

ART REVIEW

A Kaleidoscopic View of Eastern Europe Via Video

By ROBERTA SMITH

As you walk through "New Video, New Europe," an engrossing exhibition at the Kitchen, you may begin to feel that you are seeing bits and pieces of another world, one that few Americans know well, if at all. It is the world of Eastern Europe, recovering from the tumultuous aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, when economies unraveled, ancient hatreds resurfaced, and some nations broke apart.

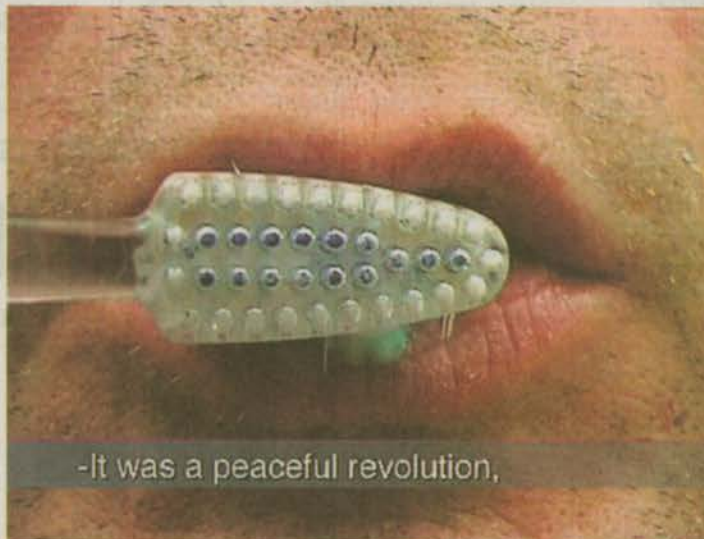
There is a thin, saintly-looking grandmother who supports her family by working on a mine-clearing crew, and women who eke out a living selling flowers at market. An Albanian 3-year-old invents fairy tales that involve "international forces" and happy endings in Italy. During extreme close-ups of a man calmly carrying out his morning toilette (shaving, clipping, brushing), we hear radio announcers begging citizens first to remain calm and then to throng the streets to protect the radio station, which is under attack.

Eastern Europe is a place where many still struggle with the mindset instilled by totalitarianism, the physical and psychological effects of war, the hardship of making ends meet. Material goods are not necessarily plentiful. Modernization is often something in the future, not the past, and its new name is globalization. Yet more and more artists have video cameras at their disposal.

The 48 videos in this exhibition, organized by Hamza Walker, curator at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, represent the efforts of 40 artists from 16 Eastern European countries. Mostly recent and under five minutes long, they cover a stylistic range that includes documentary, Surrealist narrative, performance art and rather too much formalism and generic experimentation. Not all are intrinsically interesting, but taken together, they add up to something considerably greater than their sum: an inadvertent collaborative portrait or Exquisite Corpse documentary that mixes history, art, everyday life, folklore and the landscape. A result is a kaleidoscopic view that goes quite a bit beyond the evening news.

Some of the works are so rudimen-

"New Video, New Europe" continues through June 30 at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea, (212) 255-5793.



-It was a peaceful revolution,

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A video still from "La Revolution dans le Boudoir" by Dan Mihaltianu.



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A video still from "Run Rabbit Run" (2002) by Pavle Vuckovic.

tary and D.I.Y. that they might hark from the 1970's, when American artists treated the video camera as a new toy, pointing it at whatever crossed their paths. In the case of the Polish artist Piotr Wryzykowski, that means a burning motorcycle; for Jelena Radic, it's her cousin, a young Serbian girl in a glittery gymnast leotard, dancing her heart out in a cramped living room. In "Domestic Violence," Kai Kaljo, an Estonian with a quietly comic knack (a short video titled "The Loser" is also hers), ties her ex-husband to a bed and questions him about his infidelities.

Inevitably, a few of the works that Mr. Walker has selected evince the

up-to-date professionalism and economy you might witness at an international biennale. In his 68-second "Birds," the Czech artist Jesper Alvaer records what ensues if you place a video camera amid a pile of bird seed in the Piazza San Marco in Venice: something like Uccello's "Battle of San Romano" enacted by pigeons. The Polish artist Azorro achieves similarly universal physical comedy when he and several friends try to lip sync to an old English recording of "Hamlet."

The videos that give this show its staying power involve highly specific mixtures of documentary and art, like Alma Becirovic's understated

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"Survived 'n' Lived Another Day," the compressed, jewel-like day-in-the-life of the mine-hunting Bosnian grandmother, or Dan Mihaltianu's "Revolution dans le Boudoir," which recalls the turbulent days leading up to the execution of the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu by infusing one man's bathroom rituals with the anguish of years of repression and the shock of freedom.

In "Brezhnev Likes Mamaliga, and Mamaliga Likes Brezhnev," Stefan Rusu, a Moldovan, intersperses clips of Leonid Brezhnev (also a Moldovan) with the preparation on an outdoor fire of a peasant chicken-and-maize soup that the Soviet leader said he loved, beginning with the summary execution of a live chicken.

Adrian Paci, father of the story-telling 3-year-old, excavates another peasant tradition in "The Weeper," hiring a professional mourner to keen a haunting song that celebrates his life while he stretches before her, imitating a corpse. In Pavle Vuckovic's "Run Rabbit Run," someone in a rabbit costume is chased across a beautifully snowy Serbian landscape by someone in a fox costume, a sequence that is by turns amusing, sinister and in the end, real.

Several longer pieces are especially impressive. Pavel Braila's "Shoes for Europe," made for Documenta XI in 2002, is an ode to inefficiency; it documents the time-consuming process performed each time a train crosses the Moldovan-Romanian border, all because Moldova still uses outmoded Russian wheel gages. Mircea Cantor's "Double-Headed Matche's" contrasts machine production of single-headed matches with the artisanal methods for making double-headed ones.

Old and new attitudes about art collide in "The Girl Is Innocent," in which Arturas Raila records his colleagues as they give year-end critiques at an art school in Vilnius, Lithuania, and rail against the corrupting influence of "Americanism" and kitsch. The heated discussion among faculty members, who are almost entirely older and male, is sexist, rigid and blinkered, but one teacher touches on the truth.

Gesturing sarcastically toward the camera, he clearly refers to the artist when he says, "He thinks it's a stroke of genius, filming this and then exhibiting it somewhere."