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## Evolving art scene, waiting for its moment

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The city has world-class artists and thought-provoking art, but not much of a market and not many showcases.

Ever since the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade closed for renovations in 2008, the chief curator Dejan Sretenovic has been asked when the museum will reopen.

Sitting in the museum's temporary administrative digs earlier this spring, Mr. Sretenovic said that, unfortunately, he doesn't know.

The museum, which opened in 1965 and is one of Europe's oldest contemporary art museums, has a fantastic collection of modern and contemporary art spanning the 20th century, including works by artists like Andy Warhol, David Hockney and Joan Miro, as well as some of the former Yugoslavia's most important artists and sculptors, including Marina Abramovic, Rasa Todosijevic and Milica Tomic.

The situation the run-down museum finds itself in -- long on enthusiasm but short on funds -- is emblematic of the contemporary art scene in Belgrade. It has world-class artists and thought-provoking art, but not much of a market and not many appropriate showcases for the work.

In bad need of maintenance and updating, the contemporary museum space was closed and the administrative offices were moved to space near the memorial complex that houses the tomb of Marshal Josip Broz Tito in Belgrade. Three small galleries scattered across the Serbian capital are being used to exhibit parts of the collection and shows by contemporary artists.

Construction hummed along the first year, with the roof and the underground space reconstructed, but by 2010 budget cuts and the global financial crisis had combined to bring work on the museum to a halt. The EUR 6.5 million, or about \$8 million, needed to finish the project has proved hard to come by.

Because of frustration over its future, the museum is staging an exhibition in the partially reconstructed space of the museum titled "What Happened to the Museum of Contemporary Art?" The show (through Sept. 30) includes a timeline with documentation and debate about the reconstruction from newspaper articles, photographs, interviews, government statements and a video with curators talking about the problems of working in a museum without a building.

Mr. Sretenovic also commissioned artists and designers to intervene in the space, which still has remnants -- including floor installations, posters and wallpaper by the artist Phil Collins -- from the last show the museum held on British contemporary art in 2008.

"Even for a poor country in a deep crisis, I do not think it is a big amount of money to finish this reconstruction," Mr. Sretenovic said. "It is more a matter of political will. We need the public to support our pressure on the government and decision makers to finally decide if they need a museum of contemporary art or not."

The situation with the museum is not an isolated example; Belgrade's National Museum, which includes in its collection works by Matisse, van Gogh, Titian and Picasso, closed its permanent collection to the public 10 years ago. It remains unclear when reconstruction on the floors where the collection is housed will begin, though the museum still holds exhibitions in its foyer and in various spaces across the city.

Many artists and curators, frustrated by the lack of institutional support for contemporary art and a nonexistent art market, have either left the country or spend a good portion of their time seeking exhibitions, residencies, commissions and gallery representation outside of Serbia.

Aside from the October Salon, an annual international contemporary art show that is organized by the government-financed Belgrade Cultural Center, there are very few contemporary art programs supported by the state. It is mainly left to the private initiatives of artists, curators and foundations to organize exhibitions, festivals and discussions on contemporary art.

"We cannot offer infrastructure to young people," said Vlado Jeremic, an artist and curator. "How can you graduate with a degree in the history of art and curating and have never been to the National Museum to see what we have? Or to have never had a chance to go to the Museum of Contemporary Art? An entire generation has never seen these collections in their lives. How is that possible?"

Two decades ago, before Yugoslavia split apart, Belgrade was not only at the heart of the progressive Yugoslav art scene but was also a thriving center in Europe for conceptual and performance art.

"We had lots of movements and important events for world art history," said Sasa Janjic, a curator with Belgrade's Remont Independent Artists Association. "In the 1970s, the gallery at the Student Cultural Center was one of the most important points in all of Europe -- so the foundations were strong, especially in terms of conceptual art."

The Student Cultural Center was where many artists involved in the Nova Umjetnicka Praksa (New Art Practice) movement -- which included people like Ms. Abramovic, Mladen Stilinovic and Tomislav Gotovac and was focused on mixing new media with a social context -- held some of their earliest performances and events.

By the late 1980s, Mr. Jeremic said, there was a strong drive to create an art market in Belgrade. "There were serious professional galleries running in the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s and hosting really international events," he said. "We had a stronger position in 1989 or 1991 than we do now. Since that time, the art market doesn't really exist here."

Because of that and the lack of exhibition space, many artists who continue to live and work in Belgrade have developed strong international contacts.

"I knew from the very beginning that was part of the whole package," said Vladimir Nikolic, one of Serbia's most celebrated young video artists. "You make connections, people start seeing your work and after awhile you start receiving invitations to participate in events and residencies. So I am suffering for living in Belgrade because of that but it still works somehow."

Vesna Milosavljevic, the director and co-founder of the cultural portal seecult.org, described the art scene in Belgrade as being in a "primal phase" of artistic production.

"We do not have an artistic system where everything in that chain -- from artists to galleries, curators, dealers, collectors, the media and museums-- is connected," she said. "But I think we are used to working in such circumstances because organizations that were active in the 1990s during the wars, when we had no support, still exist. I think the problem is how to continue that independent cultural and artistic production in the future."

One group interested in helping tackle that issue is the Asocijacija Nezavisna Kulturna Scena Srbije (Association of the Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia), which formed last year and is made up of more than 50 independent cultural organizations across the country. The group works to promote, coordinate and develop the country's cultural and artistic spheres.

Based in Belgrade, the organization helps independent arts groups, including dance and theater, with everything from managing public relations to holding workshops on applying for European Union funding.

Last October, running partially in tandem with October Salon, the group coordinated the festival "Self-Powered," which helped promote various independent cultural events taking place across the capital.

"We are definitely becoming a voice," said Boba Mirjana Stojadinovic, an artist who is the coordinator for the group. "I think people who deal with cultural policy in government realize that independent organizations are one of the main representatives of culture in this country. So they actually need us, but they do not want to give us money."

According to Mr. Janjic, the curator with Belgrade's Remont Independent Artists Association, there are estimates by researchers at the University of Arts in Belgrade that 70 percent of all cultural programming in Serbia is organized through independent groups and individuals, yet they receive only about 20 percent of state funding.

"Definitely I think the independent sector is driving contemporary art," said Ms. Milosavljevic. "I was in Holland recently and they were talking about budget cuts and the difficulties in funding for culture. For me, their support of the cultural and artistic scene is paradise because we do not even have any money to cut from."

Despite all the problems, many people remain optimistic that things will improve.

"There is a huge field of creativity, enthusiasm and energy," said Miroslav Karic, also a curator with Remont. "There are a lot of interesting artists, groups and initiatives that are fighting on a daily basis against these problems. I see great potential for this scene."