

PRACTICES OF NEARNESS

OLJA TRIAŠKA STEFANOVIĆ

CURATED BY: PATRIK KRAJČOVIČ | 17.09. - 22.11. 2026

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The second half of the 20th century was marked by a frozen conflict between the Western and Eastern blocs. The Cold War brought not only competition in the areas of economic growth, arms development, and technological superiority, but also the formation of new geopolitical relations. It is precisely the question of political proximity, alliances, and the ways in which they are represented that serves as the leitmotif of the exhibition Practices of Nearness by Serbian-Slovak visual artist Olja Triaška Stefanović. Through archival research, the artist examines the mechanisms through which political alliances are established and the ways in which relations between states and their representatives were shaped.

During the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement emerged between the two poles of power, with Yugoslavia among its co-founders. President Josip Broz Tito sought to create space for an independent foreign-policy agenda and to strengthen Yugoslavia's position on the international stage. During this period, the country became an important meeting place for leaders of countries positioned outside the main power blocs. It is precisely these encounters and forms of diplomatic representation that provide the starting point for the artist's exploration of how political proximity is created and through which gestures it becomes visible.

Through extensive archival research, Olja Triaška Stefanović traces the mechanisms of building international alliances and the ways in which political relations were formed not only during official diplomatic ceremonies, but also through subtle gestures of partnership, exchanges of gifts, and symbolic rituals. The exhibition comprises series of works in which the artist combines historical photographs and newspaper articles with her own photographic images. She reconstructs and reassembles archival materials into a mosaic in which fragments of the past come together within a broader historical, political, and personal context.

Photographs of the stone memorials installed in Friendship Park in Belgrade, from the series Imagined Friendship, reconstruct the image of a former diplomatic utopia. It was here that the first conference of the Non-Aligned Movement took place in 1961.

As a sign of friendship and cooperation, leaders planted trees, next to which stone memorials bearing their names were subsequently installed. Over time, however, the inscriptions gradually deteriorated under the effects of weather and the passage of time. The memorials thus become reminders of ideals that, much like the stone itself, are subject to time: they fade and disappear. The motif of political proximity and its symbolic representation is further developed in the series of collages Hunting Rituals and the tapestries Politics of Flowers. Both refer to the principles of so-called soft power and explore a diplomatic culture in which gifts, rituals, hunting, and floral arrangements become instruments for building relationships. Exotic animals were not only objects of the hunt but also prestigious gifts exchanged among political elites. Similarly, elaborate floral arrangements played an important role in official ceremonies. Flora and fauna thus became instruments for shaping alliances, carriers of symbolic meanings, and at the same time means of exercising soft power.

The exhibition Practices of Nearness, however, does not merely reflect on the historical events of the second half of the 20th century. The political proximity that the artist traces at the level of international relations is simultaneously translated into personal experience. The central video installation What's Happened addresses the paradoxical experience of proximity and distance. A static image of the artist's parents is juxtaposed with an audio recording of a telephone conversation, or rather a monologue, in which we hear only one side of the communication. Through the question "What happened?", the personal dimension of the telephone conversation intersects with a broader social context.

In the context of the present day — the formation of new geopolitical partnerships, ongoing armed conflicts, and the gradual disintegration of the world order — the exhibition acquires a new sense of urgency. The ways in which alliances emerge, political proximity is created, and symbols, rituals, and gestures contribute to this process remain highly relevant.

Olja Triaška Stefanović (1978) is a visual artist, photographer, associate professor, and Head of the Department of Photography and New Media at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava. Her work has been presented in numerous exhibitions both in Slovakia and internationally. She was a finalist for the NOVUM Foundation Award (2019) and a Fulbright scholar (2023–2025). Her practice is characterized by archival research into sources from the Cold War period. In her work, she brings together collective memory and the personal experience of growing up in former Yugoslavia, exploring the ways in which individual and collective histories intersect.