

Agents & Provocateurs
Institute of Contemporary Art . Dunaúváros

October 16 – November 20, 2009



ERSTE Stiftung



• Visegrad Fund

nka
Nemzeti Kulturális Alap



Instytut Polski
Lengyel Intézet

agents
provocateurs

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provocateurs

Julius von Bismarck (D)
Scott Blake (USA)
Ondrej Brody (CZ)
Jan Budaj (SK)
Budapest Reconstruction (H)
Ildiko Enyedi (H)

Ion Grigorescu (RO)
Andris Grinbergs (LV)
Igor Grubic (HR)

Tibor Hajas (H)
Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party

IRWIN (SLO)
Künstler informieren Politiker (D)
Istvan Kantor (H/CND)

Judit Kele (H/F)
Andreja Kuluncic (HR)

Ivank Lazki (AR)
Zbigniew Libera (PL)

New Collectivism (SLO)
Orange Alternative (PL)

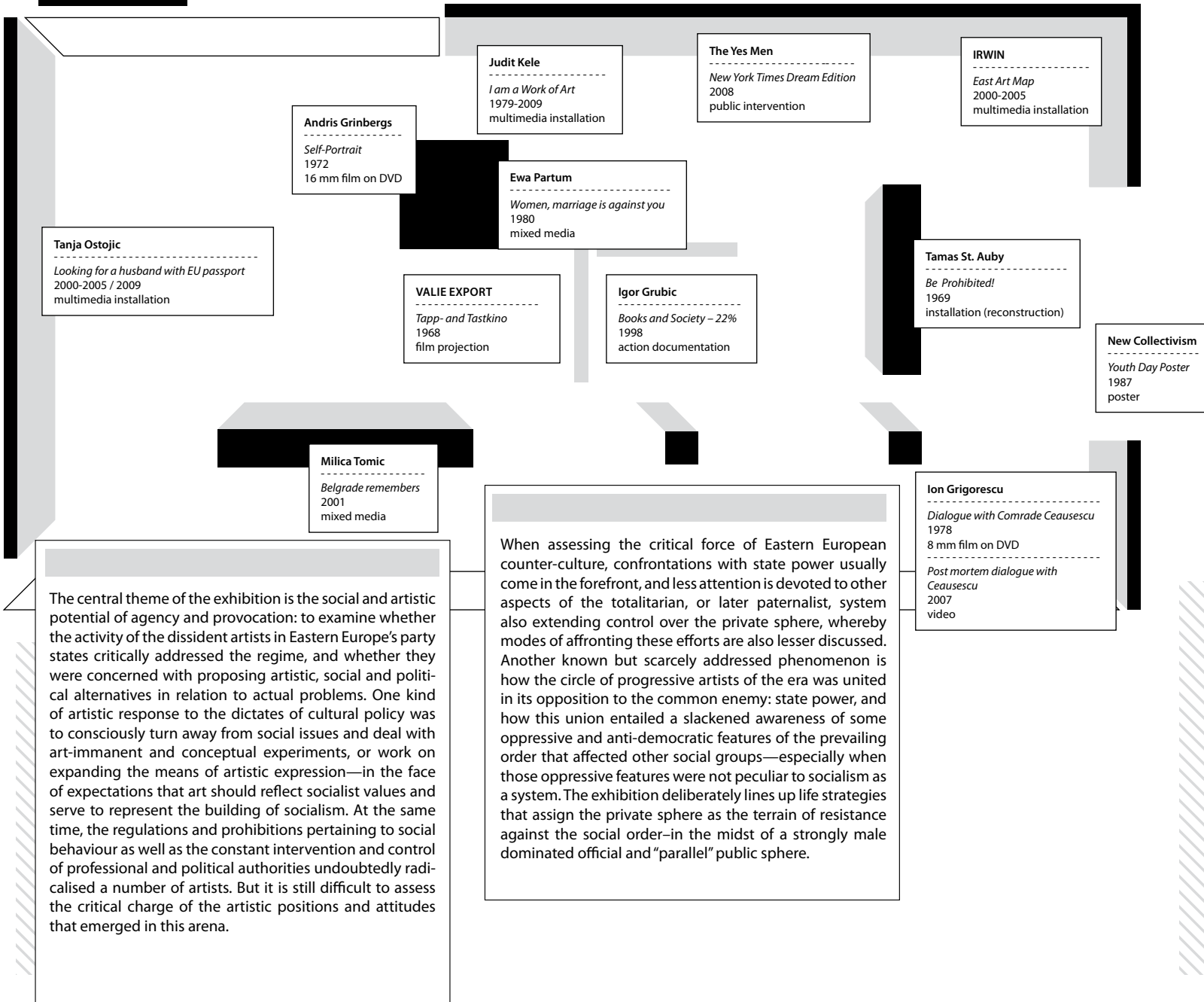
Tanja Ostojic (RS/D)
Ewa Partum (PL/D)
Tamas St. Auby (H)

Janos Sugar (H)
The Yes Men (USA)

Milica Tomic (RS)
U.R.A. FILOART

VALIE EXPORT (A)
Zelimir Zilnik (RS)

Uitz Hall 1/3



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Uitz Hall 2/3

The art project Agents and Provocateurs is composed of several parts: research, exhibition, film, archive, workshops.

The central theme of the exhibition is the social and artistic potential of agency and provocation: to examine whether the activity of the dissident artists in Eastern Europe's party states critically addressed the regime, and whether they were concerned with proposing artistic, social and political alternatives in relation to actual problems. One kind of artistic response to the dictates of cultural policy was to consciously turn away from social issues and deal with art-immanent and conceptual experiments, or work on expanding the means of artistic expression—in the face of expectations that art should reflect socialist values and serve to represent the building of socialism. At the same time, the regulations and prohibitions pertaining to social behaviour as well as the constant intervention and control of professional and political authorities undoubtedly radicalised a number of artists. But it is still difficult to assess the critical charge of the artistic positions and attitudes that emerged in this arena.

Works exhibited in the Uitz hall

In his fictive dialogue with Ceausescu from 1978, Ion Grigorescu takes the "father of the people" epithet literally, and directly addresses the political leader to offer constructive criticism. For several decades, this film of Grigorescu was only available to a narrow circle as the artist mostly worked as a restorer, secluded from the professional public. The Latvian hippy commune which Andris Grinbergs was a member of, had greater publicity. Still, his film *Self Portrait* (1972) was not restored until an initiative in 1996. Tamas St.Auby's imperatives, *Be prohibited!* and *Art is everything that is prohibited go beyond the issue of political bans*. More than engaging with the question of artistic transgression, the installation *Be prohibited!* addresses the categories of the permitted and the prohibited on a broader level, urging the spectator to commit a prohibited act when s/he trespasses the cordon to read the miniature inscription on the wall.

The situation is somewhat easier in the case of works and initiatives from after the democratic transition. Identifying particular problems is now a much more widespread practice; responses and proposition often appear in a more explicit manner, and the cooperation with the public is also more deliberate. This holds true for the Slovenian IRWIN group's *East Art Map*. The project which mobilized Central and South-Eastern European participants sprung from the realisation that the historiography of the contemporary art of the region almost completely fail to include the activities of dissident artists, critics, and art historians. The elaborate conceptual framework and operation principles of *East Art Map* generate a solution, while the project also thematizes not only the problem but also the reason for the unresolved nature of the issue. Doing so, the project also highlights the dangers of allowing certain readings to gain ground that might be colonial and turn out to be less receptive to local concerns.

Igor Grubic's initiative *Book and Society—22%* has a similarly problem-solving intent. The artist, also an active member of non-profit organisations, did not just expect others to take action against the introduction of a tax that was going to severely damage Croatian book culture. Mobilizing fellow artists, he took matters into his own hands and created publicity for the issue in downtown Zagreb. Individual artists expressed their protests in different ways, employing the devices of provocation (Tomislav Gotovac), information dissemination (Igor Grubic) or metaphorical symbols (Mladen Stilinovic). Despite the greatly different interventions, their actions triggered overwhelming response, and the media coverage helped to activate other social groups, too.

The Yes Men, famous for their mimicry-technique, worked with a completely different impact mechanism when circulating a fake edition of *The New York Times* in big cities around North America. Not long after the presidential elections of November 2008, the urban population, weary of the growing domestic political confusion and the international criticism cracking down on the policy of George W. Bush, came across a future issue dated 4 July 2009. Among others, the paper contained information about the end of the War on Iraq, the elimination of POW camps, restraining environmental pollution, and self-critical proclamations of responsible politicians. *The New York Times* "special edition" bore striking resemblance to the original paper's appearance and was a reality-hack of direct impact. In addition, it outlined a set of completely different government principles than those prevalent in contemporary American politics. With the promise of "anything can happen", the dream edition opened up new perspectives in the minds of readers towards countless alternative endeavours, ideas, and concepts of the future.

While **The Yes Men's** campaign denaturalizes the current state of affairs and absurdly exaggerates the criticised phenomena, the Slovenian **New Collectivism's Day of Youth Poster** draws from the invisibility of the strategy employed. The poster self-consciously adopted Nazi aesthetics in 1987, but its intention to warn about the underlying structural similarity of different ideological systems was only revealed after an official jury had already identified with the re-used image on public forums, prized it, and appraised its expressivity.

agents

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Uitz Hall 3/3

When assessing the critical force of Eastern European counterculture, confrontations with state power usually come in the forefront, and less attention is devoted to other aspects of the totalitarian, or later paternalist, system also extending control over the private sphere, whereby modes of affronting these efforts are also lesser discussed. Another known but scarcely addressed phenomenon is how the circle of progressive artists of the era was united in its opposition to the common enemy: state power, and how this union entailed a slackened awareness of some oppressive and anti-democratic features of the prevailing order that affected other social groups—especially when those oppressive features were not peculiar to socialism as a system. The exhibition deliberately lines up life strategies that assign the private sphere as the terrain of resistance against the social order—in the midst of a strongly male dominated official and “parallel” public sphere.

One such example is **Andris Grinbergs's** 1972 film *Self Portrait*, which is now screened in Hungary for the first time. It presents an alternative, communal lifestyle that surpasses the dictates of heterosexuality. The activity of women artists can also be mentioned here who, having recognised the inequality of the male-female relations within traditional matrimony, no longer consider this bond sacral. The relatively little known works of **Ewa Partum** from the 1970s-80s address the limited roles that patriarchal culture assigns to women. Throughout her performances, opening speeches and accompanying texts, Partum considers the institution of marriage one of the “traps” that effectively constrain women.

Judit Kele and **Tanja Ostojic** appropriate this same institution as both an artistic and (very literal) escape strategy, the means of social mobility when seeking a way out of the given political and social system at the level of the individual. Both artists' projects have similar points of departure: both left their home country with the help of a matrimonial ad. The time and the way of execution of the projects, however, bring into play different subtexts. **Judit Kele's** action from 1980 – the reconstructed version of which could be seen for the first time at this show – continued her series of performances entitled *I am a Work of Art*: she auctioned herself off as a work of art, to be purchased for a period of time defined by the purchase price. Bidders were found and invited through placing a matrimonial ad in a French daily paper. Many of the replies Kele received came from correspondents offering their help out of comradeship. These and other details do not only outline the particular status of an Eastern European woman in Cold War Europe, but also the near self-evidence of marriages of convenience. Some twenty years later, **Tanja Ostojic** is *looking for a husband with EU passport*, thematising the coercive force of geopolitical factors. The two works are clearly impacted by the time that has passed between their conception which also transformed the channels of communication as well as the degree of artistic and female consciousness. There is an intriguing difference between the tone of the newspaper ad and the handwritten letters on the one hand, and the emails on the other. The treatment and formal presentation of the communication conducted with the applicants also differ, and different roles are assumed by the two female protagonists. While Kele, naively and boldly exposes not only her body, but her entire existence to a situation with an unforeseeable outcome, Ostojic confidently controls the situation, and keeps

the event within the confines of an art project, grounding her decision primarily in intellectual dialogue.

VALIE EXPORT's *Tap and Touch Cinema* is one of the best-known instances of conceptual feminist body art. In this public space action EXPORT confronts the spectator-participant with the ingrained sexist attitude that characterised the Austrian society of the time and was normalised through (visual) culture. Her strategy is to render apparent a profoundly sexist act: the artist uses her own body to expose a practice that treats women as mere commodities or sexual accessories. As much as EXPORT's gesture may seem amusing to the present-day spectator, the inequalities in the contemporary civic status of the sexes made it clear that the intention of the artist went way beyond mere provocation.

Milica Tomic's action documentation *Belgrade remembers...* operates as a link between the former works questioning and challenging political and ideological regimes and the latter gender-specific examples. Through a public bodyart action, the artist warns about the dangers of failing to come to terms with national history. The Serbian WWII anti-fascist movement, as many other momentum of the socialist past, is too often completely blurred into the history of socialist Yugoslavia whereby it lost its social value after the disintegration of the socialist state. At the same time, Tomic juxtaposes the marginalisation of female anti-fascist figures of the recent past with the objectification of women in today's mass media and their degradation into mere spectacle.

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U.R.A. FILOART

VALIE EXPORT (A)

Zelimir Zilnik (RS)

Small Gallery

1/2

The works exhibited in the Small Gallery present cases in which public interaction, dialogue and interpersonal communication as well as the expression of opinion is feasible but often takes absurd forms.

Recalling the expressions and phrases used to communicate commands and prohibitions under socialist rule can be helpful in understanding the kind of parodies and language use of the counter-culture, their recourse to the techniques of doublespeak or double negation, overidentification, and self-censorship.

Ondrej Brody, Jiri Franta, Vaclav Magid, Marek Meduna, Petr Motejzlik

Untitled
2004
action documentation

Magyar Kétfarkú Kutypárt

General (abstract) demonstration
2009
street art action

Hajas Tibor

We declare that this wall does not exist
1974
b/w photo

Orange Alternative

The Revolution of Dwarfs
documentation compiled by the Orange Alternative Foundation

Ewa Partum

The Legality of Space
1971
documentation of public space installation

Zbigniew Libera

Nut
1985
series of b&w photographs

Jan Budaj

The Day of Victory
documentation compiled by Mira Keratová

agents

provocateurs

Small Gallery

2/2

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Recalling the contemporary expressions and phrases used to communicate commands and prohibitions can be helpful in understanding the kind of parodies and language use of the counter-culture during state socialism, their recourse to the techniques of doublespeak or double negation, overidentification, and self-censorship.

Centralised control, however, was far from being complete and consistent, which created countless gaps where to form (partial) publics. This is what **Ewa Partum's** public space project *The Legality of Space* (1972) bears witness to: officially authorised and under police supervision, the artist displayed real traffic signs, mostly prohibitive ones, along with invented signs, such as "No permissions!". The latter ones could be interpreted as so many projections of the oppressive regime.

Sometimes it was a matter of mere chance what sort of critical messages could be publicly posted. *Nut*, a series of photographs by **Zbigniew Libera** was taken during the martial law in Lodz. In an urban space carefully cleared of all carriers of political commentary, the artist came across some handwritten messages. The papers were pasted at highly frequented places and, as Libera assumes, must have escaped the attention of the authorities on account of their small size and apparent insignificance.

The overstated repetition and the distortion of totalised power was a significant aspect in **Tibor Hajas's** work, which also impacted his attitude both as an artist and a private person. After having been arrested on the pretext of participating in a street demonstration in 1965 and consequently having had to abandon his university studies, the artist nevertheless went on carrying out public art works. His 1974 action *We hereby declare this wall nonexistent*. *It is an unfounded forgery* disputes directly experienced reality itself: the existence of the wall bearing the above sign. Questioning evident factualities was a parody

of standard propaganda rhetorics and, at the same time, a reference to the mechanisms of self-censorship routinely practiced by people, including some of the intellectuals who had signed the documentation of Hajas's action.

For **Jan Budaj**, urban space was an actual space of action, an opportunity for interaction with the "audience". The artist, also an active participant of civil movements, made attempts to dislodge everyday life and everyday experience. Announcing fictitious cultural events, diverting the routes of passers-by, or consuming a family meal in urban public space, his activities meant to pose alternatives to a prescribed "reality" that was to control and colonise even the private sphere of each citizen.

The Orange Alternative, a Polish group with ties to the Solidarnosc movement, often drew on mass protest as one of the most spectacular collective forms to express disagreement. Dwarves painted on walls put the group on the map. Paradoxically, the spots the dwarves appeared on had been marked out by the authorities: they popped up on surfaces that the police had painted white to cover political graffiti. **The Orange Alternative**, at times protesting through the simple gesture of collectively wearing dwarf caps, employed several other tactics. Their appearances not only publicly ridiculed official authorities and tested the patience of the police, but also paved the way for spontaneous, flashmob-like participation. "God save Communism!" is but one of their slogans that may fall into the category of subversive affirmation.

The **Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party** (MKKP) is driven by a different kind of motivation to undermine the usual heard clichés and protest keywords, or parody the very act of demonstration. **MKKP** started off as a street art group and later became known as a bogus party. In an atmosphere of the demonstrations of recent years that ever more frequently got drowned by violent acts, **MKKP** reacts to processes that emptied out political rallies and political culture in general, and attenuated the chances of civility and exerting pressure.

The 2004 action of **Ondrej Brody**, Jiri Franta, Vaclav Magid, Marek Meduna and Petr Motejzík also springs from the general dissatisfaction and disappointment following the democratic transition. They criticize the collection and exhibition policy of the director of the Czech National Gallery, formerly persecuted artist Milan Knizak. The young artists' admittedly vulgar action reconnect to the fundamental questions of **Agents and Provocateurs**: how do state-socialist mechanisms of power wielding and exclusion live on in the new democracies? Does provocation prove to be a sustainable practice, or can it be the case that the development of new behaviour patterns and operation principles requires more analytical and goal-oriented strategies?

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Basement Gallery 1/2

The Basement Gallery features projects in which the artists reveal and counterbalance the faults and imperfections of current democracies. The themes addressed include the updated and more subtle mechanisms of surveillance, nowadays also interconnected with data trading; the intertwining of political and economic power; the triumph of consumerism that came to replace ideological brainwashing.

Künstler informieren Politiker

TAMM TAMM

2005 / 2009
action documentation

Julius von Bismarck

The Image Fulgurator
2008-
multimedia installation

Scott Blake

Flipbook September 11
2005-
mixed media

Ondrej Brody

Protest
2005
performance documentation

U.R.A. FILOART

I.-R.A.S.C. and I.-R.A.S.C. II F.C.P.
2002-2007
interactive installation

Ivank Lazki

Radical ATM Service
2009
poster

agents

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Basement Gallery 2/2

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Scott Blake (USA)

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Jan Budaj (SK)

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The Basement Gallery features projects in which the artists reveal and counterbalance the faults and imperfections of current democracies. The themes addressed include the updated and more subtle mechanisms of surveillance, nowadays also interconnected with data trading; the intertwining of political and economic power; the triumph of consumerism that came to replace ideological brainwashing. At the same time, this section presents the most illustrative example of artists considering themselves active participants of society. In the framework of the action **Artists informing Politicians**, the members of the Hamburg art scene developed a widely publicized communication strategy to contravene the establishment of a publicly financed private collection and the political decision that had led up to it. Each artist “adopted” a member of the city parliament, and employing a wide range of artistic strategies and professional arguments, they attempted to compensate for the lack of preliminary public discussion and communication. The goal of the campaign was to elicit the arguments of the participants involved as well as to demand personally endorsed decisions from those responsible.

Scott Blake's idea, *the flipbook* replaying and rewinding the attack of the Twin Towers, is undoubtedly frivolous and provocative. The artist's intention, however, was other than mere provocation or the violation of others' emotions and memories. What interested Blake was to explore the opinions and explanations surrounding the terrorist act, the diversity of which was never manifest in mainstream media. By keeping the heterogeneity of stances, the artist hopes to diversify the forming dominant narrative of the event and preserve its polyphony.

Similarly to the flipbook that replays and rewinds the 9/11 attack, **Julius von Bismarck's** *Image Fulgurator* “hacks” reality by means of a visual intervention. His device which looks like a camera (or a gun?) is in fact a projector that casts an iconic image on the photographic subject. This manipulation—for instance when, at a press conference, the logo of a big company corrupting a certain politician is projected onto his coat—reveals implicit content that, according to the artist, already underlies the situation in question.

The Argentinean activist duo **Ivank Lazki** manipulates the operation of an emblematic device of today's society. Their re-programmed cash machine appropriates the aggressive operation of advertisements that constantly urge one to shop. But instead of cash, their ATM floods its users with anti-consumerist propaganda.

I.-R.A.S.C., designed by **U.R.A. FILOART**, offers an easy-to-use personal solution against faceless and mostly ineffective public surveillance systems. The headband which can be easily built at home, provides reliable protection against security systems. Whether or not such criticism and elimination of surveillance generally invalidates protection even in cases when state protection may be justified, is another question.

Ondrej Brody's self-destructive performance *Protest* recalls the body-art actions of the 60s and 70s. At first sight, it is a parody of heroic artistic gestures. Beyond self-irony, however, this act carries a reference to an iconic moment of Czech history from the same period: the death of Jan Palach in 1969, who committed suicide by self-immolation on Prague's Wenceslas Square in protest against Soviet occupation and dictatorship. Establishing a connection between Brody's and Palach's acts leads to the question whether the counter-culture of the time was an actual opposition to the regime, or was it rather a kind of para-opposition? Another emerging question is to what extent artistic engagement remains merely symbolic? For, if one were to scrutinize the signatories of Charta 77—one of the most important political documents of the age in which the Czechoslovakian intelligentsia demanded that their government adhere to the human rights agreement it had endorsed—one would hardly find any representatives of the art scene.

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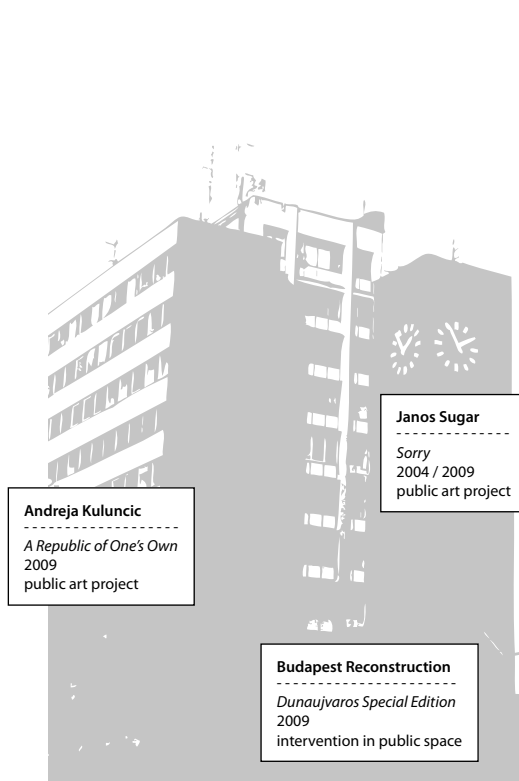
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Projects in public spaces 1/1



Andreja Kuluncic

A Republic of One's Own
2009
public art project

Janos Sugar

Sorry
2004 / 2009
public art project

Budapest Reconstruction

Dunaujvaros Special Edition
2009
intervention in public space

The impact of the political and economic system change can nowhere be so clearly traced as in the public space. The exhibition at the ICA, too, is accompanied with public art projects unfolding in public space. Throughout the past twenty years, much of state socialism's collective occasions as well as the characteristic urban zones hosting them have disappeared. Past events have been replaced by new festivities of the democratic successor states or politically motivated protests and demonstrations organised by single-issue interest groups. The property relations of common goods have also changed; a new array of privately owned leisure or consumption spaces and services have appeared, often only offering limited or selective access. The usage of public spaces has thus been modified, and this entailed the decline of their centralised maintenance. From the perspective of the formation of civil society, the fact that public space has increasingly become the arena of fights and campaigns defined by domestic politics, also has enormous importance.

Budapest Reconstruction, a project active for a couple of years now, initiates unauthorized collective actions. The group consists of a varying number of volunteers who set out to renovate dilapidated parts of the city. Their method of action can be applied to any urban setting and, beyond pointing to the neglected duties of (in)competent authorities, they promote the importance of the individual's social responsibility. In the context of the present exhibition, the focus is on their volunteer problem-solving strategy and the attitude of assuming responsibility as well as their readiness to act more efficiently than those appointed to be in charge. Passing on the "recipe" of **Budapest Reconstruction**, the group has painted over, and fitted with amusing palindromes, the benches of one of Dunaujvaros's main streets, inviting local volunteers. While few respondents came to their invitation, local politicians expressed their wish to see similar renovations in their election districts. Placing such top-down orders fundamentally misses the point of a gesture calling for voluntary civil participation, but this case of misinterpretation on the part of politicians remained harmless.

Janos Sugar's intervention had took place in a number of Hungarian cities over the past few years. A simple board reading "*Sorry*" is fixed beside regular traffic signs and thus acquires their authority to assing a direction to follow. This direction is meant to offer the simple gesture of apology instead of covering over unacknowledged mistakes and weaknesses with offensive arrogance. For **Agents and Provocateurs**, the artist created a bilingual sign reading the word „sorry“ in Hungarian and Slovakian—the modification was clearly impacted by this year's conflicts between the two countries. The signboard was placed in one of the busiest crossings of Dunaujváros, and the topicality of its message was reinforced, paradoxically, by the generated reactions most of which was fuelled by hurt feelings of national pride.

The informal political intervention that **Andreja Kuluncic's** project elicited was a case of actual banning. Drawing on her preliminary research in Dunaujvaros, the artist who has authored numerous public art works internationally, responded to the problematisations of the exhibition by addressing the topic of active citizenship. The city-wide interactive game through which Kuluncic wanted to tackle the issue got outmanoeuvred, which confirmed a major hypothesis of the **Agents and Provocateurs** project with unexpected force. The totalitarian system will reproduce itself as long as the kinds of habitudes, cultural templates and automatism, the patterns of thinking and acting—including the phenomenon of both censorship and self-censorship—continue to be practiced. Until a kind of political culture that is based on responsible political representation and a willing civil society comes to replace it.



agents

provocateurs

Agents & Provocateurs
Institute of Contemporary Art – Dunaújváros. Hungary
October 16 – November 20, 2009

Curators: Beata Hock and Franciska Zólyom

Project management: Nóra Deák
Project assistants: Ibolya Farkas, Anna Kiss, Janka Sipiczki

Graphic design: Pascal Rubertus
Web programming: Michael Reifenrath

Exhibition architecture: Tibor Horváth, Gábor Kerekes
Installation: Gábor Kis Ervin, Péter Páhi, Gyula Várnai

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