

# REPORT FROM ZAGREB

## Croatian Modern

*"Here Tomorrow," a five-venue, 35-artist exhibition, drew from Croatia's avant-garde past and its newly democratic present to consider the future.*

BY CAROL KINO

When it comes to art in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, the truism is that Slovenia has the best infrastructure, but Croatia has the artists. Look at the lineup of most major international showcases today and you'll see this borne out. Croatian artists have been included in recent editions of Documenta and Manifesta, with more to come at this year's Venice Biennale. They have also made strong showings in the many recent European and American surveys of art from the Balkans and the former Eastern bloc.

Within Croatia itself, this does not seem surprising. Throughout the 20th century, the country has had an extremely active avant-garde, courtesy of the location of its capital, Zagreb: one hour by air from Vienna and Budapest, and not much farther from Prague and Rome. In the 1950s, Zagreb became the center for Yugoslav film; in the 1960s it was a hotbed of Conceptual art. Today, after decades of Communism, followed by a bitterly fought war in 1991-95 among the ex-Yugoslavian republics combined with almost a decade of President Franjo Tudjman's authoritarian, nationalistic rule, Croatia is finally an independent democracy, newly pointed toward the future. Last fall, this hopeful moment provided the impetus for a huge, monthlong group exhibition, "Here Tomorrow," at Croatia's Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb.

To provide a fresh perspective on the local scene, the museum brought in an outside curator:

Roxana Marcoci of the department of painting and sculpture of New York's Museum of Modern Art. (The aim may also have been to see what an emissary from the world's preeminent modernist institution would make of Croatia's essentially modernist tradition.) At Marcoci's instigation, the show's scope was radically expanded to encompass 35 artists and collaborative groups, and five exhibition spaces. In addition to the museum itself, venues included the Glyptothek HAZU, a museum of sculpture and plaster casts; Kaptol Center, the shopping mall next door; the Paromlin, a disused flour mill; and the Internet café Mama, which hosted a discussion program.

Marcoci also decided to bring together the work of several generations. Thus her lineup included eminent historical figures such as the sculptor Ivan Kozarić, formerly a member of Gorgona, Croatia's version of Fluxus, and Mladen Stilinović, one of Zagreb's Group of Six, known for its 1970s-era guerrilla street performances. Marcoci also tapped many of Croatia's seminal film and video artists, such as the video pioneers Sanja Iveković and Dalibor Martinis, and the structuralist filmmaker and actionist, Tomislav Gotovac. (Gotovac was an early mentor to Serbian-born body artist Marina Abramovic.) The show also included many younger talents: while some have already shown widely, others are emerging, and a few are still in art school. Marcoci chose the participants on the basis of their entire body of work, but selected new work for the show and in many cases commissioned new projects. Though the resulting display was somewhat uneven, it provided vivid insight into Croatian art today.

Because Croatia has virtually no commercial art market (exhibitions are largely government funded), its artists have never been under pressure to create marketable objects. Thus performance and actionism, a major focus of Croatia's art scene since the 1960s, remain extremely vibrant and important. The show's opening day boasted several performances, many of which had a dramatically filmic edge. The first, which took place in the afternoon at the abandoned Paromlin, was *Silicon Valley*, performed by the young artist Ivan Bura (a recent graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence), which deftly summed up the prevailing mood. The roof of the derelict mill's administration building had sprouted a crop of long grass. Bura, garbed in a black cloak and hood, like a medieval vision of Death, harvested this crop with a scythe—a chilling specter that suddenly seemed to turn hopeful when the artist pushed back his hood, picked up a satchel of grain, and reseeded the surrounding terrain. (The seeds, I learned later, had been genetically modified, which suggests a different intention, but that was not at all clear from the performance.)



Zlatko Kopljar: KA, 1999-2002, concrete box, approx. 13 by 10 by 10 feet; outside of the Glyptothek HAZU. Photo Boris Cvetanović.

More performances came that night on the grounds of the Glyptothek. One of the strongest was enacted by the body artist Slaven Tolj, known for work that pushes the limits of physical endurance. (As many people pointed out to me, Tolj comes from the seaside town of Dubrovnik, which was brutally bombed by the Serbs throughout the war; he participated in both the city's civilian and military defense.) The performance, called *Nature and Society*, involved a cherished family heirloom—a pair of deer antlers bequeathed to the artist by his paternal grandfather. (During the Second World War, Tolj's grandfather, a postal worker, was asked to ship this hunting trophy to Mussolini by an official in Croatia's Nazi-backed Ustashi government. He substituted a smaller pair of antlers, figuring Mussolini would never know the difference, and nabbed the original trophy for himself.)

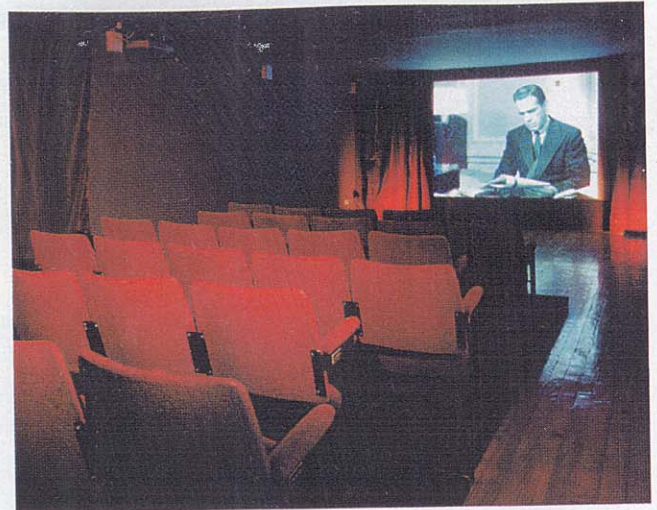
At first we saw only a square of light on a white-painted brick wall, cast by an empty film projector. Then Tolj, wearing nothing but the antlers, which he balanced on his forehead, walked into the light and began to bash them against the brick. Tolj was clearly trying to destroy this war trophy, as if by doing so he could obliterate Croatia's hereditary conflicts and its war-torn his-

Slaven Tolj: *Nature and Society*, 2002, performance, 20 minutes. Photo Ana Seric, Zagreb.





*Labin Art Express: Monument to the Hero of the 21st Century, 2002, interactive performance.*  
*Photo Cristian Alexa.*



*Dalibor Martinis: Inside the Maltese Falcon, 2002, video installation.*  
*Photo Boris Cvetanović, Zagreb.*



*Ivan Kozarić: Installation under the Sphere, 1958/2002, mixed mediums.*  
*Photo Boris Cvetanović.*



*Ivan Bura: Silicon Valley, 2002, site-specific installation and 15-minute performance.*  
*Photo Cristian Alexa.*



*View of Silvio Vujčić's Fashion Performance, 2002, 20 minutes.*  
*Photo Mare Milin.*



*View of Ivan Fijolić's Twelve Self-Portraits, 2002, porcelain, plants.*  
*Photo Boris Cvetanović.*



Dan Oki: *Oxygen 4*, 2002, video, 20 minutes.  
Photos this page Boris Cvetanović.

View of Kristina Leko's installation *Shopping, a Local History*, 1991-2001.



tory—and no doubt his own, as well. Yet, though he put dents in both his forehead and the brick, he succeeded in damaging the antlers only slightly. Throughout the show, they remained at the foot of the wall, chipped and splintered in places but relatively intact.

Another stellar performance was staged in the Glyptothek garden by Silvio Vujčić, a prodigiously talented art student who also has a degree in fashion design. Called *Fashion Performance*, it involved 10 models and a runway but might perhaps have better been termed an “anti-fashion” event. To the sound of synthesizer music he’d composed himself (it opened with a George Clintonesque track of yapping dogs), two men and three women stepped onstage, wearing outfits made of bright yellow paper, as water streamed down from pipes overhead. The models posed and paraded beneath the water until their outfits fell into shreds and color ran like golden blood down their legs. They exited, whereupon a second group of models entered wear-

ing green clothing—a process that repeated itself (with color variations) nine times over the course of 20 minutes. Occasionally, the models’ behavior seemed to parody fashion’s recent courting of masochism and abjection; yet somehow the accumulation of sound, color and sheerchutzpah also felt hopeful and thrilling.

Other performances included a sound piece by the deejay Ivan Marusić-Klif and a performance by the 12-year-old collective Labin Art Express, which is converting a warren of disused Istrian coal mines into a living underground city, in commemoration of the 1921 miner’s revolution there, that was quickly quashed by Mussolini on his rise to power.

The show itself was heavy on photography, video, film, installation and conceptual work, the bulk of which could be found at the Glyptothek, starting with the garden. Here, for a piece called *Installation under the Sphere*

**It is not surprising that Croatian artists should explore multiple views, considering that their country has been attacked or annexed by six other nations in the last century and a half alone.**

(1958/2001), Kokarić had reworked one of his own 1958 sculptures, a red jungle-gym-like construction, by surrounding it with prosaic objects—two old Renaults, an uprooted tree stump and bits of packing crates. (At Documenta XI, he presented hundreds of his sculptures installed in a replica of his studio.) Ivana Franke, who participated in New York’s P.S. 1 studio program in 2001, contributed a 49-foot-long white tunnel that directed visitors from the garden toward the Glyptothek’s back door. It consisted of a metal framework draped floor to ceiling with yards of layered cloth. The overall visual and aural effect was bright but muffled—as if one were walking through a passage lined with snow. As the days wore on, the tunnel grew muddy and leaf-choked, and took on a damp, forestlike smell.

Inside the building, a long, dark gallery on the first floor held mostly video and film projections that offered different takes on the urban landscape. Gotovac’s film, *Glenn Miller, 2000*, used soundless visuals of a drive through Zagreb to evoke the bandleader’s looping riffs and lushly romantic melodies. It was made with a camera mounted on the back of a truck that circled by the Sava River for nearly half an hour, just as night was falling. The camera itself was affixed to a rotating tripod, so that it often wheeled from sky to earth, sometimes remaining upside down for extended periods. The result was 26 minutes of dizzying loops and swings, backed by a sky that changed in imperceptible increments from upbeat sunlight to moody twilight.

*Gradually* (2001-02), an hour-long color projection video by Iva-Matija Bitanga, takes a similarly disoriented viewpoint. (Bitanga, a recent graduate of Zagreb’s Academy of Fine Arts, now lives in Germany, where she also pursued postgraduate studies at Karlsruhe’s Hochschule für Gestaltung.) To make the piece, Bitanga wrapped the strap of her camera around her wrist, and swung it rhythmically as she walked through various cities in Europe. The resulting footage and soundtrack, both of which she slowed down by 60 percent, provides a sideways look at the world—an effective metaphor for travel and dislocation.

Nicole Hewitt, an English-Croatian artist, contributed *In Between*. (As well as living and teaching in Zagreb, Hewitt has worked at Prague’s renowned Jiri Trnka animation studio.) This arresting 20-minute, 16mm color film focuses on one of Zagreb’s annual civic rituals—the day when people leave discarded furniture and oversized trash on the streets for collection. Hewitt shot footage of the piles accumulating, being

picked over by gypsies and hauled away by truck. The footage is spliced together in a jerky, speeded-up way that suggests an animated, time-lapse vision of a city being overrun by refuse.

Also in this gallery was a video by the youngest artist in the show, the very talented 22-year-old Goran Skofić, currently an art student at Split's Art Academy. Called *Pilot, 01*, this deftly edited five-minute piece juxtaposes footage of faces and masks shot at a carnival in Istria with views of International Style apartment blocks, construction sites and lampposts—as though a Constructivist collage and a Surrealist collage had been spliced violently together, bringing both to life.

More photographic work was installed upstairs, much of which had a political edge. Stilinović offered the photomontage poster piece *Seducer Me* (2001-02). Here, six posters pair apparently random photographs with lines of advertising and newspaper text. Rather than presenting biting political commentary, each has the effect of ironically undercutting the other; one might even call it anti-agitprop. In one poster, a picture of Croatia's parliament is accompanied by the slogan "Don't forget to take your bill"; another matches a couch with the words "Seducer Me!"

Nearby, the much-admired young political artist Igor Grubić offered *Velvet Underground*, another photo-and-text piece. (Grubić recently finished

his studies at Zagreb's Academy of Fine Arts and its Academy of Theater and Film.) Because he's mostly known for political and conceptual actions, this piece was perceived as a radically new direction. It consists of four unframed color photographs, each picturing a man in a prison cell wearing a plush animal costume, among them a long-eared rabbit and a teddy bear. These are paired with text panels that list the inmate's birth year, crime and sentence, followed by a story about the inmate's childhood, told in his own voice. Clearly, much of the focus here is on the action behind this work—the very fact that Grubić managed to penetrate Croatia's toughest prison and bring its stories to the outside world. In fact, because of legal restrictions regarding prison photography, he had to pose for the pictures himself. Despite these efforts (or perhaps because of them), the resulting work does not seem fully resolved. Even though the prisoners are not pictured, the piece seems to confuse documentary with parody—and perhaps with a whiff of exploitation, too.

Meanwhile, in a room built inside a larger gallery, Martinis offered the elegantly subversive video installation *Inside the Maltese Falcon*. (It's part of his "Binary Series," in which one visual statement is encoded with another, using a digital language.) Upon entering, one found oneself in an old-fashioned cinema, complete with red velvet curtains and seat cushions. Playing on the screen was a video projection of *The Maltese Falcon*, interrupted by stroboscopic pulses of black. In this case, this Hollywood product also transmits an anti-globalist statement by the Zapatista Subcomandante Marcos, rendered in binary code. (In Martinis's lexicon, 0 equals a black frame and 1 equals a frame of film.) Not only does this neatly parallel the subversive spirit of film noir, but it also rather mordantly suggests the big red herring at the film's heart—the nothingness inside the falcon.

The other galleries here were largely taken up with multimedia and video installations, all of which varied wildly in terms of size, ambition and mood. Ivan Fijolić offered *Twelve Self-Portraits*, a sprightly assemblage consisting of 12 identical white porcelain planters modeled after his own head. Filled with ferns, cacti, flowers and trailing vines, they suggest the artist's varying mental states.

Kristina Leko struck a more elegiac note with the complicated installation *Shopping, a Local History* (1991-2001). This piece addresses Croatia's 1991-95 war, but it also seems to be a personal diary. Leko, like many others in Croatia, used to do much of her household shopping at the Ikea in Graz, Austria. The piece centered on one of two glasses—with a dead spider inside it—left from a set she purchased in 1991 when she first set up housekeeping by herself, and 10 sets she bought there when she was able to return in 2001, after the war, her own marriage and divorce, and Croatia's postwar stabilization. The spider, which she found drowned in the glass one day midway through the war, seemed to memorialize loss and guilt, while the 10 new sets signified the years during which Leko was unable to return. The installation involved five photographic posters of



Video still from Iva-Matija Bitanga's *Gradually*, 2001-02, 60 minutes.

Video still from Sanja Iveković's mixed-medium installation *My Name Is Nermina Zildzo*, 2002.



the spider glass and text recounting the story, three floor-level vitrines that housed the replacements, and a pedestal vitrine that showcased the spider glass itself. A two-stream video projection archived the objects purchased for Leko's first adult household in 1990-91 and documented the return trip to Ikea. Leko, currently a participant in P.S. 1's studio program, is highly respected in Croatia, and this ambitious piece was a popular favorite among the Zagreb art community. Unfortunately, though, to an outsider it required too much explanation, and thus seemed too diffuse to have much impact.

At the other end of the autobiographical spectrum is *Lost Amigos*—a video in which Vladimir Frelih and Leo Vukelić (both of whom recently completed postgraduate studies at Düsseldorf's Kunstakademie) send themselves up. This vividly colored projection piece uses tourist postcards, real-life photographs, computer animation and a soundtrack of something called "Chinese rockabilly" to parody and memorialize a road trip the pair once took together. In one passage, the two men stand in the ocean—backs to the camera, heads bowed, pelvises slouched forward, both obviously urinating into the waves. This vision multiplies until the screen is filled with pissing men. Using stills from this scene, the artists created 20 photolaminated chipboard sculptures, some life-size,



Detail of Mladen Stilinović's *Seducer Me*, 2001-02, collage, 9% by 15 feet.

Still from Nicole Hewitt's *In Between*, 16mm film, 20 minutes.



**The “Community Art” project solicited footage of all sorts of conflicts and then invited sociologists, philosophers and peace activists to convene with the public to discuss the nature of antagonism.**

which were installed to nice effect in the gardens of the Kaptol mall next door.

Much of the work here spoke directly to the war years, as in *My Name Is Nermina Zildzo*, an elaborate installation by the renowned feminist artist Iveković. This piece, which was installed upstairs at the dilapidated Paromlin, is based on Iveković’s 1995 videotaped interview with Nermina Zildzo, the former head of Sarajevo’s art academy. Zildzo lived in Sarajevo through much of the 3½-year siege (which lasted until 1996) and, like many others, burned books and furniture to survive. This piece, which is still in progress, had many other parts, too, including an article about Zildzo from France’s *Telerama* magazine titled “Sarajevo Breathless,” which was taped to the wall, and a table filled with art catalogues and Post-its (visitors were invited to use different colors to mark which books they’d burn first and which they’d save). Its most effective component was a projection video of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* that Iveković had taped from television during the war. The film is striped with two lines of text: Croatian subtitles at the bottom, and a list of towns currently being shelled at the top—an adroit comment on the ex-Yugoslavia’s relationship to Europe, and to itself.

The most impressive display was at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Perhaps that’s because much of the work here addressed conflict and war directly, and also because most of it was the product of a contiguous generation—midcareer artists in their



An evening discussion from Ivana Keser & Aleksandar Battista Ilić’s interdisciplinary project *Community Art: Paradigm of Conflict, 2000-present*.

30s and 40s who’d had the opportunity to establish artistic identities before the war. The work was also strikingly organized and installed. During the first five days of the show, the museum’s main door was blocked by a huge rectangular concrete block—a project by Zlatko Kopljar, who’d conceived the idea in 1999, during the last gasp of Tudjman’s ultranationalist regime, which ended with the autocratic ruler’s death. Called *K4* (1999-2002), this brutalist barricade seemed to incarnate all the obstacles Croatia had been up against in the preceding years; it also suggested a critique of the museum itself, which had not previously shown almost a third of the artists included in this show. (While the piece was installed, museum employees and visitors were forced to enter the museum through the bar next door—a smoky, medievalist den called “Fantasy Club in Tolkien’s Pub.”)

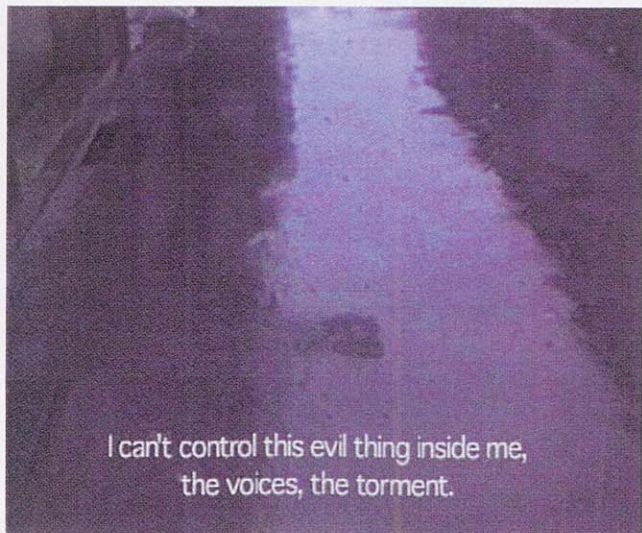
Inside the museum, Renata Poljak, an artist in her 20s who lives and works in Nice, presented the video installation *Wonderland*, which starts by equating the time of Tito, Yugoslavia’s relatively liberal Communist leader, with her own protected childhood, then sows seeds of adult doubt. News footage, 8mm home movies and shots of mosques, synagogues and churches are projected on the wall, while two monitors show Poljak walking through the streets of Sarajevo, now part of another country. The streets soon dissolve into fields of gently waving poppies—the flower of Tito’s Partisans, and a centuries-old symbol of battleground dead. On the soundtrack, she reads passages from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and sings the Yugoslavian Socialist youth group song “Crveni Makovi” (Red Poppies). Here, childhood wonder leads to adult wondering.

Many pieces at this venue explored the idea of bringing multiple perspectives to bear on a single issue, or drawing manifold interpretations of a common theme. (It’s not surprising that Croatian artists should be motivated to explore such things, considering that their country has, in the last century and a half alone, been attacked or annexed by the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Mussolini’s Fascists, the Nazis, the USSR and the Serbs.) In Dan Oki’s mesmerizing color video *Oxygen 4*, European astronauts, including one from Croatia’s entirely fictitious space program, are united in a common quest for air. Like much Croatian work that addresses globalism through the prism of science, this piece struck me as too fanciful to be on the mark—but the interesting thing here is that all the astronauts are played by actors from different European countries, who must communicate in something other than their own native languages. (This piece, which is excerpted from a longer film, may be explored on the Internet, at [www.oxygen4.com](http://www.oxygen4.com).)

More multiperspectival art came from the conceptual artist Tomo Savić-Gecan, whose work involves spatial dislocation. His untitled installation simply used two panes of glass to block off both entrances to a gallery—so that visitors could look into it, beyond it and at their own reflections, but couldn’t get inside it. Was he framing a white cube, presenting visitors with their own faces or simply keeping outsiders at bay? Certainly, the piece could be interpreted many ways—and in the first few days, it frequently provoked anger, as visitors bumped their heads against the glass.

Through the glass, in the next gallery, visitors could glimpse a projected video, apparently of a street demonstration, surrounded by rows of bleachers. This was the setting for *Paradigm of Conflict*, a project by the brilliant activist artists Ivana Keser and Aleksandar Battista Ilić. Working together under the project rubric “Community

Ivan Faktor: *The Song Is Over, 2002, video, 18 minutes.*





Untitled photo from Igor Grubić's *Velvet Underground*, 2002, photo-and-text series.

Art," they present lectures, discussions, performances, actions and publications, all aiming to investigate different aspects of cultural and political issues. For this piece, the public was invited to bring in footage of any sort of conflict—public or private, within Croatia or elsewhere—that could be projected on the wall. Then, for a series of evening discussions, they invited a group of sociologists, philosophers and peace activists to convene with the public to explore the nature of

antagonism itself. Keser and Ilić describe the piece as a "situation-specific work"—the idea being that Croatia itself has been a paradigm of conflict. They are continuing to present it at various venues throughout Europe.

Because Savić-Gecan's piece blocked one entrance to this space, *Paradigm of Conflict* could only be accessed via the video installation next door—Ivan Faktor's *The Song Is Over*, which offers a bird's-eye view of the hell that conflict can create. Faktor spent the war in Osijek, a town in Eastern Croatia that has been the site of countless battles going back to Roman times. In 1991, Serbian tanks arrived, and Faktor diligently recorded what he saw on 70 hours of videotape. This 18-minute piece mixes excerpts from his document with snippets of the soundtrack from Fritz Lang's horror film *M* (1931), which chronicles the hunt for a serial killer in prewar Berlin. (This icon of Expressionist film was later used by the Nazis in two ways: it was vilified as decadent, and co-opted as anti-Semitic propaganda.)

Over footage of a soccer game in a peaceful Osijek square, long-ago children's voices sing, "It won't be long/the bogeyman will come . . ." (the dialogue is also shown in English subtitles). Bombs explode, buildings fall into rubble, a man examines a burned-out car. "A murderer is terrorizing our city," a broadcaster opines, "as a cat toys with a mouse." We see a corpse, a ruined church, soldiers flipping through porno magazines, flooded streets—and we hear the murderer's voice: "I can't help this evil thing inside of me. It drives me through the streets. . . . Ghosts of mothers and children pursue me." The

**In *Velvet Underground*, text panels providing a prison inmate's age, crime, sentence and a story of his childhood were set against photos of men in cells wearing plush animal costumes.**

film ends with Marlene Dietrich's anthem, "Das Lied ist aus."

This searing piece was worth the price of admission alone. By putting fact and art on an equal footing, it implies that both play an equal role in history and in life. In this way, it is also characteristic of the politically charged, activist, media-savvy work that can be found in Croatia today. □

*"Here Tomorrow," organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, and curated by Roxana Marcoci, was presented at multiple venues in Zagreb [Oct. 4–Nov. 3, 2002]. It was accompanied by a 223-page catalogue featuring an essay by the curator.*

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