

ICI PERSPECTIVES IN CURATING

# Comradeship

Curating,  
Art, and Politics  
in Post-Socialist  
Europe

Zdenka  
Badovinac

INDEPENDENT CURATORS INTERNATIONAL

*Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe* is the third of the publication series PERSPECTIVES IN CURATING developed by Independent Curators International (ICI). It offers timely reflections by curators, artists, critics, and art historians on emergent debates in curatorial practice around the world.

This publication was made possible in part by a grant from the Evelyn Toll Family Foundation. Additional support was generously provided by the Trust for Mutual Understanding, as well as the members of ICI's International Forum and the ICI Board of Trustees.

Published by Independent Curators International, (ICI)

Independent Curators International  
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New York, NY 10013  
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Printed by Weber Offset (Munich, Germany)

Library of Congress Control Number:  
2018968298

ISBN 978-0-692-04225-0

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# Foreword

This book is long overdue. It may sound a little dramatic to make this pronouncement, but over the last twenty years, Zdenka Badovinac has been an astute and incisive voice reflecting on the social, cultural, and political urgencies of our time, yet this is the first book in English to present a full account of her thinking.

Badovinac became director of Moderna galerija/ Museum of Modern Art in the newly formed Slovenia in 1993, following the fall of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Since then, she has built that institution into one that thinks out loud on an international stage, and she continuously champions artists through curating, writing, and building networks that reflect critically on both the contradictions and consequences of contemporaneity, decolonialization, socialism, internationalism, and modernism.

Insistently maintaining her particular perspective—from a region that is now recognized as part of Eastern Europe—she has questioned the impact of globalization in the so-called flattening, or homogenization, of the art world. She has explored correlations between the Global South and Eastern Europe in challenging the master narratives of Western art, introduced concepts such as self-historicization, and pioneered curatorial methodologies. One approach is through engaging with repetition in making exhibitions, and

another, no less far-reaching, is the collaborative construction of a new lexicon for practices that participate in making world views.

The term comradeship has become a focus for her in the last few years, insofar as it is ripe for reappraisal and reinterpretation. As such, it is the perfect title for this book, which is a compendium of essays written by Badovinac from 1998 to 2018 that, read together, articulate a wide-ranging vision for the potential of contemporary museums, collectivity, and exhibition making. Several of the texts are translated into English for the first time. Some are new, while others are hard to source because the books, magazines, and catalogues are rare. Together, the fifteen essays create a portrait of a curatorial mind in constant process, from a place and a time rife with speculation: no matter where from, or under what circumstances we think about curating, there is something that can be learned from Badovinac's perspectives.

*Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe* has been stewarded by J. Myers-Szupinska, a razor-sharp art historian who specializes in exhibition histories. Myers-Szupinska made the final selection of texts, working with Badovinac to compose the rhythm and pacing of the material presented in this volume, and also became her interlocutor to parse out the key topics and hone how they might be more widely understood by those who aren't steeped in issues of the region. As such, Myers-Szupinska has provided an editor's note at the beginning of the book, as well as conducted an interview with Badovinac that stands as an introduction to her background and ways of thinking.

This is the third book in a series entitled *Perspectives in Curating* published by Independent Curators International (ICI) to provide sustained analysis on topics that are pressing for curators now. The precedent for this series was established in 2001, when ICI published *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*. The first of its kind, the book included short texts offering advice to a new generation of curators from sixty practitioners—including Lynne Cooke, Bice Curiger, Thelma Golden, Hou Hanru, Vasif Kortun, Lucy R. Lippard, Maria Lind, Jean-Hubert Martin, Gerardo Mosquera, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Seth Siegelaub, and Harald Szeemann—all of whom were playing a crucial role in shaping the profession. It is hard to imagine today, but at the turn of the millennium there was one Curatorial Studies graduate program in the United States (five worldwide) and barely six publications available on the subject. Now the need is not an increased quantity of material but more internationally widespread and comprehensive research that enables the field to gain a shared history and common understanding of language from which to learn. By dedicating resources and attention to one person's insights, the *Perspectives in Curating* series is intended to be responsive to rapid developments in the field while recognizing the need to slow down in understanding what is at stake in the questions we ask of the practice.

*Comradeship* grows out of ICI's enduring relationship with Badovinac over the years and, interestingly, her involvement traces many of the initiatives ICI has established since 2010 to generate curatorial research and development in

various forms. Beginning in the spring of 2011, she presented an ICI *Curator's Perspective*, which is a talk series that periodically travels across the United States providing a platform for curators from all over the world to present their work and the social and political situations that are impacting curatorial practice. Shortly after, in 2012, she contributed to the previous publication in this series—Terry Smith's *Talking Contemporary Curating*—and, later that year, she served as ICI Faculty in the *Curatorial Intensive* at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing: a role she generously returned to in 2013 for the *Intensive* at the Bag Factory Artists' Studios in Johannesburg.

ICI's Curatorial Intensive is a short-term program for working professionals from around the world, held in collaboration with partners internationally to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and expertise between peers and experts in the field. At the time of print there have been 34 Curatorial Intensives convened in 17 countries across all continents, involving 437 participants, who now form an incredible network of minds around the globe. In parallel with this program, ICI has recently initiated the *Curatorial Forum*, a three-day program for curators based in the United States that interrogates their practice to foster regional professional networks and collaborations.

Where each of these programs—together with ICI's conference and fellowship initiatives—offer curators the opportunity to test ideas, think out loud, and develop an international network, the imperative for the *Perspectives in Curating* book series is to consider what is distinctive



## FOREWORD

about contemporary curatorial thought from curators who have spent a lifetime committed to pursuing the cultural field. Furthermore, through charting Badovinac's involvement with ICI, it is evident that the community and relationships that ICI's programs bear out are central not only to the formation of this publication but to the organization as a whole.

\* \* \*

This book would not have been possible without the help and support of a number of people and organizations. My indebted thanks goes to Zdenka, who has been a friend and colleague from whom I have learned a great deal over the last decade; Julian, another friend, intellectual sparring partner, and long-term collaborator has, as always, steered the project with great dedication. Behind the scenes, editor extraordinaire Audrey Walen and ICI's ever-creative designer Scott Ponik have made production a pleasure; Moderna galerija's Sabina Povšič and Ana Mizerit, as well as ICI's Maddie Klett, have shown immense commitment to sourcing the publication's trove of images and texts; and Amanda Parmer, ICI's inimitable Director of Programs, has ensured this book gets out into the world.

*Comradeship* has taken three years to come into being. Along the way, a number of people have been key in its nascent stages. Most importantly, Leigh Markopoulos, an incredible editor, curator, and educator who passed away in 2017, was the driving force of the publication as it began: indeed, her editorial work is still present

throughout. María del Carmen Carrión, as ICI's Director of Public Programs & Research until 2018, also steered the book for the first two years.

Ongoing thanks to all of ICI's staff, especially Renaud Proch, Executive Director, whose vision and stamina has ensured that the organization remains vital and relevant over time and around the world.

Crucial to the development of *Comradeship* was the confidence in ICI from the Evelyn Toll Family Foundation and the forward-thinking support of the Trust for Mutual Understanding. Generous support also comes from ICI's International Forum members—Joan Borinstein and Gary Gartsman, Lacy Davisson Doyle, Terry Fassburg, Elaine Goldman, Bettina Jebsen, Emily-Jane Kirwan, Nicole Klagsbrun, Sally Morgan Lehman, Ingela Lorentzen, Dominique Markham, Kathleen O'Grady, Susan Seelig, Doreen Small, Joseph Yurcik, and Andres Zervigon—who are pioneers in supporting ICI programs around the world.

And last, but by no means least, I extend my warmest appreciation to the ICI Board of Trustees for their ongoing support and enthusiasm. They are the people who have believed in what ICI is doing for years. Without them, none of our endeavors would be possible.

—Kate Fowle  
ICI Director-at-Large

# Zdenka Badovinac, in Conversation with J. Myers-Szupinska

J. Myers-Szupinska: Writing has played an increasingly important role in curators' work over the last few decades, representing their thinking on a global stage for audiences that might never encounter their exhibitions first hand. But for you, it seems even more important.

Zdenka Badovinac: I would not be the same curator or museum director without writing, which demands I organize my thoughts and meditate on my work. The museum produces occasions to write, of course, but it also works the other way: writing generates the whole thinking of the museum.

JM: Most of the essays in this book were written in the twenty-first century, but they are, in many ways, connected to your passage through the late twentieth century, to your experience of socialism and its aftermath in Eastern Europe. The first essay in the book has an epigraph from Freud's writing about communism. He writes that the psychological premises of communism are an "untenable illusion," and that communism altered nothing about human aggression. How did you come to that passage?

ZB: I often related my subjects at the time to a psychoanalytic framework, whether from Freud, Lacan, or Slavoj Žižek. Sociopolitical context is important, but those of us who grew up in socialist countries like Yugoslavia were expected to give materialist explanations—to be very concrete in our critique. Freud opened the possibility of thinking about deeper human drives.

JM: How did you encounter psychoanalytic theory? In classrooms?

ZB: I was reading privately, but I also studied art history and philosophy in university, from 1977 to 1986. It took me a long time to finish because there were so many interesting things going on. Among them I was co-editing *Razmerja*, a magazine published by the socialist youth organization in Metlika, the town in southeast Slovenia where I was born. In '77 I went to study in Ljubljana, and have been there since.

JM: Was it common at the time to combine art history and philosophy?

ZB: I was not the only one. Igor Zabel, who would later become my colleague at Moderna galerija, also studied both subjects. We studied philosophy of course, though it was still very much about Marxism. Then, in the early 1980s, many young students in my circle, philosophers and artists, were under the influence of Žižek and Lacan. I had a parallel group of friends in Metlika who were ecological activists. In Slovenia in the 1980s, culture was very decentralized. Small towns had extremely rich culture, including their own alternative and punk cultures. Some of the

members of Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), for instance, came from Trbovlje, a small miners' town. Ljubljana itself is small, with only 300,000 people. Slovenia has a population of only two million.

JM: What Marx were you reading? Was *Capital* being taught in primary school?

ZB: No. But socialist ideas and Marxism were present. You would see pictures of Lenin, Marx, and Tito in classrooms and offices.

JM: This was in the early 1970s, the last decade of Tito's life. There were strikes and protests at the time in Croatia—what became known as the Croatian Spring.

ZB: That was before my time, really. Those protests were driven by Croatian nationalism, unlike the student demonstrations of 1968, which were inspired by some of the same emancipatory and democratic ideas as in other countries. Throughout Yugoslavia's history, we constantly had this critique from the left. For example, there was the group around the Marxist journal *Praxis* in Belgrade and Zagreb in the late '60s. Then there were Stalinists left over after Yugoslavia's split with Russia in 1948.

JM: Were ideas, or ideologies, like these visible to you at the time?

ZB: I remember my parents describing someone from Metlika as a Stalinist when I was a kid. There was a prison and a forced labor camp in Croatia on an island called Goli otok, where

political prisoners, Stalinists, were sent. This remains a shameful passage in Yugoslav history. But there was critical awareness everywhere. Even in school, we knew there was a disparity between socialism as it existed and what we were being taught.

JM: Were those tough years, economically?

ZB: The standard of living was not very high in the 1960s and '70s. Many people worked in what we might call the gray economy. Some Yugoslavs worked in Germany, as so-called *gastarbeiters*. They lived modestly and sent money back to Yugoslavia. This was how Yugoslavia tried to solve the issue of unemployment.

JM: By sending workers outside of Yugoslavia?

ZB: It was not official policy. They went of their own free will; the borders were open by then and people could travel. And Germany had become a manufacturing giant. It needed foreign workers. Because of this, certain Yugoslavs had money. They could build houses and buy cars: Mercedes or BMW, usually used, but the brand names were important. Yugoslavia developed a consumer mentality.

JM: Not the stereotypical image of socialism.

ZB: Yugoslavia had a planned economy in the early years, but, as the Serbian writer Branko Dimitrijević says, what was planned was production, not consumption. Later there was more of a market economy. We had a workers' imaginary of labor and ethics alongside a

consumer imaginary. We had our own pop stars and pop design. We had strong affiliations to certain Western products. One of the most important things we did as teenagers was to go shopping in Italy. We took the bus to Trieste.

JM: Trieste is an Italian city?

ZB: Italian, but with a large Slovene population and only one hour from Ljubljana. It had been an Austrian port city until the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, so in terms of architecture, it looks more Austrian than Italian. It has an important cultural history. James Joyce spent time there, so did Sigmund Freud and Rainer Maria Rilke. In World War II, Trieste had been surrendered by the Italians, occupied by Germans, and liberated by Yugoslavs, before it was returned to Italy. There are still openly fascist types in Trieste, though.

JM: What were you like at the time?

ZB: Like many of my friends, I wore jeans and had long hair. Shopping in Trieste was where we first met the West. It was so close and yet so far. You could feel the difference. We Yugoslavs would shop at the legendary Ponte Rosso, a street market with cheap things. There was a derogatory image at the time of Yugoslav people with their plastic bags. We looked different from the elegant Italians. I remember entering a fancy shop where the women stared at me; that is a feeling you can't forget.

JM: When did punk arrive into your world?

ZB: In 1977, the year I came to Ljubljana to study, I began going to underground events. There was a punk group that started that year called Pankrti, or Bastards. Slovene punks were traveling to London, and international punk records were available in Ljubljana. But groups like Pankrti were not followers. Slovene punk was strongly related to its own context, and had local reasons to exist. There was unemployment and economic trouble in late 1970s Yugoslavia, and Slovene punk was reacting directly to that.

JM: So there was a lot of culture around.

ZB: We were well informed, culturally. There was a foreign bookstore, and there were Western rock concerts in Ljubljana and Zagreb. As a student, I went regularly to the cinemathèque, where great films played daily. I hung out there nonstop.

JM: What kind of films did they show? *Bonnie and Clyde*, Ingmar Bergman?

ZB: They showed everything: Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Eisenstein, Bergman, Tarkovsky, Andrzej Wajda, as well as 1970s films, which I still love. Mostly movies from the West, but Yugoslavia had an important film movement, the Black Wave, in the 1960s and '70s—there were great Black Wave directors like Dušan Makavejev, Želimir Žilnik, and Aleksandr Petrović.

JM: Yugoslavia's independence from both Russia and the West allowed this cultural mixing.



ZB: We were in a special position. We grew up with Western culture. Hollywood, rock music, and jazz were not forbidden. On the contrary. And we had a sense that Tito was well known and respected internationally. He was popular. His funeral in 1980 was attended by delegations from all over the world, which is hard to imagine today. He was friends with movie stars like Sophia Loren and Richard Burton, who had played Tito in *The Battle of Sutjeska* in 1973. Partisan war films were, genre-wise, a bit like Yugoslavian Westerns.

JM: You were a university student when Tito died. How did you feel about it?

ZB: We didn't hate him. We knew he'd created Goli otok, and that people had died because of him, but we also understood that he had created self-management socialism and the Non-Aligned Movement, which we considered heroic acts. Today, conservatives paint a terrible picture of Tito as a dictator. We didn't think of him that way. He was a controversial person, a sympathetic figure, maybe a little narcissistic with his well-designed suits. He died in Ljubljana, by the way.

JM: Really?

ZB: I saw his funeral procession. He died in Ljubljana and his body was to be sent to Belgrade by rail. Masses lined up to say goodbye. It was very touching. Feeling things collectively, everything becomes amplified. It was not a rational thing. Ljubljana was completely empty, and suddenly I saw a mass

of people coming from one corner, going in the direction of the railway station. That was a real moment. It was spectacular. The same thing happened at all the stops on the way to Belgrade.

JM: What were you doing at that time?

ZB: I was clubbing in Ljubljana. And, with my friends, I was editing *Razmerja*, which included strong social criticism and eco-activism. Self-management socialism was organized from the municipalities up. Even small towns had a cinema club, a photo club, and a socialist youth organization that would publish a magazine. It's almost unimaginable today. In a small town of six thousand people, there were, at one point, ten punk bands.

JM: Incredible.

ZB: Fantastic things were done within the framework of Yugoslavian student culture centers. All of the most important contemporary artists from the former Yugoslavia started their careers in the student-center galleries in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana.

JM: Were you in contact with those art scenes?

ZB: Zagreb was close, so we went there frequently. We visited Belgrade, too, but not as often; it was a whole night's travel by train. I remember seeing an important exhibition in Belgrade of Zenit, the Yugoslav avant-garde group from the 1920s. People also came to Ljubljana. Goran Đorđević, for example, and others, exhibited at ŠKUC, the student center

gallery in Ljubljana, while Slovene artists like OHO, and later the young NSK, exhibited in Belgrade and Zagreb. Dejan Knez, one of the founding figures for NSK, spent his army days in Belgrade, where he met Goran. Goran's work became a very important inspiration for NSK.

JM: Let's talk about NSK. When did you first encounter them?

ZB: I saw IRWIN graffiti in underground clubs in Ljubljana, and their exhibitions at the ŠKUC (Študentski kulturni center, or Student Culture Center) Gallery. I went to Laibach concerts. But we were not close in the 1980s. I liked their work, but I was removed from the psychosis around them. They were like rock stars. They built a circle of followers, people who would dress like them, in black uniforms.

JM: Their 1983 interview on Slovene television was an important moment for you.

ZB: Yes! It was shocking. There was something almost self-sacrificial about it. Afterward, everyone was talking about it—whether it was staged, and if the group truly believed the things they were saying. It was very provocative.

JM: Did you have an intellectual relationship to what they were doing?

ZB: I think so. Žižek and others were integrating things in parallel. The journal *Mladina* was important. And the journalist Igor Vidmar had regular shows on Radio Student Ljubljana, an independent student-run radio

station, where he explained the ideologies of punk music and discussed Laibach. Theory and interpretation were constantly present.

JM: So you had ways of coming to terms with what Laibach was doing.

ZB: Most people at their concerts were informed. Laibach was strange for punkers, though, especially in the beginning. At a concert in Križanke in 1982, Laibach's singer was in a military officer's uniform, which was very provocative for punks. People in the audience threw beer bottles and cut the singer's face. In Germany the totalitarian look caused a lot of misunderstanding with young skinheads. They didn't understand Laibach's strategy of overidentification. They took it seriously.

JM: When did you start working at Moderna galerija? What were your early exhibitions?

ZB: I began working there in 1987, a year after graduation. I was interested in a group of artists around the sculptor Marjetica Potrč. They were deconstructing modernism, reading Lacan and Merleau-Ponty, and applying those ideas to their work. British sculpture was influential: artists like Richard Deacon. I thought it was important to relate this generation of Slovene artists to international trends, so that impulse drove some of my early shows. I learned a lot from Potrč.

JM: Then Slovenia declared its independence from Yugoslavia. There was a war.

ZB: Yes, in 1991. After that, many things changed. There was an incredible shift in my thinking about how art related to war and politics. I remember being in my office and getting a call from a friend who was a member of the Slovene presidency. He said, “Listen: there will be a bomb attack. The museum is endangered. Do something.” I called the curators and we took the works from the walls and moved them to the basement, quickly. The attack didn’t happen, but it was a sobering moment. We were altered by it.

JM: You became acting director of the museum soon after that.

ZB: Yes. The museum’s director, Jure Mikuž, was appointed Deputy Minister of Culture for Slovenia in 1992, and proposed me as acting director in his absence. He initially thought he might return, and trusted me to run things in the meantime. When he decided to leave Moderna for good in 1993—he soon left the Ministry for a professorship—I was appointed director.

JM: In that role, you commissioned Slovenia’s pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1993, and included NSK in that show. How did that come to pass? It is not obvious that NSK, who were so independent, would have had any relationship to the established art scene, except for the one you built starting in the early 1990s.

ZB: Obviously I believed in their art. At the same time, I was aware of where I was. It is important for the curator of a national institution to be open, and not committed to just one aesthetic concept. I didn’t want to be dogmatic and work only with

NSK. When I became the commissioner for the Slovenian pavilion at Venice, I invited Potrč as the official artist, and a project by IRWIN called Padiglione NSK (NSK pavilion) as a guest country. Working with NSK meant the end of my good relationship with Mikuž, though. Mikuž was, and is, a modernist, and, at that time, an advocate of abstract painting. Even today, he remains an important figure in Slovenia's cultural infrastructure. For him, NSK were anathema.

JM: Let's go back to the fall of communism. Did you feel Yugoslavia had been in trouble for years and was bound to collapse someday? Or was this unexpected?

ZB: Not at all. Despite the crisis, nobody believed Yugoslavia would fall apart. It was such a strong country, it was impossible. But then it happened. Our story ended relatively well, with just ten days of war, and our independence was recognized quickly. Then things started to develop economically. This is partly due to the differences between Slovenia and other former Yugoslav countries. Slovenia's population was less complicated, in terms of ethnicity and religion, than Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example.

JM: Was there a debate about whether Slovenia would turn to capitalism?

ZB: Nobody really discussed what would follow socialism. We talked about democracy, not about capitalism. When you are young, you look at things around you and criticize those things. We were critical of socialism as it was. We couldn't be critical about the future.

JM: At what point did capitalism make itself visible to you?

ZB: More or less immediately. In 1993, all citizens of Slovenia got certificates of privatization in the mail. In socialism, property was held socially. After socialism collapsed, the state distributed it to private individuals. Most of us sold those certificates for little money, but there were people who knew how to deal with them, and made their fortunes. Some became local oligarchs. Citizenship also became an important question. In 1992, the Slovene Ministry of the Interior erased over eighteen thousand people from the register of permanent residents. These were people who resided in Slovenia, but had citizenship in one of the other republics of former Yugoslavia. They could register as foreigners and apply for citizenship, but many didn't know about this, or applied and were refused, and lost their civil, social, and political rights. It was a big shame.

JM: These were big changes, even if not as traumatic as elsewhere.

ZB: Slovenia didn't suffer as much as Bosnia or Croatia, where the wars were more severe. Nevertheless, we were constantly discussing the proper way to react. In 1995, for example, I organized an exhibition called *House in Time*, about different migrations related to the war. And in 1994, Igor Zabel and I went with the NSK artists' group IRWIN to Sarajevo, while it was under siege by Serbian forces.

JM: What are your memories of Sarajevo?

ZB: IRWIN was in Sarajevo some days already. Zabel and I traveled to meet them on a United Nations plane from Zagreb. The hotels were closed, so all of us stayed with a local family. There was a police curfew, and we had to be indoors by eight o'clock. I remember men dressed in suits, proud urban citizens, but you could see their clothes and shoes were worn out. There were no cosmetics available, so the women used what they had. They were trying to look decent and lead a normal life despite the war.

JM: Were you in danger?

ZB: We were there during a short cease-fire agreement, but there were snipers in the hills around the city. I remember crossing a bridge and feeling tension in the air. Afterward, they told us there was a sniper shooting at us; the shots had gone above our heads. But Sarajevo was not all misery. Bosnians have such pride, and a fantastic sense of black humor. I remember those things too. Anyway, we discussed with people there, and decided to help build an art collection for a future museum in Sarajevo. That collection later became part of an existing initiative, *Ars Aevi*.

JM: You made *Body and the East* in 1998. What was that show thinking through?

ZB: I wanted to organize a show that not only brought together new and unknown artists but also problematized the representation of East European artists. I wanted to compare the play of representations between East and West with the relation between a singular performance event and its subsequent interpretations.



JM: Was that the first time you made a show using the frame of Eastern Europe? Since then, Eastern Europe and “post-socialism” have become important rubrics for the history of art, and have driven collecting initiatives at major Western institutions.

ZB: I had organized shows for East European artists: Magdalena Jetelová, Czech, in 1990; the Polish artist Mirosław Bałka in 1995; Ilya Kabakov, Russian, in 1996; and Marina Abramović, born in Belgrade, in 1998. But *Body and the East* was the first big exhibition of East European art. That’s why it has become important, I think.

JM: *Body and the East* was neither a Slovenian show nor a global, universalist show on the model of *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989). Instead, you were producing a solidarity across the post-socialist world. This was a real turn from the geopolitics of the Yugoslavian period. During the Cold War, Yugoslavia was always marked out. Its relationship with the Soviet Union was deeply antagonistic, and it was not part of the Warsaw Pact. Indeed, Yugoslavia was a founding member, with Egypt, India, Indonesia, and Ghana, of the Non-Aligned Movement. Those were its allies, not Europe.

ZB: This question of political geography has many levels. From the beginning of the 1990s, there was increased interest in regional and East European art. It had become a market niche. At the same time, there was a real need to historicize East European art, which did not appear just because of interest from the West. Much more importantly, we began to see connections among

different countries that were not so visible or relevant before the collapse of communism.

JM: Like what?

ZB: The art communities of all the post-socialist countries had to position themselves vis-à-vis this new interest from the West. Moreover, there was, throughout Eastern Europe, a lack of art-historical accounting. What had been done was fragmentary rather than coherent, limited to individual countries, without much comparison with the rest of the East, only to the West. This shared lack united us. This project of historical recovery has only become more crucial as right-wing parties have embraced historical revisionism and tried to erase all that was good from socialism. It was also true that doing an East European show was a statement within the frame of Slovenia—that is, in Slovenia’s culture war about what its proper context ought to be.

JM: What do you mean?

ZB: There are competing opinions. Is Slovenia Central European? Balkan? East European? It is the westernmost country of former Yugoslavia. We were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. German was our official language for a thousand years. Before World War II, our cultural workers studied in Vienna and Munich. Some believe our proper affinity is toward Austria and Germany, and that we are different from other Balkan countries. They believe the Balkans are underdeveloped, a little dirty. For them, Slovenes are more like Germans in the Balkans: serious, industrious, *ordnung und disziplin*. And then, after

independence, there were different understandings of Slovene history. On the one side, nationalists, reactionaries; on the other, Slovene partisans, and the emancipatory left. For both groups, the question of Slovenia's relationship to the Balkans and the East is related to their feelings about the legacy of socialist Yugoslavia—even if those feelings are in direct opposition to each other. Reactionaries wish to be associated with a Central European identity only—that is, not to the Balkans, and not to Eastern Europe. So, when I started to emphasize Eastern Europe, it became a problem.

JM: What sort of problem?

ZB: When we initiated the Artest 2000+ Collection, for example, we were criticized: “What is this? We are not part of Eastern Europe. We are part of Europe.” Europe, meaning Western and Central Europe, not these wild Balkan countries, and certainly not Russia. Many Slovene intellectuals are internationalists, but they are more oriented to Paris.

JM: Did you travel to research *Body and the East*?

ZB: Yes, with the help of advisors in each country. Josef Backstein and Viktor Misiano in Moscow, László Becke in Hungary, Jiří Ševčík in the Czech Republic, and others. In Romania, Ileana Pintilie introduced me to artists who, since then, have become major figures: Ion Grigorescu, at the time unknown, and Geta Brătescu, who died recently.

JM: You were building an expansive knowledge of artists in the region. You were also building a

transnational network of curators, theorists, and culture workers.

ZB: That network came about in various ways. There were international conferences in the early 1990s including one I attended at the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow in 1990. Another was the NSK Embassy in Moscow, organized by IRWIN in 1992, where Eastern European identity was discussed in the East, perhaps for the first time. Then, in the mid-1990s, there was an important internet exchange among curators of my generation, VOTI, which included Carlos Basualdo, Okwui Enwezor, Udo Kittelmann, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and many others. Also crucial was the International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art, or IKT. I met Harald Szeemann at an IKT Conference in Malmö; I also met Saskia Bos and Ute Meta Bauer. We became friends. They became part of my community, apart from the East European thing.

JM: This is a generation of curators who would go on to become major figures. A global network. How does that internationalism relate to politics on the ground in Ljubljana?

ZB: It's complicated. I go through an election process every five years, and there are always various interests at play. I have always had support from a vital part of the cultural community. But there are also those artists we didn't present in the museum and who would not mind if someone else was in charge. And I have never fit very well with the expectations of mainstream cultural policy in Slovenia. Slovene elites do not identify with modernism, much less conceptual art. Their icons

are figurative painters. It is therefore something of a miracle that I am still director in times that would seem to favor the bourgeois *ressentiment* of a small nation.

JM: Are there authoritarian dynamics in Slovenia as in Hungary, Turkey, and the United States?

ZB: We had parliamentary elections last summer, and Janez Janša, the leader of the opposition and the key right-wing figure, won. But he couldn't make a coalition, so then he left. Now we have a more center-left government. We are surrounded, though, by countries where fascist tendencies are becoming stronger: Austria, Croatia, Hungary, and Italy. And we are not isolated from those tendencies. There is a barbed-wire fence on our Southern border meant to keep out refugees.

JM: How does politics at that large scale relate to the museum, or to daily life? Politics is about struggle for power ....

ZB: I think it's more than that, it's also about consciously doing things to affect reality. Politics is not only about political parties or activism, but about how the museum responds to urgencies. We reacted to the war in the 1990s. We currently work directly with refugees, though we don't want to make a *reklama*, an advertisement, of this aspect of our activities. We have reacted to a new situation in post-socialist Europe, against historical revisionism and neoliberal ideas of culture.

JM: Let's talk about terminology. In one essay, you used the phrase "civil society" and it sent a sort of shock through me. I thought, what could she possibly mean?

ZB: For us it meant a critical public sphere. Have you ever used it that way?

JM: Well, sure. But I wasn't sure how you could use it in an unproblematized way. This difference might be what you're negotiating when you write that, in the West, institutional critique is useful because the West has major institutions, institutions of civil society, to critique. In many other parts of the globe, the task is opposite: to establish the institutions of a civil society, not break apart their authority.

ZB: My reference to civil society related to the 1980s. There's nothing like that today.

JM: Right. The other word that struck me, when I was working on the book, was the title, comradeship. That word almost doesn't have a meaning in a Western context, except maybe in moments of mass entertainment, like in the audience of a concert.

ZB: The word comradeship contains important historical experiences. It tries to save, at least on a symbolic level, something we lost. I write about the loss of society, in the full meaning of that word. In socialist times, there was a social system. Medical care, kindergarten, and the school system were free. Everything was about solidarity and mutual help. Those things are now gone. A philosopher I quote in the book, Boris Buden,

writes that the past exists in cultural translation. Things still exist, but in cultural form. Art tries to preserve what is absent, and, we hope, not lost forever. There is still this utopian moment in my work. I believe we can contribute to a better society.

JM: Don't utopian impulses cut both ways, politically? Isn't this also the promise of authoritarian movements, that comradeship can be recovered through a sense of shared ethnic belonging? When you talk about it, it refers to a reservoir of social good, a collective project that resides in the socialist past. But authoritarian leaders are also promising, however cynically, a utopian restoration: "Make America Great Again."

ZB: Probably you have the same phenomenon on both sides, right and left. There is a universal human need to belong, to share. What is society? Society is when a community shares common concerns. What do we share? There can be completely different answers to this question. It can be something national or ethnic, or it can be socialist. There is a big gap between those two possibilities today.

JM: You refer to this idea from Žižek, who was writing about NSK's project at the Venice Biennale in the early 1990s, of a state without a nation.

ZB: The same phenomenon can have dark and light aspects. The dark side for Žižek was neoliberal capitalism, which he described as a global force without borders. What NSK proposed, by contrast, was an alternative global community. But I think Trump is somewhere else entirely. It's the end of the free market, and a return to protectionism and

nationalism. Territory, and the classical state, are again at issue. The question is how to approach it from the other side. Can we think the state from the left? I believe so.

JM: On a different note: as I was editing, I was struck that you don't often discuss feminism explicitly. Do you think gender has played a mediating role in your career?

ZB: Feminism has been a recurring concern of my work, of course, as with *Schengen Women*, an exhibition I organized for the ŠKUC Gallery, Ljubljana, in 2008, in which women artists from beyond the Schengen border engaged critically with stereotypes of East European women, such as the communist androgyne, the refugee, and the prostitute. But you are asking about my career. I became the director of Moderna galerija as a young woman, and have never experienced any direct problem because of gender. During socialism men and women were, at least at a declarative level, equal—even though it remained a patriarchal society. As I have become more experienced, though, I see patterns of behavior, boys clubs, even among male colleagues who are completely open. Too often we notice only obvious problems like harassment. You can't read subtle things that are even more dangerous because they are embedded in behavior.

JM: I have noticed an aspect of your writing that may have less to do with gender than comradeship. You write with others' voices mixed in, Eda Čufer, Tomaž Mastnak, Žižek, and many others. These are your interlocutors, you use



them to think, and you credit them carefully. That is not what some of your peers always do. They sublimate others' thinking into their own. They don't acknowledge others' work.

ZB: I've heard something like this recently. It was a lecture by a woman artist who was mentioning her references and credits. A woman artist spoke up from the audience and said: "This is because you are a woman. Male artists never credit so much."

JM: I don't know if it totally goes along gendered lines, but maybe so.

ZB: Maybe on gendered terms, women are not so self-confident?

JM: Here's how I see it: men often presume the right to the labor of others.

ZB: Some directors rule their institutions in a masculine way. They have secretaries or assistants as lovers. They try to subordinate women in this way. They do it for real and they are in love, of course. Powerful people can be very sexy.

JM: I think about their spouses too. Many curators we know have partners who perform, as Italian feminists would put it, different kinds of reproductive labor.

ZB: I was having a discussion with Goran Đorđević recently about this. Yugoslav art history is comprised of mostly male artists. There are few women. You can't invent them. He said there were many women among the gallerists and curators,

and that maybe it is time to rethink history and art history from this position. What was the role of those women, from the 1960s on? There was an army of women—curators, gallerists, artists' wives—who contributed, who were not only organizers or executors of male masterminds. This is what I experience with some of the artists with whom I collaborate. Sometimes I hear behind them another voice.

JM: Maybe the expanded category of cultural worker, as opposed to artist, allows for a more complete picture, one that would encompass those voices.

ZB: This is pertinent to the question of comradeship in the collectives I discuss. There were so many examples of this kind of community in former Yugoslavia. Whose idea was first? Who did the first act? At the beginning, it was not so important, but it became important over the years. Sometimes you don't know. But in the end, comradeship must include everyone.

# Comradeship: Editor's Note

This book gathers fifteen essays by the writer, curator, and museum director Zdenka Badovinac. Together, these writings represent two decades of engaged thinking at the forefront of international conversations about art, museums, politics, and history. The period they track spans from the late 1990s to the present—from the aftermath of the collapse of communism and the wars in the Balkans through the rise of social media and a new sense of global connection embodied by the Internet, by way of economic collapse, environmental catastrophe, and the ongoing political crisis of Europe, and toward a febrile contemporaneity in which art and its discourses search out unstable positions on a tilting stage.

What are these essays? They took shape in an expanding international conversation around museums, curating, and exhibitions over those twenty years, and amidst a generation of curators and museum directors whose experimentation would shift the terms by which art would have public life. These essays were initially composed for one of that generation's characteristic forms of discursive expression: conference presentations, lectures, catalogue essays, or broadsides in debates staged in art magazines or academic journals. As such, they were a means by which a brilliant

thinker from a small country, Slovenia, cleared space for herself in global conversations and produced a community beyond her home city.

Equally they are a form of institutional thinking and institutional building enacted close to home. There is a direct relationship between her thinking as it is organized in her writing and her organization of Moderna galerija, the institution she oversees in Ljubljana. Appointed in the aftermath of Slovenia's independence, Badovinac has been director since 1993. In 2011, Moderna opened a second location devoted to contemporary art, Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM), in a former Yugoslav army complex in Ljubljana's city center. (These are conventionally referred to as MG+MSUM to signal the two-in-one nature of the institution.) As if through sheer force of will, Badovinac's essays have placed the two museums at the center of current debates about what an art museum might be in the twenty-first century. They have also set the terms on which the art of post-socialist countries has been historicized and collected for the last decade or more. Art museums in New York and London have been taking leads from Ljubljana for some years now.

The central importance of writing to Badovinac's practice means that she is fearsomely prolific, even by the standards of a present-day curatorial field that demands discursive overproduction alongside exhibition making as a matter of course. How else to mediate something as temporally and spatially bound as an exhibition in the delirious flux of global communication? These conditions of writing—exacerbated demand and constant

cross-cultural transmission—were apparent in the fat folder of essays I received for consideration in Spring 2018. This bristling file of translations and versions initially made a full accounting seem a somewhat Borgesian proposition: What selection, what system, could do it justice?

The order we eventually decided on was structured by chronology, though obeying above all a sense of editorial intuition over rigorous adherence to sequence by year. Organizing things in this way suggested, if in a somewhat oblique way, a five-section arrangement, with each section embodying a knot of ideas being worked through in a specific historical juncture.

Section one features catalogue essays written for three of Badovinac's exhibitions at Moderna galerija: *Body and the East* (1998), a pivotal retrospective exhibition of body art in Eastern Europe from the early 1960s; *Form-Specific Art* (2003), a revisionist understanding of the history of formal abstraction, linking modernist and post-conceptual practices; and *Interrupted Histories* (2006), an exhibition of artists' archives generated in Eastern Europe in the absence of systematic historicization of art in their countries.

The second section gathers Badovinac's crucial contributions to the discursive scrum that converged around defining "the contemporary" in the back half of the 00s, namely, "The Museum of Contemporary Art," and "Contemporaneity as Points of Connection." The latter essay imagined a shared project among museums in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere, based on their shared urgencies: the need to

overcome exclusion from Western art narratives, as well as the traumas of art histories disrupted by war or dictatorship. “What Will the Next Revolution be Like?” surveys artistic practices that critically embody a condition of repetition, concluding that it is only through repetition that we can access the real and “go back to the future.” “Histories and their Different Narrators” presents a historiography of the very notion of Eastern Europe, questioning the mechanisms by which history is written.

Section three focuses on the question of collectivity, addressing the group-work of collectives Gorgona, OHO, and Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK). The latter, an umbrella organization encompassing Laibach, IRWIN, The Sisters of Scipio Nasica Theater, New Collectivism, and more, is examined with special intensity. Formed in the same theory-drenched subcultural habitus of early 1980s Ljubljana, Badovinac has been a crucial NSK ally (though not a member) since the early '90s. Among other things, these groups offered Badovinac a key case study in the charged recovery of the utopian project of the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, and a vital example of institutional autonomy, internationalism, and self-reliance.

Introduced late in the process was a standalone essay on the work of Tobias Putrih, written to mediate his contribution to the Centre Pompidou’s exhibition *Promises of the Past*, a 2010 survey of art from the former East. Considering his riffs on cinematic architecture, it recalls Badovinac’s own time hanging around socialist cinemas in Ljubljana

watching Western movies and those of the Yugoslavian Black Wave. In a section of its own, the essay interrupts the symmetry of the other groupings, like a diagonal shaking up the strict order of a Suprematist painting.

The fifth section includes a quartet of recent essays. “Happy End of the Cold War” reviews Eastern European artists who heretically refused to internalize the Cold War’s Manichean world view of capitalism and communism. “The Future from the Balkans” considers artists working through the contemporary refugee crisis on the edges of Europe, advancing, in the face of new nationalisms and neo-fascist movements, the idea of culture as “becoming-common.” “Sites of Sustainability” is less about an ecological sensibility or financial security than what museums stand to learn about survival from artists’ strategies of recursive thinking and autonomy. Endurance is also at issue in the final essay, “My Post-Catastrophic Glossary,” which takes the form of a diary written in the aftermath of an imagined catastrophe that has destroyed Moderna galerija (MG+MSUM), and, indeed, all museums and institutions of learning worldwide. Featuring illustrations by artist (and Moderna galerija guard) Nika von Ham, it pictures a traumatized humanity cast upon human resources alone, and observes, as if from across a chasm, the ideas that have driven Badovinac’s work during the period this book surveys.

The last among these ideas is comradeship itself—a term that, unlike the others, still awaits Badovinac’s overt theorization. Nevertheless, comradeship is woven throughout every aspect of

this book. It appears explicitly in the accounting of the collectives in section three but is also present in the knitting together of previously isolated avant-gardes in section one, and the repetitions across time and network building across distance in section two. Throughout this book, we see repetition, recollection, conservation, and restoration imagined as critical modalities, in opposition to the cynical backward-glances of contemporary authoritarian movements. Rather, these are means to preserve lost forms of group being in culture. It is only through recollection and repetition, Badovinac argues, that we will recover a future worth living.

—J. Myers-Szupinska



# Body and the East

I have no concern with any economic criticisms of the communist system; I cannot enquire into whether the abolition of private property is expedient or advantageous. But I am able to recognize that the psychological premises on which the system is based are an untenable illusion. In abolishing private property we deprive the human love of aggression of one of its instruments, certainly a strong one, though certainly not the strongest; but we have in no way altered the differences in power and influence which are misused by aggressiveness, nor have we altered anything in its nature.

—Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

## I

### PLAY OF REPRESENTATIONS

We should not talk about artistic creativity in Eastern Europe as a discrete phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> If we do, we risk making this Otherness—until recent events, we were relatively isolated from the world—even more evident; we present ourselves, consciously or not, in the way that we believe the Other would want to perceive us. But we would

1 Eastern Europe is not used here as a geographical term but as a term of popular politics, referring to the countries of various former socialist regimes in the late twentieth century.

be risking more if we simply forgot about this Otherness altogether, and presented ourselves, in the spirit of the newly united Europe, as equal—that is, if we pointed only to those cultural or historical characteristics which comply with the popular slogan that “we have always been part of Europe.” The idea of a united Europe, which has been politically and economically enshrined in the European Union, rests on a Western definition of being European, notwithstanding the European Union’s cautious opening to new members from the East. The unequal balance of power is perfectly evident, in direct contrast with a contemporary multiculturalism that conceals the cultural logic of multinational capital.<sup>2</sup>

2 This phrasing follows the title of Slavoj Žižek’s essay, “Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 225 (September–October 1997): 28–51.

It is true that the Otherness of the East has been stereotyped and even “folklorized” in the domain of art. Take its representations in popular cinema, such as Milče Mančevski’s *Before the Rain* (1994) or Emir Kusturica’s *Underground* (1995), films made in Yugoslavia during the war. Both cater to a Western liberal viewpoint, as Slavoj Žižek writes, “Both films offer precisely what this view would like to see in the Balkan conflict—a spectacle of timeless, incomprehensible, mythical circuit of passion, in contrast with the decadent and anemic Western life.”<sup>3</sup>

3 *Ibid.*, 107.

By contrast, numerous artists from the East have been critical of this Otherness as something constructed through a play of representations. Among the artists included in the exhibition that this essay serves to introduce, the Russians Alexander Brener and Oleg Kulik take this position; there are many others not included in this exhibition who have dealt with the



Oleg Kulik, *Dog House*. Performance at the exhibition *Interpol*, Färgfabriken Contemporary Art Center, Stockholm, 1996

deconstruction of Eastern identity. Take, for example, the Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov, or the Slovene group IRWIN (part of a wider collective called Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), founded by three groups: IRWIN, The Sisters of Scipio Nasica Theater, and Laibach; the latter included in this exhibition). Solakov creates narrative installations in which he deconstructs the Western art system by shifting its center of power to an unexpected place—to himself, an artist from the East, or even, in one installation, to the chief of an African tribe.

Reacting to political changes in the East at the end of the 1980s, and to the new status quo that culminated in the Balkan conflict, IRWIN similarly took a critical stance against the prioritization of national belonging. In their 1996 project *Transnational*, for instance, a series of discussions and lectures was held during a trip from East to West across the United States. Featuring an invited group of international curators and theorists from Eastern Europe and the United States, this project focused on the displacement of centers and the circulation of ideas. The artists in IRWIN leave the relationship between identity and Otherness an open question, or they imagine it as an ongoing process of mutual characterization that can be presented in countless combinations. This emphasis on permanent doubt and the play of representations distinguishes them from their earlier artists who, by contrast, resorted to ancient practices and esoteric rituals to overcome Otherness.

The creative linking of Eastern and Western ideas has largely remained a utopian ideal outside

4 Beuys stretched the geographical boundary of Eastern Europe as far as China, but this is not particularly relevant to the general purpose of this essay.

the realm of art. There have been some brief realizations, however, such as the *Eurasienstab* action, first performed by Joseph Beuys and the Fluxus composer Henning Christiansen in Vienna in 1967, which took anthroposophical ideas as its basis.<sup>4</sup> This striving for oneness of different sociopolitical spaces whose energy flows had been interrupted—most drastically by the Berlin Wall—was expressed in a monumental manner by Marina Abramović and Ulay in their *Great Wall Walk Project* of 1988. Approaching each other on foot from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China, the artists journeyed for three months. But the desired reunion was not to be: intended to culminate in their marriage, the performance instead resulted in the breakup of their relationship.

Meanwhile, the position of artists caught in the trap of multiculturalism's version of Otherness has primarily been challenged by writers under the rubric of "new internationalism." One such writer, Ekaterina Degot, has produced a sharp analysis of the Russian context in her 1997 essay "The Revenge of the Background." She writes, "The Russian artist perpetually finds him/herself between the Scylla and Charybdis of two representational mechanisms which are switched on automatically and ruthlessly. In Russia ... being a 'contemporary artist' means representing Western culture. ... In the West, on the other hand, a Russian artist must inevitably represent Russia."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, such analysis describes a condition that applies to all Eastern artists.

5 Ekaterina Degot, "The Revenge of the Background," in Silvia Eiblmayr, ed., *Zonen der Ver-Störung* [Zones of disturbance] (Graz, Austria: Steirischer Herbst, 1997), 44.

II  
THE POWER OF THE NON-SIGNIFIED

What connects the reflections above to the present exhibition, which considers artists who have used their body as their basic medium of expression? That is, aside from the self-evident intention of presenting an area of creativity that until now has been quite unknown. It is to be found in the question implied by people such as Žižek and Degot, as well as others like Igor Zabel.<sup>6</sup> Namely, is it possible to avoid the “representational” role of the Eastern artist? I will then add a question of my own: why might artists using their own body as a medium allow us to address this question particularly well?

6 Zabel presented relevant ideas at the *We and the Others* conference, part of “ART-Manege 97” Moscow International Art Fair, December 6–7, 1997.

Installation view, *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1998



To answer the latter question, it is because the artist’s body is necessarily defined in relationship to the Other, and because—due to its inherent intersubjectivity and performative potential—it can offer a model of another representational

economy. That is, the body in body art is not self-sufficient; the artist acts within a cultural context. Compounding this, the artist's body is also the locus of the viewer's desires. This essential intersubjective and interdependent character belies claims of the directness of experience or the unique presence of the body, whether in body art or in performance more generally.<sup>7</sup>

7 I am relying here on a distinction between body art and performance explained by art historian Amelia Jones in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Jones writes, "The work that emerged during the period—from the 1960s to the mid-1970s—was labelled 'body art' or 'body works' by several contemporaneous writers who wished to differentiate it from a conception of 'performance art' that was at once broader (in that it reached back to Dada and encompassed any kind of theatricalized production on the part of a visual artist) and narrower (in that it implied that a performance must actually take place in front of an audience, most often in an explicitly theatrical, proscenium-based setting). I am interested in work that may or may not initially have taken place in front of the audience: in work... [that] *takes place through enactment of the artist's body*, whether it be in a 'performance' setting or in the relative privacy of the studio, *that is then documented such that it can be experienced subsequently through photography, film, video and/or text*" (13; italics by the author).

The medium of the body is not a guarantee of truth, nor is it a reflection of the self. It does not offer itself to the viewer as a one-way relationship. Rather, the essence of body art lies in the fact that it upholds the process of the development of truth as an open structure; contrary to the understanding of body art as engaged with a metaphysics of presence, it is open-ended, social, and mediated. The very fact that a performance loses its totality as it is reproduced or otherwise documented underscores the fragmentariness and contingency inherent to these practices.

Performativity (or theatricality, as it was famously denounced by art historian Michael Fried, who saw it as robbing modernist sculpture of its self-sufficiency) emphasizes the importance of physical experience and challenges the central position of reason. Modernism privileges the object over the artist's body; the object enshrines the artist's genius forever in form. Body art, by contrast, is counter-formalist; its meaning is not circumscribed by the limits of an autonomous or fixed object. Instead of an artifact we face a process of creation and, equally important, a process of perception. If modernism construed the object as self-sufficient, so too did it imagine the body as self-contained and

unique, housing an essence that an artist might “reach” through physical pain. Concealed under superficial social codifications, the modernist finds universal truth through shamanic actions, whereas the postmodern artist ascribes individual characteristics to specific practices.

Let us return now to the question of whether it is possible to avoid the “representational” character of Eastern and Western European art. If we consider the last fifty years as a type of comprehensive performance of extended duration, we can see that the art of both sectors has been interpreted primarily through the represented—i.e., absent—body of performance. To be more concrete: both East and West have witnessed the other side’s art through images. The West presented itself to the relatively isolated East through reproductions in magazines and books. The East was represented in the West by a rather small number of poor-quality documents or by a mythography of official art and long-suffering dissidents, or simply by its absence from retrospective surveys of European art.

Installation view, *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present*, 1998





In this dialogue, the power was always on the side of the West. The West generated new trends, which were attributed a universal character; and it produced new interpretations of those trends, which helped preserve the political borders of the visible. Eastern art, by contrast, was visible only to the extent to which it figured within the limits of this representational economy—that is, whether it was itself ideological or critical of ideology—or insofar as it figured within the frameworks dictated by Western trends. This returns us to the bind that Degot described above, in which both unhappy positions belong to an ideology of the visible.

In her 1993 book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, the performance scholar Peggy Phelan writes about the force of that which is not signified—and which therefore cannot be confined by the ideology of the visible. By locating her subject in this blind spot, she is, she writes, “attempting to revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable. This is not the same thing as calling for a greater visibility of the hitherto unseen. . . . [I]mplicit assumptions about the connection between representational visibility and political power . . . have been dominant forces in cultural theory in the last ten years.”<sup>8</sup> She goes on to claim that greater visibility does not necessarily equate to greater power, and suggests that power might be located precisely in those things that are invisible or unrepresentable.

8 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

How might such a suggestion play out in the unequal relations between East and West? The invisible or absent are manifestly part of the works of Kulik and Brener; their works represent the non-articulated or non-signified,

that which does not figure within the borders of the institutionalized and controlled—indeed something that undermines the stable representative economy of East and West altogether.

Take, for example, the philosopher Renata Salecl's description of the actions of Kulik and Brener at the opening of the exhibition *Interpol* at the Färgfabriken Contemporary Art Center in Stockholm, in her 1996 essay on the human/animal divide. Salecl writes:



Oleg Kulik, *Dog House*.  
Performance at the exhibition  
*Interpol*, 1996

[I]n regard to Kulik's performance, the West finds aesthetic pleasure in observing the Russian dog, but only on condition that he does not behave in a truly dog-like manner. When Kulik ceased to be a decorative art-object—the Eastern neighbor who represents the misery of the Russian dog-like life—and started to act in a way that surprised his admirers, he was quickly designated the enemy. His performance (together with the performance of another Russian artist, Alexander Brener, who at the *Interpol* show destroyed a work by Chinese-American artist Wenda Gu) was described as a “direct attack against art, democracy, and the freedom of expression,” and as a “classical model of imperialist behavior.”<sup>9</sup>

9 Renata Salecl, “Love Me, Love My Dog: Psychoanalysis and the Animal/Human Divide,” in *(Per)Versions of Love and Hate* (London: Verso, 2000), 106. Salecl credits the denunciations in the Nordic art review *Siksi*, 1996, though she does not mention an author or page number.

Defending his art, Brener has said that he draws on the centuries-long democratic traditions of plebeians, proletarians, slaves, and rebels; he speaks of the culture of revolt and destruction based in the lower strata of society, but also as practiced by intellectuals. He lists some of his

10 Alexander Brener, "The Dream of Democratic Culture," in Joseph Backstein et al., *It's a Better World: Russischer Aktionismus und sein Kontext*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Secession, 1997), 22.

11 Quoted by Hubert Klocker, "Gesture and the Object," in Paul Schimmel et al., *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 166.

heroes: "François Villon and Walt Whitman, the theater created by Antonin Artaud and Berthold Brecht, films by the Marx Brothers and Buster Keaton."<sup>10</sup> We can safely assume that his list, if continued, would include Kazimir Malevich—in 1997, Brener spray-painted Andy Warhol's dollar sign onto one of the Russian artist's paintings. Those who condemned this act were probably unaware of the fact that Malevich himself, in an essay on museums, argued for the burning of all old artworks to enjoy the resulting ashes.<sup>11</sup>

Assessing the actions of Brener and Kulik, we can see that they do not merely reference the aggression, suffering, and trauma of our civilization but, rather, embody them.

### III BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Since their emergence in various forms over the course of the twentieth century, body art, performances, and happenings have often provoked embarrassment and apprehension in their audiences through their inclusion of unpredictable and uncontrollable elements. They have also, throughout their history, required interpreters, who have endeavored to place them in their various cultural contexts. In his 1985 essay "Art in the Darkness," Thomas McEvilley saw conceptual and performance art as existing on a proverbial dark side of the moon—from which position they could constantly challenge the rules of art.<sup>12</sup> To this "dark side," McEvilley attributed many things: the timeless Freudian storehouse of childhood memories, the Jungian

12 Thomas McEvilley, "Art in the Dark," *Artforum* 21, no. 10 (Summer 1983): 62–71.

collective unconscious, shamanism, and exotic cultures. By serving as this sort of psychoanalytic or shamanistic storehouse, he suggests, art enables its viewers to explore issues suppressed by social conventions and mores, and to counterbalance their restrictive force.

Going further, McEvelley ascribes the meaning that Freud saw in the beauty of art to this darkness, to the non-pragmatic, and in relationship to an aesthetics of the ugly. Indeed, we could see non-pragmatism as one quality uniting different aesthetics under the common rubric of art. The authentic impulse of any art lies in exploring the dual nature of humanity, as both beauty and the beast at one and the same time. Or, we might follow Žižek and attribute to ugliness an ontological primacy. For him, “Beauty represents a kind of defense against the Ugly and its disgusting existence—or, rather, existence *itself*, since ... what is really ugly is the brutal fact of existence (of what is real) as such.”<sup>13</sup>

13 Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Phantasms* (Ljubljana: Analecta, 1997), 86.

In his essay “Eros and Thanatos of Communism,” the Russian theorist Alexander Jakimovich refers to Georges Bataille in pointing to the motives of totalitarian politicians and artistic geniuses alike: both groups belong to the shamanic, irrational, marginal, bohemian, and delinquent forces in society.<sup>14</sup> Yet while the powerful have sought to suppress or otherwise alter their legacies following an initial romantic revolutionary euphoria, art has increasingly sought to liberate those issues wrapped in Dionysian darkness and to deconstruct the hidden mechanisms of power.

14 Alexander Jakimovich, “The Eros and Thanatos of Communism,” *New Moment* (Belgrade) 4 (1995): 110.

Earlier we spoke of the game of control in the relationship between East and West, and between body and reason—relations in which the body is a medium for games of power and control. Now I wish to discuss this issue in terms of the relationship between body art and Eastern European institutions of art. This will involve some periodization, exploring this relationship as it took different shapes in different decades: between the individual and collective as it was evidenced in Eastern European body art in the 1960s and '70s; between identity and the role of the body in body art in the 1980s; and between the old and new identities of body art during the period of social and political transitions in the East in the 1990s.

IV  
ON THE MARGINS OF  
STATE-SUBSIDIZED INSTITUTIONS

Contemporary art generated via the artist's own body, which is also called body art in the East, first manifested in the 1960s. The term signals a wide range of very different art practices, even if all treat the artist's own body as the main site or carrier of sociopolitical, existential, or cosmological meaning. This sort of art emerged in Eastern Europe in the time of Marshall McLuhan's "global village," and clearly belongs in the trajectory of the broader European-American lineage—specifically, the recovery of models from prewar and interwar avant-gardes, such as Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism.

However, such a genealogy may overemphasize Western European models over those equally

important precedents among the Russian Futurists and Constructivists, as well as numerous local avant-garde movements from the beginning of the twentieth century. The model of the avant-gardes was hardly eradicated under communist domination; indeed, even in places where the communist regimes were most repressive, the model of the avant-garde inspired artists to sustain a kind of communication network; it helped them negotiate and overcome their isolated and marginal position during the totalitarian period. Artists making new and challenging work invented groups modeled on the earlier avant-gardes, they wrote manifestos and prepared joint actions, and they internationalized their activities to whatever extent they were able. The Fluxus movement, which was internationalist and communicative by nature, had special importance: it enabled Eastern artists to contact the larger world via mail art. Milan Knížák even organized a Fluxus festival in Prague in 1966, in collaboration with Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, and Ben Vautier.

The levels of repression varied from nation to nation. The most repressive regimes were in Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, and Russia, while the former Yugoslavia had relatively more freedom. Countries without much allowance for individual freedom evolved special conditions for performative practices. The Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu, for example, staged his performances at home, before a photographic camera, since this kind of activity would not be possible in public spaces. The Collective Actions Group, with its charismatic leader Andrei Monastyrski, performed most of its events in Moscow for closed circles of people in the 1970s.

Artists in the former Yugoslavia, by contrast, were less isolated, and had opportunities to collaborate with the outside world. Numerous foreign artists exhibited at the Belgrade Student Cultural Center Gallery, for example, or at the Belgrade International Theater Festival, founded in 1967. There were the *New Tendencies* international exhibitions held in Zagreb between 1961 and 1973, and the International Biennials of Graphic Art in Ljubljana from 1955 on.

However, body art from the East was seldom represented at similar events in the West, aside from appearances of individual artists at the Edinburgh International Festivals or the Biennales des jeunes artistes (Biennials of Young Artists) in Paris, or at the *Works and Words* international art manifestation at the Foundation De Appel in Amsterdam in 1979, which featured artists from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia.

Such sporadic international activity multiplied in the 1980s, alongside a growing international interest in art from these regions. With this was forged a Western stereotype of the Eastern artist, though entirely based on Russian artists like Erik Bulatov, Ilya Kabakov, and Komar and Melamid. These artists became real stars in the West. Meanwhile, art exhibitions of Croatian, Czech, Russian, Polish, and other artists steadily established a representative picture of the East. All this—new Eastern art stars, new regional representations—occurred in the general context of the transition from modernism to postmodernism, universalism to particularism.

In 1994, the first major exhibition of twentieth-century Eastern European art was staged in Bonn under the title *Europa, Europa*. It seemed at the time that what lay ahead was an ever-growing interest in the East. Now what is happening is exactly the opposite; the eye of the West has turned elsewhere, to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Nevertheless, it will never again be as it was: the political and economic changes have resulted in cultural exchanges. Networks of state-run galleries—which nowadays are marginally less inert than before—provide a larger flow of information in Eastern European countries, together with various Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, which have had a decisive effect in certain countries. In addition, Manifesta, the new nomadic European biennial established in 1996, is focused on building a fresh geography of art, thereby ensuring frequent representation of Eastern European artists.

Returning now to the history of body art: despite its inherent provocativeness, body art was institutionalized in the West through the activities of museums that have found appropriate ways of collecting, presenting, and documenting it and other similar art practices. In the process, one of the important reasons for the emergence of performative practices—an opposition to the commercialization and musealization of art—has been somewhat forgotten.

From the 1960s on, artists in the West have been resisting, in one way or another, the manipulation of the art market. In the East, where the art market was and remains barely existent, artists have resisted the manipulation of the state and its



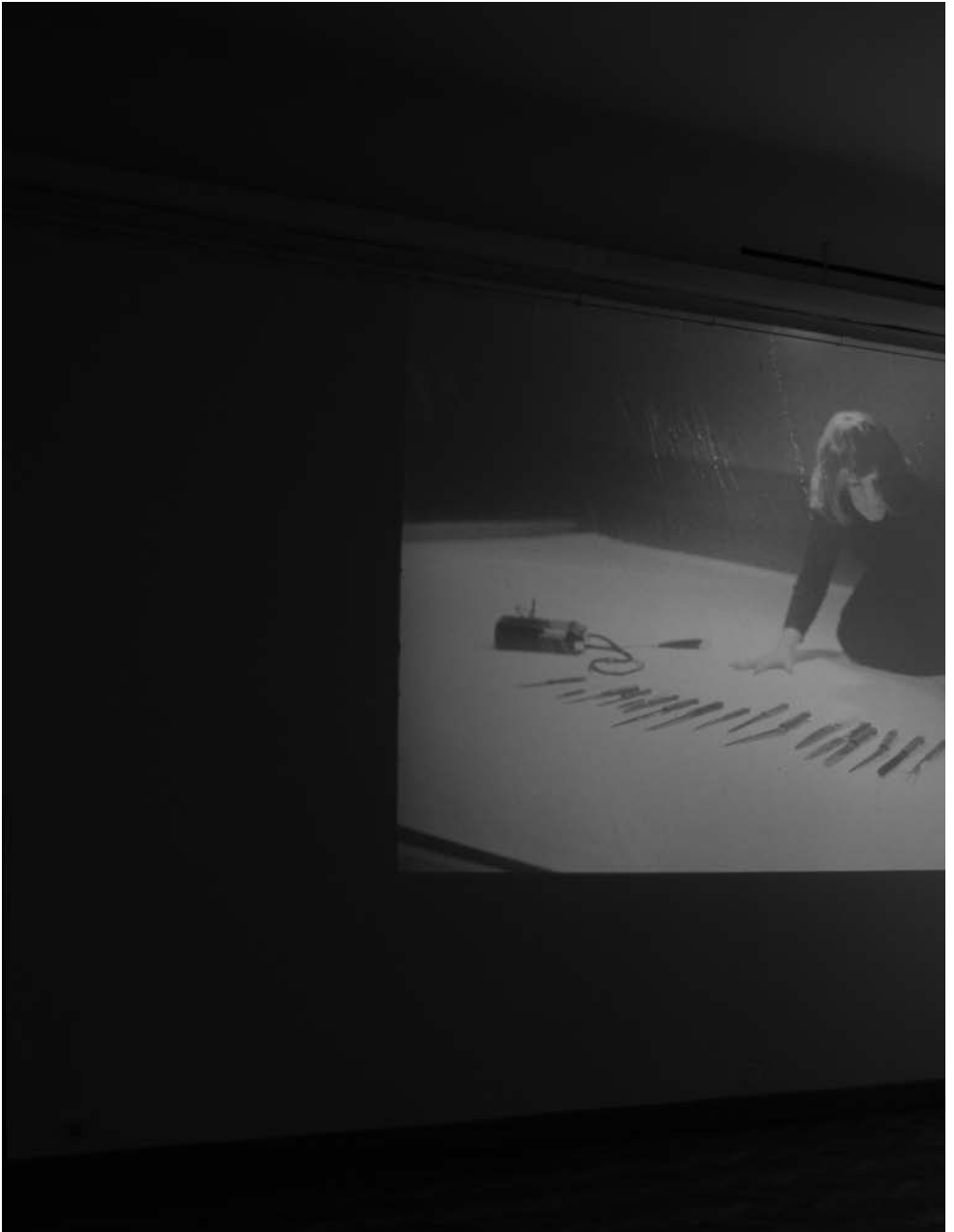
ideological apparatus. If the West knows how to take advantage of the Otherness of art, and in so doing to prove its own openness, Eastern regimes succeeded in keeping new forms of art on the margins. This is evidenced by the fact that most of the works in this exhibition were borrowed from the artists themselves, as very little can be found in the repositories of state museums. There is probably no need to point out the consequences of this neglect, such as the poor technical quality of the material; we had to transfer most of these works to newer media.

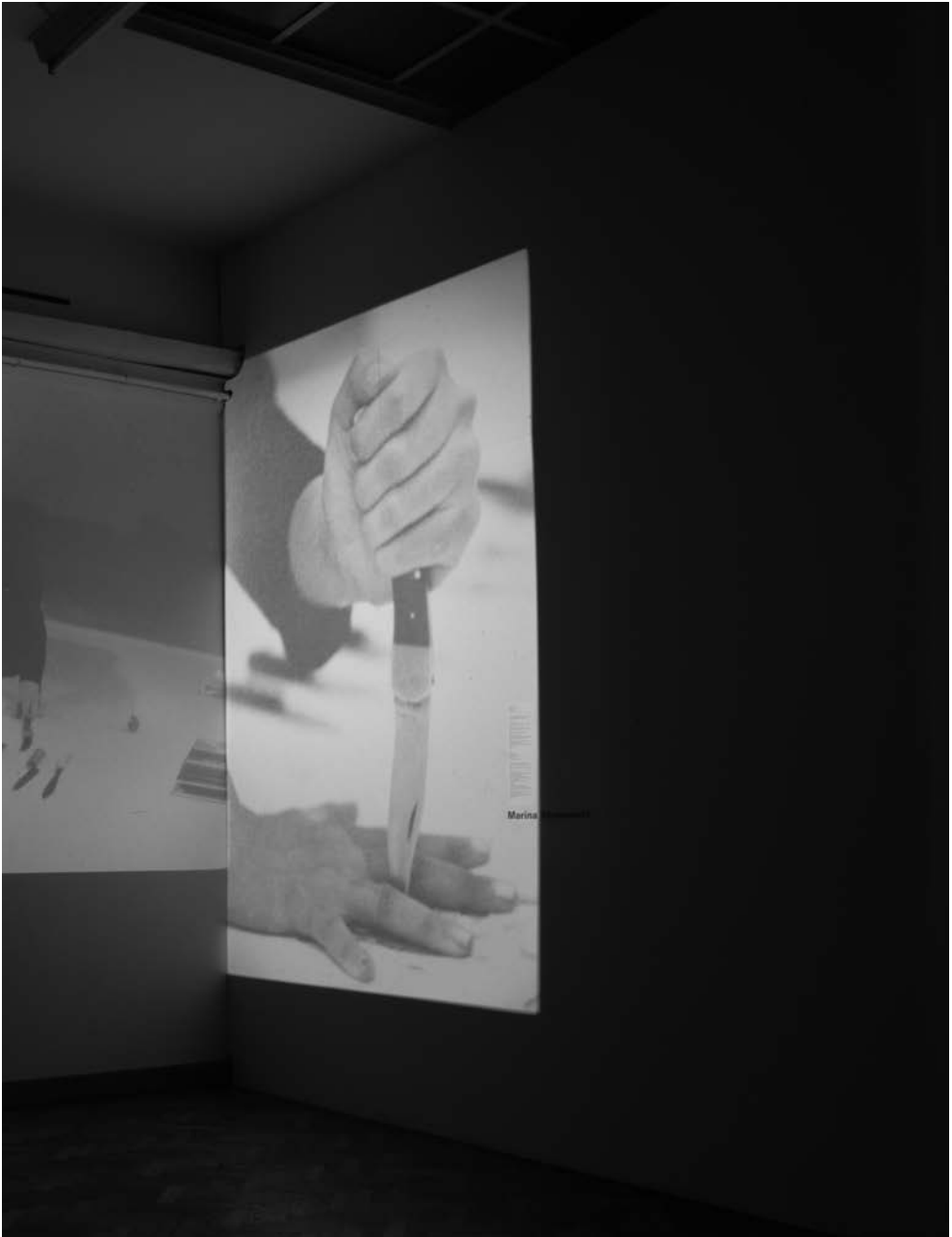
Even though it was precisely state-run institutions that were positioned to support such practices during socialism, they did not want to occupy themselves with such matters. Instead, they left these new art forms in the care of marginal student and youth centers and other alternative spaces (such as the galleries of the Student Cultural Centers in Zagreb, Belgrade and Ljubljana, Foksal Gallery in Warsaw, and others).

Artists, for their part, mostly understood the absence of the art market and indeed their enforced isolation as personal freedom. They experienced the margins as an oasis permitting the development of autonomous creativity, which elsewhere was under attack from the prevailing spirit of collectivism. In such conditions, art in the East, particularly that of the 1960s and '70s, acquired a utopian dimension, resulting in the emergence of a specific type of bohemian artist, marked by a heroic, individual stance.

following pages:  
Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 10*, 1973. Installation view, *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present*, 1998

Nevertheless, these performative practices did not display—on superficial terms, in their





appearance—essential differences from their Western counterparts. I do not agree, for example, with arguments that have claimed that the greater aggression of Eastern European artists toward their bodies reflected more repression in the East. Marina Abramović, Tibor Hajas, or Petr Štembera did not torture their own bodies more than Chris Burden, Günter Brus, or Gina Pane. There are some important differences related to local traditions, particularly in the works of Jerzy Beres and Paul Neagu, but these do not amount to much. Nor was certain artists' emphasis on politics, or living under a communist regime, as in the works of Radomir Damnjan, Raša Todosijević, and Jerzy Truszkowski, so direct that it would justify major distinctions between body art in the East versus that in the West.

The differences, such as they are, lie in something invisible and non-signified. Thus, for example, the bodies of the naked men photographed by Tomislav Gotovac or Ion Grigorescu do not at first glance tell us very much about the sociopolitical situations of the respective artists. When Gotovac ran naked through the streets of Belgrade, or when Grigorescu photographed his own genitals, these acts expressed no overt political message. Nevertheless, if we know something about the context in which the works were made, we may know, for example, that the appearance of a naked artist in public in Romania had at that time an overtly political dimension.

Performance artists in the East often had to work within significant restrictions, in countries that permitted minimal personal freedoms. Artists were often condemned for acts of perceived

hooliganism or for destroying sacred icons of communism or socialism; in Slovenia in the 1980s, they were even condemned as fascists. The threat of police surveillance and censorship was omnipresent, making people very cautious about their public behavior. Actions in public, and on the streets, were frequently banned by the police. Artists were arrested.

As with Grigorescu's privately staged performances, a culture of actions and rituals also developed in private apartments in Moscow suburbs in the 1970s and '80s, and for similar reasons. The Collective Actions Group performed many events for invited audiences in the 1970s. Therefore, we can understand that the public exposure of the private took place within specific framing restrictions in the East; such gestures are of course also limited in democratic countries, but this can be ascribed primarily to the observance of morals and social etiquette over outright legal restriction.

On the other hand, the messages conveyed by the naked male body do not differ so much between Eastern and Western art. In the East, the representation of the male body or genitals signaled anarchy, while in the West—I am thinking now of the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe and the physical element of the erect penis—they underlined the demystification of patriarchy and the threat of homosexuality to a phobic culture. In their respective challenges to accepted social norms, these characterizations do not differ greatly.

The female body, which social realism had depicted as asexual and androgynous, featured in performative practices as a vessel of freedom and



Sanja Iveković, *Triangle* 2000+, 1979. Gelatin silver prints (2 from a series of 4), 160 × 126 cm. Documentation of a performance. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

15 The renowned Swiss curator Harald Szeemann invented the phrase “individual mythologies” to describe artists whose work consisted of a self-referential system of symbols, most famously in the exhibition *documenta 5* (1972).

individuality, in the form of the ritual body of Abramović, the cosmological bodies of Natalia LL and Teresa Murak, the intimate body of Sanja Iveković, or the erotic body of Vlasta Delimar. Whether smeared with honey and fat (Egle Rakauskaite) or exhausted by disease (Katarzyna Kozyra) these artists represented liberation, but also pointed—directly or indirectly—to their active relationship with society. If the 1970s were, as the exhibition-maker Harald Szeemann surmised, a decade of “Individual Mythologies,” these women signal that such individualism had a distinct meaning in the East, where self-determination had been marginalized and thereby gained a political dimension.<sup>15</sup>

v  
 BETWEEN THE RED STAR  
 OF COMMUNISM AND  
 THE YELLOW STAR  
 OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY

In the 1980s, as Eastern European nations started to make some political moves toward democracy—culminating in Mikhail Gorbachev’s Perestroika policy—the belief in the great ideologies started to crumble. At the same time, the construct of the autonomous individual—including the mythic artist-hero of previous decades—began to decline. Performative practices accordingly began to distance themselves from personal identity, and embraced increasingly complex (and perhaps less coherent) forms of expression. The 1980s also witnessed the introduction of new forms of social behavior that were no longer based on the search for an authentic identity but rather on the construction

of personality. In this decade, theater was everywhere: on the streets, in subculture (the punk movement was especially important), and in art. Performance no longer exposed the body as the bearer of individuality but emphasized it as a site of possible transformation. It was a hybrid form, straddling visual art, rock music, new media, and theater.

There were especially strong manifestations of this hybrid form in Ljubljana, exemplified at concerts by Borghesia and Laibach. The former destroyed sexual taboos, while the latter conflated Nazi and communist iconography—both practices analogous to the laying bare of traumatic issues in psychoanalysis. But if there was a therapeutic effect, it was directed toward society rather than the individual, as had been the case in earlier decades. Compare, for example, Abramović's *Role Exchange* from 1975, in which the artist took the place of a prostitute in an Amsterdam shop window, while the sex worker replaced her at the opening of her exhibition, with Laibach's performative interview on Slovenian TV in 1983, in which members of the group assumed the roles of totalitarian politicians. The works map well the different decades' strategies: Abramović tests her will by initiating a challenging situation, while Laibach test their audience by exposing, through their acted behavior, the mechanisms of power. Abramović's critique is implicit, Laibach's explicit. Similarly, artists in the 1980s began to distance themselves from the laborious and self-torturing performances of the '70s. Certain performances, such as those by the Autoperforationsartisten, Marko Kovačič, Józef Robakowski, or Jiří Suruvka, even venture beyond irony to satirize body art.



Laibach, *XY-unsolved*, 1983.  
Television interview with  
RTV Ljubljana. Collection  
Moderna galerija, Ljubljana



In the 1990s, after the fall of the communist regimes, artists in certain countries found themselves in even worse conditions. This is not only a time of new social conditions but new states, in which new spaces and new forms of art are beginning to develop. In Lithuania and Moldova, which have little tradition of body art, there are now artists using the language of performance to reflect on the emerging situation. Artists in these new states often feel as if they have been pushed to the edge of civilization—as in Česlovas Lukenskas's video *Thrown Out Man* (1989), in which he is literally thrown into a garbage dump.

The 1990s have also been a time of new sociopolitical chaos, in which specific art scenes are still dominated by small, mafia-like groups, as was indicated by the case of Brener and Kulik described above. This is, furthermore, a time of new nationalistic regimes, with Serbia and Croatia as pertinent examples. Artists have been emigrating from these countries, yet, were they to stay, their presence would be registered only as absence. The artist Tanja Ostojić speaks poetically about such a situation in her work *Personal Space* (1996). Covering her body with marble dust, she posed motionless in the gallery, occupying the space like a living sculpture, before departing, leaving behind only a trace of dust on the floor that remained for the exhibition's duration.

This decade has also been a time of war in the Balkans. This is reflected in the works of Božidar Jurjević from Dubrovnik, as well as Slaven Tolj and Nebojša Šerić-Šoba from Sarajevo; they expose a situation in which the artist is not only starving but speechless, without language. Overlooked and

caricatured in the 1980s, body art has returned in the '90s as a means of dealing directly with the shocks of transitioning to a new reality, as well as the direct threat of war, which, after all, endangers that selfsame body. The war in the Balkans employed the most primitive weapons and tactics—knives, rape—reminding us that we are captives of existence.

Still, this does not signal the emergence of a special representative type of Eastern body art. The West, too, is returning to the body, as a means of responding to the threat of death—AIDS-related death in particular. Yet one can discern a broad range of other concerns: the absorption of the real into the virtual, racial discrimination, the subjugation of women, bioengineering, and so on. Obviously, these forces are felt in the East too.

We find in recent Eastern European body art the proximity of iconographies of life and death. This is reflected in the work of younger artists, alongside enthusiasm for new technology and new forms of communication, and an accelerated flow of energies between East and West. The most notable example of this is provided by the work of Rassim Krastev, who invigorates himself daily with vitamins provided by Ami Barak, a curator from the West. If the East and West remain different spaces, works like this one signal that the play of representations between the two is becoming less pronounced, and perhaps more elusive. Eastern identity hovers between the specifics of local situations, and the dispersed masses of virtual spaces—between the red star of communism and the yellow star of the European Community.

# Form-Specific Art

I

## SELECTIVE TRADITIONS

Does it still make sense to speak about form as something autonomous, as a *differentia specifica* that distinguishes works of art from life? How should we look at the long line of anti-illusionistic modernist artworks that culminated in the formula of art-as-art, i.e. what you see is what you get and nothing else? The aim of the exhibition *Form-Specific* is to synthesize three aspects of twentieth-century art: the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, which were deeply involved in the social revolutions of their times; high modernism, which, in the mid-twentieth century, strived for pure and autonomous forms; and recent post-conceptual art, which is more entangled with concrete experiences of time and space.

Through this synthesis, *Form-Specific* seeks to point out the problems of a selective tradition—a retrospective view that is not universal but rather quite specific. It indicates that the prevailing history of formalist modernism is just one possible narrative among many and demonstrates that even the ways in which this narrative embraces diverse interpretations of art, or accounts for art's relationship to sociopolitical or historical events, is biased. To put it another way, the exhibition aims to prove, in retrospect, that modern art

has never been universal; and, to show how contemporary artists have internalized this fact by building on the decaying myth of universal form to establish its confinement to specific historical contexts.

Claims for a synthesis between abstract form and progressive social ideas have a long history, reaching an apotheosis with the European avant-gardes of the 1910s and '20s, including the Russian avant-garde (which included Wassily Kandinsky, El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, and Vladimir Tatlin) and various adherents of the Bauhaus and De Stijl movements (such as Piet Mondrian). For these artists, abstract form was objective and repeatable across diverse creative fields in the sociopolitical sphere, including architecture, mass-manufactured commodities, urban planning, and so on. Artists committed to this prewar lineage often associated abstract form with socialism and modernization; in contrast, postwar American artists and their interpreters divested pure form of these social associations, relocating it to the idealized space of the white cube gallery.

*Form-Specific* means to recover and reevaluate the social aspirations of this heritage of European modernism. Thus, it means to expose the existence of multiple modernisms, to challenge the selectivity of the Western tradition, and to examine the specificity of local contexts. It does so, of course, in a moment when Otherness is valued, and as opposed to new and hazardous universalist programs.

II  
BETWEEN ABSTRACT FORM  
AND LIFE PRACTICE

While we cannot proclaim that the prevailing history of modernism neglects the prewar modernist avant-gardes, we can make the case that it overemphasizes the essentialist qualities of medium at the expense of parallel impulses—for example, toward a synthesis with other genres, heterogeneity, or just the randomness of life. Form-specific works do not confine themselves solely to addressing their own tradition or medium but rather address their immediate life-world. This is a central argument of the present exhibition: that the relationship between abstract form and life, for these artists, was much stronger than American interpreters would understand it to be—and that, perhaps, those American interpretations were rather more conflicted, or internally contradictory, than everyone initially assumed. Indeed, the notion that modern art was strengthened by its acknowledging its own objecthood embodied conflicting desires—that art could somehow merge into life while simultaneously standing apart from it.

Nowhere was this internal conflict dramatized more visibly than in Michael Fried's famous 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood." Separating authentic modernists from fakers, he argues that medium-specificity is endangered by literalism (tagged mostly to the work and writing of Donald Judd) and theatricality (connected primarily to Robert Morris). We could say that these artists embodied for Fried a drive to objecthood, on the one hand, and "life," on the other—the latter referring to

the works' dependence on time and space and the randomness of their context. As Fried saw it, these artists opened high-modern formalism to troubling contaminants, such as participation, site-specificity, and conceptual inquiry.

For Fried, this was an either-or proposition. Either something was art (meaning high-modernist, formalist art), or it was something else entirely: object, theater, or whatever. But we could go against the grain of Fried's argument and say instead that what resulted was a both-and proposition: art that might embody all the things that Fried rejected while still retaining its status as high art. It is no accident that the white cube, which enthroned and institutionalized the high-modernist aesthetic, only truly came to the fore through Minimalism. It is, of course, true that certain artists, such as Judd, produced functional objects, such as furniture, much like the artists and designers of the prewar avant-gardes—but this was hardly his essential mission.

We could therefore claim that form-specific artists rely more on their modern inauthenticity than on their alienated appearance. If high-modernist formalism meant to separate artists' work from the world, the artists in this exhibition mean to connect with it; if high-modernist formalism meant to follow an historical genealogy or trajectory, today's form-specific art evinces no such developmental continuity. It aims to abolish the code that has until now made art what it is—while nevertheless remaining art.<sup>1</sup>

1 This sentence paraphrases Douglas Crimp's examination of the work of the artist Daniel Buren, which, Crimp writes, "aims at nothing less than abolishing the code that has until now made art what it is, in its production and its institutions." See Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 103.

III  
BEYOND PAINTING

With these thoughts in mind, we can turn to works included in the exhibition itself. The French conceptual artist Daniel Buren, for example, started his career in the early 1960s by exploring the physical limits of painting by employing the language of formalist modernism. By mid-decade he had assumed a convention of 8.7-centimeter-wide stripes, and in 1967 began printing these stripes on wallpaper and posters that were applied *in situ*, thereby emphasizing the specific topology and cultural environment of each site and advocating for their concrete presence in the world.

Daniel Buren, *Comme dans un miroir: Division–Multiplication–Addition–Subtraction* [*As in a Mirror: Division–Multiplication–Addition–Subtraction*]. Installation view, *Form-Specific: Arteast exhibition*, presented in the then-unrenovated premises of the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM), Ljubljana, 2003



The work Buren produced for *Form-Specific* made this commitment clear: the artist built a construction that doubled the existing windows of the building where the exhibition took place, a former Yugoslav army barracks intended for renovation as a future museum of contemporary

art. Titled *As in a Mirror: Division-Multiplication-Addition-Subtraction*, the installation became a frame for witnessing a world in transformation, much as the building where the exhibition took place was changing.

Though very committed to abstract art, the work of the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica clearly indicates the limitations that can be found in the fidelity of American artists to specific mediums. While rejecting painting, Oiticica's art embraces context and social life. The critic and curator Guy Brett, who was an important mediator of Brazilian avant-garde art for the Anglophone context, wrote of Oiticica that through color the artist "explored all the basic structural questions, beginning with pictorial order and expanding outwards to the experience of space and time, which he and other concrete and neo-concrete Brazilian artists in the 1950s inherited from the prewar European avant-garde."<sup>2</sup>

2 Guy Brett, "The Experimental Exercise of Liberty," in *Hélio Oiticica* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1992), 224–25.

"Far from being the 'death of painting,'" the artist wrote, "this is its salvation, since true death would be the continuation of the picture as such, as the 'support' for painting. How clear it all is now: painting had to launch itself into space, be complete, not in surface, in appearance, but in its profound integrity."<sup>3</sup> Oiticica described this new state of modernism in 1967 as a "new objectivity," and at the heart of this new objectivity lay the tendency to include objects tasked with activating the participation of the viewer. This participation had political and ethical significance: it represented a return to the world, an opposition to cultural imperialism, a reestablishment of cultural identity, and more—all grounded in universal form.

3 Hélio Oiticica, "Selected Writing 1960–1980," in *ibid.*, 42.



How does work like this figure in the prevailing lineage of art history? In this, modernism is understood to be the art of modernization, on the model of rapidly developing or industrializing metropolises in Europe and America. These cities had, since the late nineteenth century, ceased only to function as centers of governmental administration and instead become hubs of transnational capital. Many of the iconic artists of this sort of modernism were unbound from local context, becoming cosmopolitan emigrants moving easily from city to city. As Marxist writer Raymond Williams has noted, this itinerancy had consequences for the development of modernism:

The life of the emigré was dominant among the key groups, and they could and did deal with each other. Their self-referentiality, their propinquity, and mutual isolation all served to represent the artist as necessarily estranged, and to ratify as canonical the works of radical estrangement. So, to *want* to leave your settlement and settle nowhere like [D. H.] Lawrence or [Ernest] Hemingway, becomes presented, in another ideological move, as a normal condition.<sup>4</sup>

4 Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism, Against the New Conformists*, ed. and with an introduction by Tony Pinkey (London: Verso, 1989), 35.

By extension, the art of these years naturalized and emblemized the self-referentiality, alienation, and exile of the itinerant groups that produced it; “universalism” is, on these terms, both exaggeration and inversion of the transnational identity of the artists themselves.

However, despite sometimes dealing with objective, abstract, or even “cold” forms, modern art has always been attached to specific places

and contexts. Yet such forms are both specific and universal. Consider, for example, the different ways in which ideologies of autonomy and transnationalism served capitalist nations in one way—as a useful emblem of international markets and commodities, as well as democratic freedoms—and some communist nations in another.

#### IV SPECIFIC MODERNISMS

We will turn, therefore, to cases where, as with Oiticica, we find contextually grounded universalisms, or specific modernisms. Take, for example, the art of socialist Yugoslavia, which developed within the framework of an independent “self-managed” path to socialism. In Croatia, for example, the EXAT 51 group, whose individual members are included in this exhibition, was the first radically to break with socialist realism. The group even proposed a language of geometric abstraction (as well as the synthesis of different visual arts) as the possible art of a new socialist order.

5 *New Tendencies* was an exhibition series comprised of five numbered “Tendencies” staged in Zagreb, Croatia, from 1961 to 1973. International in nature, they sparked a movement dedicated to “visual research” that manifested both in optical abstract art and new dialogue between art and technology emblemized by the exhibition *Computer and Visual Research* presented at Galerija suvremene umjetnosti [Gallery of Contemporary Art], Zagreb, May 5–August 30, 1969, part of “Tendency 4,” 1968–69.

In the 1960s, some members of EXAT 51 became part of the international New Tendencies movement initiated in Zagreb in 1961, which was dedicated to making connections between visual language, new technologies, and new media (which included the German group Zero, the French Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel, and the Italians Gruppo N and Gruppo T).<sup>5</sup> These apparently formalist practices were often strongly politically motivated—a fact highlighted both by crucial decisions made by individual participants as well as by their joint or collective actions.



Installation view, *Form-Specific: Artest exhibition*, presented in the then-unrenovated premises of the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM), Ljubljana, 2003. Foreground: Vlado Kristl, *The Magic Skin*, 1960 (animation, 10 min.). Background: artworks and documentation by members of EXAT 51

The Serbian art historian and critic Jerko Denegri writes that the politicization of these artists was not necessarily reflected in the content or semantic characteristics of their paintings:

Members of this movement are aware that the fundamental note of artistic discourse in the political field is not only effectively but also historically compromised (within socialist realism and partly also within the concurrent emergence of the political wing of new figurative art). This kind of discourse is endangered by a one-sided inclusion of art into politics; in other words, there is a

threat that it would become subjected, that art would start functioning in the interest of the ruling power, which is an unacceptable and essentially humiliating destiny. Members of New Tendencies knew very well that in order to avoid such a fate, the work should remain totally autonomous, purely a visual and formal matter, and that it was precisely this autonomy, this “non-contamination,” which could make it play an active role it had been inevitably entering in the contemporary art system (made of the links between the institutions of market-criticism-the public, private collecting, and others).<sup>6</sup>

6 Jerko Denegri, *Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa: Exat 51 i Nove tendencije* [Constructive approach art: EXAT 51 and New Tendencies] (Zagreb: Horetzky, 2000).

Many of the older participants in *Form-Specific* shared this understanding of the fraught relationship between political engagement and the autonomy of art, among them members of EXAT 51, one of whom, Dušan Vukotić, introduced these ideas through animated films featuring schematic figures, abstract characters, and synthetic music. Nevertheless, one could argue that the very formation of New Tendencies was itself a political act, given that at the time of the movement’s formation, many progressive Western intellectuals and artists believed in the independent Yugoslavian model of socialism, which represented the free development of an international socialism beyond any strict ideological (or totalitarian) diktat.

With memories of World War II fresh in their minds, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and the theorist Theodor Adorno debated the necessity and possibility of a political art in the early 1960s. Adorno’s 1962 essay “Commitment,”

for example, answered Sartre's call for art to become more immediately engaged in politics by arguing for autonomous art as a space of resistance: "[I]t is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics. ... This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead."<sup>7</sup>

7 Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900–1979: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 764.

We could deduce from Adorno's admittedly complex statement that art's autonomy is conditional—that is, it has a time ("This is not a time for political art...") and a place ("nowhere more so than where..."). Today, however, we see "autonomy" as meaning an alienation from *any* context. *Form-Specific* aims to show that this assumption is not inherent in the works themselves but inscribed onto them through our own historically specific perception and interpretation, through capital and ideology.

It is of course true that art dealing with medium-specific issues did not produce a *direct* criticism of its world. But, in a particular historical moment, this art did help some artists in socialist nations develop the illusion that their engagement with their artistic medium was connected, even if indirectly, with universal concerns of being and selfhood. This orientation toward universalism was a sublimation of their gray socialist day-to-day existence. We might point to the context specificity of Minimalism's reception as a key example. In the West, this work was read in terms of materialism—while in the East, it signaled sublimity.

Indeed, when Yugoslavia's path to socialism split from the Soviet model in 1948, modernism gradually became something like an unofficial state art, replacing a Soviet-style socialist realism—even if the Yugoslav authorities' relationship with modernism remained somewhat two-faced. On the one hand, Yugoslavia's greater openness to the West proved its independence from the Soviet model. On the other, it still harbored some concerns about the “decadence” of modern art. Architecture and town planning was the first sphere to incorporate modern ideas, prompted by the need to reconstruct the national capital to better reflect the new society. Following a plan developed in the late 1940s, by the 1960s the “New Belgrade” broke all continuity with the old city center, but at the same time it placed great emphasis on monumental edifices reflecting a strict political hierarchy.

Installation, Marko Lulić.  
 Foreground: *Enter the System*  
 (*Ljubljana Sucked Dry*), 2002.  
 Background: Dejan Karaklajić  
 and Jovan Aćin, *We Don't*  
*Sell Hollywood*, 1972 (16mm  
 film transferred to video).  
 Installation view, *Form-*  
*Specific: Artest Exhibition*,  
 2003



The artist Marko Lulić deals directly with the complex reception of modernism in socialist Yugoslavia, which left behind many partisan monuments in a high modern style, as well as modernist hotels and housing blocks for a socialist elite. Lulić brings representations of this architecture into the “white cube,” thereby pointing at a double alienation—from Western systems of display and from ideological context.

We now return to the questions about the context-specific reception of Minimalism. In America, “objecthood” would be understood in the context of medium specificity, but also as a sort of reaction or intervention into a commodified consumerist world. In countries where consumerism was not the dominant pattern of behavior structuring society, the notion of freedom was less connected to the drama of being and having and more associated with economic, social, or political freedom. This in turn implied a stronger connection to the prewar European avant-gardes, for whom art was closely related to revolutionary change.<sup>8</sup>

8 As advanced by critics and art historians associated with the journal *October*, the concept of the neo-avant-garde suggests that some New York artists dreamed of re-activating the radicalism of the European avant-gardes. However, the prefix “neo” suggests the relative impossibility of realizing this union between radical form and politics in 1960s America.

9 See the introduction for Naum Gabo, “The Constructive Idea,” in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory 1900–1979*, 365.

The avant-garde artists who emigrated to America in the 1930s and ’40s found terms like “constructivism” were used merely to signal a school of abstract sculpture, absent of the political and social implications such terms had in their home countries.<sup>9</sup> Eastern European avant-garde artists, by contrast, often insisted on autonomy *as well as* a connection to the real world. Take, for example, the concept of Unism developed by Polish modernists Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro. Based on the idea of synthesizing art with other fields of activity,

Unism had utopian and practical dimensions, and incorporated design, which was intended to bring radical modernist form to the masses.

Espoused as the art of a new society, such work was soon repressed by reactionary elements within the new order. Strzeminski is a case in point: during the era of Stalinism, his works were hidden away in the cellar of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Poland. The work of Polish artist Edward Krasieński should be understood as, among other things, a critique of such repressions. Using blue masking tape, Krasieński documented his presence by taping walls and objects around him, obeying tightly defined rules (the tape is always 19 mm wide, and always installed 130 cm above the ground). These interventions, and their rules, can be understood as a specific—and at the same time thoroughly subjective—reaction to the loss of freedom and suppression of individuality in postwar Polish socialist society.

Edward Krasieński, installation view, *Form-Specific: Artest Exhibition*, 2003. Left to right: *Tap* (assemblage), 1989; *Tap* (intervention-photograph), 1989; *Intervention 2*, 1974





Modern art followed different paths in different socialist countries. In Yugoslavia, as we have seen, it became almost a state art; numerous artists in other countries suffered persecution and even imprisonment for employing the “decadent” style of the West. Painters and sculptors, who were expected to orient themselves toward realism, suffered most. On the other hand, modernism grew deep roots in Eastern design and architecture—indeed, the iconic socialist image of functional housing blocks is a product of this commitment to modernism.

Modern architecture can be said to have been particularly amenable to communist ideology. This was seen most dramatically under the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, who ordered the destruction of many bourgeois villas in Bucharest, only to replace them with new housing blocks that provided severely limited family living quarters—too small for pets, the number of dogs on the streets rapidly increased, becoming one of the city’s “attractions.” Many Eastern European countries have seen the phenomenon of new socialist towns built in the modern style, such as New Belgrade, or, in Slovenia, Velenje (which, after the 1980 death of the dictator Josip Tito, was briefly renamed Tito’s Velenje). Velenje appears in *Form-Specific* in the work of Tadej Pogačar, who counters the aesthetics of modern architecture by exposing an ornamental grid on a building’s façade.

Modern socialist towns represented a break with the past and therefore the most distinct manifestation of the virtues of planning and progress. They also embodied the desire for

control and surveillance that was characteristic of many of these regimes, extending well beyond Eastern Europe to become a global style. For example, Marjetica Potrč's work in *Form-Specific* looks to the history of Brasília, designed in the 1950s to serve as Brazil's capital city, while Florian Pumhösl investigates various examples of modern architecture in the so-called Third World, revealing the tension between colonial modernization and local notions of progress, as well as between the potential of utopian ideas and the actual state of things.

The films of French director Jacques Tati equally show how modern architecture played a role in the formation of postwar societies in East and West. Describing the “central character” of Tati's 1958 comedy *Mon Oncle* as the modern house that serves as its setting, the Spanish architect Iñaki Ábalos connects Tati's film to a certain sort of utopian socialism, in which the individual is regarded as a sort of generic abstraction, and the goal or ideal as a sort of conflict-free life.<sup>10</sup> It is, as Ábalos writes, the integration of the family into a “collective machinery” in which the family group is to be understood as a “cell within the higher social organism.” “The final destiny of housing will be to model and resolve public space, to make the city,” Ábalos continues—and, indeed, to see individual and family both as building blocks of a real socialist society.<sup>11</sup> This ideological attitude unites modernist architecture in the East with similar projects across the planet, which transformed global living conditions in the twentieth century.

10 Iñaki Ábalos, “Jacques Tati's Machine for Living in the Positivist House,” in *The Good Life: A Guided Visit to the Houses of Modernity* (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili SA, 2001).

11 *Ibid.*, 78.

## LIFE AS FORM

The contemporary artists in *Form-Specific* are facing a world that has advanced toward a modernism of order and control rather than one of utopia. We live and work in a world of signs, a codified world defined by agreements and conventions, standardized sizes, colors, contours, and amounts. Today, much of society's functions are invisible—and should we wish to visualize them, we conjure up a network: the banking system, the corporate franchise, the Internet, or transit maps. This is a world in the form of a grid: repetition without model, hierarchy, or developmental logic.

Those who wish to criticize geometrical abstraction often point to its relative autonomy from life. Meanwhile, ironically, it is precisely geometrical abstraction that, through design and architecture, has most dramatically taken root in the practice of everyday life. Life itself turned into form. Some artists in *Form-Specific* refer directly to this fact—but unlike the constructivist artists of the early twentieth century, who used design to distribute modern form to the masses, they explore design as strategy, as a tool for testing the limits of art. They not only transpose decoration into art but step with it back into life; it is as if these works mean constantly to test their own identity as art.

If the art of the avant-gardes was seemingly more autonomous, it nevertheless built bridges into life through the attitude and behavior of artists, as well as through their manifestos and ventures

into architecture and design. The autonomy of form-specific work was always a paradox, being built and destroyed simultaneously. Likewise, contemporary form-specific artists present work in the sphere of art, where it is relatively autonomous, but constantly negate this autonomy through the works' obvious usability. They recall that the myth of originality appeared alongside the industrial revolution, that is, alongside mass production and (eventually) standardization.

Central to the contemporary work, therefore, is the co-presence or conflation of terms that the prevailing modernist thinking worked hard to keep apart, namely, abstraction and decoration, or ornament. Modern artists were supposed to consider the grid as the starting-point for creating things from scratch, while at the same time reviling ornamentation or decoration altogether. The architect Adolf Loos, whose writing influenced a generation of modernist architects, argued that ornamentation in design or architecture represented regression, famously going so far as to connect a taste for ornament with uncivilized brutishness, criminality, and illness.

By engaging directly with decoration and ornamentation, form-specific works point back to this tension, or phobia, at the very root of the idea of modern art—thereby crossing those boundaries between high and low art that the interpreters of modern art erected long ago. In doing so, they return to a sort of counterproposal from Loos's moment, advanced by figures like John Ruskin, Augustus Pugin, and Gottfried Semper, who increasingly argued that it was design that should deal with pure forms, while relegating to

art the imitation of nature. (Today, the imitation of nature—or, better, reality—would require the imitation of the abstract network.)

The distinction between art and design survives today, no matter how much modernism owes to decorative art—and no matter how much this debt has been ignored. This debt, of course, goes both ways. Contemporary design often overlooks the fact that formalism is inherent in secular life, and that abstraction is not only a metaphysical category but that abstract forms are, in fact, the building blocks of the most ordinary objects of daily use.

Form-specific artists work with the world around them: its forms, materials, and situations. Contrary to what happened in modernist utopias, which have been only partially realized in our time, and largely in the form of technological and scientific progress and not social ideals—and which moreover have been characterized by the reduction of human beings to individuals in only a statistical sense—form-specific artists argue for new forms of freedom that oppose this “statistical” status of the individual. In one way, they simply represent situations as they are, but they also signal unrealized possibilities, activist disobedience, or challenges to what exists.

Such subjective interventions into the functional world characterize many artists in the show. Angela Bulloch, for example, intervenes into a world of socially negotiated rules, and thereby indicates their contingency or openness to individual interpretation. Luisa Lambri imbues modern architecture with subjective atmosphere

and emotion. Yuri Avvakumov proposes to rethink the projects of the constructivist avant-garde, such as El Lissitzky's iconic, unrealized design for a pedestal for revolutionary speeches (*Lenin Tribune*, 1920). Marko Peljhan studies technological and scientific systems and networks—military or media-based, economic or artistic—and creates subversive proposals for their use. Apolonija Šušteršič usually deal with unrealized social, living, or urban situations; for *Form-Specific*, she organized events in the former army building where the exhibition took place, proposing alternative rules for discussion with the public about the building's future use.

Apolonija Šušteršič,  
*Showroom/Meeting Room*,  
2003. Installation view,  
*Form-Specific: Artest*  
*Exhibition*, 2003



Our hyper-designed environment seduces us but also controls us. Many of the artists in the exhibition aim to bring these forms of control into clearer view. The films and paintings of Sarah Morris, for example, discover in the beauty and glamor of the modern metropolis elements of paranoia and conspiracy. Liam Gillick intervenes

into the dominant structure of film, similarly moving between fiction and documentary. Olaf Nicolai compares the seductive forms of consumerist society with the standardized living spaces defined by communist society. Mathieu Mercier shows how present-day objects were derived from the designs of the modernist avant-gardes; their utopian designs have today become objects of mass consumption. Anton Vidokle populates public spaces with stickers that remind us of commercial logotypes, taking advantage of their abstract visualization and ephemerality. Finally, Tobias Rehberger creates optimistic, pleasingly designed installations that nevertheless express the tension between art and design.

Olaf Nicolai, *Lenin: 8m<sup>2</sup>*,  
2000. Installation view,  
*Form-Specific: Artest*  
*Exhibition*, 2003



All these artists confront, in one way or another, the universality of form. Such reflections are certainly important in an increasingly globalized world. We know that the world is speedily heading toward homogenization and the erasure of cultural differences. The more that

forms—including both graphic images and forms of life—are standardized and broadly dispersed, the more they shape implicit social contracts and relations of power. We therefore need to learn how to recognize form as a tool and a weapon of communication.

Where modernism was oriented toward the pure and autonomous expression of form, the works in this exhibition indicate that such forms can also be viewed from the perspective of their function, as well as their social life. This is increasingly important in a world of codified and global communication. If site-specific works were composed of an interaction between the artwork and the viewer in space, form-specific works imagine a free use of existing forms in the sense of their repetition in specific places and times. Each time it is used, its universal character is endangered anew; all uses of a form threaten the system in which it originally developed, insofar as there is no guarantee it will be understood as it was intended. Understood in this way, the re-use of forms in art provides them new flexibility of meaning, which may allow them to articulate new kinds of freedom—as the free use of signs in an “formalized” world.



# Interrupted Histories

I  
THE NEED TO MODERNIZE  
THE ART SYSTEM

*Interrupted Histories* does more than simply present the individual projects of the twenty-seven artists I invited to participate in the exhibition. It offers these artworks as examples of how art can become an instrument of its own historicization. It is this newly acquired function, demonstrated by the works on view, that allows us now to speak of a changed relationship between art and its history.

We see this in the deliberate and systematic way the projects in this exhibition search for answers to the urgent questions that face cultures currently excluded from the art historical canon. Such cultures we can call spaces of interrupted history. And while the present exhibition focuses primarily on the eastern half of Europe and, to some degree, the Middle East, one might easily extend these same concerns to the whole of the non-Western world—a world that, for political and economic reasons, has not been able fully to integrate the processes of modernity—among which processes we can include the system of historicization itself.

Nations that have undergone long, traumatic periods of colonial despotism, ideological

oppression, dictatorship, genocide, and mass migration have time and again been forced to contend with violent interruptions of their artistic traditions as well as of their political freedoms. Although the Western Christian world has also, throughout its history, known poverty, plague, the horrors of war, Nazism, Fascism, Francoism, and other ruptures, it has always nevertheless managed to retain and even build its economic dominance, which underwent significant expansion with the spread of capitalism. The West's ascendancy thereby enabled a certain continuity in art, which could be expressed in the linear succession of historical styles over the course of centuries. Meanwhile, capitalism, which has dominated the world, succeeded in establishing Western art history as the only one able to bestow legitimacy on a given form of creative expression.

The exhibition *Interrupted Histories* is, therefore, premised on a pair of questions. First, what are the implications of the absence of systematic historicization in spaces outside, or on the margins of, the West? And, second, how might the processes of such historicization be accelerated?

These are the most urgent questions today for nations with interrupted histories—and they are connected to these nations' ongoing integration into a global exchange of ideas, which relies upon modernization happening across many different fields of activity. Along with accelerated processes of globalization, which escalated in the 1990s, the processes of musealization and art evaluation also began to be developed in these nations. With the globalization of capital came the global expansion of the Western art system; now, after a decade and



Middle: Komar and Melamid, *History of the USSR in Slogans 1917–1991*, 1991. Installation view, *Interrupted Histories: Arteast exhibition*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2006

a half of this process, we are asking ourselves: just what sort of modernization is this?

The artists in *Interrupted Histories* come from spaces that do not yet have their own collective narrative—this being a key element of the modern system of history. At present, it seems that the only way to foster awareness of the contemporary cultural identity of these places is through a system able to link artists into international networks. The existence of such a system seems to be a prerequisite for their sovereign and equal entry into the international arena, and the only tool for preventing ideological game-playing or manipulation by capitalism, both of which view as easy prey anything that is not already labeled or systematized. Curators and artists from these spaces of interrupted histories are therefore asking how they can become the subject, or agent, in their own development.

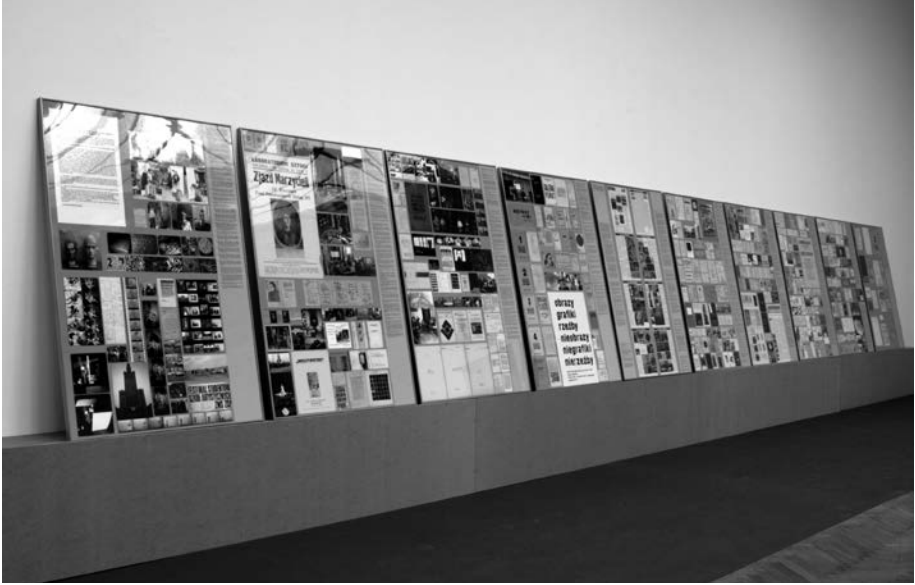
*Interrupted Histories* presents places engaged with local histories and at the same time with the processes of contemporary globalization. More than anything else, these processes brought to the fore questions of identity. In Eastern Europe, for example, it wasn't until the collapse of the communist regimes that we began seriously to ask whether such a thing as a common Eastern European identity even exists. The Western art system became interested in the art of Eastern Europe at a moment when identity politics had come into play in a more general way. Thus, integration into the modern art system was predicated on a recognition of Eastern European identity; after decades of allegiance to international styles, the West suddenly took

an interest in art with a distinct ethnic, national, racial, sexual, or religious character; in a moment distinguished by increased global contact, it became more important than ever to have a recognizable identity.

What the West really wanted was not contemporary identities, which are continuously being constructed and falling apart, but, rather, something fixed and bound to the past. This made these identities, on the one hand, marketable as something exotic and, on the other, vulnerable to certain sorts of nationalism and fundamentalism. This Western interest in fixed identities tended moreover (and ironically) to embrace stereotypes and, in particular, to tell ideological stories about failed communist regimes. A peculiar situation arose in which, whenever you talked about collective identity, you were actually talking about the past; the Western demand that we define a shared Eastern European identity called upon us to consolidate that identity in retrospect—only after the whole thing was, as it were, over and done with.

It is, of course, true that every space possesses its own identity and history—we are not speaking about whether the past or tradition in fact exist but rather about the absence of history as a relatively homogeneous system, such as was developed by Western modernity.

Now, fifteen years after the intense process of modernization of non-Western cultural spaces began in earnest, we have started to see considerable differences among individual places, both in the degree of their integration into the



Zofia Kulik, *From the KwieKulik Archive, 1968–88*. Installation view, *Interrupted Histories: Artest Exhibition*, 2006

international market and in the extent to which they have contributed to the global exchange of ideas. Notably, artists from formerly excluded spaces have been included in Western exhibitions, while the model of the Western art system—exhibitions, galleries, educational systems, and forms of discourse—has spread around the globe.

The greatest expectations, and reservations, emerged with the popularization of the large-scale exhibition format, in the form of the biennial. Even as curators and artists took part in an increasing number of such shows, they began to wonder about their purpose—to wonder, that is, whether they were not in fact a kind of art supermarket composed of offerings that were determined by globetrotting curators. Despite



ARTPOOL, *Art Institution as Art Practice in Hungary in the 1970s and 1980s*, 2006. Installation view, *Interrupted Histories: Artest Exhibition*, 2006

these misgivings, however, these shows proved, at least in the best instances, to be successful at connecting local art communities to the wider world while at the same time allowing their participants to address issues particular to the given locale.

All these processes entail an expanding migration of images, ideas, and people, which is slowly transforming the relationship between centers and peripheries. The globalization of the Western art system also includes processes of standardization that allow capitalism to operate with as little hindrance as possible. By digitizing their collections, museums worldwide are essentially reducing themselves to databases—which, in turn, allows their symbolic capital to circulate without

difficulty through networks of power, even if these networks of power are somewhat less centralized than before.

It seems like things may not have changed in essence. Capitalism still dominates. Modernization is its tool, creating the false picture that spaces on the periphery are part of the same system as those that are more central, and that they are subject to similar conditions of production, presentation, and distribution, as well as compatible methods of historicization. “Others” are included into the Western system, but only as individuals who represent diversity. The established history does not essentially change—it merely expands.

II

PARALLEL HISTORIES

When we talk about the West, we understand that even in the Western world there exists—in parallel, as it were—much that has been marginalized, erased, or forgotten. We know that subordinate histories are multiplying, and that fewer and fewer people identify with the unified collective narrative of this imaginary community. Today’s archetypal figure is the migrant who lives between different cultural spaces; hybridity has replaced national identity. (This hybridity cannot fulfill our need for some form of community—even as any such community needs constantly to be reinvented.)

The nature of these parallel, marginalized, or erased histories, however, changes from place to place—as does their relationship to the dominant or official narrative. The West, for example, has a relatively flexible relationship to its marginal



histories, and grafts them more quickly into the main narrative. The unofficial art that existed under more rigid forms of communism is a different story. Originally repressed, this art attained legitimacy only after the collapse of communism. In this sense, they were truly parallel histories.

During the years that communism held sway, therefore, we must acknowledge that there were essentially two or more parallel art histories. And should we wish to develop an art history that is at all relevant, we must therefore take this separateness, this lack of connection between official and unofficial art, into account. This schema might need further investigation to distinguish between *parallel* histories and *subordinate* histories—the latter being something like the root networks of a larger system, within which they continuously appear and disappear, transforming and disrupting each other. In this sense, we might say that all histories are interrupted histories.

It would, however, be a mistake to think that, with the collapse of the communist regimes and the acceleration of the process of global integration, things would somehow normalize—that art history would become organized into a system of continuities. On the contrary, after the fall of the communist regimes, just when we expected to see a great wave of normalization, new interruptions appeared. Today, for example, we are witnessing amnesia about the communist past—not so much its degeneration in recent decades but, rather, an erasure of the progressive humanist ideas that originally inspired it.



IRWIN, *East Art Map*, 2002–2005. Installation view, *Interrupted Histories: Arteast Exhibition*, 2006

### III MAPPING INTERRUPTED HISTORIES

Art history, in the sense of a cohesive, collective narrative of art, remains Western art history. Other places are, by and large, spaces of interrupted histories—separate and individual narratives that cannot be easily drawn together into a meaningful whole. These small and fragmented systems map national or regional histories, or even the little histories of groups or individuals working at some remove from the main lineage.

Lacking a suitable collective history or sympathetic state institutions, many artists were forced to self-historicize, to search out their

own places in historical or interpretive contexts. They had to become their own art historians and archivists—a situation that still exists in many places today. Such self-historicization includes the collecting and archiving of documents, whether of one's own art actions or of broader movements—thereby recording art forms and social fields otherwise marginalized by local politics and invisible in the context of international art. These self-same artists today find themselves in a peculiar situation. On the one hand, they are largely left to do their own historicizing, while, on the other, the West has become interested, and has begun to include them in its museum collections. This Western musealization of the East—which the Russian critic and theorist Boris Groys has described as the victors appropriating the art of the vanquished—means classifying it according to Western ideas and estranging it from its original context. Greater visibility, then, does not automatically imply greater power.

Why, therefore, should we be interested in modernizing our art (and system of institutions) if it is clear that it does not enhance but instead compromises our sovereignty? Modernization, as I understand it, is a double process—it sanctions resistance to colonial domination, but also new forms of colonialism; it strengthens, but also destroys. As with any strong medicine, dosage matters, and combination with other chemicals can be dangerous.

We spoke earlier of the way that parallel and subordinate histories are a characteristic feature of the non-Western art world. Indeed, in such environments we could discuss a range of

informal systems, which people were compelled to develop in order to survive under oppressive political regimes or in places lacking a developed infrastructure. From the perspective of the modern world, these informal systems look like obstacles on the road to economic progress and the development of a mature political democracy. Indeed, they appear as features of the Other that must be dispensed with as soon as possible in order to modernize ourselves.

Critical of this demand, art now often turns to what are essentially premodern systems, in which it perceives a subjective creativity almost eradicated from the capitalist world. In turn, it views the informality of these premodern systems as a positive form of otherness. This is not a position driven by romantic nostalgia but rather is based in a recognition of how, and from what artifacts, a history of the Other might be composed. This means, of course, that the last thing we should do is pick and choose from such informal systems whichever aspects most resemble modernity as the Western master narrative defines it, while relegating the rest to the scrap heap.

Can modern history legitimize procedures that exist in conflict with it? Can history, as a science, take such informal activities seriously? The works in *Interrupted Histories* may be informal, but they are indeed real historical materials—the kinds of documents that should please even professional historians, ranging from genuine archival materials to quasi-anthropological ones. They can, therefore, have an effect on the processes of historicization itself; such art becomes a

genuine instrument of history—if not history as a science, then the sort of history that lies outside the traditional classifications of thought.

The purpose of these histories—for which the term “informal” is starting to seem rather inadequate—is not, however, to establish yet another collective narrative. Their purpose is not to create another master narrative but rather to sustain the tensions between small or temporary histories and the main line. We might say these artists are advocating for the modernization of the art system, but without the creation of new canons that would formalize (and therefore distort) their procedures. They are not, I want to make clear, advocating for some completely unsystematic form of popular historicization; data and procedural rigor matter to these histories as much as to the subject who is doing the historicizing.

The exhibition *Interrupted Histories* might therefore be thought of as a collection of possible tools for creating history. This is not a situation in which the curator or art historian claims the exclusive right to speak, as someone trained in such matters, on how history fits together. Others have been invited to participate—not only the artists but, indeed, anyone.

Drawn together in this exhibition, different histories live side by side; master narratives transpire alongside personal histories; the story of an anonymous street corner is no less worthy than that of a monument in a public square. Obscure or local histories face off against canonized histories, becoming equal elements in a myriad of differences.

These works are presented in the exhibition as themselves objects of history and, at the same time, its instruments. When art becomes a tool, it regains a social function that was lost when it entered the museum. Indeed, the exhibition may compel us to think about how we can protect ourselves from various forms of manipulation in the future, or—following Michel Foucault, who argued in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) for a form of knowledge that was constantly interrupting itself—we may come to understand history as inherently a history of interruptions in a productive process of continual redefinition.<sup>1</sup>

1 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1972). First published in French as *L'Archeologie du savoir* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1969).

# The Museum of Contemporary Art

## I THE TIME OF THE MUSEUM

What is a museum of contemporary art? How can we define its time, space, and history? What is its relation to time? Until the founding of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1929, museums of art looked to the past. The modern art museum, however, was interested in the present, and in temporal rather than spatial differences. The very phrase “museum of modern art” has a period flavor; it is tied to the twentieth century, and to that century’s tradition of modernism. In the museum of the modern, time also determines quality: a first-rate artwork should represent the quintessence of art’s development up to its present moment, while at the same time signifying a break with the past and a transition to the new.

When we attempt to define the museum of *contemporary* art, we are mainly defining it in contrast to the museum of modern art. Of course, the two are partly distinguished by the time periods they deal with, although in this regard they also partly overlap: the modernist tradition remains alive, while contemporary art has its own history. However, although the modern art

museum was intended to be a museum devoted to the art of the day, over time it became a museum of the past—a past that continued to pile up as time progressed. Today, the contemporary art museum represents a return to the original impulse for the modern art museum: namely, to reflect the present age. At the same time, it takes an approach to history and narrative that is distinct from its modernist precursor.

In the early years of the Museum of Modern Art, its first director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., developed a new model of history. In the nineteenth century, art was historicized in terms of national schools; Barr saw it as a genealogy of international styles based on linear development. A distinctive aspect of the museum of contemporary art is its critique of such linear time constructions and their universal application—and by extension a critique of the modernist understanding of quality.

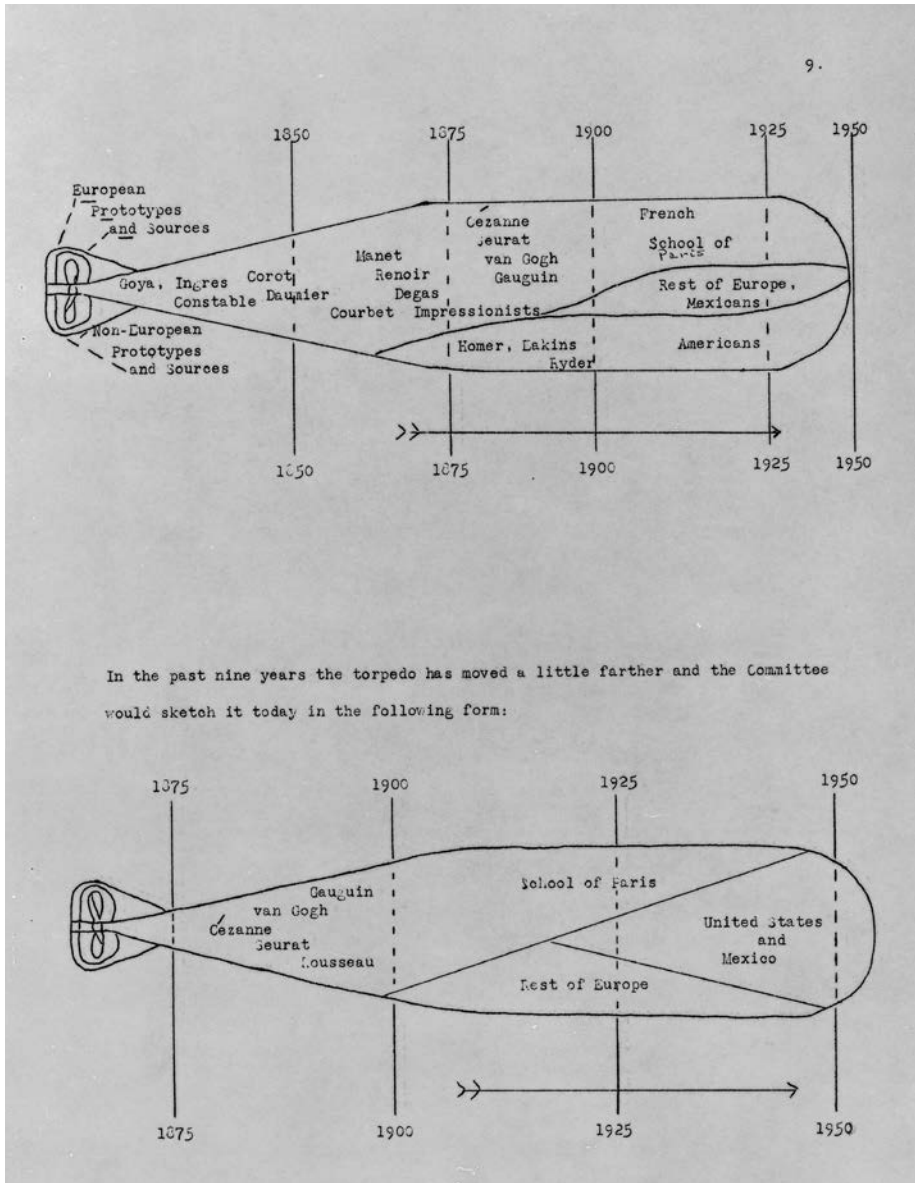
Building a museum of modern art on such premises, however, leads it into a state of aporia. As the Russian critic and theorist Boris Groys argued in his 1993 essay “The Logic of the Collection”:

Although it represents the historical, the space of the museum itself is unhistorical. ... We can therefore detach the term innovation from its association with the linearity of historical time—and hence we can also detach it from its association with progress.

He continues,

[I]nnovation does not occur in time but rather on the boundaries between the collection





Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Torpedo" diagrams of the ideal permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1933 (top) and 1941 (bottom), prepared for the "Advisory Committee Report on Museum Collections," 1941

and the outside world. ... Individual innovations ... do not generally constitute history, although they have an impact on the entire state of the collection and change the logic of other innovations ... these changes and restructurings do not lineate. They are selected points and define, or even continually invent, their own historical past anew.<sup>1</sup>

1 Boris Groys, "The Logic of the Collection," *Nordisk Museologi* 2 (1993): 78. Translated into Slovene in Groys, *Teorija sodobne umetnosti: Izbrani eseji* [Theories of contemporary art: selected essays] (Ljubljana: Študentska založba, Knjižna zbirka Koda, 2002).

Such simultaneity, he states, ironically puts this museum of modernism in a confusing state of cosmic nullity, like a black hole:

Together [these styles and movements] form a zero sum, a homeostasis, an entropic void. ... This is the museum's void, in which a collection that presents an entire palette of opposing art positions makes, as the sum of these positions, a zero, which repeats the zero point of the empty museum space. ... Thus in the space of the collection, the entire cosmological myth of modernism is portrayed, from the big bang at the beginning of the explosive evolution of all forms from the black hole of matter, to their possible implosion at the end of time.<sup>2</sup>

2 Groys, *Teorija sodobne umetnosti*, 100.

Thoughts like these are helpful for understanding the modern museum's drive to accumulate art from all parts of the world—a project which is today gathering momentum, but which can ultimately never be realized. Only in this fictive projection can all antagonisms be reconciled. Such art museums in their final phases may in some ways be compared to contemporary democracy, which strives to elide difference through pluralism and to conceal antagonism. The future

development of the museum of contemporary art, by contrast, demands that antagonisms are highlighted rather than hidden. But such a demand requires us to ask: what sort of antagonisms should the contemporary art museum be interested in?

II

DIFFERENT NARRATIVES

In common with other post-socialist countries, Slovenia does not yet have a fully developed Western-style art system. Along with the absence of any strong cultural or educational infrastructure and a weak market for art, we also lack a strong collective narrative of Eastern European art comparable to those found in Western Europe or the United States. While ideology did not dominate art in the former Yugoslavia to the extent that it did in the Soviet bloc countries, we always felt a certain frustration when we compared our art to that of the West. We could speak of pioneering artwork in Eastern Europe, especially in the avant-garde movements, but it seemed to us that we could never keep time with the West; we were always lagging. (Here I will refrain from addressing such issues as can be found in any country, such as provincialism and imitation.)

Although we still find much evidence of lagging behind in the linear framework of art history, today we think about this problem differently. Indeed, increasingly such lag-time has seemed to infect the very history of the modern as such. Following a psychoanalytic model, and thereby one attuned to the effects of trauma, Hal Foster describes this as “deferred action,” a term that he sources from Sigmund Freud (Freud’s word was

*Nachträglichkeit*, elsewhere translated as retroaction or afterwardsness). Foster writes:

The avant-garde work is never historically effective or fully significant in its initial moments. ... One event is only registered through another that records it; we come to be who we are only in deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*). It is this analogy that I want to enlist for modernist studies at the end of the century: historical and neo-avant-garde are constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of protension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts—in short, in a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition.<sup>3</sup>

3 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 28–29.

Foster makes clear that retroactive interpretations are crucial to the construction of any linear narrative of Western history. Today, when the Western narrative is under fire for aspiring to universalism, the question that arises is: how should one think about non-Western art and its history in relation to this narrative? If the canonized history was created through deferred actions, then we must pose this question of “afterwardsness” in a different way. There are, of course, essential differences between “deferred action” and a sense of lagging behind, but whether we speak about the one or the other, our findings can be valid and measurable only within the framework of a single system. Lag is more easily measured within an unproblematized linear universal history than it is within the plurality of histories we see emerging now. Inasmuch as we live at a time when these parallel narratives are just beginning to take shape,

we can, through the contemporary art museum, think about history as something constantly restaged anew; we can give untold histories new visibility. Such a museum can enable the creation of new narratives based on the relationships between small histories and large histories—between local traditions and global networks.

III

THE TIMELINESS OF THE MUSEUM

To produce the conditions for a museum of contemporary art as I am describing it, we must first define the priorities of such an institution. Adherence to these priorities is essential if an institution is to free itself from time lag and become *timely*, instead of merely keeping time with the West. Whether a museum is timely depends on how it behaves in regard to the antagonisms that exist between the local and the global arenas. In concrete terms, the contemporary art museum must dedicate itself to the art of its locality, its local public, and its local knowledge, while at the same time participate in the global exchange of ideas. However contradictory this sounds, holding these two priorities in tension is necessary should the museum wish to avoid its instrumentalization by local policies (on the one hand) and the power of global capital (on the other).

To realize these priorities, the museum of contemporary art must respect institutional rules: it must operate in accordance with local and international laws and it must obey professional standards. At the same time, it needs to operate with a certain sovereignty, even defiance, toward politics and capital if it wants to realize its full

social potential. After the enormous social changes that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia, after the dismantling of the socialist regime in the early 1990s, the only way that we could ensure that the Moderna galerija, as a museum of contemporary art, could be timely was by establishing connections with an informal network of artists and interested members of the public. It was them, more than the cultural policy-makers, who were most aware of the urgent tasks that needed to be addressed. Here I should mention that Ljubljana had already, throughout the 1980s, fostered a rich tradition of alternative approaches to cultural activities and networking, which, among other things, helped lay the groundwork for the country's democratic changes that occurred in that decade and into the early 1990s; these later developed into more complex interactions, such as the involvement of the contemporary art museum with non-governmental organizations and individual artists and intellectuals. Such informal working methods contributed in large measure to the development of the local art system and the production of a local context.



Richard Deacon, *From Tomorrow*, 1996. Installation view, *For the Museum of Contemporary Art Sarajevo 2000*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1996

One of the characteristics of the museum of contemporary art is that it reproduces itself. It does so through ideas and concepts, which it spreads both physically and virtually. The museum of contemporary art also must fight to reproduce itself through gestures of solidarity. In 1994, we initiated conversations with some artists based in Ljubljana, such as the group IRWIN and the Bosnian artist Jadran Adamović, about what an art institution can offer a city under siege—in this case we were discussing Sarajevo, which, since 1992, had been surrounded by Bosnian



Left to right: John Dunn, Zdenka Badovinac, and Tomaž Mastnak, at the symposium *Living with Genocide – The War in Bosnia, Political Theory and Art*, held at Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1996

4 Together with the art collective IRWIN and Jadran Adamović, we organized this exhibition project under the title *For the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo 2000: International Cultural Project: The 1996 Collection—Moderna galerija Ljubljana*; we also organized the international symposium *Living with Genocide – The War in Bosnia, Political Theory and Art*, which was held at the Moderna galerija May 23–26, 1996.

Serb and other forces and suffered mass civilian casualties. We agreed that what was most needed was capital. Accordingly, our group put together an acquisition strategy and asked internationally known artists to donate works to the future museum of contemporary art in Sarajevo.<sup>4</sup> Thirteen artists agreed to do so, including Marina Abramović, Mirosław Bałka, Günter Brus, Sophie Calle, Richard Deacon, IRWIN, Anish Kapoor, Marjetica Potrč, Thomas Schütte, Andres Serrano, Bill Viola, the Slovene group VSSD (Veš Slikar Svoj Dolg), and artists from the Russian pavilion at the Venice Biennial 1995 (Evgeny Asse, Vadim Fishkin, Dmitry Gutov). We could not have sent weapons to Sarajevo, of course, but we were able to help create a museum of contemporary art.



IRWIN and Bogoslav Kalaš, *L'etat (Portrait of IRWIN)*, 1988. Installation view, *For the Museum of Contemporary Art Sarajevo 2000*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1996

Reproducing museums in the way of the Guggenheim franchises is more about reproducing capital than about reproducing the idea of the museum of contemporary art. However, whatever self-reproduction it undertakes, the museum risks losing its aura of uniqueness, to borrow a concept from Walter Benjamin. No longer does it offer us original and universal ideas of art; now what is universal is only the act of reproduction, even if this yields different results and so makes possible both the mobility of ideas and the mobility of capital.





Marjetica Potrč, *Kampala*, 1996, with fresco by Taylor Spence. Installation view, *For the Museum of Contemporary Art Sarajevo 2000*, 1996

#### IV NARRATIVE OF PLURALITY

As part of the process of becoming a museum of contemporary art, a museum must violate existing institutional rules and establish new priorities which may not necessarily be inscribed in its formal mission statement. At Moderna galerija, for example, we set ourselves the task of producing a “narrative of plural narratives” of Eastern European art—a mission that was only later included in our official mission statement, but which we take quite seriously.

At present, there are two pathways for non-Western artists to enter global discourse. The first is through selective integration into the Western narrative. However, in this way, artworks from non-Western zones, including Eastern Europe, do little more than function as correctives to the existing art system and to the perceived shortcomings of specific museum collections. The second way is to propose parallel narratives, developed primarily with the help of local institutions. These processes are complementary; their future, however, is primarily dependent on financial resources and the politics of their respective local art spaces, as well as on their successful international integration. I will venture that when, in 2000, we created the international, largely Eastern European Arteast 2000+ Collection, to supplement Moderna galerija's existing collection of mostly national art, we initiated a pioneering self-definition of the art of the former socialist countries. Thus it was that when we involved ourselves in the production not only of our own local context but also of the corresponding international context, it was then that we became a museum of contemporary art.

Wishing to reorganize our museum work into two main categories—modern and contemporary—we had to conceptualize the division of the collections. First we followed the generally accepted notion that *modern art* is based on the autonomous logic of the medium, the myth of originality, and the notion of authorship, while *contemporary art* is based on a historical genealogy that has opposed modernist orthodoxy ever since Duchamp. Here it is important to remember the dialectical relationship between

these two trajectories. Regardless of whether they understood themselves as autonomous or critical toward social reality, these two trajectories were, at least in the West, defined in an essential way by the logics of the museum and of capital. In the East, however, the field of reference was marked by ideology: the position of neo-avant-garde art was in direct or indirect ways critical toward ideology, whereas for modernist art, its existence itself was often sufficiently provocative. This applied specifically in the Soviet bloc, since it had been condemned as the product of the decadent West by the governing regimes. But, equally, modernism's lack of direct social engagement also allowed it to be instrumentalized by the state. This was especially true in the former Yugoslavia, where the most important modernist artists were, in many cases, protected and supported as "state artists."

The museum of contemporary art, then, must draw attention to the differences between social worlds, in our case those of East and West, and thus also the differences between respective neo-avant-garde movements. In so doing, it creates a foundation for the reception of art as it has evolved in very different contexts.

Hal Foster speaks about the reception of pivotal works of Western art as having developed over time through deferred action and repetition by other artists. In the development of art history, en route to becoming part of the collective consciousness of the West, signal moments were repeated and reinforced by museum collections, university programs, exhibitions, publications, and other cultural productions. Western artists had one art history that was readily available to them,

which was shared by artists from other regions, who also added to this their own fragmentary local histories. Both groups could wander through this shared history without major obstacles, thereby reinforcing its key aspects. However, as most non-Western countries existed outside of the modern system of art, they were unable to construct opposing narratives to the dominant history. Even when the conditions in Eastern Europe changed, it was impossible to replace what we had missed.

The historicization of Eastern Europe had to take a different path. Thus, in Eastern Europe, as in other non-Western places, a multitude of narratives has been slowly taking shape, which can only be reflected in a museum that espouses a multitude of narratives. I do not, however, imagine this collection of narratives to be diverse, or to offer a plurality of styles. Rather, accepting this multitude means maintaining a permanent distance from one's own power. The museum of contemporary art must constantly reflect on its own position and observe itself, as if from an external meta-position. In so doing, it becomes a kind of meta-museum, one that, through self-observation, investigates, among other things, its own place within local and international contexts.

One of the major differences between the East and the West concerns artists' familiarity with their own history. Much of what we know about the history of the neo-avant-garde art of Eastern Europe—which, for ideological reasons, was often subjected to social marginalization and persecution—we know largely thanks to artists' self-historicization, rather than through

institutional endorsement. Eastern European art is a tradition that has been more-or-less forcibly interrupted, or erased, by political regimes and ideologies. Many Eastern European artists are today trying to connect with these interrupted or unacknowledged traditions. In this connection, it's worth mentioning *Interrupted Histories*, an exhibition we organized in 2006 that surveyed the work of younger artists who are trying to define their historical context as well as older, neo-avant-garde artists who, from the 1970s on, have been documenting their countries' unofficial art practices. Zofia Kulik, for example (partly with her former partner Przemysław Kwiek), has assembled a rich archive that consists not only of Polish art from the socialist period but also documents that testify to the ideological pressures in the education of artists, obstacles in the flow of artistic ideas, the control and censorship of information, and other things. Similarly, the Artpool archives, which György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay have been assembling in Hungary since 1970, make it possible to reconstruct the Hungarian neo-avant-garde art scene of the 1970s and 1980s. Galántai and Klaniczay are among those artists who have developed the concept of the *active archive*, which facilitates professional research as much as artistic interventions.<sup>5</sup>

5 This notion, and these artists and others, were presented in the exhibition *Interrupted Histories* at Moderna galerija in 2006.

The museum of contemporary art does not merely educate and inform its public, it also produces knowledge with the help of its visitors, users, the art community, and others. In designing a museum of contemporary art, then, it would seem sensible to be guided by the artistic experience of historicizing local traditions and their distinctive features.

In the East, and particularly in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, there is additionally a rich tradition of neo-avant-garde artists who assume a critical attitude toward the notion of the author and the author's name. Their concepts are grounded in a deconstruction of the (Western) modernist myths of author, originality, and individuality, as well as in the nearly anonymous status of the author under socialism. In the former Yugoslavia, from the end of the 1970s onward, the problematization of authorship and the reinterpretation of canonized art history were taken up by a group of artist-copies operating under familiar names like Walter Benjamin, Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, and the Salon du Fleurus in New York's SoHo.

When Eastern European artists reenact artistic experiences in their work or adopt historic artistic personae, it is as if they are restaging history and thus compensating for the absence of a history constructed in the manner Hal Foster describes, that is, through countless repetitions. In examining history, they operate as skilled observers, not merely as actors who each time restage some different historical event. In the territory of the former Yugoslavia, especially, there is a rich tradition of such meta-positions, which, among other things, also comment on the canonical or official history.

Currently, museums are grappling with the problem of how to include the Other in their collections; they are making the transition from one narrative to many narratives. As the person who has assumed the name Walter Benjamin noted, when we change the narrative of a given

6 All references below to Walter Benjamin refer to the contemporary theoretician and anthropologist of art and culture.

object, we change its meaning.<sup>6</sup> For example, when we see a painting that initially had the status of a religious object in a museum, we are confronted with both secular and sacred narratives. Benjamin makes a distinction between works produced before the founding of the “Museum of Modern Art History” that were “retroactively selected to illustrate this new narrative and ‘promoted’ to the status of the artworks in the process, regardless of their previous meaning and function,” and works produced after the museum and “Art History” were established. Benjamin writes:

Perhaps those objects conceived inside the “field” of Art History and the Museum are the only *real* works of art. They were produced exclusively to *be* works of art, to be included in the Museum and in Art History. ... Today, we should start thinking about how to define a position (a platform) that represents a meta-position in relation to Art History and thus a meta-position in relation to the Christian narrative. In other words, the question is, how to move beyond Art History, how to establish another platform from which we could see Art History from the outside. The point is not to forget Art History and its Museum but rather to place them in another context. This is why those works that have Art History as their subject might help us in establishing this meta-position.<sup>7</sup>

7 Beti Žerovc, “My Dear, This Is Not What It Seems to Be: An Interview with Walter Benjamin,” in Inke Arns and Walter Benjamin, eds., *What is Modern Art? (Group Show): Introductory Series to the Modern Art* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006), 2:30.

Every artist, it seems to me, has the legitimate right to produce his or her own individual history; the museum, then, is left with the open questions of collective history and cultural

context. The museum of contemporary art must therefore also preserve tensions between major and minor histories; it must develop a collective narrative, which must be continually examined and confirmed from the perspective of individual positions. If the museum wants to avoid becoming merely a stage on which different history exhibitions are presented one after the other, it must create a meaningful new role and relevant new social position for itself.

As an example, the Moderna galerija collection includes, alongside Slovene art, Eastern European art exemplifying neo-avant-garde tendencies from the 1960s on; this is art made since artists began to direct more serious criticism toward the modernist orthodoxy and its institutions (in the West), and toward an ideology-saturated reality (in the East). Our Arteast 2000+ Collection was the first significant collection of Eastern European art, founded in part to address Eastern European efforts at self-definition. But is it even possible to provide sufficient context for artworks in an international museum? And even if we try, are we not limited by, if nothing else, our own interpretations? It seems to me that these questions can be satisfactorily answered by the museum of contemporary art as I have tried to describe it here: a museum that does not aspire to universalism in terms of its collections and that respects parallel narratives. Above all, this is a museum that does not merely describe its context but produces it. It is the production of context, rather than the mere mediation of it, that we can understand as the new function of the museum.



# Contemporaneity as Points of Connection

When the editors of *e-flux journal* invited me in 2009 to write on the matter of contemporaneity, they suggested I start from my professional experience as a curator and museum director. For that reason, I have tried to place my own story, which happens in Eastern Europe and at the art museum I direct, Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, within the context of a much larger geographical field—linking issues that we face to those facing institutions in the Global South. By doing so, I suggest that such shared coordinates are a key aspect of the contemporary as such.

## I CONTEMPORANEITY AND DECOLONIZATION

If we can no longer speak of the evolution of art over the course of its history, we can speak about the evolution of its *access*, which is to say, its public life. Access to art increased exponentially in the twentieth century. It did so through the power of print and digital reproductions, which improved in quality, affordability, and reach over the decades, and through increased attendance by a popular, rather than scholarly or elite,

audience. The democratization of art is one of the most important aspirations of modernity, even if, in many ways, art remains limited to the educated classes when it is not simply handed down from above, from the wealthiest to everyone else. In other ways, this democratic model, rooted in the Enlightenment, is being challenged as knowledge percolates up from below. More and more initiatives, from more and more places or social positions previously excluded, are opposing the hegemonic models created by Western modernity.

On these terms, we can understand “modernity” less as an historical period than a persuasive political and cultural ideology that promises progress, civilization, and, indeed, happiness. As described by the Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo, this positive modernity must be joined to, and contrasted with, its darker side, which he calls “coloniality.”<sup>1</sup> Coloniality is a term describing the ongoing legacy of the European colonial project, and the forms of knowledge—including racism and the concept that certain cultures are more (or less) developed—that exist to naturalize domination. As decolonial thinking argues, modernity and coloniality cannot be extricated from one another; one cannot think about modernity without linking it to a Eurocentric view of the world. On these terms, one cannot be “postcolonial” in the modern world, since coloniality is both fundamental to modernism and ongoing.

It is interesting to consider how the lessons of Mignolo’s thinking might be applied, in part, to Eastern Europe. Socialism was itself a unique project of modernity, of course, with its own global ambitions and its own colonialism; socialist

1 Marina Gržinić and Walter Mignolo, “De-linking Epistemology from Capital and Pluri-Versality: A Conversation with Walter Mignolo, Part 3,” *Reartikulacija* 6 (2009): 7.



Braco Dimitrijević, *The Casual Passer-by I Met*, 2000. Exterior view, *Arteast 2000+ Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West*, presented in the then-unrenovated premises of the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM), Ljubljana, 2000

countries were hardly immune to Westernizing influences, especially in the spheres of art and pop culture. However, after the collapse of socialism, it would be fair to say that many Eastern European states entered an intensified colonial relationship with the West: saturated by Western culture, cooperative with (or bullied into being subservient to) Western militarism and capitalism; relegated to second-class status in international debates, subject to an ethnic hierarchy, and often confronted by nativist hostility.

At the same time, we find globalization accelerating; in contradistinction to Mignolo,

2 See Nicolas Bourriaud, “Altermodern Manifesto,” 2009 Tate Triennial, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/altermodern/altermodern-explain-altermodern/altermodern-explained>.

others are envisioning a new, decentralized modernity in which “planetary negotiations, discussions between agents from different cultures,” are taking place unhindered.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, too, it is becoming increasingly important to think about how such nations and peoples inhabit a global exchange of ideas—and how they might come to participate in them with some degree of authority and self-determination. Indeed, the very subject of participation calls up the philosopher Irit Rogoff, who defines contemporaneity not as a period but as “a conjunction”:

“Contemporaneity” for us means that in the contemporary moment there are a certain number of shared issues and urgencies, a certain critical currency, but perhaps most importantly a performative enablement—a loosening of frames all around us, which means we can move around more freely, employ and deploy a range of theoretical, methodological and performative rhetoric and modes of operation, inhabit terrains that may not have made us welcome, or more importantly, which we would not have known how to inhabit productively.<sup>3</sup>

3 Irit Rogoff, “Academy as Potentiality,” in *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.*, ed. Angelika Nollert and Irit Rogoff (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006), 13–20. This book was published as part of an international series of exhibitions and projects initiated by the Siemens Arts Program in cooperation with the Hamburger Kunsthalle; Goldsmiths College, London; Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp; and the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

In this passage, Rogoff is discussing how various fields of knowledge are connected by a shared sense of urgency and a common set of questions—one could, however, apply the same logic to various geopolitical territories and their common exchange of knowledge. Issues of access and participation are central to the processes of decolonization; they are also increasingly shaping the imaginary of contemporary art.

4 See Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant Garde?" *October* 70 (Fall 1994): 5–32.

Among the things Eastern Europe might share with the Global South is a desire to challenge the master narratives of Western art—especially their teleological nature. Yet, even if we assume the critical psychoanalytical model described in the 1990s by the American critic Hal Foster,<sup>4</sup> in which contemporary artists repeat and fulfill the unfinished work of past artistic revolutions, we inevitably remain embedded in the logic of that same hegemonic art system; one can hardly “repeat” something that one has simply never had the opportunity to encounter in the first place—or, even more importantly, where the conditions for such repetition do not exist. Similarly, the Western model of institutional critique may be less than useful in countries without deeply rooted institutions to criticize. This may explain why Eastern European avant-gardes were more concerned with attacking ideology than the art system, which, for practical purposes, has yet to develop in the East in any form comparable to the West.

We are mutually disinterested in replacing the old narrative with a new one, but, instead, wish to embrace plural narratives and incomplete projects (including, perhaps, the unfinished project of decolonialization itself). Such narratives may not take the form of “transmodernity,” “altermodernity,” multiple modernisms, subaltern modernisms, peripheral modernisms, or any kind of modernism at all; returning to Mignolo, these various concepts all retain the stigma of modernity itself, each affirming in one way or another Euro-American modernity as the “modernity of reference,” while relegating all others to subordinate positions. Instead of inventing new modernisms, decolonial thinking encourages us to

produce local bodies of knowledge, which include the genealogies of local avant-gardes.

5 Indeed, the historian Susan Buck-Morss has argued that “The historical experiment of socialism was so deeply rooted in the Western modernizing tradition that its defeat cannot but place the whole Western narrative into question.” Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), xii.

We would, however, be misguided if we supposed that emancipatory ideas come only from the non-Western world. That would be like saying that socialism was solely the project of the East.<sup>5</sup> No single place can claim exclusive rights to universally applicable emancipatory knowledge. Some nations or institutional systems are better able to instrumentalize knowledge—this is true. Those in a better position in this regard contribute more to the positive or negative development of global society. Nations or regions with weaker infrastructure, nations that lack robust institutions to serve the structuring and distribution of local knowledge, are at a disadvantage. The most they can do is seek points of connection with others in similar situations. Doing so is a precondition for establishing “planetary negotiations” on an equal basis.

## II SELF DEFINITION

In the remainder of this text I will discuss my own experiences in this country of two million people. I do so because I believe those experiences are, in a way, symptomatic. They are an example of the praxis of so-called “peripheral spaces,” and a down-to-earth illustration of all that I have presented so far in only a general and theoretical way.

Much of what I do in my day-to-day work involves defining contemporaneity. This is true of both the artistic practices I engage—contemporary art—and those places in which that contemporary

art is presented. Over the past twenty years, I have been forced repeatedly to consider this term from within the Slovenian context, which at the beginning of my career in the second half of the 1980s was entirely dominated by modernist orthodoxy. In addition, the specific needs of Moderna galerija, where I have served as director since 1993, have also led me to a more intensive examination of the issues surrounding contemporaneity. This institution's various urgencies culminated in the need for a museum of contemporary art, which will become a reality, we expect, in eighteen months.<sup>6</sup>

6 Called Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova [Museum of Contemporary Art, Metelkova], this museum opened in November 2011.

As soon as I became the director of the Moderna galerija, I found myself in a situation in which I had to adopt a clear and unequivocal stance on many issues—not only because of the importance of the position I had assumed but also because of the nature of the moment we were living through. After the collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Moderna galerija became the central art institution of a new country. Slovenia's birth in 1991 was accompanied by a ten-day war—a war that then shifted to the rest of the Balkans, where it continued for the next several years. The proximity of war, the old and new nationalisms, the blunting of the progressive ideas of communism and politicians' equation of communism with fascism, increasing emulation of the West, and the beginnings of a new neoliberal economy all helped to forge the spirit of the time, which was already so different from that of the late 1980s.

Along with my colleagues—especially the curator Igor Zabel, with whom I worked for many years,



Igor Zabel at Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2003

until his death in 2005—I asked myself: how can a museum move forward when it has been primarily dedicated to national art? As even the most sympathetic studies took pains to stress, this national art lagged “behind” the Western art it superficially resembled. There was, moreover, a near-total absence of any critical theory or art-historical narrative that could link this production to broader social or political contexts—at least none aside from its fatal attraction to a Western art it could resemble but never approach. Art history and criticism would, sometimes quite crudely, place our national art within a “universal” (read: Western) narrative, while blithely ignoring the avant-garde traditions and powerful processes of self-contextualization that characterized artistic practices in Slovenia, especially throughout the 1980s.

Left: Katarzyna Kozyra, *Blood Ties*, 1995. Right: Nebojša Šerić-Šoba, *Tragedy*, 1999. Installation view, *Arteast 2000+ Collection. The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West*, presented in the then-unrenovated premises of the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM), Ljubljana, 2000



How can such a situation be remedied? How do we improve our self-image? Such questions encouraged us to find a different way of defining ourselves and our priorities. Moderna galerija was founded in



1948, the same year that Yugoslavia had taken a stand against Stalin and Soviet colonialism and begun to consider a “third way,” that is, a real alternative to the Soviet model of communism. The museum therefore represented a break with the ideological model of national museums, but also a refusal to accept the “universal” Western example; it determined instead to invent a new kind of museum proper to its own time and place. We took inspiration from this model of independence in the 1990s. Being contemporary meant being producers of our own knowledge; it meant, as much as was possible, refusing to be passive recipients of Western ideas. We relied, right from the start, on the model of those artists and small, non-institutional projects that had, especially in the 1980s, invented strategies of self-organization, alternative networking, and international lines of communication—and that had been much more successful at doing so than the official cultural agencies.

Drawing strength from these examples, our operations would use knowledge “from below.” In doing so, we would often refuse to heed demands made “from above,” as well as the expectations of a certain standard of institutional behavior. Furthermore, our understanding of contemporaneity is about our sense of shared project with agents from other locales that similarly had been excluded from the Western art world’s attention for most of the twentieth century. To put it in Rogoff’s terms, we shared issues and urgencies, which drew us together into new geopolitical conjunctions—for example, considering the commonalities between postwar avant-gardes of Eastern Europe and

7 One example of this kind of activity was a symposium on Eastern European conceptualism at Moderna galerija in 2007 where, among other things, we compared the modes of cultural production in Eastern Europe and Latin America. A conversation from that symposium was published by *e-flux journal*. See Zdenka Badovinac, Eda Čufer, Cristina Freire, Boris Groys, Charles Harrison, Vít Havránek, Piotr Piotrowski, and Branka Stipančić, “Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part 1,” *e-flux journal* 40 (December 2012), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/40/60277/conceptual-art-and-eastern-europe-part-i/>.

Latin America.<sup>7</sup> We began to understand such conjunctions as our principle international context.



Throughout the 1990s, then, Moderna galerija organized projects connected with the Balkans and, more generally, Eastern Europe. In 2000, we also inaugurated the first museum collection of Eastern European art, which was later followed by a series of shows we called *Arteast Exhibitions*. We were committed to the idea that Eastern Europe must contextualize its own cultural production—that it must historicize itself and not become merely another object for more powerful Western institutions to fit in to this or that narrative. As we saw it at the time, there were essentially two ways forward: non-Western art could be incorporated into Western institutions and the master narrative they had constructed, or non-Western institutions could begin to produce knowledge about their own history, and thereby influence the global art system. We tried to pursue the latter path. Of course, it has

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov,  
*Twenty Ways to Get an Apple*  
*Listening to the Music of*  
*Mozart*, 1997. Installation  
 view, *Arteast 2000+ Collection*.  
*The Art of Eastern Europe in*  
*Dialogue with the West*, 2000

turned out that these two paths are not mutually exclusive—and it remains an open question which one will end up being dominant.

When I talk about Moderna galerija as a museum of *contemporary* art, however, it is not just in the sense of what is being discussed above but also in the concrete sense in which we began reorganizing its activities, including the collections and display. After sixty years as a museum of modern art, both the official mission and the physical space of the museum had become restrictive. To solve our space problems, we acquired a second building, which needed a total renovation; forced to sort our activities into two separate locations, we began discussing the idea of two separate museums. This in turn inspired us to think extensively about the distinction of “the modern” and “the contemporary” as a practical concern.

We came to the realization that, while museums of modern art continue to amass collections of twentieth-century art (focused on work that fits their narrative and remit), museums of contemporary art require a new definition and a new kind of space, much as modern art had, in its time, demanded its own characteristic forms of institution, organization, and display. In a certain way, Moderna galerija was lucky—circumstances forced contemporaneity upon us, but we have embraced it, and, in a way, come to defend it.

Drawing on my own experience, I would summarize the project of a museum of contemporary art as follows: whereas the museum of modern art serves a master narrative

and big universal projects, the museum of contemporary art must serve the needs of local art spaces, so that they can enter as equals into dialogues with spaces in other countries and regions. If conditions are to be favorable for designing such a museum, it must be able to determine its own priorities; these priorities will naturally be specific, not universal, proscriptions. Such self-determination is necessary if a museum is to be truly timely and not merely concurrent with or trailing behind the West. Such a museum must make possible the perception of art as it has developed within its various social realities and—furthermore—must account not only for the artworks and art movements but how their art is presented.

A museum of this kind can no longer be merely a museum of art. It must also be a museum of history, of social and political science, a museum of diverse narratives and of their presentation. For such a museum, the white cube is just one form of display among many possibilities. But more important are the points that connect this “cube” to others worldwide.

# What Will the Next Revolution be Like?

Despite the more-or-less impoverished realities of life in Eastern Europe in the socialist era, or perhaps because of those realities, people in this region of different socialisms talked constantly about the future. Indeed, an orientation toward the future was built into communism itself; people frequently referred to the communism that was to follow the “real socialism” being endured. While the collapse of the socialist states and the transition to capitalism in the 1990s relegated much to the past, this commitment to anticipation remained. Thus, many Eastern European artists have begun to ruminate on the notion that what collapsed in the 1990s was not communism at all but, rather, that communism might be an unfinished project, still to be realized—as well as a key component of their cultural traditions.<sup>1</sup>

1 Contrasting postcolonial and post-communist subjects, Boris Groys has written that, “while the postcolonial subject proceeds from the past into the present, the post-communist enters the present to the future,” and stipulates that “communism is nothing more than the most extreme and radical manifestation of militant modernism... of utter commitment to the future.” Boris Groys, “Back from the Future,” in Zdenka Badovinac and Peter Weibel, eds., *Arteast 2000+ Collection: The Art of*

One will find in the preceding paragraph many pasts and futures, from the past future of the socialist period to a tendency toward future-imagining, which, paradoxically, goes back many generations. We must of course not lump all these pasts and futures together. Nor should we conflate all those Eastern Europeans, from serious artists to popular entertainers, who are, in one way or another, trying to revive communism or partisan resistance movements. Nevertheless,

*Eastern Europe: A Selection of Works for the International and National Collections of Moderna galerija Ljubljana* (Bolzano and Vienna: Folio, 2001), 12.

perhaps we can find some shared causes behind this heightened culture-wide interest in futures past. Among these might be worsening standards of living for workers, the rise of nationalism, and right-wing attempts to equate communism with fascism.

Artistic responses to these developments have been extremely varied. They range from nostalgic retrospection to serious reflection on the future of the idea of communism. The goal of this essay, then, will be to think about artists who see this tradition as offering renewed potential for designing alternatives to the dominant forms of globalization. These artists return to local traditions not because they wish to resist the homogenizing power of globalism but, rather, because they want to draw attention to the *universal* potential of the unfinished past.<sup>2</sup>

2 Inke Arns has introduced a distinction between Soviet post-utopian artists like Ilya Kabakov and Victor Pelevin, who look back at a failed utopia, and Yugoslav retro-avant-garde artists like Neue Slowenische Kunst, Mladen Stilinović, and Kazimir Malevich, Belgrade, who treat the past as still subject to contestation, an open issue. Arns, *Avantgarda v vzvratnem ogledalu: Sprememba paradigme recepcije avant-garde v (nekdanji) Jugoslaviji in Rusiji od 80. let do danes* [The avant-garde in the rear-view mirror: Changing the paradigms of the reception of the avant-garde in the (former) Yugoslavia and Russia from the '80s to today] (Ljubljana: Maska, 2006), 102.

## RECURRENCE AND REPETITION

Quite a few writers today, all connected in various ways to Eastern Europe, are devoting themselves to the question of repetition. In so doing they are relying on a common set of philosophical and psychoanalytic traditions: Gilles Deleuze and Søren Kierkegaard, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. The German curator and theorist Inke Arns, for example, has distinguished between distinct forms of Eastern European art: one that comes to grips with the discourse of the historical avant-garde through repetition, the other through appropriation. The Slovene cultural theorist Mladen Dolar defines repetition in contradistinction to remembering. Both cite Kierkegaard's insight that "Repetition and

recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions; for what is recollected has already been, and is thus repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards.”<sup>3</sup>

3 Søren Kierkegaard, “Repetition,” in Jane Chamberlain and Jonathan Rée, eds., *The Kierkegaard Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 115.

4 Mladen Dolar, “Automatism of Repetition: Aristotle, Kierkegaard, Lacan,” unpublished manuscript, ca. 2008–9.

In his essay “The Automatism of Repetition: Aristotle, Kierkegaard, Lacan,” Dolar discusses thinkers who explain repetition through paradox.<sup>4</sup> Deleuze, for example, argues that something repeated cannot be assigned an identity, insofar as the bare fact of its reproducibility negates the singularity on which identity depends. Kierkegaard suggests, by contrast, that what is repeated is the impossibility of repetition—on these terms something repeated is nevertheless singular and demands of its audience or receiver an active position. In his discussion of Lacan’s treatment of repetition, Dolar underscores the fact that repetition “meets the real” and thereby changes the past:

Psychoanalysis is not about remembering the past, reintegrating banned memories and censored chapters, but, rather, about the capacity to change the past and relegate it to becoming. It espouses the great paradox that Kierkegaard tried to promote: that the way to change, and to freedom, to use this highly laden word, leads through repetition.<sup>5</sup>

5 Ibid.

Repetition, in this sense (Kierkegaard via Lacan) can be a strategy for catalyzing change—even if, in some cases, this change initially looks somewhat familiar. Indeed, much of the post-Yugoslav neo-avant-garde over the past thirty years has understood things in this way, seeing the

“new” as a repetition of that which exists, and vice versa: repetition as the necessary path toward the new. Kazimir Malevich, Belgrade, for example, produced his *Last Futurist Exhibition* in Belgrade and Ljubljana in 1986 (thereby repeating the other Malevich’s signature exhibition of seventy years previous); his *Armory Show*, which was also staged in Ljubljana in 1986, featured copies of paintings by Piet Mondrian, which means it was in some ways more radical and forward-thinking than the *Armory Show* of 1913, which was very old-fashioned by comparison.

6 Walter Benjamin was a German Jewish philosopher and essayist, known for his theorization of originality and reproduction, who died in 1940 while attempting to flee the Nazi occupation of Europe. He re-manifested as an authorial identity with this lecture and with an exhibition the following year in Belgrade. He subsequently published the thesis “On Copy” (2003), gave an interview (“My Dear, This is Not What it Seems to Be,” 2005), and co-curated (with Inke Arns) the exhibition *What is Modern Art?* held at Kunsthaus Bethanien, Berlin, 2006.

7 The Dutch painter Piet Mondrian died in 1944.

8 Walter Benjamin, “Mondrian ’63–’96” (manuscript of lecture at Cankarjev Dom, Ljubljana, 1986, organized by the ŠKUC Gallery). Unpublished at the time this essay was written, the text later appeared in *Walter Benjamin: Recent Writings* (Los Angeles: New Documents, 2013).

The same goes for the 1986 lecture of Walter Benjamin in Ljubljana, organized by the Marxist Center and the ŠKUC Gallery, titled “Mondrian 63–96.”<sup>6</sup> Benjamin spoke of two (alleged) copies of the same Mondrian painting, both “signed” by the artist and dated 1983,<sup>7</sup> and discussed how they differed from the original painting:

Even those so-called answers that we’ve arrived at in this lecture are only conditional answers; they are based on assumptions and not facts. The only true facts are the paintings that stand in front of us. Such simple paintings and such complicated questions. We still don’t know who authored these paintings, when they originated, or what they might mean. They rely neither on the coordinates of time, nor on coordinates of identity, nor on coordinates of meaning. They simply hover, and the only comprehensible sense of their existence that we can accept with certainty is these questions themselves.<sup>8</sup>



WHAT WILL THE NEXT REVOLUTION BE LIKE?



Kazimir Malevich, *The Last Futurist Exhibition, Belgrade, 1985–86*. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana



Walter Benjamin presenting his lecture "*Mondrian '63–'96*," in Cankarjev dom, organized by ŠKUC Gallery, Ljubljana, 1986

9 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2004), 90.

Such a statement is not so far from Hume's thesis, quoted by Deleuze, that "repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it."<sup>9</sup> Regardless, it is the case that, unless we account for this Eastern European tradition of repetition, it will be impossible to grasp any of the current art practices under discussion. The Yugoslav retro-avant-garde, for example, has from the start made clear that its quest to challenge the prevailing order refers to the Russian avant-garde and its utopian revolutionary context.

What I would like to emphasize, however, are the very trans-historical elements in that historical avant-garde art and, moreover, its international character (even though it unfortunately ended in severe isolation, as these artists were increasingly marginalized, politically and aesthetically, after the late 1920s). The abstraction of their forms seemed to guarantee both their truly universal readability and their infinite reproducibility—and indeed these distinctive shapes were repeated ad infinitum by Arn's post-utopians as well as the retro-avant-garde. Regardless of whether the Russian avant-garde "failed," as many interpreters have claimed, the forms they created, by providing a truly universal formal language, bore out the democratization of art that they imagined.

The tradition of socially critical art, then, includes both impersonal "general" forms along with contingent forms grounded in "reality." Perhaps another paradox is that the "reality" most accessible to vast sections of the population is the mass media (where reportage frequently blurs authenticity and fiction, the real and its representation). This

provides ample opportunity for provocation, as happened in 1983, when members of the group Laibach gave a TV interview assuming a totalitarian aesthetic and reciting their answers in an impersonal, alienated manner. This baffled the public, which had little ability to distinguish repetition from original, and caused a huge scandal. This practice of provocation was riskier than, say, the “interventionist” projects of the Yes Men, or the German anti-globalization group Attac, which published a mock version of the respected Hamburg newspaper *Die Zeit* with articles that announced the positive results of solutions to the financial crisis, hunger, and the world’s ecological problems. However different these projects are, they underscore how repetition can make inroads into the real.

Such a volatile approach to “the real” also characterizes several recent actions by Eastern European artists interested in re-opening past conflicts to make them live issues in the present. In the early 1990s, the collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) founded a nation it called the NSK State in Time and began issuing passports that looked remarkably realistic. These passports have been requested by many people—art world denizens, to be sure, but also a much wider public—each of whom, upon receipt, became a citizen of NSK State in Time and, additionally, a voluntary participant in an art scenario. At the same time that NSK began issuing passports, many new states were forming in Europe and a war was raging in the Balkans. Naturally these world events led to increased interest in the NSK artistic copies of official documents, at times impelled by entirely practical

motives. Most of the NSK passports were issued in Sarajevo, at the time a city under siege, to members of the art world who used them as supplementary ID. Some, out of necessity, risked using their NSK passport as a substitute for their real one.<sup>10</sup>

10 A connected situation came up in the mid-2000s when NSK began receiving requests from people in Nigeria who were interested in using the NSK passport as a national ID in a time of political crisis. One of the groups in NSK, IRWIN, documented these stories and, as it were, brought them back into the sphere of art.

11 Janez Janša, Janez Janša, and Janez Janša, *AME Readymade*, Steirischer Herbst, Festival of New Art, Forum Stadtpark, Graz, Austria, 2008.

Rather than issue their own passports, thereby providing a guarantee of identity, however notional or provisional, members of another artist group each assumed the name Janez Janša, after Slovenia's right-wing former prime minister. At a 2008 exhibition in Graz, Austria, the three Janšas relinquished all documentation of their personal identities, including their bank cards, displaying these documents as readymades for a month.<sup>11</sup> Through this, they tested out—in the context of their real lives—what life was like without official documents, thereby showing how forms defined by repeatability define our life and work. So too did this collective gesture underscore (if in whatever symbolic or potential new form of citizenship) a *difference beyond difference* that might transcend such political and bureaucratic forms of identification.

## LEARNING FROM BRECHT

The financial crisis that followed the 2008 crash is in some respects comparable to the economic depression that followed the stock market crash of 1929, which precipitated both the rise of fascism and the radicalization of leftist positions. The Croatian curatorial group What, How, & For Whom? (WHW), which is curating the 11th Istanbul Biennial as I am writing, has drawn the exhibition's conceptual framework from the



Matej Bor and Sebastijan Horvat, *Ragged People (Pupils and Teachers)*. Production, EPI Centre, MG Ptuj and Cankarjev dom, 2007

social and political context of the interwar era, specifically as it was addressed by the German playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht. WHW points out several parallels between that moment and our own, such as expanding poverty, moralistic views, and political repression. WHW's title is drawn from a song in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, of 1928, "What Keeps Mankind Alive?"

In their curatorial statement, WHW places their project in a line of adaptations; just as their biennial drew inspiration from Brecht, Brecht had adapted his play from *The Beggar's Opera*, a 1728 ballad opera written by English dramatist John Gay. That play, which described the earliest moments of industrial capitalism in satirical terms, in some ways resembled the turbulent

years of the early twentieth century. Departing from Gay's form, however, Brecht established his concept of epic (later dialectical) theater. This was a form of theatrical performance designed to provoke rational self-reflection in the viewer and a critical view of the actions on stage, and thereby circumvent being regarded as escapist entertainment. One of the main principles of this form of theater was what Brecht called the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or "alienation effect."

Performers achieved this by disclosing and making obvious the manipulative contrivances and fictive qualities of the theatrical apparatus. For their part, WHW followed Brecht's model by publicizing the details of the biennial's budget, seeking to avoid the usual opacity of the contemporary art apparatus. Rather than critique political slogans with rational arguments, another of Brecht's strategies was to repurpose them in even more radical form—thus exposing their meaninglessness. All this adapting and repurposing, I am arguing, is a kind of repetition, allowing for the critique of ideology through the recovery of past models. Such direct borrowings of previous gestures can serve to underline crucial differences among iterations, such as who is speaking, to whom, and in what social, political, or historical circumstances.

It should come as little surprise that such an interest in history migrates freely between the contexts of art and politics; history is not so autonomous as people sometimes suppose. We might consider, for example, the case of the Slovene theater director Sebastijan Horvat. Horvat has staged several plays in recent years

that make direct reference to Brechtian concepts, the most famous of which was his production of *Raztrganci* (Ragged people). Staged in the wake of a right-wing government that had disparaged the Slovenian partisan resistance in World War II—for them, communism was no better than Nazism—*Raztrganci* was a legendary partisan play by Matej Bor that dramatized battles against fascist occupiers almost as they were happening. Horvat gave his production a Brechtian subtitle, *Učenci in učitelji* (Pupils and teachers), underscoring a renewed need for a didactic theater. At the end of the play, to everyone’s surprise, surviving members of the Slovenian Partisan Choir, who were attending at Horvat’s invitation, began singing well-known partisan songs; this triggered a powerful emotional response in the audience—a response invoked not only by the subject matter but the power of contemporary theater itself. Another example of the connection between art and politics can be seen in a group with the evocative name Chto Delat? Anglicized Russian for “What is to be done?” the phrase comes from Vladimir Lenin’s revolutionary pamphlet of 1902 in which he argues for the establishment of a political party, or “vanguard,” of dedicated revolutionaries to lead complacent working classes toward Marxist revolution.<sup>12</sup> Chto Delat? conducted extensive research in a working-class neighborhood in Saint Petersburg, Russia, that had been a focal point of the workers’ uprising in 1905. The objective of their research was an analysis of possible forms of resistance against new systems of exploitation and alienation. One result was the art action *Angry Sandwich-People, or, In Praise of Dialectics*, which was dedicated to the centennial of the mass unrest, mutinies, and

12 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of our Movement,” 1901–2, trans. Joe Fineberg and George Hanna, *marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>.

13 David Riff and Dimitry Vilensky, *Prekinjene zgodovine. Arteast Rastava* [Interrupted Histories: Arteast Exhibition] (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2006).

workers' strikes of 1905 Russia. Carried out with local activist groups, this action took the form of a theatrical happening in urban space.<sup>13</sup> The aim was to visualize one of Brecht's most powerful poems, "In Praise of Dialectics," the verses of which were displayed on sandwich boards worn by performer-protesters. Played by children, activists, and pensioners under Chto Delat?'s direction, these protesters continually rearranged their positions, thereby transforming the source poem. Eventually this silent rearranging stopped, and the protesters began, in formal Soviet fashion, to declaim aloud Brecht's poem, which resounded with the empty pathos of the revolutionary past. This repetition underscored that the words of the failed revolution had lost all meaning, while discovering that real political potential remained in the very consciousness of this failure.

Brecht also wrote short works he called *Lehrstücke*, or didactic pieces. These were intended to help actors gain as much distance as possible from their scripts. Emphasizing process over persuasion, these pieces are rigorous formal exercises requiring the mechanical repetition of specific, and often absurd, gestures. Character and identity are sacrificed to a common idea. In a similar way, we could say that today Eastern European artists are making art in the form of *Lehrstücke*, which serves the same purpose for themselves and their audiences. We would, however, be entering dangerous territory if we began ruminating about why the communist idea was so well received in Eastern Europe, and why the spirit of collectivism is so strongly felt in the work of artists from this region. Here it is enough to establish certain facts necessary for my reflections on repetition. In various Eastern



European artists, we see affinities for utopian content, abstract forms, and the ritual nature of repetition. These affinities, which translate into characteristics of their artistic practice, emerge from contingent cultural and historical circumstances, but aim at the same time to obscure those circumstances, to become universal.

Today we can hardly imagine that something like the October Revolution, which deposed the Russian regime and founded a workers' state, could be repeated. Nevertheless, it is getting easier to participate in protests through social networking sites, blogs, and so on. Regardless of whether these actions are trivial, in the end we feel we have done something—made some sort of a difference. The Internet is also enabling new economics of culture through the improved and decentralized distribution of content and the free sharing of knowledge. If a revolution lies in the future, it will necessarily be quite different from previous revolutions, insofar as it will take full advantage of the educational and informative power of these new technologies, as well as the social distress felt by all the victims of wealth inequality and social crisis.

Many now understand Brecht's alienation effect through the prism of postmodernism—even though pervasive self-awareness has not been “alienating” for a long time. It is therefore important to underscore the differences between Brechtian ideas and those that prevail in postmodern entertainment, especially because those differences suggest why Brecht has renewed relevance now. Whereas postmodernism blurs reality with fiction, and takes a skeptical view

toward truth itself, Brecht's theatrical techniques are constantly sending us back to reality and forcing us to take a stand. In place of dramatic catharsis, which relies on inducing the audience's empathy with the performers, Brecht employs alienation; instead of using illusion to effect self-knowledge, he advocates for constant critical reflection. Only in this way will contact with the real become possible. And only in this way will repetition catalyze open-ended change, creativity, and freedom. Or, as Dolar says, repetition "concerns the core of our being, it is what enslaves us and what brings forth the tiny crack for the subject's freedom."<sup>14</sup> Only through such repetition will we access the real, shed indecision, take a position, and go back to the future.

14 Dolar, "Automatism of Repetition," ca. 2008–9.

# Histories and their Different Narrators

In my work related to historicizing Eastern European art, I find it is crucial to ask questions about position and perspective. Who is doing the historicizing? Who is the narrator? What is their position? These questions place the matter of historicization in the context of politics—in my view, politics has been the only appropriate setting for the act of historicizing the art of this region in the two decades since the fall of socialism.

For me, historicizing is a process that yields not a single objective history but, rather, a plurality of narratives. Unlike history, which presents itself as an objective and impersonal account, historicization foregrounds and preserves the voices of multiple narrators. Rather than produce from these different accounts a single story—no matter how complex—it is important that the very variety of these positions be preserved. This approach to history gained prominence at the end of the twentieth century as new regions began to figure in global conversations, regions that could not be understood unless social context, tradition, and interpretation were taken into consideration. This way of doing things sought to break the precedent of history being written only by the most powerful, and to give a voice to those who are weaker. In this text, I will discuss some

examples of how Eastern European art has been historicized, that is, the processes involved and the various narrators' positions vis-à-vis a selection of exhibitions of Eastern European art staged from the late 1980s onwards.

It was the West that first began to codify Eastern European art. After some time in which the West attended to Eastern European art only when it was relevant to international developments, it began to historicize this work in a more purposeful way. One such effort was made in 1962 by the British art historian Camilla Gray, who published a pioneering work on the Russian avant-garde called *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922*. This book not only revealed these artists to the Western world but also spread knowledge about these artists throughout the East, sparking new interest in the region in its own artistic traditions. Similarly, the distinction between official and dissident art originated in Western discourse.



Camilla Gray, cover of *Ruski umetnički eksperiment 1863–1922* (Beograd: Izdavački zavod Jugoslavije, 1978). Originally published in English as *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962).

It took an outside view for the East to “re-territorialize” itself—that is, to recognize itself as a unified entity. Indeed, the very designation “Eastern Europe” speaks from an external position, as if seen from the viewpoint of Europe proper (or, at least, its “other” side). The West’s tendencies toward acquisition (of knowledge, but also wealth and land) and typology have roots both in a powerful tradition of epistemology and in economic and political interests. Such systematic acquisition of diverse knowledge, as well as a tradition of self-criticism, produced an impression of freedom that was often idealized by the East. This, in turn, caused an inferiority complex to develop throughout the East, which eventually

became a self-reinforcing dynamic and contributed to its art being underrated locally and under-recognized internationally. This is one reason that a collective narrative of Eastern European art could not develop; certainly few in the region were interested in producing such a narrative until the fall of the communist regimes. It was this newly aroused interest in Eastern Europe and its cultures that retroactively stimulated an awareness of regional belonging, as well as an urgent need to define shared characteristics. Thus, art institutions and artists in the region began to use the term “Eastern European” to describe themselves and their work. Few thought this was problematic at the time or noticed that it relegated us to a subordinate position. Some critics did point out that the West had effectively accorded its own art universality, while relegating non-Western art to pre-modern classifications, as if it (still) belonged to national schools.

During the Cold War, when the world was divided into Eastern and Western “blocs,” Eastern European art generally denoted ideological pressure. According to conversations I had with some who were influential on the international art scene during this time, such as the curator Harald Szeemann, many thought it best to simply ignore the art of countries under communist dictatorships. Therefore, only a few renowned curators established long-term collaborations with Eastern European artists. One was Pierre Restany, whose surviving archive is an invaluable resource for information on Eastern European art.<sup>1</sup>

There were, however, numerous instances of communications between artists across the

1 The importance of Pierre Restany and his archive was presented by the art critic and curator Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez at Espace 315, Centre Pompidou, Paris, in 2010. Titled “Sources, Archives, Documents and Films,” her presentation was part of the exhibition *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*.

divide—including those connected to Fluxus, mail artists, and other postwar avant-gardes. In 1972, West German mail artist Klaus Groh, for example, edited one of the few books providing a contemporaneous view of art in the East, *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa* (Contemporary art in Eastern Europe).<sup>2</sup> There were also some international exhibitions. Eastern European nations participating in the Venice Biennale typically presented modernist artists; Eastern European postwar avant-gardes were featured in the Paris Biennial and the Edinburgh Festival (the latter thanks to the Scottish artist and arts-promoter Richard Demarco); the exhibition *Works and Words* at Foundation De Appel in Amsterdam in 1979 included artists from East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia alongside Dutch artists.

2 Klaus Groh, ed., *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa* [Contemporary art in Eastern Europe] (Köln: Dumont-Schauberg, 1972).

Interest in Eastern European art grew after the fall of the socialist regimes. The first exhibitions of art from post-socialist countries were staged, understandably given their proximity and shared history, in Austria and Germany. These shows favored artists from “Central Europe,” a persistent idea that had survived even under the socialist order. One of the longest-running projects to embody this notion was the Graz biennial Trigon, which covered art produced in Austria, Italy, and Yugoslavia, or “Inner Austria” (the core of the former Habsburg Monarchy).<sup>3</sup> Immediately after the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1992, an extensive exhibition titled *Identity: Difference. Platform Trigon 1940–1990. A Topography of Modernity* was staged at the Neue Galerie in Graz. Curated by art historian Christa Steinle and artist/theoretician Peter Weibel, both Austrian, *Identity: Difference* was essentially a retrospective of Trigon itself, and

3 Between 1963 and 1992, the Neue Galerie in Graz staged biennial exhibitions under the title Trigon. The first Trigon presented works from Austria, Italy, and former Yugoslavia; these countries were later joined by “guest countries” like Czechoslovakia, France, Great Britain, Germany, Hungary, and Spain.



Peter Weibel, *Wind*, 1975. Four neon tubes, metal bases, and electronics, dimensions variable. Installation view, *Identity: Difference*, Neue Galerie Graz, Austria, 1992

aimed to demonstrate what the three countries represented by the biennial had contributed artistically to modern art.

Vienna, too, contributed to this effort to revive a common Central European space. Under the direction of the Hungarian curator Lorand Hegy, Vienna's Museum of Modern Art (MUMOK) organized a special exhibition under the rubric of the Venice Biennale, bringing together artists from Austria, Hungary, and Italy with those from the former Czechoslovakia and former Yugoslavia. Titled *La coesistenza dell'arte* (The coexistence of art), the exhibition was aligned with the overall theme of that year's Biennale: transnational multiculturalism and cultural nomadism. The Austrian Vice-Chancellor Erhard

4 Erhard Busek, “The aesthetic of resistance,” in *La coesistenza dell’arte, Un modelo espositivo, La Biennale di Venezia* [The coexistence of art: An exhibition model, Venice Biennale] (Vienna: Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 1993), 11.

5 This is one argument of his book *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaction Books, 2009). Originally published in Poznań, Poland, by REBIS Publishing House, 2005.

6 The concept of Central Europe survived, however, in Kontakt, the art collection founded in 2004 by the Austrian Erste Bank, which has branch offices in most Eastern Central European countries. Its mission states that it reflects on conceptual forms of art production within Europe’s changing political geographies. This involves placing the art of the formerly socialist countries in an international art context and drawing attention to its reciprocal connections and varied practices. Kontakt aims to collect works that play an integral role within European art history while also claiming an exceptional status within a politically heterogeneous terrain.

Busek contributed to the exhibition catalogue a text underscoring this narrative: “Austria, whose cultural tradition and political psyche are defined in trans-national terms, made this coexistence part of its nascent self-awareness, which is why Austria’s identity will always be open and multicultural: Austria was thus predestined to fill the role of mediator in politics and culture, and within the Central European community of states true friendship has arisen from many formerly secret contacts with producers of culture in what used to be the Eastern bloc.”<sup>4</sup>

The former colonies of the Soviet Union reciprocated this interest in a Central European “common space.” They saw the momentum toward a different alliance of nations as a means by which to work through the traumas of their socialist past. But as the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski pointed out, the revival of what he termed “Eastern Central Europe,” was initially the project of dissident writers and independent, politically committed intellectuals; modernist and avant-garde artists from Eastern Europe usually spoke in far more universalist terms.<sup>5</sup> Per Piotrowski, the last instances of this cultural ideology appeared in the immediate aftermath of 1989, soon to be replaced (or overpowered) by the identifications required by European “integration processes” in the lead-up to the establishment of the European Union.<sup>6</sup>

This notion of Eastern Central Europe—essentially the post-socialist world minus Russia—united those who saw the fall of socialism as their liberation from Russian dominance. The exceptions, here, were the former Yugoslavia,



which had shaken off Soviet control in 1948, and Albania and Romania, which had become more independent in the 1960s (and which were, in any case, geographically somewhat separated from the “Central Europe” dynamic). The Balkans also long represented a sphere of interest for Austria: Austrian cultural influence intertwines with traces of the Ottoman period, perhaps contributing toward the region’s exoticism.

Harald Szeemann installing works by Homo Socialisticus for the exhibition *Blood & Honey*, The Essl Collection, Klosterneuburg, Austria, 2003. Modeled on an installation by Gëzim Qëndro at the National Gallery of Arts, Tirana, Albania, 1999



Post-1989, the wild and underdeveloped Balkans became an opportune target for the new European politics of tolerance. Exhibitions dedicated to art of the Balkan states were held in Austria and Germany; even more than the Central European shows, these reflected a spirit of liberalism and respect for difference—qualities that defined Europe’s positive image. While the Central European shows had seemed to wish for the resurrection of a prewar cultural space encompassing Milan, Munich, Prague, and Vienna, the gaze that now turned toward the Balkans was more exoticist in nature. Exhibitions

such as *In Search of Balkania* (Neue Galerie, Graz, 2002), *Blood & Honey: The Future's in the Balkans* (Sammlung Essl, Vienna, 2003), and *In the Gorges of the Balkans—A Report* (Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, 2003) updated the colonial paradigm of the “art of the other” and delivered it to a global art market.<sup>7</sup>

7 The curators of these exhibitions were: Harald Szeemann, *Blood & Honey*; Roger Conover, Eda Čufer, and Peter Weibel, *In Search of Balkania*; René Block, *In the Gorges of the Balkans*.

Writing for the catalogue of *Blood & Honey*, we find Busek again pointing out the important place the Balkans hold in Austrian history, as well as in the history of European integration. “*Blood & Honey* is a symbol of the seduction and radicalism emanating from the cultural landscape of southeast Europe. Austria of all countries should understand this message.”<sup>8</sup>

8 Erhard Busek, “Austria and the Balkans,” in Harald Szeemann, ed., *Blut & Honig: Zukunft isy am Balkan* [*Blood & Honey: The Future's in the Balkans*] (Vienna: Sammlung Essl/Kunst der Gegenwart, 2003), 45.

We should, however, be under no illusions: the motive behind this *cultural* integration—and these exhibitions—was the *economic* integration of new markets into the European Economic Area (which came into being in 1994). The most ambitious of these exhibitions, staged in 1994 in Bonn, Germany, was titled *Europe, Europe*, and pointed directly toward the priorities of the European Union.<sup>9</sup> It aimed to show that art, like Europe itself, transcended national borders—was, indeed, universal. The exhibition seemed to be structured around the belief that the main task of cultural history was to sort artworks into a preexisting system of classification by style—ergo, Constructivism, Cubism, the Neo-Avant-Garde, Socialist Realism, Surrealism, Symbolism, Systematism, and so on.

9 *Europa Europa—Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa* [Europa Europa – The Century of the Avant-garde in Middle and Eastern Europe], curated by Ryszard Stanisławski and Christoph Brockhaus, Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, 1994.

Announcing their geopolitical interests in their titles, these exhibitions shared a common ambition

Sanja Iveković, *Nada Dimić File*, 1998–. Installation view, *Blood & Honey*, The Essl Collection, Klosterneuburg, Austria, 2003



of surveying the art of the region. Two later shows came to underscore the dimension of time, as if to mark out and reify the distance between recent past and neoliberal present. Staged in Stockholm in 1999, *After the Wall* focused on art of post-socialist countries in the first decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall. At the time, this decade was often referred to as a period of transition, or even “normalization.” Although opinions differ as to when this period is supposed to have ended, many would agree that a good marker is the entry of individual post-socialist countries into the European Union. *After the Wall* addressed a range of themes, including history, politics, gender issues, and artists’ private worlds, which together indicated that the normalization then occurring was traumatic in its own way. In an

essay titled “The Dialectic of Normality,” one of the exhibition’s primary curator, Bojana Pejić, wrote, “[I]f we accept that the ‘normalization’ of most of the East which started in the late 1980s is now almost over, this cannot mean that life in the region—finally—has become normal. And this should have an impact on the art as well.”<sup>10</sup>

10 Bojana Pejić, “The Dialectic of Normality,” in *After the Wall, Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999), 18.

However normal things are supposed to have become, there is still such a thing as “post-socialist art”—even though it shares concerns with many other forms of art.

Eleven years later, in 2010 the Centre Pompidou, Paris, organized an exhibition titled *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*. In his introduction in the catalogue, the Pompidou’s director Alfred Pacquement signaled that the old divisions between East and West were obsolete:

The wall fell twenty years ago, on the very day that I am writing these lines. The borders have been modified and the limit between two sides of Europe has become obsolete. Artists have circulated in both directions, just as art observers and institutions have developed: the contemporary approach can only be transnational since many countries have joined the European community on a political and economic level. What was still called, ten years ago, “the other half of Europe,” according to the title of a series of exhibitions at the National Gallery of the Jeu de Paume in 2000, now appears to be an outmoded concept.<sup>11</sup>

11 Alfred Pacquement, “Introduction,” in Christine Macel et al., eds., *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2010), 13.

The exhibition’s curators, Christine Macel and Joanna Mytkowska, similarly questioned the

usefulness of thinking about Eastern European art through the East-West duality, advocating instead for a multi-vocal approach to history. One work that was specially commissioned, an architecturally scaled construction by the Polish artist Monika Sosnowska, made reference to the national pavilions that are used to present work from specific countries at international art fairs and exhibitions. The catalogue explains that it was these sorts of events—art fairs—that gave artists from Eastern European countries greater latitude for experimentation during the socialist era. Unfortunately, Sosnowska's work, which is otherwise fascinating, became in this exhibition the very type of regional representation it aimed to quote formally; despite the curators' best intentions, the exhibition ended up being exactly the sort of condensed regional survey they had hoped to critique.

The Pompidou, one of the most influential and powerful museums of the West, may have contributed to this reading, but so did a certain willful denial on the organizers' part. By trying to avoid the East-West dichotomy under the sign of a unified Europe, the organizers failed to acknowledge that the power relations between East and West remained unequal. The curators posed the question, "What should be done with the art history of the dozen or so countries east of Berlin and west of Kiev that were/are referred to as Eastern Europe?" But one cannot obviate such a geopolitical category and the politics it codifies by wishing them away or simply proceeding otherwise, happily sorting transnational concerns into thematic groupings: modernist utopias, micro-politics, feminism, the relationship between public and private, and so on.

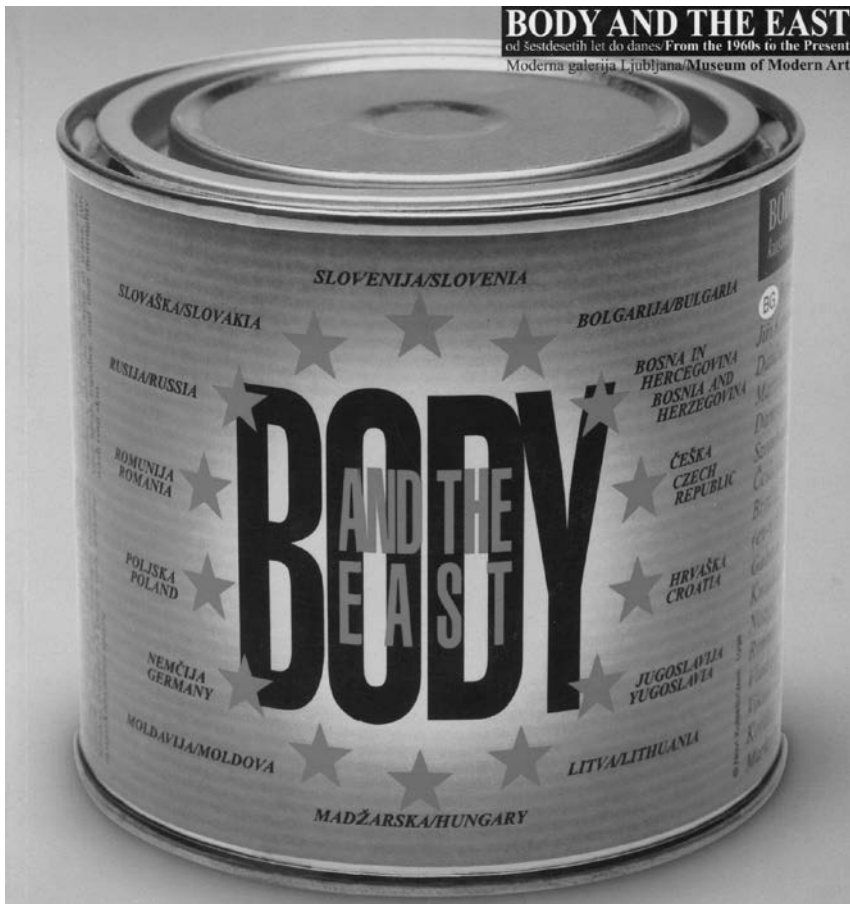
Yet the curators' central questions remain worth answering two decades after the establishment of Europe's "new democracies." How do we proceed in a time when our identities are merging, and the world is no longer [so] divided? Is a change in narrative enough? Are we in fact becoming more and more similar, and, if so, might this be a problem? Who is served by such homogenization? Do we all contribute equally to formulating new global patterns? The events of 1989 brought more than just the "Fall of the Wall," they also brought new processes of globalization (worldwide neoliberalism) and new architectures of information exchange (the Internet).

The exhibitions I have discussed so far were produced in the West, and happened not only in concert with, but often in direct collaboration with, the broader political and economic interests of the integration processes of the European Union, as well as in concert with the development of multiculturalism (mostly in the neoliberal sense of that word). Most of the exhibitions I have described involved gifted curators from the region who contributed not only their deep knowledge of local art and their professional contacts but also their insights into nation-specific societal processes. In such cases, though, the curatorial framework is just one factor—perhaps not even a central factor—in how an exhibition functions or is perceived. The institutions themselves are not neutral. Even if at some level a museum wishes to speak in a multiplicity of voices, these voices are nevertheless filtered through the institution's preexisting concepts and representations, which interact with those of the exhibitions they house. Can anything be done to prevent this kind of distortion?

This was a question we had on our minds at Moderna galerija as we were staging the latest exhibition of Arteast 2000+, our museum's collection of Eastern European art. While making room for many different narrators, we also underscored our own institutional framework by including the archives of several previous exhibitions, such as *Body and the East* from 1998. By doing so, we framed the contemporary exhibition within our historical commitments and contributions to this subject. We privileged the voices of artists who have always played an important role in historicization in this region, building archives and systematizing local traditions. Similarly, we placed emphasis on oral history, in the form of video interviews with Eastern European artists. Such narratives, rooted to individual voices, prompt us to imagine and reflect upon exhibition models based on other logics than "representation." Indeed, with the opening of new territories, a need has emerged for models of exhibitions that preserve the space of unique narratives without controlling or transforming them.

I will conclude by saying, however, that it is not enough to provide a variety of narratives, as if they make up a happy family or multiplicity. Rather, the kind of historicization I advocate requires that we draw attention to the position of the narrator and to the institutional or geopolitical contexts in which they speak—and that we do so without further reifying the identities of the past. One might argue that the question of the identity of the art of a region ought to be replaced by the question of the agents of its historicization. This is not only true for Eastern European nations but also is true for many other regions which occupy

weaker positions in the global hierarchy, but which nevertheless aspire to participate in shaping the future image of the world. Such historicization entails more than presenting voices without distorting them, it means bringing narrators face-to-face, even into direct confrontation, in order that we begin to grasp the various mechanisms of the writing of history itself.



Cover of *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present*, exh. cat. (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 1998)



# The Scent of Apricots, or *Back to the USA*

In the summer of 1983, the Slovenian artists Andrej Savski and Roman Uranjek went apricot picking in southern Switzerland. They earned enough from this work for a trip to Paris, where Savski pilfered a copy of the *Back to the USA* exhibition catalogue from a bookstore.

It was an eventful summer for them. Uranjek got the idea to travel from Slovenia to Switzerland from his professor of painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana. She had warmly recommended to her students that they go to the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne to see *Back to the USA*, which represented the latest information on what was happening in the New York art scene. After Lucerne, the show was to travel to Germany, to the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn, which was the organizer of the exhibition, and then to the Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart. Its subtitle, *Amerikanische Kunst der 70er und 80er Jahre; Pattern & Decoration, New Image, New Wave, New Expressionism, Graffiti*, gives an idea of what was on view.

In those days, Savski and Uranjek socialized frequently with members of the multimedia

artist group Laibach, and with Marko Kovačič, Dušan Mandić, Bojan Štokelj, and Borut Vogeltnik; together with the latter four they formed the group IRWIN in October of 1983. Kovačič and Štokelj left the group soon thereafter and were replaced by Miran Mohar, who remains an IRWIN member to this day. Even before the group was formally founded, its members had painted graffiti, mainly depicting partisan fighters being tortured during World War II. They had also begun discussing arrangements for a group show at the Students' Culture Center in Ljubljana, or the ŠKUC Gallery for short. They were accepted into the gallery's exhibition program, but because it was booked for the rest of the calendar year, their exhibition was scheduled to take place the following year, 1984.

That Orwellian year was fateful in many respects. It symbolized a transition from the old forms of totalitarianism (the society of discipline, in Michel Foucault's formulation) to the new ones (society of control, ditto). That transition was the focus of the work of *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK). NSK was founded in Slovenia, the westernmost Yugoslav republic, by three groups: the multimedia group Laibach (founded in 1980); the visual arts group IRWIN; and The Sisters of Scipio Nasica Theater (founded in 1983 and lasting until 1987).<sup>1</sup> NSK made a distinctive mark on the art of the 1980s in the territory of the former Yugoslavia where, after the death of President Josip Broz Tito in 1980, various processes of democratization were initiated by a number of governmental, social, and cultural initiatives. Laibach, the first of the NSK groups to be founded, wrote in its 1982 manifesto, "Art and totalitarianism are not mutually exclusive," thus intimating its aim to expose the totalitarian

1 At the same time as they formed NSK, the three groups founded a fourth, called New Collectivism, which has consisted over the years of members of each of the founding groups. Later, other groups joined NSK, of which the longest lasting has been the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy.



Rose IRWIN Sélavy, installation view, *Back to the USA*, ŠKUC Gallery, Ljubljana, 1984

impulses of socialist Yugoslavia by outwardly identifying with its imagery. All the NSK art groups adopted the same retrograde principle from the beginning, based on appropriating seemingly contradictory elements of socialist and Nazi art; historical, particularly Russian avant-gardes; national art; socialist ideology; and new forms of media control. One of the key characteristics of NSK was the abandonment of individual authorship in favor of a collective aesthetic principle.

IRWIN's paintings can be described as having the form of appropriation art, but with crucial conceptual differences. Their adoption of images derived from all possible sources was, for example, less indebted to modes of postmodern bricolage than a deliberate reference to the eclecticism of marginal cultures—which the cultures of the

Yugoslavian nations were. Eclecticism became a central concept for IRWIN, but a concept in dialogue with everything else that theoretically informed contemporary art was concerned with at the time, including, first and foremost, the deconstruction of authorship and originality.

What became a universal principle in the 1980s was, on another level, a trauma familiar to marginal cultures. IRWIN's concerns included a sense that their local culture was trailing behind an artistic progress that always happened elsewhere, and concern about the tendency in small countries to copy the styles established by more dominant cultures. But a series of new concepts, articulated in art and theory, became tools that IRWIN applied to turn disadvantages into advantages. Why remain traumatized about being perpetually behind the times if linear time has been abolished? Why strive for originality if the author is dead? And why worry about being unable to host an expensive traveling show of American art if one can simply copy it?

The IRWIN artists were irritated by what they perceived as a lack of confidence among Slovenian artists, who would employ foreign aesthetic approaches to paint local motifs, such as a hayrack. The young artists of IRWIN would employ the double negative to get a positive result. They prioritized non-originality, not only in terms of style but also in choice of motif. They adopted the stag from the Laibach group, figuring that nothing in art was natural or original, and that wild nature is more familiar to us from art than from firsthand experience. The stag remains one of the central motifs used both by IRWIN and Laibach to this day.

In the early years, IRWIN even appropriated the name itself. Laibach is the German name for Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, and was used officially during the Nazi occupation of World War II. The industrial rock band Laibach adopted this German name to provoke the socialist authorities, which they further sought to do by performing in military uniform. It soon became blatantly obvious that Laibach was using the language of other totalitarianisms to critique the totalitarian impulses of those then in power, which, in 1983, led to the band being officially banned from using its name and thus from working; the ban was not lifted until 1987. While it was in place, IRWIN assumed the name Laibach and signed their icon paintings as Laibach Kunst.

*Back to the USA* captured the zeitgeist of the new trends in Western art. The young Slovenian artists wanted all that information to come to Yugoslavia as well. They were aware of how unlikely this would be, since exhibitions providing insight into current developments in Western art came to Yugoslavia—or to Eastern Europe in general—by mistake rather than by rule. Compared to other Eastern European countries, however, Yugoslavia was relatively open to the art of the Western world; Ljubljana, for instance, held the International Biennial of Graphic Arts, which regularly presented prominent Western artists, but there was little freedom of choice when it came to international exhibitions. Generally these were distributed by a central department for cultural cooperation in Belgrade, which received offers of exhibitions based on reciprocal agreements between states. Even if

it had been possible to bring *Back to the USA* to Ljubljana, given the general state of apathy among local institutions, the idea never occurred to anyone—except, of course, to the five future IRWIN members.

Determined to stage the exhibition in Ljubljana, they finally succeeded, but in typical IRWIN manner. They procured locals to act as “doubles” of some of the American artists featured in the original show (Nicholas Africano, John Ahearn, Jonathan Borofsky, Richard Bosman, Neil Jenney, Matt Mullican, Tom Otterness, and Cindy Sherman—artists whose works were filled with personal poetics and motifs of everyday existence, popular culture, and anxieties about urban life). The doubles did not necessarily take the works in the *Back to the USA* exhibition catalogue as their points of departure, either. Faithful to their principles, IRWIN orchestrated copies of the *motifs* rather than the *works* themselves.

Kovačič, for instance, repeated Borofsky’s *Hammering Man* motif, which Borofsky first used in 1979 and himself repeated in different scales and variants over many years. Borofsky’s *Hammering Man* symbolizes the worker in all of us. Kovačič produced similar freestanding worker figures, adding the word “Strike” as a criticism of the status of laborers in socialist Yugoslavia.

Uranjek also focused on Borofsky after seeing a photograph of Borofsky’s *Man with Briefcase* (1982) at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. The photograph of the work, which was installed in the skylight of the museum, presented a challenge because of the

distorted perspective in the reproduction. Uranjek decided to make a copy of the work for ŠKUC Gallery that would be installed on the ceiling as well, but in such a way that the figure's distortion made its head-to-body ratio 1:3 instead of 1:7. This was Uranjek's way of conveying that, for him, the reproduction was a more important source of information than the original.

Savski copied paintings by Kushner and Jenney. In the case of Kushner, he followed the motifs and the basic style of Kushner's pattern painting, making only minor transformations of texture and pattern. For his copies of work by Jenney, he used an older three-dimensional installation titled *The Press Piece* (1969), which he rendered in Jenney's "bad" painting style. Štokelj chose Ahearn's 1981–82 series of portraits of black and Hispanic people from his Bronx neighborhood as his motif, and portrayed some of his own friends, including members of IRWIN, in the manner of Ahearn. Vogelnik repeated motifs found in Bosman's painting *Sunday Morning* (1982), which was reproduced in black and white in the *Back to the USA* catalogue. Vogelnik executed the motifs of a man, a woman, and what looks like an after-sex cigarette in a black-and-white woodcut, opting for printmaking to underscore the concept of repetition. The three prints follow one another in the manner of comic-strip frames. Mandić referred to Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80), in which she photographed herself in poses evoking movie stars. He worked together with Marina Gržinić, filming her in similar poses, thus bringing Sherman's stills to life.

This collaboration by Gržinić and Mandić must be mentioned in connection with another work in the show that is important to the broader Yugoslavian context in which this unique concept of copying evolved. Pioneering work in this vein had been done by Goran Đorđević, who was not involved in conceptualizing the Ljubljana version of *Back to the USA* but who had developed a special concept of copying between 1979 and 1985. Đorđević had two important presentations at the ŠKUC Gallery before the Ljubljana *Back to the USA* show: *Harbingers of the Apocalypse* in March 1981 and *Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures: Copies* in March 1984. *Harbingers of the Apocalypse* had previously been staged in his apartment in Belgrade. On that occasion, Đorđević sent slides and Polaroid shots of a drawing, a landscape with dead trees and skull-and-crossbones, to acclaimed international artists with the request that they make a copy. Among those he contacted was Borofsky, who returned a miniature copy, a drawing on plastic film, reminiscent of a black-and-white slide, only slightly larger than the 35-millimeter standard. From this copy by Borofsky, Mandić made a huge graffiti copy, adding the text: “From the warm reasons to the cold regions.”

A catalogue of sorts accompanied the ŠKUC Gallery *Back to the USA* exhibition. Though essentially a fanzine, it also included two seminal texts that are still relevant to an understanding of IRWIN’s subsequent work. “The Retro Principle: The Dictate of the Motif,” written by Savski and Uranjek, clearly lays out the main IRWIN concept. The retro principle is not defined as a new trend in art but as “a principle of thought,





Rose IRWIN Sélavy, cover of *Back to the USA*, exh. cat. (Ljubljana: ŠKUC Gallery, 1984)

2 IRWIN (credited as R Irwin S), “Retroprincip—diktat motiva,” *Back to the USA: Luzern-julij 83, Ljubljana-april 84* (Ljubljana: Galerija ŠKUC, 1984), n.p.

a way of behaving and acting, founded on reinterpretation and re-creation of artworks from the past. ... The retro principle ensures constant variability of the language of art and moving from one form of artistic expression to another, following the dictate of motif.”<sup>2</sup>

The other text, entitled “Back to the USA,” was written by Borut Vogelnek and Miloš Gregorič, and is primarily concerned with a critique of then-current conditions of art making. It describes recent drastic reductions in public funding for art, and how these cuts affected the status of freelance artists in socialist society, which the two artists describe as class-structured. They interpret the Ljubljana *Back to the USA* show as a radical

3 Ibid.

unmasking of an ideology that presents art as universality with local motifs grafted onto it. Such “local universality,” they say, is in the service of the prevailing socialist ideology in Yugoslavia, which needed neutral art to exploit for the needs of a quasi-market and, more importantly, to camouflage any position “through which heterogeneous authoritative criteria and perspectives can penetrate artistic production.”<sup>3</sup> This criticism referred primarily to New Image painting, which was very popular at the time; it had taken Slovenian museums and galleries by storm and sold well, despite the fact that the local art market was undeveloped. New Image painting made Slovenian artists feel they were part of an international trend and up to date; at the same time, it was such a neutral trend that the authorities did not perceive it as a threat, as they did the art of the NSK.

Today, thirty years later, in a time of severe economic and political crisis in Slovenia, such writing seems more topical than ever. In criticizing local universality, the Ljubljana *Back to the USA* exhibition referred pointedly to its inverse, namely the general condition of localism, a “universal localness”—a localness that was rooted in material conditions of production, the one truly universal basis of artistic production.

The Ljubljana rendition of *Back to the USA* was partly repeated in 2011, with a selection of works presented at the October Salon show in Belgrade.<sup>4</sup> As the exhibition catalogue put it, this “reenactment of a reenactment” underscored current issues of cultural politics in the former Yugoslavia. It highlighted the role of art in the 1980s, when it played an active and effective

4 The curators of the 52nd October Salon were Galit Eilat and Alenka Gregorič. The show took place at the Museum of Yugoslav History.

role in shaping civil society, contributing to the fall of the socialist regime, and drew attention to what Yugoslavian society had turned into, and to the conditions under which artists work today. The current economic crisis, in which the welfare state—one of the best facets of former Yugoslavia—is dying, is becoming a handy tool for silencing socially critical art.

The idea of localness, in the sense of folklore, is again topical; it sells well. Meanwhile, cutting funds for culture and education destroys the roots of critical thought and lays the groundwork for future dictatorships.

The 2011 presentation underlines the radical gesture of the Ljubljana *Back to the USA* show, which has proven to be more memorable and important than the show it reproduced, and more charged than the contemporaneous Yugoslav versions of New Image painting or New Expressionism, which were influenced primarily by trends in Italian and German painting. IRWIN and the New Image and New Expressionist painters all referred to their locality, but in radically different ways. The New Expressionist artists were fascinated by the genius loci, recognizable in their use of a general local iconography unrelated to the historical moment of the 1980s. The members of IRWIN stood for a wholly different, active locality—one focused on local material conditions. Using the method of over-identification, they unmasked, together with like-minded artists from the NSK collective, the symptoms of the local dictatorship, striving at the same time to increase the influence the margins had on defining international art.

The Ljubljana edition of *Back to the USA* can be understood, therefore, as an artistic proposal for historicizing the art of diverse localities. Rather than scramble to keep up with prevailing trends of Western art, adding local flavor but remaining subject to a history written elsewhere, IRWIN assumed the right to narrate this history from their own perspective. We might call this practice *singular historicization*, a form of narration which uses the sociopolitical position of the narrator to deconstruct governance mechanisms otherwise untouchable. Such narratives then become *singular local materials*; they cannot be made into or understood to be a new general history, and are as such genuine historicizing resources. Such narratives acquire the quality of oral histories: unique testimonies parallel to narratives produced from a position of power, challenging a longstanding tradition of writing.

This text is a result of the oral histories of individual participants in the Ljubljana *Back to the USA* exhibition. It is a result of memories triggered by the scent of apricots.

# How Do We Work? Collectivity as an Aesthetic Gesture

How do we work? Or, rather, how do we work in the art system? Or, even better, how might we work outside of the art system? I am inspired to ask these questions by a 1970 project authored by the art collective OHO Group at the Aktionsraum in Munich, Germany, in which the group presented a diagrammatic explanation of their mode of production. This involved more than describing the working conditions of the specific artists; responding to these simple questions demanded a complex answer: it required members of the collective to explain the entire context of production relationships in socialist Yugoslavia.

In both East and West, conceptualism is the heir of the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century—Dada, Constructivism, Surrealism, and others. These prewar movements were not inherited in the same way in each place; they were understood in different regions through different social circumstances, and in different rhythms. The Russian avant-garde, with its utopian dimension, was of special importance. Transmitted to Anglophone artists by Camilla Gray's 1962 book *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922*, the Russian avant-garde

influenced the development of American Minimalism and conceptual art—though, as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has argued, the Americans left behind its utopian horizon.<sup>1</sup>

1 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 514–35.

Yugoslav artists, by contrast, had no such historical hiatus or estrangement. The Russian avant-garde influenced, directly or indirectly, every generation of Yugoslav avant-garde artist in the twentieth century. The impact of this is still felt today. There was direct contact between Yugoslav and Russian avant-gardes before World War II, and after the war, despite differences and conflicts, the utopian dimension could still be sensed in both nations’ versions of socialism. Although Yugoslav new art practices of the 1960s and ’70s mostly looked to Western contemporary art, and therefore partook of spiritualism and utopianism on terms set by Western counterculture, this art nevertheless retained a strong link to the communist utopias of the early twentieth century—although there was scant reference to communist ideas in the work.<sup>2</sup>

2 The post-conceptualist artists of the 1980s would return their attention to the Eastern European context.

Notwithstanding the ongoing communication between representatives of the new art on both sides, the fact remains that Eastern European artists saw themselves as different from their Western counterparts—and not only because they lived under different social and political conditions. They were, for example, working from within a different tradition of understanding collectivity and utopia. They had a different sense of time and space (as they understood it, the East had less space, but more time). They were more isolated and had fewer opportunities for developing individual art-world careers.

These were all facts Eastern European artists experienced as both oppressive and liberating.

They were, importantly—perhaps counterintuitively—idealists; after all, there were few other motivations for conducting an art practice. They devoted all their time to creativity, which is not to imply that all their time was spent on production; much of their time appeared idle or fallow rather than productive. It is hardly an accident that quite a few Eastern European artists invoked their right to be lazy—a product of their special sense of time, and a reaction to a system that afforded everyone alike, the hardworking and lazy, equal pay.

## GORGONA

My opening question therefore might also imply its inverse: how do we *not* work? In fact, one group I will discuss, the Croatian proto-conceptual group Gorgona, seems to have answered this very question: Gorgona sometimes did nothing but live. Active between 1959 and 1966, Gorgona consisted of five artists, three art historians, and one architect. The artists were the painters Marijan Jevšovar, Julije Knifer, Đuro Seder, and Josip Vaništa, and the sculptor Ivan Kožarić; the art historians included Dimitrije Bašičević (known as Mangelos), Radoslav Putar, and Matko Meštrović; and the architect was Miljenko Horvat.

Gorgona did not share a common artistic ideology or aesthetic; their group work was based primarily on communication and socializing. What united them was something they called

3 Nena Dimitrijević, “Gorgona–Umjetnost kao način postojanja” (1977), in Marija Gatin, ed., *Gorgona: Protokol dostavljanja misli* [Gorgona: Protocol of submitting thoughts] (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2002), 52.



Gorgona, cover of *Gorgona*, anti-magazine, no. 4 (1961). Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

the “Gorgona spirit,” which meant a spirit “of modernism ... defined by a recognition of the absurd, emptiness, monotony as an aesthetic category, a tendency toward nihilism, and metaphysical irony.”<sup>3</sup> Alongside their individual work, which was autonomous from Gorgona activities, they produced group actions, which today are documented in their correspondence, questionnaires, and administrative records. Alongside these actions, Gorgona members created a type of parallel art-system-in-miniature: an international network of artists, a gallery called Studio G, and a publication, the “anti-magazine” *Gorgona*.

The magazine was one of their most important projects. Each of the eleven issues published between 1961 and 1966 was the work of a single artist. This both distinguished *Gorgona* from other avant-garde magazines of the time and foreshadowed what would later be known as the artist’s book. (The first well-known work of this kind is Ed Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, self-published in 1963 and thus appearing after the first issue of *Gorgona*.)

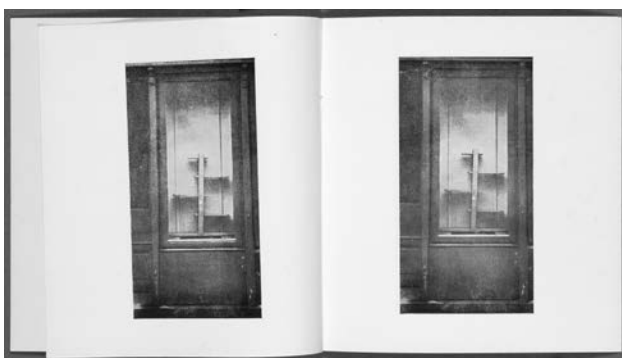
I will single out three issues. The first, which was the work of Josip Vaništa, presented a photograph of an empty display rack in the otherwise vacant shop window in Zagreb. This photograph was reproduced on all nine pages of the magazine, the repetition serving to underscore the absence of meaning, while also recalling avant-garde predecessors, specifically Marcel Duchamp’s readymades. In the sixth issue, Vaništa analyzed the relationship between a reproduction and an original using one of the most frequently



reproduced artworks in history, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. "I chose what I considered to be the most absurd thing to print in the magazine," Vaništa explained, "since reproducing the *Mona Lisa* is tantamount to leaving the page empty."<sup>4</sup> Western artists also participated in the magazine; for the ninth issue, Dieter Roth sent two hundred different drawings on paper, in this way making each copy of his issue an original.

4 Quoted in *ibid.*, 61.

Gorgona and Josip Vaništa, interior spreads of *Gorgona, anti-magazine*, no. 1 (1961), unpaginated. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana



Gorgona's gallery, Studio G, was in a frame shop called Salon Šira; Gorgona organized a series of exhibitions there from 1961 to 1963. These exhibitions were funded by the group's membership fees, which were determined by what each member could afford. Though, as members could take what money they needed from the common fund, the collective was usually broke. The group would send out letters describing their impoverishment using archaic and subtly humorous language, recalling the style of Zagreb bureaucrats during the Austro-Hungarian period.

Gorgona's correspondence and mail art, manifested on A4 sheets of paper, was particularly

forward-thinking. In 1961, they sent out invitations to various addressees with only the words “You are invited,” omitting any notice of to what—thereby parodying the art opening as a social event. Once a month, a group member (usually Vaništa) would collect literary and philosophical quotations, or texts on aesthetics, intended to reflect as much as possible the spirit and current mood of Gorgona. These were sent among the group under the heading “Thoughts of the Month,” and included quotations from Samuel Beckett, John Cage, Martin Heidegger, Allan Kaprow, Yves Klein, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Lao Tzu, Tin Ujević, Paul Valéry, and others. These quotes revealed the essence of the group’s philosophy, as well as the value of interpersonal relationships, mental concentration, and the beauty of the moment.

For most members of Gorgona, their meetings had special importance. They were creative gatherings based on spiritual and intellectual interests and made no directive that members produce anything. Most often they took the form of walks in the hills around Zagreb or of a gathering to watch the sunset. The goal was playfully to connect art and life.

Gorgona’s questionnaires are illuminating. Questions were recorded by hand, with responses charted on a second sheet. *Questionnaire B*, for example, asked members if they knew the name of a doctor (apparently only one member did); if they knew the address of a Socialist League member (again, only one member could respond); and how many works of art each had sold in 1963 (one answered, ironically, “a lot;” another replied

“zero in this country”). From these short and sometimes witty responses, we can sense their alienation and disinterest in local political and professional organizations, the impersonality of the socialist healthcare system, the absence of an art market, and so on. Some questionnaires addressed matters of self-definition directly, from interrogations about the nature of collective work to somewhat absurdist questions, such as one inquiring about the definition, or even the color, of Gorgona. The questionnaires could also be used as a referendum on organizational issues: in one case, when meetings were becoming more and more infrequent, Vaništa sent a questionnaire asking the group to answer with a plus or minus as to whether they still wished to attend (all the answers were positive).

Gorgona was part of an international conversation: members were familiar with the ideas of leading Western avant-garde artists, and even worked with some of them. Furthermore, they developed a form of collectivity that was distinct from, or alternative to, the petit-bourgeois attitudes of the communist society of which they were part, affording them some protection or separation from the art academy or cultural establishment. They were active in their local community, even as their questionnaires evidence a playful disaffection from Yugoslav cultural politics and an intentional distancing from what they saw as the incompetence of Yugoslav professional or social organizations. Meanwhile, the activities of Gallery G, the international network developed around the magazine, and the precise, even clerical recording of their thoughts and witticisms offer evidence

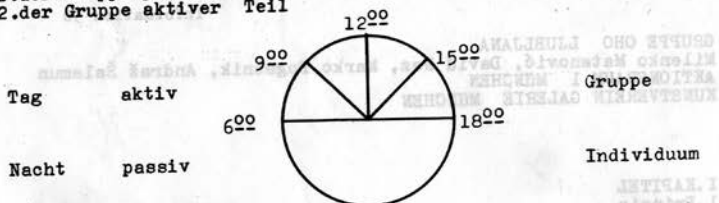
of a complex and self-organized poetic system. To the question “how do we work?” Gorgona answered with an awareness of the complexity of life—a life that included emptiness as an intrinsic part.

## OHO

The Slovene group known as OHO similarly aimed to connect art with everyday life, and, like Gorgona, engaged with processes of self-reflection and reconceptualization of work. They did so, however, following their own artistic inclinations and in the spirit of their own era. The latter included existentialism, structuralism and post-structuralism, and semiotics, as well as the significant influence of hippie culture. Drawing their name from an invented word, the group defied easy definition: over a short period (roughly the second half of the 1960s), the group’s membership and strategy shifted, as did their way of working.

The 1960s were a period of relative political liberalism in Yugoslavia, and of consumerism as well, though the latter in a milder form than prevailed in the West. Cultural magazines made a big impact, despite being in frequent conflict with political authorities; these magazines benefited from disagreements within the governing party, being suspended one moment, then reactivated by the same people the next. Indeed, one of OHO’s ventures was a new magazine titled *Katalog* (Catalogue), which they planned with a group of sociologists, philosophers, and art critics from the important avant-garde journal *Problemi* (Problems). A

III. KAPITEL  
 Die Aktion im Aktionsraum 1 wird symmetrisch in zwei Teile geteilt:  
 1. der Gruppe passiver Teil  
 2. der Gruppe aktiver Teil



IV. KAPITEL  
 Der Gruppe aktiver Teil wird symmetrisch in zwei Teile geteilt:  
 1. Erfahrungszeit (6<sup>00</sup> - 12<sup>00</sup>)  
 2. Werkzeit (12<sup>00</sup> - 18<sup>00</sup>)

- V. KAPITEL  
 Die Erfahrungszeit wird symmetrisch in zwei Teile geteilt:
1. Erneuerung der Gruppe (6<sup>00</sup> - 9<sup>00</sup>)
    - a. Leibesübungen - weltliche Erscheinung der Gruppe
    - b. Atemübungen - überweltliche Erscheinung der Gruppe

über die Erneuerung der Gruppe: Da der Tag mit Tun ausgefüllt ist, so kann die Nacht dem Ruhen und Feiern gewidmet sein. Es wird geleert um gefüllt zu werden. Die Nacht vereinzelt jeden in seinem Traum, so dass der Tag ihn mit der gestrigen Gemeinschaft wieder vereinen kann.
  2. Gruppenwanderung (9<sup>00</sup> - 12<sup>00</sup>)
    - a. Gehensrhythmus
    - b. Perzeption
    - c. Richtungsselektion

↓ 76

≡ Dominantpunkt



OHO Group, *Concept of the Exhibition in the Aktionsraum 1 Gallery and the Kunstverein Gallery in Munich*, 1970. Typescript on paper, 29.5 x 21 cm. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

single issue of *Katalog* was published as a special edition of *Problemi*, and for a short time the co-creators of *Katalog*, who included the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, operated as a separate group under that name.

The intellectual climate of Slovenia in the mid-1960s offered fertile ground for the development of the unique OHO philosophy known as *reism*, which served as the essential intellectual framework for all phases of the group's work. Indeed, *reism*—which derives from the Latin word *res*, or “thing”—might be seen as the group's signal contribution to global conceptualism: an anti-humanist understanding of the world in which man is no longer superior to other things but, rather, exists with them in equal and mutual relationship.

When we understand things as being free from servitude to man—so OHO's thinking goes—we also free ourselves. Understanding that things have a life independent from the uses or meanings we ascribe to them, OHO sought to develop a “reistic” consciousness, based on observing things in all their details, in their unique manifestation; a reistic point of view meant not only a new awareness of things but an intensified self-reflection about working and living with other people, and toward the environment in all its complexity.

The foundation of OHO's art was therefore its relational aspect, its group work. This remains the case even in each of the distinct periods that its work took, and in particular between the approach of the art historian Tomaž Brejc and that of

Marko Pogačnik, the leading OHO artist. For Brejc, for example, OHO's initial period focused on reism, before moving closer to Arte Povera, land art, body art, process art, conceptual art, and the like, resolving with a period he classifies as transcendental conceptualism. Pogačnik, by contrast, periodizes the group's activity by the structure of its collective formation: initially a widespread movement, it then became a group consisting of four permanent members (including an occasional fifth), before finally becoming the Šempas commune. Following Pogačnik's periodization, each phase can be identified as occurring from 1965 to 1968, early 1969 to 1971, and 1971 to 1979.<sup>5</sup>

5 On the different methods of periodization, see Igor Zabel, "A Short History of OHO" (2005), in Igor Španjol, ed., *OHO: Retrospektiva / Eine Retrospektive / A Retrospective*, 2nd enlarged ed. (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2007).

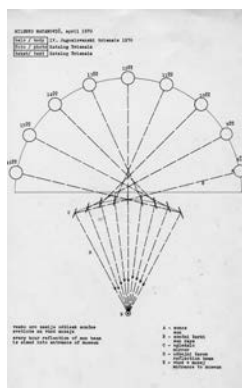


OHO Group and Marko Pogačnik, *Family of Fire, Air and Water: Water–Air Static*, 1969. Gelatin silver print, 14 × 8.9 cm. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

The first period, which we might call the period of the OHO movement, functioned as an informal network centered on Marko Pogačnik and I. G. Plamen. The name OHO served as a conceptual label for members' various activities, which included visual and concrete poetry, visual art or "articles" (small objects), films, happenings, and OHO Editions, the group's publishing arm.

The question "how do we work?" became more central in the conceptual art that OHO began to produce in 1969, leading it to develop approaches that challenged the art system, and the conditions under which OHO worked, in various ways. Pogačnik conceived the idea for a new kind of gallery, which he called a *Sintgalerija* (Synth Gallery), deriving its title from the synthesis of art and life. This was a mobile gallery construction that could be set up in any public space, such as a marketplace, wherein the artists would sell things at minimal cost, without seeking to make

a profit. Pogačnik sold artifacts such as plaster casts of everyday objects like jugs. The group also sold matchboxes, each with a different drawing pasted on it, at whatever price they had paid for the original matchboxes. They also sold book editions in bookstores and had hopes (unrealized) to sell “visual photographs” in record shops.



OHO Group and Milenko Matanovič, *Project*, 1970. Gelatin silver print, 14 × 8.9 cm Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

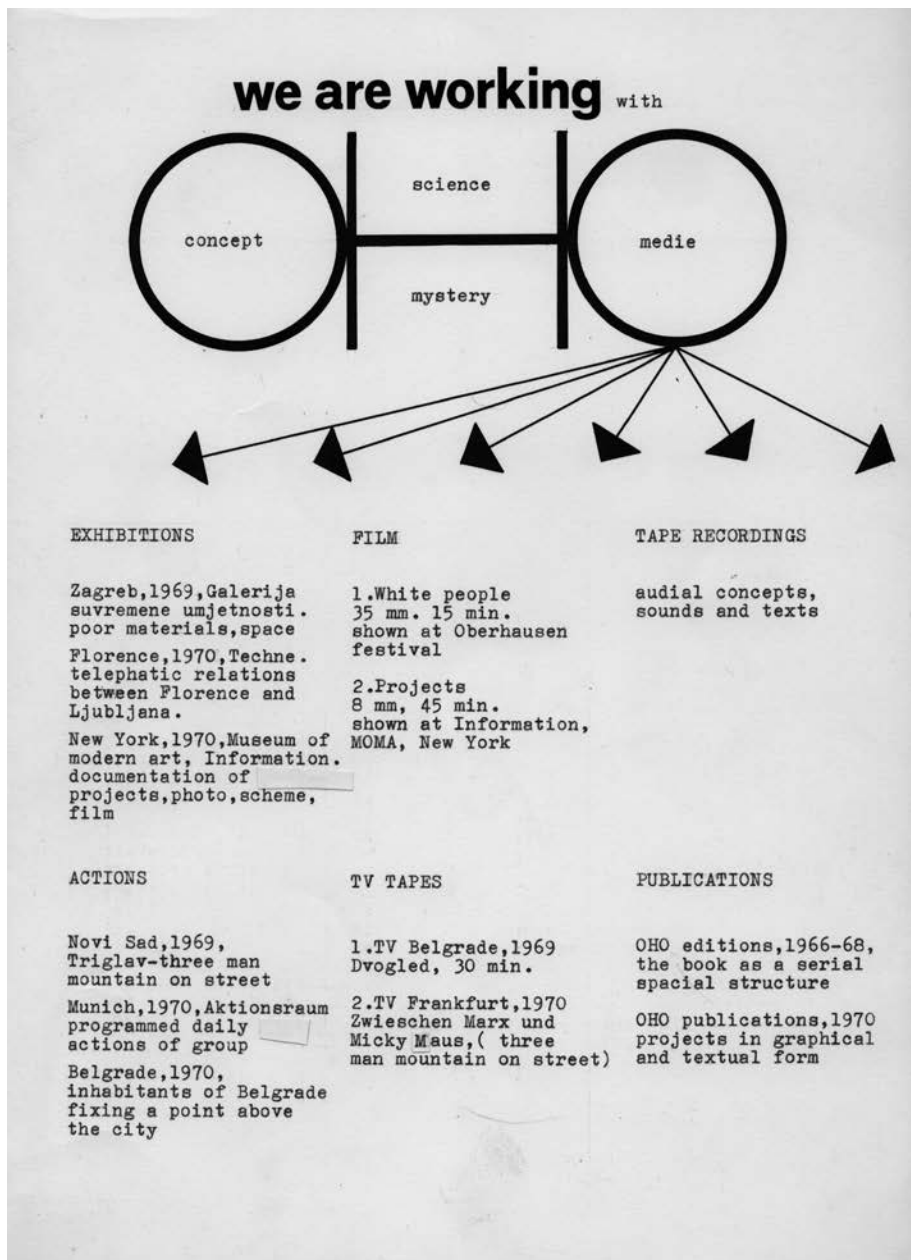
This was the phase that Brejč’s periodization denotes as transcendental conceptualism, which signals the inclusion of an esoteric or mystical dimension to help people connect between micro- and macrocosm. The interpersonal relationships between the four members of the group—Milenko Matanovič, David Nez, Pogačnik, and Andraž Šalamun—became increasingly important, as did their relationship to nature, society, and the cosmos. Then, in 1970, OHO began devoting increasing amounts of time to what they called “schooling”—events in outdoor settings intended to enable participants to achieve greater consciousness of interpersonal relationships. These involved enacting esoteric rituals like meditation or telepathy, close observation of the environment, the consumption of food, breathing, walking, and so on—all with the goal of strengthening the relationships between people and discovering patterns of behavior. These patterns were then presented visually, in the form of geometric shapes.



Walter De Maria, *High Energy Bar no. 60*, 1966. Installation view, *Sites of Sustainability: Pavilions, Manifestos, and Crypts*, Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM), Ljubljana, 2018

OHO had a moment of international renown in 1970, with their participation in the exhibition *Information*, organized by Kynaston McShine at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition opened in June; in August, the American artist Walter De Maria visited them, joined a few of their “schooling sessions,” and offered advice about





OHO Group, *We are the Group OHO*, 1970. Typscript on paper, 29.5 x 21 cm. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

entering the Western art system. With one foot on the threshold of an international career, OHO decided instead to remain true to their quest for an alternate path and severed themselves once and for all from the art system and commercial art market. The catalyst was their project at the Aktionsraum in Munich later that same year, which consisted of the daily, rhythmic alternation of processing and analyzing their own work. In the daytime they would work, and in the evening they would present the results of the day's work. They documented the project on A4 sheets of paper kept in a folder, through which OHO presented themselves like a corporation, using organizational charts and diagrams. The first sheet included the text, "We are the Group OHO" and listed their four names; the second explained the origin of their name, an amalgam of the Slovene words for eye (*oko*) and ear (*ubo*). The third offered, "We are working with," and listing the various fields and mediums of OHO's work. The fourth, aimed at gallerists, offered two proposals for collaboration.

After this presentation, OHO decided to abandon both art and ordinary life, instead devoting themselves to the search for a new model of living. In 1971, they moved with their families to the village of Šempas in the Karst region of Yugoslavia (contemporary Slovenia); there they founded a commune. Their unique work and life in the commune embodied the OHO principle of reism, emphasizing the organic connection between people, things, and their environment. The 1978 drawing *The Concept of Planetary Work* portrayed the commune as an active prism through which the creative activities of the members were transferred to the planetary realm.



IRWIN, *Retroavantgarde*, 2000. Installation view, *Irwin Live*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2000

## THE RETRO-AVANT-GARDE

The practices of Gorgona and OHO were not, as mentioned earlier, consciously modelled on the utopianism of the historical Russian avant-garde movements but, rather, looked more toward their contemporary avant-garde movements in the West. The Yugoslav avant-garde groups of the 1980s, however, did link themselves to the Russian “great experiment.” Two books had a powerful impact on this development. In 1978, a Serbian translation of Camilla Gray’s landmark *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922*, first published in English in 1962;<sup>6</sup> even more influential was a Serbian translation of texts by and about Kazimir

6 Camilla Gray, *Ruski umetnički eksperiment 1863–1922* (Beograd: Izdavački zavod Jugoslavija, 1978).

7 Slobodan Mijušković,  
ed., *Kazimir Maljevič:  
Supretamizam-Bespredmetnost*  
[Kazimir Malevich:  
Suprematism; Objectlessness]  
(Beograd: Studentski  
izdavački centar UK SSO,  
1980).

Malevich, published in 1980, titled *Suprematism; Objectlessness*.<sup>7</sup> The conceptualists of the 1960s and '70s had pursued a holistic relationship to nature, society, and the cosmos; the artists of the 1980s, by contrast, devoted themselves more seriously to the study of society and its constructs. Although Gorgona and OHO were also interested in the concrete conditions of their work, the artists I will now discuss dedicated themselves much more resolutely to researching and documenting the construction of history, the art system, and their own place in art history.

At the beginning of the 1980s—after the death of Josip Broz Tito (the leader of the partisan resistance struggle during World War II and lifelong president of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia)—the groundwork was laid for democratic change, but also for the disintegration of Yugoslavia itself, which was followed by nationalist wars in the 1990s. Faith in great ideologies was waning. There was a greater sense of distance toward one's own identity; new forms of social behavior manifested, and individuals began to inhabit a broader variety of roles.

The cosmologies of the hippies were felt to be completely useless. The 1980s generation of artists took a critical attitude toward their counterparts from the 1960s and '70s, making clear that their dreams of functioning outside the art system (or any other system) were naive. The answer to the question of collective work became more complicated, too. Work was no longer related only to the question of collaborative practice and solidarity among artists, but to their impact on local and international systems of art

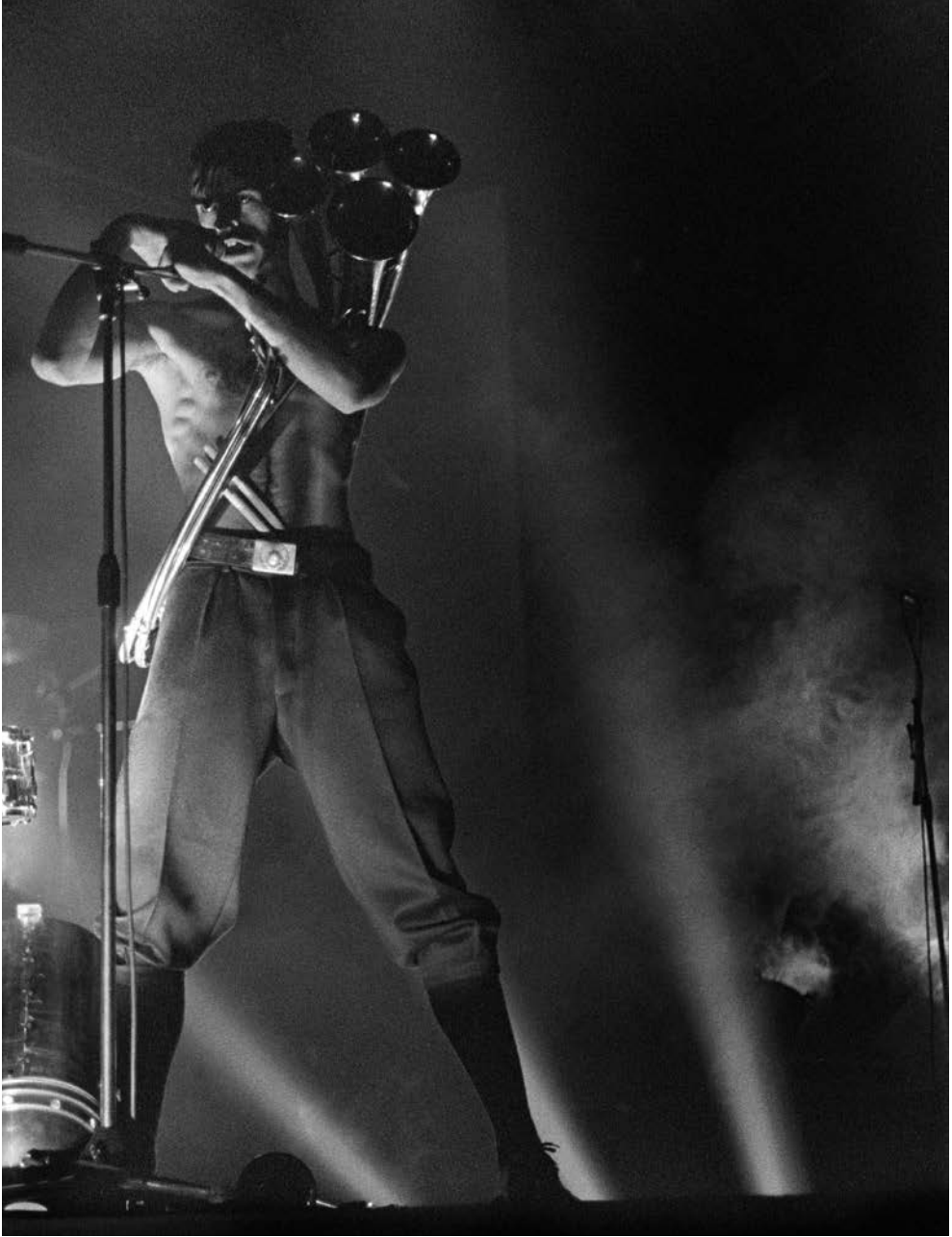
and culture. Local histories became their tools of operation, and they became newly interested in the Eastern European avant-gardes, especially those with ties to the revolutionary movements of the early twentieth century. There appeared new paradigms for the critical reception of the historical avant-garde, and its conception of utopia.<sup>8</sup>

8 Inke Arns, *Avantgarda v vzvratnem ogledalu* [The avant-garde in the rearview mirror], trans. Mojca Dobnikar, Maska Transformacije 21 (Ljubljana: Maska, 2006). Originally presented as *Die Avantgarde im Rückspiegel* (PhD diss., Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2004).

Like many postmodernists in the international context, these artists quoted from past artistic traditions. But where other postmodernists often quoted without taking a clear stand on their appropriations, Yugoslav artists took a distinct and specific approach, reviving the constructive aspirations of the Russian avant-garde. Mladen Stilinović combined quotations from Suprematism, Constructivism, and socialist realism; the Slovene group IRWIN blended socialist-realist motifs with Malevich's infamous black square; the multimedia group Laibach's insignia recalled Malevich's cross; The Sisters of Scipio Nasica Theater reconstructed Vladimir Tatlin's model for the *Monument to the Third International* in their performance *A Baptism under Triglav*; an artist who adopted the name Kazimir Malevich re-presented Malevich's 1916 *The Last Futurist Exhibition* in Belgrade (1985) and Ljubljana (1986). These borrowings and juxtapositions combined the utopian avant-garde with local symbols, seeing art through the lens of eclecticism as a vital crossroads of different cultures and traditions. Moreover, they embraced a semiotic reading of images, pointing out how, ultimately, loaded images were empty signifiers that could be "filled" with content, ideological or otherwise, and exposing the manipulations of symbols for political ends. They repeated history to reshape it for themselves.

following pages:  
Laibach, *Sympathy for the Devil*. Performance at Tivoli Hall, Ljubljana, 1989





In 1996 IRWIN created a “family genealogy” of all this production called *Retroavantgarda* (the retro-avant-garde). This arose from their sense of the need to define a local tradition of (primarily) Yugoslav avant-garde art in the twentieth century. The selection of artists they presented emphasized eclecticism and deconstructed nationalist authenticity. The language of IRWIN—and more generally, Neue Slowenische Kunst, or NSK, the umbrella collective to which IRWIN, Laibach, and The Sisters of Scipio Nasica Theater belong—is made up of quotations, repetitions, and copies from existing discourses. But it goes beyond mere questioning of authenticity and originality. Like a trauma, we see repeated here the practice of eclecticism—a feature typical of the art of small nations—as well as the assimilation of the artistic avant-gardes by totalitarian systems in the twentieth century.

The aim of IRWIN’s project was to chart an Eastern European modernism of which the Yugoslav retro-avant-garde would be an intrinsic part. Along with their own work, the installation incorporated works by artists the group saw as “relatives,” including the Zenitism movement of the 1920s, Dimitrije Bašičević (known as Mangelos), Braco Dimitrijević, Laibach Kunst, Kazimir Malevich (the 1980s Belgrade version), and Mladen Stilinović. Typical of these artists was the fact that they appropriated works from the historical avant-garde, thereby making visible a shared artistic tradition that previously had been excluded from canonical history. Moreover, as IRWIN acknowledged, the project had a double role, both as an independent artwork and as a pragmatic tool for self-positioning. In



contemporary art, IRWIN found a tool useful for constructing a new narrative.

The question of collective labor was vitally important to IRWIN and the other groups in NSK, no less than Gorgona or OHO. It was the subject of manifestos and diagrams that clarified their working relations, and that described the individual groups. Furthermore, IRWIN has devoted quite a few projects to depicting the workings of the art system and its essential instrument, the history of art. The most ambitious of these projects is *East Art Map*, a multimedia archival and art historical project involving many art historians from Eastern Europe.

It is *Retroavantgarda*, however, that best illustrates the central importance of self-historicization. To better grasp their own work, IRWIN began searching for local historical and interpretive contexts; so too does the project become a vital tool for understanding the effects art can have on the world. This is what connects IRWIN and other retro-avant-garde artists to the earlier groups I have discussed. However, it is interesting, and perhaps ironic, that neither Gorgona nor OHO appear on IRWIN's family tree. The reason for this exclusion may be that neither of the earlier groups drew directly on the eclecticism of their marginalized cultures, something that IRWIN's genealogy aimed to bring to light, although we should note that IRWIN did include OHO among the key art concepts in the lineage of that local tradition they consider their own. For example, we could point to IRWIN's *Svoji k svojim* (Like to like, 1985–2004), in which they repeated actions first performed by OHO between 1968

and 1970. In the words of IRWIN, by doing so they addressed the “formal radicalism of the recent avant-garde.”

A first repetition involved IRWIN producing oil paintings of performances that OHO had done in nature, which had been dedicated to the four elements; IRWIN then damaged the paintings by those selfsame elements (fire, water, earth, and air). It is important to realize that by the 1980s, OHO had been relegated to the farthest margins of the national art history, which favored modernism. By renouncing the object-based nature of art, OHO had provoked their absence from the main narrative of national art history; this in turn provoked IRWIN to conceptualize this absence. Reflecting on IRWIN’s 1980s repetitions, OHO member Pogačnik wrote, “If in 1969 I made the installation *Water–Air, static* on the Sava River to make it possible for art to enter its directness, then the painting of this installation is the extreme variabilization of this work, which again falls within the overall concept of OHO.”

IRWIN engaged these OHO performances again in 2004, this time for a photo session with Tomaž Gregorič, one of Slovenia’s most accomplished photographers. The photographs of the repeat performances, shot in the style of Düsseldorf-school photographer Thomas Ruff, were then framed by IRWIN as a genuine art object ready to circulate in the art market. This was intended to contrast with the relatively poor documentation that exists for the original OHO performances. IRWIN thus drew attention to the fact that OHO was a group that, had it occurred on the “right” side of the Iron Curtain, may well have enjoyed

commercial success. IRWIN's gesture amounts to a critique both of the local art system, which failed to support this work, and, cutting both ways, the ignorance of the Western art establishment. Let me summarize. I have attempted here to outline a narrative of the Yugoslav avant-gardes, which—like all the avant-garde movements of Eastern Europe—shared a strong desire to influence reality at a micro-political, or even a macro-political, level. As I have made clear, this was part of a long continuum that connects them at least back to the post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde—if not to Cubism and Futurism before them, which, as Malevich said, announced the revolution of 1917 *avant la lettre*. So, too, had Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet commissar for education, linked the October Revolution to the aesthetic precedent of the Futurists.

That story ended tragically: revolutionary and post-revolutionary art was soon replaced by socialist realism, and members of the Russian avant-gardes came to suffer from marginalization, exile, and worse. Despite the awful end of the Russian experiment, these artists' involvement in the political life of the young nation, however brief, nevertheless had a long-term impact on Eastern European art and artists. Here it is important to say that in Yugoslavia we had our own revolutionary art during World War II, when artists and cultural workers were deeply involved in the communist revolution and People's Liberation Front; many of them later built modernist partisan monuments.

While the postwar avant-garde collectives were more into micro-politics, the groups of the 1980s, NSK especially, revived the desire for culture

to have a more direct impact on politics. How else can we understand their efforts at self-historicization? They aimed to influence the national historical narrative. Moreover, with different collectives working under a single organizational umbrella, they structured themselves like a state organ or agency. This agency had some real political effects in the region. In 1992, they established the NSK State in Time, and issued passports, which helped some Bosnian people to cross borders during the national conflict that began in April of that year. Indeed, we could say that during the postwar period, these groups of different generations created among themselves a collective habitus, a kind of parallel cultural infrastructure, that helped them operate in otherwise difficult conditions: without a developed art market, comprehensive histories, or well-functioning institutions.

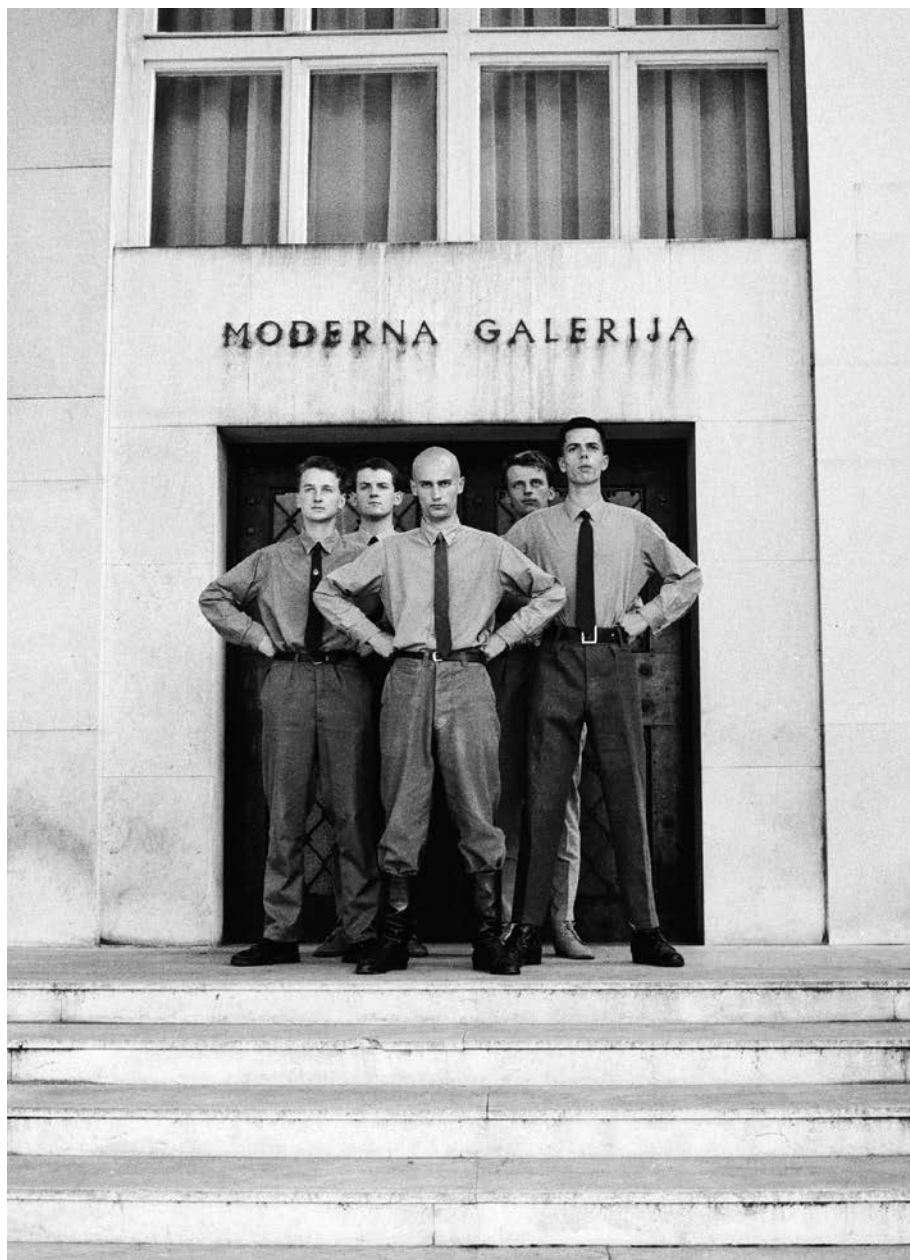
# How NSK Made Present the Absence of History

## I

### INTRODUCTION

The story of the West's reception of the Russian avant-gardes is by now familiar. It starts with the Soviet travels of the young art historian Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in the late 1920s; visiting Moscow and Leningrad, he saw works by Russian cubists, Futurists, and Suprematists. Traveling in Germany several years later, Barr—who was now the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York—was shown paintings left over from Kazimir Malevich's 1927 exhibition in Berlin. Keen to acquire them, but worried Nazis would block their export, Barr smuggled them back to New York wrapped in his umbrella. And so these works entered history.

We know rather less, however, about the reception of artists like Malevich and his peers in the East. Indeed, the historical avant-garde movements of Eastern Europe, including those of Russia and Yugoslavia, were largely excluded from the dominant art histories of the nations in which they had developed. Thus, artists from these nations did not refer to these earlier movements



Laibach in front of the Moderna galerija, 1984. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

in their work, or at least not until recent times. In fact, one can hardly discuss the “reception” of Russian avant-gardes in the East at all, except as a structuring absence.

However, this essay is being written in the context of a museum retrospective in Moscow of Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), a Slovene art movement active from the 1980s until the present, that was deeply inspired by the Russian avant-gardes of the 1910s and '20s. (*NSK from Kapital to Capital*, was held at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, from September 30 to December 9, 2016.) It is the goal of this essay, therefore, to explore this inheritance: how NSK made present the very absence of the Russian avant-gardes.

It is a supreme irony that the avant-garde movements that emerged in the Eastern Bloc after World War II learned about their own prewar traditions mostly through Western interpretations—in particular, through the interpretations of Russian avant-garde art advanced both by the Museum of Modern Art and by mid-century modernist critics such as Clement Greenberg, who understood the turn toward abstraction in terms of formal concerns. In these incomplete parsings, the connection of art with everyday life or with politics was purposefully discarded or obfuscated.

What politics, and what everyday life, are we talking about here? The art made by the avant-garde was the art of a revolutionary moment, and, indeed, can be organized into pre- and post-revolutionary phases: before the

October Revolution of 1917, it was an art of intense utopian energies; after the revolution, Russian artists were directly involved in the construction of a new society. Increasingly, over the course of the 1920s, this meant they were involved in educational processes, design, industry, and propaganda. Although the post-revolutionary period has been a source of immense inspiration for socially engaged artists of later generations—this was especially true for NSK in the 1980s, the last decade of socialism in Yugoslavia—I am more interested in underscoring the impact of the earlier utopian moment on the work of NSK.

Like the Russian avant-gardes, NSK views art as a space in which utopian ideas become possible. That is the case I seek to make here. The belief that art can transcend existing conditions is what connects art of the past with the present and the future. And, moreover, I wish to propose that artists in Eastern Europe like NSK were best positioned to understand this belief in the power of art not only to imagine but to affect what is absent—a belief that appears in the most concentrated form in that most famous example of avant-gardist ambition, Malevich's *Black Square* (1916).

Artists of NSK's generation did not become fully acquainted with the Russian avant-garde (or earlier Yugoslav avant-gardes) until the late 1970s and '80s. Nevertheless, it is important to recall, when speaking about Yugoslavian art, that Yugoslavia was a socialist republic, and therefore incorporated in its very fabric many utopian ideas—even if they appeared



in practice in more degraded form. Although the postwar avant-gardes in Yugoslavia never criticized directly the dysfunctional aspects of this “utopia,” they nevertheless offered a kind of social corrective in their practices. This corrective quality manifested both in their collective work and in their self-organization, which strove to present more authentic forms of collectivism and solidarity, as well as social behavior not motivated by profit.

NSK deconstructed various national traumas in Yugoslavia, such as the unrealized emancipatory potential of Communism, or the absence of an original national culture and developed art system.<sup>1</sup> To these we might add the absence of a history that included the earlier avant-gardes. NSK’s relationship to this absence is not corrective; they do not simply or neatly reincorporate earlier efforts in the story of twentieth century art. Rather, they *present the absence* of this emancipatory art. It will be the task of this essay to explain just what that means, and to point out how such a gesture may lead not to a happily restored lineage but, rather, to alternative methods of cultural production.

1 This list is not comprehensive; early NSK also referred to the defeat of the anti-imperialist People’s Liberation Front during World War II and the basic lack of workers’ rights, among other things.

Fully grasping the efforts of NSK and its constituent groups will require a bit of historical context. Ergo, before turning to examples drawn from NSK, I will first take a stroll through the different generations of Yugoslavian avant-garde artists, noting those whose works played a role in the conception of alternative models of cultural production, and on whose precedent NSK built.

II  
 AVANT-GARDES IN YUGOSLAVIA

Before World War II, there was a lively interaction between Yugoslavian avant-garde artists and their European and Russian counterparts. In the 1920s, for example, the Serbian artist Ljubomir Micić saw in the October Revolution and the new Soviet art an “explosion of Barbarism,” imagined positively as the manifestation of an elemental primitivism and a Slavic and Asian resistance to the West. Micić led the Yugoslavian avant-garde group *Zenit*, and edited their eponymous newspaper, which devoted a special issue to the Soviet avant-garde; Russian artists Ilya Ehrenburg and El Lissitzky contributed the article “The New Russian Art.” *Zenit* was banned by Yugoslav authorities in 1926, leading Micić to Paris where he mingled with expatriate Russian artists. *Zenit* also connected with groups closer to home, such as the editors of the avant-garde Slovene magazine *Tank*, founded in Ljubljana in 1927: the theater director Ferdo Delak, the painter Avgust Černigoj, and the poet Srečko Kosovel, all of whom NSK would later list as part of its “family tree.”



Cover of *Zenit*, no 17/18 (1922), edited by Ilja Ehrenburg and El Lissitzky

Journals like *Zenit* played a crucial role in forging international connections among artists. The German avant-garde magazine *Der Sturm* devoted a 1929 issue to the Slovenian avant-garde titled “Junge Slowenische Kunst” (Young Slovenian art). Such international conversations were an important counterweight to local or national situations that the artists understood as stifling or backward; they fostered new forms of cultural production among an international cohort of artists.

After World War II and following the break in relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, a new generation of avant-garde artists appeared. This included the group EXAT 51 (the name was short for “Eksperimentalni atelje,” or Experimental atelier; 51 referred to the year the group was formally established). Based in Zagreb, EXAT 51 (per some experts, at least) was unaware of the Russian avant-garde. Whether this is strictly true—it seems somewhat dubious—they certainly received Russian ideas in indirect form, through the Bauhaus, Piet Mondrian, and De Stijl. In their manifestos, EXAT 51 advocated for a synthesis of the arts and for blurring the boundaries between fine and applied art; abstraction, with its ability to migrate among art, design, and industry, was ideal for them. EXAT 51 presented abstraction as a new art for a new socialist society. Although the “apolitical” nature of abstraction would later allow its political instrumentalization in Yugoslavia, in the 1950s it still carried a revolutionary charge.<sup>2</sup>

2 The activities of the EXAT 51 group can be connected to the later movement known as New Tendencies, which was organized around five international exhibitions in Zagreb between 1961 and 1973. New Tendencies focused on connecting visual language with new technologies and new media and, like EXAT 51, pursued abstraction, which can also be understood as a reaction to the emphasis on figuration in the social realist painting prevalent at the time.

Later in the 1950s, also in Zagreb, the proto-conceptual group Gorgona appeared. Although they too made no reference to historical avant-gardes, we know that at least one member, Julije Knifer, studied with the Croatian painter Đuro Tiljak, himself a student of the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky. Gorgona (which is discussed elsewhere in this volume) ran a small gallery and published an “anti-magazine,” each issue of which was made by a different artist. In this way, Gorgona developed parallel forms of cultural production, again along international lines (so far as was possible for them at the time). The Slovene group OHO (also discussed at more length in other essays in this volume) was equally interested in

building alternative networks and forms of cultural production. Based on their philosophy of reism, they developed not only new forms of art practice in tune with artistic trends of the late 1960s but also alternate economies, new forms of public display, and distinctive forms of communal living.

### III POSSIBLE UTOPIAS

Working collectively was a necessity for avant-garde artists; avant-garde practices were extremely marginal during those decades in Yugoslavia. Official art centers ignored these artists, and there was no art market to provide an alternate path for recognition. Successive generations of Yugoslav artists therefore had little choice but to create a parallel cultural infrastructure through which they could organize exhibitions of their work, develop local and international networks, and build a genealogy and pattern of legitimation. By working collectively, artists overcame the deficiencies of their immediate working conditions, and, at the same time, transformed their working methods into the subject of their art.

This was not a matter of criticizing the institutions of their time, as it might have been among Western artists. Yugoslav artists were less interested in challenging existing institutions than in setting up alternate systems altogether—a tendency we should recognize as part of their ambivalent heritage as artists formed in a socialist country. However degraded, however precarious, the utopian spirit was part of the fabric of life. At the same time, the biggest utopian idea of them all, communism, had been forestalled.

Anyone part of Yugoslav society could compare the communist ideal with its troubled realization; constant references to communal ideals in official communications allowed everyone to contemplate how the reality fell short. By the early 1980s, Yugoslav socialism had largely descended into farce. People only pretended to believe in it. By the end of the decade, the economy was in ruins, the country was in a constitutional crisis, and no one believed in utopia any more.

This period was also when, as if by design, the first truly detailed information about prewar avant-garde movements began to appear. In 1978, a Serbian translation of Camilla Gray's *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922* (first published in English in 1962) was released; in 1980, a collection of texts by or about Malevich was published. Yugoslav artists sifted through these books with intensity, not just to learn about the art but also to uncover their relationship to it. Traces of evidence were scant: four Serbo-Croatian texts in scholarly journals in the 1950s or '60s, one or two articles in Slovene. In 1978, a retrospective of the Slovene constructivist Avgust Černigoj, who had studied at the Bauhaus, was held at the municipal museum of the small town of Idrija in Slovenia. In 1983, an exhibition in Belgrade presented works from the estate of Ljubomir Micić; the Zenit movement was now on the map.

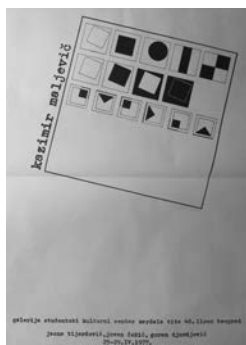
These books and exhibitions served to remind us about utopia, even as the utopia we lived in was disintegrating. Nevertheless, these movements remained well outside the mainstream for a while longer. At the same time, a new generation of



Audience attending lecture presented during *With Regard to Certain Works by Kazimir Malevich*, exhibition and lectures, organized by Goran Đorđević, Jasna Tijardović, and Jovan Čekić, SKUC Gallery, Belgrade, 1977

artists began to integrate this secret knowledge into their work. These artists, who included Goran Đorđević, Mladen Stilinović, and Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), would come to be known as the Yugoslav retro-avant-garde (the term is an NSK coinage). Each in their own way copied, quoted, and appropriated works from avant-garde traditions. They did so partly as an act of self-historicization as well as out of a need to find some context for themselves and their work. There was nobody else to do it.

This context will help explain why Đorđević began, in the late 1970s, to use Malevich's motifs in his paintings. In 1977, he and two other artists (Jasna Tijardović and Jovan Čekić) had gone so far as to produce an exhibition and publication titled *With Regard to Certain Works by Kazimir Malevich* at the gallery of the Student Cultural Centre (SKC) in Belgrade. Đorđević designed the cover of the publication, exhibited a few works that were variations on Malevich paintings, and gave a lecture in which he presented a formal analysis of Malevich's work—in a diagram on a blackboard—which was published in the Belgrade newspaper *Umetnost* (Art). In 1979, Đorđević included a copy of a Malevich black square in a series called *A Short History of Art*; the work was shown at SKC in 1980. Another copy was included in his triptych *One and Three Paintings* (along with the Malevich copy were copies of works by Roy Lichtenstein and, as the title implies, Joseph Kosuth). That work was exhibited in Berlin at the Museum für (Sub)Kultur in October 1980.



Poster for the exhibition *With Regard to Certain Works by Kazimir Malevich*

More copies followed; then, a re-presentation of Malevich's 1915 exhibition in Petrograd, *The Last Exhibition of Futurist Paintings 0.10*, was exhibited in a private apartment in Belgrade in 1985. Not long afterward, in September 1986, Kazimir Malevich, Belgrade, described the exhibition as follows:

One part of the exhibition was an exact replica of the Petrograd installation. But this time, no papers with titles on the walls, no numbers, no chair. Another part of the exhibition presented some of my recent neo-Suprematist works: Suprematist icons on ancient

reliefs and sculptures. Suprematist icons in needlepoint. I think you can get a better impression from the picture. I know that for most of you this letter will come as a great surprise since it is generally believed that I died in 1935! I know ... Suetin's coffin ... the great burial procession along the streets of Leningrad ... the Black Square on the grave. ... Yes, there are many people thinking that I died. But, did I?<sup>3</sup>

3 Kazimir Malevich, Belgrade, "A Letter from Kazimir Malevich," *Arteast 2000+ Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe; A Selection of Works for the International and National Collections of Moderna galerija Ljubljana* (Bolzano and Vienna: Folio, 2001), 136–37; first published in *Art in America*, September 1986.

Dorđević was not the only one involved in such obsessive relations. In 1984, Stilinović curated the exhibition *Toward the Russian Avant-Garde* at the PM Gallery in Zagreb, in which he included not only his own works but also those of other Croatian artists who, in one way or another, referenced the Russian avant-garde. Stilinović was by this time working on a long-term series he called *Exploitation of the Dead*, a title that pointed to the history of twentieth-century art. The title refers primarily to his exploitation of "dead" painting styles: Suprematism, socialist realism, and geometric abstraction. For Stilinović, these styles no longer communicated anything; they had lost their meaning. Stilinović furthermore argued that religion, ideology, and even art, from the 1970s on, exploited dead religions, ideologies, and painting styles in irresponsible and aggressive ways. But, unlike these other exploiters, Stilinović was not trying to bring anything back to life—a gesture he described as a "brutal act." He was merely re-painting their deadness.<sup>4</sup>

4 Mladen Stilinović, in Branka Stipančić, ed., *Mladen Stilinović: Nula iz Vladanja [Zero for Conduct]* (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 2013), 144.



IV  
 AVANT-GARDES IN THE 1980S

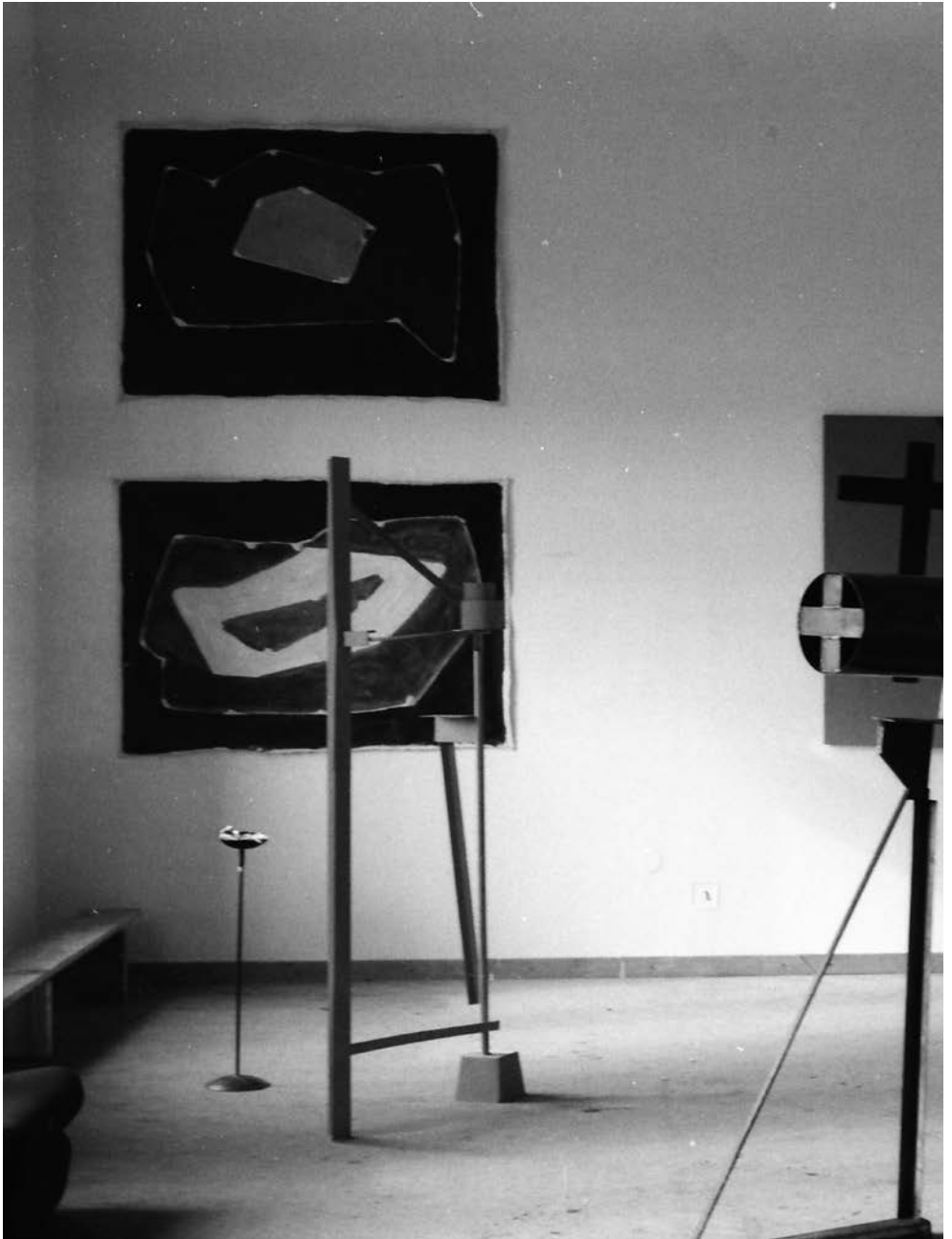
With *Exploitation of the Dead*, the retro-avant-garde finds itself rather far from the utopian spirit I was talking about earlier. Nevertheless, I want to distinguish such practices from international art trends they may superficially resemble, like 1980s appropriation art, in which the “play of signs” signals a sort of empty exchange of images. The retro method allowed a kind of research into the relationship between art and ideology specific to their social context—a specificity they share with other artists in Eastern Europe and Russia.

This comparison is not based on some shared Slavic identity among the various countries but rather on shared material conditions of production—typically, in cases where the conditions changed, the subject of the art has changed too. There are obviously major differences between various Eastern European countries—however, most share the broad outlines of an interrupted history: the victory of socialism and its later defeat.<sup>5</sup>

5 I discuss the concept of interrupted histories extensively elsewhere in this volume, particularly in the essay “Interrupted Histories.”

6 Boris Groys, *Teorija sodobne umetnosti: Izbrani eseji* [Theories of contemporary art: selected essays] (Ljubljana: Koda, Študentska založba, Knjižna zbirka Koda, 2002), 206.

When Boris Groys writes about Moscow conceptualism and Sots art,<sup>6</sup> for example, he finds in them distinctive utopian features not unlike those in Yugoslav art of the same period. Among them, both Russian and Yugoslav artists aimed to expose the effects of selective histories. Groys reads the installations of the Russian artist Ilya Kabakov in this way, as museum exhibitions in which certain elements are illuminated while others are left in darkness. For Groys, these works are allegories of history’s omissions: boundaries





previous pages: Mladen Stilinović, installation view, *Toward the Russian Avant-Garde*, PM Gallery, Zagreb, 1984

are obscured, and what was yesterday exposed to the light of history was today lost in oblivion, and vice versa.

Equally, Yugoslav and Russian artists both compensated for the absence of cultural institutions by constructing artificial comparative contexts in the frame of their art. Groys describes how Russian artists created autonomous and extra-institutional spaces—here, too, we find consonances with the Yugoslav groups—while at the same time, he points to the possibility that these efforts will themselves one day be pushed into the background of history. This had happened with the Russian avant-gardes of the early twentieth century; for decades, their utopian efforts to transform life were relegated to the background, even as their radical formalism was brought to the fore.

Historical narratives can include or exclude; they can represent or repress. The utopian dimension of the Yugoslav retro-avant-garde is often overlooked even now. Although NSK's constituent groups were, in the 1980s, similarly operating in the context of interrupted histories, there are differences, too. There are no fictive contexts in their art, no narratives to connect the heterogeneous material of their works. What we find instead is a pastiche: copies and quotations from a variety of artistic styles and traditions.

Such juxtapositions and montage elements had a performative function; they aimed to impact reality through shock and provocation. Consider, for example, the posters produced by Laibach Kunst, which, along with Laibach's concerts,

drew motifs from Nazi iconography—largely this material was taken from the German propaganda magazine *Signal*, which was published in the languages of German allies and of Nazi-occupied countries during World War II. For Laibach, employing this taboo imagery allowed them to make visible the totalitarian impulses within socialist society. At the same time, Laibach’s posters harked back to artists who were victims or staunch opponents of the Nazi regime: Expressionists, Dadaists, and the powerful anti-fascist photomonteur John Heartfield.

One of Laibach’s early posters gives evidence of this double-edged referencing of the past. Featuring a black cross and the group’s name, it marked their first public action, which took place in 1980 in their home town, the small mining community of Trbovlje. For viewers familiar with the history of the avant-garde, the cross may seem to refer to Malevich, who had painted a similar abstract shape in the early 1920s. It made quite a different impression on the inhabitants of Trbovlje. Combined with their German name, a language which had last been used during the Nazi occupation during World War II, and the likeness to the *balkenkreuz* (black cross) used on Nazi warplanes, the poster seemed to attack the legacy of the Slovene anti-fascist resistance and to incite intolerance toward Christians (who might regard their use of the cross as sacrilege) and communist partisans. Shocked local authorities moved to ban the posters and cancel the show.

Yet a black cross is just an abstract symbol, after all, which can be said to carry this or that “content,” this or that “association,” while



New Collectivism, design concept for Youth Day poster, 1987

7 I describe the “poster affair” in greater length in “Neues Slowenisches Museum: An Essay on Institutional Critique and the Production of Institution,” special issue, *Mythmaking Eastern Europe: Art in Response*, ed. Mateusz Kapustka, trans. Rawley Grau, *kunsttexte.de-E-Journal für Kunst- und Bildgeschichte* 4 (2014), <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/8215/badovinac.pdf>.

8 Slavoj Žižek, “A Letter from Afar,” in *NSK from Kapital to Capital: Neue Slowenische Kunst—An Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac, Eda Čufer, and Anthony Gardner (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 175.

9 In the context of its original publication, this passage included further analysis of the concept of absence from a theoretical and Lacanian perspective.

nevertheless resolutely and silently remaining what it is—an abstraction. In this case, the range of associations was so wide that it could encompass Nazis and Soviets, enemies and friends, faith and disbelief. The mutual dissonance among these incompatible associations leaves the viewer with something that resists investigation—while becoming itself a medium of investigation, less something to be seen and grasped than an active influence disturbing and transforming the consciousness of those who encounter it. A black cross is an abstract symbol, yet—like the case of New Collectivism’s 1987 poster, in which the group entered an item of Nazi propaganda into a Yugoslavian poster competition with only its national symbols exchanged, and, disruptively, won the contest<sup>7</sup>—the debate over the Laibach poster tells us something about how NSK challenged viewers at the time. Drawing on his reading of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan—Lacanian theory was in vogue in Ljubljana in the 1980s—the philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that NSK provoked by extracting images and symbols from their familiar socio-symbolic contexts and presenting them back to us “stripped ... of their phantasmatic constructs ... hover[ing] before us in all their imbecility ... circling in some empty space as fragments on which our social pleasure depends.”<sup>8</sup>

Such a disruptive use of symbols does not exactly have as its goal a critique of concrete social circumstances. Rather, NSK wanted us to see something more universal: a human craving for mastery and discipline.<sup>9</sup> So, too, did they open a space for “the real,” in Lacan’s formulation, for something that cannot be depicted or verbalized



Laibach Kunst, *Black Cross*, 1980. Linocut, 68 × 50 cm. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

within the existing symbolic order. And they wished to express an image of history as the ongoing destruction of what came before. This is the aspect of NSK that I wished to emphasize in my concept for the Moscow exhibition, where the works of the individual NSK groups were organized around events that I understood as interruptions, or self-interruptions—the latter being a mechanism for sustaining the energy of their community. Even when they were addressing the past, NSK were always presenting something new—making present again what the mainstream had discarded in order to survive more easily.

But if NSK aimed to make the avant-gardist past visible *in its absence*, it was not with the intention of canonizing these historical movements, producing a new status quo. Rather, as their name suggests, NSK was devoted to the new, and conceived of their work as both a destructive force for change and a platform for multiple new beginnings. In assuming this stance, they were, in a way, approaching the attitude of figures like Malevich, who at the height of Suprematism coached a ruthless disregard of the past and an orientation toward the future. NSK's new beginnings were not to be symbols at all but actual incursions by "the real," a phrase which we should read with its period-appropriate Lacanian slant. For this reason, the exhibition presented NSK's art through a series of public actions or "initiations": concerts, exhibitions, theater productions, performances, guerrilla actions, public appeals, memoranda, statements, and interviews.



v  
NEW MYTHS

We can speak of at least two parallel ways of dealing with history in the NSK groups: the first is the deconstruction of dominant forms of history making, through the montage and juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible things; the second I call self-historicization (we will turn to the latter in section VI). The former, which I have already introduced in my reading of Laibach's 1980 poster, tends to jump from one narrative to another, and to confound notions of linear history. It must be said that the same is true of its concepts of authorship: the group even saw the police who stopped their concerts and the authorities who banned their work as participants—they had to submit to the principle of Laibach through their negative reaction to the group's noise, imagery, and so on.

The Sisters of Scipio Nasica Theater also follow the disruptive line, as it saw Slovenia's national history to be a history of interruptions. This, for instance, is the central theme of its theatrical production *A Retrogarde Event: Baptism under Triglav* (1986), which was based on a narrative poem by Slovenian Romantic poet France Prešeren. The play describes the discontinuities of history as "rebaptisms," which occur on several levels, of which the most important is one that replaces verbal language (the medium of the poem) with visual imagery; the very act of rebaptism is translated into the stylistic shifts of modern art, the revolutions and reinventions that characterize the most basic narrative of twentieth-century modernism.

The Sisters of Scipio Nasica Theater, *A Retrograde Event: Baptism under Triglav*, 1986. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana



The group viewed its own history through this lens, as a continual process of tearing down and building up. Literally, each phase of the project was renamed, rebaptized. Active from 1983 to 1987, The Sisters of Scipio Nasica Theater deconstructed national myths. Renamed the Red Pilot Cosmokinetic Theater in 1987—a name borrowed from a Slovene avant-garde magazine from the 1920s—it highlighted science and the future. In the next phase, which began in 1991, the project took an even more radical form, and called itself the Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung. It is to

this project that I wish to turn now, leaving behind the 1980s, to show how NSK's historical project took shape in a new decade.

The only permanent member to have participated in all three phases of the theater's history is Dragan Živadinov. It was Živadinov's decision to make central to the group's work the story of the Slovene scientist Herman Potočnik Noordung, who in 1928–29 published a book called *The Problem of Space Travel*, which included the first drawing of a geo-stationary satellite. Živadinov's work frequently orbits around the matter of weightlessness in avant-garde art, including abstract sculptures by Antoine Pevsner, László Moholy-Nagy, and the Slovene artist Edvard Stepančič, whose levitation construction appeared in the 1927 *Trieste Constructivist Cabinet*—a photograph of which had appeared in the avant-garde journal *Tank*.<sup>10</sup>

10 Alongside Edvard Stepančič, the other artists involved were Avgust Černigoj, Giorgio Carmelich, and Josip Vlah.

These were combined with other references to the avant-garde, including theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold's system of actor training, called biomechanics, and *zaum*, the universal language intended to replace national languages, invented by Russian futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov along with fellow poet Aleksei Kruchenykh. These concerns came to a head in the 1991 Noordung production *Kapital*, based on the 1913 Russian Futurist opera called *Victory Over the Sun*, which had a libretto written in *zaum* and a set design by Kazimir Malevich, which was where the artist first used the motif of the black square.

The 1991 work is something of an enigma, insofar as it seeks to free itself from the weight of the past and turn toward the future, using the

model of a past work that had attempted the same feat. Notwithstanding this paradox, the production dwelt on the liberation from gravity as a complex figure of drifting free from history, using a wide range of forms. There was the space in which the production took place: a rotating cube within a circle, alluding to a spaceship, a sort of scientific-artistic machine to produce perpetual motion. Noordung's satellite drawings were reproduced on the walls, as were references to Malevich's set design: black, white, and gray crosses, reconfiguring themselves to emulate a non-gravitational effect. This ever-changing space, shared by both actor and spectators, was constantly reconfiguring itself in the viewers' gaze.

Cosmokinetic Cabinet  
Noordung, *Drama Observatory*  
*Kapital*, 1991. Still from  
video of a performance at  
Kampnagel, Hamburg, 1994



At the five hour press conference for *Kapital*, Živadinov announced his plan for future repetitions of the Noordung concept. The first, a theater piece called *Noordung 1995–2045*, was staged in 1995. Later repetitions were to take place every decade after until 2045. Any performer who died in this fifty-year period was to be replaced by an abstract symbol. Ultimately, when all the performers have

died and only Živadinov remains, it will be his task to send these symbols into orbit, where they will create a new abstract theater. As such, Živadinov has produced a projection based not only on what art and science can produce but one that imagines (with intentional hubris) his control over death itself.

## VI

## SELF HISTORICIZATION

Now I will turn to the other method in which NSK groups deal with history: through self-historicization. This is reflected especially in the work of the group IRWIN. We see it, for example, in their 1985 work *Svoji k svojim* (Birds of a feather), for which the group looked back to earlier Slovene avant-gardes, specifically a series of outdoor performances by the group OHO in 1969. Recalling these performances, each of the four IRWIN artists produced an oil painting depicting motifs from OHO's actions; each artist then exposed his painting to one of the four elements: earth, fire, air, and water. These new actions were both *documents* (of the effects of the forces of nature) and *anti-documents* (of the OHO actions). Working against the utopian ideas of the 1960s artists, IRWIN's gesture pointed to the "musealization" of the previous generation of artists, to their increasing entrapment in the art system, while at the same time making room for their own strategies.

Another key project for understanding their attitude toward history is an ongoing painting series commenced in 1984 called *Was ist Kunst?* (What is art?). In the frame of each painting in the series, we find a wide range of motifs, some

associated with Laibach (the sower, the stag, the cup of coffee, the drummer boy, the metal worker), others borrowed from a wide range of sources, from the medieval to the modern. These include the historical avant-gardes, totalitarian imagery, and folk art, all depicted in period-appropriate styles.

In one such series, titled *Malevich between Two Wars*, we find them producing disruptive combinations along the lines described above: remakes of Malevich's Suprematist abstractions sandwiched between figurative works from the Nazi era. Perhaps the works gesture to Malevich's own complex return to figuration in the last decade of his life, works that represent a gap or problem in the conventional modernist view of historical development, in which progress only moves forward. IRWIN may signal that discontinuity is closer to the truth: continuous evolution is constantly broken down, both at the macro-historical level of revolutions, wars, and crises, and at the scale of individual lives, in which all sorts of contingencies and intersubjective dynamics determine how things might go.

The premise of discontinuity is internalized to IRWIN's collaborative dynamic as well, in which individuality is constantly interleaved with shared principles or projects. Each of the painters produces individual works using a set of agreed-upon motifs, which are continually repeated. Moreover, they discuss their works amongst each other, often correcting or intervening in each other's paintings. Similar thinking seems to be at work in their designation, in 1996, of certain frequently repeated motifs as "icons." Such

IRWIN, *Malevich between Two Wars*, 1984–86. Mixed media, 77 x 51 cm. Private collection



designation has historical analysis behind it, and rests on their understanding that, without a developed art system, there can be few conditions for repetition, and thus no icons. As the group progressed, however, it established a self-ratified set of conditions in which icons became possible, at least within their own micro-climate. In this way, IRWIN assumed under its own control processes that normally occur at the level of whole cultures or nations.



Marina Gržinić and Viktor Misiano of NSK Embassy Moscow (initiated and organized by IRWIN), delivering a lecture in a private apartment, Leninsky Prospekt 12, Moscow, May 10–June 10, 1992. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

A similar micro-political space was created in the summer of 1992, when IRWIN initiated and organized *NSK Embassy Moscow*. The members of NSK moved to Moscow for a month, designating their apartment at No. 12 Leninsky Prospekt a “living installation.” This included a series of lectures, discussions, and exhibitions that centered on issues that united Eastern European artists. Artists from the former Yugoslavia (it had dissolved) and Russian artists, critics, and curators (whose nation was similarly undergoing a rapid transition) took part in a week-long program organized by IRWIN and Eda Čufer. The goal of these discussions was to analyze similarities and differences between what are now two post-socialist nations.

Another part of the embassy’s program was an action by IRWIN and Michael Benson titled *Black Square on Red Square, Moscow*. As the title intimates,



the action sent embassy participants to unfold a large, square black cloth on Moscow's Red Square, a repetition in public space of Malevich's famous work. This gesture was not a straightforward tribute to the Suprematist painting but, like many of the works produced by NSK, a simple gesture that cut in multiple directions at once: signaling that there can be no history without repetition, underscoring the self-generative nature of art, embedding autonomous gesture in sociopolitical context, exposing the very temporariness of such gestures, comparing the red square and the black square.

## VII CONCLUSION

IRWIN and Michael Benson,  
*Black Square on Red Square*,  
*Moscow*, 1992. Video, 3:15  
min. Collection Moderna  
galerija, Ljubljana



The Red Square project returns us to the dilemma from which the essay began: that is, how do we relate to the past? Is our task to correct existing histories? Or is it instead to establish alternative forms of cultural production that allow for more just or utopian arrangements to come into view? What does legitimation even mean—merely that we

include something that had been excluded?  
That we incorporate it into an existing narrative  
that we already know, where it was the only  
thing missing?

In 1984, Lev Kreft, a Slovene expert on the avant-garde movements of previous generations, wrote about the provincial, claustrophobic, and anti-intellectual atmosphere of prewar Yugoslavia. He detailed the vulgar tastes of the bourgeoisie and nation-obsessed elites, neither of which were very supportive of modern art at all, much less the avant-garde. Such an atmosphere, which was augmented after the war by rhetoric about the gap between art and the working class, continued into the 1980s, when Kreft wrote, “We Slovenes are only now discovering that we even had an avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s.”<sup>11</sup>

11 Lev Kreft, “Viharni spopadi z negotovimi izidi” [Stormy clashes with unclear outcomes], *Književni listi* [Literary lists] (supplement), *Delo*, February 16, 1984, 4–5.

The fact of this rediscovery must be credited, at least in part, to artists. When they began to discover the history of these avant-garde movements, they made themselves the subject of that story. By doing so they placed at the center of that history not the holy names of once-neglected artists or styles but absence itself. In other words, what is alien and undefined. These artists who recovered the past did so by legitimating interruption itself, as the only means by which history has a future.

# Tobias Putrih: *Šiška, International*

Tobias Putrih's art shows us that all would-be-perfect systems contain an inherent imperfection, a flaw, which stems from the drive toward total organization. Most of the utopian projects of the twentieth century were conceived as self-sufficient systems that treated the individual as a measurable statistic. There is no need to belabor the point that, in the twentieth century, everything, even art, became quantifiable. In the process, art acquired its own autonomous system, in which it was understood to derive entirely from its own immanent logic. Such art was best served by a neutral, white presentation space. No matter how often the idea of the white cube has been problematized over the past several decades, the paradigm endures, for it was developed alongside the modern art system and will survive until this system collapses.

Putrih's architectural sculpture *Šiška, International*, which he made for the Centre Pompidou's 2010 exhibition *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former East Europe*, exposes how deeply we remain enmeshed in modernist notions of presenting and perceiving art. *Promises of the Past* was a transnational, transgenerational show that sought to reinterpret the history of former socialist countries in Central and Eastern

Europe from the perspective of their art. Putrih's work offered a space for archival or documentary materials connected with the historicization and communication of Eastern European art to be featured in the exhibition. *Šiška, International* evokes socialist modernist architecture, which strived for democratic space even as it enabled a near-total control over that space.

The exhibited materials, which were until then largely unknown to Western audiences, pointed to a duality in the established modernist system of historicization, which presented itself as universal while excluding non-Western spaces. In this way, the history of modern art served as a tool for reinforcing the centrality of the West. Despite the continued isolation of many parts of the world, the age of modernity was above all one of rapid communication—a fact that reinforced the sense that distinct genealogies were, over the course of the twentieth century, converging on a single and universal history. Putrih underscored this fact by using the language of universal systems, rather than the specific imaginaries of individual places. While he grew up in socialist Yugoslavia, the artist does not address that period through references to “totalitarian” ideology; rather, he seeks totality, in a broader sense, in the organization of space.

For most young people living under socialism, the red star, the hammer and sickle, and, in Yugoslavia, the image of Josip Tito were merely symbols of the sphere of official politics. Far more appealing were the Hollywood movies they watched in modernist movie theaters with open, glass-fronted lobbies. One such movie house was Ljubljana's Kino Šiška, a cinema built in the finest socialist modernist



Main façade of Kino Šiška, overlooking the shopping mall on Celovška Street, 1962

manner, to which Putrih refers in the title and the content of *Šiška, International*. The building was formalistic and ideological: while its architecture exuded clarity and lucidity, its transparency was designed to assist the controlling gaze, much as boulevards in new socialist cities offered no hidden corners in which to meet secretly and organize resistance. And in Eastern Europe, the universal style of architectural modernism was somehow even less ornate than elsewhere and utterly devoid of those small details that make buildings habitable.

The socialist order further included purpose-built workers' neighborhoods in areas far removed from the memory of the old romantic parts of

town. Šiška was one such new district; like other neighborhoods of the sort, it consisted of faceless apartment blocks near industrial complexes. Often centered around a square, these new districts included municipal offices, a shopping center, and a workers' hostel, as well as cinemas like Kino Šiška. Such hubs served to organize workers' leisure time by providing opportunities for socializing, shopping, and cultural activity. In the past ten years, we have witnessed reverse processes: capitalism has turned city centers into bedroom communities, while most other activities have been relocated to new shopping malls built, as in Ljubljana, on the city's edges. In comparison with today's urban uniformity we can say that, though drab, socialist neighborhoods contributed, in their own way, to the diversity of the city's cultural offerings—the memory of which has driven recent efforts to bring new cultural programs to abandoned movie theaters like Kino Šiška.

The dismissive attitude toward socialist modernist architecture in most Eastern European countries today reflects, in part, a desire to quickly forget undesirable things that, in their time, shaped our everyday lives. Although these buildings undoubtedly deserve better care—and some of them are important architectural monuments—the fact is that we hated them back then. We deplored their barrenness and strict functionality, which was only occasionally enlivened by some sort of geometric design in contrasting tiles, or by a coffered ceiling or wavy wall paneling. Only rarely did figurative motifs in the socialist-realist style adorn blank walls or exteriors, though the façade of East Berlin's Kino International, decorative aspects of which Putrih repeats in his architectural



Tobias Putrih, *Šiška, International*. Installation view, *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2010

sculpture, is an exception. These quotations call up the matter of memory as well as the unrealized dreams of that time.

The failures of modernism and socialism often make us forget the positive utopias that were their intended outcome. Putrih frequently refers to the works he makes out of impermanent materials such as cardboard and polystyrene foam—works that usually have the appearance of maquettes—as ruins that recall precisely this unrealized potential of the past. In his essay “The Allegorical Impulse,” American critic Craig Owens writes that the past can only be preserved as a fragment, which is why it is so appropriately embodied in the allegorical cult of ruins. Owens finds a contemporary form of allegory in the site-specific earthworks of Robert Smithson, which are characterized by their impermanence and “natural” deterioration. We preserve them only through photography, and then only incompletely. In view of their transient, ephemeral nature, Owens describes site-specific works as twentieth-century *memento mori*.<sup>1</sup>

1 Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 52–69.

But we can think more radically about memory and the twentieth century. The century was marked by disasters designed by those who wished to deprive people of even fragmentary memories. Here I will mention two thinkers who have argued that the cleansing, or expunging, of memories was perhaps one of the essential characteristics of modernity. In his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman writes that the twentieth century witnessed the first modern—that is to say, rational, deliberate, scientific, and expertly and efficiently coordinated—genocides.<sup>2</sup> Stalin and Hitler destroyed people who, for one

2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).



reason or another, did not fit into their schemes for the perfect society. Similarly, Gérard Wajcman, another Polish Jew, writes in his book *L'Objet du siècle* (1998) that the Holocaust was intended as “the perfect crime,” for it was conceived to leave no trace of its victims.<sup>3</sup>

3 Gérard Wajcman, *L'Objet du siècle* [The Object of the Century] (Lagrasse, France: Verdier, 1998), 24.

Thus, for Wajcman a ruin is not a fitting symbol for the twentieth century, because a ruin acts as a mainspring for memories, instead of denoting their absence. For him, Duchamp's 1913 readymade of a bicycle wheel mounted on a stool, or Malevich's 1916 *Black Square*, are better representations of the time. He claims, for example, that,

In order for art to create something great, it has no need to remember anything great. And when we see it, it has not been made in order that we remember, but in order that we see, that we make present. Even and especially that which is not seen. To cause to be seen in the present that which is otherwise not seen in the present but which is nevertheless in it. And to throw this into the world, among objects. To throw it in front of our eyes. And sometimes to throw it even in our face.<sup>4</sup>

4 Ibid., 24.

Putrih's fascination with ruins would seem to disagree with Wajcman's stance in this passage. But Putrih is perhaps more aligned with Wajcman's theorizing than it may seem at first glance. While the visual aspect of his work is, to be sure, directed toward memory fragments of modernity and its utopian projects, and thus to an allegorical impulse in Owens's sense, his projects also include a performative aspect: namely, their provocative absences assign to visitors the tasks of

realizing the potential of the past and of calling up that which is not seen.

Putrih intends the architectural elements from modernist movie houses that he borrows for *Šiška, International* to create the illusion of a well-ordered, visitor-friendly space. But the path to his movie house, which leads through corridors and exhibition spaces, is labyrinthine. This unexpected route forces visitors continually to be aware of their own movements. Indeed, Putrih is concerned in all his works with finding ways to deny the expected—through mistakes, obstacles, and surprises—and to draw attention to the fact that most planned and controlled spaces overlook individuals and their needs. In short, Putrih seeks a space of subjectivity; his project centers on escaping, or denying, the manipulative aspects of various systems.

Just as we can think about a movie theater as the frame for a film, we can think about the exhibition space as the frame for the artwork. Movie theaters, however, rarely problematize this relationship. By contrast, the history of art in the twentieth century is to a considerable degree concerned with precisely this relationship between the work and its frame. Being mounted on a stool, Duchamp's bicycle-wheel readymade problematizes the notion of its absent pedestal. Moreover, the wheel itself is also a support, of a kind, for an absent object, namely a bicycle. Ultimately, then, the work's objective aesthetic properties are less crucial than the fact that it represents things that aren't there. Putrih's work, too, is a vehicle for the potential unseen space of subjectivity that exists in every space, no matter how strictly controlled.



Tobias Putrih, *Šiška, International*. Installation view, *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2010

The artist also uses the movie theater as an example of the contradictoriness of presence. The work constructs a space wherein viewers lose all sense of time and embodiment. Simultaneously, it offers a space where they become aware of the transitory. When the lights come on at the end of a movie, they signal the end of the illusion. Equipping his movie theaters with materials other than movies allows Putrih to create an atmosphere in which viewers are confronted with the mechanisms of projection and representation. What is more, he proposes this environment as a possible setting for the screening of a film. Thus does the boundary between the frame and the work become even more elusive.

Assuming a wide range of forms and sizes, from maquettes and images of blank movie screens to large, designed spaces with curated film programs, Putrih's cinema works draw our attention to the phenomenological, social, and historical role of movie theaters. He is particularly inspired by architects and artists who think about the movie theater as an optimal viewing environment and about a diversity in the programming of films shown. One series of such works comments on the history of the movie theater from its visionary American beginnings, when they were constructed to enable the best possible perception of film, to modernist socialist cinemas, and onward to the present-day culture industry and multiplex.

Putrih comes from Ljubljana, where in socialist times there were many movie theaters with a range of different programs. One was Kinoteka (Cinémathèque), which had a superb offering of archival films that were, however, returned to Belgrade after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. In the transition from socialism, the city lost nearly all its old movie houses: the building of the new multiplex on the city's outskirts, which shows commercial American films, signaled the end of the old movie houses. There are only three movie houses left in the city that have programs aimed at an art-house audience. Putrih's critical stance toward this manipulation of the audience's taste can be seen in works that create movie theaters for individuals, or for individually selected programs.

*Šiška, International* also functions as a frame for presenting artworks, archival material, and films

by Eastern European artists. Like the exhibition of which it was part, it presents an art world that is still largely awaiting historicization. We might think of the entire art system and its history as frames in this sense: objects included within that frame are accorded the status of proper artworks, while those excluded are defined as art only tenuously, if at all. Putrih's architectural sculpture therefore accords such material with at least a temporary frame, while at the same time is itself framed as part of this whole. In this way, the work is a form of self-historicization, in the sense I have described elsewhere in this book—that is, the result of Eastern European artists' need, in the absence of official forms of historicization, to provide their work with a suitable context. Such artistic self-historicization also includes the collection and archiving of personal documents or those otherwise relating to local context and traditions.

The works presented in *Šiška, International* included archives from galleries and exhibitions dealing with Eastern European art, documentation of performance art and actions, and a rich program of screenings from artists' films by Tomislav Gotovac, Zofia Kulik, OHO, Želimir Žilink, and others. Assuming the nature of fragments, this is a history comprised of incomplete stories, local myths, and ongoing self-reflection; it is therefore heterogeneous in nature. Just as Putrih advocates programmatic plurality and different ways of seeing through the medium of cinema or the architecture of the movie house, art historians today advocate a plurality of narratives. Taking the comparison further, we can say that in the same way Putrih juxtaposes

the subjectivity of space to a space governed by uniformity, contemporary self-historians produce the subjectivity of history and its rootedness in concrete space and time.

History produced in this way is no longer the description of something that was. It becomes a self-conscious construct grounded in a specific location and a specific period in time, or the construct of a single person in relation to their community. On the symbolic level, such a history can begin to threaten the master narratives that underlie the art system—the same system that, among other things, produced the white cube. Thus, the white cube, too, can finally begin to be dismantled and replaced by a space that is no longer characterized by the absence of memory but rather by the presence of the hitherto-absent subject of (non-)memory.

# Happy End of the Cold War

Heaven and hell are usually imagined as completely isolated spaces. The chances of escape from either are slim; only fallen angels can plummet from heaven to hell, while travel in the other direction is impossible. Many supposed a similar analogy applied during the Cold War. The worlds of socialism and capitalism were separated by walls, weapons, and soldiers; self-contained universes defined by their mutual exclusion, the success of one was delineated by the downfall of the other. Across ten fragments, the following essay will reflect on this notion, questioning its historical validity while exploring its many effects—focusing especially on those artists and intellectuals who imagined things differently.

## I

### HEAVEN AND HELL

It is remarkable to realize, looking back on the Manichean conflict between East and West, that both sides (rather unlike the Christian antithesis of purity and temptation) were defined by their desire for a happy ending—disagreeing only about whether it was to be found in a workers' paradise or in the supermarket. In fact, it turns out that the

good versus evil view of things was an ideological fiction all along. The American historian Susan Buck-Morss, for example, points out that the Soviet Union started learning from the economic policies of the United States very early on, and continued to do so throughout the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> This exchange of ideas went both ways: the historian Fredric Jameson, for example, is fond of pointing out that the expansive economies of scale enacted by multinational corporations (Walmart is Jameson's favorite example) might be an "anticipatory prototype of some new form of socialism," if one looked at them from the right angle and without ideological presumptions.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, after the fall of socialism, it has started to seem as if some version of global capitalism was not only inevitable but was what the East and West had in common the whole time. Indeed, the Croatian philosopher Boris Buden has written about the intrinsic heterogeneity of socialism *in general*, pointing toward early criticisms of Soviet socialism as a form of state capitalism, managed by and benefiting the state's bureaucracy. Then, after the split with Stalin in the 1950s, the Yugoslav Communist Party abandoned the Soviet model of state capitalism and embraced "market capitalism," which cast off centralized federal plan directives for business enterprise and liberalized labor, and, allowing banks a stronger role, also constructed a sort of financial market.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the mutual exclusiveness of the two systems has served to perpetuate a sense that Eastern European art and culture somehow related only to itself—and therefore to a rather stereotypical narrative of communist

1 See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe, The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000). The book argues the premise that, from "the present side of this cultural divide"—she means after the end of the Cold War—"the cultural forms that existed in East and West... appear uncannily similar" ("Preface," x). She points out that "socialism failed in this century because it mimicked capitalism too faithfully" (xv), and suggests that "the Soviet Union's enthusiastic adoption of the Fordist model in the 1920s and 1930s meant that the crisis, when it came, was experienced in the East and West alike" (264).

2 Fredric Jameson, "Utopia and Its Antinomies," in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 153. Jameson pursued this line of thinking (and the Walmart case) in *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009) and *An American Utopia* (London: Verso, 2016).

3 See Boris Buden, "Recycling the R-waste (R is for Revolution)," in *L'Internationale, Postwar Avant-Gardes Between 1957 and 1986*, ed. Christian Höller (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2012), 122.



totalitarianism—and not, for example, also to the West.

But this was hardly the case. The Russian theorist Boris Groys has pointed out that artists of the late socialist period, such as Komar and Melamid and the Yugoslav group IRWIN, were voracious borrowers of all sorts of imagery; they were committed to appropriating symbols from both West and East, thereby bringing together ideas that had previously been considered incompatible. This, Groys argues, was no betrayal of communism but rather an extension or realization of it:

One can say that it is an extension of real-socialist paradise, which now accepts everything it once refused to include; in other words, it represents utopian radicalization of the Communist demand for the total salvation offered to all, including those usually considered dictators, tyrants, and terrorists or capitalists, militarists and profiteers of globalization. This kind of radicalized utopian inclusiveness was often misunderstood as irony, even if it really simply represented a post-historical idyll, which no longer searches for differences but for analogies.<sup>4</sup>

4 Boris Groys, “Privatizations, or Post-Communism’s Artificial Paradise(s),” in *7 Sims: Ljubljana–Moscow*, exh. cat. (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2008), 24.

By moving past the logic of heaven and hell, these artists risked landing themselves in purgatory. Groys points out that nationalists of either side during the Cold War “agreed with one another as far as their historical diagnosis is concerned,” but stipulates that “the only thing that falls out of this convenient

5 Ibid.

consensus is post-Communist, or, better yet, post-dissident art, which adheres to universalism, internationalism, and the good old spirit of utopia.”<sup>5</sup> Often wrongly understood to be postmodernist ironists, in Groy’s estimation these artists turn out instead to have embraced a more radical and utopian inclusivity by searching for analogies between East and West, rather than differences.

II  
NEW IDENTITIES

We might ask, then, what happened to this historical diagnosis after the fall of socialism. Did one side, heaven or hell, win? That is certainly how some saw it. Did utopian artists like Komar and Melamid or IRWIN, who had “fallen out” of this consensus view, now find themselves at home on an endless plain of culture? Not exactly. Rather, these artists found themselves contending with different urgencies and new antagonisms.

6 See, for example, “Body and the East” and “Interrupted Histories” in this volume.

I have written elsewhere about how the historical developments of the 1990s recast a huge region with complex and differentiated internal relations as “Eastern Europe.”<sup>6</sup> While we must regard this development with a certain degree of skepticism, we cannot simply discard this new identity as merely essentialist or just a sop to a newly minted global marketplace. Socialist and post-socialist art demand contextualization; they cannot be separated from local cultural traditions and the histories of their respective public spheres without distorting them beyond recognition. To some degree, therefore, this sense of shared history is useful.

But where should we draw the line between identity claims that are useful from those that are not? Where is the boundary between the interests of local artistic traditions and “culture” as it is defined by the philosopher Alain Badiou, that is, the subjective or representative bedrock of existence? The culture of identity claims that its constitutive elements are wholly comprehensible only under the condition of belonging to a pertinent subset.<sup>7</sup>

7 Alain Badiou, “Sveti Pavel: Utemeljitev univerzalnosti,” *Problemi* 5–6 (1998): 15. Originally published as *Saint Paul: la fondation de l’universalisme* [Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism] (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997).

It therefore comes as little surprise that many artists over the last twenty-five years—Eastern European, South American, African, and others—have insisted that their art is “untranslatable.” In her book *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Buck-Morss narrates exactly such an occasion, in the very moment, October 1990, when the Soviet Union had begun to wobble visibly, and it no longer seemed clear whether the Soviets would find a bargain with capitalism or fall apart.<sup>8</sup> She was attending a conference organized by the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik, Croatia. The conference had been intended, in the spirit of international collaboration, to imagine a joint critical strategy regarding Cold War discourse. Although the goal of the conference was to discuss common subjects between East and West during the period of industrial modernization, representatives of the East began to insist on the utter uniqueness of their experience, which, they argued, could hardly be understood by their Western counterparts.

8 The conference is described in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 230–43, and is one part of an extended and gripping intellectual autobiography of this period titled “Lived Time/Historical Time,” 214–78.

Among the Westerners in attendance was Jameson, who attributed this failure to find

common ground to deeply rooted Cold War dualisms on both sides. Buck-Morss, by contrast, saw their rejection of translatability and insistence on the absolute uniqueness and incomprehensibility of their experience as an expression of hope—a hope that insisted on difference as a way of keeping alive at least some image or fragment of the dying utopias. She wrote:

For critical intellectuals from the East, the existence of a nonsocialist West sustained the dream that there could be “normalcy” in social life. For their counterparts in the West, the existence of the noncapitalist East sustained the dream that the Western capitalist system was not the only possible form of modern production. ... [T]he mere fact of the existence of a different system was proof enough to allow us to think the dream possible....<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 277.

### III OPPOSITIONAL FORMS

The collapse of the dream-worlds of socialism and capitalism accelerated the processes of globalization; Buck-Morss makes the case that this had instant effects in academic discourse, producing new subject positions: the “global intellectual,” who belongs to a small, mobile elite and reproduces global discourse at a local level, and the “national intellectual,” defender of traditional culture. On one side, there are figures like the American economist Jeffrey Sachs, who counselled the countries of Eastern Europe on their transition to the most restrictive forms of

10 Ibid.

neoliberal economy; on the other, “a rear-line defense of cultural exceptionalism.”<sup>10</sup>

11 Ibid.

If both positions seem immediately problematic, however, it is also true that we can only work within the structures we have; and Buck-Morss retains some hope that producers of culture working on a different level might yet “open up alternative spaces—on the margins, at boundary crossings, at cultural intersections, within electronic landscapes—in subaltern worlds that avoid the homogenizing topology of globalization, while taking advantage of its electronic infrastructures and technological forms.”<sup>11</sup> Buck-Morss sees a solution in new means of production; written more-or-less before the rise of social media, her hope is a product of a utopian moment around technology that we may regard in a more circumspect way now. If recent history has shown that it is almost possible to organize a revolution with mobile phones, it has also demonstrated that mobile phones are hardly enough to keep the positive results of an uprising alive. An accumulated local tradition of democracy is required for that, permanently accessible through local cultural infrastructure. Nevertheless, her call for a third path between global and national intellectuals remains compelling—as does the prospect of carving out a position for broad and equal participation in the production of knowledge. The only way to fight the homogenization of knowledge is by producing alternative local knowledges, and networking horizontally on a global level, free of too much filtering or mediation by wealthy Western institutions.

## IV

## AVANT-GARDE TRADITIONS

In attempting to envision such alternate positions and institutional ways-of-being, we might look to the traditions of the Eastern European avant-garde movements, which had no choice but to invent forms of self-organization while forging independent international connections. It could be argued, in fact, that their inherent internationalism often coexisted, somewhat paradoxically, with various localisms and nationalisms. Russian avant-garde art was entwined both with the universal goals of the October Revolution and with local Russian traditions.

So, too, was it a specific characteristic of other Eastern European avant-gardes, which fostered similar forms of utopian idealism, in the early years at least, while at the same time fantasizing about superhuman figures—the space-traveling *udarnik*, the *barbarogenius*—that might confidently bring local culture to international exchange. The latter figure was symptomatic: invented by Ljubomir Micić, editor of the magazine *Zenit* and the driving force of the eponymous Yugoslav avant-garde movement of the 1920s, the *barbarogenius* longed for an authentic art freed from cultural colonialism, suggesting it could be found in a primitive or elemental quality that drew on the fresh spirit of Slavic and Asian cultures. Such avant-gardes were, on the one hand, highly transnational—Micić dedicated a special issue of *Zenit* to the Soviet avant-garde, for example—and, on the other, obsessed with local tradition, much as Malevich had wanted

to burn all art of the past and reinvigorate (and perhaps secularize) the icons of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The avant-gardes of the 1960s and '70s were socially critical and universalist in nature. But even here we find that this search for universal truths has roots in local traditions, such as mysticism and esotericism, which are themselves in keeping with a global trend toward spiritual exploration. In an early essay, Groys calls attention to the spiritual dimension of Moscow conceptualism, writing that it “not only testifies to the continued unity of the ‘Russian soul’; it also tries to bring to light the conditions under which art can extend beyond its own borders.”<sup>12</sup> In his performance *Going Tornado* (1976), Romanian artist Paul Neagu twirls and “dematerializes” like a Balkan dervish; drawing on traditions of esotericism, the Slovenian group OHO carried out a “transcendental conceptual” project in which they tested out a telepathic connection between America and Europe while drawing signs in an outlined field.<sup>13</sup>

12 Boris Groys, “Moscow Romantic Conceptualism,” in Tomáš Pospiszyl and Laura Hoptman, eds., *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 164.

13 The term transcendental conceptualism was coined by Tomaž Brejc, who worked with the OHO group as a critic and writer; he used it to talk about the third stage in the group’s activities, between 1970 and 1971.

14 The exhibition *7 grehov: Ljubljana-Moskva* [7 Sins: Ljubljana-Moscow], part of the series of exhibitions titled *Arteast razstava*, was co-curated by Zdenka Badovinac, Viktor Misiano, and Igor Zabel at Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, December 20, 2004–March 13, 2005.

V

THE SINS OF SOCIALISM

Westerners saw Eastern Europeans as different, and it must be stressed that, whatever their similarities, people in the East *felt* substantially different from Westerners. These differences took the form of stereotypes reinforced on both sides. In 2004, at the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, we staged an exhibition dedicated to exploring these cultural formulas, titled *7 Sins: Ljubljana–Moscow*.<sup>14</sup> The seven sins of the title are:



Installation views, *7 Sins: Ljubljana-Moscow*. "Masochism" and "Unprofessionalism" galleries. Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2004–5



collectivism, utopianism, masochism, cynicism, laziness, unprofessionalism, and love of the West. These sins were simultaneously seen as virtues, if seen from a different perspective, such as authentic creativity, a different sensibility of time, genuine collectivism, and so on. In the exhibition's catalogue, for example, we described the sin of loving the West:

East–West relations, both during the Cold War and in the post-Cold War period, have been founded not only on power and politics, but also on attitudes such as love and hate, desire and repulsion, and so on. These emotional relations determine the very idea of Eastern Europe, and Easterners are invariably caught up in a complex array of feelings about the West. The art of the East, too, has been defined in essential ways by its view of the West as the desired and, at the same time, hated Other. For Easterners, the West appears, in fact, as a phantasmal image, the positive projection of freedom, abundance, and enjoyment. At the same time, the West is accused of being responsible for the difficult living and working conditions of Eastern artists, their lack of international success, and so on. In short, the West is condemned for its general lack of interest, knowledge, and involvement with regard to the East, as well as for its desire for domination.<sup>15</sup>

15 Zdenka Badovinac, Viktor Misiano, and Igor Zabel, "Introduction," 7 *Sins*, 10.

Regardless, this love of the West was most genuine when it was reciprocated, when artists from both sides connected by means of unofficial, and often politically undesirable, projects. The section of the exhibition dealing with this

premise included the Moscow group The Nest, in the form of their 1976 action *Let's Become a Meter Closer!* The action was an appeal to the international art community for rapprochement, symbolized by people at opposite ends of the world digging tunnels toward each other at a prearranged time. Artists in the West responded and began digging from the opposite side of the globe on the set date and time.

VI

CONNECTOR OF TWO WORLDS

In the 1960s and '70s, artists came to believe that art was the same in the East and West, and that the borders separating artists artificially from their spiritual siblings should be pulled down. The first collaborative project between Soviet and American artists is said to have been carried out in 1974; Komar and Melamid collaborated with the American video artist Douglas Davis on a work titled *Where is the Line Between Us?* According to Vitaly Komar, Davis came to Moscow on assignment for the American magazine *Newsweek*, hoping to write about an unauthorized exhibition that the authorities had literally bulldozed within a couple hours of its installation (this show would come to be known as the *The Bulldozer Exhibition* and would be accorded a place in Western histories of the period).<sup>16</sup> After drinking a fair amount of American whiskey and Russian vodka, the artists decided to jointly enact a piece “about a ‘symbolic line’ between people, countries, and political systems.”<sup>17</sup> The result was a series of photographic montages produced for the Russian artists’ 1977 exhibition in New York, in which the artists, standing in front of a white wall

16 For example, Vitaly Komar, “The Avant-Garde, Sots-Art and the Bulldozer Exhibition of 1974,” in *L'Internationale, Postwar Avant-Gardes Between 1957 and 1986*, ed. Christian Höller (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2012), 306.

17 Vitaly Komar, letter to the author, May 14, 2013.

HAPPY END OF THE COLD WAR

Komar and Melamid,  
*Questions: New York-Moscow /  
Moscow-New York*, 1980.  
Gelatin silver prints, 139.7 ×  
121.9 × 5.1 cm (each). The  
Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
Gift of Eugene M. Schwartz  
and Matching funds from the  
National Endowment for the  
Arts, 1981





Joseph Beuys, *In memoriam: George Macunias*, 1978. Installation view, *Arteast 2000+ Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West*, presented in the then-unrenovated premises of the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM), Ljubljana, 2000

divided by a black line, eventually reached across the imaginary line.

In some nations in Eastern Central Europe, however, international collaborations had been ongoing, in the form of international exhibitions, biennials, festivals, and other similar events. Yugoslavia had been particularly involved, while other countries—Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, and others—saw far fewer such events, if any at all. In addition to important inter-institutional collaborations, the joint projects organized by the artists played a significant role in lowering ideological barriers and furthering democratic processes in socialist countries. A particularly important and influential artistic network was the international Fluxus movement. Fluxus spread throughout Eastern Europe—especially within Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, and Poland—between 1962 and 1969, through personal contacts and extensive mailing lists.

As the German curator Petra Stegmann explains in the catalogue for her exhibition *Fluxus East*, the presence of Fluxus in Eastern Europe is partly due to the ambition of one of its leading artists, the Lithuanian George Maciunas, who emigrated to the United States in 1974.<sup>18</sup> Maciunas had special plans for Eastern Europe; among his unrealized ideas was a series of Fluxus concerts via the Trans-Siberian Railway. Maciunas considered Fluxus to be an inheritor of the Soviet avant-garde group LEF (Levy Front Iskusstv, or Left Front of the Arts), which had been formed by the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in the early 1920s. Maciunas believed the groups were so connected that he pictured relocating Fluxus to the Soviet

18 Petra Stegmann, *Fluxus East: Fluxus Networks in Central Eastern Europe*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007).

Union, writing a letter to this effect to Nikita Khrushchev, asking the Soviet leader to endorse a union between Soviet “revolutionary-realistic” artists and “revolutionary-artistic” artists of the world.<sup>19</sup>

19 Ibid., 12.

The Soviet authorities failed to respond, perhaps unsurprisingly, but there were other crossings: Fluxus artists Eric Andersen, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Emmet Williams, and Ben Vautier undertook a grand tour of Eastern Europe in the mid-1960s, and there were Fluxus concerts, performances, and happenings throughout the region. Czech artist Milan Knížák was appointed the director of Fluxus East and pursued all kinds of border-crossing projects.

Mail art, self-published books, artist’s books, postcards, stamps, visual poetry, photographs, films, slides, audio recordings, and other inexpensive forms of production connected artists from different continents throughout the Cold War. Through their collaborations, artists created “counter-cartographies and an alternative sense of belonging.”<sup>20</sup> This kind of networking was understood as passing from a logic of identity to identification and solidarity.<sup>21</sup> Through these collaborations, artists identified common experiences and interests, as well as a shared feeling of marginality. Moreover, Eastern European and Latin American artists shared a sense of exclusion from the dominant Western art narrative, as well as the impact of living under a variety of dictatorial regimes. (Western artists were, by contrast, critical of capitalism, the art market, and the imperialistic actions of the great powers, emblemized by the Vietnam War.) The result of this contact was that

20 Klara Kemp-Welch and Cristina Freire, “Artists’ Networks in Latin America and Eastern Europe,” *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2–3: 3.

21 Ibid.

ideas circulated freely and without commercial or political strategy, while at the same time, ironically, it meant that many Eastern European artists were better informed about Western art than about Eastern artists—a typical symptom of inferiority complex.

VII

THE TRANSNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Mail art had an important role in building these international networks; a forerunner of electronic networking, it served as an antidote to isolation, particularly for artists living in countries ruled by repressive regimes.<sup>22</sup> Artists were forced to devise ploys to outwit the local authorities: in Hungary, for example, to circumvent official control over mail sent abroad, artists crossed out the intended recipient's address and marked the sender as unknown; in this way, the addressee received mail as "returned to sender," marked with the stamp "Inconnu." (The artist group to be discussed in the next section borrowed its name from these stamps.)

22 One important network of this kind, called NET, was established by the Polish artists Andrzej Kostołowski and Jarosław Kozłowski in the early 1970s. Their "NET Manifesto" (1972) was sent to 350 addresses worldwide with the ambition of establishing an alternative means of distributing ideas.

Centered on print and artist-created stamps, mail art in many regards looked superficially no different from regular mail, thereby allowing artists to exchange ideas determined by their contexts, while effectively establishing an international common space. In this way, mail artists could be said to have created the sorts of public space they were deprived of in their own localities. The mass distribution of mail art was combined with an affinity for poetic language; this combination of standardized formats and ambiguous gestures produced resistance

within an everyday channel of communication. Untranslatability became a weapon in the hands of the international art community, as well as the gravity around which a community was built.

How should we present the art of Others in a way that makes it comprehensible to Western audiences, while preserving its ambiguities and resistances? Such gestures are easily lost in museum collections and displays, which privilege didactic meaning and have trouble depicting mail art's dialogical character; such work is often better served by numerous artists' archives that serve to break down monolithic narratives and have a different attitude toward the "educative." Western museums and galleries similarly tend to present art from other parts of the world sorted by medium or theme; the original context of the artwork gets lost.

There is much phraseology stressing the importance of dialogue among nations, while at the same time ignoring that in every dialogue, one side is always stronger. Mail art, on the other hand, is based on the perceived equality of sender and receiver; neither represents the other, both present themselves. The Other is present in the very structure of the artwork, as is the prospect of self-translation. Western institutions, by contrast, have yet to create conditions for equal dialogue; in such unequal conditions, "untranslatability" is the consequence of Western dominance, which allows only for the Other to adjust to the forms of its discourse.<sup>23</sup> The tradition of mail art and other artistic networks offers a possible answer—joint projects involving the exchange of knowledge, affects, collective and individual

23 Many people are trying to find a way out of this quandary, and the problem is not just geopolitical—there are many "margins" even within "the center." A new term has come into use, the Global South, which gestures toward epistemological alternatives outside the East-West dynamic; Paulina Varas Alarcón talks about "learning communities," in which collaborations are collectively translated, tapping into the tradition of mail art. See Varas Alarcón, "Artistic Networks: From Effect to Affect and Its Translation," *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2-3: 73-86.

desires and interests, and so on. In these projects, the problem of translation might be replaced by self-mediation.

VIII  
INCONNU

A case study of the Hungarian group Inconnu (Unknown, a name drawn from the mail-art trick mentioned above) will support some of these general claims. Over the course of the 1970s and early '80s, Hungarian authorities had been very suspicious of avant-garde practices, shutting down projects it saw as anti-authoritarian.<sup>24</sup> But by the end of the 1980s, it was less common for authorities to cancel or ban exhibitions, which is why the confiscation by police of artworks sent for an exhibition planned by Inconnu was a shock.

24 These include the endeavors of Budapest-based artist György Galántai and curator and organizer Júlia Klaniczay, who began an archive and non-profit institute called Artpool in 1979. Accorded official status in 1992, Artpool remains active today.



From the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security. Image reference number ÁBTL-4.1-A-2020

Conceived as a thirtieth-anniversary tribute to the 1956 Hungarian revolution, the exhibition was titled *The Fighting City!* First planned (according to the Barcelona-based scholar Julianne Debeusscher) to open in a private apartment in Budapest on October 23, 1986, it had been postponed under pressure from the police, who had learned of the show from both the Hungarian independent press and the *New York Review of Books*, which had published an international open call to artists to participate in the project. It proceeded the following year, on January 28, 1987. Although the organizers tried to keep the exhibition secret from local authorities, police raided the apartment hours before the opening, pronounced the 41 already-installed artworks illegal and pernicious, and confiscated them. The opening proceeded without the works; in their



place, the organizers taped the official certificates of confiscation, and a short video, shot before the police arrived, was shown.

The renown (and consequently, power) of Inconnu grew as word of the suppressed exhibition spread; the advertisement in the American magazine, which included their real names, also drew attention to their situation. The Inconnu members endeavored to keep their work and everything related to it in the public eye—which they did in advance of the repression, on the assumption that such repression would occur. For example, in their second advertisement, placed in 1986, when preparations were still underway, Inconnu published a list of the works that had arrived in Budapest, urging participants whose works were not on the list to file complaints with the Hungarian embassies in their countries, working on the presumption that some of the works had already been confiscated. In February 1987, Inconnu addressed a letter of complaint to state authorities, which was published by the Hungarian independent press as well as the British magazine *Index on Censorship*, under the title “No Glasnost in Hungary.”

Because of these actions, the Hungarian government destroyed the confiscated works in June 1989—what turned out to be the very eve of democracy. Placing the whole messy affair in the context of the Helsinki Accords, which obligated Hungary and other socialist countries to uphold human rights and freedoms, Debeusscher argues that the show had become an international embarrassment for the Hungarian government, which had been trying to portray itself as newly

25 Agreed upon in 1975, the Helsinki Accords were a significant step toward reducing Cold War tensions. Signed by János Kádár, General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, they included a commitment to "fundamental freedoms," including freedom of thought.

open to political expression—the very hypocritical construct that Inconnu had set about trying to debunk in the first place.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the exhibition's organization and documentation, the confiscation and destruction of the works, and the international media coverage became subjects as important as the unexhibited works themselves. Thus, Inconnu provided an oppositional model of cultural production, in which the repressive conditions became their own tools of production and representation.

## IX NEITHER-NOR

In 1989, the Hungarian government adopted a "democracy package" and substantially revised its constitution; it would become a member of the European Union in 2004. The Inconnu case, therefore, places us at the end of a certain form of socialism—and, ostensibly, at the very moment of capitalism's vanquishing of its arch enemy.

It is interesting, then, to return to Komar and Melamid, who, several years after their optimistic project with Douglas Davis, painted *Smooth Sailing with Lenin* (1985). The work is a tetrptych, or four-part painting, and is based on a circumspect and critical take on Russian and American "realist" styles, adding to these traditions contradictory details or incongruencies, and conjoining opposed styles in a spirit of conceptual eclecticism. The four parts are stacked vertically, and each is painted in a distinctive manner. At the top is a childlike depiction of a sailboat above a realistic, if highly theatrical, picture of Lenin lying in state;

the effect is something like the dead Lenin dreaming of a sailing vacation. The bottom half shows a geometric shape floating in a blank field, above a recumbent homeless man painted expressionistically, a style that was often combined with social criticism in this way, in both Eastern and Western contexts. The effect is similar: as if the impoverished man is dreaming of Suprematism.

The two pairs show capitalism and socialism *in extremis*, at the end of their respective ropes. Lenin is a corpse on museum display; the homeless man is dying on the street. As assembled, however, both seem to be simultaneously dreaming of the “other side.” For both, reality is the hell, while the dream is heaven; Komar and Melamid point the viewer, again, to some new utopia; neither socialism nor capitalism are the answer.

Numerous people in socialist countries, artists among them, risked their lives to escape to the West, in the hope of finding better living conditions, and, in the artists’ cases, a more generous public.<sup>26</sup> And so it is strange to note that one is hard pressed to find any positive representation of this projected paradise in art produced under socialism. The artists who commented on East-West relations during the Cold War often took a critical stance against both systems, capitalism and communism, instead proposing some other ideal world.

As the end of socialism came to pass, the Western art market became interested in Eastern art. This was not a pure gesture of

26 Indeed, Komar and Melamid had themselves emigrated to the United States in the late 1970s.



Komar and Melamid, *Smooth Sailing with Lenin*, 1985. Oil and acrylic on canvas, four panels: 128 × 203.5 cm; 91.5 × 203.2 cm; 91.1 × 203.2 cm; 9991.2 × 203.2 cm. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

curiosity or magnanimity, of course: Capitalism, as Marx pointed out, must expand into new territories to forestall internal crises, and the Western art market was, circa 1990, in a very severe crisis indeed; it pulled free of glut and stagnation precisely through “globalizing” itself over the course of the decade. Mail art and all the other connective art forms were absorbed, as was Sots art and—eventually—even socialist realism itself.

In this atmosphere, some artists adopted a certain kind of pragmatism, playing their “Eastern European” card, acceding to their own exoticization. Others experienced a sort of critical awakening. The sometimes-naïve ideas about international coexistence in autonomous worlds from the 1960s and ’70s gained a new dimension in the ’80s and ’90s; artists could not “interconnect” without the intermediation of the art system. A new twist on institutional critique was adopted, one especially attuned to issues of geopolitical context.

x  
HAPPY END

The happy end of the Cold War is constituted by its heritage: the knowledge we draw from the historical relationship between two sides, and our understanding of what the ideology of the two systems’ absolute difference required from those living within the conditions it invoked. As is evident from the various practices described above, this heritage compels and informs us. Heaven is not to be found in East or West, but in the emancipatory potential of the “fallen

angels,” those who crossed from one system to another and, in so doing, found a third way. These “heretics” did not accept as nature the division of the world into communist totalitarianism and capitalist fundamentalism. Their model is instructive for those living through today’s false choices: global or national, identity politics or internationalism, capitalism or nothing. We are no longer so isolated, and for the first time in history, the concerns of the multitude can be recognized.<sup>27</sup> Routes of escape lead only to heaven.

27 The concept of “the concerns of the many” is here used in the sense explained by Paolo Virno. See Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York: Semiotexte, 2004).

# Future from the Balkans<sup>1</sup>

1 My title derives from an idea expressed by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek in 1993 in, among other places, a documentary film about the band Laibach: Peter Vežjak, *Bravo: Laibach v filmu* [Bravo: Laibach in film] (Ljubljana: Dallas Records, 1993). Describing the group as staging for Western audiences their own primitivizing stereotypes, Žižek continued, “[Y]ou may remember when political troubles began in Yugoslavia, serious troubles, some two or three years ago, no? What was the first reaction of the West? It was an ironic, mocking attitude, as if, ‘Ha ha, primitive Balkans [with your] nineteenth-century, nation-state, ethnic conflicts’ et cetera. Now I think it’s becoming clearer and clearer that we in the Balkans, we are the future.”

The current refugee crisis in Europe, largely triggered by the war in Syria, brings up once again the tired question: what can art do in times of war, exodus, and genocide? I want to reflect on this question by considering the work of various contemporary artists and theorists on the current refugee crisis, as well as of artists and theorists associated with the region of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, a period that encompassed both the downfall of communist regimes and the various wars of that decade. Given that the Balkan refugee route has, until recently, run mainly through former Yugoslav countries, it seems instructive to trace parallels between the present crisis and the effects of the 1990s wars in the region.

So, too, should we reconsider the notion of collectivity in terms of these crises. In the socialist era, collectivity was an official ideology that meant, among other things, that responsibility belonged simultaneously to everyone and no one; at the same time, there was a genuine spirit of collectivism. Founded on communist ideals and an ideology of brotherhood and unity, the collective ethos was strongly rooted in Yugoslav artists, and it is still operative today, despite the current environment of refugee columns and razor-wire

fences. This collective ethos is evident in the fact that artists in this region have paid relatively little attention to how contemporary crises have affected individuals, choosing instead to focus on reexamining (or challenging us to reexamine) our notions of community.

## BROTHERHOOD AND UNITY HIGHWAY

In choosing to enter Europe through the Balkans, the refugees could hardly have found a better metaphor to suggest the decay of collectivity and sociality. Their route generally followed the Brotherhood and Unity Highway, as it was known in the era of Tito; built by the Yugoslav People's Army with Youth Work Actions, a volunteer labor brigade, over the course of the 1950s, the completed highway spanned 734 miles, northwest from the Greek border of modern-day Macedonia through Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, to the Austrian border. Obviously, most refugees would not have known the highway's history, but for many of us living in these territories, these roads, constructed after World War II to connect the whole of Yugoslavia, symbolized collective effort and solidarity.

Things have changed drastically from the time of socialist Yugoslavia, with its free health insurance, schools and kindergartens for all, a community center in every village and functioning museums in every town. Now, education and health care must be paid for individually, most of the principal museums have closed or are barely scraping by, and unemployment is on the rise. Indeed, some of the main refugee centers on the Balkan route were



set up in factories where, until recently, workers from various ex-Yugoslavian republics had come to work. Many of these factories failed or were downsized after the 2008 economic crisis. While most of Europe has been affected by ruthless austerity measures, it was the Balkan countries, along with Greece, that suffered the worst consequences. Thus, the Balkan route has come to symbolize not only the refugees' loss of home but also the loss of our own community—not only the loss of our former shared country but the loss of a society of solidarity and shared welfare.

It is true that one of the mechanisms whereby the socialist regime “protected” its people was the country's relative isolation, and in one way or another, artists took up this isolation as a subject for their work. One of the ways of transcending this situation—although it needs to be emphasized that of all the socialist countries, Yugoslavia's borders were the most open—was for artists to establish contact with like-minded colleagues, both within Yugoslavia and beyond. This was done via various collective artistic projects and networks of communication, such as mail art. The collective desire was for freedom, which meant mobility.

How, then, are we to account for the fact that it is precisely the ex-socialist countries—the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia—with their experience of bitter isolation, which have championed the most restrictive policies on the current refugee question? Although Hungarian president Viktor Orbán was the first to initiate razor-wire fences along the southern borders of his country, other countries quickly

followed suit. Not only that: just before the EU and Turkey concluded their agreement on immigration policies, governments in the region decided to close the Balkan route to refugees.

The EU-Turkey agreement, which was intended to stop the uncontrolled mass influx of refugees to Europe, was assessed by critical observers to effectively constitute a bribe in which responsibility for hundreds of thousands of people was shifted from the EU to Turkey. European leaders not only promised Turkey an additional €3 billion in financial assistance and to abolish the visa requirement for Turkish citizens, they adopted a model of exchange of refugees that breached international law: for each Syrian refugee returned from Greece to Turkey, one Syrian refugee was to be resettled from Turkey to the EU, at the expense of the latter. The fate of refugees of other nationalities was left unresolved. Thus, to solve “its” refugee crisis, the EU concluded a questionable agreement with the autocratic regime of Turkey, which, per Amnesty International, has not even ratified the Geneva Convention related to the status of refugees, and which has, since 1968, granted refugee status to European seekers only. In practice, this meant that international law did not oblige Turkey to treat refugees as refugees at all.

The closing of the Balkan route—and therefore the preemption of even this diabolical bargain—precipitated a humanitarian catastrophe in Greece and the forced return of refugees to Turkey. Far from being a safe country, in Turkey these people were exposed to further human-rights violations and even sent back to Syria, against

the terms of the deal. The agreement between the EU and Turkey was supposed to establish order. What it brought about instead was a breach of international law, and the indirect refusal of any political-civil identity to the refugees and migrants.

## NONCITIZENS

A similar case was raised by Tomaž Mastnak in 1996. Mastnak was speaking at the symposium *Living with Genocide – The War in Bosnia, Political Theory and Art*, organized by Moderna galerija, Ljubljana.<sup>2</sup> Mastnak's thesis was that contemporary political theory had failed to grasp the war in Bosnia. Unable to understand the war in the context of wider changes in the world, it also neglected the question of the Bosnian state and that of the sovereignty of its citizens. The consequence, per Mastnak, was that in public discussions, the citizens of Bosnia morphed into "Muslims" and their state into a "Muslim state." The question of the state thus found itself transformed into a question of ethnicity, facilitating the justification of the thesis that the war in Bosnia was about local ethnic conflicts rather than any wider political interests.

What came of this was that it became impossible to arrive at a political interpretation of the war in Bosnia, or indeed any analysis at all. This played into the hands of those who refused to take a clear political stand in the war, let alone help the Bosnian state to mount an armed resistance against the Serbian aggressors. Highlighting this depoliticization of war, Mastnak noted that, "by addressing Bosnians as simply humans and not citizens of a state that fell victim to military

2 *Living with Genocide – The War in Bosnia, Political Theory and Art*, international symposium, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, May 23–26, 1996. The symposium consisted of two parts: "Art and the War in Bosnia," conceived by Zdenka Badovinac, IRWIN, and Igor Zabel, and "Political Theory and the War in Bosnia," conceived by Tomaž Mastnak. Participants in the former section included Marina Abramović, Zdenka Badovinac, Dunja Blažević, David Elliott, Jürgen Harten, IRWIN, Alexandre Melo, Viktor Misiano, Edin Numankadić, Peter Weibel, Igor Zabel, and Denys Zacharopoulos. This part of the symposium was documented in [*M'Arts: Magazine of the Museum of Modern Art*] 11, no. 1–2 (1999).

3 Ibid., 11.

4 Slavoj Žižek, “Es gibt keinen Staat in Europa” [There is no state in Europe], in *Padiglione NSK / IRWIN: Guest Artists in the Slovene Pavilion*, exh. cat. (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 1993). Republished in IRWIN, eds., *State in Time* (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2014), 17–18.

5 The NSK State pavilion formed part of the Slovenian pavilion in 1993, the year of Slovenia’s first independent presentation at the Venice Biennale after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The formerly shared Yugoslav pavilion remained closed, having been appropriated by Serbia. As commissioner for the Slovenian pavilion, I asked the then-director of the biennial, Achille Bonito Oliva, for help finding a suitable venue. The attempt failed, although Bonito Oliva did suggest that national pavilions sometimes host artists from other states. When Slovenia finally found its own venue outside the Giardini, we presented Marjetica Potrč as our official artist and the group IRWIN as representatives of the guest state of NSK, thus commenting on the attitude of the Venice Biennale toward new states in Europe at the time when the region of former Yugoslavia, in the immediate vicinity of Italy, was still torn by civil war.

6 Žižek, “Es gibt keinen Staat in Europa.”

aggression, humanitarianism denies their civic existence. In the world today, it is only as citizens that people can hope to have a say in what happens to their lives.”<sup>3</sup>

Slavoj Žižek was another thinker who pointed out how the collapse or malfunction of the state leaves its inhabitants at the mercy of transnational interests. In an essay published in the catalogue of the NSK State pavilion at the 1993 Venice Biennale, he wrote of the collapse of Bosnia and Herzegovina as predicting the future of Europe: “Europe is coming closer and closer to a state of non-statehood where state mechanisms are losing their binding character. The authority of the state is being eroded from the top by the trans-European regulations from Brussels and the international economic ties and from the bottom by local and ethnic interests, while none of those elements are strong enough to fully replace state authority.”<sup>4</sup>

Žižek, however, did not argue for the preservation of the nation-state; after all, one of the points of the very catalogue in which his essay appeared, which was for the artists’ state of NSK, was to denounce the very concept of the Venice Biennale, based as it is on national selections.<sup>5</sup> Rather, he emphasized the importance of an artistic utopia geared “towards a state without nation, a state which would no longer be founded on an ethnic community and its territory, therefore simultaneously towards a state without territory, towards a purely artificial structure of principles and authority which will have severed the umbilical cords of ethnic origin, indigenosity and rootedness.”<sup>6</sup> Here Žižek

invoked the subversive character of art, which, as such, can only serve an as-yet-nonexistent state.

The fact that former Yugoslav countries closed their borders to refugees and migrants even before the EU directly ordered them to do so indicates how eager present-day nation states are to obey their master's desire even before it is expressed—a gesture that erodes their governments' authority and power in the eyes of their own citizens.

### THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF EUROPE

Internationalism has been a complicated project so far. Even in the heady days of modernist internationalism, we can find artists adapting transnational styles to the established cultural patterns of their individual national cultures. Similarly, faced with the current situation in Europe, some artists have begun drawing attention to the ways that “universal values,” whether of humanity or art, sooner or later find themselves captive to a politics of exclusion. One finds a similar tension in play in current evocations of generally held European values, which are then paradoxically employed to bolster defenses of the member states' national identities. We may be compelled to ask whether the nation state simply *is* a defensive structure, a means of protection against difference or the unknown?

Slovenian artist Nika Autor, for example, points to the current situation as a *point de capiton*, or anchoring point—in so doing, revealing connections between landscape painting,

nationalism, modernism, and the current state of pervasive surveillance. Her work *Impressions: Landscapes: Paradise of Slovenia* (2011), for example, incorporated video and photography to reflect on how painting in the Impressionist style has often been recruited to serve nationalistic purposes, presenting romantic pictures of homeland, national symbols, and similar. Moreover, in Slovene art history, Impressionism has played a double role. On the one hand, it represents an international style that could provide local artists with an entrée into the modern world; on the other, it suggests the embrace of a rooted and wholly subjective world view, and even the identity of “genius”—with the paradox that such “originality” has been imported from elsewhere. Autor’s blurred landscapes look like Impressionist paintings, at least at first glance. Some discrepancies soon appear: these images are in black and white, not color; rather than manifest the artist’s individual view, they are derived from the video archive of Slovenia’s national public broadcasting system. Taken with heat-sensitive cameras, the footage registered the movement of bodies—including those of refugees—through the countryside. Autor shows us that the Slovenian landscape is mutable and alive, not something that can serve as a symbol of the nation’s eternal qualities. Indeed, since thermal cameras are intended for supervising the landscape and not picturing its beauty, which changes “naturally” only with the rhythm of the seasons, any change is therefore seen as “unnatural”—a disturbance requiring a potentially violent response.

The Slovenian landscape in this case is emblematic of the European landscape overall,

which now brandishes a shared European heritage against enemies from outside Europe. It is hardly an accident, for example, that Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" was adopted as the official "Anthem of Europe" in 1972 (and since 1993 the anthem of the EU). Inspired by a poem written by Friedrich Schiller in 1785 glorifying brotherhood among people, by the late twentieth century, Beethoven's composition seemed, contra Schiller's or Beethoven's universalist intentions, instead to celebrate Christianity as the common faith that unites all European nations—not brotherhood among all people but among all those who inhabit the same European culture and Christian religion.

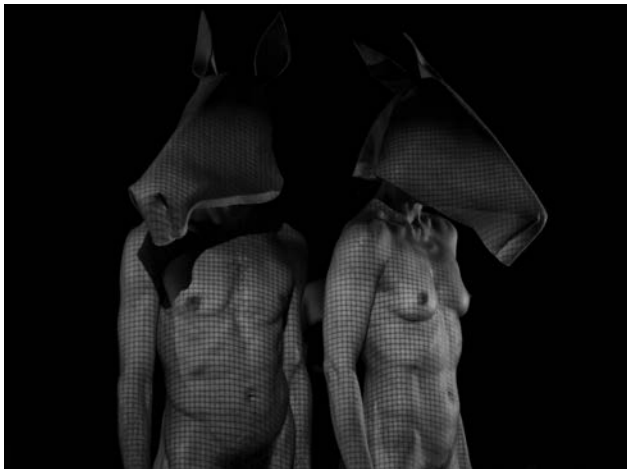
Indeed, "Ode to Joy" was read in this way by a theatrical production created by the Slovenian group Via Negativa. Titled *The Ninth*, the show's program features the usual commentaries on the piece, calling it "a masterpiece of Western civilization," "giant and complex," "sublime," a "striking example of the human spirit," and a "triumphant vision of brotherhood." This elevated language is placed in direct contrast with the play's own account:

Nothing great about us. Nothing sublime.  
Naked and suspicious. Not complex but  
reduced. Not sublime but explicit. Not  
romantic but digital. Switched on or switched  
off. Repetitive. Blinded by images that we've  
seen. Deaf from sounds that we've heard.  
Looking for a connection with the Animal.

The six performers in *The Ninth* wear horses' heads as digital patterns are projected onto

their nude bodies. Their movements are limited, cautious, repetitive. These are not human-animal hybrids but rather metaphors for what Europeans have become—what the dressage trainers of purebred Lipizzaner horses at the Habsburg court almost succeeded in creating. Lipizzaners, we should note, are named after the Slovenian village of Lipica, then under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (as was the whole of Slovenia at the time). However, the *Via Negativa* performance should be understood through the lens of the present, as referring to the current refugee crisis and the attendant European passion for the conservation of “purebred” culture. European wars and interference in the domestic affairs of Middle Eastern and African countries have contributed substantially to the problems that are forcing millions of people to abandon their homes. Few of the refugees arriving can be turned into perfectly trained Lipizzaners; most will be demeaned as terrorists or rapists—mere beasts.

*Via Negativa, The Ninth.*  
Performance at VN Theatre,  
Old Power Station, Ljubljana,  
2016





## CULTURE OVER ANIMALITY

Many believed that the closing of the Balkan refugee route meant that order had been established, and that our status as genuine Europeans had been restored. Speaking at the *Living with Genocide* symposium, the Austrian artist, theorist, and curator Peter Weibel argued that war and genocide were not exceptions to civilization but the results of it. “We must recognize,” he said, “that in our century it has been just this kind of strong identification that has created war by creating the other. Art therefore produced, as Freud called it, *Gefühlsbindung*, these emotional bonds between group members. Art is not against war. Only art which opposes identification processes, which does not produce *Gefühlsbindung*, which does not produce emotional bonds, is against war, against violence.”<sup>7</sup> According to Weibel, any art that contents itself with simply condemning violence and aspiring to purity and order thereby contributes to the reproduction of the very civilization that produces war.

7 Peter Weibel, “Anatomy of Art, Art and Power, Culture and Power, Complicity or Contradiction, Affiliation or Opposition,” *M’Ars* 11, no. 1–2, 56.

Identification processes are not one way but reciprocal in nature. Likewise, a self-image is not produced strictly from within the self but requires the incorporation of others’ gazes and impressions, imposed from “outside.” The Middle Eastern and African refugees who manage to obtain European citizenship will never be the same people they were before. We can look to the example of the experiences of Eastern European artists over the last twenty-five years—a period in which strategies of inclusion and exclusion based on difference have become more pronounced than in any previous moment in history—to help us understand

how the European gaze stands to shape the self-image of those it regards. Westerners saw Eastern Europeans as less civilized, still ruled by instinct. Such subjects would not be fully incorporated by European integration policies but would be required to shake off their instinct and irrationality, their quasi-animality, to become useful members of the regulated world. Accordingly, some Eastern European artists have chosen not to deny animal nature but rather to foreground it as a critique.

One of the clearest statements on this issue was made by the Russian artist Oleg Kulik, who in his performances in the 1990s would sometimes adopt the persona of a dog. In 1996, at the opening of the exhibition *Interpol*, this identification went a step too far. The show, which was hosted by the Färgfabriken Contemporary Art Center in Stockholm, was ostensibly dedicated to dialogue between Eastern and Western artists, but Kulik and another Russian artist, Alexander Brener, took to attacking and biting visitors before being removed from the venue by the police. These actions were interpreted by some critics as proof of cultural collapse and the end of humanism, while others pointed out that museum-goers were happy to consume Kulik as a “decorative art-object,” affirming Russians’ savage life, but only on the condition that he does not behave in a truly dog-like manner and start biting.<sup>8</sup>

8 The Slovene philosopher and sociologist Renata Salecl wrote of the performance that, “[I]t can be said that the West finds an aesthetic pleasure in observing the Russian ‘dog,’ but only on the condition that he does not behave in a truly dog-like

We might read the work in still another way. Kulik’s intent was of course not just to present himself as a victim but to agitate for a different style of communication. Finding everyday

manner. When Kulik ceased to be a decorative art-object—the Eastern neighbor who represents the misery of the Russian dog-like life—and started to act in a way that surprised his admirers, he quickly became designated the enemy.” See “Love Me, Love My Dog,” *Index: Scandinavian Art and Culture*, no. 3–4 (1996): 117.

language and narration insufficient, he resorted to shock tactics literally to engage with the audience. In addition to commenting on East-West communication, Kulik’s animal projects carry a deeply ecological message, and a critique of anthropocentrism. The artist has repeatedly advocated for a society in which animals are to receive the same treatment as humans.

The charge of being uncivilized and uncultured is one that has been leveled at nations at the margins of Europe throughout history; these characteristics were also invoked to account for the most recent Balkan wars. Particularly after the collapse of communism, and during the wars that followed, artists from Eastern Europe have been testing, firsthand, the extent to which borders can be truly open and walls brought down between the two Europes.

Artists with the experience of migration share, above all, a sense of a loss of human dignity. Why a person has been forced from their home country, whether because of war, economic crisis, climate change, cultural isolation, or national stigma, hardly matters. After the last Balkan war, many artists from the former Yugoslavia emigrated to the West. Many of them were Serbian and, because of the negative role their country played in the wars, they needed visas and were generally subject to restrictive immigration policies. In response, in 2000, Serbian artist Tanja Ostojić published an online advertisement: a photograph in which she appeared naked, with a shaved head and body, captioned, “Looking for a Husband with EU Passport,” with an email address for those interested in volunteering.

Thanks to this ad, Ostojić did marry a German artist and was granted temporary residence in Germany—first for three months, then for three years, after which her permit was extended, this time for another two years, instead of being converted into permanent residence. Over five years, from 2000 to 2005, this project offered a firsthand test of European immigration policies. The image used by Ostojić was deliberately shocking—her naked, emaciated appearance was intended to draw attention to what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has described as the “bare life” of those not accorded rights of citizenship.<sup>9</sup> In his book *The Open: Man and Animal*, Agamben points out that biopolitics, or the administration of life, has been present in Western politics since Greek antiquity; Aristotle’s *Politics* conflated human life with the life of a citizen in the polis.<sup>10</sup> What exists outside this political frame? Only deities and animals, that is, the lives of nonhuman beings. Understood in this way, life itself is a raw material in the hands of political power, serving only self-reproduction of governing institutions.

9 See Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). First published in Italian in 1995.

10 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

## THE COLLECTIVISM OF UNSTABLE RELATIONS

Now that the Balkan refugee route is closed and refugees are being transferred to Europe in a more orderly fashion and in drastically limited numbers, per the terms of the EU-Turkey agreement, it is incomprehensible why razor-wire fences still line our borders. It is difficult to look at them and not think of prisons or concentration camps. Or, another impression: two ships with passengers mutely observing each other as they



Tanja Ostojić, *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport*, 2000–2005. Installation view, *The Present and Presence*, an exhibition of the *Arteast 2000+ Collection*, Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM), 2011–12

pass by, paranoid Slovenians in one, the stream of refugees on the other. These “ships” have more in common than might be apparent at first glance. Both sides have lost their communities, their homes, and their solidarity with other people—a sense replaced by the EU’s values of austerity and “security.”

It would be difficult to claim that life in Eastern Europe today is better than it was in the socialist era. Particularly in underprivileged communities, to which many artists belong, the deterioration of living and working conditions, which were already precarious, have accelerated since the economic collapse of 2008. Faced with crises—economic, ecological, political—artists have been obliged to invent new structures of mutual support, and have returned to the subject of collectivity. These projects have been made possible by the increasing use of social media,

among other things. As early as the beginning of the 1990s, the development and widespread use of digital technologies inspired some Eastern European artists to return to the utopian thinkers and scientists of the early twentieth century, who had been interested in environments outside of our planet, where global administration of human life prevailed.

All of this has led to new forms of awareness—for example, the ecological awareness that we are not the only inhabitants of earth, and that our “environment” has long ceased to be limited to Earth—and a new set of post-humanist ideas. As living standards worsen and xenophobia and even fascism begin to thrive (once again) in Europe, exploration of post-human ideas, such as a community with the dead, the “culturalization” of space, or political parties representing animals, may appear as so many ways to evade reality.<sup>11</sup> Yet it seems instead that these utopian ideas may constitute a significant understanding of the crises provoked by the failure of capitalism. Whatever the outcomes of these crises, change on a global scale seems inevitable, and therefore requires preparation—including through investigating the potential forms of collectivity already extant in our present-day reality. In this way, future forms of collectivity will clearly be shaped by our current crises, and by the fact that these emergencies will take shape, in part, as short- or long-term states of rebellion.

It is artists who have started to imagine that future, drawing upon some of the post-humanist ideas mentioned above—for example, by pointing out the limits of rationality, or by questioning the

11 Such explorations have been undertaken by various artists in Slovenia and Russia, such as Anton Vidokle (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQ4NKajfdwE>) and Dragan Živadinov, Dunja Zupančič, and Miha Turšič ([http://www.culture.si/en/Delak\\_Institute](http://www.culture.si/en/Delak_Institute)), invoking, among other sources, the early-twentieth-century tradition of Russian cosmism, particularly to writings by Nikolai Fyodorov. Similar topics have been addressed by thinkers such as Boris Groys (<http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/authors/boris-groys/>) and Keti Chukrov (<http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/authors/keti-chukhrov/>).

presumption that the fate of the planet depends exclusively on a somewhat fantastical “good human being,” who is part of a population that can expand forever without causing problems. What if what is needed is *less* humanity? Whatever the case, it is necessary to start thinking beyond anthropocentrism—since nonliving nature, flora and fauna, are subject to our reality, but not part of governing it. These forces, along with all those who have been pushed aside and humiliated, must join forces to resist the dominant forces of capital.

Some humanitarian, artistic, and cultural projects have been outspoken and critical about the new walls and fences sprouting up around Europe, of mounting xenophobia, of the lack of empathy in the bureaucratic treatment of refugees. An often-voiced criticism is that officials and the media completely depersonalize the refugees. Journalists opposed to this trend have focused on the disturbing stories of the fates suffered by individuals or families, and some artists have focused on creating refugees’ portraits to foreground their humanity. These strategies attempt to highlight similarities between “us” and “them”—that these are people with jobs and homes, that among them are intellectuals and artists—with a view toward showing that they are productive individuals who can be integrated into European society.

While individual stories are important, however, attention to them alone can blur the collective nature of the current crisis. The laudable concern with the refugees as individuals often stops at humanitarian gestures, leaving the political potential of the refugees’ collective

presence overlooked. This potential lies in the commonality of their problems and ours, in recognizing the common interests of refugees and underprivileged Europeans, potentially leading to calls for more radical changes in European society and for a return to a form of community based on solidarity and equality.

Indeed, as the welfare state of the twentieth century seems to be dying, artists are taking up questions of the very sociality which, per Croatian cultural critic Boris Buden, has ceased to exist. Buden writes, “While the social utopia of the past was prospective, the cultural utopia of the present is retrospective. Nowadays, the possibility of a better world only opens up in a utopian retrospective.”<sup>12</sup> This retroactive experience, or yearning, for a more just form of social life, is now increasingly manifest. Artists themselves, now subject to multiple definitions and impacted by new constructs of history, have become highly sensitized to questions such as who makes history, how to revive emancipatory traditions, and how to use art as a tool to preserve the memory of those ignored by history.

12 Boris Buden, “Prihodnost: utopija po koncu utopije” [Future: Utopia beyond the end of utopias], in *Cona preboda: O koncu postkomunizma* [Zone of transition: On the end of postcommunism] (Ljubljana: Krt, 2014), 156.

Yugoslav artists have been especially attentive to such matters. For example, the latter question was central to a project conceived by Serbian artist Đorđe Balmazović, who, from 2013 to 2015, visited various refugee asylums in Serbia with a view to drawing maps of their routes to Europe. Balmazović argues that participants in the project in addition to the refugees—Belgrade Group 484 and other artists—did not wish to see migrants through the lens of humanitarian paternalism, as victims, but rather as courageous individuals



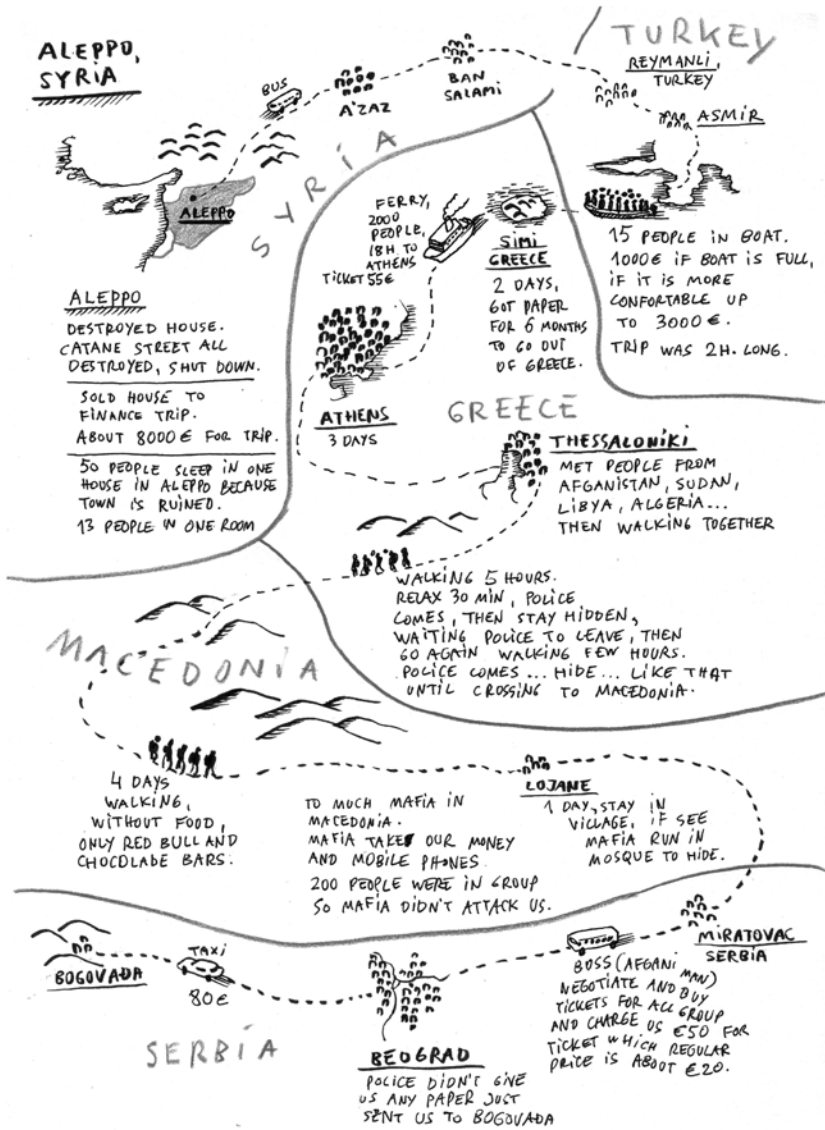
who had initiated radical change in their lives by fleeing war. Hence, his maps also incorporate information about why the respective refugees undertook their journeys, what hardships they faced, how they crossed borders, how much they paid smugglers, and their experiences with the police and inhabitants of the countries they had traveled through. The drawings bear written inscriptions, including:

From Somalia, grew up in Saudi Arabia but there was no future. Not given citizenship only permission to stay.

We left deposit of €9000 for smugglers to help crossing the borders. Deposit should be left in the Western Union or to friends in mobile shop.

6 hours walking through jungle. Border police here is tougher.

Even limited to bare facts, Balmazović's representations offer a scathing portrayal of the absence of humane asylum policies in Europe. While the refugees themselves are pictured schematically, with children or bags on their backs, their transcribed oral accounts highlight a multiplicity of histories, including the histories of those not typically entitled to write them. The Balkan route is where the common interests of all migrants in the world can be recognized: the interests of those who have lost their homes, as well as those bereft of society and history, and, therefore, bereft not only of the conditions for a better life but of their dreams for the future.



Dorde Balmazović and the Škart collective, *Map Drawn from Account of an Asylum Seeker in Bogovadja, Serbia*, 2013–15. Digital image from drawing on paper

UTOPIA BEYOND THE END  
OF UTOPIAS<sup>13</sup>

13 This section's title is taken from the title of the third chapter of Buden's book, *ibid.*

Identifying common interests that could become the foundation for different communities seems to be one of art's foremost tasks today. Not that art has much influence on the present, but it can impact the future. Eastern European avant-gardes have a close connection to utopian ideas—as did Communism, which, despite Marx's criticism of utopian thinkers, drank deep at the utopian well. Reflected in art, this utopian heritage was evident, for example, in the NSK State in Time, founded by member groups of the collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) in 1992, just after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the creation of the new nation of Slovenia.<sup>14</sup>

14 In 1984, three groups—the multimedia group Laibach (established 1980), the visual arts group IRWIN (1983), and the theater group The Sisters of Scipio Nasica Theater (1983–1987)—founded the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) art collective. That day, the three groups founded a fourth, the design department New Collectivism. Later, NSK established other subdivisions, such as the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy, Retrovision, Film, and Builders.

Earlier I quoted Slavoj Žižek from NSK's 1993 Venice Biennale catalogue. As I have described elsewhere in this book, soon after its inception, NSK State began issuing passports, which mimicked real ones in form and content. Since then, over fifteen thousand people from all over the globe have filled in the forms and attached the photographs required for acquisition of citizenship of this artistic state. Most hail from the world of art; many are fans of Laibach. Yet a significant percentage also hail from regions devastated by past or present wars, characterized by repressive regimes and poor economic conditions. Some of the first NSK citizens in the early 1990s were inhabitants of the besieged Bosnian city of Sarajevo. Some discovered that their NSK passports were useful in crossing borders before the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina won international recognition, since their Bosnian

passports were insufficient. At a time when new states were being established in the region, border control officials must have been faced with daily uncertainty about which documents were legitimate representation of citizenship; this opened a loophole through which, for a time, NSK citizens could walk.

Then, in 2007, thousands of Nigerian requests for NSK passports flooded NSK's official address in Ljubljana. The cause was a little enigmatic, but certainly poor conditions of life in Nigeria had provoked an exodus of dramatic proportions, while a Nigerian passport allowed rather limited possibilities for crossing borders. This desperate situation may explain what brought many Nigerians to the NSK State website, where they applied for passports. (What is less clear is how useful these passports would have been for them.) Regardless, applicants for NSK passports flooded the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with phone calls asking about visas and the rights of NSK citizens. This was obviously a misunderstanding on a massive scale, but it confronted IRWIN with moral questions and dilemmas for which they were not prepared.

Among these dilemmas was the price of the passports, which barely exceeded their costs of production. This was not expensive for Europeans but was onerous for Nigerian applicants. The very fact that the latter were prepared to pay demonstrated how highly they perceived the value of these documents. The situation reached the point where NSK members were obliged to publish a disclaimer on their website, stating that the passports were not official documents,

but rather part of an artistic project. In acknowledgement of the political ramifications of the situation, IRWIN traveled to London, home to many Nigerian migrants, where they held a public discussion to clarify the status of their passports and to learn about the motives of Nigerian applicants. In 2010, IRWIN carried out a similar discussion in Nigeria.

IRWIN with Nigerian NSK passport holders, London, 2007



The NSK State in Time is a project with a double ontology: an artwork on the one hand, a useful object on the other. Persisting in real time, it will encounter various social realities that are outside its control. It could be said that its citizens often take things into their own hands, building unprecedented communities of their citizens. These communities have not formed based on a uniform principle, whether nation, religion, culture, or identity. Rather, they are what individual citizens need or want them to be. Whereas in the past art served a community by facilitating its self-recognition and by bestowing meaning on an otherwise happenstance existence, the art of persistence-in-time, as exemplified by

the NSK State in Time, constitutes a location where a more-or-less accidental community can arise. This is a community whose individual members might meet occasionally to take stock of a social moment, or to deal, by means of art, with a concrete social obstacle.

### CULTURE AS BECOMING-COMMON

One can imagine that a future society based on more dynamic and open structures might function in a similar way. The Austrian theorist Gerald Raunig, for instance, writes of the “productions of the common,” which he argues cannot be understood as an achieved state (*being-common*) but rather as a continual process: *becoming-common*.<sup>15</sup> If such a becoming-common is taken to include culture, it would mean that, in the unstable relations of present-day Europe, culture is not a matter of *being*—continuity and purity—but *becoming*: about discontinuities and heterogeneity. As for the bearers of culture, they have long ceased to be recruited exclusively from members of European nations; more and more they are individuals caught up in unstable identities and collectives, increasingly capable of organizing their own conditions for social interaction—and thus for a different culture.

15 Raunig’s concept of the common is based on the Italian post-Operaist theory that argues that “the sphere of the public” has been moving from the field of politics into the field of production, which increasingly assumes “the modulation of social cooperation.” A question that follows from this is how to re-territorialize the values of social collaboration that post-Fordist production had co-opted. Raunig argues that an answer lies in the institutions of the common, which for him means more than shared wealth. Following Negri and Hardt, it means “those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledge, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth.” See Raunig, “Flatness Rules: Inherent Practices and Institutions of the Common in a Flat World,” in *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, ed. Pascal Gielen (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013), 11–35.

# Sites of Sustainability

## INTRODUCTION

This essay was produced to accompany a display of artworks at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Germany, most from Moderna galerija's Artest 2000+ Collection. The presentation was part of a larger exhibition called *Hello World: Revising a Collection*, which posed questions about the museum and collecting practices at a time when the processes of globalism have had a pervasive effect on how art institutions work. Conceived in dialogue with the Hamburger Bahnhof, this chapter of the larger exhibition presented works by crucial art collectives of the Eastern European postwar avant-garde under the rubric *Sites of Sustainability: Pavilions, Manifestos and Crypts*.

Any contemporary museum that seeks to confront its colonial past and overcome current geopolitical divisions is faced with the problem of its collection. What logic will drive new acquisitions? How will such works be presented? How will they be organized and conserved? How can institutions sharing such critical commitments showcase artworks from disparate cultural spaces and geographical regions in the right way?



*Hello World: Revising a Collection.* Exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2018, including works by Kazimir Malevich, Belgrade (left), Vadim Zaharov (right), and Mladen Stilinović (middle)

These questions and others are best answered in dialogue with agents from the communities that produced the works in question. An exhibition like *Hello World* is, therefore, more than just a display of artworks: it is a manifestation of inter-institutional dialogue and self-reflection.

By presenting the collection of one museum (Moderna galerija) at another (Hamburger Bahnhof), *Sites of Sustainability* makes visible the specificity of the distinct models of cultural production each museum represents. The selected works are placed in dialogue with those chosen



from the host museum's collection, but, rather than juxtapose them using similarities in form or theme, this dialogue focuses on the histories of exhibitions—in particular, self-organized international projects and artists' networks in Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Our approach to presenting relatively autonomous modes of production from Eastern Europe made in the decades after World War II has been to shape a "site of sustainability." The display is inspired by how the artists in the exhibition treated material production as the very form of the artwork; we did not view the conditions of production as something extrinsic to the work but, rather, as essential to it, or part of it. In this way, art was understood to be a condition of its own production, a site of its own sustenance, and a means of its own survival.

This description inevitably raises certain questions. How can an art object incorporate its own production? How can survival be inscribed in the artwork itself? Where would such qualities even be located? They are not to be found in the material object, or not there alone. Rather, the "location" of postwar avant-garde art involved everything that allowed this art to be perceived as art—including the collective modalities of production, discussion, correspondence, and decision-making. These conditions also included the works' conditions of public life: their staging in artist-run spaces and improvised venues, art supply stores and shop windows, basements, private apartments and studios, city streets and the countryside. Written manifestos, *samizdat* publications, artist's books, and journals were also important sites of production.

These were often the only places or contexts in which these artists could show their works. Arguably the site of this art was civil society itself, the collective habitus so typical of socialist countries. Because these artistic practices were often “decentered” in nature and incorporated duration and various forms of relationship, at the Hamburger Bahnhof we came up with a flexible structure of display, one that allowed us to “locate” this art (at least conceptually), and that facilitated thinking through it. We decided upon the architectural model of the pavilion, a temporary, mobile structure.

Pavilions have a specific resonance in the history of exhibitions: they have been used by individual nations for expositions, to present work that testifies to the nation’s sovereignty. The most famous example is the Venice Biennale, where such national displays continue, despite the recent erosion of belief in the sovereignty of individual states, or the purity of national art, and notwithstanding the increased homogenization of the world (and its cynical ideologies of difference). Our use of the form therefore called up further questions. From what position, national or otherwise, do we speak? What, exactly, are we safeguarding when we sustain the specificity of geographic spaces? Is cultural belonging an absolute value, or just another consumer slogan?

At the same time—and distinct from the questionably “eternal” values of nation-states—a pavilion is a temporary construction. It is easy to assemble and to dismantle. Left behind after its initial occasion, a pavilion can easily be repurposed to house new contents with no allegiance to its

original builder's intent. Indeed, we were inspired by one such pavilion, the *Sintgalerija* (Synth Gallery), built by the Slovenian artist group OHO in 1966. The *Sintgalerija* was a portable pavilion set up in different spaces of the University of Ljubljana to present art. Like OHO, we were critical of the idea of the display space as a somehow hermetic or self-sufficient environment; art, we thought, must be seen in relationship to other systems.

Finally, we were interested in the pavilion as something usually outside or alongside the main building; these off-site structures are places where alternate ideas can be formed and where those in power might lay down their problems. Such an exterior space might be imagined to be a "site of difference," a crucial position from which institutions' inevitability might be questioned.

## SUSTAINABILITY

As we are using it here, sustainability is not (or not only) a matter of an ecological sensibility. Rather, it involves inventing an alternative model of cultural production and social interactions that enable the shaping of tools for understanding and perceiving the world, or tools for the reproduction of society. From the immediate aftermath of World War II until the fall of socialism, avant-garde artists in socialist countries attempted to form self-sustained environments outside the control of authorities and the limits of the existing cultural establishment.

Some groups, like Gorgona and OHO, set up their own economies, to generate a subtle commentary on the contradictions of socialism. Essentially, they set up arrangements that, at least in miniature,

were more truly socialist than the comparatively market-driven economies of their nations. Gorgona collected membership fees to fund the organization of exhibitions in the framing shop Salon Šira, and to aid members when necessary; these fees differed based on individual members' ability to pay. OHO developed an economy that produced no profit. Their leading member, Marko Pogačnik, sold plaster casts of everyday objects and matchboxes on which the artist had produced drawings or collaged elements, selling them for whatever price he'd paid for them. (Of course, such approaches were better at sustaining the life of the artist's idea than the day-to-day existence of the artist.)

Such collectivism, which played out in both formal and informal groupings in the postwar decades, was in some ways closer to the ideals of socialism than had been realized in organized socialist society. Collectivism, however, had many faces under socialism. While it stimulated cooperation and solidarity among workers, it also served as a justification and excuse for brutal expropriations and impoverishment, particularly in countries with more repressive regimes. Consider Ion Grigorescu's fictional filmed *Dialogue with President Ceausescu* (1978). In the film, the Romanian dictator brags about having saved people from poverty by settling them into newly constructed apartment blocks, while conveniently omitting the fact that these self-same people had been evicted by the government in the first place. Interestingly, this was a rare example of a work dealing directly with an authority figure; most Eastern European artworks aimed, instead, to expose the mechanisms of governance.

Ion Grigorescu, *Dialogue with Nicolae Ceaușescu*, 1978. Still from 8mm film transferred to 16mm film, 7:11 min. Collection Moderna galerija, Ljubljana



## REPEATING THE MECHANISMS OF GOVERNANCE

As I have argued elsewhere, different socialist countries afforded different freedoms to their citizens. Under self-management socialism in Yugoslavia, people had more freedom, while in countries under direct Soviet influence, there was far less. Regardless of such differences, restrictions on freedom came from a *centralized* power. This is somewhat hard to envision today when power is exerted immanently and biopolitically, in our very pores, as it were—even as the ideology of the free market seems to prevail everywhere. Today, power is everywhere and nowhere, and it is increasingly difficult to parse freedom from non-freedom.

The Slovene philosopher Mladen Dolar has suggested that resisting such decentralized power requires first recognizing it:

If we are to devise an effective strategy against the mechanisms of governance affecting us in all areas and ways, the first step should be to recognize these mechanisms in operation, and not be fooled by the optics that offer a monarch, sovereignty, law, and repression as their mysterious and fundamental distinctions.<sup>1</sup>

1 Mladen Dolar, *Kralju odsekati glavo: Foucaultova dediščina* [Cutting off the king's head: Foucault's heritage] (Ljubljana: Krtina, 2009), 9.

The postwar avant-gardes had, in a way, done exactly this—not by criticizing power but by appropriating the imagery, organizational forms, and technics of the state and ideology. By allowing their audience to “recognize [governmental] mechanisms in operation,” they challenged all aspects of society: education, history, culture, and so on. At the same time, by developing independent economies, running their own spaces, forming international networks, creating their own archives, museums, and even nation-states, these avant-gardes shone a spotlight on the deficiencies of the mechanisms of governance—precisely by existing independently from them. This double approach remains relevant today: by adopting some of the techniques of authority, art can provide a more complex accounting of power and how it transforms us; by building independent means of sustenance, art was positioned to correct, rather than merely to criticize, actually existing socialism.

## MANIFESTOS

Almost all the groups presented in this exhibition wrote manifestos, in part continuing the spirit of the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. The French philosopher Alain Badiou has described such manifestos as “formulas for the real,” suspended between fixity and

unfixity—proscriptions that cannot be named as such, but only approached by language. As Badiou recounts, the avant-garde was trying to pin down the present, thereby to secure a novelty beyond repetition; their works were uncertain, “almost vanished before they are even born.” But this contingency was “conserved in the theory, the commentary, the declaration.”<sup>2</sup>

2 Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2007), 137.

Artistic manifestos written in socialist countries—perhaps distinct from the general form—were composed in environments rich with agitational slogans, each one calling for immediate action. While these slogans had real charge in the early years after the revolution, soon they turned into empty catchphrases. This led artists to approach their manifestos in specific ways. Some wrote sincere manifestos, of course, but others used the emptied-out form of the manifesto and the political slogan as material for their work.

An example of the latter style can be seen in the work of Mladen Stilinović, who began exploiting such ideological language in the early 1970s, paraphrasing radical language in a way that revealed its vacuity. One slogan from his series *Red Era* (1973–90) declared that “attacking [his] art is attacking socialism and progress.” By appropriating the very diction of everyday political speech in socialist Yugoslavia, Stilinović exposed the true state of affairs—that the authorities were merely exploiting socialist ideas for demagogic purposes. Similarly, the Collective Actions Group, a Moscow-based collective led by Andrei Monastyrski, produced a series of performances entitled *Slogans* (1977). The artists made banners bearing agitprop or ideological

slogans and took them to the countryside outside Moscow in winter. Amid snow-covered fields, the slogans shed their ideological content; with only the slogan's form remaining, the artists could engage with them in a new way.

EXAT 51 produced more direct manifestos, announcing their break with tradition and the arrival of the new. Written three years after Yugoslavia had rejected the Soviet model of socialism, EXAT 51's manifesto proclaimed that a society seeking to stimulate progress in all fields of human activity also needed to fight against obsolete ideas and mediums in the visual arts. The group's primary target was socialist realism, which had become the "ideologically correct" style under Soviet domination. Their manifesto proposed that abstract art might better represent Yugoslav socialist society and point the way for a synthesis of fine art, architecture, and design. This, as they saw it, would in turn popularize art with the masses.

The new aesthetics they advocated were on view in the pavilions that Vjenceslav Richter, an architect and member of EXAT 51, designed for world's fairs. His pavilion for *Expo 58*, held in Brussels, promoted Yugoslavia as an open, socialist, and modern society, self-managed and free of the Soviet yoke. In the early 1960s, some members of EXAT 51 joined New Tendencies, an international movement centered on advanced artistic theories and practices. New Tendencies organized a series of events, exhibitions, symposia, and publications at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb between 1961 and 1973, inspiring international respect. Per Darko Fritz, a scholar



of the movement, New Tendencies did pioneering work in the development of information aesthetics, and, furthermore, served as an important self-organized international network of artists. In the darkest years of the Cold War, New Tendencies drew together artists, curators, and theorists from East and West Europe, the United States, the Soviet Union, South America, Africa, and Asia.<sup>3</sup>

3 Darko Fritz, "New Tendencies," *Oris* (Zagreb) 54 (2008): 176–91, [http://darkofritz.net/text/Fritz.NT\\_oris%2054.pdf](http://darkofritz.net/text/Fritz.NT_oris%2054.pdf).

In countries with more repressive regimes, it was necessary to organize parallel social spaces that would allow for more freedom. In Poland, for example, artists Andrzej Kostołowski and Jarosław Kozłowski used the mail system to organize a parallel social sphere with international dimensions under the name NET. Their manifesto was sent out to 350 recipients worldwide, including artists associated with conceptual art and Fluxus, along with the Polish artists' mailing list; mail soon began to arrive from all over the world. Seeking to further share these materials and the ideas therein, the artists staged a presentation at Kozłowski's private apartment in Poznań in May 1972—but the event was stopped by Polish secret police, who accused the artists of forming an anti-state anarchist organization. Eventually the dust settled and, within the year, the seized material was partly returned; later it was presented at a students' club where Kozłowski had established his gallery *Akumulatory 2* (1972–89).

"NSK State in Time," written by dramaturg and writer Eda Čufer and the artist group IRWIN, is also a manifesto of sorts, and imagines a similar sort of global community. It includes the statement, "Neue Slowenische Kunst—Art in the image of the state—revives the trauma of

avant-garde movements by identifying with it in the stage of their assimilation in the systems of totalitarian states.” Unlike the manifestos of earlier avant-gardes, these artists were not interested in undermining tradition or institutions. Rather, they appropriated institutionalized gestures, symbols, and images, divested them of established meanings, and replaced them with suggestions for an alternative art and institutions—and, as the quote suggests, an alternative state.

### SELF-HISTORICIZATION

With such statements, NSK accorded to itself tasks usually performed by the government. One of the NSK groups, IRWIN, dedicated itself to the construction of history, becoming chroniclers, archivists, and historians of the work of the NSK groups, as well as other local avant-gardes otherwise omitted from the national narrative. The Slovenian writer Jela Krečič has pointed out that “the shaping of an archive and the reinterpretation of the history of art ... is a political gesture, indeed a gesture of the ruling power *par excellence*.”<sup>4</sup> We can find similar self-organizing approaches throughout the Eastern European avant-gardes of the late twentieth century, often compensating for the absence of cultural institutions that would do this work. Now, however, the historicization of Eastern European art is substantially supported by EU programs that facilitate the flow of content toward building a common European heritage. Though this project is still in its early stages, it already exerts pressure on those avant-gardes that sought to build their own narratives—threatening to absorb them or erase them.

4 Jela Krečič, “NSK Manifestos and Programmes,” in *NSK from Kapital to Capital: Neue Slowenische Kunst—An Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac, Eda Čufer, and Anthony Gardner (Ljubljana: Moderna galerija; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 371.

## INSTITUTION BUILDING

To avoid this risk, one must not leave the historicization of Eastern European avant-gardes to the administrative logic of EU programs or other such forces. Rather, institutions in the East must formulate a model of museum suitable to the task. In doing so, we can take inspiration from artistic practices that I have described as *institution building*. This term refers to art that in the Western context might be classified as institutional critique, though describing it in that way would obscure its important differences. Artists in the West aimed to correct existing institutions; artists in the East proposed the construction of a different type of institution.

Let us call up a few examples. Soon after the October Revolution, Kazimir Malevich called for the construction of a vast network of museums of contemporary art suited to post-revolutionary times. As he pictured it, this network was to span the entire geography of the new republic and be interconnected by a superhighway that would allow for the smooth circulation of exhibitions and audiences across great distances.<sup>5</sup> Later, after World War II, when avant-garde art was marginalized and even in some places persecuted, artists began collecting documentation of underground, or unofficial art, in order to locate their own work within the framework of local traditions (including the tradition of the avant-garde itself). Some of the most important were formed in the 1970s, including the archive of Polish artists Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek (who worked together for many years under the moniker Kwiekulik); Artpool, the

5 Maria Gough, "Futurist Museology," *Modernism/Modernity* 10, no. 2 (April 2003): 327–48, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/42437>.

archive of Hungarian artists György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay; the fictive archive of Július Koller in Slovakia; and, later, the archives of Vadim Zakharov (Russian art) and Lia Perjovschi (Romanian art).

Such projects envisioned alternate models of art history and art museums, which can offer both a critical perspective on the dominant models of our own moment and useful principles for historicizing Eastern European art now. We should, however, consider Boris Groys's cautionary advice on all of this. He describes the rapid process of museumization of the East currently taking place in the West, through numerous exhibitions and new collecting priorities, which have driven museum acquisitions. This process assumes, among other things, that the West "won" the Cold War, and therefore has a right to the (artistic) spoils.<sup>6</sup> Groys argues that such winners have always appropriated the art of conquered people. But if capitalism has indeed won, and thereby become truly global, the spoils of such a victory would be *the whole world*. What museum is capable of accommodating that? Where could the art of the whole world even be put?

6 Boris Groys, *Teorija sodobne umetnosti: Izbrani eseji* [Theories of contemporary art: selected essays] (Ljubljana: Študentska založba, Knjižna zbirka Koda, 2002), 100.

Such a museum, we should be clear, is impossible physically, but also conceptually. Rather than entertain such a fantasy proposition, we might instead change the existing model of the museum. In a text from 2016, Walter Benjamin points out two systematic problems museums are beginning to face: accumulation, or the prospect of infinite growth; and selection, or how to justify choosing anything if everything is eligible.<sup>7</sup> Per Benjamin, art museums are becoming obsolete; he points out that in the

7 The German critic Walter Benjamin died in 1944 by

committing suicide. A figure claiming this name and identity has been reappearing in public since 1986, giving lectures and interviews, and curating exhibitions. In other words, today Walter Benjamin seems to be both dead and alive, something like Schrödinger's cat in quantum physics. "Beyond Art Museums," Berlin 2016, from the Archive of the Museum of American Art-Berlin, was presented as part of the installation "The Museum of American Art," in the exhibition *Low Budget Utopias*, Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM), Ljubljana, 2016.

future, different sorts of spaces may be needed for recollecting the past, shaping memory, and understanding history—and this task may have little to do with art as such. In these future museums, art may be just one specimen among others.

## CRYPTS

The universalization of art has made subsuming that art under a universal history unsustainable. Alternative models of cultural production and collection, such as those mentioned above, may point contemporary institutions toward approaches that do not lead toward infinite expansion and the paralysis of choice. The question thus arises: what sort of institution might emerge from embracing such models, and what are the long-term effects?

Let us use as a case study the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM) [Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova]. This institution, which operates as part of Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, which I direct, stewards the Arteast 2000+ Collection, which focuses on contemporary art from Eastern Europe. Neither this relatively new museum, nor its collection, were part of Moderna galerija's mission. Founded in 1948, Moderna galerija was dedicated to the exhibition of national—that is, Slovene—art. By the end of the twentieth century, that nation had ceased to exist, and the paradigm of the national museum had itself begun to shift.

The Arteast 2000+ Collection was acquired chiefly through corporate sponsorship. In the early 2000s, business in the region was solid and companies

were eager to show their enterprising spirit by associating themselves with a cultural project that looked beyond national borders. Inaugurated in 2011 on the premises of a former Yugoslav army barracks, +MSUM was the outcome of this changing ideological context, more than of any national cultural policy. New circumstances had produced new artistic content that had no easy place within the premises of the existing collection, and that could not be fit neatly within the parameters set by the institution's founding mission.

A new situation had to be produced in which these artworks might find shelter. Aiming to become that refuge, +MSUM was co-financed by the EU's European Regional Development Fund, a program that aims to "strengthen economic and social cohesion in the European Union by correcting imbalances between its regions."<sup>8</sup> Applying for this funding required us to produce a precise and detailed program proposal. When it came to executing the project, however, the program we proposed turned out to be less important than a rigid adherence to deadlines and budget. This bureaucratic logic led to a building with incongruities, unnecessary fixtures, senseless fittings, and spaces with unclear purpose. We later invited the artist Marko Sančanin, who describes his practice as "institutional care," to consider some of these irrationalities.<sup>9</sup> Sančanin saw these spaces as "crypts," arcane spots guarding the truth of the building, as well as offering a position from which to reinterpret the institution that inhabits it.

How should we think about such a museum in the circumstances of a post-socialist world? How might we think about sustainability through

8 See "European Regional Development Fund," *ec.europa.eu*, undated, accessed September 26, 2018, [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/funding/erdf/](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/funding/erdf/).

9 Marko Sančanin developed the notion of institutional care alongside his ongoing project *Maintenance Works*, which he began in the exhibition *1:1 Stopover* at the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM), Ljubljana, 2013.



Marko Sančanin, *Maintenance Works*, 2013. Institutional care in process

Sančanin's perspective? The legacy of avant-garde art was secured in some way by art becoming its own process of production. Might a post-socialist institution survive by doing something similar? Such survival would demand more than simply finding new forms of income. Perhaps it is now time for the museum to repeat an artistic gesture, just as the postwar avant-gardes repeated the gesture of governance. This museum could imagine itself as a place with a purpose not yet named, a *becoming-museum*. Yet even such an institution-in-process has crypts—indeed, it relies on them to live on.



Illustrations by Nika von Ham (2018)



# My Post- Catastrophic Glossary

We had nice weather last week in Ljubljana, though I am unsure it still deserves that name. The young artist Nika von Ham and I were hanging out among the ruins of Moderna galerija and stretching our muscles. In the old days, Nika used to guard our collections. I remember she had a strange habit of laying down on the floor and posing for the security cameras. That, she remembers, was her art project. As we chatted, recounting the old days before the catastrophe, she recalled some useful things about the museum. I asked her if she would describe her recollections through drawing. Memories, after all, are the only thing left.

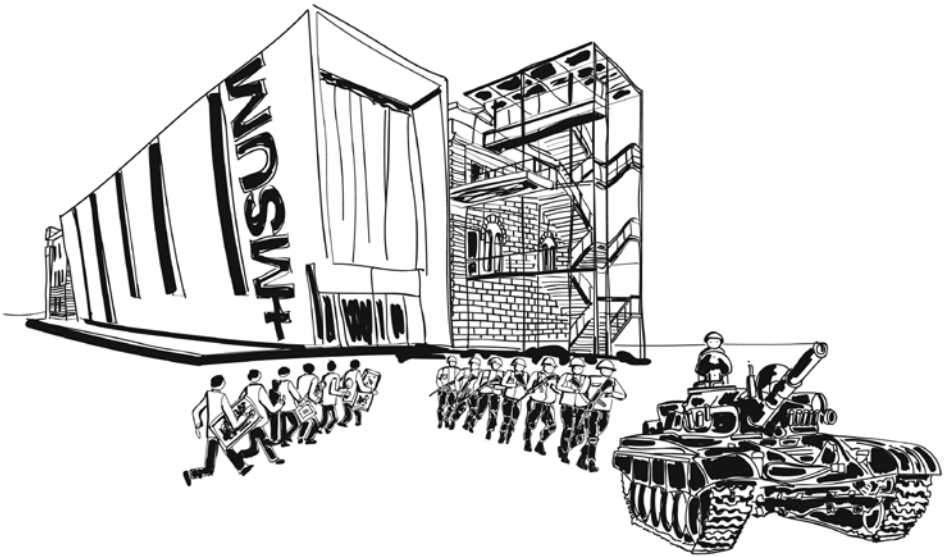






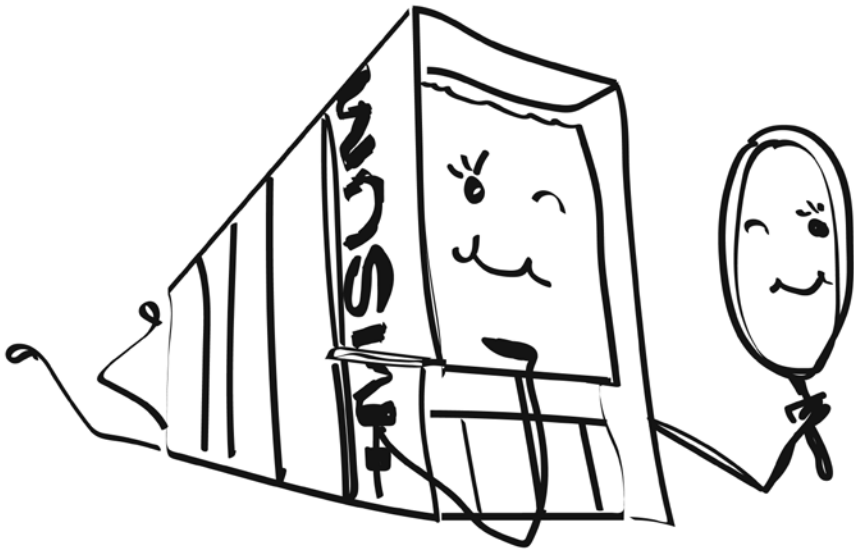
## DESTRUCTION

These days my thoughts often drift back to Malevich ... to his demand that all museums be burned to the ground. The only way the artworks they housed could be made relevant again, he said, was if they were incinerated—reduced to ashes, collected in jars, and placed in a pharmacy. Then, he allowed, contemporary artists could use them as a kind of medicine. I also think about Boris Groys, who sometimes reminded me that Malevich's black square touched on the essence of revolution. It was not constructive, it did not imagine a new society, but instead pictured the radical destruction of his society and, indeed, every existing society. As Boris described it, the black square was an image of that destruction; destruction is all that survives permanent change. As such, it countermanded all the imagery of construction that followed the revolution—and, indeed, the project of building an ideal communist society altogether. *Material forces are non-teleological*, Boris said; *they never attain their telos, never reach their end*. Destruction was the only thing Malevich expected from the future. Being a revolutionary artist, on Boris's terms, meant accepting a universal materialistic flow that destroyed all temporary and political orders.



## WAR TIME

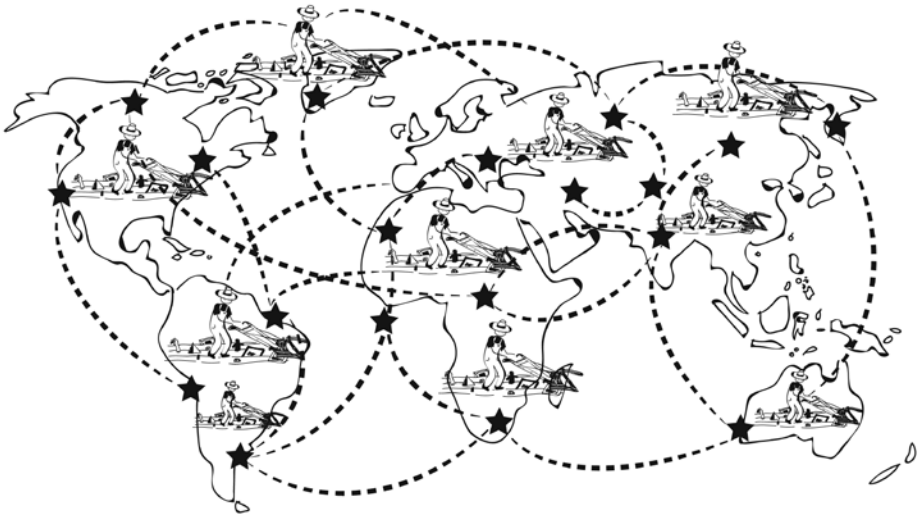
Today, we can speak only about one time, the time of catastrophe. When our museum still existed, we organized its collections around the idea of eleven times, one of which was the time of war. War time was the time of irruption; it brought contemporaneity. When the barracks of the Yugoslav People's Army were vacated after the army's departure of Slovenia, the building they left behind became a museum of contemporary art. The wars in the Balkans therefore directly inaugurated our contemporaneity. Every second there was a war happening somewhere in the '90s. Contemporary time, as we experienced it, *was* the time of war. How we should respond to war, and specifically the war in our vicinity, was thus a constant question. We assembled a symposium, called *Living with Genocide*, dedicated to the war in Bosnia and the genocide enacted against the Muslim population, and we organized an exhibition: artists donated their works to the future Ars Aevi museum in Sarajevo. Later this was called a museum of solidarity.





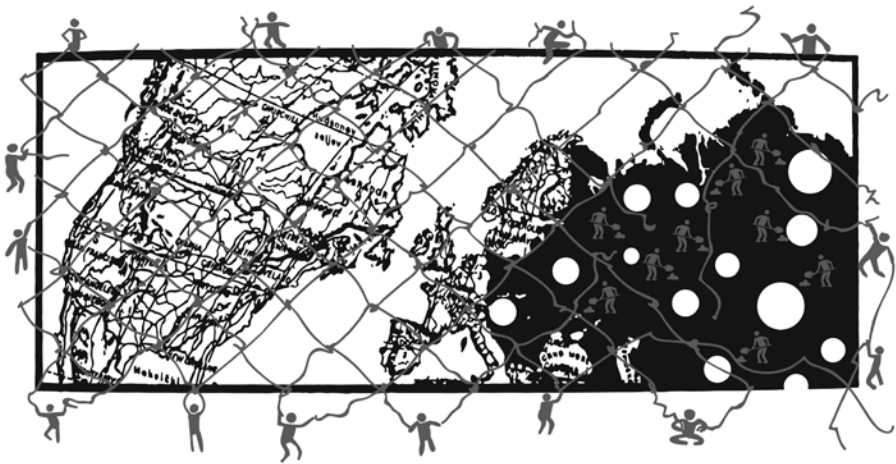
## THE SELF-REFLECTION OF THE MUSEUM

Those times, when a museum could be concerned with its own history, seem far away. Before the catastrophe, I believed the museum should be more open, should extend itself outward, into the world. At the same time, I thought it should be more and more concerned with itself, should understand itself as an independent system with its own history. Let me put it another way: a museum was a system that constantly reestablished its relationship toward the outside world. It did so by introducing certain strategies of art into the logic of its work. Not only did it represent art but it tried to observe itself from an outside position. By doing so, though, the museum was confronted by its own traumas and complicities: its instrumentalization by capitalism and ideology, its imbrication in hegemonic systems of knowledge. These pressures had only intensified before the catastrophe, taking forms that were new and hard to recognize.



## THE AUTHENTIC INTEREST OF THE MUSEUM

Everything is gone now. Yet I remember it so clearly, as if it was right in front of me. Long ago, my work concerned the need to reclaim concepts that had been absorbed by capitalism—ideas like “authenticity” that had come to seem useless or outdated. Capitalism was of two minds about authenticity. On the one hand, it was seen merely as an illusion. On the other, it was presented, within the world of consumption, however cynically, as a quality that commodities may nevertheless possess. We sought to reclaim the idea from this contradiction. Once the master narrative of the West began to crumble, and with it the universalist models of the museum, it became necessary to define the authentic interests of local institutions: their needs and the methods by which they could join international networks. Making connections was the imperative of the time, and it required adjusting to the circulation systems of global capitalism. Authentic interest meant the opposite: a kind of not-adjusting to global capitalist norms. This had little to do with either the cultivation of traditional identities or with isolationism. Rather, we sought connections of a different kind, with institutions and with people around the world who shared our urgencies.



## HISTORICIZATION

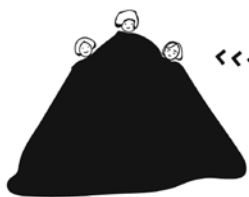
It seemed at the time that capitalism would last forever. Our museum aimed to resist that system, and the cultural hegemonies that had grown from it. I was committed to the historicization of Eastern European art; that word, historicization, had a specific meaning in my work. It was associated with what was then arriving to history: not only new information into an existing system of knowledge but new ways of thinking that would necessarily transform that system. One of the aims of this kind of historicization was to oppose the single master narrative of history. I imagined a form of history that was not linear, that did not speak of mastery. Historicization was history-in-process, constantly supplementing and interrupting itself.

## Local Avantgarde



## SELF-HISTORICIZATION

To this idea I added the notion of self-historicization—an idea that emerged from my encounter with certain features of Eastern European art in the socialist era. The local institutions of the non-Western world, when they existed at all, took a dismissive attitude toward such art. Self-historicization was an informal system practiced by artists who, in the absence of any suitable collective history, were compelled to search for their own historical and interpretive contexts. Artists archived documents of their own work, of other artists, of broad art movements and their conditions of production. In the post-socialist period, this practice continued, but assumed new forms and took on new subjects. Critical toward new forces in society that aimed to instrumentalize history, their subjects included the cultural legacy of socialism and, among artists living in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav partisan movement.



1960  
NEW ARTISTIC PRACTICES



1991  
WAR IN SLOVENIA



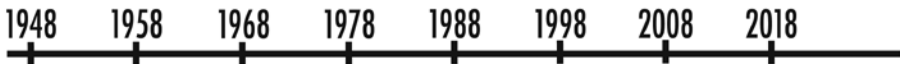
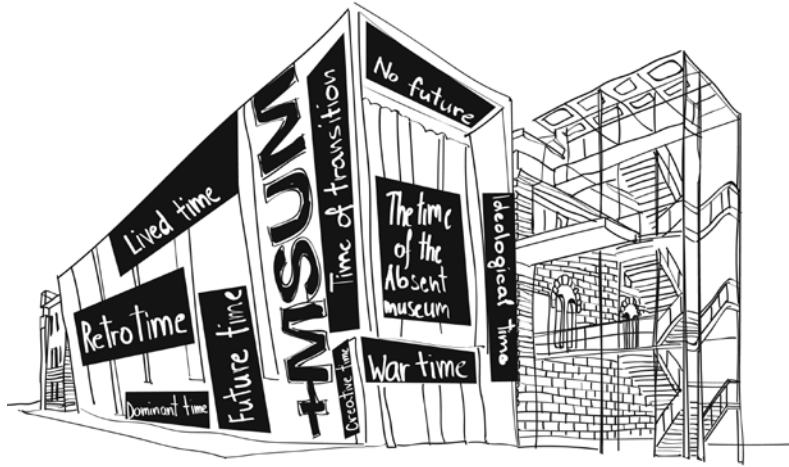
## CONTEMPORARY ART

I remember it vividly. In 2011, we started operating in two locations—not only in the existing Moderna galerija but now also in the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM) [Museum of Contemporary Art]. Working across these two sites made it necessary for us to define the difference between a modern museum and a museum of contemporary art. As I thought about it then, contemporary art had two beginnings. The first came in the 1960s with the introduction of conceptual art, Land art, and performance art—or, as we called all of this in Yugoslavia, new art practices. These artists assumed a critical position toward modernism, including its central concepts of the autonomy of art, the originality of the artwork, and the neutrality of the white cube. A second beginning then arrived in the early 1990s with the fall of the communist regimes, the acceleration of the processes of globalization, and the expanded use of digital technology. Contemporaneity was therefore not easily demarcated in simple chronological terms. It did not have just one beginning. Contemporary art engaged most deeply with matters associated with its second beginning: the processes of globalization and their impact on individual local spaces; the instrumentalization of technology, science, ecology, and other forms of knowledge; the colonization of the private sphere; marginalized art traditions; and searching out the potentials of emancipatory social political traditions.



## THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Before the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, museums looked primarily to the past, and largely organized art into national schools. With the founding of MoMA, the museum's director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., inaugurated a new understanding of history that differed significantly from that model: a genealogy based on linear time, and advancing universal styles (like geometrical abstraction) over national schools. The museums of modernism that have followed have therefore been more interested in time than geography. Time determined quality for museums of modern art. In other words, a work of art of the highest order should, in a sense, be the quintessence of art's development up to that point, while, at the same time, should also represent the transition to the new. Barr had imagined that this commitment to time would require the museum constantly to move forward—to be both contemporary and modern—yet over time it became primarily a museum of the modern past—a past that accumulated as time moved on.



## THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS TIME

The modern and the contemporary were not discrete periods; indeed, the two categories can be said to overlap. The tradition of modernism remained alive right until the end (rumors suggest it may have contributed to the catastrophe); contemporary art in many ways encompassed the history of the modern. Where the two types of museums differed absolutely was in their respective models of time. The modern museum embraced a teleological and linear view of time. The contemporary art museum was characterized, in contrast, by a critique of that model, as well as of the modernist understanding of quality. Quality was connected to newness. What happened first was venerated, and therefore recorded in history. Anything that followed chronologically was automatically seen to lag behind and was, therefore, both irrelevant to the historical record and of questionable quality. Modern art in the non-Western world was, for a very long time, written off in this way as behind the times, a verdict that can only be handed down if one presumes the universal applicability of an unproblematized single and linear time. Today, such matters of order and priority are less important. With no more museums, nothing is “behind” anything else.



## NARRATORS

Memories are all we have left today. All books, artifacts, and archives have been destroyed. Not only museums but schools and libraries have been wiped from the face of the earth. Our future will therefore be built only from our memories and what we tell each other, as it was in premodern times. I can still recall whole sentences of Alessandro Portelli's essay on oral histories, though the title escapes me. He wrote that *oral histories were fragmented and tied to the memory and subjective perspective of the individual, group, or class concerned*. He wrote that *while orality is saturated by writing, the memory behind it is not a passive depository of facts but an active process of creation of meanings*. In premodern times, people remembered by telling stories. Only some of those stories were ever written down—and not even by the people who told them, but by learned individuals. After the collapse of the educational system, all memories are now equal, whether the one who recalls them is rich or poor, male or female, black or white. Today we are all narrators, and all narratives count the same. I have to say that I am relieved that I no longer must sit for whole days in front of a computer checking emails. People are listening to each other again! We realize how precious and unique our memories are.



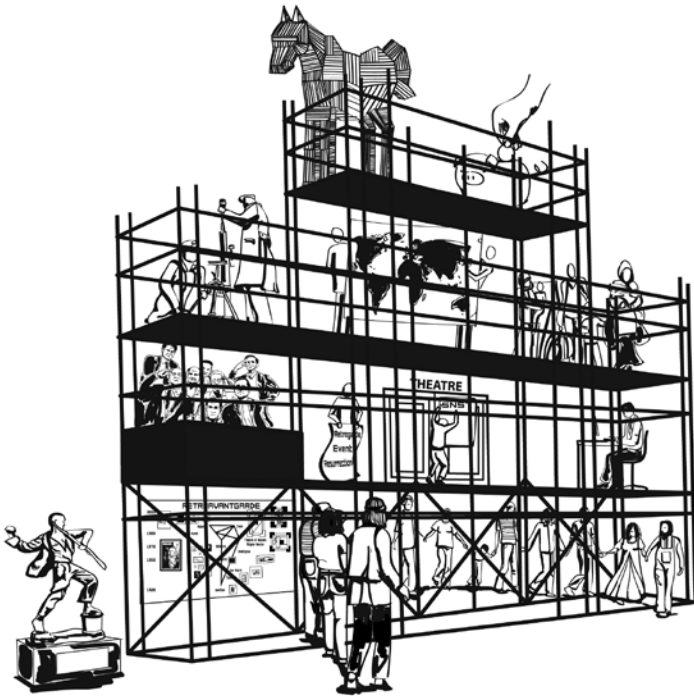


## THE SUSTAINABLE MUSEUM

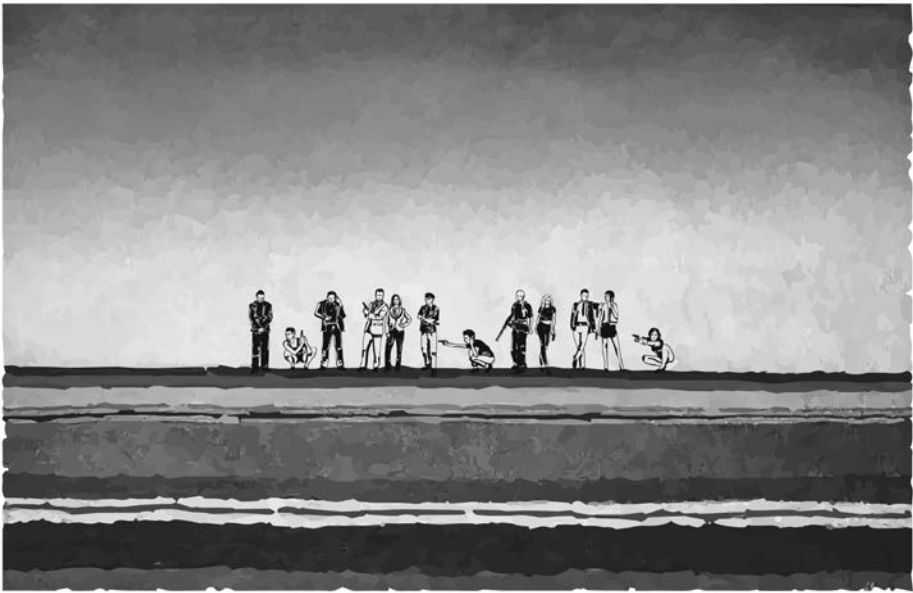
These days we meet and talk in underground chambers, beneath the ruins of our former institutions; all we have left are our human resources. A diagram from an exhibition close to the end, *Low-Budget Utopias*, comes to mind, in which I illustrated four models of the museum. The first two, the universal museum and the global museum, were for me associated with MoMA. Such ideas seem absurd today, when there are no more museums. Then there was the sustainable museum. That one didn't have much to do with the eco-friendly, energy-saving "green" museum people were talking about back then. The sustainable museum operated in a low-budget environment. Though Slovenia was not such a poor country, it afforded little money to culture, so we were always enduring little catastrophes, budget-wise. Such a museum, which rested on human efforts in specific material conditions, could even operate without a building. Finally, there was the meta-museum of Walter Benjamin, which offered an outside perspective on both art and the museum. Comprised of both copies and originals, this museum contained symbols testifying to what we once called the canon. The sustainable and meta-museums did not require constant expansion or the perpetual acquisition of more and more objects. They were designed to survive catastrophes like this one. Such catastrophes do not mean the end of the human needs embodied by museums, even if we do not use that name. What matters is collective memory: not only the memories of experts or museum guards but the public and the fire brigades.

## INSTITUTIONAL BUILDING

These days I often think back to the 1980s. As their world was about collapse into war, Yugoslav artists were already thinking about how to build a new world: one that might resurrect the spirit of the avant-garde, if not the Reformation. On the night of October 23, 1984—the date is etched



into consciousness—The Sisters of Scipio Nasica Theater staged an event called the *Retrogarde Event Resurrection*. Members of the group went to all the institutional theaters in Ljubljana and, like Martin Luther calling the Catholic church to order, nailed on their doors a call for theater’s renewal. The Sisters had no mercy for anything institutionalized; indeed, on their founding in 1983 they had announced their eventual self-termination, seeking to avoid becoming an institution themselves. True to their word, the group resolved itself in 1987 and was resurrected with a new vision and name. I have often thought that if institutions of art followed the dictates of art, they would be inevitably changed in just this way: transformed from inside by the very art that they housed, or perhaps birthing new and parallel institutions. “Institutional building” was my term for this. I first used the phrase when assembling a retrospective of the collective project Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), which included The Sisters alongside IRWIN, Laibach, and five other departments. Unhappy with the institutions of the socialist era, the NSK groups sometimes infiltrated the institution like a Trojan horse, aiming to transform it from the inside. As often, they accorded to themselves the institutions’ duties, building for themselves the history the institutions had ignored. Unwilling to accept the marginalization or underfunding of Slovene art, they developed their own international networks and sources of funding. NSK could have survived without museums. That is a good lesson for our present situation.



## COMRADESHIP

No museums, no careers, no Documenta, no Venice. No competition over prestige, no funding, no government. Just a bloody fight for survival, with no hypocrisy or masquerades. I recognize now that this struggle did not start with the catastrophe. My years at the Moderna galerija were already a battle, one I hardly would have survived without a community held together not just by family ties or personal friendship but by a cause bigger than any of us as individuals. Through war to peace, through socialism to capitalism, from the Yugoslav dinar to the Slovene tolar and finally to the euro. The last moment, remember, when Slovenia joined the European Union, was somehow meant to signal the end of the great social transition! How ironic, then, that this transition was accompanied by the election of a right-wing government in Slovenia and, we feared, a new era of fascism.

But that bad future didn't last. The living memory of civil society from the 1980s was too strong. That spirit reawakened and answered the threat. A spirit of collectivism lives on, too, in *L'Internationale*, the international confederation of institutions launched in the very place where Nika and I sit now. Our museums are gone, and we don't meet as often since we can no longer travel by plane. But our friendship has only grown stronger. Cynical reason having lost its purchase, there is now even greater idealism among us. The senses of solidarity and shared humanity once left in the dustbin of history are in the new light of aftermath being revived and redefined. I think we will survive this disaster. My friends are alive and I can hardly wait to see them roar again like young lions—to sit down with them again in some ruin and start planning a renewed world.

ESSAY AND ILLUSTRATION  
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Versions of these texts have appeared previously:

“Body and the East.” In *Body and the East: od šestdesetih let do danes [Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present]*. Translated by Mika Briški. Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 1998, 9–35.

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“My Post-Catastrophic Glossary.” Translated by Rawley Grau.

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#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Zdenka Badovinac is a curator and writer, who has served since 1993 as Director of Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, comprised since 2011 of two locations: the Museum of Modern Art [Moderna galerija (MG+)] and the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova [Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM)]. In her work, Badovinac highlights the difficult processes of redefining history alongside different avant-garde traditions within contemporary art. Badovinac's first exhibition to address these issues was *Body and the East—From the 1960s to the Present* (1998). She also initiated the first Eastern European art collection, *Arteast 2000+*. One of her most important recent projects is *NSK from Kapital to Capital: Neue Slowenische Kunst—An Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia*, which was presented at Moderna galerija (2015), and traveled to Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2016), Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow (2016), and the Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid (2017). She co-curated, with Charles Esche, the NSK State pavilion for the Venice Biennale (2017). Other significant projects include *The Heritage of 1989. Case Study: The Second Yugoslav Documents Exhibition* (Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2017), co-curated with Bojana Piškur; *Sites of Sustainability: Pavilions, Manifestos and Crypts* and *Hello World: Revising a Collection* (Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2018); *Heavenly Beings: Neither Human nor Animal* (Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova [+MSUM], Ljubljana, 2018), co-curated with Bojana Piškur. Badovinac was Slovenian Commissioner at the Venice Biennale 1993–97, 2005, and 2017, and Austrian Commissioner at the São Paulo Biennial in 2002 and President of CIMAM, 2010–13.

#### EDITOR BIOGRAPHY

J. Myers-Szupinska is an art historian and editor based in Los Angeles. An influential scholar of contemporary art and exhibitions, Myers was founding faculty in the Curatorial Practice program at California College of the Arts; was senior editor for *The Exhibitionist*, a journal on exhibition making; and, with partner Joanna, is part of the critical and curatorial collaboration *grupa o.k.* Myers's essays have appeared in *October*, *Afterall*, *Frieze*, *Fillip*, *Artforum*, *Tate Papers*, and elsewhere. Recent publications include *Hopelessness Freezes Time*, a study of earthworks, Detroit, urban warfare, and guerrilla historiography, co-authored with artist Edgar Arceneaux (Kunstmuseum Basel, 2012); "Earth Beneath Detroit," an essay for the exhibition catalogue *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974* (Prestel, 2012); *Sterling Ruby: Soft Work* (Koenig Books, 2014); "After the Production of Space," in *Critical Landscapes* (UC Press, 2015); and "Exhibitions as Apparatus," in *The Exhibitionist: The First Six Years* (DAP, 2017). Myers has co-edited books with his students on Etel Adnan, Martin Wong, artist-run spaces, punk-inflected media art, and more—most recently *Black Light*, on self-organized black art spaces, and *Artwork for Bedrooms*, on San Francisco art, evictions, and tech culture at the turn of the millennium (both 2018).

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