

The Strategy of Silencing the Artist to Perpetuate Culturicide

Leyla Kucukalic. Universidad Politécnica de Valencia

“If you’re looking for hell, ask the artist...”

The Bosnian sculptor Alija Kucukalic (1937-1992) is one of the major contemporary artists in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina. His death after being hit by a Bosnian Serb shell during the war catapulted his work into oblivion by the country’s cultural institutions. It is a common practice concerning those artists who, like Kucukalic, have not aligned themselves with the nationalisms that separate the three ethnic groups coexisting in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that Juan Goytisolo called “culturicide”. To fight against this determination to relegate Kucukalic’s work to oblivion, the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, in the framework of doctoral studies on art, is developing a project whose objective is to preserve the legacy of the artist, who produced highly symbolic sculptures, such as *Executions* and *Figure on a Chair*, and his documentary archive to help the past to be present through heritage and hold out a hand to the country’s reconciliation.

More than two decades since the end of the Bosnia and Herzegovina war, the wounds are still open, especially in terms of the country’s cultural and artistic heritage. They continue to fester under the yoke of what the writer Juan Goytisolo called culturicide during the burning of the library of Sarajevo. The doctoral thesis we are conducting at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (UPV) suggests that this tendency for the state to implode continues through the ostracism of the cultural institutions and the lack of attention to the work of specific artists. One of them is the Bosnian sculptor Alija Kucukalic, who died in the conflict and whose work is the victim of the ethno-nationalism in which the country is trapped, a destiny that can be common in many countries swept by war today.

The institutional model of Bosnia and Herzegovina, designed after the war in the Dayton Peace Agreement, establishes that competences in the field of culture are not state-wide but fall within the ten cantons and local institutions into which the country is divided. This system has meant that the funding of national cultural institutions has been insignificant for two decades, which intentionally causes cultural heritage to be divided into three ethnic parts. This is the same criteria that guided the nationalist war aspirations of 1992, according to which each constituent ethnic people (Serbian, Croatian or Bosnian) is the owner of their culture, history and legacy. Based on this premise, the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its viability are more than questionable.

Against this panorama, the main cultural institutions are heading for extinction given the lack of a legal status and commitment to preservation and budgetary provision by the state. The most notorious case, cause of great international controversy, has been the closure of the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is a 19th century neoclassical building dating back over 130 years that houses the history of the country, with more than 6,000 works of incalculable value and national heritage. Some of them, such as the medieval tombstones called *stecci* or the Sarajevo Haggadah – the oldest Jewish Sephardic document in the world, written in Barcelona in 1350 – are listed by UNESCO World Heritage.

For three years, the museum was covered with wooden boards, bearing the word “closed”, causing great indignation among citizens and internationally. It was reopened, but its legal status is still unresolved and its staff continues to work despite the extremely harsh economic conditions they endure. Other institutions in the same situation include the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the National Film Theatre, the Museum of Literature and Performing Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Museum of History, which houses one of the most important permanent exhibitions on the siege of Sarajevo, among other collections. This is also the case of the Library for the Blind, while the Vijecnica, the National Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was burnt by Serbian and Bosnian Serb troops one night in August 1992 when over a million books were burnt, was never again a temple of knowledge, but today is the town hall. The Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art – whose collection, with pieces by Marina Abramović and Nan Goldin among others, was founded in the war thanks to donations from prestigious international artists who wanted to support a project of such symbolism – is awaiting definitive premises, even though the plans for the

building were drawn up decades ago by the architect and UNESCO goodwill ambassador Renzo Piano. The entrance hall of what is today Ars Aevi bears an epigram by the 18th century writer Avigador Pawnsner, which the artist Dean Jokanović Toumin revived to refer to the siege of Sarajevo: “If you are looking for hell, ask the artist where it is. If you don’t find the artist, then you are already in hell.”

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A few steps away, a sculpture with open arms witnessed this hell. In the heart of the war of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 1995, the journalist Diego Alquerache noticed it in Sarajevo and felt compelled to describe it. “I can’t get close to it; a tangle of barbed wire delimits its constant distance. It’s cold and starting to snow. I try to imagine the touch of the freezing bronze on my fingertips. This sad orphan is the symbol of Sarajevo’s cultural reality. Alija Kucukalic died on 22 June 1992 when, walking in the street, a Serbian shell ended his life. He was professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in the city and father of this divine creature of the Skenderia neighbourhood,” he said. It was love at first sight, as that creature is a symbol of the resistance described by the reporter in the siege of Sarajevo. Alija Kucukalic must be credited with the development and consolidation of sculpture in Bosnia and Herzegovina in Bosnia, Yugoslavia and internationally, especially in the Mediterranean, with more than twenty prestigious awards, including the Grand Prix at the International Alexandria Biennale and the second prize at the Venice Biennale. Due to his multifaceted artistic and cultural work in the field of sculpture of the 1970s, Bosnia



Figure on a Chair by Alija Kucukalic (Leyla Kucukalic).

and Herzegovina would be recognised for its extraordinary artistic output, typical of an autonomous culture. He was one of the founders of the Faculty of Fine Arts of Sarajevo, where he trained a distinguished group of artists, and his public monuments are symbols of the living history of Sarajevo and of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, and despite the irrefutable artistic merits of Kucukalic, during the twenty-five years that have passed since the death of the artist at the age of fifty-five, killed by Serbian and Bosnian Serb artillery on his way to the Academy to teach during the siege of Sarajevo, the destruction of his work has become a tragedy. His monuments and sculptures in Sarajevo and other cities in

Bosnia and Herzegovina were destroyed by war, and pulled down in the post-war period and exposed to continuous vandalism. The root of this ostracism lies in the ethno-nationalist cultural tendency clearly seen in the institutional treatment of specific artists such as Kucukalic who, through their life and work, have shown themselves to be clear humanists and patriots of Bosnia and Herzegovina, without aligning with the nationalism of any ethnic group.

Therefore, the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia considered it necessary to conduct scientific research into this great artist beyond the geographical framework of Bosnia and Herzegovina. After all, what would have happened to universal cultural heritage if after the Spanish Civil War, for example, the commitment and legacy of great artists had not been vindicated by the scientific community? Thus began our research in the framework of the doctoral programme in art at the San Carlos Faculty of Fine Arts of the UPV, in the form of a doctoral thesis on the perpetuation of culturicide in Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on the figure of the renowned sculptor. During the search for documentation, we discovered that it is almost impossible to find works by this artist in the exhibitions of galleries or museums in the country. Moreover, there are still no plans for a permanent exhibition of the sculpture of one of its greatest artistic exponents, and no book has been published about his life and work.

One of Kucukalic's most representative works in Sarajevo is, precisely, the beautiful bronze creature that captivated Alquerache like many others, whose real name is *Figure on a Chair*. Its location, Skenderija, is a reference in Sarajevo because it was the Arts and Sports Centre during the 1984 Olympic Games and today is a meeting point for citizens, who have rechristened it "the crucified lady" to establish it as a symbol of a city, of its cultural reality and its resistance as grenades rained down

during the siege. It is, therefore, an extremely well-known sculpture in the city and, from an artistic point of view, a masterpiece that heralds the recent history of contemporary sculpture in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It belongs to one of the sculptor's series, entitled Horizontal-Vertical, and was made between 1972 and 1976. It portrays a seated female figure and received an award at the 4th Exhibition of the Federation or Alliance of Associations of Visual Artists of Yugoslavia (SULUJ) in 1972, one of the most important visual arts exhibitions of former Yugoslavia. It featured 621 works of art and 240 artists were selected as the best from the six Yugoslavian republics. Alija Kucukalic won the SULUJ first prize, marking a crucial moment in the history of art in his country because, in the framework of this great exhibition, the sculpture of Bosnia and Herzegovina emerged from total anonymity to become the peak of Yugoslavian sculptural art due, no doubt, to the merits of Kucukalic.

The artist also created what is undoubtedly the most important artistic monument in Sarajevo: the sculpture *Executions*, a figure of a woman with arms raised dedicated to more than 11,000 Sarajevo victims who died in World War II, located in the Vraca National Park complex, at the feet of the city. This work survived the last war despite being located on the Bosnian Serb front, in a position with "unbeatable" views to target and kill civilians, and which would be mutilated during the post-war period, in addition to being ideologically used by ethno-national appellations and meanings. Kucukalic's studio, where the fruit of thirty-five years of work was found (sculptures, drawings, sketches, studies and projects for monuments), was dismantled and transformed into a rental space, while the artist's material and sculptural furniture ended up in the rubbish, and his drawings and sculptures in basements, corridors and rooms of neighbours and relatives, at risk of being stolen or damaged. After

the artist's death, much of the documentary data disappeared from his studio and, like his work, his archive, from biographical documents to official public and private documents, was severely damaged.

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To combat the deterioration of the work and legacy of the sculptor, after several years of documentary reconstruction and photographic archiving carried out in Spain, a monograph came to light entitled *El escultor Alija Kucukalic: con comentarios del artista*, presented in November 2016 at the Sarajevo National Gallery and recognised in the framework of the aforementioned UPV doctoral programme as scientific material. The presentation of the book served as a basis for organising the sculptor's first posthumous solo exhibition, "A tribute to Alija Kucukalic: presentation of the monograph and sculpture and drawing exhibition", held in the aforementioned gallery from 3 to 17 November 2016. It brought together masterpieces by Alija Kucukalic, anthological pieces of 20th century Bosnian and Herzegovinan sculpture that recognised the artist with awards in prestigious international exhibitions and biennales. "A small exhibition of great importance for Bosnia and Herzegovina," commented the critics. It consisted of twenty-one works from different institutions and private collections found among many other sculptures and drawings at the bottom of the basements of museums, under decades of dust, in the depths of oblivion, and that saw the light for the first time after the war with this posthumous exhibition

Based on the research carried out in the monograph, institutions such as the Museum of History of Sarajevo have been able to com-



Executions by Alija Kucukalic (Leyla Kucukalic).

plete and rectify key data about the works of Kucukalic that they own, or with which they are related, as in the case of the sculpture *Executions*, for years named after a partisan with nationalist links in an attempt at political manipulation of the monument. But what has driven this search for relevant documentation

by the institutions is a reencounter with important intellectuals and authors removed from the official archives, as indicated by sources linked to the Bosnian cultural sphere. These sources ratify the main argument of this research, which is the promotion of the oblivion of the intellectual elite to perpetuate culturicide.

The progress in our research over these years has allowed us to catalogue for the first time virtually the entire period of artistic production of Alija Kucukalic, despite the damage suffered by his work, while establishing a chronological and thematic inventory of that period. This has been expanded with personal comments by the artist published in the media about his sculpture and art in general, which gives great testimonial value to the work, while contributing to a better understanding of his legacy and to his reassessment by today's critics, as well current artistic discourses. The Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the University of the Arts London have promoted an initiative to expand with artistic works the exhibition rooms of the Bosnian museum dedicated to the siege of Sarajevo. A project called "Art and Reconciliation" led to an exhibition of the works selected in London and, later, they became part of the museum's permanent exhibition in Sarajevo.

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As the sculpture *Executions* is one of the most recognised monuments – or *spomeniks*, in the local language – of Sarajevo, one of the artistic projects proposed by a multidisciplinary group of international artists that we led consisted of offering the public the possibility of seeing this *spomenik* of enormous artistic and symbolic value inside a gallery. And not only see it but, also, reinterpret it based on artistic creation. Thus, an installation comprising two units interrelated with the original *Executions*

sculpture, dedicated to the victims of fascism (1941-1945) by an artist who died at its hands in 1992, was exhibited there. A date that marks the beginning of the siege of Sarajevo and the beginning of the intentional and fascist "execution" of the intellectual and artistic elite of Sarajevo, which that year the British reporter Michael Nicholson called "elitocide". The genocide figures would be repeated, and today *Executions* pays homage not only to the 11,000 dead from the year 1945, but to all those who were killed, died of hunger and cold or disappeared in the last conflict, among them 11,541 civilians, including Kucukalic himself.

A few days before the sculptor's posthumous exhibition, the mutilated hand of the monument appeared. From the signing of the peace agreement to the present, the vandalism that threatens cultural institutions and cultural heritage has been a challenge for the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina or the final *coup de grâce*. This raises the issue of the closure of cultural institutions and the destruction of heritage in the framework of the Dayton Peace Agreement, with a languid timeframe that, we believe, is perfectly portrayed by that hand. Therefore, the hand is an integral part of the work, which is strengthened by graphic documents that help us to understand the causes and consequences of the siege of Sarajevo, one of the darkest episodes in the history of Europe. This work could be exhibited in Spain as part of the research plan framing our doctoral thesis. The viability of this project and the research we are carrying out at the UPV vindicate the artist and aim to help restore the historical memory of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sarajevo, but also recover, protect, preserve and restore artistic heritage, making it universal in the fight against culturicide, thereby aiding reconciliation.