

An artful exchange of cultures

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Last summer, five members of the Mobius Artists Group traveled to Macedonia. All performance and installation artists, and all women, they set up shop with five of their Macedonian counterparts in an abandoned 16th-century Turkish bath and created a three-day event, "Liquor Amnii."

This month, the Macedonian artists have come to New England. They're staying with their friends from Mobius, and the 10 artists have put together a second "Liquor Amnii" as part of Providence's Convergence X International Art Festival, which takes place today and tomorrow between the College Street and Crawford Street bridges along Riverwalk Park.

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JANET KNOTT

Zaneta Vangeli is one of five Macedonian artists exhibiting in Providence.

Artist exchange makes cultural connection

■ MACEDONIA

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The idea for the exchange arose when Mobius codirectors Marilyn Arsem and Nancy Adams visited Macedonia two years ago as part of an arts administration exchange with Mala Stanica, an arts center in the capital city of Skopje. Last July, Arsem and four others flew to Skopje and moved into the homes of the Macedonian artists.

Suzana Milevska, a Macedonian curator, managed the details of the Skopje project.

"None of the artists knew each other. The Americans and Macedonians had different methods of working. The Turkish bath is a big space, but it consists of little rooms, and I had to find the appropriate room for each artist," she recalls.

The Americans, she says, were thirsty for knowledge about the space, the city, and the country, which formed its own government after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

"Most of the Americans were performers," says Milevska. "They were rehearsing, rethinking the process. They wanted to know the history of the space, the context. The Macedonian artists didn't work in historical terms. They were installation artists, dealing with their intimate experiences."

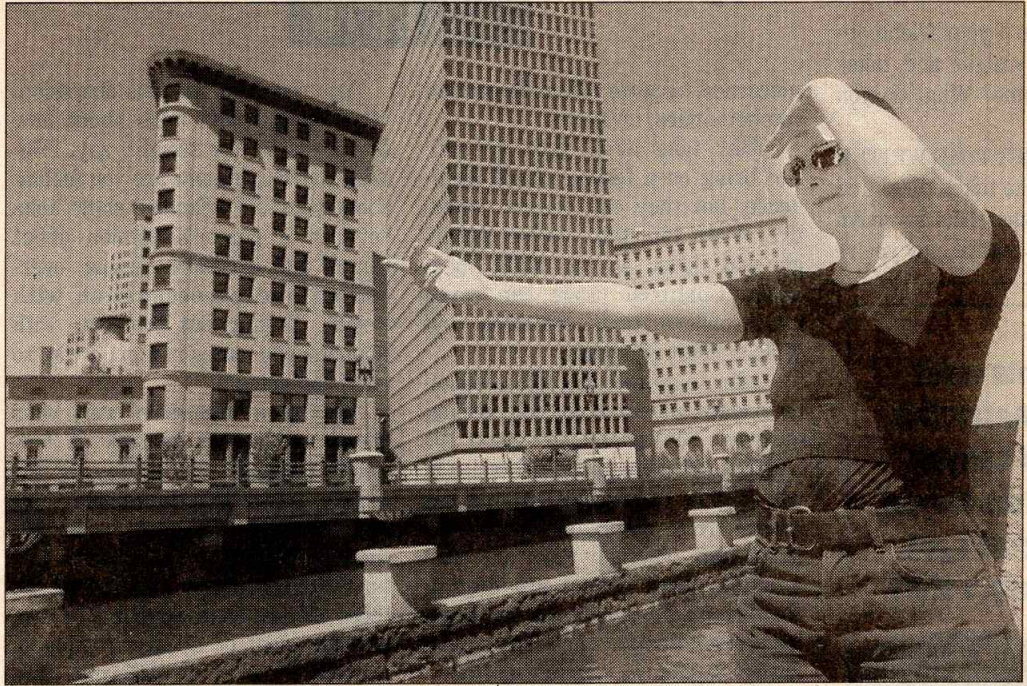
Cathy Nolan, one of the Mobius artists, took her performance to the streets. She saw herself as an archetypal traveler.

"My work started to be about my cultural heritage, in a consumer culture," she says. "I carried games and plastic toys in my bag. I started outside, and carried my suitcase and collected things. I didn't expect to be helped. But the first night, an old man carried my suitcase the entire way."

"I had made the choice to be silent, and he's trying to understand where I'm from. I just pointed to where I was going."

This year, Nolan's baggage has gotten more cumbersome. For her performance as traveler in Providence, she plans to drag a barge up the Providence River.

She'll be wearing an evening gown and white gloves, but she expects she won't be able to pull the barge from the bank by herself. If need be, Nolan will walk right into the river. "We'll see if anyone helps,"



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / JANET KNOTT

Mirna Arsovska checks out exhibit locations along the river in Providence. She and four other Macedonian artists will join Boston's Mobius Artists Group today and tomorrow at the Convergence X International Art Festival.

she cracks.

Giving a stranger a helping hand is more common in Macedonia than in the United States, Nolan says. And that's not the only thing.

"I fell in love with Macedonia. It was so beautiful, and we were totally immersed in the artwork," she remembers. "And we were honored in Macedonia! Art is more respected than it is here."

Iskra Dimitrova, one of the Macedonian artists who initiated the exchange, is enjoying her time in New England.

"The USA looks very exotic to us," she admits. "It's exotic when you see it on TV. When you see it in reality, it's exciting. 'Hey, I'm here!' I like this country very much."

"Double," Dimitrova's installation at Riverwalk Park, continues her body of work about the ritual circle of birth, death, and self-initiation. She works with wax and wool, and will submerge her piece in the river.

Water is the common element between the installations at the Turkish bath and those in Providence. (In fact, the show's title, "Liquor Amnii," means amniotic fluid.) The baths were damp and dark, dusty and crumbling, with no electricity. The installations there had an imposed interiority that delighted the artists.

The Mobius artists tried to find a similar space in Boston. They asked about some old Turkish baths in

South Boston, but the building had burned. They put their heads together with city officials to find a building that could accommodate 10 separate installations. They had no luck, so when the Convergence X Festival presented itself, they jumped on it. But not without apprehension.

"We heard it was an open space and we were disappointed," admits Milevska.

"We were, as well," says Arsem.

"In accepting this location, we had to accept that in some ways it's the opposite [of the Macedonia site]. It's outdoors, full of water, brand new, very bright."

Macedonian Zaneta Vangeli had to rethink her plans to continue the installation she had mounted in Skopje. "But then I started to see it as a challenge. There is no bad space. You can make an exhibition in every space. When I saw pictures and video of the park, I let it inspire me."

Vangeli's Providence piece, "The Constant Desire for Eternity," fea-

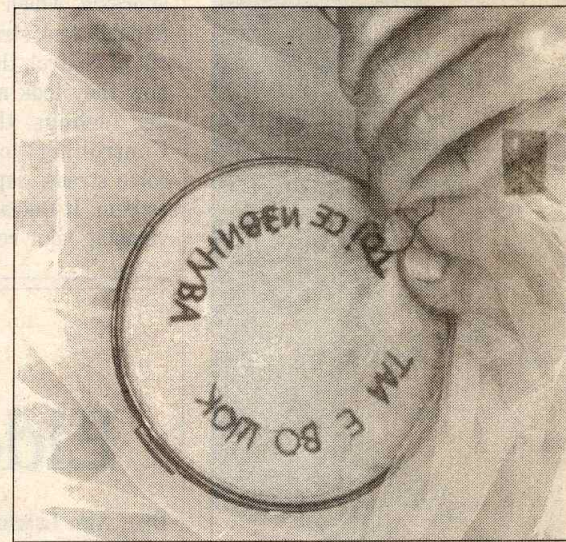


PHOTO / BOB RAYMOND

"Wedding Albums," by Mobius artist Margaret Tittlemore, part of the "Liquor Amnii" exhibit.

tures a red carpet leading to the river's edge, where life preservers dangle. American flags fly over the site. The artist intends to conflate the religious ideals of eternal life with the notion of the kind of freedom America offers to immigrants.

For Nora Stojanovik, the collaboration with the Americans has opened up many new avenues of thought.

"It brings up questions or issues of communication," she says. "Building and rebuilding relations. We have water, time, space, to work with. A new continent. New people."