Translocal Alliances of the 1990s

The OSTranenie Video Festival, the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, and the Syndicate Mailinglist

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The 1990s in Eastern Europe were marked by a transition from socialism to democracy and a market economy (which, sadly, was not always socially committed). The decade saw far-reaching changes in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Unlike Western Europe, the transitional phase in Eastern Europe was characterized by extreme rapidity—particularly with regard to economic restructuring: within only twenty years, a radical change had taken place, which had begun in the West perhaps thirty years earlier and continues up to the present day.

In the West, this conversion is referred to as structural change—a massively cushioned restructuring of the economy of heavy industry (coal, steel, etc.), up to and including new economic sectors, which remains incomplete to this day.[1] In the East, however, what occurred was a structural *break,* caused in large part by the extensive closing of factories within only five years, with virtually no social cushioning, except for the former GDR. As

a result, the East has already been through what the West still faces.

In that sense, the East has a clear head start over the West. It is just too bad that, in general, the West had, and still has, no interest in (let alone an understanding of) the experiences of its neighbors to the East—aside from spectacular "bad news" cherished by the mass media. And yet in the 1990s, platforms arose in the West due to an interest in Eastern Europe. The three examples that I present in this essay are very heterogeneous and, seen in the context of society as a whole, certainly also marginal: the OSTranenie video art festival, the Syndicate Internet mailing list, and the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, or SCCA, a network of centers for contemporary art financed by a Hungarian-American stock exchange speculator. Each in its own niche, these initiatives were more or less successfully dedicated to fostering communication between East and West—and also between East and East.

None of these three initiatives exists any longer: OSTranenie, after staging three festivals (in 1993, 1995, and 1997), ended with a conference and a publication in 1999; the Syndicate Mailinglist, founded in 1996, ceased to exist in 2001—or rather, it was transferred to the new Spectre Mailinglist—and the SCCA Network, which was founded in 1992 and part of the Soros Foundation, also came to an end in 1999. The mandate of the SCCA, which was active in seventeen countries, was "to support the development and international presentation of contemporary art in Eastern and Central Europe, the former states of the Soviet Union as well as in Central Eurasia, as the central element of an open society."[2] In 1999 the SCCA Network was converted into the International Contemporary Art Network (ICAN), a charitable foundation based in Amsterdam. Many SCCA branches in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe were unable to stay afloat without the financial support of the Soros Foundation, and thus had to close.

The Syndicate Mailinglist was a special translocal alliance—a "gateway," one could say ——because it was a model for new cultures of cooperation that emerged in this period through the open, dispersed structure of the Internet. Global or translocal forms of cooperation were made possible by "small media," which enable horizontal, non-hierarchical communication between individuals or groups of various sizes and geographical distribution. As early as 1968 J. C. R. Licklider and Robert W. Taylor, two "co-inventors" of the Internet, were already talking about future "[c]ommunities not of common location, but of *common interest*."[3] They were thus pointing to the development of new, interest-based communities—as opposed to conventional local or geographically defined communities—whose formation is promoted through communication via the Internet.

In the 1990s, Internet mailing lists or newsgroups contributed to translocal networking. This was no end in itself but, rather, supported the construction of strategic alliances and collaborations that were no longer nationally limited. One result of these new possibilities for interconnections was, for example, the close cooperation between artists in Eastern and Western Europe, which in the first half of the 1990s gave rise to and defined the earliest examples of net art.[4] Another example is the V2_East / Syndicate Initiative, created in the winter of 1995 by the Rotterdam-based

V2_Organisation. It was dedicated to supporting contacts and cooperative efforts, improving communication, and fostering exchange between institutions and individuals active in the field of media and media culture in Eastern and Western Europe. The most important result of the V2_East Initiative was the construction of the Syndicate Network. This name harkens back to a comment made by Vladimir Muzhesky of Kiev during the first V2_East meeting at the end of the "Next 5 Minutes" conference, held in Rotterdam in January 1996: "As individuals we are relatively weak when it comes to negotiating with sponsors and public authorities about support for projects in new media and electronic art. But if we join together and build something like a syndicate, then we can speak with one voice during strategically important moments, and be more powerful than we are right now."[5]

The unmoderated Syndicate Mailinglist—the network's most important communication channel—enabled participants to have an ongoing exchange via e-mail about upcoming events as well as joint projects. From its first meeting in Rotterdam in January 1996, in which thirty media artists and activists as well as journalists and curators from twelve

Eastern and Western European countries took part, the Syndicate Network continued to grow, and by August 2001 it linked more than 500 participants from more than thirty European and non-European countries. The original idea may have been to link East and West, as well as East and East, but the network increasingly became a European-wide forum for media culture and media art.

It gave rise to short-term joint projects and long-term cooperative efforts with changing constellations. Regular Syndicate meetings and workshops usually were held within the framework of festivals and conferences.[6] In August 2001, however, the Syndicate Mailinglist suffered a sudden meltdown. The Syndicate Network had been in a precarious situation for some time, due to the constantly growing number of subscribers whom the founders did not know personally (direct contact had always been something that distinguished the Syndicate Network from other mailing lists). In other words, the number of "lurkers"—passive members who only read and do not contribute—was growing, as well as the number of those who filtered their mail into folders and left it unread. But perhaps the most decisive point was the fact that the Syndicate was

increasingly used by aggressive self-promoters, who abused the list as a personal performance space and whose appearances broke the "netiquette" sensibilities of this online community to such an extent that the Syndicate List was damaged by it. The (as is so often the case) silent majority did the rest.

After six years of successful work with and for the Syndicate community, the end of the list in August 2001 was quite a bitter experience for Andreas Broeckmann and me. We were forced to recognize how basically weak, or even vulnerable, this kind of communications channel and community can be, and how quickly they can be destroyed. Some subscribers wanted to continue the Syndicate list with the original subscribers on another server. But Andreas Broeckmann and I decided instead to found a new mailing list, Spectre, which has been in operation since August 28, 2001. Currently (at the end of 2010) it has 1,699 subscribers and carries on the "tradition" of the Syndicate list as an open platform for cooperation and exchange in the realm of media culture in Europe.

The first OSTranenie Festival—OSTranenie 93—was held seventeen years ago at the Bauhaus Dessau. Since the network of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art had not been created yet, I visited many video art festivals and systematically looked for works from Eastern Europe. The International Short Film Festival Oberhausen proved to be particularly helpful in this regard, since one could also see videos there that were not in the official program. OSTranenie 93, which had the subtitle: "Eastern Europe in the Focus of the Video Camera," was also the first video art festival in the world to have this focus. It became clear that the so-called East Bloc was far from uniform but, rather, consisted of very many different red flags.[7]

It was also remarkable that guests coming to Dessau for the festival seemed to realize for the first time that they had colleagues doing similar work in their respective neighboring countries. In other words, there had been no (or little) contact between artists in socialist Eastern Europe.[8] This lack of knowledge (or lack of interest) of each other had two causes, in my opinion: on the one hand, the term Eastern Europe was rejected, since it served as an official political-ideological bracket separating the socialist brother and sister states. One could not and did not want to identify with it. In addition, one's orientation and primary interest had

always been first and foremost toward the West. For a long time in the (unofficial) East, the West was the only point of reference. This situation is changing today (to be more specific, it has changed in the last ten years): interest has grown in the shared history. I am thinking of the collections policy of the Moderna galerija Ljubljana (Museum of Modern Art Ljubljana), of projects like *Transitland: Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989–2009,*[9] or of the publications of the Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw), founded in 2008. The various past and future experiences in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe are important today and will finally be made productive, whether in or through their differences.

The Soros Centers for Contemporary Art played an important role in the transitional phase of the 1990s in the opening of the respective cultural landscapes of the countries of Eastern, Central, and South-Eastern Europe. In many countries there were absolutely no institutions dedicated to the support of contemporary art. With the establishment of the SCCA there was at least *one*. Due to the discontinuation of (full) financing after 2000, the individual SCCAs were pressured into achieving financial independence. This led to a

"normalization" in the field of contemporary art, because these centers either managed to find other funding and stay afloat, or they closed and staff found jobs in state institutions, where they could continue the work they had begun with SCCA.

As such, for example, the former management team of SCCA Belgrade (Branislava Anđelković-Dimitrijević and Dejan Sretenović) today heads the Muzej savremene umnetnosti (Museum of Contemporary Art) in Belgrade. In the existing institutions, the older generation was discredited after the change of systems and thus the way was paved for a very young successor generation, which then suddenly, at the age of perhaps thirty, ended up in leading positions of large museums and institutions. The Šiuolaikinio meno centras (Contemporary Art Centre) in Vilnius is a good example: Kestutis Kuizinas took the reins at the former "Art Exhibition Palace" in 1993, immediately after completing his studies; and also Edi Muka took on the role of curator at the Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve Figurative (National Gallery of Figurative Arts of Albania) in Tirana. Here, too, the West could learn from the East: bring more young people into the institutions!

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The fact that the initiatives described here no longer exist does not mean that they failed. On the contrary: they were always intended as temporary projects and they achieved their goal in this period of transition. Today there is a need for new "gateways," more closely adapted to current needs and issues—gateways that, given their structure and the orientation of their content, clearly look much different today. There is (still) a lot to do.

1 Germany still keeps unprofitable mines alive with coal subsidies. The government coalition has decided to continue this subsidy until 2018.

2 Soros Center for Contemporary Arts (SCCA), http://www.c3.hu/scca/index.html (accessed December 2, 2010). This Web site provides a good overview of the order and history of the SCCA.

3 "Communities not of common location, but of *common interest.*" J. C. R. Licklider and Robert W. Taylor, "The Computer as a Communication Device," *Science and Technology* (April 1968), pp. 37–38.

4 On the importance of Eastern European artists in early Internet art, see Inke Arns, "'149.174.206.136 does not like recipient': Zur Praxis der kleinen Medien am Beispiel des 'Syndicate'-Netzwerkes und einigen Werken der Netzkunst," a lecture from the lecture series Vom Elitären zum Populären: Popular Culture im Ost-West-Vergleich, Osteuropa-Institut der Freien Universität Berlin (Berlin, January 24, 2001). This author accessed the online version: http://www.inkearns.de/Lecture/oei.html (accessed December 2, 2010); as well as *The CIAC's Electronic Art Magazine,* (January 12, 2001), http://www.ciac.ca/magazine/archives/no_12/magelectronique.html (accessed December 2, 2010).

5 Vladimir Muzhesky, quoted after Inke Arns, "Editorial," *Junction Skopje: The 1997–1998*

Edition, Syndicate Publication Series 002 (Skopje, 1998).

6 For example, in 1996, during the DEAF (Dutch Electronic Art Festival) in Rotterdam; 1997 during the Video-Positive festival in Liverpool; the Nettime Conference "Beauty and the East" in Ljubljana; the documenta X in Kassel in 1997; the Ars Electronica festivals in Linz and the OSTranenie Festival in Dessau in 1993, 1995, and 1997. In 1998 there was a Syndicate meeting in Tirana and another during the Skopje Electronic Arts Fair. In 1999, Syndicate members met in Budapest (this meeting was originally supposed to be in Belgrade but had to be moved to Budapest at the last minute because of NATO bombardment); two additional meetings were held on the occasion of the exhibition *Net Condition* at the ZKM in Karlsruhe, and during the Temp-Media Laboratory in Helsinki. Finally, they met in June 2001 on the occasion of the Communication Front 2001 festival in the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv.

7 See also Inke Arns and Andreas Broeckmann, "Kleine östliche Mediennormalität," *diss.sense: Zeitschrift für Literatur und Kommunikation* (1998), http://www.diss.sense.uni-konstanz.de/ostweb/arns.htm (accessed December 2, 2010).

8 On an excursion to Dessau in 1993, on neutral ground, so to speak, I encountered also the contemporary media art scene in Yugoslavia, which at the time was embroiled in civil war. Most people had not seen each other in a long time, because since the start of the war not only made travel impossible, but also all telephone lines between the Yugoslavian republics had been cut. There were some very emotional moments.

9 Project catalogue: *Transitland: Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989–2009,* exh. cat. Ludwig Museum—Museum for Contemporary Art, (Budapest, 2009).