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# INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY ART IN B&H

JONATHAN  
BLACKWOOD

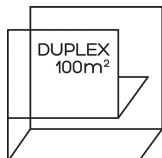


CONTEMPORARY ART IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA — CONTEMPORARY ART IN B&H

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INTRODUCTION TO  
**CONTEMPORARY**  
**ART IN B&H**

JONATHAN  
BLACKWOOD





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## *PREFACE*

This is the first iteration of a book project that has been a long time in the making. It is an opening discussion in themes and trends in Contemporary Bosnian and Herzegovinian art; a social and cultural mapping of a particular scene at a particular time.

I have many people to thank for their support and encouragement since my work on this project began in 2011. Firstly, and most importantly, I have to thank Pierre Courtin for having the foresight to help realize this book, and for his friendship and support. I must also acknowledge the hard work of Maja Zećo in designing and preparing the book for publication.

I must also thank Dunja Blažević and Aida Hajro at SCCA in Sarajevo for providing the text of Dunja's essay on the history of the institution and giving permission for it to be reproduced here. Dunja's remarkable work in Sarajevo over nearly two decades at SCCA deserves a critical study and analysis all of its own.

Moreover, this book would not have been possible without the help and support of the artists who have given kind permission for their works to be represented in these pages. I can only hope that I have begun to do their works, which have given me so much to think about, and which invite constant and engaged re-looking, some justice. The copyright for all images, remains with the artists, and any listed associates.

On a personal level, I would like to thank many friends in BiH and beyond, who have encouraged me to keep going during the production of this book; in particular Ahmet & Amina Čikić-Ertem, Lana Čmajčanin, Danijela Dugandžić-Živanović, Zulfikar Filandra, Amela Hadžimejlić, Jusuf Hadžifejzović, Nela Hasanbegović, Elma Hodžić, Irfan Hošić, Adela Jušić, Marija Kolobarić, Jim & Adisa Marshall, Radenko Milak, Daniel Premec, Aida Salketić, Edin Vejselović, Branka Vujanović, and

Maja Zećo; Janka Vukmir in Zagreb; in Scotland, Greig Aitken, Elaine Campbell, Patrick Elliot, JP O' Rourke, and all colleagues at Gray's School of Art.

I hope you enjoy reading this. Any remaining errors are my responsibility alone. And this was never intended as a last word on any subject- just the beginning of an ongoing debate both within BiH and beyond.

Jon Blackwood  
Montrose & Sarajevo, July 2015





# Introduction: What and Where is BiH Art?

“Bosnia and Herzegovina’s history is a kind of battleground of national and ethno-national ideologies and historical myths since the beginning of the nineteenth century. When it stopped to be a training ground of Austro-Hungarian imperial scholars and experiment of cultural politics dominated by Orientalism, Bosnia and Herzegovina became a training ground for the interpretation of national histories which have seen it as ‘a sub-group of the national groups’, that wanted to untangle or to usurp this knot of regional national identities... Bosnian-Herzegovinian history today has a strong ideological charge representing a minefield for scholars ...who want to have access to it solely on scientific grounds, and Bosnia and Herzegovina as a unique space.”<sup>1</sup>

Damir Nikšić’s short essay, which deftly outlines the simultaneous absence and troublesome presence of art historical narratives in BiH, addresses a key question that we must answer before taking forward this introduction; what is contemporary art in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who makes it, who discusses it, where is it seen, and by whom? What, if anything, makes art produced in this small country compelling and interesting for a twenty first century audience jaded by visual hyper-stimulation, in the digital age, and for whom the

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1 Damir Nikšić, “Bosnian and Herzegovinian History Painting Tradition of Non-Existence” in *The Desire for Freedom: Dossier Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Umjetnička Galerija Bosne i Hercegovine, Sarajevo, 2014, p. 47

phrases “emerging artists” and “undiscovered scenes” induce little more than a cynical half-smile?

The answers to these many questions, as with all historical and cultural questions in BiH, are nuanced, complex and defy easy understanding. But an account of contemporary art practice in Bosnia is in danger of becoming bogged down, if it follows the route that Damir has outlined; a heavily ideologised and contested history, where differing ethnicities and national traditions shout over the top of one another, without ever stopping to accept the challenge of listening.

In order to avoid the colossal pitfalls of ethnic nationalism, the invidious amalgamation of myths, half-truth, absurdities and lies that have frozen artistic, cultural, economic and social life for so many ordinary citizens of this country, we will in the first instance define BiH “art”, as the sum total of visual images produced by two particular groups. These groups are firstly, the artists and cultural workers, who live and work in BiH, regardless of ethnic or national background. We must also include, secondarily, those artists with a birth, family or cultural connection to the country who, for whatever reason, live abroad- the “diaspora”. Between these two groups, a varied spectrum of discourses around “BiH” and contemporary art are produced; a fluid, constantly evolving set of discussions, collaborations and disagreements evolving and mutating on a daily basis. Whatever the false certainties of definitions of “BiH” in political life, contemporary art in BiH, as in any other country, is in a constant state of re-definition and flux.

In outlining this definition, we must also provide a broad context- an “anatomy” of the BiH art world; how native “elites”, such as they are, view art and art production; the state of the infrastructure of the “official” BiH art world; the opportunities that public and private institutions offer to artists to present their work, and to support their developing practice; the varying perceptions of BiH art in the rest of the world; and, the audiences for art, and the level of public debate surrounding it.

Between this broad definition of what BiH art might be, and how it is viewed, we will have a better chance of understanding the wide spectrum of activities happening in BiH art. A mere traditional focus on biography, or the variable levels of quality associated with each chronological “generation” of BiH artists, will confuse more than it illuminates.

This account does not seek to present itself as a “comprehensive” overview of everything that has happened in the BiH art world since the end of the 1992-95 war. Accounts of contemporary events are always partisan, selective and can only therefore be seen as partial and subjective. Nevertheless, what follows is written as a snapshot of a particular time and place in the art history of Bosnia and Herzegovina; part cultural analysis, part provocation. Rather than making a doomed attempt at an unattainable omnipotence, our account will seek to group the work of BiH artists into some broad, overarching categories.

Inevitably, the experiences of war; not only the hideous war of ethnic aggression that occurred in the last years of the twentieth century, but also reflections on earlier wars and conflicts that have afflicted this territory; the Fascist occupation and Partizan resistance from 1941-45, and the events of 1914- the centenary of which is being marked as this text is written- also provide fertile ground for a creative response. The processing of cultural memory from the world wars, the confrontation of unresolved traumas and political shortcomings from the most recent conflict, are a central theme in contemporary art production, but it would be a debilitating mistake to reduce all BiH art as merely reflective of the experience of conflict. Such a category includes a very diverse spectrum of activity, from the photographs of Milomir Kovačević, through the videos and performances of Mladen Miljanović and Adela Jušić, to the self-dramatisations of Šejla Kamerić. On top of this, we might also expand out definition of “war” away from the most prominent recent historical events, to the daily battle to survive as an artist in a society such as BiH; themes dealt with by Daniel Premec in his 2012 project *Spiked*.**(1)**

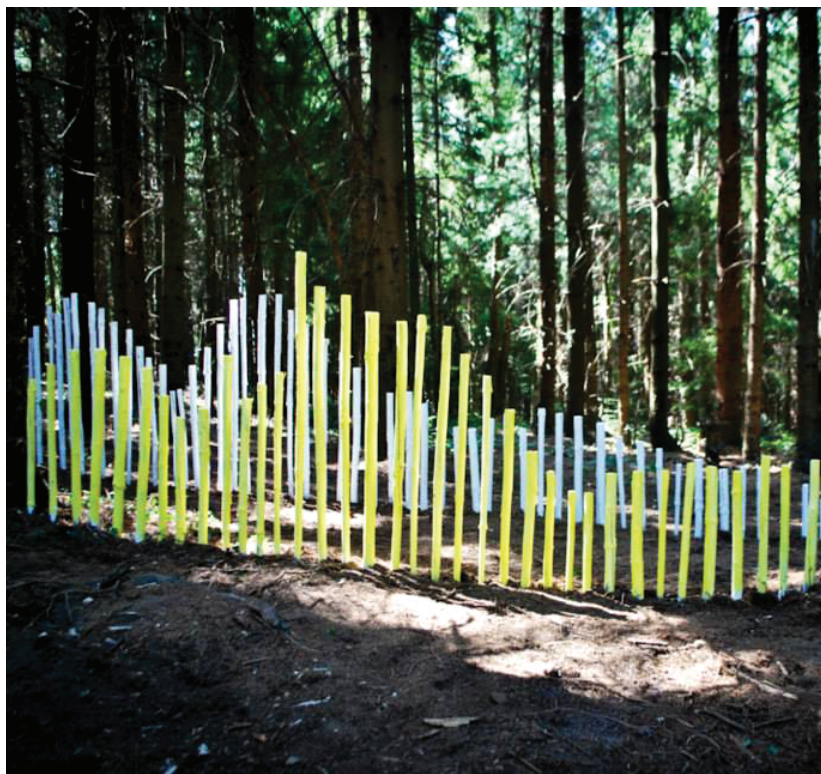


1. Daniel Premec, Spiked,  
Collegium Artisticum,  
Sarajevo, 2012



More broadly, many BiH artists, in the post-Yugoslav present, examine aspects of the Yugoslav past. This is a trend observable in the work of mid career artists who had a childhood and education in the former country, and the younger generations who cannot remember experiencing “actually existing socialism” but who have learned about it both from family stories and from history. In this sense, the legacy of the Yugoslav past, and the consequences of its bloody dissolution, seen through two very





2. ARS KOZARA, Installation



different perspectives, is a visibly animating tension in contemporary practice. On the one hand, we have the work of Gordana Andelić-Galić, tracing the actions of Yugoslav history on the individual; Maja Bajević's video work, which in part responds to the burden of canonical early performance in Yugoslav art history; the rigorous historical re-dramatisations in the paintings of Radenko Milak; to the video works of Igor Bošnjak and Ibro Hasanović, investigating the contemporary resonances of the common past in the fragmented present.

Our third theme is often overlooked in accounts of contemporary BiH art. This is the relationship between artists, their environment and the land, which mutates through video, performance and installation. Traditional landscape *painting* is still practiced and produced at the five art academies in the country, but the most interesting work in relation to the land and environment takes place beyond those academic confines. From the annual ARS KOZARA (2) land art event near to Prijedor, organized by the tač.ka grouping, the videos of Borjana Mrđa, to the apocalyptic visions of Lala Raščić in her performances, such as the on-going *The Damned Dam*, it is a recurring theme turning over the cultural and personal significance of the landscape and an articulation of fear and doubt for its future.

More so than in many contemporary milieu, performance and the performative has been a vital strand in the contemporary visual fabric of BiH. Such a trend is not merely limited to performance art, but also to how the individual artist plays the role of an artist in a society where such a role is little understood, and chronically undervalued. Jusuf Hadžifejzović, whose performative practice or "depotography" stretches back over thirty years, is perhaps the best example of such "performativity" in the BiH context, someone who focuses intensely on the everyday object, the readymade, the bawdy and the surreal narrative combined. Yet, if Hadžifejzović is the best known example, he is far from the only artist exploring this aspect of creative life to the full. We also have to consider Damir Nikšić, whose youtube videos and occupation of the National Gallery





3. Nebojša Šerić-Šoba,  
Broadway Boogie Woogie, 2006

in late 2011 have raised his profile beyond that of almost all other artists currently active in BiH; the nuanced and reflective work of Alma Suljević; and, looking further back, the witty provocations of Nebojša Šerić-Šoba (3), and the high level experimentation of the Ambrosia group. Performativity, and the on-going struggle for a public-facing role for the artist, is a critical theme to consider.

Art dealing with issues of gender, gender politics and resistance to patriarchy has also been notable in recent BiH art. Such art is as much an analysis of post-Yugoslav identities and the persistence of the patriarchal organization of society, as much as a front in a campaign for greater equality, and an improvement of the quality of womens' lives. There is also a spectrum of interpretation ranging from the collective campaign (CRVENA's

travelling *Perpetuum Mobile* video booth) to the intimate and the recondite; Nela Hasanbegović's works relating to social scripting and commodification; Borjana Mrđa's drawings relating back to a lost childhood and the relationship between child subjectivities, family and place; Lana Čmajčanin's installations, charting the unresolved injustices and unpunished pathologies of sexual violence from the 1990s war.

Common to all these five main themes is humour, and adaptability; the reaction of artists to the almost impossible circumstances in which they find themselves, and their continuing to make art in the face of so many discouragements and material deprivations; celebrating what Emina Kujundžić calls *futavizam*, the operation of the last-minute, low-budget and imperfect in order to present some ideas; the youtube films of Damir Nikšić; the intelligent response to immediate circumstances, as in the *Subdokumenta* festival of 2009; the artistic strategy of living locally whilst operating internationally.

It will be suggested that what outsiders might see as contemporary art's greatest weakness in BiH- barely functioning infrastructure, and a lack of finance- actually forces the most ambitious artists to work more smartly, to be ready to produce work whatever the problems facing them, to merge a tough and disciplined approach with humour, and an ability to work with equal facility in many different situations and contexts.

We will return to develop these five themes in much greater detail, later on. Before that, however, we will turn to the body in which all these differing discourses continue to operate; an anatomy of the contemporary art world in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

# *An Anatomy of Contemporary Art in Bosnia-Herzegovina*

“...the general current social environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country which a press article by Clemens Ruther has described as ‘the last undead living part of the corpse of Yugoslavia’ and as ‘being kept alive in an international intensive care unit’, a country where post-war trauma, everyday nationalist political madness, corruption, a catastrophic economic situation with an average unemployment rate of 50%, demonstrations of power instrumentalising religious confessions, homophobia and macho structures meet, where a feeling of powerlessness, demoralization and dissatisfaction prevails, and which seems to be trapped in a dead-end street of depression, lethargy and complaining, without a critical mass believing itself ready to actively address these conditions...”<sup>2</sup>

These conditions, described by the curator Veronika Somnitz in late 2011, are the backdrop to contemporary art production in BiH. This was written at a particularly bleak moment for culture, generally, in the country; a chronic lack of funding and investment had forced the closure of the National Gallery, and a long running symbolic protest by Damir Nikšić; subsequently, the same reasons forced the National Museum of BiH, originating in 1888, and which remained open during the Nazi occupation and the siege of Sarajevo, to close its doors. Even although the National Gallery has re-opened, on a limited commercial basis, the National Museum has remained closed, stubbornly, since October 4 2012. The appointing of yet another “parliamentary commission” to look into the status of the National Museum of BiH, and the grandstanding of some of Sarajevo’s

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2 Veronika Somnitz, text to accompany the Porschismus no. 9 DEAL WITH IT exhibition, duplex 10m2, October 2011; reproduced in *Duplex10m2 Inventory of Exhibitions 2004-11*, Sarajevo, 2012, pp. 230-31

self-appointed cultural “elite” around the issue, give little hope that the institution will re-open, on a permanent basis, any time soon.

The chronic problems of BiH’s cultural institutions have their roots, as with so many other difficulties faced by the country in the Dayton Peace accord of 1995, the agreement signed by the political leaderships of BiH, Croatia and Serbia to bring to an end the devastating three year war, that began in 1992. Whilst at the time there was relief that agreement had been reached and a fragile peace could be built upon, subsequently, the glaring flaws and inadequacies of the agreement have become entrenched.

In the old Yugoslav constitution, the funding for culture and cultural institutions was the responsibility of the governments of each of the six constituent republics, and two associate republics, that formed the Yugoslav federation. In Dayton, responsibility for the funding of culture was not clearly given to any of the new, complex, intersecting sections of government; federal government, entity government, kanton, or *općina* (local council). The seven national cultural institutions within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a result, have been starved of funding and resources since 1995, as the differing tiers of political power refuse to accept the responsibility of their upkeep. This refusal by any level of government to accept responsibility for the funding of culture, on anything other than an adhoc basis, has atomized the official view of culture, a process mirrored in the grim daily struggle for survival experienced by the country’s working artists, who, unable to plan meaningfully ahead, adopt individualist strategies, or try to work towards some kind of common understanding through NGO or other group work.

The result, consequently, has been the steady atrophy of the national museum network, with successive directors and curators forced to rely on extremely limited funds, and grant applications abroad, to keep their institutions operating at the most

basic level. The normal work around the collections of national museums- conserving the collection, developing themed research around long-planned exhibition programmes, encouraging interest in and developing knowledge of local visual and material histories, developing commercial strategies to increase museum income alongside core funding- has proven totally impossible in the current climate.

Politicians are not above using the national collections to fit their own political narrative- as happened when some of the National Archives were destroyed in the protests of February 2014 in Sarajevo<sup>3</sup>. But, in the main, the role of national institutions are a matter of little concern on a day-to-day basis for the governing elites. The need for institutions to adopt a strategy which does not expect money locally but which instead develops their programme of work through support and profile raising with international partners, as well as a commercial strategy, has begun to happen only recently, as is exemplified in the inspiring directorship of Elma Hasimbegović at the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In many ways, the function of the national museums is not only hampered by lack of money, but also by the complete collapse of any functioning market for culture. We are talking not only about a vanishingly small number of individuals interested in buying contemporary art, but also a dramatic shrinkage in the market for ideas, and in the time available to individuals to develop those ideas. It is this latter factor that is just as damaging for younger people keen to make a career in the arts. At present, there are five art academies in the territory of BiH; Sarajevo, Trebinje, Mostar, Banja Luka; with some creative courses also offered in Bihać.

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3 See The Guardian, 9 February 2014: "Bosnian fire feared to have destroyed Ottoman archives" at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/09/bosnia-herzegovina-fire-ottoman-archives>

Graduates from these courses emerge into a cultural economy that barely functions. Of the tiny number of privately run galleries in BiH, none can survive from the sales of work; the most inventive and forward looking, duplex100m2 in Sarajevo, does make sales but also uses international grant application and crowd-funding to augment its resources and maintain its programme. Smaller spaces- such as Galerija AB in Maglaj, Galerija Virus in Mostar, Čarlama in Sarajevo, and Dogma Arts in Banja Luka, either rely on community support, private enthusiasm, networks of mutual support, or a month-to-month survival strategy.

So, if the “national” network of museums and galleries operates in survival-only mode, and the tiny private sector tries to carry on in almost impossible circumstances, where is contemporary art shown, by whom, for whom? Participants often bemoan that the audience for culture in the different cities of BiH have declined exponentially since 1992, and their ranks have not been replenished in the post-war period. Serious art criticism and art journalism is almost non-existent in the Dayton State. Other than in the work of the campaigning art journalist Kristina Ljevak, and in the perfunctory coverage given by the major newspapers and internet portals (*Oslobodjenje*, *Dnevni Avaz*, *klix.ba*) art is little discussed publically in contemporary BiH.

The academies themselves grow small audiences for contemporary art in the cities where they operate; self started, self organized spaces such as Čarlama, operate regular openings which are often extremely informal and offer access to local artists that would be difficult to imagine elsewhere. Activism and the ritual of the exhibition opening nationally, are the building blocks to provide BiH artists with the cultural profile and track record to apply for funds to exhibit internationally. Successful exhibitions in spaces such as Sarajevo’s Collegium Artisticum, one of the longest running public spaces in the city, or in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Banja Luka, can offer such possibilities.

In the main, however, artistic development- either on the basis of individual talent, or in engaging in a course of study at one of BiH's art academies- is crushed in a grim vice in Bosnia-Herzegovina; between the pitiless existential struggle for survival at the level of national institutions, and the vanishingly small private sector. In the absence of what would be regarded as a functioning art world, artists and art workers themselves have had to fill the breach and keep things functioning at a basic level. The lack of an overall cultural strategy however, is a real difficulty. With a myriad of short run groups and formations, and individuals desperately trying to maintain a practice in these circumstances, the task of co-ordinating artistic and NGO responses to the current situation- even if it is held to be desirable- has proven elusive. *Inicijative Kultura 2020 (Cultural initiative 2020)*, under the leadership of Ines Tanović Sijerčić and the Tač.ka group from Prijedor, is the latest attempt to try and kick start an overarching cultural strategy currently in BiH<sup>4</sup>.

The Sarajevo sculptor and installation artist Daniel Premec said in an interview, that *'Bosnia and Hercegovina is an observer in the international art scene, rather than a participant.'*<sup>5</sup> Such a view seemed to be challenged by the welcome return of a representative from the country at Venice in 2013, but was sadly reinforced by BiH's renewed absence, on the basis of lack of administrative capacity and downright political incompetence, in 2015<sup>6</sup>. The reality is that artists from this country who have gone on to make international careers, have done so in spite of the cultural conditions in their native land, rather than because of them. In the past decade we can point to individuals such as Nebojša Šerić-Šoba in New York, or Maja Bajević and Milomir

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4           Ženska Mreza, Zenskamera.ba, "Ines Tanović Sijerčić: Dizajne Glasa je moralna etička profesionalna i građanska družnost" <http://zenskamreza.ba/ines-tanovic-sijercic-dizanje-glasa-je-moralna-eticka-profesionalna-i-gradanska-druznost/>, 6 July 2015

5           Interview with the author, July 2012

6           Federalna.ba, "Neisvjesno predstavljanje BiH na Bijenalu u Veneciji" <http://www.federalna.ba/bhs/vijest/123964/video-umjetnicka-galerija-bih-odustala-od-organizacije-nastupa>, 9-10 March 2015

Kovačević in Paris, as examples of artists who have made international careers; to individuals such as Endi Posković making a career as printmaker and a challenging and inspiring pedagogue in the US; of the younger generation, the likes of Mladen Miljanović, Radenko Milak, Adela Jušić, Lala Raščić and Lana Čmajčanin are all in a position to make good a very promising current position, on an international level.

The cultural economy is now of vital importance to post-industrial, and transitional, societies. In the UK, for example, the cultural sector now contributes more to national GDP than manufacturing industry. Culture is now inextricably tied in with tourism strategies, and with being monetised; one doesn't have to be a particularly sensitive observer to note that global cultural 'brands' such as Tate or MOMA have irreversibly intertwined culture with leisure, retail and aspirant 'lifestyle' discourses in the last twenty years.

Given the almost total indifference of the BiH state to cultural infrastructure, and their utter failure to grasp the importance of the cultural economy to post-industrial twenty first century societies, this infrastructure can only be produced and developed by artists and art professionals themselves. Inevitably, this is an extremely slow and contentious process, and in the continuing absence of an overall cultural strategy for the whole country, the results on the ground, in this time of transition, will be varied and uncertain.

As visual culture moves headlong into the private sector in the neo-liberal economy, so too BiH's culture has been largely privatised- although, as we have seen, for legalistic reasons, rather than as a result of a political decision.

This is the terrain on which contemporary visual culture in BiH is produced- and barely consumed. It is a terrain where the state has all but washed its hands of responsibility for culture. In such circumstances, artists, curators and art workers have to expand to fill the vacuum left by the absence of an official



set of discourses on the regulation and evaluation of culture. The adaptability of contemporary artists in BiH- the ability to move between the differing levels- between “official” events in the remnants of the “official” art world, to much more informal and short run happenings, events, and shows, is a vital characteristic. There is a long tradition in the art history of Sarajevo, and wider BiH, of this studied informality. Witness, for example, the ease with which Jusuf Hadžifejzović moved between helping to curate and deliver the canonical *Yugoslav Dokumenta* exhibitions at Skenderija in 1987 and 1989, the most significant survey exhibitions of contemporary art in former Yugoslavia; and his concurrent involvement in one off performances, happenings and shows elsewhere in the city. This flexible mode of operation continues to this day, with the *subdokumenta* exhibition, featuring the work of Hadžifejzović and many of the city’s prominent younger artists, echoing the early exhibitions of the 80s; Galerija Čarlama, meanwhile, in the years of its operation in Skenderija (2009-13), gave a focus for the city’s lively arts scene.

In this introductory section we have given an overall view of the cultural ecology in which the artists of BiH have to operate, and some of the strategies that they have used in trying to adapt to these circumstances. It is now time, with specific examples, to consider the thematic range of their work, produced in this climate.

# Themes in Contemporary BiH Art

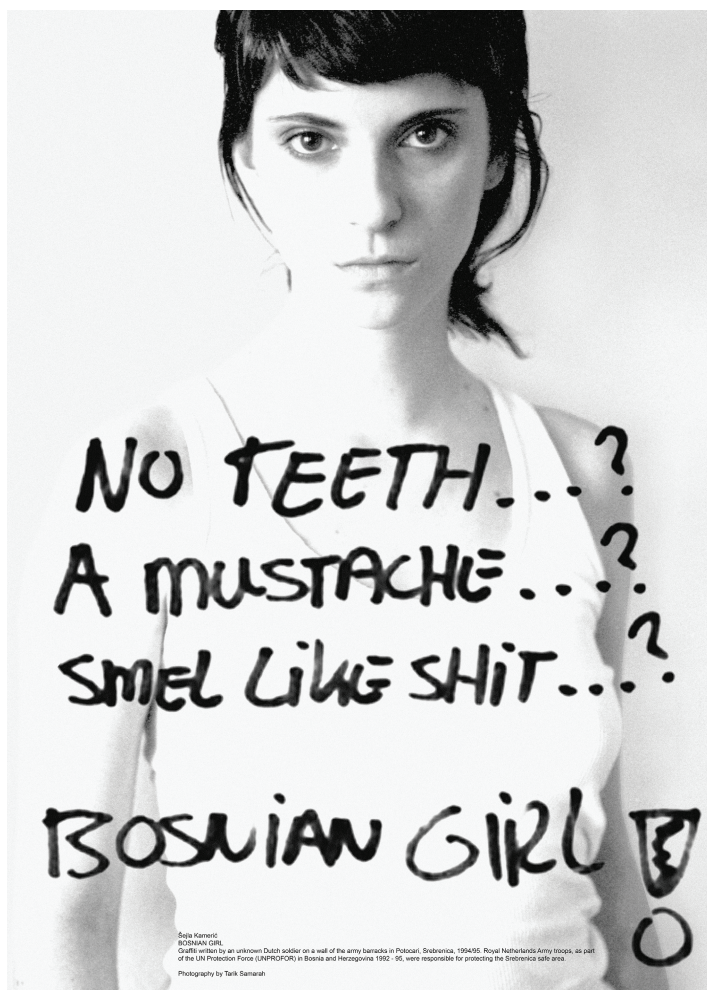
*“One of the Few Things that  
Bosnia-Hercegovina still produces,  
is artists”<sup>7</sup>*

## *Art & Conflict in BiH*

The notion of “conflict” in contemporary art in BiH is multi-faceted. The artistic processing of the catastrophic legacy of the 1992-95 war of ethnic aggression is still ongoing; internationally, the works of artists such as Sejla Kamerić, and Nebojša Serić-Šoba, are perhaps the best known pieces of contemporary art made in BiH. But, as we shall see in this essay, notions of post conflict and transition in the contemporary art world require a breadth of vision at once more detailed, and subtler, to process fully. “Conflict” is about so much more than the events of 1992-95; presently, it stands as much for a conflict between the artistic community, and a political class utterly indifferent and ignorant to its potential value.

Sejla Kamerić’s *Bosnian Girl*, (4) which appeared in 2003, is perhaps the most instantly recognizable piece of contemporary art from BiH; it is an image widely reproduced in newspapers, and magazines, as well as in more specialist art literature. The subject of the photograph, taken by Tarik Samarah, is the artist herself, confronting her audience with a direct and penetrating stare. This is quite a deliberate compositional strategy, which focuses the attention firmly on the *humanity* of the subject, in contrast to the vulgar, dehumanizing graffiti placed over her. The source of the graffiti is from Potočari, the notorious camp on the outskirts of Srebrenica, abandoned by Dutch UN soldiers in the days immediately before the Srebrenica massacre, in which 8,732 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were murdered in a genocidal act by Serb militias under the command of Ratko Mladić.

The power of the image is in one of contrasts; the defiant individuality of the artist herself, her insistence on her own humanity, against the dehumanizing stereotype written by the anonymous UN soldier. Twelve years after its making, and



4. Šejla Kamerić, *Bosnian Girl*, 2003.  
Photograph by Tarik Samarah

twenty years after the events that underpin the making of the picture, this is an image that still has a troubling power to unsettle the viewer. It presents war as ludicrous, stupid, the failure of reason against a farrago of lies and deliberate untruths, willingly accepted; it presents, unflinchingly, the impact of conflict on those unwittingly caught up in it; the image also stands as a condemnation of the lost potential of the people killed, and the wreckage of disrupted family lives and futures left behind. These things are unspoken in this image; it is this unspokenness, this provocation of a million myriad reactions from the spectators that pass before it, that give it its enduring hold.

Whilst those surviving relatives of the victims of the Srebrenica genocide mark an extreme example of the effect of the war on the peoples of BiH, the stories of personal and economic loss, rupture, the disappearance of a communitarian system in favour of a Darwinian neoliberal wasteland is, very much, the material of “transition” here; the basic daily struggle to survive, and somehow to navigate, as part of that survival, the labyrinthine bureaucratic and financial obstacles to the development of anything approaching a “normal” career as an artist.

On a broader level, the constant low level political bickering as to the nature and future of BiH as a state cannot but impact to some level on artistic production. If BiH itself is to be dismissed as a “non functioning” or “failing” state, then where does that leave the country’s artists? Between fresh and painful memories of recent military conflict, and the no less painful present reality of life as an artist in this country, lies a whole spectrum of linked but parallel responses; a linked archipelago of artistic reflections on a recent history and a present impossibly intertwined.

Jim Marshall’s photography gives some indication of these artistic reflections. Marshall, a Scotsman who first spent time in BiH during the 1992-95 conflict, serving as an aid worker both in Mostar and Sarajevo, has subsequently made his home in the country and developed a remarkable career as a self-taught





5. Jim Marshall, Vijećnica, 2012

photographer, known principally for his landscapes and photographs of buildings bearing the trace of war. His ongoing *Sklonište* series shows the gradual erosion of signs indicating bomb shelters in buildings, dating from the siege period; once a common sight, these signs are now vanishing at a rapid speed, as buildings are demolished or renovated.

But the image I would like to spend a little time discussing is the attached image of Sarajevo's *Vijećnica*, or City Hall (5). This sumptuous neo-Moorish building, designed by Karel Pařík, Alexander Wittek and Ciril Iveković, was a controversial building, arousing the displeasure of Benjamin Kallay, a senior Hapsburg administrator in late nineteenth century Sarajevo. In the Yugoslav period, the building became a university library; its callous destruction by Serbian artillery in August, 1992,

was one of the earliest signs of the bitterness of the conflict that lay ahead for the Bosnian capital.

In Marshall's hallucinogenic, meticulously detailed photograph, Vijećnica is shown in bright morning sunshine after rain, the newly reconstructed building is shown reflected in a wide puddle in the foreground of the image; inverted and re-presented. This accident of the moment has led a compelling quality to the picture; the viewer, captivated by the unusual image, is prompted to look again and again at what is for local audiences and extremely familiar landmark. It is this process of repeated re-looking, of re-investigation, that draws the viewer into a similar approach that Marshall's photographs derive from; a walking practice, a profound knowledge of the history of the city, and learning through repetition. This challenge to the viewer- to look again- is also a challenge to the easily digested narratives that have been presented about the Bosnian conflict and its aftermath.

Having introduced the constantly shifting terrain on which contemporary visual culture in BiH is produced, it falls to us now to examine specific examples in terms of the post-conflict echoes sent back. And there is no better place to start than the first official exhibition of BiH art in twenty years, at the 2013 Venice Biennale.

The Banja Luka post-conceptual artist Mladen Miljanović's contribution to the 2013 Venice Biennale was a complex and dense show, which had to hold together the competing imperatives of presenting new work, as well as summing up the themes of past pieces already completed. Miljanović found the means to respond in the work of Hieronymous Bosch, and in re-capitulating the trajectory of his own art career. The central work, *Garden of Delights*, returned to Miljanović's early career as a funerary portrait artist; engraved work on granite dominated the presentation, as a whole.

On opening night, Miljanović performed in the first, small room of this exhibition space, standing against a wall with his





6. Mladen Miljanović,  
The Garden of Delights, 2013  
Courtesy Antje Wachs Gallery Berlin, and the Artist.

form obscured by one such heavy granite slab, on which text messages were reproduced. In the lead up to the show, the artist contacted friends and contacts to try and ascertain what they would expect to see from an art exhibition representing BiH. The answers, varied in terms of seriousness, present one of the major themes of the show; the molten, uncertain, variable definitions of 'Bosnian' or 'Hercegovinian', and the failure to think clearly of a working definition of either category, beyond the moronic commonplaces of ethnic politics. In terms of a performance, it also neatly symbolised the 'burden' carried by the artist, of the hopes of all the people who were not there.

The central piece, the *Garden of Delights*, (6) however, fitted perfectly against a back wall, dominating the show. This is a triptych of engraving on granite, taking its inspiration from Hieronymus Bosch's 1503–1504 *Garden of Earthly Delights* in the Prado in Madrid.





7. Mladen Miljanović,  
Sweet Symphony of Absurdity, 2013  
Courtesy Antje Wachs Gallery Berlin, and the Artist.

The Belgrade artist Mileta Prodanović wrote a celebrated essay on the fashion for opulent tombstone decorations for deceased Zemun criminals<sup>8</sup>; this take on Bosch, too, reflects on the contemporary fashion for ‘unique’ tombstone engraving that reflects upon the main characteristics of the deceased. The artist takes the opportunity to present us with his own perception of the ‘hell’ of transition in BiH.

A myriad of occupations, preoccupations and eccentricities are carved here, with no clear or convincing overall picture

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8 Mileta Prodanović, “Heroisation of War Criminals: The Symbolism and Aesthetics of the Tombstones of Serbian Warlords and Mafiosi in the 1990s”, in Cristina Demaria and Colin Wright (eds.), Post-Conflict Cultures Rituals of Representation, Zolus Press, London, 2006, pp. 88-97



emerging. The artist's critique of contemporary BiH society also mirrors wider concerns regarding narcissism, social isolation and a retreat into the virtual, characteristic of the social media age. This retreat into a private, semi-fantastic world, it could be argued, leaves public life and public debate impoverished, attracting little attention other than a cynical detachment. The well carved figures here represent a mixture of the prosaic and the absurd: from the vested policeman writing a traffic violation ticket for a *Stojadin* driver, to a partisan figure on a horse, to absurd pnderosa-style new houses. The dominant representation of the military and various types of police in this tableau indicates the extent to which this is still a militarised, traumatised society, a theme first touched upon in the artist's video *Do You Intend to Lie to Me?* of 2010.

The video piece *Sweet Symphony of Absurdity* (7) continues this theme of discord and neurotic absurdity. The members of the Banja Luka Philharmonic slowly emerge into out view, one by one, each playing their own favourite piece of music, or ideal concert piece. The result is caterwauling anarchy; each individual is of course, performing a well known piece flawlessly, but the overall result is one of continual over-writing and permanent conflict. The parallels with politics and society are not hard to grasp here. As part of the Venice exhibition, Miljanović included, again carved in granite, Jusuf Hadžifejzović's observation 'From Kitsch to Blood is Only One Step'; in the context of the humorous installations elsewhere in the show, this quotation assumed a sober and menacing overtone.

The themes of conflict, a militarized and over-policed patriarchal society were visited previously by this artist in several works, perhaps most noticeably in *Do You Intend to Lie to Me?* In 2010 (8). This video features a dramatic raid by Republika Srpska special forces on the artist's café *Dijalog* in Banja Luka. Their targeted fugitive is none other than Veso Šovilj, the artist and academic that Miljanović regards as his "academic father". In the film, having watched the special forces helicopter take off from the beautiful landscape of northern Bosnia, near to



8. Mladen Miljanović,  
Do You Intend to Lie to Me?, 2010  
Courtesy Antje Wachs Gallery Berlin, and the Artist.

the village where Šovilj grew up, the viewer sees the special brigade storming the café and very roughly manhandling the old man off to police headquarters for interrogation.

Once there, we witness Šovilj's interrogation, hooked up to a computerised lie detector, by an anonymous detective. He is asked carefully scripted questions about his artistic career, deftly mixed in with very painful questions about his activities in Yugoslavia, and in the 1992-95 period. The subject, who was unaware that he his "arrest" was actually stage-managed, and this intrusion was arranged as part of his former student's film, blinks with an air of resigned calm throughout the exercise.



The work is revealing in focusing intensely on the plight of an ordinary man subject to state force, and interrogation. The interview questions- written by Miljanović- focus almost as the unravelling of his old tutor's biography; his independent streak, commitment to the old Yugoslavia, and arms-length relationship with the conflict in Bosnia in the 1990s.

There's also a sense of the «readymade» here- in that a well-known art tutor is taken from his usual context and examined in a starkly different set of circumstances to the ones where he would normally be encountered. Once the camera was turned off, Miljanović entered the room and gave a full explanation of his project- much to Sovilj's delight. This is a clever and engaging piece looking at the militarisation of ordinary life in Bosnia and the arbitrary nature of arrest and detention, and a subtle unpicking of power dynamics in such a situation.

Moreover, it reveals the latent power to disrupt and unsettle that the biographies of those whose lives straddled late Yugoslavia, its dissolution and aftermath can have. It underlines processes of selective amnesia and memory suppression that so many who lived through those years have had to adopt as a strategy for living in the present. It has been a subject recently revisited by the emerging performance artist Selma Selman, in the streets of Banja Luka, where she has roared "You know nothing!" at passers by, playing on inner secrets and the multiple re-inventions of the self in the Dayton period<sup>9</sup>.

Radenko Milak's watercolour series *Flags* (9) analyses the deep-rooted psychological responses of individuals to representations of nationhood and ethnicity. Here, the psychological focus is not on individuals, but in how whole groups of people willingly buy into the mythical narratives of nationhood as represented by pieces of coloured cloth; and subsume their own priorities and preferences in the name of these myths.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFKerrgnEUE>: Selma Selman "You Know Nothing!", performance, Banja Luka, August 2014.





9. Radenko Milak, *Flags*, 2011

This bizarre process, so corrosive in the Western Balkans, is presented through many different small vignettes; typically, the colours of the flag are livid and luminous, reducing the appearance of represented individuals to that of a cypher, a puppet. The same composition is employed across this series of works, from the Greek football fans burning the Bosnian flag in Athens, during the qualifying campaign for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil; to the Albanian paramilitary holding the red and black flag alongside the Stars and Stripes, mounted on horseback.

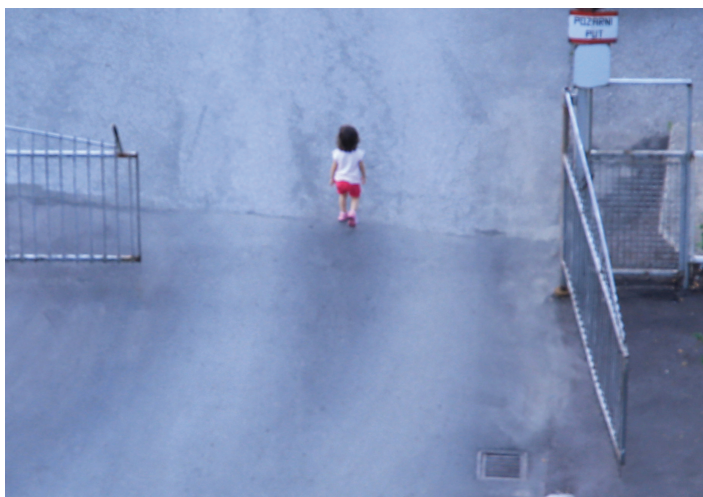
In each of the paintings, the handling of the colour and the landscape recalls late nineteenth century realism. In those paintings, however, typically of agricultural labour, the character and experience of the individual is paramount in understanding the priority of these paintings; this is a kind of twisted twenty first century Balkan realism, where the equation is inverted; the individual matters much less than the arbitrary and contingent symbol that they identify themselves with.

Ultimately, Milak's Flags series very assured control of the differing mediums that he chooses to work in, but in holding up a mirror to historical and political developments in South-Eastern Europe in the last two decades.

For people who lived here or in exile through the traumatic wars and subsequent anarchic period of transition, these are very familiar. But, to present these events again and to have an audience re-consider the familiar, to subtly prompt the individual to think again and re-examine their recollections and fixed perceptions, sees these images fight hard for a memorable place in the jaded visual imaginations of contemporary spectators. This was a technique subsequently exploited by Milak in his hugely ambitious watercolour cycle, 365, which chose a major historical event from each day of the calendar and rendered them; from key events such as the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, to less recalled moments, such as the audacious flight by the West German amateur pilot Matthias Rust onto Red Square in Moscow, in 1987.



10. Adela Jušić, *The Sniper*, 2007

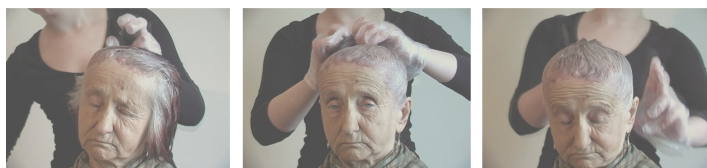


11. Adela Jušić, *Ride the Recoil*, 2013

The notion of conflict, and its impact both on family life and the imagination, can be found in the earlier work of Adela Jušić. *The Sniper* of 2007 **(10)** is an agonizingly personal work, focusing on the artist's father, who, as a sniper in the Bosnian army during the 1992-95 conflict, was killed on active service. The work focuses on a photograph of the man, in army uniform and holding his sniper's rifle, whilst a soundtrack details the deaths of individuals killed by sniper fire; Adela's hand traces the small red dots on the face of the sniper, calling to mind both the sighting of a sniper rifle and, ultimately, the wound that was to kill the soldier whose face we are considering.

Jušić's sound installation *Ride the Recoil*, of 2013, **(11)** is a pitiless critique of the commodification of the Bosnian conflict, without regard to those who actually lived through it at the time. Developed through research and discussion for over a year, the artist has been working up a response to the video game *Sniper : Ghost Warrior 2*, which is set in Sarajevo. Relating programmatically to her earlier work *The Sniper*, this





12. Adela Jušić,  
When I Die, You Can Do What You Want, 2011

piece, entitled *Ride the Recoil*, moves beyond the deeply personal narrative of that video piece, towards a critique of those who would concrete over such memories with commodified falsehoods.

Sequential images of a child in red shorts- successively larger as though we are homing in on her through the sights of a sniper rifle. As we observe these images, the “instructions” on how to play the video game effectively are relayed through two speakers, just at a pitch to be insidious and uncomfortable. The overall effect is quite chilling, as the visitor processes the multiple gaps between personal memories of that siege, and the commercial fiction now offered for sale by a global corporation.

The callousness of the computerised female voice, giving the gameplayer instructions of how to kill more effectively, set against the very human surveillance images of a small child, can’t help but provoke feelings of anger in the viewer; the flattening of the worst suffering into a dehumanised, pixellated game environment for the desensitised consumer; with, at best, an indifferent shrug from the game’s producers when called to account for their product. That the game’s “narrative”- the arrival of a specialist US sniper team to protect the citizens of Sarajevo from ethnically motivated violence and murder in 1993- is at painfully at variance with the real history of the siege of the Bosnian capital in that year; a year where international hand-wringing and diplomatic equivocation was at its worst.

*Ride the Recoil* marks a new phase in Jušić's work, moving beyond the intensely personal earlier video pieces such as *The Sniper* and *When I Die, You Can Do What You Want* (12). It marks a new phase of research and production focusing on the consequences of conflict and post-conflict; the ongoing project *Unknown Heroines*, begun in 2012, focuses on the experiences of the 100,000 women who fought an active war in the partisan struggle against the Axis occupation of Yugoslavia during 1941-5; and, also, the experience of women in the more recent Bosnian conflict.

Jušić picks out the hopes of these women for a genuinely transformed society in the wake of the victory of the Communist resistance movement led by Josip Broz Tito, and their bitter disappointment at the re-emergence of a traditional patriarchal organisation of society, in the first decade of Communist rule. This work, in its various manifestations, provides a platform for Jušić's uncompromising feminist analysis of the effects of conflict on individuals, and the consequences conflict has for their place in post-conflict societies.

Lana Čmajčanin's sound installation, *20,000* (13) attempts to grasp the almost unimaginable scope of the rape industry during the years of the Bosnian conflict. In a blacked out room, the number '20,000', the title of her piece, in white, dominates the back wall, in a room filled with partly-illuminated music stands. On each of the music stands is a score filled simply with successive numbers, much as though the room has been prepared for a kind of demonic John Cage or LaMonte Young performance; literally, an anonymous orchestra of rape. In this dark, claustrophobic interior, a low, ambient soundtrack plays, overlaid with the voices of rape victims describing, in excruciating detail, either the trauma they suffered or individual detailed recollections of their attacker. The overall effect on the viewer is emotionally murderous; not dissimilar to the experience of visiting the former rape and death camp site at Srebrenica. This is exactly the effect that the artist intends; to make the viewer grasp, viscerally, the enormity of these



13. Lana Čmajčanin, 20 000, 2012

unpunished crimes, and the daily choking memories of them, that the victims are obliged to cope with. Part of the logic of the installation is the underlining of the continuing violence and trauma suffered by the victims in the post conflict situation, encouraged not to talk about their experiences and shunned if they do- any vestigal hope of achieving closure through the arrest and trial of the perpetrators long having vanished.



## *Performativity*

In this section, I am not speaking of “performance” in the narrow sense of “performance art”, but rather identifying performative elements in a much broader portfolio of artistic production. Specifically, I would like to highlight performativity as a communication strategy; as a biographical and confessional intervention, in which the artist offers implicit comparison between personal stories and those of the audience; and, the use of performativity in the construction of socio-political critique. Perhaps the best example of using performativity as a communication strategy can be found in the practice of Jusuf Hadžifejzović, as artist, curator, and advocate for contemporary art in wider BiH.

Jusuf’s already-mentioned experience as an organiser and constantly evolving practice as an artist feed into his contemporary artworks, and his struggle in maintaining the artist-run Galerija Čarlama, in the city’s Skenderija shopping centre.

Jusuf’s practice of “depotography”; the recycling of installations and performances in different locations, as well as the collection of a vast range of objects from high art to mass produced kitsch, is an all-encompassing practice that has been developing since the late 1970s. In a series of developmental performances, performed on a solo basis and together with others (in recent times, Dzenan “Cviki” Hadžihasanović and Emir “Mute” Mutevelić), Jusuf examines recent historical events, contemporary politics and aesthetics through a range of satire, absurdist humour and Dadaist contrasts. Steeped in the history of performativity, this is an artist who manipulates a spectrum of performative possibilities to challenge and make his audience think again.



#### 14. Maja Bajević Art Must Be National

A parallel strategy can be found in the work of Damir Nikšić. Like Jusuf, Damir is a performative artist who intervenes in a wide variety of disciplines; from performance (*If I Wasn't Muslim* of 2005), through painting (*Richard Burton as Tito* 2011), and art historical installations (*Bosnian History Painting* of 2013-14). But, even more so than Jusuf, Damir's work harnesses the possibilities of social media to grow and develop his profile as an artist. Uploading a new video on youtube almost daily, Damir adopts the persona of an idiot-savant, a playful fool, to comment upon misconceptions, misunderstandings and the absurdities of daily life in the Bosnian capital. In so doing, he has achieved a much higher profile than most of his contemporaries, with his work regularly trending and being discussed on Bosnia news portals and messageboards. In achieving a much larger audience and reception for his work, beyond the traditional gallery exhibition, Nikšić's on-line interventions offer one possible strategy to grow new audiences for contemporary art.

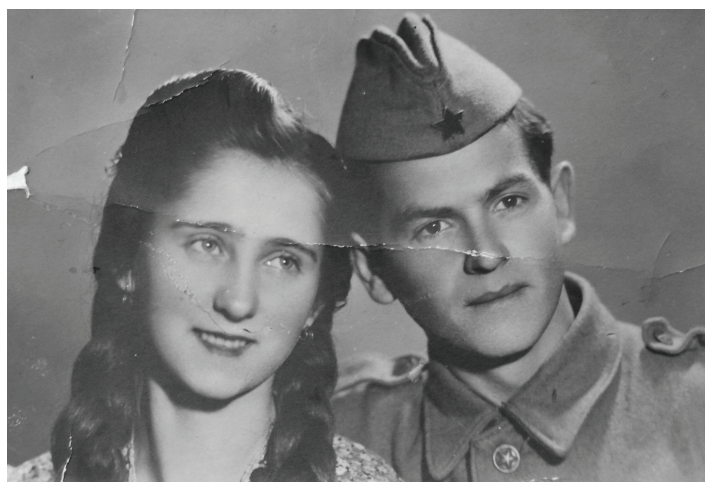
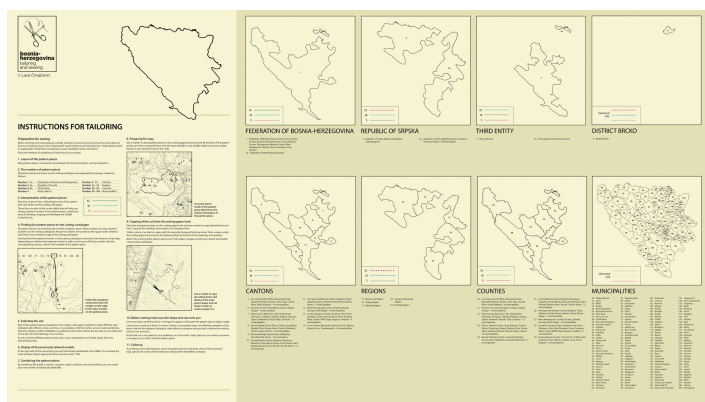
Maja Bajević's video *Art Must be National* (14) is an example of performative art offering a sharp socio-political critique. Taking Marina Abramović's *Art Must be Beautiful* (1975), Maja changes the word "beautiful" to the word "national" and repeats the original performance. In so doing, the emphasis of the whole performance shifts to one of horrifying self-destruction. A parallel is drawn between male-defined notions of "beauty" and the way these definitions are written as scripts on womens' bodies, and the arbitrary and often downright untrue scripts of nationhood and national identity that have visited the Western Balkans since the dissolution of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s.

The real impact that the myths and phantom half-truths of ethnic nationalism have on real people's lives are laid bare, here. There is also a bitter recognition of the fact that the "international" art audience expects work from this part of the world to contain messages either of war or of national identity, placing a further burden on the artist who may have no wish to communicate such messages or develop a practice involving these issues.

Caught between the contradictory expectations of the domestic audience, and those of the international art market, this video very subtly shows how the Yugoslav legacy has mutated in a post-socialist present.

The artist's collective CRVENARed has played a major role in developing a cutting critical edge to performative art in recent years. Artists associated with CRVENA, such as Adela Jušić, Lana Čmajčanin and Lala Raščić have all developed practices that hold up, through the lens of gender and politics, a mirror to the myriad dysfunctionalities of contemporary society in BiH.

Lana Čmajčanin's work is a turns agonising and humorous. Her installation *Tailoring and Sewing* (15) uses the methods of "gendered" domestic labour to invite the viewer to construct their own version of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Taking the geographical outlines of entities, kantons and općinas, the artist



15. Lana Čmajčanin,  
Tailoring and Sewing, 2011

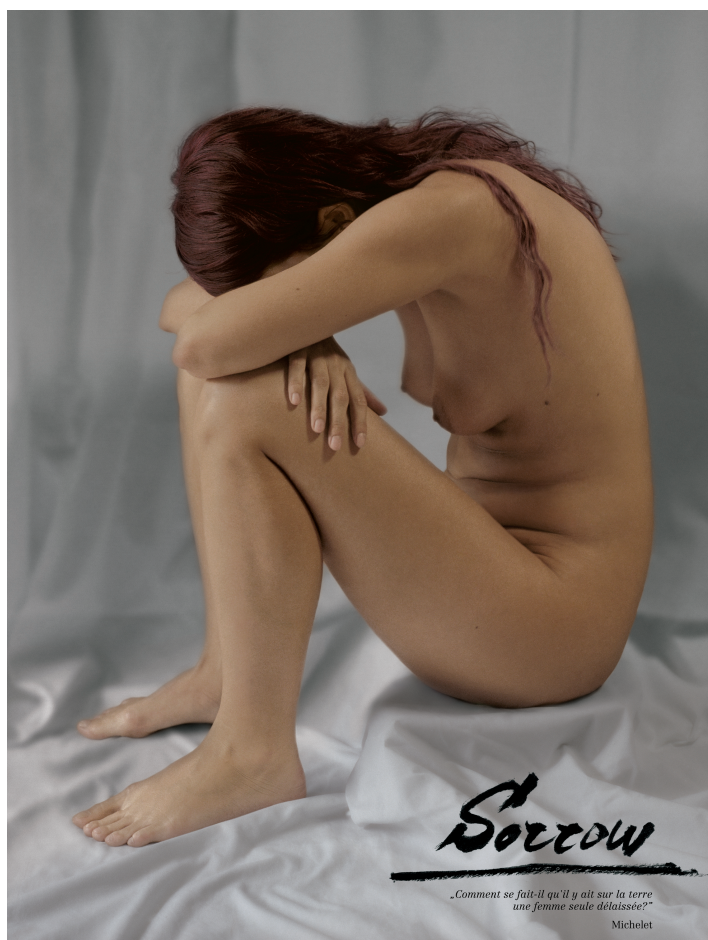
16. Adela Jušić, Memory Lane, 2014

comments archly on the absurd over-government of BiH, in the Dayton structure imposed from abroad by diplomats who understood very little of the region that they were operating in. By opening out the possibility of a limitless succession of BiHs produced by each individual visitor, Čmajčanin impresses on the viewer the absurdity of easy nationalist politics, and presents the idea of a “nation” as a complex mosaic of interacting, constantly changing individual subjectivities.

“Performative” art also offers the possibility of building a relationship with the audience, through the confessional and the biographical. Adela Jušić’s photographic installation *Memory Lane* (16) is one such example. The work focuses on the destruction of family photographs during the siege of Sarajevo in 1992-95, and the attempt to reconstruct priceless personal memories through discussion with family members in other locations, and friends. The destruction of personal memories and the family unit is exemplified by the framed statement by Adela’s sister, now serving in the Bosnian army, of her father, who was killed on active service in the siege; the familiar figure of the dead serviceman takes its place alongside other lost photographs recovered and preserved, from the maternal line of the family. In the candid revelation of her own family history, the artist immediately begins to build a link with the anonymous viewer, who is invited to consider their own family history, and how much of it they actually remember, in viewing *Memory Lane*.

Šejla Kamerić’s *Sorrow* of 2005 (17) adds another layer to our consideration of performativity. Šejla’s inserting of her own figure into her work in the first years of her career was something of a leitmotif, and in this photograph she dramatises herself in a re-creation of a van Gogh drawing entitled *Sorrow*, of 1882. In this way the original nineteenth century context is mutated into a densely layered twenty first century narrative; “sorrow” for events lived through by the artist in the 1990s, but also an attempt at re-establishing the link between BiH visibility and the European tradition, a cultural link denied





17. Šejla Kamerić, Sorrow, 2005



18. Nela Hasanbegović, *Under the Veil*, 2010

by those who sought to destroy the country in that recent conflict. This is a drama, therefore, of introspection, reflection, and re-invigoration.

Nela Hasanbegović's performance *Under the Veil*, (18) first shown in 2010, marks a very different kind of gender scripting. In the performance, eight young women are shown dressed in white bridal-type gowns; a symbol perhaps of purity, and also a play on feminine beauty and display in the public sphere. On top of this group of figures, the artist projects an image of chains, which inverts the beauty metaphor into one of constraint, slavery, abjectness and loss of agency. In presenting this overwritten image, Nela intervenes in the debates surrounding woman-as-commodity, subject to scripts of patriarchy, domestic abuse, domestic unhappiness, and human trafficking- all debates which have a painful contemporary resonance in those countries of the former Yugoslavia constrained on all sides by an exponentially expanding European Union.

## *The Land and Environment*

Lala Raščić's performance project *The Damned Dam* **(19)** which the artist has been working on for over five years, is based partly on the Modric dam in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This dam was the subject of BiH's very own *War of the Worlds* moment some years ago; the broadcast of a radio play, suggesting that the dam was about to break and give way, caused serious panic amongst listeners in the small town of Lukavac, who took the fictional narrative seriously.

In addition to the environmental agenda running through this performance, there is also a profound awareness of the oral tradition, of the expansion and development of epic narratives passed on from generation to generation. *The Damned Dam*, a mixture of dystopian post-apocalyptic landscape, a narrative of travel, and the unlikely growing together of the two main protagonists- Tarik and Merima- is a piece suggesting at an unpleasant future but very firmly rooted in a local past, with the two held together in a tension located in an uncomfortable parallel to present West Balkan realities.

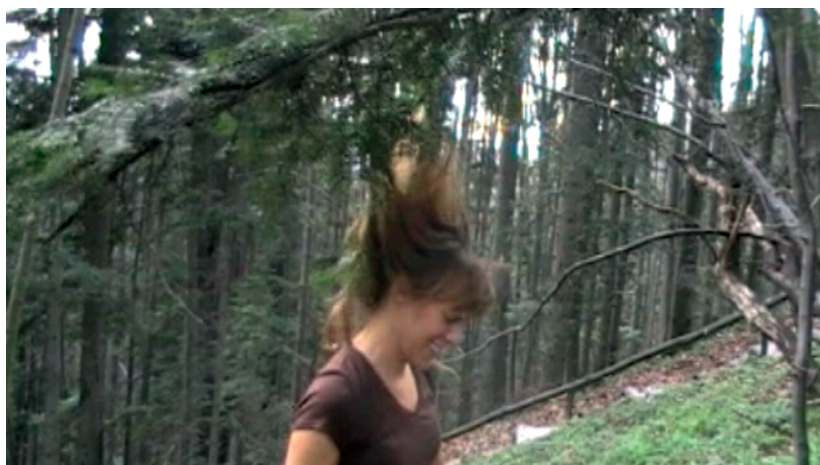
This poem, set in the late 2020s, portrays Bosnia as a colonised and devastated land, ruled by remote-control EU commissioners, with the local population reduced to the status of overworked, anonymous vassals, tasked with meeting energy targets set in Brussels. It is a land subject to frequent flooding and turbulence, natural events watched over by a weak and supine administration. Neighbouring Serbia, it seems, has disappeared under successive waves of floodwaters, with all but a tiny part of Belgrade lost forever. Part apocalyptic vision, part conscience pricking, an analysis of the words spoken reveal a subtle critique of the dehumanising aspects of neoliberalism and a dark imagining of what may lie ahead in the future.



19. Lala Raščić,  
The Damned Dam, 2009-present

This multi-layered piece can be approached in a number of ways. It is possible simply to enjoy the performing of it—concentrating on the artist’s magnetic “stage personality” and the contemplative release offered by the saz interludes. But this would be to pay less attention to the piece’s sumptuous visuality and its deep emotional range. There is every sensation here, from mild embarrassment and laughter at Tarik’s clumsy attempts to woo Merima initially, to terror in the three dam breachings and floods that programmatically break up the narrative; from sadness and pathos at death and the environmental destruction of a whole way of life, to relief at escape from near certain oblivion for our heroes.

Implicit in the declamatory rhythms and the lilting of the saz is a strong critique of our present, in terms of politics and man’s relationship with the environment. We live in an era of worsening environmental disaster; of political impotence and shoulder shrugging in response to those disasters; where recycling a plastic bottle or wearing a wristband endorsed by a



20. Borjana Mrda, Transfigurations, 2009

21. Borjana Mrda, Cut Out Moments, 2011-13





1992, two trains collided in Jazepol, killing between 300 and 500 people and injuring an estimated 700 others. Cold war, Yugoslav troops fleeing Serbia, and the state of emergency orders issued by Yugoslav president Slobodan Milošević set off over 100 and would over 700 protesters. The text is written vertically along the left edge of the image.

celebrity is enough to make us forget the impact of the rest of our actions on the world around us. As such, Lala's work forms a reflective parallel to the performative practices of two Sarajevo performers who preceded her- Alma Šuljević, and Jusuf Hadžifejzović.

Lala's spoken imagery also relies heavily on a deep knowledge of, and love for, different landscapes and their appearance in all conditions. There is a careful tracing of the contours of BiH in the opening section, and BiH both in winter and early spring; an imagining of the destructive forces of nature on the flat uplands of Serbia, and the people that live there. This passionate engagement with nature is replicated in Lala's research on the landscape of Louisiana, around New Orleans, and her work reading past geographical surveys from the nineteenth century, plus engagement with thinkers critiquing man's use of land in that part of the world, in the present.

Two very different takes on specific landscapes and the impact of that landscape in forming an individual subjectivity can be found in the work of Borjana Mrđa. Her video piece *Transfiguration* of 2009 (20), filmed partly on Mount Kozara, the area of northern Bosnia where the artist grew up, is a vigorous demonstration of the pressures that locality and gender can have on identity formation. In one part of this video, the artist's hair is entangled in the branches of a tree on Kozara, and she is shown in pain trying- and failing-to disentangle herself.

Borjana has developed this theme of identity formation in a long, developing series entitled *Cut Out Moments* (21) (2011-13), which show drawings of a partially remembered childhood drawn again against the background of cut up pages of typescript. There is a powerful sense here of trying to re-make and re-capture a time from which the artist has been forcefully taken; there is a strong sense of rupture, and of the presence of a half remembered, Yugoslav past, in a post-Yugoslav present. In many lives this attempt to re-connect with childhood memories and stories would be an entertaining and nostalgic diversion;

in the context of this childhood, the attempt becomes one of re-performing a lost identity, in order to understand it, and the process of rupture and conflict, in a more comprehensive manner. As such, this process is performative, relational, and ongoing.

Beyond the work of Borjana, Kozara mountain also plays annual host to the dynamic festival of land art, *ARS KOZARA*, organized by the Prijedor collective of artists known as Tač.ka<sup>10</sup>. Tač.ka have run this event since 2007, explaining the genesis of the project as follows:

“The organizers and the participants had the primary role to investigate the features of the environment in which the laboratory is to be held every next year...The truth is that Kozara mountain has no need for enrichments of any kind, in first place thanks to its rich biodiversity and its glorious past. What this environment is actually crying for is the appreciation and protection. The monument on Kozara won't be able to compete much longer with the horizontal monumentality of the landfill created nearby while the descendants of the warriors, whose names are today inscribed in the walls of the memorial, perceive this ex-battlefield as a synonym for a “no man's excursion and picnic site”. On the other hand, there is countless possible measures to preserve Kozara's natural beauty...idea of the organizers of this laboratory is, however, also extreme but maybe more sustainable. Creating artworks of natural materials found in the area of National Park offers the visitors a different perception of their natural environment. The artists involved give over the right of finishing the artwork to the nature that decides according to its own laws.”<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, then, the festival of Ars Kozara operates on a number of levels; as traditional festival of Land Art in nature; as a

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10        Members of tač.ka have included artists such as Mladen Bundalo, Igor Šovilj, Boris Eremić, Sanja Kovačić, Milica Tošić, Maja Bojić, and Dalibor Popović.

11        See [http://tacka.org/htm/projects\\_ars\\_kozara\\_eng.html](http://tacka.org/htm/projects_ars_kozara_eng.html)

means of a relatively isolated local group of artists successfully making connections and establishing working relationships between the symbolic place of Kozara- resonant with Dušan Džamonja's memorial to the common anti-fascist struggle of the occupation years (1941-45) with a renewed cross-border co-operation with artists from neighbouring countries, repeated extended and developed over the years; also, to raise the environment as a political issue, by aesthetic means, at least on a local level. Tač.ka, whose work is the subject of detailed doctoral research by my colleague Charlotte Whelan, are perhaps the most under-written and under-discussed contemporary formation in contemporary BiH art, a gap which Charlotte's work will help to fill up.



# Art, Artists & Curatorship in BiH

In a country where the 'official' art world suffers from a permanent existential crisis, artists who would normally be associated with the 'underground' or 'alternative' scenes have filled the vacuum left by a functioning set of 'official' cultural discourses. The wholesale destruction of a liberal elite in the conflict of 1992-95 has not been reversed since the conflict's end. In the absence of these types of cultural discourse, short run organizations and collectives (Barake, 2005-6) and NGOs set on a more firm developmental basis (CRVENA) have expanded to fill the gap, and given Sarajevo a contemporary art map remarkable for its parallels to art scenes outside of BiH, as well as the dissonances between organizations with the country itself.

The relative late arrival of an art academy in the city- in '72- also encouraged a close relationship in a small scene between different 'layers' of artistic activity. However, whilst we might say that the different layers had a mutually enhancing co-existence before '92, the reality now is that the almost total absence of the state in the territory of culture, has meant that- with the exception of Collegium Artisticum and the former Museum of the Revolution in Sarajevo- artists have to re-build their own art world on the scorched earth of 'transitional' culture. The complete lack of a cultural infrastructure or transparent overview of how the very little money in culture is allocated or spent, means that this process happens at different speeds and in varying ways.

I want to talk about four separate case studies which might be thought through as representative of the contemporary art world in the Bosnian capital; the work of Jusuf Hadžifejzović in Skenderija; the collective of feminist curators and artists associated with the CRVENA grouping; the contribution of Dunja Blažević and SCCA; and, the private sector example represented by Pierre Courtin and his gallery duplex 100 m2.

Given the ongoing cynical indifference of the BiH state apparatus to cultural production, artists and art professionals themselves must produce and maintain that structure in the state's absence. This infrastructure can only be produced and developed by artists and art professionals themselves, alongside the vestigial operation of a cultural administration different from Yugoslav times only in its lack of money. Inevitably, this is an extremely slow and contentious process, and in the continuing absence of an overall cultural strategy for the whole country, the results will be varied and uncertain.

Whatever one's ideas on how culture should be funded, the current hegemonic political view- that the state should retreat from funding all but the most basic aspects, and the rest should be found from corporate or private sources- has little application in BiH. As visual culture moves headlong into the private sector in the neo-liberal economy, so too BiH's culture has been largely privatised- although for legalistic reasons, rather than as a result of a political decision. The conclusion is obvious therefore; waiting for a weak central government to do something about cultural funding is going to be a waste of everyone's time, at least in the short to medium term. So, if the governments of BiH don't have any answers, how can such problems be addressed?

My first example of such excellence concerns the practice of Jusuf Hadžifejzović both as artist and curator. Together with Enver Hadžiomerspahić, he produced Yugoslav Dokumenta in the last years of Yugoslavia, with the exhibitions at Skenderija in Sarajevo proving to be amongst the most significant events

in the production and consumption of contemporary art in the old Federal State; perhaps only the legendary exhibitions of the French modernist and the Abstract Expressionists in the early-mid fifties had more impact, and this is an arguable point. A point of comparison for younger artists whose careers developed in the post-Yugoslav era might be the encounter with Ilya Kabakov's work in the collection of ARS Aevi in the summer of 1999, or in the ongoing programme of challenging and ground breaking performances mounted by the group AMBROSIA in the decade from 1994.

In 2009, Jusuf re-kindled the spirit of the old Yugoslav Dokumenta shows by curating and organising *Subdokumenta*, again in Skenderija. Formerly one of the key shopping venues in Yugoslav Sarajevo, Skenderija today has been superseded by more modern shopping centres built since the end of the war, and has a large area of vacated shop fronts lying empty for most of the year. With the co-operation of the centre's authorities, he was able to bring these empty spaces into play, displaying the work of young and emerging artists from all over the country, in an exhibition that was reviewed in the *New York Times*. Jusuf's aim here was simple- to show that, with very little money, an international art scene, of credibility and depth, could still be created and sustained in the city, and in this he was successful. Unfortunately, his efforts were little rewarded in terms of extra funding.

Of fundamental importance to the art scenes throughout BiH since 1996, has been the work of Dunja Blažević as director of SCCA, the former Soros centre. Sarajevo Centre for Contemporary Art has made an incalculable contribution not only in developing exhibiting and networking opportunities at an international level for successive generations of artists, but has also overseen the establishment of a vital bridge between the art scenes (within) BiH, between Sarajevo and Banja Luka, but also between those cities and the outside world, through the *Zvono* award for young BiH artists. This vital prize, first awarded in 2006 to Lala Raščić, provides an exhibition and six

weeks in New York City for the winner. Many of the names that have emerged from BiH in recent years have either won the award or reached the final stage. Through the *Zvono* award, through exhibition curation, and through personal friendship and encouragement, Dunja has left an indelible stamp on the shape of the post war art world in the country. For a full understanding of the work which Dunja completed, the structures that she put in place, and some examples of her most significant works, readers should consult her essay, published in full, in the Appendix at the end of this text.

Similarly, the relentlessly active and imaginative group CRVENA merge feminist politics, art activism and a nuanced perspective on contemporary art production in their activities. In regard to curatorial excellence, the four day event held last September in Sarajevo, the *Bring In Take Out Living Archive* stands as their most noteworthy recent intervention. Taking a brownfield plot of land at the Marshal Tito campus, in Marin Dvor, the group cleared it and turned the space into a children's play park, reflecting a general concern amongst citizens that there were few usable parks for the city's children to enjoy themselves in.

This new park was used as a venue for talks spread over four days, on all aspects of cultural practice and development across the region; finally, an old security guard's booth, found on site, was restored and turned into a temporary art and documentation space, with a rolling loop of video pieces from across the Balkans. Combining art activism, a refreshing new look at how the many vacant brownfield sites could be transformed and how a different Sarajevo might be imagined, together with contemporary art, this was a landmark event. Subsequently, the *Bring In Take Out Living Archive* has travelled to other cities in the region and strengthened hugely, the international ties and links of the 'Red Mined' curatorial collective responsible for it. This was an event that not only addressed issues in contemporary art in a meaningful way, but suggested the 'fit' of that art in a contemporary society seemingly defined by permanent instability and uncertainty.

Lastly, Pierre Courtin's duplex gallery, which has organized the *Memory Lane* exhibition, has come to be relied upon by local artists and art audiences as a bridge between Sarajevo and contemporary art elsewhere in Europe, in the last decade. Open from 2004-11 at a now-demolished premises in Stakleni Grad, and recently moving to new premises by the river Miljacka in Sarajevo, this gallery has to all intents and purposes been *the* private sector in the BiH art world during its time in existence, alongside Damir Nikšić's activities at Jawa Galerija, up until the point of his departure in 2013. Duplex is a gallery which seeks to present the best of emerging talent from BiH alongside international shows, and whose profile, through representation at Europe's most visited art fairs-Paris and Athens so far this year alone- is hugely significant for the international profile of art made in this country, and for the profile of represented artists.

Key to all these projects is a simultaneous deep rootedness in local circumstances, also comprehensible to international audiences and with an international appeal; these are adaptable and mobile art events, not only physically in terms of moving around, but mentally, occupying and developing a range of aesthetic and critical discourses; lastly, all these initiatives are capable of functioning effectively on tiny budgets, navigating the complex and parched labyrinth of cultural politics in this country ably, and turning the force of the many obstacles to cultural production against themselves.

Only the development of a functioning cultural infrastructure in the next few years in BiH will see meaningful change in the way that work and business is done in the shattered cultural economy here. It is not enough to expect the vestigial institutions of culture from the Yugoslav period, initiative, and enthusiasm, to continue to make up for that lack of a functioning infrastructure. As we have already observed, any wait for central authorities to put something in place will be a forlorn one. These three projects that I have mentioned also fall into the category of 'excellence' because all of them, in their own way, hint at the development of a new cultural infrastructure put

in place by artists and art workers themselves, firstly as part of an ongoing battle for survival, secondly as a means of opening out contemporary art to new audiences. The designing of a new cultural infrastructure by cultural actors themselves, and the making of the infrastructure work to an agreed common strategy, is the biggest challenge facing art in BiH in the next decade. If such a challenge can be met successfully, then the art world in the country will be all the stronger for it.

Nearly one hundred years ago now, Ljubomir Mičić professed one of the aims of the 'heroic' avant-garde Zenitist philosophy was to 'Balkanise Europe'. A century on, Mičić's pronouncement seems ludicrous, but it still has an unexpected echo in our time. It is to be hoped, as I have suggested, that a new infrastructure for art and cultural production emerges organically in BiH in the next few years, and that such an infrastructure, sustained and developed by loose, self-organised, semi-detached groups of artists and art workers can in time sustain and nurture the generations of young creatives to come. But in times of austerity, where budgets for culture in other countries are being cut relentlessly, and the reasoning behind public money being given for art subject to constant scrutiny, it may be that the art worlds of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and neighbours such as Serbia and Macedonia, are well placed to withstand the cultural landscape that may be coming later in the century, simply by virtue of being more experienced in adapting to and coping with conditions that, at times, border on the hopeless. The adaptability, creativity and mobility of artists and creatives in such a dystopian cultural landscape, is ultimately the strength that will carry art production in BiH forward, hopefully to better times.

# Recent Developments in the Art of Bosnia- Herzegovina

2012 drew to a close with the threat of closure apparently lifted for the Čarlama gallery in Sarajevo's Skenderija shopping centre. For a couple of months, it seemed that the existential threat to the space was over; however, since early summer, it has been without electricity. Although not officially closed, this lack of electricity has made it very difficult for the space to be used as it once was; as a space of artistic experiment, as a repository for Jusuf Hadžifejzović's fascinating collection of contemporary art and ephemera from ex-Yu; and as a meeting point for the exchange of ideas and information between the city's artists. Whilst it is possible that Čarlama may again open at some point, the prospects of that happening any time soon seem remote, and it is the loss of this exchange of ideas which has been perhaps felt most keenly.

From the times of subdokumenta in 2009 to early 2013, Čarlama was *the* space for experimentation in the city, and if no solution can be found for it in Skenderija then surely alternative venues will have to be looked for.

Čarlama was the last institutional casualty of the year. The National Museum, scandalously, remains closed, and despite a day of protest on the first anniversary of its closure, and



22. Nela Hasanbegović, *Priča o Ribi*, 2012

continual pressure from campaigns such as Culture Shutdown and Akcija Građana, there seems to be very little movement on that issue. A new commission has been formed to look into the matter of the crisis in BiH's national institutions, but it will not move quickly. Elsewhere, new leadership, in particular at the Historical Museum of BiH, has seen fresh energy and approaches developed both to the care of national collections, and to the funding of programmes of display and education.

Nela Hasanbegović's solo show *Speech of Whiteness* opened in the National Gallery in January 2013. The stand-out works in what was almost a retrospective of the artist's early career, was the beautiful video installation *Priča o Ribi*, (22) a childhood story of a desire to eat fish when it was completely unavailable during conditions of wartime. Perhaps the most striking work visually was the *Between Light and Darkness*, a spectral lancing of a dark and awkward space with strings of fluorescent thread; a geometric shattering of a familiar terrain.





23. Edo Vejselović, Neretva Paintings 2012

Early in 2013, a show of young BiH artists was curated by Jusuf Hadžifejzović at Collegium Artisticum. Jusuf's work as a curator, and as an encourager of emerging talent, receives less attention than his work as an artist, but it is no less significant for that. This was an engaging showcase of about a dozen artists, with the paintings of Demis Sinancević and the brightly coloured geometrical sculptures of Emir "Mute" Mutevlić perhaps sticking longest in the memory. This was a significant show, as people tend to conceive of BiH art as running in generations; it gave an idea of who from the next generation of younger artists may-with a fair wind- emerge in the coming years.

Edo Vejselović's 2012 action landscapes of the River Neretva **(23)** show a passionate engagement with the environment of BiH and The finished paintings- the triptych in is captivating and invites repeated looking-certainly stand alongside other examples of contemporary landscape painting, such as those by John Virtue.

But traditional landscape painting, in its attempt to capture the 'spirit of place' or 'the timeless spiritual values of (what-ever) nation', fundamentally is about an individual artist ordering and composing nature, in order to impose his own (dis) ordered vision on the spectator. Quite the reverse is going on here. For sure, the River Neretva with its amazingly luminous colours at certain times of day, and with its central role in the different stages of BiH history, is a key marker of the contingent historical narratives and identities of this country; but, if anything, the artist reduces himself to a very minimal role here. These works reveal an artist who wants us to focus on his subject and its contemporary situation, rather than on his own creative personality.

The nature of these compositions leave chance and random circumstance playing as important a role in the finished work, as the artist himself. There is the sense that a good proportion of the artistic personality has been 'washed away' by the constant movement of the river. In this sense, it is possible to draw interesting parallels between these instances of landscape painting, and both Land Art- a direct intervention in nature then left to the mercy of natural processes following the departure of the artist (as practised annually by *Ars Kozara*)- and site-specific performance. The process by which the paintings were made was, just as in performance art, documented carefully and preserved for the future. There is more than a sly echo of Jackson Pollock's famous stripped-to-the-waist open-air 'gesture painting' in 50s America, and these contemporary photos of the artist at work on the river.

Traditional landscape art, if any thing, is noted for its political conservatism. These landscapes have a much sharper critical edge to them. This is a snapshot of the Neretva before it becomes a contested site of protest, perhaps a contrast between the 'eternal' nature of the river and the fleeting political forms of the day.



24. Gordana Anđelić-Galić, *Washing*, 2012

Gordana Anđelić-Galić's video performance, *Washing*, (24) was a compelling parallel, programmatically developing her earlier *Flags* performance in a new way, wittily echoing the forms and paradigms of socialist realist portrayals of domestic labour, as well as drawing attention to the absurdities of the multiple emblems that have presumed to represent this part of the world in the last century.

Another high profile contemporary art institution that we should mention, is the D-0 ARK biennale of artists who show at a military base in Konjic, in President Tito's former nuclear bunker- carved out into a mountainside, an enduring state secret until relatively recently, and claimed as a space for art since its first iteration in 2011. Whilst access (the bunker is still part of an active Bosnian army base) and the impact of the biennale in stimulating new audiences and appreciation for contemporary art within BiH are still rather uncertain, the project has enabled Bosnian artists to show alongside international counterparts, and for a remarkable series of snapshots



of both BiH and international art to be developed into a permanent collection in this small town. In this sense, the D-0 ARK biennale offers a high profile example of the strategy that many BiH artist use in maintaining and developing careers- being based locally but co-operating and operating internationally on an ongoing basis.

Sadly, the excellent work achieved in Venice in 2013- Mladen Miljanović's exhibition was very favourably received and widely praised for the ideas it dealt with and the sheer professionalism of its presentation- counted as nothing when it came to 2015. At the very last moment, after no information whatever being provided about the selection process for the 2015 exhibition, the Federal government in Sarajevo, via the director of the organising institution, the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, announced a "lack of capacity" as the reason for why they would not be choosing or supporting a BiH pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale. A callow farce played itself out subsequently, with a self-organising group of artists protested the decision; a well-known local theatre director offered to organise a pavilion, but his efforts met with considerable scepticism and, ultimately, failure. Predictably, after much noise and mutual recrimination in the media, BiH failed to provide an exhibition; a sickening and lamentable failure that set back the profile of contemporary art considerably, after the gains of 2013-14.

The exhibition *Memory Lane*, curated by Pierre Courtin in June 2014 at La Galerie du Jour agnès b. in Paris, **(25)** functioned both as a summation of developments since the turn of the century, and a provocative suggestion of future developments. Courtin's curation of an extensive and varied show, pitched established international names such as Šejla Kamerić alongside emerging talents such as Ibro Hasanović, as well as Bosnian artists who have made their careers in a foreign context, such as Andrej Đerković, and Damir Radović. The impact of this show was to reveal to an international audience the challenging depth of visual culture in BiH, and to provoke



25. Memory Lane installation shot,  
Paris, June 2014  
Photograph by Andrej Djerковиć

discussion and comment on the subtlety of its main themes. The show revealed real strength in video, installation and performance, with reprises of key performances of the past by Jusuf Hadžifejzović and Alma Suljević on the opening night. For Bosnian's art's profile internationally, it was the most significant showing since the canonical socialist-era *5000 Years of Yugoslav Art* in Paris in 1971, and Richard Demarco's travelling



*ASPECT '75* show, opening in Edinburgh in 1975<sup>12</sup>.

This exhibition stood at a crossroads between two potential futures for BiH art. The positive, optimistic view is that over time, Bosnian art will improve steadily; that opportunities will open up for domestic artists and the infrastructure will gradually improve. Sadly, such a view is borne of little more than wishful thinking, as all the differing iterations of the Dayton state have shown such little interest in, or understanding of, the importance of culture.

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12 See Jonathan Blackwood, "Richard Demarco and the Yugoslav Avant-Garde", published in McArthur & Watson (eds.), *Dialogues: Richard Demarco and the European Avant-Gardes*, Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh 2010, and available on-line at [https://www.academia.edu/368725/Richard\\_Demarco\\_and\\_the\\_Yugoslav\\_Avant-Garde\\_in\\_the\\_1970s](https://www.academia.edu/368725/Richard_Demarco_and_the_Yugoslav_Avant-Garde_in_the_1970s)

# Conclusion

The Banja Luka based installation artist Veso Šovilj showed his piece *The Art of Bosnia Herzegovina Stays Within the Boundaries of Bosnia Herzegovina* in 1996. The installation was dominated by a stark black outline of the newly independent state's boundaries, the solidity of geographical representation absurdly crossing over with the fragile enduring political reality on the ground. But as much as it was a stark illustration of the new cultural circumstances facing BiH artists at the beginning of the Dayton state, it was an underlining of the crippling isolation that many were to face until the turn of the century. Continuing strict visa restrictions and clumsy bans on imports impacted badly on the ability of local artists to travel, and to exhibit abroad, and, crucially, to have their work seen by new audiences.

The consequences of this situation also impacted on the visibility and reputation of BiH art abroad. Leaving aside spectacular exceptions already mentioned, such as Šejla Kamerić's *Bosnia Girl* and Mladen Miljanović's *Do You Intend to Lie to Me?*, misconceptions grew that Bosnian art was trapped in the mire of subject matter forced upon it by the traumatic experience of war or, worse still, had been a casualty of war, forced back into obscurity even in the domestic context.

In the text above, we have charted the process of Bosnian and Herzegovinian artists re-engaging the attention of both domestic and international art audiences in the last decade. This has happened on the basis of individuals, rather than on the basis of a concerted cultural policy or set of cultural ambitions set by a functioning state. In a non-functioning, failed state

shaped by the ignorance of the international community and the rapacity of political elites, it is individual ambition and the actions of NGOs and galleries which has still helped maintain the vestigial profile of BiH art.

There is a sad paradox here. It can be argued that the national has never been less important in the production and consumption of contemporary art, in the international art world. At elite level, the international biennales in Doha and São Paulo, national identity and background are mere details of biography, overwritten by more urgent critical, theoretical and commercial concerns. In the broader terms of international politics and economics, the “power” traditionally associated with the “nation-state” construct is being eroded relentlessly, subsumed by a mobile and ruthless corporate power, as the current Greek debt crisis illustrates clearly.

BiH artists, attempting to engage in this context (and with notable and significant success, with the involvement of Danijela Dugandžić-Živanović in the curation of the 2013 Oktobarski Salon in Belgrade, as part of the international curatorial collective Red Min(e)d), face the bind of a domestic cultural polity where the national is everything. The pressure to self-define, to accept a set of pre-packed, ready made definitions confining subjectivity rather than allowing for an individual negotiation, mean that in the local circumstances issues of national and ethnic identity continue to have a resonance.

This resonance derives in part from the calamitous infrastructure of the Dayton State, where differing groups are obliged to compete for vanishingly small amounts of money within an absurdly over-complicated, ethnically defined bureaucracy. It is a commonplace to observe that such a bureaucracy has its own self-preservation as a paramount function, rather than in providing a structure whereby individual citizens can realize their own goals and ambitions. As a result, the many successes that BiH artists have enjoyed in the last few years, in parallel to successful endeavours in other sectors of activity (literature, music,



sporting success in football) have arisen in spite of the prevailing conditions within the country, rather than because of them.

It is no surprise then that much of the thematic range of contemporary BiH art, particularly those artists touching on issues of the environment and gender, offer both a critique and suggested set of alternatives to the current political and cultural realities. The difficulties that such artists face derives from the lack of domestic audience for contemporary art in BiH.

It might fairly be argued that contemporary art, in its various locales, is often spoken of as a “scene”, with all the negative connotations that word has. Since the war much BiH art has operated as some kind of subculture within broader society, operating according to its own rules and with particular ways of speaking and engagement, and familiar networks. The reason that we have not spoken about “art scenes” in this text is that it implies a certain unprofessionalism, a spectacular appearance with little content or ideology behind it; a farrago of unrelated ideas whose lifespan is contingent on the butterfly life of the social groups interested in them.

What we have presented in this text is a group of Bosnian and Herzegovinian artists who are so much more than just an “art scene”. We have a group of artists who, in their own way, address a group of linked ideas and who, in the absence of a functioning cultural apparatus, have taken responsibility for themselves to find a way of working that can at least partially meet their creative and material needs.

The artists active in this state, or who have some personal or biographical tie to it, are amongst the most mobile and adaptable anywhere in the world. In the twenty first century the contemporary artist has to be a nomad, based locally but seizing opportunities for exposure and the development for new ideas. Since the summer of 2014, Bosnian artists have exhibited from Sao Paolo to Dublin, and a new generation of artists in their thirties are now receiving regular international exposure.

The need to develop a functioning infrastructure is the most urgent task facing the BiH art world in the next decade. If a functioning infrastructure, commonly authored and with an identifiable budget, can be developed, then visual culture and career pathways will develop across the whole sector. Without such an infrastructure, Bosnian artists will continue to rely heavily on their own adaptability to circumstance, and ability to operate on multiple levels of a fragmented global art world, taking advantage wherever possible. Without such idiomatic and creative athleticism, the BiH art world simply could not continue to exist at the level that it does.

From the politically charged, idea-heavy installations of Adela Jušić, the creative and humorous youtube clips of Damir Nikšić, the passionate performances of Lala Raščić, based on profound and wide ranging research; the exponentially growing profiles of Mladen Miljanović and Radenko Milak; the factoring in the obstinate professionalism of Pierre Courtin and the activism of CRVENA, to the firecracking development of the performative practice of Selma Selman, the winner of the Zvono award in 2014, BiH art is in a fascinating stage of development.

APPENDIX :

*SCCA-s - STILL ALIVE / CASE STUDY/*

This looking back through history and significance of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (SCCA), from their establishment in the nineties throughout the countries of Eastern Europe and ex-Yugoslavia (euphemistically named west Balkans), corresponds with the systematization and editing of the SCCA - Sarajevo archive.

Soros Centers for Contemporary Art were formed on a common platform within the national Open Society Funds (OSF-s) and were adapted to specific conditions in each country. They all went through transformation after becoming independent in 2000. Many of them have survived and have continued their work, mostly as non-government, non-profit organizations. They found themselves on the market of cultural and art projects, living from one project to another, without any stable source of income. Some of them have not survived and some have become parts of newly established state institutions. The initial program dynamics, the continuity of work and keeping all the programming lines open weren't possible anymore. What remains as a constant and comparative advantage, thanks to professional skills acquired and developed working as a parts of Open Society Institute (OSI), is projects writing and managing, networking and constant presence, reputation and professional image on the international art scene. Interesting is the fact that collaboration between SCCA-s, especially those within ex-Yugoslavia, is still intensive, primarily thanks to foundations which support regional projects (Swiss Cultural Program, European Cultural Foundation). Further reasons for those connections being still alive and kicking are the common cultural space we had shared for decades, as well as the fact that the SCCA-s from ex-Yugoslavia since their

very beginning positioned themselves in relation to the existing museums of modern and contemporary art in the countries of former Yugoslavia which in most of other countries of Eastern Europe (in former regimes) had not existed until nineties. From today's perspective the SCCA "experiment" seems to be one of the most productive and successful segments of the OSI's Foundation.

The fundamental model of the chain of SCCA's that operated in former Communist countries was based on small professional team and a flexible program adapted to local needs and conditions. They acted as a corrective agent or complement to the institutions of the old system. The program mission was to keep contemporary art alive in the countries in transition (which is not taken care of by anybody during the so called transition period) and ensure its equal participation in international art scene. The basic activities were financial support of new projects; assembling and editing documentation; creating a database and forming a library; organizing annual exhibitions and individual actions that affirm contemporary artistic tendencies complementary or alternative to the predominantly traditional and anachronistic local scenes. Connected in a network, they developed intense mutual communication and in joint or coordinated initiatives they helped the presentation of Eastern European art in the West.

In 2000 (when Open Society Institute started to reduce financial support, which would end in 2003) the centers legally changed their status and names and established a new network - the International Contemporary Art Network (ICAN). Since 2000, SCCA has operated as an independent, non-profit professional organization, and changed its name to Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Art (abbreviation remained the same - **SCCA**).

The argument of Mr. Soros for terminating the budget line of the SCCA network was that if the local actors cared about culture, then they should finally assume the responsibility for the

vitality of contemporary art. His logical assumption was that from the 90s until that moment, there had been enough time in all the countries of transition to establish new structures capable of assuming the care and responsibility for social - economic development. Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a special case was not considered.

## *SCCA story*

For the existence of what we call contemporary visual art an important role from the end of the war has been played by the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) founded in 1996 by the Open Society Fund Bosnia and Herzegovina, the latest in the network of more than twenty Soros Centers for Contemporary Art in Central and Eastern Europe (the reason was the war 1992 – 1996). It's organizational and program structure was based on a concept common to all the centers in the network. The analysis of post-war situation in the country and specifically in Sarajevo gave the guidelines for future program activities of the SCCA: gather dispersed creative energy and recognized the urgent needs specially of young generation of the artists who wanted to re-appropriate the streets and places after years spent in shelters and give them a chance; fulfill generation's gap; bridge discontinuity in artistic life; re-establish missing links between individuals and cultural centers. Direct response to all these accumulated problems and the complexity of the existing situation, SCCA developed itself as an **information/documentation/education / production and distribution center.**

As a gathering place, an active promoter of new cultural model, new events and developments in art, SCCA unites the functions of institution and active participant in the cultural scene. SCCA does not have its own gallery space, but acts as a mobile art

center, in complement and as an alternative to the programs of other art institutions. Most of its projects, such as annual exhibitions, are held in open spaces of the city. The change of environment, the relocation from art-oriented space (the gallery) to non-art-oriented space (the street), changes an artist's manner of thinking and behaving, his / her choice of subject matter and materials, and his / her manner of communication with the public - with casual passers-by. New meeting places are created for interactions between artists and a new audience. Art becomes a part of everyday life. The mobilization of public opinion with the emergence of this new concept not only relates to a change in the artistic paradigm, but also to a change in the understanding of the function of culture and art. The new model of art, whose references are grounded in personal (life) experience and a critical approach to the social environment, influences the public opinion. This kind of concept has proved itself to be productive, has expanded the notion of art, and has become a corrective agent to local artistic and public life.

As the cultural life in the city is mainly reduced to the level of one-time events or traditional manifestations for the general public, the Center considers that its primary role is to focus its activity on clear program goals and to keep programs' activities on three basic levels: local – local; local – international; international – local.

The Centre developed two-way communication between BiH and international artistic communities, promoting art beyond territorial boundaries; establishing active cooperation with BH artists in the Diaspora, and with the artists and similar centers in neighboring countries and in the region. Important task, not only because of artistic but also political reasons, was development of collaboration with Banja Luka (Republika Srpska) in spite of political obstruction of local ministries.

## *SCCA projects overview*

SCCA's First Annual Exhibition in 1997, "Meeting Point,"—a two-month series of installations, actions and performances in creative response to the historical and architectural context of one specific place, the summer garden "Čulhan" located in the remains of a 16th-century Turkish bath in the heart of Baščaršija (the old town), and the screenings of collected video works that were created during and immediately after the war—defined the fundamental programmatic directives of SCCA.

As a result of great interest and the need to systematically continue what began the year before, SCCA initiated new projects in out door spaces (second Annual Exhibition – "Beyond the Mirror" in 1998, and the Third one in 1999 – "Under construction") and continued to work in the electronic and digital arts.

A technical base was created for the multimedia production department **pro.ba**, which enabled number of artists to create higher quality and more professional video works, as well as the means by which the Center could document its own actions and exhibitions. **pro.ba** has been producing original work in new media, encourages and enables young authors to realize their own projects using digital technology, and provides assistance to artists in creating works in new media. In the last ten years, **pro.ba** has developed rich video and independent (non-commercial) film production, developed collaboration with public televisions as independent producer (realizing TV series on alternative art and culture "Kitchen", literature "Compulsory reading" etc. ) as well as multi media public campaigns. Number of films produced or coproduced by **pro.ba** have been selected and presented at numerous galleries and international film festivals (Sarajevo, Venice, Rotterdam etc.) see [www.pro.ba](http://www.pro.ba)

In 2000, SCCA officially registered as an independent, non-profit organization, which meant that every project had to compete for funding from various sponsors and donors. Center changed the strategy and tactics, but not its essence. Attention was directed to the “export” of new art from BiH that was already recognized as having originated with SCCA's support. There were no more resources for the main annual activity - Annual Exhibition. Instead of it SCCA organized a series of exhibitions by domestic artists around B&H (Mostar, Bihać, Zenica, Tuzla, Travnik, and Banja Luka), in neighboring countries (Zagreb and Rijeka in Croatia; Celje and Ljubljana in Slovenia) and—in cooperation with other regional centers—in Europe (Bruxelles, Warsaw).

The year 2001 was characterized by the continuation of these established activities on the local and international levels, with a few long-term programmatic innovations: internationalization of our production – initiation of the guest-artist program, in which artists from abroad, during their visits in Sarajevo, create their own works or collaborative works with domestic artists, with our production and logistical support. Because this program is most often realized in collaboration with similar institutions abroad, it ensures reciprocity - the participation of our artists in residencies at corresponding centers; presentation of contemporary art scenes and new production from other cultural centers of our region, Europe and non-European countries. Active protagonists in art scenes from different countries, representatives of like institutions, and artists are invited. This program also opens up the possibility of initiating common exhibitions and other forms of programs' collaboration; series of individual and group actions in the city by domestic artists taking place throughout the year (instead of Annual Exhibition), which guarantees continuity and fills the gaps between big one-time-only festival-type events.

From 2003 on SCCA remained without any financial source which would cover operational /\_running costs. Aside of individual projects financed by different donors, SCCA is focused



on mid-term and long term projects within B&H and our Region realized with different partners.

Let's mention the most important once:

**De/construction of Monument**, multidisciplinary project, 2004 – 2007, composed as a series of panel discussions, lectures and seminars, artistic presentations, exhibitions and interventions in public space. This project involved particularly important examples of the post-Yugoslav counter-monument-works that re-thought the forms, objects and stakes of public memory. The project started with introduction of the artists who use the form of monument in anti-monument sense (Braco Dimitrijević, Sanja Iveković) or creating “monument to the negative past” (Jochen Gerz). Last faze of “De/construction” was contest for the “new monument”. Four monuments have been produced and installed one in Mostar and three in Sarajevo.

Local partners: Urban Movement from Mostar, Cener for Information's Decontamination from Banja Luka. Project was supported by German Cultural Foundation, Open Society Fund B&H (OSF B&H) <http://www.scca.ba/dekonstrukcija/index.html>

**Bosnia and Herzegovina Searching for Lost Identity**, 2006 – 2009, media – cultural project consisting of several different segments. It is unique in its research, cultural and phenomenological orientation. Based on the series of documentaries and fictions, 12 films and videos and have been produced and then broadcasted at BH public Television. Some of them were selected for international festivals.

The project was supported by Swiss Cooperation Office Bosnia and Herzegovina, Embassy of Switzerland and OSF BiH. <http://www.pro.ba/bosna-i-hercegovina-u-potrazi-za-izgubljenim-identitetom/>

**Political Practices of the (Post) Yugoslav Art**, 2006 – 2009, a multidisciplinary project consisting of research, mapping and

analyzing the historical, socio-political and economic conditions, which lead towards the contemporary constellation of art practices, intellectual and cultural production in the post-socialist region of the former Yugoslavia, now defined as West Balkans. Regional partners: **kuda.org** (Novi Sad), **Prelom Collective** magazine (Belgrade), **WHW Collective** (Zagreb), **SCCA** (Sarajevo).

The project was supported by European Cultural Foundation (ECF) and Erste Foundation. <http://pp-yu-art.net/en>

**ZVONO (The BELL)**, Annual Young Visual Artists Award – (Yvaa), started in BiH in 2006 as a ongoing project organized by SCCA in collaboration with Foundation for Civil Society and Trust for Mutual Understanding (New York). Local partners are Museum for Contemporary Art and Protok Collective, (Banja Luka). The Foundation for a Civil Society (FCS) with affiliates in eight countries in Central Europe and the Balkans has organized an international fellowship award program for young visual artists in the region. This program was established with President Havel and a group of artists in Czechoslovakia in 1990. Since then this annual program with national exhibitions and awards, including travel fellowships to the United States for artists under the age of 35, has now been expanded from the Czech Republic to Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, Albania and Bulgaria. In each country local institution organizes competition, selection of four artists by international jury, exhibition of finalists and the winner (Banja Luka, Sarajevo). Awarded artist spend six weeks in New York in at International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) center. Interesting to mention is the fact that the former SCCA-s are organizers of the awarding process in at least five countries.

ZVONO is supported (sporadically) by Ministries for culture in BiH and the French and German Embassies in B&H. [www.scca.ba/zvono](http://www.scca.ba/zvono) and [www.yvaa.net](http://www.yvaa.net)

**Individual Utopias Now and Then**, 2009 – 2012, a long term research and production project with multidisciplinary and multimedia approaches, focused on artistic practices and different media phenomena (individual and collective). The project is run by SCCA in partnership with Tirana Institute of Contemporary Art – T.I.C.A (Tirana), KUDA.ORG (Novi Sad).

Supported by Swiss Cultural Program (SCP) and Open Society Fund (OSF) BiH. [www.pro.ba/utopia](http://www.pro.ba/utopia)

## *Conclusion*

New forms of artistic communication become means for change, not only at the cultural level, but on the socio-political level as well. That's how SCCA recognizes its role in the process of democratization and in the creation of a civil society.

Culture and art in B&H and in the former Yugoslav countries play a decisive role in the process of catharsis, reconciliation, reestablishing broken ties, and abolishing physical and mental barriers. "In no country in Europe is cultural policy more important than in Bosnia Herzegovina. Culture is both the cause and solution to its problems. Cultural arguments were used to divide the country, yet culture might be able to bring the people back together again through initiating cultural programs that increase mutual understanding and respect."<sup>13</sup>

SCCA supports art which thinks critically and poses the provocative questions, which deals with social traumas, which demystifies the traditional notion of art as well as collective

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13 Cultural Policy in Bosnia Herzegovina: Experts Report, "Togetherness in Difference: Culture at the Crossroads in Bosnia Herzegovina", by Charles Landry; European Programme of National Cultural Policy Reviews; Steering Committee for Culture, COUNCIL OF EUROPE. This report was presented and accepted at the 1<sup>st</sup> Plenary Session, Strasbourg, October 9, 2002

ideological patterns and truths. Such art practice is, on one hand unaccepted (the majority of local art and cultural arbiters neither recognize nor admit these appearances as art), and on the other hand, unacceptable for political arbiters who control and behave as owners of the public space.

SCCA stands behind and promotes these new tendencies in art together with our partner's organizations from the region and the others who work on reestablishing broken ties among neighboring countries. Our method of organization, our working strategies and spheres of interest, have the potential to change the dominant cultural models and thought matrices. To make this potential visible and recognized is the main task and the goal of the new and emerging cultural subjects in the region.

SCCA (today - Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Art) not only changed the image of art in this country but also appeared as a mediator and promoter abroad for the works created in B&H and cooperated (professionally and logistically) with foreign professionals and institutions in organizing exhibitions in the region and wider area. It is difficult to say that the existence of SCCA in Bosnia and Herzegovina is more significant than in other countries (for the above-mentioned reasons), however the fact stands that it was the nucleus for generating and creating of a new art scene (not only in Sarajevo after the war but also in Banja Luka (Republika Srpska several years ago), focusing on the development of multimedia and art in public space, video – film production collaborating with artists in the country and in Diaspora, and creating two-way cooperation on an international level.

In short, the concrete output is as follows: without this Center, artists from Bosnia and Herzegovina would not be represented in international exhibitions since 1997, from Manifesta(s) to the International Biennales in Valencia, Istanbul, etc. In this moment the continuation of the work of SCCA is insecure, even considering its flexibility and ability to adapt to all sorts of conditions.

The survival of SCCA and the continuity of its essential activities is dependent on securing and maintaining stable partners who will support SCCA's projects financially; this means that they recognize not only the artistic merit, but also the cultural, social and political significance of SCCA in the development of a civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as SCCA's contribution to a positive image of B&H on the world stage.

**Dunja Blažević**



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