

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Contemporary Visual Arts in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Characteristics of the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century

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The end of a century is approaching, which began with the emergence on the art scene of the first specially trained painters in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Branko Radulovic, Djordje Mihajlovic, Gabriel Jurkic, Todor Svra-kic, Petar Tijesic, Karlo Mijic, Djordje Mazalic, Jovan Bijel-ic, Roman Pertovic and some others, were the first to study in the art schools and academies in Vienna, Prague, Krakow, Munich, Paris and Budapest. During the first two decades of the century and also of our modern art, some of them managed to form and even complete their artistic style and biography. During the next decades most of them reached their creative peak, in line with European traditions, regardless of the fact whether they worked in our country or abroad. They were followed by a new generation that has studied mainly in Paris but also in the first art academy in the first Yugoslav state - in Zagreb: Danilo Kabiljo, Josip Monsino Levi, Mica Todorovic, Rizah Stetic, Hinko Laas, Ismet Mujezinovic, Sigo Sumerecker, Ivo Seremet, Hakija Kulenovic, Vojo Dimitrijevic, Behaudin Selmanovic, etc.

Bosnia and Herzegovina founded their State School for Art and Handicrafts in 1945. And in this past times it was quite normal for the graduates of this school after passing entry exams in the academy to be enrolled immediately in the second year. Then they went to study at three center - Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana. This was true till 1972, respectively until the founding of the Academy of Fine Arts in Sarajevo. And then we cannot name all of our artists they today, regretfully, are spread around the world.

The fact that our artists came out in the world art scene is a kind of delayed historical fact as far as the annals of the directions and tendencies (faufism, cubism, dadaism, the beginning of abstractionism, etc.) In the following periods, from decade to decade, our artistic interests moved from problem to problem, from phenomenon to phenomenon depending on the historical moment and the art trends.

Each epoch had its own ideas and ideals, and the common conditions for the development of arts in our space became better, regardless of the social and historical context. Our art was exhibited at home and abroad, awards were received - both at home and abroad. Quite impressive were the 70s when the graphic art of Bosnia and Herzegovina became a specific phenomenon and was highly praised among the art circles (in the country and abroad) as a specific boom.

Many new studios were built, a number of galleries opened up, the exhibits were bought. Lacking only was a specialized art magazine. Some of the trends in our art conformed to the taste of the reality, while through others - opposed it, aiming to change the taste and criteria of the audience. And so we come to the present day.

In the 80s Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the frame-work of the then existing Yugoslav space, had a bursting art scene, not only in the field of fine arts but also in the other arts and phenomenon. During that decade took place some of the most important undertakings (manifes-tations), such as "Art - Criticism - in the mid 80s", "A View to the 80s", "Yugoslav Documents - 1987" (as first of a

series) and "Yugoslav Documents - 1989". In Banja Luka under the auspices of the biennial "Autumn Saloon" were presented the exhibitions, entitled "The Material as a Challenge 1986", "Loners 1988", "Art - Politics - Ideology 1990". These were exhibitions where shown was the luxurious pluralism of postmodern times, the times of the great revisions of the formal models of art history, while on the other - the times of subjectivity, instincts, decorativeness, the use of all kinds of metaphors and symbols. The artists from Bosnia and Herzegovina - after a critical selections - took their proper place as deserved.

The end of the century was marked with the end of the "second" Yugoslavia, respectively with the emergence of new states.

In all of the newly founded states from the beginning of the 90s was born also a new periodicity of art. In our country the first half of the 90s was marked with the sign of the terrible and tragic war, and the almost 4 year siege of Sarajevo. From the circle of protagonists of the art scene only one-tenth was left, after our artists left in exile and the largest part of those artists left the Balkans. Those that stayed, at least in Sarajevo, in the beginning were subject to threats and had to sustain physically, because they shared the everyday faith of their compatriots (artillery fire, snipers, lack of water, food, electricity, heating, etc.), or in other words - general devastation, but devastation in the souls as well. The resistance and persistence of the artists was so great, that they worked and created even during the war ... The perception of foreign influence, i.e. the traces of aggression, gave birth to works of art with an original sign and an autochthon value. The artists worked with different type of materials and recycled instruments, which were used in the making of completely new plastic works. Each material was simply a material from which something was to be made, and each space turned into a place for artistic activity. The life impulses could be found even under the shade of a tragedy - as witnesses of a radically changed human situation, in the midst of a transformed spiritually and materially reality and its ephemeral substance the artists conquered new creative spheres and became "witnesses of the existence"

Such was the title of a series of exhibitions, situated among the ruined walls of a cinema in Sarajevo. Similar



Eldina Begic, Meeting Point, 1997

individual exhibitions by Edin Numankadic, Nusret Pasic, Zoran Bogdanovic, Radoslav Tadic, Sanjin Jukic and Petar Waldegg, which were joined together were shown in a number of European cities: Edinburg, Innsbruck, Lille, Prague, Budapest and also in New York, and on a video cassette at the Venice Biennial in 1993. All this was arranged by the organization "Bregat Art Center", that same center which during the siege organized exhibitions and invited as guests such authors, like Sophie Ritelhueber, Christian Boltanski, Miriam Cach, "Neues Slowenische Kunst", and immediately after the end of the siege of the city - Antony Gormley.

Besides the authors, gathered round the project "Witnesses of Existence", during the siege there were attempts also for a folk promotion of retrograde and mystification national and quasi-patriotic pseudo-identities, but luckily these undertakings in the art field did not have much of a success, except in some minority circles.

The times of war had a much greater influence over some of the older artists, such as Afan Ramic, who for years was inspired by the attractive landscape of Herzegovina (the southern part of the country) and the beauty of the rocky environment. The war led this long established style to a maximum of transposition in the reality of life. The method of this transformation has its origin in the more condensed and expressive use of paint and the proper material (he painted with almost everything he got his hands on) - combining these materials in vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines, through which method he brought his paintings to perfection.

As greatest achievements of the war period is also part of the work by the rest of the designers group "Trio":

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Dalid and Bojan Hadzihalilovic, which works with combinations of popular phrases and semantic signs and through editing decisions on posters, printed during the war, created the cover of one of the issues of the magazine "Art Press".

During the time of the war the art scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina as far as typology was concerned continued with the phenomenon of the former decade, respectively with postmodernism. But there did not exist an underlined dominance of a particular tendency, style of movement. The decade was characterized by the new and young authors, gathered round the Center for Contemporary Art as well as by the parallel creative activity of those that were already established artists. This means sustaining of the top achievements and finding support in the former high points, while what marks this particular decade are the authors whose works go along the line of continuing the traditions: Dzevad Hozo, Mehmed Zaimovic, Nada Pivac, Seid Hasanefendic. Although they insist on autonomy and specific originality, their language of expression is penetrated by some reflections on the war reality. Naturally, there are artists - younger and older - whose conservatism and aggressive localism does not interest us much.

As far as methodology and the problems covered are concerned during this decade the greatest achievements were connected with the use of surfaces. From the space of the canvas and the paper the artists moved to the space of the installations, sculpture, environment. The genres that widen the field of visual culture were quickly developed: video, video-installations, photography, graphic design. For the generation that started to affirm its own position on the art scene, the classical classification of sculpture, graphics, drawing, painting are old-fashioned terms, lacking substance. The modern electronic technologies defined a new system of thought among authors, such as Maja Bajevic, Danica Dakic, Alma Suljevic and others. At first glance very few things in their art are connected the baleful temptations of the recent war. The only exception actually is Alma Suljevic, that fills the exhibition space with maps of the mine fields in Bosnia and Herzegovina and provoked in this way and engaged reflection on the still visible signs of the consequences of the severe times. Lately these maps are accompanied by video-installations and these screens show her own entrance in the mine fields. This installation was presented



Salim Obralic
Sahan, 1997



Jusuf Hadzifejzovic
Grand Sarajevo Depot Performance,
1997



Maja Bajevic,
Meine Kleine Nachtmusik,
1997

recently at the international exhibition "The Edge of Awareness" in Geneva, the concept is by the commissioner of the exhibition Adelina von Furstenberg and it was under the auspices of the World Health Organization. After Geneva the installation was shown in New York, Sao Paulo and New Delhi.

Alma Sulovic graduated sculpture, but the realities in Bosnia and Herzegovina mark her expressive style, i.e. she turns away from the traditional understanding of sculpture. Something similar happened with some other local sculptors - Mustafa Skoplak, Kenan Solakovic, Fikret Libovac and Mirsad Sehic. They, by the way do not totally discard the use of pure plastic forms, with or without reference to the objective world, respecting also the typical for this art volume, material, plasticity, etc. What is new though is the fact that in the language of sculpture they introduce space in a way where the whole image is not just a simple installation but a whole spectacle. As an illustration we can take, for example, the choice of material. Besides the traditional one - stone, metal, wood, terracotta, glass, etc, some non-traditional materials are added - cotton wool, ashes, dust, sand, and also noise in the video shots. These postmodern combinations of heterogeneous elements in the exhibited objects gives some allusive properties to the presentations and they turn into new semantic combinations. During the last three years in the framework of these experiments, one should note the works of Mustafa Skopljak "Light in the Darkness" (Gallery "Obala" - Sarajevo), the installations by Kennan Solakovic (at the exhibition pavilion Collegium Artisticum, Sarajevo), "Ancient Game" by Gordana Galic (Gallery "Novi Hram") and the ambient "Letter" by Nusret Pasic (also in the Gallery "Obala"). If we look at the age, these four authors belong to the middle generation. The only installation by Mustafa Skopljak was chosen for the cover of the prestigious American magazine "art in America" (May, 1994).

Edin Numankadic is a noted artist for over a quarter of a century now. We shall not discuss here his numerous works before the war and will only mention his famous installation "Traces of War", as well as "Witnesses of Existence". He is constantly invited to take part in international exhibitions and one of his most interesting works, a combination of a table and a easel, was presented at the

exhibition "House" in Ljubljana in 1996, and then shown at the exhibition "Memento Metropolis" in Copenhagen and Antwerpen.

The composition system of the ambients made by Salim Obralic - another name, which should not be omitted - could be interpreted in a number of ways. Obralic incorporates in the ambient round and triangular copper plates, on which are engraved calligraphy signs. In this way the plates sustain their initial identity and receive a new one. Their basis serves as a matrix for imprinting over its graphic signs, and the novelty is in their ambiance where one can read the symbolic and psychological signs of the circle as well as to observe the rhythm of pulsation, which are emitted from the engravings in the copper under the light of different lighting and under the rhythm of a musical accompaniment. One of these installations was presented in Istanbul at the "Modernity and Memory" exhibition under the patronage of the Rockefeller Foundation.

Space, i.e. the volume of this text, does not allow me make a wider and more detailed elaboration of the visual arts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The harsh times imposed different limitations, especially of space character. You see, for example, that this text is limited practically on the art in Sarajevo, which otherwise sounds paradoxical since it was in physical isolation, but did not stay isolated spiritually. It is quite indicative how influences came from far away and not from the neighboring countries, respectively not from the territory which until recently was our common homeland. With the exception of Ljubljana. And what was born here was evaluated at the international art scene. The negative reflections on the visual arts in Bosnia and Herzegovina we can find also in the Dayton accords, respectively in the post-Dayton situation in culture and art in general. The aspirations of the kind "We do not want to be a periphery - we want to be in the center" gave birth to the ideas for the founding of the national art academies - the Croatian in Shiroki Brijeg (Western Herzegovina) and the Serbian in Trebinje (Eastern Herzegovina). In such a political and spiritual constellation were lost art centers, such as Tuzla, Mostar, Banjaluka, Zenitza... Instead of demetroplization a kind of provincialism of these cities occurred, at least in the sphere of culture.