

Claudia Zini

Courtauld Institute of Art, London

Post-War Negotiations: Art from Bosnia Herzegovina in the Global Field

My thesis investigates Bosnian contemporary production, from the flourishing art scene bursting in Sarajevo in the 1980s and the collapse of the state, to the production of radical, courageous art projects that contributed to the revival of the idea of a Bosnian nation state in the decades that followed. Recapitulating regional art historical events since the early 1990s and tracing their legacy for Bosnia Herzegovina today, my thesis works outwards from this case study to examine more widely the cultural processes affecting artists from previously war torn nations today.

In the past twenty years, Bosnia-Herzegovina has experienced a process of new definition of its cultural identity and a traumatic transition from a socialist republic of Yugoslavia into a Western, liberal and capitalistic nation.

In 1997 more than 200 hundred artists applied to be part of the exhibition organized by the Soros Center for Contemporary Art directed by Dunja Blazevic. In a time where the twelve pre-war galleries had been reduced to just four, with most other older artists still in exile, the field had now opened up for an entirely new generation of artists in their 20's who started to question the consequences of the war with new and experimental subjects such as identity, trauma and memory, approached through new media and site-specific projects strongly connected with socio-political issues. I am examining the impact of this historical and cultural legacy on two generations of artists - those educated under the old system such as Jusuf Hadzifejzović, Group Zvono and the protagonists of the exhibition "Witness of Existence" held in Sarajevo in 1993 - and those who have come to maturity post-war such as Shoba, Damir Niksić, Maja Bajević and Mladen Miljanović. I am also taking into account their participation at the Venice Biennale in 2003 representing Bosnia-Herzegovina on an international stage and how their art works negotiate the line between the local context, recent history and the trauma-infused discourses of the politicised global art world.

Art historian Dunja Blazević has argued that the experience of war severed the tie to pre-war Bosnian and Herzegovinian cultural history, and “the realism of lived experience” came to determine artistic practice in a fundamental way¹. One of my research aims is to explore to what extent this remains the case for artists working today. Building outwards from theories of post-socialism, and remaining aware of the dangers of measuring artistic production too directly against history and politics, I am taking on board and rethinking art historian Bojana Pejić’s concerns about Bosnian art simply being reduced to the context in which it was produced. I will engage with Boris Groys’s analysis of Art Power, Marina Gržinić’s theory of Necro-capitalism, borrowed from Achille Mbembe, and Suzana Milevska’s psychoanalytically framed approach to the art of the Balkans. I am also drawing on the work of Ivan Lovrenović and of the Slovenian group IRWIN to contextualise my research, and consider Boris Buden’s writings on transitology and Slavoj Žižek’s philosophy of violence.

The thesis will be divided into five chapters with an introduction that will challenge trauma studies as a framework. The first chapter will explore the specificity of Bosnia Herzegovina in respect to the other former Republics of Yugoslavia and examine the works of the Zvono Group other experimental projects raised in Sarajevo in the 1980s. The second chapter will analyse the local cultural developments during the war and its effects on Bosnian artists in an ethnically divided Country. The third chapter will examine how the transition from a socialist society to a nation-state affected artistic infrastructure and practice, the role of art institutions such as the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art in Sarajevo and its legacy since 2000, and the creation of the Ars Aevi contemporary art collection thanks to the generosity of the international art community. The fourth chapter will take into account the curatorial responses studying Harald Szeemann’s exhibition and others staging Bosnian artists. The last chapter will assess the position of Bosnian contemporary artists in the globalized art world, using the Bosnian pavilion in Venice as a case study. I will conclude my thesis affirming the role of the war as international spectacle and referring to artists navigating this international field. I will demonstrate how my research reveals as much about the international art world’s desire for political spectacle as it does about Bosnian art itself.

¹ Blazević, D., *An interview with Dunja Blazević on her research in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. The Erste Foundation <http://www.erstestiftung.org/gender-check/bosnia-and-herzegovina-dunja-blazevic/>