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Vadim Checkorsky & Miroslav
Kulchitsky. Flirting with clichés,
displacements and repetition

[2.054 words]

Ukraine



EUROPSKA PRIJESTOLNICA
KULTURE



This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

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Vadim Checkorsky & Miroslav Kulchitsky. Flirting with clichés, displacements and repetition

When I arrived in Odessa, Ukraine, I was asked if I was surprised to find that there is contemporary art coming from or taking place there. It was easy to answer: No, I was not. There are far more peculiar things going on. You can even find interesting art in Turku, Finland, so my answer bears no relation to the question of whether pigs and cows can or should fly.

I am, however, ready to admit that I was truly surprised that, coming to this scene from right out of the blue, I was to meet two artists who I could directly relate to in terms of their work and attitude. And that I would find two people making contemporary art that is very relevant, nonchalantly and explicitly aware of what is going on, and of where they are situated in the field of art. Artists who are making relational, site-specific video installations, works that create and achieve their own content within the context. This revelation, of open-ended and definitely reciprocal communication, as always, gave me a really pleasant, funky feeling.

Vadim Checkorsky and Miroslav Kulchitsky (both born 1970) have been working together since 1993, mainly concentrating on video installations that have been very varied in character. They have participated in quite a number of local and international exhibitions and festivals, for example, the *Belleville - Milieu du Monde* festival in Paris, where in an unforgettable event they got to shake hands with the Mayor of Paris, who said their work is nice. They also had a research residency at the CICV international video center in Montbeliard-Belfort, France, in 1997.

So what are their installations like? That's a damn good question, and the effort of describing them coherently and adequately forces me to take a short two-year vacation in Barbados. But, on my return, stretching a little

after all that amazing sunshine, and concentrating on three, I would say, excellent art projects, I start chronologically with *Supertrack* (1995), which is a good example of their work. Set in a circle on an abandoned factory floor are five monitors. Between the monitors are white corridor-like structures that guide and connect the motorbike that is moving from monitor to monitor against a green background. A motorcycle driving in a circle, forcing you as a viewer to revolve in that circle from one monitor to the next. There is this cacophonous white noise coming from the speakers. This is about being there on two levels, in that specific setting, moving back and forth from hazy control of the ground on which you are standing, to another one, which for want of a better word might be called virtual reality.

Example number two is called *Jump!* (1996). This time, in a large hall Checkorsky and Kulchitsky create something that resembles a basketball court. The lines of the court are marked out with sawdust, and instead of the two baskets, at the exact same height and normal place are two monitors set on stands. On one monitor, you see a lion jumping through a hoop, followed by a man jumping through it. This is repeated over and over again, while on the other side these acts are presented in reverse. Visitors are unaware that the sawdust is part of the work, and their wandering about messes up the lines. You are somewhere where you don't know where you are. The coordinates of shared experience and habit are either displaced or confused; thus shaping a time and place that is in-between.

The third example takes us to the ABC of contemporary artpractice. *Quis leget haec?* is a wonderfully simple but highly effective work, in which a monitor shows us the final credits of a film. We are not told which film; we only see how the names scrolling up the screen. While looking at the credits, you hear a soundbite from the film, also repeated over and over again. It is a clip of action-movie dialogue, and the sounds are dislocated, out of context. What you see and experience is once again something utterly familiar, meticulously commonplace, while yet not being at all recognizable.

It is evident - perhaps not from the examples provided here but trust me - that these artists want to rock the boat. They flirt with clichés, displacements and repetition. If you like, points of comparison can be found with the work of artists like Angela Bulloch, Rirkrit Tiravanija or Douglas Gordon. The catch is that the unlisted company C & K is producing something that is highly contextual and local, and extending that to the general level. It is accessible, I would claim, to anyone who cares to give it a try. To listen, and to be there, in interaction. And, of course, they are only

able to do this because they are not following or aping South, West, East or George Best, but are focusing on their own home ground and perspectives. It is quite telling that both artists are also writers, and that they do not have an art-school education. Vadim actually graduated as an electromechanical engineer, while Miroslav has a degree in economics. And, you guessed right, they don't look even a bit bohemian. They are very articulate in their approach, which sees art and artists as a vital part of the social environment - reflecting and transforming it.

When Vadim says that, for him, art and their projects are "a way to cope with reality and a way to survive", we see a connection with their chosen medium - video installations - and the changing and unstable times in post-Soviet Ukraine. In this country larger than France, with its population of 52 million, a country that gained independence in 1991 during the collapse of the Soviet empire, an important and way to keep in contact with the outside world is through videos. This statement does not just come out of from my own head, but from various local people. As Miroslav says: "Videos are so essential and self-evident here that you hardly stop to think about."

Ukraine and Odessa are still feeling very isolated. The local press and TV are always biased in one way or another to the various rival groups. But, alongside them there is a blossoming import market for foreign videos, and of course, they are pirate copies. Odessa is a city of more than a million inhabitants. The funny thing is that in this place that God and time - recently replaced by the coughing Marlboro Man - left behind in the '50s, you can sometimes see pirate videos before the films are shown on cinema screens in Berlin.

This is one phenomenon of the neo-capitalistic Eastern Europe that poor Bill Gates complained about just recently on a visit to Moscow. It is estimated that only ten percent of the computer programs used are official versions. The rest are pirated. This is a phenomenon that the Soros Open Foundation, with its positivistic ultimately universal assumptions of rationality, also finds it difficult to cope with.

Checkorsky and Kulchitsky, however, have not have such great difficulty adjusting their artistic preoccupations since their breakthrough. Having been there, seen that and done this in a number of international shows, they have decided it is time to stop running from one event to another. Instead of becoming art-fair and festival junkies, they want to concentrate on their home turf, the local context, and to combine that with very focused collaborations with foreign colleagues.

A part of this back-to-the-roots approach was participation in a one-day show in October in front of the Opera house in Odessa. Exactly 30 years ago to the day, the first non-conformist, avant-garde show was hung on the building-site fence around the Opera. The match clock said it took the police 20 minutes to close the exhibition down. Three decades on, there is still a building-site fence, on which artworks were again placed for this one-day event. This was not a statement about this or that, but a means for the Odessa artists to understand and to relate to their own background; i.e. the dissident movement and its modernistic art. The story goes that, during the '60s, one of the local art heroes was the first in the town to own a pair of jeans. In the current show, two brand-new local heroes have designed a pair of jeans sporting the name of this former dissident as a logo. No wonder the old boys criticize the young lions for being too western minded.

Miroslav says: "It is a certain self-reflexive process that we have in mind. This means that we go into the local mythology and iconography of the society, and also of the art and the artist. It is about wanting to work with the audience's expectations and carrying out social experiments with them."

Vadim adds that: "It is sometimes very hard, if not impossible, to confront modernistic attitudes. Like, some artists feel uncomfortable because they have not read any postmodern literature. And when we try to explain that you do not have to understand anything, just relate to the work and experience it, they do not listen."

This characterization reveals not only a generation gap, but also something very important with regard to the broader perspectives of the modern-postmodern debates that are so alive, and in the never-ending cul-de-sac of existing anywhere and everywhere. It is the nice-to-meet-me project that has to be reversed.

Riding high on the wave that I caught while discussing with C & K and confronting their work, I am deliberately surfing with a pyramid-sized load of pathos. But, in that vital process of avoiding dichotomies of any kind, a certain homesickness and the resultant craving for security apparent in the current discussion in the voices of Baudrillard, Buchloh and Foster needs to be confronted, and it needs to be confronted vigorously.

In this process of trying to cope with the ontological insecurities that are always there, no matter what, we should take a look at the new Europe emerging on the Eastern front. That means Odessa, that means St. Petersburg, and that means Sarajevo, for example. Places in which the instability and uncertainty are so much stronger than in the so-called West. These are places where they at least appear to have begun to cope with these problems.

In post-Soviet times, without wanting to promote social pornography, I am prepared to assert that it is absolutely not just the so-called East, the developing countries, that needs to learn to cope with these changes and risks, and also chances, but very much the so-called victorious forces of the relatively open societies of the West. Both of them - all of us - are old accomplices in the crime of keeping the Cold War masquerade going.

So, you might wonder how insecure, dangerous and unstable it is out there; out there in the wild East? I put the same question to the head of the local Soros Center for Contemporary Art, Mikhail Rashkovetsky. He replied that it is hard to say, and that things are pretty much as bad as before, only the names of those in the government have changed. I was nodding as if I really understood, which I didn't. The next day, I would be given a convincing example.

While sitting talking with some artists in the back room of the Center in Odessa, three huge men dressed in black entered the front room and proposed to the director that the Center might need protection. Rashkovetsky was very surprised by these unannounced guests and tried to explain that the Center doesn't need protection because the Center is a non-profit organization helping local artists. The gangsters did not at first accept this, asking: "How come you have such good computers and such a nice office here then?" Luckily, in the end, the gangsters were willing to believe that there is no money to be made, and that they were dealing with artists. Rashkovetsky then showed a brilliant eye for situation comedy by giving these men an invitation to the next art exhibition organized by the Center. These open-minded fellows left the building in a friendly mood, saying that "Well, see you at the opening, then." Yes, see you there.