

Arts

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ART/ARCHITECTURE; Making Art From the Splintered Memories of War

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Published: December 16, 2001

DUBROVNIK, Croatia— LATE in September 1991, Serbian forces of the Yugoslav Army began bombing the Croatian city of Dubrovnik, a glorious 1,400-year-old walled tourist destination at the foot of the Dinaric Alps and the edge of the Adriatic Sea. Dubrovnik is a designated Unesco World Heritage Site, but in 1991, at least 100 of its inhabitants were killed and more than half of its historic monuments were damaged by rockets and mortars.

As the war spread throughout Croatia, which had declared independence from the former Yugoslavia, some artists registered the shock in their work immediately. Others retreated into a facsimile of life and art as usual, while still others waited out the digestive process by which events are transmuted into art.

A decade later, their war long over and ours just begun, the experiences of these artists have a striking relevance to our situation. The questions they faced are the questions facing American artists today: what is the difference between journalism and art? What are the roles of metaphor, material, moral questioning, immediacy, distance and raw emotion?

When the bombing started, Pavo Urban quit his film and photography classes in the capital city, Zagreb, and came home to photograph the war. "War-art," he called it.

Around 7 a.m. on Dec. 6, 1991, Urban was shooting the empty Stradun, the main street of the old city, framing a doorway in the ancient wall, when the worst day of shelling began. Suddenly film and camera were jarred as fire swept through the gate. Urban pulled back, then back again, shooting all the while as flames were replaced with the dense smoke that would become an emblem of the World Trade Center attack.

By Urban's sixth shot, a bulletin board with notices of the war dead came into view. By the eighth shot he had run out of color film and switched to a black-and-white camera to take in the action as missiles hit the city's primary symbols: the church of St. Blaise, patron saint of Dubrovnik, and the Orlando Column, celebrating its legendary eighth-century defender and topped with the Croatian flag. In the 12th and final shot, pillar and flag are centered in a smog of exploding shells. A fragment from one of those shells hit Urban in the stomach and killed him. He was 23.

Urban's "Last Shots" were exhibited this fall, as they have often been in the last decade, at Dubrovnik's Museum of Modern Art, enlarged and printed so that the sprockets show. When the Rodney King tapes are included in a Whitney Biennial, it may seem irrelevant to ask whether journalism can transcend itself, but the controlled intensity and desperate poetry of these photographs make their own argument.

Antun Maracic, 51, who is director of the museum, has always taken absence as his subject, and in the 90's subject and history intersected. He was trained as a painter. But with the attacks, he found himself photographing the devastation surrounding his hometown in the region of Slavonia by searching out empty places: kiosks barren of

advertising but dotted with death notices, a void where a bench had overlooked the sea. Last year he installed the photographs with empty velvet jewelry stands.

"When the attacks began, jewelry store owners emptied their shops, so it was very dramatic," Mr. Maracic said. "It was like a universal sign of the disappearance of value in every sense."

And yet there was something in the extremity of war that vitalized Mr. Maracic. "It was the moment you felt a reason to live," he said. "And this is very important: I felt an incredibly strong need for art. I was making art all the time."

The installation and performance artist and art entrepreneur Slaven Tolj goes even further. "For me the period when the war was really bad was the most beautiful time in my life," he said. Mr. Tolj, 37, is the motor that drives the tiny Dubrovnik art scene, though his reputation is an international one. When the city was under siege, "people were completely free and energized and friendly," he said.

"There was no electricity, no wood, no bread," he added. "We were completely split from the world. But our library was full of people all the time, reading without light."

Now that children on bikes meet again at the Orlando Column, and tourists throng the cafes, "the library is empty," he said.

"People are thinking about money and tourism. When the light came back and the situation became normal, it was the end of this clean thinking and human energy."

Mr. Tolj's first artistic response to war was to commemorate his friend Pavo Urban. The installation (which was exhibited in 1996 at the Gramercy Contemporary Art Fair in New York) consisted of Urban's last shot and a black-and-white re-creation of the Croatian flag. The alteration raises questions about the meaning of the state, patriotism, death and reality. Janka Vukmir, director of the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb, makes the point that in the context of a gallery, Urban's photograph is more real than the flag.

For two years, Mr. Tolj fought with the Croatian Army, taking his first leave in 1993 to give a performance in Valencia, Spain. "I was completely lost," he said. "In the five hours before the performance, the war period flashed like a movie before my eyes." He shaped the event out of his realization that he was wearing a blue T-shirt he had on when a poet friend became the first Dubrovnik casualty.

It is a mourning custom among Croats to sew a black button on one's clothes. During the performance Mr. Tolj removed 12 layers of clothing. He sewed one button to the first layer, two to the second, three to the third and so on, signifying the multiplying death toll. His final layer was a sailor's jacket he had worn in the winter of the siege. He tore a button off it and sewed it to his skin, externalizing internal suffering as a wound, in a cathartic ritual. "The action was simple, but inside it was a terrible process," he said.

Dubrovnik is a 13-hour drive from Zagreb, which includes a six-mile passage across part of Bosnia. Both its isolation and its beauty have continued to be fodder for artists. Ana Opalic, 29, photographs herself in a continuing diary as a small figure subsumed by the landscape. But during the siege the isolation became dire and dangerous, infecting the work of Bozo Jurjevic, 38, who, in videos often shot in his extraordinary garden overlooking the old city, began setting himself dangerous tasks of physical endurance that sometimes involved injuring himself.

By its end in 1995, the war had become a fraught and complex issue in Croatia. Some Croat military leaders have been accused of war crimes against both Bosnian Muslims and Serbs.

In Zagreb, artists habitually wield art as political critique, which they surprisingly had the freedom to do, quietly, during the communist era. In 1994, Dalibor Martinis, 54, projected images of faces that advanced and disappeared in slow motion. Intermittently, one would spew flames, with a sound like mortar fire. "It was the idea of nice people doing bad things," Mr. Martinis said.

At the 1997 Venice Biennale, he showed his video installation "Coma." Its source was the Milgram experiments on "Obedience to Authority" conducted at Yale University in the early 60's, in which student volunteers were instructed to push a button that appeared to cause extreme pain to a man -- actually an actor -- in a glass booth. Some 65 percent of the Yale students obligingly administered shocks to the "extreme danger" level.

"Coma" burlesques the experiment, with a video image of Mr. Martinis sleeping and a real red button. When visitors press the button, a cartoony electric current zaps Mr. Martinis, who vibrates and slumps forward. After a time he straightens and begins reading, until someone else presses the button in an endless cycle of savagery and business-as-usual. "Like a video game, it is pure violence," Mr. Martinis said.

This fall, Croats were asking why almost no bodies were shown in the news media after the World Trade Center disaster, whereas American newspapers had been filled with bodies from the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Sanja Ivekovic, 52, mounted an installation that took as its centerpiece a photograph from The New York Times of Feb. 6, 1994, with a caption describing the killing of 61 and wounding of 200 by a shell in a Sarajevo market. She juxtaposed the photograph with blow-ups of the fashion ads that had appeared on the same page.

In 1992, Ms. Ivekovic, who is a feminist activist fiercely involved with the plight of battered women, responded to the mass rape of Bosnian women by the Serbs with the video installation "Frozen Images" (eventually shown at the Long Beach Museum of Art in California). On a smoking bed of dry ice she projected the image of a naked woman curled on her side. As the ice melted, the figure twisted, disintegrated and melted away.

Both "Coma" and "Frozen Images" were included in "To Tell a Story," an exhibition of work by leading Croat artists at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, mounted to coincide with a meeting of the International Association of Art Critics this fall.

The exhibition's show-stopper was the 48-year-old Ivan Faktor's intricate 1997 video and photographic installation, "15 Minutes for Nada Lang," a meditation on death, evil and guilt using manipulated film stills, soundtracks and gothic script from the films of the Weimar-era director Fritz Lang.

Mladen Stilinic, 54, showed his iconic 1990 "Bol/ Pain," in which the word bol, Croatian for pain, is printed in black on a red mattress and in red on a black mattress, in a critique of the communist regime, which wanted to change even the color of mourning. In 1992, after Zagreb had faced almost daily air raid warnings, Mr. Stilinic reworked the concept as a constructivist grid of six white mattresses.

"There was terrible fear," Mr. Stilinic said. "Nobody knows what will happen tomorrow. Whatever you are doing, you cannot see the value in it. You are writing a book. The siren interrupts. You go to the basement. What is the value of the book? And what is the color of pain? I decided the color is white." His 1990 statement was political; in 1992 it had become personal.

Even after its own war was over, Croatia was affected by the suffering in Bosnia, Kosovo and more recently Macedonia. "We continued to live in the psychosis of war," said the 36-year-old artist Aleksandar Battista Ilic. "War is not only killing between people and bombing; it is also killing of the spirit."

In a continuing work of regeneration and performance art that he called a "fight for normal life," Mr. Ilic, his wife, the artist Ivana Keser, 34, and the performer and filmmaker Tomislav Gotovac, 64, made weekend excursions into the hills. Mr. Ilic set up a camera on a timer and they cavorted in front of it to produce 800 color slides for postcards, an Internet project, billboards and a catalog they published last year as "Weekend Art: Hallelujah the Hill, 1996-2000."

Refugees, as always, were the bitter harvest of the Yugoslav wars. The subsequent diaspora is the subject of a live Internet work currently in New York. Danica Dakic of Sarajevo, Bosnia, and Sandra Sterle of Split, Croatia, arrived in New York in mid-September, Ms. Sterle with a small baby. Since then, for the performance, "Go-Home," they have been holding intermittent dinner conversations streamed onto a Web site with a chat room at www.project-go-home.com. At 2 p.m. today they and other artists will be discussing "Imagined Homes: Nationalism and Globalization."

THE 80-year-old artist Ivan Kozaric has lived through two wars and a communist regime. But standing in the eclectic clutter of his studio amid the surrealist, modernist, primitive, found and abstract sculptures he has made, the garbage he has gathered and shows as installation, his tin foil and his wire works, he said: "Art is something very, very positive and can't be destroyed by the material world. War is evil, of course, but it can't destroy the spirit of the artist. Everything is just an idea. Life is an idea."

It was his idea in 1971 to paint every object in his studio gold, even his shoes, which left golden marks as he walked. At the Venice Biennale in 1973 he piled his sculpture like trash. And he had the idea to mount one of the few exhibitions in Zagreb in the midst of the air raid warnings in 1991. He called it "In the Sign of the Sun." It reprised his regard for the optimism of gold, as in, "Everything that man can see can be turned into gold."

Mr. Kozaric's encyclopedic enthusiasms and art of inclusiveness still arouse international interest. This fall Okwui Enwezor, the Nigerian-born poet and curator who is the artistic director of the forthcoming Documenta 2002 in Kassel, Germany, visited Mr. Kozaric's studio to inform him he would probably be invited to show in the event.

"I'm attracted to the quixotic nature of his work," Mr. Enwezor said. "He understands the studio as a work. He's not afraid to make connections between his own sensibility and the real."

War or peace, Mr. Kozaric's stance remains the same: "You must be alive every day."

Photos: In Dalibor Martinis's "Coma," museumgoers can torture the artist's videotaped image. (Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb); Pavo Urban died just after taking the above photograph in Dubrovnik, Croatia; Ivan Kozaric, at left in his Zagreb studio, says, "War is evil, of course, but it can't destroy the spirit of the artist." (Boris Cvjetanovic for The New York Times); (Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb)

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