وزارة الثقافة

Ministry of Culture

Ministerio De La Cultura

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Ministerie Van Cultuur

Ministerium Der Kultur

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Ministry of Culture
Shifting Base Catalog
2008
exhibition catalog
21.6 x 21.6 cm, 47 pages

This catalog houses, in its entirety, an exhibition conceived and produced by Ministry of Culture, for the College of Fine Arts and Design's Rewak Gallery, at the University of Sharjah, in April 2008. A sculptural intervention entitled *Shifting Base* was staged at two distinct locations in the United Arab Emirates– the College of Fine Arts and Design, and a location on the edge of the Rub' al Khali desert. These activities were intended to generate ideas and images, from which the Ministry of Culture was able to construct the narrative portrayed in this publication. This catalog will constitute the work's sole form, allowing it to become a siteless, traveling exhibition.

Shifting Base

From the pages of history books and glossy magazines to an impromptu sculpture garden in Sharjah, **Ministry of Culture** takes on the travelling exhibition, addressing the conditions surrounding the work of art on site and in transit, as well as the artwork's further extension as a virtual traveller in the ceaseless flow of images. The project takes the 1961 Piero Manzoni work *Socle du Monde (Base of the World Magic Base No. 3 by Piero Manzoni, 1961, Homage to Galileo)*, as the starting point for an inquiry into the artworld's place in a global economy, and as a conceptual metaphor for the recognition that the "base" of this "world" is shifting. Following an inaugural exhibition at the University of Sharjah's College of Fine Arts and Design, *Shifting Base* was transported to its ultimate destination, Abu Dhabi's Rub' al Khali sand sea. Once there, our ersatz "axis mundi" was set adrift in the shifting sands of the Empty Quarter.

No one really wants the product; We much prefer the advertisement

Isak Berbic

A Shifting Foundation

Socle du Monde is the third iteration in a series of works Piero Manzoni referred to as "magic bases." The first two also take the form of sculptural pedestals, but include a pair of marked footprints. These marks are an invitation to the viewer to become a part of the work, and one only needs take his place atop the plinth to be "magically" transformed into a figurative work of living sculpture. Manzoni's magic bases rehearse a central lesson of twentieth century art, earlier postulated by the readymades of Marcel Duchamp, and later explored by such diverse artists as Yves Klein, Daniel Buren, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Fred Wilson, and Tom Friedman. The lesson is that art is no longer to be defined qualitatively, but contextually. It is not a rarefied type of experience at a remove from everyday life, but a lens through which one can view the world. This notion of art as context is most clearly demonstrated by the simplest of artistic acts, the ostensive actions of pointing, naming, or framing. To transform a common porcelain urinal into the twentieth century's most important sculpture, Duchamp needed only to re-christen it *Fountain*, sign it with the nom de guerre "R. Mutt", and place it before an available audience. Buren's infamous stripes, Friedman's *Untitled (A Curse)*, and Levine's *After Walker Evans* all reproduce this central strategy of twentieth century re-presentation, reminding us that "art-ness" is not a property of objects, but inheres instead in the perspective of the viewer.

The simplicity of this gesture might allow anything to be repurposed as a work of art. Reframe it, rename it, and a grain of sand, a volume of atmospheric gas, or even a mountain peak might be transmuted into an objet d'art. Socle du Monde performs this same grandiose and absurd action upon the earth itself. It would seem unlikely that Manzoni intended to declare the pedestal's permanent home, in Denmark, as the de facto "base of the world." If anything, the work's location represents a de jure base, marking the place that inspired what is, conceptually speaking, a siteless work.

We much prefer the advertisement

How is Manzoni's *Socle du Monde* related to the photograph of it? The question seems redundant. The answer is, of course, that the photograph represents, in two dimensions, the actual three-dimensional sculpture. This suggests that one might accurately imagine the sculpture after studying the photograph. Obviously, however, we cannot walk up to the sculpture, circumambulate it, touch it, or look down on it, when we encounter it in a photograph. We cannot experience its materiality. We are locked into the viewing position of the photographer and the formal attributes of the image. We are also subject to the demands of the mythological context that is parasitically attached to the image and the context of its publishing. Therefore, we are not experiencing the object in its intended format, but are left instead with its symbolic dimensions.

We are faced with a different problem when the image presents a narrative or an event. After all, what would it mean to walk

PIERO MANZONI
Socle du Monde (Base of the World), 1961
iron

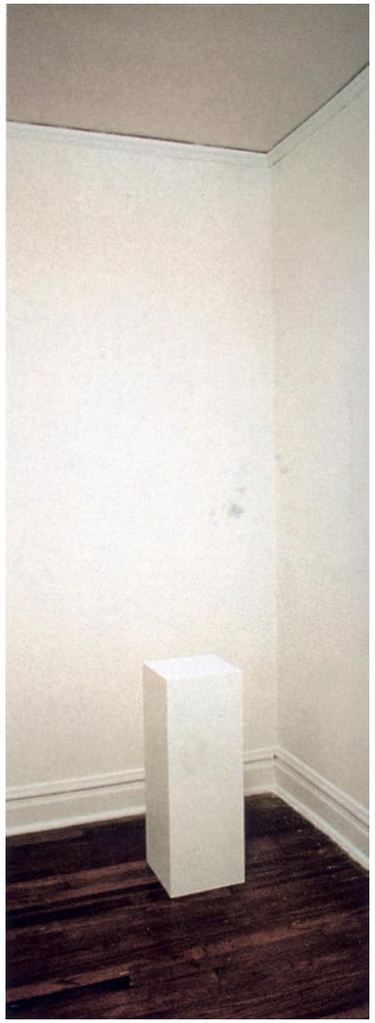
MARCEL DUCHAMP (as Richard Mutt)
Fountain, 1917
upturned porcelain urinal

up to a story? When all that we have is the recorded image, then that is all there is. It becomes the thing to walk up to and the thing that informs us. What is necessary then, is to learn how to read it in order to understand it. It does not matter that the Base of the World is really out there somewhere, sitting on a grass field on the peninsula of Jutland, in Denmark, a couple of hours north of the German border. If the Manzoni, or the Barbara Kruger, or the Christo are events within the art historical narrative, then what is the point of asking if images are adequate to know them? Even if we were to make a pilgrimage to Denmark, to the Herning Kunstmuseum, to confront the sculpture in all of its materiality, the work would continue to elude us to some degree. Despite the fact that we would finally have full physical access to the object, the totality of its original context would remain out of reach, winking coyly at us, from a distance of about forty-seven years. We would still find ourselves before a representation, albeit in three dimensions, and at full-scale—much better, perhaps, than the photograph—but a representation nonetheless. It is the symbolic image that is most appropriate, most useful, and most available for wide dissemination.

We mostly learn about artworks by looking at books, art magazines, culture sections in newspapers, exhibition catalogs and internet websites. We have, long ago, become accustomed to consuming cinema on the television screen, and symphonies in earphones. Through these mediums, we learn about flat works, three-dimensional works, large-scale installations, and time-based pieces. We have become used video art on the small screen of YouTube, and imagining

installation art through photographs that describe it. It is common practice that artists' submissions for exhibitions, or applications for school programs, are viewed on laptop screens or digital projectors. While looking at art, through its second-hand representations, we judge it by reconstructing all or part of the experience in our imagination. We use our imagination to decode the images, while at the same time, we keep in mind that in reality, the works themselves are somewhat different, somehow more real. This desire to experience art on what we perceive as real terms is becoming more and more difficult to fulfil. Artists themselves are aware of these limitations, and their work has increasingly come to address the conditions under which it will be seen, not only in the gallery or the museum, but in the pages of art magazines, catalogs, and websites. In a contemporary scene flooded with international biennials and art fairs, they know that these second-hand impressions that can be made available to millions are perhaps more important than the first-hand encounter that will occur for only a privileged few. As the work is increasingly conceived with this in mind, we should begin to accept photographic documentation as an intended and legitimate part of the art experience. Some artists, such as Gabriel Orozco, Francis Alÿs, and Erwin Wurm have even created sculptural interventions that can only be viewed via their photographic documentation.

When encountering art on its real terms, in the gallery, art fairs, or the local biennial, we cannot help but load up on those free pamphlets and nicely printed catalogs and posters—all the extraneous array of stuff that surrounds



TOM FRIEDMAN
Untitled (A Curse), 1992
cursed spherical space
(a 28 cm spherical space, 28 cm above a pedestal was cursed by a witch)

GABRIEL OROZCO
Crazy Tourist, 1991
cibachrome

the artwork. In these publications, we find reproductions of the artworks and short essays that "read" them for us. We refer to them as "readings" because art criticism today, in many classrooms as well as the press, no longer criticizes but decodes meaning. Instead of critique, the writers dole out theoretical art-speak that instructs us in how to understand and experience the work. Even though these catalog essays are often bland and pretentious articles that recycle the usual art terminology, they serve the purpose of describing that real experience we should be getting from the work that is not present in the reproduction.

I once answered a Sarajevo taxi driver, who asked me what I do for a living: "I am an artist." He replied, "You artists take two sticks and some rope, put it on the wall and call it art. And what is worse, the uglier and more confusing it is, the more original they say it is." His response struck me as a very candid picture of the way many people feel about art today. Besides truth-telling taxi drivers, people are generally uncomfortable to speak about art, because they feel they do not "get it." They believe they do not have the authority to speak about it, and they fear being wrong. Those art-speak essays also tell us why we should take the sticks and rope seriously, they read for us the art-ness in the thing, and they sell to us the aesthetic and intellectual commitment at hand. The essays promote the artwork's significance, and indeed, they help to sell the artworks themselves. No one really wants the product; we much prefer the advertisement.

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Text edited by DENNIS HODGES

Forgery

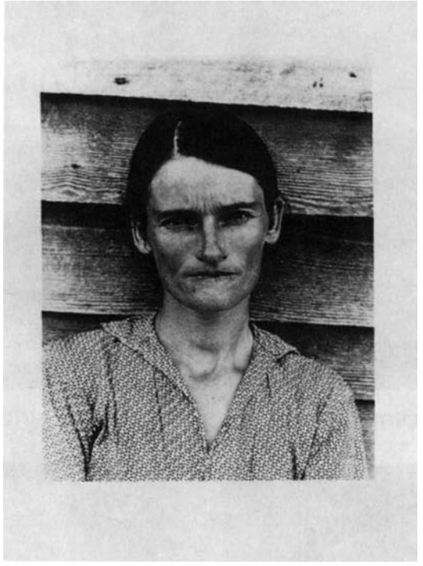
Zdenko Mandusic

The Oxford English Dictionary (O.E.D.) defines "forgery" as: "1. the action or craft of forging metals… 2. invention, excogitation; fictitious invention, fiction… 3. the making of a thing in fraudulent imitation of something." As the first definition is labeled "obsolete" and the second, "now only poetical," the third definition prevails in respect to relevance. Application of the adjective "fraudulent" is made necessary by the absence of culpability in the O.E.D. definition of "imitation" as "a copy, an artificial likeness; a thing made to look like something else, which it is not; a counterfeit." A sense of fraudulence is only found in the attributive definition of imitation as, a thing "made (of less costly material) in imitation of a real or genuine article or substance." Though the use of parentheses implies an externality to the inserted conception of quality, imitation is still marked as inferior–being made of less costly material–while the assumed original is purportedly superior–being made of more costly material. Forgeries are culpable exactly because they do not appear inferior or cheaply made; they are passed off as and pretend to be the original. They pose the practical problem of identification and the theoretical dilemma of differentiation. Forgeries have influenced how works of art are looked at, troubling critics and art historians with the possibility of wrongful attributions, connoisseurs with the prospect of loosing money, and philosophers with the question of aesthetic value.

In the Grove Dictionary of Art, the fraud enacted by art forgeries is defined as "a departure from transiently agreed canons of authenticity."[1] Anxieties over authenticity have

affected the categorization of media according to the potential for forgery. Nelson Goodman offers the split between "autographic" arts, in which the distinction between original and forgery is relevant, and the "allographic" arts, in regards to which the distinction is redundant.[2] While painting and sculpture have been plagued by forgery, the concept of fraudulent imitation is foreign to music and the verbal arts. The inability to forge literary works and musical scores is reliant upon their "definite notation," or their "consisting of a certain number of signs or characters that are to be combined by concatenation."[3] These particular signs, such as the word order, punctuation, or spelling of a poem, function as the required features of the work. As long as spelling is correct, a copy of a literary work acts as a legitimate original since the identity of the text is not bound to any copy or physical form. "In painting," Goodman points out, "with no such alphabet of characters, none of the pictorial properties …is distinguished as constitutive."[4] Following this assertion, identity in painting and sculpture remained reliant upon the establishment of the work's historical facts and the identification of the product of the artist's hand. Expert forgeries enact this substantive connection between artist and artwork through imitation of an artist's style.

The transience of authenticity stipulated by the Grove definition becomes evident in respect to differing conceptions regarding the duplication of objects. In the sixteenth century, Giorgio Vasari, the Italian painter and artist- biographer, praised the forging of an antiquity as a triumph of artistry.[5] In his stories about Michelangelo, Vasari praised the artist's reproductions of antiquities as original creations. It is possible



SHERRIE LEVINE
After Walker Evans (After Walker Evans' portrait of Allie May Burroughs), 1981
gelatin silver print

RICHARD PRINCE
Untitled (cowboy), 1989
Ektacolor photograph

to identify hints of fraud even in this positive conception of forgery since, according to Vasari, Michelangelo was in the habit of returning forged antiquities to their owners in place of the originals.[6] In the restoration of ancient churches and cathedrals during the Victorian era, the concept of forgery is placed in opposition to the act of restoration. This tension originates in the Victorian custom of replacing early features with modern ones. The Victorians believed they were lending the ruins a higher truth. While these gestures did not appear to be problematic or questionable at the time, such restorations were later denounced as forgeries for pretending originality.

Despite its transience, the concept of authenticity foregrounded by the Grove definition underwrites the socio-cultural relation of power and value realized through collections and their exhibition.[7] If the possession of a collection of original artworks is a demonstration of power, as suggested by the anthropology scholar Richard Leventhal, art forgeries violate this conception by pretending originality. Behind assertions of authenticity emerges the traditional connoisseur, who also became the first art historian with the self-ascribed agency of "assessing quality" and differentiating between "authentic objects and imitations."[8] The connoisseur arrives at the moment culture is commodified, when artworks and objects of antiquity are transformed into market commodities.[9] In this transformation, the value of the original object is augmented, as rarity and uniqueness enhance value.

During the golden age of forgery, roughly delineated from 1850 to 1940, connoisseurs asserted varying methods of authentication, persisently trying to perfect the detection

of forgeries masquerading as genuine objects. Between 1874 and 1876, one such connoisseur, Giovanni Morelli of Italy, argued that paintings should be properly attributed through the identification of minor stylistic details, "especially those least significant in the style typical of the painter's school."[10] Claiming that museums are full of forgeries and wrongly attributed works, Morelli sought to attribute works and establish authenticity by noting peculiar details in a painter's work, such as earlobes, fingernails, and the shapes of fingers. These details could only be found in originals and not in forgeries. Though Morelli made dozens of new attributions in galleries throughout Europe, his method was called "mechanical" and "crudely positivistic," and was quickly ostracized. Despite its fate, the "Morelli method" points toward "an appreciation of the detail over the whole," leading to suggestions that it exemplifies a more modern approach to artworks.[11] As noted by art historian Edgar Wind, this method, in tune with modern psychology, suggests "that our inadvertent little gestures reveal character far more authentically than any formal posture."[12] In this light, Morelli's method locates the authenticity of the work within the artist's idiosyncrasies. In contrast to Goodman, Morelli appears to claim that forgeries cannot access those facets of an artwork located outside of its medium.

By concentrating on content, Morelli departed from the connoisseur's obsession with establishing the historical facts of an artwork. This obsession is best exemplified in the advent of the concept of provenance, the history of an object's ownership and display.[13] Morelli's method necessarily bypasses the early authenticating device of the artist's

SHERRIE LEVINE
Fountain, 1991
cast bronze

HAN VAN MEEGEREN
Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus, 1936-37
oil on canvas

signature, which had already become unreliable by the fifteenth century. At that time, the rampant forgery of Albrecht Dürer's name and monogram provoked the Nuremberg City Council to order that "prints containing Dürer's signature... be confiscated unless his cipher was removed."[14] More recently, the forger's ability to imitate almost every possible aspect of artwork leads art historians and connoisseurs to use x-ray, infrared, and laser microanalyses in authenticating artworks. But in revealing what is behind the surface of a work, scientific methods have the potential to devalue art as "mere surface representation of chemical media and optical structures."[15]

The paintings of Han van Meegeren are often cited in discussions of the artistic value of forgeries. In 1945, van Meegeren confessed to having painted and sold six paintings as the legitimate works of Johannes Vermeer and two as that of Pieter de Hooghe. His *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus* (1936-7) hung in Rotterdam's Boymans Museum for seven years and received the highest praise. A noted scholar and critic, Abraham Bredius, exalted its artistic value. He called *Christ and the Disciples at Emmaus* the "masterpiece of Vermeer."[16] In discussing the fraudulence of van Meegeren's painting, Alfred Lessing asserts: "The fact that the Disciples is a forgery is just that, a fact. It is a fact about the painting which stands entirely apart from it as an object of aesthetic contemplation."[17] For Lessing, this fact can only be meaningful in reference to the concept of originality, by which he means the novelty and innovation attributed to every good work of art. Lessing draws the conclusion that the fault of van Meegeren's most notorious work is its lack of original artistry, as "it presents nothing new or creative (in terms of style or

technique) to the history of art even though …it may well be as beautiful as the genuine Vermeer pictures."[18] But as van Meegeren's paintings show, despite their lack of originality, forgery can easily feign authenticity.

The transience of the agreed canons of authenticity reflects the "shifting interests and the shifting history of artistic, technological, economic, political, and moral experience."[19] These shifting interests and experiences are necessarily attributed to changes and developments in the varying media of artistic production. Evincing this notion, Walter Benjamin states, "Confronted with its manual reproduction, which was usually branded as a forgery, the original preserved all its authority; not so vis á vis technical reproduction."[20] For Benjamin, the question of authenticity is displaced in the age of mechanical reproduction. Richard Prince's 'rephotographs', such as his *Cowboys* series, in which he closely crops images from cigarette advertisements, confront the displacement of the authentic that begins with the advent of the photograph. As Prince's 'rephotographs' take on the appearance of paintings, they prompt the questioning of their identity. Are these works forgeries? David Lowenthal offers the assertion, "Every relic displayed in a museum is a fake in that it has been wrenched out of its original context." [16] Is there then a difference between the refashioning of the past and the refraction of the present culture?

Though authenticity and artistic value remain the primary points of debate within the discourse on forgery, imitation for profit has moved away from fraudulent imitations of 'high' works of art, and into the mass-production of brand-named goods. Mark Jones notes that people purchasing these forgeries, better known as "counterfeits" (though the definitions are relatively the same), are fully aware that they could not purchase the original for the price of the forgery.[21] This move is, in large part, due to the sophisticated methods of material analysis and the rigor of modern attribution. Within contemporary 'high' artistic practice, forgery is utilized to test the power and mode of operation of the artistic effect.[22] As Sándor Radnóti asserts, in the age of reproduction "the referential character of the original was abolished, along with the imitational character of both the copy and forgery."[23] Sherrie Levine's *After Walker Evans* (1981) demonstrates this notion by questioning the conventions of artistic authorship. In a similar fashion, her *Fountain* (1991), a Bronze counterfeit of Marcel Duchamp's legendary readymade, interrogates the ascription of the artistic value by recasting the base original in the classical medium of sculpture. Levine's *Fountain* underscores the institutional nature of the art world and its ability to neutralize challenges to its system of values and conventions. As reproduction is inscribed into the media of new art, forgery becomes an tool for the interrogation of the canon and the banal. Through this gesture, the culpability present in the O.E.D. definition of "forgery" is stripped of its agency, as forgery is no longer disguised but laid bare and its implications mobilized.

ZDENKO MANDUSIC is currently studying at the University of Chicago

Notes:

1. Grove Art Online, "Forgery."
2. Nelson Goodman, "Art and Authenticity?" in The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art, 103.
3.Ibid, 105.
4.Ibid.
5.Sándor Radnóti, The Fake: Forgery and Its Place in Art, 5.
6.Ibid.
7. "Geopolitics of Archaeology: Global Market for Stolen Antiquities." Worldview. Chicago Public Radio. WBEZ 91.5 FM, Chicago. 8 Feb. 2008.
8. Grove Art Online, "Forgery."
9. David Lowenthal, "Forging the past," in Fake? The Art of Deception, 19.
10. Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Modeling," in The Sign of Three, 82.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid, 84.
13. Grove Art Online, "Forgery."
14. Lowenthal, "Faking In Europe from the Renaissance to the 18th century" in Fake? The Art of Deception, 120.
15. Lowenthal, "Forging the past," 19.
16. Alfred Lessing, "What Is Wrong With Forgery?" in The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art, 59.
17. Ibid, 64.
18. Ibid, 72.
19. Joseph Margolis, "Art, Forgery, and Authenticity" in The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art, 167.
20. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction" in Illuminations, 220.
21. Mark Jones, "Why Fakes?" Fake? The Art of Deception, 13.
22. Radnóti, The Fake, 207.
23. Ibid.

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MINISTRY OF CULTURE
Shifting Base, 2008
steel
82 x 100 x 100 cm

INAUGURAL EXHIBITION INSTALLATION, April 2, 2008
College of Fine Arts and Design, University of Sharjah

RUB’ AL KHALI SAND SEA, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

INSTALLATION IN THE RUB' AL KHALI SAND SEA, April 3, 2008
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

INSTALLATION IN THE RUB' AL KHALI SAND SEA, April 3, 2008
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

MINISTRY OF CULTURE
Shifting Base, 2008
steel
82 x 100 x 100 cm

قاعدة العالم

انتقال القاعدة رقم 1
بواسطة وزارة الثقافة 2008
إهداء الى مانزوني

BASE OF THE WORLD

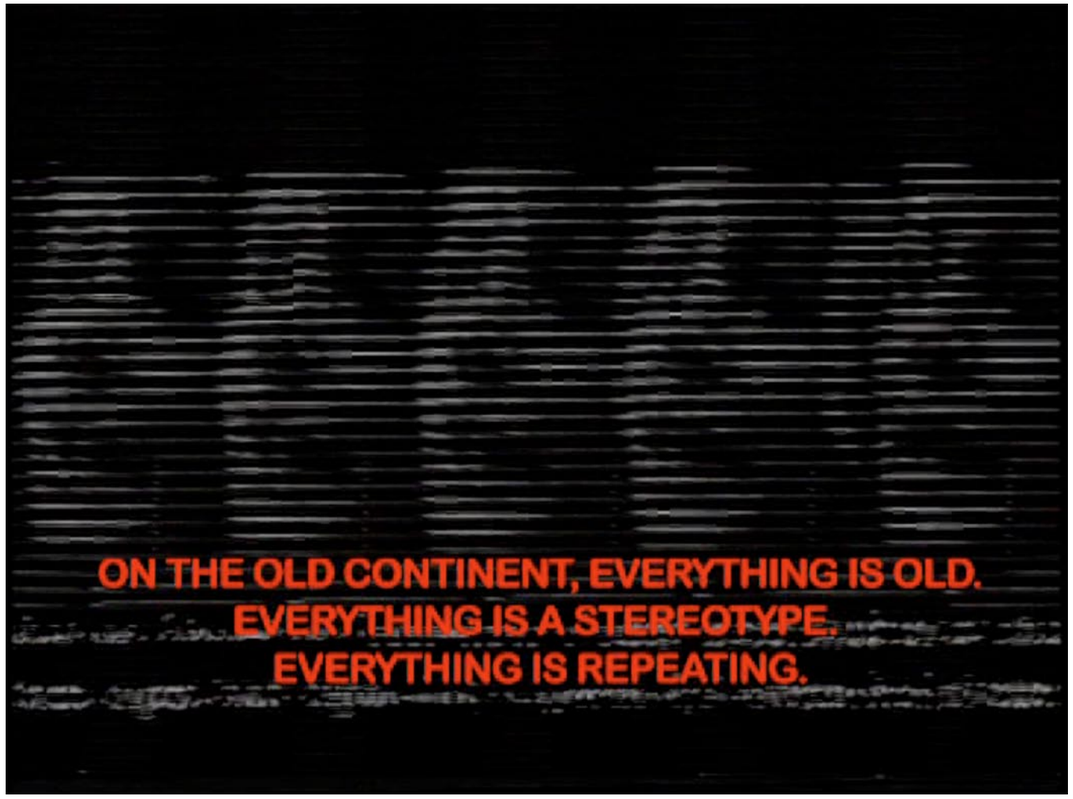
Shifting Base No. 1
Ministry of Culture 2008
Homage to Manzoni

ISAK BERBIC

Isak Berbic was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He first learned about art from his mother, father and brother. Escaping from war he and his family became refugees, migrating from Bosnia, to Croatia, to Denmark to the United States. He studied photography, film and electronic media at the School of Art and Design, University of Illinois at Chicago. After art directing a political monthly journal, Zambak, he left his fourth home, Chicago, and moved to the United Arab Emirates. Currently, he teaches at the College of Fine Arts, University of Sharjah. His works deal with memory, histories, tragedy, humor, exile, and the limits of representation.

ISAK BERBIC
My uncle gave me his tooth to take from Bosnia to America to photograph; and now I have sent it back, 2005
c-print
20 x 24 inches

ISAK BERBIC
Bosnian Spaceboat, 2006
c-print
60 x 60 inches



ISAK BERBIC
still from *The End of History,* 2007
digital video
11 minutes

DENNIS HODGES

Dennis Hodges was born in Chicago, in the United States of America. He studied painting and video at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He received a Master of Fine Art from the School of Art and Design, University of Illinois at Chicago. He has taught sculpture at the University of Illinois at Chicago and Columbia College. His work, primarily in sculpture and video, deals with the relationship between perception and ideology. He mines the ideologically charged, facilely transparent representations of American popular culture for moments of opacity, doubt, contradiction, and ambivalence.

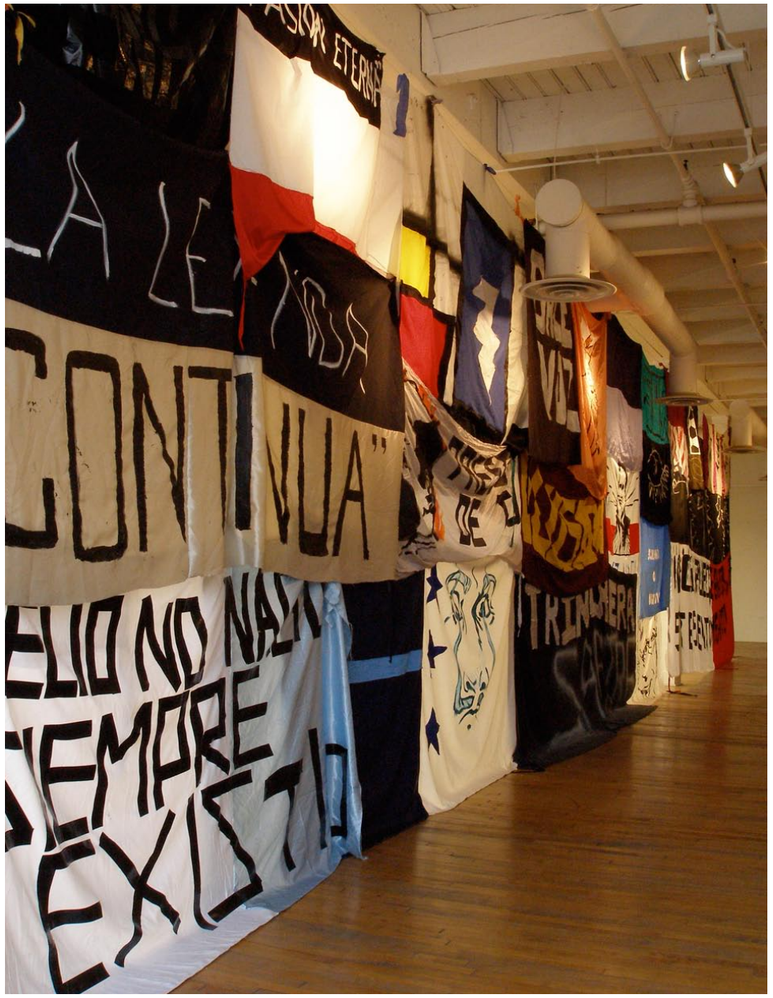
DENNIS HODGES
Lark, 2004
water-gilded poplar
8 ¼ x 8 ¼ inches

DENNIS HODGES
Espereble, 2007
nylon, pvc, rock, urethane

DENNIS HODGES
still from *Toward a New Way of Languaging,* 2007
digital video
5 minutes

EMILIANO CERNA RIOS

Emiliano Cerna Rios was born in Lima, Peru. He studied architecture and fine art at the Pontificia Universidad Catolica in Lima. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Art in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a Master of Fine Art from the School of Art and Design, University of Illinois at Chicago, where he also taught. His works which are primarily paintings and installations deal with the conflation of mass spectacle, sublimated history and avant-garde dreams.



EMILIANO CERNA RIOS
Alambrado, 2006
nylon
dimensions variable

EMILIANO CERNA RIOS
The Scholar, 2007
oil on canvas
48 x 60 inches

EMILIANO CERNA RIOS
Retarded Militant, 2008
acrylic and oil on canvas
34 x 48 inches

ZDENKO MANDUSIC

Zdenko Mandusic was born in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. He studied English Literature and Pedagogy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and is currently an interdisciplinary, graduate-level student in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Chicago. He works on the visual aesthetic of nationalism, film theory, and Post-Communist Literature.

"Forgeries are culpable exactly because they do not appear inferior or cheaply made; they are passed off as and pretend to be the original. They pose the practical problem of identification and the theoretical dilemma of differentiation."

Ministry of Culture
Shifting Base

Organized by
Isak Berbic

April 2008, *Rewak* – The Art Gallery
College of Fine Arts and Design
University of Sharjah

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Rewak - The Art Gallery
College of Fine Arts & Design

University of Sharjah