

PARTICIPATION OF CROATIA AT THE 54TH INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION – LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

One Needs to Live Self-Confidently... Watching

Artists:

Antonio G. Lauer a.k.a. Tomislav Gotovac and BADco.

Curated by:

What, How and for Whom/WHW

The exhibition, *One Needs to Live Self-Confidently... Watching*, presents Antonio G. Lauer a.k.a. Tomislav Gotovac and theatre collective BADco. from Zagreb. The art of Tomislav Gotovac is based on the idea of 'global directing', not only as applied to film directing, but also as it extends into everyday life. BADco.'s artistic practice, operating at the intersection of theatre, performance and dance, engages with a redefinition of the performative act, and of the established relations between the audience, performers and performance.

The focus of the exhibition is on a critical discourse based on the thematisation of the procedures of watching, modes of spectating, and the politics of attention, within exhibition conventions and beyond. The exhibition's stance is one that BADco. describes as *theatre by other means*, juxtaposing the artistic position of Tomislav Gotovac, the recently deceased artist considered a pioneer of body art, performance, and structuralist and experimental film in the former Yugoslavia, with BADco. – 'Nameless Authors' Assoc., a theatre collective that operates as an independent artistic initiative, organisationally similar to a number of precarious cultural initiatives formed in Croatia in the late 1990s and early 2000s in opposition to the dominant cultural policy. The exhibition is conceived as a field of friction between the coordinates of the art system and art's autonomy that involves the viewer in examining the work of spectating.



The title of the exhibition, *One Needs to Live Self-Confidently... Watching*, a quote taken from Tomislav Gotovac, in many ways summarises Gotovac's artistic credo, but it is also a demand that governed the decision to engage with his works in the Croatian presentation at the Venice Biennial. It is an attempt to ask questions about the meaning and actuality of Gotovac's artistic life, which spanned five decades, or longer, if we consider that for him life and art posed a curious combination that guided his continuous striving to

structure reality as art. What is the actuality of his work, his understanding of freedom and artistic autonomy? How should we look at the other side of the notion of the artist-rebel? Should we view his autonomy not only as individual engagement striving for more artistic freedom and experimentation, that produced impressive aesthetical coherence - which it certainly did, but also as autonomy that engaged with the blind spots of power in ways that are important for present times?

The statement *One Needs to Live Self-Confidently... Watching* is ubiquitous enough to include a demand for us to take **Responsibility for Things Seen**, which is the title of the site-specific installation by BADco. Conceptualising the absence of performers and the complex field of friction between a stage and exhibition space, their installation sets the spatial parameters of the exhibition. Their installation transforms the exhibition space into an analytical laboratory for the examination of the power of images, mediated responsibility, different modes and conditions of viewing and their critical and transformative possibilities, using as its 'material' works by Tomislav Gotovac. But the installation also addresses a broader set of questions related to his presentation in the national pavilion as well as Gotovac himself, the cult figure of the Croatian neo-avant-garde, the 'radical' artist whose 'anarchistic' desire led him to uncompromisingly sacrifice his comfort and success and whose works involving his naked body never ceased to shock. BADco.'s *Responsibility for Things Seen* is not a reaction or intervention into Gotovac's work, but takes 'Gotovac' as a problem around which it evolves, which is more than just an element of its 'site-specificity'.

Tomislav Gotovac's presentation includes his key structural and experimental films, and a series of photographs from the early 1960s through to the end of the 1970s. It downplays the recuperation of his opus within the narrative of Croatian national art history and the usual clichés of the underrepresented dissident who fought for the freedom of artistic expression in the dark times of communist repression, as the story goes in the standard readings of the 'body in socialism'. The selection of his works attempts to accentuate specific procedures whose strict discipline and analytical possessiveness often trespassed into excess and transgression, to reinforce once again the systemic organising principle that underlies them, maintaining their autonomy as the ultimate responsibility to the self-devised and perfected system whose iron logic governed Gotovac's life and art.

This intention to evade definitive and directive readings comes to the fore in BADco.'s installation **Responsibility for Things Seen: Tales in Negative Space**. In every moment what is offered to the viewer is a construction that remembers, notes and anticipates, while the very act of seeing becomes a subject, an obsession, a game, a problem, the same one that Gotovac attempted to solve by his 'non-stop image' principle, and systemic subjection of reality to the principles of film. BADco.'s installation incites performative events in an enclosed, seemingly protected (surveyed) and yet fragile space, showing no traces of the assumption that community is established through gestures that abolish the dividing line between spectators and actors, staging instead the absence, making sense of activities already at work in the spectator. BADco.'s temporal gesture of manipulating absence as presence, of both performers and spectators, and our sense of time and ability to experience the present as opening to the future, demands nothing, steers nobody, yet makes clear that there is no such thing as neutral viewing.

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication, with essays by Bojana Cvejić, Florian Malzacher, Renata Salecl and Georg Schöllhammer, which is available for free [download](#).

As part of their work BADco. is publishing a book with contributions by Petar Milat, Giuliana Bruno, Peter Szendy and Stephen Zepke.