



Fig. 1 Tanja Softic, *Tuba Mortis*, drawing (conte, acrylic, oil on paper), 72"x52", 1993



# Tanja Softic and the Dread of History

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Tanja Softic, Rollins College, is the recipient of the  
1994 Southeastern College Art Conference Exhibition Grant.

*Erlebnis*, the German word for "experience," sandwiches the root of *Leben*—to live—within its three syllables. To experience life, to live it, is both personal and public or, in the European sense of the word, political. Like all of us, artists experience both a private and a public life, differing only in their desire to communicate in images, in refusing to remain private. In recent years, art has emerged from the secluded realm of the studio and its self-referential formalism to address the world outside, quite often in the guise of critical commentary. That this is dangerous is obvious; experience is complex and contradictory, something that art in its most classically serene and universalized sense must never be. Indeed, the personal history of Yugoslavian-born Tanja Softic reflects the complexity and contradictions of our era, and in the last few years, alongside her countrymen, she has experienced history's indifference and violence. As she expressed it in a panel presentation at SECAC in 1993, "Invited or not, history, politics, and human suffering have found their way into my work."

This was not always so. Softic was raised and educated in a Communist country, albeit one of the least dogmatic in the Eastern Bloc, where a standard academic system favoring Socialist Realism was modified by westernized aesthetics. Her professors had loosened the Soviet canon to promote a formal abstraction that often served as protection against political vagaries. Says Softic of her undergraduate training at Sarajevo's Academy of Fine Arts:

Yugoslav artists had the choice: flatter the establishment or steer clear of social issues in your work. It was only logical that I arrived in the United States equipped with the firm belief that art is about form and form only, that dealing with any moral or social issue is compromising and polluting to the very essence of art and that moral issues, after all, have nothing to do with the dialogue with the universe that art is supposed to address.

Leaving her parents in Sarajevo, Softic arrived in the United States, where she entered graduate school at Old Dominion University to concentrate on printmaking. Her shock over what she perceived as an American devil-may-care approach to techniques and processes did not have an immediate impact on her work. What altered first was the subject matter. Figures appeared, and with them the theme that has infused her work, despite its formal control, with an expressionist charge: fear. A dread born of the conflict that

has been raging for over two years in her homeland, concentrating its fury on her beloved city of Sarajevo and on family and friends, has brought forth allusive imagery expressive of Softic's loss and mourning. Drawings such as *Tuba Mortis* (fig. 1) and *Under the Knife* (fig. 2) are examples.

Now an Assistant Professor at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, and recipient of the 1994 Southeastern College Art Conference Project/Exhibition Award, Softic is acknowledging her own loss of innocence with a series of prints and books. In the tropical heat of her exile, she remembers the darkness and remains unreconciled to its looming presence. More importantly, Softic now recognizes the impossibility of controlling experience, expressing in her tenebrous prints the sweep of forces that give history its tragic dimension.



Fig. 2 Tanja Softic, *Under the Knife*, drawing (conte, acrylic, oil on paper), 72"x52", 1993



In an interview with Ann Mikell for the *Rollins College Alumni Record*, Softic observed sadly, "People think of Europe as colorful, like a theme park. For me now, Europe is a very dark place." To communicate this sense of enveloping unease, Softic has combined her commitment to technical perfection with the need to express a temporal, spatial, and emotional alienation from her own history. Geographically safe from Serbian aggression, she mourns the lost history of her country in the monoprints and books that she currently sees as the focal point of her art. In a viscous monoprint like *No More Blue Skies* (fig. 3) or the mezzotint *Private and Global* (fig. 4), she wonders who will remember the women raped during the physical dismemberment of her country; Softic's empathetic vision of their plight emerges from a repertoire of personal symbols: striped robes, conical containers, and knives levitated expressionistically above the curve of the globe.

The robes have a special significance for Softic. Given to each other by Muslim women, they function as a family's sacramental heirlooms; typically woven with golden threads, they are to be worn on wedding nights, traditionally transporting girls into womanhood. Impermanent and fragile, Softic's robe, given her in childhood by her paternal grandmother, disappeared in the fiery shelling and subsequent looting that destroyed her family home in Sarajevo. Softic's collection of memorabilia has now been reduced to a single object: a childhood photo with her father. She is thus forced to "recreate" her history through her art, visualizing an experience difficult to pinpoint by either figuration or abstraction.

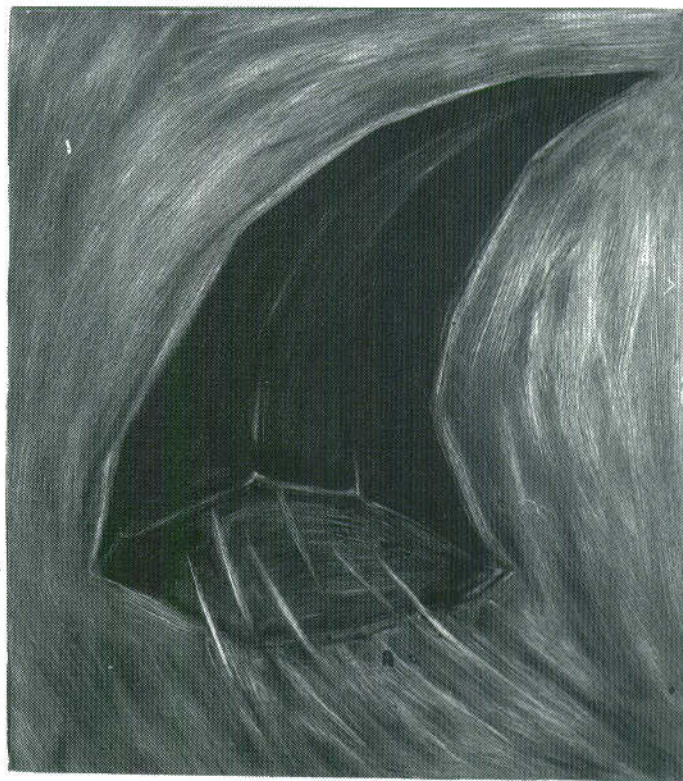


Fig. 3 Tanja Softic, *No More Blue Skies*, monoprint, 18"x15", 1993

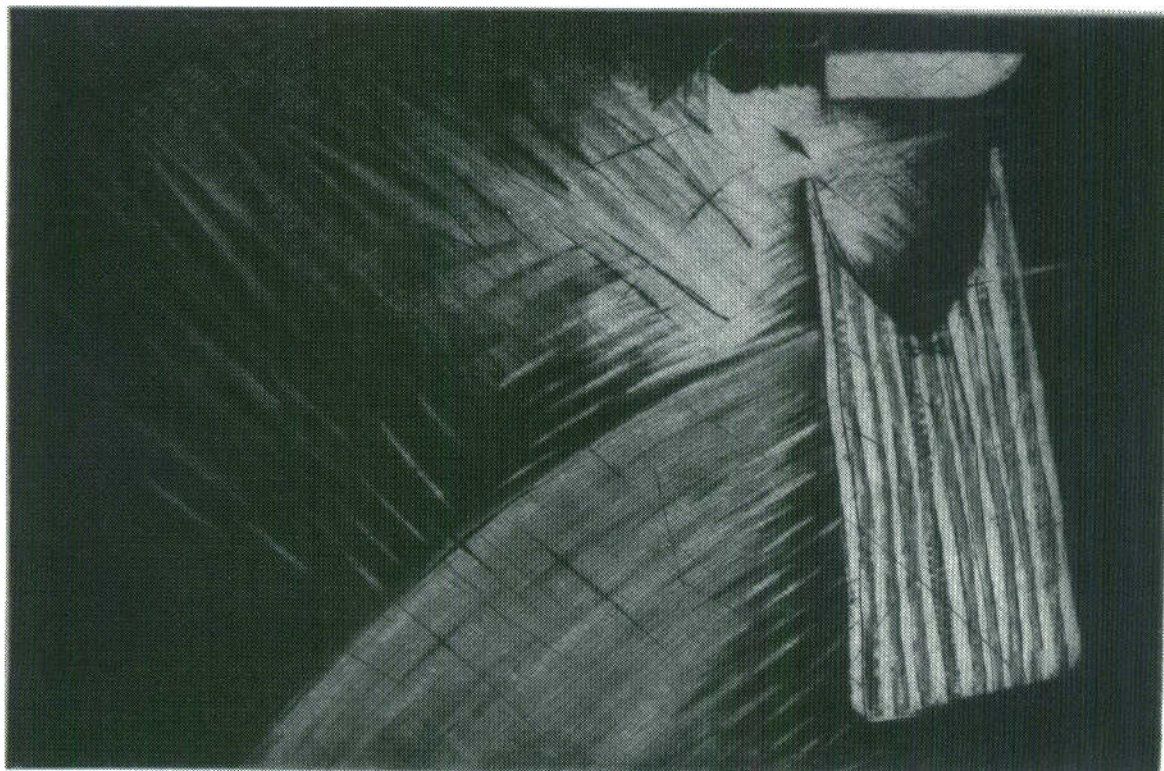


Fig. 4 Tanja Softic, *Private and Global*, mezzotint and engraving, 9"x6", 1993



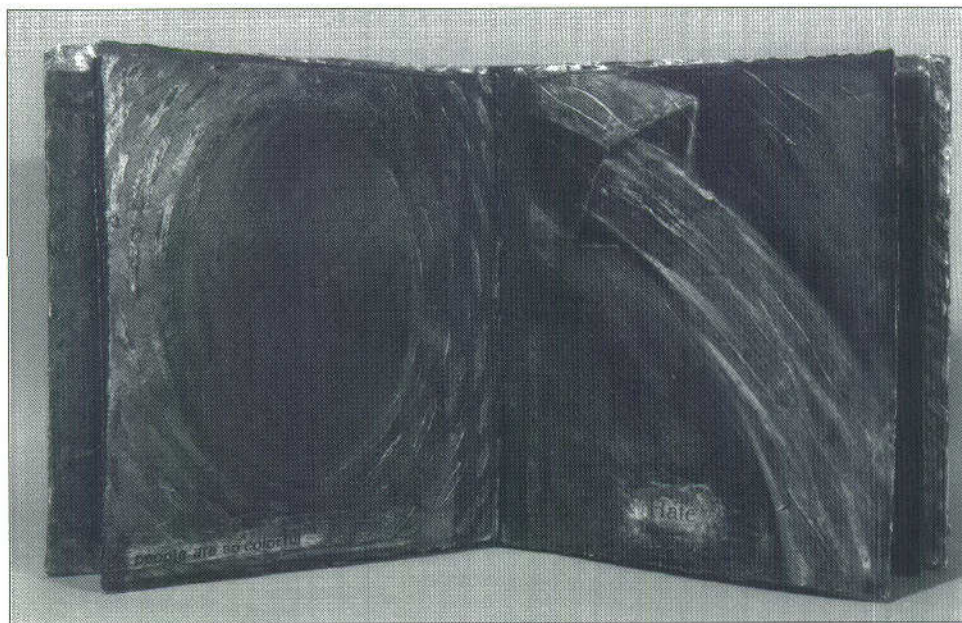


Fig. 5 Tanja Softic, *Europe, Europe*, book (mixed media), 8"x15" (when open), 1993

Though political art is currently *de rigueur* for the committed artist, Softic is frustrated by the strictures and excuses that accompany its re-emergence. In her SECAC presentation, she complained eloquently of "the frequent implication that one must choose between the aesthetic seductiveness of formalist art and the fire of activist involvement that burns any aesthetic consideration in its path." Refusing to make such a choice, Softic continues to merge the two without compromising the integrity of the image. In her unique books, *Europe, Europe* (fig. 5) and *The Book of Mourning* as well as in the sole editioned example to date, *The Mechanism of Indifference* (fig. 6), she embeds dark

commentary in pages laden with thickened pigmentation. Virtually indecipherable, the text is fragmented, like the newscasts that trickle from the besieged Sarajevo.

One page of *Europe, Europe* carries the quote "People are so colorful," opposed by another page ending in the single word "hate." An oval frame and one of the artist's hard-edged tubular containers—the former empty, the latter pouring a steady stream across the page—provide emotional allusions. The overall coloration of this book (like its pendant *The Book of Mourning*) is bluish gray, but the effect is ashen rather than lyrical. Each of Softic's books takes the form of a lament.

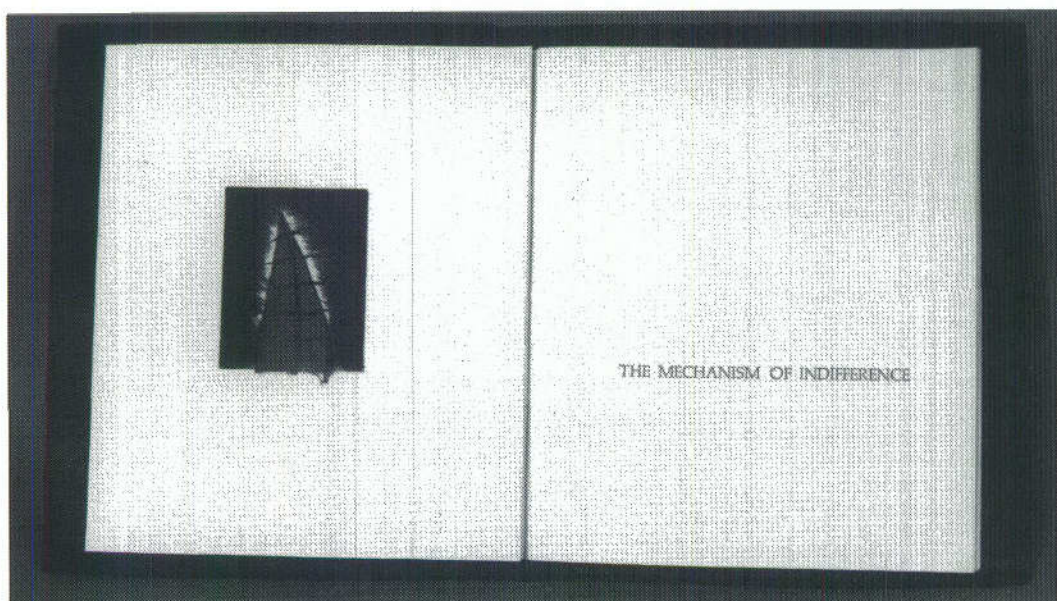


Fig. 6 Tanja Softic, *The Mechanism of Indifference*, book (letterpress, mezzotint, chine colle), 7"x13" (when open), 1993



Tentative words like “almost” pepper the pages of *The Book of Mourning*, which resembles Anselm Kiefer’s charred bookworks, notably *The Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen*, a reference to an accidental explosion that obliterated an entire region of Germany during the Second World War. Both volumes seem torn from the flames. In Softic’s, thickly corroded gilt framing devices alternate with images of threatening projectiles raining down on a distant surface; this is a hellish manuscript that chronicles what is left “when screams die.”

Yet Softic continues to speak of the books in both formal and emotional terms, stressing that

...carefully chosen or thought-out words are inseparable from the abstracted, intuitively sought imagery that provides the visual, less intellectual and more sensual aspect of the book. Books themselves are craft objects, and aesthetic decisions...cannot be carried out separately from resolving the problems of communication of content. Rich surfaces and abstracted imagery are not illustrations in the traditional meaning of the word. Rather, they are visually evocative of the emotional content of the text. It is my intent to give the viewer the opportunity to approach the history in a way alternative to the “objective” reporting and recording of world events. Lines between the form and the content, the political and the aesthetic, are blurred.

The formal, sensual aspect of the work continues to be the first one I become aware of in my work.... The *first*, but not the *dominant* or the *single relevant* aspect: I make art because I believe that I

have something to communicate to others.... On the other hand, I make art for the sheer pleasure of creating another object that will not fulfill any of the functions that the contemporary utilitarian system ratifies, the object that will be a summary of attempts to visualize my emotional or philosophical response to the world around me.

But Softic’s experience is now charged with a conflict, one that dates back to the turn of the century, sparking a world war. The most politicized and powerful of that war’s artists, the German Critical Realist Otto Dix, once said, “I did not paint pictures of war to prevent war...I painted them in order to banish the war. All art is banishment.”<sup>1</sup>

Quite obviously, Dix’s long involvement with subject matter that documented the horrors of trench warfare did not “banish” it from his or our experience. Similarly, Tanja Softic may likewise be no more successful in her own artistic attempts to share her fearful knowledge. Still, like Dix, she is able to express her dread, to utilize an aesthetic of conflict in her allusive works, to momentarily banish the fear. Her conclusion to the SECAC presentation most aptly sums up her double-edged intentions:

It is the sincerity of our attempts to understand life (in all of its aspects) that counts, not the novelty of our methods or the prominence of issues we are addressing. We must communicate that, as artists, we do not have to make a choice between involvement with society, its patterns and politics, and involvement with formal and sensual aspects of art; we can, and should, have it all.

1 Quoted in Eva Karcher, *Otto Dix 1891-1969: His Life and Work* (Cologne, 1988), p. 30.