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"Subversive Practices: Art under Conditions of Political Repression 60s -1980s / South America / Europe" in Stuttgart (Exhibition Review)

Exhibition Reviews

Allan Siegel (Budapest)

Tuesday, 01 September 2009 16:37

SUBVERSIVE PRACTICES: ART UNDER CONDITIONS OF POLITICAL REPRESSION 60S / SOUTH AMERICA / EUROPE, WÜRTTEMBERGISCHER KUNSTVEREIN MAY 30 - AUGUST 2, 2009

This summer, the exhibition *Subversive Practices: Art under Conditions of Repression 60s-80s / South America / Europe* was presented at the Kunstverein Stuttgart. As the organizers Iris Dressler and Hans D. Chris state, the exhibition describes "a multidimensional cartography" in which the many faceted corners spanning periods of time and geographical categories appear anew, often, in the margins of skewed art discourses.

Subversive Practices assembled practices and theoretical positions within joining countries of Europe with counterparts from South America. Its critics achieved not simply by the quantity of works drawn from the last four decades of the twentieth century or the Kunstverein's spatial dimensions but rather because they sought to enjoin artistic work, indeed endeavors and obsessions, challenging the assumptions and definitions that often view the art world with a decidedly American bias.

Thirteen curators participated in a project that contained more than 300 works by eighty artists from nine countries (two of which no longer exist). The intention of the exhibition is not to highlight one work versus another, which would negate its importance, but also to challenge the constraints of those discourses that criticism often nestled safely within borders drawn by the exigencies of art.

According to Dressler and Chris, these are works in which, "body, language and space represent the pivotal instruments, of resistance, symbolic and performative, equal measure." This covers a broad terrain, not simply the landscape of the stagnated socialism with its authoritarian variants, but social environment and forms of repression in which the most minute social deviations can trigger conflict with the police or military.

And thus, what could be seen were the articulations and topographical outlines of 'power relations' that appeared under various forms of authoritarianism and

Foucault states, "attack everything which separates the individual, breaks others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and own identity in a constraining way." Consequently, 'resistance' here embodies forms of conceptual strategies to establish or re-confirm links and maintain identity amidst a societal fog that blurs both individual desire and collective

The Brazilian curator Cristina Freire tells us that in "those days the postal was a privileged medium of communication in this extended circuit, unaware of the political dynamics and the concerns of the hegemonic art centres." This circuit linked artists in Brazil with those in Eastern Europe who "were in search of strategies with which to resist the censorship imposed by a dictatorial regime." The strategy extended beyond the Brazil-Eastern Europe postal circuit but included public interventions, discursive actions and other ephemeral activities. Often the existence of a particular project was maintained only through photographs or other forms of documentation.



Artur Barrio's installations and performances in Rio de Janeiro took place in the 1960s and then slowly disappeared. Similarly, in Hungary, Gyula Pauer's 1970 project *Sign Forest* pre-figures the type of public interventions that would appear in the West. In this example of Pauer's completed works, covering an area of about 100 square meters, it lasted for barely a day and was eradicated immediately before anyone could document it. The sole record of its existence are Pauer's photographs.



Begun in 1976 at the twilight of the Soviet Union, in the Soviet Union, Gyula Pauer's performances in the 1970s were part of a group called *Collective Action*.

Employed a comparable strategy in order to explore "an alternative space for communication in Russian-Soviet culture during late communism" according to Barbara Hänsgen, this section's curator. Like INDIGO in Hungary, Collective Action has continued to transform its original concepts in order "to comprehend the new processes of globalization."

Related tactics appeared in the German Democratic Republic where artists, facing serious repercussions, used their cleverness, as described by Anne Thurmann-Jajes, "to continue their artistic

activities, indeed with very enigmatic, astute, and ironic allusions to the situation." In these instances, discretely organized raves or happenings were not simply acts of resistance but reaffirming events. Equally, the appropriation of abandoned or empty spaces and windows created exhibition venues outside the normal channels.

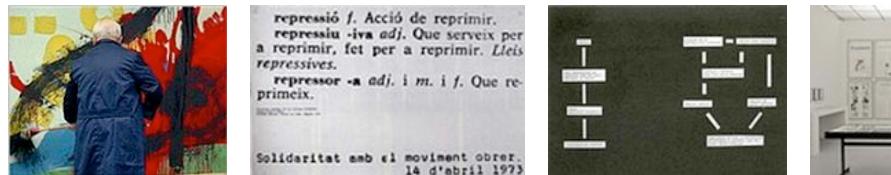




A daring example of this circumvention of official channels was the "First Leipzig Autodrome" exhibition held in the summer 1984. In his record of it, Michael Damm recounts how a group of painters, sculptors and filmmakers "employed partisan tactics to occupy a trade-fair building at the heart of Leipzig's inner city and they produced and curated their own group exhibition in an area of more than 10,000 square meters."



Beyond central and eastern Europe, in Catalonia, during the closing years of the Franco dictatorship, the appearance of associations like *Grup de Treball*, with its non-members, signaled a surfacing of repressed cultural identities and a "movement" to leave conventional artistic practices and joining a critical current where art had a social function." Alternative exhibition spaces such as COAC (Association of Architects of Catalonia) and Sala Vinçon appeared and became sites both for presentations and meetings. In spite of the state of emergency declared in 1975, artists from a wide range of disciplines, including Pere Portabella and Antoni Muntadas, were able to circumvent constraints and explore new vocabularies. Thus, in a highly repressive cultural atmosphere, new public spheres on the boundaries of the permissible opened up activities that came to maturity at later dates.



This was certainly the case in Hungary. Annamária Szőke and Miklós Peter, Hungarian curators, recall how in the late 1960's, "in opposition to the officially controlled public sphere of artists, another 'second public sphere' began to take shape, which manifested itself in various forms in all the countries involved in the exhibition, typifies the conflicting realms of an 'official' culture and its alternative outlets and a more socially embedded vein of cultural activity emerges in the currents but also to present realities and aspirations.

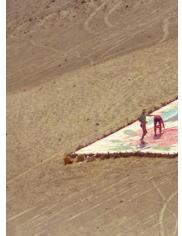
Working within this second sphere, the INDIGO group, emanating from the Faculty of Fine Arts, challenged not only pedagogical boundaries but also the nature of an interdisciplinary praxis. INDIGO's examination of the social responsibility of the artist reflects a multi-faceted thread that appears throughout the exhibition. A thread not coloured by one ideological strand but imbued the diverse challenges of each society.





The complexity of situations in which cultural practices had to go into subterranean channels appears in the Chilean case. In 1973, curators Ramón Castillo and Paulina Vara recovered the language of art to turn it into a silent—silence. In 1979, five years after the military coup, *CAD* (Centro de Acciones de Arte) began initiating actions which addressed human necessities and gave voice to 'silenced' projects. The project *In order not to die of hunger in art* consisted of half-litre bags of flour distributed in a barrio in Santiago de Chile and then used the recycled bags for other projects. They also initiated the slogan NO+ which appeared on walls throughout the city. The slogan became a sign of resistance to the dictatorship.

Analogously, in Peru the eight members of *Taller E.P.S. Huayco*, a group which lasted from 1980–1982, utilized 'found materials' and well known images. In the piece, *Art on the Way*, they copied a popular fast-food image and used it to form a carpet composed of painted dots resembling the dots in Pop Art paintings. Following this project, they produced the likeness of a Sarita Colonia, an *unofficial* saint adored by many on the margins of Peruvian society. The large image was constructed on a hillside adjacent to the Pan-American Highway.



In contrast with the ensembles or collectives whose innovative activities helped to sustain a resilient unofficial culture, strong individual voices persisted in defining forms of expression to negate the authorized vocabularies of the official culture. From Chile, Guillermo Deisler used the vehicle of mail art to maintain contact with his homeland and at home Carlos Leppe used his own body as a metaphor for the nation. In Peru, Employing a different strategy, and also with the support of the government, Jesús Ruiz Durand transformed North American pop styles to promote new industrial and agrarian policies. Francesco Mariotti's intervention *Artifex Basin for Special Use Intervention* was intended for installation in a retro Banco Continental gallery in Lima in 1975. The piece never appeared and before it could be seen by the public. An updated version of the piece was shown in a Stuttgart exhibition.



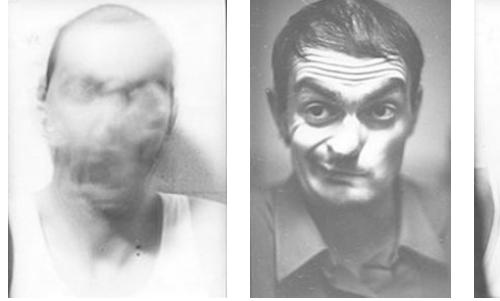
In Brazil, Peru and Chile the artist's body was used as the medium of investigation and the living canvas. Using 'self-portrait' and 'identity documents' as tools, Ana Mendieta and Gloria Burga created a series of performances where Face Report, Blood Report, and Blood

the headings for the display of related data which she collected over the course of her work.

single day. In Letícia Parente's eleven minute film, the artist sews the words "Brazil" on to the sole of her foot. Seen in close-up, the branding becomes self-referential to the artist's status and the broader social realities.

Not surprisingly, in environments with stringent cultural regulations, the body as the focal point of activity, appeared in Romania also, where "several artists tried to make up "survival" techniques [imbued with] ephemeral forms, at irony and social criticism."

Making use all possible sites in order to, as Ileana Pintilie Teleag said, "survive censorship." A case in point is Ion Grigorescu whose "visual research" project was carried out from within the artist's private space and self-confabulations. These films record "private happenings" both pre-figure and appear in parallel with other forms of performance which were able to find semi-private or more public venues. As in much of the work shown in this exhibition, their existence is only corroborated by different forms of documentation which in many cases were integral to the work.



In this context, and the exhibition's discursive frame, a subversive practice is not necessarily a transgressive or experimental work or act but rather an affront to authority and political power. Thus, as seen here, artistic expressions, like other exigencies, are very much manifestations of individual necessity, regardless of the political circumstances. Yet, whether brought to life by an individual or group, they are representations of the moment and refractions of the cultural forces within which the moment exists in its spatial and temporal realities.

What is striking than is the manner in which these efforts eluded the traditional boundaries and drew upon interdisciplinary connections defined by members of the collective or by a vocabulary not restricted by an imposed formalism. Within this framework, conceptualism can be seen as a much broader methodology, a way of working that is not grounded in its 'conceptual thingness' but rather emanates from a conceptual orbit or field of activity that both crosses and utilizes multiple dimensions evolving from its idea as well as the social and political realities within which it exists.

The exhibition thus reaffirms a truism perhaps: that even under the most repressive conditions and beyond the glosses of socialist realism or a neutralized and 'modernism' that were the official palliatives other solid forms of cultural expression are always flowing beneath the surface and searching for their outlets.

In any event, what becomes apparent are the false terms, the one-dimensional nature of the types of discourse promulgated by Lucy Lippard when she discusses "art" which is different from or in opposition to "mainstream" art. In these

formulaic descriptions, emanating from conditions in which cultural activity within a framework of a highly developed art market, labels can only tell us where we are entering or leaving. What is called for is a further exploration of the various forms of expression which rupture an obtuse commodified form which in a sense demystify the cultural forces of highly commodified advanced societies. What is perhaps symptomatic of this discourse, or rather its limitation, is what it omits, either from ignorance or lack of interest, the body of work which constitutes the exhibition.

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