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# **(Re)Addressing Mostar: Global Imaginaries, Local Activisms**

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## **Abstract**

This article engages critically with Roy and Ong's concept of 'worlding' (2011) to focus on how artistic interventions in public space become *worlding practices* that attempt to challenge established, global representations of cities. The essay focuses on the case of Mostar, an ethnically divided city in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in order to discuss how the globally emerging representation of this city as intolerant, uncooperative, and hopeless shapes current understandings of what the city can and cannot become in relation to overcoming persisting ethnic polarisation. The globalised discursive production of Mostar as a place of permanent deadlock caused by the ethnic conflict is then contrasted to the worlding practice of Abart, a local platform of cultural activists whose site-specific art performances in public space aim to initiate alternative forms of knowledge production that expose the limits of the 'divided-city' label and make visible moments of cooperation, solidarity, and consensus among supposedly-conflicting actors. Through a mobilisation of critical urban theories, particularly that of Henri Lefebvre's notion of *heterotopia*, this essay therefore attends to the ways in which Abart navigates global funding streams from various international organisations through the re-appropriation of donors' vocabulary as a means of countering their normative narratives that limit the very potentials of urban activism. Thus, Mostar's network of activists and performers constitutes a significant example of grassroots actors critically intervening into the 'art of being global'.

**Keywords:** Mostar, Site-Specific Art Intervention, Contested City, Heterotopia, Lefebvre

## **Locating Competing Worlding Practices in Mostar**

The Yugoslav wars during the early 1990s are remembered (for better or worse) as wars of division. Resulting in the internationally-mediated partition of the former socialist federal republic, these divisions found their concentrated expression within the medium-size city of Mostar, in the southern part of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). This city is now largely known for being a problematic environment, polarised among two ethno-national communities (Croats and Bosniaks) that have thus far failed to achieve the hoped-for unity expressed by both external observers as well as Mostar's citizens. Since the end of the wars and the independence of BiH, the fate of this new nation state has interweaved with that of major

global players such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN) that, monitoring and overseeing the transition process from war to peace, became key actors in re-thinking and re-shaping the present and the future of the country.

By looking at the case of Mostar, one of the cities in BiH where ethnic conflict has been the most difficult to tame, this article wishes to make two main interventions. First, I discuss the internationally-led project of peace-building to assess the roles played by international standards of ‘urban normalcy’ that guided the rebuilding of Mostar to become an ideal ‘European’ city (including a reflection on the failure of these attempts). Second, I consider on how local actors (both elite and grassroots) re-appropriated the international peacekeepers’ discourses both to reinforce the spatial division of the city *and* to produce radical projects that challenge spatial norms of international and local elites. Thus, I discuss how local politicians twisted the international lingo of peace and reconciliation to keep the city (de facto) divided and, on the opposite, how local grassroots organisations used international funds and networks to create spaces of ethnic inclusion and solidarity. Reviewing the aims and specific projects of Abart, a grassroots platform for art production and urban research active in Mostar from 2008 to 2014, I wish to reflect further on art practice as a form of worlding, which, in this case, voices a radical attempt to intervene in the process of post-war reconstruction by proposing a different reading of what Mostar is and could become in the future (within or outside the EU). Specifically, I discuss how Abart’s choice to develop artistic interventions in public space supported the creation of alternative venues where citizens could experience the making of politics outside mainstream (and largely nationalist) political arenas.

Overall, this article challenges the representation of Mostar as a divided city that is the hopeless site of ethnic divisions, which emerges from many documents drafted by the international organisations attempting to rectify its dysfunctional administration. Rather, I wish to offer a more nuanced portrayal that accounts for the many divergent and experimental projects of worlding that produce Mostar’s urban space and thus to account for how ‘worlding operates as a means of critiquing the role and representation of particular cities in the “canon of urban studies and its archives of knowledge”’ (McCann et. al 2013, cited in Baker and Ruming 2015: 65)<sup>1</sup>.

Saskia Sassen, discussing the future of urban sociology, argues that cities can no longer be approached as territorial units that relate, in a scalar hierarchy, to regions, nation

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<sup>1</sup> In this sense, this article contributes to the growing academic scholarship that problematizes Mostar’s seemingly unshakable ethnic division (Hromadžić 2015; Forde 2017; Summa 2016; Carabelli 2018).

states, or global networks. Rather, she observes, ‘cities engage with the global directly, often bypassing the national’ (2000: 146). She addresses globalisation, the rise of new information technologies, the intensification of transnational dynamics, and an increasing socio-cultural diversity in urban settings as the macro-social trends that, materialising at the city-level, require new theoretical and methodological tools capable of capturing the complexities of cities as they become a ‘territorial or scalar moment[s] in trans-urban dynamics’ (ibid: 144-146). Sassen argues for the importance of fieldwork to document the re-shaping of urban dynamics in specific contexts to map out the diversity and distinctness of these socio-spatial (trans)formations (ibid: 146-147).

A decade later, Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong (2011) made explicit Sassen’s concerns by putting forward the concept of *worlding cities*. This perspective seeks to go beyond previous critical approaches to urban space that view the process of city-formation as born from a singular logic or processes (e.g. capitalism, or the ‘post-colonial’ heritage) (ibid: 5-9; cf. Wilson forthcoming). Rather, the worlding framework ‘dives below high abstraction to hover over actual human projects and goals unfolding in myriad circumstances of possibility and contingency’ (Ong 2011: 12). In this way, the social, political and cultural forces that give life to urban space must be ‘situated in everyday practices... that creatively imagine and shape alternative social visions and configurations – that is “worlds” – than what already exists in a given context’ (ibid). Such a perspective on the transformation of cityscapes thus frontloads the question of specificity, contingency and creativity in place of privileging the all-encompassing logic (and power) of a universal ‘world’ process. More concretely, while different cities engage in the act of worlding for a variety of reasons (some for the purpose of increasing global economic competitiveness) and with varying degrees of imitation of pre-established ‘global forms’ (such as neoliberalism), the process of worlding cities is not a science but an *art*, comprised by ‘constitutive, spatializing, and signifying gestures that variously conjure up worlds beyond current conditions of urban living’ (ibid: 13). Indeed, as Wilson suggests, ‘worlding as such opens up different ways of being with others and being in the world, to other worlds, opening life to other “lived temporalities” and ways of dwelling (being with) above or below the nation-state or the world system’ (forthcoming: 11).

From a methodological point of view, the concept of worlding prompts a more anthropological or ethnographic approach to mapping the transformation(s) of urban worlds. Writing on African cities, Simone suggests that while worlding dynamics always emerge from ‘somewhere else besides the particular city occupied’, they also entail ‘an uneasy mixture of external imposition and local redeployment of selective appropriations of that

imposition' (2001:18). To truly capture the unanticipated innovations bound up with worlding projects, we need to better understand the very actors that attempt to bring their world-visions to life. More importantly, the worlding of urban space is not a linear process that flows from imagination to plan to execution in a frictionless space. Rather, just as there are different scalar relations in the process of worlding cities – from within and beyond the cityscape – there are different actors, groups and collectivities whose visions and strategies either converge or diverge. It is perhaps here that I depart somewhat from Ong's rejection of 'worlding from above and counter-worlding from below' (confusingly construed as a kind of 'Marxist view' of 'emerging world citizenship') (Ong 2011: 11). In contrast, the very idea of 'worlding from above', as the prevalence of elite urban planning in many of the world's major cities (cf. Baker and Ruming 2015), suggests the myriad possibilities and potentialities of 'worlding from below'.

In starting from the notion of contentious worlding, this article echoes Roy's (2011) call to re-asserting the potential utility of critical Marxian approaches in the project of worlding cities. Specifically, I aim to mobilise Henri Lefebvre's theory of 'the production of space' as a key vector of urban transformation. In doing so, the article emphasises the terrain of contestation between various groups in Mostar whose specific patterns of worlding are complexly imbricated by the intersections between cosmopolitanism, cultural particularism, and everyday forms of contingent urbanisms. This Lefebvrian reading of worlding thus retains the understanding of how global capital seeks to subsume difference and diversity under the rubric of *abstract space*, while at the same time remaining attentive to myriad groups, projects and imaginaries that evince 'promiscuous borrowings, shameless juxtapositions, and strategic enrolments of disparate ideas' (Ong 2011: 23). This perspective allows us to explore how urban dwellers negotiate opportunities and challenges that emerge from their situated place within the field of transnational and global networks, while maintaining a sense of belonging to a localised set of cultural, social, and political practices. Accordingly, the first part of this article introduces the city of Mostar as an ethnically divided city. The second part discusses projects of worlding from above focusing on the normative role of the EU to decide on how Mostar should be to be considered 'normal' again. These (largely failed) attempts to rectify Mostar are then related to local elites' and grassroots practices of worlding, which produce opposite understandings of what the city is and can become in the future. In the final part of this article, I recall Lefebvre's notion of *heterotopia*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of *heterotopia* tends to be primarily associated to Foucault and it is important to highlight that Lefebvre's use of this concept is quite different. Briefly, and as a way of

to reflect further on Abart's practice and address the radical potential of grassroots practices of worlding through art production.

### **The Contested Project of Transforming Mostar into a (Reunited) European City**

Mostar was harshly affected by two wars in 1992 and 1993. The first conflict resulted from BiH declaring its independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), which caused the Yugoslav army to deploy its force to keep hold of the territory within its remaining borders (Slovenia and Croatia had already declared their independence). At this time, an alliance between the Croat and Bosniak-Muslim communities was able to free Mostar from the aggressor. Yet, a year later, the same communities were fighting against each other for the exclusive control of the city (Donia and Fine 1994: 248-254; Grodach 2002: 66-70; Malcom 1994: 240-241; Mazowiecki 1993). Imaginaries of urban destruction, warfare, and violence quickly travelled globally to narrate the emergence and violence of this conflict (e.g., Mojzes, 1995; Ramet, 1992; Rieff, 1996). In particular, the shelling of the Stari Most (Old Bridge), symbol of the city and its namesake, became the international metaphor in Mostar's *urbicide*, understood as the planned practice of destroying the built environment with the aim of erasing the past memories of inter-ethnic tolerance and cooperation (Coward 2006).

The Dayton Peace Agreements (DPA), signed in 1995, are generally acknowledged for bringing the conflict in BiH to a halt. Yet, many scholars have noted that the logic of ethnic partitioning underlying the accords produced concrete and long-lasting effects that can hardly be imagined as conducive to reconciliation, let alone tolerance and solidarity between groups. An in-depth review of this critical literature cannot be discussed here (though see, Kolind 2008; Jansen 2008; Hromadžić 2015), but it is important to highlight some of the guiding principles that contributed to shaping the country to its current form. Recognising that the conflict over the sovereignty of BiH (as a new nation state) was over the question of ethnicity, the DPA declared the new-born country a multinational state constituted by three Peoples; Bosniak (Muslim), Bosnian-Croat, and Bosnian-Serb. Within the borders of BiH, additional boundaries were drawn to accommodate the territorial ambitions of the ethno-national communities. Two main entities were granted some sort of political autonomy; the

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clarification, Foucault approaches heterotopia as spaces of irreconcilable 'otherness' while Lefebvre understands these 'other spaces' as potentially-liberatory practices emerging "out of what people do, feel, sense, and come to articulate as they seek meaning in their daily lives" (Harvey, 2012: xvii). For a more exhaustive discussion on this topic, see Carabelli and Lubbock (2017).

Federation of BiH (with Croat and Bosniak cantons) and the Republika Srpska (where the majority of Serbs relocated). By re-imagining BiH as a mosaic of ethnically homogeneous tesseræ, the DPA de facto encouraged mass internal relocation movements, a situation somewhat reminiscent of apartheid (Campbell 1999). According to the 2006 unofficial statistics, 90 per cent of the population of BiH lived in ethnically homogeneous spaces (Robinson and Pobrić 2006: 249). In other words, the Dayton strategy to bring and keep stability accounts for the practice of *divide et impera* in order to foster a dialogue between the (spatially) fragmented parts.

Because of the violence of the conflict in Mostar, the city was put under the direct administration of the European Union in 1994 and re-organised in six semi-independent districts; three Bosniak in the East and three Croat in the West. The two halves of the city were separated by a ‘neutral’ zone around the Bulevar– the main artery of the city and the buffer zone during the conflict – which became the headquarter of the international administration. Embracing the logics of the DPA, the EU administration first, and the Office of the High Representative (OHR)<sup>3</sup> later, legitimised territorial divisions between the communities at war so that the conflict could be stopped and peace-dialogues established among the leaders of same groups. After several unsuccessful attempts to foster such a reconciliatory conversation, in 2004, the then High Representative Paddy Ashdown declared the reunification of Mostar and imposed the internationally-drafted recommendations on how to reconcile the city in the form of a (provisional) City Statute. To date, elected councillors have still not accepted the imposed statute, which means that no changes can be made to its original text (only by accepting it, modification could be proposed, voted, and implemented) de facto creating a permanent political stalemate.

Thus, the emergent narrative from internationally-drafted documents and decrees re-inscribe Mostar within international circles of meaning and power with the intent of rectifying the city’s (temporary) ‘abnormality’. I understand these processes as worlding aspirations that model the future of Mostar according to international expertise and criteria, the selection of best practices, and policies on how to standardise cities according to functionality. From a Lefebvrian standpoint, the general impasse of administrative power – between cosmopolitan European elites and recalcitrant local political actors – represent not merely different forms of worlding, but of producing urban space as such. The Lefebvrian approach to the worlding of

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<sup>3</sup> The OHR (created in 1995) is the organ in charge of overseeing the implementation of the DPA and to guide the post-war transition toward a full integration of the country in the European Union (the closure of the OHR, demonstrating that the country has fulfilled the necessary steps to be a sovereign country, is the pre-condition for its candidate status to the EU).

cities that I propose aims to better ground the radical contingency inherent within the *art* of worlding within the very real pressures and imperatives exacted by the forces of global capital. In this way: ‘to say that the urban problematic becomes global is not to make a claim about the totalization of any particular urban form. Rather it is to say that what becomes planetary is the urban *as a question*, as a theoretical framework, as a conceptual object of struggle’ (Madden 2012: 781, emphasis added). And while this article is not concerned with the political economy of capitalism, nor with the economic effects of peacebuilding (e.g., Pugh 2002), a theory of worlding that does not attend to dominant socio-economic processes risks losing much of its traction, at least in terms of accounting for the social sources of various discourses, imaginaries and practices. This sentiment was central for Lefebvre’s wider project in *The Production of Space*, particularly with respect to disentangling how differentially situated groups understood, approached, and produced space in contradictory ways. More importantly, Lefebvre’s ‘spatial triad’ places greater emphasis on the relative dominance of a given spatial ‘moment’ in the overall ensemble of social relations between different classes or (ethnic) groups.

His ‘spatial triad’ thus forms three ‘moments’ in the totality of space production (Lefebvre 1991: 33): *Representations of space (conceived)*: conceptualised spaces of dominant classes or groups, such as planners, architects and bureaucrats. As the dominant space of every (class) society, representations of space underpin the dominant mode of production, and reproduced through specific hegemonic projects adequate to a given politico-economic agenda, and heavily mediated by symbols, signs, and abstractions; *Representational spaces (lived)*: inhabited spaces of dwellers and users, which are directly lived, and variably ‘consumed’ either passively or through radically contingent appropriations and deviations from dominant scripts. It carries its own symbolic coordinates, but one that directly grounds itself in the lived experiences of the body, the community, and more generally concrete (rather than abstract as such); *Spatial practices (perceived)*: constitute the totality of urban praxis, and the generalised process in which the coherence of the urban fabric is (re)produced.

Broadly speaking, these moments refer to elite conceptions and scripts, everyday interpretations and uses of established infrastructures, and the general contradictory unity of the spatial fabric itself. Yet this schema is not merely a binary opposition between ‘dominant’ and ‘dominated’ classes. Rather, it seeks to clarify the degree to which each individual, class or group is *more or less* overdetermined by one moment or another. In other words, every spatial practice manifests itself as a specific combination of all three moments, in which one moment tends to predominate over the others (Schmid 2008: 34). For Lefebvre, pre-capitalist

societies were characterised by the prevalence of ‘absolute space’, in which abstract conceptions and codes of dominant groups were heavily overlaid with a sensuous poesy grounded in ‘the bonds of consanguinity, soil and language’ (Lefebvre 1991: 48; cf. Galli 2010: 14).

Thus, absolute space inheres through the relative dominance of *representational space* over the entire society. Under capitalism, however, the moment of *representations of space* comes to dominate, producing a field of ‘abstract space’ in which ‘the richness of lived experience is progressively eviscerated’ (Wilson 2013: 371). Inherently global in content, the abstract space of capital ‘carries no flag’ (Lefebvre 1991: 9). And yet, absolute space continued to underlie the worlding process of capitalism, most immediately in the proliferation of multiple *nationalisms* that, while signifying one of the core characteristics of ‘modernity’, were inherently grounded by ‘the bonds of consanguinity, soil and language’ (ibid: 48). In this way, dominant classes in capitalist societies do not merely rule through the abstract language of commodities or the market, but through the affective registers of belonging, rank and prestige (an inherently *othering* practice).

From these considerations, we can better understand the real contents of the contrasting and contradictory processes of worlding that undergirds the spatial production of Mostar. Firstly, European elites, embodying the cosmopolitan principles of market society, human rights, and (abstract) citizenship, deployed a series of *representations of space* articulating what Mostar could (and *should*) be. Having previously failed to re-unify the administrative apparatus of the city, due to the intransigence of local politicians, a new Special Commission for Reforming the city of Mostar was established in order to kick-start new rounds of negotiations. The circulated document of the commission offered a specific image of Mostar as both hopelessly dysfunctional yet inherently aspirational:

as Mostar overcomes its reputation for discord, it will also begin to attract an even-larger volume of foreign and domestic investment and recover its status as a major tourist attraction in BiH. The reunification of the city will mean its administration is better able to serve its citizens, effectively delivering proper education, healthcare, and other services (OHR Board of Principals Press Office 2004).

The language of this document suggests that the reform should not to be judged in its capacity to solve problems of regulation and legislation, but because it could help *humans*. This is a familiar rhetoric in practices of humanitarian aid and intervention. As Ranciere has argued, in

‘the seventies and eighties the Human Rights had been rejuvenated by the dissident movements in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe [...] as the charter of the irresistible movement leading to a peaceful post-historical world where global democracy would match the global market of liberal economy’ (Ranciere, 2004: 297). As the consequence of the outburst of ethnic conflicts and religious fundamentalisms, the

‘Rights of Man turned out to be the rights of the rightless, of the populations hunted out of their home and land and threatened by ethnic slaughter. They appeared as the rights of the victims of those who were unable to act any rights or even claim in their name’ (ibid: 297-298).

As Foucault reminds us, to conceive a society as a population is to construct the social in a manner that is not naturally given (Foucault 2008). Mostar now comprises two main distinct entities each of which has its own ethnic-organised political structures and plays a constitutive role in the administration of the city. These two communities are represented as homogeneous and fixed over a given territory, and this logic gives rise to a ‘geo-body’ obscuring the relations of power implicated in its production. Although the EU and OHR officials aimed to re-create Mostar as multi-ethnic, the model of conviviality they proposed is one based on interest-representation of relatively closed ethno-national groups, not one of mixing and mingling. For instance, to pre-determine a guaranteed quota of seats for each ethnic group is justified by the idea that Bosnian society has been historically formed and characterized by separate ethnic identities therefore the ethnic groups are constitutive people of BiH (Campbell 1999: 428) and yet, this choice licenses the divisive policies it opposes.

As well as embodying a paternalistic (pastoral) role over the citizenry, the Commission aimed to re-integrate the local political class into the process of re-unification:

The aim of the reform is that of actively engaging local authorities in determining the future structure, administration and functioning of Mostar so that the city could develop as a normal, unified city in line with European norms and standards (Commission for Reforming the City of Mostar 2003: 12) ... all those special regulations that would establish Mostar as an exception are no longer required and Mostar can begin its work to become a truly European city and a model for BiH (ibid: 22).

And yet, Mostar's elites played a two-level game. On the one hand, they had welcomed the proposed reforms, at least to the extent that it promised to deliver Mostar into the (EU)topia (Nicolaidis and Howse 2002), yet they were only prepared to do so on their own terms, for *their people* (Carabelli 2018: 61-69). Thus, various elite actors, from the city's Mayor Ljubo Bešlić to technocratic urban planners, started talking about the city as united, normalised, and 'safe' validating the proposed European visions (cf. Bešlić et al. 2008). However, they also continued to manage the city in a highly divisive manner, particularly with regards to the fragmentation of the city's public utility infrastructures (ICG 2009: 12). More than two decades after the conflict, BiH remains a contested country and Mostar a divided city. As Bollens writes, Mostar has become the symbol of

[a] significant *missed opportunity* to work out at the micro-scale the key parameters of shared governance and territory needed for the effective functioning of Bosnia Herzegovina at the macro-scale. Management of the city has not provided a model for the Federation or the country; Mostar provides lessons for Bosnia Herzegovina, but they are largely negative ones, entailing how ethnic war-profiteers are able through relentless efforts to obstruct development of a cross-national public interest, and how the International Community has unintentionally accommodated these assertive ethnic actions" (Bollens 2007: 213; emphasis added).

In other words, following the failure of (imposed) attempts to re-unite the city, Mostar is now associated with the gloomy picture of an impossible-to-manage environment in which ethno-political divisions persist with no end in sight. Thus, within this convoluted project of worlding Mostar, different moments of spatial production converged and collided, with the abstract space of EU elites partially coinciding with (but significantly in antagonism to) the ethno-national world-frames of local political actors, keen to engineer a 'normal' European city, but not in cooperation with the ethnic 'other'. As the next section of this article will show, the problem with imaginaries is that they are selective, choosing to represent only parts of complex lives, scenarios, and *worlds*. It was therefore within the realm of Mostar's grassroots movements that we find contingent projects oriented towards the creation of another, less antagonistic, 'world' within the city.

### **Grassroots Organising and the Possibility of Another Future**

Abart was born in 2008 as a platform for urban research and art production. Funded by three women from Mostar, Anja Bogojević, Amila Puzić, and Mela Žuljević, Abart wanted to reinvigorate the local culture scene, while at the same time conducting research about the city:

Our goal is to promote and establish an active collaboration among local and international artists and organisations which adopt similar concepts in their work... We take the situation in Mostar and its polarisation as the starting point to open up a discussion about *divisions* and *divides*. We are not only interested in religious and ethno-national separations, but rather in observing the ways in which the urban divide affects public spaces and the everyday. (Abart nd).

Abart took residence within the premises of the OKC Abrašević, a Youth Cultural Centre that has been active since the end of the war. Its mission is to advocate for the creation of supra-ethnic spaces in the city, open to all the citizens irrespective of their ethno-national identity. The centre, located just off the Bulevar (the former buffer zone), is unique in Mostar and one of the very few centres that refuse to engage with ethnic-politics. The goal of Abart was to strengthen the centre's cultural offerings by promoting contemporary art projects and performances.

Since the beginning, Abart has had international aspirations. By setting up collaborations with international artists, especially those working in other ethnically divided cities, Abart intended to create networks for sharing experiences and new collaborative projects. Abart had a clear interest in thinking about the roles of public space in Mostar both historically and in the contemporary (post-war) city. On the one hand, there was the observation that Mostar's public spaces were mainly consumption spaces (cafes and shopping centres) that had been privatised as part of the transition from socialism to a market economy. On the other hand, there was the intent to re-appropriate public spaces for art projects, and thus making them *public* again.

The existence of Abart, as many other local NGOs was made possible thanks to the conspicuous amount of money invested in strengthening civil society in BiH. This was part of another internationally-led plan of rebuilding the country as a democratic, independent, and multi-ethnic state. By investing in bottom-up projects run by international and local NGOs, sponsors such as the EU, UN, US and other actors (including states and private foundations) wished to cement bonds between people so that, in the long-term, a new social cohesion could be achieved (see also Kappler 2014; Keil and Perry 2015). Abart's first international project,

*Arts in Divided Cities* (2009-10), was funded by the European Cultural Fund, gathering a small group of artists from Beirut, Berlin, Kosovska Mitrovica, Mostar, and Sarajevo. In their fundraising application to the EU Cultural Fund, Abart wrote,

We will point to the fact that there are various forms of ‘borders’ that divide the city in physical and in spiritual ways. Besides the obvious division on the national and religious basis, we will point to divisions within the ‘homogeneous nationalist constructions’, which are dissolving under the influence of new neo-liberal ideologies, so they can be further manipulated for profit interests. We will try to improvise architectural and artistic solutions – bridges on land – which can act as non-conflict passages between the parts of the city, and which are more essential today than the reconstructed bridges over the river Neretva. (Abart 2009)

While acknowledging the significance of ethno-national division in Mostar, this funding application hints at how ethnic conflicts have been overexposed to the point where they become the only problem of the city, silencing many of the other ongoing struggles.

The project brought together for a week local and international artists whose work reflect critically on the challenges and possibilities of engaging with art as a political tool of contestation in ethnically divided cities. The artists exchanged anecdotes from their own artistic experience, they explored the city and worked together towards organising a series of activities to take place during the highlight of the *Arts in Divided Cities* project: an open-air festival (14-17 April 2010). In the final programme, there were exhibitions displaying some of the invited artists’ previous works, lectures and seminars to discuss the phenomenon of ethnically divided cities, and site-specific interventions (including outdoor games such as a gigantic version of Twister proposed to reactivate Spanish Square in the former buzzer zone). Abart proposed an alternative guided tour, entitled, *False Stories from the Histories of Mostar*<sup>4</sup>. A small crowd of twenty to thirty people gathered in the premises of the OKC Abrašević early in the afternoon; there were locals, international tourists, and the artists participating in the project. The touring crowd walked in front of construction sites, ruins, and newly-built shopping centres – far away from the celebrated Stari Most and other touristic sites. Instead, this tour showed how the process of rebuilding the war-torn city, combined with its re-integration into the global market, was shaping the future of Mostar in often

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<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the *Arts in Divided Cities* project see also Carabelli 2018 (133-143).

problematic ways. For instance, the tour visited many of Mostar's new shopping centres pointing to the curious fact of having seven malls in a medium size city, many of which remain empty. The tour stopped in front of these 'alternative' monuments to the city where a member of Abart read a short story describing the importance of the site (the story, engraved in aluminium plates was left on site for other passers-by to read, see [photo 0 and 1](#)). These were fictional stories (thus the title of the tour) that used sarcasm and fantasy to address very real problems, which remain outside the interest of mainstream political discourses.



[Insert [Photo 0](#). A member of Abart translating the *false stories* for the English-speaking visitors, April 2010, Mostar. Photo of the author.]

[Insert Photo 1. *Monument to the Fallen Cedar*, Abart site-specific intervention, April 2010, Mostar. Photo of the author.]

For instance, the tour started from the fences enclosing a huge construction plot. This was the pre-war location of the city hospital, not far from the Bulevar and Spanish Square. Abart refashioned the empty plot as the *Monument to the Fallen Cedar*.

We are tempted to discuss the Monument to the Fallen Cedar in relation to Stonehenge because of the way it penetrates the landscape... This is a land-art project that illustrates a successful liberation from the limitations imposed by human ratios. The advantage of contemporary builders - over those of the Neolithic era - is that they possess machinery for excavating. Yet they must face serious problems because of the high prices of the land especially in our overcrowded city, so this plot was taken as the ideal location for this piece of land art. Further, the Monument to the Fallen Cedar could be considered both as a work of conceptual art and happening, because this ambitious step into the destruction of nature is a public event involving the whole army of assistants and mercenaries. The emphasis is on the action itself but the outcome implies a victory of epic imagination (Abart 2010, translation of the author)

The site was under redevelopment to make space for the construction of (another) shopping mall, Mepas Mall – inaugurated in 2012, and currently the largest shopping centre in BiH. It is an imposing building, hosting multiple shopping outlets on seven floors, a luxury hotel, and the only cinema and McDonalds in town. The title of the monument condemns the process of eradicating trees (*the fallen cedar*) to make space for yet another space of consumption whilst the *false* history of this monument, associating it to a land art intervention, points to the ways in which this enormous construction radically alters the landscape of the city, bringing Mostar's silhouette closer to many other global cities whose centres are occupied by tall glass buildings.

Abart wanted to point to the many problems that the city shares, rather than dwelling on the facts of its division. More specifically they wanted to switch the main narrative about Mostar by replacing the story of a city solely defined by ethnic polarisation to a politically-engaged discussion on how the ethnic division has been used to silence an aggressive neoliberalism. The crowd laughed at the surreal stories despite their bitter aftertaste. By the

end of the day, all the aluminium plates had been stolen and only those who took part in it can now recall the tour.

The above recollection of Abart's project points towards the ways in which grassroots actors seek to forge entire different spaces beyond the confines of dominant scripts and narratives. These are spaces in which people could meet and mingle as if Mostar was more than a divided city (and during this and other Abart's project, these spaces materialised as exhibition venues and outdoor performances), but rather a city struggling to cope with the legacy of ethnic-warfare and neoliberal strategies to normalise it. Lefebvre called these spaces *heterotopias*, characterised by 'a difference that marks it by situating it (situating itself) with respect to the initial place' (Lefebvre 2003 [1970]: 38). This 'initial place', or *isotopy*, is the analogous, inter-changeable spaces of likeness and similarity. As such, 'isotopy and heterotopy clash everywhere and always, engendering an *elsewhere*' (ibid: 172). These contrasting spaces thus correspond to representations of space and representational spaces (respectively), which, as argued at the beginning of this article, either cohere or collide in contingent and unpredictable ways. Thus, 'by making explicit how fragmented, mobile and changing the production of space is' (Cenzatti 2008: 81), heterotopias provide a catalytic impulse to the contestation and transformation of urban space(s). Similarly, Abart seeks to situate itself as an interstitial space within the taken-for-granted divided space of Mostar.

Of course, Abart's members felt compelled, since the beginning of their projects in Mostar, to clarify their position within the local and national NGO *scene*. As mentioned before, the existence of these grassroots organisations was made possible largely thanks to international funds (often from major agencies such as the UN). Somehow, Abart was using international money to criticise the same actors guaranteeing the existence of their platform, which seemed problematic. Further, because the available funds were assigned through national competitions, existing associations, Abart included, found themselves competing rather than collaborating with similar groups, which also seemed inconsistent with the collaborative principles leading the platform. In fact, the international project of strengthening civil society created further fractions within BiH society (Keil and Perry 2015). Also, there was a need to learn new skills such as writing a successful proposal, monitoring the delivery of milestones, assessing that projects' goals were reached, and compiling end of project reports. In other words, not only did NGOs enter a competitive market, they also needed to professionalise so that the 'language' of the donors could be mastered in order to become reliable and trusted allies of international actors. This entangled process intimately reflects 'the proliferation of neoliberal techniques [which] thus contributes to the blossoming of an

urban terrain of unanticipated borrowings, appropriations, and alliances that cut across class, ideological, and national lines even as it depends on the continual meta-practical discursive resedimentation of these boundaries' (Ong 2011: 5).

In the specific case of Mostar, the main paradox remains that of funding and supporting projects that could foster meaningful inter-ethnic relations, while the DPA and the Constitution of BiH de facto re-imagined (and built) the post-war country as territorially divided along ethno-national lines. As other scholars observe, by empowering the leaders of the ethno-national communities, the DPA - and the consociational model of governance - had sabotaged the project of re-creating a multi-ethnic environment, despite the fact that this was the main goal (Bieber 2005). Fagan (2006), for example, has pointed to the severe limits faced by civil society actors since they have no power to change the constitutional architecture of the country and thus re-frame the geopolitical imaginary that produces BiH as a divided and contested state (Fagan 2006).

In Mostar, the problem of ethnic segregation was visible in the extreme but difficult to tackle since local political elites lacked interest in working towards an effective reunification. However, generous international funds were allocated to support civil society projects that aimed at creating an interethnic dialogue from the bottom-up. As Björkdhal and Gusic observe:

The city [became] a site of friction between the international, and the local... a space that provides opportunities for both coexistence and contestation. Such frictional encounters have produced anomalies and antagonism in Mostar but also certain forms of mutual group and cooperation... (2016: 85)

Collaborating with Abart since December 2009, I became aware of the difficult compromise the group made in accepting to enter the national NGO context in order to survive<sup>5</sup>. In fact, the group was extremely critical both of local nationalist politics as well as international strategies to 'normalise' Mostar, especially through economic manoeuvrings. Accordingly, Abart's grant application always played with words and concepts to adapt their critical stands to the donors' less critical plans in order to secure funding. For instance, despite the fact that

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<sup>5</sup> I met Abart's members during the field-research in Mostar that contributed to the writing of my doctoral work (2009-2011). I started collaborating with the group in December 2009 because of a shared interest in conducting innovative spatial research in Mostar using art practice as a method of political intervention. My collaboration with Abart continued until the end of their projects and the dissolution of the platform in 2014. I discuss critically the implication of this participatory methodology for my research and understanding of Mostar in Carabelli (2014) and further in Carabelli and Deiana (2017).

Abart's projects were conceived for people in Mostar *regardless of* their ethnicity, each application had to emphasise how the proposed activities would bring together individuals from different ethnic groups. Of course, nobody would have ever dreamed of asking people attending Abart's events where they came from but this was part of the compromise entertained to get funded. Despite the wording of Abart's funding application, the implementation of Abart's projects clearly shows that their plan was never to reconcile the divided city, at least as the international sponsors understood it. Their projects were radically inclusive because, for instance, they invited all the citizens to take part, without asking for people's ethnic affiliations. As such, Abart wanted to create *other* spaces ('heterotopias') in which the citizens of Mostar could come together and discuss what affects them all (the process of post-war reconstruction) despite their differences. In other words, Abart's projects were never about bringing different communities together, despite stating this to their sponsors. Rather, they aimed to create a new community of people who understood that the future of Mostar should be discussed by the citizens rather than local or international elites, whose visions of Mostar routinely write out alternative worldviews of what the city might be.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing on broader debates about *worlding* practices in contemporary cities, this article assessed the case of Mostar. Specifically, it engaged with how divergent projects of worlding materialise in the city *spatially*. Thus, the article drew on Lefebvre's theory of space production to reflect on how the spatial (and material) production and reproduction of Mostar reveals the workings of oppositional forces: of global capital and the international project of *normalising* Mostar to become European; of local ethno-national elites whose local strategies embody a contradictory mix between a yearning for (European) normalcy yet under conditions of ethnic homogenisation; and of ongoing process of *re-worlding* Mostar from the grassroots. Ultimately, this article attempted to challenge the pervasive representation of Mostar as a 'divided city' by shedding light on the multitude of worlding projects that inhere within the city.

To list Mostar as one of the most problematic of ethnically divided cities means to erase the possibility that it could become a *different space*. The article presents the case of Abart to discuss how Mostar is also a fertile ground in which alternative projects of worlding take root and flourish. Drawing on the example of the *Arts in Divided City* festival, organised by Abart in April 2010, I gesture towards the use of art practice as a tool of *worlding by occupying*, remaking and reshaping public space through movements, actions, and research.

The article also problematizes how Abart re-appropriated the vocabulary and methods of international peacekeepers to gain funds and produce art projects. Their applications declare their desire to reunite the city and to work towards a more inclusive future. Yet, their projects never address the citizens of Mostar according to their ethno-national group because their intent was never to bring ethnic-subjects together. On the contrary, projects like the *Arts in Divided Cities* pointed to how the ethnic divide is used to hide other political and economic processes of rebuilding Mostar that, indeed, should be of concern to all citizens. Accordingly, and by occupying and making use of public spaces, Abart designed a series of site-specific art interventions that could bring attention to problematic aspects of *worlding Mostar from above*. Instead, and by relying on different international networks (donors and alternative networks), Abart wanted to produce new spaces in which the future of the city could be re-thought critically. This article therefore reflected on how artistic interventions in public spaces become worlding practices that attempt to challenge established, global representations of cities.

In attending to how radically different worlding practices interweave, clash and converge, this article drew on Lefebvre's theory on the production of space to add nuance and complexity to recent scholarly approaches of 'worlding cities'. As such, it becomes important to understand how projects that seem distant and incompatible (for instance Abart, the local elites, and the international actors' visions for the future of Mostar) intersect, hybridise, energise, and fissure in ways that do not impart straightforward political programmes but rather concretise specific strategies in the service of navigating the complex art of making cities global.

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