Slovene Studies 15/1-2 (1993) 35-50

GROUND AND ITS LOSS: LANDSCAPE IN SLOVENE MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART (FOUR EXAMPLES)

Igor Zabel

Introduction

Landscape appears relatively often as a subject in Slovene modern and contemporary art; it appears, however, in very different contexts and has thus differing significance. Landscape is often connected with the idea of ground. I do not think here merely of a kind of *Blut und Boden* ideology (which could also be found in Slovene arts, especially in the thirties, although it was relatively mild); in the work of some of the more important artists, this subject expresses a search for belonging, identity, for a firm base of the work. Often, however, it also speaks about a loss of the ground and the impossibility to find an identity. Here, I would like to present four examples, artists belonging to four different generations from the beginning of Slovene modern art to recent art production. Each of these artists uses landscape in a specific way, and all of them connect it with themes of ground, belonging, identity, and also lack of ground, homelessness, difference.

Rihard Jakopič

One can find such dilemmas extremely clearly present at the very beginning of Slovene modern art, in the work of Rihard Jakopič. This painter was the leading figure of an extremely strong generation of artists, the so-called "Slovene Impressionists;" these artists, trained in Munich, returned to Slovenia with the idea to turn Ljubljana — which was at that time rather provincial and lethargic as regards the visual arts — into a real art center. But their aims went even further: they wanted to establish a strong national art. It is important that they understood national art not as, e.g., historic painting or folklore genre, but as truly modern art. Because of this, their works were at first rejected in Ljubljana and criticized as foreign imports. But after a successful show in an important Vienna gallery, Salon Miethke, in 1904, the importance and national character of these works started to be recognized. In fact, it was first the press in Vienna which — per-

haps from political reasons — stressed the particular, "Slovene" character of these works; and after this show, the reception of this generation was clearly marked with the idea that their art grows from their home-ground which gives it a special authenticity and quality. Two important Slovene writers of the time, Ivan Cankar and Oton Župančič, wrote articles about the show at Miethke's, both stressing the distinct Slovene character of their works. Cankar found in them a special Slovene "mood," and Župančič wrote: "Vigor, sucked from domestic ground, endows them with freshness and makes them distinct from artists of other nations." This understanding proved to be very influential, and in the mid-twenties it was already a common theme.

As for Jakopič, such an understanding was not only an exterior interpretation of his work, but it was to a certain extent decisive for his own position and self-understanding. It was tightly connected to the project of establishing modern national visual culture. Such a project demanded not only the production of good works, but also works which belong somehow to the national context. In a certain sense, this project was similar to the project of establishing a distinctive American modernism, as was achieved with Abstract Expressionism; of course, here we must take into account not only the difference in the international importance of the two movements, but also certain differences in the understanding of the concept 'national' (which is for Slovenes more closely connected with ethnicity and territory than it is for Americans).

Despite the popular notion "Slovene Impressionism," Jakopič's work can only in a limited part be referred to as impressionist. It belongs much more to the Post-Impressionist context and sometimes approaches Expressionism. His position is traditionally described as a synthesis of impression and expression. His paintings are based on observing nature, but they are not a mechanical reproduction of visual sensations (as radical Impressionists' works were supposed to be). The impressions were transformed in his mind, and the depicted nature is thus loaded with expressive and emotional contents. This idea fits perfectly with the idea of "growing from the home-ground." What Jakopič eventually "expresses" is his attachment to this "ground," i.e., to the nation. (Of course he expresses his individual personality but, as he himself wrote in one of his texts, a strong personality somehow synthesizes the creative powers of the whole nation, and can

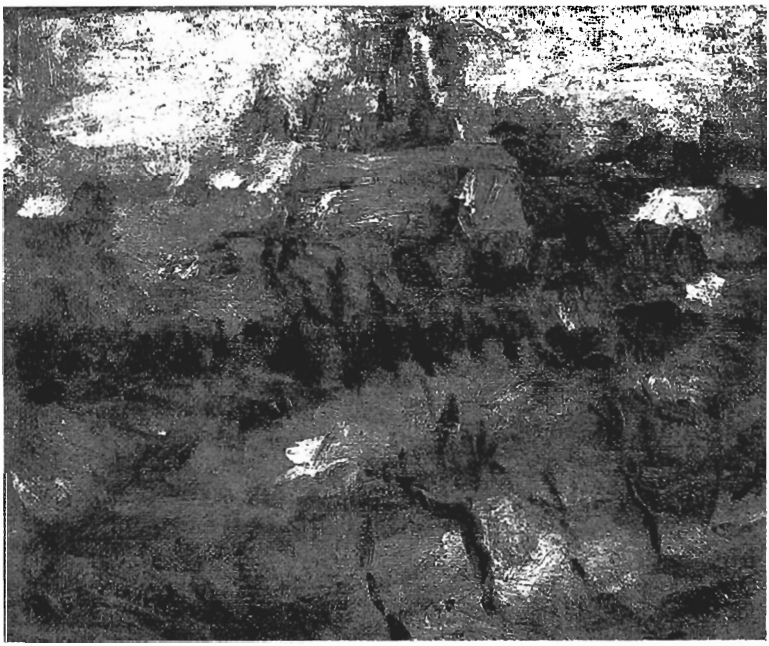
subsequently influence the nation.) His "impressions," therefore, necessarily became "expressions," and *vice versa,* the "expression" cannot be separated from "impressions," since it does not come from an autonomous source, but from the "ground."

It would be wrong to suppose that this ground can be identified with the actual Slovene landscape; but there certainly is a special connection between the two. The least we can say is that this landscape serves as a kind of symbol or metaphor for the metaphysical "national ground."

RIHARD JAKOPIČ: *MEGLA* [The Fog], 1903
(Oil on canvas. Private collection, Ljubljana)

Only slowly, the critics became aware that Jakopič's position, based on the idea of individual personality as a synthesis of

nation's creative powers and on the synthesis of impression and expression, not only guaranteed the special authenticity and quality of his paintings but also blocked some very long-reaching and radical aspects of his work.



RIHARD JAKOPIČ: *TRNOVO*

If we look at his paintings we see the importance of the paint as material and of the impulsive brushstrokes — an importance which cannot be explained just by the "expressive" aspect of his work. We may say that the immanent logic of Jakopič's painting lead him into abstract painting where the medium itself would prevail. In such works, the expressive content of the subject would be replaced by expressive connotations of brushstrokes and color combinations. This is not a pure speculation. We know that some of Jakopič's works came very close to this kind of painting; although the motif is still present, it is totally unrecognizable and is dissolved, so to speak, in the texture of the applied paint. Most of these works, however, were small and not intended for public display and were therefore often treated as "studies." This is, of course, wrong; these little works were not in preparation of a final work, they were themselves the final phase of a long development.

Only later, in the 1920s, did he start to work on larger-sized landscapes where he at least approached the radicality of his small "studies," stressing the importance of the applied paint and of the brushstroke. The dualism between the motif and the medium, however, remained.

I believe it was Zoran Kržišnik who, in his book on Jakopič, first drew attention to the fact that the painter's decision for the project of establishing national modern art (and also its necessary institutions, such as exhibition, art school, art museum, exhibition hall, etc.) blocked the most advanced and radical tendencies in his art — tendencies which are, in certain aspects, comparable to much later avant-garde movements, such as Abstract Expressionism in America or Art Informel in Europe. Jakopič eventually succeeded in his efforts to turn modern visual arts into an essential part of the national life, but as the price for it, as Kržišnik wrote, he had to sacrify "some of his deepest artistic visions."

Was it only the radicality of these visions — a radicality which made such works totally unacceptable for the local public — which forced Jakopič to abandon the path he was following? I believe this is only a part of the answer. A picture based on the autonomy of its medium could not be included in Jakopič's theory of artistic production, which included nature and nation as its basic sources, and individual creative personality as the intermediator (a relationship which found its form in the synthesis of "impression" and "expression"). It would mean a total loss of the "ground" and there would be, so to speak, no excuse for it.

OHO land art

Even in the context of the radical avant-garde of the sixties, landscape had a particular role. Of course, these artists did not depict it, but used it as the site and eventually the essential content of their works. I am thinking here of the OHO group, an extre-mely interesting movement active from about 1966 to 1971. The OHO artists developed a particular type of land art. They first tried to bring their works out from traditional art spaces, such as galleries, into open public space in the city, or into landscape. Soon, they did not only 'install' the works in the open air, but started to work with the space itself. I would particularly like to mention here a series of works made in 1969. The specific charac-ter of these

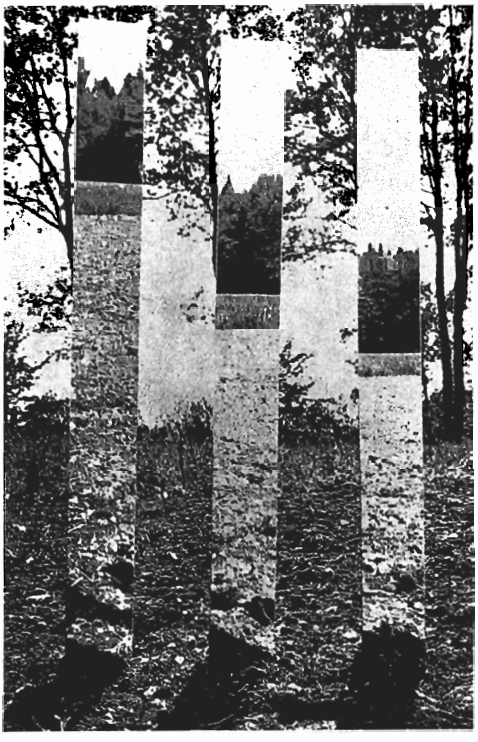
projects can be, I believe, better understood if we com-pare them to American Land Art produced at about the same time.

The expression "Earthworks" very well describes the character of these American projects. Regardless of the important differences between the artists, some essential similarities among their works are also obvious. The sites of these projects are often huge deserts or industrially devastated areas. This choice stresses the idea of virtually unlimited space which is at the artist's disposal. The artist can — and usually does — build large permanent installations using heavy mechanization and other advanced technical means. Often, such works function as a mark on an empty territory; i.e., the site is treated as "white paper" or *tabula rasa,* not loaded with any previous tradition or meaning, as a totally empty and neutral space ready for artist's signs and "writings."

The connection of the Earthworks with the idea of the sublime in art was often noted. Endless space, extreme atmospheric conditions and physical efforts connected to the experiencing of such works, often even the slow process of their change and disappearance (Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* or Heizer's *Double' Negative*, to mention but two examples), stress a certain heroism and imply the idea of an active individual personality *vs.* huge, disposable, but extreme and powerful space. The quality of the sublime is (corresponding to the original meaning of this concept as it appears in Burke's *Essay*) also connected to the experience of the immense power of technology which is often devastating and terrible.

The OHO land art took place in very different surroundings. Their sites were not in big cities, but relatively small towns, not in huge deserts, but in cultivated landscape. Fields, meadows and woods demanded a totally different approach. The works could not be permanent; moreover, no trace remained after the project was completed. Therefore, OHO land art exists only as photographs and films and is, in this respect, closer to performances or actions as to the Earthworks. Further, the sites of OHO projects were not only cultivated, but also loaded with tradition and meanings. For one of his project, Marko Pogačnik prepared a map of a valley where several OHO actions and projects were organized; on this map we can see prehistoric and old Slavic sites, a medieval church etc., as well as the sites of OHO projects, which were thus connected to history and tradition. Advanced industrial technology, of course, could not be used. OHO artists used very

simple, pre-industrial tools, which demanded a close physical contact with the sites and dimensions equivalent to the artist's body. There is a film where this intimate and corporeal relationship is especially stressed. We see Marko Pogačnik removing turf from a certain area; and he is acting as if he were skinning some large animal. The relationship between the artist and the turf is indeed a close relationship of two bodies. Compare this to the character of the bodily experience in, e.g., De Maria's plan for a work where the observer would be forced to walk one mile between two parallel walls built in the desert.



DAVID NEZ (SKUPINA OHO): *ZRCALA* [Mirrors], 1969

For me, the very essence of OHO land art is concentrated in Milenko Matanović's project *Grain and String*, 1969. This work (published also in Lucy Lippard's book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Work of Art*) consists simply of a string drawn across a wheat-field; the string is slightly bending the wheat. It is a

very gentle and temporary intervention which functions as a kind of "scratch" constituting, so to speak, an extremely intense emotional and conceptual complex. We could perhaps think of Heidegger's descriptions of an ancient temple in his famous essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*. Heidegger speaks about the power of the "temple" (i.e., a work of art) to throw light on "earth;" "Der Tempel läßt die Erde eine Erde sein" ["The temple lets the earth be an earth"], as he writes.

MILENKO MATANOVIĆ: *ŽITO IN VRVICA*
[Grain and string], 1969

If we compare this work with some works by Dennis Oppenheim from about the same time (e.g., *Surface Indentation*, 1968, or *Branded Mountain*, 1969) we notice a basically different approach. Oppenheim, too, worked in cultivated areas, but these were large, industrially cultivated fields. Furthermore, very many of his works include the dimension of marking a territory with the

artist's sign. In *Surface Indentation,* the field is not treated as a complex synthesizing emotional contents and references, it does not call to mind the idea of a co-existence of nature and man; it is simply a material. Wheat growing is understood as a kind of industrial production, and the line, cut into the even, flat surface of the field is a line cut into the material.

All these aspects are connected to a particular relationship of OHO towards nature. For them, landscape did not represent or signify the ground any more, and, of course, they never referred to the national as their source or base. (It is worth mentioning that exactly at that time avant-garde artists and critics explicitly demanded liberation of art from the role of the constitutive force of the nation.) What they did try to achieve, however, was a harmony between their activity and the space they were working in. They developed a particular ecological approach which tried to connect their activities and the landscape in a harmonic, although dynamic unit. For OHO, such a harmony resulted exactly from the internal differences and their supplementary relations. Consequently, their land art developed into so-called 'education,' i.e., a series of exercises and actions in nature, aiming at the development of their personalities, of the close internal relationship within the group and of the harmony between the group and its national, social and traditional context, and eventually at recognizing and accepting one's position within the cosmic order. Quite naturally, such an attitude resulted in giving up art as a separate, closed area and starting a community on a deserted farm in the village of Šempas, where they intended to re-unite art life and the universe. These very esoteric ideas, however, were formulated in the very rational and precise language of land art and conceptual art. Rationally describable concepts, even gestalts and geometrical forms, in a certain sense form the base for this unity and harmony and for its understanding. The emotional, sometimes even mystical experiences of the unity of the group and nature were, in the work of OHO, always re-articulated and developed through highly abstract and rational models and proceedures.

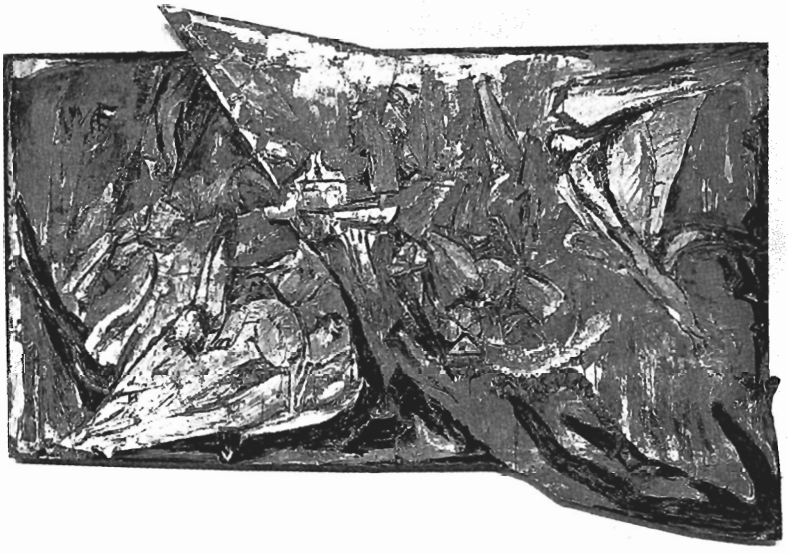
Emerik Bernard

In the art of the 1980s, i.e., in the time of "New Image" and "Neo-Expressionist Painting," landscape painting regained a new importance, connected, of course, with personal experiences,

visions, obsessions, desires and fears. The art of Emerik Bernard was one of the highlights of that period and is perhaps one of the highest points of recent Slovene painting.

For Bernard, landscape offers not only a picturesque motif, but leads into complicated questions about belonging and separation, about identity and difference. But first he had to solve the question how to paint a landscape at all. For him, a landscape (or any figurative) painting could not be taken for granted any more. After vivid discussions in the 1970s, when phenomena like "fundamental painting" re-actualized the modernist concept and ideas, especially Greenberg's analyses and demands, it indeed seemed "impossible" to make a painting which would refer to anything but its own material conditions and the process of execution. Bernard resolved this dilemma by pointing to the basically ambiguous character of the "material" used for a painting. He questioned the idea of simple and originary "presence" ("presentness") of such material, and referred to the psychology of perception to support his idea that material presence cannot be separated from the process of perception and therefore from interpretation. Possibilities of double and multiple reading, therefore, essentially belong to a painting, however "flat" and "material" it is. In the mid-eighties, Bernard achieved a synthesis of a basically "flat" painting and suggestive, "deep" landscape visions. The rough material nature of the paint and different materials, such as pieces of paper or cloth, old clothes, etc., is not hidden at all in these works, moreover, it is even stressed. The combination and internal relationship of these materials, however, are ambiguous and they make it possible for a spectator to discover large landscapes and panoramas appearing, like a vision or a mirage, "in" the rough material surface.

The landscape (or its fragments) which appears on Bernard's painting is geographically precisely located. It is Istria. For over 25 years, Bernard has not only been going to Istria to work in a picturesque landscape, but he became intimately attached to this land and its people. We can therefore understand these paintings as a repeated effort to achieve not only an empathy, but even an identification with the land and its complex, sometimes very archaic and often contradictory culture and tradition. One could perhaps say that these works, metaphorically speaking, represent a search for home.



EMERIK BERNARD: *ISTRSKI PALIMPSEST II*
[Istrian Palimpsest II] 1985

Bernard himself quoted a line from T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets.[1] In the context of Bernard's art, we can understand these words in the sense that "home" becomes a "home" only in the moment when it is abandoned or lost, when the immediate identity with it is no longer possible. Painting is thus a surrogate for belonging, or better, for an immediate identity. Of course, "home" is really a metaphor here. Bernard is not searching for a national or regional "ground." The problem he is dealing with is connected to the problem of the relationship between art and life. Bernard recognized the importance of the avant-garde demands for re-uniting them, but he also realized that the efforts to abandon art in favor of life practice itself failed and had to fail.

In this respect, we can perhaps understand his landscapes as examples or parables speaking about the nature and destiny of art and of human existence. While looking at a landscape painting we perhaps recognize the beauty of the represented landscape, we may even, through empathy, feel united with it, its culture, history and tradition. (Indeed we can see that Bernard is not only presenting an instantaneous view; his paintings are thick, multi-

1 "Home is where one starts from,' *East Coker*, line 192; in T.S. Eliot. *Four Quartets* (New York NY: Harcourt, Brace, 1943).

layered structures — "palimpsests", as he calls them — full of different traces and remains, half hidden or nearly lost; one could say that this complex structure itself reflects the complex structure of Istrian history and culture.) But we may suddenly become aware that we are not looking at landscape but at a flat picture, at layers of paint and pieces of cloth. Instead of the landscape itself we are admiring its illusion, a surrogate. And as we are standing here, in front of the canvas, instead of going out to see the real landscape, "real life," it seems that this surrogate not only "replaces" nature but indeed prevents us from experiencing it directly. But there is another aspect of these works: while looking at them, we recognize the beauty of this landscape, of its special character, of its complexity and deep-rooted, although rapidly disappearing traditions. We thus experience a kind of unity with the depicted world; this unity has been achieved through empathy, it is an illusion, but is nevertheless emotional and genuine. We may discover that our relationship to the landscape itself and to its representation in a painting becomes strangely perverted: while we somehow enter an empathic unity with the depicted landscape, we suddenly discover that we look at the actual landscape as if it were a picture, or a text. And if it is a home, it is an abandoned one.

EMERIK BERNARD: *KRŠETE*, 1986
acrylics and collage, 83 x 14 cm, Private collection, Ljubljana

We could say that the whole Bernard's artistic activity points toward one basic aim: toward a spontaneous, immediate, therefore

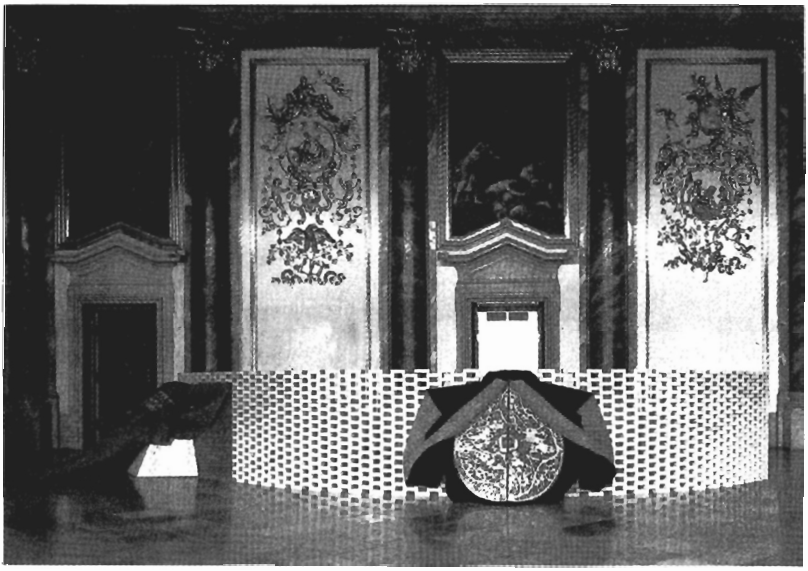
"primary" and "original" identity with the world and with life. This is perhaps the main suggestive source of his paintings and their openness for empathy. But, as we have tried to show, he is repeatedly forced to experience how artificial art is and how this artificiality prevents him from sinking into immediate existential continuity or totality. Nevertheless, Bernard cannot simply follow the avant-garde in describing this problem through the dualism of "institution art" and "life practice" and in the attempt to revoke the separate field of art and unite it with life. Bernard supposes that the loss of this "existential continuity" (what actually this continuity is, we cannot say, we are only sensing it or feeling its absence) is rooted in the very first scratch on the cave's wall, the scratch which introduced difference, definitions and signifying relations, and is thus inscribed into the very base of civilization. Being thoroughly constituted through systems of signification which introduce presence only through an absence, we can only search for such a unity, and maybe replace it with a surrogate, a "made-up," artificial work of art. Art is therefore the very space where civilization succeeds to gain, in itself, a balance between open experience and the forms and models of civilization (i.e., signifying structures). Bernard therefore somewhere described paintings as "beings of reconciliation;" and his landscape paintings could well be described with these very words.

Marjetica Potrč

The question of space was from the very beginning eminently present in the work of Marjetica Potrč, one of the leading figures of Slovene contemporary art. In the mid-eighties, she made a series of works (some of them based on different parts of human body, like legs, belly or eyes) which used a strong theatrical effect to deconstruct the viewer's presupposed ideas of space and their own position in it. What the artist "attacked" was the idea of a homogeneous and synchronous (or, better, timeless) Euclidian space, which is at the subject's (i.e., viewer's) disposal. She organized her sculptures in such a way that the viewer dramatically experiences the difference between the front and the back side of the work. The viewer's expectations about the back, initially unseen side are based on the pre-given spatial concepts, but the radical difference between the two sides radically denies these expectations. Although the two sides necessarily belong together, they

can never be seen and experienced at the same time. It is thus impossible to actually experience the sculpture as a timeless whole; in our experience it always remains un-whole and essentially temporal (since we experience it as a sequence of fragments).

Such an experience has at least two far-reaching consequences. First, we become aware that we cannot understand space as a homogeneous and synchronous (or timeless) unit any more. Second, such a concept of space includes a silent (sometimes even unconscious) supposition that the viewer remains somehow outside this space and thus has a general and complete overview of it; these sculptures, however, force us to recognize that we are ourselves in the space, "on the stage," so to speak. Therefore, we do not only see but we can also be seen; and, what is even more traumatic for us, there are certain aspects of ourselves which only another person can see but for us remain invisible.



MARJETICA POTRČ: *DVA OBRAZA IZGUBLJENIH PRIČAKOVANJA: KRAJINA IN TORZO*
[Two Faces of Lost Expectations: Landscape and Torso], 1991
brick, felt, plywood, photoprocessed mylar, 1.9 x 12 x 4 m,
Palais Liechtenstein, Vienna

But does this mean that the concept of the space as a whole has lost all relevance? I believe not; we are repeatedly forced to refer to it to be able to orientate in the space and to function in it.

Only, now this concept cannot be taken as something "real" but as an idea, ideal concept or ideological image. To actually experience the "wholeness" and synchronicity of the space, we would have to be in God's place.

These works treated the questions of space and the viewer's position in it in an extremely direct and personal way (the viewer was forced to take part in a certain "drama," experiencing the failure of his or her spontaneous spatial concepts), but on the other hand, they were also rather general. They dealt with some fundamental concepts of the modern (i.e., post-medieval) time, such as subject, body, space, time, etc.. In several works, begun during her stay in the U.S.A., however, Potrč began to speak about space in a different, more explicit and specific way. For example, she started to introduce images into her works. Usually, these are ideal images of closed, ordered places, often loaded with symbolic significance (like the view of Rome). Very often, these places are seen from above, which underlines their utopian character. The places (cities, parks, etc.) represent, so to speak, the concept of synchronous and homogeneous space, they are manifestations of ideal concepts to which we refer while moving and acting in space. But they represent another thing: a distinct, recognizable and organized place which we can recognize. At the same time, these images (and, consequently, these concepts) are utopian; i.e., they exist as pure idea(l)s while they do not actually exist at the "place" itself. I will try to explain this with an example. If we actually enter a place which was planned and built following the ideas of utopian synchronous and homogeneous space, such as a French-style garden or an "ideal" town (e.g., Palmanova), we have to admit that we do not really experience the ideal structure but only a series of fragmented and partial aspects. To gain a view of the whole, we have to look at a map or to see the place from a distance, usually from above (e.g., from an airplane). But a place is a place only if we can be present there. With distance, we are losing the very essence of place and we are operating with intelligible ideas. There is another aspect of utopia which should not be overlooked. It can be supposed that such utopian concepts actually work as ideological images, and that means that they have their function in the distribution of power. Space, whole or un-whole, is thus not neutral any more, the distribution of power is essential for the way it is understood and perceived.

Some of the artist's recent works introduced another dimension. In these sculptures she uses recognizable skylines of certain cities, such as Prague. These sculptures explicitly function as stage-settings. Recognizable forms which are supposed to form an inner structure and form of space are reduced to a mere image, a backdrop. These works reflect the ongoing process of "displacement" in our space, a process we are experiencing daily. In her sculptures, and also in her texts, Potrč stresses how the progressive displacement, or de-location, inflicts the space, which is now not only fragmented, un-whole and temporal, but also formless, seemingly without any strict organization and structure or indeed identity, and, in a certain sense, entropic. It does not mean that traditional points of orientation and identification have lost their function or even disappeared. But they are subject to the process of displacement and replacement; they are, so to speak, returned to their original sites, but as something "typical" and "local," as "sights," losing thereby their organic identity with their place. They became a point in the network of images which is interwoven with the amorphous and anonymous "network" of space.

It seems to me that Potrč's most recent works (the *Territory* series) somehow completes a certain way of questioning and researching space. The walls she is building now still follow the basic motif of her work — two different sides — but now she is aiming at a defining of territory. A wall thus does not only fragment, but also defines and encloses space.

Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

POVZETEK

TLA IN NJIHOVO IZGUBLJANJE: KRAJINA V MODERNI IN SODOBNI SLOVENSKI UMETNOSTI (ŠTIRJE PRIMERI)

Krajina je pogost motiv v novejši slovenski umetnosti; ta motiv pa pogosto ni nevtralen, temveč je povezan z idejo tal. To ne pomeni le različnih različic ideologije "krvi in zemlje;" gre za vprašanje utemeljenosti, pripadnosti, identitete. Tako se prav skozi ta motiv izraža tudi doživetje izgube tal in identitete, tako rekoč doživetje brezdomstva. Članek obravnava štiri slovenske umetnike različnih generacij, pri katerih igra krajina važno vlogo. Ob Rihardu Jakopiču opozori na to, kako ideja "utemeljenosti v tleh" (ki je povezana s projektom prenove nacionalne likovne kulture) blokira radikalne nastavke v njegovem delu. Ob delu skupine OHO se ustavi ob specifikah njihovega land art-a, posebej v primerjavi s sočasnimi ameriškimi earthworks. Ob delu slikarja Emerika Bernarda govori o vlogi, ki jih ima Istra v njegovih "palimpsestih", ob delu kiparke Marjetice Potrč pa o vse intenzivnejšem doživetju "izgube tal", delokacije, ki je značilna za nas čas.