

**The Contemporary Thesaurus: The contextual determinants  
of present-day art practices in the Republic of Srpska**

*About The Contemporary Thesaurus*

In formulating the concept of the exhibition *The Contemporary Thesaurus*, shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Republic of Srpska in February 2016, its author drew on the postulates of museum thesaurisation theory, central to the work of museums and the starting point for a whole range of professional activities of museum curators. The concept of the show is grounded in the notion of **thesaurus** (lat. *thēsauros*), which museum science associates with the process of building up museum collections and which provides the collections with an ideational and cognitive foundation. Thesaurisation is an abstract evolution running in parallel with the making of a museum collection, which takes an actual form through the process implementation; it is the result of the value recognised to be inherent to objects and phenomena (their museality), as well as equivalent to the sum and identical to the treasury of the most significant discoveries and revelations; finally, it does not constitute a closed, inert system but a continuous and open-ended process that supports the broadening and increase of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

As the central cultural institution in the Republic of Srpska that works in the visual arts field, the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Republic of Srpska has focused its scope of activities in the last ten years on building and developing the regional contemporary visual arts scene, by actively identifying the most relevant phenomena and promoting and encouraging the major contributors. Hence the exhibition operates as a **contemporary thesaurus** – a peculiar hybrid cognitive construct that unifies the mass or thesaurus of knowledge of contemporary art in the Republic of Srpska, its contextual determinants, theoretical provenance and media particularities.

The exhibition included works by ten artists (Igor Bošnjak, Nikola Kekerović, Ninoslav Kovačević, , Mladen Miljanović, Radenko Milak, Borjana Mrđa, Mila Panić, Selma Selman, Saša Tatić and the Tač.ka Group of Visual Artists), identified as the main agents of this process, because of their strong and continued presence on the art scene in the Republic of Srpska, which can generally be connected to the last ten years. The exhibition recognised, singled out and defined those phenomena that have come to continuously raise the quality of contemporary art made in the region, as relative to a number of parameters of contemporaneity and its redefinition as resulting from current theories of art. The exhibition *The Contemporary Thesaurus* aimed to show the continued

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the theory of museum thesaurisation, see: Bulatović, Dragan. *Od trezora do tezaurusa. Teorija i metodologija izgradnje tezaurusa baštinjenja*. Beograd: Centar za muzeologiju i heritologiju Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu, 2015; Stransky Z, Zbynek. *Temelji opšte muzeologije*. (documents.tips/documents/stranski-temelji-opste-muzeologije.html).

existence of this vivid and heterogeneous micro art scene and its growth over a relatively short period of time, marked by a pronounced artistic pluralism and uniqueness of the work of several generations of young artists.

Following the more recent museum trends, this exhibition promoted a more open and democratic approach to cultural heritage and its presentation, adhering to the principle “make a combination and take a risk.” According to this principle, works of art are selected and grouped into blocks around a theme – they are juxtaposed in new and unexpected ways, creating temporary dynamic semiotic clusters (Prajor 2014, 753–754), as illustrated by *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico*, the central international exhibition of the 55th Venice Biennale, held in 2013. This exhibition and the concept that underlay the Biennale were founded on the idea of an imaginary museum containing all of the world’s knowledge, i.e., universal, comprehensive knowledge, encapsulating human civilisation in all its infinite diversity and plenitude. Accordingly, the exhibition freely coupled contemporary art with historical artifacts and randomly found objects.<sup>2</sup>

The principle of having unexpected combinations of elements reflected in *The Contemporary Thesaurus* thanks to the inclusion of pieces that formally and “at first glance” did not fit in the ensemble of the selected contemporary works. These pieces were the drawings found on the inside of the WWII memorial on Banj Brdo Hill on the outskirts of Banja Luka. This monumental memorial was made by Antun Augustinčić in 1961, and in the 1980’s Ismar Mujezinović decorated its inner walls with scenes from the Second World War based on the sketches made by Ismet Mujezinović, his father. Most of the composition has been ruined and thus irretrievably lost, and can only be partly reconstructed today thanks to the film negatives made by Dušan Momčilović, which have been preserved and are among the few original documents related to this forgotten art composition, locked in the inside of this memorial falling into decay. The film negatives have the potential of “living” documentary material, meaning that they can be reproduced, digitised and presented in new ways in line with the dictates of modern exhibitions, such as the *lightbox* installation showing a selection of battle scenes, soldiers, weaponry, civilians and animals in the hell of warfare, made specifically for this occasion. A complicated process was used to reconstruct the original composition, i.e. join and arrange the prints as fragments of reality, which evidently existed once as they were recorded by a camera, bringing back to life scenes from the past right before the eyes of the viewers and as if across time gaps (Bart 2011, 80–87). Bearing in mind parameters of history, ideology, politics, cultural heritage and a specific territory, the Mujezinović drawings were given the symbolic role of the unifying factor in the process of thesaurisation of knowledge of the abundant visual arts made in this region.

### *History/(Post)-memory/Nostalgia*

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<sup>2</sup> See: Gioni, Massimiliano and Natalie Bell. *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico. 55th International Art Exhibition/La Biennale di Venezia, Volume I*. Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2013.

Reconsideration of history and the past, most often critical, from the perspective of revision of the “end of communism” through pushing forward the “communist idea” and recollections of life in the socialist Yugoslavia, has been the focus of the contemporary art practice of a great many artists from and/or working in the former Yugoslavia and the region of South East Europe (the Balkans). This interest in the “communist era” and the utopian narratives of the classless communist society has taken the form of a tendency to offer a political and cultural alternative to the contingencies suffered by contemporary society under neoliberal conditions, and is usually the product of disillusionment with the reality of nationalism and capitalism, having emerged as a kind of resistance by the generations that were raised and formed after the collapse of real and self-governing socialism, in the circumstances of global transitions in the 1990’s and 2000’s (Šuvaković 2012, 222–230). The current sentiments in favour of communism are relatable to the phenomenon of “post-communist nostalgia,” the various ways in which the communist era is evoked as a period of ostensible stability, optimism and security (Todorova 2010, 1–13). As for how the communist and socialist past has been dealt with by present-day artists in the Republic of Srpska, the process concerns the presence of post-memories in the minds of those “born afterwards,” i.e. of second-hand memories constructed by the young generations based on the legacy of the direct, first-hand experience of the past of the actual eyewitnesses, and essentially keeps going the process of articulation of those memories in the collective conscious (Gibbons 2007, 73).

The role of the artist as a second-hand provider of accounts and bearer of post-memories, decoding of the past and projection of memories in response to today’s crisis and conflicts are the key points of departure for **Ninoslav Kovačević** in creating his art. Although belonging to a generation born during the actual breakup of socialist Yugoslavia, this artist has given us a series of works (installations, photographs, videos, performances and drawings) that he made applying the appropriation principle, i.e. borrowing from the plethora of notions, symbols and texts that no longer belong to anyone and “quietly lie on the dump of historical waste as the legacy of the communist period” (Groys 2008, 168). The photograph *Corner* was taken by chance, as the artist searched for relics of the past, still present in various aspects and the arena of everyday life of his hometown and country. It shows an almost surreal scene photographed on the roof of a cultural institution in Banja Luka in 2014, a discarded bust of Josip Broz Tito, his face turned to the wall (cornered). The work *Ideological Imprint* consists of photographs documenting a performance Kovačević staged during the *Ars Kozara* festival in 2012, during which he lay still on the ground, naked to the waste and exposed to the strongest imaginable UV radiation. The performance referenced the famous performance by Dennis Oppenheim, who also lay in the sun, with an open book on his chest as the only protection against the sunrays; in his performance, Kovačević used a copy of the children’s picture book called *Kozara* published in 1980 as part of the Bambi Lektira reader series. The regime published this kind of literature with the goal of infecting even the youngest with its ideology and propaganda; this picture book in particular could still be found and was available in the early 1990’s, when the artist was growing up. He stumbled upon the actual picture book used in the performance years later, while rummaging through the books withdrawn from the collection of the National and University Library in Banja Luka. The power of the picture book to leave an indelible imprint on the

memory and shape the beliefs of young generations, including the artist himself, is equated in the performance with the intensity of solar radiation leaving a physical mark on a person's skin. The conceptual framework of the performance also inspired and allowed the artist to make the series of drawings *Archive of Remembrance* (2014), in which he combined life-like scenes of war violence with World War II battle cries, based on the illustrations and text in the picture book, which is entirely inappropriate for children, according to today's pedagogical norms. The drawings are on several layers of overlapping sheets of tracing paper, with the drawings on successive sheets partly covering those on the sheets below, and together they represent a transparent compositional whole. The attempt to cover these inappropriate scenes corresponds to the process of suppression or archiving of memories.

Also interpretable using the discourse of the art of remembrance is *The Ars Kozara Outdoor Art Laboratory*, a project initiated and staged by the **Tač.ka Group of Visual Artists** (Nemanja Čađo, Dajan Špirić, Dragan Inđić and Biljana Banović). This art event has taken place on Mount Kozara near Prijedor since 2007 and is the result of the four artists' efforts to put on the map, help emancipate and revitalise a small and underdeveloped community that is their hometown, by cannily incorporating its greatest asset into contemporary art, resulting in an international event that is unique in the region and that has attracted artists from around the world. Conceived as an outdoor art laboratory, *Ars Kozara* is a festival during which artists gather together, over a period of several days, at special places across the Kozara National Park, well-known for its thick vegetation and abundant wildlife. The artists create pieces of art using the materials they find on the spot and then leave them right there where they made them, exposed to the elements and allowed to fall apart. The concept underlying *Ars Kozara* can be associated with the *Art in Nature* activities and reinterprets that behind the *Land Art* movement back in the 1960's. It brings together nature and art, and the artworks created are relatively short-lived, easily decay, and are also allowed to decompose; it is entirely uncommercial and challenges the way most contemporary art is market-dependent and promoted through an institutional network. Importantly, the concepts behind the works created outdoors during this event often directly or indirectly relate to Mount Kozara as a site of historical, political and cultural memory, i.e. they are created as visual articulations of the so-called loan memory (Hranova 2014, 233–250). The contemporary art made during the *Ars Kozara* festival inevitably means the participating artists know or get to learn about the dominant historical context of the venue they are at, which has to do with the WWII anti-fascist liberation movement and resistance to the aggressor. A great many human lives were lost at that time, and to commemorate that loss, the SFRJ authorities built a monumental memorial complex, designed by Dušan Džamonja, in the central part of the Kozara National Park in 1972.

The *Transformers* video by **Igor Bošnjak** (2015) is one of the most recent examples of appropriation in contemporary art of recognisable and well-known symbols of the region's communist and socialist past. The video shows the monumental Tjentište Memorial, part of the Valley of Heroes Memorial Complex, designed by Miodrag Živković and erected in 1971, which commemorates the River Sutjeska Battle, one of the most fierce, bloodiest and greatest battles of the

Yugoslav People's Liberation War. Once a world-famous tourist destination, this memorial ensemble has shared the fate of all the other gigantic modernist structures of this kind – the forgotten relics of a past ideology that recognised the potential of the visual arts as a *par excellence* communication channel capable of reaching the masses. Nevertheless, these colossal symbols of resistance to fascism still fascinate the visitor, like in the years immediately after they were built, with their intriguing, almost futuristic shapes and the special ambient quality obtained by inserting artworks in landscape, which is why they often provide inspiration for all sorts of projects in the field of popular culture.<sup>3</sup> In his video Bošnjak draws a parallel, at the aesthetic-visual and formal-associative levels, between the Tjentište Memorial and the Transformers, an international media franchise launched in 1984 with the manufacturing of the famous transforming toy robots, which includes comic books, video games, cartoons and feature films. According to the artist, in his video he plays with visual codes and significations and questions the identity of the designer of the visual identity of the Transformers.

### *The realism of lived experiences/Trauma/Identity*

Any account of how and under what conditions the contemporary art scene in the Republic of Srpska came into being has to take into consideration the extremely complex social and political reality of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last twenty years or more. The transformations that Bosnian and Herzegovinian society has undergone – marked by political turmoil that began with the breakup of the SFRJ, territorial as well as ideological and political, which resulted in the breakout of civil war that lasted several years and ended with the signing of the Dayton Agreement and the re-establishment of a highly complex political system in the country, one that has made coexistence possible – are the primary contextual determinants that essentially marked all the development processes in the country, with the consequence of activities in the domain of culture and art taking different paths and developing independently in the Republic of Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Given the different timelines, special local characteristics and conditions in which art emerged and has been made in the country's two entities, it is possible to identify two micro art scenes in Bosnia and Herzegovina established independently from one another, whose standpoints in terms of the work mode and interrelations within this common matrix remain undefined and insufficiently determined. The contemporary art made in Bosnia and Herzegovina, i.e. across the country, has been created, ever since it first appeared, as a direct consequence of these social and political transformations; it is thus inseparable from considerations of the trauma of war and shattered personal identity that it resulted in, i.e. the vital question arising from the direct experience of living in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, split into entities and caught in the grip of transition to democracy and neoliberalism (Vukičević 2012, 65–70).

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<sup>3</sup> The unique setting of the Tjentište Memorial served as the *mise en scène* for making music videos not only of local bands, but also of the popular Brazilian rock band Fresno.

It is precisely the “realism of lived experiences”<sup>4</sup> that provided the framework for a number of artists close in age, who are the earliest representatives of contemporary visual arts in the Republic of Srpska after 2000 and the majority of whom are concentrated in Banja Luka as the regional culture hub, to define the concepts that served them as starting points for their art.<sup>5</sup> These young artists were aware of the need to position themselves in relation to the complex parameters of the time and space in which they live and to set up a new model of work within the frame of reality as it is. The theoretical foundations of this sort of relational art touch upon the very domain of interpersonal relationships and their social context; communication processes and interaction with an audience in connection with an aesthetic experience offered are also of interest to the field of the relational. In other words, the fact that works of art are socially transparent has formed a basis for dialogue and stands as testimony to fundamental transformations in aesthetic, cultural and political aspirations and tendencies in art.<sup>6</sup>

The lived experience of war – a constant traumatising both the collective and individual conscious of the people living in Bosnia and Herzegovina – has dominated the thematic range explored by these artists, and is basically their way of confronting psychological trauma, which they have tried to overcome by using a range of art strategies. On that account, the fact is that even after so many years since the signing of the peace accords, Bosnian-Herzegovinian society has seen a systematic political and ideological exploitation of war narratives in the form of one-sided interpretations of the recent past and accusations of responsibility for the war, as well as the equating of victims with villains and defining and redefining these two roles in society. It is possible to claim that the substance of these artists’ existential experience of growing up and of the reality of life as lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990’s was consciously incorporated in the context of art and resulted in the appearance of different forms of “terrorealism,” i.e. works of art infected and contaminated with this experience of reality, which can hardly leave any audience neutral or gullible.<sup>7</sup>

We find the role and power of the media images created to “tell the truth” and construct the public perception of the armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina problematised in **Radenko Milak**’s *Blow Up* (2016), a work which supervened on the concept of a series of oil paintings made by the same artist called *And What Else Did You See? – I Couldn’t See Everything* (2010). The artist

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<sup>4</sup> South-African artist, critic and curator Kendell Geers coined the term “the realism of lived experience” to denote the contemporary art made in the so-called Thrid World countries, illustrating it with the work of Milica Tomić, presented as the Pavilion of Serbia and Montenegro in the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003 (see: Geers, Kendell. *The Work of Art in the State of Exhile*. <http://kendellgeers.com/library/texts/328>). The same term has been used to commonly refer to the art made in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the late 1990’s (see: Blažević 2007).

<sup>5</sup> See: Blažević, Dunja, Sarita Vujković i Nebojša Milenković. *Međuprostor/Interspace*. Banja Luka: MSURS, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> See: Burio, Nikolas. *Relaciona estetika*. ([documents.tips/documents/nikolas-burio-relaciona-estetika.html](http://documents.tips/documents/nikolas-burio-relaciona-estetika.html)).

<sup>7</sup> See: Geers, Kendell. *The Work of Art in the State of Exhile*. (<http://kendellgeers.com/library/texts/328>Kendell Geers).

incorporated motifs from the photographs taken in Bijeljina by the U.S. photographer Ron Haviv back in 1992 in both *Blow Up* and the mentioned series of oils; they are scenes showing the brutality of the “Tigers” paramilitaries against non-Serb civilians, seen by the whole world as proof of one of the worst atrocities that took place in the region. Choosing to reproduce these scenes of terror and bring them back to life in a series of paintings years after the actual events is obviously part of the artist’s personal efforts to confront the trauma of war, and also his way of bringing under scrutiny the collective guilt of the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose coexistence in this region is still burdened by numerous contentious issues, with that of the responsibility for war crimes often leading to bitter accusations, vehement denial or outright rejection (Dimitrijević 2012, 42–50). On the other hand, this brings up the question of the power of the media to manipulate the truth in event reporting; as much as a photograph may document a moment and what one sees, it is always taken at an angle and shows only a piece of the puzzle, essentially remaining incomplete and vulnerable to simplistic interpretation. The artist is interested, “simultaneously, in the nature of the tragic armed conflict and of the media-distributed perception of events in the field of contemporary ‘culture’ (...) The sea of images brought to us by the media immobilises our ability to establish and know the truth, and we stop believing what we see. This reveals deliberate manipulation, whereby documentarity is transposed into political mystification, with fiction offered instead of the truth. The aesthetics of terror, factography, suffering, stories and images meant to manipulate and the multiply conditioned mediation of significations render the visible world of media images unreliable, and contemporaneity an unstable, unreliable and manipulative set of perceptions” (Šuvaković 2012, 26–27). The large-size painting *Blow Up* (*blow up* can mean both to enlarge or expand, and to detonate or bomb) is really an enlarged detail from a photograph – a dried blood puddle on pavement, as a tangible *corpus delicti*, which was zoomed in several times until it became an abstract blotch, i.e. crime evidence expanded and inflated to disappearance.<sup>8</sup> Milak’s artistic deliberations move along the fine line between abstraction and representation, photography and painting, and deal with the political potential of abstract images in the digital era lived by a world drowning in an ocean of information poured out by the media. This artwork is based on an assumption that watching abstract images or pictures means looking at that which is visible in a painting or photograph as much as contemplating that which has been omitted (Eichler 2011, 7, 10).

The reality of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society – racked with inter-ethnic identity trials and tribulations (with the identity of the local inhabitant being primarily ethnic or national) and embodied in such absurdities and contradictions as those concerning the fundamental issues of language and alphabet – is reflected in the work *BHS* (2010) by **Igor Bošnjak**. This video deals with language as an instrument for showing and highlighting the differences and sameness of the three constitutive peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is based on the theoretical postulates of identity according to which “...the real essence of true identities resides in issues connected to the use of the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming, rather than in the process of

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<sup>8</sup> According to the artist, this work references the feature film of the same name made by the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni in 1966.

being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we come from,’ but rather what we might become, how we are represented and how that affects our self-representation. Therefore, the forging of identities is part of representation and does not occur beyond it” (Hall 2001). Consistent with the processes of creation and promotion of national identities – Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian – what was once the Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian language became three languages, based on minimal and essentially travestied differences, whose presence in the public domain has become the standard proper manner of showing political correctness, often taken to absurdity. The sign language is a case in point: several years ago, a television channel said it needed three interpreters, one for each of the three languages spoken in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to interpret shows for the hearing and/or speech impaired. In his work *Bošnjak* re-enacts or repeats this situation, by showing three interpreters simultaneously interpreting for the hearing and/or speech impaired, thus effacing and removing all inter-ethnic differences, simply by the state of things, and highlighting the grotesqueness of this kind of linguistic manipulation, which he experiences as extremely restrictive and repressive.

Shattered and fragmented identities, as built with the help of divergent and antagonistic discourses, practices and attitudes, also reflect in the existence of two alphabets, Latin and Cyrillic, officially in use in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The equality and mandatory use of both scripts by government institutions serves as another public display of ethnic equality. Given the situation in the country and its division into entities after the war, selecting or using one of the scripts rather than the other is most often seen as an indication of correctness or (in)appropriateness, or may be deemed completely incorrect, depending on the entity one is in. *Write Yourself.. Erase Yourself..* (2010) by **Borjana Mrđa** is a video in which the artist writes and erases her name on a piece of paper, while alternating between the two alphabets. The mechanical action of writing and erasure gradually gains in intensity and aggressiveness, and the artist eventually tears the paper. In this case, the alphabet is seen as one of the key determinants of the personal identity of someone who invariably uses both scripts and thinks of it as something natural. However, in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s new political reality, using one script rather than the other has served to exaggerate differences and become an instrument for showing one’s ethnicity. This duality has been a cause of identity confusion, and the artist’s rapid and emphatic writing and erasure is like a physical manifestation of introspection. The objects remaining after this dramatic auto-analytical act, its inanimate witnesses – the piece of paper, rubber and pencils (used-up, deformed, “wounded”) – were put together by the artist to form the work *Identity Crisis* (2011). The message really conveyed by Mrđa’s work is that “...‘belonging’ and ‘identity’ are not carved in stone or enjoy a life-time warranty; they are absolutely negotiable and can be recalled; our decisions, the steps we take, the way we act – and how resolved we are to stand firm through it all – are the factors that decide when it comes to these two things” (Bauman 2009, 16–17).

Ever since **Mladen Miljanović** first appeared on the art scene in the mid-2000’s, he has implemented a series of special art strategies grounded in autobiographical narratives and highly introspective and deliberate processes of transformation from soldier to artist and of transplanting



militaristic codes to the coordinate system of the visual arts.<sup>9</sup> The fact he started as an outsider, as someone who came from Bosnia – a country on the geopolitical, social, economic and cultural margins of the world – ghettoised, conservative, racked by internal conflicts and impoverished – surely provided him with impetus to leave the isolation of the local scene and infiltrate himself into the international one. After elaborating plans to “invade” art centres around the world (New York, London, Graz, Verona, Philadelphia, Hégenheim, etc.), Miljanović engaged in direct action and “occupied” them with his art, heavily drawing on his knowledge of the science of military strategy, thus engaging in “acts of art terrorism.” In drawing this parallel, the artist proposed the hypothesis that in contrast to the *mainstream* system of art as it exists in the West, basically a system of domination and power, the world is experiencing “art terrorism,” threatening to dismantle the entire domination system, with artists everywhere now ready to join in (Bodrijar 2007, 11). Miljanović consciously assumed the role of aggressor and purposely and repeatedly cast himself in it through his performance of art, in an obvious attempt to recover from the trauma of shattered personal identity and deconstruct the imposed negative public perception of the ethnic community he belongs to and the entity he comes from.

Several years later, territorial identity – as well as individual and collective identities usually associated with it – were still this artist’s chosen frame of reference, except that now his approach changed to become more analytical, purified and relieved of the previously present process of trauma sublimation. Miljanović participated in the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2013, and by doing so, he not only officially moved from the margins of international culture and art as an individual artist, but he also accomplished the same thing for all contemporary art created in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Museum of Contemporary Art of the Republic of Srpska started an initiative to endorse a participation model for the Pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Biennale after a ten-year gap, and Mladen Miljanović’s project *The Garden of Delights* was chosen to represent the country.<sup>10</sup> The project is an impressive composition consisting of several pieces (*The Garden of Delights*, *A Stone Garden*, *Fragments of Wishes*, *Flying – Perspective – Sign*, *A Sweet Symphony of Absurdity* and *The Pressure of Wishes*) which Miljanović made by continuing to employ the skills and knowledge he acquired long before taking on the “aura of a professional artist” – a headstone carving technique, in which drawings are engraved on marble slabs. He intentionally chose a most peculiar, unorthodox art medium and a type of headstone typically found in the Balkans, and created his most important, complex and coherent work of art to date to show to the world what his country really is like. Indeed, the centrepiece – a majestic triptych that conceptually and formally evokes Hieronymus Bosch’s famous *The Garden of Earthly Delights* – is a miniature representation of that far-off “imaginary” Bosnia, built on contradicting mentalities, cultural diversity and the absurd life of the individual, constantly wrenched between great expectations, real enjoyment and mere survival, of which the last is the only truly feasible option. Combining people’s authentic typological perceptions

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<sup>9</sup> See: Miljanović, Mladen. *U službi umjetnosti*, Banja Luka: Besjeda, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> See: Vujković, Sarita. *The Garden of Delights. Pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina/55th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia*. Banja Luka: MSURS, 2013.

and status symbols, Miljanović created a visual depository of the common man's honest wishes, whose fulfillment somehow always escapes him during his lifetime, which thus stay ungranted and are imprinted on marble as his bequest instead.

*The Imaginary Pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina* is a project of the **Tač.ka Group of Visual Artists**, which formed in 2007. The group gathers young artists turned to radical art and employing subversive approaches to the institutional art framework, models of development of national cultural policies and the consequences of their being unspecific, relative to the current political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The project has been carried out several times since 2007 with the aim of crossing the limits set by the country's political division into entities, which has made these artists feel marginalised and unable to position themselves or build their careers outside the art system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After the country failed to send a representative to the Venice Biennale in 2015, the Tač.ka "kept the tradition alive" by building *The Imaginary Pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina*. It was jointly constructed by all the artists who participated in the *Ars Kozara* festival that year, in an attempt to draw attention to the fact that the country still does not have an effective mechanism for officially presenting its contemporary art in international art shows and on the international art scene.

#### *In keeping with the time/Criticality/Topicality*

Several young artists trained at the Academy of Arts in Banja Luka have been very active in the field of contemporary art in the Republic of Srpska in the past few years. While still at the Academy, they proved to be very serious and ambitious about creating work that was distinctly their own (mostly video art and performances) and gave new impetus to the development of the visual arts in this part of the world. Born after the civil war and unburdened by a sense of isolation and direct experience or traumatising memories of it – the contextual framework that had a major impact on early contemporary art in Bosnia and Herzegovina in general – these artists have sought to problematise the given social reality in a time of globalism, transition and economic crisis. In their dealing with social reality, they have used a wide range of contemporary art media to explore the critical power of art, not with the goal of creating something new, but primarily to stage unique events and create unique significations, as well as exchange and interrelate them amidst the myriad chaotic objects, names and references that make up and pervade everyday life. This kind of art practice, which we may call Nicolas Bourriaud's theoretical notion of "post-production," views the domain of arts and cultural production as a depository of previously created forms and data, which authors like DJ's and web surfers use and recombine and then present, display and network as different forms, where an artwork is no longer a result of the creative process but a generator of new activities (Bourriaud 2015, 17–19).

**Mila Panić, Saša Tatić, Selma Selman, Ninoslav Kovačević and Nikola Kekerović** are young artists who built up a creative relationship of interdependence while still at the Academy of Arts, so one should hardly be surprised by their tendency to join forces and work together, which has

so far resulted in the collaborative project *Apartment*, carried out three times since 2014. *Apartment* focuses on devising and finding alternative ways to show contemporary art, as opposed to the tradition of having an institutional infrastructure and a network of art galleries, i.e., it is the artists' response to the serious lack of art galleries both in Banja Luka and in the country. During the event, which usually lasts one day, privately owned flats turn into venues where young and aspiring artists can show their art, distribute promotional materials and talk to the media and visitors. This project is a kind of emancipatory social activity carried out by artists in their local community that has at its heart action intended to transform the artist-curator relation, with the artist taking charge of showing a piece of art, and in this case also of "popularising" contemporary art practices, which is the primary goal of *Apartment*.

These young artists have matured while profoundly influenced by the awareness that the world of images around us has never changed quite so quickly as in the last few years, that never before have we been exposed to such a great number of different worlds of images, and that the manner of production of these images has changed so thoroughly. This situation has led to virtual reality becoming the central medium of the new "information society", with media art (videos, computer graphics and animation, the Internet and interactive art) now dominating theories of the image and the arts (Grau 2008, 11–12). According to Boris Groys, contemporary art ought to demonstrate its contemporaneity, where contemporary does not simply mean present here and now; contemporary art is a kind of art that works in unison with its era and is "friends with its time." They are temporally conditioned art practices, i.e., media practices of mass culture, meaning that contemporary also implies the kind of networking found on social networks like *Facebook*, *Youtube*, *Instagram*, etc., which become art media (Groys 2009). In other words, the artwork has infiltrated itself into media communication systems and turned into a form of media communication itself, leading to radical changes in the positions of artists and audiences. Contemporary artists can use the Internet as a place to both create and show their work, but we should bear in mind the fact that digital cameras are now widely available and highly commercial, in light of the production of photo and video materials, and that the possibility of their unlimited publication/posting on social networks has resulted in mass art production, which is the reality of today's art world, meaning that this endless creation of virtual materials using the media has now reached a point where there are practically no users who are not involved in some kind of artistic activity (Groys 2016).

One of the earliest examples of the use of social media as a proper art medium in this part of the world was the series of drawings called *Dicktator* by **Nikola Kekeć**. The artist began his work on the series in 2014, and he not only made it on the Internet, but he also posted/promoted it only on the Internet. He made digital drawings using special software installed on his *Smartphone*, which he then posted on *Instagram* and *Facebook*, where they immediately became accessible to the widest possible audience. The critical success factor for this kind of placement or publication of media content is the continuity and constancy of the given activity, both for attracting and keeping an audience, because once a product has been *uploaded*, it continues to live in the virtual world by interacting with the public through commands such as *Like*, *Share* or *Comment*. Over a certain

period of time Kekećević uploaded and posted his drawings on social networks almost daily, and so gathered an audience, who looked forward to updates and new additions and actively commented on and shared the content. The *Dicktator* was really an imaginary figure, a phallic illustration, who/which spoke to the visitors by providing daily commentaries on a range of situations, events, characters or the latest daily social and political news; in fact, it was the artist who communicated his views and observations about the reality that surrounded him through the *Dicktator*. The drawings revolved around contrasting political messages – concise, incisive, ironic and very serious at times – and the truly witty and, relatively speaking, silly way in which they were visualised. Their minimalist linearity and terse captions are reminiscent of comic books; also, they possess the kind of spontaneity characterising common anonymous graffiti randomly written in public places. With these “nomadic drawings under work” the artist did not strive to occupy only virtual space but also galleries and museums, where he made them on walls and floors, in chalk, with markers or charcoal, on black or white backgrounds. Kekećević’s art speaks a language that reveals an ambivalent attitude toward institutional(ised) art; as an individual subject, the artist is highly critical, even subversive, when it comes to the complex structures of the art system, while he can simultaneously operate inside them and according to their rules. This is best illustrated by his works *Nikola Kekećević Wins the Best Artist of South East Europe Award* (2015) and *Their Art* (2013), which successfully combine the artist’s strong sense of humour and bitter irony.

The video *Point of View* and the series of photographs *Dot-Body-Dot* by artist **Saša Tatić** (2014) explore the complex interrelations between an individual’s sensitive and unpredictable subjectivity and the expected or general model of social conduct. In keeping with her choices at the time when she only began working as an artist, Saša Tatić’s reduced and purified style is grounded on minimalist elements; she focuses on the human body as the main material resource (eyes, nose, mouth, skin, hair, nails), which operates in her works, characterised by a peculiar, highly intimate atmosphere, as the conveyor of different accumulated meanings. The video *Point of View* is a close-up of two people’s eyes. These people are two closely spaced discrete integral entities looking at one another and conversing, and as the video progresses, their subtle mutual inspection gradually gains in intensity and grows into a physical competition. Paradoxically, this extremely unnatural way two people stare at one another and cross into each other’s personal space is seen by the viewer as an uncommon aestheticised scene. It operates as a symbolic intimation that a situation, person or event is sometimes best observed from a distance, as more adequate and productive than proximity, if it/he/she is to be seen well, objectively or rationally; this means one should not overlook the possibility of the existence of a great number of distinct and subjective points of view that are always present within a certain global matrix. The series of photographs *Dot-Body-Dot* documents a special kind of “skin drawings” made by the artist, who used markers to draw lines to connect beauty spots on the backs of several people, both male and female, selected as samples. This produced peculiar body maps or schemes, entirely different from person to person, showing some possible combinations in which spots can be connected on human skin to map out specific, normally invisible drawings. By doing so the artist engaged in a symbolic process of detection and loading of peculiar individual codes, i.e. unique marks characterising a person.

The works *Happy Birthday* (2013), *If No Animal Was Roasted, There Was No Celebration* (2015) and *We Have a Wonderful Life* (2014) by **Mila Panić** illustrate an art practice in which various autobiographical micronarratives are transposed and transferred to the art domain, in a process of exteriorisation of personal memory, i.e. of one's private, intimate reminiscences. Laying bare one's personal history means working in the area of extremely intricate interrelations between the private and public spheres, because the private/personal inescapably exists in the public sphere and is part of wider cultural issues and histories, where memory does not only play a part in reconstructing the past or coming to terms with it, but is an active participant in the construction and presentation of reality. This approach typically involves using objects, photographs, video and audio materials connected with the given memory base either directly or indirectly (Gibbons 2007, 9, 15–16, 29); Mila Panić thus took videos and photographs from her family albums and used them raw. The series of photographs called *Happy Birthday* was taken on the artist's tenth birthday, but to the viewer who does not have this information the photographs simply show the twelve steps of the process of slaughtering and roasting a pig; little Mila is seen in the background in only one of the photographs. The installation *If No Animal Was Roasted, There Was No Celebration* can be seen as a 3D sequel to and an inverted interpretation of this slightly bizarre set of photographs, as it consists of eight metal rotisserie spit rods rotating with nothing on them. Coming from a family of butchers, the artist can undoubtedly remember a lot of situations that involved preparing meat using butcher implements; however, the question is – what does this specific childhood memory mean in the new context of art? This personal evocation and recapitulation of how the artist's family celebrated her birthdays when she was a child is equally an anthropological comment on the local people's tradition and customs and the stagnation of their mentality and habits, for whom a celebration is not a celebration without the ritual of spit roasting, which both epitomises the pride and honour of those having guests and points out the existential reality of a society obsessed with the (im)possibility to subsist itself. The work *We Have a Wonderful Life* consists of photographs and extracts from VHS tapes which Mila's family received from their relatives after they emigrated to Australia in the early 2000's. The artist stumbled upon them in her family archive years later, and this freshened up her fading memories of the early underprivileged childhood she spent in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the civil war, as the country underwent transition. Back then, photos and VHS tapes helped families keep in touch – those who had stayed in the country with their relatives abroad, i.e. those who had emigrated. Such photos and tapes eventually became piles of detailed, emphatic and almost absurd photographic and video evidence of the émigrés' new, better, perfect lives far away from Bosnia and all its problems, which many people (including Mila's family) dreamt about at the end of the 1990's, trying to leave the country. The domain of personal memories as explored in this work shifts the viewer's attention to the story about the phenomenon of mass migrations of people living in war-torn countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, destroyed, divided into entities and ruled by the nationalist paradigm, emigration was possible primarily for ethnically mixed families, whose precarious position was their ticket out and to one of the “promised” lands.

**Selma Selman**'s art falls along the lines of the discourse of cultural diversity policies, i.e. the new form of the intellectual awareness of talented individuals who promote and encourage, through

their work, the demoralised, depoliticised and disorganised members of different marginalised social groups, with the aim of galvanising the masses into collective social action to spread freedom, democracy and individuality (Vest 2012, 424). She came to play the role of advocate of the new cultural diversity policy thanks to her being a Roma with a university degree, a visual artist who has held a prominent place in the local contemporary art in the last three years and whose work has been publicly recognised by art professionals and got substantial media attention, which is unique for all of Bosnia and Herzegovina. A policy of representation and contextual identity positioning is found in Selman's *Mercedes 310* (2014), created in honour of an old van, a vehicle which was the artist's family's means of subsistence for years, as they used it to collect and sell scrap metal. The van interior (understandably soiled and untidy, given the type of activity it had been used for), as the one setting where Selman most strongly remembers her childhood and growing up, is now the *mise en scène* for a new self-portrait by the artist – an independent and confident young woman in a clean white dress, whose identity self-representation rests precisely on the encounter between these two irreconcilable realities. However, she does not relinquish any of these two identities, her life being a symbiosis of the two extremes, and her works unambiguously showing her activist stance. Selman presents herself as a role model for Roma children to emulate, telling them that there is life outside the ghetto and other ways to live one's life, as recapped by her action under the slogan *Dash Off To School!* (2015). In articulating her art, Selman demystifies her ethnic group and the cultural environment she belongs to, while staying attuned to the complex dynamics of institutional power structures and the actual conditions of today's social reality, with firmly rooted perceptions and class, patriarchal and homophobic bias toward "people of colour," as well as self-degrading perceptions. She has displayed her critical sensibilities and taken an activist stance in a series of performances, actions and video installations, without suppressing her voice or uniqueness, and striven for a redefinition and revision of the meaning of the terms "mainstream," "margin," "heterogeneity" and "otherness" (Vest 2012, 424). In a video titled *16,000 pieces* (2014) she shows a conversation about money – the key survival factor – between the male members of her family, which grows into a fierce row, without their reaching a resolution or a conclusion as to who is right. The artist filmed her family in the confines of their home, incorporating the spontaneous, everyday reality of the life of a Roma family in its crudest form in contemporary art, or rather, making it art. While it is the comic aspect of the situation filmed, with its witty exchanges and retorts, that will draw one's attention before all else, the concept underlying the video problematises and distinguishes between seeing "Gypsies as a cultural phenomenon" and understanding "the social and political fate of being a Gypsy" (Buden 2004, 28).

### *The Contemporary Thesaurus, or on the continued existence of a contemporary art scene*

*The Contemporary Thesaurus* delved into the contemporary art created in the Republic of Srpska after 2000 with the aim of probing its conceptual foundations and precisely locating its contextual matrices. The selection of several most important, referential and recent art phenomena (without the intention of denying the existence of other phenomena or belittling their importance),

their interpretation and profiling in keeping with contemporary art theories also allowed their categorisation into ideational and contextual sets, which provided potential models for reading the work of each artist individually. These distinct oeuvres have been recognised as the core of active development processes, so this exhibition, a sort of contemporary thesaurus, was intended to index and map the contemporary art scene in the Republic of Srpska by going back to its formative stage, screening it as it is today, and possibly predicting its future. Generations of young artists have now followed one after another in the Republic of Srpska, and they are not only trained at the art academies in Banja Luka and Trebinje, but are ever more enthusiastic and determined to continue school abroad and also stay attuned to the newest trends in international arts. These tendencies are seen by art theorists as vital prerequisites for keeping the locally made contemporary art fluid, heterogeneous and dynamic, in stubborn opposition to the stagnation of the socio-political system that has yielded it and in which it has survived for more than a decade.

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