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Deim, R.

Publication date

2019

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Deim, R. (2019). Uneasy Transformation. The Critical Potential of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo. Web publication or website, artPortal. <https://artportal.hu/magazin/uneasy-transformation-the-critical-potential-of-contemporary-art-in-sarajevo/>

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Uneasy Transformation. The Critical Potential of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo

Deim Réka • 2019. 03. 18. | Olvasási idő: 15 perc

East Art Mags Szarajevó

Despite the nationalistic political rhetoric that reinforces exclusive collective identities, art projects reveal the possibilities of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in a society polarized by traumatic histories.

Although substantial attention has been paid to Bosnia and Herzegovina's post-war art production and the reconstruction of its cultural institutions, little focus has been put on the art scene's present-day state of affairs. In the light of growing nationalism across Europe, it is fitting to turn our attention to Sarajevo from the perspective of critical art production in the current political climate, which maintains ethnic division in the country plagued by ethnic tensions twenty years after the war. Known as the "meeting point of cultures," the city of Sarajevo exemplified successful coexistence of various cultures and religions for many years before the outbreak of the Yugoslav Wars. However, with the memory of genocide and the longest urban siege in 20th century history still very much alive, Bosnians have been struggling to pave the way for a more inclusive society. This paper focuses on the potential of art projects to challenge the dominant exclusivist discourse at a time when the political leaders of the country are vigorously promoting ethno-nationalism.

Conflicting Narratives

Since the dissolution of Yugoslavia, a country that united an extremely diverse population, the Balkans has increasingly been perceived as "the terrain of ethnic savagery and intolerance," especially in Western Europe.^[1] In the light of the tensions that escalated into the Yugoslav Wars, it is indeed easy to fall into the trap of seeing the region merely through the lens of ethnic division. This perception is, however, the very core of the problem when it comes to evaluating the past and imagining the future. One of the most pressing problems of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina is institutionalized ethnic ideology reinforced by the Dayton agreement that concluded the war in 1995. The peace agreement that still serves as the temporary constitution divides the country into two administrative entities, which are governed by a three-member presidency based on ethnicity. The Bosniak and Croat members of the presidency are elected from a joint constituency in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Serb member is elected by voters in the Republika Srpska, while the Jewish, Roma and other minorities are entirely excluded.



Gordana Andjelic Galic: *Mantra* (still from video, 5'12"), 2005. Courtesy of the artist

This system not only fails to represent the multiethnic society but it also maintains ethno-nationalism and reinforces what Vacláv Havel called the “ethnic interpretation.” According to Havel – who was an active advocate of international intervention from the beginning of the Bosnian war – the international community failed to see the conflict from the perspective of the values it was supposed to represent and “unwittingly followed the monstrous ideology of the instigators of the conflict.”^[2] The then Czech president identified the essence of the conflict not in ethnic terms but as two different notions of society: “On the one side is the modern concept of an open civil society in which people of different nationalities, ethnic roots, religions, traditions and convictions can live together and creatively cooperate. On the other side is the archaic concept of a tribal state as a community of people of the same blood.”^[3] In other words, the focus on common ethnic ancestry rather than shared historical and cultural heritage reinforces the exclusivist ideology that is largely responsible for the emergence of the armed conflict.

Although the ethno-nationalist approach still infiltrates much of Bosnia’s administrative institutions, several museums, galleries and artworks challenge this dominant notion of society. In the frame of the East Art Mags residency program, I visited public institutions and private initiatives, where I had the chance to talk to artists and curators about the recent past alongside the challenges they currently face. These conversations provided insight into the extremely complex situation loaded with elements of both historical and personal implications that seem hardly possible to grasp as an outsider. While focusing predominantly on contemporary art, the following account of my research trip will touch upon aspects that are key to understand conflicting memories in Sarajevo and it will include as much as possible the perspectives of those who actively shape local discourses today.



Exhibition view of The Sarajevo Storage, National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2018.

Art as a Means of Resistance

The arts have played a vital role as a means of resistance in multiple ways in Sarajevo’s turbulent history. During the siege, theatre, literature, music and other forms of art were crucial to resist cultural annihilation, providing an opportunity to preserve a piece of the normalcy of life. Going to theatre, for instance, was an act to confront general apathy, which explains why performers and visitors were ready to risk their lives to attend performances during the permanent shelling of grenades. Susan Sontag’s interpretation of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in the besieged city in 1993 not only captured the mindset of many Sarajevans at the time but it also directed the attention of the international audience to the absurdity of the ongoing war.^[4] There were also exhibitions, performances, radio and TV programmes that reflected on the situation from within. As a comic counterpoint to the horrors of everyday reality, the popular television comedy, *Top List of the Surrealists* (*Top lista nadrealista*) and the movement of New Primitivism contributed a great deal to question and deconstruct identities by ridiculing ethnic stereotypes.^[5]

The establishment of Sarajevo's modern art museum, the Ars Aevi Collection, was also an expression of cultural resistance, as well as a major act of solidarity coming from the international art world. The unique collection emerged during the siege from donations by artists from all over the world – Marina Abramovic, Daniel Buren, Ilya Kabakov, Anish Kapoor, Joseph Kosuth, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Bill Viola, among others – and by museums, including the mumok, Vienna, directed by Loránd Hegyi at the time. The renowned architect Renzo Piano offered the design of the new museum building, the realization of which was postponed for decades but since earlier this year the beginning of the construction seems to be under way eventually.[6] These initiatives not only served as mediators between the local and international scenes but they were also important reference points in the process of reconstruction after the war.

Besides the genuine need to confront the past in the aftermath of the war, contemporary art has gained different critical functions as a tool to create discursive space for silenced narratives that challenge the dominant nationalistic interpretative framework. The war caused an abrupt rupture not only existentially but also in terms of artistic practices, driving several artists to reflect on their sociopolitical reality. The internationally recognized artist, Gordana Andjelic Galic shared her story with me to illustrate the devastating experience of the war even though she actually managed to spend the worst years of the siege in Germany as a refugee. After returning to Sarajevo in 1995, she could never get back to her pre-war practice of what she considers as “apolitical” abstract art. In the 1990's and 2000's, it was the question of national identity and the notion of healing that characterized much of her videos, performances and installations. Also, the relationship between abstract and political art in the post-war context was a reoccurring theme in her practice.[7] She noted that dealing with the everyday reality in Bosnia means constant reflection on nationalistic political manipulation, which becomes exhausting and depressing, yet there seems to be no escape from it whatsoever. In her words, “in different ways, the war is always present but – she added – I believe that nationalism only exists on the level of political manipulation, not in the people.”[8]



Adela Jušić and Lana Čmajčanin: I will never talk about the war again (still from video performance), 2011. Courtesy of the artists

The impossibility to talk about the war outside the given nationalistic framework reoccurs in Adela Jušić and Lana Čmajčanin's powerful video “I will never talk about the war again” (2011). By repeating the same sentence over and over again, the two artists transform the notion of silence as a passive position of the victim into a speech act to interrupt the political status quo.[9] According to one reading of the work, the sort of silence conceptualized by the artists reflects the position of the traumatized subject, whose unspeakable experience of the war remains the main reference point despite any attempt to escape it. Another layer of the notion of silence is the refusal to accept the fabricated narratives employed by politicians on each side in order to maintain the threat of the “enemy” and to consolidate political power. In this regard, the statement “I will never talk about the war again” can be read as a call for a new vocabulary to talk about the past, underlying the role of agency as opposed to the position of the victim.

This type of agency manifests itself in critical art production in diverse ways. Since there is no political articulation to deconstruct structural ethno-nationalism, artistic statements are even more powerful because of their potential to address taboos and formulate a new conceptual framework to talk about the implications of the past. One can think of many important works that represent the diversity of aspects and perspectives, from Šejla Kamerić's “Bosnian Girl” (2003),

which activated discussions on the agency of female victims with regard to the Srebrenica genocide to Ziyah Gafić's "Quest for Identity" (2010) that shed light on the taboo of missing people and the ongoing forensic investigation of the mass graves. Reflections on deeply personal memories, such as Adela Jušić's "The Sniper" (2007), Mladen Miljanović's "Meadows of Ignorance" (2008) and Ibro Hasanović's "30.Nov'93 – Pieter Bruegel in the letters of my father" (2013) point out the consequences of the armed conflict in family relations and ways to cope with the guilt of the fathers who fought in the war, regardless of which side they had to take.^[10] More recent artworks, including Igor Bošnjak's "Monument to the Fallen War Heroes of a Future War" (2017) and Smirna Kulenović's "Bosnian Girl 2" (2017)^[11] reflect the insecurities and frustrations underlying the current sociopolitical situation in Bosnia – and there are plenty of other artworks that could be mentioned here.^[12] (Find East Art Mags's interview with Kulenović [here](#) and [here](#).) Instead of further analysis, however, I would like to highlight art initiatives that play an equally important part in the transmission of various counter-narratives.

A MONUMENT TO THE FALLEN WAR HEROES OF A FUTURE WAR / 2017



The Role of Independent Art Spaces

State-funded cultural institutions have been unable to sufficiently support the local art scene to this day. This is partly because contested heritages are still at play when it comes to financing national institutions, as decision-makers representing different ethnic and religious interests want their own national narratives to be represented. To illustrate this ambiguous situation, the case of the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as a well-known example, which had to close its doors completely in 2012 due to lack of funding. Prior to that, the 65 employees of the museum worked for free for a year but since no resolution was found, the closure was inevitable. It was not until 2015 that the authorities managed to agree on the finances and the museum could eventually reopen.^[13] Today, the recently renovated museum welcomes visitors with exhibitions on archeology, ethnography and natural science but the situation of the rest of the state-funded institutions, including Ars Aevi, the National Gallery and the History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina is yet to be resolved.



The ZVONO Award 2018. Finalists group exhibition, installation view at SKLOP, Sarajevo (Photo: Vanja Čerimagić)

Since the major externally funded NGOs that supported the reconstruction of the art scene in the post-war years have quit or reduced their activities,^[14] the responsibility to oversee the local and international representation of Bosnian artists has increasingly shifted to private initiatives. For instance, the *Zvono* award, the most prestigious award for emerging visual artists consisting of a two-month residency in New York and a solo exhibition upon return has been taken over by *Sklop*, an independent association for contemporary art in Sarajevo, founded in 2017 by Sandra Bradvić. Sandra, who is finishing her PhD in art history in Switzerland, highlighted the discrepancies still prevalent between the Western and the Bosnian art worlds, which motivated her to return to Sarajevo and establish a research and documentation center that is also dedicated to the representation of emerging artists: "There is still a misbalance between the Western art discourse and Bosnian reality because a lot of people simply don't know how difficult it is to organize and finance things here. The classical misunderstanding still often takes place: artists are invited to international events but cannot even pay for their tickets to get there."^[15]



One of the most important institutions to reactivate the art scene was yet another private initiative, Duplex100m2, founded by Pierre Courtin in 2004.[16] (Find East Art Mags' interview with him [here](#).) The gallery aimed at promoting contemporary artists from Bosnia-Herzegovina inside and outside of the country. According to everybody I talked to, Duplex100m2 was not only an exhibition venue but also an important meeting point always open for informal events and conversations. Despite its successful activities and internationally recognized status, after more than 200 exhibitions in Sarajevo and over 40 projects realized worldwide, the gallery space recently closed. When I asked Pierre why he had decided to end this project and why now, his answer was: "Money. I have tried hundreds of options but at one point it became absurd because maintaining a gallery costs a fortune if you want to do it well. The last fifteen years were absolutely crazy but now I need to take a break to think about what I can do next." [17] Pierre also owns the largest private collection of contemporary art from the region, which emerged exclusively from donations and exchange. "I never bought anything and today I have works of over 180 artists." - he says. This exceptional collection was recently on view in Sarajevo and Tuzla [18] and at the moment he is working on a publication that not only records the past fifteen years of his activity but also provides a comprehensive overview of contemporary art in Bosnia. The book entitled "Duplex & Contemporary Art in BiH 2004-2018" is coming out in April 2019 and will contain theoretical essays, over 200 reproductions of artworks, documentation of several projects and an expansive chapter on the exhibition "Memory Lane" held in Paris in 2014.



Interior of the Brodac Gallery (Photo by author)

Artist-run spaces have also been vital in maintaining the critical discourse. The Charlama Depo Gallery, for instance, has been one of the most active exhibition venues of Sarajevo since its conception after the war. It was founded by the artist Jusuf Hadžifejzović as a continuation of his previous initiative, the Yugoslav Documents, a biennial of Yugoslav contemporary art in Sarajevo in the late-1980's. The gallery is located in the Skenderija center, a vivid commercial and cultural center in Tito's time that also hosted events during the 1984 Winter Olympics. Today, the run-down boutiques and smoky cafés that surround the gallery trigger memories of the radical historical transformations that took place in the city in the past fifty years, which provides an uncanny setting for Charlama to operate within. Another artist-run gallery, Brodac is also a frequent meeting point. Mak Hubjer, one of the volunteers who founded and still run the space explained to me that Brodac had come into existence as a reaction to the 2014 reopening of the City Hall, a venue for VIP events and history exhibitions, targeting predominantly tourists.[19] Initially, the representative building constructed during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy housed the National and University Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina but it was completely destroyed - including 1.5 million books and manuscripts - in a 1992 shelling of incendiary grenades. Brodac, standing right next to the current City Hall, aims at reminding visitors of the building's original function as a library open for every citizen, as well as to direct attention to the underrepresentation of young artists.[20]



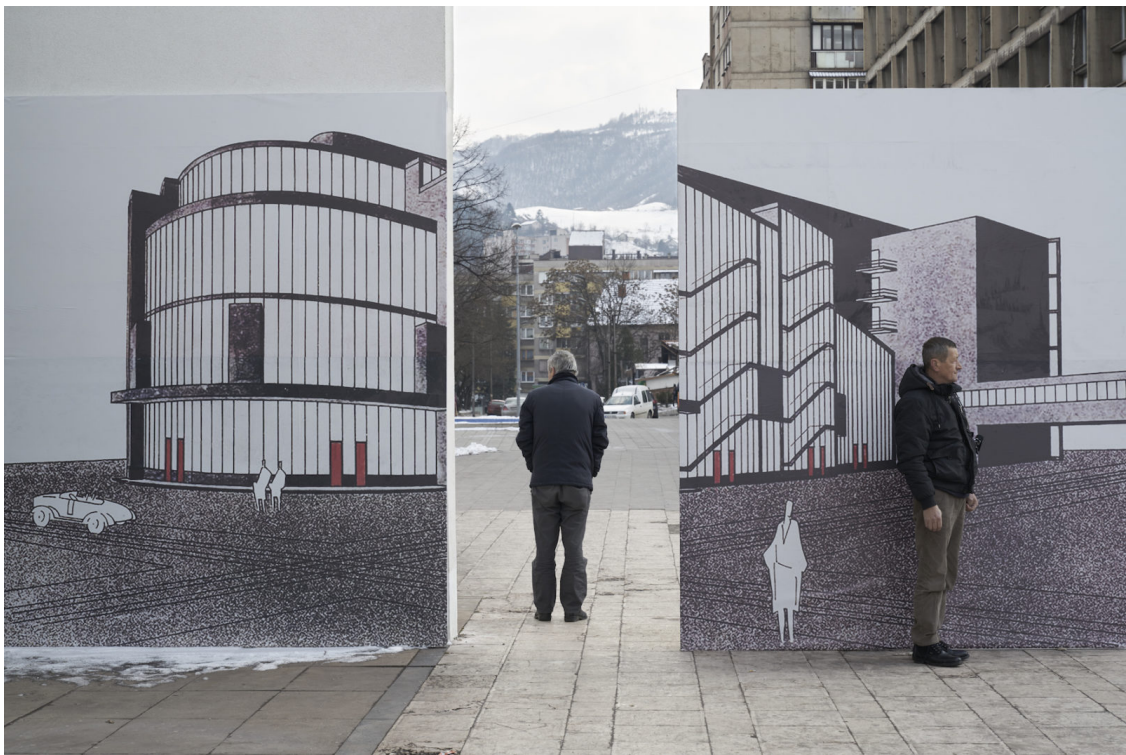
Interior of ARK D-0 with Alfredo Pirri: Steps, 2013. (Photo by author)

The bizarre idea to organize a biennale of contemporary art in Josip Broz Tito's former nuclear bunker was also conceived by two artists. Edo and Sandra Hozić transformed the ARK D-0 into an exhibition venue in 2011 and their biennale has increasingly been successful ever since. The facility is fascinating in itself being the largest nuclear shelter ever built in the former Yugoslavia, designed to protect the president and up to 350 members of his inner circle in the event of a nuclear attack. The complex was never used but its construction took 26 years (1953-1976) and cost \$4.6 billion, an immense amount of money at the time. The existence of the bunker was top secret until recently, which is why its entire interior, from the original furniture to Tito's portraits and his office, has remained entirely intact. Today, this time capsule houses the artworks of local and international artists. The goal of the Project Biennial D-0 ARK Underground is to transform the site still officially under military control into a regional cultural institution alongside the preservation of its historical relevance. The organizers invite artists to create site-specific works that often remain on-site as permanent exhibits. The artworks not only rewrite the function of the building but they also contribute to the understanding of the past as the guides use them frequently to contextualize and explain complex histories from multiple perspectives.

May You Live In Interesting Times – Venice Biennale 2019

This year's Venice Biennale will be a landmark for the Sarajevo art scene because it is the first time since 2003 that the city's art institutions will realize the exhibition of the Bosnian Pavilion. Claudia Zini – art historian and one of the three curators of the Bosnian pavilion alongside Anja Bogojević and Amila Puzić – explained to me that, as a consequence of the country's division, the two administrative entities alternate the duties of selection and organization for the Biennale upon agreement. After Mladen Miljanović's successful project "The Garden of Delights" in 2013, [21] Sarajevo was supposed to take care of the upcoming participation but the National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina withdrew last minute because of the lack of capacity, which is why Bosnia did not take part in the 2015 Biennale.[22]

This time, however, the curatorial team is dedicated to make the best out of the opportunity, in collaboration with the Ars Aevi Collection. They invited Danica Dakić, artist and professor at the Bauhaus University to present her new film installation entitled "Zenica Trilogy." "Once the site of one of the largest steel factories in Europe and the symbol of Yugoslav modernist progress, the period after the Bosnian war has left the city of Zenica facing high rates of unemployment, extreme air pollution as well as a general feeling of resignation among the population" – the artist explains in the project description.[23] The work that addresses questions of social and individual responsibility in the Bosnian context reflects on the heritage of modernity from the Bauhaus to the utopian paradigms of international and Socialist modernism. The 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus makes it even more relevant to locate "Zenica Trilogy" in a larger European artistic and political context.



Danica Dakić: *Zenica Trilogy* (still photograph), 2019. ©VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Claudia hopes that the project will not only represent important issues of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina but will also create meaningful discussions. As the founder and director of Kuma International Center for Visual Arts from Post-Conflict Societies, an initiative that aims at facilitating interdisciplinary discourse on complicated memories through art, she finds it essential to create “safe spaces” of conversation because the way implicated citizens see and discuss the traumatic heritage of the war is extremely different from that of external visitors.^[24]

Projects like the above-mentioned artworks and art initiatives significantly contribute to the articulation of perspectives that polarize the discourse on societal problems and counter one-sided, exclusive narratives in the current political climate of Bosnia that maintains ethnic division. When the political representation of inclusivity is virtually absent, these expressions substantially resonate with Jacques Rancière’s thought: “politics begins exactly when those who ‘cannot’ do something show that in fact they can.”^[25]

[1] Slavoj Žižek. “The Spectre of Balkan.” *Journal of International Institute*, University of Michigan. Volume 6, Issue 2, Winter 1999. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jii/4750978.0006.202/-spectre-of-balkan?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

[2] Vacláv Havel. “Conclusion of the Month of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Prague.” Prague, 13 October 1995. http://vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=projevy&val=186_aj_projevy.html&typ=HTML. Accessed 25 August 2018.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Susan Sontag. “Godot Comes to Sarajevo.” *The New York Review of Books*. 21 October 1993. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1993/10/21/godot-comes-to-sarajevo/>

[5] Pavle Levi. “Yugoslavism Without a Limit.” *Disintegration in Frames*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007

[6] “New Contemporary Art ‘Ars Aevi’ Museum to be built in Wilson’s Promenade in Sarajevo.” *Sarajevotimes.com*, 12 January 2019. <http://www.sarajevotimes.com/new-contemporary-art-ars-aevi-museum-to-be-built-in-wilsons-promenade-in-sarajevo/>

[7] Projects that deal with healing and the question of national identity include: “Sewing,” 2000; “Mantra,” 2006; “Washing,” 2011. Performance that reflects on the relationship between abstract and political art, for example: “Walking Malevich,” 2005-2014. See: <http://gordanaandjelicgalic.com/>

[8] Interview with Gordana Andjelic Galic, 7 November 2018.

[9] See also: Jelena Petrović. “I Will Never Talk about the War Again.” Jelle Bouwhuis and Zoran Erić (eds.). *Resolution 827* (exhibition catalogue). Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, SMBA/Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Archive Books, 2015; Jelle Bouwhuis and Zoran Erić (eds.).

Resolution 827 (Newsletter No. 141 of Global Collaborations). Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade, SMBA/Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2015.

<http://www.smba.nl/static/en/exhibitions/resolution-827/smba-nieuwsbrief-141.pdf>

[10] I would like to thank Claudia Zini for pointing out this aspect to me. Interview with Claudia Zini, 7 November 2018

[11] See the interview with the artist conducted by the author on *Artportal.hu*. Part 1 and Part 2.

[12] See for example: Jonathan Blackwood. *Introduction to Contemporary Art in BiH*. Duplex100m2, 2015.

[13] "Bosnia revives landmark museum of ethnic treasures." *Reuters*, 15 September 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-museum-idUSKCN0RF2LN20150915>

[14] For example: Open Society Foundation (including the Sarajevo Centre for Contemporary Art), Swiss Cultural Fund, European Cultural Foundation

[15] Interview with Sandra Bradvić, 7 November 2018

[16] See: "The youngest grew up among the ruins." *Artportal.hu*, 5 December 2017. <https://artportal.hu/magazin/youngest-grew-among-ruins/>

[17] Interview with Pierre Courtin, 5 November 2018

[18] *The Sarajevo Storage*, National Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 14 June – 6 July 2018; Art Center of Tuzla, from 14 November 2018. <http://www.duplex100m2.com/?portfolio=sarajevo-storage>

[19] Since 2018 the City Hall also houses the archives of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. See: "Hague Tribunal Archive Centre Opens in Sarajevo." *BalkanInsight.com*, 23 May 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/23/hague-tribunal-archive-centre-opens-in-sarajevo-05-23-2018/>

[20] Interview with Mak Hubjer, 6 November 2018

[21] Sarita Vujković (ed.). *The Garden of Delights – 55th Venice Biennale*. Museum of Contemporary Art of Republika Srpska. 2013

[22] Interview with Claudia Zini, 7 November 2018

[23] "Bosnia and Herzegovina Pavilion at the Venice Biennale." *E-flux.com*, 30 January 2019. <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/246955/danica-daki-zenica-trilogy/>

[24] Kuma's international summer school on contemporary art will take place in Sarajevo, 8-14 July 2019. Application is open until 15 May. Interview with Claudia Zini, 7 November 2018

[25] "Jacques Rancière. Politics and Aesthetics – an Interview." *Angelaki* 8:2, 2003. Pp. 191-211

Cover image: Bojan Stojčić: *Viva la Transición! Inscription on a city tram*, 2015 / Duplex100m2

This article was written and published in the frame of East Art Mags programme with the support of Erste Foundation.

