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ART AGAINST MODERN DEATH A Retrospective of Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid

One of the critical reviews after the exhibition points to the general characteristic of the project by Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid:

“Entanglement: this term emerged in my mind whilst travelling from one work to another, activating connections and mutual amplification of meanings” (Francesca Lazzarini, **“Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid: Dissident Histories,”** Exhibitions, *Camera Austria International* 161 (2023): 87-88. <https://camera-austria.at/en/zeitschrift/161-2023/>).

The entanglement can be unraveled, the knot untied. In a global world, we walk many trails. Clarification is a choice, like the one presented in this article, one of the possibles. Despite the first impression that the exhibition is an ‘entanglement,’ the viewer is not left without a guide. The exhibition has a focal point around which this constellation of images on the surrounding walls of the gallery room revolves. It is Dada.

In the Loža Gallery, in the center of the exhibition space, opposite the entrance, a reconstruction of the exhibition facility known from the documentary photographs of the *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe* show in Berlin in 1920 has been placed. Just like there, here as well, was a

pedestal in the middle of the room, and four chairs were arranged around it, facing the gallery walls. A reproduction of this photo was pasted on the gallery floor, and the whole situation invites the visitor to re-enact the attendance at the Dada show. Dada welcomes us to this exhibition.

The curators of this exhibition answer in advance a rather fundamental question that comes to everyone's mind here: „Why make this homage to the *First International Dada Fair* (Dada-Messe), that was displayed in 1920? Because »death is a thoroughly Dadaist affair«. It is time to rewrite counter histories” (the notation with quotation marks is original and is not a direct quote, but results from the desire to emphasize the function of this statement in the ongoing discourse that structures this exhibition). This explanation we can find placed on the gallery floor. However, it raises new questions. In answering why death is Dadaistic, many aspects can be pointed out.

Dada represents the figure of an artist for whom the world of culture and art had died at that time along with existing norms, and at the same time those who died for this world and refused to participate in it, to be a part of it. Therefore, for the Dadaists gathered at the *Dada Fair* in

Berlin, the only point of reference was the art of revolutionary Russia, because it was then that it dealt a death blow to the existing culture. Among the many slogans bringing the political nature of Dada art closer to the audience were those that proclaimed the death of art: „Die Kunst ist tot/ Es lebe die neue / Maschinenkunst / Tatlins.“ Russian Constructivism was the model of political art *par excellence*. The (European) World War and the revolution were the context of modernity at that time. At the same time, they constituted the legitimacy of criticism of the contemporary culture, on the one hand, and the need for revolutionary change, on the other. Both Dada in Germany and Constructivism in Soviet Russia were killed by political totalitarianisms. Both are still alive as a point of reference for the present, which was used particularly effectively in the context of Yugoslavia, and the statement by Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid proves it.

The reference to the historical avant-garde trend anchors the exhibition in the history of art. For Peter Bürger, Dada was the only avant-garde because it assumed the annihilation of art institutions, not its reforms. This implies that the category of style, which supported the social and artistic functioning of art institutions, is losing its importance. Instead, with Dada, the category of 'artistic means' (*kunstmittel*) is introduced, which is a shock. While the category of style is based on repetition, artistic means is a *modus operandi* that offers freedom of use in artistic and social discourse. Bürger found the Dada shock a key means because it originated on the outside of the arts but is intrinsic to the art recipients' life. And by the same token, in Dada, the social and political is prior to art. Therefore, Dada's artistic means are critical and thus dissident *par excellence*.

Dada is pivotal. All post-Dada art - conceptualism and post-conceptualism, actionism, contextual art, postmodern forms of site specific and culture specific installation, as well as contemporary critical narratives in art - have been made possible by this turn. Art has changed its placement. It is not located in the realm of arts, but

in the social realm of the beholder. In his study, Bürger does not refer to the forms of ballet, theatre, poetry, or avant-garde art trends, etc., which were used by Dada, but they all belonged to historically established genres of art. He rejects comparative methods, appropriate for art history, as useless. Instead, Bürger's method is the reconstruction of Dadaism. And reconstruction is always creating a new construction. In the Loža Gallery, we reach Dada, coming out of the present. The exhibition installation as reconstruction built upon Dada is based on the shock of death in order to subvert culture subjugation in favor of inclusiveness. This pair of contradictory terms, and the dynamics of the relationship between them, constitute the guiding line of critical thinking throughout the project. The shock evokes the postcolonial discourse of the 'other,' which today holds critical power and is as dissident as Dada used to be. In the Gržinić and Šmid exhibition, we observe how these post-Dadaist means functioned in a project that lasted for 40 years. The time span of the project is its justification. The perspective of time distance allows for reconstruction, i.e. a new present order. (Peter Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, translation from the German by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Walter Benjamin sees mass media images, mostly film, as originating directly in the social sphere of its participants, unlike pictures of art history whose uniqueness makes them function as distant from the viewer's reality. (Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1935). Therefore, images become inevitably political, and thus subject to critical use.

Benjamin's diagnosis was deepened by Guy Debord and the Situationists. The spectacular overall character of contemporary culture causes *recuperation*, which deprives the image of its political power, i.e., its potentially subversive properties. Situationists use images of mass-produced visual culture to change their meanings or to reverse the vector of their interpretation (*détournement*) so that the images reclaim their critical potential.

Mass culture is also the matter with which Gržinić and Šmid work. Their critical method is based on the use of cultural images, both global and domestic, in contemporary Slovenia (or former Yugoslavia).

This aspect of locality proves how this common theoretical equipment can be applied to a specific situation. The project begins at a key moment in the region's political history. After the death of Yugoslavian leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980, nationalist and separatist movements began, fueled by the growing economic crisis. In the nineties, these internal tensions were compounded by political changes in Central Europe, caused by the fall of the Iron Curtain. All these processes led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia into independent countries, and then to the ethnic civil war (Yugoslav wars - in plural as there were several conflicts between the states into which Yugoslavia was divided). This was at exactly the same time when the Laibach band gained popularity and a wide creative community was formed around the group, including visual arts like NSK and IRWIN. Laibach's style was a mockery of totalitarian aesthetics. It was used to invert its meanings, by the Situationist method. Malevich's cross, a frequent reference in the works of NSK and IRWIN (but also Gržinić and Šmid in their early films), signified an unspecified revolutionary force with subversive potential. A similar potential for building meaning had another well-known cross - from the works of Joseph Beuys. Building such references the artists called Retro-avantgarde, which in other words was an application of the method of reconstructing Malevich as the beginning of a new history of art in Central Europe (not only in Yugoslavia). Their 'retro' as a principle was explained in the film directed by Gržinić and Šmid, *Postsocializem+Retroavantgarda+IRWIN* (not shown in this exhibition but published in the DVD set released by Arge Index, Vienna, 2003), in the words of Slavoj Žižek.

The popularity of Laibach proves the accuracy of their message transmitted to the audience in Central Europe, in the momentum

of history. At the same time, in Poland, in the eighties, after a period of freedom and the influence of Solidarity, martial law was in force, and Józef Robakowski illustrated it in his assembling film (or collage film), *Art is Power*, based on footage from TV, the program presenting a Russian Army parade, with Laibach music, and then he directed the clips of the Polish punk band named Moscow. (<https://artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/praca/robakowski-jozef-powietrza>). Here, too, the Situationist *détournement* of the meaning of images took place. At the same time, Gržinić, as curator of the ŠKUC gallery, organized Laibach, NSK and IRVIN exhibitions there in 1984-85, the heydays of the then still dissident group.

The use by the artists of the iconography of totalitarianism, or the star symbol from the partisan iconography in Yugoslavia, meant reaching for images close to them, present in their social sphere. Although Socialist Realism was rejected, it was also transferred to the conceptual art of the seventies in Yugoslavia, as by Marina Abramović in a performance or by Mladen Stilinović, who appropriated such iconography taken from public television to his collages. Thus, despite the originality of particular works of art and attitudes towards art, the background of the political history of Central Europe is common to the artists of the region.

Then, in 1984 at ŠKUC, along with working with Slovenian icons of contemporary culture and art, Gržinić made the Magnus project about the gay scene of Ljubljana, titled *Homosexuality and Culture*, as the participants belonged to the close social circle of the gallery: „Magnus was established through art projects – an exhibition as a cultural act – although primarily it had a social background” (Gržinić recollection, ŠKUC website <https://www.galerijaskuc.si/marina-grzinic/>). Equality and inclusiveness became a constant theme in her work to this day. However, in the eighties, to overcome totalitarianism in the countries on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain was still a major dissident stand, it was Gržinić, already at that time, who pointed out perfectly **new threats to which**

Western-style democracy is susceptible.

Šmid at some point withdrew from joint activity. Gržinić continues to work in this direction at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, realizing exhibition projects together with international students representing different minorities, ethnic and/or sexual. (Asma Aiad and Marina Gržinić, "Muslim* Contemporary," *Art and Documentation* no.25 (2021): 326-347. http://journal.doc.art.pl/pdf25/art_and_documentation_25_muslim_contemporary.pdf)

This activity is based on the intellectual currents of postmodern philosophy. The great achievement of postmodernism is the establishment of the meta-order of plurality as the meta-base of all assumptions. As the freedom it offers cannot be declared alone, it must be grounded in political and social practice, against any fictitious norms, pre-established by means of power. Gržinić works with the expanded concept of postcolonialism, because the 'other' could be anyone, everywhere.

Gržinić's and Šmid's film form is based on postmodern artistic methods, such as footage, assembling, appropriation, or the extensive use of quotation, juxtaposition and captions that are pointing to reinterpreted meanings which are functioning outside culture as the institution that originally produced them. Its original background is newly plowed ground on which new meanings will grow. The artists use the entire postmodern array of means, which reflects the inconsistent and heterogeneous nature of modern times since the eighties. Images of medialized culture, both created and quoted, always function in the project as ready-made, made ready to make meanings.

Guy Debord, whose Situationist film *The Society of the Spectacle* (black and white, 1974), is composed of self-quotes and quotes from literature and philosophy, where it is difficult to attribute quotes to authors, and this carelessness is intentional, as well as in cult films of the period. An earlier film, *Howlings for Sade* (1952), consists of black and white sequences but has a soundtrack with film music and quotes.

Reader, released for exhibition at Loža Gallery, edited by Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek, includes an essay by Tjaša Kancler, "Politics, Decoloniality, and Delinking in Obsession, Naked Freedom and Images of Struggle/Decoloniality" in which the author clarified the issue of Gržinić's and Šmid's references to postcolonial theory. 'Decoloniality' is a key word defining the best method of achieving inclusiveness in contemporary culture. This is articulated in the films *Obsession, Naked Freedom*, and *Images of Struggle/Decoloniality*, which are from 2008, 2010 and 2012 respectively. Thus, they were created in the same period of building the artists' reflections. The author of the essay describes these works as film collages composed of images taken from the history of cinema, both feature and documentary productions, or by the artists themselves, as records of symposium discussions, or films that are types of fictionalized documentaries, with the participation of actors playing arranged gigs. Thus, we have a mixture of many film forms. Quotation and self-quotation are mixed here, authorship is suspended, similarly to Debord, who even considered plagiarism to be justified, (thesis 207. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* [1967], newly translated and annotated by Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014. <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/8.htm>). For it is only when we lose track of 'who is speaking' that we pay attention to 'what is being said,' when the message can come to the fore. Therefore, it is a method very suited to the purpose of this collage of quotes reused in a reconstruction process. As Kancler concludes, Gržinić and Šmid, in the three analyzed films, use dialectics (p.14), mediated medium and socio-political context to construct their message. This remark is all the more important, as the author criticizes the lack of dialectics in contemporary narratives. The indication of dialectics, i.e., structure of thinking, transfers the use of numerous postmodern re-practices to the meta-methodological level, and not only the practice of montage, editing or exhibition arrangement.

In the *Reader* we can find an article by Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek, “Race and Its Far-Reaching Contemporary Ontological and Epistemological Implications.”

“Part 1: Marina Gržinić: Politics of Death in Europe.”

The first part is a survey of Gržinić philosophical reference points that inform crucial aspects of the Gržinić and Šmid project, and the exhibition. She reflects on key terms on which she based her artistic research and works, explaining their philosophical origin and meaning in her reasoning, and the notion of death that appears with Dadaism and circulates throughout the exhibition.

Necropolitics (and necropower) – is the keyword of Gržinić and Šmid's concept. They describe how death from the period of colonial rule returns to the present day. Necropolitics is a concept coined by the postcolonial political philosopher, Achille Mbembe, who points out that the very concept of power includes the right to kill (necropower), not only literally though that as well, but as subjugation of the normative power, that blurs the line between ‘civil rights and civil death.’ (*Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," Public Culture 15 (1) (Winter 2003): 11-40. doi:10.1215/08992363-15-1-11*). Gržinić added to Mbembe's view a radical political economy stand by equating necropolitics with global neo-liberal cuts in every not-for-profit sphere.

Another author who acts as a guide to this project is Giorgio Agamben, and his term ‘bare life,’ which characterizes someone who has neither property nor social rights, nothing but his own life (living death). In other words (of Agamben), life has no form. And human life should have a form, not be ‘bare.’ (Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

These two complementary terms - ‘necropolitics’ and ‘bare life’ – create a system of mutual references in the Gržinić and Šmid project. As a description, they place life beyond culture, just as art located in Dada. The film is treated on an equal footing with a philosophical text, as they support each other. A part of the

exhibition was a library of films, available in the Loža gallery, as further reading (viewing) in the conducted discourse. She therefore proposed, in addition to the above readings, a set of 12 films. They are known and discussed many times in the film studies literature. However, here they create a database of images. Their accumulation, multiplication, indexation, repetition, strengthen the message of the exhibited works, the exhibition itself and the entire project, and at the same time show the nature of mass production/consumption of images, thoughts, and things. This collection of films, selected by Gržinić, includes examples from all post-World War II European production. They show the permanence of the policy of death and what Agamben and Mbembe call a ‘state of exception’ (or emergency) in world culture. Death and culture of spectacle is a contradiction that reveals a lacuna: a mass culture allure acts as camouflage of death culture supported by global political economy. Gržinić sees death as a nucleus of culture.

Let us list these films to enable the reader/viewer to reconstruct the Gržinić and Šmid necro part of their project. Since the *Reader* contains a synopsis of these films, anyone can continue this conversation for their own use. The concept of the exhibition, as well as the project by Gržinić and Šmid, has no final form. It's not about the conclusion, it's about the state of attention to the world.

Night and Fog (1956) by Alain Resnais,

The Battle of Algiers (1966) by Gillo Pontecorvo,

Early Works (1969) by Želimir Žilnik,

Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom (1975) by Paolo Pasolini,

In a Year of 13 Moons (1978) by Rainer Werner Fassbinder,

Germany Pale Mother (1980) by Helma Sanders-Brahms,

Handsworth Songs (1986) by John Akomfrath,

In Uranium Hex (1987) by Sandra Lahire,

M.I.A.'s Born Free (2010) by Romain Gavras,

Leviathan (2014) by Andrey Zvyagintsev,

The Fool (2014) by Yuri Bykov,

Son of Saul (2015) by Laszlo Nemes.

“Part 2: Jovita Pristovšek: We Remember Carrying the Word in the Mouth. Race. Chewing.”

Jovita Pristovšek, in her part 2, linked the necro stand with transcendental philosophy, as if adding a post-colonial chapter to it, and the race issue as a metabasis of considerations. In the philosophy (i.e. European as there is no other philosophy), one can find criticism of the commodification of values, and the globalism issue as one of them, a modern take of an old debate, a contribution to the method of reconstruction widely used in the project.

For further thinking, in addition to those mentioned above, in the conversation Gržinić suggested some of her authors, contemporary researchers working at the intersection of media theory and postcolonial theory, and who broaden her own field of research and outlook on the politics of moving pictures: Trinh T. Minh-ha, a Vietnamese filmmaker and literary theorist, works in an Asian context where cultural geography transcends the national borders of this vast territory on a massive scale; Rizvana Bradley, an American scholar, linking black studies and feminist/gender studies with contemporary art, film, and time-based media; Jill H. Casid, an American scholar and artist, who situates her global and postcolonial studies in a broad perspective of visual culture – they all offer a very general view that allows to construct a meta perspective of looking at the modern world.

Let us now consider the exhibition installation and method of presentation by Gržinić and Šmid. The leading arrangement principle, which is the collage of quotations, constitutes not only the structure of the films presented, but also determines the structure of the exhibition itself.

The slideshow, located in the corner of the gallery room, does not look like a spectacular element of the exhibition, the projection of diapositives on the wall is small compared to the format of the neighbouring banners or film projections. However, it is here that we should

start the reception of the exhibition because the workshop, the method of work, i.e., the creation of a database of images - characters' faces, film frames - rephotographed from a TV screen, were revealed here. Creating an image database is a key method of dealing with the images that are embedded in our lives. At the same time, they are the base of the meanings that these images evoke, and the discussions they trigger. All of them find a continuation in the screening of film works in this exhibition or other visual materials composing the exhibition installation. Images, when taken out of the body of the film, begin to be used as ready-made images, i.e., those that can be filled with their own meaning or reconstruct it anew, here and now, as the building material of the narrative. We can see how the Gržinić and Šmid project uses variable means, all at once, in one installation.

This mosaic of images can be read with help of *The Archive of Memories* a digital archive of Gržinić activities over four decades, since the eighties, placed in the room preceding the entrance to the gallery room. For the purpose of this exhibition, the archive was organized according to categories that map her interests as social and political thinker and her public activities (“Parallel Histories of Slovenia's Empowerment and Urbanity 1980-1990-2000” <https://sistory.github.io/ljsubkultmediji/index.html>). It was also diagrammed on the wall and reprinted on the cover of the *Reader*.

The exhibition is constructed like an environment. The artist reuses the same images as still images with captions next to the film. Images surround the viewer who is immersed in their flow. There are various methods of exhibition design here. We have large flex banners, the full height of the gallery, composed of stills from films, with text placed between them (in the Dada exhibition, slogans were also placed between the paintings). Next to the banners, we have a film projected on the wall in large format, from a projector standing on the floor, and then there is a banner with a set of black and white frames from the key film, *Naked Freedom*, with captions and statements (a photo novel form), where the text is equally important

as the image; next we have two videos on the wall, then a statement important for the whole project, that reads: „The crisis in contemporary art is related to our ability to re-locate conflict and social contradiction in artistic work” (like all texts, in three languages - Slovenian, Italian and English). Then again, a banner with quotes from Gržinić, Kancler and Pristovšek, and monitors flanking the entrance to the gallery. And we come full circle around the exhibition. The viewer's method of reception must be similar to that of the artists - it is not possible to receive all images, so you have to choose. Staying with one, you actually have all of them, because the same issues are discussed in all works, just like in countless conferences, seminars and lectures at universities around the world, also by Gržinić and Šmid. For a more individual view, a bed is used, with a projection for viewing on the ceiling.

The exhibition is like a document of an ongoing conversation, or an endless panel discussion – it is composed of many fragmentary statements and pictures featured in various places, situations, contexts, by various people who meet here and now, on the walls of the Loža gallery. You can probably create a different constellation of images and sentences using the database of works by the artists. Gržinić and Šmid's project is not a call to action, a revolutionary deed (contrary to Debord). Rather, it is rethinking the surrounding reality in order to take a critical position towards it. Their statements are well grounded in film culture. The present is well anchored in history by the method of reconstruction.

However, while various arrangements are possibly based on these collected materials, the guiding idea of inclusiveness based on equality, against domination, is common on a global and local level. Today, the dissident theoretical basis is provided by postcolonial studies. The authors perceive post-colonialism not only as a historical past, but also as a contemporary phenomenon, very flexible to adapt to discourses. Decoloniality is crucial also for the functioning of European societies, because it helps to overcome nationalism. It was prejudice against minorities that caused the tragedy of the civil war in Yugoslavia. A simple

ethical principle stems from this – in our world there should be a place to live for everyone.

Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, *Dissident Histories (1982-2022)*, Loža Gallery, Koper, Slovenia, November 25, 2022–February 28, 2023.

illustrations



Marina Gržinič & Aina Šmid, *Dissident Histories*, Loža Gallery, Koper, November 2022. Photo by Łukasz Guzek



1



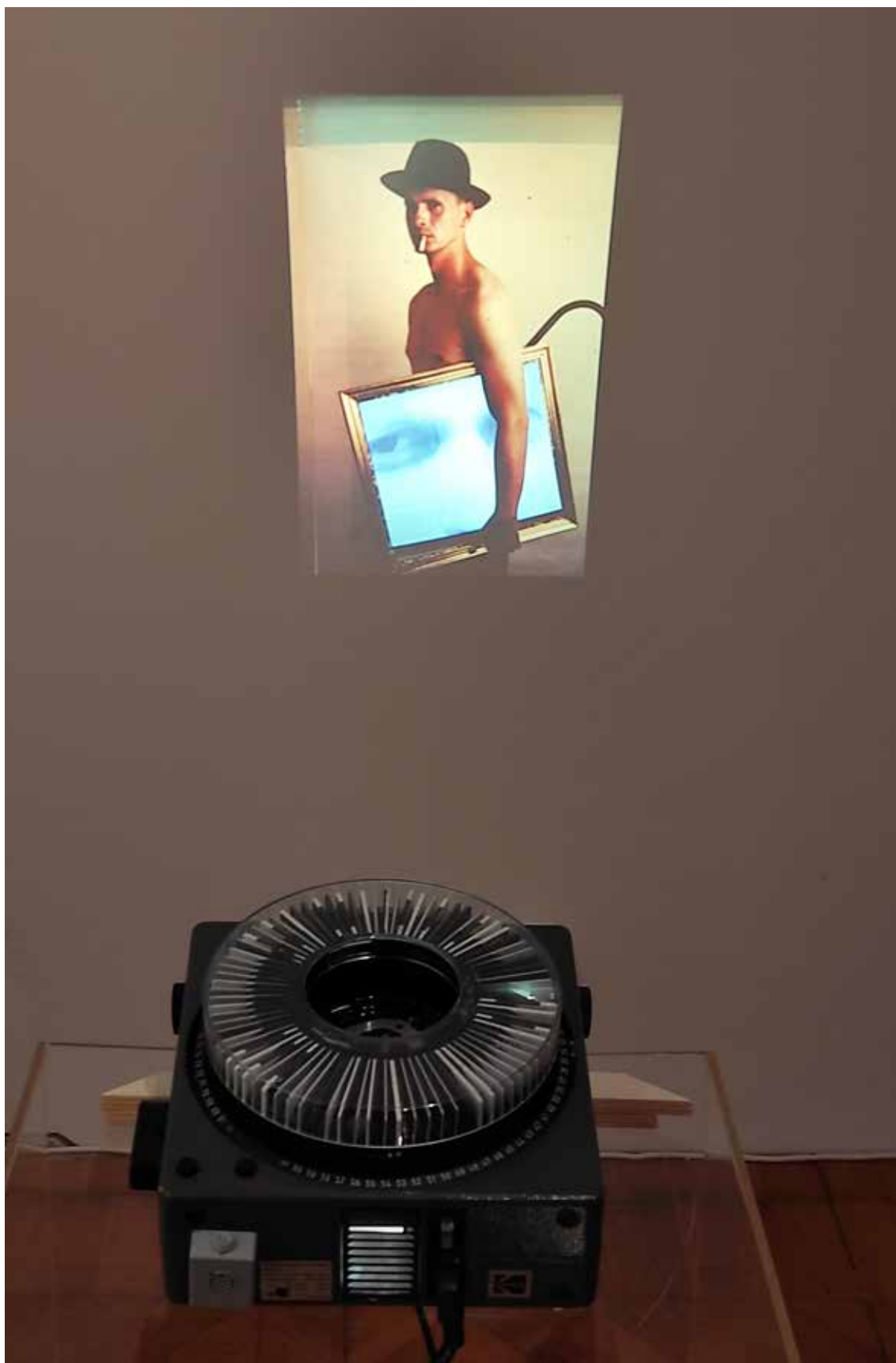
2



3

1, 2, 4. Marina Gržinić & Aina Šmid, *Dissident Histories*, Loža Gallery, Koper, November 2022. Photo by Jovita Pristovšek.

3. Marina Gržinić & Aina Šmid, *Dissident Histories*, Loža Gallery, Koper, November 2022. Photo by Ernest Ženko.



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1. Gržinič and Šmid from the video *Bilokacija* (Bilocation), video, 1990

2. Gržinič and Mandič from the video - *Cindy Sherman ali histerija produkcija predstavlja rekonstrukcijo fotografij Cindy Sherman* (Cindy Sherman or Hysteria Production Presents a Reconstruction of Sherman's Photographs), video, 1984

3. Gržinič and Šmid from the video *Bilokacija* (Bilocation), video, 1990

4. Gržinič and Šmid from the video *O muhah s tržnice* (About the flies in the marketplace), video, 1999

5. Gržinič and Šmid from the video *Tri sestre* (Three sisters), video, 1992

6. Gržinič and Šmid in collaboration with and in the group *Meje controle number 4* (The Borders of Control no. 4) image from *Grožnja prihodnosti* (The Threat of the Future), video, 1983

7. Carrying the painting *The Sower* (Slovenian: *Sejalec*) is a 1907 oil painting on canvas by Slovenian impressionist painter and musician Ivan Grohar, depicting a farmer sowing in a plowed field on an early and foggy morning.

8. Gržinič and Šmid from the video *Sejalec* (The Sower), video and video installation, 1991

Actor Borut Mauhler reconstructs the scene verbatim from Man Ray, Philippe Soupault, 1922, original gelatin silver print, photograph, 11.8 x 9 cm



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9. *Labirint* (Labyrinth), video and video performance, 1993/10.

10. Gržinić and Šmid, from the video *O muhah s tržnice* (On the Flies of the Market Place), video, 1999

It is a reference to the WASP mothers. The United States once had a ruling caste. It ruled for about a century, from Reconstruction to the Nixon administration, but it was not until the last years of their rule that they got a name: White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, or WASPs.

Except for a few resorts, the real WASPs have largely disappeared from view today. Since Thurston Howell III was introduced to Gilligan's Island, most Americans have known them only as cartoon characters in brightly colored vacation attire. In his insightful new book *WASPS: The Splendors and Miseries of an American Aristocracy*, Michael Knox Beran shows that this caricature is deceptive. The WASP legacy is still present, even if their accents and rituals have become punch lines. They may have lost much of their privilege and cohesion, but their achievements—including the administrative state, the educational elite, and charitable foundations—remain a dominant influence on American life.

11. Gržinić and Šmid in collaboration with and in the group *Meje kontrole number 4* (The Borders of Control no. 4) Image from *Grožnja prihodnosti* (The Threat of the Future), video, 1983 Bathroom: Gržinić and Šmid sit naked on the floor and talk about police repression.

12. Gržinić and Šmid from the video *Moscow Portraits*, video and video installation, 1990

Made in Banf, Canada. Banf is a town very close to Lethbridge (and throughout Southern Alberta) where the Ku Klux Klan is concentrated. While many people think of the Ku Klux Klan as an American phenomenon, the Klan moved to the Prairies in the 1920s and tried to establish a foothold in Lethbridge and surrounding communities. In Canada, the Klan targeted different groups than in the United States, attacking Catholics, Eastern Europeans, and people of Asian descent.