

A Rictus Grin

Curated by Christopher Eamon and Anke Kempkes

DUNCAN CAMPBELL (UK)
HARIS EPAMINONDA (Cyprus)
ÖYVIND FAHLSTRÖM (Sweden)
EUSTACHY KOSSAKOWSKI (Poland/France)
SAM LEWITT (USA)
MARIA LOBODA (Germany/Poland)
MIKLOS ONUCSAN (Romania)
JOYCE WIELAND (Canada)

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A rictus grin connotes a communication that does not express interior emotions. Instead, as a metaphor, it can be said to summarize a particular state of affairs such as paralysis or rigidity and yet the grin is received affectively as a smile none-the-less. The artists grouped in this exhibition have each created incisive positions in, and attitudes toward the milieu that they have chosen to inhabit, using public space and the symbolic sphere of mass communications as their media. Changing circumstances in the current art world in relation to the broader culture suggest a need for a return to historical forms and artistic approaches, today, in more subtle and fragile ways than ever. The contemporary world cast as a seducing cadaver is dealt with in this exhibition by artists who have worked with mass media and publicity in the past in intuitive if not analytical ways and by younger artists who relate specifically to the space opened up by artists of the 60s and 70s, while managing to escape the pitfall of an exhausted nostalgia.

Public space and institutional politics or, the street as a target, have been notoriously exploited as a site by artists throughout the decades since 1968. In the course of this evolution art as "intervention" has become yet another form of the acceptable in art, or even an ultra-sophisticated pastiche. How do artists today approach the political sphere through public space? How do we look back at artworks that dealt with these issues in the first wave of the genre from the distance of today's vastly more commercial context? Should we be fulfilled merely by a sentimental look back? Is our longing for the (politically) relevant in art to be satisfied only by a nostalgic return to the 1970s, via black and white footage, documentation, cinéma vérité, etc? And can, or should we, fully and seriously resist this embrace? How much should we 'forgive' this 'innocent' material by historicizing it as the primary effort of a previous avant-garde, thus unwittingly emphasizing its potential lack of relevance today as a cultural expression? Artistic and intellectual sentiments for historicism is all around us now, at times unchallenged and/or uninspected.

At the same time as there seems to be strong urge to reassess work of the 60s and 70s among younger artists. Just as there are, and have been, artistic moves in the area of mass media and other public spheres, some attempted, as they now do, to deal simultaneously with the doublebind of avoiding nostalgia while retaining an urgent sense of engagement. Already in 1967, Canadian avant-gardist JOYCE WIELAND'S film **1933** delved into the heart of this issue in a conceptual way, creating an artistic metaphor for how perception of present and past is colored by desire, passion and projection.

Take One 1933. The year? The number? The title? Was it (the film) made then? It's a memory! (i.e., a film). No, it's many memories. It's so sad and funny: the departed, departing people, cars, street! It hurries, it's gone, it's back! It's the only glimpse we have, but we can have it again. The film (of 1933?) was made in 1967. You find out, if you didn't already know, how naming tints pure vision. - *Michael Snow*

An outright criticism of nostalgia and sentimentality for the past as cultural regression may at times seem short-sighted, since there is a reason for the intensity with which contemporary artists address these forms with a silent urgency of their own. One of the subjects of this exhibition is a need for further interference in this zone—a knowing one—an insightful look into practices at times when they were not fashionable. Many of the artists included here look back to art forms created for the first time while at the same time test new forms adequate to expression today. The reflex by some artists may be at once fairly formalistic and yet, on another level, acts on the psychological behind the political, being more than a literal take on former or even current political agendas. We see this in a very concentrated form in DUNCAN CAMPBELL'S recent film project **Bernadette** (2008) which is a subtly formalized portrait of Irish political activist Bernadette Devlin. It is more a psychological study invested with a degree of fiction about a radical activist of that particular time than a straightforward political documentary about the Irish conflict.

In **Mao-Hope March**, 1966, Swedish artist ÖYVIND FAHLSTRÖM staged during his time in NY a fictional demonstration where the participants carried posters of Mao and film star Bob Hope through the streets. During this experiment, passers-by were interviewed about what they thought was the agenda of the demonstration with astonishing results.

The highly prescient work Polish/French artist EUSTACHY KOSSAKOWSKI'S **Hijacked Posters** photographed in the streets of Paris between 1975-79 nod to the *affichistes*, whose work by the 1970s may have appeared nothing more than aesthetic objects domesticated into museums and other collections rather than as the '*detournements*' they once had been. The open series includes posters of film and pop-stars as well as prominent politicians during the election in France. The vast appearance of political stickers which were pasted on top of the official poster as well as the ridiculing or demonizing graffiti mark a time of intense engagement with the public sphere as a place for counter-cultural and –political intervention – captured by the eye of the artist and informed by his heightened perception and artistic sensibility. Kossakowski formalized these public expressions through the process of selection and the cropping of his lens.

The Camouflages of Romanian conceptualist MIKLOS ONUCSAN are outdoor pieces, interventions, markers of „unnamed“ locations he chooses for these ephemeral paper cut-outs to hang somewhere down a facade. One of the camouflage pieces will be enacted outside of the gallery space in NYC.

The Camouflage is a sign, born out of the simple gesture of tracing a borderline, a threshold. *The Camouflage* resumes this equation and condenses the ubiquity in a material object, one that bears in itself as much the significance of a borderline, of a threshold, as the unnamed areas which it marks out.
- Miklos Onucsan

Miklos Onucsan's **The Concrete Book** object from 1990 was made as a reaction to the burning down of the Central University Library in Bucharest. The piece was reproduced on a poster announcing a national group exhibition Onucsan was included in, which was planned during a time when miners were recruited like a militia to march against the new democratic structures. As a consequence the artist stamped all the posters, which had been pasted up all over the city, announcing the cancellation of the show thanks to the 'Miners' Strike'. Political signifiers appear here in unfamiliar ways to the Western perception where a miner's strike would be associated with left wing unionism or a progressive force. Think for example of Jeremy Deller's legendary film re-enactment of the 1984 miners' uprising at Orgreave, UK. Onucsan's intervention in contrast contains the dark note of drastic political disillusion.

Contemporary work included in this exhibition takes a similar meta-critical stance. The offset print works of **SAM LEWITT**, recuperates the residue of graphics from consumer culture in order to transfer their essentials into another sphere - one of fading traces and hope.

My concerns reside mainly with representational and display conventions that have seemingly lost their discipline as communicative tools; but this so that they might bounce back some light onto whatever general conditions of use and legibility obsolesce in them (like so much *realia* given to the possibilities of fetish and knowledge alike). Book covers, newspapers, industrial printing equipment and productions of ink and paper have turned my attention toward building a typography of sorts. (...) If this typography sounds as if it were gathered from the characters which pass through Bartleby's hands in the Dead Letters Office: it is because the collection of materials that the work constitutes attempts to mark the present with the unresolved contradictions that arise between literate subjects and lettered objects, both of which are in the process of passing into oblivion. - *SAM LEWITT*

MARIA LOBODA'S fictional book pieces like **From the estate of D. Negrin: Letters and Writings from the mountains with an additional list of pigments (Afterword)** have some familiarity with Lewitt's projects of re-created books and graphic designs for the sake of exploring shifting signification processes invested at the same time with structures of cultural memory. The story is about a non-existent spiritual traveler from the late 1950s and early 1960s, a post-Nabokov kind of adventure of so much obscurity that it appears "a life never lived" (*Loboda*). Loboda's sculptural installations liberate the hidden, spiritual, obscure, and at times paranoid underside of public consciousness.

The moral antithesis of the perfect consonance is based on the musical *tritonus interval*, also called *devils chord*. The crystals in the piece, hanging from the ceiling, illustrate the notes of the composition.

I took Camille Saint Saens' *Danse Macabre* as my starting point, which departs from a dance with a violin playing the devils chord. *The moral antithesis of the perfect consonance* is a quotation from the Hutchinson encyclopedia. This term was used in the Middle Ages to describe the odd sound which used a consonance, - a harmonic chord considered to be stable and beautiful -, and transformed it from within into an eerie tone, also called „diabolus in musica“. It's like using beauty to create horror. - *MARIA LOBODA*

Cyprian artist HARIS EPAMINONDA explores the possibilities of an alternative fragile, at times exotic archeology of past and present. Like in her film work, **Untitled 88c/l** and **Untitled 89pc/l** are conceptually approached collages of found images whose pictorial quality resonates the color saturated postcard aesthetic of the 1950s and 60s. While the artist exploits material that has a certain sentimental and nostalgic echo, she treats these images on a strictly structural level: she references the given formal qualities of an image and enacts on its surface her own pose, an intervention of geometrical cut-aways, creating an expansion, a play or subtle adjustment to the existing image composition. In **Untitled 89pc/l** we see 'The copper mining town of NababEEP', South Africa. The artist manipulated the image by cutting a black grid into the paper visually on top of the mine as if the technical construction would be in the course of planning, the extension looks like a logical step. The same procedure happens in **Untitled 88c/l** the picture of a football stadium against the back drop of an US heavy industry city. Epaminonda cut two black lines connecting the goals on each side of the field giving the game and the whole setting an uncanny dimension. While the artist claims that the specific references she makes with the choice of found footage are of less importance and that she gives priority to the compositorial features of an image, - her interventions are demarcations which highlight the content of the image in a peculiar way. Epaminonda's seemingly beautiful intimate collages have therefore a severe impact: they constitute the very enactment of cultural dissonance along various timelines and social geographies.