



Newsreel Front

# NEWSREEL SHREDS

Andreja Hribernik

# IMAGES FROM THE ARCHIVE

Images and testimonies revealed by the archive of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Koroška, connected to the international exhibitions organized under the patronage of the United Nations in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, recount different stories. They speak of the heroism of individual actions, attempts at building identity and a sense of belonging, of idealism and faith in a better tomorrow, as well as the instrumentalization of art and utilitarian political gestures.

All of this is suggested and revealed by documents, manuscripts and black-and-white photographs that more often linger on faces and groups of people than on works of art. At times it seems as though we are spectators at a performance in which the main actors recount a tale of success, speak of a place and an event that made history.

*Peace, Humanity and Friendship among Nations* was the title of the 1966 exhibition.

Today, almost 50 years, the title seems almost ironic.

Peace? There was no peace after 1966. Wars continue to exist, and continue raging in many regions around the world. Humanity? Just two decades back, we were witnesses to a mass genocide and untold massacres on the territory of former Yugoslavia, which was a shining example of harmony among different ethnic groups and religions back in 1966. Friendship among nations? Today we separate ourselves from other nations by erecting walls, fences and barbed wire.

Despite all of this, however, we started browsing through our archive in 2015 with the hope of understanding and thinking a different time.

In 1966, the organizational committee for the exhibition in Slovenj Gradec invited artists to participate through various channels. Some were invited personally, and some 400 invitations

were purported to have been sent out.<sup>1</sup> Artists from Non-Aligned countries of the East and from the African, Asian and South American continents were contacted and invited, mostly through political delegates, consulates and embassies. At the exhibition opening, awards and honorary citizenships of the city of Slovenj Gradec<sup>2</sup> were presented. Among the winners was but a single woman – the rest were men, mostly members of the established Western canon: Henry Moore, Ossip Zadkine, Victor Vasarely, and only the winners of prizes for prints bore names less familiar, from more distant lands (Arthur Luiz Piza from Brazil and Hideo Hagiwara from Japan). Looking at the event this way, many power relations and connections are uncovered, emphasizing the fact that political relationships were and are translated into the field of art. And we are compelled to admit to ourselves today that the reputation the exhibition enjoyed at the time was based largely on the participation of well known Western artists, who received far more media coverage than the rest.

Both the year 1966 and the exhibitions that followed can be read as an experiment that fell apart in many places, an attempt to manifest the illusion that Yugoslavia was supposed to embody and represent at the time. However, this experiment did manage to mobilize an improbably large number of people to take part in the story, be it owing to their own personal beliefs or simply because it all seemed so important at the time.

Searching for an answer to the question why this story interests us as it does, the answer probably lies somewhere in the fact that, for a brief moment, an incredible story unfolded: in the volunteers building new spaces, in the unbelievable and unexpected responses of artists to the invitation, and in the particular local political frictions and megalomaniacal tendencies of the leadership of Yugoslavia, together with an array of attendant individual ambitions. Despite the fact that we can now take a critical stance on everything that was happening and have the luxury of hindsight to observe it all from a particular distance – one dictated by the lapse in time in which we have seen trust in institutions like the United Nations severely eroded, and likewise the possibility of realizing ideas like socialism or self-management – all of this still cannot entirely erase a certain hope, a hope to which this entire story is testament: that everything and anything was possible in but a single, tiny utopian moment in Slovenj Gradec.

<sup>1</sup> Pablo Picasso, Oskar Kokoschka, Henry Moore, Ossip Zadkine, Vistor Vasarely and many others. Picasso and Kokoschka did not respond to the invitation.

<sup>2</sup> Ossip Zadkine, Henry Moore, Werner Berg and artists from the territory of former Yugoslavia: Krsto Hegedušič, Petar Lubarda and Božidar Jakac.

Andrej Šprah

# NEWSREEL 62 – “THE OUTLINE OF THIS IMAGE IS A DISTURBANCE.”<sup>1</sup>

Like most of the works by Nika Autor and the Newsreel Front, *Newsreel 62 – Family and Worker*, raises many more questions than it provides answers. If we went looking for the central strategies of this creative practice that has contributed considerably to the revival and recognition of current newsreel practices in contemporary film and artistic production, we could highlight the notion-element of imperfection as one of its most prominent features. This is true of all its (audio-visual) aspects – in the sense of its verbal inconsistency, its visual indistinctness, and in its sense of incompleteness as regards both content and form. On the one hand, this anchors it (more firmly with each new work) into the tradition of activism it is both based on and fuelled by, and on the other hand it expresses the relevance, as well as the urgency of insisting on that relation to the audience, which treats the viewer as an equal element of the creative process – or, in the language of *Third Cinema*: the process of the “film act”.

The tradition and history that provide the basis and inspiration for neo-newsreel initiatives is nearly as immense as the tradition and history of the creative form they recapitulate and upgrade, but also undermine. Its long, yet in no way linear and comprehensive course is best reflected in the motivations behind those activities that rejected completeness and perfection ... What could be stressed here is the striving to achieve a sense of the imperfection of film – as a process of “*revealing the making of problems*” in the ground-breaking manifestoes of the *Third Cinema* movement in the 1960s and spearheaded by the eponymous manifesto by Julio García Espinosa. Or, the wager on the aesthetic and political charge of impoverished contemporary digital images, as defined by Hito Steyerl in her defence of the “*poor image*” in the early outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such a wager also reflects another important element of incompleteness – the singularity of the relation to the audience, which becomes – through its engaged reception of such images – a necessary factor in the structuring of the meaning of an individual film act.

<sup>1</sup> The thought is taken from the film’s commentary.

The questions raised by *Newsreel 62 – Family and Worker* reflect an adherence to a principle that stretches, in *Newsreel 55* (*Obzornik 55, 2013*), across three ground-breaking moments of resistance in a once united but today fragmented country; whereas *Newsreel 63 – The Train of Shadows* (*Obzornik 63 – Vlak senc, 2017*) swirls through excerpts from film history when film and train – or its undercarriage as an area reserved for a variety of “illegals” – meet in a special kind of expression. These are questions that – now placed on a double-track timeline from 1966 to 2015, separated by a gap of 50 years – reflect a fundamental uncertainty as regards both the national and individual identity. And precisely on account of this unbearable uncertainty can its leading image exist as but an outline, merely a disturbance ... The 50-year gap, a period in which almost everything had changed, not only expresses the transient nature of any kind of certainty, or speaks of the vulnerability of individuals, communities and systems, it also attests to the fact that art is the very thing that can and must mirror the true “face of reality”. However, only by not actually showing anything.

Although the point of *Newsreel 62* focuses on two explicitly visual elements – the absent artistic creations from the exhibition for the opening of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Koroška in 1966, entitled “Peace, Humanity and Friendship Among Nations”, and the brutally present documentary footage of refugees on the Croatia-Slovenia border in 2015 – the charge in vision and the visible is all but explicit. Bill Nichols is of the same opinion, and stresses in his discussion of the original version of *Newsreel 62* in the text “Now. And Before ...” from the book *The News is Ours!:* “*This Newsreel uses blurry, undecipherable footage and unexpected juxtapositions to announce its departure from didactic information. It puzzles and troubles, questions and provokes more than it informs. It is representative of the avantgarde, politically radical status that characterizes much of the Newsreel Front’s work.*”

What is left to the viewer is therefore not to seek the answers to the questions directly expressed in the film about the missing paintings: “*What was the image of the family and what was the image of the worker? Did they caution about the future or illustrate the here and now? Did they reflect on a better tomorrow or point out the yesterday? Did they show the horror of repetition or tear the gaze with unexpected imagination?*” Neither does any chance of finding an answer lie in the credibility of definitive

images that are unbearable – be it due to their perfection that serves to disable the prospect of interpretation, or their always being the same, worn out, that prevents the possibility of our understanding how they can appear unchanged time and time again, with no lesson learned from the unbearable facts of history and experience. Watching the images, seen countless times, from the heart of oppression, restriction, prohibition, elimination . . ., when those in power systematically abuse the rights of “inferior” members of humankind, we, the audience, are ultimately left to recapitulate, to internalize the efforts of the creative film gesture. It is a gesture of urgency, to try and do something (although what that is remains unspecified and incomplete); the same gesture that is stressed, along with the worn-out images, seen countless times, of the refugee tragedy along the border by the commentary of *Newsreel 62*:

*Therefore:*

*An attempt.*

*To sharpen.*

*To not succeed/fail.*

*To resist.*

*To get entangled. In images and language.*

*Cut.*

Nace Zavrl

# IN DEFENCE OF A LOST IMAGE

“There are so many images in the world, that you think you have seen everything, thought everything. For many years, I have been looking for a missing picture,” says Cambodian documentarian Rithy Panh in the film *The Missing Picture* (*L'image manquante*, 2013), an investigation of the bloody history of Cambodia built around a non-existent image – photographic evidence proving the Khmer Rouge had committed genocide. On its own, the photograph, the director continues, proves nothing, but it “gives us cause to think. To record history. I searched for it vainly in the archives, in old papers, in the country villages of Cambodia. Today, I know: this image must be missing ... I was not really looking for it; would it not be obscene and insignificant?” *Newsreel 62 – Family and Worker* follows a similar kind of thinking. The short essay experiment, haunted by the lost works of Mahmoud Hammad, a Syrian modernist who lent two of his paintings, *The Family* (estimated price \$25) and *The Worker* (\$15), to the Art Pavilion in Slovenj Gradec<sup>1</sup> for the exhibition *Peace, Humanity and Friendship Among Nations* in the mid-1960s. All traces of the two paintings disappeared after the exhibition closed, and all that was left of them was a tiny black-and-white reproduction in the exhibition catalogue.

In the absence of an original, the film employs a different strategy. Instead of the images themselves, Nika Autor presents only a filthy outline of them. *Newsreel 62* consists of dissected, smeared, and occasionally quite abstracted units (old film footage and digitized, pixelated photographs); and in the epilogue, a shaky amateur video from the Slovenia-Croatia border. Its fundamental building blocks become what the German theorist and cineaste Hito Steyerl calls “poor images”, deformed and largely low-quality newsreel shreds, rolling uncontrollably through our internet plumbing. The author’s materials are largely official, archival (and not from the internet nor, god forbid, pirated), but the words of Steyerl hold true nevertheless: “The poor image is a rag or a

<sup>1</sup> Today the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Koroška (Koroška galerija likovnih umetnosti)

rip ... a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances.” Instead of technical quality, *Newsreel* swears by informality and low resolution, discarded, washed up images found somewhere in the forgotten nooks and crannies of the archive. Visual luxury is replaced by sketches, snippets, shadows (drafts and remainders of pictures that don’t exist), which the Newsreel Front collective uses to successfully illustrate Foucault’s well-known saying “Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, *which ultimately protects.*” In other words, (high) quality is overrated; visibility, wrote the philosopher, is in the end merely a “*trap*”.

A great deal can be done with a blurred, veiled (or invisible or lost) image. It opens political and emancipatory paths that high resolution and infinite megapixels do not. “Isn’t a bit of compression in our time of compulsory visibility, high resolution and broadband perhaps tactically useful?” asks Alexander Galloway. “Yet in an age of mandated visibility, of high resolution, and high bandwidth, I wonder if a little bit of compression isn’t tactically useful. I wonder if a cryptographic world isn’t more attractive today than a world decompressed and fully legible to all. I wonder if a degraded image isn’t better than a photorealistic one.” The theorist’s logic should be pushed to the extremes here: do we really need even more beautiful, perfect images in the world, have we not seen and created enough already? The only real approach to philosophy, said Marx and Laruelle with him, is to simply stop philosophizing. Could the same not be said of the production of clean, perfectly produced images – those that are never seen in the *Newsreel*: “In a world that seems increasingly like worldlessness,” a just, political image is not, will not be and can never be faultless. Its message is not clear, transparent, but empty, computer-encoded; instead of a figure, only an impoverished, diluted outline can be seen on the surface. “The outline of this image is a disturbance,” *Newsreel* tells us; and today, a disturbance is nothing other than the rawest form of realism.

Nika Autor

# CLOSE AND NEARBY

Image 1: The year 1966

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Slovenj Gradec. A tiny, insignificant town becomes the center of the world for a few months, and its smallness is temporarily forgotten about as the result of art. The post office spends months delivering paintings, prints and small sculptures by artists from the African and Asian continents: The Ivory Coast, Congo, Morocco, Tunisia, Indonesia and Syria; artists from the West, from South America and Yugoslavia, as well as artworks from countries whose names have since been erased from the map. 1966, a time when an artist coming from the African or Asian continents or from South America represented the quota dedicated to the Non-Aligned Movement, which is now shattered and finally forgotten.

Image 2: The year 2016

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia no longer exists. People from the African and Asian continents are chased away at Europe's borders with infinitely complicated procedures, bureaucratic traps and barbed wire, with dogs unleashed upon them, batons breaking their bones, with smoke bombs and empty cartridges thrown at them; they are electrocuted, and looked shamelessly in the eyes as they raise their heads with their last remaining strength before forever disappearing into the depths of the Mediterranean.

*Newsreel 62* places Image 1 and Image 2 side by side. It molds them, weaves them, entangles and bends them. It sets them *close* and *nearby*.

In 1966, technical teams hauled onto Mount St. Ursula, through mud and snow, long heavy cables, transmitter parts and other components necessary to establish a signal that would enable live broadcasting of images and sound across Yugoslavia. The opening date of the big international exhibition called Peace, Humanity and Friendship among Nations was nearing. The exhibition, which connected artists from Yugoslavia, the Third World and

the West, commemorated history by imagining a better tomorrow. The exhibition organizers wanted as many people to come as *close* and *nearby* as possible. Due to prolonged broadcast of the Eurovision Song Contest from Stockholm, five million Yugoslavian viewers were finally able to tune in, with a delay of 15 minutes, to the transmitters in Slovenj Gradec, thus feeling *close* and *nearby* as they watched the live broadcast of image and sound.

Today, we can feel *near* and *beside* anywhere our cellular telephone signals allow for the transmission of mobile data. Live streaming is a function of all mobile apps, and for some years now individuals and groups have been using these tools to “stream” images and sounds of the most hidden and as yet unseen and unheard tragic situations. *Close* and *nearby* an overcrowded and sinking immigrant boat, lost somewhere in the Mediterranean, *close* and *nearby* the shootings of immigrants by Hungarian security services somewhere along the border, *close* and *nearby* immigrants frostbitten and lost in the snowy mountains somewhere at the edge of the Schengen border.

*Close.*

*Nearby.*

Many viewers watching the exhibition on their TV screens in 1966 had never seen sculptures, paintings, prints, small plastic creations, nor their creators from distant continents. In a program about the exhibition kept by the archive of Radio-Television Slovenia, images of artwork from Africa and Asia are juxtaposed with art from Britain, France, The Netherlands and Belgium. Black masks and other artefacts from Congo, Syria, Tunisia and the Ivory Coast are juxtaposed with canonized Western artists, creating a tension, a strained proximity, an uncomfortable and unpleasant dynamic; they are standing (too) close to each other. A tense *Close* and *Nearby*, under a flag bearing the mighty words: Peace, Humanity and Friendship.

A low resolution image – a poor image, played through an online app, functioning as a live broadcast and distributed with the help of other users, shows a drowning, nameless, rightless, dirty, hopeless individual, somewhere amidst the waves of the Mediterranean winds. A brutal image, a tense and horrendous (too) close and (too) nearby. *Close* and *nearby* as resistance, as both warning and guilty conscience.

*Close.*

*Nearby.*

Close and nearby, however, is not only a feeling produced by the transmitted images, close and nearby is a principle, a method, a way of creating these images, close and nearby resistance. The famous first line<sup>1</sup> from the ground-breaking movie *Reassemblage*, directed by Trinh T. Minh-ha in 1982, who made it into film history with her dynamic montage of images and her criticism of the Western imperialist and colonialist view of the African continent, introduces a montage of disappearing images and the ambivalence of sound. Her critique of racism is announced by the director in the shot's first minute, when she resists speaking *about* and instead announces "only" *close and nearby*. The principle of *close* and *nearby* embodies a criticism of imperialism through images and words, and with the same *close* and *nearby*, it redefines the view of the conventional vocabulary of African imagery. The montage of pictures and sound, which elude, pulsate, juxtapose, appear, disappear, all the time *close* and *nearby*.

*Close.*

*Nearby.*

*Newsreel 62* also places, addresses, juxtaposes and thinks about events and images close and nearby, it sets them close and nearby with no real reason, without a clear motive, with no determinate cause.

*Newsreel 62* is not a movie about art or works of art from the African or Asian continents presented in 1966 at the exhibition in Slovenj Gradec – but neither is it a movie about family or happiness, as the title would seem, falsely, to imply. *Newsreel 62* connects two completely unrelated events, two situations, two blurry images, which are separated by half a century and several thousands of miles. It tries to approach both, to think of them as *close* and *nearby*, and to talk about them. *Newsreel* "flicks" these two events together, throws them into a montage and almost naively expects to produce a new image, a more appropriate image that would finally speak *about*. But *Newsreel* does not speak about, instead it smirks, bends, approaches and drifts away, trying to be both *close* and *nearby*. It touches upon images that are long gone. In a world that increasingly resembles more a worldlessness, *Newsreel* tries to sharpen the de-sharpened image. It organizes bodies, organizes views, organizes distances; it shortens lengths and narrows closeness, so that the whisper of images would be *close* and sounds would appear *nearby*.

<sup>1</sup> "Scarcely, twenty years were enough to make two billion people define themselves as underdeveloped. I do not intend to speak about. Just speak nearby."

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