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Women Engaged/Engaged Art in Postwar Bosnia:
Reconciliation, Recovery, and Civil Society
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Abstract

In postwar and post-Communist Bosnia-Herzegovina, civil society has been developing along with a significant recasting of women’s roles in public life. Researchers have equated civil society since the war in Bosnia almost exclusively with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Certainly this has been the most influential sphere of both women’s work and of public activities contributing to a nascent civil society. Researchers have given insufficient attention, however, to the contributions of women in the burgeoning free press in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as to the increasing social engagement and influence of women artists and arts administrators. The contribution of the arts to civil society receives little attention, but women writers, artists, and arts administrators are addressing in their work and projects issues of justice, reconciliation, and human rights. Some who began their creative life in Yugoslavia, and who formerly sought independence from ideology in pure aestheticism, now embrace political engagement. They employ the potentially “free zone” of art to encourage the communication and mutual responsibility between the government and citizenry that underlies a civil society. Just as women have taken on new public roles since the war—as directors in non-governmental organizations and as editors and journalists in the independent press—women artists are addressing specific postwar themes, and women arts administrators are promoting publications, creating exhibitions, and organizing events that draw attention to issues that are critical to the success of Bosnia’s fledgling democracy.
the empowerment of women (for the artist as well as the woman experiencing the art). That empowerment has been fostered even further in some cases by the financial support that women in the arts have received. International agencies have often favored women in postwar BiH—women’s organizations, women directors, and individual women, including women artists, who share their goals. Some women writers, artists, and arts administrators have commanded attention (as in some other successor states to Yugoslavia) by virtue of their “message” and, in some cases, have benefited from expanded access and sponsorship for their work.12

What is specific to Bosnia, and more difficult to research, is the conflict that must arise when such women path-breakers in the arts attract the attention of cultural and religious conservatives. During and since the war, women have born severe, and in some instances, unique trauma. In the aftermath, some women now exert, in certain arenas, unprecedented influence on Bosnian society. Among these, women in the arts are engaging in “engaged” art. Yet, we cannot overlook certain equally unprecedented obstacles to women’s postwar agency—a subject we will return to below.

Literature

Prose

During and soon after the end of the Bosnian War (1992–95), and with the crucial support of the Soros Foundation’s Open Society Fund, writers “wrote” the war. The crucible of war informed the work of writers of all generations. A glance at the corpus of publications, 1992–96, reveals the names of writers who were already well established (such as Ferida Duraković, Miljenko Jergović, Semezdin Mehmedinović, Josip Ostić, Abdullah Sidran, and Marko Vešović) and of others whose varying talents were forged or released in that wrenching reality (such as Muharem Bazdulj, Šejla Šchabović, and Fahrudin Žilkić).13

More recently other considerations have come to the fore. Many writers and artists have chosen to focus in their art on the restructuring and reconstruction of postwar and postsocialist Bosnia. As outlined above, the success of these efforts depends in large part on the amelioration of hardships endured by women as a result of the war. Women in the arts are addressing in various ways the most pressing issues of life in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many women writers are engaging, explicitly or implicitly, in the public debate over justice and reconciliation, multiculturalism, and
innate intelligence and encourages him to pursue the education he missed as a child. Mirza juxtaposes these “saving graces” to the horror he saw and many experienced during that July of 1995, writing that it was surely hell (džehenem) on earth.29 He could imagine nothing worse.

Mirza’s last letters to his father serve well Bazdulj-Hubijar’s stated conviction to choose hope over despair. He reveals that he has fallen in love and has become engaged to Biljana, an ethnic Serb. Biljana’s parents give their blessing, and Mirza’s boss rejoices at the news and that “there’ll be someone to preserve ‘brotherhood and unity’” (153). Only Mirza’s aunt, who with her daughter are Mirza’s only known surviving relatives, objects to the marriage. She accuses Mirza of having gone mad—how else could he think of marrying a “Chetnik” (četnikuša)? Mirza threatens never to cross his aunt’s threshold if ever again she speaks against Biljana. Although Mirza laments the proliferation since the war of mosques and churches when so many other new buildings are needed, and because they express the differences among religions rather than the “one God” that his father and his boss and mentor profess, he is comforted by a hodža’s30 assurance that the dead live on. In his last letter, he enumerates the mementoes that remain and remind him of his father, mother, and sister, and most important among these are his memories. These he will share with his children, whom he refers to as “half Vlach, half Muslim.”31 Mirza is guileless in his guarded optimism, and as Nura Bazdulj-Hubijar has said—Mirza is she.

Poetry

Damir Arsenijević, a critic who focuses specifically on Bosnian women poets, has characterized their writing as providing a liminal space, where difference can be reconsidered in Bosnian society—the “poetry of difference.”32 Others have made such observations about the power of art, and certainly this possibility for dialogue lies at the center of work that goes on in other spheres of Bosnian society that foster peace, justice, and reconciliation—in the NGO sector, in governmental initiatives that promote communication and cooperation across ethnic boundaries, and in the independent media. That art occurs in a “free zone,” a special space, whether real or imagined, recommends this particular cultural activity to the very sensitive undertaking of reconsidering the past and building a future in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Women’s writing in Bosnia, constituting as it does an “undercurrent” (podstruja) of the mainstream, provides even greater opportunity for the consideration of difference.33
Visual Arts

It is in the area of the visual arts (and no doubt a result of their greater cross-cultural accessibility) that women artists and filmmakers have received the greatest recognition beyond the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In particular, the awards won in recent years by films such as Grbavica and Snijeg (Snow) have brought worldwide attention to the female directors of the films and, through their visualizations, to some of the pressing concerns of postwar Bosnia. Yet, women artists began immediately after the end of the war in 1995 to contribute to the recovery effort. Through their various media, they gave representation to catastrophic events and voice to survivors who desperately needed advocacy. Most significant for the growth of civil society, women, through their art, have encouraged public discourse or debate on matters that to some might have seemed less compelling than the country’s urgent need for material reconstruction.

Sculpture / Installations / Performance Art

For Alma Suljević, a sculptor and instructor at Sarajevo’s Academy of Fine Arts (Akademija likovnih umjetnosti), the war led to unconventional choices. Although she maintains that she never wanted to join the Bosnian army, she felt compelled, nonetheless, to defend her besieged city.42 What she experienced as a citizen of Sarajevo and as a soldier transformed her art as well. She now rejects pure aestheticism: “Art must take the position of doctor of society. We must recognize our problems. We must tell of its cancers. We must show... people how they can... make... our society better. I mean to make it healthy.”43 Formerly apolitical, her artwork now deals exclusively with the war and its aftermath. She combines her work as a de-miner with the artistic genres of installation and performance art.

Suljević’s mission to eradicate landmines remains relevant more than ten years after the end of the war. The government has not yet met treaty commitments concerning de-mining, and it is estimated that two hundred twenty thousand landmines remain over an area of approximately six hundred square miles.44 To raise public awareness, Suljević has constructed jewelry boxes that open to display defused mines.45 They not only warn against the danger that lies within the country’s natural beauty; they also lament the war that transformed Bosnia into a “Pandora’s box.” An installation, also on the theme of landmines, invites guests to walk upon a map of Bosnia, where minefields have been identified, and to share their thoughts on the theme and their experiences. They can purchase lithographs related to the installation, and
Film

In the visual arts, it is arguably engaged women filmmakers and directors who have made the greatest strides for women artists in postwar Bosnia. At the same time, they have, again arguably, achieved the greatest success in drawing international attention to the issues surrounding the Bosnian War and the current challenge of recovery and reconciliation. Two of these women, Jasmila Žbanić and Aida Begić, have already received international acclaim for films they directed that depict the plight of women who survived the war.

Jasmila Žbanić wrote and directed Grbavica/Esma’s Secret (2006), which describes the plight of a victim of wartime rape and the daughter she conceived in violence. Žbanić and the lead actress Mirjana Karanović received numerous awards, including the Golden Bear, given to Žbanić at the 2006 Berlin International Film Festival. Grbavica refocused international attention on the aftermath of the Bosnian War and on rape as a war crime, which in many places still in Bosnia will not be discussed. Dina Iordanova identifies Grbavica, along with Žbanić’s episode “Birthday” in Lost and Found (2005), as examples of what she terms “hushed histories.” These she defines as “stories evolving at the peripheries of a peripheral region, narratives of patriarchal dominance and subplots of suppression that do not quite line up to fit into the rough outline but remain hidden, forgotten, relegated to oblivion.” She considers such hushed histories a characteristic of women directors in Southeastern Europe. The hidden story of “Birthday” comes from Mostar and follows two girls born on the same day, 9 November 1993, when Croatian forces destroyed the iconic sixteenth-century Old Bridge, and who were raised in silence and isolation on their respective (Bosniak and Croatian) sides of the Neretva River. Both films have contributed to postwar recovery, breaking the silence that may surround the victims of wartime rape, and the postwar generation that in many cases is being raised in ignorance of the events of the 1990s in Bosnia and Herzegovina.57

Žbanić’s most recent film is entitled On the Path (Na putu, 2010), and it was also nominated for the Golden Bear at the 60th Berlin International Film Festival. The film addresses her most “hushed” theme to date. Luna and Amar both work at the Sarajevo Airport—she is a flight attendant, and he an air traffic controller. Amar fought with the Bosnian Army and both lost their families in the war, but they have found happiness with each other. The film chronicles the effects upon their relationship of Amar’s problem with alcohol and their inability to conceive a child. Amar is eventually suspended from his job due to his drinking, and attempts to overcome his dependency through traditional therapies fail. Quite by chance Amar
that confront the past, that give image and voice to those who might be overlooked (particularly women) in what she considers a misguided or facile rush to move on.\textsuperscript{61} Truth provides the foundation for reconciliation and recovery.

With the international acclaim—and distribution—of their feature films, Jasmina \v{Z}bani\'c and Aida Begi\'c have established the reputation of women directors and filmmakers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Other women have gained recognition on a smaller scale and in the field of independent documentary film, which by definition provides greater access to women filmmakers in general.\textsuperscript{62} Danijela Majstorovi\'c, a professor at the University of Banja Luka (Serb Republic), has produced two films that address the plight of vulnerable women in Bosnia. She conceived the idea of her film on human trafficking, \textit{Counterpoint for Her} (\textit{Kontrapunkt za nju}, 2004) after learning that a report by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2003 identified Bosnia as the first stop for trafficked women in Southeastern Europe. Her next film, \textit{Dream Job} (\textit{Posao snova}, 2005), chronicles the fate of young girls lured by “show business” in a society of limited opportunities for women. Both films reveal the particular effect on women in Bosnia of postcommunist and postconflict social and economic instability. They indict government and law enforcement for their unwillingness, or inability, to thwart criminal activity or to provide adequate training, education, and protection for the most vulnerable members of society. Majstorovi\'c states that in conjunction with her Center for Social and Cultural Repair, she will continue to produce documentaries: “We want to make docs for . . . marginalized groups and we want to at least provoke . . . society.”\textsuperscript{63} Women directors and filmmakers are closing the gender gap in this realm of the visual arts in BiH. Even more important for this fragile democracy, their films challenge social and governmental structures and thereby contribute to the growth of civil society.

\textbf{Organizing in Their Own Behalf}

It is evident that the work of these women writers, artists, directors, and filmmakers constitutes, in essence, “social action.” Yet, women in the art world have mobilized and taken action beyond their own engaged art and in their own defense, to address a concern that threatens their ability to create. A declaration, sent in 2003 to the male ministers of culture and signed by a number of the artists and directors profiled above, began thus: “How to solve the problem of the basic conditions for work and creativity (work space, the means to work) if you are an artist, a designer, a director . . . ? And if you live in Sarajevo in 2003? There is no way, because you

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are a woman, because you are a woman with local and international professional references, because behind you there stands no party, no nation, no influential man—a father or a spouse."

Alma Suljević, Šejla Kamerić, Jasmila Žbanić, and others protested the lamentable situation for women artists in Bosnia—“sexual, professional, and political discrimination.” Topping the artists’ complaints was the lack of work space, a benefit that studio artists in socialist Yugoslavia received through well-known government-funded centers for the arts. However, in 2003, eight years after the end of the war, no woman had managed to obtain funded work space, and the artists complained as well of a lack of institutions to which they might turn in their pursuit of a studio. This type of grass-roots action characterizes more the work of NGOs. In this case, however, Bosnian women artists, whose engaged art fosters the pursuit of truth and encourages recovery efforts, have taken on the additional role of (necessarily self-interested) civic activist. Their work in this vein dovetails with that of arts administrators, who decide, as directors and curators, which exhibitions will be mounted and who will be provided space and/or financial support.

**Arts Management**

Since the war, women are seeking not simply greater representation in all public spheres, but positions of authority within these spheres, as leaders and owners in business, as editors in journalism, as heads of NGOs, as influential politicians. Women in the arts evidence these aspirations as well. They are seeking to be funded and to receive work space through political action. And they have risen, in some organizations that support the arts, to positions of leadership.

Jelka Kebo directs the government-run Center for Culture (Centar za Kulturu) in Mostar. Unfortunately, the postwar situation in this famous “city of the bridge” (in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, most means “bridge”) belies its modern history as a symbol of interethnic harmony. As in Sarajevo during the Yugoslav era, one could find ethnic neighborhoods in Mostar where the residents were primarily ethnic Croats or Bosniaks. However, the city identified with its relatively urban center, where the various ethnicities commingled, worked together, and often intermarried. At the beginning of the war, the primarily ethnic Croat and Bosniak inhabitants fought together against the Bosnian Serb forces. Later, however, they fought each other, in a particularly lethal and close-range conflict that led to the destruction of the emblematic sixteenth-century bridge. Inhabitants took sides and the city became

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Curation

A consideration of the activities of arts administrators like Ferida Duraković or Jelka Kebo demonstrates that it is not only the original work of artists that can provide opportunities for recovery, reconciliation, and the growth of civil society. Those engaged at various levels of organization and activity in the art world, and not only the artists themselves, acknowledge with their professional decisions a belief in the power of art, new and preserved, to celebrate humanity and, perhaps, to bridge differences.

We cannot turn to a consideration of curatorial decisions at the National Museum in Sarajevo (Zemaljski Muzej)\textsuperscript{76} without recognizing the valorous efforts of curators and other employees during the siege of Sarajevo. Because some staff members of the museum had come from other republics (Serbia or Croatia) to work in their specialty in Sarajevo but chose when war broke out to return to one of these successor states, and because most able-bodied men joined the Bosnian army or other defense forces, those left to preserve and protect the holdings of the museum were primarily women. They strove, with great commitment and courage, to work their shifts (usually every other day), debilitated by hunger and stress, and often under sniper fire. They arranged the evacuation of some exhibits, moved others for safekeeping on the grounds of the museum, and struggled to protect the buildings of the museum complex (e.g., by lugging heavy bags of wet dirt to cover exposed windows).\textsuperscript{77} Their story calls to mind similar heroic actions during the siege, like the evacuation of some of the holdings of the National and University Library before it was shelled and destroyed by fire (25–26 August 1992) and the rescue and preservation of the famous Sarajevo Haggadah from the same National Museum.\textsuperscript{78} Dr. Denana Buturović has since written a history of the National Museum before and during the Bosnian War, and colleagues and academics in related fields have acknowledged their contribution to the survival of the museum.\textsuperscript{79} The exhibitions that today speak to the shared material culture of Bosnia and Herzegovina would not be possible without the sacrifices these women creators made to preserve their shared heritage.

An outstanding example of the critical choices the primarily women curators have made since the war to utilize the museum’s holdings to consider the critical questions of history and identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the exhibition Which Shirt Is Mine? (Koja je moja košulja?). In a series of display cases, the curators and preparators of the Department of Material Culture have chosen a beautiful array