

# Shell-shocked art

Doug Aubrey

It wasn't so long ago that Sarajevo was considered the hippest and coolest place on earth, attracting everyone from mercenaries to missionaries, from media celebrities to war junkies. Some claimed that Sarajevo actually became a different planet. Because as well as being besieged by a dirty and bloody (and still unresolved) civil war, the three year siege of the city (which it has to be said, got off lightly compared to Mostar and Gorazde) was also probably the first saturation media war of the satellite broadcasting age. While people optimistically talked about a "CNN effect" bringing a rapid end to the siege of Sarajevo, the war in Bosnia and the siege of Sarajevo in particular instead became the opposite: the first MTV generation conflict, in which the camcorder truly came of age.

Sarajevo under siege was a live-fast, die-young Rock'n'Roll war story, in which everyone from Magnum photographers to Susan Sontag, from acid-head street performers to U2's Bono were to play a part, alongside incompetent UN officials and corrupt politicians.

But what of the role of the local artists in all this?

The Sarajevo Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA) contains a remarkable record of art and other perhaps more worthwhile cultural artefacts produced as a result of, or during the conflict ([www.scca.ba/](http://www.scca.ba/)).

Much of the work in this archive was produced by the many artists who stayed in the city and found themselves surviving or fighting against former friends. Friends which they had grown up with in a unified city that represented all that Yugoslavia formerly stood for.

"You just didn't have a choice you either fought or would end up in some concentration camp or another!"

## Nebojsa Seric - Shoba or Soba

Soba, like many Sarajevans, was the offspring of a mixed marriage. Neither Moslem or Orthodox, Serb or Croat, but a child of something that was once called Yugoslavia. So, when extreme nationalism tore his nation apart and besieged his city, Soba's conscience led him to stay and defend the civilization that Sarajevo represented against the barbarism that surrounded it. The Artist became the Soldier.

I first met Soba in the legendary *Obala* bar—a subterranean hangout where the wild, the beautiful and the damned used to accumulate after a day queuing for UN rations under fire, or returning from the front. Here, they would listen to bands such as *Sikter* (Sarajevo's answer to the Sex Pistols) and try to persuade the multitude of journalists present to buy them drinks and "tell their story of the war."

Soba—the descendent of three generations of Partisan fighters—was everywhere: he was a student at the art academy, bassist in *Sikter* and it has to be said a complete media whore. Soba had his photo taken by the *Magnum* photographer



Paul Lowe, appeared in countless news and documentaries about the war (including my own *Victim of Geography*), featured in articles by the likes of Ed Vuillamy and was even turned into a comic book character by war junkie/cartoonist Joe Sacco.

Soba: the Rock'n'Roll Star, the Artist, the Soldier and the cartoon character. Had the war gone on, chances are there may have even been a Soba rap album, a clothing range and eventually a movie that perhaps Michael Winterbottom may have made instead of his dire and dishonest 'Welcome to Sarajevo'.

Then there was the black humour. One night in a club surrounded by mostly drunken young men, a number of whom were in wheel chairs, Soba joked that everyone in the room had "probably killed more people than Fred West."

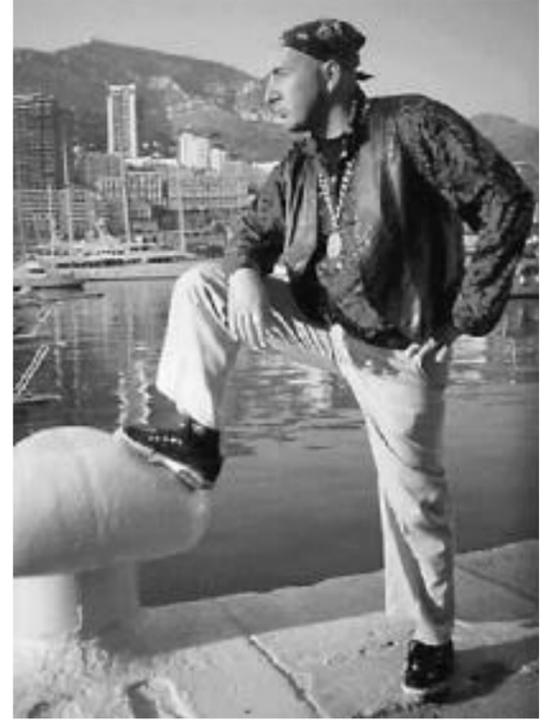
But the surreal humour aside that the Sarajevo war spectacle created, the dark reality of war was having to fight and witness friends being killed and eaten by packs of wild dogs, seeing children killed by snipers, and mothers and lovers torn apart by mortar shell fire.

Being a soldier that survived came at a cost. Soba suffered a breakdown brought on by shell-shock (he was caught up in a major offensive during which more than 1,000 shells fell on one small hill) and the cumulative trauma of witnessing carnage first hand (post-traumatic stress).

Like many involved in the war, Soba felt that the act of making art became irrelevant. Rather than creation there was destruction. Survival with the minimum of resources itself became an art form—a key factor on his eventual rebirth as an artist.

Soba's work—a testament to the humour and resilience of the human spirit, or more to the point a good laugh—can be found at his virtual on-line retrospective at:

[www.scca.ba/artistfiles/soba/ok/index.htm](http://www.scca.ba/artistfiles/soba/ok/index.htm)



It is an art born from the downside to heroism, that by degree celebrates and mocks the cult of the artist as a celebrity, its black humour (of which there is plenty) is born from horror:

"When you see someone running across a sniper alley like John Cleese in Monty Python's Ministry of Funny walks and you start to laugh, then you know you will survive."

## Nebojsa Seric - Shoba or Soba

Soba's art is the art of a survivor, a cultural refusenik who for a while lost his mind and has permanently lost his country. (He now lives in New York, where he arrived pre 9/11 and before the near continual war that we have all lived in since.) His work's spartan and irreverent nature belies the fact that this is an art born out of first hand experience.

With the media coverage of war now reaching saturation point and the theory of the "war spectacle" now a reality in all our living rooms, perhaps to even talk about the role of the artist in simply recording war any more is an oxymoron. For the most part, that which passes itself off as official "war art" is often as heavily censored as much of the media "inbeds" coverage has been in the current war in Iraq. To talk however of an artist responding to war in their art, either as an issue or via their actual experiences of combat, raises a number of key and crucial questions of the roles and responsibilities that all artists have in dark times.

