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Free Zone

[2.132 words]

Ukraine



EUROPSKA PRIJESTOLNICA
KULTURE



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.

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Free zone

FREE ZONE. ODESA, JULY 15-16, 1994

On July 15-16, Odessa played host to the artistic event "Free Zone" and the scientific conference "The Potiemkin Settlement: The Attempt to Create A Socio-Cultural Myth", Organized by the "New Art" association. Naturally, a number of issues arise which must be further investigated.

WHO

are the organizers? Allow me to interrupt the chronology to cite directly Mr. M. Rashkovetsky, director of the newly-created association "New Art", from day two of the event: "We are born to turn myth into reality". This upbeat little phrase, rather similar to a Soviet song, started his conference speech and continued: "Today "New Art" may be called an absolutely mythical organization despite the fact that it has be registered and even conducts some type of activity. However, the organization actually does not have any land of serious structure - there are a few people who from time to time want to do something. They create a specific myth - a would-be structure, would-be association, would-be society of people here, in this city that needs exactly this activity, and reality. Though, in truth, this is not always so".

I suppose M. Rashkovetsky's frank speech suffices to get an idea of the organizers of the event.

WHY

countless groups of people were wandering about between five topographical objects during the stifling midsummer heat in the famous hero city of Odessa?

It seems that "New Art" association has engaged artists belonging to various "castes" of the latest trends in the contemporary artistic process to

participate in the "Free Zone" project. This paradoxical word combination gives rise to a rather straightforward collection of associations and was accompanied by the flowery text, filled with scientific terms. Analyzing or quoting its content is senseless since it in no way influences the further development of events. So, summarizing the notion behind this measures: visual artists were proposed to locate and display their creations at several places in Odesa City according to their preference and time. The chief risk of curatorial activity arose in an artistic zone, without clear organization or jury. So as not to make groundless accusations, I quote an observer of the exposition Mr. K. Akinsha, art-critic and staff member of "Art News" magazine: "Ukrainian art generally has nothing to do with any "strict" curatorial projects. We simply have not introduced the idea of curating; we tend to invite. We continue to be involved with amateur activity that creates interest. Organizers have vast super-human efforts, possibly even overestimating their abilities. Nevertheless, through the efforts of the commissars O. Roitburd and M. Rashkovetsky something was accomplished".

WHERE

then did the event of this "free" act occur?

The route on July 15 was:

- Potiemkin stairs. (The stairs embody the thematic opening of the event with mass realization of the main "image" of the project about to unfold). "Everyone has his own set of stairs leading wherever the pedestrian himself desires. He can choose to ascend, descend. The stairs may take the form of an escalation, step-ladder, staircase, etc.," M. Rashkovetsky says.
- Folk Art Museum. (Giving up to the temptation to immerse themselves in the troubled streams of radical art, the museum staff loudly and quite sincerely sung folk songs for 20 minutes, blocking the way to the display hall.)
- Art Museum. (The crowd, slowly stretching itself along the path to the new "dislocation site", was met by an enthusiastic march of a military orchestra, which later enigmatically vanished. M. Rashkovetsky and M. Kuzma then appeared with friendly speeches. (Mrs. Kuzma directs the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Kiev.)
- Bristol Restaurant. (A wonderful party by the wives of the maitres of Ukrainian art.)

July 16 route:

- Museum of Regional Studies. (The nervous, yet still-charming speech of the artist and curator O. Roitburd, the relaxing performance by L. Bazhanov, the Deputy Minister of Culture of Russia, and the sarcastic, laconic replica by I. Diurich, director of the

Zacher-Mazoch Fund, about the desire to stop using this occasion to interfere with the artists permanent state of mind-suffering. The evenings and nights were spent Bohemian-style, speculating "about art".

Finally, the Tone-awaited:
WHO AND WITH WHAT

could be seen at this "Black Sea Biennale" as it was defined by an art critic. Artists from three countries Russia, Ukraine and the USA, participated, numbering almost 30. It should be noted that the organizers managed to avoid internal conflicts between artists because the list of participants were of higher calibre than those in the action "The Frontiers to a Cultural Revolution" held in May in Kiev. Citing all the participants here is in no way part of this journalistic review. (See the catalogue which will soon be published).

To begin the "report on the distribution of forces", note that in addition to the radical, visual genre, there were those correlating to the Descartes philosophy - paintings, snapshots, and a la decoupages. The "classics of Ukrainian trans-avant-garde" displayed several works each in a style developed in previous years: simulating savory baroque canvases (O. Hnilitsky), and anti-Roerich, meta-historical mountains (O. Tistol). Playing with old photographs and wrapping paper retroaesthetics became the leading element in collage imitation by many artists both from Ukraine and Moscow. B. Mikhailov was vaulted to the top of photo artists with his technical perfection and choice of models. Locating the naked body of an old pervert with podophilic leanings and an artificial pintle in his arsenal had the effect of not only lifting a taboo, but also as a work of art with its appropriate qualities. Photo art was presented, both in the purity of its genre, and in symbiosis - photoinstallation and photofilm. "In Search of Pox" by I. Chichkan in an aesthetic, dark-colored, rather large-sized photo. An old doctor places a phonendoscope to the pregnant belly of a beautiful woman, whose body gives on-sparks from time to time. V. Tsagolov presented his photofilm project, "a mixture of elements from melodrama, black humour, and mysticism, sexual perversion and a detective story". The next manages to capture the style of the best elements of world, "formula" bestsellers. Video art per say was not displayed, but video-installation prevailed. Some video artists even confessed to their fascination with home-porno and mail-art simultaneously: television screen and photos, located nearby, were framed by the enlarged teeth of postage stamps. The TV showed a locally-popular sex-symbol writing on the screen.

The ego-Catholic, A. Hankevich, drew attention with his paradoxical thoughts and laconism. His installation consisted of a large-sized black cross against a red background with a television mounted on the middle of the cross. A sign placed above the cross read "CATHOLICISM" with the third through eighth letters in italics. The monitor showed the wonder of morphine, para-phrasing Cortazar, "continuity of crucifixions". The image of the crucified Christ with a crucifix hanging around his neck in a long shot moves to a close-up. On this cross next to his skin, you can see a crucified Christ wearing a crucifix and so on into infinity (A. Hankevich plays Christ).

A. Savadov and G. Senchenko shocked observers with their terrible carelessness: a TV set in a hammock alongside old toys and a three page text (without distributing copies) with the name O. Holosiy - rather depressing. O. Roitburd presented an object of heraldry and romance, with ironic hints at M. Duchamp's imperfect art concept: a urinal with gigantic, red-feather wings on a tall podium.

H. Vysheslavsky tempted the public almost fainting from thirst under the hot sun, with his "A Toast to Art". Visitors wanted to drink right there and then. A glass of champagne set up at eye level, on a tripod in the middle of a stucco frame extended in a teasing manner.

A. Sahaidakivsky evoked no public interest at all with his everyday conceptual game in an ordinary day. A minimum number of props were used: table, few chairs, mirror in a small entrance hall and a sign in large lettering, saying something to the effect: "How nice it is to sit in a quiet corner when you have something to sit on and someone to sit with".

Among the Odesa youth, A. Kravchenko was the biggest success. A table, chair, typewriter and lamp were located in a corner of the hall, but this was all thickly covered with white, fluffy feathers from a bird of some kind.

Unfortunately, some contemporary artists participating in the action, were unable to find any "free time" - to create something new, if not original and professional.

SCANDAL?

It was even called three times for an encore. What happened is that "Free Zone" happened to be not quite free from prejudices, as far as official bodies, especially museum officials are concerned.

Twice in the Art Museum, administrators banned the installation by M. Kulchitsky & V. Checkorsky by simply switching off the video 15 minutes after it started. Also the major piece of "object in action" composition by I. Diurich & I. Podolchak was taken away (strangely enough only these two projects had booklets with texts).

The project "The Space of Capitulation. Stalingrad under Berlin" was a room with the big stands by its walls with the enlarged well-known picture

from World War Two (a Soviet soldier levels a gun). In the middle of the room a video showed the no less popular German pornofilm that was switched off. The authors expressed their culture studies of age-old relations between two sociocultural subjects "the Germanic" & "the Slavonic" in a quite interesting and professional manner, supplying a well-written text. To illustrate the above-mentioned theoretical tendencies, they chose two tools used in the installation: war and "male-female".

The installation by Diurich - Podolchak was given a rich baroque-style name, "Watching the food that is enjoying the picture and outraged with the process of digesting" and eloquent text in first person. On a podium in a glass box worms were eating rotten meatloaf, watching events. On the wall a picture in the style of double-dyed socialist realism showed the funeral of the deceased comrade from the battleship "Potiomkin", served as the background. The museum officials perhaps had their views on "Higher Expediency". The jar of worms was furtively carried away. Then the artists were asked to display a snapshot of the object and rent out the picture. You can imagine the answer.

Officials at the Regional Studies Museum puzzled everybody. They took down one of D. Neumaier's (USA) works from the collection of photoimpressions from this country, while the exquisite self-portraits of above-mentioned B. Mikhailov were left. It is possible that the well-known three letter word written on the base of the Lenin monument scared them more than this term in reality itself.

Not only in Odesa can one find the strange cultural state structures.

HOW IT CAN BE

that none of Ukrainian Ministry officials and numerous cultural agencies (though there are few exceptions anyway) have an interest in developing contemporary Ukrainian art? L. Bazhanov (Russia) is interested, coming from Russia, V. Levashov, director of the Moscow gallery, participated in the conference, K. Andreyeva (representative of the department of the newest tendencies in contemporary art, Saint-Petersburg Museum of Russian Art) came with a definite purpose - to buy. She bought three (A. Hankevich, O. Roitburd and O. Shevchuk).

And at last, what can we expect to take place in the future on Ukrainian geocultural territory? Let's quote conference participants.

M. Rashkovetsky: "We accomplished the tasks set by the organizers - to frame something common in different and numerous trends... Everyone understands freedom his own way, even representatives of contemporary art". K. Akinsha: "The problem is that we have neither audience and it is doubtful to appear soon, nor support from official bodies is expected. We stew in our own juice. That's why we organize exhibits for ourselves and

the question concerning professionalism arises. This "club life" will last for the next 3 or 4 years. Thus, the only possible way is continuing the boyscout tours within Ukraine, while the way out is in the West, East & the South - outside the borders of this country".

V. Levashov: "It's quite normal development. Yes, I agree that some artwork is created in a slipshod fashion. I mean, from the technical point of view. Perhaps, the commercial aspect is not all that is desired either. But this question is not the most important. We have quite a large number of high-quality works. Though its unfortunate the exception is in contemporary art".

L.Bazhanov: "The reality of our time can be compared to the desired western one. We should cast aside the complexes along with entering into professional space. Here we have a good experience. I'm quite sure that the matter here is sociocultural reality which has a certain axiological significance and has nothing to do with boyscout camp".