

Dunja Blažević

East Side Story; Local / Global

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Bosnia and Herzegovina



EUROPSKA PRIJESTOLNICA
KULTURE



Republic
of Croatia
Ministry
of Culture
Republika
Hrvatska
Ministarstvo
kulture



REPUBLIKA HRVATSKA
Ministarstvo
turizma



Institute for
Contemporary
Art Zagreb

This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

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The difference in the tempo and character of the transitional change the former Communist countries are going through is most drastically seen in the example of the former Yugoslavia. The gap between Slovenia, democratically ordered and policy-wise focused on economic self-sufficiency, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, a victim of the imperial aspirations of its neighbouring countries, looks unbridgeable. We recall that these two countries, until ten years ago, lived under the same conditions and were approximately at the same level of development. It is important to emphasize that the issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not only about transition-the process of moving from one political system to another-but also about the reconstruction of a country destroyed by war, and the creation of elementary conditions for the return of a hundred thousand refugees and displaced persons. The country is under the protectorate of the international community; it doesn't live from its own economy (which is in ruins and still shows no trace of recovery), but from donations, which are dwindling six years after the end of the war. The state institutions of this "Frankenstein" system, designed under the constitution patched together at Dayton, do not function. The international community, present here in the form of a great number of organizations (UN, EU, OSCE, UNHCR...), finances the reconstruction of the infrastructure (destroyed houses, electrical and water systems) in order to give refugees a place to return to, but not to give them something to live from. In other words, there are no new jobs; the economy doesn't move. Culture and art don't exist in the donors' reconstruction programs. This destroyed material condition is accompanied by the continuous departure of the young and educated, mostly to countries across the ocean, because Europe won't accept them. Since the end of the war, this percentage has grown. If we add to this the knowledge that during the war a large percentage of the active, educated population left the country, and that today entire professions are lacking (these days on the evening news there are reports that a piano tuner has

finally appeared in Sarajevo), then it becomes clear that the situation is catastrophic.

Neither a cultural policy nor a system of the arts exists; instead there exists the remains of the old system. The former program activities of museums, galleries and cultural centers have either failed or are barely scraping by on minimal budgetary resources. This year's budget of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport totals five million German Marks, or 0.5% of the national budget. However, what is most frightening is that the domestic government and public consider this situation normal. There are no crisis plans, no plans for intervention.

And how do the other actors on the cultural scene behave? In this material and systematic vacuum, making do is the basic mode of survival. Institutions that have their own building rent out museum-exhibition space to those who can pay. Here, therefore, programming policy doesn't even come into question. The Academy of Fine Arts, for example, in order to pay its heating bills, rents space to the Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Art and other tenants. In the final cynical analysis, we can conclude that these are the first signs of market behaviour. However, whether paradoxical or normal, the tough plant-art-still grows here, despite the absence of the essential conditions for a normal life (cultural policy, art market, sponsors, collectors and the other sources of financing, including public and private funds). Old institutions are not in the position to carry out their functions, and contemporary art has no benefit from them. A substitute or parallel system of non-governmental, non-profit organizations is now appearing, a new model flexible in structure, which has taken over the role of supporting new initiatives in contemporary art production in various fields. In this way projects have been supported by the Arts and Culture Program of the Open Society Fund (until 2000, when that program in Bosnia and Herzegovina was phased out), the Swiss foundation Pro Helvetia, which in 1999 started a program of donations for the development and improvement of precisely these new structures and projects, and the Austrian KulturKontakt Foundation. These foundations, however, finance individual programs only; they do not finance the operating costs of the cultural organizations themselves. Cultural centers of foreign embassies continue to finance, almost exclusively, programs that promote the culture of their countries abroad.

Similar new structures are appearing in the entire region and are supported for the most part by the same foundations, including the European Cultural Foundation (Amsterdam), which is not present in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the existence of that which we call contemporary art, an important role

from the end of the war in 1996 until today has been played by the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA). The fundamental model of the chain of centers that operated in 20 former Communist countries was conceived for work under conditions of transition—a small, effective and professional team and a flexible program whose primary goal was to keep contemporary art alive: financial support of new projects, assembling and editing documentation, communicating and making connections with professional institutions and individuals abroad, organizing exhibitions—actions that affirm contemporary tendencies in art that are complementary or alternative to the predominantly traditional and anachronistic local scene. 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 Fund 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. 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.

Aside from generating new production, which changed the image of art in this country, SCCA (today the Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Art) also appears as a mediator and promoter abroad for the work created in B.H. and cooperates (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 the creation of a new art scene, focusing on the development of multimedia and public art, working with artists in the country and in the 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 first International Biennale in Valencia in 2001. The continuation of the work of SCCA is insecure, even considering its flexibility and ability to adapt to all sorts of conditions.

I will mention just two more examples from Bosnia and Herzegovina typical for the situation in this country. One of the mega-projects in regional terms

is an international collection-the core of the future museum of contemporary art ARS AEVI, initiated and managed by Enver Hadžiomerspahić. The endeavour of gathering the collection, started already during the time of the war, is based on the formula of solidarity of European museums and centers of contemporary art with the city-martyr Sarajevo. This formula has two clear advantages: first it capitalizes in the best way on the tragedy of the city and arouses the consciences of people who feel a moral and professional obligation to participate in this project. The fact that the museums make the choice and give their stamp of approval to the chosen works, which the artists then donate to the collection, the author of the ARS AEVI project is freed of the responsibility to make the selection. Until now a more-or-less consistent collection of 100 works has been formed, a collection which gives a good overview of the last 30 years of contemporary art. The intention of Mr. Hadžiomerspahić is that the future museum be a global multicultural center, deriving the argument for this concept from the geopolitical position of Sarajevo. Setting aside international aspirations and projections, let's look from the inside at the advantages and disadvantages of the project. To the first question of whether we need an international museum of contemporary art, the answer is affirmative. However, deep misunderstandings and confusion, still not adequately stated out in the open, exist regarding the order of steps taken, the analysis of the situation, real needs and possibilities and in the first place the question of professional and material preconditions for the entire enterprise. Up to now no competent museological study has been proposed. The general consensus that we need a Museum prevents the posing of the serious professional question of the concept and contents, as well as the profile of the cadre who will work in the museum. This is, to be picturesque, like selling a model of a cake with all its outer festive decorations, without knowing its price or its ingredients or the recipe for baking it. As far as financing goes, from infrastructure onwards, the project is counting on the international community. Here one can theoretically rely on the cultural-political interest of European institutions and the governments of individual countries, but again, not for the long term. European bureaucracy will understand and reward the idea of spreading multiculturalism beyond its borders, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which this looks like a beneficial formula for preventing further ethnic wars. With this in mind the opinion of Miran Mohar (IRWIN, Ljubljana) is very interesting:

"Multiculturalism came to be an official ideology using art to control the neighborhood. Multicultural art became a way to make peace in conflict spots. This is an official need, and it's important to ask whose needs this serves. Artists are not police or social workers, but I find interesting

similarities here. As soon as art gets functionalised, it becomes what social realism was in the early stages of Communism. In a liberal system, multiculturalism can very easily become a kind of liberal social realism.”

(quoted from Transnacionala, Ljubljana 1999)

(The concept of multiculturalism here in Bosnia and Herzegovina is nevertheless a bit older and has a slightly different meaning from that of contemporary liberal-capitalistic discourse.)

In short, this project needs to be carefully considered and to be professionally set on its feet. Potentially, for the intensification of international communication, this museum is strategically important, but without the fundamental conditions here for the development of domestic and international art production, the project could be fated to become merely an expensive ornament.

A characteristic local (provincial) syndrome, which could be expressed, “Sarajevo is the navel of the world into which the entire planet flows,” describes various international quasi art festivals and biennials (whose effect is measured in the thousands of participants), as well as the initiative for the Winter Olympic games in 2010. I mention this kind of “planetary” endeavour in order to point out the serious symptom of illness, which is called—a normal answer to the non-normal situation of the lack of policy, system, will and competency for the creation of the basic conditions for the life of culture and art. Despite the fact that the life of sport’s organizations depends only on the enthusiasm of individuals, that new artistic production continues to be supported almost exclusively by SCCA, practice shows that only these kinds of “mega” projects find financing and sponsors, which is also a sign that globalization hasn’t passed us by (to be cynical again). This kind of “normal” behaviour in non-normal circumstances completely brings into question those unspectacular and everyday efforts to guarantee a minimum of professional performance, which would allow this country normal communication with the international artistic community.

So much for local conditions and domestic actors in the international scheme of things.