CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA FROM 1995 TO 2020 AND THE ISSUE OF CRISIS Infan Hošić

An important perspective for understanding the crisis in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina can be established by looking at its institutions of cultural and artistic significance. The term "institutions" in this context means public institutions, but also private initiatives whose activities have left a significant mark in the artistic context of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, it is impossible to discuss the institutional and noninstitutional culture in the country, without references to the cultural crisis, which has been articulated primarily around and within the seven cultural institutions of national importance. These are the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Cinematheque of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Museum of Literature and Theater of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Library for the Blind and Visually Impaired of Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹

By signing the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, the legal status of these institutions remained deliberately unresolved and seemingly postponed for better times. Bosnia and Herzegovina's ethnocracy, formalized by the new constitution, has "lowered" cultural issues from the state to the entity and cantonal levels, bringing into question the collective cultural identity of the entire country, limiting and minimizing it. The smaller entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina had no interest in participating in the creation of a national cultural identity and in being an active creator of joint, i.e. state cultural policy that would restore the importance that the seven mentioned institutions had enjoyed earlier.

Such an attitude has weakened awareness of the importance of culture in general; key institutions have been systematically marginalized and some even shut down. Within the legal and legitimate framework, cantons and municipalities missed the opportunity to take over what the state failed to do – the regeneration of the devastated cultural space. Culture eventually died out and was recognized as useless and passive, as an object of constant tension, problems and unfinished processes.

In addition, the poor territorial organization of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Dayton agreement—which did not follow the geographical characteristics but the results of the brutal seizure of territories and mass expulsions—made its cities unconnected, which is to say, on the margins and periphery. The Bosnian entity of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina with its ten cantons on one side and on the other Republika Srpska as a separate entity with a pronounced national focus, further isolated and aggravated the situation of the country within which they are organized. The Dayton model has long shown its unsustainability, with parliamentary political nomenclature unable to redesign the existing constitution for fear of the possible loss of war booty.

In this regard, it seems important to keep in mind that the cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, although in process of development and construction, were places of sophisticated industry with a strong urban middle class before the country's independence in the 1990s. After the war and the signing of the Dayton Agreement, the position and importance of Bosnia and Herzegovina's cities was redefined due to the new reorganization – they were industrially devastated and demographically weakened. In some of them, new institutions of general importance have been established, such as universities, galleries or cultural centers. Although for a moment it seemed that these cities were facing new social challenges, many opportunities have not been used enough from the end of the war.

Continuously poor policies at all levels of the state, disintegration in the education system as well as radical provincialization aided by changing demographic conditions have turned Bosnian cities into isolated and closed provinces on the margins. Pseudodemocracy, parliamentary travesty, corruption and clientelism, together with neoliberal tendencies of a global character, have served as a framework for unprofessional and unethical reflections in the heritage and cultural identity.

Within such an environment, cultural institutions have been contaminated with apathy, lack of propulsion and lack of ideas. Many of them have found themselves in a vicious circle that perpetuates the crisis. The absence of public discourse on culture, the lack of cultural strategy at the state, entity, cantonal or municipal levels and the lack of creative ideas have created an environment in which below-average cultural practices are established, that include courting the citizens and the public with insufficiently critically-informed and entertaining content. As Strajo Krsmanović, the director of the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the moment when this institution was supposed to take over the organization of the national pavilion of the country at the Venice Biennale in 2015, said:



Figure 26 Artist talk with Joaquin Luzoro (Panaflex, curated by Smirna Kulenović). Brodac, Sarajevo 2018

"The National Gallery of BiH is currently unable to perform this task. We are not able to take over the organization, neither in terms of personnel nor finances"

The statement was greeted with shock and disbelief, as a model had finally been created between the entities, for financing the country's continuous performance at this prominent art festival.²

Disinterest and general ignorance have bypassed the awareness that culture is an agent of social change, that it has the power to identify and reidentify society with new models, as well as the power to reshape the consciousness of an individual and a group towards something new.

Although there are funds at all levels that cover the needs of culture and art, it can certainly be said that their implementation is marked by nepotism, corruption, bad criteria and constant cuts. The existence of the Foundation for Music, Performing and Fine Arts at the level of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina does not suggest seriousness and commitment, while the process of evaluating received applications, and allocating funds, takes place in a non-transparent and clientelist way. The situation in the equivalent Foundation for Publishing is no better. Viewing nationality as a key element, incompetence, bureaucracy and deadly formalism are just some of the characteristics of how these funds function.



Figure 27 Ulay, For the Love of Water. Gallery Duplex100m2, Sarajevo 2011

A similar practice is present in the cantonal, i.e. municipal institutions and departments for culture. It is useless to talk about the ministers and officials who hold the positions at these departments and who supervise the available financial resources. Their appointment is often tantamount to sabotaging national and civic interests because their competence is unable to meet even the lowest demands of modern society.

Noninstitutional involvement is a counterpoint to the aforesaid and a reflection of the responsibility of citizens and individuals to resist the general decline and systemic devaluation. It is often motivated by the crisis of society, ranging from systemic state negligence, official ethnocratic organization, but also commodification due to the uncontrolled restoration of capitalist ownership relations in post-socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the other hand, the mentioned problems on the scene of Bosnian culture, which are most evident through issues of institutional action in the range between the legislative and executive power, are a suitable environment for social practice and civic engagement. This type of action is marked by a discerning judgment of the validity of official practices of parliamentary political discourse, and is operational in clear spheres of assessment and action. Of course, this fits into the global trend of "increased tendencies to subject politics and art to the moral judgment of the validity of principles and the consequences of its practices." An ethically intoned approach on the cultural and art stage does not make all parties happy but on the contrary, it provokes, confronts and polarizes.

Perhaps the most important noninstitutional art project in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo. In the spirit of the "Sarajevo cultural resistance", even while Sarajevo was under heavy attack, the idea of the Museum was born. The initial idea of its creation was based on "the conviction that the artists of this age feel and understand the injustice done to our city." Thus, the project, which was administered from the beginning as a citizens' organization and not as a public institution, encoded the idea of proactive action based on the need for civil resistance to war destruction and the natural desire to open the besieged city and connect it with the free world.

The expectations of the significance and scope of activities of an organization were surpassed with Ars Aevi, because in its breadth and depth it managed to produce incredible results. Under the leadership of Enver Hadžiomerspahić, former director of the opening program at the 1984 Olympics – later director of cultural programs at the Skenderija Olympic Center, Ars Aevi remained actively involved in the fight against the devaluation of general social and cultural values in its community. Careful curatorial selection of several collections that would form the fund of the future Museum was accompanied by painstaking engagement in the administration of the entire idea, only to become a Public Institution of the City of Sarajevo in 2017. From the formation of the first tangible collection until today, Ars Aevi still does not have formal headquarters and has moved several times, although its main architectural conceptual design was made by well-known architect Renzo Piano.

Ars Aevi is a cultural and artistic idea that, with its constituent elements, speaks about the phenomenon of the crisis in the field of culture and art in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is the paradigm of a new era that began with the unfortunate war of the 1990s, and which no longer has the capacity to base a projection of itself on events and happenings before that.

Ars Aevi is tangible with its problems and challenges while the establishment of cultural institutions after World War II is a distant history that is difficult to understand and turn into possible paradigms with which society could easily identify. Although Ars Aevi represents the logical development of an urban environment, in its essence it is a symbol of interruption, break and discontinuity caused by war.

Some sort of counterpoint to institutional action in the field of art is the appearance of the Sarajevo Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) in 1996. The intention to open the center in Sarajevo was based on the analysis of the post-war situation, and the guiding principle in its mission is to "gather dispersed creative energy" and to recognize "the urgent needs specially of young generation of the artists who wanted to reappropriate the streets and places after years spent in shelters." 5

Curator Dunja Blažević was appointed as the head of SCCA and, as an experienced and knowledgeable person in the field, she understood the key points of the crisis in the field of art immediately after the war, which aim to "fulfill generation's gap; bridge discontinuity in artistic life; reestablish missing links between individuals and cultural centers."

SCCA has done an important job of stimulating contemporary art practices and generating an exchange of the local scene with the international one. The number of initiatives, exhibitions, discursive and educational content – initiated by SCCA – is a very important and indispensable element in creating the cultural physiognomy of Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also their recognizability on the domestic or international scene. At the same time, SCCA nurtured the awareness that official state institutions were not able to provide a "direct response to all these accumulated problems" which is why it imposed itself as an important factor that would understand the "complexity of the existing situation, SCCA developed itself as an information/documentation/education/production and distribution center."



Figure 28 Participants of the Kuma International Summer School, Sarajevo 2021

Due to its agility and adaptability to a specific moment, SCCA can be understood as a link between what Obala Art Center did during the war on the one hand, and related noninstitutional and independent initiatives that will follow later during the first and second decades of the 21st century on the other. As such, and in terms of the importance of its activities and its contribution, SCCA is a continuation of what developed so well during the 1980s when Sarajevo was definitely one of the "central stages of the then Yugoslav endeavors", while at the same time it is a generator of institutional pluralism and independent artistic activity.⁸

In such social, political and cultural framework, the emergence of individual and independent initiatives can be understood, whose goal is also to generate artistic discourse, mediate its content and educate the general public. The significance of these initiatives is vast because each of them in its own way managed to accompany some of the most important artistic phenomena during its existence, stimulate the emergence of some sort of art scene and encourage dialogue within contemporary art practices and independent curatorial work. The initiatives also served as platforms for the exchange of ideas, but also as a meeting place for artists from abroad.

Among the most important is the appearance of French gallery owner and cultural manager Pierre Courtin, who from 2004 until 2018 was one of the most important figures on the Sarajevo art scene with a very intensive program. His first exhibition initiative called Gallery $10m^2$ was founded in 2004 in Sarajevo's Glass City [Stakleni grad] near the pedestrian zone in Ferhadija Street, literally in an area of 10 square meters. His fourteen-year professional stay in Sarajevo was marked by progress and the need to grow the exhibition space, which eventually led to a relocation in 2011. The last six-year phase (from 2012 to 2018) called Duplex $100m^2$, was marked by activities in the residential unit of the Art Nouveau building in Obala Street. "Duplex was the only space with a constant program of rapidly changing exhibitions, which since its inception in 2004 decidedly supported contemporary art."

With his direct and often experimental work, Courtin covered several different but similar fields – from commercial gallery activity and affirmation of Bosnian artists abroad through participation in numerous art fairs, affirmation of art collecting in a country affected by the economic crisis, to social practice which is consciously or unconsciously generated "on the sidelines" of his program – exhibitions, round tables, promotion of publications and many other events.

Pierre Courtin's curatorial and managerial strategy can also be understood as compensation for what official institutions have been unable to do. The scope of his work covers the mistakes of official institutions which did not consider themselves invited or responsible to be the initiators of art life in the city. While official institutions were failing, his way of working operated consciously with the context of the crisis and found a certain starting point in it. Ingenuity and adaptability to the situation made him flexible and resistant to all possible adversities in a society of devaluation of universal

values and art. Today, it is almost impossible to reflect on the content, dynamics and development of contemporary art in Bosnia and Herzegovina without the awareness of Pierre Courtin's presence.

The closure of the gallery in 2018 left behind a gap that is difficult to fill, although the participation of international actors on the Sarajevo scene has continued through some new independent initiatives. This primarily refers to the Brodac Gallery, the gallery of the Sklop organization or the Kuma International Center for Visual Arts from Post-Conflict Societies.

The Brodac Gallery is interesting because it has been created through the idea of comparative reliance on the mentioned Duplex. It was launched in 2016 by enthusiast Mak Hubjer and is based on the belief that as such it fills the "void" between the space of young and non-established artists on the one hand, and Duplex by Pierre Courtin on the other. It is conceived as sort of "step" on the artistic path of young artists, i.e. graduates of art studies who did not get enough practice in designing, curating, organizing and conducting exhibitions. Such knowledge and insight into the situation came from the young founder of the gallery, who himself, as an art student at the Sarajevo Academy of Fine Arts, found it easier to see the problem on the art scene from his student position. At the time Brodac was created, Duplex had more than ten years of operation behind it, and it was easy to see what it didn't cover through its program that should be included.

Judging by the motive, it is a socially engaged project of an individual who consciously addresses the problems of official institutions – the Academy of Fine Arts of the University of Sarajevo – and points out the shortcomings of its current curriculum and syllabus subjects. On the other hand, Brodac is a space of informal and spontaneous interaction, not only of artists and participants in the scene, but also of their immediate surroundings, which are the Baščaršija neighborhood and the nearby Telali market.

The mentioned gallery of Sklop and Kuma International Center for Visual Arts from Post-Conflict Societies, although independent and largely inspired by the unenviable state of the country, come from the academic and scientific research register and have greatly influenced the cultural and artistic physiognomy of Sarajevo and whole country. Both were founded by art historians who came to Sarajevo from abroad – Sandra Bradvić, founder and artistic director of Sklop, although originally from Bosnia, came to Sarajevo as a doctoral student from the University of Bern. Italian Claudia Zini, the founder of Kuma International also came as a doctoral student from Courtauld Institute in London.

Sklop continued in a somewhat smaller and limited form with what SCCA had started, focusing on the organization and performance of the Zvono Award for Young Artists from Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was necessary to continue awarding this important prize at a time when the SCCA was in crisis and on the verge of closing down. By focusing on domestic and international art of the younger generation of artists, Sklop nurtures commitment to scientific work, research practice and curation, i.e. presenting art. It



Figure 29 Opening of the exhibition Zvono 2020. KRAK, Bihać 2022

was founded in 2017 and for two years it operated within its own space intended for exhibition, research and collaboration, located near the Academy of Fine Arts. Since 2019, the organization has been operating without its own physical space, which indicates the instability and discontinuity of the independent art scene in the country.

On the other hand, Kuma International projects its vision and mission of existence through educational programs and curricula in which local, regional and international groups of professionals overlap – artists, practitioners, researchers and activists, for whom art and culture are the primary tools. In Kuma's spectrum, the crisis is the thematic backbone and it very consciously grows into a strategic commitment, or *modus operandi* in the design and implementation of educational syllabi. Based on expertise on artistic opportunities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and aware of the need for its international opening, Kuma is a dynamic educational program of engaged art history and contemporary curatorial practices in the broadest sense of the term.

Apart from Sarajevo as the most propulsive art center, important institutional phenomena took place in Banja Luka as the capital of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian entity Republika Srpska. The establishment of the Academy of Arts at the University of Banja Luka in 1998 and the Museum of Contemporary Art of Republika Srpska in 2004, with a number of

important exhibitions organized by them and the initiative to represent the country at the Venice Biennale in 2013, are considered a pledge of Banja Luka's dynamism in the field of institutional art. In particular, the Academy of Arts, like few institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, managed to justify its founding and generate a significant artistic turn in the country, and through the practice of ideological and programmatic newness to articulate a sort of counterpoint to existing patterns often burdened with tradition. It was a pledge of new educational paradigms that have already spawned several generations of socially responsible and proactive artists, who have sovereignly and without restraint made Banja Luka an art center worthy of attention at all levels – local, regional and beyond. Precisely these young artists were the bearers of the noninstitutional art organization and the initiators of associations that would form a sort of counterpoint to institutional action.

Although Banja Luka has recently been seen as an interesting and young cultural destination, as evidenced by its initiative to host the European Capital of Culture in 2024, its ethno-national exclusivity is manifested through numerous unofficial censorships in the field of cinema. An additional test for this environment and its cultural closedness caused by ethno-national politics are films *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2012) by Angelina Jolie and Jasmila Žbanić's *Quo Vadis, Aida*? (2021). Only sporadic voices of some activists advocated the right to artistic freedom, not in Banja Luka but in Prijedor.

The group of visual artists Tač.ka, founded in Prijedor in early 2007 by several then students of the Academy in Banja Luka (Igor Sovilj, Mladen Bundalo, Boris Eremić, Dragan Inđić, Milijana Grabovica; later joined by Dajan Špirić and Nemanja Čađo), was recognized from the start as a subversive group bold enough to use strategies through which they examine the practice of manipulating cultural tradition and its stereotypes but also the practice of manipulating official politics with historical and cultural narratives. The subversiveness of Tač.ka group is manifested through the fact that it has been marginalized by state institutions and public institutions. Cultural theorist Charlotte Whelan argues: 'The small art gallery in Prijedor, Gallery '96, has consistently prohibited Tač.ka from exhibiting there because they are too politically controversial in terms of their critiques of cultural institutions and connections to local NGOs that go against the standard heteronormative Serb framework of the town."

Tač.ka strived for an alternative understanding of art and action in the field of culture, criticizing the inert glorification of elite art events, while "pioneering conversations, analytical processing and critical freedom, characteristic for narrow discursive space, are suppressed, condemned and not actualized within state and cultural institution." The organization was active until late 2016 and, and in the span of nine years of its existence, it produced eight editions of the international art laboratory in form of an artistic stay, far from institutional domination, known as *Ars Kozara*.

Perhaps the most ambitious and complex noninstitutional art event in the country took place under the auspices of the Banja Luka Center for Visual Communications

Protok [Flow]. Its initiator and visionary is painter Radenko Milak. As the name of the organization says, the vision was to make Banja Luka flowing and fluid in the post-war period when it was still burdened with a fresh post-war legacy. The most important contribution of Protok is their annual exhibition *Spa Port*, whose first iteration took place in 2008 with the title *It's raining outside*, *but I don't believe that it is*, curated by Ana Nikitović. The launch of this exhibition was permeated with the efforts of young Banja Luka artists to open up to cultural and artistic trends that surround them, and "it's basic goal has focus on a region, that is on a regional production, and that in this way sort of characteristic regional production should be represented, in this case Banjaluka would be some, let's say place where people of profession could meet and get acquainted with lates regional production." *Spa Port* boldly and ambitiously pursues the continuity of pre-war exhibitions such as Sarajevska Dokumenta [Sarajevo Documents] and Banjalučki jesenji salon [Banja Luka Autumn Salon], and relies on the methodology and conceptual approach of the Sarajevo Soros Center for Contemporary Art.

Through the next two iterations of *Spa Port*, the artistic leadership continues the initiated practice of critically confronting what it *is* and what it *should* be when it comes to current topics from broad and narrow socio-political context. In accordance with complicated organizational approach and a demanding curatorial concept, *Spa Port* has grown into a leading event in the field of contemporary art in our country after a few years. It is a qualitative counterpoint to local organizations of fine artists inherited from the past system. On an ideological level, *Spa Port* decisively opposed the opportunism, romanticism and amateurism of numerous and impersonal art colonies of our environment and managed to question extremely sensitive, socially undesirable and politically taboo topics.

The last and most ambitious exhibition is curated by the duo DeLVe (Institute for Duration, Place and Variables) from Zagreb, consisting of Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača. Their name Where Everything is Yet to Happen sublimates the basic assumptions of contemporary art – absurdity, paradox, irony – and places Banja Luka at the center of the world of art. The curatorial concept tried to bring attention to the traumas of the 1990s and "the issue of cooperation, complicity, articulation of trauma, the issue of exile and return, politics of memory, politics of language, politicization of art versus culturalization of politics." With this exhibition, a number of urgent issues in the local community have been initiated, and it is considered a qualitative turn that marked a new time on the Banja Luka art scene. 14

Spa Port nurtured cultural pluralism, stimulated the development of art and as such was a pledge of continuity of mature artistic reflection on current social issues. With its content and represented artistic positions, the exhibition managed to overcome local trivia and with undisputed artistic credibility, to be recognized among artists and art critics as the most important event of contemporary art in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region in the period from 2008 to 2010.

Insight into the dynamics of cultural and artistic noninstitutional activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1995 onwards is a completed survey determined by extremely specific socio-political processes of attempts to normalize the situation after the brutal war from 1992 to 1995. Such a review detects the main causes of the crisis in Bosnian society and sheds light on the constitutive elements on which the crisis is based. Reconstruction of the social, political and cultural context is a basis on which it is possible to define what could be conditionally called the "picture of the crisis". This syntagm refers to the semantic framework determined by political upheavals, conflict scenarios and poverty – which in turn produce a general state of crisis within which culture, art and design articulate an image of it but also a self-image as sort of response to a given situation. At the same time, civic and professional self-organization takes responsibility by compensating for the shortcoming caused by the "non-existence" of the state and its system.

Endnotes

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