



FLIPSIDE

NUMEROUS ARTISTS (INCLUDING VADIM FISHKIN, JOAN JONAS, KAI KALJO, CHARLES KRAFFT, YURI LEIDERMAN, AUDRIUS NOVICKAS, TONY OURSLER, ANTHONY AND KATYA PEMBERTON, IGOR SAVCHENKO AND STEPHEN SHANABROOK)

CURATED BY KATHERINE CARL

ARTISTS SPACE

NEW YORK

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During the Cold War, there was an alternate universe behind the Iron Curtain those of us raised in the West knew little about, save the fact that the Communists were supposed to be our enemies. *Flipside* at Artists Space presented artwork from and about this alternate universe, most of which seemed fixated on the murky ontology of the Eastern Bloc. In the video *Pathétique* (1999) by Estonian artist Kai Kaljo, the artist trains her camera on the marionette-like dance of a drunken man stumbling around the street outside her window, stealing a snapshot of happenstance in the middle of winter from her corner of the Baltic States.

Accompanying works by artists from former Communist countries were contributions from American artists who had also received funding from ArtsLink, an organization that facilitates cultural exchange between these locations. As expected, a show based on such an arbitrary group of artists resulted in something a bit uneven and confused. However, in its best moments the exhibition created an eerie feeling, akin to the realization that your reflection is alive of its own volition and staring back at

you from behind the mirror.

One of the most remarkable examples of this was a piece by Igor Savchenko entitled *A Small Research on Contemporary Coded Radio Transmissions* (1999). The piece consisted of a series of audio recordings of coded radio transmissions sent into the ether by the American military. The viewer is invited to sit in a vinyl armchair, put on a headset and listen, the transmissions erasing the difference between the present moment and the moment of relay. The recordings conjure images of the Cold War, the gravity of constant surveillance and the intrigue of ground operatives awaiting each other in order to exchange microfilm or commit murder. In addition to the tapes and mock living room set-up, Savchenko presents a bound dossier of research and findings. Perusing this, it becomes obvious that to Savchenko, a native Belarussian, English might be exotic and even difficult to decipher.

Across the room from Savchenko's piece is a sculpture/video projection by Tony Oursler in which a petulant doll shouts out the colours of the rainbow in Polish. The use of

Tony Oursler
Spectrum
video projection and mixed media
1999



a Polish soundtrack reinforces the questions posed by Savchenko about the indecipherable nature of foreign languages, and the space for imagination and misinformation created by such. However, the rest of Oursler's arrogant sculpture just takes up space that should have been allotted to a more interesting artist like Lithuania's Audrius Novickas, who only gets to present three of his lush colour photographs entitled *Power Views* (2001). In this series, Novickas presents views from the office windows of the prime minister, the chairman of parliament and the president of Lithuania, once highly guarded sites during Soviet times. The photographs beg the question of why such banal topiaries and postmodernist landscaping had been top secret, and is a sound commentary on the absurdity of power.

Unfortunately, the show was also cluttered by artworks that were too clever and one-dimensional, like Charles Krafft's *Porcelain War Museum* (2002/2004), a group of hand grenades and AK-47s rendered in decorative porcelain. Another low point was the collaborative installation *Traveling Bullet* (2004) by Vadim Fishkin, Yuri Leiderman and Stephen Shanabrook. This hodgepodge of works ranged from delicate line drawings to a video of three skullcap-clad men drinking tea together. Add a vaguely related sound element and drawings made from shotgun spray and what you get is a wholesale mess of shit. If the individual works had been given a chance to speak for themselves, something legible may have emerged, but this eclectic installa-

tion only manages to bury its more powerful elements, like Shanabrook's human-wound chocolate casts.

Countering this was an outstanding exploration into the memory of Communist culture by American artists Anthony and Katya Pemberton. The artists' video, *The Children Met Lenin in Spring* (2004) presented interviews with various veterans of Communist regimes about their memories of Lenin. In this sweet and surprising video one woman attributed the theory of evolution to Lenin. In her fantasy, Lenin, who is the smartest fish in a pond, jumps out of the water and morphs into the leader of man. Another person interviewed conflated Lenin with Zeus, an unexpected but logical result of Communism's tendency to turn its leaders into feared gods by replacing religion with belief in the state.

The overarching themes of mirroring protagonists and a lost sense of place (and love) are nowhere more poignant than in Joan Jonas' video *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places... Sweeney Astray* (1992-2003). Despite its abbreviated form, *Sweeney Astray* punctuates the longing explored by other pieces in the show. Ultimately, *Flipside* meandered much like Kai Kaljo's drunken subject through disparate and difficult ideas about the bygone era of Soviet Communism. Although this Cold War vertigo was pleasurable, I wonder if the curator could have put her short list through another round of editing.