

MAKING STRANGE

Ostranenie '97 Electronic Media Forum
Dessau, Germany
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PERRY BARD

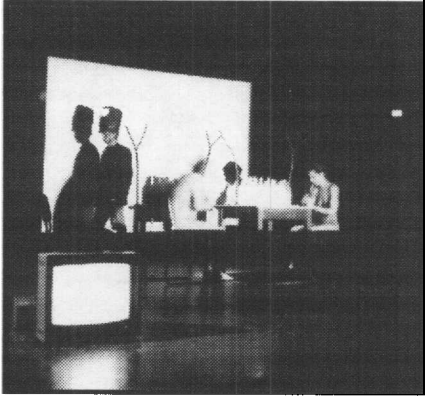
In the spirit of the Bauhaus, Ostranenie '97 was a provocative inquiry into the state of the electronic arts in Central and Eastern Europe. Two hundred artists gathered in Dessau last November to view and discuss artwork that critically examines issues about the remapping of Europe. This forum differs from most media festivals in two important ways: first, it encourages the presence of the artists themselves, aiming to create a meeting point for vital conversation; second, in an effort to broaden support for and knowledge about Eastern Europe, it sought out participants from isolated and under-represented areas. This year's roster included artists from Albania, Moldavia, Bulgaria, Bielerusse—no small feat considering the red tape involved in getting them there.

Due to bureaucratic delays, featured artists Natalya Petrova and Ruslan Umarov arrived two days after the screening of their video *Chechen's Ancient Land* (1997). Visas, a revenue ploy for governments in post-communist transition, are required for travel into the "West." Artists must present an original invitation (not a fax or copy) to obtain exit visas from their countries, entrance visas into Germany—and then wait. This post-cold war situation was best described as "post-what" by art critic Bojana Pejic, referring to the expectations and promises that the term "post" implies versus the lived reality of many of the artists present.

The forum originated five years ago when codirectors Stephen Kovats and Inke Arns initiated a festival to examine artistic and technological activities in the former Eastern Bloc. As political boundaries began shifting, the focus concentrated on the East/West delineations. Five years later, the East/West focus persists. Common concerns among artists from locations as distant as Bosnia, Bulgaria and Russia are new national borders, access to technology and support for independent media.

This year's forum included installations, performance, video and a NET-Lounge or digital salon, and was given an historical context. There was an exhibition of works by original Bauhaus teacher László Moholy-Nagy, whose dictum was the unity of art and technology. Lev Theremin, inventor of the first electronic musical instrument in 1920 (the theremin, played by waving one's hands near metal antennae), was honored with a performance by Lydia Kavina, who mesmerized the audience as she grabbed music out of thin air. Historian Velimir Abramovic (Belgrade) lectured on the visionary work of Nicola Tesla, the father of radio transmission, whose experiments with electromagnetic fields, according to Abramovic, were 120 years ahead of their time. Tesla's 1898 patent for remote control, the basis of telecommunications, inspired a performance by Marco Peljhan and Carsten Nicolai titled "Wardendlyffe Project No. 2," named after one of Tesla's unrealized projects: a wireless

broadcasting tower built on Long Island that was expected to provide worldwide communications.



Photograph of the performance "Where Do We Go From Here?" (1997) by Dragana Cukavac and László Kerekes. Photo by John Fass.

In his opening speech, theoretician and historian Lev Manovich (Russia/U.S.) provided a critical framework for computer-based art by arguing that the "new vision" of the 1920s, which introduced aesthetic techniques such as extreme close-ups, camera tilts and aerial views, is embedded in the commands of computer software ("zoom in," "magnify"). Since the techniques that were once used to reveal the underlying struggle between the old and the new are now, by his analysis, basic work procedures, he encouraged the exploration of new resources for artmaking like the Web site that can be approached from many different perspectives—as a catalog, or as an associative personal experience.

In the former East the problem is more rudimentary: the technological infrastructure needs to be established. Thus, one of the critical issues facing artists is access to technology. In St. Petersburg, for example, there is no support system for independent video, so artists produce TV programs to gain use of equipment, a solution that has obvious plus and minus points. Iliana Nedkova, in her introduction to the video program *Crossing Over*, described a slowly evolving situation in Bulgaria where computer-aided and interactive works are still considered a novelty and few institutions offer technical support. As a result, aspiring digital artists are often forced to turn to the advertising industry for access to media and training. Bulgarian artist Petko Dourmana's Net presentation was notable for the description of his process, which involves basically working alone. His intention for his interactive game "Metabolizer" (<http://www.naturella.com/metabolizer>) is to create a symbol for fighting isolation.

To fight isolation on a different level, the Syndicate, established by v2 East (<http://www.v2.nl/east/>), is a network that connects more than 170 people from 28 European and three non-European countries. Communication is primarily on-line, with meetings held at media festivals. Their aim is to convince funding and governing bodies to lend support to independent media.

While the NET-Lounge, given the rarity of Net projects in the East, was a special feature of Ostranenie, video was the most inclusive and researched category. Memorable videotapes from ex-Yugoslavia were

presented in several different sections of the program. Artist Enes Zlatar, introducing a selection of tapes from Bosnia-Herzegovina, described the emergence of a Sarajevo war "home movies" scene—artists who picked up a video camera for the first time to document what they were seeing and feeling. This situation was a direct result of the war: the main video center burned down and critics, curators and artists fled, leaving a gap for a younger generation to fill. In contrast to the war footage we are accustomed to seeing on commercial TV, these tapes record moments of recognition and acceptance tinged with humor, urgency and despair.

In *Hobby* by Smail Kapetanovic (1993), a young boy describes the ritual he and his friends established after each bombing, some of them getting wounded in the process, of racing out into the streets to collect bits of shrapnel. The boy's bedroom, filled with these souvenirs, is his reward. *Shovel* (1997, by Nebojsa Seric-Soba), is one continuous shot: a man is seen leaving his apartment, entering a basement, emerging with a shovel and digging a hole—another wartime ritual. Enes Zlatar's *24 Hours with Bure* (1995) is a video letter that documents one typical day in Sarajevo—from waking up and walking through decimated streets to work to visiting



Frame enlargement from *White* (1996) by Francesca da Rimini and Josephine Starrs, projected during *Cyberknitting*.

the cemetery. Each of these tapes becomes a testament to the will to speak out and remain productive in the most extreme circumstances. Jasmila Zbanic's *After, After* (1997) picks up where the official story leaves off. The tape reveals the affects of war on a young child who seems to be performing normally. A roving camera observes, with subtlety and understanding, the child's daily activities among other children at school, at play and at home. The power of the tape comes from sensitive videography, as the camera rests just long enough on this smiling child for us to grasp her pain.

Equally poignant was *Ogaj-Le Deuil* (1996) by Dragana Zarevac. The artist learned to chant in the tradition of female mourners in order to perform her own soundtrack. Using the lyrics of the Serbian medieval poem "The Death of the Yougovic Mother," mixed with the musical theme of the "Solemn Song" (which glorifies the communists of Yugoslavia) and stolen documentary footage from the Serbian war, Zarevac weaves an uncomfortable fabric of sound and image into a persistent and haunting rhythm of despair.

Yanko Baljac's *The Crime That Changed Serbia* (1995) is a horrifying documentary about the rise of the new mafia in the war/post-war environment. A bunch of "normal" looking guys stare straight into the camera, naively philosophizing their violence, dif-

ferentiating their concept of crime from the official war crimes that are being committed. Their tales of killing and being killed (three of them died while the tape was being made) are so preposterous as to seem scripted. One has to wonder whether to laugh or cry.

On the whole, the videotapes screened at Ostranenie fell into two categories: one in which the camera was witness (e.g., raw footage of protests in Belgrade and in Novi Sad from 1993-95 presented by Alexander Davic, that showed an active resistance movement that was ignored by the media); the other, in which the medium became a tool for personal expression (e.g., *The Virgin* by Tsvetelina Gancheva [Bulgaria, 1997] in which the artist humorously considers her options for losing her virginity). In this area works that engage Dadaist sensibility and the absurd were predominant in every country represented. If there was one generalized response, it was the desire on the part of audience members to see documentaries dealing with crises of war in countries where this history is very recent—"Am I condemned to make all my videos about the war?" was one impassioned reply.

One of the more ambitious installations was presented in the Dessau train station by a group of German artists called the Active Men. Three video monitors placed in an open tent screened variations on the exercise theme demonstrated by humans assuming impossible positions with inflatable bodies. Posing as a fitness ad, the piece drew a lot of attention from people going about their daily routines and addressed one of the central concerns of Bauhaus thinking: art integrated in society.

Moving theory into practice, *Cyberknitting*, a performance/panel conceived by Nina Czegledy, Iliana Nedkova, Branka Milic-Davic and Denis Neumann, was the most unresolved yet most interesting event of the forum. Using the title as a metaphor for human and artistic linkage and as a means to explore gender and identity issues on the Net, panelists sitting in a semi-circle on a dark stage with videos projected behind them were continuously interrupted by performers from the Novi Sad group Baza, who crisscrossed their paths, rearranging their chairs. Performers crawled under seats in the audience, grabbing legs and physically knitting spectators together with red wool. While this event clearly had a contemporary noise/activity level and an apparent desire to debunk traditional roles and definitions, that breakdown didn't quite occur, leaving a perplexed audience wondering how to respond. In his 1916 essay "Art as Procedure," Russian Formalist Victor Shklovski characterized art as a process of ostranenie, "'making strange,' . . . a procedure that increases the difficulty and duration of perception since in art the process of perception is an end in itself." If Ostranenie '97 is aspiring to this definition, *Cyberknitting* was right on target.

Also on target was the intensity of the interpersonal exchange. My lasting impression of Ostranenie will be the Bauhaus cafe animated by continuous conversation among artists who formerly couldn't share a meal. □

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SCREENING THE DIGITAL

D.FILM or Digital Film Festival
New York, New York
September 19-20, 1997

BARBARA L. MILLER

Last September I attended the inaugural D.FILM/Digital Film Festival in New York City, an event held at The Kitchen on two separate nights. In November, the festival moved on to other locations, including San Francisco and San Diego; and in the spring it will travel to various other cities throughout the United States and abroad (Ed. note: check <http://www.dfilm.com> for schedule updates). This impressive schedule of upcoming venues suggests that d.film, a constructed term the festival organizers use to indicate digital film, has the potential to

influence a variety of producers and viewers, both in this country and abroad. Its ability to do so arises less from its own reputation that, given the newness of the media, has yet to be defined and more from the exhibition space within which d.film made its debut.

In his brief introduction at the start of the festival, Bart Cheever, the chief producer-curator of the show, reminded the audience of the Kitchen's important historical role as a showcase of ground-breaking artistic work. In 1971, Steina and Woody Vasulka established the space, dedicating it to the exhibition of video art. Since then, the Kitchen has been a leader in introducing new media to New York City audiences. It has also influenced the founding of other sites and the programming of other festivals. Because the space was so instrumental in promoting video art, it is appropriate,

Cheever argued, that now, 26 years later, the Kitchen should launch d.film's entrance into the art world.

Cheever's comments are somewhat ironic since the very space that opened its doors to early experimental video art is now exhibiting work that all but signals the end not only of such analog-based media, but the exhibition space itself. In many respects, however, d.film's bid to edge out '70s and '80s video art arrives too late. Conversely, its ability to herald the end of such alternative spaces as the Kitchen is a little premature. Nonetheless, the Digital Film Festival was a benchmark event; the work in the festival clearly confirmed that digital media has an exciting future.

As expected, the festival played to a packed audience. Like others around me, I laughed at Paul Kevin Thomason's *Billy Ray Shyster's House of Discount Special Effects*

and *Animation Emporium* (n.d.). Our laughter, however, abruptly turned into an uncomfortable silence. Although Thomason's opening piece and his *The Green Man* (n.d.) easily stole the show, Kristen Lucas's *Watch Out for Invisible Ghosts* (n.d.), a nostalgic re-evaluation of early video games, and Paul Vester's *Abductees* (n.d.), a visually complex yet inauspicious interpretation of alien abductions, wandered aimlessly through long and underdeveloped scripts. I began to shift nervously in my seat, and noticed others around me doing the same. Confused, I began to fumble in the dark for my copy of the program notes.

The Digital Film Festival, as the art-poster that accompanied the program explains, showcases "low budget films made with computers and other radical new forms of technology. This includes non-linear editing systems, 2-D and 3-D