

Art as the result of society's transformation

An overview of contemporary visual arts in the Republic of Srpska

When we talk about contemporary art in the Republic of Srpska, its origins and progress, we roughly take into consideration the past ten years. In terms of territory, this separation of entities within Bosnia and Herzegovina is necessary and understandable for various reasons. Mutual division and isolation in the aftermath of civil war of the early 1990s, after which there was a slow and painful process of recovery and normalisation of conditions of cultural production, as well as the activities from the domain of visual arts in the Republic of Srpska and the BH Federation which happen independently of each other. Soon after the war ended, the preconditions were met for emergence of a new art scene in the BH Federation with the centre in Sarajevo, mitigated by the existing structures such as, the Academy of Visual arts and museums, whose activities are largely supported by foreign donations. Foundation of the Soroš Centre for contemporary art was of particular importance in 1996, which was later named Sarajevo Contemporary Art Centre. Since 2006, they have been awarding the Zvono award, the only prize for contemporary visual art in BH for young artists of both entities in order to promote them abroad.

During the 1990's, the art scene in the Republic of Srpska functions in isolation in relation to other parts and is limited to modest achievements of the local community, with a certain number of mostly older active artists. New artistic tendencies appear much later with the establishment of a cultural and political centre in Banja Luka, mainly the Academy of Arts in 1998 and the transformation and renaming of the Art Gallery into the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Republic of Srpska in 2004. We should also mention the Academy of Fine Arts in Trebinje established in 1995, with several successful artist of the younger generation. Additionally, there is **namaTRE.ba**, an online platform for contemporary art, set up in 2006. Its main focus are video, film and performance. Nevertheless, a real generation of artists, interested in new media, but also aware that they have to position themselves in relation to current parameters of the place and times in which they appeared with the first graduates of the Academy in Banja Luka. The cornerstone is collaboration with similar institutions and presentation of recent artistic tendencies in the region. As the main institution and the strongest link in the process of creating contemporary art in the RS, it became a venue and a platform for this group of young artists. They stepped into the spotlight in 2007 during the Interspace exhibition in regional centres: Sarajevo, Novi Sad, Skopje and Belgrade. The activities of Protok, Centre for Visual Communication, a non-profit organisation formed in 2005 by several of Banja Luka's artists, stood out as another important factor in the process of revival of the local art scene. Their most important projects include the International exhibition Spaport, first of its kind in BH, which has been held three times so far.

If we take into account the different time frames, local features and circumstances, we can detect two separate scenes in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole. However, their functioning and mutual relation is not well defined and established, given that opposing political, ideological and propagandist factors inevitably come into play. Generally speaking, visual art in BH goes hand in hand with the complex socio-political reality of the past twenty years. Transformation of the Bosnian and Herzegovian society, marked by a series of political processes, from the decline of the SFRY, many years of war and to the Dayton Peace Treaty and re-establishment of a new, complex state structure to enable co-existence between the warring peoples is the context which undoubtedly determines and relates to all internal developmental processes. Since its inception, contemporary BH art is manifested as a direct consequence of all this, inseparable from contemplation of war and conditions in its aftermath. There is a country divided according to ethnic entities during transition into a democratic and neoliberal state. In order to reveal the principles which govern the representation of the socio-political map and its reading in visual art, here is a selection of several works, considered to be the most representative of contemporary art in the Republic of Srpska. In this way, there is a tendency to discover issues and unresolved conflicting fields which are results of an artificial and essentially dysfunctional model of co-existence within a single state, while maintaining ethnic divisions. Artists insist on finding ways to confront and overcome these issues.

Most authors favour repetition of motives that refer to Bosnia and Herzegovina as the dominant thematic corpus, regarding the relation to the recent war past, as well as the present which is oversaturated

by intranational ethnic rivalry, especially when it comes to issues of language, writing and state emblems, often resulting in absurdity and contradiction. All of these elements are frequently seen as impositions, foreign and debilitating factors. Artists from the RS approach them from a more or less critical and subversive standpoint.

Video artwork "BHS" (2010) by **Igor Bošnjak** (from Trebinje) deals with language as a means to establish and point out mutual diversity and equality of the three constitutional nations in BH. The former Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian, alongside the processes of formation and affirmation of national identities – Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian – was transformed into three separate languages, based on minimal and far-fetched differences which became mandatory in the public domain to stress political correctness, often with absurd results. One example would be sign language, more specifically, something that happened a few years ago, when a television station addressed the need to have three sign language interpreters. The video repeats this situation with three simultaneous sign language interpretations which logically do not differ from each other in any way, underlining how grotesque this sort of manipulation is. Apart from language, there is also writing, i.e. two alphabets, the Latin and the Cyrillic, obligatory in all aspects of institutional activities as a public manifestation of equality. On the other hand, using or choosing one of the alphabets, depending on ethnicity is often a parameter of correctness or (in)eligibility. In her video *Write yourself...Erase yourself* (2010) Borjana Mrđa (from Banja Luka) writes and erases her name and surname on a piece of paper, alternating between Latin and Cyrillic. This mechanical action gradually becomes more intense and aggressive and the paper is eventually torn up. The alphabet is one of the key aspects of artist's personal identity because she is used to using both alphabets. But, in the new political context which insists on separation based on alphabet, it becomes a sign of national ethnicity. The duality causes confusion, so writing and erasing your name quickly and demonstratively unravels as a physical manifestation of artist's introspection.

National emblems in the works of artists from the RS detect and observe different models of political manipulation, since it is precisely these elements that are used to dispute or cause misunderstanding of political factors, while ignoring real problems in BH, most importantly poor economic and living conditions. Further, the flag, coat of arms or the anthem were not adopted through mutual agreement, they were imposed by the High Representative for BH. Very bad design by Igor Bošnjak (2010) is composed of six oils on canvas with actual design suggestions for the BH flag in 1998. These are attempts to find the proper forms and colours according to diversity and equality among the constituent peoples. By presenting these examples of bad design, the author reveals limited possibilities of finding a neutral, acceptable and applicable solution, since the flag was a burning issue for many years between the political elites. Finally, the only reference to BH on the flag is the yellow triangle, as a geographical reference, while other elements place it in a broader European context. Nevertheless, the RS has had a separate ethnic flag since 1992, constitutionally confirmed in 2006, while the state flag refers to the Federation of BH, because the actual federal flag was revoked in 2007 because it did not represent the three constituent nations. In that regard, the relation to state emblems varies from adoption to ignoration, depending on the ethnic group, as a symptom of opposing sides which infrequently tend to exclude each other. Bojana Tamindžija (from Trebinje) attempts to confront the opposing factors within this problematic construct in her performance *I am not naked, I am not alone* (2009) at the Banski dvor Cultural Centre in Banja Luka. It consisted of reciting the national anthem in three varieties, respectful of the three languages, but in reality without any differences, while the author was naked and draped in the BH flag. Intentionally pointing out controversial state emblems in an institution which is marked exclusively with RS emblems, is additionally supported by statements such as "I love my anthem, I love my flag, my body is the body of my state." This kind of provocative and direct intervention within one's ethnicity indicates manipulation methods which are present everywhere and applied by all political structures in BH, that treat the individual as only a body, unable to resist or make any change.

The immediacy of the war experience as a permanent source of trauma, both individually and collectively for all BH citizens, provides constant artistic production at the RS art scene. Dealing with this extremely difficult and painful topic primarily confronts personal traumas to find a way to overcome them using different artistic strategies. We have to bear in mind that years after the civil war, that same war has been

systematically exploited through one-sided interpretations of the past, determining the levels of responsibility, as well as identifying the roles of criminals and victims. Also, the external experience of the BH conflict implies the accepted and well-rooted image of the Serbian people as the only culprit, supported by the media. Occupation (2007-2008) by Mladen Miljanović (from Banja Luka) are on-site interventions on specific locations, such as exhibition spaces in New York, Graz, Philadelphia and Hegenheim. The author occupies the sites by wallpapering the interiors and exteriors with a matrix of multiplied soldier figures in black and white, in regular, endless rows. This piece functions as an invasion on the world of art centres, mirroring subtle, clever and complex processes of transformation from military to artistic as the core concept. The artist, Miljanović, attended military school and instead of furthering his military career, the school was shut down, the army was reduced and the former barracks in Banja Luka became the Academy of Fine Arts. This is what caused his drastic transformation from soldier to artist and determined the type of art he would be engaged with. In his work, there is an awareness of the stereotypical views of the ethnic group he belongs to, the imposed identity of the occupator, which he tries to deconstruct by overstressing this component when showing his work on the international scene.

The role and power of the media in constructing the truth and perspective regarding specific events, in this case the war in BH, is examined by Radenko Milak (Banja Luka) in his work *And what else did you see – I could not see everything* (2010). In a series of more than twenty oils on canvas, the author uses a motive from a photograph taken in Bijeljina in 1992 by Ron Haviv, an American photographer. The motive is repeated in same formats and same colour schemes, with minimal difference. It is a violent scene depicting a member of the Tigers paramilitary unit terrorising non-Serbian civilians. The image circled the world as one of the most brutal scenes ever documented during the war.

Its revival through the painting medium many years later is part of a personal process which deals with the past and questions collective responsibility. In the present context, where BH nations live together, the war trauma functions as an active point of conflict in the process of assigning, escaping or absolving blame. On the other hand, there is the issue of the manipulative potential of the media image – how this photograph can allow insight into the truth about war crimes in BH – because no matter how valid it is as a document of a moment in time, it is an excerpt in a wider chain of events which remains invisible and can be selectively overlooked.

Artists in the RS feel the need to determine their own position and perspective as creators with regard to art outside the BH domain. They are aware of the isolation, marginalisation and the impossibility of stepping out of the complex and self-limiting internal field of politics, which has resulted, among other things, in two art scenes and an undefined art policy for production and presentation of art on national level. Under these circumstances, promotion of contemporary BH art on the cultural map of the world is left to individual efforts and aspiration of NGOs. Veso Sovilj's *Art of Bosnia and Herzegovina* is within the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2006) talks about precisely this issue. As a professor at the Academy of Arts in Banja Luka, he has influenced many artists of the younger generation. The piece consists of a print of the BH borders on a white surface and a short text: "Art of Bosnia and Herzegovina is within the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, limitlessly, enormously I multiply the limited borders (...) production is without support, post-production is without support, without support the artist stays within the territorial borders..." These statements refer to author's personal fate. He was part of the neo-avangarde movement during the 1980s, and one of its most talented representatives in Yugoslavia. His rising career was cut short by the war and years of isolation. Also, this is a realistic presentation of the BH situation when referring to the art system, or lack thereof. *BH Imaginary Pavilion* is a project/action by Tač.ka (from Prijedor) from 2007-2009. It is based on the fact that BH does not have a pavilion on world art events, such as during the Venice Biennale. The first action was performed in 2007 as a protest and an attempt to symbolically construct the BH pavilion. Members of the group visited the 52nd Venice Biennale and documented their interventions – putting or inserting black cardboard dots, 80 centimetres in diameter, in the pavilions. In relation to the exponents, the dots corresponded in form and content, so the intervention curve went from one work to the next to symbolically draw in a BH pavilion. The action was presented at the University Campus in Banja Luka with a sign at the entrance to the exhibition saying "Bosnia and Herzegovina", just like at the Venice Biennale. This led to the

university issuing an order to take down the sign because it is potentially controversial and uncalled for from an ideological standpoint. It is precisely this kind of reaction that is one of the symptoms of the comprehensive political context which hinders the presentation of BH art abroad, due to inability, incompetence or lack of interest shown by relevant authorities. Given that in the two years leading up to the next Biennale, the issue had not been resolved despite open discussions and public appearances, Tač.ka group organised another action in 2009 called Can you imagine a BH pavilion at the Venice Biennale? They asked forty random people and staff members at the Biennale to show them where the BH pavilion was. All of them were eager to help them, convinced that such a pavilion existed, since every country in the the world is allowed to participate. This underlines the absurdity of the situation in which internal organisational barriers prevent the presentation of art at an important event.

Ljubija kills (2010) by Sandra Dukić and Boris Glamočanin (from Banja Luka) deals with postwar reality during transition in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including consequences of political and economic processes over the past twenty years which directly terrorised ordinary people, pushing them to the side, who are now disenfranchised and left to survive under extreme conditions. A typical example can be found in Ljubija near Prijedor, a small mining town in former Yugoslavia. The mines stopped working when the war broke out and went back to business after twelve years when a foreign company Arcelor Mittal, bought a major share. This, however, did not solve unemployment among large numbers of refugees and returnees, ignored by the state and ethnic constituency as social waste. Since Ljubija foundry made sewage manholes for the entire region, artists used the motive of the manhole as the symbol of Ljubija, its past and present. Ljubija kills consists of a table for four in the form a manhole and from which we can hear confessions of people from Ljubija. Then there is Man-hole, where artists left imprints of manholes in various public places, as well as coordinated action with women's association Rudarka from Ljubija, called I don't see and I don't hear. Women from Ljubija made little eye and ear patches with the logo of the mine, on sale during every exhibition to help them out financially. Presenting a clearly critical attitude to a problem that has been overlooked by society, Ljubija kills is a reminder, a warning and a call for change to which it contributes to a certain degree.

Since its beginning, contemporary art in the Republic of Srpska is an active field for detecting anomalies in Bosnian and Herzegovian society and their critical analysis. It is a young , developing scene, and the authors selected have shown they are willing to provoke and reveal frustrating, conflicted focal points that shape their reality. There is a subversive tendency towards any kind of internal political manipulation. The topics they are dealing with are typical indicators of bigger issues, always in the context of BH as a whole. When considering war traumas, however, artists in the RS have not dealt with loss and terrors of their own ethnic group, although they have all experienced the war directly. There is a tendency to universally approach the horrors of war critically without ignoring the burden of responsibility of the Serbian nation, which is openly demonstrated in some cases. This phenomenon could be explained in the context of external perception of the civil war in BH, or the constant ideological climate that benefited the artists of the Federation. The dominant theme with a significant number of Sarajevo authors relating to the war from the position of the occupied victim, is correspondent and immanent to the international view of Bosnian Serbs as aggressors and criminals. Therefore, the way artists from the RS deal with this topic, stepping into the international scene almost ten years after federal artists, is consequently steeped in trauma and frustration caused by internal processes and awareness of how they are perceived as a nation. In this way, their ambition to be recognised outside BH, as well as to require foreign funding to revitalize the local art scene, inevitably implies an awareness of the reduced possibility to speak out about the war, a need to adjust and take an acceptable ideological stand.

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