

Title **A visual response to the Siege of Sarajevo**

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Abstract

This paper considers art works made by the author over a gap of twenty years in response to the siege of Sarajevo (1992-1996). The first works were inspired by the then BBC War Correspondent, Martin Bell in his radio broadcast of 1996 in which he reflected on the tragedy of the Bosnian War. The second group of works were made as part of the AHRC funded project *Art & Reconciliation* and were the result of visiting Sarajevo for the first time in 2018. For this the author drew upon his experience of using collections and archives as source material, here drawing from the collection of the Museum of History in Sarajevo where the final exhibition was staged. The author reflects on the role of the artist in tackling issues of conflict when not an eyewitness and draws parallels with examples such as Michael Tippett's oratorio *A Child of our Time* and Bob Dylan's *The lonesome death of Hattie Carroll*. The paper also considers how knitting can be used to construct a form of alternative memorial how his own personal experiences and memories can form the foundations for new work.ⁱ

Key words conflict, Sarajevo, reconciliation, installation, knitting, memory

A visual response to the Siege of Sarajevo

Paul Coldwell

Introduction

The exhibition *ReConciliation*, staged in the History Museum in Sarajevo as part of the conference *Why remember? Ruins, Remains and Reconstructions in Times of War and its Aftermath* (27-29th June 2018), provided me, as one of the exhibiting artists with a very particular and demanding challenge. ⁱⁱHow can I, with no first-hand experience of the Bosnia war or indeed any conflict, present work that I believe might contribute to an understanding of events whilst also offering some attempt at reconciliation?

To begin to address this question I want to consider the works that I made that were included in the exhibition; two pieces made twenty years ago before ever visiting Sarajevo *With the Melting of the Snows* and *Abandoned Landscape* and two new pieces as a result of a research and study visit in Jan 2018 where I was able to explore the collection of the History Museum, *A Life Measured; Seven sweaters for Nermin Divović* and *Three Bottles for Sarajevo (for Edin Numankadic)*. The exhibition presented work from a range of artists, many of whom were from the region and included a wide range of approaches including Mladen Miljanović's *MWRL 100mm (Multiple Water Rocket Launcher)* a rocket launcher created for destruction, transformed into a watering system for caring and cultivation and Vladimir Miladinović's series of drawings from printed archival material held in the History Museum. The exhibition also served as a focal point for the three-day symposium in Sarajevo entitled *Why Remember? Ruins, Remains and Reconstructions in Times of War and Its Aftermath*. Together, it provided an opportunity for artists, historians, researchers and academics to reflect both on the tragic circumstances of the war and how we might contribute to reconciliation. ⁱⁱⁱ

Background

Over a number of years, I have used museums and collections as starting points for bodies of work, infiltrating these spaces and drawing inspiration from the objects they contain in order to tell new stories and bring contemporary references to bear upon historical material.

For anyone with an interest in history, piecing together precious fragments and ephemera constitutes a special kind of adventure that leads one to hidden, oft forgotten narratives. (Perkins 2010).

As an artist I operate between the polarities of what is present and what is absent, often using simple day-to-day objects as touchstones for more speculative thoughts. Collections provide source material in abundance but what has been interesting for me is how it is often been the quite ordinary or un-presupposing objects that have provided the 'spark' to ignite my imagination. I have worked with the house and collection at Kettle's Yard to produce an exhibition *I called while you were out* (2008) where it was the absence of any evidence of daily activity that became my focus; at The Scott Polar Research Institute (2013), where it was a combination of viewing their collection of objects from Scott's expedition to the South Pole in 1912 alongside documents and records concerning the raising of funds and the delay in posting and receiving letters that gave me an entry into making new work and most recently in 2016-17, a project which brought together the Sigmund Freud Museum in Vienna and the Freud Museum London where I took the motif of the coat Freud had purchased for

his migration to London as a central motif and a way of thinking about migration in general and what it means to uproot.^{iv}

Two of the works exhibited in *ReConciliations* in 2018 were made in 1998 and rather than taking inspiration from a physical object or collection, took their genesis from the chance hearing of a radio broadcast. The broadcast was the BBC's *From our own correspondent* in which reporters present a short broadcast about something topical. On this occasion, Martin Bell, the then BBC War Correspondent used the occasion to sign off and reflected on his most recent experience reporting the Bosnia War.

... the abiding memory I shall take away with me is not of any particular massacre or atrocity or ruin or traitor or front line, but of hundreds of refugees fleeing on foot down a mined country road all wearing their Sunday Best, formal black suits for the men, ample black dresses for the women. For if all you can take is what you can walk away with then you walk away in the best clothes that you have and, in the pockets, you carry the family photographs. (Bell 1996)^v

What struck me about this broadcast was how through objects, in this case family photographs and clothes, a connection with memory and culture is made manifest. The *best clothes* carry with them a sense of personal dignity and the *family photographs* an implicit sense of identity. This chimed with imagery that I was working with in my studio at the time.

I experienced the Bosnia War like so many, through the media and the daily news reports of atrocities and Sarajevo under siege, but from the safe distance of London, Sarajevo seemed far away and it wasn't until I visited in Ljubljana 1996 and saw a road sign pointing to Sarajevo that I had the realization that this war was happening in the middle of Europe, literally in our back yard. This provided a trigger, and remembering the broadcast, I wrote first to the BBC asking for a transcript and then to Martin Bell who was by then an independent member of Parliament, to ask permission to use his text. The radio broadcast had made a great impression on me; why and how, out of all the thousands of reports did this one get under my defences I can't say but I felt compelled to respond and try to shape my ideas in artworks. I also wanted to give a degree of permanence to what was otherwise a fleeting radio broadcast, a temporary moment on the information highway.

I recalled other instances in which a received story has taken the place of a first-hand encounter as a starting point for creative work, including the composer Sir Michael Tippett taking a newspaper story to inspire his oratorio *A Child of our Time* (first performed in 1944) in which the assassination of a German diplomat by a young Jewish boy leads to the reprisals by the Nazi's against the Jewish population in Kristallnacht. *Tippett's oratorio deals with these incidents in the context of the experiences of oppressed people generally and carries a strongly pacifist message of ultimate understanding and reconciliation.*^{vi}

In another example, Bob Dylan draws upon a news report of a rich white landowner, William Zantlinger who is acquitted of murdering a black barmaid, to shape his protest song *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll* (1963). Dylan takes the factual account of the court case and projects it into the wider issues of civil rights and segregation. This song is forensically dissected by Christopher Ricks who claims that *Hattie Carroll is one of Dylan's greatest political songs, not so much because it has a political subject as because everything in it is seen under the aspects of politics. Truly seen so.* (Ricks 2003)

These are just two examples which gave me the confidence to feel that my lack of being an eyewitness shouldn't be a deterrent and that working from received information was a legitimate and well tested strategy. This methodology also serves to draw upon my own personal memories, in some cases serving to bring forgotten memories and experience to the fore. For example, when researching *Re-Imagining Scott*,^{vii} I vividly recalled the experience as a schoolboy, rising early to deliver newspapers and being the first out in the snow, leaving my tracks as if I were the only presence. Again, working on *Temporarily Accessioned; Freud's Coat Revisited*, I recalled the first winter when I had left home and buying a trench coat which providing me with both warmth and comfort. This idea of the essential nature of the coat became the leitmotif for the exhibition, projecting these feelings and memories on the coat that Freud had purchased for his exile to London. (fig 1) Here, I had Freud's actual coat x-rayed at the National Gallery London, to provide the data for this life size digital print.

Returning to the siege of Sarajevo, I began working on two pieces, one an artist's book, the other an installation of bronze objects as if abandoned objects, left behind under the threat of snipers. The objects were all common-place, books, bottles, children's toys and I wanted to present them as if they had been discarded in a hurry, the residue of conflict, that which can't be carried has to be left behind.

My artists book took as its title, *With the melting of the snows*, a phrase used by Bell to describe how following the winter thaw, the full horror of the atrocities was revealed, a perverse coming of spring. The book consisted of three visual chapters with all the images extensively worked on the computer. Mid-day images I had taken in sunny Ljubljana, in colour were transformed into black and white re-imaginings of Sarajevo as if dusk was falling with the threat of curfew. (fig 2)

The second chapter were images of objects on my studio floor, some made in wax, others found, arranged informally, whilst the third chapter used photographs taken in the backroom stores of the gentleman's outfitters, Moss Bros^{viii} with suits and coat waiting to be hired, which in my view acted as surrogates for the unnamed.^{ix} (fig 3)

The second piece was an installation of bronze objects *Abandoned Landscape* in which I imagined the siege of Sarajevo as evidenced by skeletal objects, left behind, dropped while fleeing or simply discarded. I wanted these objects to reference the everyday aspects of life, and together begin to conjure the idea of the life of a city.^x Conflict begins by disrupting the simple activities, the daily rituals of meeting friends, shopping, working and playing. For me it was poignant to see this work now in Sarajevo twenty years after I made it and to see how it might work in this context. Joanna Morra in her book *Inside the Freud Museum*, talks about 'site-responsive art, that being art that is temporarily installed within a space not primarily meant for contemporary art'. The History Museum where the work was presented, certainly fitted into this description. (fig 4) The final installation was installed by the museum's curators but I was delighted with how when viewing the work, through the window in the garden a first world war tank can be seen, setting up a welcome juxtaposition. Both in terms of material (metal), and colour (green patination), my objects took on a greater resonance when seen against the tanks, which of course, themselves had now been abandoned. This certainly set the work within the context of history and conflict in a manner that was not apparent when I first showed the work in a 'white cube' location.^{xi}

When I finally visited Sarajevo earlier this year (January 2018) it was an uncanny experience, both familiar and different. and despite the amazing transformation of the city, the scars and

reminders of the conflict were still self-evident. The History Museum as a building carries the trace of the conflict on its façade and environs, while inside an exhibition focusing on the siege included many personal objects that vividly expressed the day to day life under conflict. The History Museum itself has had a number of reiterations, beginning as a museum to celebrate Josip Broz Tito through to its current identity as The History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina.^{xiii}

I spent time in the museum researching within the collection but one item above all resonated with me and seemed to represent the tragedy of civilians involved in a war zone. That object was a sweater worn by a young boy Nermin Divović who at the age of seven, was shot by a sniper's bullet 100 yards from the entrance to the museum. The bullet we are told, passed through his mother before killing Nermin. As an image this is a terrible inversion of the mother and child where it is the mother's milk that sustains the child's life, here what has come through the mother, has brought death. The family donated the sweater to the Museum where it is displayed alongside photographs which capture his brief life. (fig 5) In one photograph, he is seen alive in the sweater with his mother and sister in front of the cathedral while the same photographer recorded the tragic images a year later of him laying dead on the pavement.^{xiii}

One of the important aspects of collections is the way in which objects are presented as portals into stories and events. They are the physical connection and provide touchstones for the imagination as expressed by Susan Stewart in her essay, *Objects of desire*

... we might say that this capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience is, exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that exist only through the invention of narrative. (Stewart 1993)

Methodology

As an artist, I try to intensify experience through the making of objects and prints in the hope that through this, ideas can find a visual equivalent and become part of the collective memory. As a humanist and in the context of conflict, I have to believe it might be just possible to effect change. But art invariably operates outside of the immediate call for action, a role more fitting to journalists and politicians. However, through reflection, art practice might support notions of empathy and contribute to an understanding of difference, common needs and values.

Nemin's story is made poignant for the fact that his life was so suddenly cut short at just seven years old, when, having survived the natural risks of birth and the early years, he would have expected a long life, school, playing football, a job, falling in love, a family of his own and even beyond as a grandparent. I wanted to capture this loss of both a life and its potential through memorialising his life through a series of sweaters, one for each year of his life. T.S.Eliot in his poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915) talks of '*measuring out my life in coffee spoons*'. I in turn wanted to memorialize Nemin by measuring out his life in woollen sweaters.

I took a number of photographs and along with some drawings and measurements, set about trying to find someone to knit duplicates. (fig 6) Following a chance conversation with Ann Jones, (a friend and curator from the Arts Council) who lives in rural Wales, she took the

project to heart and found a lady, Carol McDavid in her nearby village, who offered to knit the sweaters, working back from one to fit a 7-year-old to a tiny sweater for a baby 0-1-year-old.^{xiv} It seemed in keeping with the circumstances that the piece developed through conversations, one person passing on the story to another so what started in Sarajevo, continued in London, then Wales before being then returned. Carol made some tests and we tried to get as good a colour match as possible for the wool. She was also able to use the photographs in place of knitting patterns and adapt her knitting to the different sizes required.

I printed and sewed into each sweater a label indicating its size by year, so 0-1 yrs, 1-2, yrs. etc. and the sweaters when shown were presented in a line in a case as if on display in a shop. (fig 7&8) I hoped that through the progression, from the smallest to one for a seven-year-old, the tragedy of a life cut short would be made visible. As with the original sweater, my sweaters had been hand-knitted, carrying with them that intense investment of time, care, craft skill and pride on behalf of the maker.

The meaning of knitting, particularly knitting for others, within the popular cultural psyche, is to see both act and object as indicative of love, be it familial, platonic, or romantic [and how] it requires a certain extent of sacrifice, of personal time spent on an activity for the benefit of another. (Turney 2012)

My own mother knitted so I know from first-hand experience, the pride she took in ensuring myself and my brothers looked smart and warm as we went off to school. But I also wanted the softness of the wool to provide a contrast to the hardness of the majority of the Museum's collection, which is dominated by the metal of the guns, shells, hardware etc. and in the bright blue and white colour, a contrast to the military greys, greens and blacks. Here was something colourful, soft and warm. *"The essence of closeness, either through the tactility of making, or the nature of the knitted object, i.e. a toy to be cuddled or a sweater to hug the body. Therefore, one might suggest that such a gift is indicative of an embrace."* (Turney 2012)

Wars are invariably waged by men but it is the women and children that are too often the innocent victims. The siege of Sarajevo targeted the civilian population and according to reports over 10,000 civilians, including 1,500 children, were killed during the 44-month-long siege. I wanted to give space to those feminine qualities of nurture and resilience that were so important both to survival and to rebuilding, post conflict. Set in a museum whose brutalist architecture and its collection of artefacts which invariable testify to the masculine idea of strength and power, I wanted my sweaters to provide an alternative vision. Furthermore, I saw my set of sweaters as a memorial in direct contrast to the public commemorative stone located on the spot 100 meters from the museum where the tragedy occurred. The official memorial in white stone with carved text was revealed in 2015 commemorating the sad events of 1994.^{xv} This chimed with the sentiment expressed by Ralph Rugoff in his catalogue essay to accompany the exhibition, *Invisible: Art about the unseen*, in which he writes

In the sphere of public art, meanwhile, disillusionment with traditional political monuments gave birth to what art historian Sergiusz Michalski has called a new art form: monuments which tried to attain invisibility as a way of engendering reflections on the limitations of monumental imagery. (Rugoff 2012)

A further element that attracted me in the collection was the importance of plastic bottles for collecting water during the siege. These were evidenced in a number of objects donated to the Museum and brought into sharper focus following a visit to the artist Edin Numankadic's

studio on the top floor of one of the social housing projects in the company of Dr Paul Lowe. Edin told me how he made the journey each day along *Sniper's Alley* to go to his studio and have a space to think. In the course of our conversation, he told me a joke, that a man was crossing sniper's alley with plastic bottles to collect water when a sniper shot his bottle, so the water poured out. The man screamed at the sniper, 'don't shoot the bottles, shoot me!' Here in the dark recesses of humour, lies a sad truth that without water you cannot live. In Edin's own installation *The Traces of War*, now in the collection of the Picture Gallery of Bosnia & Hercegovina, a plastic water bottle takes its place amongst the other ephemera that constitute a reconstruction of his studio under siege and a reminder of the importance of this ubiquitous object.

Responding to this story, I made three small sculptures, first in wax, and then cast in bronze and painted, of damaged plastic bottles on landscapes of fingerprints. (fig 9) I had been struck by the poignancy of the *Sarajevo roses*,^{xvi} the resins stains on pavements marking where mortar shells had exploded and also in the presence of the EU flag on tins of beef and other items in the museum's collection. (fig 10) In one of the sculptures I have the stars from the EU flag like an ironic halo, since for all their authority and influence, it seemed so little was done to resolve the conflict. (fig 11) Without any authentic experience of the conflict, my approach throughout was based on traces that have been left, either in the form of physical evidence on the buildings and pavements, artefacts in the collection or from stories and accounts. This results in work which I hope addresses an audience quietly as opposed to the sensational and shocking.

Dr Paul Lowe, whilst talking about the photographic recording of conflict, sees the place for the more oblique approach.

Images of atrocity are therefore deeply problematic, in that they potentially create a tension between form and content and are often accused of re-victimisation, compassion fatigue, exploitation, and the aesthetisation of suffering. How to resolve this dilemma has been a major question for both critics and practitioners alike. As an alternative, therefore, there is considerable potential in examining images associated with atrocity that do not depict the actual act of violence or the victim itself, but rather depict the circumstances around which the acts occurred. (Lowe 2014)

Conclusion

In the work that I made and presented in *ReConciliations*, I was aware that the location of the History Museum was not a neutral space. Not only was it a museum that itself had gone through changes, but also as a location it was positioned in what became known as Sniper's Alley and as such bears its own scars from the siege. It was also opposite The Holiday Inn that had functioned as both the refuge and centre for the International Press and from where the news and images of the conflict were transmitted across the world. As the war photographer John Olsen observed, 'the past is 'not left behind but gathers and folds into the becoming present, enabling different forms of material memory' (Lowe 2014)

Against this backdrop, I was aware that my contribution was adding to already existing layers of memory and that the collective memory in the Balkans was still in the stage of being formed. My hope is that in presenting a view of conflict based in imagination rather than first hand witness, I am able to show how such conflict affects all involved and how an empathic approach might serve to aiding reconciliation. Ricks again, writing about Dylan's *Lonesome death of Hattie Carrol* seems to summarise the desire of all artists trying to effect change

through their work, describing the song's effect as *tak(ing) you right back to a time when you believed, or hoped against hope, that there surely must be somebody who would see to it that such things didn't happen. The sadness and pathos are on her behalf, but they touch us all.* (Ricks 2003) Ricks' comment is both a plea for justice and a wish for order based on a shared overreaching morality.

The work that I have discussed has been framed by and was a contribution to the AHRC research funded project *Art and Reconciliation: Conflict, Culture and Community*. This not only set my work alongside a range of other artists, many from the region, but also frames it within broader debates both in terms of post conflict resolution and how such a recent history can be addressed. This has enabled the work to engage with a wide range of audiences, both specialist and the general public and furthermore to open up opportunities for dialogue across barriers of language and ethnicity and through this make a contribution to reconciliation.

4714 words including abstract

Images

- Fig 1 *Temporarily Accessioned X-Ray* 1150 x 1520mm inkjet 2016
- Fig 2 Page from bookwork *With the Melting of the Snows* 1998 Lithography 275 x 397 mm published by Culford Press & EMH Arts in edition of 100
- Fig 3 Page from bookwork *With the Melting of the Snows* Lithography 1998
- Fig 4 *Abandoned Landscape*-1998 Installation of 19 unique cast bronze objects, sizes varying from 120 x 80 x 100 mm – 400 x 250 x 60 mm
- Fig 5 Nermin Divović's sweater from the collection of the History Museum, Sarajevo.
- Fig 6 Nermin Divović's sweater- preparatory drawing. 2018
- Fig 7 *A Life Measured* (1-2 years old) Wool & acrylic printed labels 2018
- Fig 8 *A Life Measured; Seven sweaters for Nermin Divović* Wool & acrylic printed labels ranging from one to fit a child of 0-1 years old through to 6-7 years old. 2018
- Fig 9 Sarajevo Rose
- Fig 10 Canned Beef donated as part of EU Relief aid from the History Museum collection
- Fig 11 *Three Bottles for Sarajevo (for Edin Numankadic)*. Painted bronze each approx. 300 x 220 x 260 mm 2018

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ⁱ The paper develops ideas expressed in the author's keynote address for the conference *Ruins, Remains, and Reconstructions* in Sarajevo 27-29th June 2018.

ⁱⁱ *ReConciliations* was shown at The Museum of History, Sarajevo 27/06/18 – 31/08/18, The Exchange, Bush House, London 01/11/18- 01/12/18 and will be further shown at the Museum of Modern Art, Banja Luka summer 2019 (dates to be confirmed)

ⁱⁱⁱ *Why Remember? Ruins, Remains and Reconstructions in Times of War and Its Aftermath* 3-Day Symposium in Sarajevo, Bosnia & Herzegovina, June 27th-29th, 2018, Hotel Europe, Sarajevo.

^{iv} *Setting Memory* – Sigmund Freud Museum Vienna, 2016 (Paul Coldwell & Bettina von Zwehl), *Temporarily Accessioned-Freud's Coat Revisited* Freud Museum London (Paul Coldwell)

The Film-maker Susan Steinberg used this exhibition as a focus for her film *The Hope*
<https://vimeo.com/202936303> which set the exile of Freud against the recent migration crisis.

^v Bell, M., 4/4/1996 *Farewell to War Reporting*. In; From our own correspondent, London; BBC Radio 4

^{vi} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Child_of_Our_Time referenced 03/09/2018

^{vii} *Re-Imagining Scott: Objects & Journeys*. The Polar Museum, Scott Polar Research Institute. 31/05/13-20/07/13

^{viii} Moss Bros is a gentleman's outfitters with a long tradition of hiring suits for special occasions such as weddings. I associated the brand with the idea of Sunday best as referenced in Bell's text.

^{ix} *With the Melting of the Snows* has been acquired by a number of collections & libraries both in UK and abroad including New York Public Library, Tate Gallery London and the Imperial War Museum London. It has also featured in the exhibition *Catalyst: Contemporary Art and War* IWM North, and in exhibitions in Bradford, Gallery II & Canterbury, Studio 3 Gallery.

^x The skeletal structure of the sculptures was an attempt to suggest that these were linear representations of a solid object: I saw them as drawings in space, the trace of the line leading the eye around the form. Coldwell, P (2005) *Finding spaces between shadows*. The Camberwell Press P45

^{xi} *Abandoned Landscape & With the Melting of the Snows* were first shown at the Eagle Gallery, London in 1998. They have subsequently been shown at Arthouse, Dublin in 1999 and again at Gallery II, Bradford in 2015.

^{xii} 'From its founding in 1945 until 1993, the Museum remained thematically focused on the history of antifascism during World War II and the cultivation of socialist state values. The name of the Museum, once Museum of the Revolution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has changed several times, but it has always been recognizable. After being renamed the History Museum in 1993, the thematic structure of the Museum has also changed. Now the aim is to study the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the Middle Ages to present times'. From museum website <http://muzej.ba>

^{xiii} The photographs were taken by Enric Marti, first on 01/12/93,
<http://www.apimages.com/metadata/Index/Watchf-AP-I-BIH-APHS461968-Bosnia-Civil-War-Nermin-Divovic/1cb3aaf7a494413fa4d3b1ef43cd61a4/17/0>

the later on (18/11/94)

<http://www.apimages.com/metadata/Index/Associated-Press-International-News-Bosnia-Herzegovina-BOSNIA-SNIPER-ALLEY/4f5a4667fbc6da11af9f0014c2589dfb/13/0>

^{xiv} I realised in retrospect that the passing on of the story of Nermin was part of the process of constructing an alternative memorial through the aural tradition of exchange.

^{xv} <http://www.sarajevotimes.com/memorial-to-nermin-divovic-revealed/>

^{xvi} A Sarajevo Rose is a concrete scar caused by a mortar shell's explosion that was later filled with red resin. Mortar rounds landing on concrete create a unique fragmentation pattern that looks almost floral in arrangement. Because Sarajevo was a site of intense urban warfare and suffered thousands of shell explosions during the Siege of Sarajevo, the marked concrete patterns are a unique feature to the city.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarajevo_Rose accessed 03/09/2018