

Balkan Journal

[This essay was excerpted in the British music magazine *The Wire*, and will be a chapter in my forthcoming book *Creative Life*. – Bob Ostertag]

First I had better explain myself. I am a musician and composer, specializing in electronic media. But I have also been a journalist and a political organizer. My interests in politics, writing, and music may seem far afield to some, but for me they come from the same creative impulse which has to do with finding beauty and possibility in unlikely places.

With these broad interests, I have always feared being the dilettante. I try to foreclose the possibility by being a compulsive perfectionist, who cringes at the idea of doing anything half way. So when the Central American revolutions caught my imagination at the end of the 1970s, I dropped my music career and became a full-time organizer for the guerrilla support groups in the US. Soon that wasn't enough. I felt like if that was what I was going to do, I had to go to El Salvador, where the bombs were actually falling, and completely immerse myself in the work. I did. A decade later, when I went back to music, I wanted to throw myself into that just as fully, and that has been my life ever since.

The 1990s came and I followed the break-up of Yugoslavia in the news as closely as I could, as horrified as everyone else at the return of genocide to Europe. The Kosovo crisis and NATO bombing brought me to my own little personal crisis. Never had I felt so passionately about an issue about which I could not decide on a position. All through the Bosnian war I had argued that the West had to do more to help Bosnia. And when NATO finally bombed the Bosnian Serbs, I was all in favor of it.

I was in favor of the West helping the Albanian Kosovars as well. But when NATO finally acted, it did the worst possible thing: leaving Kosovo to Milosevic's forces while bombing Beograd, Novi Sad, and the rest of the country. I decided, as I usually do, to work things out in my head by composing a new work on the subject.

And I decided if I was going to perform the piece at all, I should do it first in Yugoslavia. And that is how this story began to take shape.

Though it is not the subject of this article, you ought to know something about the concert I prepared, "Yugoslavia Suite."

The first part is called "War Games," and in it I play a computer game of my own creation which is projected on a big screen. The game is a collage made in part from actual fighter/bomber computer games, and in part from other, "real" images from the US military not generally available to the public. These latter show what pilots flying over Yugoslavia were actually looking at when they were dropping bombs, as well as footage showing what tank gunners in the Iraq war were looking at when firing from their guns. There is also training software from the US Air Force and Army. These latter look very much like games. In fact, the computer game images I used look more realistic, and the "real" war images look more like what most people think of as games. The performance actually is set up like a game, which even keeps score as I play.

The second part, "These Hands," uses video footage from the civil wars of former Yugoslavia, each scene chosen because it shows someone doing something interesting with their hands. My colleague Richard Board is on stage, with the light set so that the audience sees only his hands suspended in black space. Using a video camera and special software, I can place Richard's hands directly into the projected video scenes. He can reach his hand right into Milosevic's, or wipe a tear from the face of a refugee. He can even manipulate the projected image itself by the motions of his hands.

The piece begins with the sound of Richard clapping his hands in the dark. His hands appear gradually. And while the image of his hands is transformed into the hands of striking miners in Kosovo, or Milosevic's hands while gesturing during a speech, or a soldier shooting a bazooka, the sound of the clapping slowly multiplies into a larger

and larger crowd, to a soccer stadium roar, to a torrential rain, to explosions, and finally to ferocious wind, -- all made just from the sound of clapping hands.

Once I began to organize the tour, it immediately became clear that just getting in to Serbia was not going to be easy. There are no diplomatic relations between the US and rump Yugoslavia, so Richard and I sent our passports to the Yugoslav Embassy in Canada, which sat on them for two months. We did a little research and found that no Americans, other than the most mainstream press, had been granted visas since the war. Yugoslav embassies had been instructed that visa applications from Americans could only be handled directly in the Foreign Ministry building in Beograd, and Beograd always said no.

With only four days left before our departure for the first gigs in Slovenia, I called the Embassy and asked them to return the passports by express mail. This they promised to do, saying, "We're sorry, but no visas." I set about canceling the concerts in Serbia.

The next day the passports arrived, and mine had a visa in it! But not Richard's. The Embassy had no explanation. "Yes, I know, you are a *team*," the bureaucrat on the other end of the line practically shouted at me in that particular Serbian way. "A *team*. I cannot explain. Even my Ambassador personally signed an urgent fax to Beograd saying, 'Why just one?' But you cannot have two!"

My concert organizer in Beograd later surmised that, at the moment of putting the passports and application fees back in the envelope, some enterprising office hack decided that since I could not do the concert alone, he could pocket the application fee for one visa and still keep us out of Serbia.

We were not to be so easily dissuaded, but what to do? We poured over our options. Richard could try again at the Embassy in Budapest, where we were to perform just before going to Serbia. I could try to do the concert alone. I could go alone but just play some improvised music (I often do improvised shows). Or we could try to find someone of a different nationality to accompany me. We put all these plans in parallel motion, and got on the plane with the matter completely unresolved.

Monday, October 11

We arrive in Ljubljana, capital of Slovenia, the northern-most province of what used to be Yugoslavia. We are met by Miha Zadnikar, the tall, bearded director of the Cinematech of Slovenia. He teaches sociology, and with him are two of his students, video taping our arrival and our every move. Somehow all five of us and all the gear cram into a little Yugo and zip off to the capital as the radio blares "Bye Bye Miss American Pie."

Miha, his students, and basically everyone we meet in Slovenia is in a good mood. Slovenia has done OK. They made it out of Yugoslavia with comparatively little fuss, only a "week-end war." They see themselves as becoming increasingly Westernized while the rest of the Balkans falls deeper and deeper into hell. On the whole, they like their president, Milan Kucan, a communist-turned-democrat who finessed the departure from Yugoslavia. Many will admit that, given the chain reaction of terror that followed, perhaps Slovenia's exit from Yugoslavia was a bit precipitous, but, as opposed to almost everyone else in the Balkans, the Slovenes are looking forward.

For the next day and a half we are wined and dined by our hosts. Mostly wined. We quickly discover the staggering difference in alcohol consumption between San Francisco and the Balkans, a discrepancy which will keep us either mildly drunk, completely drunk, or in hangover recovery for most of the coming weeks.

This first night the combination of drink and jet lag sends us off to our only full night of sleep in the Balkans.

Tuesday, October 12

The next day we discover another continuing pattern that will follow us around the tour: the organizers have not really read our detailed list of technical needs we sent in advance, so the day is spent frantically trying to put together the sound system, video projector, and theatrical lights needed for the show. Richard deals with these problems while I try to communicate with the Serbian organizers via email, trying to come up with an alternative to canceling the Serbian leg of the trip.

And there is a further problem that will follow us around as well. This is my first time touring a show that uses computers this extensively, and software I have written myself. Bugs start to emerge. All the time I am not trying to send email to Beograd I am frantically trying to debug my programming.

Any one of these problems would have made for a stressful day. But the combination of putting a complex show together without the right equipment, with risky political content in an unfamiliar part of the world, with both the future of the tour and the current state of the software in doubt, pushes the stress load right off the meter. I am glad for the bounteous offerings of alcohol.

On this first day it is the computer that proves the most unruly of the problems. With one hour to go the software just isn't working. I am on-stage, pouring through computer code. The national television has sent a crew to shoot the show and interview me. We are just discovering that we are actually big news: Americans in an area Americans usually bypass, doing a concert on a political situation most Americans know little about, just months after the war.

I keep the TV crew on hold, however, and keep trying to fix my code. A sell-out crowd has turned up, but I ask the organizers to hold the house. Finally, with a few minutes to go before show time, I think I have the problem solved and the crowd comes in.

Amazingly, the concert runs without a hitch. A little ragged, to be sure, but not bad for the first show. The audience response is effusive. Everyone wants to thank us, shake our hand, get autographs, and offer us drinks. I relax for the first time in days. The TV crew stays overtime to get their interview, but their main question is, "Why did you put our President Kucan's image in your piece next to Milosevic and Tudjman?" A difficult question to answer, given Kucan's complex role in the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In fact, I had put him in and taken him out several times during the creation of the piece. First interview, and they had gone right to the issue about which I myself was the most ambivalent.

Mixed with the congratulations and thanks, several times I am questioned, "You are going to do *that* piece in Serbia?"

After the show we go out to eat and drink. And smoke pot. I myself do not smoke marijuana, but it seems like everyone in Ljubljana does. I can't even keep up with the drinking, let alone the grass. But I love the relaxed outgoing nature of the Slovenes. At dinner I sit next to a pleasant college girl who studies sociology. I ask her what her major is. "Blow jobs with iced tea," she responds matter-of-factly.

Dinner is accompanied by wine and Slovenian *eau de vie*. Following dinner come more joints, then we go out for drinks. In the Balkans, when they say "let's go have a drink," they don't mean a cocktail. They mean drink until the sun comes up. We drink at the restaurant until it closes, at which point we move to a bar. When that bar closes we move to another bar. When that bar closes it is after 3am and the group prepares to move to yet another bar. Richard and I beg off, explaining that we are jet-lagged, have had an exhausting day, and must be up early to head to the next town. Our hosts are slightly offended.

Before falling asleep, I mentally review the chaos that surrounded putting the show together, and decide that trying to do this show in Serbia without Richard is out of the question. Some other solution to the visa problem must be found.

Wednesday, October 13

Thursday begins completely up in the air. We are supposed to do a gig in Koper, a small industrial town near the sea, but it is looking like a long shot. The gig is at a club run by Marko Breclj, quite a storied man in the Balkans. "The Yugoslav Frank Zappa," is how most people refer to him. Breclj was Yugoslavia's main rock star of the 1968 generation, and in fact organized a Frank Zappa gig in Yugoslavia long before other western rock bands appeared Eastern Europe. Breclj cut quite an eccentric figure in 1968, and the intervening three decades have not brought him closer to the mainstream.

What he does not do very well, it seems, is organize concerts. Though the concert is tonight, he has not secured any of the equipment, nor, more urgently, our transportation to Koper. We sit in the Cinematech office while messages fly back and forth to Koper. "Marko has arranged for the light man to drive you." "No, the light man has

no car." "Marko says you can take the bus. "There is no bus." "Marko knows a woman somewhere who can maybe drive you later in the day, but you won't get there in time."

I sit in the middle of the chaos exchanging emails with Beograd, trying to figure out what to do about "the visa problem."

The one thing that everyone coming in and out of the office in Ljubljana agrees on is that Marko is an exceptional man and we must go to Koper, if only to meet him.

Finally, Marko succeeds in getting a personal friend, Marko Kosnik, to drive us to Koper. Richard, the instruments, the backpacks, Marko and myself pile into his tiny Yugo and we are off.

The ride turns into its own little epic, for Marko Kosnik turns out to be a very interesting man. He has wild stories to tell about the Yugoslav army, into which he was drafted in 1981. Somehow Marko's encounter with Balkan militarism ended with him handcuffed to a bed for three days under military arrest. He was subsequently placed in military psychiatric care and doped with psychiatric drugs at doses far beyond any a real doctor would use.

Marko, the only veteran of the Yugoslav Army I meet on the trip, is the only person I meet who does not condemn the NATO bombing out of hand. "You will have to wait a few years before you can look back and see if tgh bombing was a mistake or not," he argues.

Marko co-founded LAIBACH with others drafted along with him, a group which has attained a near-mythic stature among those in the know in eastern Europe. Most easily described as a rock band, Marko prefers to call LAIBACH a "media provocation:"

It was about being taken to the police station very often. It was about having nothing to eat. It was about our decision not to study the "false" philosophy. It was very near the social suicide when being called a fascist in that period of Yugoslav politics. And my best friend, who became the frontman and did the most of poetry, could not avoid it at a certain moment - December 21, 1982 he hanged himself.

In 1982 LAIBACH was considered enigmatic and opaque. When the cataclysm of the 1900s arrived, they were re-interpreted as geniuses working ten years ahead of the curve. But by then Marko was long out of the group and venturing into new terrain in video art. In the process, he has become one of the few people in the world skilled with the core video software I am using for these concerts. As we talk, I feel an immediate artistic affinity with him, a rather uncommon experience for me. I begin to hatch a plan.

We arrive at the club in Koper -- a punk rock dive with graffiti-covered walls, a kitchen in which Marko Breclj's wife, Arijana, is cooking us eggs, numerous other people coming and going, and none of the technical things we need to do the concert. Richard goes to work trying to assemble the necessary goods. I go to the phone and computer to resume communications with Beograd about what to do, while Marko Breclj, a portly man now in his fifties, seems to half pout and half storm around the place. And of course, everyone drinks wine.

I finally reach the Beograd organizers by phone and they are adamant I must come. I hang up and approach Marko Kosnik with my plan. Why doesn't he come with me to Beograd? He knows the technology, he knows Beograd, and he saw the show last night in Ljubljana. Richard can train him tonight. As a Slovenian citizen, he can get a visa no problem.

Marko thinks carefully. His schedule is busy. He has a show coming up in Switzerland he needs to prepare for. He is also not really *looking* for any more run-ins with Yugoslav authorities. We talk about the project.

Finally, he looks me in the eye and says, "So what you really have in mind is being something like video guerrillas taking it right into the heart of the beast, right?"

"More or less, that's it," I reply.

"Then I have to do it," Marko answers.

Now the chaos doubles, with Richard and I trying to get ready for the show, me trying to get through to Beograd to tell them of the new development, and Marko trying to begin making all the necessary arrangements to leave for Serbia in 3 days.

Finally the show comes together, everything works, all is well. The crowd is the sort that has become typical for me in recent years: small, but quite passionate about my work. One group is there from Ljubljana. They had seen the concert last night, and traveled to Koper to see it again. Another group has come from Italy for the show.

But beyond the hard-cores, the audience reaction is decidedly mixed, much more so than the previous night. One man, a crane operator by day, dislikes the work to the point of agitation. He points out that we show an image of the Mostar bridge exploding right after showing an image of Bosnian Serb commander Ratko Mladic. "But the Croats blew up that bridge," he exclaims. "Its another lie."

I knew the Croats blew up the fourteenth-century Mostar bridge. In fact, on my bulletin board at home is a newspaper clipping with the Croat commander on the scene, lecturing an incredulous reporter as his men were destroying the bridge. "Don't worry," he proclaimed, "We Croats will build another bridge in its place, more beautiful and more ancient."

What I had not known was that the audience would infer from the order of the images that I was blaming the Serbs for the destruction. I am learning how much identity counts in the Balkans. It is one thing to know it from a book or newspaper. And another to know identity politics in a place like the US, where racial identity is usually something one can infer at a glance. Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, Slovenes -- to me they look alike. In fact, they *do* look alike. They are ethnically indistinct. We're talking shades of white. The *only* way to make sense of these wars is as *religious* wars. Then everything becomes quite clear: Orthodox vs. Catholic vs. Muslim. El Salvador, my only other war experience, was a class war. I am realizing how little that experience can offer me to help navigate where I am now.

One person at the show whose feedback I seek out in particular is Sasha Mikrobz. Sasha is a giant, bear of a man who performs around the Balkans as a storyteller, and, happening to be in Koper, came to the show. He also lives in Beograd and works with FreeB92 radio, my hosts in Beograd. Sasha was the first Serb to see our show, and I was quite curious as to his reaction.

Though he is a professional talker, Sasha is extremely reluctant to discuss the concert. He is obviously disturbed. Finally, he says, "Well, OK. We Serbs are the bad guys. So?" I asked if he thought it was appropriate to do the show in Serbia. Several times his mouth said "yes" while his tone and demeanor said a loud "no." It was extremely unsettling.

It took me a while to sort out my reaction to Sasha. After all, yes, Serbs had been bad guys. Along with many others, of course. What I was unprepared for was how deeply ethnic identity works in the Balkans.

I am an American. In my view, there are very few nations who have as many "bad guys" as my own country, but I don't carry that around on my shoulder. I don't see myself as having much to do with them. In fact, I joined the "other side." I spent years working with the Central American left. That's me, fifth column all the way. I could be around friends painting "Yanqui Go Home" banners, or marches denouncing "North American Imperialism," and never found it insulting, never felt anyone was pointing a finger at me.

They weren't. My Central American comrades had more or less the same take on all this as I did. After all, their countries were even more divided than mine. As nationalistic as they were when confronting the US, no Salvadoran I ever met felt any morale burden for coming from the country that produced Roberto D'Aubuisson and his death squads.

I had assumed that the Balkans would work in a similar way. That people who had actively stuck their necks out in opposition to the war policies of their governments would not feel personally indicted when others did the same. I clearly had a lot to learn.

After the show I meet with Marko Breclj to settle the money for the night. It turns out he is running the club on such a shoestring that the extra expense of lighting for the concert is worrying him deeply, thus his hostility in the afternoon. For my part, this tour has never been about making money, so I promptly cut my already token fee in

half. Marko immediately lightens up. Now we are best friends. Now we have to drink together. Homemade wine from the area. If you think about the last time you bought a bottle of Yugoslav wine (maybe never?) then you can get a good picture of what we are drinking. But drink we do.

Only then does it come into clear focus what an amazing character Marko Breclj is. He describes his last project. He got a flat-bed truck, put a big sound system on it, positioned it at the foot of the hill the town sits on, aimed the speakers at the town, and had the punk bands he godfathers go to work. At 3am. Marko leans over as if to share an important secret. "Very disturbing music," he whispers.

Soon we are quoting Brecht to each other. Richard and I are invited to spend the night in his apartment. After more drinks, we are at his modest abode, and it is 4am. Richard and I have to be on a train at 6am. We catch a catnap, then return to the club in a stupor to pick up the gear. Marko grabs a laptop, the one we bring as a back-up in case one of the other two computers fails, to carry to the car. He sets it on top of a wall and turns around to unlock the car door. Bam. The laptop crashes to the street. Marko is profusely apologetic, but there is no time for that. We assure him all is fine, and rush off to the train.

Thursday, October 14

The train is set to leave as we pull up to the station and by some mad dash make it on board. One hour later we are changing trains at a gray, non-descript junction in a haze of exhaustion. With an hour to kill in the cold morning, we find the steamy cantina and order breakfast.

Coffee. We are from San Francisco, yuppie coffee capital of the world, and we need our coffee. Coffee and eggs sound sooo good. We get our trays, sit down, take a big sip of the hot drink, and spit it out coughing. The stuff is absolutely undrinkable. It is not just bad coffee, it is some entirely other substance which I cannot precisely identify but something about the flavor seems to suggest a dog had pissed in the pot. It is so bad, I cannot believe *anyone* could actually drink it.

I look around the cantina, full of sullen workers fueling up before settling in to another day of minding the tracks, mopping the floors, cleaning the johns, and all the other dull jobs that keep a train station running. And sure enough, not a one is drinking coffee. Every single customer, from the train crews to the old washer women, is having a very tall bottle of beer with their eggs. For breakfast. Seven am. Slovenia. End of the millenium.

We arrive in Maribor, the second city of Slovenia. Here we play at Kibla, a surprisingly well-equipped multi-media center. Kibla feels very western. Off from the bar is an internet cafe, equipped with numerous computers with high-speed internet connections, and full of teen-agers surfing the web. The teen-agers, I am told, are always there. So much so that Kibla has had to start closing for lunch just to get the kids out the door. Parents were complaining.

As opposed to the first two gigs, the Kibla folks have read the tech rider and have everything we need. Yet bizarre problems plague the set-up. Cable after cable seems to go bad. We get shocks from the gear. Finally, Richard gets out his volt meter and checks the power in the hall. The outlets at the back, where the video projector is plugged in, and those at the stage, where everything else is plugged in, are wired differently, and the two grounds are off by 110 volts! We have just cooked the solder off most of our cables. Frantic rearrangements ensue, continuing right up until show time.

Somehow, everything comes together, and we play by far our best show. The audience, however, offers only cursory applause before quickly filing out. I am mystified.

Dinner and drinks follow. Once again, our hosts could not be more gracious. David Braun, a human rights lawyer and sometimes music critic, is among them. David has seriously studied my music as much as anyone in the world, and was central in helping me organize the tour. He is preparing to go to work for the International War Crimes Tribunal. Peter Tomaz Dobrila, the director of Kibla, is an extremely warm man, as is his partner, Aleksandra Kostic.

After what is for me a considerable amount of alcohol (though I am sure not for our hosts), the talk turns to the concert. David is very enthusiastic. In fact, he had written a pre-show article for the Maribor newspaper saying that I was the only artist he would trust with such politically delicate material. Coming from David, this was extremely flattering. I ask him about the subdued audience response. David had seen both shows, and agreed tonight's was

superior. "But think about the nature of the show," he tells me. "Of course, the better you do it, the less the applause."

I press them about whether I should go ahead and do the show in Serbia, should that prove possible. They are decidedly mixed on this score. Aleksandra tells me it all depends on how much I value my teeth. Peter's opinion is just a straightforward no, it would be too dangerous.

After more drinks, however, Aleksandra Kostic loosens up and really speaks her mind. Not only does she think I should not do the piece in Serbia, she thinks it is inappropriate for me to do it anywhere in the Balkans. "The images you use," she explains, "we have a completely different relation with them than you or anyone else who is not from the Balkans can have. We have seen them every day for 10 years. At first we cried over them. Now we watch them over dinner without a second thought. You cannot know this experience. Your piece is very good, don't get me wrong. It has been a very long time since I have seen such an effective use of image. You should definitely do the piece. In Austria. Do it in Germany. Certainly do it in the US. But do not come here and do this piece. It is wrong."

This silences the group. Our hosts seem worried that Aleksandra has crossed the line of polite behavior. I am half elated to be finally having a serious discussion of my work with someone who is obviously extremely intelligent and articulate, and half panicked over the content of her remarks. The fallout from her outburst occupies the rest of the evening. As we part company, she says once more. "Don't do this in Serbia, unless you don't mind coming back without your teeth."

I turn this over and over in my mind before falling asleep. I think she is right. This is the first time I have used video with my music and I am learning how different image and sound are. It is very rare that a sound, by itself, will carry such specific personal, social, and political baggage as an image. Though we do not all hear sound the same way, the difference in how we see images is much greater. This difference is greatly magnified by the media. In San Francisco I really had to dig to find the images I used. In Maribor, I could have taken them from the TV almost any night in the last ten years.

Friday, October 15

Today we head to Budapest for one more show before Serbia. That is, if I do in fact go to Serbia. It is our first day with no concert, and we are thankful for it. Before departing for Hungary I collect my email at the Kibla internet cafe, and step into the morass once again.

There is a message from Marko Kosnick, saying he will not be able to accompany me to Serbia after all, since he too cannot get a visa. Marko is quite surprised. He has always received a visa with no problem, and has performed in Beograd several times. It seems that getting in to Serbia is not just an American problem.

The second message is from the organizers in Beograd, encouraging me once more to go ahead and come, insisting that all will be fine. I write back a detailed account of Aleksandra's comments last night, and add that after having thought about it I am inclined to agree with her.

Richard and I discuss all this on the train. There are several options in front of us.

- Richard can try to get a visa in Budapest. This seems such a long shot as to be virtually out of the question.

- I can go, but just play concerts of improvised music.

- I can go, but just do War Games, the first half of the concert. I can handle this piece on my own. And it is the second half of the concert, "These Hands," which is being perceived as anti-Serb. On the other hand, I cringe at the idea of doing one version of the show in Serbia that is "sanitized" for Serbs, and another version everywhere else. It seems fundamentally dishonest. Better to not do the show at all. But this is a bitter pill after so much preparation, finally getting my visa, and arriving a stone's throw from the border.

- There is one more possibility. In Budapest we are to hook up with Jozef Cseres. Jozef is a professor of aesthetics from the University of Bratislava who has been instrumental in helping set up this tour. Jozef is planning on going to Serbia at the same time I am, for an art show he has a hand in in Novi Sad. "Plan Z" is that in Budapest we teach Jozef to do Richard's work, and that Jozef do the concerts with me in Serbia.

The number of factors to weigh, the complexity of each, the diminishing time before a decision has to be made, and the accumulating sleep deprivation and alcohol in the bloodstream leaves me extremely stressed out. I begin to feel sick.

Saturday, October 16

In Budapest things go wrong from the moment we arrive at the venue. Our concert is at the very grand Palace of Fine Art in central Budapest, but inside we find a dismal situation that is all too typical of my experiences of such places. Though the building is gigantic, our concert has been banished off to a decidedly not-so-grand lecture hall in the basement. Serious work will have to be done to mount the concert in this room. Unfortunately, that is not what the technical crew has in mind. The crew views concerts like ours as an irritation imposed upon them by some bureaucrat who for some reason cannot be happy simply putting on the more mainstream fare upstairs. And they view us as rank amateurs who have no idea what we are doing. They have not even looked at the technical rider. And when we show it to them, they simply do not believe that we actually need the gear we request. It is going to be a very long day. For Richard in particular, it will be a fight to the wire to get the show up and ready by curtain time.

Any thoughts of spending the day training Jozef to do our show are scrapped. In fact, all thoughts of anything other than getting the show together go out the window. Things are not helped by the fact that I now have a full-fledged fever, cough, and sore throat. All I want to do is lie down. For the fourth time in four concerts, the set-up goes the entire day, right up to, and in fact a few minutes past show time.

After the show, which was not surprisingly sub-par, we discuss the concert with audience members. There is one man from Serbia, and of course I seek out his opinion. He is ethnically Hungarian, part of the Hungarian minority in the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina. He is very moved by the piece, and he thanks me effusively for the evening. But he is quite taken aback when he hears that I might be leaving for Serbia the next day. "You can do this concert in Vojvodina," he says. "This will be fine. But do not do this piece in Beograd. They will kill you."

Off we go for the night's drinking, fever and all. I almost collapse at my place before they finally consent to call me a taxi. I go to sleep more torn than ever over what to do the next day, though really I am too sick to think about much at all.

Sunday, October 17

In the morning Richard and I meet Jozef and several others at the apartment of the director for breakfast. Breakfast with wine and schnapps, of course. I get a last email from Beograd. It is a lengthy, detailed, and well thought out response to my last message as to why I should, without any doubt, leave for Serbia that day.

Finally, I am too sick and too tired to think about it anymore, and I just give it all up and say I am going. I will go, and I will play one set of improvised music, and the first half of Yugoslavia Suite, War Games. I will leave the desktop computer and all the accessories necessary for These Hands with Richard in Budapest. With nothing but the two laptops I can do the stripped down show I have decided on. But we have to move quickly.

Jozef agrees to come along. His art show has been canceled, and he cannot participate in my show, but he comes for moral support and because he will write an article about the tour afterwards.

I empty everything possible from my bags. Books -- most importantly the history of Kosovo I am reading, but also papers, notes, and most of my CDs (don't want customs problems on top of everything else). It is a routine I am familiar with from crossing borders in Central America a decade ago. I pare down to the laptop computers, spare socks and underwear, and a toothbrush.

As I am saying good-bye and making arrangements to meet Richard in several days, Richard insists he will go to the Yugoslav Embassy in Budapest in the morning to try to get a visa one last time. I try to explain that he would be better off just enjoying himself in Budapest instead of wasting his time pointlessly arguing with Yugoslav bureaucrats, but Richard has decided. I am concerned for him. Aside from brief tours with me, Richard has hardly been out of his home state of California, much less out of the US. The idea of him, through some weird fluke, getting a visa and coming into Serbia by himself is disconcerting. On my way out the door, I turn and tell him that, even if he gets the visa, he should not bring the trunk with all our instruments, which would make him an easy

mark crossing the border. This means that even if he comes we cannot do our full concert, but it seems the only prudent course.

Everything is tense. Our idea is to take the train to Novi Sad, then connect with a car to take us to Beograd. At the train station Jozef and I share nervous beers in a wonderful "old Europe" restaurant in the grandiose but grand Budapest train station. There is a white grand piano on a stage in the middle of the restaurant. Very fancy. Each of its three legs is carefully seated in a glass ashtray. Very odd. Jozef thinks this is hilarious and wants to me take his picture, seated on the stage and pointing at one of the ashtrays as if he is giving a lecture. Waiters come running, terrified that the bearded bohemian character with raggedy clothes, a thick beard and few teeth is actually about to play something at the piano.

At the border things are even more tense. Team after team of customs officials, immigration officials, police, and soldiers pass through the car, asking to see our passports for the fourth time, our tickets for the third time, our visas for the nth time, and so forth.

After nearly an hour wait and no serious problem, the train lurches forward and we are heading in to the final remains of Yugoslavia, thinking we are in the clear. Wrong.

Two very large and aggressive Serbian police come into the car, pass by everyone and stop squarely in front of us. They want my passport. They want to know what I am doing in Yugoslavia. They want to go through my bags, item by item. There is not much to look at. For some reason they are not interested in the laptops. Even more surprisingly they are not interested in the cds, which are usually the touchy issue at borders. But these are police, not customs officials. Which is fine by me. A quarter of the cds are from my new trio, Pantychrist, a topic I did not want to get into with the cops.

They are done with me. I breathe a sigh of relief, but then they turn to Jozef. Since Jozef is traveling with me, he is also under suspicion. Typically, a Slovakian traveling into Yugoslavia would not attract much attention, so Jozef did not pack his bags with the expectation they would be searched by Milosevic's police. But now he is traveling with an American. And in his bag, it turns out, is a cornucopia of modern art *stuff*.

There are many languages in Eastern Europe, and almost no one can speak them all. But almost everyone speaks a little English. So Jozef and the cop discuss the contents of his bag in extremely broken English.

The cop finds a packet of snapshots. "Vat is dis?" "Dis is pictures of exhibition at Andy Warhol museum" The flustered policeman carefully scrutinizes each of the photos for subversive content. Out come more and more photos, programs from obscure dada-esque exhibits, momentos of the extreme absurdism popular among eastern European intellectuals. The cop examines each one as if it were a counterfeit hundred dollar bill, scratching his head, squinting, but trying to maintain his aggressive and intimidating presence, which he accomplishes quite successfully.

Out comes the lecture notes from Jozef's performance the previous night, an absurd and completely hilarious bit which featured Jozef lecturing about artists floating in space making art which emanates from their suits as electro-magnetic waves.

The cop is now completely stumped. "Vat is dis?" "Dis is art lecture about artists in future."

Next out comes the program from my show in Budapest. Oops. There is a picture from "War Games" which shows a stealth bomber looking like a giant bird flapping its wings. "Vat is dis?" "Dis is parody of American war games." Not good. Not the right photo. Not the right answer.

But worse is to come. "Vat is dis?" "Dis is article I wrote for Slovakian minority in Vojvodina." This requires some explanation.

Vojvodina is Serbia's northernmost province. Other than Kosovo, it is the only area in Serbia with significant minorities, and, unlike Kosovo, there are many: Slovakian, Hungarian, Croatian, Gypsy, and more. Like Kosovo, Vojvodina enjoyed considerable autonomy until Milosevic came along. It is conceivable that at some point in the future Milosevic will have a problem with Vojvodina on the same scale he has now in Kosovo. But the police are Serb, and for now they have everything in hand. Some of these police, in fact, are standing right in front of me.

They don't like minorities, and they particularly don't like the idea of foreign intellectuals stirring up the local minorities.

Not that Jozef is going to stir anyone up. Jozef's work is all about absurdity and impossibility, about Andy Warhol and pianos in ashtrays. But these subtleties are beyond our policeman, who is looking increasingly unhappy.

Back to Jozef's magazine for the Slovakian minority. The cop doesn't believe such a magazine exists. (Slovakians read magazines?) Jozef produces a copy.

Finally, the police are gone, and Jozef and I relax. OK. I am in. The only American artist in Yugoslavia.

I look around. Not surprisingly, the train is almost empty. Very few people want to go to Serbia now. Those that want to cannot get visas. The countryside is typical of this part of the world: farms and fields in every direction. Huge bunches of wheat in rows. Farmers with tractors and even an occasional elevated irrigation system are interspersed with farmers on foot using handmade tools. You often see these solitary figures walking through a field or on a road with no buildings or vehicles in sight. These are people who walk a very long way.

Novi Sad is the capital of Vojvodina and our first destination. I need to get to Beograd tonight, but there are no trains that far. The bridges have been blown up by NATO. I am to be picked up by car in Novi Sad and taken to Beograd. After the Beograd concert I will be driven back to perform in Novi Sad before finally leaving Yugoslavia.

But just as the train pulls into Novi Sad the police are back. "You," they point to me, "and you," they point to Jozef, "must come with us to police station in Novi Sad." Without further discussion we are marched to the very back of the train. This is seriously not good. In a rational sense I am not afraid. My visa is in order. My invitations are in order. It is not credible that the Yugoslav government would find it in its interest to create an international incident over a visiting American musician. Nevertheless, I do *not* want to go to the police station in Novi Sad. I am feeling very alone. After all, not only did the US break diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia, there is hardly a western embassy left in the country. If I am in trouble, there is no one to go to for help.

The one thing between us and the police station are the concert organizers who are to meet us at the train station. I hope they got the message that we were to be on this train. I hope they are on time. I hope I will recognize them. But when the train stops we are led out the back door and into a dark area away from the small crowd on the platform. Just before disappearing into the blackness I blurt out that I just need to tell the people who are waiting for us where we are going, and head off in the opposite direction toward the light and the voices, with the startled police following close behind.

"Bob Ostertag?" A face materializes out of the crowd. "Welcome. How are you?" "Fine, fine, just a small problem with the police," I answer, motioning to the goons following on my heels.

A short time later Jozef and I are seated in an Italian restaurant on the main square of Novi Sad. Seated in a semi-circle facing us are Elza Vuletic, her technical director Arpad, and two other men. Boris and Olya, who came from Beograd to pick us up, have been banished to their car. "Shouldn't we invite them in too," I ask. "They have nothing to do with this," Elza responds. "They are just drivers." So for the next hour, while Jozef and I warm up over cappuccino, Boris and Olya freeze outside in the front seat of their unheated Yugo. Apparently the bad blood between Beograd and Novi Sad extends even to cultural organizers in the opposition.

Typically, upon arriving in a town for a concert, a touring musician exchanges a few pleasantries with the organizers, visits the venue, goes over some tech, and goes to the hotel to freshen up. But any sense of pleasantness or casualness evaporates when, first thing, Elza looks me in the eye and in an icy voice says, "So, do you really think you have anything to teach us about the bombing?"

It dawns on me this is less a friendly cup of coffee than an interrogation, by five very angry people who want to know why the hell I am there and what I have to say for myself. They watch my every move, my every twitch. I try to explain. I am not there to teach anyone anything. I was opposed to the bombing. I have written a piece about the bombing I want to perform for them.

It is heavy going. In part they are testing me, probing this stranger in a place where no one visits. And in part they are, in some very small way, starting to spill their guts about the horrors they have recently gone through, and

which they have had no chance to share with anyone who did not go through it with them. And in part, as I learn much later, they are testing each other, but that is getting ahead of the story.

People in Vojvodina certainly have reason to be angry. Vojvodina is Serbia's *other* multi-ethnic, formerly autonomous stronghold of opposition to Milosevic, but NATO rained more bombs down on them than any other part of Serbia. Their once-beautiful bridges now lie in the Danube blocking boat traffic. (A new locally-produced postcard proclaims, "Novi Sad, where the Danube runs over the bridges.") No bridges were bombed in Beograd. There NATO hit the Ministry of Defense, the state television, and other military and political targets. In Novi Sad they hit the power plant, the oil refinery, and the cigarette factory.

There were no militarily strategic targets in Novi Sad. Kosovo is at the south tip of Serbia, Vojvodina at the north, as far from the fighting and refugees as one can get. Not once in 10 years has the region voted for Milosevic. But NATO had decided not to fight a war in Kosovo, but rather to bomb Milosevic into submission by destroying Serbia's industrial infrastructure, much of which happened to be in Novi Sad.

I remember back to my days as a journalist in El Salvador. Economic sabotage played a key role in the rebel strategy to overthrow the US-backed regime. The sabotage consisted mostly of blowing up electrical poles and small bridges with homemade bombs. And every time they did so, the American Embassy would trot out some talking head to condemn the act. Bridges and civilian electrical infrastructure, they would tell us, were *not legitimate military targets*. Though I was quite sympathetic to the rebels, I agreed with the Embassy on this point. Counterproductive too: the rebels lost enormous popular support over it.

In Novi Sad we're not talking about a local militia member strapping a homemade bomb to the electrical pole on the corner. We're talking about bombs which explode above ground, spreading magnetic junk specifically designed to take out major power installations. The war is over but when the wind comes up the junk blows around and more damage ensues. All this is in the isolated and bankrupt Serbia of Slobodan Milosevic. There is no money to rebuild much of anything that was destroyed.

We arrive with the first chill winds of winter, which bring the Serbs face to face with a very harsh reality. The coming winter is going to be hard. There is no heat in Novi Sad, and the electricity is intermittent. The weather is not improving anyone's mood.

Finally, the people from Beograd have had enough of sitting in the cold. They come and rescue Jozef and I from our interrogation. We pile into the tiny Yugo with no heat or defrost, and speed into the night towards Beograd.

Olya, a thin, beautiful young woman who does not say a word, is driving. A very tall, string bean of a man who looks to be in his late 20's does the back seat driving and talks non-stop. Together with the cop, that makes two really tall Serbs I have met already. I remember how the NBA is stocking up on Yugoslav basketball players.

Boris is a student. He is full of opinions, and he hates Milosevic. He doesn't want the War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague to get their hands on Milosevic because they have no death penalty. Yet as the conversation develops, it becomes clear that his hatred of Milosevic is of a particular sort.

Boris lives with his parents. His father is a colonel in the Yugoslav (Serb) army. A "war hero" in the last war, according to Boris. (I briefly wonder how one becomes a war hero in a war where one side just picks on civilians and the other side launches missiles from hundreds of miles away.) The family lived on a military base until the beginning of the bombing, at which point they moved into a friend's house since the base was expected to be hit. Now the war is over, but the family is still squatting with friends. Apparently Milosevic lacks even the resources to find housing for decorated army colonels. Boris' anger at his housing situation is multiplied by his feelings for his dad, who he clearly worships, and the result is a deep felt rage.

What he hates most is his country's isolation, and he dreams of getting out. The first chance he gets, Boris is out of here and not looking back. He doesn't want to go to demonstrations, doesn't want to fix anything, he just wants to leave. And when he gets to the West, he is going to buy a nice car. This is what he really wants to talk about, what kind of car he will get in the West.

Unlike the people we left in Novi Sad, Boris is very up to date on the international music scene of which I am a part. He is the first fan I have ever met who wanted to talk to me about hot cars. Somehow, in the midst of all the

extremes and contradictions I am surrounded by, at the moment this is the most jarring. But this is nothing compared with what comes next.

After cars, Boris wants to talk about John Zorn. Would I please tell him everything I can about John. John has been a close friend and colleague for 20 years. From the obscurity of the avant garde, John has shot up to a celebrity status previously unimaginable for "one of us." As a result, everywhere I go people want to talk about John.

Finally, I say, "You know, I have collaborated with dozens of extraordinary musicians, but everywhere I go people only want to talk about John. I wonder why that is."

Without a moment's hesitation, Boris answers back, "Because he's Jewish."

I am dumbfounded.

"But, he's industrious, not lazy. So it's fine," Boris continues. "Many of them can be like this. I have no problem with them."

To get to Beograd, Olya has to negotiate one of the scariest roads on which it has ever been my misfortune to travel. The highway to Beograd was a grand idea that was never completed as the Tito regime ran out of money in the 1980s. It was intended as a 4-lane divided highway, but only one side got built. Traffic in both directions now squeezes onto the same half. The oncoming traffic took one good lane. Traffic going our way drove on what was intended to be the shoulder. The other actual traffic lane, between us, was used as a passing lane for cars going both directions. The result was a constant game of chicken that involved everyone on the road.

Major unrepaired potholes were everywhere, but did the holes and the soft shoulder make anyone slow down? Not in the slightest. The Serbs drove as if they were out on the German autobahn. Each near miss or thud from a pothole would elicit fresh curses or expressions of surprise, but the velocity of our little chunk of metal hurtling through the cold Balkan night remained constant.

Before falling asleep at the hotel, Jozef and I exchanged notes just long enough to agree on one thing: that in no case should Richard come to Serbia. We both had the exact same reaction when imagining Richard on his own with the people we had just met in Novi Sad: they would eat him alive. I decided to call first thing in the morning to tell him to stay put.

Monday, October 18

The new day brought a whirlwind of activity as different in feeling from what I had been through in Novi Sad as one could imagine. Despite everything, Beograd is still a busy city, and no part of it was busier than the offices of Free B92 where I spent most of the day.

Free B92 is the only major independent media functioning in Serbia. It encompasses a radio station, a web site, and TV shows which are passed by video cassette among several local stations round the country. In the beginning it was known only as B92, a lone voice of authentic opposition. Milosevic got his money's worth by making sure everyone knew that *he* was allowing something as critical and sharp-edged as B92 to operate, while in neighboring Croatia with whom Serbia had been at war, the *other* butcher of the Balkans, Franjo Tudjman (who the US supports), allowed nothing of the kind.

But that war was over. When the war with NATO started, Milosevic's goons marched into B92 and took it over. The workers were free to stay, in fact, strongly encouraged to stay, because the goons knew nothing about running a radio station. But from then on, party hacks would be in charge. The story went that the new director decorated his desk with a framed photograph of himself with Milosevic, a photo which was an obvious montage.

The staff would have none of it, and within weeks Free B92 was on the air, operating from a different premises a few blocks away, with a frequency subtlet from another station. The hacks were left in an empty office broadcasting taped music all day, admiring the faked photograph of their boss with *the* boss.

To an urban western radical like myself, Free B92 is a sort of Shangri-La. In a country run by a bona fide war criminal they fearlessly tell the truth. Their use of the internet is pioneering. The sophistication of their ideas about

media, politics and culture is second to none. Their shows are very popular. People really listen to them. They're young, hip, and good-looking. They've got style for days. And they manage to mix real politics with playing real music. And we're not talking Pete Seeger or Tracy Chapman. We're talking *my* music, which gets no airplay *at all* in my home country.

Amazingly, they seemed pretty excited about me too. Suddenly, I was transformed from obscure avant garde artist into minor celebrity. By the end of the day, I had done three television interviews, four radio interviews, and one newspaper interview.

Everywhere people seemed somewhat incredulous. First, that I had made it there at all. Second, that I had wanted to come in the first place. Third, that I had actually done my homework, and could discuss the break-up of Yugoslavia in a nuanced way.

People in Beograd had a unique take on the war. They were not bombed as heavily as the people up north. There had been no fighting there like down south in Kosovo. Their direct experience of the war was limited to the long range missiles and bombs that fell. And the highly accurate and selective targeting of these weapons made that experience into something of a show.

As it was first explained to me, "If you were in a pub drinking a beer, and missile hit your car outside, you would just go on drinking." The point being that the NATO bombs were so accurate and selective that ordinary people could go about their lives, after a fashion. Several people told me stories of smoking pot on their balconies while watching bombs fall and anti-aircraft guns shoot tracers.

The remains of the war one sees around Beograd lends credence to these stories. Buildings tied to the Milosevic regime or to the army stand in various stages of rubble, while the buildings next door on either side seem untouched. (In Novi Sad, a floating restaurant at the foot of a formerly majestic bridge that is now crumpled in the Danube did not even sustain a broken window.)

But this almost artificial character of the war in Beograd leads to the wildest conspiracy theories. Everyone has one. No intrigue is too far-fetched. My first night in Beograd the concert organizers take me to dinner. Over pizza and the Spice Girls blaring from the muzak system, they explain to me how the war was fake: a theatrical, phony war contrived by Milosevic and Clinton working in cahoots behind the scenes for their mutual advantage.

Milosevic arranged the war, according to this theory, because his faltering regime was on the verge of collapse, and he needed to rally the country and isolate the opposition, which the war did, in fact, accomplish quite nicely.

My finely-tuned social antennae suggest that laughing out loud and saying, "But that's preposterous," would be inappropriate. So I delicately ask what Clinton got out of the deal. On this score they are a little unsure. Perhaps just the opportunity to show off American weapons that they could then sell around the world. Another theory is that NATO wanted a base in Kosovo.

One hears more and more of these stories. They differ wildly, but if you add all the conspiracies together, and subtract those details that do not match from one story to another, what you are left with is this: the war had two players: Bill Clinton and Slobodan Milosevic, and one set of victims -- the Serbs. Kosovars just don't figure in the math.

Later, back in Novi Sad, while listening to another conspiracy theory unfold, I try to ask why it was that 850,000 Kosovar Albanians left their homes, livestock, and all other possessions and fled over the border into stinking, inhuman refugee camps. It was all a trick, I am told, a giant ruse organized by the KLA to trick NATO into bombing the Serbs. It doesn't take too many of these discussions to conclude that engaging in meaningful dialog about the war is a sycophantic undertaking.

A few weeks before my arrival, the opposition had announced it would hold nightly protest marches against the regime until Milosevic resigned. But that was before it became clear how weak the opposition is. Not weak in numbers -- very few Serbs actually support the regime anymore. But the opposition is divided. There is a huge gulf between those who hate Milosevic because he is a war criminal who has trampled on democracy, and those who hate him because he lost the war. There is no alternative politician who arouses anyone's passion. And in the

meantime, Milosevic has made it clear he will not leave without bloodshed. The state media continually warns of the possibility of civil war.

As a result, every last person I meet in Serbia is pessimistic and depressed. This, truly, is a country -- or at least, part of a former country -- that has just lost four wars.

There seems to be a generational response. Boris and the 20-somethings think only of leaving. Bojan Djordjevic is Boris' 30-something boss and the chief organizer of my concert. Bojan is a wonderful, soft-spoken man with a gentle manner, a lawyer by trade and a concert organizer by avocation. Bojan is not going anywhere. Bojan is old enough to remember Communist Yugoslavia, and somehow the result is a lasting political commitment to his country. "These younger people, they just want to leave," he explains with a heavy air of resignation. "I understand why, but it is sad. My generation wants to stay and somehow set this situation right."

The memory of Communist Yugoslavia is a fascinating piece of the current patchwork of political life. I ran a highly unscientific opinion poll, asking everyone I met in current and former Yugoslavia what they thought of Tito. Stacked against one negative reply were dozens of positive responses. In fact, "positive responses" doesn't really get it: there were many forthright expressions of love. From Serbs, Slovenes, and Croats. I try to imagine an American president staying in power for 40 years and people still loving him. Nope, can't do it.

Everyone reminds me that Yugoslavia was the only Communist country with an open border to the west. While East Germans were risking death climbing over the Berlin Wall, Yugoslavs could come and go as they pleased. In fact, given Tito's role as founder of the Movement of Non-Aligned Nations, a Yugoslav passport was possibly the easiest passport to travel with in the world. Many Yugoslavs took regular advantage of this fact, as did many criminals -- Yugoslav passports may have been the most frequently stolen as well.

There never was an anti-communist revolution in Yugoslavia. No one was itching to throw off the yoke of Bolshevism. What there was instead was an extremely rapid decline of the credibility of the communist party after Tito's death. When "democratic" elections finally appeared on the agenda, the only card the Party had to play was blatant, violent, aggressive nationalism.

Now every night people march through downtown Beograd to demand Milosevic's resignation. I accompanied my friends from Free B92. Despite the reduced numbers from just a couple of weeks ago, there is still energy crackling in the cold night air. People whistle, boo, and shout slogans. "Slobo - Saddam, Slobo - Saddam," seems to be the one that touches the deepest nerve.

The march ends up at the square where the club I will perform in sits, which bodes well for the turn-out at the concert. I break off and go in to set up my instruments. I get a message that Richard is in Novi Sad. My heart sinks. Somehow, he got a visa in Budapest, and crossed the border, (without the instruments, as I had hastily instructed). But there is no time to even *think* about this now. He is on his own.

I boot the two laptops, one for audio and one for video, and disaster strikes. In all the chaos and stress, I had completely lost track of the fact that the second laptop, which until now had only been along as a back-up, had not been turned on since its dramatic fall from the wall back in Koper. And in fact it is damaged. It doesn't boot properly and exhibits various kinds of erratic behavior. With time winding down, I go through yet another round of extremely stressful last-minute hi-tech fiddling. Finally, the computer is in a state where at least some of the features of the software are working. Every time I reboot the system manifests a new kind of weird behavior, so if for any reason I have to reboot there is no assurance I will be able to get it working again. But as long as no one touches it, the concert *should* be OK.

Despite the fact there has been very little publicity since no one knew exactly when or if I would arrive, an overflow crowd arrives, boosted no doubt by the demonstration. There is also FreeB92 TV, radio, and newspaper. To say that I am nervous would be an understatement, but at least the nervous tension is picking me up out of the lethargy of my cold.

I go on and play an improvisation that the audience seems to be quite excited about. Then I do War Games, which is a disappointment. It may have been the tension, or the fatigue, or being sick, or the malfunctioning of the computer, but it is the worst version of the piece I have done. This, combined with the fact that it really was

intended as the opening half for a finale that is absent, leaves me with a bitter taste about the show. But the audience is appreciative, and there are more TV and radio interviews to do.

The moment I finish the show another tall Serb strides across the stage and is in my face. "I tried so hard to forget about these things," he tells me, "and now you bring them all back."

"I hope I have not offended you," I reply.

"No. No, not at all." he responds. "Thank you. Thank you very much." He warmly shakes my hand and turns and walks away.

Tuesday, October 19

Up early in the morning and off for Novi Sad, with Olya again at the wheel of her beat-up car with no heating. Only this time it is pouring rain, and the broken defroster keeps her new companion busy trying to maintain at least a modicum of visibility by wiping the window with his hat. Through the foggy windows, I perceive a disconcerting feature of the road I had missed in the darkness of night on my way in: the sides of the highway are strewn with the remains of numerous car wrecks.

In Novi Sad the Cultural Center proves difficult to find. We ask people on the street and no one has heard of it. I learn later this is due to recent demographic changes. Novi Sad has been hit with a flood a Serbian refugees from Milosevic's failed wars. First from the Krajina region of Croatia following the war with Croatia. Then from Bosnia after the tragedy in Bosnia. Now most recently from Kosovo. There is tension between city's new and old residents, and many of the long-timers who had a way to move away have done so. The change is so pronounced that if you ask someone on the street for directions, chances are they have not lived in the city long. We finally find the theater, and find Richard having a very tough time of it with our hosts.

Richard, it turns out, had his own travel difficulties. Police pulled him from the train at the border for interrogation in a room somewhere in the train station. Where was he going? Why? Who was he meeting? And the cop kept asking if he wanted a Yugoslavian dinner. Richard thought this was not a good sign, since at first they had told him it would only take a few minutes. But, being the exceedingly polite and open person that he is, he responded each time by saying, "Thank you, you are too kind, but I have sandwiches in my backpack." What Richard did not know was that the Yugoslav currency is the *dinar*. The cops wanted bribes, and Richard was offering them sandwiches. Evidently, at some point it was determined that Richard was not a threat to the security of Yugoslavia and he was sent on his way.

Upon arrival in Novi Sad, Richard landed on the same hotseat I had, but there was no car waiting to rescue him away to Beograd. Richard is an excellent lighting designer and theatrical technician, but politics have never been his thing. His knowledge of Yugoslavia is limited, as is his experience in travel of any kind or dealing with people from other cultures. But Richard spends the evening at Elza's surrounded by the same crew that "greeted" me the night before. There is no heat, and then the electricity goes out. Huddled around a candle, he tries to answer the questions. "Why did you bomb our oil refinery? Why did you bomb our cigarette plant?" It is a very long night.

When I arrive at the theater, however, there is little time for catching up. The show is scheduled to start in just hours. I pull the laptops out, boot them up, and discover that the one that was dropped is functioning more erratically than ever. Time for more frantic computer fiddling. Eventually I decide that maybe the memory chips were knocked loose in the fall. Using only Richard's Swiss Army knife for a tool, we start dismantling the computer right there on the stage.

An exceedingly drunk Serb walks up on the stage, announces he is an artist, and watches our work. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to fix this computer." The situation is tense and time is running out. The last thing we want to do is humor this drunk but we are not sure how to make him go away.

"It's broken?"

"Yes." We are trying our best to ignore him.

"How?"

"Someone dropped it in Koper."

He gets a wild light in his eye. He grabs our laptop by the screen and raises it over his head as if ready to smash it on the floor.

"Well, if a Slovene broke it, hey, I am Serb. I should *destroy* it!"

"No No! NO!. *Please* put the computer down."

"No, you don't understand," he leers at us. "If a Slovene broke it, then a Serb should really smash it to bits."

It is difficult to tell if he is really going to smash the computer on to the floor, but he is holding the thing by the lid, and it is quite clear that his thumb is about to go right through the screen. The guy goes teetering about the stage with the computer over his head and Richard and I trailing, pleading, "*Please* put the computer down."

We finally get the computer back and the man staggers off, but things do not improve. We coax and curse and blow on it and reboot over and over, but this computer is toast. I explain to Elza that we will not be able to do any part of Yugoslavia Suite. There are two options, I continue. I could do a concert of improvised music on the one working computer, or we can cancel the show.

Now the real trouble starts, as it becomes clear who we are dealing with. It turns out that the man who first agreed to present the concert, an artist friend of Jozef's, had left Novi Sad for Stockholm. He passed the job on to Elza, and Elza passed it on to the Cultural Center. And the Cultural Center staff are straight out of central casting for the role of Balkan bureaucrats for a "B" Hollywood movie. They never smile. They are stern and seem constantly annoyed. More importantly, they do not seem to understand why we are here; they don't like us, and they certainly don't trust us.

Arpad is the man from the Center to deal with, and Arpad decides we will postpone the concert until tomorrow night. This makes no sense at all. The computer is not going to fix itself overnight, and in any case we are scheduled to leave the next morning. But the decision is made, we ask the audience to come back the next night, and soon Richard and I are upstairs in the office, in another meeting that feels more like an interrogation.

Arpad does not actually believe that the computer is broken. He keeps asking us why we do not want to do the concert. What he *is* thinking is not at all clear, but he finds our whole project fishy. By this point Richard and I are thinking that even if the computer worked, we might *not* want to do Yugoslavia Suite, but we certainly don't say so and it is a moot point anyway.

Arpad announces that overnight they will find us another computer. I try explaining that this is far-fetched. The computer we have is quite fast, stuffed with an extraordinary amount of memory, and includes special video hardware I am sure he cannot find in Yugoslavia.

Arpad produces Sinisa Sremac, a chunky fellow of about 25 whose got "hustler" coming out of every pore. Sinisa produces a cell phone, and announces with a quick call he can produce any computer I wish for. I give him the list of our requirements. After a few phone calls, he admits it may take a bit longer, but promises he will have it in the morning. I reiterate my view that we are on a wild goose chase, but refusing their offer and heading for the train station does not seem to be a realistic option.

Off we go to an uneasy dinner. I spend most of my time conversing with Elza, who I am starting to warm up to. She is tough as nails, with a pronounced masculinity about her that in the US would be misread as "dyke," but in Novi Sad just means that she is up to the struggle of daily life. We discuss Milosevic and the subject of his wife, who they hate more than him. They say he is even more hard-line than he is, and that he is completely dependent on her, calling her more than 10 times every day. I mention that I am often skeptical when the wives are blamed for the shortfalls of political couples. "No," Elza firmly replies. "I completely understand this thing of a woman dominating a man."

As much as they hate Milosevic, it is difficult to engage them in a real way. Nothing bad happened in Kosovo, they are quite sure. They know it from a neighbor boy who was drafted. As for Bosnia, Elza flatly declares that "ethnic cleansing never happened." It is disconcerting to hear such a statement from an obviously bright and well-informed person.

Richard and I go to bed in a hotel which, like everywhere else in Novi Sad, has no heat and no hot water. We are counting the minutes until we can leave Novi Sad. The problem is that we don't know when this will be.

Wednesday, October 20

Back at the Cultural Center in the morning, and Sinisa reports that he cannot get the video hardware we need. (Surprise.) He is shocked there is a computer item he cannot get, and has ordered one just to prove to himself and anyone who will listen he can get it. But it will take three days at the earliest to arrive.

Just when Richard and I think we are off the hook, Arpad and Sinisa announce Plan B: they will repair our computer. I try to explain that this is the latest model Apple laptop, that we have already checked to see if the memory is loose, and that what really needs to happen is that it should be sent back to Apple.

Our hosts take this as an insult. We Americans do not understand the industriousness of Novi Sad -- how people here learn to make do with little, and to make the most of the little they have. "We have really good hackers here in Novi Sad," Sinisa counters. "Just give me your computer. In 3 hours I will bring it back working."

There is no way I am going to let this shark walk off with my computer, so soon Sinisa, Richard, Arpad and I are packed into a car racing across Novi Sad to hacker central. I am there because I want to be with my computer. Richard is there because he doesn't want to be left alone at the Center. And Arpad is there because he wants to keep an eye on us. All the time we are in Novi Sad, Arpad is there, watching our every move. If he isn't there himself, he has someone else there for him.

We pull into an apartment house complex of gray towering rectangles of cinder blocks like Communists built all over Europe after the world war. Up the rear elevator to the top floor. An apartment door opens and here we are. Hacker Central. The room is full of computers, very late model ones at that. A laptop like ours (minus the video input) is sitting on a table. "Nice computer," I comment.

"Yeah, it was stolen in Germany," Sinisa replies. Is he joking? I don't think so.

They have an internet phone hook-up and insist that I should make a "cheap" call anywhere I want. But, oops, their account is empty. Do I have a credit card? Yes? Just type in your numbers there. Good. I never did manage to make the call, but they got \$25 off my credit card for their phone line.

They bring us coffee and we sit and sip at a coffee table piled high with computer mail order catalogs and gun magazines, surrounded by whirring disks. They point to a field outside the window, into which fell several Tomahawk missiles during the war.

And then we meet the hackers. The hackers are worth the wait. These are serious kids, doing amazing things. So amazing, in fact, that we had to promise not to discuss their work with anyone.

Despite their skills, of course they cannot fix my computer. But Arpad is unconvinced. Back in the car and off to another hacker joint we go.

Finally, it is late in the day. We are back in the office at the Cultural Center, and I am facing the same interrogation team I was facing last night. Arpad has finally gotten it: the computer is broken. It is not a trick. I am not faking it. There is no subterfuge. It just got dropped by a drunk Slovenian rock star.

"So, what do we do now," he spits out the words.

Once again, I repeat what I said last night, that I can do an improvised music concert, or we can cancel the whole thing. I remind him that we are doing this for no money, not even travel expenses. I add that I am a composer, with 14 cd's of my music released, and that video is a recent addition to a career of mostly improvised music.

Arpad crosses his arms, leans back, squints his eyes, and in the iciest tone he can muster, says, "What *kind* of music."

People have been asking me this question since I was in junior high school, and I have never found a satisfactory answer. "Avant garde" (too academic). "Experimental" (not really). "Computer music" (I *hate* computer music). Lately I have settled on "Unpopular," but I don't think Arpad would get it. So I hand him a cd. "Listen for yourself."

Finally Arpad decides I should play. An audience about half the size of the previous night comes. We explain the situation. I play. Before the concert Arpad insists on coming on stage to tell me the way I am setting up my software and sound is completely wrong. At this point I sort of snap. I mean, I *wrote* this software. What is he talking about?

After the concert I grab Elza and tell her we need to talk. She is the one person in Novi Sad I feel any real connection with, and I have actually come to like her a lot. She takes me into her office and I let it all loose:

Elza, you gotta cut us some slack. There are millions of Americans, and Richard and I are the only ones that came here. We've studied the politics, made this concert, got the visas, and asked for no money, just to show some art and have some kind of a dialog. But you all haven't trusted us since the moment we got here. You don't believe us when we say the computer is broken, you watch us. I *told* you from the beginning that trying to fix this was a waste of time. And now Arpad tries to tell me how to use my own software.

I go for broke.

And as long as I am telling you what I think, I gotta say I think ethnic cleansing *happened*. You are a smart, well-informed and honest person. I respect your opinion. But I have done my research too and it *happened*. It was very real and very very bad.

Elza doesn't flinch. She speaks very quietly. She explains the Center people have been bothering her too, but since she technically does not work for them there is little she can do.

"But if you really knew the computer was broken, why did you go along with all this effort to fix it?," she asks.

"Elza, think about it. No one believed me. I honestly didn't know what would happen if I had announced we were leaving."

"Bob, you don't understand the Serb mentality. If that is what you really thought you should have said so, and told them, 'If you don't believe me, I am going to drop 17 more Tomahawk missiles on your heads!'"

"Elza, you know I couldn't do that."

She knows. "And as for ethnic cleansing," she adds, "maybe I am not as well-informed as you think I am."

We talk more. She tells me she is actually Croatian, but married to a Serb. I note that Croatian forces were guilty of crimes heinous as the Serbs. She asks me to send her any good documentation I have on ethnic cleansing. I felt very close to Elza, a very good person in a very tough situation.

Thursday, October 21

We finally leave Serbia. Richard is so happy I think he might break into song. I am mostly feeling tired and sick, but I am looking forward to hot water. When I think back to how Elza had one position on ethnic cleansing when in the presence of the men from the Cultural Center, and another one in private, I decide it was fortuitous that we were unable to perform Yugoslavia Suite in Novi Sad, and probably even in Beograd. A project like ours assumes the existence of a minimal amount of political space necessary to have the dialog the art is about. In Serbia, that space did not appear to exist.

The tour continues through Eastern Europe and into the West, ending in Bern, Switzerland, the tourist capital of the Alps, where everything is neat and tidy and the Balkans are far, far away.

I get my software stabilized. We have the working computer back. We discover that, given appropriate conditions, our show is actually quite easy to set up and perform. Free to concentrate on the work, the concert improves to the point we are very happy with it. As the shows improve, so does my health.

I haven't sent Elza the materials I promised on ethnic cleansing. She is quite internet-savvy, and there is documentation all over the web when she is ready to find it. I would love to see her again, but not tomorrow. Some time needs to pass.

On the other hand, I am in regular touch with Bojan from FreeB92, and also Marko Kosnick, with whom I am discussing a possible collaboration. In Marko I think I have found a long-term friend and colleague. And I sent a copy of my favorite Brecht poem to Marko Brecej:

I stood on a hill and I saw the Old approaching, but it came as the New.

It hobbled up on new crutches no one had ever seen before, and stank of new smells of decay no one had ever smelt before.

The stone that rolled past was the newest invention and the screams of the gorillas drumming on their chests set up to be the newest musical composition...

Back home in San Francisco, I turn to my next project: a multi-media collaboration with a Salvadoran playwright about a Salvadoran war veteran homeless on the streets of Washington DC. At this time next year, we hope to be touring it in Mexico and Central America.

Postscript

Excerpts from this journal were published in the British music magazine *The Wire* in XXXX, followed by numerous letters to the editor both supportive and harshly critical. The responses I really cared about, however, were from Aleksandra Kostic, the Slovenian art curator who had told me I should not tour my performance in the Balkans, and Elza Vuletic, the Croatian woman living in Serbia with whom I had had so much difficulty. Two strong, smart, opinionated, women.

Dear Bob,

I have read your article very carefully. I can not comment it yet. In some parts I felt bitter, in others I completely agree with you. In some situation I think you misunderstood me, in some other you understood me better than I understand myself. Anyway, you are right in one thing: There should be some time until we really realise what was happening. I just hope it will happen soon. I wish you all the best in your private and professional life. And truly I am sorry you did not perform Yugoslavia Suite in Novi Sad.

Elza

Dear Bob

Final conclusion: yes, you certainly are an American and no, we are not Yugoslavian any more - unfortunately. Maybe you haven't noticed that my and older generation are deeply nostalgic for Tito's Yuga. It was a special time. Ruining it with terrible human sacrifices is a tragedy difficult to understand. Such a hate is born from a deep love, I believe this.

Best,

Aleksandra

I should also note that Aleksandra and I have become close friends, she has stayed with me at my house in San Francisco, and I have returned to play in Slovenia at Kibla, the venue she is associated with, once a year. Marko Kosnic organized an ambitious if somewhat chaotic symposium for Balkan artists in 2000 which I spent several weeks teaching at. And Elza and I maintain a warm correspondence. At the personal level, at least, the dialog I had hoped to open has in fact taken place.

Yugoslavia Suite

Program Notes for the Balkan Tour of Bob Ostertag's Yugoslavia Suite following the NATO Bombing of Serbia

Perhaps it is a crazy idea that an American artist should go to the Balkans in the wake of 10 years of war culminating in the NATO bombing. What could an American, coming from so far away and knowing so little, have to say to those who lived through these experiences every day? Isn't this part of the problem, that Americans feel they can sit in judgment on far away peoples?

I do not think, however, that it falls to art to pass judgment, but rather to open new windows for reflection, to help us contemplate more deeply and see things from new angles. Judgments people make may be influenced by art, but only indirectly. Art that seeks to judge stops being art and becomes political speech.

Not to belittle speeches, which are important and necessary. I have made some myself. But hopefully tonight's concert will not be a political speech.

I do believe that we live in a global community, in which we are called upon to reflect on, and take positions on, events in far away lands.

I come to this from the position of an American citizen, whose government is unique in the world at having amassed the technological means to project military power anywhere in the world, at almost no risk to itself or its soldiers. The recent bombing of Yugoslavia was the first time that American spokespeople explicitly articulated a moral position vis-a-vis this capability: that there are causes for which Americans should be willing to kill, but not willing to die. A truly shocking development.

I also come to this as an artist who has used technology extensively in his art. And it is striking that the technology NATO used to bomb Yugoslavia is the same technology I use to make music. Which is also the same technology used to make the computer games which simulate real-life wars.

This is an historically new development. The technology used to make, for example, violins, soccer balls, and automatic rifles couldn't be more different. But today, the tools we use to play, kill, and compose music are the same.

I have even worked personally with an instrument designer who, when his musical work doesn't

keep him busy, supplements his income by selling the same technology he develops for music to NASA (the US government agency that builds satellites and rockets).

War Games is a reflection on this new reality. The video mixes footage of computer games you can find in an arcade or play on a home computer, computer games the US military uses for training airplane pilots and tank personnel, actual footage of bombing missions in the Balkans, and other images from American television.

As a member of the audience it will be difficult to tell which is which. Not to worry: neither can anyone else. As I learned doing the research for this piece, the experience of playing a fighter-bomber computer game is now so similar to the experience of actually bombing a real city, the US military views recruits with extensive experience playing computer games as particularly promising.

Or take a gunner in a modern tank. Even in actual battle, when he pulls the trigger he is not looking at the actual target he is firing at, but at a screen showing an animated computer version of the target, the same image most of us associate with computer games. In fact, in many cases a child playing a game is looking at a more realistic image than a soldier firing a weapon of enormous destructive power.

These Hands, by contrast, is a reflection on the "old-fashioned" kind of war which recently occurred in, for example, Bosnia. The kind in which killing happens at a distance of 3 meters instead of 30,000, and perhaps there is even eye contact between the executioner and the executed.

I have only experienced this through the mediation of American television. Thus this work is perhaps more accurately described as a reflection on the experience of watching these images flashed around the world by satellite to my TV. And this again is of course the same digital technology we just discussed.

I have no idea how these works will be perceived by people whose experience has been at the opposite end of this technology: who saw the real bombs really explode, and lost real friends and real homes, and now worry whether their water is really safe to drink, and their air really safe to breathe.

We sit on opposite sides of a technology chasm unfathomably wide. My hope is that these performances will be part of a dialog across that divide.

Many many thanks to the many friends in the Balkans who have done so much to make this happen.

Yugoslavia Suite was commissioned by Real Art Ways, an alternative art space in Hartford, CT, USA.

