

## Reflections on Art and Reconciliation Project, Sarajevo 2018 Isabella Pearce<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1: Exhibition Poster, Image by: Isabella Pearce

*Art&Reconciliation* is a new multi-disciplinary research initiative that explores the relationship between art and reconciliation, and how the arts may (or may not) contribute to facilitating reconciliation in the Western Balkans. From 25-30 June 2018 the project hosted a series of workshops, talks and opened an exhibition of art works commissioned by the project (see [here](#)) at the [Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), in Sarajevo.

Central to the workshops and exhibition in Sarajevo was questioning the role of art within processes of reconciliation in post-conflict societies. While encouraging the interdisciplinary collaboration between art and academia, the role of the artist became a focus of the dialogue: what is the artistic response to reconciliation, and how can creative, experimental ideas challenge how we visually represent and imagine 'reconciliation'? This piece will explore some of the themes and questions that emerged from the project, the art exhibited and from conversations with the artists involved. In particular, it will question and reflect on the role of art in opening up spaces of dialogue at local level, as well as its possibility in shaping new and alternate ways of approaching the topic of reconciliation altogether. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isabelle Pearce is a MA student in the Department of War Studies, King's College London, and was a research assistant during the project workshops and exhibition in Sarajevo.

<sup>2</sup> Given the varied nature of the commissions, and whilst no reflection on their relative merits, individual analysis of the significance of each of the pieces is beyond the scope of this post. In the near future however, there will be full details of each of these hosted on the Art&Reconciliation website

### *The exhibition and approach*

At the heart of these discussions was the desire to get inside the question of what reconciliation has meant, and could mean, in the current regional context of the Western Balkans. Given the rapidly changing political and societal context in the region, questions included what reconciliation meant to a post-conflict society 25 years later, who did it work for and what was, and is, the role of the artist within this process? It became apparent that there was widespread disillusionment with previous reconciliation programmes in the Western Balkans, as many of the artists felt that these projects had been co-opted by political elites for their ends. As such, throughout there was an engagement with the possible role of the arts could play in reconnecting individuals at a local level into this discussion, and to *re-shape* what these discussions might look like, by offering space for new interpretations of reconciliation. It was therefore important to question and approach different modes and methods of artistic production to understand how these might contribute towards these debates in different ways. This saw a wide variety of types of artistic intervention commissioned, from individual to collective approaches to reconciliation, from abstract to mimetic, and visual to performance based etc. In each commission there was brave, diverse and refreshing ways of visually approaching the topic of reconciliation, which not only allowed space for reflection and debate but offered the possibility to explore the role art as a mediator in challenging mainstream narratives and offering alternative approaches to reconciliation. Despite this wide variety, a number of cross-cutting themes ran throughout each of the commissions: dialogue and discussion; materiality and re-storying.



Figure 2 and 3: Exhibition Piece by Paul Coldwell, Image by: Isabella Pearce

### *Dialogue and Discussion*

The inclusion and engagement within the commission, of both international and local artists, became a success of the exhibition. This relationship between the various layers of intervention provided a fruitful and rich discussion from differing angles and perspectives on both 'reconciliation' and how artistic practices can engage with that. From an international perspective, Paul Coldwell reflected a position of an individual, disconnected from the lived experience and legacy of the conflict but whose work and discussions surrounding

reconciliation were informed by his emotional responses to the conflict as someone removed from the conflict itself. Alternatively, Milena Michalski, (a second international artist) was torn and conflicted by how to visually respond to the discussion of reconciliation because of her position as an 'outsider artist' (but with Serbian heritage) and so responded through a focus on the abstraction of everyday objects such as bottles, concrete and wire as a way to engage with those discussions of 'reconciliation', materiality and life. Milena's contribution also forced a reflection on the question of who has the right to speak in the aftermath of conflict. In contrast, Ziyah Gafić, who had a lived experience of the conflict, presented an important discussion surrounding his disillusionment with more collective methods of reconciliation, which led him to focus on how people reconcile relationships at an individual level.



Figure 4 and 5: Exhibition Piece by Milena Michalski, Image by: Isabella Pearce

These tensions and differing views between the artists themselves led to a diversity in the work that powerfully echoed the discussions and conflict surrounding reconciliation. This also challenged the idea that there is a form or mode of reconciliation, but, rather, highlighted its complex nature. Given the different connotations associated with the term reconciliation, whether it be positive or negative, the project and the work itself emerged as an important platform to unsettle dominant narratives of what reconciliation is or isn't and to give voice to dialogue, dissent and differing views, as expressed by the artists themselves. It also pointed to, and in contrast with current academic assumptions, a potential for these different layers and subject-positions to work together in pursuit of a response to violence and conflict. For it became clear that (whilst not always unproblematically) international interventions could open up space for local agents to reclaim the post-conflict process and explore alternative means in which to approach this.

## Materiality

Another theme running through the work was a relationship with and connection to objects. By reflecting on and utilising the performativity of objects as spaces and sites of agency and narrative, the artists challenged the traditional notions of materiality and symbolism of everyday objects such as beds, water bottles, sweaters and created new ways of approaching visual forms of reconciliation. One example of this was in the work of Paul Coldwell and his reflection on the importance and predominance of masculine materials and objects such as metal and concrete in the types of memorials created in post-conflict environments. Paul's work inverted this relationship, creating his piece from wool to reflect more feminine type of materials and to re-imagine memorial objects in a new and powerful way. By re-contextualising memorials in this way, 'feminising' the role of objects, Paul contributed to a discussion on how artistic practices can be used to challenge dominant or hegemonic discourses of conflict. This, and in contexts more generally where there is a frequent under representation and marginalisation of women and their experiences post-conflict, reinserted a feminine and female presence within the work itself through the use of the symbolism of materials, and with this provoked a reflection on what approaches are needed in the aftermath of conflict. Thus, Coldwell nuanced how we perceive, experience and frame reconciliation.



Figure 6 and 7: Exhibition Piece by Paul Coldwell, Image by: Isabella Pearce

## Re-storying and re-imagining

Through the use of objects and spaces, the artwork and artistic processes inserted new narratives and new imaginings of what reconciliation may mean in the Western Balkans today. Central to this was the use of 're-storying', and particularly visual-storytelling, to tell the same story of the conflict and of reconciliation but in a different way. This sense of evolution and progression of visual forms of reconciliation through narrative and storytelling is present in Ziyah Gafić's documentary photography of the personal objects found in mass

graves.<sup>3</sup> In this process, Ziyah is ‘re-storying’ and restoring focus to a series of objects that have been forgotten. This encourages the audience to confront a known story (of crimes against humanity and genocide) from a new perspective. By reducing the scale in this way and photographing each object individually, Ziyah is able to reframe the numbers and the scale of a story that has been told many times, back down to the individual lives of those affected.

Similarly, in Vladimir Miladinović’s work, by meticulously re-creating and replicating newspaper front pages from during the conflict by hand, Vladimir encourages the audience to look closer at the images and content of the articles – both because of the intricate skill and detail in the artwork itself but also because of the size and quantity of the replications which make them impossible to ignore. Here, Vladimir draws attention to the stories of the conflict which have existed in archives but that paradoxically remain both forgotten and contested. In this way he is able to contribute to a ‘re-storying’ of these previously told and documented stories and opens up space for new interpretations and reflections. In both cases, the artists have engaged with important processes and attempts to reconcile past and present and to provoke new discussions, engagement and meaning into stories already told.



Figure 8: Exhibition Piece by Vladimir Miladinović, Image by: Isabella Pearce

These commissions creatively introduced bold new approaches to how we can visually and experientially represent and engage with reconciliation, in ways that further disrupt dominant approaches. Adela Jušić and Lana Čmajčanin’s installation ‘Bedtime Stories’ emerged at the forefront of this process of disruption and reflects a powerful example of the types of playful and bold approaches to storytelling that emerged from the commission. Using the

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<sup>3</sup> This wasn’t a commissioned piece in the exhibition but was a piece of work Ziyah had previously worked on and which he talked in depth about during the workshop

symbolism of beds and ‘bedtime stories’ to create a participatory installation where the audience were encouraged to lie in the beds to listen to the testimonies of survivors, Adela and Lana juxtaposed materials, objects and experiences to create a new and unexpected approach to the testimonies of survivors. This challenged the ‘normal’ occurrence of bedtime stories and daily practices of storytelling (normally associated with peace and security and used as comforting practice to children) and disrupts the everyday with a realisation of the continued legacy of the past. Consequently, the retelling of the story and testimonies in this context, forces the audience to think differently about survivors and what their lived experience might mean in society today – creating new discussion surrounding the legacies of the conflict at an everyday and community level.



Figure 9: ‘Bedtime Stories’, Stockholm 2011. Image by: Adela Jušić<sup>4</sup>

Mladen Miljanović engaged in a similarly disruptive encounter with reconciliation by producing a replica rocket launcher that would water a new botanical garden on the site of a former military base in Banja Luka, deconstructing and re-imagining narratives relating to military spaces and military weapons. This, perhaps a form of *spatial reconciliation*, reclaimed a space associated with violence, destruction, conflict and death and inserted a new narrative of life and re-growth. Here, the artist engages with sites of violence and destruction, which most people would want to forget, and instead encourages the audience to forge new relationships and reactions to those spaces – no longer as something threatening but as a site that has been reclaimed and re-contextualised to now create something positive.

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<sup>4</sup> Note this image is not from the REconciliations exhibition in Sarajevo. Bedtime Stories is now, however, part of the permanent exhibition in the Historical Museum, Sarajevo.



Figure 10 and 11: Mladen Miljanović and his replica rocket launcher, Image by: Isabella Pearce

### *Concluding thoughts*

By questioning the role of the artist, the role of art within processes of reconciliation and reconciliation itself, the project has been able to challenge dominant narratives about these processes/ practices and opened up space for experimentation and reflection at a local level regarding these complex issues. The workshops and exhibition reflected not only the personal views of the artists but a much needed engagement with individual and everyday processes and conversations about reconciliation happening in the region. These views and perspectives did not always sit comfortably side-by-side, and disagreements existed as to the role of forgetting/remembrance, individual vs collective reconciliation, and how, and even if, these processes should be happening at all in the region. However, what became apparent was the importance of showcasing and reflecting these *different* views through artistic

representations, not only as a way to present and acknowledge the complexity of processes of reconciliation but to demonstrate the ability of artistic practices to open up spaces for dialogue, reflection and engagement at an individual and community level. This space for discussion was in and of itself a valuable and enriching outcome, both in showing that there is a no 'one size fits all' reconciliation process, and as an appreciation of the different types of reconciliation that can exist. Moreover, it highlighted the importance of making a more inclusive space for different approaches to, and interpretations of, reconciliation, whereby different views and representations could be acknowledged, and showcasing the importance of recognising reconciliation as something that is always evolving, fluid and in some cases contested. The question that remained therefore was how to continue this type of research and relationship with local artists to further push the boundaries of visual creativity and move forward and evolve these types of visual reconciliation practices.