

In spite of the profoundly poetic impact of her works, Vënera Kastrati is engaged in a shrewd, demanding, selective battle of defense against everything that tries to silence the multiple expressions of the need for identity..The memories do not change; what changes is our way of seeing them, because even a simple souvenir does not act on the realities of the world if not through our gaze.

“...The object is no longer a stimulus to trigger a memory; it draws its origin from a memory. The work crystallizes a time and a space of firsthand experience; it springs directly from a memory, precisely as happens in literature written by diarists. All too often we tend to mistake this literary genre – also quite different from biography and autobiography – for an uncontrolled stream of consciousness. We think the words flow across the page in a direct impulse, simply to summon forth certain episodes. Instead, the diary is the result of a process of collage of materials found and conserved inside or outside of us, the outcome of erasures and reconstructions in which absence rules over the presence of the narrated facts. Through their formalization, that space and that time extend into events with which many people can identify, even if they have not experienced them directly. Chains of memory take form that bring alive the fleeting occurrences of everyday life. It is another way of existing and therefore of coexisting with others, of giving rise to that plural “us” that Jean-Luc Nancy posits as the foundation of the construction of subjectivity and community. And it is precisely through art that personal memory can reach the point of becoming collective memory. It scales the bastions of egotism and partial views, of revisionist thinking and the slippages of mere data vaunted as objective. To reach the top means gaining a wider view, aware that everything is not visible to the naked eye, but that together we can see much more.

The art of **Vënera Kastrati** seems to perfectly don this garb, which is simply one of the many guises in which contemporary artistic endeavor can present itself. Like any garment, it influences movement, making her proceed in an original way along her paths, protecting her from bad weather that might cause a detour to more customary shelters, those safe zones in which so much of the art of our time seems to seek refuge. Her works trigger the memory of those who observe them, precisely because they have their origin in her memories and in the stubborn desire to give them a concrete form. A way of working that repeats in non-repetition, because she is aware of the fact that memory proceeds by reiteration of that immaterial experience that allows it to always stay alive. A way of continuing to link facts and people in her head, to unite moments and interpretations of meaning. Her logic seems to be that of a closed circuit, but instead it is capable of creating new openings that help to extend a different vision of reality to those who observe it. To those who know how to activate their own mnemonic connections.

In her work memory is not just a fuse, a pretext – it is the vital fluid from which everything springs. And this has been true since her very first works, as is demonstrated by **I Heard Her Voice on the Telephone, Kosovo March 28th '99**... A video in which she is the protagonist, which introduces another one of the fundamental themes of her work with a synthetic, elementary sign: the home, evoked various times over the years. In her work it becomes a tender repository of memories, the

place of those uprooted origins that can be reassembled only with the help of other memories, voices, objects of affection.

In spite of the profoundly poetic impact of her works, Vënera Kastrati is engaged in a shrewd, demanding, selective battle of defense against everything that tries to silence the multiple expressions of the need for identity, for insertion in a culture, for a distance that is not always transmuted into a tendency towards openness. The memories do not change; what changes is our way of seeing them, because even a simple souvenir does not act on the realities of the world if not through our gaze. The attention we devote to it, our lingering over one of its characteristics, our way of overlooking other characteristics, without seeing them. Kastrati aptly underlines this way we have of interacting, through the silhouetted images in her work **7 Memories of You...** The summary of a profile, a projected shadow, has a lot in common with that essence that arrives from memory, because both are also the result of an absence. The image – again as explained by Jean-Luc Nancy – asserts the presence of an absence, just as memory feeds on absences in presence. It restores presence to an absent thing. Calling to mind means being other than an other that is evoked and erased at the same time. In any form of memory something takes the place of something else. It would be unthinkable to be faithful to reality through an accumulation of details. In fact, often a senseless gathering of details can derail us precisely into the opposite effect. We have to select the possible discourses, to choose just one, precisely as our gaze makes a selection in the case of facial recognition. Or precisely as Kastrati does, with the “reconstruction” of the home of her relatives at Peja in Kosovo, in her latest video: **Renovim**. That which the ruins of the house can no longer convey – its shape, its layout, the uses of its spaces – is re-formed in the words of cousins, and takes form in an architectural sketch that suggests what was, but even more what could be after a possible work of restoration. If the voices of the relatives give rise to a possible idea of the future based on a past, in the female voices that occasionally interrupt the reconstruction and can be heard when the contours of certain figures, including that of a nude pregnant woman in the foreground, appear on the screen we can sense a renewal of that separation that was the conclusion of the tragic events that disrupted the life of the artist’s family and of entire countries. Very gently, Kastrati intertwines two stories that only those who have no memory would be unable to “renew” in their complexity. A complexity the artist does not want to lose and also seeks in the project **Correspondence**, where once again she operates between the personal and the collective, on postcards in which only the sky of Kosovo remains visible. The sky as an element in which man does not have the power to intervene, but also as a place of profound nostalgia for a place.

The buildings are absent, suggested only by their contours, which viewers can fill in with the gaze, just as they can follow up on the phrases on the back of the postcards. With the spread of social networks postcards have lost their function, but they conserve the charm required to reconstruct a time, to keep the imagination turning in the construction of a world that does not coincide with ours. With their physical reality and their positioning for display on furniture or walls they are still reflections of the bonds of affection of the people who sent them, and were thinking of us when they did so. But looking at them again, over time, they also become the objects of a past, our past, of that private diary that tells our story. It is with this spirit that Kastrati has brought them into her work and re-presents them in those notebooks where the writing leaves lots of space for images. Once again there is a game of absence to reassert a figurative stratification of inner existence, as when the landscape becomes a form of the soul. In their apparent superficiality these notebooks are a work of excavation in that dual absence that characterizes the identity of those who have left their native country. Deprived in their own country, far from their own adoptive land, because before becoming an immigrant one is an emigrant. In the challenge of this dialectic, memory and its ongoing pursuit have a fundamental role; memory must be nurtured and cradled, just as one does with a child as it grows. So to show a **cradle**, though in adult size, means reasserting precisely this

viewpoint, for all, namely that of the fact that without memory we return to a monstrous state, but also that too much memory implies the risk of being imprisoned in the errors of the past. The subtle labour of Vénera Kastrati with her memories that become works of art speaks to us of the right balance to escape any personal or collective excess.”

*Text written by **Marco Bazzini** (curator, critic and historian of art), extracted from “Missing pictures” exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Kosovo, September 2016*