

ART IN REVIEW; 'Flipside'

By KEN JOHNSON

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Artists Space
38 Greene Street
SoHo
Through Jan. 8

"Flipside" is a lively mess of an exhibition, mainly featuring high-concept works by Eastern European artists, along with a few things by artists based in the United States. It was organized by Katherine Carl, an art historian working on a doctorate about conceptual art in the former Yugoslavia in the 1960's and 70's. In putting together the show, Ms. Carl worked with ArtsLink, a group that promotes contemporary art in Eastern Europe.

The title refers to a "post-utopian" era for Eastern European artists, the "flipside" of a former time when the most extravagant hopes for socialism could still compel collective conviction.

Most works in the show address politics and social issues, some more overtly than others. A Serbian group called Apsolutno presents an extremely slowed-down video of a deer shedding its antlers along with a slide-projected, ponderously academic text that interprets the image as a complex symbol of the breakup of Yugoslavia. Similarly, a video by Maja Bajevic shows a staged performance in which laundresses wash sheets embroidered with the sayings of Marshall Tito over and over until they disintegrate. More simply and ambiguously, Audrius Novickas presents large color photographs of the "View Out of the Office Window of the Chairman of the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania."

The exhibition's most compelling video, Audrius Stonys's beautiful black-and-white film of a child traveling in a car with an older man, is not evidently political at all. But in the catalog you learn that it is about the artist's father, who volunteers to transport children who are otherwise alone to visit their mothers in prison.

There is humor in the show. Aleksandar Zograf's autobiographical comic strips about his visit to New York are funny and poignant; Pravdoliub Ivanov's "Pessimism No More," a real section of Swiss cheese with its holes treated like wounds with gauze and bandages, is a mordantly comical metaphor about political progress. And Tomislav Gotovac's "Mr. Foxy" is provocatively ridiculous: it is a series of photographs of the gray-bearded, pot-bellied artist himself in naked pornographic poses (he looks like a combination of John Coplans and Lucas Samaras).

Some works are heavy handed or too obvious: a full-size swing set with motorized floor-sweeping brooms instead of swings, by a group called Art Attack, for example, and an AK-47 and a set of hand grenades that were made in Delftware by Charles Krafft. And it is hard to see why a suave, Africanesque abstract painting by Odili Donald Odita and the small octopuses cast in red glass by Julia Kunin -- both based in the United States -- should have been included. But as a snapshot of the dissemination of various forms of conceptualism in a distant part of the world, the show warrants a visit. KEN JOHNSON