



# BEING SUBVERSIVE AND LOOKING GOOD IN THE END MEANS TO OBEY

By Ivan Jurica

The Viennese project art centre Open Space profiled itself within few years facilitating the most vital contemporary art situated in-between. On the one hand this could be seen as a conscious strategic choice to make use of the antagonism between the mainstream and the alternative, between international/Austrian and East European art production (meaning also between the centre and the periphery, but not just in a geographical sense), and on the other hand as a strategy in terms of visibility within the art scene intertwined with the politics of surviving in the privatized art sector and commodified culture. Open Space is the only venue in Vienna (because of its non-profit constitution) that exhibits East European art almost constantly and not as a necessary political obligation to commemorate 1989.

The current exhibition sets an example to this. 'Encounters in Relational Geography - Dust, Ashes, Residua', curated by Richard Appignanesi under the directorial of Gulsen Bal who initiated Open Space, attempts to elaborate the question: is the area of central and south-east Europe, branded as East Europe, really accounted as European 'added value'? Seven East European artists were invited to comment on the 'space for life' in the neoliberal capitalist reconstruction and re-territorialization of East Europe, as proposed in the brochure describing the exhibition and its works. And it continues: 'Vienna, the former imperial lynchpin of trans-territorial peoples, is the ideal "in-between" site for this exhibition.'

The selected works do not offer an answer but rather create a spatial matrix inside and outside of the exhibition conceived of different perspectives towards the posed question. The central reference point, following the logic of the exhibition's cryptic title set out by the curator, is the documentary film *Curse of the Hedgehog* by the Romanian anthropologist Dumitru Budrala. In his feature-length video one can observe and emotionally participate in the working life and survival tactics of the Baesi Roma community, the 'broom-makers of Romania'.

The curator has conceptually aligned the precarious livelihood of these people to the Arna-Jharna Museum in Rajasthan, India, and its long-term project of collecting brooms as a basis for documenting and conserving the material culture of this area. The links in the relational geography between the Baesi Roma and the Arna-Jharna

Museum in Rajasthan are two – the broom-making and the origins of the European Roma in Rajasthan, India.

The Slovenian artist Sašo Sedla ek directly refers to India in his artwork *AcDcWc (Merda d'Artista)* in complementary relation to social misery and recycling technologies. The technologies developed by the poorest strata in India for recycling excrement into energy are represented in his work by light bulbs 'plugged' to tins of 'artist's shit' (a wink at Piero Manzoni's *Arte Povera* irony) and an intense sweet aroma vaporized and dispersed in the air. So, long live waste-packaged technologies and the sweet-smelling environment, hiding its real smell!

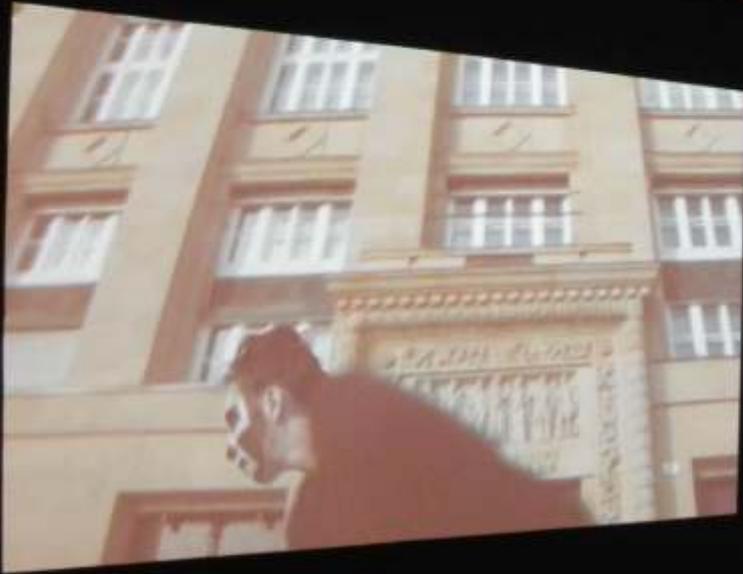
Another and more direct link to relational geography is presented by the Romanian artist Vlad Nancă in two photographs. One of the two depicts a finished birch broom (such the Baesi make for sale or barter), and a second one shown in reversed position as a plant in a large jar of water which permits the continuance of the natural process – growing roots and new leaves, thus, by retrieval, maintaining a healthy environment in its original sense.

It should be said that all the artworks enlisted in this exhibition find their relevance in the inner dynamism established and conceptualized by the exhibition itself, not in the works themselves. Three steps are involved in advancing this dynamic. First, the central referent of the exhibition is the text as the programme which itself, so to speak, evokes and crystallizes the works selected for it. Second, the power of an artwork and its meaning lies foremost in language; and, third, consequently language is the most powerful tool constructing any necessary reality (in terms both of sustaining globalized neoliberal capitalism, but also the reverse – its dismantling). *Residua (1976 – 2010)* by the Croatian artist Ranko Bon is a case in point. The work is advertised by a brief textual description on a wall placard. The work proper is 'in perpetual progress', formulated in virtual space, since it functions purely online on a Wikipedia principle, but initiated in 1976, long before the dictate of digital technologies.

*Residua* demonstrates the shifts that have occurred within language and digital media – changes of meaning enforced by ideology, by the global applications of technologies, by changes in the means of production in the timeframe of 1976 to 2010. And, of course changes that have developed within the work itself, as, in the meantime, it counts a history long enough to reflect these events. In the end, the meaning of the work is in its accumulated amount of 'two million words' of collected notes, essays, stories, jokes and other linguistic forms.



The Austrian artist Isa Rosenberger is on a search for the visual and performative representation of the intertwined and blurred processes of the contemporary economic and political machine. Her video *ESPIRAL: A Dance of Death*, which engages with the domineering intrusion of Austrian banks profoundly affecting the transitional processes in East Europe, operates on multiple levels: dance, aesthetics, language; capital expansion; Austria, East Europe, South America. These interfacing layers of her investigation succeed to provoke encounters in relational social and political geography. The video adopts and re-interprets the work of the German choreographer Kurt Jooss, inventor of political ballet in Germany during the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism. She also deploys economic theory from a text by Hannes Hoffbauer on Austrian financial imperialism which enables her to extend the work beyond visual and performative expression in an attempt to de/link art, culture, capital, and thus the role of the art in neoliberal capitalist societies. It is an added pleasure of this film to see a contemporary Chilean dancer, a follower of the Jooss method, verbally intervening as the artist applies her skull-like make-up. The fetishized medium of dance is modified through another medium – language.



The Czech artist Zbyněk Baladrán plays another sort of formal game with the video medium in his video essay *Bookcase*. A hand is seen writing a list of books, we do not know whether from the past or as a 'wish list' for the future. A textbook on architecture from the Socialist era is then opened on the table alongside the list. The entire video is shot from an orthogonal perspective, shown from above, and projected on the gallery floor. What appears through the 'technological eye', with its manipulated image/possibility, is thus blurred, unreadable, without meaning.

The most complex work of the exhibition is the video *Naked Freedom* by the Slovenian artist/filmmaker duo Marina Gržini and Aina Šmid. Their reflections on the role of (video)art, technology, biopolitics, capital and ideology as overlapping processes that sustain the functioning of contemporary societies, might seem intended to intervene theoretically and dismantle the notion of 'encounters in relational geography' in this exhibition, as if asking, what is the difference seen here 'in relation' to other exhibitions?

Gržini undermines any absolute pedestal for the artwork by text references to the theoreticians Beller, Kopac, Lopez Petit, Deleuze, Nimako, but also to the tacticians of the Soviet filmmaking Vertov and Eisenstein.

The video installation thereby re-invents the historical performative strategies of the ex-Yugoslav art scene of the 1980s (for instance, the Slovenian punk band Laibach mimicking emptied totalitarian rituals) projected onto contemporary conditions of video art and turning the 'capitalized' artwork against itself.

Gržini / Šmid pose their question to the very system of exhibition itself, and the answer is as simple as it is powerful – the film/video form of display acknowledges the viewer as a reader. What is seen on the wall, a monitor screen in a gallery, can be read as a text in co-option with the image, techniques of cutting, acting, the setting, and so on, because it can also be read in the reverse direction. *Naked Freedom* urges us to make another tour of the exhibition and reconsider new media technology as the perfect tool to organize the sensory and to construct reality; to think of the constellation of a 'shot' as a repetition of colonial hierarchy (in terms of Farocki's 'line of gaze' and as a reference to the 'necropolitics' that Gržini borrows from Mbembe); and, finally, to engage with language as the most powerful and violent tool for executing perfect ideological control over the productive subject – the artist included!

So, is East Europe accounted as an 'added value'? Yes, it is, otherwise the question could never be posed. Antagonism produces confrontation and a critical theory derived from it, and through which artworks, conceived as a mode of production on the axes of trans-cultural practices, emerge from encounters in the relational geography tracing the 'space for life' behind 'dust, ashes, residua'.

<http://openspace-zkp.org>