

# ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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SEAN SNYDER'S COMMENTARY  
PHOTOGRAPHS  
CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTATION  
BY SEAN SNYDER



Sean Snyder,  
*Dallas Southfork in  
Hermes Land,  
Slobozia, Romania*  
(detail), 2001,  
photographs, color  
videos, architectural  
models, digital  
prints, photocopied  
documents, news-  
paper articles.  
Dimensions variable.



'Dallas' was one of the few American Television series broadcast during the communist regime

## Sean Snyder ARTISTS SPACE

What does the classic Warner Brothers cartoon "Road Runner and Coyote" have to do with the urban condition? Sean Snyder's 1996–98 *Urban Planning Documentation (Road Runner & Coyote)*—the earliest of the eight works in this modest, twelve-year survey—proffers tentative answers. Beside a monitor playing clips of Wile E. Coyote's elaborate, doomed-to-fail schemes, Snyder presents two groups of black-and-white photos, all depicting seemingly innocuous elements from the urban landscape. In the first set, each image is accompanied by an ambiguously descriptive sentence: A FAILED LANDSCAPING ATTEMPT ON A MEDIAN, for instance, captions a photo of what appears to be sod and road infrastructure combined in an incongruously informal manner. In the second, ten images are collectively labeled with the single phrase AS A TERRORIST PRECAUTION EVERY PUBLIC TRASH CAN IN THE CITY WAS COVERED WITH A THIN METAL LID AND RENDERED USELESS. manuals and vandalism protection documents, and his reframing of the materials may be an attempt to lampoon the underlying ideologies of urban space—as well as to note the intrinsic interpenetrations of representation, image, information, and ideology.

Snyder's concern with tracking the ways in which ideologies shape the representational language of mass media (primarily television) is evident in *Dallas Southfork in Hermes Land, Slobozia, Romania*, 2001, which centers on a Romanian amusement park that features a meticulous reconstruction of the ranch from the infamous 1980s US television series *Dallas*. Presenting video, newspaper articles, digital photos, and architectural models, Snyder details the park's history, displaying ephemera documenting, for instance, a visit by *Dallas* actor Larry Hagman, as well as the nefarious financial and political collateral matters directly and indirectly related to this perverse episode of trans-cultural identification run amok. These elements seem to analyze the way in which this American television show (itself a kind of postmodern morality tale regarding the dynastic legacies of US oil wealth and corporate greed) was reframed by another society in transition, evidencing a range of cultural-ideological contradictions. E.g., Ceaucescu broadcast the show as anticapitalist propaganda; the show became popular, and remained so in post-communist Romania; and Hagman appeared in advertisements for a Russian petroleum company with ties to the Romanian developer of the *Dallas Southfork* park. Yet once we

put the disparate pieces together, what results? A sense of irony that what was demonized by a Communist dictator as emblematic of America's evil capitalism would be reappropriated by a Romanian capitalist for entrepreneurial ends? In other words, a cautionary tale of the global contagion of neoliberalism?

*The Site*, 2004–2005, is a collection of photographs and texts pertaining to Saddam Hussein's hideout, or "spider hole," at the time of his capture by US troops. Snyder includes a self-redacted e-mail exchange with a woman from the Associated Press regarding the purchase of the photos, thereby self-reflexively foregrounding the use of the media apparatus to obtain his source materials: Process is at once embedded and dismantled as subject. The tendency toward self-reflexivity spills over into "Disobedience in Byelorussia: Self-Interrogation on 'Research-Based Art,'" an entertaining text published in *e-flux journal* no. 4, in which the artist claims that "artistic experimentation, whether presented as research or not, precludes an outcome—a conclusion or a statement." By this he means, I assume, that we should not expect that an *effect* will result from a given artistic endeavor, and, by extension, that his dismantling and reframing of the representational systems of mass media acknowledges that the artist and artmaking can never be exempt from the nebula of globalized media. An ethics of uncertainty mobilizes Snyder's antiaesthetic, and his metapositionality—at once analytical and complicit—deploys a documentary language for postdocumentary ends.

—Joshua Decter