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HEADS UP

## Art Crops Up in Sarajevo's Shuttered Shops

By YASMINE RYAN

ON a recent fall evening in Sarajevo, a crowd of [art](#) enthusiasts sipped drinks as one of [Bosnia](#)'s most respected artists and curators, Jusuf Hadzifejzovic, began his remarks at the opening of a new exhibition. Suddenly, the lights went out — but he continued his speech in darkness, unfazed. Minutes later, a cleaning woman calmly pushed her cart laden with mops and detergents through the center of the audience. The speeches went on.

So goes a typical opening in Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital, where the contemporary art scene is in perpetual collision with everyday life. Yet somehow, out of the chaos of the city, the art survives.

“All these things, I call ‘bustling with reality,’ ” Mr. Hadzifejzovic said afterward. He sees the struggles of Sarajevo's creative scene as a piece of living art itself: “The whole thing, for me, it is like one work.”

The gallery he started three years ago, Charlama Depot, is situated in the midst of the Centar Skenderija, a dreary underground shopping mall that has seen better days. Though the mall was once a symbol of prosperity during the days of the former Yugoslavia — the sporting facilities above the mall were a site for the Winter Olympics of 1984 — many of its shops have gone out of business because of the economic downturn.

Mr. Hadzifejzovic saw opportunity in the growing number of empty shops, and persuaded the director of the mall to entrust around 40 of them to artists, free of charge, scattered among the remaining manicurists and bridal boutiques. Beginning in October, the mall began to show artists' work as part of Mr. Hadzifejzovic's Sub Dokumenta exhibition. The project, expected to involve artists from as far afield as [New Zealand](#) and [Italy](#), will have its official opening in March; the exhibition will continue through the end of the year.

The chance to see contemporary Balkan art on such a scale is increasingly rare in the city. Ars Aevi, a world-class contemporary art collection, can currently be viewed by appointment only at the Centar Skenderija; a new building by the architect [Renzo Piano](#) to house the collection was scheduled to open in 2009 but awaits financing. And with the Bosnian government largely unsupportive and individual financial support hard to come by, young local artists scramble from project to project, space to space.

But other art sites do exist. Pierre Courtin, a French-born curator, runs the five-year-old Galerija 10m2 and its newly opened twin gallery, the Duplex/10m2. As an exchange student visiting Bosnia, Mr. Courtin was struck by the fact that there was nowhere for his fellow art students to present their work. He came across a tiny shop for rent, and with a grant from the French Embassy, he and his partner Claire Dupont opened Galerija. Hidden down the back alley of yet another shopping center, this space is smaller than its name suggests — more a location for experimentation than an actual gallery.

Mr. Courtin long had his eye on the larger, two-story building next door, vacant since the war. He scraped together money from friends in [Paris](#) and was finally able to open the Duplex last February. While the Galerija has become an essential stepping-stone for lesser-known artists, “the Duplex is more for artists in whom I am completely confident and convinced by their work,” Mr. Courtin said. Minimalist in design, the Duplex is intentionally generic; its identity lies in its content rather than in its architecture.

The Duplex and galleries like it aren't just filling a void for local artists, they are replacing public art that has largely disappeared following the postwar period. Daniel Premec, a young Bosnian sculptor participating in Sub Dokumenta (his exhibition space sits just past Mr. Hadzifejzovic's Charlama Depot) and in coming shows at the Duplex, said that many public monuments had been taken down for political reasons following the breakup of Yugoslavia. “Our town is very poor in public art,” he said. He added that there's been little consultation with local artists about the handful of new monuments erected to replace them.

There are, however, exceptions, including two pieces on the grassy area between the Museum of Sarajevo and the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, each by prominent Bosnian artists currently living overseas. A simple stone block by Braco Dimitrijevic bears a cryptic inscription in English: “Under this stone there is a monument to the victims of the war and Cold War.” Nearby, a Warholesque sculpture by Nebojsa Seric-Shoba takes the form of a giant can of beef — an ambivalent critique of international aid.

These pieces are part of a project by the Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Arts, an organization that has worked to foster contemporary arts in Bosnia since the end of the war. Through the sculptures, “we tackle this idea of erasing the past,” said Asja Hafner, the center's program coordinator and editor. There is continuing interest in this approach to collective memory, she added, across the Balkan regions, as well as in other Eastern European countries.

Selected artists will soon be invited to interact with the past in an entirely new way for a more ambitious project, planned for 2011, the Biennale of Contemporary Art, D-O ARK Underground ([www.bijenale.ba](http://www.bijenale.ba)). (Mr. Hadzifejzovic is one of three curators for the event.)

The site for the event, near the town of Konjic, a train ride of about an hour and a half from Sarajevo, directly references the city's militaristic past: a bunker that was built to protect the Communist dictator [Josip Broz Tito](#), along with his family and closest comrades, in the event of nuclear war. The shelter remained top secret until recent years, and visits are usually permitted only with authorization from the Bosnian Ministry of Defense. Local and international artists will produce their work onsite within the colossal labyrinth of rooms, more than 900 feet below ground level.

The biennale, which is being organized in cooperation with the Serbian Ministry of Culture and various Bosnian government organizations, has been named one of the most important coming cultural projects for Europe by the Council of Europe. But since the financing has yet to materialize, the project, like so much of the art scene in Sarajevo, is still just a plan.

#### IF YOU GO

Charlama Depot Gallery, Centar Skenderija, Terezije; (387-33) 203-178. Open 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday to Saturday (9 a.m. for the Sub Dokumenta exhibition).

Galerija 10m2 and Duplex/10m2, Stakleni Grad, Ferhadija 15; (387-63) 952-197; [galerija10m2sarajevo.unblog.fr](http://galerija10m2sarajevo.unblog.fr) and [www.duplex10m2.com](http://www.duplex10m2.com). Both galleries are open 2 to 7 p.m. (closed Wednesday and Sunday).

Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Art, Obala Kulina Bana 22; (387-33) 665-304; [www.scca.ba](http://www.scca.ba) and [www.pro.ba](http://www.pro.ba); visits by appointment only.

Obala Meeting Point, Hamdije Kresevljakovica 13, Skenderija; (387-33) 668-186. A cafe where mini-exhibitions are often on display; video pieces by artists are sometimes screened in the adjacent cinema.