



Digital Memorialisation and Virtual Witnessing in ‘Galerija 11/07/95’ and the ‘War Childhood Museum’

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Abstract: This paper offers an examination of the uses of digital memorialisation in two multi-media museums located in Sarajevo, Bosnia, focusing on the ways in which technology is used to create presence, aura, and memorialisation, both on the public and private levels. The two museums of focus—The War Childhood Museum, and Galerija 11/07/95—engage with the past in tactile, testimonial, multimedia ways. In the case of the War Childhood Museum, objects from the war—donated by citizens who, as children, were in Sarajevo during the war and blockade—commingle with personal video testimonials and audio installations; in Galerija 11/07/95, focused on the massacre of that date in Srebrenica, Bosnia, photography, video, and multimedia installations immerse the viewer in the events of Srebrenica, bearing witness to them and to their aftermath.

Keywords: digital memorialisation, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, digital trauma, thing theory, aura, Benjamin

Walter Benjamin’s foundational text, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1969), is centrally concerned with the destruction of ‘aura’ that the reproducibility of images entails. In particular, Benjamin is thinking of the relatively new mechanical reproduction of visual representation made possible by film and photography. Marcel Proust shared similar concerns over photography and what he saw as its propensity to erase memory, predicting that in a world saturated by images people would remember not individuals but their likenesses. Now that we live in a world whose image-saturation and concomitant reproducibility surpasses anything Proust or Benjamin could have fathomed, and mechanical reproduction has given way to digital reproduction, it is fascinating to note the degree to which images and technology are increasingly relied upon to actually *create the possibility of memory*. Everything from one’s afterlife on social media to, technological

memorialisation in the funeral industry, is rightly critiqued by concerns over the diminishment of presence that such simulacra can and may entail, and yet the persistent desire to have the afterlives—of ourselves, and others—digitally curated and preserved is an important aspect of our present, digital lives. This paper seeks to address the connections between Benjamin's notion of aura, Giorgio Agamben's (1999) concept of witness, to the technological means of memorialisation that are prevalent on the contemporary landscape, with particular attention to national modes of memory and memorialisation. To this end, I will focus on two new museums established in Sarajevo, Bosnia, both of which are aimed at preserving and contextualising cultural and personal memory surrounding the violent events of the wars of the region between 1992-1995, and both of which deploy multimedia technological means toward these ends. Through readings of Benjamin and discussion of these two museums' methods and curating practices, I argue that multimedia technologies hold an important place within the scope of both public and personal memory and memorialisation, and that their ultimate end is not to disperse aura and presence but, in fact, to endeavor to recreate it. On the scale of public memorial, the presence of technology being deployed as a presencing mechanism is readily apparent. Indeed, some of the most technologically advanced museums of recent years are memorials. This is particularly so of two recent museums founded in Sarajevo, Bosnia, both endeavoring to commemorate and memorialise the events of 1992-1995 in ways that make careful use of multimedia technologies. Galerija 11/07/95 Srebrenica Memorial Museum, and Children's War Museum, as compelling, recent examples of the ways that technology is being used to protect and curate not just individual memory, but public, collective memory as well.

Galerija 11/07/95

The genocide of July 11, 1995 in the town of Srebrenica, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was the largest mass killing on European soil since World War II. Galerija 11/07/95, located in downtown Sarajevo, is a hybridised space that seeks to present art and documentary materials together. In this way, the permanent photography exhibition is combined with multimedia apparatuses—footage shot during the war, news casts, interactive maps tracing the ways in which the genocide was carried out, covered up, and its continual prosecution—in ways that underline the ongoing nature of the process. Entering the gallery space, one is confronted by hundreds of photographic portraits of victims of the killing. These faces stare out from the walls of the first room and surround the visitor.

Founded by Tarik Samarah, the photographer and documentarian whose work composes the gallery's exhibition space, 11/07/95 presents a cohesive and yet fragmented—and fragmenting—picture of the events the gallery is focused on describing. This fragmentariness is intentional, and even inevitable. As the museum's own literature describe the space's form as one intended to 'offer an insight into fragments of the still unresolved trauma of Srebrenica' (Galerija 11/07/95, n.d.).

Figure 1. Permanent Exhibition – ‘Srebrenica’. This portion of the exhibition features photographs by Tarik Samarah related to the exhumation process and to survivors awaiting identification of family members.



Source: Galerija 11/07/95 Srebrenica Memorial Museum

This unresolvedness has a dual meaning, first to underscore the horrific nature of the events themselves and, second, due to the still-evolving search for justice in connection with the events. Since ‘what happened there was so horrific, so monstrous, that every description of the events fails their essence and eliminates their horror’ (Galerija 11/07/95, n.d.), it is sensible that the exhibition is largely a photographic one – though these confront rather than assure the viewer. As Samarah (n.d.) writes,

The photographs remove any mediator between the observer and the observed, showing the emptied landscape of reality in Srebrenica. The black-and-white technique expresses the boundary between life and death – the reduction of colors brings us into the world of grey, where all norms of humanity cease to exist. That very insight into liminality is fragmentary, and it does not permit the creation of a single, well-rounded narrative.

This activity of the fractured narrative forces the viewer to attempt to construct meaning, ultimately placing him/herself in the position of witness. As Samarah (n.d.) continues, ‘images of the Srebrenica fields of death do not allow an observer to be a passive consumer of the story; instead, they produce a witness’.

Figure 2. Permanent Exhibition – ‘Srebrenica’. In the foreground is visible a portion of the 'Portraits of Victims' section of the museum that leads into Tarik Samarah’s photography exhibition.



Source: Galerija 11/07/95 Srebrenica Memorial Museum

It is this production of witness that is one of the key features of the museums multimedia approach, since it combines documentary film, interactive maps, photography, and film, all of which fracture together and around the unfolding and chaotic story of Srebrenica. Easy answers are avoided, and the viewer is left with a sense of standing among the ruins, ‘since the photographs depict the aftermath of traumatic events, and not the event itself’ (Galerija 11/07/95 n.d.) making ‘true understanding of the horrors impossible, since they remain beyond the boundaries of everything conceived by the human mind; a road towards understanding trauma implies collecting the scattered pieces of reality’. This language of witness and testimony, Giorgio Agamben writes in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, is always about this activity between the said and the unsaid:

Testimony is a potentiality that becomes actual through an impotentiality of speech; it is, moreover, an impossibility that gives itself existence through a possibility of speaking. These two movements cannot be identified with either a subject of with a consciousness; yet they cannot be divided into two incommunicable substances. Their inseparable intimacy is testimony (1999: 145-6).

Figure 3. Permanent Exhibition – ‘Srebrenica’. A second view of the central room featuring photographs by Tarik Samarah of the long aftermath and identification process in Srebrenica.



Source: Galerija 11/07/95 Srebrenica Memorial Museum

Figure 4. Permanent Exhibition – ‘Srebrenica’. Part of the exhibition’s multi-media display, a continuous projection of ‘Srebrenica Memorial Film’, directed by Leslie Wood Head.



Source: Galerija 11/07/95 Srebrenica Memorial Museum

Other features of the museum emphasise its work of instantiating the viewer in the position of witness, including ‘The Wall of Death’, a sixteen-meter-long wall contains the names and ages of the 8372 people killed in Srebrenica; the ‘Portraits of victims’ in the first room, depicting 640 personal photos of the deceased; the ‘Mapping genocide’ project, which features an interactive computer touch-screen interface consisting of maps, timelines, news and documentary footage that provides exacting details of the events leading up to, and following from, the genocide in Srebrenica; the ‘Genocide Film Library’, sponsored by the Cinema for Peace foundation, that provides video witness testimony and oral histories of Srebrenica survivors; and the ‘Srebrenica Memorial Film’, directed by Leslie Wood Head, a documentary featuring first-hand witness testimony and rare footage of the immediate history leading up to the final hours of the genocide.

This fragmented, immersive view results in a larger completion, one that both personalises and seeks to preserve the genocide of Srebrenica, calling upon the visitor to actively take up the position of witness. This witness is enacted by the multimedia, technological installations, since they produce an immersive experience form which the viewer cannot easily look away. This idea is recalled by the very notion of witness itself—and the duty of witness—which Agamben unpacks in *Remnants of Auschwitz*:

The witness usually testifies in the name of justice and truth and as such his or her speech draws consistency and fullness. Yet here the value of testimony lies in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to ... the ‘true’ witnesses, the ‘complete witnesses,’ are those...who ‘touched bottom: the survivors speak in their stead, by proxy...they bear witness to a missing testimony (1999: 34).

Figure 5. Emblem of the War Childhood Museum website



Source: War Childhood Museum

War Childhood Museum

This project began online, through a call via social media asking Sarajevans who were in the war as children to donate objects and share their stories. Social media was a very important part of this, as the war in Bosnia resulted in a scattered population, social media being an especially efficient way of reaching a displaced population. As objects were collected and catalogued, stories of them were recorded and shared, and video testimonials and oral histories were collected as well. Visiting the museum involves walking from one object to the next, each kept on a podium, and listening to the narrated history of that object via headphones connected to an iPad the museum lends to visitors. The history of objects becomes a remarkably visceral way to tell the story of the war, focusing in particular on the experiences of children during war time. Such oral history projects are not without precedence. In his review of multiple on-line virtual memorial projects, Ed Martini discusses a remarkably similar project, focusing on the preservative function of individual histories. As Martini writes, ‘including [individuated] stories ... puts a very human face on the object of the war’ (2000: 988).

In addition to the functions of exhibition and individualising the war experience, the War Childhood Museum serves a very important curatorial and pedagogical function within the region and beyond. As Jasminko Halilović (2015), Initiator and Director of the War Childhood Museum, notes:

Offering a unique platform for communication and sharing, WCM tackles trauma on an individual level, ultimately contributing to better understanding among the whole of society. Its first permanent exhibition opened in January 2017, seven years after the project’s inception in Sarajevo ... Its quick growth garnered a lot of attention and facilitated collaboration between WCM and some of the world’s leading universities. WCM has had the privilege of presenting at the largest peace-building, youth, and museum conferences.

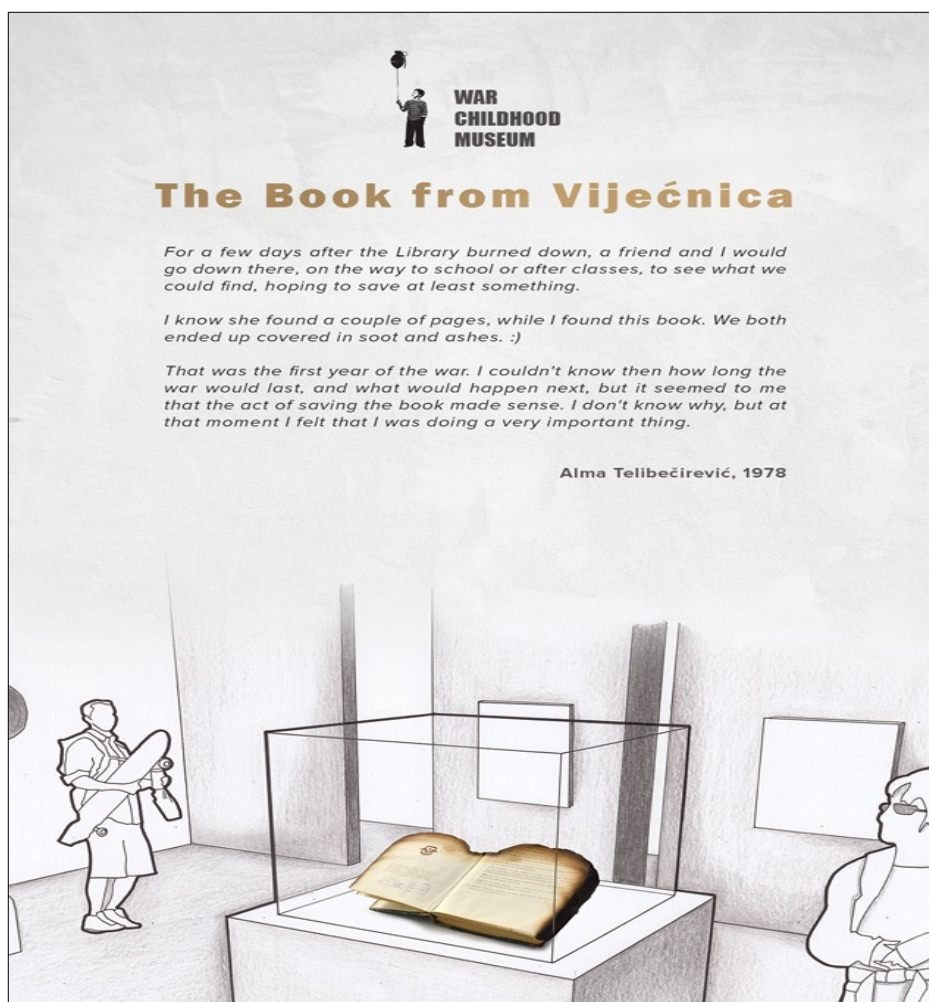
Accounting for the actual experience of growing up in war time, a topic Halilović notes is underresearched, positions WCM to fulfill these overlapping pedagogical, preservative, and curatorial aims. As Halilović (2015) writes, ‘The vision of the War Childhood Museum is to help individuals overcome past traumatic experiences and prevent traumatising of others, and at the same time advance mutual understanding at the collective level in order to enhance personal and social development’.

In memorials, the central subject of the museum is an absence, and technological means—photography, video, multimedia, virtual and augmented realities—are often called upon not to dispel aura but to make it accessible. Digital reproduction of this sort is called upon to instill public memory within these institutions, bringing the lost to presence and creating aura where it would otherwise be impossible to do so. What Benjamin means by aura is both a complex and straightforward idea. At its essence, aura can be likened to other near-synonyms—such as presence, authenticity, singularity—but it also extends beyond these into concepts such as distance, time, change, and intractability.

As much as Benjamin saw aura as a disappearing quality in his historical moment, we might begin contemporising the concept by saying that we know aura now almost entirely as

what has been liquidated from the objects around us. These objects can be works of art, musical performances, plays, and the like, but they can also be scenes from the natural world—landscapes, rivers, and so on—and may presumably be extended to individuals, buildings, and even events. Anything subject to reproduction has at its center an aura that is threatened, and all reproduction, says Benjamin, depletes the aura of the original. It's singularity, authenticity, presence—its *haecceity*.

Figure 6. An image from the War Childhood Museum depicting the meeting of text and artifact in the museum, in this case a book 'preserved' from the catastrophic burning of the Sarajevo Library Vijećnica during the war.



Source: War Childhood Museum

The authenticity of a thing is 'the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced' (1968: 221). Benjamin writes. 'What is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object ... Reproducing the Mona Lisa to infinity, countless film images of the Empire State Building, postcards of Mt. Fuji all siphon away the

singularity of the represented object, bringing it too easily and too repeatedly toward the receiver' (1968: 221).

The singularity of the single thing is no longer single or signaled—one has seen it many times before, even though one has never seen *it* at all. Something has been lost. As Benjamin sees it, aura is that which has been lost. 'One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art' (1968: 223). Benjamin is making an important point here, and even though his concerns may strike the contemporary reader as either patrician or aristocratic, what is really at stake is not so much the promiscuity of viewing but in fact the way that works of art *will come to be produced* once the sacral view of aura has been depleted completely by such viewing.

Interestingly, in the War Childhood Museum, objects are actually present – recovered and instantiated as containers for personal narrative and public memory. This actual presence is underlined by the technological means—recording narrations of the object's significance, video testimonies that can be viewed by museum visitors—but the objects themselves actual stand together with these multimedia displays. This creates a unity between object and story, drawing the artefact near, but giving voice to its distant function. This close-distance is reminiscent of the aura Benjamin attributes to cave paintings and original works of art, since the object is (once its story is revealed) one-of-one. As Halilović (2015) notes,

The crucial part of the War Childhood Museum represents a collection of personal belongings ... The survivors have been not only emotionally attached to these objects, but also very keen on sharing their memorabilia with other people. However, these objects do not express much if standing on their own. Their importance is exactly in the meaning they have for their owner. Therefore, every item that will be displayed in the Museum or as part of our guest exhibitions will be accompanied by a personal story of its owner. The War Childhood Museum is focused on the survivors and their life-stories of war experience.

In this way, both the memorial to Srebrenica and to the siege of Sarajevo bring multimedia approaches to the concept of public and personal memory, placing the viewer in the position of active participation and witness.

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