

OPEN SOCIETY ARCHIVE  
Visegrad Fellowships programme  
Budapest

Research project:  
ART AS MEMORY:  
RECORDS OF ARTISTIC PRACTICES DURING THE SIEGE OF SARAJEVO 1992-1995  
Final report

The siege of Sarajevo (1992-1995) was the longest in recent history, lasting 1425 days. Despite constant shelling and sniper fire which killed 11,500 of its 350,000 inhabitants, including 1,500 children, and despite continuous lack of electricity, water, heating, food, or medical supplies, Sarajevo was a site of intense artistic production. Over 170 exhibitions, 180 plays, and 2000 concerts were staged, most of which were well attended. Such events have been commonly described as "cultural resistance." But risking life to witness an art event behoves us to find a more meaningful vocabulary to convey the depth of these experiences at personal and social levels, and this was the primary point of this research.

The key working hypothesis of the project was that the documentation of the artistic practice in Sarajevo under siege could serve as an important deposit of collective memory, and a source of knowledge to significantly enhance our understanding of the socio-cultural aspects of the 1992-1995 war. In addition to collecting raw data, long-term goal of this research is to reconsider the function of art in times of crisis.

But carrying out such a study became much more complicated than expected because, paradoxically, even though artistic life during the Sarajevo siege was documented to a large degree, many records of important events are missing, incomplete or even inaccurate. Furthermore, there has been no substantial attempt to retrieve them. One of the reasons could be that both the subjects, potential primary sources - artists or audience members, as well as the researchers, were active for decades after the war. In these years the discourse about the war has still been very very present in public life which created an impression that all the information is just "lying around", there is a sense of shared knowledge about those events, and there is a good chance that one might get some access to someone who has some documentation about the event in question or who can "tell a story". Possibly this has caused the general lack of a sense of urgency in this respect.

Furthermore, the resources in post-war Bosnia were and still are insufficient in both financial and academic terms. Therefore, even the material that does exist has not been properly documented, analysed, and published. However, today the sense of urgency to

act arises. Most Bosnian scholars and researchers are actual witnesses, and the immediacy of their memory is still acute. At this juncture, research in war memory is critical because, as witnesses age and die, many sources were lost, oral histories were not recorded, and documentation has not been apprehended. The memory slowly ceases to be individual and becomes increasingly collective, thus mediated and interpreted, possibly inaccurately.

The goal of my application for the Visegrad Fellowship at the OSA research was to make one of the initial steps in the project that I envisage to be a long-term one, and thus consult the archive, establish which parts of the archive are relevant for the research and note the sources that will be relevant for the overall long-term project. The second reason was to deepen my own knowledge about potential ways to approach the collecting and presenting process and use this knowledge during the formulation of the greater long-term initiative that would involve a group of dedicated researchers, as well as archiving their findings.

In this sense, the time I spent at the OSA was very insightful. I have established that the OSA has a vast collection of materials relating to the siege of Sarajevo. One part is in the textual archives, in which I primarily focused on the collection *HU OSA 304 – Press reports on Sarajevo (HU OSA 304 Records of the International Human Rights Law Institute Relating to the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia: Video Recordings Relating to the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia)*. The textual archive contains 200 boxes marked by the Sarajevo keyword, many of which relate to the Bosnian war. I look forward to examining more of those in my coming visits to the OSA.

This part of the archive is very useful as it is not available in Bosnia and Herzegovina and gives an insight into the external perception of Sarajevo's cultural life, as well as the role of culture in the humanisation of the Bosnian population in the eyes of the external world. It also contains many personal records about cultural activity beyond institutions and public life – music and arts in the shelters and in homes, which was not the focus of the local media that mostly followed the activities of the well-known cultural workers. Therefore, this collection will be precious in the interpretation of relevance and function in the communication of information about the Bosnian war.

In addition to the textual archive, I was very interested in the video archive. However, during the time I spent at the OSA I was not able to access the video materials that were not digitized, and I expect to find in them other valuable information during my next stay at the OSA.

To conclude, the research project *Art as Memory: Records of Artistic Practices During the Siege of Sarajevo 1992-1995* is still in its initial stages. As such, it still triggers many epistemological dilemmas, in line with the great responsibility and particular twofold roles of researchers as both sources and investigators. However, as the project is pressed by urgency, the initial stage must be concluded soon, the methodology and infrastructure defined, and productive stages need to be carried out. Those will include a focus on primary sources – producers and witnesses of these practices, but also original researchers, who themselves are primary sources, who have executed substantial research where existing data in collections such as FAMA, SAGA, and others, among which OSA is of great importance.

The project is long-term, but the research capacity is realistically mid-term, which is why establishing sources and directions is of crucial importance at this stage. For this, my Visegrad Fellowship at the OSA was very useful and hopefully impactful.

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