

Resident Art Centre “Kamen” on Lake Bilećko

The Road of Personal Experience

By Dragana Nikoletić

Translation Nebojša Pajić



Describing the little village of Orah in Herzegovina as “paradise on earth” is prosaic and banal compared to what I see before me: the view from the artist residence *Kamen* stretches across the blue of Lake Bilećko toward a little island with a tiny church dedicated to St. Eliah, and beyond to the Montenegrin shore with clouds floating above. The atmosphere is sometimes mystical and sometimes “just” magical, like the views from postcards - perfection dwelling in the silence disturbed only by the house martins’ chirps.

“The lake changes colour every 15 minutes, the ruffled waters become turquoise in a moment, then green with refined nuances of white, while storms make it seem like a deep grey chasm. Or fog swallows it all, except for the emerald of the lake shallows,” describes Koštana Banović, director and founder of the residence program. As director she manages everything on site - from the reception of guests to finances and organising outings, their purpose being to inspire artists and encourage them to create.

However, the metaphor from the beginning of this text about this being a sort of earthly paradise, is completely justified within the context of the genesis of events that connected Koštana with Orah. Born and raised in Sarajevo, grown and educated at the Dutch School of Fine Arts, her roots drew her here. When she revisited the harsh stones of the Herzegovinian karst, it was “as

if my heart had returned to where it belonged," Koštana explained, also thinking about the church in nearby Gacko, where St. George smiled in the same manner he did in the flickering candle light of the icon in her grandmother's darkened room in Mostar.

Accident (as we often call *destiny*) directed Koštana to dedicate herself to video-art and documentaries dealing with anthropology instead of painting, so she started examining the materiality of religion. "I was interested in religious practice - the everyday in believing- which was something I began to work on in Sarajevo," she describes the commencement of her search. She had been around the world on programmes for resident artists, studying religious and spiritual rituals in Africa and Latin America, coming to artistic conclusions in the form of various films. Then she found herself on Lake Skadar, in Beška monastery, where nuns spend days in silent prayer, isolated from civilisation. At that moment Koštana thought to herself: "I wish I could live on an island on a lake as beautiful as this."

Be wary of what you wish for, claims an old adage, and in Koštana's case this was sealed by a sentence from a Chinese book she read that wisely tells fortune. It literally said, "This is the time for a new life, for a new lake," and yet Koštana did not yet see this as a sign. The message, though, continued to resonate, opening passages of fate, which could not be explained by mere coincidence.

Not long after that in Trebinje, in the monastery of St Peter and Paul, she met two monks from Danići monastery near Gacko. Encouraged by their stories about the beauty of Herzegovina, she started exploring. The monks also explained that the West-Herzegovinian and Littoral Diocese wanted to make non-profit use of a vacant facility they had in Orah. It occurred to her that it could be exactly what she had been dreaming of – a residential centre for interdisciplinary artists, ones who aim to integrate the genres they are adept in with someone else's field of interest, and to create a new network of interdisciplinary knowledge.

This location would give artists a chance to connect to the local community so that, for example, a musician could cooperate with the local *gusle* player and a theatre director could work with a folklore dancing troupe, because people in Herzegovina care a lot about tradition. In the same context, artists could attend a cheese making "course", laying the curd slabs one on top of another, or they could learn something else from the folk practice and try it out in reality or incorporate their newly acquired skills into their art works.

"Using this approach, the participants learn a lot about the cultural heritage of this area organically, through their personal experience," says Koštana, explaining her residence concept. Being seen through the eyes of others, Herzegovinian beauty becomes lush. In addition to that, once-neutral analyses of foreigners lead to contemplative "profits" and all this leads to artistic uplift of pre-existing, but sometimes insufficiently awakened, ideas.

The Diocese has accepted Koštana's plan. "Generously so," she pointed out, highlighting that the Church has shown a lot more understanding for art than the municipal officials have. And so, the Church became a modern-day patron, reinterpreting its medieval role in today's context. However, the residents' products are not religious, at least not in the classical sense – although they are based on analysing human nature, their attitudes and intentions, as well as their interpersonal relations and their natural temperament. The group finds the holistic approach better, so joint projects in *Kamen* are developed by (generally young) scientists and artists. "Artistic boundaries are porous, and neither branch is in service of others. They are equally

important in creating the final product,” Koštana explained an “abolishment” of hierarchy in the field of art. The product then becomes something third, fourth, fifth with regards to the initial premises, and research work also counts.



In line with this, Verena Blok, who was the first resident artist to stay at *Kamen*, wanted to examine the position of women in the Orthodox Christianity. As her residency continued, this idea evolved and expanded toward observation of women’s status in Hercegovinan society. It flooded over the religious framework and spread to hairdressers’ and beauticians’ salons and other intimate landscapes where womanhood is expressed in all of its complexity. Her camera recorded the hand gestures in these female spaces that hide a lot more than they reveal, communicating so much non-verbally. Verena’s parting tears at the completion of her residency were evidence enough of the impact of her stay, “Never and nowhere (have I) met such open people as here where you can start chatting someone up even if you stumble upon them in the street.” With the assistance of acquaintances that have grown into friendships Koštana makes it possible for the participants to meet lively characters who do interesting things for a living or just as a hobby. This resource is priceless and is a creative dough that is easily kneaded with artistic hands.

Of course, participants themselves bring an ever-changing complexity to *Orah*, where ideas swarm and mix. Stephanie Talić from Vancouver, of Serbian origin, initially just sketched scenes of village life. We see drawings and paintings of an old stone house or idle old men, whose chitchat becomes a burning political debate fuelled by bootlegged grape brandy. Stephanie does not understand the details of this chatter, for she barely speaks her mother tongue (although she does “Google” some terms), but she understands gestures and facial expressions. This is helpful if she wants to understand the mentality of her forefathers and the nature of traditional social events. She can also understand, interpret, or document the story of aesthetics in natural and

social occurrences - heavy showers and hail hitting the windshield frantically, sacral and secular ceremonies. She records all of them in so a video journal that she keeps. Will it turn out to be a film or sketches from life? Stephanie is still unsure about it during her first days in *Orah*.

Discussions during community meals help residents seek solutions to some of these burning creative questions, i.e. what will be my final product? The group becomes a sounding board, analysing ideas from every perspective. English is the official language regardless of the origins of the participants in this artists' colony. Jasper Hupkes and Liza Rinkema from the Netherlands are here together with Stephanie. Jasper is a geologist, he has just finished his studies, and Lisa will soon graduate as a script editor and culture philosopher. As they continue their fields of expertise will be crossed with the work of Rijan Moris, a set designer.

Theirs is an experimental and pioneering project, so they are still working on the methodology, fitting disciplines for a joint cause. "I believe that the audience sees this region through the flow of time, when the surrounding mountains were created from the remains of sea organisms that were sedimented and calcified for millions of years," Jasper explains. Lisa is immersed in scientific data and still untrained. She mixes the natural with the artificial while collecting rocks from the lakeshore, yet she created artistic cloaks: stones wreathed in thread and joined to the map of the country. These boulders make the observer think about how the world came to being.

August is booked for Matea Bakula and Majda Vidaković, coincidentally they, too, are local by blood but have resided in the Netherlands for years. Both are focused on sculptural installations. Majda will use her creative touch to fertilise found objects, artefacts that for her represent the history of Herzegovina and the wider former-Yugoslavia. Matea is interested in materials, including spiritual objects, and is exploring "how her background affects artwork and creative decisions."

Stefan Pavlović returned recently to the residence to finish his film on Zdravko, the fisherman who has lived in Lake Bilečko for 19 years, often spending the night in his boat. Stefan does not speak Serbian and Zdravko is almost completely deaf but somehow they manage to find their mutual language based on friendship.

Contemplation and art are not the only things done at *Orah*. Our hostess is learning about the many other more prosaic elements of life at the residence. For the first time in her life, she has grown a vegetable and herb garden, which can now feed not only the residents, but numerous guests and then some. As the seasons change certain vegetables ripen, followed later by others – a bountiful harvest results. Only the weed is stubborn, so it needs to be thinned out regularly. The resident artists love helping Koštana with these chores, a sort of working meditation.

The capacity of *Kamen* is limited to four persons at any given moment, as this is the number of rooms in the facility. It is Koštana's desire to involve artists from former Yugoslavia, too, but for this, the residence programme has to be developed so that the foreign participants, with their funding secured would help cover the expenses of the "local ones".

In order for the local audience to get a gist of how far *Kamen* can go, resident artists are asked to leave behind examples of their sketches, photos, and videos as a germ of a collection that would periodically be exhibited in the Museum of Herzegovina in Trebinje, or at the local Cultural Centre. This way, the efforts of the interdisciplinary artists' research would become materialised

for the local community, and easier to understand. This will help ordinary people understand how contemporary art is made.

I leave *Orah* with a sense of sadness, because Lake Bilečko will soon be nothing but a memory and new friendships will live on through social networks or mail. I belong to this open community of people, those who start a conversation without reservations- as Verena would say- but without her and those similar to her, I would not have been able to find out how precious this is. And I wonder and I hope that this text will be an adequate contribution to the collection of residential works, describing the things that the soul has been through on this artistic journey.



Majda Vidaković, Matea Bakula and Stephanie Talić in the studio.