

“Multiple Realities: Experimental Art in the Eastern Bloc, 1960s–1980s”

WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS

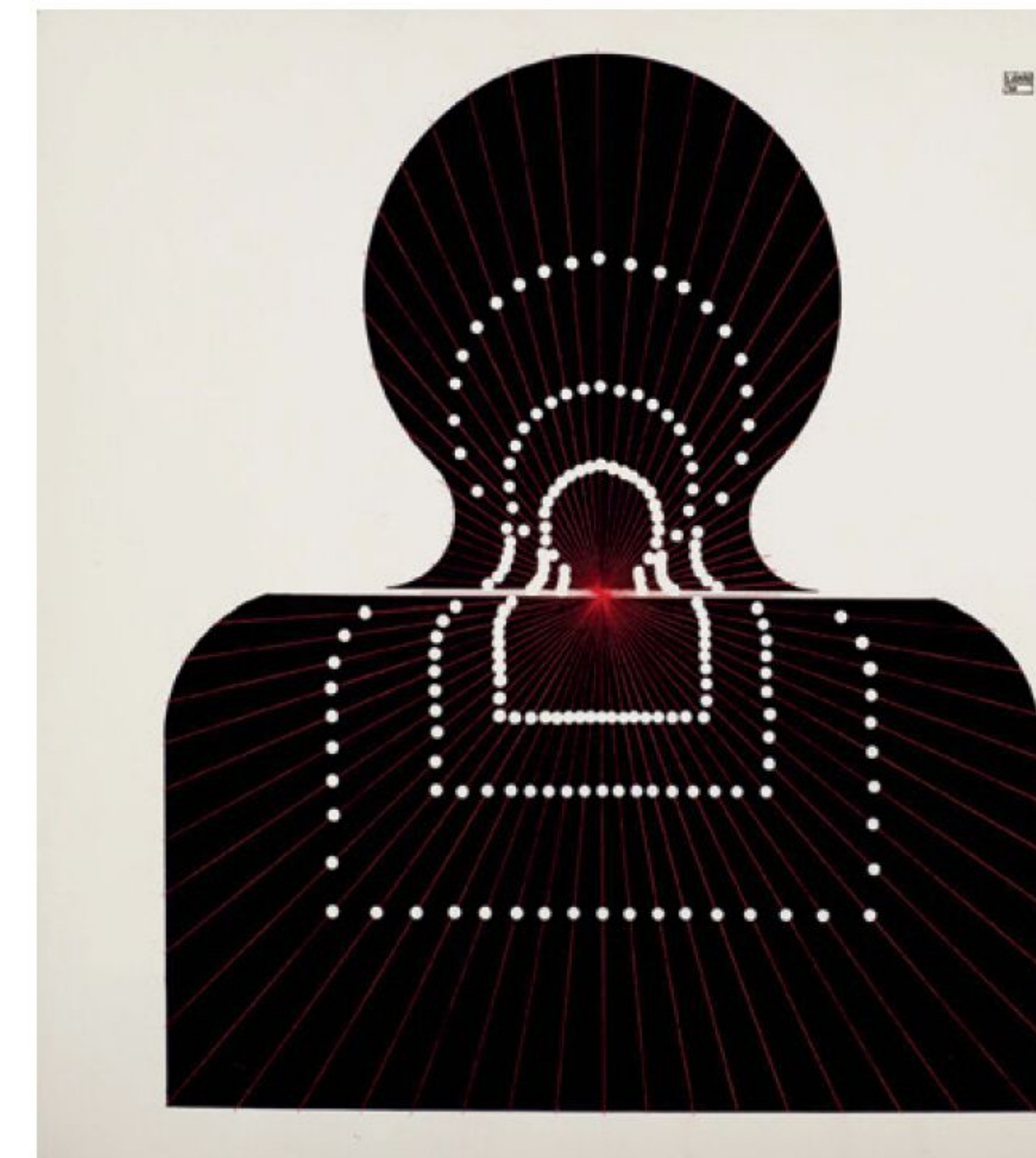
CURATED BY PAVEL PYŠ WITH WILLIAM HERNÁNDEZ LUEGE AND LAUREL RAND-LEWIS

Susan Snodgrass

AT THE ENTRANCE TO the Walker Art Center’s “Multiple Realities: Experimental Art in the Eastern Bloc, 1960s–1980s,” viewers are met by Hungarian artist László Fehér’s *Underground Passage I.*, 1975, a black-and-white, hyperrealist painting of passengers ascending the subway stairs as a solitary figure descends. Painted with illusionistic faux creases and tears to suggest a worn photograph, the work alludes in both title and subject to the multiple worlds (public and private, real and imaginary, official and underground) that artists in East-Central Europe continuously navigated during communism. Also portrayed, at least on its surface, is the gray, dreary Eastern Europe of Western stereotypes, a foil for the exhibition itself, which alternatively presents a rich and diverse cultural history through more than 250 works by nearly one hundred artists.

One of the largest exhibitions of Eastern European art organized in the United States, “Multiple Realities” is not an exhaustive survey of the region’s artistic production, but rather an in-depth study of experimental art practices from the post-Stalin years to just before the sweeping political changes of 1989, which brought about the fall of communism. Emphasized are works that are mainly ephemeral, performative, collaborative, and multidisciplinary, created under and in opposition to the repressive forces of socialist politics and state-controlled cultural institutions. Likewise, the term *Eastern Bloc* is a bit of a misnomer. The exhibition’s geographic scope is East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and the former Yugoslavia, excluding Bulgaria and Albania, as well as the Baltics and Soviet-annexed republics, including Ukraine. These definitions aside, “Multiple Realities” presents a fascinating and deeply researched view of art (often drawn from the artists’ own archives) that transcends strict national identities and local conditions. Instead, the show offers a transnational, or rather translocal, perspective organized around four themes: negotiations of the political in public and private spaces; explorations of the self; alternative models of collectivity; and experiments with new technologies.

Rebellion in the form of public interventions, on view in the first gallery, offers some of the exhibition’s most rewarding and revealing examples of how artists undermined socialism’s authority. Impromptu performances by the Czech-born Jiří Kovanda, Slovak artist Lubomír Ďurček, and the Polish collective Akademia Ruchu (Academy of Movement)—shown through still and moving imagery—disrupt the norms of behavior within official, state-controlled spaces. Kovanda’s



Left: László Fehér, *Aluljáró I.* (*Underground Passage I.*), 1975, oil on fiberboard, 94 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 66 $\frac{7}{8}$ ".

Opposite page, top right: Jürgen Wittdorf, *Freundschaftsfoto* (*Friendship Photo*), 1964, linocut, 26 × 36 $\frac{5}{8}$ ".

Above: Sherban Epuré, *Système Esthétique* (*Aesthetic System*), 1973, gouache on paper, 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ ".

Opposite page, bottom right: Natalia LL, *Sztuka Konsumpcyjna* (*Consumer Art*) (detail), 1974, ink-jet prints, 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 12 $\frac{5}{8}$ ". From the series “Sztuka Konsumpcyjna (*Consumer Art*),” 1972–75.

Opposite page, left: Gabriele Stötzer, *Trans sitzend* (*Trans Sitting*), 1984, sixteen gelatin silver prints on paper, 33 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 23 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".

well-known outdoor actions—in which, for example, the artist attempts to make friends with a stranger—and Ďurček’s *Resonances*, 1979, spontaneous assemblies of the artist’s friends in city streets and squares based on a series of drawings that serve as the gatherings’ schematics, forged new kinds of social relations. They also pushed the boundaries between public life and unofficial artistic production, as we see in Akademia Ruchu’s film *Stumble*, 1977, where group members consecutively pretend to trip on a busy sidewalk. Soon casual passersby modify their walking patterns to avoid the invisible obstacle. The work is a playful yet poignant commentary on the unseen forces of politics upon everyday life.

For some artists, this threat was quite real as they became targets of censorship, surveillance, and sometimes arrest. Czech photographer Jan Ság’s black-and-white photo suite *House Search*, 1973, documents the artist’s belongings and home after a failed police raid. East German photographer Simon Menner’s similarly titled digital color prints are recast from Polaroid images of house searches taken by the East German secret police, or Stasi. The original images were gathered from a federal agency established in 1991 that makes surveillance records available to the public.

Among the exhibition’s most arresting works were those comprising East German artist Gabriele Stötzer’s series “Trans Sitting,” 1983–84, on view in the second gallery devoted to personal identity, which reveals the unethical practices employed by the Stasi. In this group of black-and-white photographs, the artist captures a male subject in drag

and in various states of undress performing seductively for the camera. Several years later Stötzer—once imprisoned for signing a petition supporting an exiled musician—learned that the model was a Stasi informant tasked to spy on her. Stötzer, an important figure in the German Democratic Republic’s underground art scene of the 1970s, was also a founder of the Erfurt Women Artists Group, known for its Super 8 films and fashion shows employing elaborate costumes. The collective’s performance-based works, documented here, focused on female empowerment and the body.

Some of the exhibition’s more internationally known figures are women, including Poland’s Natalia LL and Croatia’s Sanja Iveković, who similarly explore gender and sexual identity in photographic works that borrow images from advertising and pornography. Commenting on consumerism and the fetishization of the female body, Iveković’s series “Double Life,” 1975–76, juxtaposes intimate pictures of the artist with images of women who strike similar poses lifted from newspaper and magazine advertisements. However, the artist’s self-portraits predate the ads, suggesting the unconscious ways women’s identities and perceptions of self are shaped by the media. In Natalia LL’s series “Consumer Art,” 1972–75, a nude blonde model—who purposely resembles the artist

herself—sensually eats two bananas. It should be noted that a burgeoning consumer culture existed in some Eastern European countries, particularly Yugoslavia, that, as in the West, targeted women as consumers and sexual objects.

Linocuts by German artist Jürgen Wittdorf and drawings by Poland's Krzysztof Jung render the male body as the object of gay desire, a subject explored further in the exhibition's third gallery, devoted to artist communities and underground movements. Several photographic series make visible the covert yet vibrant (and often persecuted) gay communities that existed behind the Iron Curtain. Among these are images by Poland's Karol Radziszewski, who in 2015 founded the Queer Archives Institute, dedicated to the "artistic interpretation" of LGBTQIA+ history in Central and Eastern Europe.

The region's many artistic networks and alternative art scenes, ranging from musical groups and performance art collectives to experimental filmmakers, are also documented in the third gallery and reveal the interdisciplinary nature of art in the Eastern Bloc. Of interest to this viewer are the Hungarian Katalin Ladik's collaged musical scores based on sewing patterns and accompanied by corresponding audio recordings, and Ság's photograph of the Czech underground prog-rock band the Plastic People of the Universe, whose arrest and subsequent trial in 1976 led to Charter 77, a public declaration that demanded Czech communist authorities uphold international human rights accords. While ambitious in aim, this section of the exhibition is cast rather broadly, with lots of disparate kinds of works and subthemes, making it somewhat challenging to connect the social and conceptual links between artists and works that are central to the thesis. Given the essential role such networks and transnational dialogues and exchanges played in forging cultural relations between countries (as documented by scholar Klara Kemp-Welch)—and in transcending the East-West divide—this section might have benefited from more depth rather than breadth.

The search for alternative realities beyond the politicized spaces of earthly existence led artists, aided by experimental technologies, not only underground but also to spatial dimensions previously unknown. Work of this nature is explored in the exhibition's final gallery. Prompted by the space race, the advent of nuclear energy, new communication systems, and information theory, artists employed interdisciplinary tools to expand the formal and conceptual possibilities of artmaking. Czechoslovakia's Zdeňka Čechová creates abstract drawings evoking cosmological landscapes using computer-generated algorithms, and Croatian artist Vladimir Bonačić's interactive light installation—consisting of over a thousand light tubes pulsating in seemingly random patterns—visualizes data structures. Just as countercultural movements in the West were influenced by cybernetics, so too were artists in Eastern Europe, including Bonačić and Romania's Sherban Epuré; the latter's hand-

drawn images incorporating geometric shapes and human-like forms are based on models of information control.

Technology as a tool for personal empowerment has been the lifelong project of Krzysztof Wodiczko, whose multimedia devices for navigating public life were first developed in his native Poland. Exhibited are black-and-white images of the artist operating *Personal Instrument*, 1972, while walking throughout Warsaw. Donning headphones that filtered unwanted noise from the surrounding environment, Wodiczko transmitted alternate sounds through hand movements activated by photoreceivers embedded in a pair of gloves to, as noted in the exhibition catalogue, "play the city like a musical score." The artist's "sonic cage" (on view as a wall-based schematic) was created under the auspices of the Polish Radio Experimental Studio, an important laboratory for the production of electroacoustic works and interdisciplinary art, which together with Łódź's Workshop of the Film Form established Poland as an influential hub for intermedia experimentation.

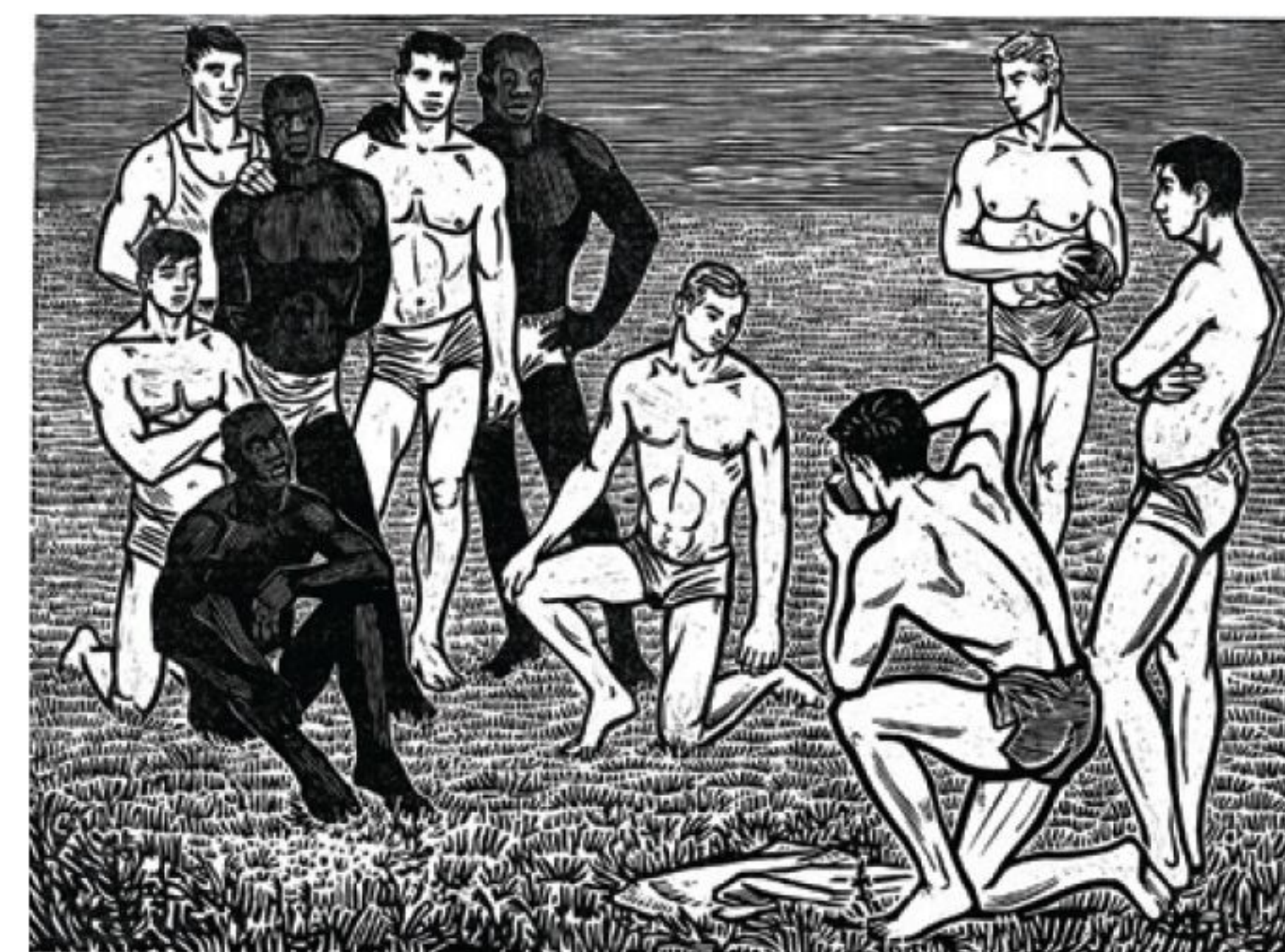
A reality that promised both artistic and political freedom would find its fruition with the fall of the Berlin Wall

in 1989 and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, historical markers outside the purview of this exhibition. Yet throughout "Multiple Realities," one is haunted by the politics of the present: the specter of Vladimir Putin's inhumane war against Ukraine and the region's rising conservatism as evinced by right-wing politicians, such as Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, whose illiberal policies have adversely affected artists and cultural institutions. As "Multiple Realities" reminds us, art is never separate from the social conditions of its time. It is, however, capable of creating alternative ways of being, as well as spaces of community, retreat, and resistance that counter oppressive systems of power and authority. In this sense, the exhibition is perhaps a useful primer for our current cultural moment. □

"Multiple Realities: Experimental Art in the Eastern Bloc, 1960s–1980s" is on view through March 10; travels to Phoenix Art Museum, April 17–September 29; Vancouver Art Gallery, December 14, 2024–April 21, 2025.

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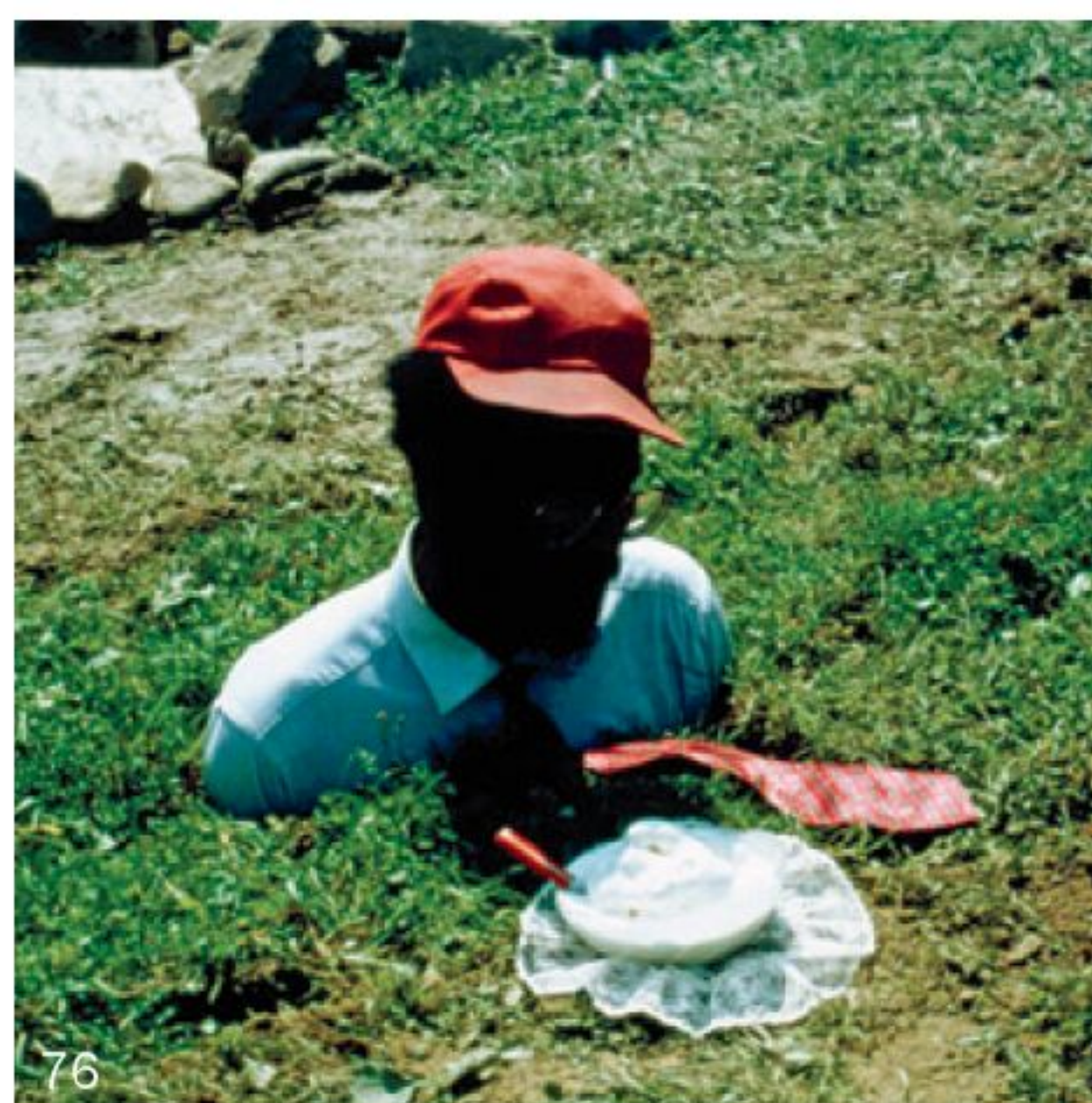
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Cover: Paul Pfeiffer, *Vitruvian Figure* (detail), 2008, cast resin, aluminum, acrylic, 9' 2¼" × 26' 3" × 26' 3". (See page 68.)

From top: Promotional image for Franko B's performance *I'm Here*, 2021. Sal Salandra, *We Celebrate* (detail), 2021, needlepoint and embroidery thread on canvas, 19 × 23". Pope.L, *Sweet Desire a.k.a. Burial Piece* (detail), 1996, digital C-prints on gold fiber silk paper, each 10 × 15". Natalia LL, *Sztuka Konsumpcyjna* (Consumer Art) (detail), 1974, ink-jet prints, 16 ½ × 12 ⅝". From the series "Sztuka Konsumpcyjna (Consumer Art)," 1972–75.