

REVIEW

Just Life

Damjan Kozole's *OHO Film* (2025)

VOL. 154 (APRIL 2025) BY ISABEL JACOBS

Having its international premiere out of competition at the 31st Sarajevo Film Festival, Damjan Kozole's *OHO Film* (2025) resurrects one of Yugoslavia's most fascinating art collectives. Active between 1965 and 1971, OHO first appeared in Kranj before establishing itself in Ljubljana, eventually radiating out across the Atlantic. The name OHO fuses *oko* (eye) and *uho* (ear) with *oho!* (exclamation of wonder). Born of playful experimentation and anarchic rebellion, the group dreamed of nothing less than creating a new civilization: one in which humans and things, freed from consumerist logic, could peacefully coexist.

Kozole spent years researching personal archives, unearthing rarely seen drawings, 8 mm reels, recordings, and underground journals. *OHO Film* reflects the breadth of the group's interests, from conceptual art, philosophy, science, and poetry to environmental activism. Their ambition was not to exhibit artworks in white cubes but to "move into life." With the exception of the Šalamun brothers, Kozole reunites nearly all the protagonists of the group for his film, among them Marika and Marko Pogačnik, David Nez, Naško Križnar, and Iztok Geister.

Set against Laibach's ambient score, the documentary tells OHO's story chronologically. Voice-overs guide the audience through a montage of experimental shorts, performances, objects, and texts. The director's aim, as he explains, is for viewers to immerse themselves "in the world of OHO from the sixties, to experience it as if that world still exists, and to return to reality only when we slowly exit the movie."¹ The film conjures the spirit of the hippie era as members wander Ljubljana in pajamas, roll a comrade inside a tire, or restage Slovenia's highest mountain in the middle of the city. "There is no mythologising," Kozole insists, "just life."²

Among the recovered gems are Naško Križnar's film *Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown* (*Devetnajsti živčani slom*, 1966), Marko Pogačnik's animation *Eye* (*Oko*, 1967), and David Nez's mystical performance *Cosmology* (*Kozmologija*, 1969), all works that embody OHO's "bricolage" method, "which means that you have no plan of what you'll do in your mind." They created more than fifty short films and dozens of objects,

including a book without beginning or end that could be read from all sides. As one member recalls, “at the time, we had more courage than brains.” It was this fearless spirit that made them the first Yugoslav artists to cross the Iron Curtain, when they were included in MoMA’s landmark *Information* exhibition in 1970.

One of the group’s early admirers was Marina Abramović: “For me, when I heard about OHO, it was something that really intrigued me,” Abramović says in the film. “You’re not talking about the studio anymore but life itself... and that was mind-blowing to me.” Križnar’s early short *Superstructure* (*Nadstavba*, 1963) captures this activist energy, set amid the ruins of a demolished Ljubljana prison, where a released prisoner nostalgically packs debris of his former cell into a suitcase before joining a demonstration nearby.

Just a year earlier, OHO started from a group of schoolboys editing a magazine. “In the established order of socialist youth,” Marko Pogačnik recalls, “it dropped like a bomb.” The publication caused a scandal among high-ranking party officials, and Pogačnik was psychiatrically assessed to prove he wasn’t schizophrenic. The group was joined by American artist David Nez, who came to Slovenia to evade the Vietnam draft. He recalls randomly putting a finger on an atlas, landing on Ljubljana. Soon, the “longhairs” would meet to listen to rock music and create “collectiveness.”

OHO’s work was driven by the illogical and nonsensical. Central to their philosophy was the principle of “reism,” the idea that objects, which are “at the bottom of life’s ladder and furthest from freedom,” have to be liberated from their usefulness and imposed function. They created the children’s book *A Bottle Would Like to Drink*: if we drink from a bottle, what does the bottle drink from? Through such gestures, humans become things among things, collapsing an anthropocentric distinction between subject and object. Hierarchies dissolve and all beings, human and nonhuman, become free.

Križnar’s *Nineteenth Nervous Breakdown* is a wildly experimental film playing with the visualization of rhythm and body movement. Križnar held a camera and a string in his hand, while performers gripped the other end and ran around him, sending the camera spinning before squeezing into a cardboard box and parading it around. A “performance for pleasure,” as members described it, “we were in our own trip.” One of the collective’s most famous interventions, *Triglav* (1968), impersonated Slovenia’s highest mountain with three people huddled under a blanket on a ladder. The event went largely unnoticed by the authorities who were too busy with the political upheavals of ’68 to care about a bunch of artists freezing their butts: “We weren’t considered dissidents but weirdos.”

OHO positioned itself as a bridge between the individual and society. Embodying the spirit of the 1960s, the group reacted to mainstream socialism; they promoted individual freedom in harmony with nature. Iztok Geister, who later became a nature advocate, explains this ethos in Kozole’s film: “If a tree grows on the path, I won’t cut it down; I’ll walk around it. I can’t expect the tree to get out of my way. That’s the OHO principle, useful in life for anyone.” A truly free life begins not from the self, but from

the act of stopping and looking at what is around us: "To see something unexpected. Oho!"

Words, too, had to be liberated from their meaning, as explored in Matjaž Hanžek's visual poems. Those works provoked a letter from students and faculty at the Medical Faculty demanding that the 17-year-old poet be institutionalized. "I was shocked. I was 17 and they wanted to put me in a madhouse," Hanžek recalled. For OHO, meaningless words become things, creating a logic that connects all elements on a single level and liberating both language and objects from their usual functions.

From the start, the group was at odds with the professional art scene. Entering the gallery space raised questions about their works becoming commodities. Their first exhibition was organized by Tomaž Šalamun at the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana in 1968. As Nez recalled, for the group art was merely a frame to enhance experience, emphasizing the sensuousness of materiality. His 1969 work *Cosmology* at Atelier 69 featured a site-specific installation: neon bulbs arranged in a circle on the floor, while Nez lay flat with a rock on his stomach, another bulb dangling above him. "Breathing with the cosmos," he entered a trance-like state, a performance that deeply impressed Abramović.

In other experiments, OHO tried to make gravitation visible using weights, elastic bands, razor blades, and strings. The focus shifted from objects to relationships, cooperatively engaging with nature. Unlike American land art, OHO's "celebrations of space" were gentle, holistic, non-intrusive, and attentive to existing natural rhythms. Their performances never changed the environment permanently or on a monumental scale but rather worked with what was already there. For example, they collaborated with Ljubljana's river: rather than imposing anything on the river, the artists asked how they could create a project for the river, one that "would enable something that was already there but invisible."

After their MoMA success, the group recognized they had reached a dead end: professional art could no longer address the deeper questions they were exploring, particularly those of ecology and human-nature relations. Their final exhibition in Ljubljana in 1970 marked a shift from materials to concepts and systems of communication. In their last filmed interview, they explained their aim was "to give impulses, transferring them to others, the environment, which reacts." Refusing to further commercialize their work, the group effectively self-abolished.

In the 1970s, they relocated to a farmhouse in Šempas, experimenting with communal living, without running water or electricity. They planted potatoes with little knowledge of rural life, digging holes with pickaxes and throwing potatoes in them: "The deeper we bury them, the better," recalled Marika Pogačnik in true OHO fashion, "a stupid farmer has good potatoes." In the Vipava Valley, OHO transformed from an art collective into a "family," extending their principles into shared labor and cooperation. Their original practice of gazing at objects evolved into a more spiritual pursuit, shifting the focus from objects to unity with nature.

They effectively became a commune, even though they refused to call it like that “because in communism everything was a commune.” While the collective often appears as a boys’ club, Kozole’s documentary makes an important point of recognizing Marika Pogačnik’s contributions. Long overshadowed by her husband, she played a central role in the group, producing much of the artwork for the New York exhibition and managing everyday life on the farmhouse.

The film’s last section, in which surviving members gather once more in the Vipava Valley, is crucial to understanding the group’s legacy. Kozole lets them speak from the perspective of their current lives, all shaped by OHO principles. Marko Pogačnik, today an “earth healer,” reflects on his work with minerals and stones, describing it as “essentially an OHO intervention to start talking with nature at the level of things.” On a planet marked by ecological destruction, OHO’s utopianism can become an ethical imperative demanding the peaceful coexistence of all beings. As one veteran concludes: “I think the only chance for the survival of this crazy world, in which profanity, weapons, wars, and genocide are normalized, is, once it sobers up, to live according to OHO principles.”

1. Sarajevo Film Festival. (2025, August 18). *Festival Daily 04*. Sarajevo Film Festival. <https://www.sff.ba/en/page/festival-daily-04-31> ↵
2. (Sarajevo Film Festival, 2025) ↵