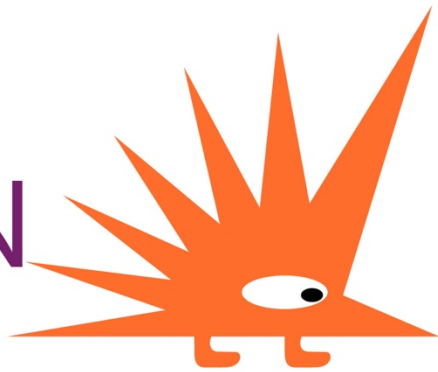


The 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts
33. grafični bienale Ljubljana, 7.6.–29.9.2019

CRACK UP – CRACK DOWN VICE V LISICE



A Word by the Slavs and Tartars Curatorial Team

or

Is each joke, as George Orwell maintained, a tiny revolution?

The Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, now in its 33rd edition, has a long and esteemed history. During the Cold War, Yugoslavia's non-aligned position made the exhibition one of the precious few meeting points possible between artists from the Warsaw Pact countries and those in NATO. The Biennial's focus on graphic editions, prints and other works on paper further allowed for a democracy (with a small d) of access: print was relatively cheap to send and thus to share. Both the geopolitical importance and medium specificity, though, of the Biennial in Ljubljana came under attack in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The end of the Cold War and the subsequent Yugoslav Wars made a mockery of the country's non-aligned legacy, while conceptual art's increased viability, both institutionally and economically, did away with traditional understandings of artistic forms.

These two historical G-spots of the Biennial, if you will – the geopolitical and graphic – retain their currency, if in a more dissonant manner. For it is not only the partitions of artistic fields which have been largely devalued, but also those brittle Cold War frontiers which helped define our 20th century lexicons. Are identity politics the domain of progressives or reactionaries? Are the former Yugoslav republics in Eastern Europe, Southern Europe or Central Europe? Is language preservation a cosmopolitan cause or a nationalist indulgence? Instead of considering “the graphic” as a medium or vessel – one used to distinguish between those who belong and those who do not – why not reclaim its philological waters, its editorial agency?

Though each enjoys a distinct history, both the graphic arts and satire claim to speak for and to the people. Often lauded for its ability to speak truth to power, satire has proven itself to be perhaps the original petri dish in a world of post-truth bacteria. A many-headed creature, satire has been considered by turns a form of popular philosophy, biting critique and a conservative genre given its moralising inclinations. It thrives in periods of authoritarian rule: from the rich tradition of Communist humour in Central and Eastern Europe, to the many examples from the Middle East. Today, the return of strong-man rule in the West has witnessed a boom in comedy and satire. With the rise of populism across the globe, in often reductive and revanchist forms, there has been a vigorous debate of late about who constitutes “the people”. For more than a millennium, satire has been a particularly effective, if contested, genre to explore this and other questions. Despite the dizzying turns of recent events, we would do well to follow the lead of

our retroactive mascot, Hoja Nasreddin, the wise-fool often found riding backwards on his donkey, and look to the past to better understand the present. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a proliferation of satirical journals across the globe – Germany’s *Simplicissimus*, the United Kingdom’s *Punch*, the Caucasus’ *Molla Nasreddin*, France’s *L’Assiette au Beurre*, or Slovenia’s *Pavliha*, to name just a few. The affordability of print offered a tonic for those brutalised by the engines of modernity: be it the Industrial Revolution in Europe or colonialism in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia. Today, increased access to hardware and software, combined with social media platforms, provide a similarly fertile avenue for satire, one which is again fundamentally graphic, through the meme or protest poster.

For the 33rd edition of the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, Slavs and Tatars propose considering “the graphic” not as a medium, per se, but rather as an agency. In particular, how does graphic language, designed for clarity, allow for the ambiguity crucial for art’s affective potential as well as its infra-political resistance? With varying degrees of invective, satire can tease, taunt or terrorise. But is each joke, as George Orwell maintained, really a tiny revolution? Or do laughter and satire release the pressure that would otherwise lead to political upheaval? *Crack Up – Crack Down* takes an expansive view of satire and the graphic, featuring works by historical and contemporary artists, as well as publishers, scholars, activists, new-media polemicists and stand-up comedians, among others.

(from The Guide)