

Introduction ("like a museum")

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This medieval siege, slaughter, genocide is happening to a country that deserves to be protected. If nothing else, like a museum. Or like a model of what I hope we all eventually become.
-- Haris Silajdzic, Bosnian Prime Minister December 1993

Not to end, not quite to live, but to survive. In Sarajevo, the National Museum has been hit by more than 400 shells, and still in the summer of 1995 its director, Enver Imamovic, could meet reporters as he "sits on a tombstone in the sun writing a history of Bosnia." Roger Cohen of The New York Times reminds us that, at the height of the siege, it was Imamovic who was the guardian and savior of the Sarajevo Haggadah, and finds in the act an allegory: "a Muslim saving a Jewish manuscript stored in an old Viennese safe in the basement of a museum built by the Austro-Hungarian empire and under attack from Serbian nationalists bent on destroying the mingling of cultures and religions that is the hallmark of Sarajevo." The heroism of rescue leaves the director unimpressed. For his part, surveying the ruins of the museum, the museum that these ruins have become, Enver Imamovic "said he felt like a man watching his child dying." (1)

Many children have died in Sarajevo and across the former Yugoslavia, while many of us have watched. Ignorance is no excuse, and there has been precious little ignorance in any case, but knowledge is no guarantee either. Two hundred thousand dead Bosnians later, as David Rieff has insisted, "in full view of the world's television cameras," and there is reason to think that it could have been otherwise. (2) Sarajevo, the destruction of its mingling of cultures, is not so much a lesson for us as it is a rebuke, the simple name of a failure. The desire to search there for a message for humanity seems particularly ill-considered -- it is humanity, precisely, that has been put to the test there, and has failed. Now we can ask, not simply about the evident inhumanity of the siege, but about the pertinence of the very category of humanity in such a time and place. Does Sarajevo, in the glare of its publicity, mark the effective limits of talk about humanity?

The siege of Sarajevo has been an experiment in cultural survival. Without pathos, without the temptations of salvation or redemption -- simply a matter of surviving. Bora Cosic, on the back cover of the brutally funny *Survival Guide Sarajevo*, after just the first year of the siege already made the point quite directly: "There is no help. There are no rescue teams and no life preservers: the ambulances are prime targets and the red cross on a sleeve is a suicidal invitation to those who are going to shoot. That is why we have to stay where we are. Sarajevo, its inner city, cannot be brought out." The museum and the city remain, in fragments, beyond the comforts and good conscience of any reassuring assistance. The loss and devastation are irreducible and irrecoverable -- no cause for humanitarian crocodile tears or hellishly well-intentioned safe areas and zones of protection. In this regard, FAMA's *Survival Guide* is our best guide, "part of a future archive which shows the city of Sarajevo not as a victim, but as a place of experiment where wit can still achieve victory over terror, ... the picture of a civilization that emerges out of cataclysm, which makes something out of nothing, gives some messages for the future." (3) And the experiment is with the city itself, a city that has become in its own cataclysmic turn a kind of museum, or rather a kind of strange test site where wit and fatigue cross in the adaptation that seeks less to preserve than to transform. "Sarajevo," wrote Roger Cohen that summer, "is now a giant laboratory." Those who live -- who survive -- there are the specimens, and "the inhabitants of this town have changed, almost beyond recognition. They are tired of being exhibits, of being asked how it feels to line up for water, how it feels to lose a limb or a child, how it feels to have no freedom, how it feels to live in the sniper's sights, how it feels to burn clothes to cook macaroni distributed by the United Nations. The adapt and sip coffee and wait for some unimaginable deliverance."

The destruction of Sarajevo was in no way inevitable. And there is a good, if unnerving, argument to be made that this catastrophe was abetted, to various degrees of inadvertence, by some of those who came to aid and rescue. But it happened -- the non-inevitable has come to pass, and the fact of this disaster can now itself no longer be avoided, least of all by rehearsing the same cheering good words about preservation, protection, and safety. In this museum's ruins, to borrow Douglas Crimp's newly appropriate phrase, something else has started to happen. Whether we call it resistance or adaptation, another

Sarajevo confronts us from these ruins. Again, it is FAMA's *Survival Guide* that offers the best interpretation: "The besieged city defends itself by culture and thus survives. ... Sarajevo is the city of the future and of life in the post-cataclysm. In it on the ruins of the old civilization a new one is sprouting, an alternative one, composed of remains... ." (4)

Not so much for or about the future, but in light of the future, a small international group of scholars convened at the Fondació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona in May 1995 to discuss the end(s) of the museum. John Hanhardt and I had asked them, just as we had the artists whose work was then on view in the Foundation's galleries in *The End(s) of the Museum*, not so much to reflect on the past or the future of the museum, but to examine critically its conceptual and institutional genealogy, its reasons and aberrations. Precisely at a moment when it is experiencing unparalleled international popularity and growth, the museum as an institution seems a little disoriented, uncertain of its bearings and inclined toward an increasingly reactive, defensive posture -- as if something were felt to be endangered or in peril -- not only the heritage or the experiments it protects but the very institution of the museum itself.

What will become of us? Every museum asks, and tries to answer, something like this question, a question about what can (and deserves to) be protected and remembered, about what cannot be predicted and what is still to come, and about "us" (family, movement, nation, people, humanity). But what might become of it, the museum? Without nostalgia or utopia, the Barcelona papers sketch out some provisional answers to this question. The work of these six scholars is far-reaching in its collective effort to expose and unsettle the things we do with and think about museums, to come to terms with the unusual coincidence of ascendancy and confusion that governs the museum as an institution today. The papers cover a range of figures, from the mother and the orphan to statistics and the shopping mall to the computer and the nation, and they mention a museum or two along the way, all the while relying on diverse and frequently conflicting theoretical premises. They read institutions and texts, cities and buildings, machines and even works of art. Strangely, perhaps, neither art history nor architecture, nor museum studies in any customary sense, are represented among the disciplines of the writers here. The exclusion, altogether too simple and arbitrary but nevertheless deliberate, opens a space for an experimental, and indeed even pragmatic, encounter with the philosophical and conceptual texture of the museum as the West has undertaken it. One of the goals of the symposium was to reinvigorate what has become a more or less conventional "debate" about the museum, to expose it to other strategies and styles, and to transform the "institutional critique" of the museum in ways that attend to unusual thoughts and practices of language, politics, economy, and history. The aim was less to be new -- although certain signifiers of novelty like computerization and decolonization did have their place -- than to challenge the often complacent sociological and economic presuppositions of so much of the last two or three decades' work on the museum. Certainly no one sought to foretell the "end" of the institution, itself the very paradigm of the manipulation of the end and the pathos of loss. (5) But each of the papers faces what seems to be a crisis, even a structural aporia, of the museum, and tries to speculate on what might happen or be done with it. The encounter is, thankfully, not altogether harmonious, and the discord and division exemplifies the active re-opening of the question of ends, in the plural, a certain inconclusion and endlessness which seems, at the moment, well worth striving for.

"At the moment" means, among other things, a time in which we witness the more or less successful efforts to put an end to the banal but apparently intolerable diversity of Bosnia-Herzegovina, "that exotic country in the heart of Europe," as Danilo Kis put it. (6) If Haris Silajdzic, then the Prime Minister, could see his besieged country oscillating between museum and model, between the preservation of a specific past and the projection of a universal future, a year later Sarajevo's best-known journalist, Zlatko Dizdarevic, characterized with typically dark wit everyday survival in that city as a regular "live performance, our very own concept." "After all, in Sarajevo, we're all conceptual artists." (7) Perhaps a hybrid of these possibilities is most attractive: a museum, but as a performance of all that remains threatening in diversity. No one, as I recall, talked about Sarajevo during that week in Barcelona, but there the museum, and with it our responses to the contemporary politics of culture, were and are still being put sorely to the test. The heaviest fighting in two years consumed the city during the days of the symposium, the airport was closed and the United Nations' civilian spokesman, Aleksander Ivanko, was quoted from Sarajevo as saying simply, "there's nobody in the streets." (8) Guilty self-criticism about an apparent omission and cheery congratulations about an allegorical relevance are equally inappropriate here: what is of interest is the test or the experiment of this arbitrary example, not a lesson but a failure, for us. "Museums, ask Enver Imamovic about museums." CBS News correspondent Bob Simon reported, one

Sunday morning on American television, on his visit to the National Museum in Sarajevo. We all know that the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina is, as they say, a "postmodern" one, fought over culture and identity, with civilians and television cameras, but this means as well that it's a war fought over and with museums -- that it could not be fought without museums, of all sorts. Simon too pointed out that Imamovic's museum "has taken four hundred shells since the war began," suggesting that this transpired "because it posed a threat to the Serbs. It contained heritage, ... and the aim of ethnic cleansing is not just to move people, but to erase a culture, clean the place up." (9)

But this war of identity against -- not simply identity but rather against, precisely -- confusion, mixture, mingling and proximity, this war in the name of ethnicity against the strange political hybrid that was "Sarajevo" or "former Yugoslavia," this war aimed to erase not simply a culture but everything that was improper about its being not just one culture. Timothy Garton Ash reminds us of the gentle irony with which Sarajevo's liberal intellectuals treat "the ideological flag of what they call 'multi-multi-multi' which has been hoisted over their city," but the iteration underscores the stubborn aporia of living with irreducible differences and resisting their interpretation as a conflict of identities. (10) For the gunners and their theorists in the hills, what needs to be "cleaned up" is precisely this conflictual and uncertain contamination of identity, of the principle of identity, by transience and careless rootless *mélange*. The shells are aimed at what refuses to come together as a culture, and they (like the siege in general) aim to accomplish that concentration and then to erase it. Which they have.

On television, Simon asks Imamovic: "Tell me this, if the Serbs have been trying to destroy Bosnian culture, have they succeeded?" The museum director answers, nodding affirmatively: "Unfortunately, many many monuments are destroyed." The reporter continues: "When the war began, people in Sarajevo saw themselves as defenders of civilization, struggling heroically against barbarians in the hills. The struggle isn't over, but the heroism's gone. Three and a half years is too long for that. ... When the war began, Sarajevo was part of Europe. Now it's nowhere, this shell of a city." Perhaps the war is over now -- only time will tell. The fact of destruction and of vanishing is just as sure as that of ruin, memory, and remains. Coming to terms with the disappearance of Bosnia as we knew it means heeding at once its irrecuperable loss, without recourse to hollow evocations of the "spirit of Sarajevo," and opening other possibilities with what remains -- for the wit, the experiments, the "concepts" that will allow something else to survive.

In the botanical garden of the Museum, we learn once again from Roger Cohen, only one of four tortoises who formerly crawled among the specimens has survived the war. Enver Imamovic points out that "this one is still going, however, and seems quite happy." The reporter spots a fable among the overgrown plants and trees: "As he spoke, the tortoise inched methodically toward an ancient tomb, as if to say, with its ponderous and steady gait, that everything passes in the end." Everything passes, without end: still going, surviving. If nothing else, like a museum ... or like a model of what we all might conceivably become.

NOTES

1. Roger Cohen, "Where Hope Has Withered," *The New York Times* (Wednesday, 28 June 1995): A1.
2. David Rieff, *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995): 23; cf. his "Epilogue," in Matthew Naythons et al., *Sarajevo: A Portrait of the Siege* (New York: Warner Books, Sausalito: Epicenter Communications, 1994): 117-120
3. Maja Razovic and Aleksandra Wagner, ed., *Survival Guide Sarajevo* (Sarajevo and Croatia: FAMA, 1993): back cover and p. 1.
4. *Survival Guide*, p. 89
5. This is my claim in "No Ends in Sight," in *Els límits del museu*, exhibition catalogue (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1995): 17-29.
6. Quoted in Mark Thomson, "The Final Solution of Bosnia-Herzegovina," in Rabia Ali and Lawrence Lifschultz, ed., *Why Bosnia? Writings on the Balkan War* (Stony Creek, Conn.: Pamphleteer's Press, 1993): 165.
7. Zlatko Dizdarevic, "Remember Sarajevo," *Time Magazine* (3 October 1994): 44-45.
8. Christopher S. Wren, "New Fighting in Sarajevo: U.N. Blames Both Sides," *The New York Times* (Wednesday, 17 May 1995): A6.
9. Bob Simon, "Once Upon a Time" (report from Sarajevo), broadcast on CBS News "Sunday Morning," 17 September 1995.

10. Timothy Garton Ash, "Bosnia in Our Future," *The New York Review of Books* (21 December 1995): 27-31.