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International Artist Exchanges in Former Yugoslavia

by Margaret Tittlemore



In the fall of 1999, I, with other members of the Mobius Artists Group in Boston, was invited to go to the Istrian region of Croatia. The project developed from an initial contact with Croatian artist Silvo Saric, who had been an Artslink fellow at Mobius the year before. Mobius is an arts organization with a 25 year history in Boston for experimental work in all media.

The Trust for Mutual Understanding, a private philanthropic organization in New York, provided major funding for the project. Dedicated to promoting closer cooperation between the people of the United States, the former Soviet Union and other countries in Eastern and Central Europe, the Trust funds projects in which direct, professional interaction plays a major role. Grants are awarded for creative artistic collaborations in dance, theatre and music, as well as the visual arts.

Our project, entitled *Taking Liberty/Usvajanje Slobode*, would have two parts. The first half would be a cultural and artistic exchange with artists in the town of Pula, which dates back to the Roman empire, and the second would occur in Boston. Pula has a rich, multicultural history. We stayed as guests of the city in an Austro-Hungarian style hotel and walked by a very intact, two thousand-year-old Roman coliseum each evening to get there. All the streets had two signs, one in Croatian and the other in Italian, as a leftover from when this was once Italy! Our hosts took us up the coastline to Rovinj, Porec and Novigrad, with the group exhibiting and performing. I did a piece at Labin in a contemporary arts center that had been a former coal mine under the Communist regime. Large metal letters spelling out TITO still loomed on the roof. In *Free to Breathe/Slobodno Disanje*, a performance/drawing, I incorporated a rubbing of the tiled wall of the coal miners' shower stall into the finished piece.

One of the most amazing aspects of making and exhibiting work in Pula were the sites that were made available to us by the Director of Archeology. I was able to select an ancient 5th century remnant of a

Benedictine monastery for my second piece, *Crossing Over/Prekoracaj*, which was a combination of installation and storytelling. I collected personal anecdotes from American friends who had experience with the consequences of a "mixed" marriage. I felt these stories about people who had crossed a barrier of race, religion and/or class would resonate in Croatia. I was fortunate to collaborate with a Croatian artist, Robert Sosic, who became more than just a translator of the stories but a part of the performance. Each time a story was completed, I lifted a veil of white tulle from my head and let it drop to the ground. Then both of us trampled a barrier of 900 orange warning flags placed in a long row outside the ancient chapel. Our work was covered in the



Crossing Over, Part I

daily local press, and a color picture from *Crossing Over* appeared on the front page of the national newspaper.

The following spring, the Croatian artists came to Boston for the second half of the exchange. We hosted them in our homes and had a series of group dinners. The group chose sites that included traditional gallery spaces as well as alternative art locations in the Fort Point area to exhibit the work. I chose the Old Northern Avenue Bridge for a performance without words, *Crossing Over, Part Two/Prekoracaj, Drugi Dio*. I was able to collaborate with Robert Sosic again as well as with Ljiljana Vlacic for this piece. This time, the many layers of veils stayed on for my trip across the pedestrian passage way and were slowly dropped on the return. I am indebted to the Croatians for getting me across! This is what I wrote for the catalog description:

Like a clouded lens, the veils build up, slowly over time, blinding her. She cannot see the way. Friends come. One in front, one behind, leading her across. High above the surface of the water, the veils begin to drop. One by one, they fall to the ground. Facing the truth, she returns.

During the summer of 2001, I was a participant in a second exchange between artists in Croatia and the Mobius Artists Group, this time in the Dalmatian region south of Pula. The project, *Digging the Channel/Prokopavanje Kanala*, had as its focus the exploration of the similarities and differences between Zadar and Boston. Primarily Roman in its history and design, the "old city" of Zadar is connected by a bridge to the more modern mainland. During World War II, a channel that used to encircle the old city was filled in with debris from Allied bombing and paved over. Recently, the city of Zadar announced an intention to restore the channel for historical and ecological reasons. In Boston, the Fort Point Channel divides the central financial district from the artists' community, which is being threatened by development. This channel has become a boundary between art, public works and public life and will be the metaphor for the Boston phase.

In Zadar, I chose the paved channel as my site and made a series of drawings, entitled *Channel Markings/Oznacavanje kanala*, in blue chalk directly on the road. I drew Neolithic marks that symbolize "water," imitating those I found on pottery shards in the Archeological Museum of Zadar. I collaborated with Croatian artist Maya Semic, who acted as "trouble-shooter" for me as I drew in the street. She gave me Croatian language lessons and taught me Croatian poetry. I also made a series of drawings incorporating "found" marks such as graphiti with Neolithic ones.

The exchange in Zadar was much more complex than the previous one, and I am still processing it. Perhaps the fact that Zadar was heavily damaged from 1991 to 1995 and is still in recovery is part of the complexity. Zadar was "on the front line," and Pula was not. Many of the artists we met had lived in basement shelters for four years. I felt a palpable sadness in the city even though the tourist season was at its peak. One powerful insight after we returned and following the attacks of September 11 was that now we knew how the Croatians felt about being victims of war. For the second half of this exchange, the Croatian artists arrived in Boston in May of this year and presented a series of installations and performances focusing on the Fort Point Channel. Our work was displayed on the Congress Street and Summer Street bridges as well as on a barge in the Channel.

—Margaret Tittlemore is Visiting Lecturer in Art



Crossing Over, Part 2