

TODAY'S ARTIST IN PORTUGAL: an interview

One of the surprises at the Art Ink'83 fair was the presence of the Instituto Portugues Do Livro from the Ministry of Culture in Lisbon, and who should be manning the booth but someone who wanted to see my identification badge. As I approached, he told me that he knew me, and indeed he did, for he was Juliao Sarmiento, who was producing postcards in 1978 and entered the bookshow I helped curate, and who was represented in documenta last year. I was so fascinated by his presence at Art Ink that I decided to interview him and found out about

ART IN PORTUGAL

The Portuguese Book Institute is part of the Ministry of Culture, but independent in budget and mainly concerned with the promotion of Portuguese literature, nothing else. This is the first time that the Institute explored another area, namely art. We are not publishers, we just promote. We contacted several Portuguese publishers and asked them to give us samples of their production to bring it to London to exhibit, this being the first attempt to promote art. Only time will tell if this will be an ongoing responsibility. There is one art magazine in Portugal published by the Gulbekian Foundation. There is no specialized art publisher in Portugal, but there are about six publishers who publish among other titles some artbooks as well. The only exclusive art books are published by the Gulbekian Foundation, plus catalogs of the shows they put on, and also exhibition catalogs from several exhibitions either published by the galleries or the institutions where the exhibitions are held, or by the artists themselves, or the groups of artists who form an exhibition. There are not even specialized bookshops for art, so you have to go everywhere to see the panorama.

There is a new Museum of Modern Art in Portugal, privately owned by the Gulbekian Museum Center of Modern Art. The Foundation supports contemporary art through very ample grants which are available to artists who make proposals to them. Because they are the sole support of grants to artists in Portugal, the Gulbekian Foundation is immune from any criticism, since it is private. The Ministry of Culture also gives some specialized grants, as well as the Institute for Portuguese Culture. There was an attempt at alternative magazines, initiated by artists, but they have failed after one or two issues, because there was no financial support and people were just not interested in the small art scene which exists. It is a very small country in a very difficult economic crisis, where survival is of the utmost importance. Artists are the only people interested in the art scene. First you need money, then you must find an audience. But there is a lot of energy, vitality in the art community, an art community which works for itself.

How do artists get information?

There is a problem. There is only one art magazine and all international art magazines are not distributed in Portugal. The only way to get them is through subscriptions. You must know the art magazines to subscribe, and they are so expensive that no one has the money with which to subscribe. But it's rare to find those who subscribe. There are no art publications, so people lose interest. And there really isn't an audience for publications in art.

How do Portuguese artists travel?

No, they don't travel much. We are just allowed to take a small amount of money out of the country for a year, only 40,000 escudos which is equal to \$280 a year! So artists really cannot travel with such a small amount of money. They stay and being an artist doesn't pay, so very few people go to the two art schools, and those who go to the art schools usually don't end up by being artists, but by being teachers. Graphic artists, fashion designers all go to art school for one year and usually become independent artists.

Yes, there are several good artists who are teachers in Portugal. Artists usually do menial labor or become public servants like me to help pay their way in life, to do what they really want to do, namely be artists.

Is there space for studios?

There are very few studios in Lisbon built by municipalities, but if they are, they are taken right away. Only one to two per cent of artists can have those studios because there are so few of them. I have my studio in my home.

Are there any artists' unions?

In Lisbon, there are at least the Natinal Soc In Lisbon, there are at least the National Society of Fine Arts, the Artists' Cooperative, the Specialized Etching Cooperative, the Circle of Fine Arts but these are organizations, not really unions. Artists and institutions get grants only if they ask for them, and not every artist gets a grant, but if they do, they usually help pay for basic needs.

How are the exhibition spaces for artwork?

Artists exhibit either in their own artists' organizations' spaces, those which belong to the unions which are not commercial, or else they show in private galleries, but there are not many of them. The market is now starting again, but there are not really collectors, just those who make one purchase.

So what drives an artist to be an artist in Portugal?

Because we have to. You feel compelled to do it. When I was in documenta, it was the first time a Portuguese artist had ever been in documenta, because I have galleries in Switzerland, in Germany, and I became known to documenta curators through that. I was not in documenta because I was a Portuguese artist. No, it was because I am Juliao Sarmiento and they liked what I did in Switzerland and in Germany.

For the Venice Biennale, however, we have commissioners, one who is a Portuguese art critic and every year he selects an artist to represent Portugal at the Biennale, and he's absolutely straight. There are very few reviews in the newspapers, since there are very few critics who write about art. Each critic has a certain group of artists and not all the artists are under a certain critic. So some artists are not represented in the literature. Only artists probably read those columns in the newspapers. Libraries also do not have those art magazines. Exhibition catalogs are purchased by those people who go to the exhibitions—collectors and artists themselves. 1000 is the normal edition, but sometimes there are only 500 in an edition: they sell about 200 and keep the others in a warehouse.

What kind of art is prevalent in Portugal now?

There is a lot of printmaking and graphics in general. Artists

in the Etching Union called Gravura, and another deals with silkscreen. Lithography isn't very well known. Artists use mostly etching and silkscreen.

Other artists use video and performance. Not many artists are using photography, but there are many of them who use it as a documentation. Copy art never really took off in Portugal, but audio art is frequently used. Mail art is also another network for Portuguese artists.

What is the relationship with Spanish artists?

Not at all. The two countries in the Iberian Peninsula have no cultural exchange. People don't know what's happening in Spain either through the movies, literature or fine arts, and vice-versa. It's probably because of the old hatred be-

tween the two countries, and there is hope that things are going to change. Cultural contact does not exist. We have more to do with France and Italy, e.g., Maurizio Nannucci is going to have a show in Florence. To be sure, there is a language problem, and there really isn't any communication device.

This is the first attempt of the Institute to do this, to go to another country and show more than literature. The Institute deals mainly in Portuguese literature, but it's so great that they are opening their doors and providing a window to Portugal.

Editor's Note: Upon receipt of all the catalogs and documentation from Portugal, we will list these titles and how to acquire them in the next issue of Umbrella.

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"AN ARTIST FOR PRESIDENT?"

Dear Friend;

In this era of capitalist lust, where there is no room for change, there is a candidate who thinks that change is possible. Susanna Dakin is running for president of the United States. Amidst smiles of skepticism Susanna gallantly chooses to place herself in the public eye. The reactions run the gamut from scoff to support. She says that she doesn't want to be president, that she wants to be an artist, which she considers to be the more difficult task.

However, Dakin looks at her campaign as a concerned endeavor that she must fulfill. She says, "given the opportunity, every person, in every walk of life, has the capacity to see with artists' eyes, and share in the responsible creation of humanity's future." The candidacy is a political performance piece. "I intend to do everything in my power to support democracy and resist totalitarianism. That's what my campaign is all about."

Dakin's platform reflects an alternative to the polar opposites of East and West. She believes that the time is right for a woman president in 1984. Dakin appeals to the apathy of 48.1% of the electorate; those who declined to vote in the last election. After a preliminary tour of the U.S., Dakin remarked that it was "scary" to think that many people who are apathetic and/or disillusioned with present politics were willing to vote for Dakin when she has no political experience.

Until the late seventies, Dakin was a sculptor. She then turned to performance art. The change in medium brought Dakin closer to the notion that art is integrated with and inseparable from life. Within the realm of performance art, the definition of art has wide boundaries. As a performance artist, Dakin can express "herself artistically about the nation's political and moral life" (Seattle Post & Intelligencer, 8/26/83 D11). Dakin says, "art is important in the same way that medicine or plumbing or being a parent or growing food is important in the living of human life."

Dakin recalls from a childhood story that the Balinese call art anything that is done as well as possible. She thinks that our leaders are not doing their best; that we need more creative initiative. The artist is too separate from society; the nation needs artistic creativity. Dakin incorporates her artistic ideals into the campaign when she says things like "the nation is the artwork and the People are the artists" or "artists take conscious responsibility for what they create."

The campaign as a performance piece is not based on the absurd. She is serious. "The future is an artwork. I'm tired of doing morbid art. I want to do something constructive, now. You scurry around, working for the SANE Nuclear Policy Committee, for the Nuclear Freeze. You get yourself involved in education, in writing and publishing. You contribute money and time to all sorts of worthy causes, and none of it seems to help." By campaigning for president, Dakin takes the ultimate step to express her ideas about how things should be different.

Dakin is a populist. She is traveling across the U.S. on Amtrack in an old fashioned whistlestop tour. She wants to "pay attention to all American viewpoints, not just those of the rich and powerful." Dakin believes that it is time for the world to "grow up" and out of the mentality that thinks that we must have nuclear weapons to survive in this world. This, she says, means developing a broad social consciousness "that might convey responsibility rather than

right." She feels that attention must be paid to "conflict-resolution and self-defense rather than the skills of aggression and domination."

One aspect of Dakin's campaign is that she is anti-nuclear and pro-disarmament. She believes that all the world leaders should have automatic detonators attached to themselves so that if someone pushes the button, the leaders will be the first to explode.

This tactic, Dakin believes, will be extremely advantageous to the speeding up of disarmament talks.

As a pacifist, Dakin believes that government defense spending is out of control. The money should be channeled into more essential human services such as: quality education, health care (including preventive health care), effective pollution control, research and development of clean energy sources, efficient rapid transit systems.

Dakin addresses other issues. On the arts in education, she thinks that the elimination of arts from curriculums in school is detrimental. She wants to reinstate the NEA programs from the seventies that funded "a large number of artist-in-residence programs in high schools around the country." She says, "the example of the artist on campus demonstrated that anything can become raw material for creativity. When students begin to feel like creators, rather than passive recipients of information, learning becomes exciting, and the necessary motivation arises to get them through the more difficult stages of acquiring discipline."

Dakin believes in socialized medicine. Along with that belief, an attitude change would help the health of the people. This corresponds to what she refers to as the "growing new discipline in modern medicine called psychoneuroimmunology, which traces the relationship between body chemistry and mental attitude."

Dakin is against prayer in school. She thinks there should be a complete separation between church and state.

On women's issues, Dakin is a feminist, although not an extremist. She thinks a woman can and should be president.

Earnest whimsy, that's what some call Dakin and her campaign performance project. It's easy to see why she receives opposition even from artists. In surmise of it all, Dakin says it rather aptly:

"Looking the situation over seriously, I find that I am just like Glenn in that I am coming from outer space and I sometimes stumble over my facts. I am just like Mondale in that I like artists and I'm realistic about Russia because I've been there. I'm just like Cranston because I come from California and I am a monomaniac on the nuclear issue. I am just like Hart in that I am young and callow and handsome, and still have hope even though I run far behind the rest of the pack, and I am just like Reagan in that I have hallucinations.

"It seems to me that last fact is my best qualification, because knowing I sometimes see things that are not there I have the freedom to use my visions, even when they contain dark shadows, as the raw material for the creation of something positive. Since our last president does not know that his nightmares are not reality he becomes their victim.

"Winnable nuclear war is a hallucination which could victimize all of us, unless we decide to make art out of our better dreams, now."