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The AUSTRIAN CULTURAL FORUM and the KUNSTHALLE WIEN in cooperation with the CZECH CENTER, the HUNGARIAN CULTURAL CENTER and the ROMANIAN CULTURAL INSTITUTE present

1989: The End of History or the Beginning of the Future?

Video Art Comments on a Time Shift

November 2 – 24, 2009



Stills from Lenin and the Maiden, Magda Tóthová, 2003

As its fall focus, the Austrian Cultural Forum presents the video-based exhibition **1989: The End of History or the Beginning of the Future?** Featuring **14 films from international artists**, the show is on view from **November 2 to 24, 2009**. There will be a **panel discussion** pertaining to aspects of repression and revolution, politics of memory, the fall of the Iron Curtain and the hopes and delusions connected to the alleged end of history.

The **official opening reception** takes place on **November 11, 2009 from 6–8PM at the ACFNY, 11 East 52nd Street** (between Fifth and Madison) with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Austria, Mr. Michael Spindelegger. **Admission is free.**

1989: Twenty years ago, who would have dared to hope that the dictatorial regimes of Central and Eastern European communism would be swept away one after the other in the wake of mass protests? Within a few years, democratic constitutions and market economy structures were introduced. However, this process also caused pains, clashes and heated conflicts about the directions for the future and the interpretation of the past.

The “**annus mirabilis**” 1989 became a historical mark from the perspective of ideology, culture, and mass psychology. Eric Hobsbawm’s “short twentieth century” came to an end. Even if most of the dividing lines within Europe have been dissolved by now, many borders still haven’t disappeared in people’s minds. Nationalistic ideologies, xenophobic and racist movements have surged alongside European integration and globalization. While new neighbors – long separated by the Iron Curtain – have begun to learn about each other, they have also started to experience new problems of migration and acculturation. The selection of films for 1989: The End of History or the Beginning of the Future? was guided by asking how artists, and in particular video artists, have reacted to these changes.

The **fall of the Iron Curtain** was more than a historical concept. It changed the personal lives of millions of Europeans. **Anna Jermolaewa**, for example, tells her story as a Soviet refugee. As young democratic activist she soon reached the limits of political freedom and had to escape to Poland and Austria in 1989. The same Polish woman who helped her journey to Krakow then left as well, to Paris. On the other hand, in his legendary film “Rejs” **Marek Piwowski** shows how normal people survived the harsh and cold rules of everyday communist life in Poland with irony and pragmatism.

The democratic revolutions happened unexpectedly. **Marcel Odenbach’s** films deconstruct TV material, mostly from the German Democratic Republic during the collapse of the Berlin Wall, juxtaposing pictures of past violence with scenes of cheer and joy. He shows that repression and revolution are two sides of the same coin. Along a similar vein, **Jonas Mekas** and **Harun Farocki** with **Andrej Ujica** document the moments of change and the manipulative nature of TV and media. Through these works, it soon becomes clear that mass media continues to be a powerful tool in the hands of the new ruling classes.

In her film “Count on Us: Only Chorus” (2004) the artist **Marina Abramovic** conducts a children’s choir singing a “hymn” to the UN in Serbo-Croatian as a symbol of understanding among nations. It was in former Yugoslavia in particular that hopes for a better and new world of brotherhood were brutally destroyed by the specter of nationalism, racism and war. The work can also be understood to unveil the cynicism of the post communist language surrounding the end of history.

Johanna Kandler was one of the first Austrian artists to react discursively to the transformation in Eastern Europe. Her snap shot paintings often confront language and reality: “Privatization” is one of the fashion words that continues to have both an influential and dramatic meaning for many.

Of particular relevance to the show are the many controversial legacies of communism. **Politics of memory** not only plays a major role in public discussions but also in culture, lifestyle and commerce.

Many artists provoke debate about the authoritarian system of spies and denunciation and how this legacy is being interpreted in post communism: **Joanna Rajkowska’s** video of the performance “Let Me Wash Your Hands” explores metaphorically the attempts of society to deal with a cloudy or even dirty past. It painfully

reminds us of purification, guilt and amnesia. **Magda Tothova's** "Lenin and the Maiden" uses a satirical approach to false desires for a renewed golden age.

By telling the story of the Budapest Freedom Square and the violent protests of the year 2006, the artist **Csaba Nemes** again points at the ugly face of nationalism. Politics of memory seem to be the focus for the interpretation of both the past and present political scene in Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, **Thomas Draschan** takes a close look at the transformed symbolic meanings of communism and socialism, where former aggressive messages of political change have developed into consumerist pop culture items.

Finally, artists like **Pushwagner and Jakub Nepras** unveil the concept of the alleged end of history as an illusion of our new era. **Pushwagner's** "Soft City" (picture novel 1968-1976, film 2006-2008) outlines a capitalist future of man's standardization which in its enforced conformity hardly differs from the communist past.

In a similar vein, Czech artist **Jakub Nepras** tells the story of his arrival in the modern capitalist industrialized world. Nothing has changed. Human beings are still ants in comparison to dominant machineries and systems.

But time and again individual approaches and stories prevail. Austrian **Isa Rosenberger** takes a very personal look from the other side of a bridge in Bratislava that became a symbol of communist industrial progress. In the film "Novy Most," she meets a daughter, a mother and a grandmother, and lets the three women reflect upon the past in their own perceptions. The bridge thereby becomes a poetic symbol for a variety of hopes, disappointments and mostly unification. Finally **Josef Dabernig's** film journey crossing the Austrian – Czech border reminds us again of the forgotten common past – a poetic reflection about overcoming former frontiers and opposed systems.

By drawing a thin grid all over the exhibition space, **Miha Strukelj** connects each video art piece in the gallery and creates a narrative where past and presence intertwine. His work also exposes the fragility of the status quo by depicting our post-1989 world as a gigantic construction site.

Participating artists: Marina ABRAMOVIC, Josef DABERNIG, Thomas DRASCHAN, Harun FAROCKI with Andrej UJICA, Anna JERMOLAEWA, Johanna KANDL, Jonas MEKAS, Csaba NEMES, Jakub NEPRAS, Marcel ODENBACH, Marek PIWOWSKI, PUSHWAGNER, Joanna RAJKOWSKA, Isa ROSENBERGER, Miha STRUKELJ (exhibition design), Magda TOTHOVA.

Curators: Gerald MATT, Andreas STADLER

Exhibition Coordination: Elisabeth Haider

Exhibition Assistance: Natascha Boojar, Anne Marie Butler, Fiona Eltz, Judith Gruber, Anna Gruessinger, Alexandra Humer, Lisa-Maria Matzinger, Maria Simma

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