

Gabriela Manda Seith

Free University Berlin

Art... Despite Everything. Contemporary Art in Sarajevo

While bombs are exploding around you, you would never think of making exhibitions. Yet that was exactly what citizens did to sustain their lives during the siege of Sarajevo (1992-1995). In the midst of the turmoil of war artists came together to make „Art... Despite Everything“.¹ This art scene attracted international audiences, curators and journalists. Invitations from the most significant centers of contemporary art worldwide like the Venice Biennial and the Kunsthalle in New York flew in. Hence the unique exhibition *Witnesses of Existence* travelled from the ruins of Sarajevo to New York, Biel, Edinburgh, Innsbruck, Paris, Marseille, Barcelona, Berlin, and Prague. Yet once institutionalization and commodification through international sponsorship in the aftermath of the war set the incorporation of the new young generation into globalized art into motion, this scene lost its enormous significance.

The focus on post-war art has created a narrative that ignores the pre-war scenes and suggests a growth of art rooted in democratisation. In reality, despite extensive international investment, the art scene in Bosnia has only recently come close to its vibrance in the 1980s, of which the arts during the siege of Sarajevo were more of an ending than a new beginning. Contrary to Post-Cold War narratives arts in Sarajevo was thriving under the communist regime. Thus a lively arts scene preceded and enabled the arts between 1992 and 1995, to which the *Zvono* collective contributed most importantly by introducing experimental practices. Sarajevo turned into the hotspot of Yugoslavian contemporary art when the most significant artists from all the republics came to Bosnia to exhibit at the *Yugoslav Documents*, a biennial ended by the breakout of the war.

Instead of following the historization of art after Euro-American model and narratives based on Cold-War bias between East and West, the theses acknowledges Sarajevo's leading role within Yugoslavian art history. By looking at the prelude of the war, the project contributes to a widening of the art canon, which was proclaimed with the dissolution of the iron curtain. Yet instead of initiating a broadening, the examination of Sarajevo's art scene shows how global hierarchies between center and periphery have rather hardened. This example raises questions about democratization and globalization of art celebrated with the end of the Cold War: How egalitarian has the art world become since then? Are art practices considered contemporary when they don't match with the globalized trends or art historical narratives that normalize some practices as central or leading? What roles did

¹ see Nermina Kurspahić: Art... Despite Everything, in: Obala 1992-1996, published by Obala Art Centar, ed. by Izeta Gradević, Sarajevo 1996.

art play that eluded the ideology of abstract art signifying democratic values in contrast to socialist realism marked as un-free, state controlled art?

By examining long-term developments from the 1980s to the early 2000s, this project proposes an alternative narration about Bosnian contemporary art and investigates the surprising inefficacy of international support on artistic growth.