

seemed to be in serious trouble; it looked as if I couldn't continue to work. Only with the aid of a magnifying machine could I see fairly distinctly flat images the size of a postcard. I decided to continue the series I had been working on.

I use Polaroid positive/negative 4x5-inch black-and-white film. It develops in less than a minute and delivers a finished print, as well as a fine negative. Since I could not see, the question arises as to how I could have taken these photographs. In fact, I have not taken any of my images since I began making the various "Self-Portrait" photographs in 1984. I have always used an assistant who does the actual shooting. Normally, I preview my pose with a video camera connected to a television set. But once my eyesight had severely diminished, this system became useless and I had to find another method.

The solution was to recognize the fact that we don't actually see an image with our eyes; instead we perceive it with our minds. If you look, for example, at a rectilinear tabletop, you do not see the actual rectangle; the four ninety-degree corners are not apparent to the eye. What you see is a trapezoid. Thus, the mind must deduce that the tabletop is rectilinear. It was necessary for me to go through a similar process to make these new photographs, but reversed. I had to imagine the image in advance and then find the pose. In the past when I could see, my assistant would have to take many photographs to match the image on the video, but when I realized that it was more a matter of perception than of sight, I could easily previsualize an image and make a drawing that my assistant could match on film.

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MARJETICA POTRČ URGENT ARCHITECTURE

May 6–July 11, 2004

MIT List Visual Arts Center

Michael Rush, exhibition curator

Marjetica Potrč's studio is the world. Her art is an enterprise that has as its purpose the fundamentals of human life: shelter, safety, communication, and happiness. Trained first as an architect, then as a visual artist in her native Slovenia, Potrč, born in 1953, finds beauty where few else do: in shantytowns or border areas where people improvise their own housing using materials close at hand.

In this exhibition, she offers a monument to impermanence, a hybrid structure that compresses elements of housing solutions in Caracas, the West Bank, and West Palm Beach. Gates, walls, toilets, water basins, windows, satellite dishes, passageways, quiet areas, all easily recognizable ingredients of "proper housing," are amassed in a surreal testimony to the enduring truth that "we all want the same things" when it comes to shelter. Potrč says:

My work is not about social criticism or institutional critique. Rather I'm trying to show what I see today in cities, for instance, low and high cultures having similar goals. I see beauty both in gated communities and in shantytowns and, in both cases, it's kind of primitive. Gated communities, for instance, are oftentimes designed as ideal cities. Jewish settlements in the West Bank remind me of old cities in Tuscany, which are located on top of hills and look a bit like fortresses.¹

Globalization is a word we hear a great deal these days. It implies, for some, an international economic opportunity; for others, exclusion from forces beyond their reach. The adage "think globally, act locally," may serve as a bridge between the opposing views of globalization. For Potrč, the global is the local. "It has slowly dawned on Europeans," she says, "that the world is not just happening in our backyards. Every three days, more than a million people move to urban areas."² Where they go and how they establish "homes" is what interests her.

In her recent project in Caracas, Venezuela, Potrč and her team were struck by a profound sense of vitality and family in the shantytowns surrounding the city. "Driving from the Caracas airport toward the city and seeing the twinkling lights of shanty towns perched on the hills along the highway, I thought how

beautiful they were. A light in the dark of night means home and family, and there were many of them, appearing in a seemingly endless pattern, communicating the human pursuit of building a life."³ Potrč does not ignore the desperation that can also inhabit these temporary or unplanned cities, but she chooses to emphasize the ingenuity inherent in these situations. "I want to celebrate individual initiative," she says. "My work is sometimes criticized for being romantic. I see no romanticism in people claiming their land in shantytowns. Both shantytowns and urban voids, the so-called unregulated sites, are facts of contemporary urban life."⁴

In Caracas, Potrč and Liyat Esakov built a dry (ecological) toilet in La Vega, a barrio of 200,000 residents. Potrč explains:

The dry toilet doesn't need any water to operate. Waste water is one of the major causes of land erosion in barrios, often causing buildings to collapse. The city of Caracas has dramatically low levels of drinking water. Water shortages are part of the daily experience. In barrios, water is provided twice per week. On a global level, water is also a very pressing issue. When arriving to Caracas, I wanted to test my ideas about self-sustainability, small scale projects, self-upgrading and empowerment of the individual. The community of La Vega barrio appropriated the project. We expect that toilets will be built by residents themselves in the future.⁵

The West Bank offers an entirely different set of challenges. It is the locus of constant warring, a place where basic pursuits of shelter and happiness are assaulted. Potrč notes, "In the West Bank you have two road systems that rarely intersect: one connecting Jewish settlements, the other connecting Palestinian towns and villages. It is all negotiated territory. Space is in constant flux, similar to what one feels in the fast-growing cities of Latin America."⁶

By locating her artistic and architectural practice on the edges, literally, of civilization and forcing us to expand our own understanding of what constitutes civilization and cities, she prepares a place for interaction where there had been none. Her work transcends its own impermanence. It begins and ends in dialogue.⁷

¹From an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Madrid, Spain, 2002.

²See Michael Rush, "Marjetica Potrč: Urgent Architecture" in *Marjetica Potrč: Urgent Architecture* (Lake Worth, Florida: Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, 2004).

³Marjetica Potrč, "Urban Nature and Natural Cities," in *Urban Negotiation*, exh.cat. (Valencià, Spain: Institut Valencia d'Art Modern, 2003), 204-7.

⁴Interview with Marjetica Potrč by Aisling O'Beirn, "Tracking the Urban Animal," *Circa 97* (autumn 2001), 29.

⁵Marjetica Potrč, e-mail correspondence with the author, Aug. 21, 2003.

⁶Ibid.

⁷For a discussion of Potrč's work in relation to Derrida's "ethics of refuge," to Walter Benjamin's investigations of the Paris arcades, and to the writings of W.G. Sebald, see Michael Rush's essay, *Marjetica Potrč: Urgent Architecture* in the catalogue of the exhibition.

About the Artist:

Marjetica Potrč is a Ljubljana-based artist and architect. Her work has been featured in exhibitions throughout Europe and the Americas, including the São Paulo Biennial in Brazil (1996); Skulptur Projekte in Muenster, Germany (1997); *Manifesta 3* in Ljubljana, Slovenia (2000); and *The Structure of Survival* at the Venice Biennial (2003); as well as in solo shows at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (2001); Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin (2001); the Max Protetch Gallery, New York (2002); and the Nordenhake Gallery in Berlin (2003). In addition, Potrč has been the recipient of numerous awards, including grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation (1993 and 1999), a Philip Morris Kunstfoerderung Grant to participate in the International Studio Program of Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin (2000), the Hugo Boss Prize 2000, Guggenheim Museum (2000), and a Caracas Case Project Fellowship from the Federal Cultural Foundation, Germany, and the Caracas Urban Think Tank, Venezuela (2002).