


THE CONCEPTUAL USE OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE ARTWORK OF ANTUN MARAČIĆ

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Based on selected works, the article analyzes the conceptual use of photography in the work of multimedia artist Antun Maračić, from his first use of analog black-and-white photography in the mid-seventies to a number of photography series from his “Dubrovnik period” that lasted from 2000 to 2012. While the artist uses photography as a necessary tool for recording the ideas of his work with strong existential connotations during the mid-seventies, the series of war photographs published in *Emptied Frames / Vanished Contents (1991 – 1994)* uses photographs in a self-sufficient and symbolic manner, and the conceptual fabric is woven into the scene itself. The conceptual framework of Maračić’s photography series from 2000 onwards is mainly centered around following motifs over a long period of time in the liminal space between life and art and the subsequent introduction of photographs into the context of art.

Keywords: *Antun Maračić, photography, conceptual art, emptied frames, vanishing contents, Lokrum, Dubrovnik*

EARLY WORK – PHOTOGRAPHY AS A NECESSARY TOOL

Maračić, with his distinctive personality and being an artist, curator and art critic at the same time, has been an important protagonist of the Zagreb art scene since the 1970s; from 1978 to 1980 he was a member of the Working Community of Artists Podroom, in 1991 he briefly acted as the manager of Gallery SC, from 1981 to 1991 and from 1994 to 2000 he was an active contributor to the Extended Media Gallery, from 1992 to 1997 he managed the Zvonimir Gallery where, for example, he staged the now iconic exhibition of Ivan Kožarić in 1993 when he organized the transfer of the

artist's entire studio to the exhibition space.¹ From 1998 to 2000, he ran the Extended Media Gallery in Zagreb, and Maračić's curatorial practice was given its long-term institutional framework in the new millennium as the artist moved to Dubrovnik and managed the Dubrovnik Museum of Modern Art for twelve years,² followed by being in charge at the Forum Gallery in Zagreb from 2013 to 2017. While working as a curator, Maračić has also continuously nurtured his artistic expression and used photography since his first art works, and since the 1990s it has become his most important medium of expression.

Antun Maračić's early works can be related to the New Art Practice manifestations held in the area of the former Yugoslavia from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, which included procedural and conceptual art, urban intervention, analytical painting and more (Šuvaković 2005; Vukmir 1998). His work from the mid-seventies is characterized by a high degree of processuality, and although the photographic medium is the main topic of this article, it should certainly be noted that, as an academy-trained painter, while working with photography, Maračić also engaged in analytical, processual painting, where the artist focused on exploring the painting medium itself and the process of creating paintings. His films from that period also feature emphasized processuality, for example, the short film shot from 1977 to 1979, covering four seasons with its train journey from Novska to Banova Jaruga (Maračić 2020; Majača 2004).

Maračić's works from the 1970s use photography to record action in a certain period of time. For instance, in the *Stol* [Table] series from 1979, which consists of 6 analog photographs (18 x 13 cm), the artist "after getting up, records the constellation of objects left over on the table from the previous day" (Maračić 2020:36). The medium of photography is a necessary tool to record the situation, but it could also be documented by a good drawing or a camera. Photography is used to record the process, to point out the immersion in the time continuum, and the composition itself and other artistic elements of photographs are less important. In the use of photography, the artist does not burden himself with technique and knowledge of the medium, much like a large number of conceptual artists active on the world scene since the sixties (Križić Roban 2010:123). "Ultimately, photography is a matter of ideas, not technique. I would not call

¹ Ivan Kožarić's studio was exhibited in 2002 at Documenta 11 in Kassel, and in 2007 the City of Zagreb bought the entire studio with more than 6,000 exhibits and entrusted it to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb for permanent preservation.

² During this twelve-year period, Antun Maračić promoted modern and contemporary art from Dubrovnik/Croatia, but also organized a number of very important international exhibitions in the field of both modern (exhibitions by Pablo Picasso, Albert Giacometti) and contemporary art (Brightness – exhibition from the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, Jan Fabre's exhibition *Umbraculum* for Dubrovnik...).

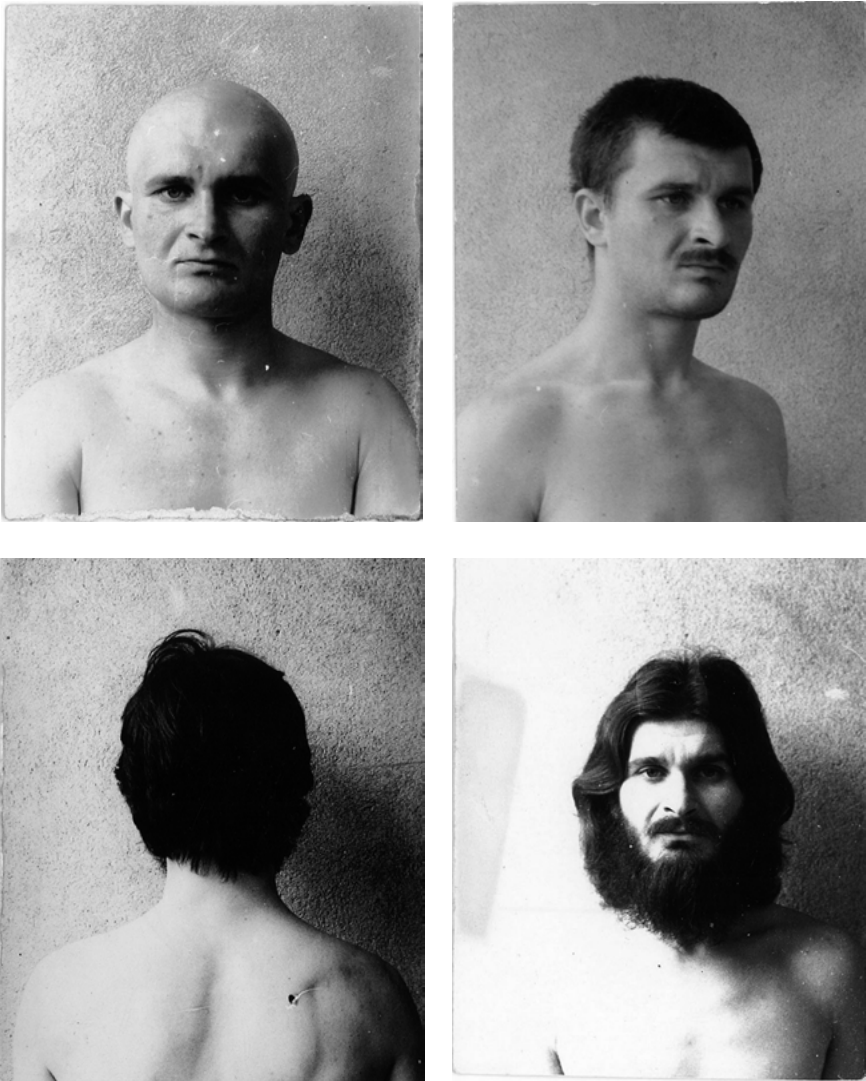


Figure 1 – 4: May 1977 – November 1979,
(9 analog photographs)

myself a photographer.” (Gessner 2011:133). An even more obvious example of the position of photography is *Demonstracija odnosa subjekt-objekt* [Demonstrating the Subject-Object Relationship] from 1979 (9 analog photographs, 18 x 13 cm) where he follows different points of view in relation to a point on a mirror whose position changes, a work which, according to the author, is “an expression of the need to clearly record the meeting of the eye and the outside world, a fascination with the awareness that visual contact carries a moment of new experience and spiritual enrichment.” (Maračić

2020:54). An even more obvious use of photography in following a certain process can be found in a photo sequence of 9 analog photographs taken from May 1977 to November 1979, in which the author takes a series of self-portraits showing his hair and beard growing from completely shaved to overgrown (figure 1, 2, 3, 4). It should be noted that the emphasized notion of “duration in time” became the key conceptual guideline in Maračić’s great exhibition “Na duge staze” [In the Long Run] (curated by Evelina Turković), held almost forty years later at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka in 2017, which included the mentioned earlier works, as the author informs us in the introductory text, because they “show the persistence of the same motifs and ideas realized over time, each time in different manifestations and thematic shifts.” (Maračić 2020:13). The author, who makes the interpretation of his work much easier with his critic alter ego, points to his own obsessive theme of “existing in time,” whether it is manifested by hair growth or the physical movement of objects on the table, like in his early works, or by systematically following selected motifs over long periods of time, like his later photography series. The focus of this article is to observe the author’s change in attitude towards the medium of photography from his early works onwards, which is, I believe, significantly affected by him taking war photographs from 1991 to 1994.

EMPTIED FRAMES / VANISHED CONTENTS (1991 – 1994) – ICONIC WAR PHOTOGRAPHS

Several photography series by Antun Maračić from 1991 to 1994 (*Rat-Art* [War-Art], October 1991 – February 1992, *No-Grad i njegov subrealizam* [No-Town and its Sub-realism], Nova Gradiška, December 1991, *Svečana prisega* [Solemn oath], Cernik, February 1992, *Ubiti mrtvog* [To Kill a Dead Person], Nova Gradiška, August 1992, *Kalahari*, Dubrovnik, Komolac, April 1993, *Dubrovačke klupe* [Dubrovnik Benches], Dubrovnik, April 1993, *Ispražnjeni okviri / Iščezli sadržaji* [Emptied Frames / Vanished Contents], 1991 – 1994), published in their entirety in the publication *Emptied Frames / Vanished Contents 1991 – 1994*, are characteristic of Maračić’s work and a strong symbol of the devastation that occurred during the Croatian Homeland War (Maračić 1996).

All the authors writing about certain series emphasize the terms “absence” and “emptiness,” for example, Zvonko Maković’s foreword of the mentioned book states that the artist “did not exhaust himself trying to literally present what was reported by the news agencies. His ‘comprehensive presentation’ was definitely noticeable, and it could be most precisely described with two words with apparently similar meanings:

Absence and Emptiness." (Maković 1996:8).

Sandra Križić Roban writes that "processuality as a permanent artistic strategy employed by Antun Maračić and the absence of narrative content are characteristic of an authorial process in which not emptiness, but absence is recorded. It is precisely in the absence that the artist recognised the topic which allowed him to express his personal doubts in different periods of his life." (Križić Roban 2007:37, 2009:25).

In a comprehensive article about Maračić's work, Antonia Majača concludes that "Absence and Emptiness are undoubtedly the cornerstone of his artwork and his indisputable ontological source as well," and Ivana Mance, in the foreword of the artist's exhibition from 2009, stated that Maračić "opens a dimension of absence in the field of the visible, a place for that which is missing or does not exist." (Majača 2004:6; Mance 2009:11).

All of the mentioned authors basically agree that the field of what is visible in his war photographs, in which the harrowing series *No-Town and its Sub-realism takes center stage*, recorded in December 1991 after a fierce artillery attack on his hometown, Nova Gradiška, functions at a symbolic and cerebral level (figure 5, 6, 7). Foggy images of a deserted, lifeless city, a public clock standing askew representing defeat of time itself, obituaries testifying to death as the cancelation of life, paradoxically, these are the only traces of man in the terrifying apocalyptic environment. "Their light and their number is shocking. What aggression and liveliness of death! And for whom are they meant in this wasteland?!" (Maračić 1996:39).

Everything presented functions as a universal symbol, as the embodiment of a concept – which in this case came about spontaneously, without premeditation, with a keen perception and anxiety of the artist himself, who, while shooting, asks "how decent it is to photograph death itself." (Maračić 1996:39).





Figure 5 – 7: *No-Town and its Sub-realism, Nova Gradiška, December 1991, (analog photographs)*

The artist's existential anxiety and close encounter with death are key to the more pronounced idea of decay and nothingness in his later war series. Observing the cause-and-effect relationship between his wartime photographs, published in the mentioned collection *Emptied Frames / Vanished Contents 1991 – 1994*, the artist clearly indicates the difference between photographs with the same motifs taken before and after. The *War-Art* series from 1991 shows wartime Zagreb and the consequences of the preliminary actions taken by citizens to protect against attacks – the lattices of adhesive tapes on glass surfaces and the volumes of protective sandbags – photographs which, depending on the observer, in their series of various geometric configurations, evoke a series of peacetime connotations, from those from the world of art (geometric

abstraction, minimalism, *arte povera*) to winsome and humorous “humanizations” of facades and cars. His later photographs of the same motifs capture the decay and rotting of the protective sandbags, once plump and bulging, reduced to limp and dirty, deteriorating volumes. The same configuration observed by the eye of the author only a few months later would become, as the artist himself called it, “the Croatian picture of Dorian Gray.” (Maračić 1996:30). The horrors had played out, and experience replaced the vague anticipation of the unknown.

The artist’s series *Emptied Frames / Vanished Contents* (1991 – 1994) best manifests the concepts of “absence” and “emptiness” – the fundamental categories of his practice, noticed and inaugurated into critical discourse in the artist’s own texts and recognized by critics. Maračić photographed signs emptied of their content, i.e. “non-signs” – wooden or metal frames placed on the facades of buildings in the center of Zagreb that used to advertise some service (figure 8, 9). Although the intense observation of voids in the fabric of the city is deeply connected to his personal wartime experience of the attack on Nova Gradiška and memories of the desolation of the city and its manifestations – empty display boards for cinema posters, their contents lost, or missing photos of the deceased in the cemetery – in the introductory text of this series, the author also refers to a number of early actions and performances that originated from “absence” and “emptiness” as their fundamental starting points (*Predstava* [Play], 1984.; *L’art en passant*, 1986.; *Ambijent* [Ambient], 1991.) Thus, by taking photographs of the emptiness left behind after removing the signs (“...their anonymous emptiness expanded to a symbol, became a universal characteristic which marked the time and environment of my experience, radiating a convincing, strong melancholy...” (Maračić 1996:124)), to which he affixes a plaque with his name and the title of the work, evoking a museum association, and moving them into the context of art, Maračić creates a work that functions on two levels. It contains action done by the author – walking around the city, noticing and appropriating – taking over and placing subjects in the context of art and the consequent confrontation of passers-by with his intervention, i.e. the detection of emptiness. Likewise, the work functions with the same intensity in a different, gallery context where the author increases the degree of, as he likes to say, “promotion into art” – photographs of emptiness, along with the plaques, are framed with the title of the series, as well as their precise location in the city. Here, photography is not only a necessary means to make the action visible in space, and although it is only one of the components of the work, it does not remain at the level of photo documentation, but is deeply imbued with conceptual meaning. The artist draws parallels with the reality of war and the resulting devastation, but also explores the fabric of non-appearance itself, photographs the “idea itself,” the sum of different possibilities that emptiness can generate.



Figure 8: *Emptied Frames / Vanished Contents 1991 – 1994*,
Hatzova 12, Zagreb, 1994,
(analog photographs, wooden picture frames, plastic plates)

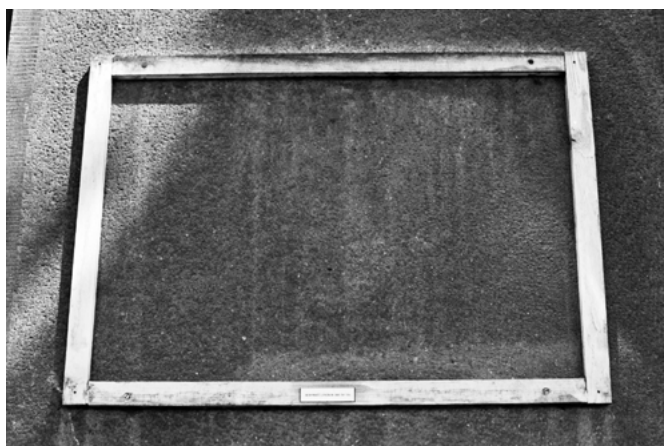


Figure 9: *Emptied Frames / Vanished Contents 1991 – 1994*,
Trg Hrvatskih velikana 2, Zagreb, 1994,
(analog photographs, wooden picture frames, plastic plates)

More than twenty years later, in 2017, Maračić again began to intensively notice voids and “non-signs” on Zagreb’s facades. He repeated the same action and changed the title of the work, which became *Emptied Frames / Vanished Contents 1991 – 2017*. The parallels with the devastation of war is no longer there, but the work evokes unfortunate peacetime processes – emigration, the disappearance of factories and workplaces, again confronting us with the poetics of emptiness and absence, which, regardless of the

proximity of nothingness, as the author himself says, “opens up spaces to be filled anew.”

In Dubrovnik in 1993, the artist took melancholic and tragic photographs that evoke the trauma of war. At Porporela, a special location with a view of the sea, the horizon and the island of Lokrum, perfect for getting away from the hustle and bustle to enjoy moments of collecting your thoughts, solitude, immersion in nature, the author takes a sequence of four photographs of Dubrovnik’s benches showing “the stages of their destruction” – from a bench which can still be used to sit down, to a non-functional, sad remnant (figure 10, 11, 12, 13). This photo sequence with a conceptual basis can be deceiving and thus, without careful observation, it may seem that the destruction is happening successively, and it also has a double effect with the spaces of its emptiness – it is imprinted with the war trauma of the author himself and the universal idea of nothingness. Regardless of whether the destruction was caused by Dubrovnik’s aggressor accidentally hitting it or by deliberate targeting, the anthropomorphized remains of the benches turn into a powerful symbol of crimes against humanity. In addition to the benches on Porporela, the author took photographs of the damaged benches of the Dubrovnik cinema “Jadran,” underscoring their





Figure 10 – 13: *Benches on Porporela (Dubrovnik Benches)*,
 Dubrovnik, April 1993, (analog photographs)

dysfunction and abandonment, evoking the lost context of the once vibrant city, and the photograph showing the wall of the Dubrovnik summer cinema “Slavica” full of holes irresistibly evokes one of the photographs from the Nova Gradiška series *No-Town and its Sub-realism*, with the whiteness of the building’s damaged large facade taking up almost two-thirds of the photograph. The experience of the war burdened the artist’s gaze and further sharpened his perception.

Unlike his earlier works, where it was a necessary tool for recording the idea of work that takes place outside the frames of the photograph, photography became truly self-sufficient and strongly symbolic in his series of war photographs. As the symbolic quality of his work grew, so did the visual quality, for example, with the *Klupe na Porporeli* [Benches at Porporela], the idea of “degrees of destruction” would not be as visible without careful framing, just as the creation of the sequence would be unimaginable without conceptual preliminary work generated by the specific perception of the author himself.

PHOTOGRAPHY SERIES FROM MARAČIĆ'S "DUBROVNIK PERIOD," 2000 – 2012 – THE BODY OF TIME AND RECORDS OF SOLITUDE

The "Dubrovnik period" of Antun Maračić is the most prolific period as far as the author's use of the medium of photography is concerned. He created numerous series over a long period of time, and all of the series come from the liminal areas between life and art – for example, *Lokrum*, the key series from the "Dubrovnik period," began when the author started his work as the director of the Dubrovnik Museum of Modern Art – by opening the window of the office which set the frame and became the stage for a natural spectacle around the unchanging motif of an island (figure 14, 15). Recording the change of light phenomena affecting the same motif is not a new occurrence in the visual arts and this practice started with the Impressionists, as noted by Evelina Turković in the introductory study of Maračić's book with photographs of Lokrum taken from December 2000 to April 2004 (Turković 2004:5), but it also logically follows the author's procedural artistic practice. Each image is accompanied by carefully described weather conditions, which, in addition to providing a practical way to distinguish between individual photos, becomes an additional testimony of a moment in time, proof of the unique and unrepeatable nature of the scene – an elaborate portrait of a moment in time that forms the fluid body of the work. Descriptions of individual scenes represent the impressions of a visual artist bordering on poetry, for example, "grey-blue sky and sea. To the left, a strip of pink along the horizon, to the right, more light in delicate baroque clouds" (Maračić 2004:25), and the simple concept of repeating the frame and showing endless variations of the scene make this series extremely meditative



Figure 14: 2.5. 2001., 19:25; 8/30,
from the *Lokrum* series 2000 – 2013, (analog photograph)



Figure 15: 29.10. 2001., 9:20; 22/125-250,
from the *Lokrum* series 2000 – 2013, (analog photograph)

and open to the most diverse personal inputs of various observers. Time, as well as weather, as Maračić notes, “is the actual theme of the work,” (Maračić 2020:80), and it is also multiplied by the different personal associations and meditations of observers. The author took photographs of the island throughout his time in Dubrovnik, so the *Lokrum* series, in addition to becoming a portrait of time itself, also became a constant and a measure of the artist’s “being in time.” Maračić’s Dubrovnik period also led to a number of other photography series that take into account the element of time, and comparing *Promatrači mora* [Observers of the Sea] (2006 – 2009) to the *Lokrum* series is perhaps the most logical choice. The series shows people seated on a bench above the Banje beach with a view of the sea and Lokrum, a bench that the artist passes on his way to work or home (figure 16). The artist did not take a photograph of them each day, but only when, as he says, he recognized that they are contemplating the scene by their body language (although they always have their backs turned). “The backs of their heads and the calmness of their bodies seen from behind revealed to me that I am witnessing the sea observers being immersed in the landscape as a result of a moving decision to take a break from the tiresome daily rhythm, to renew themselves.” (Maračić 2020:156). This is perhaps the author’s sensation of a kind of expansion of time, the lack of which hampers us in our everyday lives. Recognizing small departures from the ordinary, Maračić records man giving in to the landscape, being permeated by it, devoid of any irony or deconstruction of the scene, which the artist carries out, for example, in the series *Parazitiranje na prizorima sreće* [Parasitism on the Scenes of Happiness] (2007–2012) in a conceptual manner, demystifying the creative process. The series includes a two-faceted story – recording the act of photography done by



Figure 16: From the *Observers of the sea* series, 2006 – 2009,
(digital photograph)

professional wedding photographers and a prepared choreography performed by the newlyweds themselves. The artist is a fascinated observer, but he also deconstructs the illusion which the photo session tries to create in directed scenes and which aims to freeze a smile, a kiss, youth. He shoots the unusual poses of professional photographers, highlights the imperfections of newlyweds and their guests, bizarre combinations of natural surroundings (for instance, a beach) with florid clothing, notices everything that should actually not be noticed. Aside from creating scenes of life imbued with plenty of humor, in a certain subtext of the series he also touches on the failing modernity of this once functional, historical city, which is now used as a charming backdrop for constructing scenes of happiness.

The photo series *Dubrovački pult* [Dubrovnik Reception Desk] (2007–2012) follows a round desk in the lobby of the Dubrovnik winter cinema from the moment the author noticed its incongruous exterior to the moment it disappears (figure 17, 18). The transformations of the reception desk covered in advertisements or almost camouflaged for various occasions are only weak attempts to obscure the fact that this clumsy, lonely object simply does not fit in at its location. In this sense, a particular photograph is notable, showing the reception desk in contrast to the glitz of Stradun, where we peek into the interior of the object, further underlining its decay. The *Dubrovnik Reception Desk* series seems to summarize all the elements of Maračić's poetics. Its humor and irony elements are similar to the series *Parasitism on the Scenes of Happiness* – we are amused by the metamorphoses of the strange object and looking at the social life of the city from a completely twisted perspective. On the other hand,



Figure 17 – 18: From the *Dubrovnik Reception Desk* series, 2007 – 2012,
(digital photograph)

the photo of the empty lobby of the Dubrovnik winter cinema, taken at the moment when the author noticed the reception desk disappeared, is a work that deals with the concepts of vanishing and absence, spiritually close to the author's series *Emptied Frames / Vanishing Contents*. The accentuated awkwardness of the object, which Tomislav Pavelić equates with humaneness in his review of the series ("Paradoxically, by depicting awkwardness, Maračić shows humaneness" (Pavelić 2013:81)) evokes associations of the unsightly, anthropomorphized houses that the artist photographed in Virje as part of the *Rurbane nezgrapnosti* [Rurban Awkwardnesses] series, which is entirely based on noticing the marginal, irrelevant and unremarkable. Finally, by focusing on the placement of the reception desk inside the large empty lobby, the artist

also makes the space of solitude that he projects into the photograph – the solitude of the reception desk, and indirectly his own – feel tangible. Sandra Križić Roban pointed out that photographing an island in the Lokrum series also means the author confronts his own loneliness with the loneliness of the island, and this is perhaps the deepest connection between these two seemingly completely divergent series, the visually appealing Lokrum and the unsightly Dubrovnik reception desk (Križić Roban 2010:113).

Almost all of the Dubrovnik series give the impression that they were not made with premeditation, as if the simple concept of the series was imposed by itself through the artist's contact with space, and in later photography series, with people. The author himself offers an explanation, as he claims that "only with time, since these are obsessive motives to which he constantly returned, he promoted the accumulated photographs into art." (Maračić 2020:11).

CONCLUSION

During his long artistic practice, Antun Maračić has intensively engaged in photography, and even though a conceptual framework is always present in various forms, it is manifested in different ways through various creative periods. During the 1970s, the medium of photography is no more than a mere tool in the service of ideas, a necessity that allows documenting an action or performance, a wider context that takes place outside the frame of the photograph. Photography is used to record the process, and the composition itself and other artistic elements of photographs are not as important. The series of war photographs published in *Emptied Frames / Vanished Contents 1991 – 1994* uses photography in a highly symbolic manner, and the conceptual fabric is woven into the scene itself. Traumatic war experiences sharpened the author's perception, and the quality of artistic elements increased. In some series, such as the *Dubrovnik Benches*, the clarity of the composition is necessary to properly recognize how the artist plays with the categories of destruction and nothingness. Looking at Maračić's photographs from the Dubrovnik period, especially the *Lokrum* series, which is a visual spectacle, we can almost believe that he had softened his conceptual heritage and replaced it with enjoyment in choosing the frame, light, moment, and that he gives in to a degree of sentimentality not present in his earlier photography. However, the same issue of "being in time" and questioning the legitimacy of art and his own role in it, found in Maračić's early works, is also found in the subtext of the creation of almost all photography series from his Dubrovnik period. It seems as though the author's hesitancy in "promoting" them into art intensifies as the images

become more intimate, and their long-term existence in the liminal space between life and art is a more muted, sublimated form of the conceptual as the main idea of Antun Maračić's artistic and photography practice.

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Konceptualna upotreba fotografije u umjetničkom radu Antuna Maračića

Rozana Vojvoda

U članku se, na temelju odabranih radova, analizira konceptualna upotreba fotografije u radu multimedijalnoga umjetnika Antuna Maračića od prvih korištenja analogne crno-bijele fotografije sredinom sedamdesetih godina do niza fotografskih serija rađenih u "dubrovačkom razdoblju" od 2000. do 2012. godine. Dok umjetnik u radovima iz sredine sedamdesetih godina fotografiju upotrebljava kao nužni alat u službi bilježenja idejnoga tijela rada sa snažnim egzistencijalnim konotacijama, već u seriji ratnih fotografija objavljenih u publikaciji *Ispražnjeni okviri / Iščezli sadržaji (1991 – 1994)*, fotografije postaju samodostatne i simbolične, a konceptualna potka utkana je u sam prizor. U Maračićevim fotografskim serijama od 2000. godine nadalje konceptualni okvir serija uglavnom je određen praćenjem motiva u dugom vremenskom trajanju u rubnom području između života i umjetnosti i naknadnim uvođenjem fotografija u kontekst umjetnosti.

Ključne riječi: *Antun Maračić, fotografija, konceptualna umjetnost, ispražnjeni okviri, iščezli sadržaji, Lokrum, Dubrovnik*



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