

frieze

The Sky is Blue in Some Other Way: A Diagram of a Possible Misreading

Galería Elba Benítez

Staged as a conversation of sorts between a group of Eastern European artists from different generations – a roster of young artists and those whose careers reached their peak in the 1950s, '60s or '70s – 'The Sky is Blue in Some Other Way: A Diagram of a Possible Misreading' succeeded in conveying a sense of historical continuity through a cluster of shared strategies and aesthetics that included minimalism, conceptualism, performance and visual poetry. This collapsing of the generation gap was by no means accidental. Curated by Adam Budak, the exhibition's starting point was Harold Bloom's seminal literary study *A Map of Misreading* (1975), in which he argued that every poem is the result of a critical act whereby an earlier poem is deliberately misread and rewritten. Relating Bloom's theory to visual art allowed Budak to tease out links between the artists in the show – the influence of older generations on younger ones, and resistance to this influence.

The exhibition, a total of 37 works, crowding the modest gallery space, was a catalogue of subtle gestures. The work of Mangelos (Dimitrije Bašicevic), a key member of the Zagreb avant-garde group Gorgona, is illustrative. Mangelos described his work as 'anti-art', and the exhibition displayed a number of his 'anti-paintings', including his 'Tabula Rasa' and 'Négation de la peinture' (Negation of Painting) series (all works 1951–56), which feature rectangles of black tempera that obliterate reproductions of images found in art books or magazines. On the same wall was the black canvas of Michal Budny's *Deconstruction of Transparency* (2008), which is accompanied in this composite piece by a white monochrome leaning against the wall and a wide rectangle of silver foil diagonally glued to the floor. The work was simple and yet moving, a beautiful fetishization of materiality and surface that didn't require any further conceptual reading to seem worthy of sustained attention. Nearby, also by Budny, a group of cardboard sculptures, including *Midnight Voice* (2010), masqueraded their contingent nature with layers of black paint, as if aspiring to the immanence of marble or bronze while harbouring a certain embarrassment because of their lesser material status. Complementing Budny's models was a piece by Thea Djordjadze, its converging wooden-slat-and-steel frame sitting in precarious equilibrium in the

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Eva Kotátková, *Untitled*, 2013, cut-outs of printed reproductions pinned in a vitrine frame, 65 × 65 × 10 cm

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adjacent room, like a step ladder ascending to nowhere.

These kind of understated gestures and artistic interventions are often qualified as 'poetic', an adjective that tends to become either maudlin or vague but that gained traction here thanks to the curatorial nod to Bloom. Forging a link between these two artistic disciplines is certainly timely but, as the exhibition suggests, this relationship is far from new. Ewa Partum's *Active Poetry. Poem by Eva* (1971), for example, is a 8mm film that documents an action in which she scattered cut-out letters to the wind, bestowing a creative agency to nature while disavowing rational speech in favour of fragmentation and imagination.

Projected against a wall, almost at floor level, was Dora Maurer's film *Properties* (1979), which documents her studio-based explorations of the body as a measuring tool; her hands, legs, head and feet spread over a thin white strip of paper in a compulsive choreography that is as purposeless as it is hypnotic to watch. In the final room works by the young artists Agnieszka Polska and Eva Kotátková use nostalgic aesthetics to engage in revisionist explorations of the pedagogical policies of the old Eastern Bloc. Kotátková's *Untitled* (2010–11), an assemblage of collages on a wooden shelf, posits education as an ideological apparatus aimed at creating docile individuals and reinforcing social control. Polska's *Medical Gymnastics* (2008) is a stop-frame animation with sinister overtones. Set to an unnerving electronic soundtrack, the totalitarian-era images of children and youngsters practising gymnastics evolve into scenes where naked body parts are stroked. Who's caressing who is never made clear, suggesting that personal ownership of bodies within strict educational institutions is both usurped and manipulated.

'The Sky is Blue' was an ambitious exhibition that covered a lot of ground in terms of themes, periods and styles. But this generous and stimulating show also succeeded in creating a coherent aesthetic discourse, which emerged stealthily among the profusion of works.

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