noticed in the film is that he is one of the few among the Albanian interviewees to speak in the first person.

PC: You mean in that first section 'On Language'?

GD: Yes, the others all speak in the third person, even if they are talking about themselves, using the words they, them, their. They almost never use we, us, our. Have you spotted this?

PC: No.

GD: I find it fascinating. I do not know whether it has to do with the natural posture of (Albanian) politicians and journalists that they talk in this particular way, especially when addressing a non-Albanian audience? It suggests that by speaking another language, in this case a highly controversial one, you transpose or transform yourself, that is, you swap your identity as a consequence of the language switch. I found that quite striking, whereas Halil Matoshi, speaking about his own personal experiences, talks about it in the first person, and he has extreme difficulties doing it.

PC: I think that is what separates his narrative from that of Desanka [the Serbian teacher] in the second part, in that her movement through the story actually takes a different pace and a different emotional journey compared to his.

GD: Do you not think that there is a family resemblance between Halil and Desanka in terms of the difficulty they have speaking? It is her native language, but also for her it is difficult to talk. She becomes increasingly tired, emotionally drained, and starts making subtle mistakes in grammar and pronunciation. Her mouth becomes dry, and her body starts protesting.

PC: Absolutely, but I also think that within the context of her hometown Gjakova (Đakovica in Serbian), she would probably not have regularly spoken Serbian because it came to be identified with the enemy. Speaking Serbian was a political position during the war. It becomes obvious that even for her as a teacher of that language she falters, and that her usage of it is not one of automatic currency.

While recording we focused on the details of oral delivery, which was one of the reasons we miked it very carefully. I invited a musician over to work on the sound. Initially we were going to film in the Kosovo Institute of Journalism and Communication (KIJAC), until somebody from Radio Television Kosovo suggested we could use their big-band room. This was a kind of orchestral room, which looked like classic Yugoslav socialist design. One thing that I immediately noticed was that the room had a very specific atmosphere, this great sense of soul. We close miked on the neck and we also had two overhead mics; we recorded from the control room and also captured the sound outside. For instance, we taped a call to prayer, which occurs at one point in the film. We recorded seven channels, and that was what was mixed in the end. But it really was about the delivery of speech; that articulation had an emotional resonance, which I wanted very much to focus on, the dryness of the mouth and the smacking of the lips.

GD: It is clear in the film that speech is a physical act. What about the other aspects, that is, the technical decisions you made when you recorded the statements and

testimonies. What about the framing, could you talk a little bit about that because it is not a standard way of framing interviews?

PC: Before shooting I went back and looked at the work of Donn Alan Pennebaker and Shirley Clarke who are two filmmakers from the 1960s. I wanted to find an aesthetic that looked out of time. We used black and white 16mm and very fast 400ASA film, so it was rich in contrast and noisy. There is this constant buzzing, which is reminiscent of the 1950s and 1960s films and also of the Yugoslav Black Wave cinema from that period. I was looking for a tension between the delivery of a testimony and something that sat out of time, but which also recalls these earlier eras.

We also used all of the film's roll-out, so if someone was still talking when we were changing rolls we only captured the disembodied voice; the roll-out with lots of dirt and flicker just became a part of it. I wanted to keep these elements central. The team was incredible. We had to rent a camera from Bulgaria – there was no 16mm camera in Kosovo that we could get hold of – so we had a Bulgarian camera operator and loader, an Albanian cinematographer, and myself. The way we worked and framed things was very intuitive; it had to be done mainly through sign language. Because I did not understand much of what people were saying I could concentrate on the small monitor and direct very closely, really focusing in an intimate fashion on the difficulty of testimony.

GD: It seems that while you are doing this you are scanning the face, or other parts of the body. Are you? It seems that sometimes it is just the lips, the neck, or hands you are zooming in on.

PC: That was unpredictable, though. At one point, when we changed rolls, Desanka took out some photographs, and I did not know what to do or where to go from there. As it seemed brutal for her to have to tell these things, it also seemed cruel to stop her when there was a rhythm to the way she was telling her story. The way Desanka articulated that narrative and said, 'This may be a touching photo', was incredible. Also the contrast between the photo of her daughter, who was a source of pride for her (the fact that she went to Washington for a three-month course), and the picture of herself on her son's grave, which I had not seen coming, was extremely touching. After recording, everybody in the room was visibly moved.

GD: What did it mean to her to speak about these experiences, which I guess she never really spoke about?

PC: When we visited her, we knew her story, but her husband spoke for a long time, about an hour and a half, about the history of Kosovo, especially the Ranković period, which had been really difficult for the Albanians. Even though there was a photo of their son on the table, I began to think that we would not manage to talk to her. But then she began to speak about her son's death, and it was the most profoundly moving moment. It almost split us in two. It was also incredibly scary. I remember talking to Linda [Gusia] on the way home, trying to capture Desanka's

thoughts of that moment which she had lived with ever since. Desanka wanted to take part because she wanted to commemorate her son in some way. It was not a case of us convincing her. We laid out the project and luckily we met her at a time when she wanted to engage with that kind of thing and talk.

GD: If you do not know Serbian, you do not notice this, but at the very end of the film, when the credits are running, you hear a short Serbian language lesson, which sounds almost like a standard language class. It is only at the very end that there is some twist to it. The last sentences go like this: 1. 'I'm ok', 2. 'I'm not ok', and 3. 'Thanks for asking'. As far as I can see, the last sentence is at the core of the second part of the film. You ask a woman to tell her story and give her the opportunity to talk about something very traumatic that happened to her, which she normally cannot speak about. Do you think that it was a valuable experience for her or how did she respond at the very end? Was she relieved to have told the story, did you speak to her about this?

PC: Yes, of course. The thing is when you ask people to share such intimate and distressing experiences, it's so important to do your best to provide some kind of resolution to that experience, that you do not just say, 'Thank you for coming and see you'. We've spent the time with her, took the family out for a meal, and I think it was good, but I'm reluctant to make any claims on their behalf.

GD: Why did you decide to interview her (Albanian) husband separately, why did you not film them together?

PC: Because Avni would speak a lot more.

GD: So he was somehow silencing her?

PC: Yes, he would tend to occupy the situation.

GD: And he was providing the 'official' narrative?

PC: Yes, and also a patriarchal narrative. Her position was more unusual to me. It seemed that her story was the primary one. Her son had been killed by members of her own group because he was considered to be something 'other'. To me it seemed that all of the loss and the upset and the discord, and part of my failure to rationalize it, revolved around her story. She had an incredible delicacy and an incredible fierceness.

GD: How did you get to know her and how did you decide to include her in the film? The original concept was to ask Albanians to talk about their refusal to speak Serbian.

PC: One of the researchers, Linda Gusia, the sociologist I worked with, was crucial for the project. In 1999, she had been a fixer for the *Washington Post* and other

newspapers. She remembered this story when I was outlining what I was looking for. I explored lots of other things to be included in the film, for example turbo-folk music, which was ubiquitous across the region yet became very much nationally defined. I was, for instance, searching for a song which had been translated from one to the other language and which had been popular on both sides of the ethnic divide. I was looking for things that resisted national boundaries and definitions, such as erotic literature, whether that formed some kind of cross-over, whether that drive to separation was as stark in the field of sexual desire as it was elsewhere.

So looking for subjects, I met Linda, and she told me about Desanka. I knew that this encounter was going to be important, as it was entirely unpredictable. I had set out a question, which had taken its course, and then entered a very different territory. It was not as academic or self-reflexive as I thought it would be.

Can I question you a bit about your work on Srebrenica and your experience of interviewing people who have gone through the war? I know that you have talked to people from many different backgrounds.

GD: I indeed interviewed many different people, and one of the things that remains is that you establish a very close and intimate relationship with them while talking to them about those painful experiences. Often the trauma is unspeakable; it is not shared with anybody else, and it is not discussed in public. It is impossible to talk about it also because others do not listen as they are traumatised themselves. So there is often a deep sense of loneliness and desperation on the side of those who have gone through such experiences. Doing those interviews – and some of those interviews took two or three days – meant a lot for the people in question, as they were able to tell the story. What often struck me is the detail given. The memory of it is still very much alive, even if it is an unspoken and unspeakable reality. This happens with Desanka. Even though she talks in a very controlled and dignified manner, you observe the difficulties she has articulating the experiences. There are silences, omissions, and unfinished sentences. The film of what has happened to her is playing again and again through her head, and it is hard to communicate through words.

PC: How long were you interviewing in Srebrenica?

GD: I worked there between 1997 and 2001, mostly in brief periods. It was impossible to do anthropological fieldwork in the usual manner, that is, by staying there for a longer period, as the situation was unsettled and the memories of the war fresh. I would spend no more than one or two weeks every time I visited the area, and then I really had to get out because it was hard, distressing, and dangerous. Much of my material I actually gathered by interviewing Muslims in the Netherlands or other places where they had ended up. These are now diaspora communities that have difficulties making their experiences understood or recognized in the countries they are living in. This is the typical migrant's experience, but it is made worse by the trauma they have gone through.

Let us go back to your work. One of the things I wanted to talk about is the sequence in the middle of the film, what is happening there? We see images of children and youngsters in refugee camps.

PC: It maybe does two things. One, it takes you completely out of that first section. I wanted to give the viewer a break, to make them forget the first part before entering the second, separating the two interview sections. In addition, I wanted to show something of my own limitations or interactions at the time when I visited the refugee camps. I clearly remember how the public image of the Albanians during the 1999 conflict was produced exclusively by internationals and outsiders. I wanted to implicitly reveal that in a sequence of footage I filmed at that time, which works as a series of snapshots where we always go to black at the end.

GD: These are snapshots from the refugee camps in Macedonia?

PC: Yes, and in them you see the lack of connection between myself and the subjects. They suggest that there is a total fallibility about this. These are not moments of intimacy or people you know intimately. It is a series of detached snapshots of people in camps.

GD: The way I see it is that these are all images of people who are aware of the camera and responding to it.

PC: It sounds ridiculous now, and it is difficult for me not to romanticize the situation or my role within it, but I distinctly remember that not to take a picture would have been an insult.

GD: Not to take it?!

PC: Every few minutes, or every few steps I made, someone would say, 'Take my picture!'. They wanted some marker, as if this chaos needed to be recorded. Even when I had no film left, simply to take the picture without film was a necessary transaction, which justified my presence there. I spent a lot of time down at the dodgems, which is a beautiful moment in the film. It is when a boy plays to the camera but also pushes another boy, a smaller one whose turn it was to occupy the space in front of the camera. He pushes him away in order to play a little bit longer or perform a presence somehow.

GD: It appears that some people were grateful to be filmed by you, at a moment when it seemed like they were forgotten by the rest of the world, such as the little girl that stands still in front of the camera and starts smiling.

PC: That is true sometimes, but at other moments, I recollect there was hostility as well. It is difficult to remember ten years later but I am sure that some people said, 'Can you put that camera away?'. There are bits that I did not include in the film, especially the ones showing these hostile responses. There was also a specific

etiquette to the manner in which relationships between them and myself were established. What is amazing to me is the way people stand still for the camera, it becomes almost like posing for a portrait, as you would do for a stills camera.

GD: Does it have special significance that those images are in colour unlike the rest of the film?

PC: Yes, I think it had to be. It proposes fantasy or a dreamlike-ness, set against the black and white of the rest of the film, which was shot much later. But it was colour video and it had to remain in colour. It needed to look like a domestic, home-video type of thing rather than a controlled aesthetic.

The floor is opened for comments and questions from the audience.

Q: Can you speak a little bit about the editing of the footage? The film is about half an hour long. How much footage did you have? Was it very difficult to decide what to leave in?

PC: Yes. It all had to be first translated before I could understand what material was potentially useful, so it was difficult actually. There is a film by Shirley Clarke, called *Portrait of Jason*, which is a 1967 black-and-white film where she interviews a really interesting subject over an evening, and the film just goes on and on and on, moving through a wide range of different emotions. As a spectator you sometimes wish it would finish, and at times it is completely engaging. I wanted to have elements of that, to exceed its expected length. We would keep coming back, in the second part, to try to define this tragic moment in somebody's life. At first I thought to weave Desanka's story through the film, but doing that, with all the other commentaries, would have undermined it. It became clear that I had to separate the film into two chapters, which is what I did: one on language and another on longing.

Q: Did the people you interviewed have any say on what went in and what did not? Did you discuss what they wanted to put in or leave out?

PC: No. The thing with interviews is that people usually have an emotional drive to fill in the gaps. At some point there may be that uncomfortable moment when they feel they have said too much and wish they could remove what they just said. Yet in this instance, that didn't happen. I interviewed other people as well, but we didn't use everybody in the end. And we were limited by how much stock of film we could buy. We could only buy a certain number of rolls, so we had to go by that, and we used most of our stock on Desanka. A reel is about eleven minutes, and most people got one reel. With Desanka we shot five or so because it was impossible to stop the moment. At the end of the film you hear me saying 'Is she finished? Has she said...?', which is actually a cruel moment. The impulse of production is to explore

the story, and it is a very selfish part of the brain that you want them to revisit the things they have just told.

Q: Do you think you would have got as honest a story from people if it were in a different language? Do you think that the use of Serbian allowed them to revisit that moment, bring a different element to it? By using Albanian do you think you would have got the official story?

PC: I think it would have been a lot straighter, actually, and one important element of the film would have fallen away. It would have become a conventional documentary asking them to speak in Albanian, that is, from a much more comfortable position. Part of the problematic that I wanted to explore was that by speaking in Serbian, they were forced to reveal a hidden part of themselves, to show that they still inhabit a system which is now disavowed, the currency or validity of which is now absolutely questioned. Because some of these figures had worked in the Yugoslav socialist system up until the start of the 1990s, they had to deal with this suspicion in how far they had detached themselves from that system. So I'm sure people said different things, speaking Serbian, because they had to negotiate this element of speaking in the former 'official' language. But, above all, what is important to realize is that if you ask such a problematic question you get very different reactions. Some people feel insulted even at the question. They were angry with me and felt like 'Who are you?!', and 'What are you doing here?!', and 'Why are you asking me this?!'. Therefore it was hard to predict what may come out of it, how the film would take shape or even acquire a certain poetry.

Q: Was it shown in Kosovo or Serbia, and if so, what were the reactions?

PC: It was shown in Prishtina, Kosovo's main city. It was shown at a film festival there but I couldn't go because I was shooting somewhere else at the time, which I know sounds very dilettantish. So I was quite perturbed and bothered by it because I wanted to be there. It's hard for me to say what the reactions were, but people wrote to me saying that a strange hush descended on the place as they were hearing people whom they had not expected to speak this language. There was also a prickly discomfort around it because of the grammar mistakes people made. For some interviewees, it was not a flattering portrait because of the lack of facility or fluency. So far it has not been shown in Belgrade. For that I would need to go back and make sure everybody is comfortable with showing it there.

Q: Have the participants seen it yet? How do they feel?

PC: Yes, everybody was sent a copy. I received good responses. Desanka's husband reacted with 'Why is she in it so much and not me?', and Linda had a long conversation with him about how we had edited it. Bukoshi, the former prime minister, was very complimentary about it. I think some people enjoyed that the film provoked them into thinking about this issue and that it was not such a straightforward confirmation of their identity. Part of why I was interested to meet

Ger for the conversation we are having now was that so much of his research deals with the fluidity of identity, even if the war cemented these categories and made them much more stable. I wanted to show that these ambiguous identities from the Yugoslav past were still there and were inhabiting different personal territories, that they were not something entirely separable or entirely defined. I wanted to show that there are different sub-sets of identities, which may be retrieved or suppressed at times. Within the general framework of the film, the relationship with Serbia and Yugoslavia is of utmost importance.

GD: Can we go back to one particular section of the film, which seems to be relevant in this respect? When I saw the part with journalist Dukagjin Gorani, I almost had a feeling that his forgetfulness was not completely spontaneous, that there was an element of performance, that he feigned forgetfulness as it were. It is one thing not to be able to find certain words, but it seems almost too good to be true not to be able to find the word 'memory'. I do not know whether you felt the same or not?

PC: I just thought he was amazing because he said what nobody else would. There was in fact such a taboo on speaking about these issues, and he did say the most extraordinary things, which I had expected nobody to voice. It is a beautiful moment when he looks for the word, utters it in English, and says, 'I cannot find the word for memory', and then he says *memorija* [which is not a word Serbs would normally use either]. Somehow it plays out the complete film in one sentence. If that is a performance, it adds an extra layer. He was making explicit that you have two completely segregated and linguistically separated communities, especially among the young who are not learning each other's language. English is indeed the language most people would use, also as a form of disguise.

Q: I have not seen the film yet and am looking forward to seeing it. My question is, are you interested in distribution or have you considered posting it online, on YouTube for instance?

PC: This is an interesting question, which people of your generation often ask when it comes to the availability of videos. This issue is salient with installations such as mine because the thing with video art is that it is not only about the content, it is also about the relation with the image itself, whether you are able to step away, how you encounter it, and how it captures you. Because of this I generally avoid showing things online and on YouTube, which is a corporate mechanism, and not nearly as democratic and radical as it appears to be.

Q: But John Ferrell has a series of full-length lectures on YouTube...

PC: I'm not saying that this should be the case for everyone or for all content. But in the case of films such as this it simply feels inappropriate. It would seem to me that there is something undignified and disrespectful about making these films with people and then posting them on YouTube.

Q: Do you think the Internet is too flippant a platform?

PC: It is not the correct one for me. What I find really important is the encounter with video, how to approach the image, also in terms of a spatial relationship. My ideal form is closer to cinema, the darkened space, the scale of the subject and the interviewee.

Q: How much control do you have when you exhibit your work, that is, the scale in which it is projected, the space between the viewer and the screen?

PC: With a video installation, you normally mark out a set of specifications. When you finish the edit you sit down and decide on how the presentation should be and how important those relationships are. So what is the colour of the wall, is it carpeted or not, is there a bench in the space which encourages people to sit down and watch the whole thing, what kind of speakers do you use, the sound levels, etc. So you literally choreograph a set of variables. That may change because spaces are different, but generally the equipment and the screen stay the same, they are marked out in advance.

Q: I came across the text of a talk you gave in Cork, and it occurred to me that I had not considered you as a portrait artist before. In that text you mention that photographs are pornographic, so how comfortable are you in being implicated in that, for instance in your relation to the refugees? Is the work you did there something you take on because you feel you have to, or is it something you have difficulty with?

PC: Both. Almost all new technologies find their first applications in the sex industry. The reason a call girl is called like that is that in nineteenth-century England, at the telephone exchanges, some women putting together calls would on occasion perform sex acts. It was a way of accessing sex or desire, and it was the same with the telegraph boys. You would send a telegram and you might, say, offer a tenner for a bit of 'how's your father?'. The Polaroid, the film camera, and the internet are all good examples of that. When I say to people 'I'm a film-maker', one of the first things they ask is 'Oh, is it blue?', thinking that I'm asking them to be in something dirty. That anxiety around film and film production is central to it; everyone understands it although it is often suppressed. The positions I try to develop in my films are not particularly idealistic or favourable in that respect, so they tackle issues around exploitation, or around the problematic relationship between film-maker and subject.

In 2002, I did a project in the Basque Country, where I was invited to do a show in San Sebastian. We had booked this suite where Bette Davis had given her last interview, in a really beautiful hotel, and we put an advert in the paper inviting people to come and have their portrait taken, also indicating that they would have to take some or all of their clothes off. Everyone said, 'Oh no, people are very shy around here and no one will come', but I said that the town is called Saint Sebastian so I am sure someone will turn up. They had to call a number to make an

appointment, and at some point we had to throw the phone away because people kept calling, it was just amazing. We invited all the media from Madrid, and we had people beating down the doors, news reporters and camera crews. We did not let them film the sessions, though. Instead we talked to them about the beauty of ordinariness and about imperfection as a source of beauty.

People could do whatever they wanted to. Take their socks off or play the saxophone, if that was what they wanted. There was this woman with a saxophone who obviously did not want to take her clothes off, so I said, 'Well okay, play the sax then'. She made the most awful noises, but then she said, 'I've not played it since I've had my baby, I've not been able to', and really, that was the important moment of the meeting for her. There was a man who was caring for his elderly bed-bound mother and he left her and came down and got up to all sorts of tricks. Some people brought champagne and got into the bathroom, others had sex. We did eighteen hours of appointments, and shot a lot of pictures.

At heart it was about revelation and the reason why it worked was political – because it was in the Basque country. The idea of a naked Basque body is something that fascinates the Spanish media and we exploited media fascination as a way of accessing and transmitting ideas about beauty and conflict. And part of the staging was not to arrive at an exhibition, on a wall, but to play along with the newspapers.

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