

October 11 -
November 11, 2000

Curated by
Branka Stipančić
and Ana Dević

Kai Kaljo
Ivana Keser
Vlado Martek
Dalibor Martinis
Roman Ondák
Tomo Savić-Gecan
Mladen Stiljnović
Slaven Tolj
Goran Trbuljak
Sislej Xhafa

Apex Art
Curatorial Program

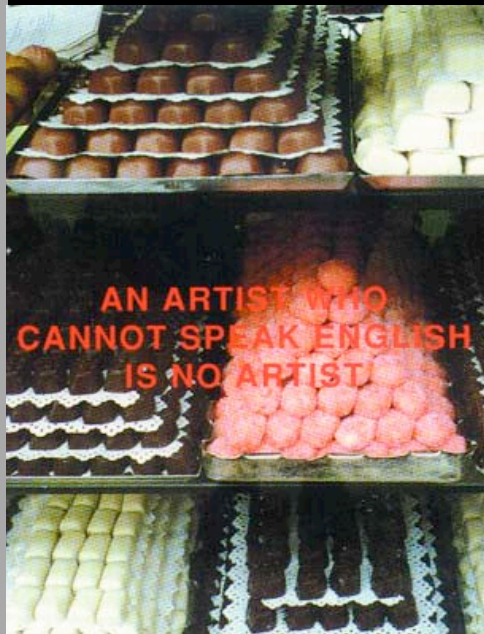
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Partially supported by FACE Croatia a program of Arts International
through the support of Heathcote Art Foundation
Special thanks to Galleria Laura Pecci, Milano, and the City of Zagreb

Cover: Mladen Stiljnović *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English is
No Artist* (detail) 1994-2000 installation (acrylic on silk, wooden
console, cakes) 138 x 300 cm

ISBN 0-9704071-1-4



Chinese Whispers

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CHINESE WHISPERS

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The title of the exhibition, *Chinese Whispers*, after a children's game, is a metaphor for misreading the message. The show questions the interaction of individual communication acts within the social context and focuses on situations when messages are misunderstood due to cultural and language barriers, or their meaning is lost due to noise in the channel. Misinterpretation usually generates further confusion and communication breakdown (in personal relations), but can also provide new, sometimes unusual perspectives and may even, paradoxically, lead to better understanding.

In this gap flourishes the art of artists featured in this exhibition. The artists all come from countries in transition, from Central and Eastern Europe, and their works are defined by their own experience and the context in which they were made. By placing themselves in various contexts, faced with distortion and misapprehension, they rely on humor, irony or the absurd. In a juxtaposition of different worlds that daily become more vocal in proclaiming their growing closeness, while in fact they understand each other less and less, drifting further apart, many of these artists opt for self-irony in their communication – never bitter, but rather gentle, witty, perspicuous, analytical, critical ... conciliatory in their willingness to continue the game of Chinese whispers.

The interpretation and understanding in the context of this exhibition are determined by the current geopolitical situation after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which is essentially influenced by the progressive inclusion of the Central and Eastern European countries into the processes of economical, political and cultural globalization. An important issue within these processes is the redefinition of national and individual identities. As the result of the globalization processes, there emerge fluid, "overlapping" identities, detached from a local context. Therefore, the need for a solid identity is increasing, but so is the awareness that it cannot be unequivocally established.

Kai Kaljo achieves in her video *The Loser* an element of the absurd by placing her personal statement into a radically different context which strongly contradicts the values we tend to connect with the dignity of an individual and his/her identity. Presenting facts of her personal life in the form of brief statements, the artist accompanies each of her sentences with laugh tracks from TV comedies. The presence of an invisible audience underscores both tragic and comical dimensions of personal loss set against the general passivity of today's technological and media society.



Kai Kaljo *A Loser* 1997 video still

Goran Trbuljak's seemingly absurd activities, such as frottaging or reproductions and articles from art magazines *Artforum* and *Art in America* onto a primed canvas, question certain practices that have become routine in the art market and the related system of values. For instance, works are sometimes evaluated on the basis of how often reproductions and advertisements are published in art magazines. Trbuljak's



Goran Trbuljak from *Frottage Black* made of various texts, advertisements and reproductions by 10 artists from *Art in America*, 1990 printer's ink/canvas on cardboard, dimensions variable

work highlights the paradoxes of evaluation where reproductions and advertisements are worth more than the works themselves.

The interaction of verbal and visual signs is a constant subject for Mladen Stiljnović who examines the

aggressive nature of language, its application in politics and everyday life, and modes of manipulation by language. The blend of contradictions, ironies and paradoxes in his works aims at deconstruction of power mechanisms. The installation *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist* indicates a dominance of language and the position of an artist within the system of values. The work deals with truth and lies, cultural and other differences, humor and the cynicism of power.

Vlado Martek's *Word:Picture 1:0* also examines the relation between the verbal and the visual. By playing with the multiple relationships between signs and between signifiers and the signified, the work provides a provocative and pessimistic commentary on the "political correctness" and clichéd one-dimensional definitions of democracy, civilization and multiculturalism. It consists of three parts; two of them are ready-made objects, tautologically labeled by their actual names (e.g., a book is labeled as "book"); in the third part, however,



Vlado Martek. *Word:Image 1:0* 1996-2000 detail of installation 22 x 30 x 30.5 cm

has "mapped" the Balkans (as a synonym for conflict and ethnic and religious intolerance) onto the geographical and cultural territory of the United States, thus creating a complex of ambiguous and contradictory meanings.

Ivana Keser's newspaper is also based on an error. The artist publishes her own paper in which she carries



Ivana Keser *Private Copy* 2000 offset newspaper 42 x 30 cm

an inaccurate report on the artist's paper in regular dailies. Keser's paper is an ironical commentary of consumer society and the ways in which modern media manipulate information, but also a bold transposition of private content into public space.

Sisley Xhafa's video *Stock Exchange* consists of the footage of the artist's performance at the Ljubljana train station a day before the opening of *Manifesta 3*. The artist, dressed in a conservative business suit, gave out information on arrival and departure of trains to passengers and passers-by, waving and yelling like brokers at a stock exchange do. Creating a surreal situation which implicitly refers to the changes caused by the massive, often illegal migrations to the West, this work accumulates a surplus of meaning that makes understanding impossible, using as a sort of metaphor for misunderstanding, one way of speaking in a totally different context.

The city of Dubrovnik plays a major role in Slaven Tolj's work; it is the departure point of practically all his projects. The experience of the original space is transformed by moving it elsewhere. *Interrupted Games* simply

news from private life, commentaries and brief articles. The title *Private Copy* is based on



Sisley Xhafa *Stock Exchange* 2000 performance video stills

transforms an actual situation into an art context: children used to play tennis behind the Dubrovnik Cathedral and the balls would often stick in the stone foliage decorating the columns. The emptiness that shrouded the streets and squares of Dubrovnik during the war made these balls highly visible, and gave them additional meaning, tragic weight and an unexpected visibility.



Slaven Tolj *Interrupted Games* 1993 black and white photograph 50 x 70 cm

Tomo Savič-Gecan's work does not exist physically, but is initiated and realized in a somewhat unusual manner. Dialing 1-866-APEXART during the duration of the exhibition, one can listen to a message in which the curators of *Chinese Whispers* interpret the artist's "work". The work thus exists solely as a description and interpretation – uncertain at best as there exists nothing to which a viewer (or indeed the interpreter) could relate. Is therefore the "power" of curators and the system such that they can initiate and actually "bring to life" a work? And who in that process is the curator and who the artist?

In the past two years Dalibor Martinis has been working on the *Binary Series*. All works in the series are based on the clear binary principle, similar to the binary code that defines the entire world of digital informational. In all the works the meaning of the message, although it defines the forms of the work, remains a hidden causal series which the viewer must decode.



Dalibor Martinis *Diary* 1999 installation, binary series

Roman Ondák's postcard series *Antinomads* presents ordinary people from various age and social groups, photographed in their everyday living or work environment. This series is a direct continuation of socially oriented project *Common Trip* in which the artist, in collaboration with people who did not travel, examined perception and communication. From the artist's descriptions, his collaborators made paintings, drawings or models of places they had never visited and experienced travel from the position of another person. The message is paradoxically confirmed or completed through interpretation. *Antinomads* are a smart reversal of a typical situation: the people who do not travel become postcard motifs.



Roman Ondák *Antinomads* 2000 2 postcards from series of 12 each 10.5 x 14.8 cm



Practically all the mentioned works accentuate the importance of the receiver in the process of communication and exchange. The importance of the receiver has thus been accentuated. While "deciphering" the message, the receiver actually co-produces it, bringing his/her own experience into it and (re)evaluating its content and meaning. In spite of the fact that there could be huge differences in the forms of the "production" of the signs and their "use", the process of communication is a vital one; it initiates interaction and exchange, includes the cognitive processes and clearly delineates the relations of power.

Ana Dević and Branka Stipančić
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