



A Group Photograph with Beba the Cow, happening on December 7, 2003, Zagreb.

CHEESE AND CREAM

An Initiative to Protect the Milkmaids of Zagreb (Since 2002)

A Project by Kristina Leko in collaboration with BLOK

Actions, Events, Research, Archives, Website, Exhibition, Roundtable, Campaign

www.sirivrhnje.org (also www.cheeseandcream.org)

While working on the project *On Milk and People*, I became familiar with many issues important to farming families. I learned a lot on issues related to agricultural policy, the dairy industry, and economical restructuring. I became deeply aware of social changes that would result from the process of accommodating the European Union regulations in Croatia and, respectively, in my hometown of Zagreb. As I understood that one of the consequences would be the disappearance of the milkmaids in the Zagreb open markets, I decided to start an initiative that would help the milkmaids of Zagreb survive, as they are a paradigmatic part of Croatian social reality.

Is it possible to join the European leveling of economic standards in a way that preserves important elements of local cultural identity? In 2002, in collaboration with the not-for-profit organization BLOK, we began our initiative aiming to protect the milkmaids of Zagreb as a cultural heritage. Since the summer of 2002 we organized several happenings, undertook research on the condition of the milkmaids, presented their situation in an exhibition and launched a small media campaign. In order to test and affect the public opinion a website was created. In order to influence the administrative and political decision making, ten officials from different institutions were invited and participated in a round table entitled «Could Zagreb Milkmaids possibly join the EU?».

More than 500 women come regularly, mostly once or twice per week, to Zagreb to sell their milk products on a number of open market places. They earn a living for their families including over 2000 people. During September and October 2003, we interviewed 448 milkmaids on 6 market places in Zagreb. Through our questionnaire consisting of 41 items, we gathered information on the milkmaids' personal, family and financial situations. The database that has been created we have offered to the general public, to institutions and individuals willing to join the initiative, and help the milkmaids.

The Cheese and Cream exhibition in December 2003 was the central event through which we tried to bring the issues of the milkmaids to the general public discussion. Two happenings had a goal to assure media attention for our initiatives. Beba the Cow was brought to the center of the town for the exhibition opening and three milkmaids were handing out cheese and cream to the gallery visitors for free. The usual market situation was transferred to the gallery room in the presence of the media. Beforehand we developed contacts with journalists and established a network of our small media campaign. The aim was to keep milkmaids in the center of the public and media attention for a week. Our main media partner was the „Good morning Croatia“ TV program.



Vive le fromage au lait cru!, happening, Zagreb, 7.12.2003. In collaboration with the three milkmaids: Renata Kostibol, Jagica Levak and Anica Horvat.



Milk 2002 Action, Dolac Market, Zagreb, 31.8.2002. It was the first happening of the project. Three milkmaids were handing out fresh cheese & cream for free, while people signed in our book and thus expressed their support for our initiative to save the milkmaids from extinction.



*Collecting signatures on the market place in the center of Ljubljana, Slovenia, October 2003. The event was organized by The City of Women Festival. Together with the milkmaid Visnja and project producer Vesna, we were collecting support signatures for the Zagreb Milkmaids in our *Book of Requests for the 22nd Century*.*



The front page of the project website is *The Declaration on Milkmaids*. By signing the Declaration, which can be read in 5 languages, one helps to ensure the future of our initiative. Now, there are approximately 3000 signatures online. The web site includes 474 personal web pages of the Zagreb milkmaids who sell their products on the six biggest open markets in the city. Each milkmaid is present with several photos of herself and her products, and optionally with an audio statement and/or short video clip. Search possibilities through the categories of the weekday and the market place enable one to locate or find her/his milkmaid. It is a complex and precise database since the schedule differs for each milkmaid. There is a growing collection of stories on cheese and cream and on milkmaids that has been written online. Through this feature, the web site became a structurally important part of the exhibition. Each visitor was invited and offered help to contribute his/her story, comments and memories on milkmaids and related issues.

The Cheese and Cream exhibition was created and functioned as an open office to the project where support signatures were collected, as well as people's stories on milkmaids, and where the milkmaids issues were discussed with different audiences. Beside myself, there was always another person in the gallery to accommodate the visitors: to explain the position of the milkmaids, to make sure the visitors sign the Declaration on Milkmaids, to show them the web site and to motivate and help them to write their milkmaid stories online. Another important exhibit was a serial of over 600 wall mounted photo portraits that were to be taken away by the milkmaids, if they visit the show. At the end of the exhibit, the missing photos showed that 15% of the milkmaids visited the gallery.



The exhibition was created and functioned as an open office to the project where support signatures were collected, as well as people's stories on milkmaids, and where milkmaids could get their portrait photos.

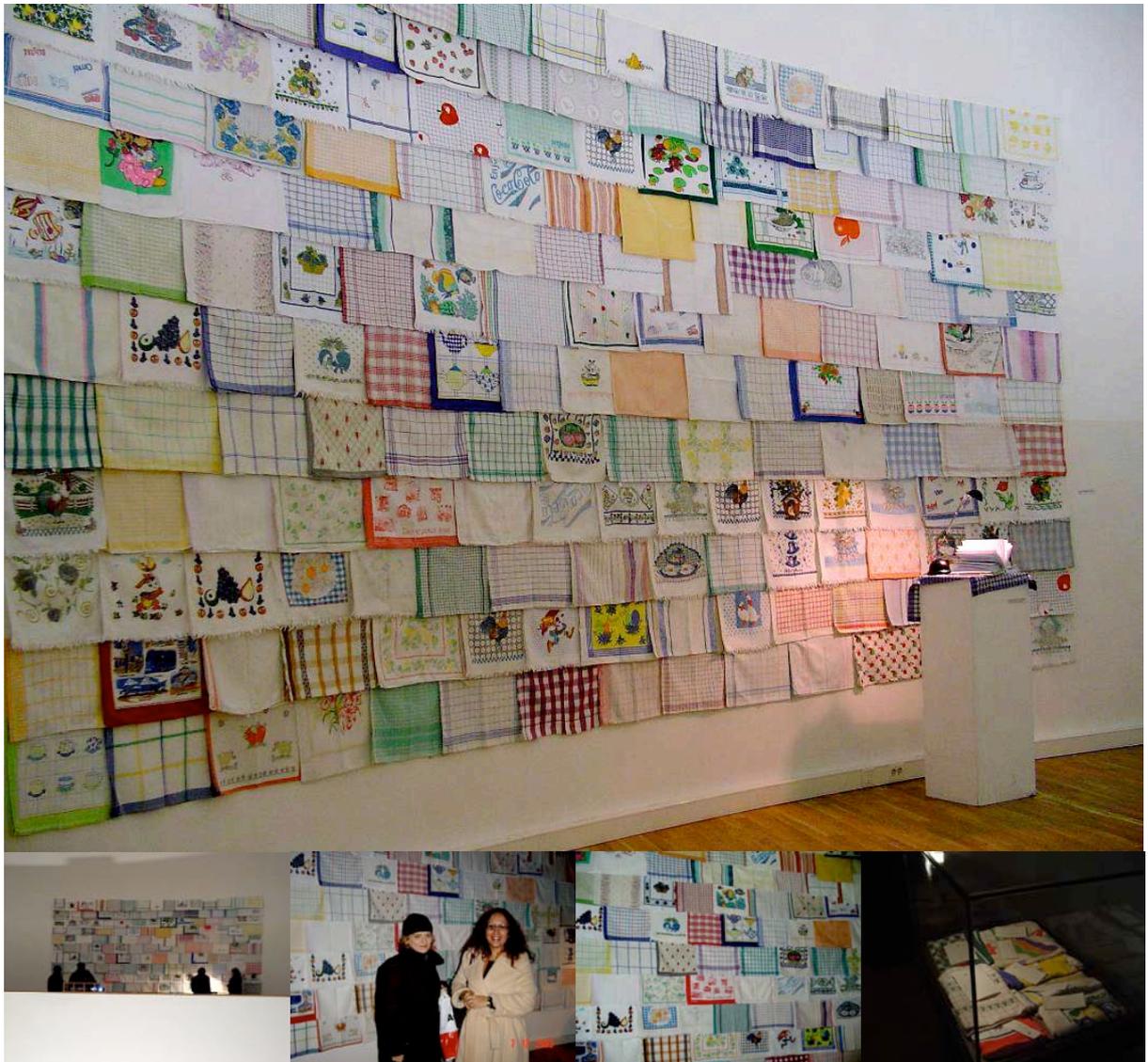


Round-table "Could Zagreb milkmaids possibly join the EU?", December 12, 2003, KIC, Zagreb.



Cheese and Cream, three channel video installation, and *The Dishtowels of the Milkmaids of Zagreb*, PM Gallery, Zagreb, 2003.

The *Cheese and Cream* exhibition was the conclusion to an intensive year-long documentation and research period. In order to introduce the issues of milkmaids to a wider non-artistic audience, the show was created as an open office to the project but it also aimed to show what our initiative did concerning the protection of milkmaids: different actions, research, archives, website, as well as my artworks: videos, photographs and objects.



Cheese and Cream, exhibition view, PM Gallery, Zagreb, 2003. *The Dishtowels of the Milkmaids of Zagreb*, a collection of over 200 dishtowels, and *The Book of Requests for the 22nd Century*, a signature book.

There were several exhibits in the show: *Cheese and Cream*, a three channel video installation, with total duration of 80 minutes, showed a collage of short statements of approx. one hundred milkmaids; *Dishtowels of the Milkmaids of Zagreb*, a collection of over 200 dish-towels belonging to the milkmaids, collected by exchanging old for new while distributing the exhibition invitations on the markets; *Book of Requests for the 22nd Century*, placed in front of the dishtowels, with approx. 1200 signatures; 448 *Questionnaires*, containing our data base on milkmaids.



Cheese and Cream, 2002/03, three-channel video installation, stills from the video channel 1.



Cheese and Cream, 2002/03, three-channel video installation, stills from the video channel 1.



Above: *Cheese and Cream Questionnaires*, detail of object-installation: 448 questionnaires with data on 448 milkmaids, and quotations from the interviews; printed paper, handwritings, tricolor string; created in September/October 2003.
Below: Beside myself, here is the team that worked on the milkmaid-questionnaires for 7 weeks: Dalija Cvetkovic (on the photo with the milkmaid Katica), Jelena Jelinic (with Marica), Vesna Vukovic (with Ivanka), Petra Pokrovac (with Danica).