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Exhibition

TOMISLAV GOTOVAC is a fifty-three-year-old Yugoslav artist whose work often requires him to get naked. He doesn't particularly enjoy it—"I'm just as shy as anyone else," he told us the other day—but he has found nudity to be an essential element of many of his performances, which have established his reputation among the art lovers, bohemians, law-enforcement officials, consulting psychiatrists, party bureaucrats, and general populace of his native Zagreb. The success of his performances—their trenchant wit and subversive spirit—attracted the attention of Milena Kalinovska, a

days in jail or a fine. Gotovac appealed the sentence, on the ground that he was an artist and such performances constituted his *métier*. That's all very well, the appellate judges ruled, in effect, but we're artists, too, and handing out fines is *our* *métier*.

The naked walks are actually quite powerful performances beyond their immediate silly-scandalous aspect. To confront a state built on mass conformity with an assertion of absolute, pristine individuality is, of course, a political gesture, and this one is rendered all the more compelling by the way it offers the individual up to the state in a spirit of raw vulnerability. Performing such a ritual in the middle of Europe, where two generations ago people were being marched naked through town squares on their way to death camps, affords the piece a profound historical dimension. And in contemporary Yugoslavia, where bitter regional and ethnic tensions are proliferating by the week, such a performance has an eerily prophetic aura as well.

Gotovac's entire "Dokumenta" piece, it turns out, is similarly charged.

guest curator who put together an exhibition of politically charged conceptual art, "Rhetorical Image," that is currently on display at the New Museum, in SoHo. A series of photographs in the exhibition show Mr. Gotovac stark naked, parading in broad daylight, trancelike, his arms outstretched, through Zagreb's quaint cobblestone streets and squares.

When we met Mr. Gotovac, he was busy attaching those images and dozens of other pictures, along with certificates and clippings and official papers, to the museum's walls in preparation for the opening—his contribution is actually a vast collage entitled "Dokumenta (—1956-1990—)"—but he seemed happy to take a few moments off to talk with us. Indeed, Mr. Gotovac seemed happy about practically everything. This was his first time in New York City, he told us, and the town was giving him a wonderful buzz. "New York's one great big pulsating work of art," he said when we asked him whether he'd had a chance to visit any of the other museums. "Who needs museums? Who needs galleries? Everything—the way time moves here, the speed, Central Park, the way light

falls on the avenues, the black and white people hurrying down the street—it's like I've walked into a movie."

In addition to doing performance pieces, Mr. Gotovac occasionally makes highly rarefied avant-garde films; references to far more conventional movies are scattered through all his work, however. For example, the title of one of his pieces pictured at the museum is "lying naked on pavement, kissing the asphalt (zagreb, i love you!)," but its subtitle is "homage to howard hawks' hatari! (1962)." Mr. Gotovac's explanation was "Parading around naked like that, with all the people gawking and the police finally running up to ensnare me, I felt a lot like the rhino in that movie."

Much of Gotovac's work comes out of the Dadaist ethos of the sixties. "Happenings were especially popular in Eastern Europe, because it was precisely state policy in our countries that *nothing* ever be allowed to happen," he said. "Those occasions were ways of getting things going." One naked walkabout recorded in the photographs at the New Museum landed him in a police station, and eventually provoked a trial: he was sentenced to ten

"In the capital of every republic of the Yugoslav federation, there's a Museum of the Revolution, through which schoolchildren, for example, are ritually marched," he told us. "The museums feature yellowing photos of photos, bad copies of copies of documents, the birth certificates and gradebooks and passports and other official papers of eventual heroes, and documents showing how they were arrested or tortured or martyred, and clippings from newspapers where they are mentioned in passing, and so forth—everything lined up on the walls in a dreadfully boring jumble. In 1986, I simply decided to create a museum of my own revolution, with bad copies of my own documents similarly arrayed." Typically, "Dokumenta" thus reads as a clever, almost sarcastic provocation—a parody of all those dreadful museums of martyrology—but is also in dead earnest: what could be more subversive in a Communist mass culture like Yugoslavia's than to insist that an ordinary individual's life might be worthy of an entire display?

Mr. Gotovac had to get back to

work. We thanked him for taking the time to talk with us, and asked if he had thought about performing a naked walk anywhere in Manhattan. He laughed, said no, and added that it probably wouldn't work here. "In Zagreb, when I tell them I'm walking around naked because I'm an artist, they think I'm crazy and seriously consider having me committed," he said. "Here, I'm afraid, if I were to go completely crazy and start walking around naked they'd probably just say, 'Oh, must be some kind of artist.'"