
"When I Open My Eyes in the Morning, I See a Film"

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Recent reassessments of the legacy of Eastern and Central European neo-avant-gardes coincide with a renewed public interest in the period around 1968. Good timing, then, for "When I Open My Eyes in the Morning, I See a Film: Experiment in Yugoslav Art in the '60s and '70s," the inaugural show at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (currently in a temporary location), which offered an extensive and illuminating look at one of the most active scenes at the time in the former Eastern Bloc. The title was taken from an interview with Tomislav Gotovac, one of the key Yugoslav artists of the period. As curator Ana Janevski argues, Gotovac pioneered happenings and performance, conceptual, and body art locally, while rooting them in his interests in experimental film, contemporary music, and pop culture.

Former Yugoslavia's unique place among Eastern European countries as a socialist state - governed by a political ideology neither communist nor capitalist - predisposed its artists to critically assess the growing impact of a corrosive media culture steeped in propaganda, typical for the region but not totally dissimilar from what was happening in the West. The result was an original and heterogeneous approach to artmaking that blurred distinctions between amateur and professional activities, play and activism, different media and styles - and between the illegal and the tacitly tolerated. Such rebelliousness against established norms, both social and artistic, was the prevailing attitude among progressive young Yugoslav artists during that period. One of the earliest groups featured, the Zagreb-based Exat 51 (Experimental Atelier 51), was formed in 1951; its combined interest in abstraction and sociopolitical matters would have been anathema for many artists of the previous generations. Active between 1959 and 1961, the Gorgona "antigroup" (as they called themselves) adopted a playful yet critical approach similar to that of Western neo-dada and Fluxus, which likewise aimed to close the gap between art and life. The Black Wave (involving such filmmakers as Dusan Makavejev, Zivojin Pavlovic, and Zelimir Zilnik) was a local phenomenon that explored dark, eschatological aspects of reality, a form of "pessimism" that is often viewed as typical for that part of Europe so steeped in tragic history. Perhaps not surprisingly, the pinnacle of that movement was reached during the 1968 event called Red Peristil, which consisted of painting red the main court of Diocletian's Palace in Split, an action (now known only from photographic documentation) that the government called a provocative act of vandalism; as a result - it is believed - two of its main participants, Pave Dulcic and Tomo Caleta, committed suicide. While providing examples of these important tendencies in the form of both artworks and documentation produced by professional or semiprofessional artists, this show also focused on the so-called antifilms produced in amateur film clubs, the impact of which on Yugoslav art and cinema has only now begun to be critically evaluated.

Yugoslavia's artistic scene expanded during the '70s, its emphasis shifting toward video and body art. New local "heroes" included Marina Abramovic and Sanja Ivekovic. While the former soon achieved international recognition with her aggressive explorations of both physical and psychological pain, the latter remains virtually unknown outside the former Yugoslavia. Yet Ivekovic's performances and conceptual pieces, such as Tragedy of Venus, 1976, in which the artist juxtaposed newspaper pictures of Marilyn Monroe with photographs of herself, were among the most telling works in this show. Taking visual similarities as a source of difference, they express both a strong sense of self and an unfulfilled desire to be someone or somewhere else - a melancholic yearning shared by many in Eastern and Central Europe before the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

- Marek Bartelik