

Amerika exhibition, MoCA Zagreb, 2005, first gallery, video projection No.1, 8 min. Wall text says:  
"Slides that Margaret Zgombic took in 1952 during her first visit to the old country of her parents.  
It was the first visit of a group of American citizens to the communist Yugoslavia after the war."

## **AMERIKA**

Expanded Documentary Cinema by Kristina Leko with Marcella Bonich, Nori Boni Zorovich, Miriam Busanic, Margaret Zgombic and Ljubica Zic  
Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb 2005

It is collaboration with five elderly women of Croatian origin living in Astoria, Queens, NY, in a center of the Croatian immigration to the USA. During my 2002/2003 residencies in PS1 in Queens, I got involved with the Croatian community in Astoria, volunteering in Croatian Sunday school. The change in perspective on the USA that I got from that environment was rather impressive. I did an extensive research on the community and its history, and found several women who wanted to participate a project that would tell a story of *the new world* through their life-stories. There are several *key-issues* in relation to which stories and materials are structured: *freedom, hunger, labor, money, family, democracy, communism, capitalism, belief, American dream, and the old home*. My project participants belong mostly to the first generation of immigrant working class; they originate from the Adriatic Sea islands and poverty. During the early 1960ies the northern Adriatic coast of Croatia was depopulated. As Yugoslav communist authorities started to issue passports, the population flooded to Italy where camps were organized to accommodate and direct them mainly to the USA, also as a part of the cold war at the time. The exhibition gives an insight into the life of an immigrant working class opposing the clichés of the USA as a land of milk and honey. Also, the purpose of the exhibition, as it comes out of the working ethics and methods used, is to strengthen the identity of the Croatian community in Astoria. The fact that the exhibit was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb means a lot regarding the community's self-estimation. My wish is not only to offer a point of identification to the community, but also to stimulate communication within it. For the exhibition venue in Queens, together with the five women, we will offer a meeting place where everyone is invited to help and take part. It should develop in a community platform that will gather different film, video and photo materials. I hope that once collected, the material will find its way to be adopted into a community cultural archive, a web site or info point.

I feel that my work do not differ from genre social paintings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, except for the medium. An *expanded documentary cinema*, realized with intensive creative involvement of the participants, where the content develops *polyphonically* through several rooms via video projections, audio-pieces, videos screened on monitors, texts, three-dimensional objects and photo/text/document archives. It is an eclectic compendium of how to document reality, and how to tell a story, created through juxtaposition of different kinds of presence; different mediums/types of *narration*. The variety of material is needed in order to deal with the complex relation between individual existence and social reality. In half an hour walk-through, one can get the basic story, or one can spend several hours watching videos, reading and searching the archives.





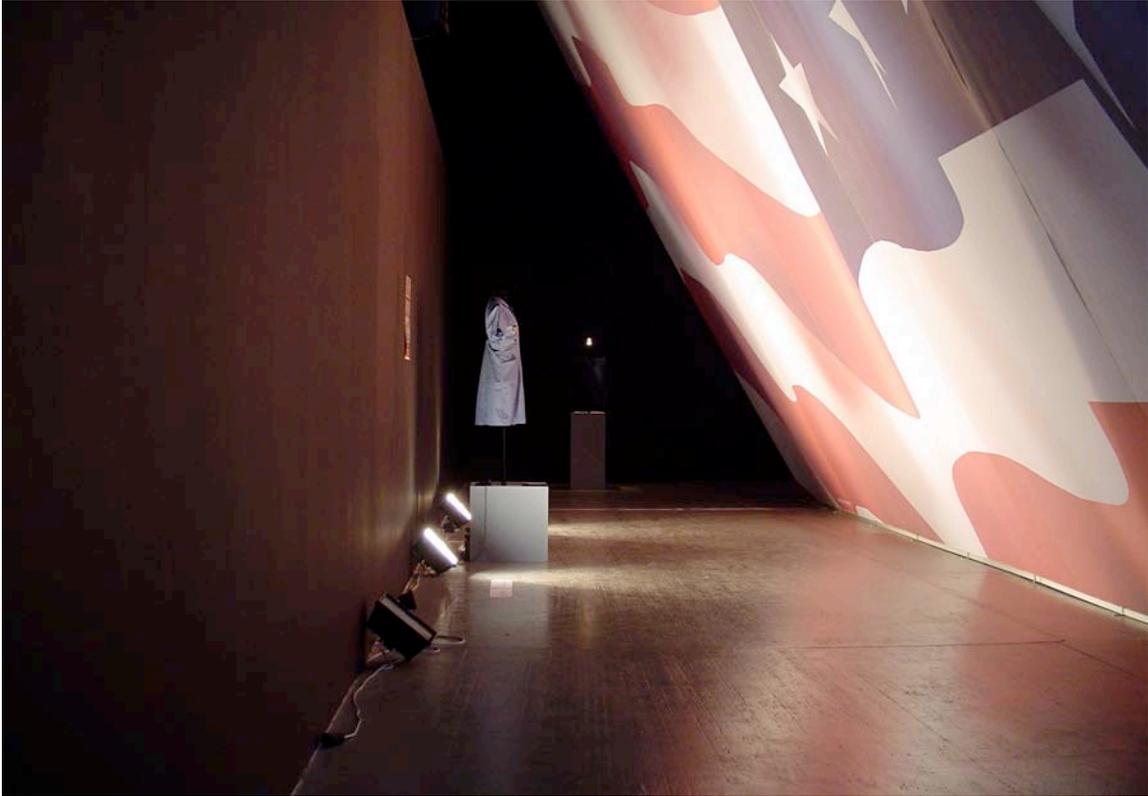
Amerika exhibition, MoCA Zagreb, 2005, first gallery, video projection No.2, 4 min.; a selection of images from the projection. Wall text says: "From the photo album of Miriam Busanic. 33 photographs of the procession on the island of Ilovik in 1953 and several photographs of the children from Ilovik in a refugee camp in Italy in 1962, before their immigration to the U.S."



*Amerika* exhibition, MoCA Zagreb, 2005, first gallery, video projection No.3, 6 min. Wall text: "The first family album of Ljubica Zic, covering the period from her immigration day until her first visit back home five years later."



A selection of photographs from projection No.3.



Amerika exhibition, MoCA Zagreb, 2005, first gallery, object and sound installation throughout the gallery space. Wall text: "Strike of the employees of the 52B-52J Union in January 1996. Remixed excerpts from the audio diary recorded by Marcella Bonich during her month on strike. On the headphones: an excerpt from the diary – Ms. Bonich arguing with strike breakers." Objects: Ms. Bonich's working uniform accompanied with a hand written related note, and a poster.



*Amerika* exhibition, MOCA Zagreb, 2005, first gallery. The objects exhibited on the pedestals are accompanied with hand written first person singular notes. An example: "We were in a group, on a ferry traveling to Italy, pretending to be tourists. We all ordered huge meals in order to spend the money we had. We knew we were not going to need it ever again... In Trieste, we went to the police office, and raised our hands. At home, when saying goodbye, my father gave me a quarter sent to him from the U.S. a long time ago. And so, this is the money I had on myself when we entered the U.S."



*Amerika* exhibition, MoCA Zagreb, 2005, second gallery, five channel video installation. This is the central video piece of the exhibition. Five video projections show simultaneously talking faces of the five women. They share with us selected aspects of their lives, as they refer to issues such as: departure, hunger, the old country, labor, money, children, freedom, the American dream, etc.



Amerika exhibition, MoCA Zagreb, 2005, upper gallery I, Five Biographies, mdf boards, 420x260x4 cm each, acrylic paint, chalk.

The biographies of the five project participants have been transformed into five one-page first person singular statements, hand written with five different handwritings on large format boards. One of the texts:

*A school teacher and a bank clerk, I was faced with physical labor for the first time in my life in 1987, at the age of 52, as I became a cleaning lady in Manhattan. When I retired in 2002, a music teacher from Macedonia got my job.*

*28800 square feet is the daily quota for building maintenance of the 52B-52J Union. It would be a line one yard wide and more than two miles long, that I used to run through and make shiny every evening. Chairs, libraries, armchairs, sofas, waiting rooms, phone sets, computers, 103 rooms, 200 tables, 200 garbage-cans, 13 to 17 big black garbage bags weighting 80-100 pounds. Every day half a ton of mostly paper would pass through my hands.*

*Although the amount of work to be done in this country almost exceeds the limits of endurance, people work and work and work. We all need money. Then, later on, we pay for it with health.*

*Despite pushing myself to the very edge of my physical limits, just like most of the people here do, I also had, for the period of 13 years, along with my full time cleaning lady job, another job or two. For 22 months I worked 16 hours a day. I would go out at 8 a.m. and return home at 1 a.m. I took care of children, elderly people, and other people's households.*

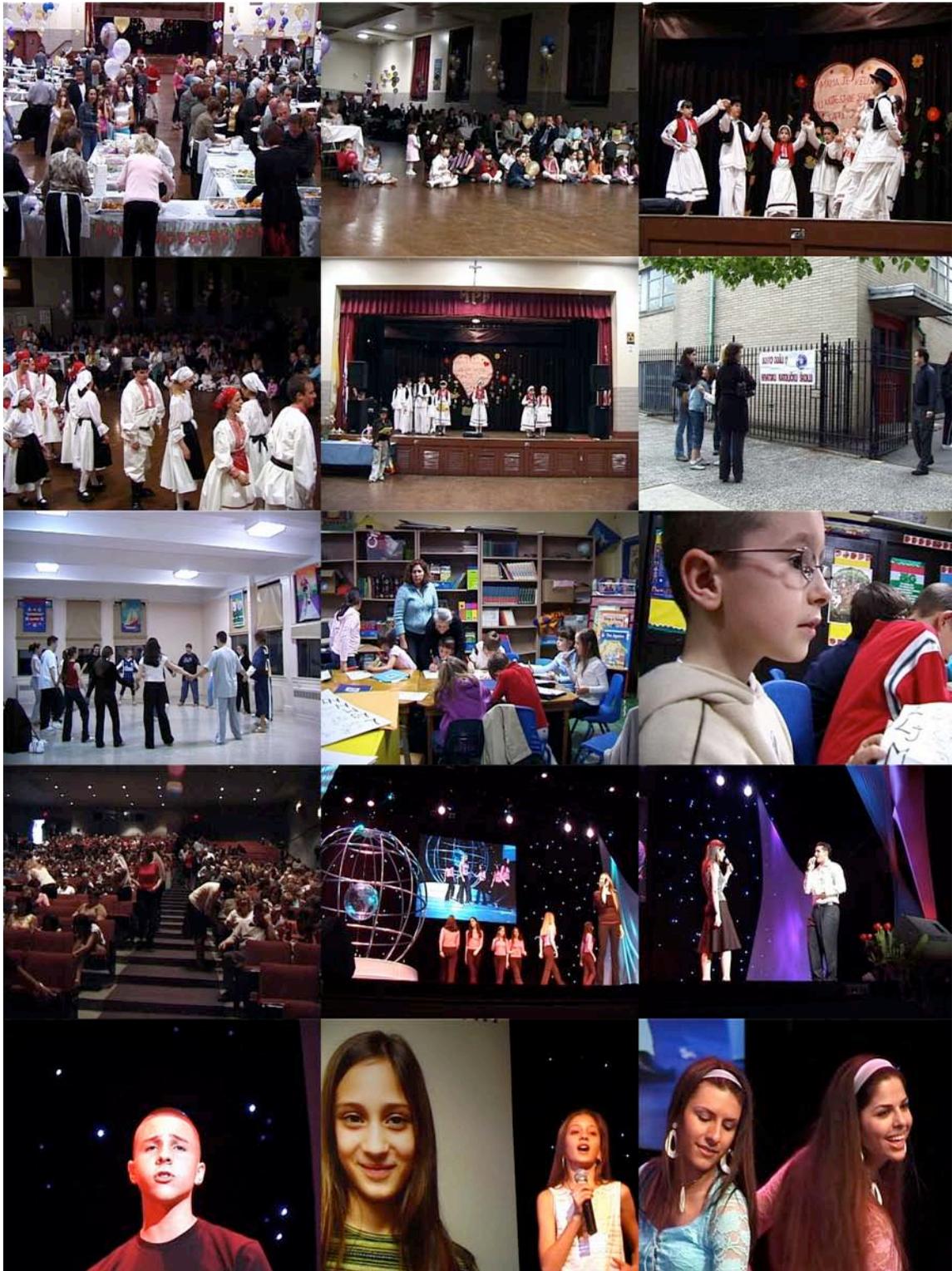
*Then, in 1991 I found another additional Saturday job. Although it did not bring any money, I devoted myself to it with great love and pleasure. The Croatian Saturday School was the only professional satisfaction that I got in this country. For my work in the school, I was awarded a medal by the President of Croatia in 1999.*



*Amerika* exhibition, MoCA Zagreb, 2005, upper gallery II. Reading room and photo archive of the exhibition created and set up together with the project participants. Over 1200 photographs (scanned reprints) from the family albums of the participants are selected and mounted by the project participants themselves. Several books and magazines dedicated to the Croatian community in Astoria and to different family histories have been selected by the project participants to enrich the room designated to the accompanying educational program.



*Amerika* exhibition, MoCA Zagreb, 2005, upper gallery III. Room dedicated to the Croatian community of Astoria, NY. Here: a 10-monitor video installation documenting the life of the community. Wall text: "During 2004, the following institutions and events were video documented by the artist: a rehearsal of the Klapa Astoria and a rehearsal of the MPB Croatian church choir, the participation of the Croatian community in the Migration Day celebration in the Cathedral of Brooklyn, the Mother's Day Celebration in the Most Precious Blood School Gym in Astoria, the Croatian Children and Youth Festival in Jamaica, Queens, an evening in the Rudar Club, Astoria, a traditional Nerezine's holy mass in Latin in the MPB Church, Astoria, Sunday holy services in Croatian & an interview with Father Zubovic, Sunday gatherings in the MPB School, the work of the Croatian School in Astoria and the Croatian School in Douglaston, a rehearsal of Hrvatski Plamen folklore group, a walk through Astoria and a visit to the Adriatic Meat Market." The copies of the different documentary videos were given as presents to the community members.



A selection of stills from several videos documenting the life of the Croatian community in Astoria.



Amerika exhibition, MoCA Zagreb, 2005, entrance area.



Amerika exhibition, MoCA Zagreb, 2005. Upper gallery III. Room dedicated to the Croatian community of Astoria, NY. Here: a collection of videotapes belonging to Ms. Busanic; it is an example of a Croatian home video collection documenting family and community events. The copies of the exhibited videotapes are screened on a monitor near-by.