

**fine arts / new media**

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## Freedom comes

“There is no border, there is no border, there is no border, no border, no border, I wish.” (Sejla Kamberić)

The work of the young Bosnian artist Sejla Kamberić (who was born in 1976) is closely connected with the siege of Sarajevo (1992–1996). She experienced the three-and-a-half-year long siege of her hometown together with her family, and her father was killed in the war. This period exerted a great influence on her as an artist: “Even though now I deal with a number of very different themes,” says Kamberić, “the war will always remain a part of me.” Her best-known work: the photomontage “Bosnien Girl” (2003) – which is part of the art collection of the Erste Bank Group and has been reproduced for advertisements, postcards and billboards – shows herself as a model, above a piece of graffiti that a Dutch soldier smeared on the wall of a military barracks in Srebrenica: “No teeth ...? A mustache ...? Smel like shit ...? Bosnian girl!” She talked to “Report” about such basic feelings as homesickness, freedom and fear as a European Bosnian woman.

Antje Mayer in conversation with Sejla Kamberić

Antje Mayer: One of your projects is a sticker with a large arrow and the words “SARAJEVO homeSICK”. Since 2001 you have stuck them wherever you happened to find yourself. Do you really feel homesick so often?

Sejla Kamberić: I once met a curator who confessed to me that he had never in his life experienced the feeling of homesickness. I then said to him: “But that means that you have never in your life felt really at home anywhere.” He admitted that this was true. For me, home is not inevitably connected with a place, it is wherever I feel safe and well. Sarajevo, the town where I was born, is one such place but I mean that less in a geographical and more in a mental sense. As an artist I have reconstructed this city as a symbol. My work commemorates the many people who were forced to flee or emigrate and now must learn to live with this “sickness”. They are forced to recreate their native city Sarajevo or home. This is what the homeSICK is about.

Is homesickness not also a beautifully melancholic feeling? For me, the German word “Heimweh” (literally home-ache) expresses that far better than the English word “homesick”.

Yes indeed, it can be very pleasant to feel homesick, for this means that there is a home somewhere that you can long for. But it can also make you truly ill. If you are unable to get to this “home” or you do not have a “home”, it can be associated with great sorrow and suffering.

When I lived abroad there were times when I felt sorry for myself, it seemed to me that I had been terribly amputated, as it were, because I could not converse in my most fundamental way, in my native language. Is language not also home in some way or other?

Language can be home in one way but I don’t believe we should build our home in the language. Vienna and Sarajevo are small cities where this is relevant perhaps, but in large cities, say like New

York, the term “native language” loses its meaning because almost everyone is a foreigner there and English is a foreign language to many. People create their own communities where they can communicate.

Is the feeling of homesickness not threatened with extinction in a world in which, via Internet, one can be present in many places, at least virtually? A world where, for instance through the Internet program Skype, we can talk to each other in real time and where everyone can afford air travel? This makes it easier. But isn't it rather like a big supermarket with a huge range of goods in which one is likely to get lost, while one still cannot find the thing one is looking for, a home? Don't forget that we Bosnians are not EU citizens and our freedom is very different to that of EU citizens. As a well-known Bosnian artist I am privileged, I have a Schengen visa. But other people have to pay a lot of money, deal with an incredible amount of paperwork and accept all kinds of indignities in order to be able to leave the country. A young Bosnian student cannot simply pack his rucksack and go on interrail in order to explore the world. This is a major problem for my country. The young people have never experienced Bosnia-Herzegovina as a prosperous country; all they have ever known is war or the post-war period. How should such young people be able to see that things can be different? Where can they find hope that something can be changed, that something can be started in our country? It is the same with Internet, low fair air travel or radio signals. Not all people have the same access.

In your work “EU/Others” at the Manifesta3 in Ljubljana (2000) you built up two entrances like in an airport, one for “European Citizens”, one for the “Others”. As a Bosnian, isn't it true that you associate different things with the terms “EU” and “Europe” than I do?

For me, the EU is primarily a political and economic community that attracts people because one can move freely across it without the obstruction of borders. I fear, however, that the more it grows the more it will exclude people and restrict diversity. At the moment we Bosnians experience the EU as rejects, so to speak, who have been shifted to the edge of this empire. Europe? My family and I have always regarded ourselves as Europeans. But European policy during the siege of Sarajevo and the war made it painfully clear to us all in BH that apparently we are not.

During the 43-month siege of Sarajevo you stayed in the city. When the horrors began you were 16, when they ended, just 20. Many of your contemporaries fled the city at the time. There was a number of opportunities to do this. Why did you take it upon yourself to stay?

Before the war my parents, my sister and I had discussed whether we should flee and we decided to stay. When someone tries to force you to leave your home because they maintain it is not your native country, this only strengthens your determination to stay. After my father was killed I was more certain than ever. I am firmly convinced that Sarajevo has benefited from my presence there as an artist.

Would you say that because of this decision you were able to preserve your inner freedom, even though externally it was restricted in the most brutal way by the Serbian siege?

Exactly. In the work “FRAI” from 2004, I dealt with the theme of freedom. I had made a stamp with the word “free“, in the course of time the word faded and it finally vanished completely. I wanted to express the fact that freedom is something relative, not absolute. It is not a permanent feeling but something that comes and goes.

Do you have the impression that I am freer than you because I am an EU citizen?

No, although I don't have the same freedom as you, to move around and to consume without restrictions – which is what is generally defined as freedom – I have different freedoms. There are innumerable feelings of freedom. When I lived in Vienna, I regarded the fact that, due to the complaints of the neighbours, I was not able to take a shower late at night as a lack of freedom. After the war one friend of mine said that if we had not survived the war, we would not know what it means to be free and happy. In one perverse way, the war also had something positive about it. In a different way one became richer and wiser. Freedom has so many different faces.

What kind of freedom do you experience at the moment?

At present, I am rather frustrated that as an individual there is increasingly little that one can change in this world. Millions of people can march on the streets protesting against the war and no government is in the slightest concerned. When the war in Israel and Lebanon broke out I was there ...

Then of all times! What were your immediate feelings?

It was clear to me that Israel was not in acute danger, but I experienced how a great feeling of fear grew inside me. I also experienced a feeling of rage at the fact that I could do nothing to prevent this violence. Everything surfaced again, all my war traumas. The only thing I wanted to do was to run away!

Sejla Kamerić was born in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) in 1976. She completed her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Sarajevo, Department of Graphic Design, and worked as Art Director in the creative team "Fabrika" in Sarajevo. In 1997 she made her debut as an artist at SCCA's (Sarajevo Centre for Contemporary Art) first annual exhibition "Meeting Point", which presented her public installation "Copy-Paste". Public interventions, diverse types of actions and site-specific installations are among the most important aspects of her approach to art ("EU/Others", "Fortune Tell-er"). Moreover, she uses photography and video as media to juxtapose an explicit social context with intimate perspectives ("Basics", "Bosnian Girl", "Dreamhouse"). In addition to participating in numerous group exhibitions at home and abroad, her most recent solo exhibitions were "Sorrow" in the Kosovo Art Gallery (Museum Priština) and EXIT Gallery (Kosovo, 2006), as well as "The Final Sale" at Karver bookstore in Podgorica, Montenegro. In 2005, "Sejla Kamerić (Another Expo – Beyond the Nation-States)" was presented at the SOAP Gallery in Kitakyushu, Japan. Kamerić lives and works in Sarajevo.