



KATJA STUKE + OLIVER SIEBER: YOU AND ME

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Not so long ago, in St. Louis, a Bosnian named Zemir Begić was beaten to death for no particular reason by four teenagers wielding hammers. He was thirty-two, came to the US with his family to escape war, and had recently moved to St. Louis, the city with the largest Bosnian population in America—indeed, with some 70,000 people, the largest outside Bosnia and Herzegovina. Zemir was murdered down the road from Ferguson, where intense protests had been taking place, triggered by the grand jury decision not to indict the policeman Darren Wilson for shooting Mike Brown, an unarmed African-American teenager, in what appeared to be cold blood. Because at least two of Zemir’s suspected killers were African-American, right-wingers, white supremacists, and even some Bosnians, appropriated his death to claim it was another instance of racial conflict in America, confirming in their minds the “liberal bias” in interpreting Brown’s killing. For their part, the police denied any racial motivation to the crime, while the Bosnian community in St. Louis held a mournful, multiracial vigil, devoid of hatred or conflict. Thus have two tragic strains of modern history met on the American street.

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History, of course, is nothing if not an endless entanglement of various strains, wherein individual lives are caught up or lost. Consider Indira, the Bosnian woman who is the focal point of Katja Stuke and Oliver Sieber's project *You and Me*. A woman of Muslim background violently expelled by the Serb fascists from her hometown of Zvornik in the early nineties, she joined some 300,000 Bosnian refugees who ended up in Germany. They were given the status of *Duldung* (translatable as *tolerated*), not more than a mere stay of deportation, renewable every six months and requiring the refugees to leave Germany as soon as the war was deemed over.

Indira found herself in Düsseldorf, where she experienced from afar the horrors of the war at home, trying to make the kind of living available to tolerated refugees. She worked as house help for a German family, which happened to be Oliver Sieber's, and something beyond *Duldung* developed: a mutual fondness and friendship. The last renewal of the *Duldung* status was in September of 1996, as the German government determined it was now safe for the refugees to go back home, even if it was destroyed or ethnically cleansed and occupied. Rather than returning into the uncertain past, many refugees decided to try their luck in the United States. They settled wherever relief

agencies could find cheap housing and labor demand, a lot of people settling in bigger cities like Chicago and St. Louis (where they ended up in Bevo, the old German neighborhood devoid of Germans), but also in some smaller ones. Indira ended up in Bowling Green, KY, where she managed to open a Bosnian restaurant called *You and Me*.

Violent displacement is deeply traumatic, therefore often psychologically permanent; refugees are never at home. The old one is destroyed or usurped; the new one is never comparable to what the old one used to be. The main struggle for refugees—perhaps the hardest one—is to reconstitute a semblance of home. If displacement is always a loss of agency, then re-establishing some home-like structure allows them to regain at least some of it. Such struggle is essentially heroic; it requires reasserting agency in a place that has little space for it. It means not only overcoming the inescapably adverse circumstances, but also transforming the place of settlement to resemble the lost home, where the displaced were their true selves once upon a time. But neither the original home, nor the original selves are available any longer, and adjustments—physical and metaphysical—are unavoidable. Not only is the host country changed by the new arrivals in ways that are invisible to the natives; so are the resettled people changed



by the new country. Refugees and displaced people are to many Americans unknowable foreigners, to be tolerated on the margins. They might become visible only if they have adapted into some culturally readable American form—as wanna-be Americans with funny accents, as clichés free of complicated personal stories. What is seldom apparent is the entanglement of the past and the present, of the person’s constitutive (hi)story. Those stories are the true, thick, harsh fabric of history.

The fabric of history is what Katja Stuke and Oliver Sieber are photographing and Indira is their lens. The story of her remarkable, heroic, previously invisible life cannot be disentangled from the history of Bosnia, of Germany, and of the United States, nor from Oliver and Katja’s story, nor, ultimately, from the story of any of the people they meet on their way to find Indira in her new Florida “home.” Everything they see pertains to Indira; Indira pertains to everything they see; she refracts history. Hence nothing is irrelevant; nothing is invisible. The result is something that could be called, to use Roland Barthes’s phrase, *a history of looking*.

The obvious implication of Stuke and Sieber’s approach is the notion that every person is at the heart of their own personal-cum-historical entanglement, as every person is sovereign, yet endlessly connected with everyone else. What photography—art—can do is reaffirm the sovereignty while strengthening the connections. That is precisely what Oliver Sieber and Katja Stuke do so superbly, so unblinkingly. They prove that there can never be *Me* without *You*. ■

Text by Aleksandar Hemon

Curated by Assistant Curator Allison Grant

Aleksandar Hemon is a Bosnian-American author and critic. Born in Sarajevo, Hemon visited Chicago in 1992, intending to stay for a matter of months. While he was there, Sarajevo came under siege, and he was unable to return home. He is the author of *The Lazarus Project*, which was a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award, among numerous others including his most recent work, *The Book of My Lives*.

YOU AND ME IMAGES:
Katja Stuke/Oliver Sieber
You and Me, 2014–15
Archival Pigment Prints
Courtesy of the artists