

AN ARTIST WHO CANNOT SPEAK ENGLISH IS NO ARTIST: WORKS BY JAKUP FERRI

Today's society is characterized by success and rampant, profit-driven materialism. The art world is no exception. Capitalism turns every cultural practice into a marketable good. This can be seen explicitly in video art, which began as a dematerialized art form, but was completely overturned from the 1990s onwards. Projections became monumental, sculptural and lost the low-tech, low-profile qualities of their early years.

Ferri's videos reverse this market-oriented trend. Ferri returns to the dematerialized quality as a means of criticizing the current art climate within post-socialist countries and the West. His witty sensibility is born out of criticism but at the same time remains within the system. His approach to reality is based on absurdity and irony. For Ferri, the task is not to rail against the art system, but to expose the power relationships within the art world and, by extension, society at large. His work is deliberately marked by low-profile, low-tech qualities in contrast with the market driven power structure of the art world. It comes across as being out of sync with current trends. These formal qualities can be read in different ways: as a reflection of the political and economic conditions in which the artist lives or as a critique of today's opulent and market-oriented art.

Ferri's native country, Kosovo, has faced not only the transformation from a socialist system to a capitalist system/market economy, but also a severe civil war. With the rapid deregulation of the post-communist countries, former state capitalism was replaced by a neo-liberal transnational market system. This not only affected social relationships; it also resulted in a confrontation with a post-modern society. Suddenly, artists living in ex-communist countries had to find a way of absorbing and integrating these new attitudes and conditions. According to Elaine King, certain questions come to the fore: how will Central Europeans, particularly artists, manage to define themselves or to formulate an identity now that the former 'enemy' has ceased to exist? Have will they maintain a sense of self as the seduction of Western power infiltrates their former closed world? How will artists and intellectuals hope to find meaningful ways of integrating the contemporary experience into their unique history?

How will these societies carve out a niche of their own and begin contributing to a larger discourse beyond the influences of Western market culture?¹

Iara Boubnova sees the art of Eastern Europe today as headed in two directions. One is the return to traditional values in art, to art that beautifies life and to the sellable work of art. The other is an absolute orientation towards the west by replicating the strategies and codes, language and idioms of its art.² Ferri turns the situation on its head. Instead of subscribing to either of these currents or rejecting the retrenchment of his native country's contemporary art scene due to political and economic circumstances, he chooses to parody them. His videos grasp a fragment of time in the current history of post-communist countries and create a powerful context capable of accommodating and assimilating outside influences by radiating an idiosyncratic energy.

In Ferri's art, the condition of the 'Other', the delayed, the excluded is mediated through ironic wit. Instead of making pronouncements or declarations, Ferri maintains an antagonistic relationship with the art system by adopting a strategy of irony, humor and sarcasm while situating himself as the subject. He foregrounds the process that a non-Western artist has to undergo in order to gain recognition in *Jakup, Come Back* and in *Save Me, Help Me*, underscores the retrenchment of Eastern European art in *Three Virgins*, and posits the effects of globalization in *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist*. By raising these issues in the context of art, he has found a way of referring to the larger issues of being the 'Other', the repercussions of economic or political conditions. Moreover, his art offers a productive alternative to the rhetoric of straightforward political art.

Ferri's art builds on the legacy of the conceptualists of the 1960s and 70s, who jettisoned the object-oriented, authority-driven art. For conceptualists, the idea of a work of art mattered more than the physical object. In addition, conceptual art rejected the importance of the talented creator in traditional art forms. It was meant to question the nature of art. Thus, Ferri crafts his artistic mode of expression through the use of ideas and forms that characterized conceptualism in the 1970s in particular seriality, repetition and dematerialized

¹ ? King, Elaine, *Transformations: Central Europe and the Post-modern Model in Crossroads in Central Europe* (Budapest, Hungary, 1997), 48-54.

² ? Iara Boubnova, "Post-What? Neo-How? For Whom? Where and When?" *Moscow Art Magazine* 22 (1998).

performative video art. According to Elaine King, the collective experience of countries in the region proved conceptualism to be the most vital cross-border trend during the period of transformation, and in a certain way, the evolution of the conceptual trend reflects the entire artistic process of the last several years.³ As a result, the founding gestures of 1960s and '70s art, which Ferri uses with a new twist, are still important in allowing us to reflect on possible critical and political explorations.

Although access to new media was limited in post-socialist countries, artists from Yugoslavia's sub-cultural and alternative scene had been working with video since the 1980s. It is true that the absence of infrastructure in contemporary art is a major reason for its laggard production. In Ferri's art, however, the limitations become a source of strength. His art turns weaknesses into strengths by ridiculing the considerable lag in Kosovo's art production. His art provides polemical ground for rethinking the art system in general, and exclusions in the art world due to economic and political factors in particular.

A further strength of Ferri's art lies in the fact that he avoids trap of cultural (Balkan) identity. As Boris Buden declares, the artists from post-socialist countries are anything but naïve. They know very well that Balkan refers neither to a community bound by a common fate or culture, to which they necessarily belong; nor is it the right label for the art they produce.⁴ Thus, none of Ferri's works can be read by affixing one particular identity. His works derive their material from power relationships, particularly those within the art world. In relation to content, his art can be compared with that of Sislej Xhafa, Phil Collins and Christian Jankowski. What he shares with Xhafa is a sense of irony as a means of questioning. Irony is used as an instrument to cope deal with their reality. The similarity between Ferri's and Collins' work lies in the disclosure of the power relationships, while with Jankowski he shares the tendency to offer humorous, playful commentaries on the predicament of the artist.

In *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English is No Artist* (2003), Ferri confronts the viewer with a single-channel video of three minutes fifty six seconds. The video is set indoors, in the studio of the artist, and opens with a close-up of the artist sitting center stage and speaking in

³ ? King, Elaine, *Transformations: Central Europe and the Post-modern Model in Crossroads in Central Europe* (Budapest, Hungary, 1997), 48-54.

⁴ ? Boris Buden, From the conference notes that took place in Istanbul.

broken English. The viewer sees the piece in its entirety from beginning to end. And after the final shot, the image fades away and begins in a loop again after a few seconds.

Ferri's works are marked by a unique sense of humor, a quality that is central to his video. The referential point of the work is Mladen Stilinovic's embroidery (1992) entitled *An Artist who cannot speak English is no Artist*. Stilinovic is an influential figure whose works comment on the altered position of post-socialist art as it becomes a part of the capitalist market. In his video of the same title, Ferri juxtaposes words to create sentences that make no sense. The audience struggles futilely to unravel what the artist says. As in all his other pieces, he presents himself as the protagonist.

Ferri's humorous video expresses explicitly the situation of artists belonging to post-communist society, their vein and pitiful drive to become part of the globalized capitalist art world. His performative videos inspired by the videos of the 1960s and '70s, in which the camera is a static witness to live action generated for the audience to view later. And this represents an artwork in and of itself.

Broken Line, 2004, is a single-channel video of two minutes and twenty seconds. Set indoors, the video shows the artist in close-up kissing, smelling and fingering a page in a catalogue written and signed by Francis Bacon on 25 January 1977. After the final shot, the video loops back to the beginning again. This piece is a tribute to the artist's adolescence, when Bacon's autograph had once infused him with faith and energy. Fingering and caressing the autograph today in the hope of restoring the same sense of energy, the artist appears to be engaged in a vein and nostalgic gesture.

Jakup, Come Back (2003) is a one minute fifty seconds single-channel video of the artist's family. In contrast to his normal role as the protagonist, Ferri now puts his family members in front of the camera. The video opens as a snapshot: his sisters sit on the floor, while behind them his father and mother talk to the camera. His father thanks the curator, René Block, for inviting his son to participate in an international exhibition. His mother, however, reacts differently. She is more protective and takes a more skeptical view. The two contrasting reactions represented by each parent epitomize not only the mixed feelings about the way of the art world, but also, more broadly, the East-West dichotomy.

Save Me, Help Me (2003) is a ten minute twenty four second single-channel video in which the artist, in close-up, sits casually on his bed surrounded by his portfolio. For the duration of the piece, he describes his art works by showing photographic documentation in Kosovan. The artist, akin to a street vendor, has a confrontational relationship with the audience, which is assumed to be made up of curators and collectors. The artist's motive is simply to sell his art or to be picked up by a curator. At one point he utters "Give me some money! Help me!" By drawing an analogy between the artist and vendor while appropriating the language of marketing, Ferri exposes the infrastructure of the art world. Separately, the long duration of the work provokes a sense of boredom, an important aspect of videos in 1970s. This performative video uses the same technique as Ferri's piece *An Artist who cannot speak English is no Artist*.

Three Virgins (2003), a single screen video of six minutes and thirty-two seconds, begins with a close-up of the artist sitting casually on the floor holding two small speakers propped against a table. The audience hears the voices of Yoko Ono and John Lennon calling each other. At times their voices are low and tender, at times loud and sensual. The artist tries incessantly to superimpose his own voice on those of Lennon and Ono. After repeated efforts, he grows frustrated. What he is attempting is to place himself up with the icons of 1960s art. Ferri's point of reference in this piece is Lennon and Ono's experimental album "Wedding Album" from 1969, in which they call out each other's name for more than twenty minutes. The piece can be read as a comment on the ultimate fruitlessness of art when all is said and done. Repetition, sly wit and humor are essential components of this work.

Don't Tell Anybody (2003), a video of twelve minute and twenty seconds, opens with the artist laying a black sheet on the floor of his studio. He unpacks a kilo of rice and spreads the grains over the canvas. He then starts counting the grains one by one. The audience has a bird's-eye view of the scene. The piles of counted grains on the black sheet resemble an abstract painting with the sheet serving as the canvas. At the end, he succeeds in counting the entire packet, a total of 52,129 grains. In this piece, as with the task-based performances of the 1960s, the artist sets himself a non-utilitarian task. Boredom and repetition are essential

themes of the piece.⁵ However, unlike the unprocessed and unedited videos of 1960s and '70s artists, which captured time as it was being experienced, Ferri's video is edited.

With reference to Charles Esche's term – "modest proposals" – it can be said that Ferri's modest and ironic intervention questions the power relations of the art world.⁶ This aspect remains an essential theme of his work. By placing himself as the protagonist of his videos and by using his own experiences as a model of the artist's condition in today's art world, the artist can be identified as non-hypocritical. This being the only position that Ferri can take, the artist succeeds in passing comment and criticism from within.

By broadening the scope of Ferri's art beyond its traditional regional and temporal definitions, this exhibition therefore intends to track how low-tech, low-profile art forms and small-scale interventions are still able to disseminate ideas countering the opulent, market-oriented works that have a greater presence in the art world today.

That the exhibition includes only video works does not position it as a medium specific exhibition, nor label the artist as a video artist. Ferri's videos are conceptual inasmuch as their essential feature is the idea conveyed to the viewer. Video is not intended here to be an identifying material or medium that defines the artist; it should be seen as another material exploited in service of an idea.⁷

⁵ ? Although audiences judge the long duration of some of the works as boring, they are not said to be boring in relation to painting or sculpture, but in relation to television, according to David Antin. David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium," in *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. John Hanhardt (New York: Visual Studies Workshop, 1986), 155.

⁶ ? Esche, Charles, *Modest Proposals* (Istanbul: Baglam Publishing, 2005), 13.

⁷ ? Lucinda Furlong, "Tracking Video Art: Image Processing As a Genre," *Art Journal* Vol. 45, No.3 (Autumn 1985): 234.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST:

An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist

2003

DVD

3:56

Courtesy of the Artist

Broken Line

2004

DVD

2:20

Courtesy of the Artist

Jakup, Come Back

2003

DVD

1:40

Courtesy of the Artist

Save Me, Help Me

2003

DVD

10:00

Courtesy of the Artist

Three Virgins

2003

DVD

6:32

Courtesy of the Artist

Don't Tell To Anybody

2003

DVD

12:20

Courtesy of the Artist

Jakup Ferri

Jakup Ferri was born in 1981. He earned a bachelor's degree from the Academy of Arts in Pristina in 2004. Most recently, he participated in the 9th Istanbul Biennial in late 2005. He also presented his work in "Coalesce: With all due intent" at the Model Arts and Nilland Gallery in Ireland, and in the Biennial of Young Artists at the National Gallery in Bucharest in 2004. In 2003, he participated in "In den Schluchten Des Balkan" at Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel and in "Fish Doesn't Think' Cause Fish Knows Everything" at the National Gallery in Pristina.