

Lene Berg: *Encounter*

March 17th – May 5th, 2007

Midway Contemporary Art is pleased to announce the opening of a new exhibition featuring new work from Norwegian filmmaker and artist Lene Berg. The exhibition will open to the public on Saturday, March 17th, with an opening reception from 6 – 8 pm.

Encounter is a two-part project comprised of a publication, *Gentlemen & Arseholes* and a video, *The Man in the Background*. The project addresses western cultural politics and propaganda during the Cold War, in particular with the role of artists and intellectuals working for the organization the Congress for Cultural Freedom (1950-1967), also called the Liberal Conspiracy.

Today anyone can read on CIA's homepage that *"The Congress for Cultural Freedom is widely considered one of the CIA's more daring and effective Cold War covert operations. It published literary and political journals such as Encounter, hosted dozens of conferences bringing together some of the most eminent Western thinkers ... Somehow this organization of scholars and artists – egotistical, free-thinking, and even anti-American in their politics – managed to reach out from its Paris headquarters to demonstrate that Communism, despite its blandishments, was a deadly foe of art and thought."*

Encounter: Gentlemen & Arseholes consists of the first issue of the cultural journal *Encounter* from 1953, along with a series of supplementary materials that Berg inserted between the original pages. The inserts were collected over a long period, from books, newspapers, private albums, conversations, and so on, and thus vary in their character and form. What they all have in common is that they describe aspects of that which, for various reasons, was never mentioned in *Encounter*, nor in connection with any of the other undertakings of the sponsor and publisher, *the Congress for Cultural Freedom* (CCF), among other things who paid the piper and why.

The first issue of *Encounter* contained texts of among others Virginia Woolf and Albert Camus, and in the editorial one can read that the men (there were no women) behind *the Congress for Cultural Freedom* were united, despite great dissimilarities, by a "love of liberty and respect for that part of human endeavor that goes by the name of culture." Through the inserts a series of unexpected stories, facts and images intrude upon the original journal, and place it, and the various contributions, in a somewhat different light.

The inserts can be read alone, in relation to the original texts, from beginning to end, or in a higgledy-piggledy way; they do not comprise an unambiguous narrative, but are rather a series of tracks, puzzle pieces and circumstantial evidence – but of what? A liberal conspiracy? A successful state-sponsored cultural effort carried out by a powerful intelligence agency? Or one that created many dilemmas, and perhaps resulted in the very existence of the world we now live in? Perhaps it made no difference whatsoever? How can we assess the consequences of art, literature, philosophy, and research? And did the CIA use artists and intellectuals for its own purposes, or was it, in fact, just as much the other way around?

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In 2006, Berg's project was presented by the publisher *GreenBox* at Art Forum in Berlin, and in Oslo at *No 9 in Exile* and *Torpedo, Art Bookstore*. On March 7th, the project will be presented at the Office for Contemporary Art Norway's new program in New York City.