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Between man and Woman

In: cat. Between Man and Woman, Zilina, 1997

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Katarina Rusnaková

Between Man and Woman

The exhibition "Between Man and Woman" completed a free trilogy of surveys of contemporary trends in the fine art of Slovakia, carried out on the basis of thematic curating projects since 1995 in the Povazska Gallery of Art in Zilina.

Thus, in the final set-up in 1997 artists Roman Ondak, Boris Ondreicka, Karol Pichler and Peter Ronai from the first exhibition "Physical/Mental" (1995) met with female artists Denisa Lehocka, Ilona Nemeth, Petra Novakova and Jana Zelibska who participated in the second exhibition "The Paradigm of Woman" (1996). Because of similar tendencies in his artistic work, Peter Meluzin was additionally invited into this group. The starting point of all the three exhibitions was a curating project in the form of a libretto which defined problem areas connected with given topics. It was to function as a generator of possible inspirational sources and creative impulses for the arousal of new pieces of artistic work. These projects aspired to initiating the creation of multimedial site-specific installations incorporated in the gallery rooms, including video installations representing electronic art of the 90s. The main aim was to satisfy the need for research of contemporary tendencies in fine art to form a creative platform and special discourse, including the support of artistic realizations. Continuous mapping of present-day moves on the Slovak fine-art scene, their presentation and interpretation, together with a conceptual acquisitive and editing activity was thus establishing prerequisites for ongoing professional activities of the gallery, oriented to art of the second half of the 20th century.

The topic of the exhibition "Between Man and Woman" subsumed manifold interpretations and instigated various visual transpositions. Beside the fact that it reflects an almost equal repertoire of the artists participating in the exhibition, it opened a wide diapason for revealing new approaches to eternal questions of coexistence, communication and nuancing of relationships between a man and a woman, both in partner and wider relations. It provoked endeavours of affecting layers coherent with fragility and vulnerability as well as with human interactions, forming themselves in a complicated network of searching for consensus and balance. It evoked connotations relating to external and internal spheres, where apart from body, physicality and erotics, psychic structures and mental space in tight connection with social bonds have an important place. It also carried in itself questions of gender, identity and the phenomenon of deviating, in the form of different sexual orientation, from the appointed roles of a man and a woman. And, natural it also implied the possibility of situating a child into its context as well as of widening the contents and the participation in the exhibition.

The exhibition project "Between Man and Woman" thus provoked the opening of a discussion on the exciting topic of variations of relationships, which the artists grasped individually in their abstract expressions.

The installation of nine site-specific works, which in the environment of the Povazska Gallery of Art were defined even narrower than the context-specific works, put emphasis on a major spatial solution. The aim was to form between them sufficient distances and in this way slow down the onlooker's time of perception so that he could concentrate undisturbed on the reception of individual creations. The majority of them were carriers of ambivalent missions which enabled the multiplicative coding and interpretation of manifold meanings.

At first sight it was obvious that the interactivity of works of art has grown and the installations have been enriched by more differentiated types of video art, whose nature rests in conceptual art, is connected with the phenomenon of time and operates with the tension between the real and the fictitious, the private and the public.

The artists appropriated and in various meaning shifts redefined ready-mades or found objects or combined neo-conceptual principles of creativity

with working methods based on forming the elements, resulting in works of hybrid nature.

The statements of artists in many cases inclined to a more personal diction, they were often directed towards innovation of a story or towards fragmental metaphors.

PETER RONAI's interactive video-installation of *Trans-Version* offered many interpretations. An onlooker coming to a domesticated readymade, formed from a wicker basket filled with chocolate granules, activated two industrial video cameras, causing the immediate appearance of his portrait on a small monitor lying in the middle. He saw himself as if in a mirror, while he could also understand the metaphor of the traditional role of woman which is, apart from other things, connected with food and looking after the household. A cable led from the basket to a hangable constructed object, formed by a fragment of a skull, facing the wall, whose upper part was filled with soft material (chewing gum). Through the opening into which the medulla runs it was possible to watch a small LCD monitor, where a continuous video recording of metamorphosed portraits of the pop culture icons Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley was shown. The artist subject their faces as if to plastic surgery, produced with the help of electronic media. The transmuted portraits repeat overlapped each other, from Marilyn to Elvis and vice versa, thus reminiscent of a continually changing identity.¹ In the skull as a symbol of death, immortal idols who physically died long ago, alternated. In the mix of reality and fiction the artist fused the past with the present or continued the tendency started by the transgressions of artistic forms, Marcel Duchamp; and his follower Andy Warhol who introduced to art an ingenious piece of work with media and metaphoric of the idolizing of pop icons.² Warhol's pictures of Marilyn and Elvis were human and

¹ It is appropriate to bring to mind Wolfgang Iser's words about a "transversal subject", which is the most complete subject, unifying inside it a number of subparts, and externally capable of shifting among various frameworks of meanings. Our production of identity is essentially more miscellaneous and complex than was originally anticipated. Identificative function leads to the construction of various identities. It does not guarantee a stable whole but, on the contrary, it leads to its various versions. Diversified identities are interconnected by intersections, messages and transits between them; their relationship has a transversal structure. Transversality is a fundamental condition of plural subjectivity and the art of being a subject grows from practising transversality. This protects an individual against the danger of alienating and splitting his existence, and it enables openness towards other forms of and frameworks of meanings.

Welsch, W.: To become oneself. In.: *Subject - Artist - Auditorium: subject in the rooms of art. A review of contributions from an international conference organized by the Soros' Center of Contemporary Art - Bratislava in Castá - Pila between 15. - 18.11.1996.* p. 26 - 28.

² Rian, J.: *The Generation Game.* In.: *Echoes. Contemporary Art at the Age of Endless Conclusions.* Edited by Francesco Bonami. New York, The Monacelli Press 1996. p. 24.

supernatural at the same time. The fact that they have become celebrities is a merit of deliberate repetition, generated by the media and in the media.³ Peter Ronai with irony and typical subversiveness adjusted these Warholian icons and by means of the manipulating capacity of the media he passed their connotations to other reflections. Through modifying their appearance, he created simulacra, familiar to the protagonists of the domestic political scene, in the form of new televisual symbols.

ILONA NEMETH through her nature installation *Boat* instigated an echo of *arte povera* and land art. She also affected the onlookers with a tactile experience, because they had to walk through a non-cohesive, loose and instable terrain formed by almost two tons of industrial salt which they experienced with their feet, and thus left temporary footprints in it. In the middle of this "landscape cutout" which was established in the neutral environment of the gallery, the artist left an old wooden boat stranded, marked by time as a found object. The laconic and modest installation based on a juxtaposition of two atypical elements could not deny the artist's feeling for selection and merging of strange material and her sense of scenic utterance of realization.

Ilona Nemeth is inclined to spatial pieces of work using natural material with which she has a sensual relationship. For her a woman means personification of nature and the ship is also connected with natural phenomena and is considered a symbol of fertility. Also, according to psychoanalytical interpretation ship evokes female sexual genitalia.

The installation simultaneously pointed at a paradoxical situation because the function of a boat as an extension of a human being, reminiscent of movement, communication and freedom, was denied. The phenomenon of water, by which sailing is conditioned, was actually absent, which both literally and in the transferred sense emphasized the feeling of loneliness and impossibility of communication.

The spectators could enter the boat, sit in it and surrender themselves to quiet visual and evocative resonances which the work evoked.

³ *ibid.* p. 43

BORIS ONDREICKA in his installation *Love Changes Notions About Love (Fucking Workshop)* juxtaposed scattered fragments of contradictory things, many of which possessed personal codes and related to his individual mythology. Visually eccentric piece of work whose base is a simulation of constructive atelier chaos, belongs to further contributions of an artist who tries radically to cut himself off from the established zones of art. He undermines the fixed conventions of expression with adequate subversiveness, and with a dose of vigour introduces new creative modes. In the installation where vitality, sex-appeal and fresh language were not absent, the artist allowed room for interpreting openness and incompleteness.

Among significant elements of this work was an easel, on which the picture was replaced by the cover of the Black Flag LP, nearby on the floor painting equipment was scattered, together with Josef Zrzavy's book - *Anatomy for Fine Artists* = opened on a page with drawings of female and male genitalia, a cardboard box with LPs lying around, music coming from a Walkman, light, cigarettes, a lighter, coins etc. They represented things, many of which are not only self-referential objects of the artist's reality but also a common part of his everyday life. The artist did not hesitate, with a gesture of attack, to incorporate even in this context some rubbish or a crumpled piece of plastic lying on the floor with some spilled solution, together with the rest of it in a bottle. The xeroxed vignette H(0)RM(0)NIAK represented all the chemical, edible and bodily components of this mystifying compound. It related to one of the possible interpretations of love as a chemical, biological and psychic reaction. The artist further created an illusion of a fictitious interior by a hanging fragment of white cloth on a wall with a painting of historicizing architecture, which he produced using red wine. Besides, inscriptions of groups were employed, and a linear figure drawing appeared on the floor. Punk music and its mentality appeals to the artist and this has become a substratum of this work of art. The installation in which mixed together are art and life, high and low, visual culture and music, work and love, emotions and irony, joy and sorrow etc. evoked an atmosphere of oscillation between the physical, sexual, creative and ephemeral. Its various meanings also referred to contradictions between ideals and experienced reality, whose productive strainings may catalyse progressive approaches and necessary changes.

KAROL PICHLER planned and designed an electric race-track for both adult and young spectators who decoded this ambivalent installation *Cogit in Unum* (It merges into one) above all as a game. The child extended not only the interpreting framework of the topic but also meant an enrichment of the exhibition by his presence in the gallery.

Adult onlookers who took part in competitions with a white (male) and a red (female) car activated by remote control, were offered metaphors referring to life acceleration as well as to various positions and situations which evolve within partner relationships - no matter whether they concerned play, union, competition, balance or a lack of balance, or the problem of dominance and subordination. In the geometrical pattern of the race-track a phallic and vaginal symbol with two circles were encoded as a metaphor of union as well as that of identity. The installation enabled a diversified interpretation of "erotic cosmology" and sexual roles not defined by conventional relationships only. The multiplied coding of the work, in which playfulness merged with interactivity, prompted men, women and children to become actors of its physical context for a longer period. The perception of a readymade, constructed in a sophisticated way, changed according to the position of the participant when walking or sitting during the game. This also influenced the reception and flow of associations of the perceivers. The work, founded on a conceptual basis, thus opened a whole scale of references, forming a part of the vibrating structure of human relationships in the unstable world.

DENISA LEHOČKA's installation *Untitled*, concentrated on a minimum of semantic details, attracted attention for its visual distinction and discreet artistic language. In the cold purism of elements bearing signs of a constructivist design, which were put in coherence with humorously incorporated inconspicuous ready-mades, the artist created an abstracted relief configuration, using a corner of a gallery section. The artist presented connotations reflecting questions of the relationship between a man and a woman (but not only) in the communicative scale, which included nearing, uniting, attempts at understanding and balance, as well as moments of distancing, in a unique language. They formed a sign record of one of the possible dialogue situations, manifested in the specific, hermetic language of objects and things. More direct allusions to a man were either missing or evoked fragmentarily, e.g. by rolled-down jeans which cohered with an absent body, or by small prosthetic appliances for swimmers. In the subtle

atmosphere of the installation, which was typified by disciplined morphology, the artist let peace resonate, together with an almost static time flow which drew us out of the stereotypical rhythm of life and forced us to ponder on the seemingly marginal or unnoticed but important nuances of communication and relationships among people.

Playful mood, emotions and joy glowed from PETRA NOVAKOVA's installation, with a title reminding us of texts of dedications in girls memento books... "Into the Circle of Memories did your True Girlfriend throw a Little Stone". A lowered horizon of seven objects from coloured cardboard resembling accordion folds, fixed on a wall, were directed to the children's audience. Especially, to children, but not only to them, the artist dedicated simplified stories from everyday family life, forming a kind of still lives composed of precisely described details bearing autobiographic features. In the individual parts of the narrative installation she devised suggestions of interiors created from miniature toys made of plastic in combination with collages, in which she used architectonic morphology together with labels of bizarre small figures of ghosts associating people or memories of them. The artist talked to the audience through small scale compositions, or a kind of diary made of fragile materials. The audience could read in it visual pieces of news from her private world consisting of family, household, artistic work and contacts with friends. The chamber installation with its carefully assembled miniature objects, based on details, required perception of the most intimate kind. As if the artist wished to call to mind the vital human quality- to enjoy everyday trifles - and the ability to see enriching connections under the surface of, at first sight, trivial or banal reality.

PETER MELUZIN in his tragicomical installation Pulp Fiction dealt with reflections of complicated phenomena coherent with the psychosocial structure of a man, reaching even to pathology. Similarly to the video installation Life after Life (1993) he became inspired by an article in the "Black Chronicle", which was an impulse for the metaphoric development of a hybrid installation. The discovered text from a newspaper of a female judge, describing a story of a man from the Zilina environs who castrated himself thirty years ago, was projected through an epidiascope onto a white wall of a simulated room. The shabby interior with its historical furniture,

remains of rubbish and scrumpled plastic soaked with an antiseptic, evoked notions connected with the event. The artist confronted the past of this real event with the present, served to us in the content-cheap broadcasting of the Slovak Television (STV), not very different from Pulp Fiction. The permanently switched on black-and-white television with its poor quality picture expressed not only failing technology but especially the mental decay of STV and its manipulative practices which deform reality. Thus, the meanings of the ambiguous installation not only oscillated in the polarities of relationships between a man and a woman, which include frustrations and depressions connected with love, partnership and sexuality, but also affected wider social and ethical relations touching the mass media.

ROMAN ONDAK reacted to the specific location in the gallery, entering it with a minimalistic intervention based on a transfer of five electric sockets. They were placed on thin metal rods anchored in the floor, at a small distance from the walls. They left only circular holes with isolated wires on the walls. By an appropriation of technical details of the interior and by making them functionless the artist negated electro-installation, out of which he, in an ironic shift, formed his installation *Closer to Each Other*. With it he demonstrated a different way of viewing common objects, reminiscent of neo-surreal poetics and fascination for things, together with the creative possibility for the artist to ascribe other meanings to them. Ondak anthropomorphized the sockets whose bizarre configuration could be decoded from the position of a psychoanalytical interpretation of sexual symbolics as a male and female principle. They reported on an imaginary transfer of energies, about passing on and receiving. Reinterpreted discovered objects generated the thinking processes of the spectators with the intention of revealing ambiguous meanings. When the exhibition finished, the sockets were returned to their original places so that they could inconspicuously assume their utilitarian function again.

JANA ZELIBSKA simulated plausible reality in her video projection *Sisters*, whose essence formed a dialogue between teenagers. With spontaneity, close to "cinéma vérité", she recorded their conversation on video, which gradually developed into a merry girlish twitter and intimate confidencies touching their experiences in the area of relationships, while

the video recording itself did not lack a humorous overview. When filming, the artist concentrated on the faces of the two girls, on the details and vivid mimicry, including the complementing body language. They spoke together with spontaneity and with natural charm, mutually reacted to each other and gesticulated. In individual sequences of the videorecording the artist managed to grasp a feeling of ' uncertainty, vulnerability and helplessness of these girls, and to indicate a balancing between the desire for the world of adults and the preservation of the problem free, gradually disappearing childhood. By means of the imposing videorecording, the public rooms of the gallery were entered by private, personal and emotional aspects, prompting in the onlookers smiling reactions filled with sympathy, and evoking in them memories of their own years of adolescence.

The exhibition "Between Man and Woman" completed the cycle of curating researches which were reflected in the performance of the trilogy of exhibitions. A positive assessment from the community of experts and the reactions of the audience have contributed to the conviction about the significance of such projects. Incidentally, it was the last of my exhibitions in the Povazska Gallery of Art, as on the 30th of September 1997 I was dismissed without a stated reason from the post of director.

Considering the manner of the dismissal and the nature of the practices preceding it, which, took the form of permanent persecution, checking, restriction of special activities and creative freedom, budget contractions etc., all dating from 1995, I decided to leave the Povazska Gallery of Arts in the middle of my work.