



JULY 2022 | VOL. 3

REPRESENTATION IN LIMINAL SPACE

SOCIAL ACTION PROJECT UNDER
THE ESC RESOLVE: VOLUNTEERING FOR PEACE PROJECT



ART AND IDENTITY IN PEACEBUILDING

WRITTEN
BY
SIOBHAN
COLEMAN

Peace-building is the task of achieving sustainable peace through identifying the root causes of the conflict and addressing it situationally. Societies rebuilding out of violent conflict are dependent on a range of peace-building tools to affirm their route towards stability. These can often take the form of economic measures to correct monetary volatility, geographical changes in borders or physical changes to civil structure.

However, ethnic conflicts require more than institution-building efforts for durable peace. Many academic discussions have focused on perceiving art as a grass-roots tool for transforming local politics, economics and social structures in post-conflict environments. Whilst already recognised as a successful means of peace-building, the potential of art in conflict transformation and reconciliation remains underexposed.

During the Yugoslav Wars, cultural resistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina was focused in Sarajevo. It was here in the capital that the sparks of a resistance ignited a series of cultural actions that would last throughout the war and beyond. The city became a hub for artists from all ethnic backgrounds. Events were attended by many people, all risking their lives in return for a chance to briefly escape reality and have safe shelter for a few hours. An ethical dilemma arose from this, which became a global topic for discussion. When is it appropriate to celebrate the arts? Whilst artistic expression can be a tool to alleviate pain and raise outside awareness of a situation, some view it as obnoxious, aloof and capitalising on pain. This ethical question was most famously documented in the song "Miss Sarajevo" by U2 and Brian Eno. Released in 1995 under their pseudonym 'Passengers', their collaboration drew attention to the personal accounts of civilians in Sarajevo which had been under siege since April 1992. At the time of release, the city had been designated as an official no-fly zone by the United Nations for three years. This made it almost impossible to get media coverage or relief aid into the country. Artistic expression in this way captivated the international audience and raised global awareness on the situation of people here during the conflicts.

Art drives to connect people through means which require no formal structures or rigid rules. It can be seen to build peace through the emancipation of people. In this way, art becomes politicised and acts as a means to drive citizen activism and mobilisation. Artistic communities often harness the role of promoting new trains of thought. Art is successful as a tool in this way due to its ability to develop group consciousness.

Here, the ideas and thoughts are shared by those who are part of the community. Movements like this are successful in raising awareness of human rights issues and educating people on affairs that are often unreported by mainstream western media.

One of the most important functions of art in peace-building is its role in restoring people's ability to convey and process emotions throughout the stages of rehabilitation. Many of these processes utilise artistic expression to access a patient's inner voice. These expressions are paramount to understanding and relaying feelings when words themselves fail us. Furthermore, artistic expression in rehabilitation is a way of taking back control of what happened to process trauma. Art here maintains the narratives of victims, allowing them to process their grief and also allowing us to better understand in order to empathise with these situations.



Today, art remains a large part of self-expression and identity. When considering the role of art in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there remains a trade-off between whether it is bringing people together or deepening ethnic strife. This is most evident in the example of art as a means of remembrance and commemoration. Figures, dates and symbols have been monopolised by nationalist clusters and used to propagate discerning sentiments across the Balkan states. Last November, a graffiti war erupted on the streets of Belgrade over a tribute to one of the Balkan's most notorious war criminals, Ratko Mladić. Portraits of the jailed, former Bosnian Serb commander appeared across the city. This was not exclusive to Serbia's capital. Murals such as these have been emerging in villages and towns across Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some have been recently adorned with the Russian pro-war symbol, "Z". It is a haunting reminder of the continuity of alliances and the survival of ethnic tensions. Most importantly, it is an overt signifier of the anti-west consciousness shared by many here.

Post-conflict resolution always requires a tailored and situational response. From art produced during conflicts to the art used in reconciliation processes, its ability in bringing people together is unparalleled by most institutional measures of peace-building. This is largely due to its strength as a grass-roots tool, connecting people directly rather than waiting for change to find its way through governmental systems which are most often corrupt or volatile. However, the question of whether art in Bosnia and Herzegovina is bringing people together or whether it is deepening ethnic strife remains prevalent. The upcoming general elections in October will undoubtedly draw upon separatism in campaigns and it is more than likely that nationalist symbolism will become increasingly prevalent in the run-up to election day. Art has a dichotomous role in current efforts at peace-building in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Numerous organisations are using artistic expression to bring communities together and rehabilitate patients with PTSD. However, what we can learn from the current situation here is that their endeavours are often overshadowed by negative media coverage on the use of art driving nationalism.

