

# **IN ACT. PERSONAL EXPERIENCES**

Performances / Land Art / Actions / Happenings  
1985–1995

by  
Bendji /ALBENA MIHAYLOVA

1985

### **Lake and Tape**

Land-art performance

at Sopot Dam near Karlovo, Middle Bulgaria

Performance by Bendji / Albena Mihaylova

Co-participant: Vesko Velev

April. On a lake between Sopot and Karlovo.  
I cross the lake from shore to shore on a row boat  
spreading paper tape across the surface of the water.  
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.

As I row I take off my clothes. I sit naked in a boat in  
the middle of the lake.



Performances 1985–1995\_Bendji /Albena Mihaylova

1985

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Performances 1985–1995\_Bendji /Albena Mihaylova

1986

### **The Golden Girl**

Performance by Bendji / Albena Mihaylova

On a river near Bratsigovo, Southern Bulgaria

Co-participants:

Anya Gaydova and Dimitar Grozdanov

The performance is an interpretation of the folk tale of the Golden Girl. The mother in law sends the girl to a river, which changes its colors. When the golden water comes in, the girl must retrieve a treasure box from the bed of the river. In this case the girl retrieves a box that is always empty.

The performance mirrors the unpredictability of the eighties and is a reflection of the internal fear of the upcoming and the «unknown». The water changing colors is a parallel to winds of change that were already being felt.



In 1995 Bendji / Albena Mihaylova enrolled in a Video Art masterclass in Basel. She made her first video based on visual materials (slides) from this performance, to which she added video and sound.

**The Golden Girl**, Video, color, sound, 5 min >>>





1987-1988

### **Waiting for UFO**

Action-performance in the Municipal Park of the town of Levski, Northern Bulgaria

Concept by Bendji / Albena Mihaylova

Organizer Dimitar Grozdanov

Co-Participants Veneta Marinova, Petya and many others



October, in the Municipal Park of the town of Levski, Northern Bulgaria.

The event was intended as a workshop of sorts for the children of the local orphanage.

Benji appears in a plane mechanic's suit from the fifties. She comes down a ladder from a tall tree and announces the imminent landing of a UFO.

Everyone is anxious to see it. There are long nylon sleeves under the trees in the park.

The children help us gather dry leaves to stuff them with. The leave-filled tubes are suspended from the trees marking landing spot of the «expected». Many passersby decide to take part in the event, a huge hustle and bustle is created.

The joy of what is to come is palpable.

We are notorious for being passive as citizens. Everyone is used to and expects change to come from the «top» or to be caused by supernatural forces.

The event is a subtle and playful commentary of that idea. It is a portent of the coming changes and is a spar of hope for participants and spectators alike.

1988

**Burial**

Group performance at Dzhufara near Sopot, Middle Bulgaria

Participants: Bendji / Albena Mihaylova, Kolio Karamfilov, Dimitar Grozdanov, Vesko Vele, Svetlaka

February, the 1st.

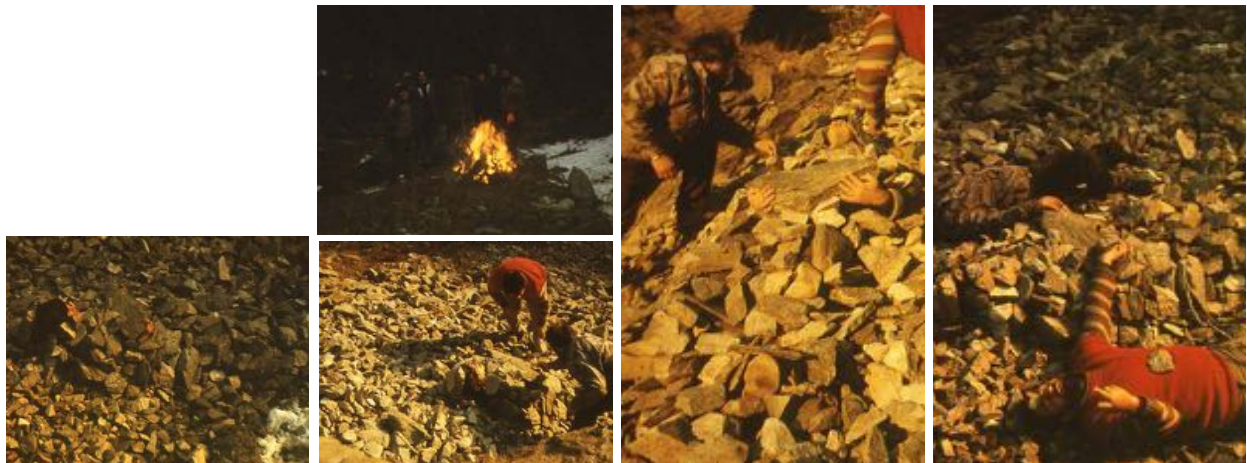
Albena Mihaylova / Bendji, Kolio Karamfilov, Dimitar Grozdanov and Svetlaka are visiting their colleagues Ivan Tomanov and Vesko Vele in their studios near Sopot. The mood is gloomy.

The idea of a joint project emerges spontaneously. The group goes for a walk in the forest and reaches a small rock-slide in the area of Dzhufara. Kolio Karamfilov, Bendji, and Dimitar Grozdanov bury each other beneath a layer of jagged slates.

This group act is a clear refusal to be a part of reality. The political situation at that point in time has reached extreme, inhuman levels, hope is a negative value, life seems stripped of any value, we exist on a day-to-day basis.

The salvation of the spirit requires physical self-destruction.

This unique performance remains under analyzed and poorly documented.





Performances 1985–1995\_Bendji /Albena Mihaylova

1998-99

**Disclosure**

Performance on the Rhine River, France

Albena: «After my Video Art master classes in Basel I repeated the main idea of this performance. I buried myself under a pile of rocks at the banks of the Rhine River outside of Basel. This time I used smooth river rocks and my body remained vulnerable and open in its bareness.»

The key moment of the 1998-99 performance was the de-piling, the dis-covering, and the shake-off. I documented this act using my first digital video camera.

Video **Disclosure**, color, sound, 5 min



1989

### Burning of Documents

Performance by Bendji /Albena Mihaylova

In front of the building of the Artists Union

at the opening of the Annual Youth Exhibition in Plovdiv, Bulgaria

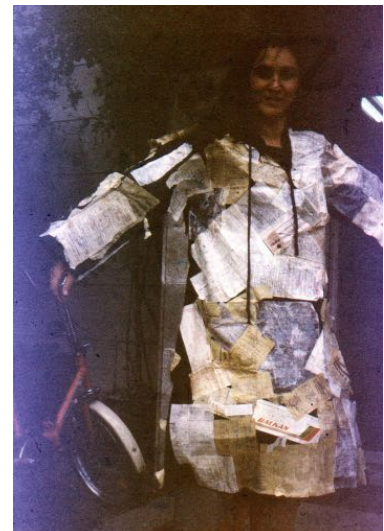
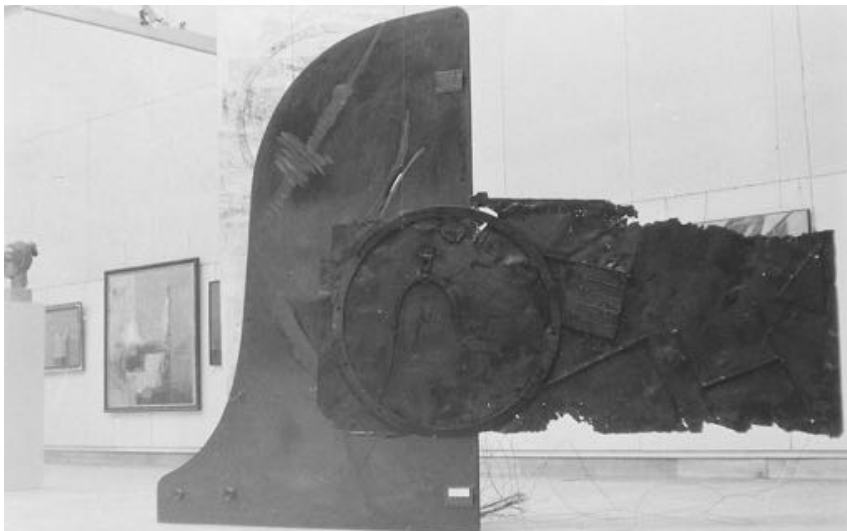
April, the opening of the Annual Youth Exhibition in Plovdiv. The monumental installations of Kolio Karamfilov and Bendji / Albena Mihaylova occupy unusual display areas such as the sidewalk in front of the building or suspended from the skylights of the exhibition room.

Visitors are shocked and the fellow artists are surprised when, without any prior notice, Bendji takes off the strange robe she has been wearing until that point, places it on the sidewalk in front of the gallery and sets it on fire. The robe is a collage of various different personal documents of the artist – police reports, sailing injunctions, bans from exiting the country, fines for contacts with foreign citizens, etc.

Like a papier-mâché sculpture or effigy, or an empty human shell, the robe goes up in flames like a living person.

Visitors lay down the flowers they have brought with them to the exhibition next to the charred remains.

The artist's act resembles the self-immolation of Jan Palach in January of 1969. It has been only 20 years since the Invasion of Czechoslovakia. AT the same time, this is the author's reaction to the repressions of the communist regime during the so called Revival Process of the mid-eighties when Albena became an unwitting target of the Security Service for her relationship with a boy with Turkish ethnic origin.





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1989

### The Dress

Group action in the locality of Resort Complex Albena, Eastern Bulgaria  
By Bendji /Albena Mihaylova, Dimitar Grozdanov, Todor Balev, Hristo Gospodinov, Sulzina Baleva, Galya Yotova, Yordanka Simeonova, Tsetso Manev, Gosho, Vera, Tatyana, Plamen, Svetlio, e.t.c.

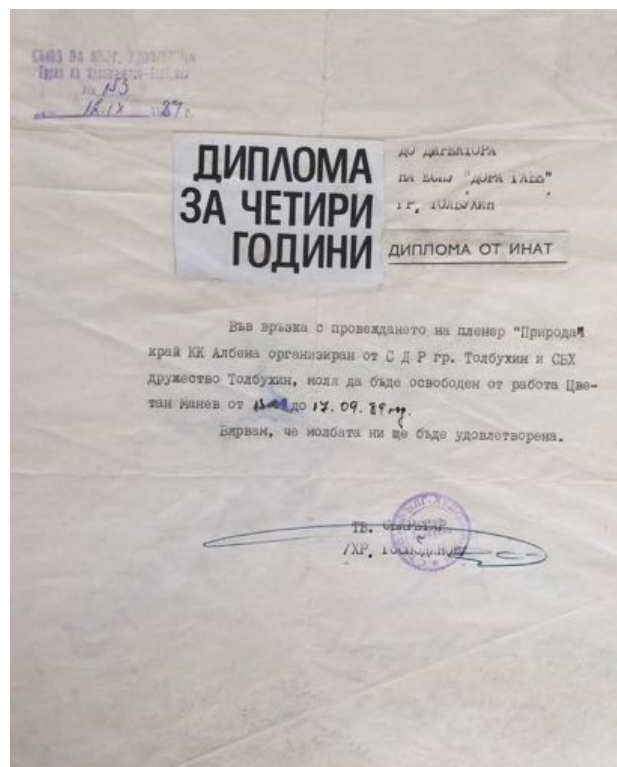
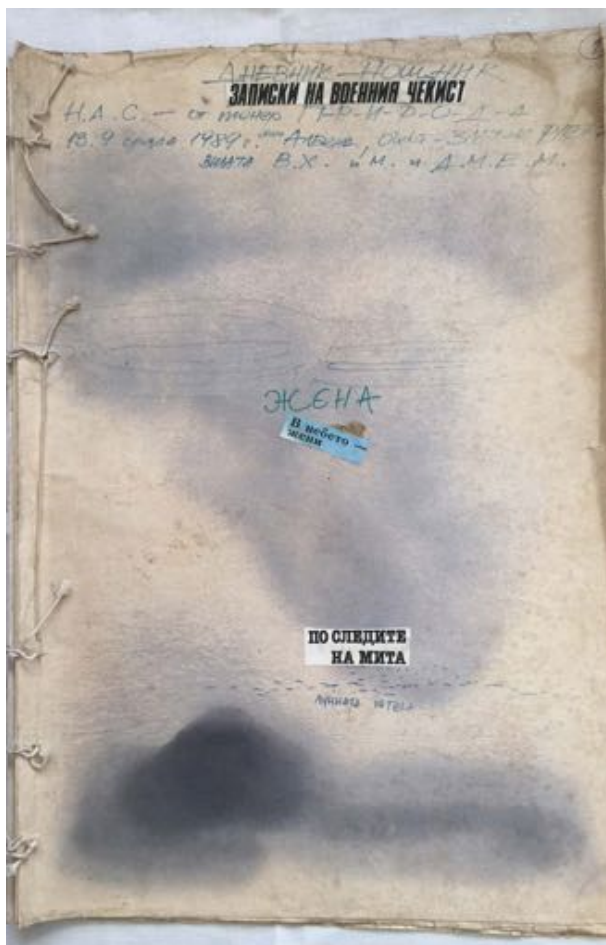
13–19 September, Hristo Gospodinov's summer house, Resort Complex Albena, Eastern Bulgaria. The Union of Bulgarian Artists (SBH) Tolbuhin (now Dobrich) has organized a traditional plein air entitled Nature. The artists have chosen their spots and are about to start painting using traditional techniques. My spot is up on the tower in the compound. I read Mircea Eliade, look at the sea through a pair of binoculars and write in my diary-nightary. I get the idea of making a giant female robe to connect the high cliffs and the sea. The terrain is a rockslide, hard and dangerous, but our group is determined. We need about 150 meters of sturdy white cotton fabric, paint, brushes, lumber, and ropes. While we are making the dress, everyone is wearing improvised formal attire made from the cuttings of

the Dress. Everyone is playing their own role and creating their own performance. The process is incredibly intense and creative. We are working on the promenade and the many passers-by take keen interest in what we are doing.

The action is well documented by the two photographers in our group, Galya Yotova and Yordanka Simeonova. There is also a video camera on site.

The Dress is displayed as an installation at the emblematic art exhibition «11. 11.1989» in Blagoevgrad, when the news of Todor Zhukov's ousting is broken.

The Dress is also a part of the Large Photography Exhibition of the EDGE Group in 1991.



To be able to take part in the plain air, Tsvetan Manev, artist and art teacher from the town of Tolbuhin, had to get an Official Release Notice from the Chairman of the Union of Bulgarian Artists in Sofia.

1989

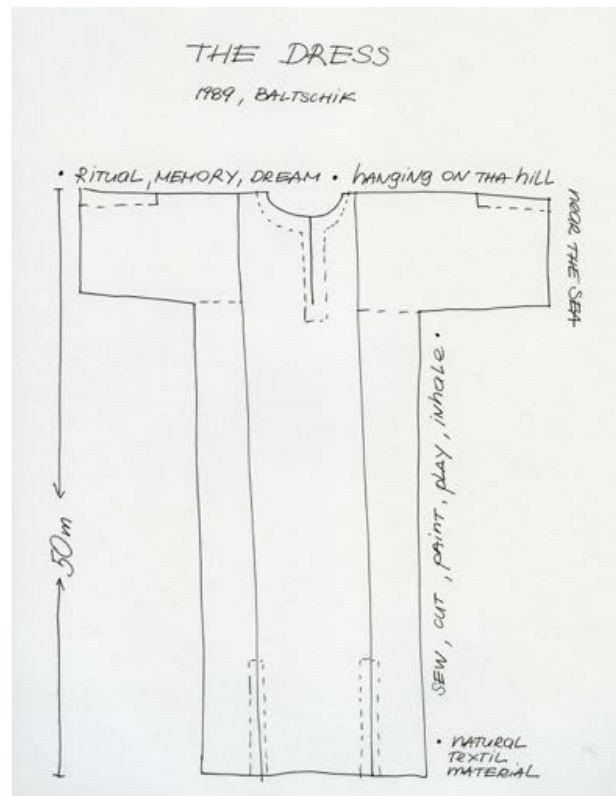
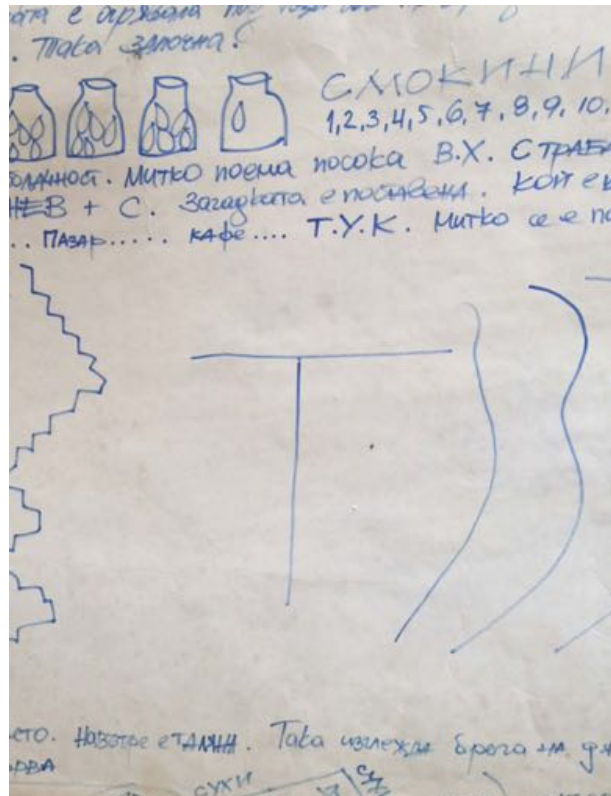
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1989

### Breathing Exercises

Performance by Bendji /Albena Mihaylova during the exhibition Earth and Sky on the roof of the headquarters of the Union of Bulgarian Artists, Sofia, Bulgaria

October, the 17th. On the roof of the building (the Union of Bulgarian Artists in Sofia) during the Earth and Sky Exhibition, Bendji /Albena Mihaylova does the Breathing Exercises Performance. She is wearing a rubberized hazmat suit and her head is covered with a mask made of silver foil, which lets barely enough air in for her to breathe. Bendji ties a parachute (D-42) to the roof railing and prepares to jump while performing different breathing techniques. She can see through the mask, but remains hidden from the eyes of her audience. Her act is politically provocative and symbolizes the suffocation of the individual by

society, not being allowed to have an independent opinion or free expression under the communist regime. Up to that point the roof of the building had never been used for display purposes. Later, artists from Atelier of the Young Artist gain access to the roof and make it their own new space in an act of political independence.

During the exhibition the roof becomes a meeting place for dissident artists who read their poetry there. The exhibition is constantly surveilled by agents of the State Security Service.





1989

**Denial of the Object**

Series of group performances during the exhibition Earth and Sky on the roof of the headquarters of the Union of Bulgarian Artists, Sofia, Bulgaria  
Performers: Bendji /Albena Mihaylova, Dimitar Grozdanov and Sasho Stoitsov

October, 27th. On the roof of the building during the Earth and Sky Exhibition, Bendji /Albena Mihaylova puts on her second performance. She ties two men (Dimitar Grozdanov and Sasho Stoitsov) down to chairs. This time it is their heads that are covered with foil. They hold objects, with no clearly discernible purpose in their laps. She takes these objects from them and then releases them by cutting the ropes. The act of their physical liberation is symbolically sacral.

She then turns into a small child, lies down in an old child's bathing tub band starts inflating balloons. The artists Nedko Solakov and Valentin Stefanov take the tub with a ritualistic pomp and place it on a pedestal. Death and birth converge. During the Earth and Sky Exhibition the roof of the building is literally crawling with plainclothes law enforcement officers. Dissident poets read their poetry in front of crowds of people who have come here to hear them. The tension is palpable.



1989

**Enclosure**

Series of group performances during the exhibition Earth and Sky

on the roof of the headquarters of the Union of Bulgarian Artists, Sofia, Bulgaria

Performers: Bendji / Albena Mihaylova, Asen Botev, the curator of the exhibition Diana Popova

Bendji / Albena Mihaylova is in action yet again during the Earth and Sky Exhibition teaming up with the artist Asen Botev on the roof. She encloses the Object, Asenn's Body.

The artist Asen Botev is apparently ready to be sacrificed just to see the changes coming.

Revolution is an intrinsic need and, as we have been taught, revolution requires sacrifice.

The performances are documented with 35-mm camera by a professional crew from the Vreme Studio and by the photographer Georgy Kepenerov.





1990

**Behind the Wall**

Action–Performance at the building of the University of Sofia, Bulgaria

Performers: Bendji / Albena Mihaylova, Ralitsa, Dimitar Grozdanov, etc.

Makeup: Allain Rois

Photography: Takor Kyurdian

Video: Georgy Kepenerov

March. The winter after the fall of communism I son its way out. Sofia University hosts the 10x10x10 Exhibition by Section 13. This is the new name of the former Atelier or Club of the Young Artist.

The attic of the University of Sofia has remained inaccessible for a long time, closed off with plywood. One of them has a hole in it allowing you to see what is on the other side.

The artist Georgy Todorov notices the hole and claims it as his own form of conceptual art. We do not know what awaits us on the other side, but we will get through, that is for sure.

A portrait of a Party big-wig from the Cult Times meets us head-on. Fossils, gypsum casts, mammoth camps and busts of Lenin roll in the dirt, formaldehyde jars and faded red stars are everywhere. Bendji, Ralitsa and Mitko have white tape wrapped tightly around their bodies. Alain paints on their faces. Bendji dons her aluminum foil mask. The three of them start running in circles, their actions resembling cleaning, sweeping, and even fighting with clubs. Going from one room to another, their tapes become looser showing their bare bodies.

The make-up and the decors make them look more aggressive. They are in a trance-like state. Bendji lies down on the floor next to Lenin and embraces the tusk of a mammoth... Their actions are a sacrifice.

*...In a test-tube, mausoleum, cocoon, mummy, death as a birth or revival...*



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1990

### **The God's Feet**

Sound performance in the National Palace of Culture, Sofia, Bulgaria

Sound: Jazz singer Yildiz Ibrahimova, Hristo Yotsov Quintet, percussionist Alain

Performance: Bendji / Albena Mihaylova, Dimitar Grozdanov, Ralitsa and Mila

April, 14th, in the Hall 1 of the National Palace of Culture, Sofia. Sound and vision during the concert of Hristo Yotsov Quintet featuring the vocalist Yildiz Ibrahimova and a guest percussionist Alain from Luxembourg.

Old copper pots and pans suspended on ropes, shattered glass, a ladder and paint-soaked fabrics form parts of the jazz composition and stage visuals. While the Jazz singer Yildiz Ibrahimova is doing her vocal improvisations the musicians make all manner of noises with these unusual musical instruments.

The actions of the three performers resemble stylized ritualistic acts typical of Easter Week – washing Christ's feet, painting in red... bringing to mind the theme of wounds, self-destruction, self-humiliation, forgiveness and humility.





Performances 1985–1995\_Bendji /Albena Mihaylova

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Sound performance in the National Palace of Culture,  
Sofia, Bulgaria

Sound: Jazz singer Yildiz Ibrahimova, Hristo Yotsov  
Quintet, percussionist Alain

Performance: Bendji / Albena Mihaylova, Dimitar  
Grozdanov, Ralitsa and Mila



1990

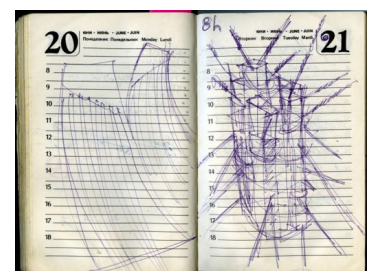
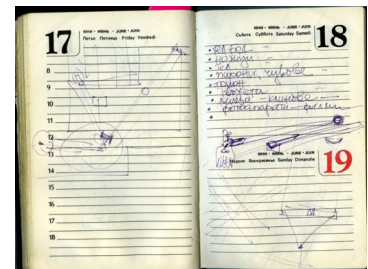
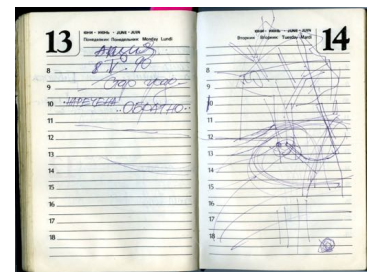
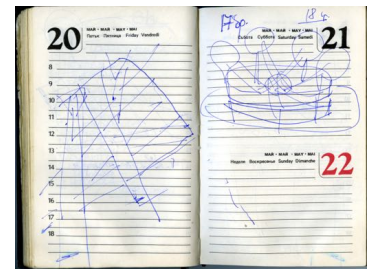
### Root high in the sky

Action / Land-art at the Old City of Plovdiv, Bulgaria  
By Bendji /Albena Mihaylova, Nadya Genova, Monika Romenska, Veneta Marinova etc., members of the EDGE Group

May, 8th. The name of the action is controversial. In Bendji's diary it is referred to as Reverse. The idea for it comes from her namesake collage inspired by Binyo Ivanov's poem «A Root High in the Sky»

The ties/ railway bars are also provided by Bendji. She purchased a truck-load of used railway ties from a railway yard in Plovdiv and spent several years working with this material. Her work resulted in the exhibitions entitled Name of the Object and 1 and 2 shown in Sofia, Plovdiv, and Dobrich. The fabrics were donated by the Maritsa Plovdiv Factory.

On the day of the exhibition the Bulgarian National Television films a documentary about the EDGE Group. The men from the group are occupied giving interviews so their participation is from periodic to minimal. Because of this, the Land Art Action was female-heavy. Later that year the Land Art and modified pictures of the process of creating it, were displayed in the Labyrinth Exhibition in the Union of Bulgarian Artists, Sofia. The installation for the exhibition is constructed by Bendji / Albena Mihaylova,, Nadya Genova and Emil Mirazchiev, members of the EDGE Group.





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EDGE Group

*The Land-Art displayed as an Installation in the  
«Labyrinth» Exhibition in Sofia.*



Performances 1985–1995\_Bendji /Albena Mihaylova

1990

### **Transition**

Performance by Bendji /Albena Mihaylova

During a plain air event at the Creative Center for Artists in Turgovishte, Northeast Bulgaria

Photographer: Yordanka Simeonova

May, 17th. A wide, white paper tape is spread on the ground from the gates of the compound to the door of the building. On it is a tube of clear plastic pipe with diameter of approximately 50–60 cm.

Bendji / Albena Mihaylova enters the nylon tube with her hands behind her back and tries to move forward. Deprived of the use of her hands she crawls forward by convulsing her body. The nylon sticks to her soaking wet body making it even harder to move. She manages to cover the distance to the house and emerges from the other end of the tube.

The performance gives the audience a feeling of being suffocated, constricted, and unable to move forward. Her act has a cathartic effect on her and the people who have witnessed it.



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Performances 1985–1995\_Bendji /Albena Mihaylova

1990

**No name**

Performance by Bendji / Albena Mihaylova and Nadya Genova during the «Ear of Van Gogh» Exhibition at the Akrafov Gallery in Plovdiv, Bulgaria

December, 12th. The Akrafov Gallery is hosting the «Ear of Van Gogh» Exhibition. The Exhibition is highly conceptual, but the motivation of its creator and participants is highly personal.

Bendji is 5 months pregnant. There are two candidates to be the father of her child.

The idea for the performance is inspired by a personal drama. While working on a sculpture for his exhibition, Bendji's husband, Dimitar Grozdanov, cuts his leg with a chain saw. The parallel to Van Gogh is clear. The performance takes place «behind closed doors». Its main theme is the number 2 in various different aspects and its relation to the female body and gender-related issues. The two stylized female figures will become a signature motif in the upcoming exhibition by Bendji and Nadya. The two artists have forged a working nucleus. They share a studio in the Old Town of Plovdiv and do joint exhibitions and intricate conceptual performances. At this time they are actively collaborating with the EDGE Group.

*Curator of the exhibition «Ear of Van Gogh»:*

*Dimitar Grozdanov*

*Photographer: Nikolay Minchev*



Performances 1985–1995\_Bendji /Albena Mihaylova

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Performance by Bendji / Albena Mihaylova and  
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Exhibition at the Akrabov Gallery in Plovdiv, Bulgaria



1991

**I am pissed off**

Happening by Bendji / Albena Mihaylova  
during the preparation of the Big Photography  
Exhibition by EDGE.

Photographer: Nikolay Minchev

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

starting 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 in the morning there was enough milk for about a dozen people who were first in line.

This was the time when we and the EDGE Group were preparing the Big Photography Exhibition. Three details of this photo-happening made it into EDGE's exhibition.





1991

**I am pissed off 2**

as a sequel to I am pissed off Happening  
by Bendji / Albena Mihaylova and with Stefania  
Photographer: Rumen Zhekov, artist and member  
of EDGE Group

Days after Bendji / Albena Mihaylova gives birth to  
her daughter, there is a second photo session.

The baby has on its back and head the same attri-  
butes and cones on playdough. Succession has be-  
come a fact.

The two photo sessions make it into the Annual «Kai-  
mak Art» Exhibition by Section 13 and get second  
prize. The prize is a large ceramic phallus. It is pre-  
sented by the exhibition's curator, Yara Bubnova.  
I threw it out not long ago for which I have come to  
regret.



1991

**Reverse**

Performance by Bendji / Albena Mihaylova and Nadya Genova, featuring the Ap'art Theater Company  
In the Youth House of Culture, Plovdiv

Our decision was to perform live with no prior arrangements, discussions or rehearsals – a joint performance with the Ap'art Theater. They had no idea of what we were going to wear or what materials we were going to use in our study. We wore black clothes with black nylon capes. Our faces were painted black. They were like masks essentially. We moved slowly and had all types of photographic, projection, and measuring devices in our hands –slide lanterns, compass, glasses, megaphone. We would say a word in the microphone and Ap'art would

answer with an improvisation like noises, words, touches, shifting around objects such as cones and so on.

Most of the props were from my previous solo exhibitions or group installations, a bridle from the Alay installation of the Symbols and Signs Exhibition, cardboard cones from the Root High in the Sky Land Art and so on.

Ap'art took it to heart. They created many emotionally saturated moments while we were frozen like floating

stern masks.

At times they were following and mirroring our movements. Then they would switch to being afraid or curious of what we were doing. The idea behind the performance was the nature of the relationship between men and machines and the ability to communicate through electronic devices or without them. We took the emerging technologies and juxtaposed them to the classic and human reactions to their intervention.



Performances 1985–1995\_Bendji /Albena Mihaylova

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In the Youth House of Culture, Plovdiv





1994

### Last Hemd

Performance by Bendji /Albena Mihaylova and Pedro Cobler

Culture factory Wetzikon, Switzerland

In 1994 Albena leaves for Switzerland on a scholarship by BINZ'39. There she puts on several performances with the young Swiss performance artist Pedro Cobler.

The Last Hemd Performance is consequence of a conceptual 30-day process – a time during which the two of them do not communicate with each other and travel to different places making daily assessments of what they have come in touch collecting the material vestiges of their experiences and thoughts.

The performance is inspired by the proverb “The last shirt has no pockets” which is an interpretation of the meaning of the material after the end of life, in death. The performance is put on at the Wetzikon Cultural Factory and its dramaturgy is subjected to the individual approaches of the two artists.

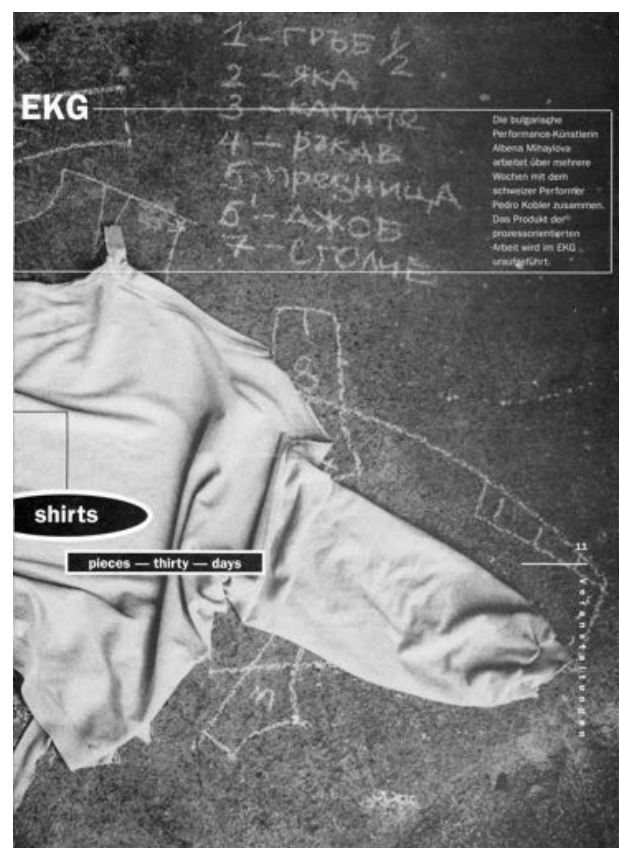
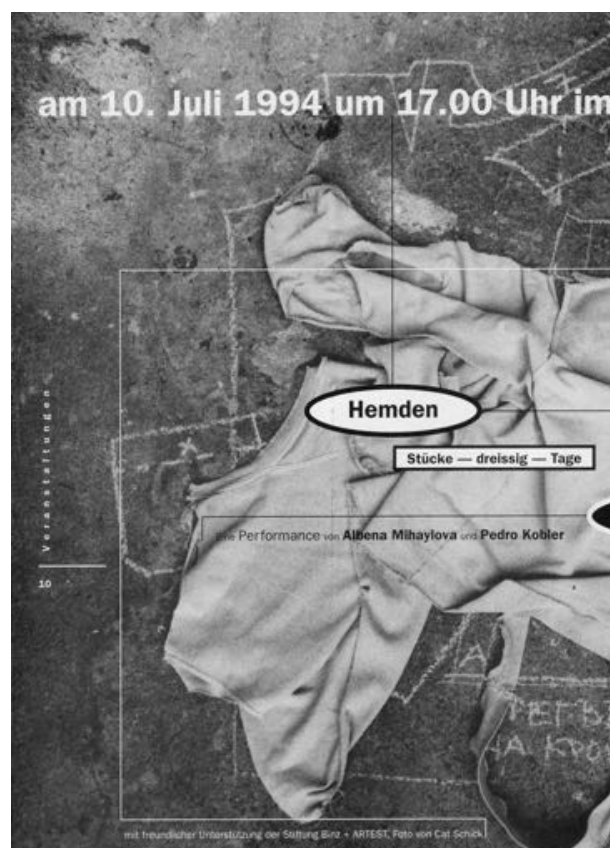
At one end of the warehouse on two opposing walls there are two similar installations, one by Pedro and one by Albena. The two of them have collected in plastic bags things they have been gathering for 30

days. Each item has a label stating its place of origin and the date and time at which it was collected.

The next stop is a multitude of white shirts hanging on the walls left and right. There are contact microphones installed in the area of the hangers broadcasting the sound of every touch over the PA system.

There are seven real-time stops in the performance:

- A sawing machine and a megaphone where Albena reads her grandmother's fairy tales with a machine-like cadence;
- A metal bathing where Albena lies curled in the foetal position while Pedro is performing a ritualistic baptism pouring water on her;
- A podium where a pocket-shaped matrix is being printed on the white shirt with microphones capturing every whisper of every fold;
- An area where words are not allowed and pose a threat, where Albena and Pedro crawl into a shared shirt literally battling each other until the shirt is shredded to pieces.



Performances 1985–1995\_Bendji /Albena Mihaylova



1994

**Last Hemd**

Performance by Bendji /Albena Mihaylova and  
Pedro Cobler

Culture factory Wetzikon, Switzerland

Performances 1985–1995\_Bendji /Albena Mihaylova





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Performance by Bendji /Albena Mihaylova and Pedro Cobler Culture factory Wetzikon, Switzerland



1990–1995

During this period Bendji / Albena Mihaylova works with the EDGE Group, which she co-founded.

Each event by the Group is a performance, action or happening of sorts.

