

Text from the catalogue: Goran Bertok, 999
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Goran Bertok is an author with an outstanding opus. The main features of his creativity have been constant since his first presentation in 1990 in Škuc. His work is based on black and white photography of the studio character. It is significantly defined by a motif, which is unique in Slovenia, as well as by his programme-conceptual placement and clarity of shots. He is interested in obsession with a human body; either completely or partly naked body is the best medium for the author to convey tensions and pain. Physical violence seems to be fil rouge of Bertok's work. In several series the author approaches violence differently - sometimes on the purely formal level, but recently he has explored also its content.

Already his earliest works are characterized by clarity of shots; a white body is positioned in front of a black undefinable background. The author does not want us to know the identity of the scene nor what is going on, but viewing the static, "acted" and unusual poses, we have a constant feeling that something more is happening than what we see. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the dialogue between the body and unusual objects, which are always "added" to it, is painful. The "objects of force" with their form increase the tension, a product of the dialogue: in one case with an emphasized diagonal, in some others with the shape of buffalo's horns and their pointed ends... Everything together has a quality of an unusual still-life - the artist places in front of him everything he likes and is attracted to.

Works which were created a year later were shot in an ex-power plant in Ljubljana and are an exception in the author's opus, since it is possible to identify the ambience. Yet it seems that Bertok was interested in the environment only because it offered to him plenty of "devices" (on)to which it was possible to chain, handcuff or hang a body, to confront it with metal, with a machine. Also here force is a way to create mainly an aesthetic effect, but in the exhibited opus the first sado-masochistic connotations appear, namely, masks and body poses (besides the mentioned devices). They become the central area of the author's creativity. /foto2/

In his previous works the artist dealt with violence exclusively by means of staging, but now he includes also realism: as he has often pointed out, there is a real couple in front of us as well as real violence. Since in this case it is voluntary, Bertok has - as much as it was possible - avoided the moral question about violence. He has denied the importance of judgement for a criminal as well as compassion with sufferers. Since 1995, in this frame Bertok has discovered plenty of motifs; he has united them in series and "upgraded" them on the content level. In the series *I'd Like to Tell You a Story* (1997), a man tells a story about his own image: he is the one who "suffers", who shows us his wounds, who kisses the boot, who has words cut and burned into his skin... A year later, in the series *From Her to Eternity*, also a woman appears more frequently. It seems that Bertok is fascinated by their extremely complicated relationship, but this is only the author's leitmotif; what we can see, is an aestheticized image, conveying what had happened just before the photo was taken and immediately after that. However, it is

transformed for us into a timeless picture. Bertok stops, guides, directs, designs the activity of the couple. At the same time the essential characteristic of these series is created - an unusual relationship between the staged and the real. In comparison with the traditional, "classical presentations of sado-masochism", we can say that Bertok has removed many kitschy and typical elements from his works. However, he still remains within the borderlines of recognizability, since by applying the term of sado-masochism, a key for understanding numerous photos is provided.

Alongside the couple's activity also individuals, the variations of the earlier works, can be seen. Five years later the image is different, though. A male body, chained to wood, is helpless in its own desire. The man is not beautiful nor superior; he is a prisoner of his desire. There are several prisoners, and when we look closely at them as at individual figures, we find out that they have moved even further away from the sado-masochistic typification and have become original creations. In the previous works, masks, for instance, reminded us of real sado-masochistic requisites; in the old power-plant they were hand-made potential fashion accessories designed by Ema Kugler. In this series a mask is a pile of chains covering the models head. Besides the aesthetic effect, a mask has also a psychological connotation. This is a rare example when bodies in the photos have their own "faces". This time a mask does not hide, but reveals.

Looking at some photos, one wonders whether pain was inflicted with the model's agreement. That seems to be the case with the "individuals" and mainly with the photos of body details, which appear throughout the author's oeuvre. They are more exposed than the series *I'd Like to Tell you a Story*, where even shocking consequences of violence, such as flogged, pierced, cut, burned skin, are revealed. In the series *Omen* (1988), the photos testify about undoubtedly voluntarily self-inflicted wounds. Skin is being pierced and stretched before our eyes. This is a demonstration of what skin can bear, of its bloodiness and elasticity. Again everything is extremely aesthetic and we can even enjoy the images, shapes and structures.

Tomislav Vignjevic recognized some elements of rituality and sacrifice in the works displayed at the *Omen* exhibition. He compared them with similar examples in the history of religions where self-tormenting had a purpose and content. Perhaps it was this text that encouraged the author into new explorations. In the most recent works (reproductions in the catalogue) it is noticeable that he flirts with Christianity (Christ's image is recognizable), but also with other ideologies in some of the works a photo from 1929, in which a Chinese revolutionary is being tortured by the empire loyalists, might be recognized. Both of the images present the extreme forms of violence performed against the will of those being tortured, of course. They mean a turning point in Bertok's opus, and the question, which he had avoided all the time, is now very obvious - we have to re-examine the image of a torturer.

As we have mentioned, the central works of the author's opus are based on avoiding this question. Such a posture enables a formal approach to violence. However, we are justified in wondering to what extent this is possible. The author is fully aware of uncertainty, but it was impossible to re-examine the image of the violent party within a

sado-masochistic relationship, which is extremely intimate, local and distant from what would be generally discernible - contrary to Christ's relationship which is extrovert and clearly defined. Although we have accepted the reason why Bertok has chosen a group where violence is "permitted", and perhaps we have also understood why he is leaving it, it is evident that he has all the time (and to please himself) moved in an area known for scandals - regarding the fact that the first themes are usually more tolerant than those with religious-ideological connotations.

However, in his latest works (reproductions in the catalogue) Bertok offers a completely different content - we can be in a field, completely undefined and nameless. In front of us there is a skinny body displaying its emptiness... On the other side, the borderline is represented by a voluminous, extremely full body. The author may be talking about the same idea with a fluid which it is possible to squeeze out of the body or pour into it.

Bertok makes a few steps forward: his use of light contributes to an obvious dramatic and expressive effect; shadows modify the body. It cannot be recognized any more. New patches and threatening masses are created, imagination has opened its way into the unknown.

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