

Nermina Kurspahić

Art in Spite of Everything

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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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Adorno's question "Will art be possible after Auschwitz?" was recorded as a pathetic and ethic cry of an individual who became conscious in his human nature, stunned before the horror and chasm incited by beings of the same species who are only directed differently. Fortunately, everything that has happened in the field of art since the end of World War II shows clearly that the art is not just possible, but that the creation as the most suppressed expression and confirmation of human existence is *coditio sine qua none* of the art as well as of the very existence.

Some fifty years after the events and revelation of those events which incited the quoted question, it can now be reactualized, though somewhat modified before outbursts of evil, destruction and meanness of wild Balkans Nazis and fascists, aimed against the people who are not (like) them, against their culture, creative work, their material goods and even natural resources. We, the witnesses of the appearance and acting performance of those human monsters who, inspired by nationalist and chauvinist hatred and the call of the past, in their evildoers euphoria commit such crimes which make any qualification an euphemism and every attempt to rationalize nonsensical, we can only, in dumb amazement and disgust,

paraphrase the question from the beginning of the text: "Is art in these areas possible after all this horror?"

And an answer to this question is offered articulated, ethically and aesthetically postulated in spirit of an authentic artistic expression. Fine artists who remained in Sarajevo demonstrated-by mere presence on this battlefield of evil, but without pomp or pretension-their own moral habitus. They transformed their soundlessness into superior and coherent artistic speeches, corresponding not just with ruins, corpses and fire sites of their surroundings, but rising onto a planetary level to testify about the superiority of human creation over destruction (which is, unfortunately, also human).

The impulse of the artistic resistance and vital power perhaps first came from OBALA, the open stage which has for years, been a starting point, as well as a host to some important theater, fine arts, film, multimedial projects and artists. By a reflex which is not only defensive but also offensive, the employees of OBALA tried to gather those artists who remained in Sarajevo, lost and perhaps unable to follow the directives of their basic life orientation (creation). The answer (artistic) of Sarajevo fine artists to the call for action from OBALA was fast, strong, authentic and relevant in its result.

Almost all the artists, in all aspects adapted themselves to the existing conditions. First of all, they have worked though deprived of the conveniences of their studios, without adequate tools and materials. And, after all, the offered space for exhibiting the works is far from usual standards. In that sense, the war debris of former cinema SUTJESKA, at the very eve of the war reconstructed premises of OBALA, now of course destroyed, are used as a war gallery in which artists of different sensibilities and aesthetic foundations, artistic choice and language, exhibited their war works. The fascinating element of this project lies in the fact that the state of war, chaos, killing and destruction as its result, even in this Balkans (read, butchering) form, were not sufficient enough to destimulate or

silence the artists and their wish to create. Naturally, their work process as well as its results are not protected or hermetic in the sense that they do not feel the beat of life around them, the life which assumed a different quality in which mere survival and all the categories belonging to the narrowed existence or death, present and form a grammar of war life. That is why artists like Ante JURIČ, Zoran BOGDANOVIĆ, Nusret PAŠIĆ, Petar WALDEGG, Mustafa SKOPLJAK, Edo NUMANKADIĆ, Sanjin JUKIĆ and Radoslav TADIĆ (sometimes) abandon some elements of their elite exclusivity (both on idea level and its realization in adequate material), and ideologically and formally correspond with, for them as well, new war situation. And the war is a state in which all the noble and even normal human activities are denied and annihilated. The war, especially from the aspect of those who find it immanent (one of the war criminals boasted with that) means destruction, death, killing, darkness. For those who are the victims, it means suffering, misery, want. And for the artists who are on this side, it means an obligation to sublime the imposed state and with the power of individual inspiration, sensitivity, spirituality to express (by a creation) in an entirely unique way both a collective fate, suffering, grief on one level of meaning and an entirely universal, transcendental value, metaphysics connotated by every real art work.

Ante JURIČ has felt that the war time is an (artistic) provocation of banality which requires an adequate and direct answer. His shots at placed glass and metal targets are the paraphrases of some similar actions of many Avant-garde artists; but in these Sarajevo war circumstances they are authentic, thought-out and spiritually stimulated, aimed, controlled and perfectly harmless (to life and limb) expressions of an artist who is a humanist by definition. Strictness and control of the artistic moves of Ante JURIČ is also shown in his work with white mud-spotted fabric put in one cleaned corner of the destroyed cinema SUTJESKA.

In contrast to him, Zoran BOGDANOVIĆ is somewhat "more talkative". In Cyrillic cursive of 15th century Bosnia he wrote DESTRUCTION-SPIRITUALITY-REMATERIALISATION, repeating the sign in English as well and thus made an ironical "short circuit", which takes its victims in these areas. The second part of his work, shown in the mentioned cinema as well, are white sheets painted with irregular and intuitively formed graphisms.

Nusret PAŠIĆ, in the spirit of Dada artist Kurt Schwitters, made a series of paintings on the pages of daily paper "Oslobođenje" which in these war circumstances records a chronology of crimes from this area. The paintings are covered with plastic foil instead of glass-material which experiences its culmination of usage in this town without glass. Nusret PAŠIĆ is an artist of exceptional sensibility and intelligence, the artist who has always known how to react to existing external provocations with his work. Therefore, his paintings on daily papers are not a mere Dada paraphrase but a true impulse of an artist jammed by "miserable times". PAŠIĆ made dumb wooden witnesses of those times which, put between scaffold and a car-wreck, like totems, carry in themselves the secret of eternity.

Refuse that remained after the destruction is a starting point for works of many artists. Mustafa SKOPLJAK also uses glass pieces collected from different buildings to make series of spiral-shaped sculptures arranged into a loose cone. Precise forms which used to be SKOPLJAK's favourite means of expression before the war, are now shattered and transformed into artistically controlled chaos incited by war destruction. SKOPLJAK decided to speak about annihilation and death through a very suggestive work with sand in which he buried human masks, like in a grave. This performance, the burying of masks, is moving and magnificent in the simplicity of its idea, and it was realized in the course of destruction.

Another artist who formed his art in the silence of graphic syntax during the peaceful times, has fully adapted himself to the existing circumstances. Peter WALDEGG's starting point is a concept that the art is a creation per se, even when it is, out of various reasons, subject to devastation and destruction. That is why he challenged the reality with artistic superiority building free sculpture forms from pieces of bricks which probably had an utilitarian past being once a part of building. Those shapes which WALDEGG built in such a way, later became objects of innocent children disarrangement, or rather messing up. The message of this work is quite clear and unambiguous: creation is mightier than any kind of destruction.

Edo NUMANKADIĆ has for almost two decades formed his own art language, reducing it to a basic level (colours, forms), but filling it with intellectual power and spirituality. His works correspond with reality only by external nomenclature, but otherwise they exist by themselves and their immanent signs and symbols. Artistic strictness of NUMANKADIĆ's latest cycle (TRAILS) allows him to connect his ideas with actual circumstances even to a greater extent than with his installation (a table with various details) especially made for the exhibition within the project of OBALA.

Sanjin JUKIĆ is imaginative in his artistic expression and turned towards all the other artistic medias in a larger measure than any of the authors included in this project. That might be a result of his education which is not primarily in the field of arts, but literature and philosophy. His works are therefore conceptual and accompanied by abundance of quotations and use of a ready-made principle, from Russian Avant-garde to Joseph Beuys. For an artist of his sensibility, the war is not in any case an obstacle, but an intellectual challenge to which JUKIĆ readily reacts applying all the aspects and wrapping; materials of war. Everything functions artistically in his works: letters and humanitarian boxes, flags and typically Bosnian furniture elements (wood-carved coffee tables).

Radoslav TADIĆ himself admits that he is an artist who reached his full artistic power in some different times. We know TADIĆ as an artist of exquisite visual culture, might and ability to transpose various visual and intellectual incitements into fine arts. A perfect example is his prewar homage to Kazimir Malevič who directed TADIĆ towards reduced art, with black and white hues. In present decoding those black and white drawings, combined with hospital cabinets and unreally beautiful apples "sound" prophetically, as heralds of some (present) bad times in which some nicer things are still possible.

With this project of presentation of some fine artists' works, OBALA tells us that nice things are possible even in the scenography of Sarajevo debris.