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Variable Geometry: Contemporary Art in Bosnia & Hercegovina

“One of the Few Things that Bosnia-Hercegovina still produces, is artists”¹

1. Introduction

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.

This, very much, is 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.

The roots of the current impasse in the visual art world in Bosnia and Hercegovina lie, as with so many other problems faced by the country, in the Dayton agreement of 1995. The Dayton agreement sought to delineate an ethnically divided state, and provide a platform for it to move forward in the years ahead. However, as far as culture was concerned, there was a catastrophic oversight. In the now redundant Yugoslav constitution, funding for culture was the responsibility of the government, both at Federal level, and at the level of the old Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina. Legal drafters failed, in the Dayton agreement, to define exactly who was responsible for the funding of culture in the post-conflict new state of BiH. As a result, cultural institutions in the country disappeared into a legislative limbo from which they show no signs of emerging, nearly twenty years later. The net result is that seven key national cultural institutions- including the National Museum of BiH, The Historical Museum of BiH, and the National Gallery of BiH, have existed in “survival mode” only. The National Gallery was obliged to close in late 2011, and did not re-open until the following year (and then only on a commercial basis, with the library and permanent collection still inaccessible to visitors), whilst the National Museum of BiH lost its fight for survival, closing finally on 4 October 2012², having previously been continuously open during the Second World War, and the more recent 1992-95 siege of Sarajevo.

The Sarajevo sculptor and installation artist Daniel Premec said last summer, in an interview, that *‘Bosnia and Hercegovina is an observer in the international art scene, rather*

1 Gordana Anđelić-Galić, conversation with the author, July 2012

2 A full summary of the current position of BiH's national cultural institutions can be found at <http://www.cultureshutdown.net/summary-of-institutions-positions/>

than a participant'.³ Such a view seems to be challenged by the welcome return of a representative from the country at Venice in 2013, but 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 in Paris, as examples of artists who have made international careers; 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. Yet, in BiH, the nation's five art schools- Sarajevo, Trebinje, Široki Brijeg, Banja Luka, Mostar- churn out an estimated two to three hundred graduates per year, into a domestic art market that barely exists. In some ways, the fate of those who are not fortunate to develop an international exhibiting practice, should concern us more than the fifty or so restless talents that have emerged in the last decade.

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.

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

3 Interview with the author, July 2012

exhibition of BiH art in twenty years, at the 2013 Venice Biennale.

2. Mladen Miljanović: Sweet Symphony of Absurdity

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.

On opening night, Miljanović performed in the first, small room of this exhibition space, standing against a wall with his 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, however, fits perfectly against a back wall and dominates this main area. This is a triptych of engraving on granite, taking its inspiration from Hieronymous Bosch's 1503–1504 Garden of Earthly Delights in the Prado in Madrid.

The Belgrade artist Mileta Prodanović wrote a celebrated essay on the fashion for opulent tombstone decorations for deceased Zemun criminals⁴; 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 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 Milicija man writing a traffic violation ticket for a *Stojadin* driver, to a partisan figure on a horse. 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.

The video piece *Sweet Symphony of Absurdity* continues this theme of discord and neurotic absurdity. The members of the Banja Luka Philharmonic slowly emerge into our 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 exhibition, Miljanović included, again carved on granite, Jusuf Hadžifejzović's observation 'From Kitsch to Blood is Only One Step'; in the context of the humorous installations

4 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, Zoius Press, London, 2006, pp. 88-97

elsewhere in the show, this quotation assumed a sober and menacing overtone.

3. Performing Conflict: Lala Raščić

Lala Raščić's performance project The Damned Dam, which the artist has been working on for over four years, is based partly on the Modrac 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.

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 breaching 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 celebrity is enough to make us forget the impact of the rest of our actions on the world around us.

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.

4. Commodity, Conflict & Gender: Lana Čmajčanin & Adela Jušić

Adela Jušić's sound installation *Ride the Recoil* 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 piquant criticism of the video game *Sniper : Ghost Warrior 2*, which is set in Sarajevo. Relating programmatically to her earlier work *The Sniper*, this piece 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 painful variance with the historical reality of the siege of the Bosnian capital in that year.

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*. 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 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 dis-similar 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 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 vestigial hope of achieving closure through the arrest and trial of the perpetrators long having vanished.

5. Radenko Milak: Painting Memories of Conflict

Radenko Milak's watercolour series *Flags* 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. 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 a football World Cup qualifying match in Athens 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 (I am thinking of Courbet, and the Scottish painter James Guthrie), 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.

6. Conclusion

In this brief analysis, we have seen the response of the visual artists of BiH, to issues of post-conflict and transition, as multi layered, complex and intensely personal. The conflict of the 1990s and the flawed Dayton accord that ended the fighting has, for many, frozen this society in a moment in time, unable to go back to a nostalgically viewed past, or to move forward beyond its chronically dysfunctional present. For as long as the present socio-political conditions hold sway in BiH, it seems likely that artists will continue to respond to their consequences. The major question, which cannot yet be answered, is how quickly BiH artists will move beyond the territories of past conflicts, to those which shape and define the country's present and uncertain future.

