



forumZFD

Issue: 10 ~ 11/2018.

Balkan PERSPECTIVES

A magazine on Dealing with the Past

**Building Bridges
with Imagination
and Emotion:
CAN ART HEAL?**

CONTENTS

03

EDITORIAL

04

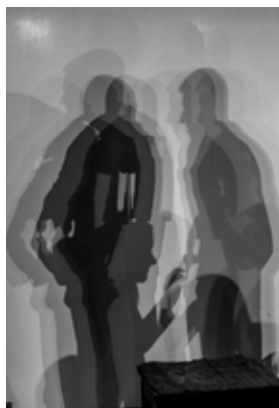
VOX POPLI

05

NEWS & UPDATES

06

WHITE RIBBON DAY

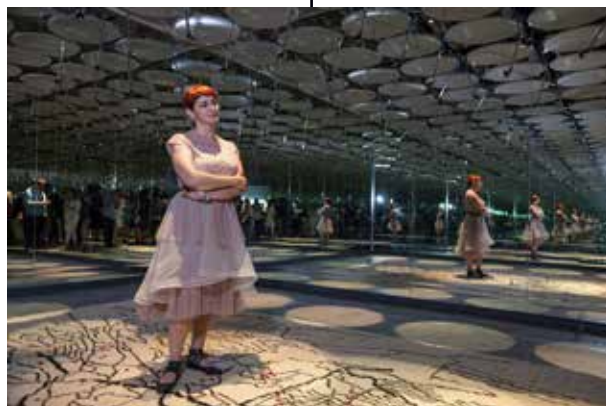


IS IT POSSIBLE
TO SPEAK ABOUT
THE PAST, WHILST
REMAINING
SILENT ABOUT
THE PRESENT AND
FUTURE?

08

THE POWER OF
ART IN DEALING
WITH THE PAST

17



20

THE
RECONCILIATION
OF BLOOD FEUDS
CAMPAIGN
1990-1991



12

THE EMOTIONAL ABOVE ALL

14

IN SITU: INTERVIEW WITH
BOJANA STOJMEVSKA

24

IMAGINATION AS TRUTH

26

SKOPJE'S TREASURE:
THE OLD BAZAAR

EDITORIAL

Issue: 10

DEAR READERS,

With great pleasure, we present our 10th issue of **Balkan.Perspectives: *Building Bridges with Imagination and Emotion: Can Art Heal?***

When the past is made up of conflicting accounts and interpretations, each not acknowledging the other, where institutions cannot or will not recognise the actions and consequences of the past nor the narratives which result from or underpin these, how do people heal? Where can reconciliation begin? Experience, trauma, wounds – these are personal. Emotion and memory are subjective. They cannot be cast aside when dealing with the past, because they play an essential role in it.

Biased or unbiased, art does not have to follow any rules – it can open topics that may otherwise not be dared to be tackled in the public sphere. As with remembrance, which too can be subjective and allow a personal or collective memory to be creatively approached.

In this edition, Borka Pavićević suggests that art can build bridges, although warns that it cannot take full responsibility for this task and should not be expected to. Milena Popović writes that we can utilise imagination to find the truth when facts lose their merit. Elma Selman sees it is only possible to address the past with the present and the future in mind, with an example of performance art and the dynamic it creates with each viewer, who can only interact with

a performance through their own experience and interpretation.

Bojana Stojmenovska speaks about the *InSitu Art Festival* in Skopje, and how art has the potential to challenge stereotypes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi, working with Oral History Kosovo, describes the impact of telling personal stories, referring to the recent *Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Campaign 1990-1991* exhibition.

Furthermore, our 10th issue explores the impact of Kosovar artists, as they seek to use art to give a voice to survivors and reflect on a part of history which is largely ignored; “White Ribbon Day” remembers the children who were killed in Prijedor between 1992 and 1995 in an illustrated comic; and the Old Bazaar of Skopje is used as a metaphor for the true diversity of life in Macedonia’s capital.

Art and memorial provide a platform for individuals and topics that may otherwise remain unheard - they enable past and what is perceived as “normal” to be deconstructed, by provoking an authentic, human response. Art is vulnerable, and in that it is powerful. Through our emotions, our subconscious, can we delve deeper into the past and take steps towards reconciliation?

We hope you enjoy this edition of
Balkan.Perspectives.

Season’s Greetings!

Vanessa Robinson-Conlon
Editor in Chief

HOW CAN ART SUPPORT THE PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION?

BOSNIA

Given the fact that I have been in touch with different types of art such as film, theatre, painting and music my whole life, I absolutely believe that art is an extremely important diplomatic medium for overcoming differences and achieving catharsis. Many persons are comfortable with talking about trauma. Art can do this for them and help them in the process. One excellent example of this is the play *Hypermnnesia* by Selma Spahić, which speaks about the war but in a different manner, so that nobody feels attacked, and with everyone trying to understand the perspective of the person on the other side.

A.T. (40)

For art to change anything, it has to be good, instead of just a slogan. Art changes one and there is no doubt about the fact that the consequences of serious and engaged art can serve the purpose of making a society face its greatest traumas.

A.B. (37)

Today, only naïve persons underestimate culture. Culture is considered one of the more important instruments for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Artists speak up also in those cases when societies as a whole are unable to do so, and artists use their works of art to initiate public discussions, rock the boat, open up new horizons and fields of dialogue. When politicians are unable to find ways to communicate, culture and art are able to do so. Often, artists are “lighting the path” in dark times, maybe specifically because of their unwillingness to compromise.

H.S. (35)

KOSOVO

Contrary to politics or economics, I think art is one of those fields that possesses vast opportunities and freedoms to encourage and grow reconciliation. As a way of expressing our most powerful emotions, experiences and imagination, art can serve as a tool that unites than a tool that divides people. This, I think, can be best done by using art to connect and share between us human beings whether Albanian, Serbian, Roma or Gorani. Afterwards, instead of trying to “ignore” our ethnicity, we can use different forms of art to understand and acknowledge how belonging to a certain ethnicity shapes our experience and narrative. I think it is very important to be aware of the prejudices and deconstruct them, art can serve as and excellent platform for this.

G.R. (24)

In the last 30 years, art exhibitions and other cultural events that have taken place between Serbia and Kosovo may be counted with the fingers of one hand! Once, an elderly Serb responded to my question why the national road connecting Kosovo to Serbia had

been neglected and no investments had been made on it for over 30 years, saying: “...had we made roads connecting us, we would not have “made” wars among ourselves, wars that have destroyed everything good that has ever been between us ...!” I am mustering up the courage to add that had we made “bridges” to connect us with one another we would not have destroyed everything among us. When culture is absent within a space (cultural, political, social), then non-culture takes up its place. And the other way around: where there is culture, there is no room for non-culture!?

Mehmet Behluli (artist and art professor)

The power of art stands on the artist’s freedom to express. Art does not have political limitations and should not be politically correct: Art is free to talk.

L.M. (27)

SERBIA

It is hard to determine the exact relationship or extent in which art can contribute towards reconciliation. The question why reconciliation would be the task of art is legitimate. Anyways, based on universal human values, art almost “intuitively” works in favour of reconciliation. Additionally, it is common artistic practice to engage towards a better and fairer society based the current setting in which the artists create. Undoubtedly, literature, movies and theatre have the power to transfer facts, to increase the knowledge about certain events and phenomena, and, at the same time, to act on the emotion of its public, making it more empathic and sensitive. Rarely something like art enables us to see the world through the perspectives of others. The understanding of others’ perspectives, feeling the pain of another is a necessary presumption for reconciliation. Or, at least, the feeling of shame on what was done to the others in our name. Here, I believe, art has rare power.

Staša I. (39)

The term *reconciliation* was misused so much, often placed in a wrong context that absolutely fails to reflect and is detached from everyday problems of people who live in this area together for more than twenty years, and thus has in fact lost its primary importance. At the same time, the concept of coexistence is very important in this area, where some of the worst war crimes and atrocities were committed on European soil after World War Two. The question still remains: with whom should peace be settled and under which conditions? In this case, art is used as a meaning to achieve different project tasks and justify funds invested in different institutions, and we can all agree that such institutions were in substantial numbers after the end of the war. That is why the term “reconciliation” is devalued. In this context, art cannot contribute to such processes because the political elites made good earnings even during the clashes and therefore. the situation today is pretty much the same. Indeed,

art should work towards eradicating consensus and creating conflicts. Above all, I refer to societal antagonisms and eradicating the agreements between the political elites that seem to work perfectly.
Vladimir M. (37)

Only critically-oriented and socially-engaged art can encourage reconciliation. This is so because art and artistic expression like this alone can question and disrupt the dominant nationalistic narratives, the imposed myths and wartime ideas. This type of art is participative in nature. Participative art is inclusive, it connects people and communities and tends to overcome the stereotypes and prejudice, thus contributing towards pulling down the walls between different sides in conflicts and post-conflict societies.
Srdan H. (31)

MACEDONIA

The different aspects of human activities in creating visual, audio and expressive artefacts or simply said, art pieces through which we can express the imaginative, conceptual or technical skill is defined as art. Its main purpose is to be valued according to its timeless beauty and emotional power through which every recipient of art opens new horizons and generate opinions which were never thought of before. Creativity is a power that can erase the past, change the status quo and find new potential. Simply said, creativity is a powerful act. The artists are the voices of the marginalized groups in the society – they reflect the social, cultural and political ties from their time and suggest new and alternative ways for the future, which encourage the community to think, fight and work for a better tomorrow. It creates an unbreakable tie between those who enjoy art, and causes unconscious harmony of emotions, which is reflected upon all its admirers. Art is always on the side of support, resistance, conscious and revolution. It is always on the side of peace and reconciliation.

Sashka J. (27)

Art plays an important role in the culture of one's society and can represent a bridge that connects the society with the other part of the world. I would separate music as a more commercially exploited branch of the art, i.e the cliché that music does not recognize borders. By finding a common language you can convey important messages from and to the other side. However, the biggest mistake that can be done is emphasizing the ethnical background of the performer. After a certain period of "ignoring" that data, it will become irrelevant and it will no longer pose a problem. By doing this, the emphasis will be on the performer and her/his music (art). The same goes in the other directions, like photography, painting, theatre etc. The emphasis should be on her/his work and not on the ethnical background.

Krsto B. (28)

Art is a medium through which people not only express their creativity, but also release their emotions, hopes and fears. Art can be edgy, divisive, but it can also be calming and inspiring. Through the interpretation of art, we can achieve reconciliation by seeing from someone else's perspective. Stepping out of our shoes can often lead to facing reality, consuming art can make us think critically and see the other person's struggle, making us turn to the middle and extending our hand for peace. This can happen for two persons, two groups of conflict or even two nations. Nevertheless, art can be powerful in its quest to find admirers for itself.

Evgenija F. (25)

NEWS & UPDATES

HOLOCAUST BY MIRJETA QEHAJA

 @MirjetaQehajaOfficial

Mirjeta Qehaja, an emerging artist from Kosovo, will be exhibiting her second solo exhibition of paintings at the University of Prishtina Art Gallery, from the 3 - 16 December 2018. Entitled "Holocaust", Mirjeta uses this reference in her paintings to reflect on the marginalized and socially oppressed, among them different ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and the LGBTI community. The artist seeks to "elevate a parallel between the state of racism at that time and the modern time we live now" and "to stimulate curiosity and new generation knowledge about diversity in Kosovo and the world, as well as positive changes for dealing with different inter-ethnic situations."



EXHIBITION TO SHOW AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRISHTINA
ART GALLERY, 3 - 16 DECEMBER 2018.

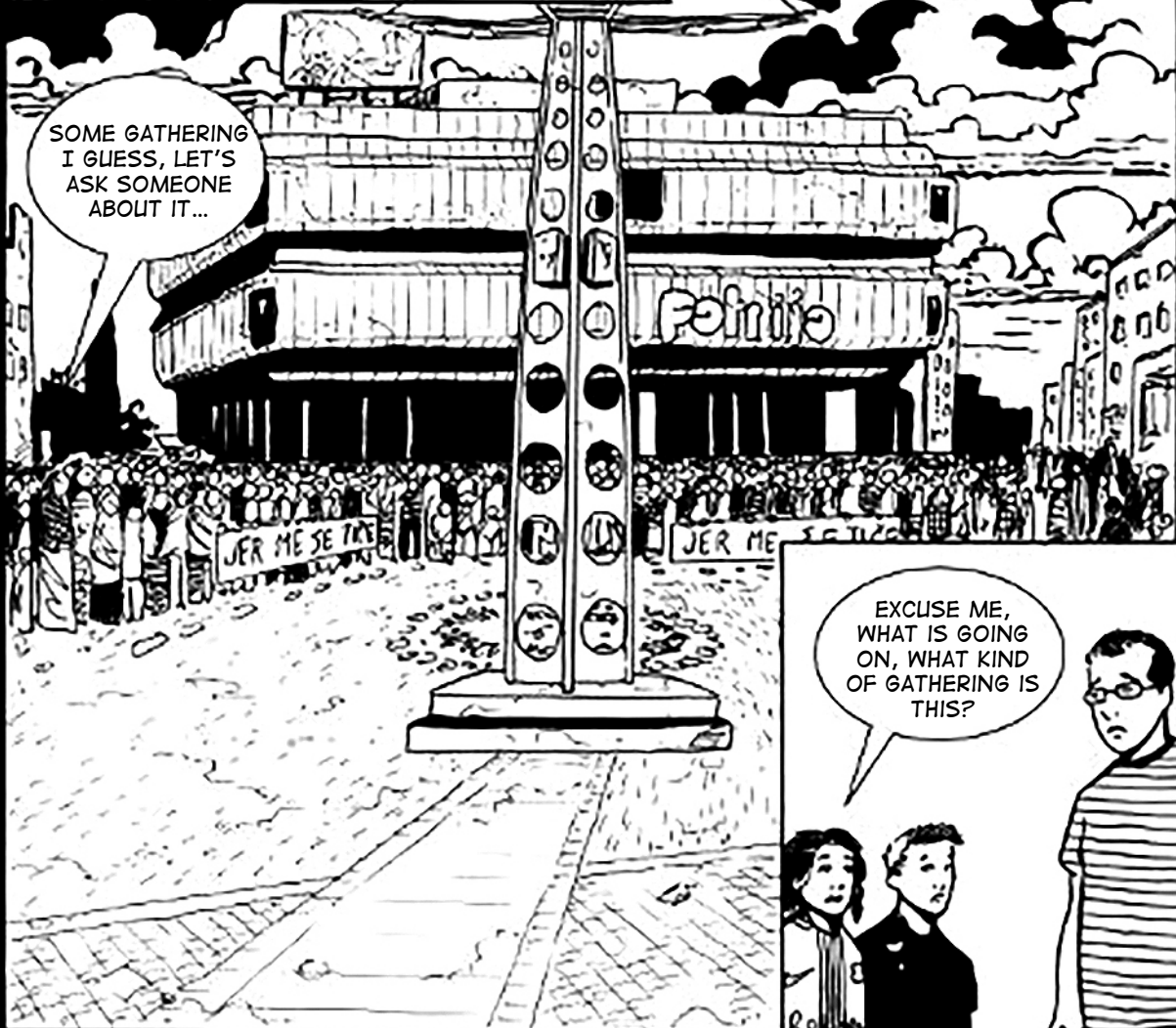
ROLLING FILM FESTIVAL, 5TH EDITION, 13 - 16 NOVEMBER 2018

The Rolling Film Festival ran from 13 - 16 November 2018, closing its fifth year of supporting Romani artistic expression. It aims to "counter one-dimensional stereotypes of 'Gypsies' in the media, presenting a richer and more complete picture of the Roma, in their families, work, art, and the diverse countries where the rolling of their wheel has taken them." The festival is a celebration of Roma people, providing a venue that is festive, dynamic and transformative. The Rolling Film Festival is Kosovo's only film festival that focuses specifically on telling the stories of Roma communities in Kosovo and across the world. In addition to screening over 150 films and building a database of more than 400 films, it has involved around 2,000 youth in human rights programs in Kosovo high schools, has produced 56 short films through the Cikore Filmja European Film workshops and has offered a space for young Kosovo Roma filmmakers to create their first films, for which 5 awards have been given at festivals around Europe.

RESOURCE:
[ROLLINGFILMFESTIVAL.ORG /](http://ROLLINGFILMFESTIVAL.ORG/)
ROMA VERSITAS



WHITE RIBBON DAY



THE INITIATIVE "BECAUSE IT CONCERNS ME" IS ORGANISING A GATHERING TO SPEAK OUT AGAINST THE DISCRIMINATION AND DENIAL OF CIVILIAN VICTIMS OF WAR ALL OVER THE WORLD. THE WHITE BAND HERE IS A SYMBOL OF THE DISCRIMINATION AND SUFFERING FACED BY CITIZENS OF PRIJEDOR DURING THE PAST WAR.



DID YOU WATCH 'GRAND STARS' (ZVIJEZDE GRANDA) LAST NIGHT? IT WAS SO CLOSE...

FARMA IS ON TONIGHT, PEOPLE WILL LEAVE THE HOUSE...

ICH VERSTEHE ES NICHT. WAS FÜR EIN CHAOS IST DAS?

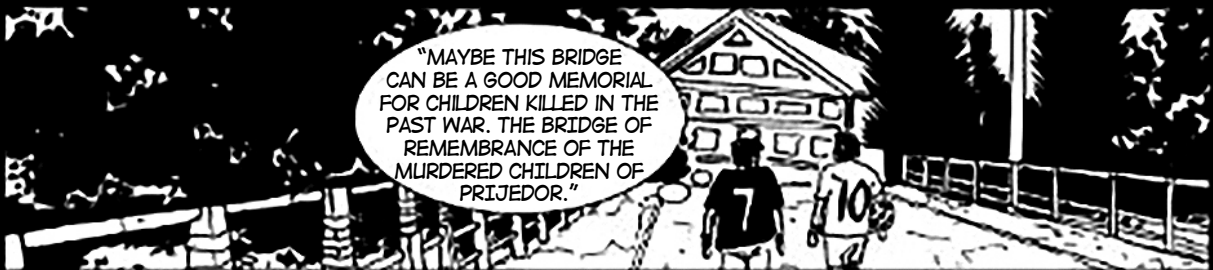
AND SO NOW MAY 31ST IS MARKED AS WHITE RIBBON DAY, IN ORDER TO SHOW SUPPORT FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORIALS FOR THE 102 CHILDREN KILLED IN PRIJEDOR.



I STILL DON'T REALLY GET IT.

ME NEITHER.

LET'S GO TO THE FOOTBALL!



"MAYBE THIS BRIDGE CAN BE A GOOD MEMORIAL FOR CHILDREN KILLED IN THE PAST WAR. THE BRIDGE OF REMEMBRANCE OF THE MURDERED CHILDREN OF PRIJEDOR."

ON MAY 31, 1992, THE BOSNIAN SERB AUTHORITIES IN PRIJEDOR ISSUED AN ORDER ON THE LOCAL RADIO FOR THE NON-SERB POPULATION TO MARK THEIR HOUSES WITH WHITE FLAGS OR SHEETS. COURIERS AND CARS WITH LOUDSPEAKERS ORDERED NON-SERBS TO PUT A WHITE RIBBON AROUND THEIR SLEEVE BEFORE LEAVING THEIR HOMES. SINCE 2012, THE INITIATIVE "BECAUSE IT CONCERNS ME" HAS BEEN COMMEMORATING THIS DAY AS WHITE RIBBON DAY, AS A SIGN OF THE FIGHT AGAINST THE DENIAL OF CRIMES COMMITTED AGAINST CIVILIANS ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD, BUT ALSO IN SUPPORT OF THE PARENTS OF THE MURDERED CHILDREN TO CALL FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A CENTRAL MEMORIAL FOR THE 102 CHILDREN KILLED BETWEEN 1992 AND 1995. THE EVENTS IN PRIJEDOR OF THAT PERIOD HAVE BEEN DESCRIBED IN DETAIL DURING TRIALS BEFORE THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL TRIBUNAL FOR THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA (ICTY). PROCEEDINGS HAVE BEEN LAUNCHED FOR OVER 150 PEOPLE, BEFORE THE ICTY AND CRIMINAL COURTS OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, RELATING TO THE CRIMES COMMITTED IN PRIJEDOR. DURING THIS TIME, 3176 CIVILIANS AND PRISONERS OF WAR WERE KILLED OR HAD DISAPPEARED, WITH MASS GRAVES AND BODIES STILL BEING FOUND.

MILENKO BOGDANOVIĆ, COMIC ILLUSTRATOR FROM PRIJEDOR



IS IT POSSIBLE TO SPEAK ABOUT THE PAST, WHILST REMAINING SILENT ABOUT THE PRESENT AND FUTURE?

ELMA SELMAN

Elma Selman (1983) was born in Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and currently lives and works in the capital, Sarajevo. She graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy (Department of Psychology), at the University of Sarajevo. Her thesis topic was "The Relationship between Art and Psychotherapy in Art Therapy". In 2008, Elma graduated from the Nomad Dance Academy (Contemporary dance education), and in 2014, completed an MA in Human Rights and Democracy at South East European University, with her final thesis, "Can the Past be Passed? The Role of Theatre in Dealing with the Past in the Western Balkans" (2014). In addition to this, Elma is a licensed Gestalt psychotherapist. She works as a psychotherapist and artist and is an engaged activist.



CREDITS: ELMA SELMAN

To paraphrase Idith Zertal (Zertal, 1998), we never deal with the past in isolation, but rather with its manifestations and is (mis)uses, which are often politically driven, how it relates to the present, and how it determines the future. It is not possible to simply “leave the past in the past”, which many politicians from our region call for in their pre-election and daily political speeches. How is it possible to think about the future without any reference to the past? These references can include direct reactions to the past and present, or specific events, or even attempts to fully deny and depart from the past, with the desire to create a completely different social, economic, political (etc.) situation. A reference is always present.

Facing the past is a comprehensive process, which can include institutional methods, individual action, and any kind of human activity. One approach is through art. Art (as well as “dealing with the past”), has as many definitions as there are attempts to define it, and contexts within which it can be used, if taken as an example in Wittgenstein’s Language Game concept (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2004).



So, let us play a (language) game. Art has political potential, since both art and politics share the same sphere - they are phenomena that require the presence of others. Performance art, for example, takes place in the presence of the multitude, an audience, whether at the theatre, in a gallery or public space, which is where its potential lies. The multitude in the public sphere serves as a protection against the singular interpretation of the past that the nationalist ideology promotes; this differs significantly from public opinion, which is the social construction of generalisation.

In the process of dealing with the past, the public sphere enables individual life stories to be shared and included in discussions about the past, wherein the past can be given meaning and, as such, remembrance, which may then be used as a guide for the future. The past of the Western Balkans has several interpretations and “truths”, which are usually in conflict with one another.

A nationalist ideology will create a uniform version of the past, reshaping it to fit the needs of its political agenda, and leaving almost no room for open discussion. Dealing with the past then takes the typical course, where victims and survivors are used as objects and fuel to preserve the reign of the political oligarchy.

Having an opportunity to present a story, or an opinion, or to ask a question, with every member of the audience able to witness, interact with or be touched by it, in any way that he or she sees, feels and hears, through his or her experience or filter of that experience, is what makes performance art a way to deal with the complicated socio-economic and political situation in which we live.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the past is omnipresent, art finds ways to process topics that affect us, allowing us to “face” the past through a fictional or

non-fictional approach, giving us the hope and desire to create a constructive society that is willing to invest in a “better” future, which, for the moment, is only an empty catch-phrase.

Based on my experience, both as an author and member of the audience, I have found that performance art deals with the past (present and future) in three basic ways.

The first asks questions and calls upon the political elite to take responsibility for preventing open discussion about the past and manipulating it for political agendas during the post-war period. By disabling public discussion of the past in the presence of a crowd, achieving understanding and finding meaning becomes impossible, consequently leading to victimisation and objectification of members of society. This further restricts the possibility of using remembrance as a guide, and instead makes it fuel for political manipulation.

The second deals specifically with victims and witnesses of the recent war, and how their experiences affect generations born after the war. As a result of objectification, a victim inevitably loses his or her subjectiveness, which has at least two implications; one is that, if treated as objects or numbers, victims can easily be manipulated and misused for the above mentioned political agendas; the other is that, the objectification of a victim prevents them from being politically active, given the fact that political action implies individual action and responsibility. Performance art can contribute to a re-subjectification of victims, survivors, and witnesses through a space intended for the public sharing of life stories. On the one hand, this contributes to the process of healing for victims, survivors and witnesses, and on the other, this helps them accept their position as a subject and, as such, they are able to be politically active. This process results

in empathy and solidarity, not from generalisation or uniformity of nationalist ideologies, but rather through acceptance of personal life experiences, which together say something about past events.

The third entails an apparent departure from the past, by turning towards and imagining the future. How do we wish to live? What would make us happy and satisfied in the social, economic or political context? What values would we like to transfer to the future? These and similar questions also speak about what we live through, what we criticise and how we feel in this country and society, and it assumes social engagement *par excellence* that paves the way for memory and experience to serve as a guide for the future.

Recently, a theatre play, Hajđekud, was created by secondary school students from Prijedor, who used the participatory approach to tackle the topic of future memories. The participatory approach allowed space and time for students to use laughter, fun, seriousness and dedication, to explore dialogue, perform scenes of group and individual amnesia, show the ways society relates towards their generation, and address the values they wish to pave their way forward. The authors of the play were the students.

The process introduced a horizontal methodology where primary and secondary school teachers were facilitators, who, together with the participants, opened topics that spoke about their generation, their relationships with older generations, and their role within society. Many things are not remembered, sometimes simply due to time passing or because it is easier to forget. There are also topics that are not forgotten in Prijedor but are not discussed. During the preparation of the play, 25 secondary school students from Prijedor attended workshops on film and movement in theatre, script development, voice, scenography, and costume, resulting in the performance they playfully called Hajđekud (short for “Let’s go! Where?”).

Visual and performance art can serve as variations of temporary monuments, and they are repeatedly arising within a region where official memorialisation is just another source of conflict between differing nationalist ideologies.

If analysed from the perspective of consumer society, which demands quick results, the previous statements about the power of art and its role in dealing with the past, may seem overly optimistic and romanticised. However, if we analyse its impact through the prism of actions and reactions, where “every” action has a reaction, and where every process is the cause of new processes” (Arendt, 1959), then the real potential of performance art is revealed.

Art will initially affect and change individuals and society at the subconscious level, at an intimate level, and later at a societal and political one. The extent to which is difficult to say, however it certainly has an impact on us and opens (at least) micro spaces for dialogue. This cannot be denied.

THE EMOTIONAL ABOVE ALL

BORKA PAVIĆEVIĆ

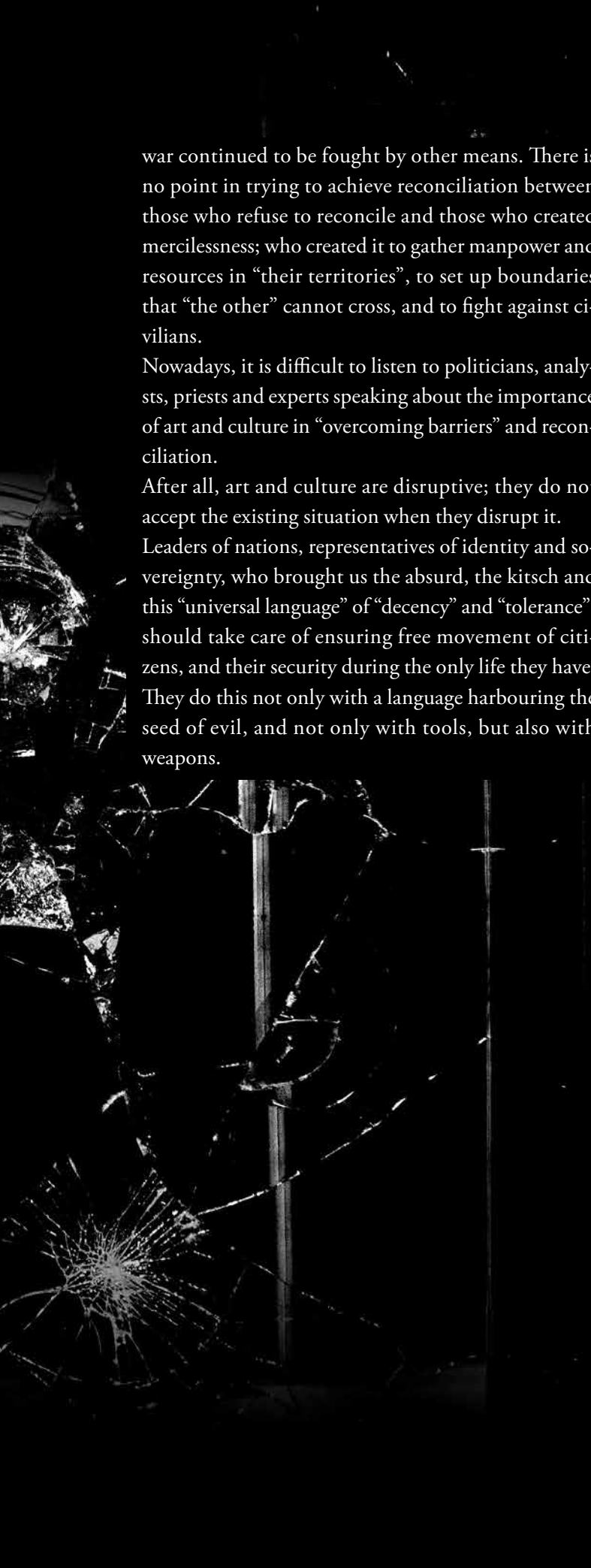
Playwright and Artistic Director at the Drama Theatre in Belgrade, Borka was dismissed due to her public and political activism (1993). Founder and Director of the Centre for Cultural Decontamination in Belgrade (since 1994). Playwright at theatres in Zenica, Split, Skopje, Ljubljana, Subotica and Belgrade (1978-1991). Winner of the 2004 Foundation for Peace and Culture "Hiroshima Award", the 2005 "Osvajanje slobode" Award from the fund "Maja Maršićević Tasić", the Order of the Legion of Honour of the Republic of France (2002) and the 2009 "Ruts" Award from the European Cultural Foundation.

What seems to be of great importance, to me, is the language we use when facing the past, the language we apply in the communities dealing with "remembrance". This language requires a new set of terms. A "coded" or "project" language only serves to dampen and understate the impact of the message. Words should not "lose their innocence" (Sartre), otherwise the entire process of thinking and acting, and the resulting thoughts and actions, become routine, undermining the very issues that people are advocating for. There is much "corruption" in the way we sing about the complexity of investigating our perceptions and feelings. We naturally tend to complicate things, not simplify them, because otherwise it would be dogmatism, and thus a rejection of the "real" meaning. So, we cannot "use" this existing language of "remembrance", and we particularly cannot repeat platitudes, or a mutually coded language of communication. If we do so, we reject those we would like to attract, and encourage them to find their "own" language for initiating discussions, filling gaps, confronting and socialising. "Communities of remembrance" create spaces for sociability, based on individuals who do not pass judgement, but rather think and

feel. When it comes to dealing with the past, a "diluted" language eventually becomes conventional, and therefore non-engaging. There is too much moralism in our immoral societies.

After not recognising the role of art and culture in human rights, democracy, and the economy for a long time, whilst still stressing these fundamental values, international and local allies have recently acknowledged that, where the law and its institutions cannot win battles independently, art and culture can achieve what they are unable to. Art achieves this with human rights compliance, reconciliation and creating certainty in citizens' lives. Art builds bridges. It provides the opportunity for catharsis; catharsis can be achieved through artistic creation and expression.

We would actually need to establish who is reconciling with whom. And in turn, who is responsible for war, violence, ethnic cleansing, genocide, urbicide, bookicide and culturocide. Certainly not the creators and activists who have critically viewed the ideology of nationalism, as the source of conflict and misfortune, by "criticising everything that exists" during the war years, as well as the post-war years, in which the



war continued to be fought by other means. There is no point in trying to achieve reconciliation between those who refuse to reconcile and those who created mercilessness; who created it to gather manpower and resources in “their territories”, to set up boundaries that “the other” cannot cross, and to fight against civilians.

Nowadays, it is difficult to listen to politicians, analysts, priests and experts speaking about the importance of art and culture in “overcoming barriers” and reconciliation.

After all, art and culture are disruptive; they do not accept the existing situation when they disrupt it.

Leaders of nations, representatives of identity and sovereignty, who brought us the absurd, the kitsch and this “universal language” of “decency” and “tolerance”, should take care of ensuring free movement of citizens, and their security during the only life they have.

They do this not only with a language harbouring the seed of evil, and not only with tools, but also with weapons.

Citizenship, passports and security for all those who do not belong to the majority, fall under the responsibility of governments here in the Western Balkans states, and with more and more certainty, this does not apply only to the “barbarian” Balkans. And all the propagandists, Ministers of Culture, and other authority figures, be they spiritual or physical, ideological or formal, should not state that art “builds bridges”. They should not avoid nor deflect their own responsibility, by transferring the role of reconciliation solely to art and culture.

Art builds bridges by questioning fascism (well, more or less fascism) and the “right” - they are not “traditions” only associated with the “Western Balkans” and the “region”, rather, they have an increasingly strong and catastrophic grip on Europe and America, waging a war on human rights and freedom of creation. Most persecuted are the artists who question their “own” and who also have the legitimacy and standing to question the “others”. Examples are numerous and thunderous. “Divine”, “scandalous”, “provocative” - these artists are labelled from all sides.

They say that we live in a post-factual world, not just because the facts are what we agree them to be. We also recognise them as interpretations; their existence creates the hope that something can be proven, that a document will be what makes citizens face the very past that they are still living out in the present. This obviously is not the essence of the process of facing the past.

No assurances, no truth, no crucial evidence has ever led to a decision being overturned in the name of justice, trauma or victims. Still, in no way does this mean that facts should not be repeated over and over. It is emotionality that brings us closer to understanding. Awareness can bring peace, and so can solidarity of those disrupting the peace of the aggressors, reconciled through their resistance. Emotionality above all. In this respect, art is an immanent community of “remembrance” and deals with both the defeat and greatness of man. What we lack, every day and everywhere, is the sense of and capacity for admiration and wonder. And this is something we need to face.

Interview with Bojana Stojmenovska, Festival Director

SIMONA
ATANASOVA

In Situ is the first international art festival of its kind in Skopje, where artists from Macedonia and the world can exhibit their works in three sections - visual arts, design and architecture. The festival director, Bojana Stojmenovska, says that the festival gives individuals an opportunity to confront the past by using the space, audience and context offered by the exhibition, to enable the elaboration, communication and interaction of the subject. This year, the exhibition was held from 13 to 15 September, at the Youth Cultural Centre (MKC), and featured works by over 100 artists.

How did you get the idea of organizing such a festival? What was the stimulus and how did it develop over the years?

When I started to organize this festival, I realized that one of Skopje's traits was that it tended to break things up instead of bringing them together. There is a lot of content, but sometimes a person cannot find that content within a single place. It must rather be sought out and this has become more and more pronounced. I realized that there was potential to do something about

that, and just then we started with the good experience of Paratissima in Turin (in 2014) and replicated their show here, as a successful example of creating a single homogeneous scene which would grow naturally by itself. There was a great deal of scepticism by everyone who was invited to cooperate. They told me that it was pointless, that it could not be done. Sometimes I even told myself that I was embracing something that was completely crazy, and on the other hand, I was had sudden attacks of a certain kind of spite and defiance because I experienced it as a provocation. With us, the tendency is to criticize all the time, but no one is trying to change anything. The prevailing opinion is that nothing can be done, as if we are living in a place that is cut off from the world, but in fact there are many people who have a sincere intention and interest in contributing to making something else turn out differently. At the beginning, it was treated as an alternative event where people connected with art and misunderstood by society gathered, however it evolved into an event where new things, new talents and individuals could be found.

What is the main goal of the festival and what is the message you want to send? Do you think it reaches the audience?

The message we want to convey, particularly in Macedonia, is that it is great to develop competition, but collective responsibility in any department, and especially in this one, is essential to raising the standard of how things are presented and how this is communicated to the audience and how new potentials and innovations are brought to the surface in everything that we do. We send a message that the space and time have been created where we should prove that it is possible and functional, and that from now on it should be something that would grow. However, I would not want to see growth alone, I would like to see growth in everyone who believes that they have something to contribute. I honestly think that the message has touched the audience.

Why are multicultural festivals having difficulty attracting artists from the Balkans?

I think that in the Balkans, we generally tend to underestimate each other, and the prevailing opinion is that everything coming from the West, or outside the Balkans, is better than what can be achieved in the Balkans, and that nothing that is done here can compete with a different scene. The fact is that our resources are limited, and we are lagging in many things that are not related to whether we can cooperate or not. I have the impression that we are avoiding each other, that we want to go somewhere further thinking that someone else is better and knows more than what we might know or do. In my experience, I honestly cannot say that there is a difference in the quality and in the seriousness and professionalism of the Macedonian, Balkan and all other authors and scenes. There is a different type of expression or a different medium of expression or a slightly different formulation. In certain parts it may be bolder or done differently because the conditions are different, but we are no less capable or backward with respect to what we have to share. In the Balkans, we have almost the same problems, which differ slightly from country to country, if and when there would be

an alliance in that regard, I think that the Balkan scene would come to the surface much faster. But everyone sees their problem as the biggest, and they think that nobody else could understand them.

How does art affect how we deal with the past?

Here, in the Balkans, I think that this is more pronounced due to the breakup of Yugoslavia and the separation of countries, we all have a collective and common past that may not be so pronounced in these generations, however it is still passed on from generation to generation, especially through the memories of the days passed. I think that this kind of event helps, particularly in that confrontation, that things that seem to be perceived as differences, when united in one space and when encountered at a particular time and place, are not differences, but rather advantages. I suppose that, for every Western Balkan country, facing the past is different, naturally because the circumstances are different. However, I think that these stereotypes and misunderstandings are overcome quite easily when they are tackled at such events as these, because the atmosphere is informal, it is related to something that is aesthetic and exists the context of everyday political developments, even though many of the authors naturally transfer their political and national and gender interpretations through their work. Generally, they deal with the same existential questions, with the same considerations, with the same global context. At the festival, they associate with each other, there are no language barriers, there has never been any problem whatsoever.



SOURCE: IN SITU

Why does the art scene in Macedonia not confront the past?

I think it does, but I think it confronts it in a different way. My view is that it should not be treated superficially, that the addressing of that issue and its treatment within the framework of culture and art should be something that has been backed up by research, by confrontation that should cover several years, so that when it comes to the end it has a clear result. Any superficial treatment of this problem of dealing with the past tends to attract more problems rather than solve them. The reason being that it looks as if the culture and the artistic sector do not deal with this topic because it is a process of research and it starts from the self-exploration, i.e. self-awareness, then it shifts towards someone else, and then it moves from a single collective towards another collective. The topic is too complex to be common. I am not saying that it should not become more frequent, but I think it should be treated with particular attention, because I am sure that the personal perspective here should not be intrusive, it should be more open than closed. Facing the past should be in line with facing the future. It should be something that has been backed up by essential thinking, not only of something that will be said or exposed, and only presented, which is superficial and creates a greater confusion, rather than offering a certain confrontation.

How will this festival change this situation?

I think it changes the situation because there is no author selection process as to who will present their work, regardless of their gender, age, format, subject of expression, country of origin. The festival offers individuals the opportunity to confront using the space offered by the exhibition and the context and the audience to enable the treatment, communication and interaction of these topics. Absolute openness, which is the democratic feature of the exhibition, offers the right space for anyone to self-elaborate those issues that are essential to everyone. Treatment of the past is something that I think should be a personal initiative.



SOURCE: IN SITU

How do you assess the cultural and art scene in Macedonia?

I think that in general Macedonia is not sufficiently developed as the art scene is primarily centralized in a large part in Skopje. There is a rather insignificant number of events outside Skopje, and I think that the events outside Skopje are successful and only prove that they need to be organized more. There is little communication between the organizations dealing with culture and art and there is some resistance, due to competition or ignorance, however I think that in the last 4-5 years there has been exceptional progress in terms of quantity and quality. Regarding the quality, I think we still have a lot of room to fill. That does not mean that what is now being marketed has no quality, on the contrary, it does have quality; however, due to the lack of resources, and as a result of the isolation imposed in part by ourselves, and in part by external factors, there is less experimentation and fewer innovations than I personally would like to see. I have the impression that at times it is relatively uniform, although this does not reduce the quality of what is being presented. I am missing experimental representations, especially since having in mind the developed technology I do not think that they are so unreachable or problematic to develop. I think that people are too preoccupied with the political developments and this takes away from their creativity. Art has always been a medium that has progressed the most during times of dire and difficult circumstances, and the least in times of prosperity.

THE POWER OF ART IN DEALING WITH THE PAST

Dardan Hoti

One of the biggest actual challenges is how to properly deal with a variety of issues that affect the essence of the society. When the past is locked inside the drawer of history, the present is burdened and there is no room left for change. Often, this is a consequence of political interference because it is convenient for politics to write history to suit specific interests, or, in the case of Kosovo, such topics are hushed by not raising the voice, because of stigma or mentality. When it seems that all paths are closed, art is the one that can bring about the change. This has been proven all over the world and in Kosovo too. The consequences of the recent war – thousands of people dead, burnt and destroyed houses, victims of sexual violence, a totally ruined economy – are still visible two decades later. Art has often been used as a way of overcoming or dealing with a reality that happened. One good example of this aspect is the installation from the London-based Kosovo artist, Alketa Xhafa-Mripa. “I think of you” was realized in 2015 in the stadium of Prishtina, and it raised one of the most sensitive topics in

the post-war Kosovo society. It gave voice to those who for many years had remained silent: it dealt with the topic of the victims of sexual violence in Kosovo. By collecting dresses from the victims, who for the first time were not judged for a “crime” they did not commit, both the victims and the other people who donated dresses to demonstrate solidarity made the entire world speak about them. In this case, not only Kosovo society opened its eyes to an extremely sensitive matter, but the voice of these women was heard far beyond.

Xhafa-Mripa is only one of many artists who, through an artistic platform, have managed to touch upon such very important topics. The well-known Kosovo singer and architect, Eliza Hoxha, is another example. Recently, she represented Kosovo at the Venice Architecture Biennale with her installation “The City is Everywhere”. Hoxha linked the architectural and artistic aspect in the Kosovo Pavilion, through her presentation that brought a historical retrospective of the country. She was touching upon the ‘90s, when the parallel education system was being developed in the country.



Credits: Korab Krasniqi

For her, artistic expression (by whatever means) is essential in addressing various social issues, be they the past, taboo topics or other problems that are pronounced in society.

“Often within this context, art opens debates in a very soft and unobtrusive way, and creates a new shelter for the past, for the pain and the many unspoken things that are a result of the social mentality. Often, artists touch on issues about which the society is not ready to speak or act upon,” says Hoxha, who in the last two decades has used her art to raise the issues of persons missing since the last war in Kosovo, and women who were raped during the war.

“Speaking about the last project - the process lasted two years, including research and discussion with stakeholders to understand the core of the issue, and always paying close attention to the sensitivity of the topic. At the time when many associations are working with these women, and have been working with them for many years, nevertheless failing to speak in public, the project broke the silence and opened the door for many other new public events on this issue,” says Hoxha. According to her, at the same time art serves to help with the process of dealing with the past, memorizing the past employing a more creative format. Hoxha says that it is important to reflect upon the past and to re-live it through many individual and collective questions.

Its effects may be varied. “Sometimes to break taboos, so-

metimes to open debates, sometimes to push a process forward, sometimes to become a voice for the marginalized, sometimes to mobilize and sensitize, sometimes to register and to memorize, and much more,” says Hoxha, who only one month ago, with her exhibition became part of a festival taking place in Belgrade, the main goal of which is to bring two peoples, the Albanians and the Serbs, face-to-face with the past. Although many topics were dealt with in the country as far as the history of the ‘90s in concerned, there is clearly still more to be done in this respect. The fact that Hoxha was stopped at the border while travelling together with the team of the “Mirëdita, dobar dan” festival, and later, the confiscation of some of her photos, is a clear indicator of this situation. A few days ago, almost the same fate was suffered by the art critic and analyst Shkëlzen Maliqi, who was prohibited entrance into Serbia. He was travelling there to promote a monograph containing 20 years of artistic collaboration between Belgrade and Prishtina, focusing on the exhibition of 1997 “Beyond”, which Maliqi opened for the first time in Belgrade with four Kosovo artists.

“Art may be used as a medium, but then it risks becoming a tool for propaganda, to serve ideologies and policies, thus degrading itself even when this is justified with ‘good intentions’,” said Maliqi. According to him, art is not used to deal with the past, but art uses the past, just as it does with other topics, as a “medium” to realize artworks

Eliza Hoxha, during the presentation of Kosovo at the Venice Architecture Biennale with her installation “The City is Everywhere”



Credits: Majlinda Hoxha, official photographer for the Kosovo Pavilion

and artefacts. “What history or morals do to explain the past, art does not have to do, otherwise it is transformed into illustration. Arts seeks the depths, the complex uniqueness of the events of the past or the present, even in dimensions that are not cognitive and learning but are a sublime experience of the entirety of life situations. Aristotle called such experience a catharsis or release of emotions, a shock of understanding / non-understanding of the mystery of life with aspects that may be simultaneously tragic, happy, comic etc...” says Maliqi.

Apart from the artistic expression through photography, installations or visual arts, another very important medium to use is theatre. The well-known Kosovo playwright Jeton Neziraj has already put on stage some plays through which he probes the past. He says that when such drama becomes public, either as a publication or on stage, in a way it makes the public face the past being dealt there. To him, the “artistic” confrontation is very important.

“In fact, I would even say that forms of artistic expression, of whatever discipline of the art remain the most efficient media to deal with the past. Especially so the theatre. Naturally, the theatre does not claim the truth, or let’s say, it claims the ‘artistic truth’. Theatre poses questions and when these questions concern the past, especially that past which has not been properly uncovered, when it is camouflaged by myths, laden with untruths, overburdened with false glory, with crimes about which nobody dares to speak, and so on” says Neziraj, who does that through his play “Carla Del Ponte drinks Vanilla Chai Latte in Prishtina” or “A One Theatre Play with 4 Actors ...”, “Bordel Ballkan” and others.

“The theatre becomes that necessary forum, which by asking questions seeks to ‘cleanse’ a society from the past and at the same time, raise its awareness about the future. In other words, by reminding a society of the past, the theatre seeks to improve the society, to make it more human, more tolerant, so that the past is not repeated,” says Neziraj. This only proves that art has the power to make a society aware of its past, so that this past is not repeated. A “problematic” past, in this case, is one which our society often suppresses, hides away from and does have the power to deal with.

The Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Campaign

1990- 1991

Oral History and Memory

SHOWN AT THE GALLERY OF ARTS IN PEJA,
APRIL 25 - MAY 21, 2018

ERËMIRË KRASNIQI, ORAL HISTORY KOSOVO

Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Campaign

The Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Campaign began in 1990 as a call for unity among Albanians of Kosovo.

As Milošević gained power, the constitution of 1974 was abolished, rendering Kosovo vulnerable in what was still considered Yugoslav space. The campaign played an emancipatory role, calling for unity and forgiveness, and inviting people to reposition themselves politically.

It recognised how the traditional Albanian code of honour was misused to portray Albanians as less civilised people within Yugoslavia.

The aim was for all educated people to approach their communities and encourage families to reconcile their blood feuds, with an emphasis on involving female students in the mediation process. The process of mediation usually took place in the *oda* (male chambers), where, up to that point, women were excluded. The campaign gave women access to these male-dominated spaces and into this domain of power. In many ways, the campaign delegitimized the authorities who maintained the code of honour and enabled people to rethink their understanding of honour within their communities.

Albanians living in diaspora took with them the





Photo credits: The exhibition Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Campaign 1990-1991 was held from April 25 - May 21, 2018, the campaign's birthplace, Peja (Oral History Kosovo)

The process of mediation usually took place in the oda (male chambers), where, up to that point, women were excluded. The campaign gave women access to these male-dominated spaces and into this domain of power.

code of honour and had never reconciled their blood feuds until a delegation of reconcilers from Kosovo led by Anton Çetta were invited to the United States to reconcile families, namely in New York and Detroit.

The result was thousands of reconciliations, and the liberation of families from the duty defined by the code of honour: to avenge and take out blood. The act of forgiveness ensured a degree of safety in public space within smaller communities in Kosovo, which was lacking at the time due to Milošević's regime.

The campaign's impact was so widespread that even people in diaspora were looking at it closely and reconciling the feud there.

How Could the Campaign be Used as an Example Today?

The Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Campaign is a remarkable story, from which one can draw many important lessons, including forgiveness, honour, and solidarity. The story embodies values and cultural processes, that themselves pose timeless questions - these may not necessarily demand our attention today, but can be referred to again and again, when one thinks about what constitutes our sense of humanity and what underlying values keep this community together. The interfaith element is again becoming a serious concern in this region; a concern to be handled care-

fully. The Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Campaign relied heavily on the 19th century national awakening paradigm, “The Albanian faith is Albanianess” and that is what it tried to represent during the 1990s: unity above all, placing emphasis on the Albanian language as the homogenizing component of the nation. It encourages a solution which is simple yet difficult to achieve, places value on that which brings us together and not on that which tears us apart. This solution is context-specific and for that reason it is successful, but I don’t see how that could translate in other cultural contexts, and that is because most Balkan countries have homogenized their national identities around religion, and not around language, and oftentimes, religion becomes a basis of exclusion in contexts where religion has primacy over culture.

Curating the Project

The activists and the members of the families that forgave were at the centre of the exhibition narrative. In the curation stage of the project, it was important to avoid glorification or elevation of certain human figures, also the commemorative dimension which is a common approach to exhibition-making. These curatorial decisions should not be read as disrespect towards the main protagonists of the campaign, but as a way of humanizing the story and opening it up for other stories, subplots and sub-characters. I tried to create more space for overlooked protagonists; women were crucial to the movement, and although they occupy hundreds of photographs of the reconciliation campaign, somehow no one recalls their names and hardly anyone has a story with them in it.

Doing away with the commemorative dimension of the exhibition, was a solution which has to do with the way I understand contemporary history; histories we remember and with which we interact and feed with today’s world-views. I don’t experience them as static, therefore it is impossible to monumentalize a single narrative and construct the memory and experience from one subject position. The faulty and fluid nature of memory itself was reflected on the exhibition narrative and curatorial solutions I came up with.



SOURCE: ORAL HISTORY KOSOVO

Building a Memory Community

It was important to build a memory community. I think we achieved that. Day in and out the exhibition was visited by people who were part of the campaign, but whom as Oral History Initiative, a small team of people, did not have the chance to meet. But the exhibition space became a meeting place, where they could browse the Photobook, a book of photographs gathered from all the people we interviewed. Those encounters brought about other stories and places of reconciliation.

Interviewing for Oral histories

The oral history interviewing methodology is an intersubjective process where the interviewer and speaker enter a process of co-production. Storytelling is a big part of the interviewing process. As an interviewer I am exposed to stories and images, and these personal encounters become a way of producing knowledge about our community. Of course, what you think as a researcher and curator is how to create a narrative environment and enable others to inhabit these spaces. In designing the space of the exhibition which is research-based, the main concern is not to overload the public with too much information, but also have enough information to sustain curiosity and discovery.

Art and the Past

Occasionally, I use curatorial strategies which traditionally are considered common in the art world, but unusual for a history-based exhibition. Here, art lends a hand in transmitting dense information, it says more with less. Also, art strategies allow themselves a degree of uncertainty, because it appreciates the process of production, and at times by veiling difficult questions and conveying them using strategies coming from the art world, suddenly some questions are humanized and aware of their imperfection.

Acknowledging that in an exhibition setting I find it quite important, because it makes the exhibition a performative space where the public just as much can produce knowledge.

Art and culture as a tool to engage with the past?

In this region of ours questions concerning the past are always difficult. Using curatorial strategies to pack content in a way that keeps the questions open for discussion and leaves space for more than one narrative, and to be able to do this, culture and what we draw from it, help us understand our own context in which we are working. Most certainly, informs my sense of responsibility towards the narrative I am trying to curate.

My curatorial approach is quite interdisciplinary, so I fail to see clearly those disciplinary divisions. I let the research guide me when I am curating; I try to

address the needs of the content I am working with; the research content dictates the way something will be displayed. However, finding a way to display material that does justice to the research and manages to accentuate the important aspects of the research, of course this dimension which is visual and yet intimately connected to content, is quite important because depending how the content is presented facilitates or not, that relationship between the public and the research itself.

Reactions to the exhibition

Every museum exhibition tries to have a selfie Photo Op, where the visitors take pictures and posts them online. The exhibition had a central wall, which had a large-scale photograph from the reconciliation gathering in Nabërgjan, a village in the Peja municipality.

The photograph showed a huge crowd of people looking in the direction of those reconciling, supposedly, since we don't see what they are looking at, but we read the situation by looking at people's faces. I chose that photograph, because it represented the togetherness of that moment and desire to be part of it. The visitors, most of them from Peja, recognized people in the photograph, which was an interactive dimension of the photograph I did not calculate or foresee. Most of the time the central wall was used as a backdrop, the visitors liked to insert themselves in the photograph of the reconciliation gathering.



Credits: Vladimir Miladinović
"KO200436 (23 July 1999) Site (KV/004)", Charcoal on paper, 188x151cm, 2018

IMAGINATION AS TRUTH



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MILENA POPOVIĆ

A Belgrade-based journalist, Milena tackles a wide range of social topics, with her journalistic work mostly focused on issues of facing the past. In addition to writing media articles, she was also a co-author of the documentary "Albanian Women Are Our Sisters".

The process of building a national identity in Serbia, following the break-up of Yugoslavia, has been deprived of all uncomfortable facts and anything which the society, community or individuals would find difficult to accept. Art, however, has embraced that uncomfortable space, full of the socially unprocessed and traumatic events of the recent past,

from the official narrative. Paradoxically, when facts lose their merit, the imagination they inspire is the only means that has the power to reach the truth. While the political amnesia is trying to suppress the discovery of a mass grave in Batajnica, which held the bodies of Albanians murdered in Kosovo, two authors from Belgrade, Ognjen Glavonjić and Vladimir Mi-

ladinović, are successfully managing to penetrate the unflinching world of avoidance, denial and ignorance, with their own artistic intervention.

Are we facing the responsibility for the crimes that have been committed and how are we doing that? These are

key questions raised by scriptwriter and director, Ognjen Glavonjić, in his new feature film “The Load”. In the film, Glavonjić captures the journey of a freezer truck driver, who is unaware he is transporting the bodies of murdered persons from one location to another, and, at the same time, is questioning whether he wants to know what he is transporting. The film was screened at this year’s Cannes Film Festival, although it has not yet reached domestic audiences.

During the long process of creating this project, Glavonjić also made a documentary entitled “Depth Two”. On the same topic, but from a different perspective.

“Depth Two” was the codename for the secret operation of the transfer of bodies of killed civilians from the village Suva Reka (Suharekë) in Kosovo, to the mass grave in Batajnica, Serbia.

Within the film, unnamed testimonies from court archives and photographs of the areas where the crimes were committed, are intertwined. The lead character of the film is, in fact, the narrator, taking the audience into a personal space of imagination, creation and experience of the event itself.

These films, as the author explains, are the space and the opportunity to speak up about persons, events, and

places that he considers marginalised, hidden, silenced and forgotten. This combination of ignorance and lack of interest in the circumstances surrounding the story, has also impacted how many questions were formulated and asked, which, he says, led him to produce both films, first to the planned feature film, and then, unexpectedly, to the second documentary.

Visual artist Vladimir Miladinović, also tries to create a space for imagining the “problematic” past in his works. Through a painstakingly long process of replication and faithful copying, namely of court trials, bureaucratic records, evidence, and lists of objects that were found and used to identify bodies in the mass grave at Batajnica, he creates his drawings.

His series of works, entitled “Disturbed Soil”, consists of landscapes created with interpreted forensic photographs, and similarly to Glavonjić’s film, inspires us to ponder what originally occurred there.

As Miladinović explains, by translating archival materials into art, he is highlighting the importance of suppressed or eliminated narratives of the past in the process of establishing relationships in the present. In addition to the questions about historical responsibility, the artist also investigates the relationship between text and image, thus testimonial and imagination. To what extent can we testify about the traumatic past, if we cannot imagine it? Is photography sufficient evidence for us to believe it?

Miladinović, therefore, uses his art to pose questions about the evidence we have, what it tells us, and what power it holds. Through artistic intervention, he is re-examining what else we can do as a society with the legacy of the past war.

While the official history creates what is acceptable, art offers us an alternative space for interpreting the past, and re-empowering the truth, which was betrayed by society.



Credits: Vladimir Miladinović

... showing the place where the father of the witness was found.”, Charcoal on paper, 188x151cm, 2018

Skopje's Treasure

The Old Bazaar

VENHAR
RAMADANI

As you get to know Skopje better and taste the tradition of the capital of Macedonia, you get the feeling that there is a major division in the city – that life in Skopje is split by the ethnicity line – into “the Albanian side” and “the Macedonian side”. This is how Skopje is often perceived, however it does not reflect reality.

In reality, Skopje is different, richer and more dignified, with the vivacity of the people taking priority over how the state organizes its system. With a more dignified organization of communities in the future, which is the aim, even Skopje will be officially inclusive and offer life for all.

All that is needed is to see this, is to take the example of life in Skopje's Old Bazaar. A fine miniature version of the city - rich, full and bustling, where people coexist and work together. Skopje has several treasures, but the Old Bazaar belongs to all, to the Albanians, Macedonians, Turks, Roma, Serbs, Vlachs, Bosnians and other communities.

The Old Bazaar also belongs to the tourists who come for the tea and delicious kebabs. It belongs to the believers who visit its mosques and churches, and history enthusiasts who visit the Skopje Fortress, itself a unique treasure connected to ancient times.



Credits: Kristina Lozanovska



Credits: Kristina Lozanovska

The Old Bazaar is what links the different sides of Skopje. Designed to function not only as a connecting bridge, but also an important means for Skopje's development, the street of gold artisans, filigree, and old folk costumes from all ethnicities of Macedonia, only enriches the beauty of this cultural neighbourhood. "The Bazaar is Macedonia, Macedonia is the Bazaar" is a local proverb summarizing its importance throughout history.

When researching Macedonia online, your search immediately leads you to Skopje's Old Bazaar, with tourists recommending it as a place that leaves an impression - its warmth, diversity and soul can be felt on every cobblestone of the ancient streets. Trip Advisor ranks it number seven out of 10 top places to visit in Macedonia.

The Old Bazaar is considered the "diamond" of Skopje, due to its cultural richness, and economic and social qualities. A diamond, as it houses social richness and ethnical diversities, and bridges a connection between the Old and the New Skopje. A diamond, wherein many generations have fed their families and whose businesses have developed the country's economy.

The cobblestone streets could have been replaced many times by now, but their cultural value to the Old Bazaar could not be, and this only shows how its rich history has a positive influence on the future. The stone laneways make you feel as though you are in the East, yet the spirit of the Old Bazaar convinces you of the prospect of development and the West. These laneways lead up to the Fortress, down to the market, better known as the Bit Bazaar, and to the mosques, churches, synagogues, museums, the Watch Tower and other historical sites.

Within the Old Bazaar there is Skanderbeg, the Albanian national figure and Philip II of Macedonia. The numerous and differing historical periods and religious beliefs here have never been a cause for ethnic, religious, cultural nor state conflicts. All have been living in harmony, united by living and working in Skopje's largest treasure. Although the government has not invested much in the Old Bazaar, it has survived without any institutional support, only with the spirit of those that love and live from it. Before a diamond is found, it can remain hidden underground for many years. Business people, artisans, artists and citizens have kept the Old Bazaar alive. UNESCO has placed it on its list of protected sites, while the state of Macedonia, in 2008, passed a special law for the Old Bazaar. Although officially supported by this law, the Old Bazaar, has not seen any large investments nor any protection from those damaging it in different ways. Yet, the diamond of Skopje is being protected by the people who frequent it every day.

This diamond is heavily protected by its citizens regardless of their identity. It is protected by the past and by the future. It is protected by God, regardless of religious belief. It is protected by the hands of the workers who, in the middle of the day, sip tea and hope for better days. Even though situated in the middle of modern Skopje and melancholic for its past, the Old Bazaar protects its inexhaustible richness fiercely. Its culture, spirit and concept, that include everyone, is protected. All in one place, for a common and bright future.

A life for all in Macedonia is the new spirit of Macedonia. Just like the Old Bazaar, which has remained here since the beginning. It took more than 27 years for someone to take the spirit of the Old Bazaar, to write it in the form of a national political program and then try to implement it. It's very simple, they should consider the experience of all who enjoy the Old Bazaar and create a functional state structure in its image.

The diamond has already been found. In fact, it already existed. We just couldn't see it. But now we do. It has started to shine! The light of the diamond wasn't blinding us before, as we were overcome by the negative, and looked only to the darkness.

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PLACE OF PUBLICATION

Cologne



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Balkan.Perspectives is published by forumZFD.

The Forum Civil Peace Service (forumZFD, Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst) is a German organisation that was established in 1996. It trains and deploys peace experts to conflict regions where they work together with local partners to promote peaceful coexistence and non-violent conflict resolution. Its strategic partner in the Western Balkans is Pax Christi in the Diocese of Aachen.

In the Western Balkans, the focus is on projects in the field of dealing with the past and on fostering dialogue between opposing parties. This includes school mediation projects, the support of civil society, or enhancing media capacities for a more constructive approach to dealing with the past.

The program is financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

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