

In the framework of the Creative Europe project

(In)Visible Traces: Artistic Memories of the Cold War

Olja Triaška Stefanović

Artist in Residence 2025

Organized by **BLOCKFREI** at **STUDIO DAS WEISSE HAUS**
Hegelgasse 14, 1010 Vienna





Olja Triaška Stefanović (1978) is a visual artist and photographer, born in Novi Sad, in the former Yugoslavia. During the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, she immigrated to *Bratislava, Slovakia*, where she completed her studies and PhD at the *Academy of Fine Arts and Design (AFAD)*, where she currently lives and works. She is an Associate Professor at the *Academy of Fine Arts and Design* in Bratislava.

Stefanović's practice centers on the historical, political, and cultural legacies of the former Yugoslavia and the broader post-World War II period. A recipient of the 2022–2023 Fulbright Scholarship at Parsons School of Design / The New School in New York, she conducted visual research on the Cold War, further deepening her engagement with themes of memory, forgetting, and geopolitical transformation.

Her interdisciplinary projects frequently examine the context of the Non-Aligned Movement, decolonization, utopia, solidarity, and specific heritage of the Cold War era, often drawing on archival materials, photography, and sound.

Stefanović's recent work includes the solo exhibition *Stories from Around the Non-Aligned* in Berlin (November 2025) and the forthcoming artistic book *Yutopislavia: Intimate Stories of the Non-Aligned*, set for publication in May 2025.

She has also been awarded a residency at *Headlands Center for the Arts* in San Francisco, where she will develop a new project with Cold War veterans at the Nike Missile Site. Her works are held in private and public collections, including the *Slovak National Gallery* in Bratislava and the *City Gallery* in Nitra, Slovakia.

The Residency in February at DAS WEISSE HAUS

In February 2025, **Olja Triaška Stefanović** was an artist-in-residence at **STUDIO DAS WEISSE HAUS** in Vienna, where she presented her new multimedia installation *Aren't They Cute?*, focusing on animal diplomacy during the Cold War.

Her residency was awarded following the acceptance of her concept by the **BLOCKFREI Collective** at the end of 2024. Olja's work explores the hidden stories and relevance of the Non-Aligned Movement, alternative cartographies, and Cold War

narratives, with a particular focus on the theme of Animal Diplomacy. This approach combines historical Cold War heritage with a playful, fictional perspective on animals, drawing on archival materials, museum displays, and historical traces. During her residency, she produced a multichannel media installation reflecting this research. Additionally, a workshop was held at **STUDIO DAS WEISSE HAUS** to engage younger generations through artistic and playful methods of sharing Cold War history.

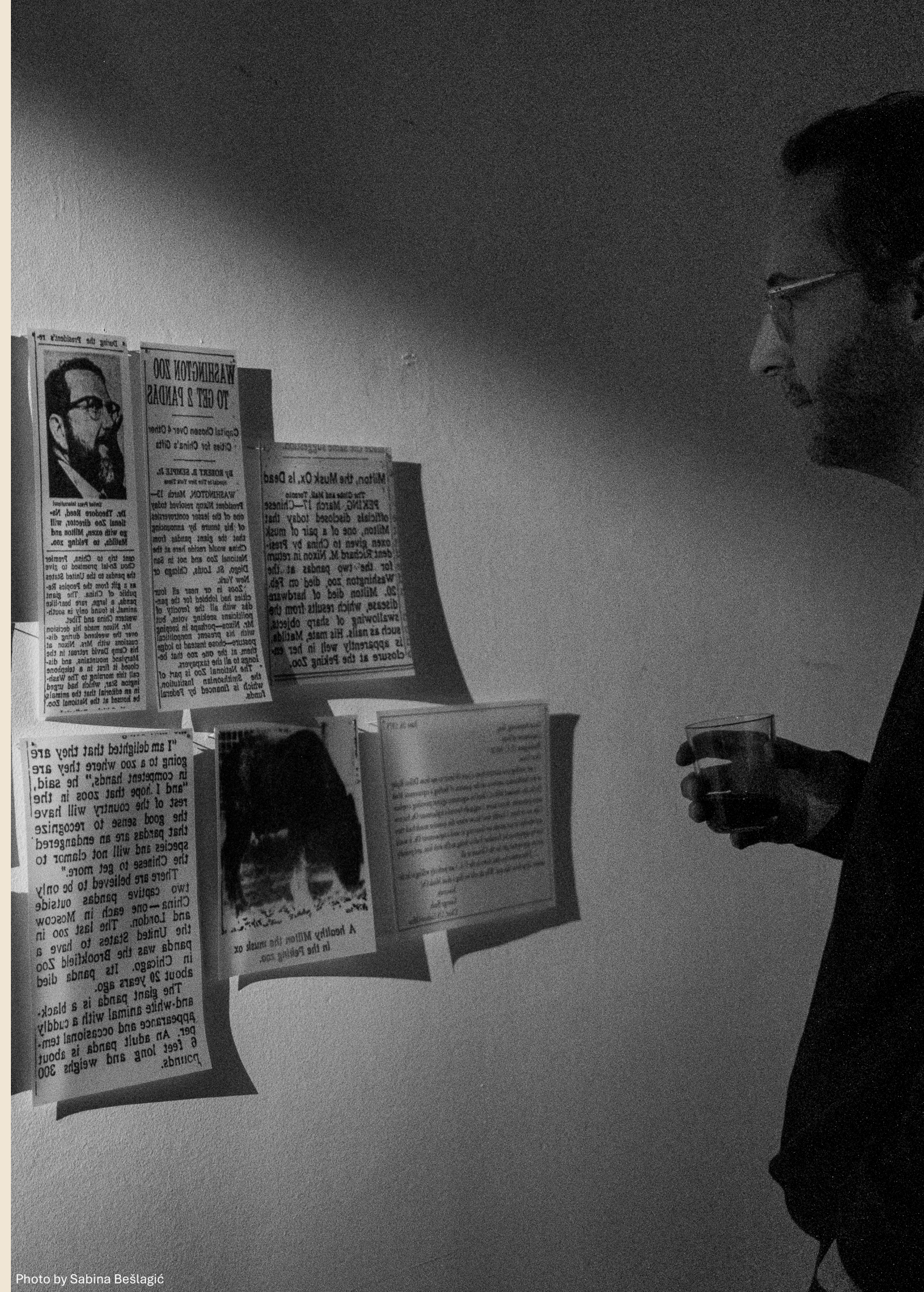


Photo by Sabina Bešlagić



Untitled #1, from the series Hunting and Animal Diplomacy, digital collage, archive material, archive newspaper, private collection, 2024



Untitled #3, from the series Hunting and Animal Diplomacy, digital collage, archive material, archive newspaper, private collection, 2024

Her project, *Animal Diplomacy (gifting) and Cold War*, culminated in the multimedia installation *Aren't they cute?*, which interrogated how the gifting and commodification of animals-through both hunting and diplomatic exchange-became subtle yet potent instruments of power, propaganda, and cross-cultural negotiation.

The artist's residency focused on exploring Cold War-era animal diplomacy through an interdisciplinary approach. Central to the work were site-specific photographic and multi-channel video sound installations that examined emblematic diplomatic

animal exchanges, such as the Soviet space dog Pushinka gifted to President Kennedy and the giant pandas Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing presented to the U.S. after Nixon's 1972 visit. These symbolic gifts, widely publicized as gestures of goodwill, also concealed complex political and ecological implications. The project integrated archival materials from presidential libraries to contextualize these events, inviting reflection on the ethical, political, and environmental dimensions of animal diplomacy during this period.





**Public Events within the framework of the
Residency at STUDIO DAS WEISSE HAUS**

**Workshop - “Remapping Cold War Geographies”
by Olja Triaška Stefanović (February 23, 2025)**

The workshop on Cold War geographies “Remapping Cold War Geographies” by **Olja Triaška Stefanović** offered a critical exploration of how the Cold War transformed global physical, ideological, and cultural landscapes, moving beyond the traditional East-West perspective. The workshop specifically targeted young participants aged 19 to 30, encouraging them to engage with historical knowledge and bridging activities of the Cold War era, including aspects they might not have previously known. This engagement was intended

to foster a deeper understanding of the Cold War’s complex global impact yet to reflect on the hidden, personal aspects of that era. Participants engaged in discussions, visual analyses, and creative exercises to examine the roles of borders, alliances such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and cultural exchanges in shaping global geographies during this period. The workshop also highlighted how these historical geographies continue to affect contemporary political, social, and cultural dynamics.

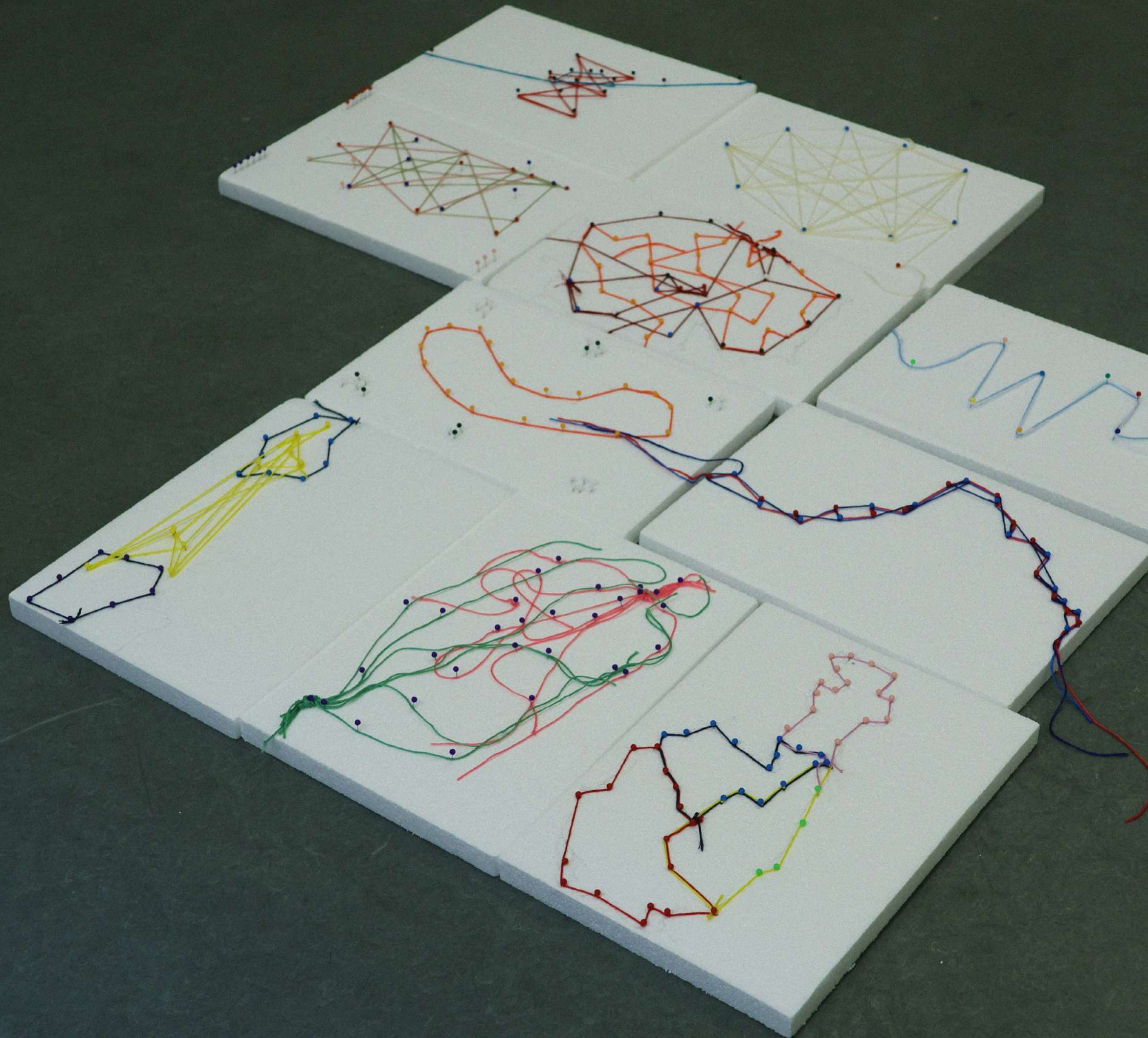
The program introduced participants to the geographic and political landscape of the Cold War, aiming to enhance critical thinking and spatial reasoning through map-based activities. It encouraged creativity and collaboration by involving participants in assessments themed around Cold War maps and fostered an appreciation for the historical significance of the Iron Curtain, decolonization, and the emergence of independent states in Africa and Asia. Activities included engaging presentations on Cold War geographies that incorporate iconic films like „Dr. Strangelove“, „Fail Safe“, „WarGames“ and „The Russians Are Coming“ bring key topics to life. Interactive group tasks help participants visualize Cold War borders and trace the influence of events such as the Berlin Airlift and the Cuban Missile Crisis.



Throughout the workshop, participants gained an overview of Cold War political divisions, cultural diplomacy, and contested territories. They learn to critically reinterpret Cold War narratives through visual art, cartography, and archival materials, while creative exercises invite them to „remap“ these geographies by imagining alternative realities.

By the end of the workshop, participants develop a deeper understanding of Cold War geographies and their ongoing relevance, producing creative outputs that reflect their personal reinterpretations of this complex historical era. This approach underscores the Cold War as a profound global reconfiguration that continues to shape political maps, alliances, and cultural landscapes today.

The workshop brought together a diverse group of participants from across Europe, Africa, and South America, each contributing unique perspectives shaped by their varied background.



Artist Talk & Multimedia Installation

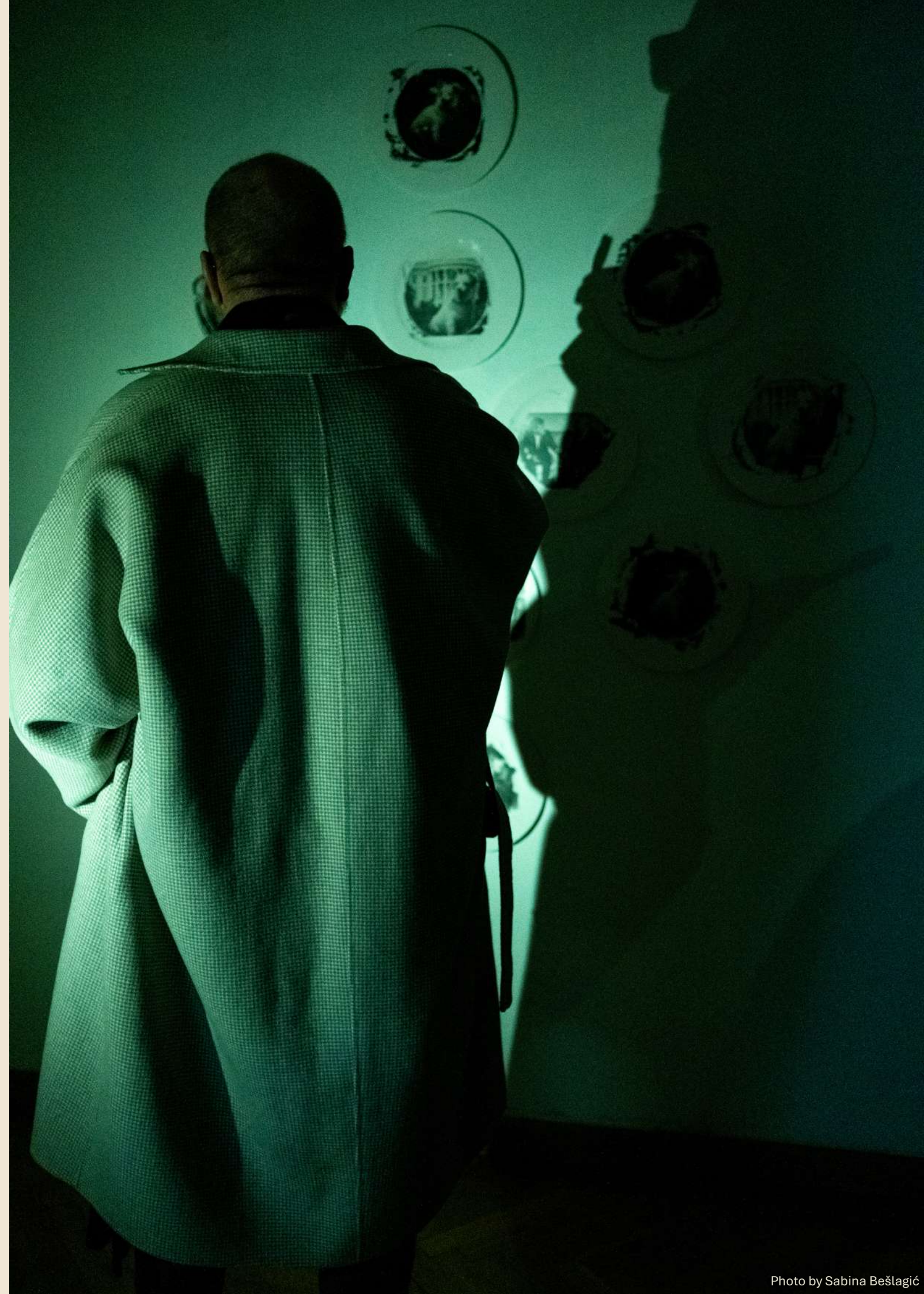
February 27, 2025

During her artist residency, **Olja Triaška Stefanović** presented the project „**Animal Diplomacy (gifting) and Cold War**“ culminating in the multimedia installation and artist talk on Thursday, 27 February 2025 during her residency. **Olja Triaška Stefanović's** multimedia installation “*Aren't They Cute?*” (2025) emerged from interdisciplinary research residency at **STUDIO DAS WEISSE HAUS**.

The installation critically examines the nuanced role of animal diplomacy during the Cold War through an interdisciplinary, site-specific work combining photography, archival materials, video, and sound. Central to the installation are two key works: Pushinka, a photographic installation, and Hsing-Hsing and Ling-Ling / Milton and Matilda, a four-channel video sound piece. The latter incorporates archival sound, including Nixon White House tapes

featuring conversations between *Richard Nixon*, *Pat Nixon*, and journalists, which highlight the performative and strategic aspects of animal diplomacy.

Stefanović's research focuses on emblematic episodes such as the gifting of Pushinka, the Soviet space dog's puppy, to President Kennedy, and the exchange of giant pandas Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing from China to the United States following Nixon's 1972 visit—an act reciprocated by the U.S. with musk oxen Milton and Matilda. These exchanges, widely publicized as symbols of goodwill and cross-cultural collaboration, simultaneously masked ongoing political tensions and, in the case of the musk oxen, tragic outcomes. The installation reveals how animals were entangled in complex diplomatic gestures that embodied both friendship and domination.



The project's realization was deeply rooted in extensive archival research, including visits to Viennese museums such as the *Wien Museum* and the *Natural History Museum*, as well as engagement with online archives like the John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon Presidential Libraries and the United Nations Archives. This research provided access to primary sources, photographs, official documents, newspaper collections and audio recordings that enriched the conceptual framework and informed the installation's visual and sonic layers. Two Archive Walls complement the central works by presenting curated collections of newspaper articles and documents from the presidential libraries, situating the artistic inquiry firmly within historical contexts.

By weaving together sound, archival material, photography, and video, the installation invites viewers to critically interrogate the ethics of animal gifting, the roles of animals as symbols and commodities, and the environmental consequences of these Cold War practices. It foregrounds the overlooked intersections of animal life, cultural diplomacy, and global power struggles, illustrating how acts of animal diplomacy — ostensibly gestures of friendship — were deeply entangled with propaganda, environmental transformation, and the politics of representation. Ultimately, the work serves as a meditation on the lasting political and ecological legacies of the Cold War era and prompts a critical re-examination of our relationship with nature under the shadow of geopolitical power.





Overall, Olja Triaška Stefanović's residency at **STUDIO DAS WEISSE**

HAUS in February 2025 culminated in the presentation of her multimedia work *Aren't They Cute?*, which critically examined animal diplomacy during the Cold War. The residency enabled her to conduct in-depth archival research in Vienna, enriching her project with historical artifacts and narratives that highlighted the paradoxes of using animals as political and cultural symbols.

This residency output not only deepened the artistic practice of Cold War politics through an ecological and political lens but also expanded her interdisciplinary artistic practice.

The residency thus served as a platform for advancing the marginalized exploration of Cold War legacies in a contemporary artistic context in the framework of the Creative Europe project *(In)Visible Traces: Artistic Memories of the Cold War* which was organized by **BLOCKFREI** at **STUDIO DAS WEISSE HAUS**.



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