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Karlsruhe
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Graz
2020

SOB 10850358

(2002)

82-5

in search of Balkania

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Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum

Introduction

In Search of Balkanĭa lifts a long overdue ban on the Balkans as a site of intellectual endeavor and cultural desire. Conceived from the outset as a curatorial operation and artistic experience against expectations, this exhibition confronts a subject full of contradictions, to which everyone brings baggage they can't easily drop. This exhibition requires that visitors check their baggage at the door, and allow the content of their own mental suitcases to be disturbed, questioned and de-sensitized before thinking uncritically about their relation to Balkania again. It is no accident that this exhibition is being mounted in Austria, specifically in Graz, a city which is historically, geographically, and culturally a border to the Balkans. The word "Graz" itself is derived from the Slovenian word "Gradec," meaning small castle. Graz is home to a huge collection of late medieval armour which local armies once used to arm themselves against attacks of the Ottomans coming from their bases in Bosnia. The pride the Grazers have in this collection of armour is but one of the many legacies of a mentality associated with the city's sense of being a "gateway to the Other," which makes the mounting of this exhibition here strategic, if not necessary. Another visible symbol of our subject is the carving of the Turk on the Palais Saurau, which local legend says is meant to represent the victory over the Turks in 1532 when all of Graz but the castle was captured. The Turks never captured Graz and the palais was built after 1532. "Today's historians see the figure of the turbaned torso without legs as far more than a sign used by local boys for target practice," Frederick Baker reminds us. We thank the people of Graz, and particularly the staff of the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum, for being open to this friendly re-invasion.

If on one level *In Search of Balkania* is a rendez-vous with a dented landscape full of used parts and accidental art, where the real still matters and storefront windows resemble surrealist

displays, on another level it is a virtual encounter with the future. Indeed, if this exhibition presents a picture different from any picture previously shown in Europe of the Balkans, it is that there is nothing in store for Europe and the West but the Balkans. Balkania is not a world unto itself, but a mirror onto all selves. To recognize the Balkans is to recognize features and syndromes out of which cities, wars, civilizations, experiments, ideas and visions are composed. We do not approach this exhibition according to the current so-called wisdom of the art market that is finally accepting activities in the "periphery" as a legitimate field of curatorial endeavor, but rather with the conviction that the symbolic geography represented by Balkania will be the 21st century's most important fold, peripheralizing the West according to a new, logic, a new fold: where Occident becomes Orient, and where none of the old lines and myths about identity, self, nation, and Other hold.

How is such a world of ideas insinuated within the museum environment? Working closely with several artists with whom we formed close alliances during several years of close exchanges sitting down low, close to the ground in the Balkans, as well as with the philosophers, writers, and theoreticians with whom we worked on two other publications accompanying this exhibition (*Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, edited by Dusan Bjelic and Obrad Savic, MIT Press; and *Balkania: A Non-Standard Cultural Dictionary*, edited by Roger Conover and Eda Ćufer) we tried to construct a matrix of Balkanic spaces and build a complex of metaphors derived not from the white cube of museum logic, but from the street collisions and market chances of Balkanic knowledge. Some rooms lead to a secret history of the avant-garde, others to a phenomenology of the banal. From the bunkers of Enver Hoxha to the imaginary of the Black Sea, from religious kitsch to urban

folklore, and from Croatian Conceptualism to Romanian Dadaism, this exhibition considers the Balkans as a source of culture without which the future of Europe is unimaginable. But as much as this exhibition is concerned with the visual, it is also concerned with the psychic spaces, contingent moments, invisible denials, and physical pleasures that objects can never fully convey. If *In Search of Balkania* is a journey, it is also a humble acknowledgement of the many roads where we had to turn back sooner than we would have liked, and of the limitations of a format where we could only begin to gesture towards other doorways leading to dimensions where the essence of Balkania also resides: where music, philosophy, ideology, war, architecture, arguments, fashion, and sex mingle with misunderstandings, friendships, accidents, memories, traumas, and silence. On the eve of the exhibition's opening, we are aware that we have tried to install something which is finally intangible, and unopenable, except to the degree that we are open to the discovery of Balkania and the meeting of "*homo balkanicus*" within ourselves.—Curators

Let's start with a short test. First, take the four or five criteria most widely used to define the Balkans. Many people would place on their list such things as: place of ethnic tensions, place where old traumas are replayed again and again, place which fears dangerous neighbors across the border, place where people like to complain endlessly, place which overvalues its ancestors. You might want to delete some of these points, fine-tune them, add your own. However, being a reasonably literate person living in the year 2002 A.D., you should have no trouble coming up with a good working definition of the Balkans. Now, take that definition you have – whatever it is – and apply it to Austria, France, Italy, United States, whatever country you are from. Warning: The surest sign of Balkan identity is the resistance to Balkan identity.