

Volume Z

Interview with Aleksandra Mik
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Aleksandra Mir

Interview by VTU

Aleksandra Mir: Switzerland and Other Islands / Kunsthaus Zurich

<http://vernissage.tv/blog/2006/08/20/aleksandra-mir-switzerland-and-other-islands-kunsthaus-zurich/>

>>The series of drawings at the Kunsthaus Zurich is called Switzerland and Other Islands.

What inspired this series?

I have been drawing naïve cartography for about 4 years. The first series called „The World from Above‘ (2003-4) took a simple birds eyes view on our planet. I was interested in zooming in at random sites, some that had a loaded political meaning (Gaza Strip), next to others that seemed completely neutralized (Central Park). The second series, „Church of Sharpie‘ (2005), is a series of very large drawings (7x5m) exclusively about the USA. The aesthetic developed to include current and historical slogans, references to popular culture. This year, I have focused my ideas about territory on islands; political, geographical and mythological, as a way to navigate around and understand what borders and isolation are all about. The current show was conceived on the urban jungle island of Manhattan, produced on the fertile island of Sicily, and exhibited at the political island of Switzerland.

>>What do you associate with Switzerland?

I have spent quite some time there so my personal experiences and my friendships are mainly defining it for me, all positive. I have exhibited at Kunsthalle St. Gallen (2003) and did a Statements in Basel (2004) so professionally it has been very valuable as well. In 2003 I spent 2 months working on a commission for Ringier in Zurich that involved research in their vast photographic archives, research that brought me deep into Swiss culture through visual historic sources, but also took me on trips and encounters with locals all around the country and whose life stories I involved in the work. This research however has nothing to do with the current show at Kunsthaus, which is almost the total inversion to the intimacy and specificity I developed in HELLO Ringier. See: http://www.aleksandramir.info/projects/hello/hello_ringier.html In this show, „Switzerland and Other

Islands“, „Switzerland“ is used as a hypothesis, a point of departure to study more general phenomena from.

>>What do you associate with an island?

My research and the drawings I have produced for this show indicate a lot of contradictions: Isolation vs. The impossibility of any isolation at all, for example.

>>You travel a lot. What meaning have borders and boundaries for you?

Points of awareness, to be transcended.

>>The drawings are made by marker on paper. For your work „The Church of Sharpie“ you used household markers, too. You obviously like the marker as drawing instrument. Why?

The marker is an unpretentious tool in my immediate environment, and in the environment of the general public. Using it as a fine art tool means getting immediate access to a vernacular present, which makes the work contemporary by default. I had been buying my art supplies in the same NYC art store for 15 years, from day one in art school when we got equipped with medium cliches such as charcoal and turpentine, all that messy stuff. When I last year finally asked for a large supply of my favorite marker, the Sharpie, the store manager cynically asked, „What, are you gonna put Sharpie drawings in a museum now?“, I said, „Yeah, actually, I am“.

>>You seem to be fascinated by technique and science, especially interested in aerospace (your works First Woman on the Moon, Plane Landing, Gravity, Airplanes). Where does this come from?

>From being a woman and traditionally having limited access to those fields.

>>Why is the Concorde the perfect plane?

It seems to me that the desires that produced it aimed for a certain kind of perfection, desires that were to a large degree accomplished through the graceful design and the speed of that plane. The fact that it got outdated and eventually crashed may possibly show the flipside of aiming to high, but for me, the Concorde is still a monument to a futuristic imagination that I think, perhaps nostalgically, is lost now.

>>Many of your works have an ephemeral character. On the other hand the documentation of the work is important to you. Is this a contradiction?

No, it is logical.

>>You run your own website. There is plenty of information on your website, which is great for anyone who wants to know about your work. This is still not very common among artists. Why is this important to you?

Self publishing is an excellent complement to an ephemeral practice. The more I document and make information about my work freely available, the more independent I am and the more risks I can take in my actual projects.

>>You have a background in mass media and communications. Do you like to be in control of what is published about you?

I write a lot about my own work, mainly on the request of others, who need my statements and facts to back up their own articles by. Any intelligent writer will take these statements further and tell me something I don't know about my own work myself already. I don't care about good or bad reviews, I care about well written and developed criticism, which is extremely rare to get. Most writers are lazy and simply like to quote, so I make sure the facts are correct and try to leave the rest wide open.

>>Did you write or edit your Wikipedia article?

No, I don't know who writes those texts.

>>You didn't want the interview to be filmed. Why?

I like to answer to my interviews thoughtfully, and writing is the best way to formulate and present those thoughts. I don't think a depiction of my physical persona would add anything, rather divert from it.

>>How important is it for an artist to be in control of his image?

I think it is less a question of control than of self preservance. Making a museum show at this scale means taking enormous amount of pressure from many people, across the institutional hierarchy, who are engaged in its productions. The last 10 years I have been involved in over 100 exhibitions. Recently doing everything from cleaning gallery floors, writing my own press releases, designing my own posters and lecturing at local art schools in association with an exhibition. This goes on top of producing the actual artwork, doing the research, raising production budgets, hiring and managing assistants, administrating the administrative help and preparing shipments. Additionally, being available for press goes without saying, since every cultural institution today is widely dependent on the media interest it can gather for itself. Replying to interviews like this one is the minimum what anyone working with me would expect from me. I don't mind it. I have a very relaxed relationship to the media, having studied

and worked in the field myself. But there is only so much one can offer. My personal cut off point goes at live TV, simple as that.

>>What do you think about grassroots journalism, web communities, remix culture, the „Web 2.0“ stuff?

I don't know the significance of the last 2 terms. I must be getting old.

>>“Mir proposes art as a tool of social improvement.“ If this statement is correct. How would this work?

I am not sure that statement is necessarily correct, or even if it may seem so, it gets way more complicated than that. I wish the writer would have elaborated further.

>>Do you consider yourself as political artist?

Yes I do, but not more or less political than any other artist.



Not everything is always Black or White.

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A phone conversation between the author of our poster collage, Aleksandra Mir (New York) and the creator of the original Che Guevara poster, Jim Fitzpatrick, (Dublin). January 3, 2005. 2pm EST.

Aleksandra Mir: A couple of communist neighbors in the Swedish neighborhood where I grew up in the 70s had your poster on their wall. Long before I could even begin to understand who Che Guevara was, I was blown away by the visual power of this image. It fed my hunger for visual culture and taught me a lot about composition and color. Today, as a practicing artist myself, I still find it to be the ultimate graphic ever created. For the last few years I have had it up on my own wall here in New York City, although with the slight alteration of a now defunct Concorde flying above Che's head. Could you describe the technical approach to your original graphic a little?

Jim Fitzpatrick: It's essentially just making a line drop-out of a photograph. At the time (1967) I was doing a series for an Irish magazine called 'Scene'. The editor commissioned me to do quite a radical series called 'A voice in our times', relating to the Vietnam War. It was very satirical. I used people's own words against them. I used Lyndon Johnson's words on Vietnam. Today you hear a lot about Blair as being Bush's 'poodle'. But I did Harold Wilson, the British Prime Minister at the time, as Lyndon Johnson's 'poodle'. The dog with his head out. Then I decided I wanted to be a bit more radical, and I did the Che Guevara image. Initially I was working in a very Art Nouveau-ish style, like Beardsley, and the first image I did of Che was psychedelic, it looks like he is in seaweed. His hair was not hair, it was shapes that I felt gave it an extra dimension. That was the image I produced for the magazine and that was done before he died and that is the important thing about that image. At first it didn't print. It was considered far too strong and revolutionary. I was very inspired by Che's trip to Bolivia. He went there with the intent to overthrow the intensely corrupt government, helped by the Americans at the time, and that's where he died. I thought he was one of the greatest men who ever lived and I still do in many ways. And when he was murdered, I decided I wanted to do something about it, so I created the poster. I felt this image had to come out, or he would not be commemorated otherwise, he would go where heroes go, which is usually into anonymity.

I thought my original psychedelic work was very artistic, very beautiful, but it didn't communicate the way the red and black did. It hit you in the face. For reference, I was looking at a photograph that I had seen in the German 'Stern' magazine, a strong political magazine with left-wing views. It was a photo taken by 'Korda', but I didn't know that at the time. I had bought the magazine to try to learn a bit of German, and because I liked what it did, and in terms of graphics it was pretty far advanced as well. So I did a number of graphic versions from the photo. The first was a square, b/w. The second that I re-photographed, had poster proportions, 20 x 30.

You had made a second generation of your own image?

Yes. I made a paper negative on a piece of equipment I used to have that was called a 'Grant'. Have you ever heard of it?

No?

It was like a giant light box. Anybody who worked in advertising, or with a printer in those days, before the age of computers, would know what it was. Essentially it made a big paper negative of anything you wanted. You put your image underneath it. I drew on acetate so the light could go through. You put a sheet of photographic paper on top of that, closed it, turned on the light box, developed it in developer and fixed it in fixer. It was very smelly and very messy. The third image was the black on red, because I had decided to do leaflets, everything, and hand them out to everybody. The red and black image was made in two flat colors, two separations. I re-drew the photograph, that's what I call a line drop-out. I wanted it to look photographic but I drew it by hand, on Litho film. I wanted it to look stark so put it on a red background, but if you saw the artwork, all you saw was a flat black with a center cutout for the face. If you ever did silk-screening you know you work in black and white and then you print it in any color you like, basically. So that was printed then in one color black and one color red, and I decided that the star should be yellow, so I painted that in with a magic marker.

By hand, all of them? What was the original edition of the poster?

Yeah. I think I printed 1000 and gave most of them away for free, I decided to get them into shops, not to make money, just to get them around. To be honest I don't even have one of them myself, for they all went all over the place. I was over in London a lot and I distributed them there. There was a huge demand for them. One lot went to Spain and they were seized by Franco's police.

Did you sent them around haphazardly, or did you have designated recipients?

I would love to say it was well organized, but it was quite haphazard. Friends of mine going to the continent would get a batch, a lot of odd people ended up distributing the work. What I was trying to do in a way was to get people to notice that this man had been murdered. It was a big story at the time but it faded away. I felt this was somebody exceptional. The poster was published in 'Private Eye', a famous satirical magazine that is still going. They passed it on to a guy called Peter Meyer, who was an art critic for 'Studio International', the most influential art magazine of its day. He was quite excited about it and along with other artists he invited us all to participate in an exhibition at the 'Lisson' gallery in London to commemorate Che Guevara. It didn't happen at the Lisson in the end, but in a space called the 'Arts Laboratory'. This was happening at the same time that Yoko Ono was having her first exhibition, she'd met John Lennon. She was chopping her clothes off with a scissor. The exhibition was titled 'Viva Che'. So for this show I did a number of works, first I silk screened a black and painted in the red by hand, to make it an original, and that was acrylic on board. They were going to sell the original to raise money. I also made an oil painting, a very big, black and white, on canvas. That was more painterly, a heavy impasto for the whites.

You made a painting from your poster?

I made a painting of the poster.

Where is that now?

I'm gonna tell you now. Nowhere is the answer. The first psychedelic image I had made of Che was also part of this show. None of them ever came back or were returned. I was told they disappeared in Eastern Europe on tour somewhere. You would have to be a detective to find out what happened, I have some of the names of the people involved if you want to follow it up.

We'll do that next year. We'll track down your originals (laughs).

I would love to, the oil painting was magnificent. God knows, I don't know what happened to it all, it wasn't just me, lots of other artists were also working on their own images of Che Guevara.

But before you had these invitations, you just went about printing and distributing on your own? How did you finance and organize that?

I did it right out of my own pocket. I also had friends who were printers, one who today is one of the richest capitalists in Ireland, and very proud he printed it for me, but I had to pay for it. I just got a good price.

So after the first edition of the initial 1000, how did it gain mass distribution after that?

It really took off. There seemed to be a huge demand for it. I decided on that basis to form a poster company called 'Two Bear Feet'. I produced the poster and a couple of psychedelic variations on it. My favorite was a black on silver foil board. So it was quite spectacular and I only did about a hundred that I gave away to my friends and people I was trying to impress. At that stage I was an artist looking for work and I handed it out. I made all these images copyright free. Not because I didn't know who the photographer was who took the picture at the time, but because I believed in the cause. I wanted anybody and everybody to copy it, change it, do whatever they bloody wanted to do with it.

So you didn't approach it as an illustrator, you were right in the middle of things, as an activist?

I was very much an activist. I was doing a lot of work for a left wing political party called 'The Official IRA'. They were the original IRA who downed arms, called a cease fire and then became a political party. They were very much spied on by British Intelligence, army intelligence here, by just about everybody. I got stopped on the street quite a lot in those days. I always thought, 'What are they looking for? What are they going to do with posters?' I had made a number of posters for a group called 'People's Democracy' in Northern Ireland, before everything went haywire, I worked for them for free. I did a lot of work free, I still do.

But you still always maintain a commercial practice next to that to support those activities, is that how it works?

Well, I do Celtic work, and I do album covers, I work for a band called

,The Darkness'. I've done Sinéad O'Connor, and all of the Thin Lizzy's. but The Darkness is one of the biggest bands in the world, They've sold more than 10 million copies.

So can you talk a little bit about copyright in general, because it appears that you embody two very different ideas about it.

I've made anything on my web site free, you can download anything you like in high resolution for free. But I do point out that I own the copyright of the images, and that I don't mind people like yourself or ordinary people downloading them, printing them out, but if I find a big American company or English company stealing the images, I'd sue their ass off.

So you are adamant about copyright when it comes to commercial exploitation of your work, but you want to promote the idea of copyright free when it has a political purpose or popular distribution?

Absolutely.

That's interesting and that echoes Korda's sentiments as well.

Korda has said that I was the one who made his photograph famous. I actually have in my possession a signed photograph, the Che Guevara photograph, signed by Korda. I am very proud of that. I had no wish of stop him from earning money. Do you know the story of the Che Guevara image itself?

Yeah, I've done quite a lot of research on it.

So you know the story of the Italian publisher Feltrinelli. (Giangiacomo) Feltrinelli stole the photograph, and he made a lot of money from it. And he never gave any money to Korda. I don't want to get into the politics of it cause I was threatened by him a long time ago. He is dead now. But he was one of the ,Brigado Rosso', Red Brigade leaders. You know all of this?

I know some of it. You are filling in some of my blanks and maybe I can fill in some of yours. Tell me what you know.

I was threatened by him for distributing the poster in London. He claimed to be the copyright owner.

Of the Photograph.

Of the Photograph. But he wasn't.

No he wasn't. But he threatened you, and you had made a posterized color interpretation? And he saw this as an infringement to his own interest in the photo?

Yes, I was over in London trying to find distributors for my posters. There was a magazine called ,Oz', that was eventually banned by the British authorities and there was the company called ,Big O'. They were the best and biggest poster company of their time. This is the summer of ,68 and they had a lot of really radical work in their range.

I wanted my work included in their range, and they said, we are already taking on the photo version and Feltrinelli has the copyright. I said, no he doesn't, the photographer does. So they took me on and he called and threatened to sue me and to kill me. I said, ,Do I have a choice, can I take my pick?' He said, ,Every man has a choice'. I chose Death, it's cheaper.

The photographer, Alberto Diaz Gutierrez (,Korda'), was the top Cuban chronicler of the revolution and Castro's personal photographer in a way.

Feltrinelli stole the photo from him, this was reported in a Dutch underground magazine, but now I think the story is, Korda gave him the photo but never expected it to be used or his name obliterated.

Either way, Feltrinelli had walked into his studio in Havana, got the photo and distributed it widely with enormous success. Korda never received any royalties.

He couldn't.

No he couldn't, for many reasons, and there are many people offering commentary at the moment of what those reasons could have been. Some say he was grateful to Feltrinelli as well, for making the image known in the name of the cause. But the bottom line is, he was not really in a position to seek royalties. Castro considered intellectual property ,capitalist bullshit' and Cuba was not a signatory to the Berne Convention on intellectual property at the time, so he was not in a position to even ask. But then almost simultaneously, you were doing the poster. Both the photograph and the poster were under the same publishing house in the UK, did you get any royalties out of that?

No, to be honest they only took a small number and I never got paid by any of these people. I just kept producing the posters, I was enjoying it. And I was feeling that...I know that sound crazy, but I was feeling that here was this Irish Argentinean that only people like myself would know about, that started to appear in all the shops, and then I started seeing all the variations....

Wait, Che Guevara was Irish?

Yes, he told me this, and I followed it up. I can give you the genealogy. It was Isabel Lynch from Galway, his father's grandmother. So he was third generation Irish.

And so you identified with him as an Irishman?

Absolutely, yeah. And I'll give you a laugh too. Two of my heroes at the time were Che Guevara and John F. Kennedy, poles apart in the Cuban Missile Crisis. The two of them almost brought the world to an end, you know. Not long after, Bobby Kennedy was murdered too, and I later did a different poster of him as well. He was standing up against the Vietnam War and became one of my heroes. I've often thought of making more people in the style of the Che Guevara, but somehow after I had created it, I felt that that was a final and shouldn't be applied to other people. Right now there is a comedian

called Ricky Gervais, who uses the exactly same pose as Che on the cover of his CD and all his ads. He's a fat guy with a sort of rubber nose. I doesn't bother me, he's a very good comedian otherwise, but I don't find that it adds anything. Over the years, I have seen so many pastiches of the image, applied to so many other people.

They don't bother you, you find them more to be silly gestures because they don't have the same strength as the Che image originally had?

Indeed, a couple of years ago, a church in England ran Che Guevara as Jesus, Jesus drawn in the same style that I had given Che, if you can imagine?

Jesus as Che!?

Yes, I mean, it is a very simple style. I had been doing that style long before I did Che Guevara, simply because I wasn't a very good artist. When I was 15 or 16 I would trace an Elvis Presley or whomever from a magazine. By now the image has been used for many causes, many of them worthy, a lot of them very unworthy. There was one variation that I particularly liked, a black image, and in the front of it a green and red vibrating off each other. Very cleverly done, and then Paul Davis, an American artist did a cover for ,Evergreen' magazine. And that itself became a great poster. There were Cuban versions of that poster as well, there was an exhibition of Latin American art in Dublin and there on the wall I saw this wonderful Che Guevara poster. But they used his face as part of the shape of Latin America.

Yes, I can see that happening. So you were seeing all these variations coming out of the photograph or out of your posterized version?

Out of my posterized version. Another one was my poster but rendered in ,real life', Che Guevara painted in flesh. Now, to take you fast forward, in the ,Saatchi' gallery, you know the Saatchi collection?

Yeah.

It's all British Sensationalist art. Like Damien Hirst, you know that sort of stuff.

Yeah.

Shark, etcetera.

Absolutely.

There is an artist called Gavin Turk, heard of him?

Yep.

He has done my image, in other words, my version of that image, black on red, on canvas, it's in the Saatchi collection and its worth a couple of hundred grand, which I think is quite funny as well.

And what about Andy Warhol, I've seen his version attributed to your

design.

Well, Warhol did his own version. At that stage, everybody knew that image.

Why do you say he did his own thing, I thought he used your silk-screen version?

Yes, but he did his own take on it. You know the way he puts a bluish pastel shadow all around everything. Well he probably drew it in black pastel and then it was printed, the one I saw was bluish. But he wouldn't have been aware of me, he'd been aware of the image.

It seems like the influence keeps going in and out of oblivion at various times. You didn't know Korda, Warhol didn't know you, Feltrinelli thought he knew it all. This was before Google though, so not everybody could know everything at once.

Nobody knew anything. I used to say to people, 'I did that', and nobody believed me.

So what can you say of influence as such, of borrowing elements of existing culture? As an artist, you draw on things you see. You need that to process culture and you take influence in order to push an idea or comment. Do you think culture could exist at all if this wasn't a fact?

I think all artists are magpies, everyone of us. My Celtic work for example, it started off with Mucha and now it's recognizably mine, but you have to start somewhere. At the time I did the Che Guevara poster, I was absolutely absorbed by Polish poster art. They had some amazing graphics coming out of there. And then there were the San Francisco Bay artists. They all produced these extraordinary posters, it was a massive boom. It was the same thing over here, but there was no poster boom in Ireland, so I joined in on the English end of things. That explosion of Carnaby Street, 'Swinging London'.

So the influence issue is at the core of creation. But what is interesting to me about the influence in the Che Guevara poster lineage, is that you can almost draw a straight line of political intent going from Che himself, then Korda's portrait of him that he let go of, and then your poster, all serving 'the cause'. But after this, it kind of explodes into all these contradictory uses. I see myself being at the end of the food chain. I was born in 1967 and my generation is mostly associated with apathy and the death of any revolution!

(laughs)

But I have to say, I've still had a great visual love for this kind of stuff. And the reason I've come to you through this, is that I have had this poster up on my own wall in New York for the last few years, with a stuck on Concorde flying above Che's head. That's my contribution to the image. I made it the year that the Concorde was taken out of traffic. As a sad nod to the end of...you know...the end of that kind of beauty and idealism. And those two together, the perfect revolutionary man and the perfect plane, fading off in memory together. So this is the image we are using for this invite of this show now, but I

would say 75% is physically your original poster still, and that's why I wanted to dig into the history of you having made it.

Well it starts with me meeting Che Guevara.

You've said you met him but have no evidence of it, what were the circumstances of this meeting and why are they doubtful?

I was working in a pub, it was a summer job from school, a priest had gotten me the job. I went to the Franciscan College in Gormanston, they got me a job in a hotel in a place called 'Kilkee', a little remote town, my mother was from there. I was working in the bar one day and Che walked in!

What year was this?

I think it must have been about '62. But there was no proof of him ever leaving Shannon airport, just proof that he had landed. Nobody ever even believed that he was in Ireland first. Then a photograph of him taken in Ireland appeared, taken by an Irish photographer, only about ten years ago I think. It's only been in the last recent years that the Che Guevara image has come of interest to the public, in terms of its gestation, how the image evolved.

So he walked into your pub?

He walked into the pub in broad daylight. And he had two people with him, they were burly, curly haired Cubans. I've read that Korda said he never drank, but my recollection is that he ordered an Irish Whiskey. I recognized him immediately because I was fully aware of the Cuban revolution. I knew of the facts, that there was an Irish Diaspora in Argentina. We were taught our history pretty well. We knew the founder of the Argentinean Navy was Admiral Brown. O'Higgins, the liberator of Chile, had a city, 'O'Higgins' named after him. I knew of all these close associations between the Irish and Latin America. The same way we are proud of the Irish in North America, a lot of people, if they knew more, would be proud of the Irish in Latin America, in their fight for freedom. I have a book on one of the very first Irish Conquistadores who is very strongly on the side of the Indians. It was Cornelius O'Crowley, an Irish Conquistador. Not everything is always Black or White.

But anyway, the Guevara family originally came from Galway and settled in Argentina, along with a huge number of Irish families from the midwest, from Westmeath. They later became, what do they call it? Whitelace Irish. They were the educated and slowly rose to the very top of the Argentinean society. Guevara's father was a doctor. Guevara trained as a surgeon and when I met him, he was the minister for finance in Cuba.

And what was your direct interaction with him in the pub?

I was only about 16, I wasn't expecting to speak with Che Guevara. I asked him vaguely about his roots, because he told me his granny was Irish. His great granny, Isabel, was from Galway, but he told me his ancestors were from Cork. I am pretty sure that's what he said.

Did he seem like he was actually there to look at his ancestral land?

No, not at all. He was curious, more from a revolutionary point of view. He had great admiration for the fact we were the first country to shake of the shackles of empire, we were the first country to start bringing down the British empire, which was the biggest empire in the world, if you remember.

But in that pub, to walk around among people and chat? How was his visit officially presented?

It wasn't an official visit. He was stuck. He was on an overnight flight from Moscow to Cuba. He touched down at Shannon airport. The Soviet airline had a refueling base there. It was fog so his plane couldn't take off, so I think they took a day off.

The Soviet fueling station makes it quite reasonable.

Aeroflot had a base in Shannon. We are supposed to be a neutral country. Americans now use Shannon as a stop-over for their planes going to Iraq. Both sides would refuel there. It's not the hub that it used to be anymore, planes simply overfly it now, in those days you couldn't. It wasn't a momentous meeting, but as a kid it was fun to say to your friends you had met Che Guevara. And they said, 'Who the fuck is that?'. But the personal experience gave me the impetus, that when he went to Bolivia, I'd follow his escapades.

I wanted to get back to the image as such. You said when you first found it in a magazine, you didn't know about Korda. But today, there is such an explosion of Che trivia, and it didn't take me long to learn, through I don't know how many accounts, about the exact circumstances of the photograph: Havana, 5th of March 1960, Korda was covering a memorial rally in Havana for the 100 plus crew members and dock workers who died when the arms cargo ship La Coubre exploded in Havana harbour, a terrorist bombing...

It was blown up by the CIA.

Cuba blamed the anti-revolutionary forces aided by the CIA. At the rally, Castro spoke from a balcony and Che stepped up next to him for a few seconds, enough for Korda to shoot him. He has been described in this moment as 'wild-haired', 'detached', 'visionary', 'with an expression of steely defiance'. That already, the image this man already conjured up in real life, on a purely performative level, that must have been a remarkable image of a revolutionary icon to watch, just waiting to be snapped.

Che was pure theatre, it's an Irish characteristic.

This is so amazing to me now when I am reading about all these layers following the photograph, because it is like the photograph was already a second layer to his personal charisma, and that was art already. Korda titled the photo, 'The Heroic Guerilla' but it wasn't published for another 7 years, until Che's death in the Bolivian jungle. So when he then got executed by the same forces he was defying in that posture, it makes the image so much more powerful, almost like

a premonition.

The reason there was such an interest in a live photograph of his, is that the American's were determined to photograph him when he was dead. There was a photo in circulation, I was tempted to use the photo of him dead, he had his eyes open, he looked like Jesus Christ, but I felt it would almost be profane to interfere with that picture.

But this was the image that his executioners wanted the world to see. His hands were cut off, he was laid out for everyone to see, and that image was plastered over the walls in Bolivia as proof of his killing. But instead what took off so intensely was the distribution of the heroic Korda shot. I think this is the understanding now, that his photo, but also the cultural ferment of the time, the rallying masses of the student revolts and the Vietnam War protesters, who needed and image and wanted Che to ,live!', immortalized him as a martyr of the revolution, as someone who really died for an idea. I can only imagine that your poster design must have amplified these sentiments and distribution many, many times over, as you contributed a whole new layer of sensuality, clarity and power to the photo.

You wouldn't be aware of this because of your age, but the image, was essentially a very rebellious image. It wasn't just the fact that he looked like a risen Christ. Because he certainly did. You say, ,steely determination' in his eyes. But he looked like a hippie. Long hair, that was an insult to authority. We all wore long hair to piss them off. And did we piss them off! I was stopped in the streets in Cork and in Dublin and told to cut my hair off! This was a symbol just as much as the man himself. The hair became a symbol. That has to be taken into consideration as well. Remember too, he was a symbol just as much in Eastern Europe as in the West. And in Eastern Europe, that's where all my stuff disappeared, they disliked him and thought he mocked authorities, just as much as he mocked the authorities here and in England and in America. They disliked the image, for they realized how powerful it was. Could a rally around a communist hero still be anti-communist?

Could you talk more about this?

The image of Che Guevara became a symbol of universal rebellion.

It eclipsed the ideology.

Oh, totally! Absolutely. It started off, I believe where it really started off, in Paris in 1968 revolution led by ,Danny the Red', Daniel Cohn-Bendit, he was shot but he survived. He was someone I admired greatly as well, but he is someone who started using the image during the street riots in Paris, and then it spread to a group called ,The Provos' in Amsterdam. These are beyond radicals. And all of us were really focused around the opposition to the Vietnam War and that became an opposition to our own governments. In France it became an opposition against the leadership of Charles de Gaulle, it became an opposition against the government itself, opposition against the opposition. It became an opposition, for the sake of opposition. The opposition parties weren't voicing these people's anger.

You saw all this happen, and what were you thinking?

I was enormously pleased. I thought the world needed changing. It has changed, not exactly the way I like it, but it has changed a lot in the direction I'd like it to go.

But the wildfire economy of the image, really, really served you and your ideas? You thought it should be applied to all those causes simultaneously?

I let the ideas loose, it didn't belong to me anymore. But obviously if you have those views that I have, no matter where you put it, it will always serve those views. I just came back from Russia, and a Che Guevara T-shirt there today would be just as offensive to authorities now as it was in our time.

Today it seems that the image still holds a lot of ground as a symbol for actual resistance. You say on your web site that both ,FARC' in Columbia and the Zapatistas in Mexico are using it.

I am not proud of the FARC, they've killed an Irish kid, Tristan Murray. But the most interesting place is in North America. Eight years ago I was in the ghettos of Los Angeles and saw the Che Guevara images appearing. I saw this band, the ,Black Eyed Peas', use one of those murals in the background for a video. The single went to number one here and in England.

But if we stick to revolutionary intentions...

But no, hold on, that IS revolutionary! This is Black and Latino America taking a symbol of anti-Americanism and plastering it on the walls of their ghettos, in America.

In a music industry context?

No, I am talking about the ghettos!

OK.

Latino ghettos are covered with the image of Che Guevara, and you go up to Belfast, you'll see the same image. But where I think it matters most, is where it is happening now, and that is in America.

I haven't seen any of that, but I have no relationship with ghettos, so I wouldn't know. But its pretty much consistent with what you are saying, that the openness of the idea allows for that. But to get to the flip-side of all of this, because there is also a really dark side of the openness here. And that is that revolutionary images of the past are also more and more introduced into corporate structures these days. And this is where Korda made a point of his limitations in 2000 by suing ,Lowe Lintas', the British advertising agency that used the image for a ,Smirnoff' campaign. There is a really distinct moment here where together with the ,Cuba Solidarity Campaign' in London who helped him to fight this cause, he set the record straight, saying that this is corrupt, that Che never drank, that it is exploitation. He got a settlement and then he donated the money to the Cuban health system,

to its childcare. I was wondering, this committee now, after Korda's death in 2001, is still out there watching out for ,unscrupulous use' of the image. Have you ever been contacted by them?

I called them. I offered them all rights I had to my images, which is essentially Korda's image. But I don't think they ever took it any further, I don't think they were that interested to be honest. I said I was the one who had created the poster and had all the documentation, but I suggested I hand over all the rights to whomever it belongs to and they would be the natural caretaker, but I don't think they knew what I was talking about. Wouldn't it be great if they had the whole lineage of it? I've never made any claims to it at all, I am proud of the fact that I was the person, you might say, who helped generate enormous interest in it, and by extension in Guevara himself and his life.

Well, so here is something really depressing I am going to tell you about. I have a recent article here from ,Utne reader' that is reporting on recent events that has to do with the copyright. It's from September 2, 2004 and they say an Atlanta company, ,Fashion Victim' they're called, that is using Honduras sweatshop labor to produce Che Guevara T-shirts, is now suing a Minneapolis company that has been doing the T-shirts for over two decades. They say that they have legally acquired the North American rights in 2002, from Korda's estate who, I must assume, with good intentions is trying to control the copyright by...simply controlling it. But here is the final twist to the story. What I wanted to ask, where do you fit into this?

I'll tell you where I fit in. They approached me to do the image. I said I didn't have the copyright and wouldn't take royalties. And they agreed all royalties would go to ,disarm.org'. And they would make sure that all royalties would be used to buy medicines and ship medicines to Cuba, to break the US embargo. I have that in writing from Fashion Victim. They then researched it further and got in touch with a company that claimed to represent the Korda family and dealt with them from then on.

It says here that Korda's family sold the copyright to David McWilliams' company, Fashion Victim, that has its T-shirts produced in Honduras.

Slave labor.

Yes. So this is the final twist to the story. And whatever that means, it means that that's the circulation of images. Copyright holders die, their families take over, the world changes and we are facing paradoxes. But what I am interested in, is that the whole industry of the Che imagery, the mass industry of Che paraphernalia now, from mouse pads to ashtrays to T-shirts, is mainly using the silkscreen process, which means they are mainly referring back to your posterized version of the image and not the photograph as such. So your creativity is always going to be part of that whole industry. Where does that leave you?

It leaves me on the outside looking in, where I've always been.

A perfect answer.

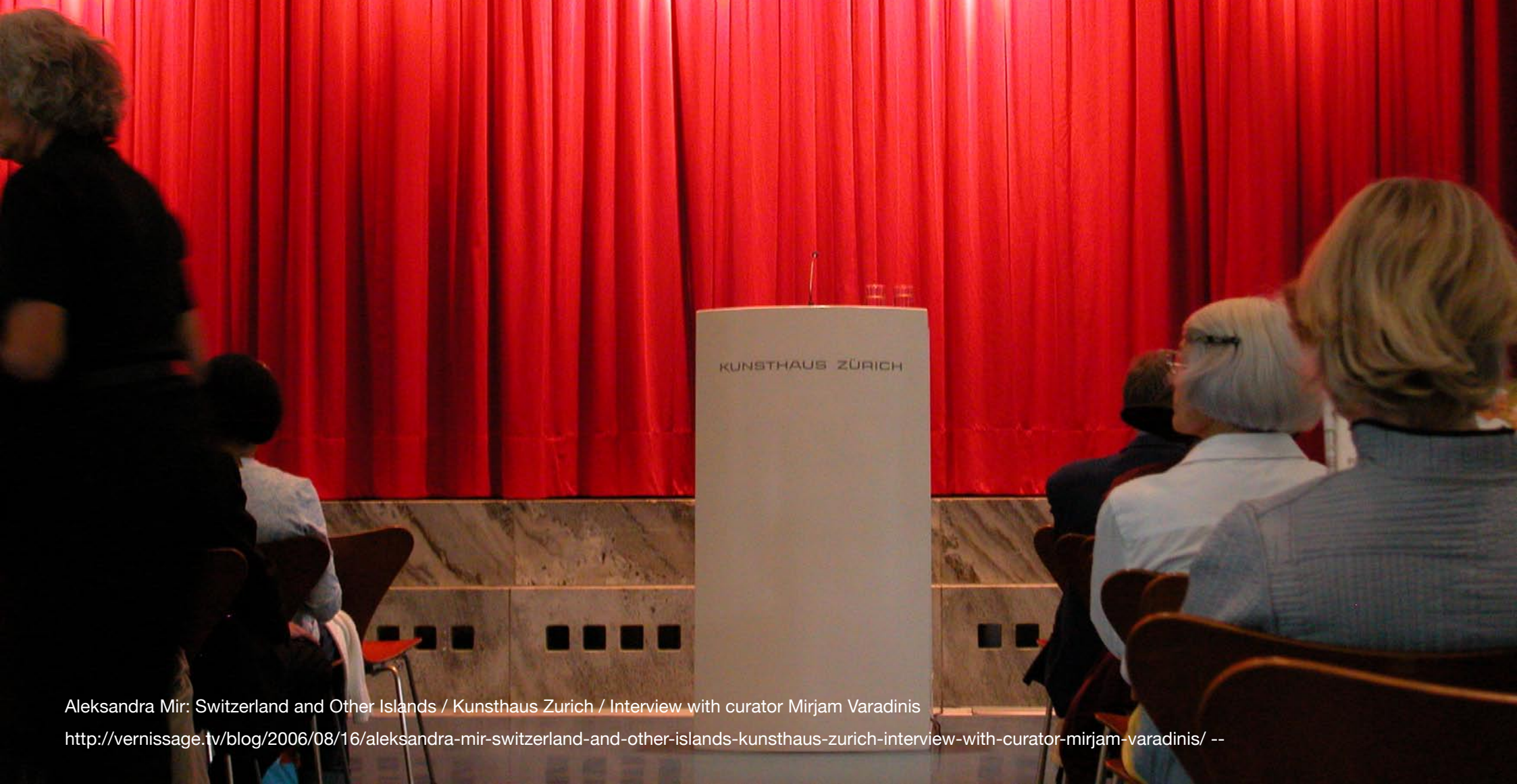
This interview first appeared on the back of the poster, produced as a piece of mailart, doubling as the invitation for the exhibition 'Communism', curated by Grant Watson at Art Space in Dublin, January 2005.

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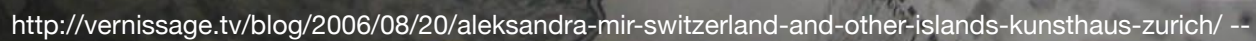
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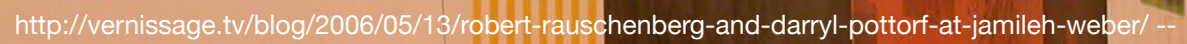
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Art openings and interviews / art project

VernissageTV

Munsterberg 1, P. O. Box, 4001 Basel, Switzerland

Phone: +41 61 283 24 55

contact at [vernissage.tv](http://www.vernissage.tv)

<http://www.vernissage.tv>

VTV correspondents:

Theodore Bouloukos, Philippe Cuny, Arno Dietsche,
Geoff Gilmore, Heinrich Schmidt, Karolina Zupan-
Rupp, Parichard Holm-Steakley, Gerold Wunstel,
Slim K, Pau Waelder, Lilli Kuschel, Mikko Gaestel,
Liza Foreman