

Framing Political Protest Artspace Exhibit Expands on Yale Conference

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Last summer, the folks at Artspace were invited by Marijeta Bozovic, an assistant professor in Yale University's Department of Slavic languages and Literatures, to be part of a conference in April called "Political Violence and Militant Aesthetics After Socialism."

Given the situation in Ukraine, Martha Lewis, Artspace's educational coordinator, said, "It started to make sense to do something." That something is an exhibition titled *Vertical Reach*, which, Lewis said in November, is "about protest and freedom of speech."

The conference at Yale, Bozovic said, will explore leftist — and even militantly leftist — art practices following the discrediting of socialism in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism in the 1990s. It brings together artists and scholars, including some who participated in *Manifesta 10: The European Biennial of Contemporary Art*, which took place last year in St. Petersburg, Russia, and others — like the St. Petersburg-based collective Chto Delat — that did not participate in *Manifesta 10*, as a way of protesting the armed conflict in the region.

In addition to artists, including poets, working in Russia and Eastern Europe, Bozovic wanted to involve like-minded individuals working in and around New Haven. She connected with Lewis and Sarah Fritchey, Artspace's visual arts coordinator and gallery manager, and, with them, worked to piece together an impressive group of participants.

"The whole idea of protest as spectacle became a focus for us."

— Martha Lewis

During a telephone conversation in November, Bozovic said it was her hope that through the partnership with Artspace, the subject matter being explored at the conference and in *Vertical Reach* "will reach a much wider community than it would have had it been either a Yale academic conference or an Artspace show."

While the focus of "Political Violence and Militant Aesthetics After Socialism" is on practices in Russia and Eastern Europe, *Vertical Reach* has been curated with an eye toward drawing parallels with work being done here.

Vertical Reach, Lewis said, is "about protest and freedom of speech."

And, while the Artspace exhibit is tied to the conference at Yale, Lewis and Fritchey very much wanted to define the exhibit on their terms — to put the exploration of political protest in art into a gallery frame.

"The whole idea of protest as spectacle became a focus for us," Lewis said.

The question for Lewis and Fritchey became: Can art practice look like activism? The curators are also interested in how protest art conceived and practiced in one place can inform and fuel strategies in another part of the world.

The morning after a grand jury declined to indict police officer Darren Wilson in the August 2014 shooting death of Ferguson, Missouri, teenager Michael Brown, Fritchey said the verdict "changes the terms of what the show means."

At press time, Fritchey and Lewis had confirmed the participation of Chto Delat, Zuzanna Janin, Zbigniew Libera, Yael Bartana and Artur Zmijewski, Laura Marsh, and David Livingston.

Fritchey had been interested in showing Livingston's work since she saw video from his *Big Dick* series — performance pieces in which the artist, who lives in New Haven and has work in Artspace's Flatfile collection, visited public places carrying as an extension of himself a giant, flaccid, textile penis.

The work Livingston has in *Vertical Reach* is from his recent performance-art series, *The Candidacy*, a project commissioned by Artspace in which he delivered a stump speech that critiqued and satirized the election process in this country. *The Candidacy* introduces us to a candidate from the nonexistent 31st ward running for New Haven's Board of Alders.

Livingston's stump speech is a combination of meaningless political speak and stream-of-consciousness nonsense. Promises like "we will give and we will take away" are woven together with phrases like "acid-dropping" and "Ebola face."

To Fritchey, the cynical message of Livingston's stump speech and fictional campaign is that "hope is a substitute for what you hope I will give you."

Livingston's campaign signs are ink blots that resemble Rorschach tests more than anything else. His fictional campaign began, actually, with the ink drawings. Interested in creating art that would represent "voids" — works that might represent the "opposite" of his phallic sculptures — Livingston started drawing black "voids" in ink, but soon grew frustrated that the pieces didn't seem to mean anything.

"I couldn't articulate what they were," Livingston said.

Still, he kept making them, and was eventually struck with the idea that he could place the drawings in situations where people would wonder what they meant.

"I started thinking about subjective meaning versus direct meaning," he said. From there, he started thinking about protest signs.

He was reading Carl Jung and thinking about "the collective unconscious."

And he started thinking about voters seeing what they want to see in campaign signs and hearing what they want to hear in stump speeches.

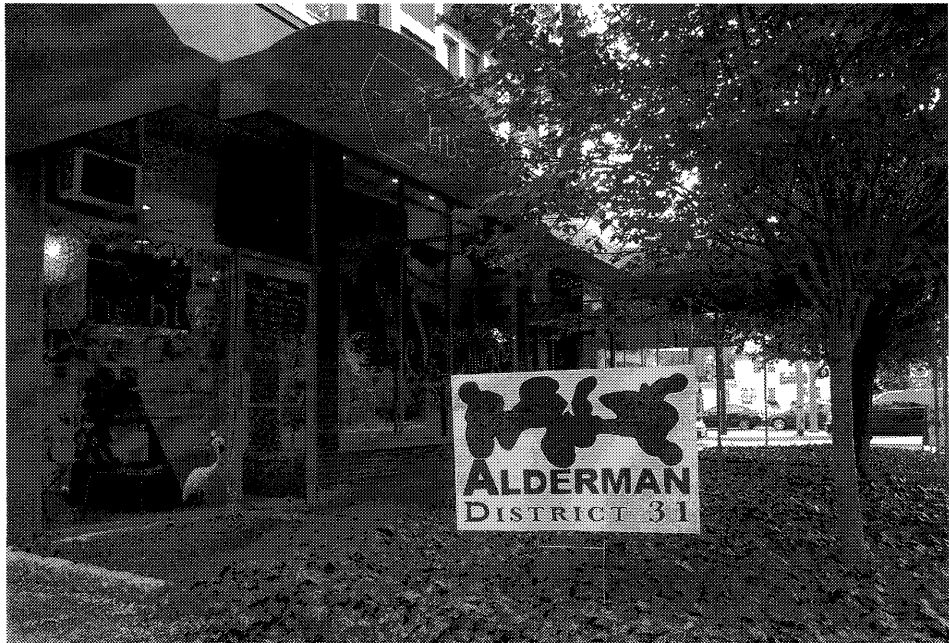
After delivering his stump speech on one particular occasion, Livingston said he was approached by a man who'd been sitting nearby



Work by local artist Laura Marsh is part of *Vertical Reach*. Photo courtesy of Artspace.

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A campaign sign designed by Livingston for his fictional run for New Haven's Board of Alders as a candidate representing the nonexistent 31st ward. Photo courtesy of the artist.



David Livingston introduces himself to voters during his fictional campaign for New Haven's Board of Alders. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Livingston's campaign signs on Election Day. Photo courtesy of the artist.

in his car.

"Great speech," Livingston said the guy told him. It was unclear whether the man wasn't really listening or if he thought the speech was great in a satirical way. That kind of ambiguity interests Livingston on an artistic level.

"Art is about something that's in between words," he said. Initially, the point of *The Candidacy* was to communicate something with his signs that couldn't be easily summed up with words.

"It's hard not to be frustrated and apathetic as a voter," he pointed out. "There's a sense of not being in control as a voter at all."

His aim with *The Candidacy* became, in a way, to say nothing while communicating something.

And while *The Candidacy* wasn't initially conceived as a form of political protest, Livingston said, "Once I took it out into the street it started to feel more like a protest piece."

Still, he said, "I don't want it to be a self-righteous protest piece."

When he thinks about global problems, he said, he feels privileged in a lot of ways and is sensitive to the fact that on some level we've all contributed to the way the world is.

"I want to also critique myself as much as I'm critiquing society," he said.

He's interested, he said, in his own psychology and how it relates to larger problems.

"I don't want to be above it all," he said. "I want to explore what is going on with all of us."

In addition to pieces from Livingston's *The Candidacy* and local artist Laura Marsh's American flag installation that she presented at Artspace's City-Wide Open Studios festival in October 2014, *Vertical Reach* includes works by major Eastern European figures, among them Polish artist Zuzanna Janin, whose 2013 video *A Trip to Fear* (part of a larger project called *Koniec/The End*) was the result of a trip to Russia — undertaken in part in solidarity with the activist group Pussy Riot — and a visit to an area where Janin's grandfather spent time in a gulag.

Language on the Warsaw-based Jewish Historical Institute's website explains that "A *Trip to Fear* is an act of solidarity with feelings of shame, fear, humiliation, unnecessary exclusion. It is also a personal and artistic journey into the depths of memory."

Polish artist Zbigniew Libera, who designed the provocative *Lego Concentration Camp* — one set of which (he made seven sets) was shown in 2002 at the Jewish Museum in New York as part of an exhibit called *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* — contributed to *Vertical Reach* a series of staged photographs titled *Final Judgment*, which was part of *Judgment Night*, a 2014 joint show with Israeli artist Roe Rosen at the Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin, Poland.

Vertical Reach also includes a 2009 video by Israeli artist Yael Bartana and Polish filmmaker Artur Zmijewski called *Demonstration Against War in Gaza*. According to language on the Warsaw-based Avant-Garde Institute's website, the piece "was created in response to the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip. Criticised for 'ordinary documentariness' and lack of artistic values, the project was rejected by the show's curators."

In November, Lewis and Fritchey said *Vertical Reach* would showcase works by 12-15 artists (fewer than 20) and would include programs — a poetry event with conference participants from Eastern Europe and a karaoke night — organized in conjunction with the conference at Yale's Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, which is scheduled to take place April 19 through April 19. The exhibit will be on view February 20 through May 2 at Artspace. ■

Visit artspacenah.org for more information about *Vertical Reach* and slavic.yale.edu for information about "Political Violence and Militant Aesthetics After Socialism."

Make.Art.Work Supports Artists' Careers

AC STAFF

How do artists build lives that are balanced, productive and sustainable? Many artists work hard to hone their technique, laboring day and night in the studio. Not as many artists tend to the business side of their careers. Make.Art.Work., a comprehensive career-training program, was created to support the working visual artists, helping them focus on their goals and the business and entrepreneurial skills needed to reach those goals.

Launched in 2013 by the Arts Council of Greater New Haven, the Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County, and the Greater Hartford Arts Council, this program is made possible with support from the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation. For the past two years, the program was structured as a series of thematic workshops led by guest presenters in each of the three communities. Artists who opted to join a cohort committed to attend six workshops and benefitted from several coaching sessions. Feedback from the workshops was extremely positive, but the artists who participated in the cohorts dug deeper, finding immense value in the added learning through coaching and the peer support. One cohort member commented, "It was so valuable to be connected to like-minded people, serious artists." Some artists made career leaps as a result of Make. Art.Work.

MAKE. ART. WORK.

An artist reported that the significance of the program was "having art become primary rather than secondary" in her life.

For 2015, Make.Art.Work. will take a different shape. Mid-career artists are invited to apply for a cohort program, a sixth-month intensive peer-learning experience. Though fewer artists will be able to participate, they will experience more in-depth learning in a small supportive group. Cohorts will meet for six three-hour sessions, January through June. The New Haven cohort will meet at Artspace. Sessions will address topics including goal setting, time management, promoting and selling work, financial and legal issues, and funding one's career. The coach/facilitator will be Ryan Odinak. The program will culminate this coming summer with an exhibit of the artists' work.

To apply, artists should complete the application available online at makeartwork.org. Applications will be accepted on a rolling-deadline basis. Artists are encouraged to apply early as cohorts will be limited to 15 participants. The final deadline is January 5. ■

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