

ALBENA MIHAYLOVA – BENDJI

Born 1959

About the Artist:

Albena Mihaylova-Benji was born on 9 June 1959 in Plovdiv. In 1978 she graduated from the High School for the Arts in Kazanlak. She graduated from the National Academy of Arts, Sofia, in 1984 in Graphics. In the years 1984-1994 Albena Mihaylova-Benji was an active artist with a number of solo exhibitions, participations in international biennials and winner of awards.

Benji has an almost legendary status as one of the first female figures in the Bulgarian neo-avantgardes of the 1980s and particularly in performance art. She initiated and participated in some of the most important collective actions at the time while also maintaining a strong solo career. Albena Mihaylova was the driving force behind one of the most emblematic collective actions/installations in the 1980s in Bulgaria – “The Dress”, 1989. “The Dress” was a gigantic white robe spread on the rocks at the sea side, with the help of ropes, on which the participants painted ritual signs. At the center of Albena Mihaylova’s creative interest is the recreation of the interrelation between the two-dimensional image and its spatial equivalent in installations and performances. In 1989 she was one of the founders of the legendary Plovdiv art group RUB. During that time, the artist inspired and led the organization of one of the first private galleries in Bulgaria – the Akrafov Gallery, which functioned as a resident center for contemporary art. Within this center, she created an art school and taught art in a method developed by herself. At the same time she was Associate Professor of Drawing and Perspective at the School of Performing Arts in Plovdiv.

In 1994, Albena Mihaylova-Benji left for Zurich at the invitation of BINZ 39 Foundation as a resident artist. As a result of this exchange, she has promoted the gallery under the International Resartist Program and organized the exchange of artists, projects and festivals between Bulgaria and Switzerland. In the period 1995-1998 Albena Mihaylova-Benji specialized in a Master class in Video Art at the Higher Art School of Basel, Switzerland. Since 2008 Albena Mihaylova-Bendji works as a documentary filmmaker and is a screenwriter, director and cinematographer. In 2009, she found a platform for cultural exchange, exhibitions and film festivals at Basel Kulturinstitut AM contemporary.

Currently the artist works and lives in Basel. Her creative biography includes her membership in the artistic group “VIA Audio Video Art”, her work in the governance of the creative union “Visarte Basel” and she leads workshops for Artlink Bern and Solothurn Higher Pedagogical School. She is a member of “Balimage”, an association of filmmakers and video artists, and the “Art Book Forum Basel”.

ALBENA MIHAYLOVA – BENDJI

1. *Lake and Tape*, 1985

Land-art performance at Murla Dam near Sopot, Bulgaria

Idea and Performance by Albena Mihaylova - Bendji

Co-participant: Vesko Velev

Photo: Vesko Velev

Museum version:

Group of 6 performance documentation photos - digital prints, edition 1/6 + 2AP

Text on the wall by the artist and curator Andrea Domesle, print on transparent foil, A4;

Original white tape from the performance, on pedestal under plexiglass

Edition: Museum Version - Unique

Ownership history: Sarieva Collection

ALBENA MIHAYLOVA – BENDJI, *Lake and Tape*, 1985

1. Print – 50 cm x 34 cm
Framed – 53,5 cm x 37,5 cm



2. Print – 50 cm x 31 cm
Framed – 53 cm x 34 cm



3. Print - 57 cm x 38 cm
Framed – 60,5 cm x 41 cm



4. Print – 50 cm x 33 cm
Framed – 53,5 cm x 36 cm



5. Print – 40 cm x 26 cm
Framed – 43 cm x 29 cm

6. Print – 40 cm x 26 cm
Framed – 43 cm x 29 cm



ALBENA MIHAYLOVA – BENDJI, *Lake and Tape*, 1985

Original white tape from the performance



Installation View "Open Art Files: Notes and footnotes", curator: Vera Mlechevska
16 August – 30 September 2019, Kapana gallery, Plovdiv



Text on the Wall by The Artist

"April. Murla dam near Sopot. With a rowboat, I cross the lake from coast to coast, spreading paper tape over the water's surface. Landscape is appreciated and intervention is sought, opportunities for contact with the land are recognized. In places along the coast, the tape wraps around a tree's crown, covers the terrain in the shape of a spiral, encircles shrubs or stones. The more the lake "wraps", i.e., it is taken over by human consciousness and intervention, the more the body develops and releases itself. While rowing the boat, I undress. I am sitting naked in the boat, in the center of the lake."

Albena Mihaylova

ALBENA MIHAYLOVA – BENDJI, *Lake and Tape*, 1985**About the work:**

“April 1985. On a Murla dam near Sopot.

It is sunny, but the weather is still chilly. I cross the lake from shore to shore on a row boat spreading paper tape across the surface of the water. The tape is floating on the surface as if trying to fly but manages to stay above the water and doesn't sink immediately.

The landscape has been analyzed and the interaction is intended. The possibilities for contact with the land have been considered. In places along the shore the tape wraps around branches of a tree, covers the ground in a spiral and wraps around shrubs and stones.

The more the lake is «wrapped», i.e. engulfed by human conscience and intervention, the more the body emerges and becomes free.”

Albena Mihaylova – Bendji

Lake and Tape, a land art performance held in April 1985, is significant in the history of Bulgarian art, for two reasons. First, it was one of the earliest performing acts in the country. The artist appeared surprisingly at the Murla Reservoir near the town of Sopot. The concept, time and place were carefully planned, but there was no public; let us not forget that it took place during a time when such actions were still very new and at best for small audiences of other artists. (The first action in nature, the installation “Dragon” of Vesselin Dimov, took place in the mountain of Strandja in 1983, and is today considered the first manifestation of the Bulgarian neo-avant-gardes).

Benji's land art performance was carried out in front of a group young people who accidentally happened to be there, and remained recorded for posterity only through the camera lens. The artist is seen in a boat while releasing a white paper strip that unfolds spirally on the water, along the shore, around a tree. The paper was the type used for electronic machines at the time, which Albena got with the help of a cousin, who was working in this field. Nature on the other hand becomes a co-author of the creative gesture of liberation. Albena rebellious gesture is gentle and full of poetic melancholy.

Among Bulgarian artists Benji is known as someone who has extensively studied examples of Western art, although her own artistic expression was decidedly intuitive and spontaneous rather than referential. With *Lake and Tape* however she seemed to respond to Robert Smithson's masculine gesture. His landartwork, ‘Spiral Jetty’, dated April 1970, on the Great Salt Lake in Utah, USA, was built over three weeks with the aid of heavy equipment, and still exists today. Albena Mihaylova counteracts, through her act, the stone spiral with feminine, fragile and ephemeral gesture.

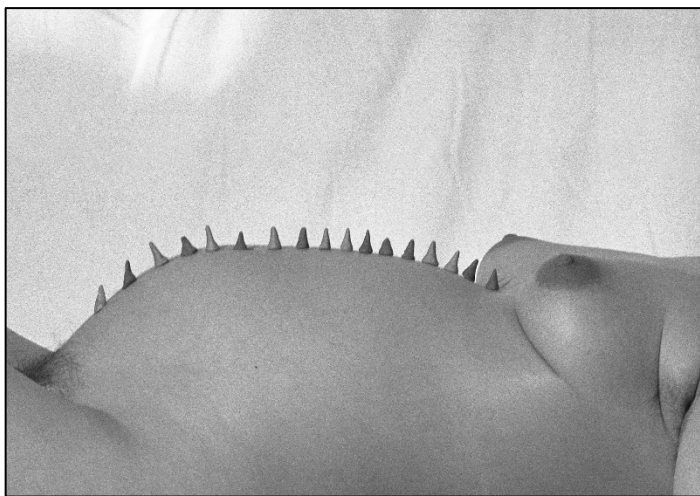
ALBENA MIHAYLOVA – BENDJI

2. *I am pissed off*, 1991

Photographs after the happening by Albena Mihaylova – Bendji
during the preparation of the Big Photography Exhibition by Rab (Edge) Group
Photographer: Nikolay Minchev

7 Black and white negatives; 2 original barite photographs and 5 digital prints

Ownership history: The Artist



“Big Photography” – Belly 1

1 Black and white negative, 6 cm x 6 cm

1 Original barite photograph, 90 cm x 60 cm, framed 105 cm x 75 cm

Edition: Unique

ALBENA MIHAYLOVA – BENDJI, *I am pissed off*, 1991

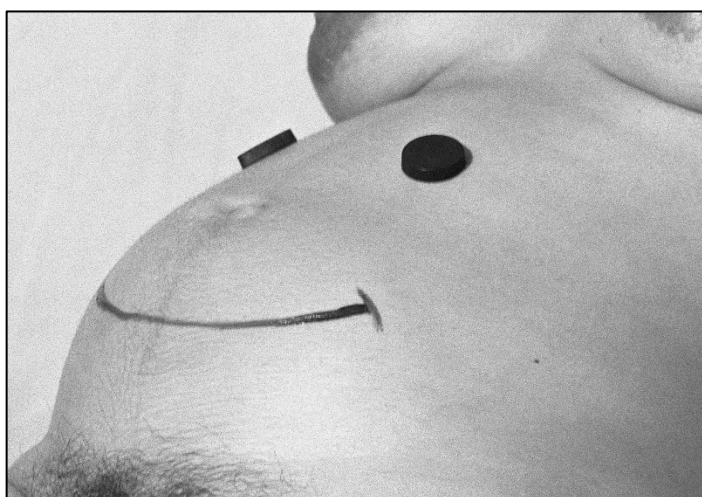


“Big Photography”- Belly 2

1 Black and white negative, 6 cm x 6 cm

1 Original barite photograph, 90 cm x 60 cm, framed 105 cm x 75 cm

Edition: Unique



“Big Photography”- Belly 3

1 Black and white negative 6 cm x 6 cm

1 Digital print, 90 cm x 60 cm, framed 105 cm x 75 cm

Edition: 1/8 + 2AP

ALBENA MIHAYLOVA – BENDJI, *I am pissed off*, 1991



4 Black and white negatives 6 cm x 6 cm

1 Digital print 60 cm x 60 cm each, framed 75 cm x 75 cm each

Edition: 1/8 + 2AP

ALBENA MIHAYLOVA – BENDJI, *I am pissed off*, 1991**About the work:**

Albena Mihaylova took extreme close-ups of her belly during the last weeks of her pregnancy. With a lot of humor she transformed her belly into different creatures. A lot of Albena's work focused on the female subject and spoke openly of topics often left untreated in the public space. According to Albena, the work was not so much about the load of a pregnancy, but about the burdens we all carry, about the succession and inheritance, that which is genetically coded and we cannot change, or can we? She used her body as a tool, as a blackboard to overcome the fear of bringing on display the subconscious, the intimate and the sacral, and exposed it publicly.

“The body as a poster, a place for open messages and as a sheet of paper to paint on. The body as an instrument or as a pop sculpture. The female body, pregnant and unprotected, with blinds on, as if to appear before a firing squad. Risk, challenge, cry and courage.

The person to come is preordained. The child does not want to live the way reality dictates. Who remembers the winter of 1990? The ice on the streets, the empty stores where there was no milk and the lines in front of the shops started at 4 in the morning.

My mother used to wrap rags around her feet and leave our home at night to queue in front of the store. When they opened up at 7 o'clock in the morning there was enough milk for about a dozen people, the ones who were first in line. “

Albena Mihaylova - Bendji

The images were taken at the time when Albena and the EDGE Group were preparing their exhibition “Big Photography” in Plovdiv in 1991. Three details of this photo-happening made it into the exhibition and carry that title. The first two of them – Belly 1 and Belly 2 are the originals from the exhibition.

ALBENA MIHAYLOVA – BENDJI, *I am pissed off*, 1991

Further reading:

Big Photography Exhibition, 1991

The second show of the Edge group, titled „Big Photography“ took place in the spring of 1991 in Plovdiv. It differed from their first show „Symbols and Signs“ mainly in its non-conceptual and experimental substance. Here the collective work seemed to have receded to the background. This was rather a show of single individual artists united by the same materials and technical means.

The show offered a large number of works that could be defined as “photographs” with a various degree of relativity. The show was a kind of homage paid to photography, which had been very slowly making its way within Bulgarian art since the 1970s. For decades Bulgarian artists were not daring to allow this “non-artistic” medium within their studios. Photography entered Bulgarian art in a big way together with the art forms of the assemblage and the installation, etc. in the late 1980s. The artists of the Edge group were underlining the expressive potential of the visual language of photography as well as its technical capacities as a carrier of a new freedom of thinking and of a new type of communication between the work and the viewer.