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**video art  
from central  
and eastern europe  
1989–2009**

Edited by Edit András

**Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art**

Budapest, 2009

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**Transitland | Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989–2009**

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InterSpace Association, Project director | **Margarita Dorovska**  
Project curator | **Kathy Rae Huffman**  
Assistant project manager | **Julia Mercurio** | Technical development | **Milen Hristov**

transmediale—festival for art and digital culture berlin,  
Transitland commissions, director | **Stephen Kovats**

Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art Budapest | ACAX  
Project curators | **Rita Kálmán, Tijana Stepanović**

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Copy-editing | **Adèle Eisenstein**

Proofreading | **Karina Horitz**

Editorial assistance | **Réka Deim**

Layout | **Károly Királyfalvi**

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## Contents

Publisher's Preface | **7**  
Editor's Preface and Acknowledgements | **9**

## Essays

- Marina Gržinić** | Video in the Time of a Double, Political and Technological Transition in the Former Eastern European Context | **17**
- Boris Groys** | From the Image to the Image File—and Back | **35**
- Giorgio Bertellini** | Making Spaces at War: Notes on Video Art and Space in Marina Gržinić & Aina Šmid's Luna 10 and Bilocation | **45**
- Zoran Erić** | The Question of Identity as Reflected through Video Art in ex-Yugoslavia | **57**
- Boris Buden** | Getting Out of Here | **69**
- Svetlana Boym** | Modernities Out of Sync: The Tactful Art of Anri Sala | **79**
- Keiko Sei** | Solidity in Flux: Video Installation, Media Art and Media Landscape in Eastern Europe during the Transition | **93**
- Miklós Peternák** | Post-Video: Footnotes to the Transformation of Hungarian Videomaking | **105**
- Tomáš Pospiszyl** | Live Coverage of the Past: National and Personal History through New Media | **117**
- Călin Dan** | Media Arts Get Media Free: A Small Anthology of Older Views | **127**
- Katarína Rusnáková** | The Visual Representation of Gender and Sexual Identities in the New Media in Slovakia | **137**
- Ryszard W. Kluszczyński** | Video Art in Poland | **147**
- Boryana Rossa** | Entertainment, Propaganda, Experiment: The Technological and Social Foundations of Creative Work Using Video Technology | **153**
- Antonio Geusa** | Video, the Purposeful Outsider: A Critical Examination of the History of Video Art in Russia | **171**
- Konstantin Bokhorov** | Performance and Video in Contemporary Russian Art | **185**
- Ruben Arevshatyan** | Glorious Futilities | **193**
- Mihnea Mircan** | Monuments to Nothing | **199**
- Edit András** | The Future is Behind Us: Flashbacks to the Socialist Past | **209**

## Transitland Video Archive

Project Director's Introduction to the Project and Acknowledgements | 225

**Kathy Rae Huffman:** Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe in the  
Transitland Video Archive | 229

Videography | 245

## Appendix

Contributors | 299

Selected Bibliography | 305

Index of Artists and Authors | 311

## Publisher's Preface

In the past few decades, video has become one of the most important artistic means of documenting social and political change. The Transitland project has produced the most comprehensive collection to date of video from the countries of the former Soviet Bloc. Transitland is an archive of video art, a wide-ranging selection that offers an insight into the history and typology of the genre, a collection of artworks that register the transformation of the former Socialist countries, including the personal and social aspects of the transition.

The Transitland project is the result of an exemplary international cooperation between ACAX | Agency for Contemporary Art Exchange, hosted by the Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art Budapest, InterSpace Association of Sofia, transmediale—festival for art and digital culture berlin. The project has been supported by Culture 2007–2013 Programme of the European Commission, Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe, the European Cultural Foundation, the Culture Programme of the Sofia Municipality and the National Cultural Fund (of Hungary). I would like to use this opportunity to thank all the institutions and individuals who have participated in the project, sharing their profound knowledge of the field with us. I wish to express my gratitude to all the sponsors who made it possible to realise the archive and the accompanying publication.

The Ludwig Museum is one of the few institutions in the region to concentrate on the acquisition and presentation of contemporary art from Central and Eastern Europe. The Transitland project fits ideally to the mission of the museum to present and support art coming from the region. A touring video collection that can be presented anywhere and accessed easily, together with a reader of theoretical writings that discusses many facets of the subject, the present initiative is probably one of the most efficient means to this end. Incorporated in the structure of the museum, ACAX engages in many similar international projects striving to establish and maintain channels of effective and continuous professional exchange among the actors of the contemporary art scene in Hungary and abroad. The Ludwig Museum, as represented by its compact but operative unit ACAX, enthusiastically participated in this international collaboration, undertaking the task of producing the accompanying publication to the project. I am grateful to the small, but dedicated and competent team that produced this reader within an extremely short time. My special thanks go to Edit András, editor of this volume, for shaping this well-founded compilation.

Barnabás Bencsik  
Director, Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest

There are vast numbers of books on the market with a focal point on video art. The scope of such surveys concentrates mostly on the geographical span of Western Europe and the United States, though the geopolitical field is rarely designated. Relatively little attention has been given to parallel practices in Central and Eastern Europe, especially not in reference books and volumes that are distributed outside the region.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of the present collection of essays is to counter this lack of visibility of Central and Eastern European video art, thus to extend geopolitically beyond the Western European and American context, focusing particularly on the New Europe (as the territory has come to be called nowadays), once called the East Bloc (or Soviet sphere behind the Iron Curtain). The New Europe is not our preferred category, as it once again divides Europe, separating the disintegrated region by drawing a distinction between Western and Eastern Europe, the former still considered (the real) "Europe". In further dividing the region in our title, however, one might also detect a hidden political agenda. It would probably be more appropriate to call the territory under contemplation the post-Socialist European countries, as the scope of this volume does not cover the post-Socialist Asia, nor does it include countries from the geographical region with no Socialist past. Despite our awareness of the problematic nature of this seemingly neutral geographical categorisation, and the heated debate connected to the issue,<sup>2</sup> for practical reasons the volume employs the same terminology applied by the *Transitland* archival project it accompanies.

Concerning the time frame, although there are some references to the premature prehistory of the genre, the core of the book focuses on the last 20 years, on the period of turbulent and incredible political, economical and cultural changes in the region. Transition and transformation are the two keywords for the volume, as the book, similarly to the archival project, focuses on videos that, in one way or another, reflect on the metamorphoses of the formerly conceived homogeneous grey zone of Europe, and on the complete rearrangement of various courses of life of these societies.

In the same way as the *Transitland* archival project, the book also concentrates strictly on video art, i.e., video films presented or screened within an art and exhibition context. It can be noted that video art in the region gradually broke out from the ghetto of experimental digital art, electronic art or media art, whatever its name, and became involved in the broader activity of local

art scenes. The number of video installations and museum screenings has dramatically increased all over the region in the last ten years. One can witness a boom in the use of video technology even by artists with totally different backgrounds, education and training, which was not really the case in the early 90s. Of late, video art is discussed within the discourse of contemporary art, instead of forming a kind of separatist, exclusive discourse of media gurus, as the centre of attention has shifted from the magic of the technology to the content and to the message. Art historians and art critics, not necessarily specialised in the (not-so-new-anymore) media, media research or activities, have begun to interpret video art. The list of the authors in this anthology clearly reflects this change, with well established authors among them in the field of critical theory, cultural studies, art history and art criticism.

It is necessary, however, to also recognise from the outset the limits of this compilation. The book is not intended to function as an all-inclusive monograph on the video art of Central and Eastern Europe, as the phenomenon is much more rich, complex and diverse than that. Nor does it seek to provide a comprehensive synthesis, or a survey of video art produced in each of the countries of the region. The reader will find here neither a coherent narrative, a kind of compressed summary of local art histories, nor an exhaustive analysis of all hundred works included in the *Transitland* video archive. Instead, it offers selective analyses of different aspects, and an angle on the field observed, demonstrating its fecundity and vividness.

The common denominator of the diverse array of writings featured in this collection is that they track specific features and the development of video art in different parts of the very diverse region, or shed light on some aspects of its expansion and power congruent with the vast cultural transformation. The issues discussed in this anthology have returned to the fore and become relevant again after two decades of the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, fuelled by a proper momentum to look back. The reader will undoubtedly be struck by the particular constellation of approaches, concepts and theories developed by the contributors of this book. All in all, the anthology proposes possible ways of thinking through the contribution of video art to the cultural transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, through an observation of different practices. It argues for the enormous creative potential of video art of the last twenty years within post-Socialist conditions to be recognised beyond the geographical borders. The impetus to frame the book from a Central and Eastern European perspective was a strategic one.

The chapter of essays includes 18 papers by distinguished art historians, curators, artists and theoreticians. One third of them, i.e., six essays were commissioned specially for this volume: those by Marina Gržinić, Zoran Erić,

Keiko Sei, Miklós Peternák, Boryana Rossa and Edit András. The other essays were carefully researched and selected on the basis of how they reflect and resonate on our framework. They have already been published in art journals, anthologies or catalogues, mostly in hardly accessible local publications. Three of them were translated into English from local languages specifically for this anthology, and thus became available for the first time in English. Other papers have been revised and modified.

The texts vary significantly, reflecting in their style and concept very different attitudes and points of view on the video art of the various regions of the territory. The international group of contributors includes well-established names, like Svetlana Boym, Boris Buden, Boris Groys, and excellent writers with less international recognition but with great expertise in their field, as well as an emerging new generation of thinkers with striking insights.

Every editor's dream is to select texts that are theoretical, critical and most importantly, comprehensive and comparative, as if it were possible to skip over the phase of putting together the pieces of the puzzle first, i.e., of gathering knowledge of the very diverse activities of a very diverse region, all pieces with their own specific history and context. Many scholars from the region argue for locality and for the importance of comprehending the relevant context, and of revising superficial statements relying on good old Cold War clichés, always returning in mega-regional or sub-regional shows and in general statements on post-Socialist countries. To demonstrate the astonishingly multifaceted context and histories of different parts of the region, the selection attempts to shed light on every corner of this shadowed land, as it was labelled in the infamous Fulton speech given by Winston Churchill in 1946,<sup>3</sup> and to reveal its colourfulness.

Nevertheless, all two dozen countries could not be represented in this anthology, given the limited extent of the volume; thus, it was intended at least for all sub-regions to find their own momentum through close encounters with the scene via the art production of one included country. Thus, the authors and texts have been loosely branded according to their geopolitical references. Those sub-regions, in accordance with the *Transitland* archival project, are the Balkans, including ex-Yugoslavia, Central Europe, and the successor states of the former Soviet Union, namely the Baltic States and the Caucasus.

While most of the authors in the volume provided an overview of just one, and mostly their own home country, only a few of them covered two (Boryana Rossa—Bulgaria and Russia) or three countries (Keiko Sei—Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania); nevertheless, the reader is compensated for the dispersed mosaics of nations by the wild variety of approaches and methods.

They range from new theoretical concepts via the correct outlining of unknown histories and events, to accounts of art practices or a deep analysis of just one single art piece.

Some of the authors give an art historical overview, or “just some notes” to the much broader story of the country they represent (Miklós Peternák—Hungary; Katarína Rusnáková—Slovakia; Ryszard Kluszczyński—Poland), tracking the most important moments and artworks of the genealogy of the last twenty years, and providing a detailed introduction to the artistic context of their country, thus helping to navigate the reader through the selected artists and artworks. Some of them also elaborate on some side aspects of the genre, as Peternák touches upon the issue of the interrelation between TV, video, and the internet as widely used public communication devices. Other authors elaborate on specific issues and artistic production, offering a more detailed account, with an attempt to provide rather a historical context in their country: Zoran Erić takes up the issue of identity in Serbia (and partly in ex-Yugoslavia); Tomáš Pospiszyl takes as the subject of his well-argued paper the historical memory in Czech video. Konstantin Bokhorov closely examines the interrelation of performance and video in Russia, while comparing this phenomenon to the international practice. Rusnáková and Rossa seek to provide a counter history to those currently in circulation, and look closely at the “herstory” of the genre in their countries, taking as their subject the use of the body and gender related issues in Slovakia, Bulgaria and partly Russia. Some authors get even closer to their subject by providing a close reading of a single segment that can, however, offer a deeper understanding of the operation of the region, like Boris Buden’s case-study on Goran Dević’s video, *The Imported Crows*, or Giorgio Bertellini’s analysis of Marina Gržinić & Aina Šmid’s early videos in terms of space, as opposed to the general notion of video centred around temporality.

The particular case of post-Soviet-post-Socialist countries, carrying a tricky double-burden in their transformation, is observed in Antonio Geusa’s critical outline of Russian video art in comparison with its equivalent on the global scene, whereas in Ruben Arevshatyan’s study on Armenian video art, many significant works are considered, contextualised and introduced. Mihnea Mircan concentrates on the fate of the regiment of Socialist monuments following the political changes, and how this issue is raised and elaborated in video. My essay takes to the centre of attention the memory of the Socialist past in different countries, and the very different coping methods. Transnationality, which is very much part of the nature of the region, despite all nationalistic claims, is present in the “cross-attention” of Svetlana Boym, with Russian origin, elaborating a deep analysis on the videos of Albanian artist, Anri Sala, exploring some of the most touching issues of the mental transformation. I myself take up Lithuanian, Estonian, Polish and Croatian videos, mulling over

the leftovers and ruins of the Socialist utopia, whereas Romanian art historian, Mihnea Mircan, focuses on Lithuanian videos. A Japanese media curator, active participant in the media activities in the 90s in Central Europe, Keiko Sei provides her perspective on the changing societies and on video being one of the most effective interpretative tools of its transformation. Her remembrance of the activity on the field leads us back to the creative euphoria experienced immediately after the fall of the Wall and to the early heydays of video art. Călin Dan’s revised essay compiled from an introduction originally published in the *Ex Oriente Lux* catalogue, accompanying the first comprehensive exhibition of Romanian video art and from a retrospective looking back onto that pivotal event, is itself documentary “footage” in our archive.

In a volume largely preoccupied with recent history, it seemed pertinent to interrogate the historical sediment from which today’s questions about specific art-making practices, strange longings, utopian thinking, and political engagement have emerged. Some authors (e.g., Pospiszyl, Rossa, Mircan, András) are obsessed with this archaeological excavation, in order to discover a clue, or at least a better vista onto the phenomena of today.

Boris Groys, one of the leading theoreticians of the post-Socialist condition, theorises both central concepts of the project and of the book, the archive and the video, and their peculiar interference, offering a fresh interpretation of Walter Benjamin’s famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”<sup>4</sup> from the perspective of the encounter of these two phenomena. Recognised philosopher and video artist Marina Gržinić’s radical and critical essay, written specially for the present volume, serves as a keynote study, providing a guideline to many of the aspects that this collection of essays raises, ranging from the political transformation of Socialism into Capitalism, and alongside the arts’ changing social functions, the need for re-politisation of art and theory, gender issues.

A separate section, entitled “Transitland Video Archive”, serves as a catalogue of the project, providing the list and short descriptions of the selected hundred videos. The initiatives, aims and history of the archival project are introduced by the project director, Margarita Dorovska, accompanied by a curatorial text by Kathy Rae Huffman, a media specialist and curator. She takes the responsibility of covering almost every single video in the archive, taking the weight off the shoulders of the editor to be obliged to follow the same routine in the selection of the essays. Naturally, the essays cannot cover every single piece of the rich collection of this video archive; however, they do mention, and in some cases even elaborate on the reading of additional videos as well, that did not get into the archive, but would have perfectly fit into a broader survey, and make the video landscape more nuanced.

Numerous people helped in getting this book off the ground in a very short time, supplying us with information, contacts and names, and the generosity is hereby gratefully acknowledged. For recommendations of specific authors and articles to our poll, I am obliged to Judit Angel, Konstantin Bokhorov, Barbara Borčić, Ana Dević, Marina Gržinić, Olga Goriunova, Vít Havránek, Kathy Rae Huffman, Karina Karaeva, Eva Khachatryan, Stephen Kovats, Margarethe Makovec, Ilona Németh, Olga Shishko, Andrzej Szczerski, Simon Rees, Sophia Tabatadze and Raluca Voinea. I am grateful to the authors and publishers of the essays for granting us permission to reprint their material. Special thanks goes to Adèle Eisenstein for her English language copy-editing, openhandedly assisting the authors and the editor through their language barriers. Karina Horitz's work of proofreading the manuscripts is also greatly appreciated. Their dedicated editorial skill enabled the production of this book. Thanks are due, as well, to Réka Deim, Magdolna Rajkai and Judit Szalipszki, interns at ACAX, as well as Zsófia Lóránd, for their assistance during the process of producing the book. We are thankful for Károly Királyfalvi's patient collaboration, thorough and attentive work. A special acknowledgement of my gratitude goes to Rita Kálmán and Tijana Stepanović, my dear colleagues, the curators of the project from the ACAX side, and producers of the book, a smoothly operating duo carrying the task of an entire publishing house on their shoulders. They provided me with enthusiastic and responsible editorial assistance I could build on, and supported my work in many ways, without which this book would not have come into being.

Long Island, NY, September 2009

Edit Andrés

## Notes

- 1 A very valuable exception has been the series of *OSTranenie: International Electronic Media Forum*, focusing particularly on the development of media in Central and Eastern Europe, which took place at the Bauhaus, Dessau since 1993 under the directorship of Stephen Kovats. Ten years after the political changes, the OSTranenie forums 1993, 95 and 97 came to a conclusion with the volume *Media Revolution. Electronic Media in the Transformation Process of Eastern and Central Europe / Ost-West Internet*. Elektronische Medien im Transformationsprozess Ost- und Mitteleuropas, Edition Bauhaus 6, Stephen Kovats (ed.), New York, Frankfurt am Main, Campus Verlag 1999.
- 2 Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York, Oxford University Press 1997; Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, Stanford University Press 1994; Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other. "The East" in European Identity Formation*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1999.
- 3 Winston Churchill, "The Iron Curtain", in: *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat. The Speeches of Winston Churchill*, David Cannadine (ed.), Boston, Houghton Mifflin 1989, pp. 303–305.
- 4 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in: *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), New York, 1968, pp. 217–251.

Essays

## Introduction

Active as a video and media artist (from 1982 in the space of ex-Yugoslavia, today Slovenia, in Ljubljana), as well as a theoretician and philosopher, I have tried, in parallel to my artistic work (done in collaboration with Aina Šmid), to develop contexts of theory and criticism, and to curate programs of video and media art from the territory known formerly as Eastern Europe. I have attempted in these various engagements to de-link myself from a certain ghetto situation that establishes a simple geography as the only specificity of the medium from Eastern Europe. If anything can be declared as the point of departure in this long period of my activity (27 years), then it is the re-defining, re-contextualising and re-politicisation of the video medium. I had the chance to develop a special programme for the *International Short Film Festival* in Oberhausen, Germany in 2000, curating ten programmes presenting 100 videos and short experimental films from the former Eastern European space, selected within a time frame of 1950 to 2000. I gave it the overall title *Sex, Rock'n'Roll and History: (Video)films from Eastern Europe 1950–2000*, and historically it is the largest and most comprehensive presentation until today, showcasing the unbelievable power of the experimental film and video productions from former Eastern Europe.

The present essay is divided into two parts. In the first part, I would like to reflect upon—despite the *Transitland* project and other similar programmes—what I call a disappearance of the practices of video and experimental short film from the former Eastern European space in recent categorisation, archiving and exhibitions. Today, the former Eastern European space is nonexistent: it has vanished symbolically, conceptually, politically and socially in the global world and is not considered a relevant counterpart in current discussions on the state of things as well as histories of art and culture in recent decades in Europe and the world. It exists as filtered through numerous economic and security zones established by the EU as a second-class space, dismembered through different economic, legislative and security processes. It reappears as a ghostly entity on the occasion of memorial celebrations, as in the current case of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

What has become a major problem then, is that art, media, social and political practices and processes from Eastern Europe are not contextualised equally with other spaces. What is reserved for us is only as a “special” program or an agenda. In the mentioned Oberhausen programme realised in 2000, *Sex, Rock’ n’ Roll and History: (Video)films from Eastern Europe 1950–2000*, it was a change, as the East was seen and confronted in parallel to the West and in the debates that were taking place simultaneously, as part of the festival.<sup>1</sup> However, it lasted only for the duration of the festival: once the projections ended, no further effort to establish a special archive, touring programme or to publish digitally and textually this first historical massive overview was carried out. This was a surprise, as a large sum of money was invested in the whole project, with an excellent outcome, not to mention the input of the excellent group of co-editors and co-curators from Germany who worked closely with me on the project (e.g., Katrin Mundt). Thus, the direction of the festival made one of the biggest historical mistakes ever, as they subsequently translated the programme as an impossibility to deal with the “wild” situation of copyright in Eastern Europe. This technical excuse could not possibly be taken seriously, as money was paid and rights secured for the Western programme presented at the same time in the festival, which subsequently toured throughout Europe (as I learned on the internet).

Time and again, the Eastern European space is the special programme (exhibition, publication) for an anniversary, or even of a “miraculous interest” of private corporation managerial structures (who deceive themselves that this is not about money or allocation of capital, but that their interest is the result of pure and almost genuine sentimentalism for democracy), etc. Of course, in most cases, a precise analysis will clearly indicate that these programmes are ultimately straightforward processes of the allocation of capital, and that they coincide with the EU’s always temporary interest established through the processes of zoning in the former Eastern European space, with the economical and judicial restrictions on a specially established zone of EU interest (Western Balkan or South Eastern Europe, etc., ad infinitum)—for a certain period. The Capitalist Western institutions of art and culture (art markets, discourses, theories, exhibition spaces, etc.) that are of primal importance for establishing hegemony and discrimination are co-substantial for developing processes of voiding the meaning, abstraction and complete commercialisation of contemporary art. Certainly, the West and its institutions will not give back all that was expropriated from the colonies, nor does this mean to give back the common knowledge/practices/skills that are now completely privatised. If this does not work, however, then the last card is played out—the card of the logic of equal redistribution of “responsibility” and positions for the state of things in the world. This obscene redistribution or claims of “equality” in 2009 take the

shape of absurdity, when exhibitions, projects, symposia, etc., talk of “former” Western art or “former” Western Germany, and so on (see the project *Former West. International Research, Publishing and Exhibition Project 2009–2012*). Talking about “former” Western Europe, just as we talk about former Eastern Europe, tries to convince us that today we all are in the same “merde” (“shite”). Though as Althusser would say, the “former” before Western Europe has to be put into quotation marks. Why? In the case of Eastern Europe, the “former” means that processes of evacuation, abstraction and expropriation of its historical, social and political realities and practices are actually over. In the case of “former” Western Europe, a purely performative, empty, speculative gesture is implied. While the former East is today robbed completely of its history, we should say with David Harvey,<sup>2</sup> expropriated and dispossessed of historical, theoretical and epistemological grounds (the Communism that is taken today as the future is dispossessed by its historical background in the former Eastern Europe), the West is just performing its dispossession. It plays with a speculative, not fictionalised format of itself (though it pretends to be fiction); the “former” presents a speculative matrix that offers the West the possibility not to be conscious of a proper historical and present hegemonic power, and therefore not responsible for it. This speculative character of the “former” Western Europe resembles perfectly the speculative character of present financial Capitalism and its crisis. The speculative and de-regulative character of global Capitalism over-determines each and every practice, each and every institution. In future, we can expect projects, symposia and statements in which the Western imperial colonising forces will try to prove how they, too, were colonised in the past, and that what is happening to them in the present is the result of some strange forces, and not the internal logic of Capitalism itself, with its two drives: making profit at any cost, and privatisation.

As it is proclaimed by Germany in 2009, celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, “Come to the country without borders!”—I will say add: and without memory! Thus, after two decades, Western intellectuals have discovered Communism as the concept for the future—though none speak about the present. History is dead, the future is on the table, and the present simply does not exist.

The second part of the essay comprises a theoretical/conceptual/political genealogy of contemporary video, film and performative practices and political spaces in the former Eastern European space, dismantling the singular, established, contemporary Western history of video and media art (conceptual, body and performance) imposed by the Capitalist First World. I have reworked some of the thesis I developed for the programme in Oberhausen; these theses stay firmly grounded in my endeavour to develop a theoretical, political and

conceptual framework for a different history of video and experimental film in the world, taking experimental film and video productions from former Eastern Europe as its centre. I develop the possibility of establishing a different history of video that comes from the territory once known as Eastern Europe. With this move, I attempt to open up the question of the re-politicisation of the field of video in general, questioning the processes of establishing genealogies and histories of practices and interventions termed as video art and experimental video that come from worlds outside the Capitalist First World, implying that Western historiography and Western contemporary theoretical writings are not capable of dealing with such genealogies. The Second World is the former Eastern Europe, which vanished from the processes of interpretation, with only two lines of perception/reworking applied. Prevailing in the West is a certain morality of good taste, bounded by unspoken rules and morés: “do not touch”, “no trespassing”, etc.—in fact, prejudices and racist views. It is also significant that the context of video changed radically on the one hand, due to YouTube and its ability to stream online video, and on the other, the world has changed dramatically under the constant surveillance of digital media technology.

### **Part one: A brief history of globalisation and Imperialism**

A sentence, coined by the artist Šejla Kamerić, from Bosnia and Herzegovina: “There is no border, there is no border, there is no border, no border, no border, no border, I wish”.

—as an artwork (recently quoted in the magazine *Kontakt*, of the Erste Bank Group, as part of an interview with Kamerić entitled “Freedom Comes”) posits the “border” as a disruptive and imposed regulative force within the various social, territorial, and artistic conditions of contemporary global Capitalism. Therefore, the disappearance of borders is to be seen as a wish that would definitively bring freedom.

The disappearance of borders seems to be the final point in the success story of the constitution of the present world. This is the point at which its whole history, in relation to the Wall that once divided East and West (Berlin) Europe, is constructed, as well. But the wish put forward by Šejla Kamerić is already operative as the logic of the historicisation of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the August 2008 issue of the Lufthansa onboard magazine, a full-page ad (p. 6) by the German National Tourist Board announces the year 2009. The forthcoming 20<sup>th</sup> jubilee is presented as a celebration of 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the following slogan: “Welcome to a land without borders”. The announcement goes on to say that the Berlin Wall symbolised the Cold War and the division of Germany and Europe into East and West (until 1989) for 28 years.

But in the coming year of 2009, representing 20 years since the reunification of Germany, it will be possible to visit in Germany only some remainders of that time in Europe (and I would add, before they vanish completely). In this announcement, it is stated that the revolution for a better world in East Germany started at St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig. A very clear parallel process is going on in Europe with regard to the overtaking of the Communist revolutionary past of the East of Europe by Christianity. A precise analysis of the circulation of capital and of the hegemonisation of Europe by Christianity will show these two processes as going hand in hand historically and currently!

### ***Accumulation by dispossession***

A very good example is the new visa regime of mobility for South East Europe established by the European Commission. As of 2010, only Bosnians from Bosnia and Herzegovina—meaning Muslims, and Kosovars (also Muslims)—will remain the only nationalities of the former Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia with a rigid visa regime for the EU. Visa-free travel should be granted to citizens of Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia as of 1 January 2010. This is already implemented for Croatia. Equal rights will be refused to Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The European Commission ignores that Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia are at nearly the same level with regard to the introduction of biometric passports and a variety of legislative acts agreed on the visa liberalisation road map. The arguments that serve to justify the Commission recommendation are factually unconvincing and politically irresponsible. Serious analysts talk about a restrictive EU policy toward Muslims and EU construction of a ghetto in the heart of Europe. Only a portion of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina will profit from the new travel regime. Bosnian Serbs and Serbs from Kosovo travel visa-free in the EU, thanks to their second passport issued by the Republic of Serbia as of 1 January 2010. Bosnian Croats have already enjoyed visa-free travel to the EU for a couple of years, thanks to their Croatian passports. Restrictions remain in place for the Bosnians of Bosnia and Herzegovina. De facto, ethnic criteria will decide on whether a citizen is able to travel freely to the EU.

I could claim that despite our feeling that invisible borders prevent the space of the world, or to be precise, of the First Capitalist Neo-Liberal global world, from being open and mobile, we nevertheless have to think differently. On one hand, we see the process of the unbelievable circulation of positions that prevents us from fully accepting the thinking of the space of contemporary art and culture, the social and economical, as being foreclosed by borders, and on the other, we see the disappearance of the borders that firmly installed a clear division of the world in the past, as was the case in the time of Imperialist

Capitalism. What we actually see is a process of the disintegration of borders, at least as part of an ideological, discursive process of the reorganisation of the new Europe and the world. What is presented by Kamezić as a wish is already operative throughout the new Europe. This is the slogan of Germany today, with which it will celebrate 20 years of its reunification.

What is the phenomenon that can be observed if one looks attentively at the different logics of functioning within the space of politics, but even more so within the art and culture of the New Europe nowadays? We see a disinterest in art and culture that comes from the region of former Eastern Europe. This is not to be romantic or sad: the disinterest must be clearly connected with the escalation of all major exhibitions and biennials that show a special appetite for the positions of Third World artists, mostly Asian and Latin American. The past divisions and ideologies of difference within Europe are seen as an obstacle to the process of capital circulation, i.e., to the circulation of financial capital. Behaving as though this is already one space (Europe), it is unnecessary to push any inclusion through exclusion; it is enough to behave as if no differences exist any longer (as China proved with the Olympic Games!). We are all identical through a process of “evacuation” that David Harvey defines in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) as “accumulation by dispossession”. This is a process of expulsion from the possession of any possible difference; when necessary, a law is used (such as the unbelievable legislative policy of the EU, which can only be followed by specialists nowadays), or there is a whole set of institutional, legislative, bureaucratic, infrastructural, theoretical and cultural processes, which are abruptly or “gently” installed.

### *Imperialism of circulation*

The Bologna process of reformulating the European Higher Education Area is an excellent example of this tearing down of borders in Europe. The process of “accumulation by dispossession” is perhaps no longer effective in Europe, as it is supposedly completed here (with the German slogan for 2009, it is cemented as a process that is finally realised, so to speak), but one can observe its workings elsewhere: in the Third World, for example.

The process of the disappearance of borders, as I try to conceptualise here—and my thesis is that the wish is nearly complete (we only have to observe the Wall Street collapse and the world that is falling down in a domino effect)—is, in fact, connected to the accumulation of capital. One such process is surely accumulation by dispossession, meaning getting rid of, or being robbed of, any difference. The second process is what we are facing today: the Imperialism of circulation. Michael Hudson, in his *Super Imperialism* from 1972 (re-published

in 2003),<sup>3</sup> says that rather than a crisis as regards gaps in distribution, today we are witnessing a process contrary to it, which is “the Imperialism of circulation”. But to come to the Imperialism of circulation today, you have to be dispossessed. In 1972, Hudson already announced that the borders that were preventing—or forming gaps in—distribution would be removed by the Imperialism of circulation. I would state that both processes—accumulation by dispossession and the Imperialism of circulation—should be seen not as a simple cut between the modes of the accumulation of capital (sending the accumulation by dispossession into retirement), but that one constituted the parameters (through dispossession) of the other in order to dominate at the present moment.

The price to be paid is the total dispossession of all our ideas, stances and specificities. Capital has only one agenda—surplus value—and this is more than a programme or a Hollywood film conspiracy. It is a drive—and human desire is not an equal opponent against it. The Imperialism of circulation without differences, as the primal logic of the condition of the production of global financial Capitalism, implies that what is produced is money. But as the crisis implies, this bubble will also explode sooner or later. Ultimately, the recent capitalist economic crisis, which can be described as a process of stagflation, i.e., of differential inflation amid stagnation, is not only a sign, but also the realisation of new processes of capitalisation in connection with new modes of capital accumulation.

But what is important for us now is the subsequent or parallel process that is equivalent to Hudson’s “Imperialism of endless circulation”, and which I can simply describe, making reference to Jelica Šumič-Riha’s article, “Prisoners of the Inexistent Other”, by stating that what is impossible in the world of Capitalism today is “impossibility” as such. These work together: on one side, the Imperialism of circulation; on the other, the impossibility of something being impossible. The Imperialism of circulation, in its frenetic processes, prevents the subversion or attack of any master entity. Everything circulates, is exchanged, clearly dispossessed of any difference, and no obstacles are to be seen in the network that structures reality for us. Those once perceived as enemies, whether individuals or institutions, behave as if we were all in the same situation, and all had to find the remedy to our problems and needs, obstacles, etc. (while those who generate expropriation and dispossession should be forgotten immediately). It is nearly impossible to say that something is impossible today.

To put it another way, in the past a subversive act was possible as it was subversion against clear foreclosure and division in society. The borders were

clear: the big Other, the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures/ed reality for us, was the thing providing “consistency”, so to speak. It was almost a guarantee of an intervention against it. The world today presents itself in an endless circulation (Imperialism is an excellent concept capturing this drive) that is seen as a “friendly” and infinite exchange; therefore, in order to solve expropriation, enslavement, and neo-colonial interventions by capital, only one measure is proposed, and this is called coordination.

Thus, we have to draw a line in space, a border. To show a border within the inconsistency of the big Other means to act. To act politically. The act changes the very coordinates of this impossibility. It is only through an act that I effectively assume the big Other’s non-existence. This implies not only that s/he has to take the politics of representation into her/his hands, and set the border within the cynical situation that the only thing which is impossible is impossibility as such, but, as is argued by Šumič-Riha, it is necessary to build the framework as well, the foreclosure that would set the new parameters, giving new coordinates to the political act. Within such a context, I can claim that what is necessary, in fact, is a precise, new conceptual and paradigmatic political act, which implies the setting of a new framework. The political act is a division, the setting of a border within a space. It reconfigures, closes or stops, if you will, the Imperialism of circulation by establishing new parameters within the space. It establishes a new structure to which to relate. It establishes a new context of knowledge and politics that is achieved through a de-coloniality<sup>4</sup> of knowledge, of power, a firm critique of anti-Semitism and racism, and by establishing a consistent queer political platform (de-linking ourselves from homophobic positions and heterosexism or “heteronormativism”).

An act is always performed through enunciation and it sets not only the parameters that initiate the act itself, but also those in relation to the Other to whom it is addressed. It is the establishment of the structure to which this line(s) of division will relate that is important. In the case of non-existent past division in Europe, it must be said that the greatest profit from the disappearance of borders in Europe is to be gained by financial capital. In order to push such logic, it was necessary to imply a ferocious process of equalisation and levelling of all the strata of the various European and global societies, from the social to the educational and cultural. It was also necessary to install one of the most ferocious politics in the whole space—accumulation by dispossession. In other words, local specificities were transformed into ethnic/ethnographical ones, and one general path of history and genealogy from art to culture, science, and the social, was established as the only valid one: the First Capitalist World history that completely (de)regulates the history, the present, and the future of the world. This process is connected with what is termed the

global age of Capitalism. As stated by Santiago López Petit, it defines global Capitalism, which starts symbolically with 11 September 2001 (with the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York), and presents the reconstruction of the Nation-State in crisis and in the form of the “War on Terror”. The global age allows unthinkable legislation, violence, economical crisis and what is termed by Petit the co-propriety of reality by Capitalism. It means that in reality, knowledge, history, institutions and the social and political space have become completely Capitalist. Therefore, the question is always to which histories we attach our representational politics and how we re-situate our position within a certain social, economic and political territory.

## Part two: The condition of possibility of video(films) in Eastern Europe

(Video) film or/and video (film)? What is at stake here could also be formulated as the problem of the status of video as an underground film category and a new—at first electronic, today media—paradigm. The word in brackets gets a precise theoretical positioning; the brackets unmistakably signal the confrontation of the ambiguous positioning of the two practices before and after the 1980s in Eastern Europe.

Video (films) gained a very particular status in the 1980s, when the Communist State apparatus (especially the most repressive ones) began to exercise a looser control over artistic and cultural productions. This owed in part to the disintegration processes that began to spurt out in the political and economic chaotic Eastern European reality of the 1980s. In spite of the differing Communist structures in Hungary, Poland and especially ex-Yugoslavia, these countries succeeded to develop avant-garde film and art productions throughout the 1970s, and connected them to the video medium in the 1980s. Hungary connected the strong avant-garde film tradition to video, or at least developed a conceptual approach to the medium through experimental film research. Poland connected the strong conceptual tradition in the visual arts with body art actions and happenings, performance and film productions. Ex-Yugoslavia, with its so-called Third Way into Socialism (i.e., “non-aligned self-management Socialism”), had already become a politically specific case (hi)story.

The so-called “first line” totalitarian Socialist Eastern European countries (i.e., the Soviet Union, Romania, Bulgaria, East Germany, etc.) suffered a delay of a whole decade in developing art connected to the electronic media, including the use of the video medium as a social tool, in comparison with Poland, Hungary and especially ex-Yugoslavia. This delay was due to the repressive nature of the Communist State in these countries, which executed an almost bloodthirsty control of art and cultural productions, not only over the written word, but over

all instant visual reproductive media and technologies (e.g., copy machines, VHS video technology and even Polaroid). The severe censorship of literature was easily extended to cover visual reproductive technology. In this context, the underground film scene, which arose in St. Petersburg (Leningrad) in the mid-80s, deserves special mention. The city had a strong underground scene known as the Necrorealist movement, which produced deconstructivist versions of the official Communist films on Super 8mm and 16mm film. Subsequently, in the late 1980s and 90s, following the collapse of Communism, it proved impossible to stop the transfer of Necrorealist films onto video, facilitating their distribution and presentation at Western European art video, experimental and media festivals.

On the other hand, the 1980s was an era of the shaping of a new scopic regime of contemporary reality, giving priority to works proceeding from, and intended for, the eye. This oculo-centrism can be applied to political and social events, as well as to cultural and artistic ones. We must remember that the 1980s, in general, are defined as landmark in video (film) production, world-wide, first and foremost due to the changing relationship of video art and television. Video art was born in the 1960s as "prepared" television, as a personal medium and a counter-culture tool for subverting the widespread dissemination of the Tele-visual mass consumer ideology, initially in the USA, and then globally. In the 1980s, video became fully integrated into television imagery through music video. The Music Television (MTV) Corporation not only radically influenced the rock and pop culture/industry, but also demonstrated how the consumer Tele-visual culture, in an almost cannibalistic way, integrated experimental Tele-visual video iconography. MTV's strategies of visualisation derived largely from video art and experimental cinema.

It is possible to detect a similar, if reversed, logic in speaking about the production of video (films) in Eastern Europe. Video, even in its most amateur form, via a non-professional home VHS system, allows instantaneous replay of the recorded image. The instantaneous internal technological production (and post-production) principle proved crucial for the growth of the medium in Eastern Europe. Through the constant reproducibility of the totalitarian "original" image of power, cracks emerged in this original to the point that the replayed "copy" involved a decoding, which was not merely a pure, innocent, internal technological trick of the medium, but moreover, a political stance. The video medium's potential for incessant replay thus brought radical changes to the watchful eye of the Communist totalitarian system of power. These processes of replaying the video image may be perceived as a subversive mediatization of the social and political sphere in Eastern Europe. Therefore, to comprehend the birth of the video medium in Eastern Europe, we must

take into consideration this switch from the technologically produced replay to the political one, and to recognise that both forms of replay were carried out in Eastern Europe, within the social, political and cultural underground. Non-professional video equipment (VHS), with its simple handling and extremely fast production and reproduction, made video one of the most popular and radical forms of media for the 1980s generation. Access to video became a status symbol in itself. The video medium connected itself with marginalised communities of punks, rockers, activists, failed intellectuals and members of the underground who perceived the video medium as an important technological tool, which allowed for personal expression and social engagement.

Documentary video (film) projects (realised by amateurs with VHS equipment, and by independent film and video groups with professional video equipment) also enable us to make a comparison with the national television's interpretations of those same events and to re-locate the responsibility of national mass media for particular versions of history. Within this context, video (films) offer "authentic" historical, emotional, artistic and political views on events, conditions, bodies, practices, languages and topics, narrated through the perspective of its authors. Our knowledge is based not only on what we see, but also on what we can render visible.

Thus, historically, video (films) were not merely a means of expression, but also a method of documenting political events, despite the mass media usage of video equipment as surveillance in airports, banks, shops, on the street and even in toilets.<sup>5</sup> In the 1980s, important documents about non-official art and cultural productions were preserved with the aid of VHS video equipment.

Establishing a new style of visual "writing" with video (films) was a result of the conscious visual reconfiguration of an "original" Socialist alternative cultural structure. This produced innumerable "explosive" contrasts and a series of "technical imperfections" (as I have termed them), which comprehend the outer and inner, sexual and mental, order and disorder, conceptual and political, original and recycled space and time. Furthermore, from such a point of view, we can detect and generalise two strategies of visualisation in the medium, which reflect two territories: (1) the body in connection with sexuality, and the social and historical corpus of the national official film and (national) television medium; and (2) history in connection with politics. These strategies can also be viewed as two fundamental approaches to video (film) production in Eastern Europe.

(1) The 1980s witnessed the over-sexualisation of video (film). This was not only a process of art-political reflexivity of the much-repressed sexuality under Socialism and Communism,<sup>6</sup> but the process of distancing and disassociating the video (film) medium from its sisters: national feature film and television. This process was carried out with the externalisation of sexuality, which had been adopted from the underground film tradition.

The externalisation of sexuality took the form of overtly staged pornography and the gender confusion ("gender-bending") of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sexual attitudes. It was a process that can be simply explained: the sexual and civil rights(!) stereotypes and prototypes were not only consumed in and by the underground, but immediately performed. In front of a VHS camera, in private rooms and bedrooms, a status of a political positioning of the sexual and social *par excellence* was acquired. In these works, the masquerade of re-appropriation ensured not only the simple question of the formation of the identity of the artists or of the underground community, but also the process of negotiation to produce continually ambiguous and unbalanced situations and identities. The acquired hybrid and non-heterosexual positioning of sexuality, in the context of the remarkably impermeable gender boundaries of Communist Eastern Europe, was a way of overtly politicising the sexual in Socialism and Communism, and fighting for civil rights. These processes of over-sexualisation, which can now be perceived as contemporary gender politics, followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, still performed in the former East European countries, spreading from the video (film) medium to performance art, photography, etc. The post-post-Socialist bodies without make-up seem to function as subversive mirror images of the female body in the industrialised, post-modernist West, camouflaged by mass media and constantly re-designed.

We also find video (film) projects that were created by copying, in most cases the political broadcasts of the national television network. These copied sequences were then re-edited and re-interpreted, taking into consideration the internal replay logic of the video medium. Selected TV sequences on political events were combined with music, and re-edited in vertiginous rhythmic repetitive works. This resulted in an almost obscene uncovering of the internal mechanism of the everyday Communist political speeches and doctrine, which itself was based on the ritual of constant repetition. The thoroughly replayed and re-edited political speeches began to reveal their internal repetitive logic; the shorter and shorter units of the re-cut political speech started to function as a pornographic act, which put the viewer in a position similar to that of a peep show. The discourse of the orderly politician was transformed through technology into an inarticulate striptease. Thus, a specific syncretism was produced through which it was possible to detect similarities between different, until then incompatible, levels and expressions. This started to displace

differences, not only between these incompatible levels and expressions, but also within them.

From this, we can formulate a thesis that in some cases, (video) films functioned as "B-movies" under (post-)Socialism. These function as *kitsch*, grotesque, absurd video (films), impregnated with sex, politics and rock'n'roll, in parallel to the "B-movies" and/or underground cinema of the West.

(2) The functioning of Socialist societies involved a painful recourse to psychotic discourse, in an attempt to neutralise the side-effects of pertinent interpretations and productions through hiding, masking and renaming history.

Through (video) films, processes of re-appropriation and recycling of different histories and cultures, a condition of the re-politicisation of history has been constructed. The result of such procedures is the development of an imagery, which refers neither to the past or present, but to a potential time, somewhere between certainty and potentiality. The video (film) image presents a persistent searching for the condensed point, simultaneously the past and the present. It redefines their place inside a contemporary construction of power relations, which also feeds back to the status of video itself.

From this point, we can derive some significant generalisations about the status of video in Eastern Europe, with reference to the "technological switch of history". In a certain binary relation that is put forward with regard to the specificity of the video medium or the socio-political context surrounding it, in the case of the Eastern European space, it was possible to detect the use not of one pole against the other, but of media specificity for the recording of socio-political specificity. The outcome was not—as in the 1980s in the West—works structuring absence (in terms of being preoccupied solely with formal questions of the medium), but a video medium in the East sutured by the social and the political—an obviously crucial difference. In fact, the low-tech medium (often in the form of a home technology such as VHS) began to function as a powerful postmodern technology *par excellence*. It meant the structuring of a fully political space in the East of Europe, rather than an abstract media space. The thesis may be drawn that with the internal technological mode of functioning of the video medium, replay in particular, video gained a new political context in the East. In the West, replay took on a mass presence in bedrooms and kitchens, where it was used for the repetitive performance of blockbuster films, porn films and/or personal documentation. With video replay in the East, on the other hand, we are witness to a process of the detailed deconstruction and reconstruction of past history. In the so-called post-Socialist countries, video has, at the end of the century, developed into a specific vanishing mediator between history and the spectator in front of

the television screen. As the third eye, video enabled us to read history, to see through the surface of the film image and possibly, to perceive the future. I propose also to question the Western view of the structures of former Eastern European relations to reality. Such Western views on Eastern Europe focus on the condition of human rights and the principles of autonomy, equality and dignity, as postulated in the Western world. More precisely, to question the examination of the West regarding the regularity with which these rights are practiced and sustained in the East. We must bluntly ask not only if these principles of autonomy, freedom and humanity contain at their core a special neo-colonial interest of the West with regard to the rest of the world, but even more significantly, whether these principles are still valuable primarily in the West. We cannot conceive of a future today, e.g., if we do not reflect on the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s. In 1995, more than 8,000 Muslim boys and men were killed around Srebrenica, not to mention Chechnya, the Kurdish territories and Kosovo. The wars in the mentioned territories, and especially their handling by the Western European states, the US and the UN put into question the credibility of all the fundamental civil legislative relations in the world in which we live—not only the paradigm of the future, but the elementary supposition of humanism and the rhetoric of freedom, humanity and civil rights developed in the industrialised Western world.

Above all, these wars raised a number of questions with regard to the theories of mass media, and the technology of new/old communications (radio-TV-satellite communications). For this reason, it not only called into question the role of the TV and printed information in (new) war strategies (in ascertaining the differences between wars prior to and subsequent to the invention of television), but also the methods of the redistribution of information in a technologically developed environment. One of the main topics today in relation to new media technology is the problem of simulation/the virtual and the real, while the other is the speed of information exchange. The extreme velocity of communication leaves no time, according to Burghart Schmidt,<sup>7</sup> for controlling information.

We are in the middle of a voracious, unrestrained Capitalism (once again, referred to as “late Capitalism”, as it was in 1984 when Fredric Jameson started his discussion about postmodernism and multinational Capitalism)—a financial Capitalism, which is more than just a cultural condition: it is our reality. But what is the relation between Capitalism and reality? Santiago López Petit, in his online essay published in Spanish, “Reivindicación del odio libre para una época global” (2008), argues that reality has gone totally capitalist. The global era in which we are now living is the era in which reality and Capitalism totally coincide.

Precisely because of this, we can state that the modern/postmodern discourse is not enough to analyse reality, or as claimed by Petit, the postmodern discourse contemplated reality as neutral, and hence developed political neutrality, as well. However, by only reflecting reality, it is not possible to dismantle the co-property of reality by Capitalism; it is necessary to attack reality and Capitalism. Even while thinkers such as Foucault and Deleuze-Guattari have offered a differentiated view of the workings of power, it is interesting to see that some aspects of the political crisis of postmodernism are linked to the ostensible impossibility of an alternative working of power.<sup>8</sup> Foucault differentiates between power relations, which in principal are reversible, and the domination of situations, which are one-sided, rigid and marked by force. Wilhem Schmid<sup>9</sup> argued that this differentiation between power relations and the situation of domination is significant, since it clarifies the possibility of bringing a reversal of power relations into play. Significantly, whenever an ambitious history of power is written, the aspect of power that comes from the merging of individuals (such as citizens’ initiatives and social movements) is systematically neglected. The video medium in the East tried to subvert the very concept of politics. What it entailed was a subversion of the body politic. The notion of (individual) politics and of the politics of the medium in the East went beyond the mere question of resistance.

The “brutal, sexually perverse, and de-humanised” form and content of the messages and media structures generated in and throughout Eastern Europe functioned as an inverted image of what was still to come in the media by the year 2001 and beyond. Today, with the crisis and the total devaluation of life, we can see this clearly. As conceptualised by Petit, Capitalism sabotaged life and rendered it totally capitalist, exploiting it by the two iron laws of capital: the drive for profit (surplus value from capital) and private property.

To conclude, I will make reference to Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez and her text published in *Zehar* (Arteleku, San Sebastian, 2008). She radicalises the situation of the translation of various relations that are today marked by gender, class, race and migration, by stating that the only way to understand translation is to think about it as a failure. For such a statement, she takes as a reference Alberto Moreira’s “aporetic impossibility” as the basis of transcultural encounters that are today, in the time of globalisation, taking place not between individuals as such, but gender, class and race divided individuals coming from different geo-political contexts. Gutiérrez Rodríguez states that instead of relating to a European discourse of modernisation, it is necessary (as emphasised by Moreira) to re-appropriate it for a critical reading of “transculturation” as an ideological tool. As was stated by Nataša Velikonja, “Europe is Boring!”, or by Moreira, “Europe is Provincial”, as it is

not capable of reflecting on its dark reality of colonialism, racism, homophobia and a persistent process of segregation and discrimination—today exemplary practices against migrants in the most brutal way, on the one hand, and on the other, protected and normalised through EU legislative policy. Therefore, in an encounter between transnational capital and a national or local state network, between economic and social interests, it is important to take as the basis of the political-conceptual framework, a process of understanding that presents a failure, impossibility, and therefore proposes as such an “uncompromised transculturation”. This means that in the present situation of complete exploitation of every “commons” (from education, natural resources, genetics, etc., to those entirely excluded from the social body, or what Jacques Rancière calls the “part of no part” of the social), the only way is to tackle the processes of art, culture and media in Europe is to take as a point of departure, as argued by Gutiérrez Rodríguez, the dehumanising logic of capital and its processes of deregulation, privatisation and expropriation.

Ljubljana, July, 2009

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## Notes

- 1 The parallel special video film program of the festival was *Pop Unlimited?*, curated by Christian Höller. The daily *Der Standard* (Austria, 11 May 2000) reported: “these two programme sections, *Sex, Rock’n’Roll and History* and *Pop Unlimited?*, meshed almost perfectly, offering perhaps a suitable metaphor for the situation in Austria in their inner conflicts. In: *Die Wochenzeitung* (Switzerland, 18 May 2000), we could read that “the Eastern European counterpoint to *Pop Unlimited?* was clever and necessary”. Both references are from the press clipping section of the festival at [www.kurzfilmtage.de/en/looking-back/2000/press-clipping.html](http://www.kurzfilmtage.de/en/looking-back/2000/press-clipping.html), accessed on 1 September 2009.
- 2 David Harvey, *A New Imperialism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2003; and: *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2005.
- 3 Michael Hudson, *New Imperialism. The Origin and Fundamentals of U.S. World Dominance*, revised edition, London, Pluto Press 2003. The book was originally published as Michael Hudson, *Super-Imperialism. The Economic Strategy of American Empire*, Austin, Texas, Holt Rinehart 1972.
- 4 I would like to note the difference between colonialism and coloniality. Coloniality differs from historical colonialism, and it is the hidden logic of contemporary capital that makes possible here and now the imperial transformation and colonial management of the World in the name of capital, constitutive parameters: progress, civilisation, development and democracy. This process of coloniality is grounded in the Western rhetoric of modernisation and salvation, through which global Capitalism attempts to disgustingly snobbishly re-organise what it calls “human” capital—or if not possible otherwise, then with pure violence and the death of millions.
- 5 Here, I refer to the supervisory episodes of installing video cameras in public toilets, where gay sexual activity was suspected. This situation is not only reserved for Eastern European State authorities, as the West does not lag behind in these matters. I refer here to similar events that happened in the 1980s in West Germany.
- 6 Throughout Eastern Europe, severe measures were introduced against homosexuals, whereby most were punished by law and imprisoned as criminals, or detained in psychiatric institutions. There was a legal penalty for being a homosexual, although in Slovenia and Croatia, e.g., just to note the difference from other Eastern European states, there was no legal ban on homosexuality, yet they were blamed and marginalised in the mass media and in public. All the other counter sexual orientations (defined as such in relation to the prevalent heterosexual and homophobic reality)—transsexuals, cross-dressers, transvestites—were invisible in public life, except in a medical context.
- 7 Burghart Schmidt, “The Rest is Utopian Fiction. Art as Showing of Information, against Pure Information in Acceleration”, in: *Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics*, no. 2., Maastricht, Jan van Eyck Akademie 1995, p. 39.
- 8 Knut Harald Åsdam, “The smallest deviation, the minimum excess”, in: *Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics*, no. 1, Maastricht, Jan van Eyck Akademie 1995, p. 7.
- 9 Wilhem Schmid, “Politics of the Art of Living with reference to Michel Foucault”, in: *Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics*, no. 2, Maastricht, Jan van Eyck Akademie, 1995, p. 16.

The presence of film images in the museum, whether analogue film or digital video, prompts us to consider the impact of moving pictures on the art system and in particular on the traditional exhibition space. Within this context, I would like to examine in particular the problematic nature of digitalisation, which applies to digital photography as well as video. Because the video image is both: digital and moving, one can best describe it by separating these two characteristics, as there are analogue images which are also moving images (film), and digital images which are motionless (photographs). When moving images are placed into a museum context, their perception is essentially determined by the expectations we generally associate with a visit to the museum and also by the long, previous history of our contemplation of motionless images, whether paintings, photographs, sculptures, or ready-made objects. These expectations relate primarily to the duration of our contemplation of such images.

In the traditional museum, the viewer—at least in the ideal case, has complete control over the duration of his or her contemplation. He can interrupt contemplation of a particular picture at any time to come back to it later and assume viewing it at the same point when it was previously interrupted. In the period of time when the viewer was absent, the motionless image remains unchanged, identical to itself and for this reason it does not elude repeated viewing. One could even maintain that this continued self-identity of exhibited pictures represents the true task of the museal system as such. The overall effort of the storage, protection and restoration of the images being “preserved” in the museum serves to maintain their identity, the unchangeability of their form, which should consistently be available to the attention of the returning visitor. One can certainly claim that this identity, produced through preservation in a museum, is an illusion, but as it determines the viewer’s expectations, it is precisely this illusion that matters.

In this sense, the protecting, preserving production of the identity, understood as unchangeability, immovability, of the image over time actually makes up what we in our culture refer to as “high art”. In our usual, “normal” lives, time for contemplation is clearly dictated by life itself. With respect to life images, we do not possess autonomy or administrative power; we are only able to see what life shows us, and only as long as life does so. In life, we are always only accidental witnesses of certain events and certain images, whose duration we

cannot control. All art therefore begins with the wish to hold on to a moment, to let it linger for a long time: the tendency is for an eternity. It is only then that the viewer has the endless reserve of time required to determine the duration and rhythm of viewing. Thus, the museum and generally an exhibition space in which motionless images are exhibited obtains its real justification, the viewer's autonomy, understood as his ability to administer the duration of his attention, as guaranteed by the system of museal storage and presentation.

However, the situation changes drastically with the introduction of moving images into the museum, as these begin to dictate the time needed to view them, robbing the viewer of his usual autonomy. In our culture, we have two different models that allow us to gain control over time, the immobilisation of the image in the museum, and the immobilisation of the audience in the movie theatre. Both models, however, fail when the moving images are transferred into the museum space. In this case the images go on, but the audience also continues on. One does not remain sitting or standing for any length of time in an exhibition space; rather, one retraces one's steps, again and again, remaining standing in front of a picture for a while, moving closer or away from it, looking at it from different perspectives, and so on. The viewer's movement in the exhibition space cannot be arbitrarily stopped because it is constitutive of the function of perception within the art system. In addition, an attempt to force a visitor to watch all of the videos or films in an exhibition from beginning to end would be doomed to failure from the very start: the duration of the average museum visit is simply not long enough. Thus, a video or film installation in a museum radically lifts the ban on movement, which determines viewing these images in the cinema system; images and the audience are permitted to move simultaneously.

It is obvious that this causes a situation to arise where the contradictory expectations of a visit to a movie theatre and a museum clearly conflict, sending the visitor to an installation into a state of doubt and helplessness. The visitor basically no longer knows what to do. Should he stop and watch the images moving before his eyes like in a movie theatre, or should he, like in a museum, continue on in the confidence that over time the moving images will not change as much as one fears they will? Both solutions are obviously unsatisfactory. Actually, they are not real solutions at all. In this new situation, one is quickly forced to recognise that there cannot be any adequate or satisfactory solutions at all. Each individual decision to stop or to continue on remains an uneasy compromise and later has to be revised, time and again.

It is precisely this fundamental uncertainty that results when the movement of images and the movement of the viewer occur simultaneously, though it creates the added aesthetic value of shifting moving images into the museum as mentioned above. In the case of the video installation, a struggle arises between the viewer and the artist over the control of the duration of contemplation. Consequently, the duration of actual contemplation has to be continually renegotiated, and this can never result in complete comprehensibility of the images. Thus, the aesthetic value of a media installation in a museum primarily consists in explicitly thematising incomprehensibility, uncertainty and the viewer's lack of control over the duration of his own attention in museum spaces. Previously the illusion of complete comprehensibility prevailed. This is, by the way, not the notorious "inexhaustibility" of the meaning of a work of art, i.e., the "intellectual" inability of the viewer to completely fathom its meaning. Rather, it is a purely physical, time-related inability to grasp the material form of the work of art prior to any possible interpretation. This inability is further aggravated by the increased speed at which moving images are currently able to be produced.

Formerly, the paramount investment in terms of work, time and power required for the creation of a traditional work of art, stood for the viewer extremely favourably with regard to the duration of consuming art. After the artist had to invest a lot of time and hard work on creating the work, the viewer was allowed to consume the work effortlessly and with one glance. This explains the traditional superiority of the consumer, the viewer and the collector over the artist-painter, who supplies the paintings produced through arduous physical labour. It was not until the introduction of photography and the ready-made method, which enabled the artist to produce immediate images, which placed him on the same level with the viewer in terms of temporal economy. Now the camera that produces the moving images can also record these images automatically, without the artist having to spend his time doing so. This gives the artist a clear surplus of time; however, the viewer now has to spend more time viewing the images than the artist required for its production. The duration of time required by the viewer to contemplate so that the image is "understood" is not intentionally lengthened; rather, the viewer is completely in charge of the duration of conscious contemplation. Rather it is the time a viewer needs to be able to watch a video or a film in its entirety which can absolutely exceed the duration of a customary visit to the museum. Thus at different levels of temporal economy, media installations force the viewer to make decisions with regard to contemplation behaviour, which at the same time—or at least this is the tendency—may prevent him from consummating the act of viewing.

The viewer's basic experience of a video installation is thus a work with a non-identity. Each time someone visits a video exhibition, s/he is potentially confronted with another clip from the same video; therefore the work is different each time, yet at the same time it partially eludes the viewer's eye, making itself invisible. The non-identity of video images also presents another, as it were, deeper level. Like a film, a video is initially produced as a copy, but can one say that all of the copies of one film are identical to each other? As long as a film is shown under the standardised conditions of a visit to the movie theatre, one may perhaps say that yes, they are. However, the situation is fundamentally changed if the film is shown within the framework of a film installation in an exhibition space, because in this case, both the space as well as the duration of the presentation is explicitly thematicised. One begins to compare the film with other objects or artworks, possibly found in the same exhibition space; paintings, photographs, texts, and so on. In the end, one copy begins to distinguish itself from another copy by the way in which it is shown, presented and curated. The explicit contextualisation of the presentation makes the enpropriation and thus the non-identity of the film or the video clear, which are often overlooked. However, the non-identity of the image manifests itself even more clearly in the case of the video because of its digitality. The digital code of a video as such is invisible, and when it is made visible, for instance in a famous scene from the film *Matrix*, this code is radically different to the image that was recorded and stored with the aid of this code. Here the image begins to function as a piece of music, whose score, as is generally known, is not identical to the piece, as it is not audible, but silent. For the music to resound, it has to be performed, and this means that a piece of music is essentially enpropriate, non-identical. Thus in addition, the video, as well as digital photography, makes the image non-identical. In general, the self-identity of the image is an illusion which conceals a specific curatorial practice of presentation. The video image makes this kind of concealment structurally impossible. Here it becomes completely obvious that in order to be seen, the image is to be shown, presented and curated. Thus one may assume, and it is actually already happening, that the presentation of an image, in the sense of an image file becoming an image, will soon be just as innovative as a theatre performance. For instance, a work can be innovative with what little remains of the author's original script and in that it interprets the context of the piece in an entirely different way.

To a certain degree, this kind of strategy is unavoidable, as the space in which videos circulate today are extremely heterogeneous. One can view videos with the aid of a video recorder, but also as a projection, on television, within the context of a video installation, on the monitor of a computer, on a cell phone, and so on. In all these cases, the same video file looks different on the surface,

not to mention the very different contexts within which they are shown. If one changes certain technical parameters, one also changes the image. These kinds of changes are unavoidable because technology is constantly changing: hardware, software, monitors, simply everything. In this way, the image is also transformed with each new presentation. Can one perhaps preserve old technology so that the image remains identical? As Siegfried Kracauer remarked, and rightly so, preserved technology shifts the perception of a specific image from the image itself to the technical conditions under which it was produced and presented. Thus we are less interested in the subject in old photographs or the individual attitude of the photographer. What we primarily react to is the old-fashioned photographic technology which is apparent when we look at old photographs. The artist did not intend to produce this effect; he simply lacked the possibility of comparing his work with the products of later technological developments.

Thus, the image itself may possibly be overlooked if it is reproduced using the original technology. We understand the decision to transfer this image to new technological media, to new software and hardware, so that it may look fresh again, so that is it not interesting merely in retrospect, but rather it appears to remain a contemporary image. With this line of argumentation, however, one gets caught in the same dilemma, as is generally known, which contemporary theatre is unable to emerge from. Because no one knows what is better: whether to reveal the epoch or the individuality of the play during its performance. But it is unavoidable that every performance reveals one of the two, or even both.

Beyond this, today's technology thinks in terms of generations, as we speak of computer generations, of generations of photographic and video equipment. But where there are generations, there are generational conflicts, Oedipal struggles. Anyone who attempts to transfer his or her old texts or images onto new software can experience the power of the Oedipus complex over current technology. Many things are lost in the process, many things are destroyed, many things get lost in darkness, become blind. Every university professor knows what it means to convey traditional, self-identical knowledge to the next generation of students, to transfer it into their brains. As soon as technology begins to think in generations, then it plainly and simply ceases to be a medium of identical reproduction, of preserving, stabilising, storing. The biological metaphor says it all: not only notorious life, but also technology, which supposedly opposes it because it is reliable, has become the medium of non-identity.

However, one can also use technical constraints productively; one can play with the technical quality of a digital image on all levels, including the material

quality of the monitor or the projection surface, the external light, which as we know substantially changes the perception of a video image, not to mention that one can fundamentally change the image through the context of its presentation. Thus, each presentation of a digitalised image is a re-creation of the image. There is no such thing as a copy. In the world of digitalised images, we are dealing only with originals—only with original presentations. Digitalised music recordings can also be presented as originals, as manifested in the job of a DJ (in the meantime, there are also video disc jockeys, or VJs). Thus we are forced to radically rethink and redefine our notions of the fate of images in the age of their technical reproducibility, as described by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".

In this essay, Benjamin assumes the possibility of a perfect reproduction which no longer allows a material distinction between the original and a copy. Benjamin insists on this perfection and again in various passages in his text, he speaks of mechanical reproduction as a "most perfect reproduction", which "may not touch the actual work of art".<sup>1</sup> Benjamin wants to imagine the most extreme possibility of absolute perfect mechanical reproduction, in which traditional art, such as painting or sculpture, becomes absolutely reproducible and thus begins to function under the same circumstances under which, for instance, photography or film function, i.e., under the conditions of the original distinguishability between original and copy. The question Benjamin poses is the following: does the blotting out of the material distinction between original and copy also mean the blotting out of this distinction as such?

Benjamin answers this question with "no". The at least potential disappearance of any material distinction between original and copy does not blot out a different, invisible, but no less real distinction between the two. The original has an aura which the copy does not. For Benjamin, the aura is the relationship of the work of art to the place in which it happens to be, to its outer context. Thus for him, the distinction between original and copy is a topological one and as such, completely independent from the actual work of art. The original has a specific place, and it is through this special place that the original is etched into history as a unique object. The copy, in contrast, is virtual, placeless, ahistorical. From the very beginning, it manifests itself as potential multiplicity; reproduction is delocation, de-territorialisation: it transports the work of art into the networks of topologically indefinite circulation. Benjamin's formulations in this regard are well known: "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be". He goes on to write: "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity, and upon whose foundation for its part the notion of a tradition

lies which has passed on this object as itself and identical up to this very day". The copy is therefore false not because it distinguishes itself as such from the original, but because it cannot be placed anywhere, and for this reason cannot be etched into a tradition or into history: "The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated", and thus its status as an original as well.

Benjamin therefore conceives of the profane space of the circulation of photography, film or, let's say video as a homogenous space in which the identity of the copy is guaranteed. Because the "originals", which used to be housed in exclusive, protected, sacred places, are beginning to be copied true to the original and to circulate within the profane networks of the mass media. It is justified to say that profane space has become totally "mechanically reproducible", and the image definitely so and identical to itself. However, as we have seen, the reality of reproduction technology has in the meantime become a completely different one. Even though the digital version of an image, i.e., an image file, can be conceived of as circulating freely, this image file is not visually identical to the image itself. However, by manifesting this image file as an image, this image is likewise not identical to another presentation of the same image file. The topological homogeneity of the technological, mass-media space of digital reproducibility is an illusion. This space is de facto highly heterogeneous, because it includes very specific contexts, as well as very different and not always compatible technologies.

One cannot even guarantee the necessary self-identity at the level of the image file. The central characteristic of the internet consists precisely in the fact that in the net, all symbols, words and images are assigned an address, i.e., they are placed somewhere, territorialised, etched into a heterogeneous topology. In this sense, the net makes an original out of every file, which perhaps at one time was a multiple copy. The net performs a (re)originalisation of the copy by assigning it an internet address. In this way each file obtains a history, because it is dependent on the material conditions of its location. In the internet the file is essentially dependent on the quality of the respective hardware, the server, the software, the browser, and so on. When these material conditions are transferred to other locations, individual files may be distorted, interpreted differently, or even made unreadable. They may also be attacked by certain computer viruses, accidentally deleted, or simply age and perish.

In this way, files in the internet obtain their own story, which like any story, is primarily one of possible or real loss. Indeed, such stories are told constantly, how certain files can no longer be read, how certain websites disappear, and so

on. We are therefore already experiencing a return of the original and its story in the internet, as described by Benjamin. The introduction of the internet may be interpreted as a reaction to the unobstructed, virtual dissemination of copies, which was halted or even reversed through the territorialisation of these copies in the net.

What has been said applies even more to film and video installations. Because the distinction between original and copy is solely topological and situative, this means that all of the objects placed into a museum are actually originals, also and especially when they otherwise circulate as copies. The installation makes copying reversible, transforming a copy into an original. But all of modernity is actually organising a complicated game of delocations and [re] locations, or de-territorialisations and re-territorialisations, or de-auratisations and re-auratisations. What distinguishes modernity from old times is not the loss of the aura, but solely the fact that in modernity, the originality of a work is not determined by way of its material quality, but through its aura, its context, its place in history. This becomes particularly apparent in the age of the digitalisation of images. Today, we are not dealing with copies, but exclusively with originals, including the original presentation of the same image files, because the space of the circulation of images is not homogeneous, but heterogeneous, and so each new contextualisation of the image is its originalisation, its reinvention.

The presentation of images is the work of the curator or of the artist, inasmuch as s/he is in charge of the curatorial activity and for instance, assembles an installation. In comparison with the traditional painted image, but also with analogue photography, the curator, at least apparently, played a subordinate role. It is modernity's conviction that an image has to speak for itself; the silent viewing of the image alone has to convince the viewer of its value. The exhibition context has to be reduced to a white wall and good lighting. Theoretical and narrative talk has to cease. Even the affirmative discourse on, or the advantageous presentation of an image are an insult. The curator's task was considered to be making the individual works of art look their best. In other words, the best curating was considered to be non-curating. From this perspective, the best solution was the suggestion to leave the work of art alone so that the viewer could confront it directly. By the way, not even the famous White Cube appears to be suited for this. The viewer is recommended to internally remove him or herself fully from the spatial surroundings of the work of art and to submerge him or herself in contemplation, completely losing oneself to the world. This means that the encounter with the work of art appears to be authentic and genuinely enproprieate beyond curation.

Now, all of this can obviously not apply to an image file. If an image file is not presented as an image, is not exhibited, then it also does not exist as an image. Digitalisation manifests the general conditions of perceiving an image which would otherwise remain hidden and be overlooked. In his latest book, *Profanations*, Giorgio Agamben writes the following: "The image is a reality whose essence is appearance, visibility, surface".<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this definition of an image's essence is not sufficient to actually guarantee the visibility of a concrete image, because a work of art cannot make itself present by virtue of its own definition and force the viewer to look at it. The work of art lacks the vitality, energy and health to do so. The work of art initially appears to be ill, helpless; one has to lead the visitor to it like the visitor in a hospital is led to a patient's sickbed by a nurse. It is no coincidence that the word curator is etymologically related to the word cure. Curating is curing. Curating cures the helplessness of the image, its inability to show itself, its lack of visibility, which becomes particularly obvious through digitalisation, as the image exists as an image file, but only in the state of its invisibility, in a state outside its essence, in a state of non-identity. The work of art always requires help from outside; it needs an exhibition, an act of showing, presentation; it needs a curator to get it on its feet. The exhibition practice is the medicine that makes the image, which was originally ill, healthy, i.e., makes it present, easily visible.

Thus the effect of digitalisation on the image is one that one could, in the spirit of Derrida, be called "pharmakon", in that it both cures the image, as well as makes it ill. Digitalisation, i.e., the writing down, the transcription of the image, helps it to become reproducible, to circulate freely, to distribute itself. It is therefore medicine that cures the image of its inherent immovability. But at the same time, the image is infected with non-identity, with the necessity of presenting the image, time and again, and always dissimilar to itself, which means that supplementary curing, i.e., curating, is unavoidable. And it also becomes unavoidable to again ask the question of whether and how one can preserve an image in its original form, which in this case really no longer exists, or present it in a radically new way—and if new, then in which sense, and so on. Thus a space for reflection is opened up that is admittedly too vast to even begin to be able to describe here.

First published: Boris Groys, "From the Image to the Image File—and Back", in: *40yearsvideoart. de-part 1. Digital Heritage. Videoart in Germany from 1963 to the Present*, Rudolf Frieling, Wulf Herzogenrath (eds.), Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz Publishers 2009, pp. 50-57.

## Notes

- 1 This and subsequent quotes are all taken from Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in: *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), trans. Harry Zohn, New York, 1968, pp. 217-251.
- 2 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort, Cambridge, MA, London, The MIT Press 2007.

## Giorgio Bertellini

### Making Spaces at War

#### Notes on Video Art and Space in Marina Gržinić & Aina Šmid's Luna 10 and Bilocation

*“Metaphorizing the transformations of discourse in a vocabulary of time necessarily leads to the utilization of the model of individual consciousness with its intrinsic temporality. Endeavouring on the other hand to decipher discourse through the use of spatial, strategic metaphors enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through and on the basis of relations of power”.<sup>1</sup> (Michel Foucault)*

On 3 October 1964, Martin Heidegger gave a brief talk entitled “Raum, Mensch und Sprache” (“Space, Humanity, and Discourse”) at the Galerie im Erker in St. Gallen, Switzerland, thirty miles outside Zurich, on the occasion of an exhibition of sculptures by the German artist Bernard Heiliger. Five years later, a twelve-page written transcript of that talk, now retitled “Die Kunst und der Raum” (“Art and Space”), was included in a small, limited-edition volume published by Erker Verlag in St. Gallen. I would like to begin my discussion of the spatial signification in two video artworks by considering Heidegger’s thought as expressed in those precious few pages.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to his characteristic philosophical conceptualisations about *Dasein* (Being), the human being, and temporality—as found in his seminal text *Being and Time* (1927) and in his writings over the next forty years—in “Art and Space”, Heidegger took a very different position toward art and art-making.<sup>3</sup> In his usual view, the search for Being is formulated not as its speculative presentification—that is, as its becoming present, “at hand”, in this world together with concrete beings—but through the notion of its openness, i.e., through its constant being-present, as the condition of the visibility of other objects, like an unfocused yet necessary background rather than a distinct, visible object.<sup>4</sup> For Heidegger, the perennial openness-exposure of Being is not only what makes the different mundane beings present, but also what allows Being to play out its own existential projectuality. How, then, can Being be encountered? According to Heidegger’s established view, the role of art functions as the setting and coming-to-pass of the truth of Being in the work.<sup>5</sup> Thus, art is what allows a revelatory opening of Being, which is always open but not always manifested. Being, in fact, is Truth which—as Heidegger emphasises in his analysis of the etymology of the Greek word for “truth”, *alētheia*—signifies “unconcealedness, uncovering”.

Early in his writings, Heidegger had stressed the fact that the work of art is not the setting of truth as a “fixing”, but as the site where Being comes to pass, bringing forth its own unconcealedness.<sup>6</sup> “Setting” and “coming-to-pass” appeared as contradictory concepts: one emphasises the spatial unfolding of the event of Being, the other its dynamics. Concerned about these terms’ co-presence, Heidegger resolved the apparent contradiction between the locality, or concreteness, of the artwork and its capacity to signify openness by means of the specific modality of the event of Being: namely, a projection.<sup>7</sup> Art projects the light of Being onto the artwork through a manifestation that is never reducible to a fixed presence, but is always performed in movement.<sup>8</sup> Art is thus a (flickering) temporal aperture, a performance of Gestalt projection: the totality of Being is partially and provisionally “screened” toward the single being of the artwork.

Within Heidegger’s philosophical project of destroying/restructuring the Western metaphysical utterance, which for him had produced the speculative oblivion of Being since Plato, the language of *Dasein*, and in particular, the artistic language of poetry (Hölderlin), allows a privileged path to Being. Because language opens horizons of signification and contexts of encounter with beings, poetry becomes the privileged artistic performance and the model of other artistic endeavors. “All art [...] is essentially poetry”, where “poetry” is not only the specific “art of poetry”, but also that in which all forms of art find their essence.<sup>9</sup>

Quite a different view, however, is offered in “Art and Space”, which rather extraordinarily—and without any notable sequel—challenges the solidity of Heideggerian thought. First of all, Heidegger does not talk about language as the privileged form of art. Instead, sculpture becomes the art form *par excellence*. Sculpture is the art of bodies, and a sculptured body embodies space. Space is what sculptures, and modern figurative art in general, strive to conquer; i.e., space is the object over which art performs its constant dispute. But what is space? Space is a primary ontological concept, not reducible to other dimensions. There is no other reality behind space: beyond its borders there is still only space. But what, then, defined space as space, apart from its technical and physical measurements? In the face of the necessary resilience of this question and its equally inescapable answer, Heidegger replies phenomenologically. When we experience a sculptural work, we experience the space occupied by the figure, the space of the volumes of that figure, and the empty space that persists among that figure’s volumes. As a result, space is what art may disclose; art is, in fact, the process and the work of making space, which is space both being freed and becoming inhabited.<sup>10</sup>

What exactly does this “making space” mean? Fundamentally, the making-space of sculpture signifies the possibility for things and bodies to be gathered and maintained in their own spatiality. This is an important point. Heidegger is not saying that making space is like filling a void; on the contrary, things already possess their own spatiality, but making space allows them to disclose their own space in a site, a locality, a place. Thus, making space means to open up a horizon, to create a territory where former spaces become “bodies in perspective”.<sup>11</sup> As a result, a sculptural work is art because it opens the spatiality of a body into a spatial event (which reveals other spatialities and other bodies within one or multiple fields) and, moreover, discloses in perspective (here again, the Gestalt) the permanent spatial openness of the fundamental background, the unfocused Being.

In this sense, the emptiness is not what previously occupied the space of a body, but what remains between one body and another. A body, in fact, does not occupy nothingness, but space. Heidegger is even more audacious on this point: “We must learn to admit that things themselves are sites, and not simply that they belong to a site”.<sup>12</sup> I read this important admission as comprehending that space holds a dense discursive significance, and therefore, because it is always someone’s or something’s, space exhibits itself as a site always already gathering identities.

Heidegger’s “Art and Space” is important, I would argue, because it shows the germ of spatiality at the heart of one of the densest modern philosophical systems, a system that is otherwise devoted almost exclusively to exploring human metaphysics in temporal terms. If it is true that, from this point on, Heidegger does not change his approach to his speculative inquiries, this short, almost incidental, essay illuminates a discourse on space that I would like to superimpose on the critical registers of video art’s own discourse.

If we ask, what, in the criticism of contemporary video art, is the significant relevance of the issues of space and geography, as well as the issues of void, vacuum, and openness, we find that the issues of spatiality have been marginalised in favor of almost pleonastic inquiries about the (post)modernist reworking of time and its appearances. In particular, given the polemical technopoetic contiguity between experimental video and broadcast television, Raymond Williams’s commonly adopted definition of the latter as “total flow” has ended up influencing the critical configuration of video art. Temporality, in its disjunctive and to-be-appropriated unfoldings, has become criticism’s most prominent “key word” for the medium. Consider, for instance, Rosalind Krauss’s “Video. The Aesthetics of Narcissism”, one of the most influential essays in recent debates. Krauss opens her essay with a spatial question: “But what

does it mean to point to the center of a TV screen?" But then, after discussing Vito Acconci's gesture of pointing to himself in *Centers* (1971), she quickly theorizes the psychological model of the video-tautology in temporal terms: "Unlike the other visual arts, video is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time—producing instant feedback".<sup>13</sup> Krauss observes that when the projection and reception of an image occurs simultaneously, the main object of representation can be only a personal identity constructed through the rolling surfaces of temporal auto-reflections and recurring selfdoms epitomised in a "collapsed present".<sup>14</sup> But there is still much that could be said, I believe, about a number of video artworks through a more focused investigation of their poetic use of space, distance, and superimposition. Such attempts would further enhance the fertile critical notion of performance without limiting it to bare or creative paraphrases of Fredric Jameson's "reel/real" formula.<sup>15</sup>

A group of texts that, to my reading, dwell deeply on the notion of space and its regimes was presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as part of the museum's weekly Video Viewpoints Program in November 1994. Titled *Post-Socialist Readings on Eastern Europe*, the presentation consisted of five video works by the Ljubljana-based artists Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, who have been making video art and documentary works since the early 1980s. The MoMA programme included five works: *Luna 10* [1994], *Red Shoes* [1994], *Three Sisters* [1992], *Labyrinth* [1993] and *Bilocation* [1990]. Here I will limit my discussion to *Luna 10* and *Bilocation*.<sup>16</sup>

*Luna 10* is an eleven-minute color video produced by Television Slovenia in 1994.<sup>17</sup> The name of the video is borrowed from an unmanned Soviet spacecraft that was sent into orbit in 1966. Such events filled the popular imagination with futuristic promises of scientific progress and human advancement. The video shows the dramatic contrast between the expansion of electronic (postmodern) media (along with the euphoria associated with them) and the (modern) outbreak of war on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, i.e., a "real" tragedy. Gržinić and Šmid's visual strategy attempts, quite successfully in my opinion, to stage the clashing and blurring of various images and contexts (TV news footage, film excerpts, animation), through what I shall explain as a palimpsest of visual emergences.

*Luna 10* opens with a rather asymmetrical split-screen effect that juxtaposes two images. In the foreground, a woman peers upward through an old-fashioned telescope; an insert in the background, meanwhile, shows an excerpt from the Sarajevo-born Emir Kusturica's well-known 1985 film *When Father Was Away on Business*<sup>18</sup> that presents us with images of a cheerful social gathering. This initial split screen is then complicated by its renderings:

images are compressed into geometric shapes (rectangles and squares) of various sizes while abstract mathematical figures (snow-like graphics, arcane harmonic symbols, and two orbit-like ellipses, evidently alluding to the space exploration implied by the video's title) are slowly drawn against the black background. Suddenly a domestic scene appears: a woman is preparing some food on a kitchen table, while a man, dressed only in underpants, talks to the camera. The woman remains silent. We will see this kitchen-like situation again and again in the video, as well as a slightly different, less intimate scene in which the same woman, dressed as a postal worker, stamps letters as the man continues his monologue.<sup>19</sup> The man speaks about the collapse of representation in contemporary Yugoslavia in the critical jargon of Western postmodern ontology. The imposing "old-fashioned" reality of the war compels the presence and the return of a past (Wellesian) medium of communication: "Every war has its own medium. Some wars took place before TV became part of our life. Other wars, however, were going on by television, which has become our roommate. The Korean and Vietnam wars. [The voice of a ham radio operator is heard, speaking in English: 'I-Z-T-O-K is my name'...] ...which has become our roommate. The Korean and Vietnam wars. How about the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina? It is a radio war."<sup>20</sup>

Television itself becomes a more faithful illustration of the war situation when it turns into radio by broadcasting the fuzzy dispatches of amateur radio operators.<sup>21</sup> Interference seems to be the key word: the layering of different sources of meaning exemplifies the objective confusion of Yugoslav political and cultural realities, but it also shows people's shared feelings of alarm, disorientation and disorder. At the same time, the war itself is somehow placed amid the technological and economic transformations of political reality that progress and profit-making have brought about. Such mutations do not happen through the instantaneous erasure of contexts, histories, and textualities, but through the problematic and disorienting co-presence of electronic ontologies with opaque materialities. In *Luna 10*, the near-naked man, displaying both his physicality and his proud decision to put up a losing resistance, repeats: "At the end of the millennium the body has found itself in the chaos of fear, pain and wars, being attacked and de-centred. Above all it is a fleeting physical-material fact. A credit-card-sized processor has taken our body materiality..." By a single key we can plug into any high-tech appliance. We are idiots and we'll die, said Zhora in *Blade Runner*. Idiots are those who defend beauty and freedom till death. We are idiots."

Yet the man's dystopian art-theoretical declarations and the enthusiastic comments of Slovene radio hams and bulletin board system (BBS) operators about radio and internet communications constitute only part of the video's

construction of meaning.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the visual register of the video is much richer and more ambitious than the man's speech. The silent woman beside him is the same figure who at the beginning of the video was holding the telescope: she appears to serve as a vehicle for the visual articulation of what we see and hear.

In fact, the images that are spliced in, either as the background of the "central" scene (domestic or public) or in the rectangular windows that crowd the screen, present portrayals of women's suffering: an image from a TV news report shows a mother shouting, "They slaughtered my children!"; a film sequence reveals a woman who is first threatened with being gang-raped and then brutally murdered; while another film sequence shows a naked woman embracing a clothed man who rejects her affection. My reading is that the video's multilayered images attempt to reproduce the hallucinating cultural impact of a war that "should not occur in a fully electronic age" (as Baudrillard provocatively suggested in a series of articles in the newspaper *Libération*)<sup>23</sup> but that instead, by inciting insane violence, especially toward women, puts in question the past of a country that, to paraphrase the title of a famous Soviet film, "cannot believe its tears".

At a specific moment in the former Yugoslavia, then, whole populations found themselves without a safe and meaningful location. This sense of disarray and chaos is rendered visually through what I call a palimpsest of visual emergencies.<sup>24</sup> Gržinić and Šmid, in fact, use the screen as a pictorial palimpsest on which they reinscribe, or make space for, fresh visual contexts that emerge over imperfectly erased images, which are, literally, marginalised or dislocated. The blank (or black) spaces that remain between the geometric shapes are the void and the loss that the artists, as modern scribes, construct and fill with their current cultural urgencies. In a state where official documentaries were often used to deform reality, the most objective video rendering of reality requires a visual strategy that attempts to literally reproduce the visual disturbances of the present-day cultural disorder by questioning the historical genealogy of the tragedy of the war. Interestingly, the visionary historian Michel Foucault was also well-acquainted with the palimpsest; at the beginning of his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", he described genealogy in palimpsestic terms: "Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times".<sup>25</sup>

In a later scene in the video, the man, wearing a metal headpiece connoting insanity, copies nonsensical strings of digits on a blackboard from a list held by the woman. The result is almost declamatory. He occupies the central part of the screen; other images are added behind and around him, with the video camera tracking back and forth. We see, and then only hear the voice of a geekish computer programmer, who explains, "Live is a very simple program; there is a special algorithm [...]" and then goes on to make similarly enthusiastic comments about internet communications, while we are shown, in the background, film clips of a woman being attacked by three men and then murdered, walking soldiers, a military parade, and a burning village. Meanwhile, the man in the headpiece has started crossing out and erasing his own formulas and adding new signs and words over the partially erased numbers. Gržinić and Šmid's visual strategy is thus redoubled: to show is to make room for new images, but it is never possible to erase them entirely from the screen/parchment, or from memory. Loss, blank space, and remnants are part of the hallucinatory textuality of the present.

The visual tactics used in the 1990 video *Bilocation* are somewhat different. Occasioned by television news reports about the unrest in Kosovo at the time, *Bilocation* represents an inscribing of these images of conflict, and their digital treatment, on the body of a soldier, who is played by a woman.

The video opens with the woman-soldier, in a red dress, marching in a peaceful rural setting (her image is electronically multiplied two to five times). A male voice-over comments on the profound significance of the Socialist parade, thus setting the conceptual context of the video: the relationship between the individual and the state in times of conflict: "A Socialist parade is not only a solemn performance; it is also a preparation involving the man condemned to death before he is taken to the scaffold. As if the final culmination of every parade were not the excitement it arouses, but might just as well be a body embalmed, glazed and made-up as a victim. When dressing up for the parade, I am actually adorning my body, which is soon to be destroyed by lust".

The woman's ritualistic movements include a high-step march, the seemingly hieratic embracing of a cross-like object, which she rhythmically raises and lowers, and the carrying and opening of a suitcase in an optically reconstructed setting that includes other images of her marching. Again this most urgent interrogation of the inter-ethnic violence appears somehow as a quest for historical evidence: how can we see and recognise the past traumas that led to these violent conflicts? An uneasy answer is recorded on the body: "The past can only be transmitted in the form of ruins, monuments, bric-a-brac in retro. The stroke of lightning is like hypnosis. I am spellbound by the scene. First I am shocked, thrilled, rotated. Then caught in a trap, flattened, bilocated".

As these words are spoken, we see, from the inside, the roof of a gigantic observatory begin to open and sunlight come in. As with the hand-held telescope in *Luna 10*, Gržinić and Šmid again make expressive use of an optical apparatus to embody and accentuate a gazing interrogation. At this point, the video visually develops the historical question of “evidence”—or, to play with words, e(video) sense—by projecting television footage of the events in Kosovo onto the body of the woman, who continues to perform agitated choreographic movements.

The specific strategy used here is the chroma key technique, which is, in a way, the electronic equivalent of cinematic superimposition. The chroma key technique enables the opening of a locus of representation—a making-space, one might argue—on top of another space, which is usually part of an entire figure. In *Bilocation*, this tactic is applied either on the whole body of the woman or on a part of it, for instance (with clear symbolism), onto an area surrounding her left eye. The conflict, visualised in burning villages, marching soldiers, and diplomatic visits, with all its absurdity and violence, is attached to her body in a kind of contamination: her affective life is profoundly influenced by the conflict, for, as the following quotation from the voice-over suggests, she shares its destiny: “But we may ask ourselves, is it not cynical to compare a lover’s suffering to that of the deported men at Dachau? Can the worst atrocities in our history be compared to the almost infantile and gloomy states in which a lover finds himself? And yet, the two states have something in common. They are both panicky, with no way back and no future”.

In a scene in which the woman appears to be making love with a soldier, her movements and gestures are also affected by the violence: the lovemaking is passionless, overtly mechanical, and without any tenderness whatsoever.

At the end of the video, a red star settles like a hovering logo on the woman’s forehead, marking her thoughts and dreams (she is sleeping). The state, after educating its citizens with red books about nationhood (a strong theme during Tito’s rule), still occupies people’s minds and bodies wherever they are, for conflict in any part of Yugoslavia affects everyone. In 1990, when the video was made, the power of the state and ideas about Yugoslav nationhood, though they were crumbling, had not yet been jettisoned. The video displays a perverse bridging of tragedies: between public spheres, political geographies, and diplomatic failures, on the one hand, and the never entirely private sphere of one’s own interior life, on the other. It does this by literally mutating people’s bodies into screens of conflict, filling the space of their body with projections of violence. According to their notes about the video, Gržinić and Šmid write that *Bilocation* “means the residence of the body and soul in two different places at the same time—simultaneously. It is the perfect term for delineating the process of the video medium”.

Let us now return to Heidegger’s “Art and Space”. Delivered on the occasion of a sculpture exhibition in 1964, the talk provided a foundation for speculating around two basic notions:<sup>26</sup> first, that art is a work and gesture performed over space; and second, that this gesture is acted out not as a means for filling voids, but as making space to space. To make space means, fundamentally, to open up an already-present, yet too-vague spatiality into a discursive spatiality, defined with references to other sites, horizons and perspectives. In this sense, the artistic gesture of making space is an epiphanic endeavour: it discloses the necessary *Gestalt* of any body in space by showing this body as a place, i.e., as a body in a site and as a site. Foucault’s comment on the discursive loadings of space and power, which I quoted as the epigraph to this essay, might well continue the argument from here. A sculptural body, or an electronically constructed body, has an identity, or a potential for identity, with regard to its position, i.e., to its spatial occupancy within wider fields of visual signification.

Going against the grain of current discussions on the language and forms of video art, *Luna 10* and *Bilocation*, while deeply rooted in historical questionings about Yugoslavia’s political and human catastrophe, performed electronic reworkings of the spatial dimension.

*Luna 10* sought to be a truthful visual rendering of an emotional and cultural state of disarray. In this way, the screen became the horizon on which the artists could spatialise, that is, discursively, different entities and images. Interestingly, the action of making space, obtained by a dynamic juxtaposition of background and foreground, never results in a successful deleting procedure: the viscosities of former images cannot be easily suppressed. The notion of the palimpsest, embodied in the video by the presence of a blackboard, seemed to provide an appropriate metaphor for an artistic endeavour that “makes space” in densely populated settings. Using a different technique, the video *Bilocation* sought, instead, to be a truthful visual rendering of an emotional and cultural state of contamination. The artists screen nightmare images onto a human figure through a localised projection: the unrest in Kosovo is re-inscribed, literally chroma-keyed, onto the human body, and vice versa. The effect is similar to a *Gestalt* exercise: once one has seen different visual configurations (and dislocations), one’s perception of distinct and autonomous identities is effectively challenged.

Gržinić and Šmid have, as a result, quite successfully shown the necessity, in times of conflict, of keeping the analytical potential of their critical (video-)gaze intact. Embodied in each video by different-sized optical devices (the hand-held telescope and the observatory), their glance over the recent history of the former

Yugoslavia takes the form of the repeated dismemberment and propulsion of spaces. Their visual mapping of catastrophe has not left any body safe; no trace of narcissism is to be found here, for the only mirrors are broken ones.

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## Notes

- 1 Michel Foucault, "Questions on Geography", in: *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972–1977*, (ed.) Colin Gordon, New York, Pantheon Books 1980, pp. 69–70. Foucault's essay was originally published in French in 1976.
- 2 "Die Kunst und der Raum" appears in Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 13, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann 1983, pp. 203–210. An English translation by Charles H. Seifert was published as "Art and Space" in the journal *Man and World* 6, 1973, pp. 3–8. My familiarity with the text stems from a bilingual Italian–German edition, Martin Heidegger, *L'arte e lo spazio*, trans. C. Angelino, Genoa, Il melangolo, 1979, which includes an introduction by the philosopher Gianni Vattimo.
- 3 An important discussion of Heidegger's theory of art may be found in Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Heidegger on Art and Art Works*, Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff, 1985, especially pp. 186–208. Surprisingly, this otherwise valuable source, which attempts to summarise and discuss every essay Heidegger wrote about art and artworks, ignores the essay "Art and Space".
- 4 It may be significant that in 1921, a few years before Heidegger published *Being and Time*, the psychologists Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Kohler founded *Psychologische Forschung*, the official publication of the European Gestalt movement. This journal was dedicated to presenting research, mainly by psychologists, based on the idea that the life of the psyche, and in particular, perceptual activity, is made up of dynamic processes organised by a number of structural principles. The main structural principle was that of the *Gestalt* ("shape" or "figure"), a perceptual configuration whereby the function of the parts is determined by the organisation of the whole. In 1938, after frequent conflicts with the Nazi regime in Germany, Wertheimer, Koffka, and Kohler emigrated to the United States. Gestalt theory soon became highly influential in behavioral and cognitive psychology, as well as in physics and phenomenology.
- 5 See Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York, Harper & Row 1971, pp. 17–87. This essay, drafted in the late 1930s but first published in Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5: *Holzwege (1936–1946)*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann 1953, pp. 1–68, represents one of Heidegger's most direct treatments of the nature of art.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.
- 7 "*Art then is the becoming and happening of truth [...] Truth is never gathered from objects that are present and ordinary. Rather, the opening up of the Open, and the clearing of what is, happens only as the openness is projected, sketched out, that makes its advent thrownness*". Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", p. 71 (*italics in the original*).
- 8 "What poetry, as illuminating projection, unfolds of unconcealedness and projects ahead into the design of the figure, is the Open which poetry lets happen, and indeed in such a way that only now, in the midst of beings, the Open brings beings to shine and ring out. [...] Projecting is the release of a throw by which unconcealedness submits and infuses itself into what is as such". In: *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 72 (*italics in the original*). For this point, I am indebted to Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Heidegger on Art and Art Works*, p.187.
- 10 Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", pp. 61–64.
- 11 "Createdness of the work means: truth's being fixed in place in the figure. [...] What is here called figure, *Gestalt*, is always to be thought in terms of the particular placing (*Stellen*) and framing or framework (*Ge-stell*) as which the work occurs when it sets itself up and sets itself forth". In: *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 12 Heidegger, *L'arte e lo spazio*, p. 29. I use Angelino's translation.
- 13 Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism", in: *Video Culture. A Critical Investigation*, John G. Hanhardt, (ed.), New York, Visual Studies Workshop 1986, pp. 179, 181. Krauss's essay was originally published in: *New Artists' Video*, Gregory Battcock (ed.), New York, E. P. Dutton 1978.
- 14 Nevertheless, more than a decade later, even such a detached neophyte in experimental video as Fredric Jameson could state resolutely: "Yet since video is a temporal art, the most paradoxical effects of this technological appropriation of subjectivity are observable in the experience of time itself". In: "Surrealism Without the Unconscious", in: *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, N.C. Duke University Press 1991, p. 74.
- 15 Jameson develops this interesting, but limiting, conception of video art in "Surrealism Without the Unconscious" (see especially pp. 74–77).
- 16 I will examine them in the order I first experienced them, though it should be noted that *Bilocation* was made a few years before *Luna 10*.
- 17 It is important (and perhaps surprising) to realise that Television Slovenia is credited as producer, not because it funded Gržinič and Šmid's video, but because it provided them with its standard videomaking facilities and aired the completed work on selected evenings in prime time.
- 18 Winner of the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival in 1985 and nominated for an Oscar for the Best Foreign Film, Kusturica's film was appreciated in Yugoslavia also because it brought international critical attention to the domestic cinema. *When Father Was Away on Business* examines the events of the late 1940s, when Marshal Tito's Yugoslavia broke away from the Soviet sphere of influence and started to develop its own brand of Communism. These events are shown from the perspective of a little boy, Malik, and his family. As a result of the country's macropolitical shift, Malik's father is sent to a labour camp for political prisoners, though his mother tells the children that he is "away on business". When the family is reunited at the end of the film, a traditional village festival is held. Images of this festival (the social gathering we see in the opening of *Luna 10*) are combined in Kusturica's film with images from the televisionbroadcast of the legendary soccer game in which Yugoslavia defeated the Soviet Union.
- 19 While such a gendered division of roles may seem significantly patriarchal, and therefore questionable, and although Gržinič and Šmid have a declared interest in issues of gender and sexual representation, it seems to me that this particular video touches on these topics without making a clear and definite point about them. Other discursive targets appear to be at stake here. The idea of the kitchen, moreover, is not apparently loaded with themes of sexual representation, although it is articulated through them. Instead, the kitchen here is portrayed through a discourse of political spheres, of private and public. Also, the kitchen represents a sort of visual topos for the private sphere, as Gržinič suggests in the essay, "Transcentrala of Exorcism", about the Slovene art group IRWIN, a part of the Neue Slowenische Kunst collective, whose paintings and sculptures were exhibited in Moscow in 1992 as the "NSK Embassy". The essay was published in *IRWIN* (Ljubljana, 1994), a booklet that accompanied an exhibition by the group. (Sally Berger, at MoMA, was kind enough to recommend this booklet to me.)

- 20 The man goes on to say: "Have you queued up for the virtual bread? As is the case with technological revolutions in the West, you will get only breadcrumbs. Better than nothing. It works as a magnet on the verbal level. Can you argue with someone who bombs you with cyber-punk, who keeps using words like 'virtual'? Can artificial worlds be generated on a computer screen? It is a bloody real world of economy and politics, scientific progress strategies, experimental labs worth billions, thousands of inventors called hackers, computer freaks, more mildly called yuppies, programmers, researchers".
- 21 As the man comments: "Television reports on the war, but we listen to it as radio. The reports of radio amateurs on the TV news can barely be made out because of interference. But that is when the television voice becomes the most effective picture".
- 22 For example, a BBS operator says: "When one appears on the BBS for the first time, one has a chance to realise all one's possibilities, ideas and phantasms. There are no limits. There is a difference between seeing someone face to face and seeing only a computer screen. It's a different level of communication".
- 23 Jean Baudrillard collected three of his interventions on the topic of war in the book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Bloomington, Ind, Indiana University Press 1995; these essays first appeared in the Paris newspaper *Libération* between January and March 1991.
- 24 Etymologically, the word *palimpsest* comes from the Greek *palimpsestos*, which means "scraped again", i.e., it refers to a parchment where the original writing has been scraped off—erased or wiped out. The earlier text, called in Latin *scriptio anterior*, is often still visible on the margins or between the lines of the more recent writing, since the new writing was usually done between the lines of the erased writing. Because they were expensive commodities, parchment and paper were often reused, with important documents being written over lesser, erased documents.
- 25 Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press 1992; 1977, p. 139.
- 26 As I mentioned at the outset, I am not claiming here to exhaust any further reflections on art that deals mainly with temporality and its discourses. I simply wish to develop a limited discussion on the issue of space, which seems—especially in video criticism—to be too often overlooked. The Foucault quotation that heads my essay should make this point clear.

## Zoran Erić

### The Question of Identity as Reflected through Video Art in ex-Yugoslavia

#### The loss of collective identity in the former Yugoslavia

The question of identity in all its ramifications has been one of the most frequently raised questions in European post-Socialist countries since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The shift in ideology and the dominant social paradigm were very strong factors that began to reshape the social space of these countries, resulting in socio-political, economic and other crises, which induced serious internal confrontations among their citizens. The crucial problem was the loss of the old collective identity, which left the citizens on their own to cope with new driving forces that began to "produce" the social space offering vague choices of models of identification. This has resulted in a retreat to historically older collective identities, above all, ethno-national and religious. The period that citizens needed to accept the process of social transformation was very long and had its ups and downs in most of the post-Socialist countries that respectively became members or are still on the waiting list to join the European Union.

The case of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was the most specific because the transformation did not occur peacefully. Already after the death of President Tito in 1980, the social system of workers' self-management began to collapse. The old Socialist systems of values and the ideology of "brotherhood and unity" were fading away, and the changes in collective identity were inevitable. The newly formed oligarchies that came to power in all republics of Socialist Yugoslavia abused the fact that citizens needed to acquire a new identity, and to identify either with political, national or other programmes and goals. In this situation, when the question of collective identity became blurred and confusing for most citizens, it was very easy to "seduce" them to turn to an exaggerated national identity, "rediscovering" one ethnic identity as being "older" than those of other neighbouring nations. The proof for this claim was found in a rich national history, with the process of the re-circulation of national myths, mainly from the period of the Medieval Empire, in most of the former Yugoslav republics beginning to shape public opinion strongly through all media.<sup>1</sup> History was therefore "understood as the active force that determines the roots of nations, nurtures the constitutive myths of ethnic communities and strengthens national identities".<sup>2</sup>

Due to the prevailing “national awareness” which led to the ethnification of the republics in SFRY, the chance to choose a civil society instead of a purely ethnic one was lost. It was obvious that the state apparatus could not mediate between common state identity and the narrow national identities that were competitive and in collision.<sup>3</sup> The consequence was inevitably ethnic clashes and the disintegration of the country because the new republics could not find common interests in a diplomatic manner.

### Confusion over new identities

After the dissolution of SFRY, the newly formed nation(al)-states took their own courses in social transformation that comprised a full shift toward the free market economy and the privatisation of former “social property”. From the perspective of their new social system(s), there was a common tendency toward a resurgence of religious identities on the one hand, and the rise of neo-liberal or predatory Capitalism on the other. Although in these years a paradigm of mythological fabula has been mostly replaced with much more pragmatic models offered to the citizens for their identification, a constant state of uncertainty and the expectation of the realisation of foggy social aims in these countries made an individual passive, kept her/him in lethargy and prevented her/him from joining the public arena more actively.

If we shift now the perspective to the global context, into which the new countries have stepped, we may argue that the new paradigm of social relationships is reflected in the appearance of supra-national hegemony, where the movement of global capital, commodities and services worldwide overcomes the strength and borders of national states. This type of sovereignty, which Hardt and Negri<sup>4</sup> described as the emergence of a new Empire, is actually the European concept on which Euro-centrism is based, developed at the same time as Modernism. The last expansions of the European Union in 2004 and 2007, and the tendency to eventually include the remaining states of the “Western Balkans” gives us the right to think about Europe as a geopolitical reflection of that new type of sovereignty, but also of a new possible collective identity to be produced in future.

While the global integration process has accelerated, some of the countries formed out of the Yugoslav republics have not yet built a coherent model of identification and homogenisation for their citizens. In those states that emerged from inter-ethnic conflicts, different social processes are actually occurring, different social realities are being produced, which could be characterised as proto-democratic, with a presence of the phenomenon of primary accumulations of capital and “privatisation” as the only process that

includes them in the web of globally flowing capital. In the discrepancy between the struggle for purifying and shedding their heritage and ballast of previous ideological constructions, and defying models for equal entry and adjustment to the global process and the new order of sovereignty, there are numerous roads and many possible models for identification.

While on one hand, we are witnessing the overwhelming expansion of neo-liberal Capitalism, on the other, we have loud critical voices that come from the position of ethno-national, clerical and above all, anti-modern disposed ideology. This schizophrenic position of the simultaneous existence of pre-modern, “anti-civilisation” movements and the latest stage of “predatory Capitalism” in countries that strive to attain the achievements of European democracy, even at the cost of the acceptance of neo-liberal politics, renders even more difficult the production of a collective identity and the homogenisation of the citizens across a small number of models of identification.

### Brief (hi)story of video art in Yugoslavia

At the very beginnings of video production in former Yugoslavia in the 1970s, the circle of conceptual artists was the first to start to experiment with this medium.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the decade, video production was in a constant interrelation with the actual “new art practice” (action, performance and conceptual work), and was strongly influenced by it. According to Jerko Denegri, there were two primary strategies and approaches to the medium: one that was influenced by analytic art and reflected the medium itself and its capacities for art, and the other that turned toward the social issues that were interpreted in a narrative or metaphoric manner.<sup>6</sup> The first line discerned by Denegri was related to the analytical approach of the artist in the 1970s, touching mostly upon the problems of the language of art itself, while the other line reflected the second important aspect, i.e., “first person speech” and emphasis on the subjectivity of the artist and her/his self-reflection.<sup>7</sup> Herewith, one of the dominant means of expression in this new medium was video performance, where the artist’s persona and body were in focus.<sup>8</sup> That particular interest in artist subjectivity and their own bodies, according to Helmut Friedel, was globally one of the basic aspects from the outset of the use of video in art, and how a new form of self-portrait was invented.<sup>9</sup> The phenomenon of “video-self-portraits” thus strongly emphasised personality, individuality, contemplation and imagination.<sup>10</sup>

The first “pioneering” period of video in SFRY in the 1970s was marked by the artists’ interest in conceptual, not technical, aspects of video and the filming process. As Raša Todosijević put it: “I made my video works without

any particular interest in the technical aspect of the medium, in the process of production itself and those spectacular possibilities of manipulation with electronic technology. Video has interested me more as a transmitter of psychological and mental activities that are fundamentally at odds with any technical exhibitionism".<sup>11</sup>

In the 1980s we witnessed the emergence of artists specialised in video art production, who dealt on a higher level with the features and specificities of the media itself and the technical aspects of production. Their stronger connections with the TV networks and orientation toward mass media culture, but also a new kind of video narration, marked a new phase of development of video in SFRY.<sup>12</sup> This new type of video, as Slovenian artists Nuša and Srečo Dragan claimed, had abandoned the experiments with the medium, video performance, and above all, the urge to change the world, inherent to the avant-garde.<sup>13</sup>

Another shift in the 1980s was driven due to the resurgence of manual artistic disciplines like painting and drawing, and the heightened interest of many artists in issues such as mythology, historicity, originality of the artwork, etc., which were also reflected in the video works. The image and the body of the artist was in focus, but the difference in relation to the previous period of the 1970s was that artists had assumed the role of an actor on a stage, sometimes orchestrated as a video installation, where all the theatrical elements of scenography, choreography and make-up contribute to the narrative constructions.<sup>14</sup>

Toward the end of the 1980s, video production in Yugoslavia visibly decreased, and the early 1990s were marked by ethnic clashes and the "disappearance" of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. From this point onwards, we can follow the development of video art along the separate avenues of the newly formed countries.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the growth of video production and the proliferation of topics that artists from the region of former Yugoslavia have dealt with from the 1990s onwards, in this text, I have chosen to focus on the problem of identity, which could be discerned as one of the key issues in the work of many artists.<sup>16</sup> This topic was brought to the fore by the new generation of artists who have a constant conceptual agenda in their work and choose any media to suit their ideas. To paraphrase John Baldessari, for them, video as a medium could be seen as any other: neutral, like a pencil, and just one among many instruments to express their ideas, visions and wishes, but also serving well as a tool for the social criticism that is so often present in their work. Baldessari argued that it was important to say, not: "I am just filming a video", but "This idea would

be best expressed in the form of a video work", and that this distinction in approach and attitude fits perfectly the generation of artists in question, formed in the late 1990s. As compared to the features of the "video-self-portraits" of the 1970s, the situation in the 1990s has changed, with videos acquiring a more narrative, story-telling mode and structure. This kind of self-portrait has a social, rather than physical background, and I would therefore put an emphasis on the capitalised "I" in the key conceptual issue of Identity, that stands more for the artist's social, than merely existential, or mental being.

I will further analyse the video works in which different aspects of identity and facets of identification processes, such as: (ethno)national identity or identity constructed through ethnic conflicts, religious identity, or artistic identity, are most explicitly expressed. The important point here is the common feature of the artists appearing "in person" in their videos, and addressing the audience with their personal Identity problems.

### The topic of identity in video art

#### *Identity constructed through ethnic conflicts—trauma, displacement*

One of the first paradigmatic artworks touching upon the issue of the consequences of ethnification and the resurgence of a strong national identity in Serbia was the video installation by Milica Tomić, *XY Ungeloest* from 1997. The work was highly politically motivated, with the artist reconstructing the crime that occurred on 28 April 1989, the very day of the declaration of the new Serbian Constitution, when 33 ethnic Albanians, citizens of Kosovo, were murdered. This work was a turning point in Milica Tomić's career, when she finally managed to address the social sphere and cope with the traumatic "real" in her work, initially in a subdued and metaphorical way. The method of crime reconstruction in the German TV series *XY Ungeloest* from the 1970s was the inspiration for the artist to conduct her investigation, and gather all possible information, particularly on the clothes the victims were wearing when they were killed, which was used in the reconstruction and symbolic re-enactment of the crime in the video in which 33 friends of the artist, representatives of the Serbian art scene, wearing the same garments as the victims, fall down in the snow, leaving the mark of their bodies.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia and the ethnic clashes have resulted in big waves of migration, with many people of all nationalities forced to move and live in exile. The work of Bosnian artist Maja Bajević has reflected exactly these kinds of intertwined circuits of personal life and political reality, touching upon such issues as the identity constructed through loss and displacement. The outburst of war in her hometown of Sarajevo in 1992 caught her in Paris attending the Art Academy, where she stayed in exile, which strongly affected her private life

and determined the focus of her work. Bajević's video work *Green, Green Grass of Home* (1997) shows the artist walking on a lawn, and telling the story of her grandmother's apartment in Sarajevo, while trying to mark its shape in space based on her recollection of the rooms and furnishings. The tone of her narration is precise and austere, as if the artist is deliberately suppressing all the emotion and melancholy this topic could evoke, but her ritual of reconstruction appears as if she is trying to "materialise" the memory of a lost home.

The same problem of displacement, but this time as the ultimate question of decision of an individual facing ethnic conflicts in her/his country, is the topic of the video *On the way to/from Macedonia* (2002), by Macedonian born, Cologne based artist Irena Paskali. The artist came back home in 2001, at the moment when the spark of ethnic clashes threatened to burst into the flame of war. She came back, only to see her friends getting ready to leave the country. The dilemma she faced was transposed into a video, in which Paskali, wearing a red dress and carrying a red suitcase, stands in front, back to back, in a line, marching with a squad of the Macedonian army. "The soldier is going to stay in Macedonia", says the artist, but what about her? How she can make such a decision? The choice of exile and life in the diaspora will determine both her personal and artistic identity.

In October 2006, young Bosnian artist Mladen Miljanović entered the site of the former military barracks in Banja Luka to "serve art" for nine months, as he "served the people" in the school for officers from October 2000 to July 2001. The video *I Serve Art* (2007) documents the entire process of "self-isolation" and the artist's decision to anthropologically operate through art. The choice of such a method shows the artist's awareness that his art production should inherently reflect (the failures in) his personal identity building process, and the consequences on his position within the art system and society. Miljanović questions the "technologies" of the functioning of a subject in society, the process of subjectification whereby an individual determines her/his own identity, modelling it through external power centres, and the subtext for political and social strategies of influence on the individual and her/his life. Thus, the artist analyses his own identity, the ways he changes and constructs, and he turns to the question of his own position in society where he acts, and to the models of positioning in the public sphere. The artist thereby repeats his personal experience of serving the army as an artistic performance, present in the media and in public, contextualising his intimate narration in the wider social sphere and creating for himself a new kind of public identity.

## *Overlapping identities*

With the formation of new states from the republics of former Yugoslavia, the issue of (ethno)national identity had to be confirmed through its distinctiveness and even uniqueness as opposed to their neighbours'. The most important proof for such "constitutive" distinctiveness of a certain nation was found in language, and its modifications if necessary, and in new state symbols like the anthem or the flag. Macedonian artist Oliver Musovik has addressed this issue in his video *Џ≠K* (2002), on the case of his own family name as seen through differences in orthography and phonetics in the Macedonian and Serbian languages. In the video, Musovik gives a short "lecture in linguistics", explaining how the confusion over different pronunciations of his family name in Serbian and Macedonian actually derived from the wrong pronunciation of his originally Montenegrin surname, when it was transcribed in Macedonian language and read by Serbs. If this whole construction has produced an even bigger confusion over the language and national identities in the countries in question, the term of "overlapping identities" introduced by Bulgarian artist Luchezar Boyadjev could be a clue for its clarifications. Boyadjev sees this overlapping happening when two or more nations "lay claim on the same 'territory' of historical, cultural, social, political, religious, linguistic, etc. experiences and/or practices that each of them considers to be only their own".<sup>17</sup> The point he makes is that these kinds of claims are based on emotional impetus and local storytelling, and not on the pragmatic research of historical facts. Problems occur when these claims are incorporated in the processes of the constitution and building of new nation-states, where they could be both the potential cause of hatred and even conflict, but can also lead to the understanding and appreciation of the other nation. A paradigmatic story touching upon the issue of "overlapping identities" throughout the whole Balkan region—in this case, the origin of one melody—provides the focus of the film *Whose Is This Song?* (2003) by Bulgarian filmmaker Adela Peeva. While travelling around the region in search of stories about the melody she thought was of Bulgarian origin, Peeva realises that in all countries of the Balkans—Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Serbia—she could find "evidence" that this was an "old local tune". It only varied in form, as a love song, a religious hymn, a revolutionary anthem, or a military march, but in each country triggered deep emotions and strong nationalism.

## Religious identity

In the former Yugoslavia, the constitutive concept of brotherhood and unity was envisioned to suppress all ethnic and religious differences among its nations. Religion was withdrawn as a topic from the public sphere, and it became almost a taboo, unwelcome to be addressed in a Communist country. In the course of the demise and devolvement of the country, religion played an important role, carried along and intertwined with the waves of ethnonationalism and populism in all the republics of former Yugoslavia. In the newly formed countries, religion has resurged as one of the main driving forces of society, whether Islam, Orthodox or Catholic Christianity. Churches and mosques began to flourish in many cities, with the presence and influence of religion in the public sphere constantly growing, along with the number of citizens who assumed a religious identity, and it all created even stronger polarisations in society. This rapid transformation of the former Communist (atheist and secular) country has become an issue for many artists to address.

In her video, *Double Bubble* (2001), Maja Bajević makes a strong statement about the resurgence of religious dogmatism and how it shapes and infiltrates into all social strata in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The distinction between techno and turbo religion, as she calls it, is based on individual choices and needs, and is exemplified in statements such as: “I don’t eat pork”, or “I do not drink during Ramadan, but I take ecstasy”, in the case of the former, or: “I did all that in the name of God” in the latter religious identity. With very explicit statements expressed in binary forms, Maja Bajević reveals the hypocrisy hidden under the cover of identification with religion, that could be just an excuse for different acts of violence, aggression and brutality.

Irena Paskali’s video, *At this Bottom* (2003), opens with juxtapositions of the Qur’an and the Bible, the holy books of Islam and Orthodox Christianity, two dominant religions in a split Macedonian society. The video leads us through documentary materials about the destruction of mosques and churches, footage of religious rituals in these sanctuaries, split and highlighted with sequences showing the artist repeating rituals. Paskali makes the point of similarities across the religions that have been embedded in the same soil for centuries, and pleads for the need to find ways of coexistence and tolerance among different religious communities.

Serbian artist Vesna Vesić’s *Wash Me and I Will Be Whiter than Snow* (1998) offers a completely different perspective on the issue of religious identity. This work could be seen as a video performance, where the camera focuses on the crying face of the artist, who is reading psalms. Vesić deals in her video with the

categories of the “inner” and the “pure”, and the “simplicity of expression... is firmly grounded in the ascetics and the aesthetics of Eastern Christian theology and art”.<sup>18</sup> This leads us to conclusion that the state of the artist expressed in the video is the result of a religious experience. The devotional act induced the emotional reaction that could be understood as a need for purification. The tears on the face of the artist could be misinterpreted as sorrow for the helpless social situation in the country, wars, sanctions, poverty and misery. It is inevitable that the given situation influenced the attitude of the artist, but I tend to see this work as a highly intimate emotional expression, induced by the religious sentiments and identification of the artist.

Bosnian artist Damir Nikšić raises an important issue of confusion over religious and national identity in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where already in 1970s Socialist Yugoslavia, the Bosnians were granted nationhood as “Muslims”. When in the 1990s, religious identities were resurging, the intellectuals in Bosnia realised that this national definition placed them into the narrow cluster of an “ethno-religious” group and not a broader or even secular national identity that the term Bosnians could offer.<sup>19</sup> In the video, *If I Wasn’t Muslim* (2004), Nikšić approaches the issue of his religious-national identity in a sarcastic way. The artist performs the melody *If I Were a Rich Man* from *Fiddler on the Roof* in its “authentic” setting—a farmhouse attic full of hay—but with the following lyrics:

“If I wasn’t Muslim

Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.

My neighbors wouldn’t set my home on fire

And surround me with barbed wire”.

What initially appears to be the artist’s humorous way to deal with the topic, covers the real existential issue underneath that has affected the life of his family in Bosnia, where the war forced them to “take sides” and declare themselves as Serbs, Montenegrins, Croats or Bosnian Muslims. The artist himself claims that despite his name, which could belong to any of the nations, his “choice” was made by others, those who put him behind barbed wire. Becoming a victim and identifying with the “oppressed and weaker side” has determined his identity on all levels; otherwise, as he says: “I could have been doing design in Slovenia”.<sup>20</sup>

## Artistic identity and the question of the art system

The problem of artistic identity, and of “Warholian” success, has become a fascination for the generation of artists formed by the end of the 1990s. This issue could be analysed as a social phenomena in the art world, and is often made ironic or addressed in a critical way by young artists. In this respect, especially (self-)ironic is the position of the Serbian artists Vera Večanski & Vladimir Nikolić in their work, *How to Become a Great Artist* (2001), in which the young and un-self-confident artist (Večanski) seeks the “recipe” for becoming a star, taking lessons from her role model artist, guru and martial arts expert (Nikolić). Building self-confidence becomes a training process, almost like a mantra, through which young artists have to improve every day.

The work by another Serbian artist pair, Nikoleta Marković & Žolt Kovač, *Choose Life* (2001), combines strategies of an almost confessional approach in the narrative structure and the use of the fictionalised script or scenario in which the artists approach the problem of artistic identity in an ironic way. The person “addicted to art” “confesses” in the manner of documentary crime stories, or other delinquents talking about their crimes in front of the camera. This kind of TV show was very popular in wartime around the country, and in an extremely criminalised society, where spectacular murders of gangsters happened almost every day. The audience was hungry for stories about the “street and war heroes”, ready to listen to their “confessions” filled with the most explicit and horrific details.

Kosovo artist Jakup Ferri touches upon the same issue in several videos, including *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist* (2003) and *Save Me, Help Me* (2003), in which he tells his stories “to the camera” from his home/studio environment in a very laid back way. The first video takes as its starting point the emblematic statement from Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović, that the artist who does not speak English is not an artist. Jakup Ferri’s confusing narration is in what appears to be English language, but without any coherence or meaning. Ferri makes ironic and even ridicules the position of an artist coming from a marginal scene and context, without the ability for self-expression and self-promotion on the global art scene. In the second video, the artist addresses curators and collectors to raise their interest in his work, offering his paintings, drawings, etc. for sale at very low prices. The artist’s “honest” desire to “sell himself” to anyone who can provide him with a successful international career renders the power games in the market driven art world ironic, as he comments on the strongly fixed hierarchies in the relations between artist and curator/collector, and the sometimes self-marginalising position that artists from the region humbly assume.

## Afterthought

The discourse of identity politics as globally reflected in the artistic practice had its peek in the 1990s. Nevertheless, due to the particular contextual framework and individual biographies of the artists from former Yugoslavia, the topic has endured into the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The artists whose work I have analysed began their careers with self-reflexive works, the topics of their videos driven by their inner struggles over an identity that is never predetermined, but constructed through structural processes, and in this case strongly influenced by the drastic changes in the socio-political context, and the loss of collective identity, and traumas experienced due to displacement, wars, economic crisis, etc. While the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century draws to a close, most of the artists in question have opened up other topics in their work, moving from “introspective” positions and “auto-topographic” video works, toward the analyses of broader social phenomena, albeit with the same sharp critical edge.

Belgrade, July 2009

## Notes

- 1 Among all Serbian constitutional myths, the myth of Kosovo was the most present in revived ethno-national stories and phantasmagoria. It marks the symbolic loss of independence of the Serbian Empire from the Ottoman Turks, and points to the “Emperor” Lazar’s choice of a Divine Realm as the correct path and decision for the Serbian national character. The nationality of Miloš Obilić, one of the mythical characters who killed the Ottoman Emperor Murat in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, is now disputed in literature, and the most recent claim comes from the Albanian side that he was actually Albanian Knight Millosh Kopitliq. A similar, even more paradoxical situation could be seen in the Macedonian “appropriation” of Alexander the Great, whose large equestrian statue will soon be placed in the capital city of Skopje, whose airport already carries his name.
- 2 Božidar Slapšak, “Promene prošlosti u društvu koje se menja”, in: *Republika*, no. 64, March 1993, p. 16.
- 3 Vesna Pešić, “Rat za nacionalne države”, in: *Srpska strana rata*, part 1, Nebojša Popov (ed.), Belgrade, Samizdat B92 2002.
- 4 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge MA, London, Harvard University Press 2001.
- 5 Among the most prominent artists were: Marina Abramović, Braco Dimitrijević, Radomir Damjanović Damjan, Sanja Iveković, Dalibor Martinis, Raša Todosijević, Neša Paripović, Goran Trbuljak, etc.
- 6 Ješa Denegri, “Video-umetnost u Jugoslaviji 1969–1984”, in *Videosfera video/društvo/umetnost*, Mihailo Ristić (ed.), Belgrade, Radionica SIC, 1986, pp. 126–27.
- 7 Ibid, p. 127.
- 8 At first, video was merely a tool for the documentation of the artist’s performative acts, but later on, the performances were conceptualised specifically for the medium of video.

- 9 Helmut Friedel, "Video-Narciz- Das Neue Selbstbildnis", in: *Videokunst in Deutschland 1963–1982*, Wulf Herzogenrath (ed.), Stuttgart, Verlag Gerd Hatje, quoted from the Serbian translation: Helmut Friedel, "Video-narcis—novi autoportret", in: *Videosfera video/društvo/umetnost*, Mihailo Ristić (ed.), Belgrade, Radionica SIC 1986, p. 105.
- 10 Ibid, p. 107.
- 11 Raša Todosijević, "Video", in: *Videosfera video/društvo/umetnost*, Mihailo Ristić (ed.), Belgrade, Radionica SIC 1986, p. 179.
- 12 Denegri mentions that the turning point could be seen in the broadcasting of the video work of Slovenian artist Miha Vipotnik on TV Ljubljana. We could even argue that this phenomenon was most present in Slovenia and Croatia throughout the 1980s. Video art was also the focus of various TV programmes, among which "TV Gallery", initiated by Nebojša Đukelić and edited by Dunja Blažević on TV Belgrade was the most important and long-lasting. Ješa Denegri, "Video-umetnost u Jugoslaviji 1969-1984", Op. cit., pp. 126-27.
- 13 Nuša and Srečo Dragan, "Traženi pogled Nuše i Sreče Dragan ili radost dvostrukog ulaska našeg videa u umetnost osamdesetih godina—postmoderna, new wave, nove slike, subkulture—je velika", in: *Videosfera video/društvo/umetnost*, Op. cit., pp. 177-78. The artists were the pioneers of video, and produced the very first video in Yugoslavia in 1969.
- 14 Branislav Dimitrijević, "An Intermittent History. A Brief Survey of Video Art in Serbia", in: *Video Art in Serbia*, Belgrade, Center for Contemporary Arts - Belgrade 1999, p. 34. This argument was related to the videos of artists such as Milovan De Stil Marković and Viktorija Vesna Bulajić.
- 15 The complexity of developments in the new (video) art scenes and the rise of video production in the 1990s in all the republics of former Yugoslavia is beyond the scope of such a brief survey in this text.
- 16 Here, I would also have to make a distinction between the specific position of the Slovenian video scene and the situation of the other republics of Yugoslavia, where the turbulent period of wars, migrations and economic crises and after all, the "identity crisis", have had a stronger impact on all spheres of society, including the art scene.
- 17 Lučezar Boyadjiev, *Overlapping Identities*, 1998  
[www.cfront.org/cf00book/en/lučezar-overlapping-en.html](http://www.cfront.org/cf00book/en/lučezar-overlapping-en.html)
- 18 Jelena Vesić, cat. preface, *Inside/Outside*, Zacheta Gallery, Warsaw, Poland, 6 November—3 December 2000.
- 19 See the artist's arguments in the essay "Da nisam Musliman po nacionalnosti" (If I Wasn't Muslim by Nationality) in: *Dani*, no. 526, 13 July 2007, pp. 70–72.
- 20 Ibid.

## Boris Buden Getting Out of Here

Goran Dević's short film *Imported Crows* (2004) tells a very simple story about various attempts of the residents of the small town Sisak, Croatia, to get rid of the crows that inhabit its parks. The crows are considered to be "foreign". They were imported in the 1950s to control the insects that infested the forests around the town. They are known as "Veber's crows", after the Communist government official who allegedly brought them from Russia—or China, or Serbia, or... No one knows today. The birds have since multiplied and flourished, becoming the town "problem" and object of irrational hatred of the town's residents. Obviously, the film is a metaphorical portrayal of a small, troubled society that obsessively—and violently—tries to exterminate its Other. *Imported Crows* can also be understood as a perfect allegory for the phenomenon we might call primal, or "old fear". However, if there is an old fear, there must be a new one too, as well as an historical change that has brought about the difference between both forms of fear.

In his *A Grammar of the Multitude*,<sup>1</sup> Paolo Virno named quite precisely this historical change—the emergence of a historical novum in what has been traditionally experienced as fear. It is the change that concerns, above all, the way we build communities—how we organise our social life, form collectives or establish social and political institutions, like the state.

This is of crucial importance in understanding the phenomenon of fear. For fear does not have an exclusively psychological meaning, but also, or even primarily—and this is what Virno focuses on—a social and historical meaning. It possesses a community building quality and it is precisely this quality of fear that defines its historical character. In other words, fear becomes an historical phenomenon and undergoes historical changes because of its social character. This logically implies that we can also think about our social and political institutions (like the state, for instance), as being crucially affected by fear; or, to put it bluntly, as being, in a way, an effect of fear.

This is, for instance, the case in the famous concept of social contract, which still informs the hegemonic ideology of social order and state. Thomas Hobbes' theoretical fairy tale of individuals who—living originally in a sort of state of nature, i.e., in a permanent war of one against other (the famous "bellum omnium contra omnes")—decide to sacrifice a part of their freedom and delegate it to the sovereign for security and peace in return. This narrative has

decisively informed the major political form of modern social life, the notion of the people, the concept of people's sovereignty, as well as the predominant political form of this sovereignty: the institution of the modern nation state. Hobbes recognised long ago that sovereign rule relies on fear, that for effective domination "the Passion to be reckoned upon, is Fear".<sup>2</sup> Fear for Hobbes binds and ensures social order, and can therefore be understood as a mechanism of social control. In short, the idea of social order or its particular political form, the notion of "the people", is intrinsically tied to the dialectics between fear—or broadly speaking, the experience of danger—and the search for security. In other words, the quality of being a refuge or shelter, of providing protection from some sort of danger, is a binding element of society and thus an essential quality of the very notion of the people. According to Virno, this dialectics between fear and the people as refuge no longer functions. Neither are we able to experience fear in its traditional forms, nor are we able to understand the concept of people capable of providing a refuge, as it earlier could be.

To understand the collapse of this dialectic we must go back to the very origins of the modern experience of fear. Its crucial moment is the absence of a consistent and uniform feeling of fear. In other words, the experience of fear dissolves into two different forms. Kant introduced the distinction—and Virno draws on this distinction<sup>3</sup>—between a particular danger (such as the concrete danger of being killed in a traffic accident or of losing one's job, etc.) and, on the other hand, a sort of absolute danger associated with our very being in this world. To these two forms of danger also correspond two different forms of risk and fear, or dread.

In fact, this distinction comes from Kant's definition of the Sublime—an experience that is based on a deeply contradictory and ambivalent feeling. Kant describes this feeling very concretely: when a person observes, for instance, a terrifying snow slide, from a place of safety; s/he is filled with a pleasant sense of security. This feeling of security, however, is in fact mixed with another feeling—with the perception of her/his own helplessness, with a sort of a basic human insecurity. The Sublime is precisely the name for this twofold and ambivalent feeling.

However, this feeling raises the question: how can we protect ourselves from this danger? There is, of course, an empirical answer to this question—a particular empirical danger implies a corresponding protection—in the case of a snow slide, one can simply keep away from mountains in winter. But the question is, how can we protect ourselves, not from any one given danger or another, but rather from the risk inherent in our very being in this world;

what is it that might provide an absolute protection for our existence, where we might find unconditional refuge? For Kant, the transcendental moral laws protect us in an absolute way, since morality places its inherent value above empirical, finite existence.

In short, there is a major bifurcation in what we experience as fear: a fear from relative dangers that have a "first and last name" on the one hand, and on the other hand, a fear from an absolute dangerousness with no exact face or content—a fear from existence itself, from our being in the world.

This Kantian distinction between two forms of fear within the dialectics of dread and refuge was developed later in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*.<sup>4</sup> He introduced different names for these two forms of fear: "fear" and "anguish" (*Furcht* and *Angst*). The fear is always a fear from this or that; on the other hand, the anguish (*die Angst*) is the basic existential orientation of human beings ("die Grundbefindlichkeit der menschlichen Existenz"). What the anguish is afraid of is being-in-the-world itself. It is only through anguish that we can experience the world as world. Again: fear is circumscribed and nameable; anguish is ubiquitous and never connected to some distinctive cause.

Virno has translated this distinction into social narrative. He finds it operative in what he calls "substantial communities" that have developed a consolidated ethos—a set of repetitive and therefore comfortable usages and customs. For this reason, such a substantial community is always experienced as a refuge; it gives its members the feeling of security. In this sense, such a community is itself a response to the feeling of fear, meaning the fear from a concrete, given danger that has a name.

This is the fear we experience inside the community—inside its fixed, stable forms of life and communication, or (as we would rather say today) inside its culture. But outside the community, this fear loses its concrete, recognisable cause and becomes ubiquitous, unforeseeable and constant. In short, outside of the community our fear is always anguish-ridden. Anguish is therefore this fear that has distanced itself from the community it belongs to, from the shared habits and well-known "linguistic games". Anguish is the fear that has penetrated into the vast world. The difference between fear and anguish is based on the clear separation between a habitual "inside" and an unknown "outside", between a substantial community, like the people for instance, and the world outside.

Only within this context can we understand why Goran Dević's film *Imported Crows* is an allegory to the old fear. It depicts the feeling of fear that is directly bound to the dialectics of "inside" and "outside". Concretely, this is the fear of a particular strange element, an element that comes from the outside and threatens the community, its alleged normality, its customs, its stable, never changing way of life—its (cultural) identity. The crows in the film are not "our crows"; they behave differently, they jeopardise our way of life, they could even attack us as those in Hitchcock's *The Birds*, as is said explicitly in the film.

The cause of this fear has a name: foreign infiltration. As such, it activates automatically a protection mechanism, the act of exclusion—concretely an act of extermination. This fear is expressed also in the form of its mobilising drives—xenophobia, ethnic hatred, racism, etc. In a metaphorical way, the film shows how a closed substantial community protects itself from intruders, how irrationally it identifies them and how cruel—in a blatant contradiction to the moral and religious principles it allegedly relies on—it deals with those who do not belong to the community.

In fact, the film tells a much more horrible story. What we see happening to the crows in the film had happened only a few years ago in the same town to real human beings, to fellow citizens who were suddenly declared intruders from the outside. The film is a clear allegory for the war in Croatia 1991–1995, and of similar political situations in which a particular fear—fear from foreigners coming from the outside—is used as a tool for political mobilisation, such as the recent election campaign in Switzerland: the story about the community of good white sheep getting rid of a bad black sheep.

Although this allegory points directly at the current political situation that we experience in everyday life, the political (mis)use of the so-called "immigrant question", we might still argue that it actually depicts an old form of fear—or more precisely, an old form of society that is already dissolving.

Just think of the usual answer to the challenge of political (mis)use of xenophobia: the hope that we can put it under rational control through an open and well functioning public capable of generating the so-called "communicative rationality", etc. The problem, however, is that this fear and its political effects are not an irrational, pathological expression of an otherwise healthy community, but politically and socially a constitutive element of this community. It is an intrinsic part of the very idea of "the people", respectively of "people's sovereignty". In other words, the problem is this very concept of a substantial community, the idea of the people itself.

In an interesting way, the film explicitly acknowledges this fact. At the end of the film, with the credits, we hear Lou Reed singing his famous "Small Town". We hear the refrain:  
"There is only one good thing about small town  
You know that you want to get out".

As little as the film is about crows, it is about provincialism or the stupidity of life in small towns. It is rather about humans and fear as social phenomenon; and it is about life in closed, substantial communities. Metaphorically, the notion of small town in the lyrics of Lou Reed evokes precisely this: the notion of an identitarian community, of nation, or politically, of people in terms of people's sovereignty. The film is about the only way to escape the horror (including the fear and its social and political consequences) of this closed community: to leave it forever! But how?

Virno argues that our feeling of fear has already gone, it has left the community forever. In other words, fear is not at home any more. While finally leaving the substantial community that was its home, and going away from traditional, repetitive forms of life, it has lost its quality of fear too. It has lost its distinctive cause, a particular danger to which it was a response, and therefore it has lost its content and its name. In other words, it has become anguish, or more precisely, what has failed, what has been lost forever is the clear boundary between fear and anguish, between relative dread and absolute dread.<sup>5</sup> This is however only an effect of a more substantial loss—it is the clear separation between a habitual "inside" and an unknown and hostile "outside", which has been lost. Finally, Virno is talking about the loss of the community itself.

Outside of the community, again, all fear is anguish-ridden, or, more precisely, there is a complete overlapping of fear and anguish. Even if we experience a well-known danger, which gives rise to a specific kind of fear, like losing a job for instance, this experience will be coloured from its very beginning, as Virno claims, by an unidentifiable anguish. It is fused together with a more general disorientation in the world, fused with the absolute insecurity, with the general risk of being in this world. This is a new facet of our experience of fear—namely its disconnection from a particular danger and particular community, and its becoming a sort of free floating fundamental experience of the world as world.

Virno argues that all forms of life today have had the experience of "not feeling at home", of being out of a stable and habitual social environment one has been accustomed to. We have got used to sudden change, to the reality, which is constantly innovated, and where we are permanently exposed to unusual and

unexpected experiences. In short, in today's world we are always already out of what the Greeks called *ethos*—out of an accustomed place.

Of course, one could reproach, although quite the contrary, the separation between an "inside" and an "outside" still belongs to the fundamental experiences of our world today. What about, just to take an extremely important example, the new so-called Schengen borders of the European Union? Isn't it fear of foreigners—a fear similar to the one depicted in Goran Dević's film—which keeps Europe together today, making out of different nations, cultures and religions a united community?

Virno would probably answer that Europe is in no case a substantial community. It does not claim a common language, a common culture, a common history, or a historical narrative all Europeans would agree upon; Europe is politically not established according to the concept of people's sovereignty; in short, the Europeans are still not "a people" in political terms. And, one could add—neither are they a society.

Again, one could argue that Europe is neither a society nor a people, simply because it is an ongoing project of a new, emerging society, the construction site of a new type of sovereignty, of collectivity, citizenship, culture, democracy, etc. In short, a sort of social and political work-in-progress, as Étienne Balibar suggests.<sup>6</sup>

Let us leave this question open. We know very well that Virno cannot accept this teleology because his concept of multitude—and this is what is at stake in his reflections on the contemporary feeling of fear—has nothing to do whatsoever with the idea of building a new home for the society that would be able to protect it from all sorts of danger.

The concept of the multitude has nothing to do with the famous tale about three little pigs that build homes to protect themselves from the big bad wolf. Virno's multitude is not a political synonym for the cleverest pig who builds the strongest brick house—a new political subject that is clever than the people from Hobbes' fairytale about the social contract and the institution of people's sovereignty. Accordingly, Virno's anguish is not an equivalent to Hobbesian "passion of fear", either—the strongest brick in the people's home able to stop every intruder. His anguish is rather the feeling of not having a home, of a social and political homelessness. Multitude is not a pig that builds its home of straw, or of sticks or bricks, but a "pig without a home" that can protect itself only by being always on the run.

However, the actual problem with Virno's anguish is that it cannot be perceived—nor articulated—in terms of social experience. For there is no society to make this experience. Instead, there is a social groundlessness, which is essential for the experience of anguish. It is an expression of what Brian Massumi calls the general condition of being on uncertain ground.<sup>7</sup> Anguish is not a symptom, nor a condition of a particular community, but a syndrome of a lost community. For Massumi, "syndrome" is "a complex of effects coming from no single, isolatable place, without a linear history, and exhibiting no invariant characteristics".<sup>8</sup> In short, something like global warming. This is why there is a difficulty with making a clear, easily recognisable picture of the anguish. It is simply difficult or even impossible to present it visually, to offer a picture and to claim that what we see is the anguish. One can visualise this or that particular danger, but how to show the picture of the emptiness itself? In fact, we can never face it directly but rather in a sort of discursive mirroring.

Let me suggest an example of such a mirroring of this new form of fear, of the anguish Virno is talking about—a work of the Russian collective Chto delat? ("What is to be done?") bearing the title *The Builders* (2005). It is a sort of a re-staging of a well-known Soviet painting from the 1960s made in the style of Socialist Realism: Victor Popkov's *The Builders of Bratsk*, that shows a group of workers who are heroically building the Siberian city of Bratsk.

Chto delat's "remake"—a video showing the members of the group in the same pose as the workers in Popkov's painting—concentrates on questions of building, social belonging, social motivation and community, as well as on the question of their own relation to the future. We hear: "For us, the feeling that we are building something is important. So we try to find out what we are building".

What the workers in Bratsk were once building is clear: a city, a society, a new life—in short, a home for the new society and therefore also a refuge from the dangers of life, the dangers of the wild Siberian nature; but also from the dangers of capitalist exploitations. In this context, one can also say that they were driven by a very clear set of fears. However, the members of Chto delat cannot identify with a similar task. They do not know what they are building, what they are up to: "Shit! What the fuck are we doing here?" they openly ask. Still, alone on a cold night, they do not seem to be scared. However, precisely this is the picture of anguish. In contrast: the determined poses and faces of the real builders of Bratsk—heroically dedicated to their common task, and driven by the same fears—is the visual presentation of the old fear. The builders of Bratsk beam with courage, for they must really be brave in order to face all those dangers. Their bravery, which is so obvious in the old painting, is a symptom of this fear, too.

However, in Chto delat's *Builders*, we are explicitly confronted with the question of community, i.e., with fear as a community-building quality. It is clear that the old builders of Bratsk represent a community, a new Socialist society of their time; but what represents young artists—the members of Chto delat? "There are thousands of workers behind the builders of Bratsk, but who is behind us?" They are obviously already beyond any identification with a social role or social task of their artistic practice: "I can derive some aesthetic pleasure from this painting, but it doesn't move me socially". Or more directly: "What is community? I do not like the word 'community'". Precisely this is anguish: confronting the empty place of community, or better, confronting community or society as an empty place. This is the social groundlessness that is essential for the experience of anguish. This is what Brian Massumi calls the general condition of being on uncertain ground.

In short: this new fear, or anguish, or, as Virno also suggests, the uncanny feeling, is the syndrome of a historical passage from the promise of a society without classes to the reality of a class without society. This is something we feel when we face the empty place of society. For it is not only Socialism that has collapsed. The society as such has gone, as well.

If Goran Dević's *Imported Crows* depicts the fear after the collapse of Socialism, Chto delat's *Builders* offer us the picture of the fear—the anguish—after the collapse of society, as such. Commenting on Victor Popkov's *The Builders of Bratsk*, the artists of Chto delat state: "It turns out that the place at which they stand and look to the future has been vacated", and they add: "And we have the same right to look to the future and hope".

At this point, we can try to reconnect these two experiences of fear we have described here: the one articulated in Goran Dević's *Imported Crows*, and the other that the artists of Chto delat portray with their *Builders*. It is the necessity of finding a way out, i.e., of a radical break with the community we live in. In fact, in Lou Reed's *Small Town*, there is also another refrain, which explicitly addresses the relation of the Chto delat artists to the former Socialist Builders of Bratsk:

"My father worked in construction  
It's not something for which I'm suited  
Oh, what is something for which you are suited?  
Getting out of here".

First published: Boris Buden, "Getting out of here", in: *Don't Worry—Be Curious! 4<sup>th</sup> Ars Baltica Triennial of Photographic Art* [exhibition catalogue], Dorothee Bienert (ed.), Pori, Pori Art Museum Publications 2008, pp. 9–19.

## Notes

- 1 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude, For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, Los Angeles, New York, Semiotext(e) 2004.  
[www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude3.htm](http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude3.htm)
- 2 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, C. B. Macpherson (ed.), London, Penguin 1968, p. 200.
- 3 Virno, *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 4 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, London, SCM Press 1962.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 33–ff.
- 6 See Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press 2004.
- 7 See Brian Massumi, "Everywhere You Want to Be: Introduction to Fear", in: *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, B. Massumi (ed.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota 1993.  
[www.anu.edu.au/HRC/first\\_and\\_last/works/feareverywhere.htm](http://www.anu.edu.au/HRC/first_and_last/works/feareverywhere.htm)
- 8 *Ibid.*

**Svetlana Boym**  
Modernities Out of Sync  
The Tactful Art of Anri Sala

Anri Sala described to me how during the historical changes in his native Albania in the early 1990s, every member of his art school class became a belated avant-gardist: "Suddenly, there was one surrealist, one expressionist, and one cubist, and I continued with my interest in fresco painting".<sup>1</sup> The uncontrollably fast pace of historical changes provoked in the artist a desire for a slow time and concentrated attentiveness. Fresco art was not about an individual signature, but about techniques of layering paint and learning how to apply and retouch, working through time and the material. This was not a retrograde gesture or nostalgia for some artistic roots, but a desire to carve a space for a singular artistic exploration that was a little out of sync with the urgencies of the current moment, yet also inspired by it.

Soon after mastering fresco painting, Sala took on video art, but he remained interested in layering images and capturing disappearance in progress. His videos take us to the outskirts of modern projects, from the half-ruined Socialist apartment buildings to the Senegalese radio studio with a lonely butterfly in the corner, and they record linguistic untranslatabilities and missing landscapes. In Sala's world, historic ruptures and scars turn into ellipses, and sensory gaps are present in most of his films. His is not merely the art of memory, but also the art of surprise and of the translation/transposition of experience into an artistic dimension of asynchronous existence, using images, music and light that are often on the edge, offbeat, and occasionally off-colour. Perhaps Sala, like his classmates, became a belated modern artist at the turn of a different century and after postmodernism. His project is a part of those eccentric modernities that come from the borderzones of Western culture and enrich it from the edges.

The contemporary cultural moment can be described as a conflict of asynchronous modernities, of various projects of globalisation that are often at odds with one another. The prefix "post" in this context seems to me somewhat passé. Instead of fast-changing prefixes such as "post", "anti", "neo", and "trans" that try desperately to be "in", I propose the use of "off", as in "off-kilter", "off-Broadway", "off-course", "off-brand", "off the wall" and "off-colour". "Off-modern" is a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modernist project.<sup>2</sup> It recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic and technological narratives of modernisation and progress.

Off-modern follows a nonlinear conception of cultural evolution. It could follow spirals and zigzags, movements of the chess knight, or parallel lines that can occasionally intertwine. Or, as Vladimir Nabokov explained, in the fourth dimension of art, parallel lines might not meet, not because they cannot, but because they might have other things to do.<sup>3</sup> As we veer off the beaten track of the dominant modern teleologies, we have to proceed laterally, not literally, and discover the missed opportunities and roads not taken. In fact, the preposition “off” developed from “of” is an emphatic and humorous onomatopoeic exaggeration that imitates oral speech. The “off” in off-modern designates belonging to, or “of”, the critical project of modernity as well as its edgy excess, marked by the second emphatic “f”. To some extent, off-modern art is closer to modern art in its unforeseen, forgotten and non-institutionalised dimensions. Off-modern art has both temporal and spatial dimensions, as it is belated and out-of-phase with the supposed progress of history and also the eccentric vis-à-vis the familiar centres of modern/postmodern culture. Only when one dares to be a little off, or even outmoded, can one become truly contemporary.

Off-modern art suggests an alternative understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and politics and a somewhat different artistic etiquette. “How can one be tactful but impolite?” wonders Anri Sala. We do not find any artists’ or elephants’ shit in Sala’s work, no bright red from the images of Lenin or Coca Cola, no chic dogma of artistic mastery. His method is de-familiarisation, but not of a Brechtian or conceptual kind, but more as an exercise in aesthetic estrangement, wonder and surprise.

Sala’s works might appear a little out of sync with some of contemporary art’s historical paradigms, offering powerful challenges to them. His art is on the edge but not marginal, playful but not scandalous, tactful but impolite. I would like to explore this edgy tactfulness and the off-modern poetics and politics that result from it.

“Tell me that this country doesn’t exist”, commented the artist Liam Gillick after watching the rushes<sup>4</sup> of what was to become Sala’s film *Dammi i Colori* (2003). But it is in fact much more interesting that the country, which looks stranger than fiction, does exist. In Sala’s words, Albania is not even considered the Other of the West: it is the unknown. It doesn’t even get to be called a “mystery wrapped in enigma”—to quote Churchill’s words about Russia. Albania makes only a few cameo appearances in the recent Western artistic imagination, sometimes as a make-believe land, conjured up for the sake of political hoax, as in the film *Wag the Dog*.<sup>5</sup> The story of Albanian art hardly fits into any paradigm, and when it does, it tampers with the paradigm itself,

turning it upside down. Albania is post-colonial, only it was colonised by the Ottoman Empire and later by the Italians; it is post-Communist, but we have to keep in mind that it offered an exceptional example even within the Communist universe. It was both most faithful to the Stalinist vision thirty years after de-Stalinisation in the Soviet Union and eccentric and isolated even within the Communist world. Albania, “the poorest country in Europe” (in the words of Edi Rama, the Mayor of Tirana), was also a borderzone between East and West, South and North, Islam and Christianity. Sala told me that, during the years of the dictatorship, artists in Albania were not “just” placed in the Gulag as some were in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but they were prohibited to paint, forever. So there was no tradition of non-conformist art here that existed in the “grey zone” the way it did in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe. “One could become an enemy of the people for commenting about the lack of fish in the market or for painting the shoe in a wrong way”, comments Todi Lubonja in Sala’s film *Intervista* (1998). And yet, in spite of its imposed artistic isolation, Albania had its own project of modernisation and a rich culture, with interesting cinema and art practiced against all odds and much everyday creativity.

Any artist or writer coming from an eccentric background (eccentric vis-à-vis the Western European/American mainstream) knows how difficult it is not to be placed in the category of “friendly exotic other” and thus to become forever a hyphenated artist with national qualifiers. These artists were not necessarily framed by their contexts, but often exceeded the frame. Today, Sala is an international artist, a wanderer, a border-crosser, an explorer, and a tourist. Yet his fascination with the edges of language and image, and his resistance to both explicitly political and commercial speech might have been shaped by his early encounter with life under the dictatorship, with its hidden violence and perversion of language in the public sphere that sometimes went together with intimate and rich friendships in private. The scars of memory and history in Sala are not to be rapidly healed, but to be touched upon over and over again—tactfully.

### Memory out of sync

One of Sala’s most celebrated early films, *Intervista*, is a story of memory out of sync. The film begins like an Albanian version of *Blow Up* (or *Blow out*) and then turns into a personal history/detective story. At the opening of the film, the young filmmaker discovers film footage from the 1970s that shows his mother, Valdet Sala, as a young Communist, standing right next to the Secretary of the Albanian Communist Party, Enver Hoxha, and talking with heartfelt enthusiasm. However, the sound is missing.

Valdet cannot identify the date of the interview and has no recollection of the occasion, but she recognises the interviewer, Pushkin Lubonja, who leads the filmmaker into the labyrinths of the Albanian art of memory. Lugonja explains that he does not remember the interview with Sala's mother either, because it was ultimately unmemorable and not meant to be remembered. Lugonja says that he made more than 2,000 interviews and there was hardly any singularity to them. The questions were "foreseeable and so were the answers". We are not dealing with the Western memory industry here, but with the peculiar *ars oblivionalis*, the art of forgetting, that generates false synonyms of the original event and a further obfuscation of language that substitutes for the experience.

The local party leader Todi Lubonja manages to date the film footage through a curious technique of anticipatory erasure that was described in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. He identifies some political actors in the footage who were not yet airbrushed from Albanian history (i.e., not yet executed, imprisoned, or erased from all the photographic documents. Todi Lubonja and his wife were arrested soon after this interview and spent 16 years in prison). This glitch in communication, or sensory gap, inspires Sala's quest. He locates the soundman of the footage, a veteran of Albanian cinema, now a taxi driver/philosopher bracing the streets of Tirana. The man explains that in the 1970s they always filmed "out of sync" but, at the same time, they were well aware that the failure of synchronisation and any technical glitch could become a crime against the state that could cost the filmmaker his job and occasionally his freedom or worse. In those days, the soundman lived in fear, quite different from the everyday fears he faces on the streets of the post-Communist city; that other, old fear, during life under the dictatorship, was a "fear without an end that accompanied one till the death". Giving up on finding the recorded sound, Sala does not give up on his cinematic and personal adventure. His film becomes a story of "glitches"—technical, linguistic, mnemonic, communicative. Sala decides to read his mother's lips—literally—with the help of deaf and mute translators.

But what kind of revelation could come from reading his mother's lips? Is there a dark secret, a corpse hidden in the missing landscape? In the next encounter with his mother, the artist shares with her the results of his reconstruction. This is what she is saying in the early footage: "This meeting was held to express a clear support of the country in the struggle against imperialism and revisionism and the two superpowers, which is only possible if the youth unites under the guardianship of the Communist party".

Valdet's reaction is bewilderment, embarrassment, non-recognition: "It's absurd", she says, "not the ideology, but the grammar. I know how to express myself". It is curious that she reacts to the glitches in grammar, not to the subject matter. "Read your lips, Mom, there are no cuts here", says the filmmaker. His technique is the very opposite of the conventional documentary or of Socialist Realist-style footage, which always hid its devices and circumstances of filming. Instead, Sala documents every step in the process of translation, exposing rather than retouching the blind spots, black holes, and gaps. The sentence that his young mother recited is not so revelatory, but rather foreseeable and unmemorable. (Having grown up with a similar media culture in the former Soviet Union, I remember how we mastered the unwritten laws of the mythological communication. The official speeches functioned as pre-modern incantations or as mediaeval frescoes with minimal iconographic differences. In fact, in many Soviet songs from the Stalinist period, there are elements of absurdity and ungrammaticality because these texts were not intended to be read closely. Their gaps and leaps of faith were to be breached by enthusiasm and cemented by fear.) Language was not about communication, but about partaking in the ritual of enthusiastic belonging. Intonation and degrees of enthusiasm were of a greater significance.

Usually, at the beginning of such ritual speeches, there were declarations of revolutionary unity in the face of the enemy, and then came an appeal to persecute the enemies of the people. This would have been a more embarrassing revelation, but the filmmaker has no desire to go there. "Does it bother you that I am filming this?" asks the filmmaker. "I don't know. I have mixed feelings. It was not black and white", replies Valdet. She speaks about sincere belief and concrete achievements in modernising the country that went hand-in-hand with the "mass hysteria" of the congresses, which made it difficult to draw the line where revolution ended and the compromise with power and with oneself began. The words about the "world revolution" still have "a nice ring to them" for her. Her speech in the footage is refracted by the more direct opinions of the other participants in the interview, who add nuances of historical understanding. *Intervista* is a "personal project", but it does not fit into the genre of identity quest (the "young Albanian artist returns to his homeland in search of his roots" genre film), nor is it a psychoanalytically inflected confrontation between mother and son. We never find out if ...

Valdet thinks that she has never compromised herself. In Sala's reflection on history and memory out of sync, "mixed feelings" predominate. It is possible that the recording of such confusions in a "non-black-and-white" manner constitutes an approach to the traumas of history that is different from the approach that characterises art from other parts of Europe. Sala holds the language of clarity in suspicion and tries to undercut its seductive syntax.

At the end we realise that the topic of *Intervista* is not the deciphering of Valdet Sala's old interview, but a continuing interview/conversation between the mother and the son, which involves a change in syntaxes. Instead of a scene of unmasking, we have a scene of intimate communication and a tactful cinema of deep affection.

### Tactful but impolite

For me, one of the most cinematically striking features of *Intervista* is the fact that here the life-shattering revelations are uttered as if off-camera or off-the-cuff: "We lived 50 years under dictatorship. Dictatorships don't expose evil, they hide it. They hide the crime", says Todi Lubonja. We notice that he is not looking into the camera. The corner of his face is framed by the brim of his dandyish old-fashioned hat and the invisible picture on the wall. The artist makes the camera as unobtrusive as possible, letting Mr. Lubonja talk away. Then, in the editing room, he makes a conscious decision not to cut from the film this awkward image "in sync" with the sound. For Sala, seamless narratives, conventionally effective cinematography, and clarity are part of the spectacle of "hiding the crime".

In his most serious conversation with his mother, Sala decides to film this segment himself, without his cameraman, so he can speak with his mother *tête-à-tête* in the intimate setting. She is on the couch, but this is not psychoanalytic cinema at all. Her face is shot in an extreme close-up, but at an angle almost reminiscent of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*. The closeness does not offer revelation; she speaks about her ambivalences, fears and mixed feelings. Her face against the dark background appears almost like a mask behind which certain things remain inscrutable.

Sala exposes the edges, but does not jump into the abyss; he reveals the place of the scars but he does not wound further. Nor does he offer an unaesthetic stance against memory and history; he proposes instead a tactful yet very unconventionally aesthetic treatment. For Sala, tactfulness is not only a way of relating to the film's cinematic subjects, but also to the medium of cinema itself. Tactfulness is respect for the fragile boundaries of the other, but also an intimation of the untouchable and unpredictable. Sala's tactfulness is not reverent, pious, or cautious; on the contrary, it is mysterious and alogical. Tactfulness might hold the secret to Sala's films, but it is also a mystery in itself. It is not very often that one hears the word "tactful" in the context of contemporary art. Could it be that in a culture that demands either corporate caution or sellable sensationalism, there is a taboo against impolite tactfulness?

The word "tact" derives from "touch", but at first glance, the concept seems to have reversed its meaning and come to signify a delicate distance and respect, a displacement of contact away from the domain of the physicality and into the domain of the sociability and aesthetic arrangement of everyday life. But this is only at first glance. The more we look into the problem of touch itself, the more ambivalent it becomes.

"Can we touch with our eyes?" asks Jacques Derrida.<sup>6</sup> The organ and representation of tact are just as elusive as those of touch, migrating and escaping the frame, preserving the mystery. Tact for Derrida is a "sense of knowing how to touch without touching, without touching too much where touching is already too much".<sup>7</sup> Tact, in other words, is connected to the art of measuring that which cannot be measured. Derrida sees at the core of tact a taboo against contact, a certain interdict or prohibition, an abstinence. But, in my view, in the case of artists from traditions other than those of Western Europe or the United States, where historical violence is not an armchair fantasy, tactfulness is less about abstinence than about a conscious reticence, less about the interdict than about a deliberate choice not to violate further that which has been violated by history. It is a choice to touch without tampering, to play in the border zone without crossing it, to explore the shades of ambivalence. Tact points to the untouchable, but also begs us not to forget the effect of touch, not to rush into the virtual or the transcendental. The tactile is still there in artistic tactfulness, which gives it a unique temperature, neither too cool nor too hot, but never lukewarm, either.

In fact, the spectacle of violating the inhibitions has become more conventional in contemporary art than in the tactful explorations of the borderzones. In his *Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Roland Barthes observes that in contemporary culture, the pornographic and transgressive have become so common that they are no longer unusual; in fact, our affections, frustrations and sympathies are more obscene than Georges Bataille's tale of the "pope sodomising the turkey". Barthes suggests, "Whatever is anachronistic is obscene. As a (modern) divinity, History is repressive, History forbids us to be out of time".<sup>8</sup> What is obscene, then, is what is off the scene, and tactfulness seems to be off the contemporary art scene.

Tactfulness affects artistic conceptions of time, space, language, narrative, and even the temperature of communication. It operates through tactics, not strategies. Tactfulness takes time; it introduces a different temporality that is deliberately not in sync with the pace of contemporary media culture and digital instantaneity. It slows the communication. It dwells in the non-signifying and non-symbolic spaces of conversation, in the interstices of language. These

include technical and communicative glitches, moments of embarrassment, of sudden fear or astonishment, and all the other uncodifiable moods. Tactful art does not repress, but represents silences in communication and the shimmer of revelation and concealment.

Tactfulness is one of the elusive tactics that Sala uses in his way of treating the cinematic frame itself. He is not trying to control the visual or conceptual field. On the contrary, he says that, for him, fiction (in the broad sense of the word) should overlap but never coincide with the cinematic frame. "It would be like setting all the conditions for fiction to happen but then record it as if we arrived a bit too late", remarks Sala. In other words, the author dreams up a tactical map of the film, sets the scene, but then leaves open a possibility for surprise.

The untouchable and unpredictable are allowed to come in if there is space for them. It is in that space in which nothing is scripted—the "un- iconic" space—where the wind of the unpredictable can blow the frame and surprise the filmmaker himself. When the camera is tactful toward its subjects, it is not violating their boundaries, but intimating their potentialities and the untouchable spaces around them. The filmmaker is not trying to instrumentalise the individuals for the sake of higher truth or a slick film, but to dwell in the mystery of communication. Tactful mediation takes place between respect and astonishment.

Derrida observed that tactfulness is always about "touching the law" and therefore it is about the "endurance of limit as such". The artistic tactic of tactfulness involves a continuous play with the laws of art, of language, of public space, of history, of memory. The most interesting form of tactfulness is not the one that leads to a comedy of manners or psychological subtleties but the one that questions the syntax of language itself and moves toward the alogical. This term goes back to the Russian avant-garde and one of its early proponents, Kazimir Malevich; only he did not stay there but marched on to Suprematism and oblique figuration. It is the art of syncope, of ellipse and accent, that highlights the gaps that cannot be bridged without violation. In other words, the tactful art is the art of the syncope.

Syncope becomes both a metaphor and an offbeat rhythm for Sala's recent works. What interests him is the way syncopation deviates from the strict succession of regularly spaced strong and weak beats and disorients "fictional" plots. "Syncope" has linguistic, musical, and medical meanings. Linguistically, it refers to "a shortening of the word by omission of a sound, letter, or syllable from the middle of the word". Musically, it indicates a change of rhythm and a displacement of accent, "a shift of accent in a passage or composition that

occurs when a normally weak beat is stressed". Medically, it refers to "a brief loss of consciousness caused by transient anemia, a swoon". Syncopal art dwells on sensuous details, not symbols. In fact, syncope is the opposite of symbol and synthesis. Symbol, from the Greek *syn-ballein*, means to throw together, to represent one thing through another, to transcend the difference between the material and immaterial worlds. For a tactful artist, symbols, metaphysical or sexual, "bleach the soul", numb "all capacity to enjoy the fun and enchantment of art", to quote Vladimir Nabokov. Syncopation is about the impossibility of transcendence and fusion. For Nabokov, personal exile and displacement determined the rhythm of his prose and in many ways enabled his art: "the break in my own destiny [i.e., the experience of exile] affords me in retrospect a syncopal kick that I would not have missed for worlds", he writes in his autobiography.<sup>9</sup> Syncopation does not help to restore the lost home; it is present as a trace, as a foreign accent. What it accomplishes is a transformation of the loss into a musical composition, a ciphering of pain into art. The tactful rhythm of syncopation does not consist in leaving things intact, but in touching without violation, in revealing the dormant psyche of things, people, and cities without possessing them.

Sala's method is estrangement, in the tradition of Viktor Shklovsky and the alogism of the avant-garde. It means distancing and making estranged, deferring the denouement, experiencing the world anew, or moving like a knight in the game of chess through the zigzags. Such operation suggests a cognitive ambivalence and a slowing down of action for the sake of play and wonder, this might open other dimensions and parallel universes that exist side by side with ours.

## Hope, not utopia

"I wanted to show images from the place where speaking of utopia is actually impossible and therefore utopian. I chose the notion of hope instead of utopia. I focused on the idea of bringing hope in a place where there is no hope".<sup>10</sup> The place where speaking of utopia is impossible and therefore interesting is not an imaginary city out of Italo Calvino, but today's Tirana. In Albania, the language of utopia, like the language of "the world revolution" that Valdet Sala speaks about, has been overused and has to be reframed in a radical yet tactful artistic manner.

Like *Intervista, Dammi i Colori* is an interview, in this case with Edi Rama, artist and Mayor of Tirana and Sala's friend and mentor. *Dammi i Colori* is also about touching, with paint and in broad strokes, the urban exteriors and interiors that transform historical scars. It is the story of a "dead city", which after fifty years

of Communist dictatorship followed by post-Communist riots and new, exciting, but anarchic democratisation, resembled a “transit station” where people “were doomed to live”, and the remarkable project of transforming it into “the city of choice” that can be inhabited anew.

How does Rama propose to do it? The way the artist does, cheaply and boldly, through colour. He wants to use the colour not as a symbol, but as a signal and bold trigger for the future shared memories of the troubled city. His project is to retouch the façades of the city in the radical artistic manner, creating a striking visual form that will allow for a new kind of urban democratisation. According to Rama, colour therapy is not for every city: “I think that a city where things develop normally might wear colours as a dress, not have them as organs. In a way, colours here replace the organs; they are not part of the dress. That kind of city would wear colours like a dress or like a lipstick”.

Touching with colour, then, does not merely change the “skin of the city”, but transforms its internal organs and awakens its dormant psyche. Rama is not interested in colour per se, but in debating colours and in the ways in which public debates become a part of a new urban citizenship: “There is no other country in Europe where the colour is so vehemently debated”, says Rama in the film. His wish was to join together the city of colour with the city of public debate, creating a new model for democratic deliberations and shared histories.

For Rama, the relationship between the mayor and his people is similar to that of the artist and his audience. This is not a case of the “aestheticisation of politics”, but rather of a transformative artistic practice that does not aim at creating a seamless spectacle. Rama defines his project as the “avant-garde of democratisation”. The juxtaposition of the two words is crucial, if controversial. Democratising goes together with “making artistic”, while avant-garde engages deliberation. In this sense, Rama’s project is a curious reversal of the art of Monumental Propaganda that originated right after the Russian Revolution. The colour project can be called “The Art of Post-Monumental Anti-Propaganda”, and yet it is very much connected to many unfulfilled “lateral” dreams of the avant-garde without totalising expectations. For the Mayor, “artistic” becomes almost synonymous with “public”; he aspires to give his city a new agora and an aesthetic public realm. His project can be compared to that of another artistic mayor of a city of eccentric modernity, this time in Latin America. I am thinking of Antanas Mocus, the Mayor of Bogotá, who used art and performance to unite and transform the city, turning law enforcement into a form of urban play. Mocus was a philosopher interested in the avant-garde and particularly in the work of Viktor Shklovsky and his theory of estrangement.

Rama’s project might appear as an utopia of democratisation. But it is certainly more imaginative and far less expensive than the *Realpolitik* architecture of Potsdamerplatz in Berlin, with its corporate privatisation of the public realm, or the rebuilding of the larger-than-life cathedrals and huge underground shopping malls and the nouveau-riche extravaganza of contemporary Moscow. Rama’s project is not that of restorative nostalgia; he does not erase the modern heritage of the city, but reflects on the unfulfilled promises of modern architecture and art that can still affect life by bringing in emotion, pleasure and care for the common world and for individuals. In short, this is a more modest dream than a large-scale collective utopia, but a dream worth dreaming.

Sala’s film tactfully estranges but does not demystify Rama’s work. Instead, Sala refracts the artist-mayor’s dream of colour, creating his own portrait of Tirana between night and day, memories and hopes. At the beginning, we see beautiful nocturnal footage that frames the slices of the city like miniature masterpieces of abstraction. Then come the split shots that reveal the edges of the urban dreams between the mud and the coloured facades, the ruins of the past and the construction sites of the future. Sala’s camera loves the ruins and engages in, what I would call, a paradoxical and future-oriented art of ruinophilia.

The nocturnal shots, which offer an almost operatic transfiguration of the city, are intercut with diurnal shots, but the relationship between the two is not a form of ideological montage or some clear opposition. Some of the daily activities of Tirana residents comment on the new refashioning of their city. There is a boy running around in a coloured mask, a man who coquettishly arranges his hair in a tiny mirror on the ruined wall, and another man who changes his costume—they are the new aesthetic urban dwellers humorously partaking in the dressing up of the city.

The film makes public vision intimate. It begins and ends with a single light, not with a total illumination. At the opening of the film we see the nocturnal street with only one window gently lit, as if there were a single intrepid romantic or insomniac eavesdropper on the transforming city (or is it the artist recording the nocturnal daydreamer with his camera?). The film’s ending is equally anti-spectacular. In the final sequence, the mayor appears to us as a private citizen and a painter who still enjoys the little surprises in daily life: “If you take the red from the car light and put it in the dark, it looks nice”. From grandiose visions we are back to a little epiphany, a moment of wonder and hope in everyday life, no more and no less than that.

Utopia is an impossible concept, but both Rama and Sala use it. Sala and (to some extent) Rama return utopia back to its origins—in art, not in life. Sala does not feel any embarrassment about things aesthetic as do some contemporary artists (and curators), for his aesthetic, is a broad “exploration of the sensory” and a particular form of artistic knowledge and interplay of the senses.<sup>11</sup> Sala is less interested in the issues of artistic “isms” or institutional critiques that concern many Western conceptual artists; instead he is engaged in rethinking aesthetic practice in the broad sense and in opening the uninhabited spaces of language.

In all of his projects, Sala disorients assumptions of contemporary art and theory. In his early project *Déjeuner avec Marubi* (1997), Albanian women reframe the icon of Western modern art, Manet’s once-scandalous painting *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*. By dressing up the nude woman in Albanian clothes, Sala returns this collage artwork back to Western audiences. The film *Promises* (2001) also deals with the global circulation of language and linguistic embarrassment. Sala asks several Albanian men to repeat the famous line of Al Capone: “Nobody puts a price on my head and lives”. They do so with genuine discomfort, and there is something uncanny about the whole procedure, which makes the lines sound like a forgotten nightmare of the Balkan wars. The friends return Al Capone’s lines with a new cultural accent.

Speaking about the relationship between “the West” and Eastern Europe, Sala describes it as a hypothetical dialogue, well-disposed but frequently one-directional: “When we [the fellow artists from Sarajevo, Tirana, Belgrade or Senegal] asked the West the questions they didn’t know the answers to, we had to rephrase our questions”. Through his films, Sala turns the tables and asks us to rephrase the questions we ask of art, East or West.

The art of tactfulness eschews both the media-driven sensationalism of the new and of nostalgia and *ostalga* alike.<sup>12</sup> If there is nostalgia in Sala’s film, it is not a longing for the particular lost homeland, but for that slow time of one’s Eastern European childhood that allowed for a long duration of escape dreams into the landscapes without propaganda and advertisement, those missing landscapes that have not been curated yet.

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## Notes

- 1 Personal interview with Anri Sala, Venice, 21 April 2008.  
 In our conversation in Venice in April 2008, Anri Sala and I tried to define tactfulness and failed over and over again. I decided to record our informal interview in the hopes of a future intellectual revelation. Upon my return home I discovered that my interview was missing sound. Inadvertently, our interview ended up being off the record, and all I had were scribbles on a sheet of paper, variations on the theme of impolite tactfulness. As we got more and more lost on Venetian streets with names like Calle Amor dei Amici and Calle della Vida, we realised that we could only come up with definitions via negatives. Tactfulness is neither “loud visibility” nor spectacular clarity. Nor is it the art of caution. Tactful art is not driven by the plot, but by unexpected detours and details. It does not move fast and exceeds the frame. Tactful filming defies a complete authorial control or mastery of ceremonies. Tactful art is neither quite sacred nor profane, neither messianic nor eschatological. What if tactfulness should not be defined by neither/nor, but by and/and or almost and yet?
- 2 On the conception of the “off-modern”, see Svetlana Boym, “Off-Modern Manifesto”, at [www.svetlanaboym.com](http://www.svetlanaboym.com) and *The Architecture of the Off-Modern*, Columbia Buell Center/ Princeton Architectural Press 2008.
- 3 Vladimir Nabokov, “The Overcoat”, in: *Lectures on Russian Literature*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1982.
- 4 The first print made of a day’s filming.
- 5 The premise of the film is that the American President fabricates a fictional war to save his presidential power. It is ironic that it actually went the other way around. In the 1990s, inflated American domestic scandals distracted the attention of the President and his advisors from the very real political situation in Kosovo and in Albania that was unfolding outside media attention.
- 6 Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry, Stanford University Press 2005, p. 2.
- 7 Ibid. p. 66.
- 8 Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Farrar, Straus, Giroux 1978, pp. 177–178.
- 9 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, discussed in Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books 2001, p. 281.
- 10 Mark Godfrey, Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Anri Sala*, London, Phaidon 2006, p.133.
- 11 I refer here to Jacques Rancière’s conception of aesthetics, in particular in: *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London, Continuum 2005 and in his essay on Sala, “La politique du crabe”, in: *Anri Sala: Entre chien et loup—When the Night calls it a Day*, Paris, Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris; Cologne, Walther König 2004, pp. 65-75.
- 12 For a discussion and definitions of nostalgia, and ostalga in the contemporary context, see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York, Basic Books 2002.

## Keiko Sei

### Solidity in Flux

#### Video Installation, Media Art and Media Landscape in Eastern Europe during the Transition

In an unspecified time in 1980, an unprecedented project in the history of video came out of the mind of artists from Eastern Europe, then the mysterious other side of the Iron Curtain. It would collect artistic expressions and statements in video form from all over the world that would be contained in a video cassette. The project took off, even lasted for one full decade, with the participation of 1,500 artists. What precipitated this idea?

In November 1989, the capital city of Prague was full of video monitors that showed daily news made by students of film school and a civic video news group reporting the situation and the development of the Velvet Revolution. Some months later, in an atmosphere of euphoria, a popular exhibition that reconstructed the Revolution consisted of impressive video installations.

What did the video installations mean to the Czech people? What did "a video installation" mean to them? Was it a form of presenting a more accurate representation of their lives, or were they aware of it in artistic terms? Did video artists help design the exhibition? Or did these installations present a rare form of art, a spontaneous creation of peoples' desire and extraordinary circumstance, not influenced by an imposed history of art?

For a video curator who had watched and worked with representatives of video art from around the world, as well as lesser-known independent video projects, video in Eastern Europe has raised numerous questions in my mind; at the same time, it has also provided me with a crucial answer to the very basic question of why we do video art.

In this essay, I look back on some of the media landscape that I witnessed or in which I was involved during the momentous change in Eastern Europe. I will focus on the three countries that I worked in most: Hungary, Czechoslovakia/ Czech Republic and Romania.

## Hungary

In 1980, Hungarian experimental film and video maker Gábor Bódy launched an innovative video project entitled *Infermental*. With the aim to create an “info-magnetic living-space” and an “annual encyclopaedia of tendencies in art and culture”, it took the form of a video magazine. *Infermental* is considered to be the first video magazine on an international scale. Over the next eleven years, eleven editions with an alternating series of editors from different countries were published. Each annual issue compiled approximately five to seven hours of the audio-visual work that represented the latest tendencies in this area. Bódy, coming from a place where information exchange was restricted, experimented with his vision that information could travel across borders more freely if it was hidden in a tiny video cassette. These efforts paid off, and as a result more than 1,500 artists from 36 countries contributed to the eleven editions. The editorial cities ranged from Berlin, Hamburg, Budapest, Wuppertal, Lyon, Rotterdam, Vancouver, Buffalo NY, Tokyo and Vienna, to Osnabrück/Skopje. Thanks to these packaged video cassettes, we the video practitioners in the West, were able to learn something about the underground artistic activities behind the Iron Curtain. We could get a glimpse of such legendary performance groups as Collective Actions in Moscow and Łódź Kaliska in Łódź. With a variety of short video expressions comprising everything from artistic performance to simple agitation, the project anticipated many media phenomena to follow, such as the concept of TAZ,<sup>1</sup> Social Networking, YouTube, and the like. What brought this visionary project into the world? Why were people in totalitarian Eastern Europe equipped with such an outstanding sense of, and sensitivity towards, media? The question was so intriguing to me while I worked as a video curator in Japan, that eventually I decided to come to the region to find a clue for myself.

The first thing that struck me when I arrived to Budapest in 1988 was the video monitors that were installed at metro stations. They showed advertisements, as well as metro announcements. Before I actually moved to Eastern Europe, the information about video and media art, independent media and alternative media from the region was extremely scarce. The only exception was *Infermental* and video art from Yugoslavia, which had already been integrated in the distribution system of Western video art.<sup>2</sup> Who would have noticed and reported to the West about the small video monitors in public space in Hungary? Had I physically not been there, I would not have been aware of these small signs that told so much about those days and the days that were coming. The significance of these monitors would weigh more when I came to know the level of independent video and media in Hungary: the scene was so lively, that the monitors looked ready to have video art on the screen. Every landscape

is a creation of psychological and social reflection. And thus, the reflected landscape is not translated to a factual sheet. The experience can be possible only with our physical presence in a place. To my eyes, the monitors were there, they were ready for art, and art was ready for manifesting in public. A manifesto was ready, the media was ready, and hence the reading out of twelve points of demands by the opposition in front of the Hungarian TV by popular actor György Cserhalmi.<sup>3</sup>

Hungary provided a series of symbolic events like this one throughout the period of political change. Another such event was the funeral of Imre Nagy in June 1989. The spectacular Russian-Constructivist-inspired design of the ceremony was designed by artist and film architect Gábor Bachman and film architect and son of the Stalinist show trial victim László Rajk, László Rajk, Jr. Only a year before, Bachman used the same square to stage a performance for his art video *East European Alarm* (1988),<sup>4</sup> with the same Russian Constructivist style, in which a Communist officer offers philosophical thinking when confronting a woman drawing on a huge red-star-shaped cloak. Superb dramaturgy, I thought, taking in the chic black columns and white cloth that covered the entire façade of Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest (formerly known as Palace of Art) at Heroes' Square, and the tens of thousands of people who emotionally watched on. Bachman managed to play with two different media, two different stages and different types of audience, mass psychology and the East-West discourse in art. What struck me even more was the comment of a local scholar who told me that, “This must be the most significant media event in Eastern European change”. The Hungarian people were highly aware of the fact that it was media, and that the media gaze creates change. The tradition of Bauhaus and Béla Balázs had prevailed, and must have left some positive trace on the mass consciousness. Miklós Erdély knew it, Gábor Bódy knew it, and Tibor Hajas knew it. The artists who followed them confidently pursued experimentation in different media. During the crucial change of 1988-89, artists such as János Sugár and László László Révész, and theoreticians such as László Beke and Miklós Peternák were exercising a particular genre called “intermedia”, a laboratory of media studies. In Hungary, already in the late 90s, there were courses teaching media theory and media art at the main educational institutions, including the Academy of Fine Arts, Academy of Applied Arts and Eötvös Loránd University. “Intermedia” study further enriched the educational opportunities for the local cultural elites.

This was also the time when the Soros Foundation, with its headquarters in Budapest, was generously funding artistic activities in former Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Due to this funding possibility, and to a certain extent reflecting on George Soros's interest in media, previously unthinkable and

impossible exhibitions of media art and technology art flourished in many countries in the region, beginning with Hungary.

Mass media responded to the artists' call, as well, and as a result Hungarian Television became the most exploratory public television in the political East. Producer Judit Kopper's series *Video World* and *Media Mix* brought out numerous noteworthy productions that intelligently examined various aspects of today's media. As we could see in episodes such as *TV Boris* and *Video Misa*, which discussed the impact and influence of media on the reform and revolution of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, *Funeral* that looked at the Soviet-era style of funerals of state officials, and episodes examining election videos, experimental video, and a collector of video tapes, Kopper's programmes offered serious educational quality in a genre of media study to a wider audience, playing a role that could hardly be overlooked.

Meanwhile Béla Balázs Studio, the Mecca of experimental film in Hungary, had been providing facilities and discursive space, not only to mighty artists, but also to political projects, notably a political video cassette magazine, *Black Box*. The video magazine witnessed and documented the decade of dynamic change of the country and the region, often taking the risk of arrest or abuse. A product of an era of new television distribution, it had taken advantage of cable TV stations that had spread mostly in the suburban social housing area, the cassettes delivered to these stations by bicycle. Thanks to this video magazine, people acquired news that had hardly been seen in the official media.

The dynamics of the experimental art scene, mass consciousness, political activism and discursive media theory intermingling with each other was in certain ways a Hungarian phenomenon. With this base, when the Romanian Revolution happened in December 1989, media scholars in Hungary immediately recognised the significance of the first revolution that took place in a TV station; consequently, we could organise an international symposium in April 1990 in Budapest—only 3 months after the event—to discuss this unique moment of history, focusing on a media theoretical analysis.<sup>5</sup> The dynamics, however, had slightly different components in other Eastern European countries.

### Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic

*Original Video Journal*, a Czechoslovak equivalent to *Black Box*, e.g., had never been produced at an experimental film lab. I must note that this influential video news journal had been produced by artists and designers, as well as filmmakers, journalists and political activists, and one of the producers, Pavel Kačírek, stated

that they had always considered it as an art project. Their art context, however, was different from that of Hungary, where conceptual and philosophical discourse within an artwork had built up a whole universe on its own.

*Original Video Journal* was initiated by Olga and Václav Havel in the mid-80s with the aim to distribute news that had not been reported in the official media to citizens. Their distribution system was pyramid-scheme-like: they encouraged a receiver of a copy of the journal to copy a couple or more, and then hand the copies to more people so that each copy multiplied. The method was as unique as that of the bicycle-delivered *Black Box* and Polish Gdansk Video Studio that used a church network. All were invented from an everyday wisdom in reaction to the totalitarian environment. In Czechoslovakia, at the time, any copying activity—whether it was a document or a music tape—was prohibited; hence, the legal problem was humorously solved by calling every copy “original”. Each edition began with an impressive animation logo, with plenty of coverage of underground artistic activities and absurd theatre, political news and social affairs. The artists and designers around this Czech underground scene had been strongly influenced by the hippie and punk movements of the United States. The band Plastic People of the Universe and their poet Ivan Jirous caused a stir in the Communist society of the 1970s, thereupon leading the Charter 77 movement initiated by Václav Havel. Their inspiration was Frank Zappa, Velvet Underground, Joseph Heller (who was influenced by Jaroslav Hašek) and The Living Theater.<sup>6</sup> The scene's tie with American culture was thus far more overt than in any other country in Eastern Europe.

Unlike the music, theatre, avant-garde film, animation film and the mesmerising Czechoslovak New Wave cinema, the independent video art and media art scenes in Czechoslovakia were virtually unknown outside the borders even in the late 1980s. Without any prior connection, and reluctant to get in touch with any official institution, I had to manage to find a clue on my own. Luckily, I came across a group of young filmmakers recording animation on the street, avoiding the eyes of authority.<sup>7</sup> They turned out to be the youngest members of the Czech Surrealist group headed by Jan Švankmajer, and since the animation master was practically banned by the state, I could open up a contact with the Samizdat film and video scene. Among what I discovered, one of the areas that caught my attention was a quiet but nevertheless distinctive tradition of what they called “private film”. Even a potential master of cinema or art disguised her/himself as a Sunday filmmaker, and made a short film about a family visiting the zoo. A component of this genre later merged in the works of the new generation of artists who started to freely expose their daily and private lives as a post-revolutionary artistic style, which can be seen in the works of Jiří David or Veronika Bromová.

1989 was also the year that left a landmark on the history of media art in Czechoslovakia. Artists from various practices, including Jaroslav Vančat from conceptual and pedagogic art, and Radek Pilař from animation, got together to initiate the first video art show in a museum context, entitled *Video Salon*,<sup>8</sup> at the Technical Museum in the summer of the year that would see the revolution. They had been discreetly studying the video art and video installation of artists such as Nam June Paik and Bill Viola from the art publications they could find at the National Art Archive, where Vančat worked. Then they tried out video installation on their own for a one-day exhibition. Later that year, the same association created a union of video artists, and shortly after the Revolution, on 9 January 1990, they declared the birth of Czechoslovakian video art before 4,000 participants at a special conference of the Association of Fine Artists. That was followed by a series of screenings at Gallery Manes, including the group's second show. The catalogue of a Czech media art exhibition that took place years later contains my eyewitness account: "[...] there was a compelling atmosphere of people discussing how to solve problems, what the future would be, and how the technology could be used. That period was a memorable and valuable moment in the history of Czech media".<sup>9</sup>

Ordinary citizens of Czechoslovakia also presented their own spectacular display of independent media—just like the stage for Imre Nagy's funeral in Hungary—in the sea of mass in flux. Just after the week-long process of the Revolution began, they set up video monitors at numerous locations throughout Prague. These monitors showed daily video news that had been produced non-stop by *Original Video Journal*, as well as students of FAMU (film academy). Huge speakers were set up in front of the National Theatre, transmitting the voices of dissident-revolutionaries during hundreds of forums and discussions. The ears and eyes of citizens were thus amplified and echoed throughout the country. Right after the Revolution in the spring of 1990, they organised a re-enactment exhibition of the Revolution, entitled *Exhibition of Democracy*,<sup>10</sup> using a museum location as well as public spaces; and this is where I saw the most impressive video installations I had ever seen anywhere. The video monitors, which were integrated in human-size cut-out photos of policemen and activists, decorated in objects that symbolised their daily life, suffering and future, were spontaneous, appealing and, overall, made from the peoples' genuine desire. This was yet another unique moment, never to be repeated, and it will remain in the memory of anybody that witnessed it for an eternity.

After the Revolution, the return or partial return of exile media artists, including Michael Bielicky, Pavel Smetana, David Vrana, curator Miloš Vojtěchovský, media art giant Woody Vašulka and influential Jewish media philosopher Vilém Flusser contributed to further flourish the scene. Competition among the

capitals of the three provinces—Prague, Brno and Bratislava—stimulated it, as well. And with these expats' returns came the growing need to re-examine the history of media art and technology in Czechoslovakia, including the role of Czech emigrants abroad and at home. The result was the exhibition and the publication project, *Orbis Fictus: New Media in Contemporary Art*, organised by Soros Center for Contemporary Arts - Prague 1995–96.<sup>11</sup> Taking its inspiration from "Orbis Sensualium Pictus" by Jan Amos Comenius, first published in 1658 as one of the world's first systems of sensory learning, or the origin of today's textbooks,<sup>12</sup> the historical research touched Zdeněk Pešánek, the team that created *Laterna Magika*, *Kino-Automat* and *Cinelabyrinth*,<sup>13</sup> Alexander Hammid,<sup>14</sup> Bohuslav (Woody) Vašulka, Vilém Flusser and some other Czech personalities in technology art. The project has given a sense of confidence in their position in the history of media art and technology in the global context after decades of isolation.

Related to this issue was my observation that a potentially significant media art project was one that would use technology that had been developed by the Communist regime for Cold War military use. Czechoslovakia had been one of the leading producers and exporters of weapon technology in the world, and during the Communist era, it had been secretly exported to, and used by, various states and groups, even rogue ones. This issue was one of the reasons for the break-up of the Czech and Slovak states. If media artists could present a conversion of those military technologies into civilian, artistic or pacifist use, by reflecting on the specific position of the country as the major arms exporter in the region, it would connect the local media artists with the general subject of new technology that had been developed primarily for military use. Several possible projects had been discussed. We sought a way even to use Syntex (the ubiquitous plastic bomb of Czechoslovak invention) for an art purpose. In the end, a young artist came up with a project for the *Orbis Pictus* exhibition that used Tamara radar (a passive radar system of Czechoslovak invention).<sup>15</sup> It was a time when discussions about the conversion of a military facility to civilian use were heated, and it was a crucial time for artists to participate in the public forum. And this made Czechoslovakia distinct from other countries in Eastern Europe. Technology was developed here; there had been many inventions that had been exported to other countries. Moreover, similar to the Big Brother Soviet Union, the technological development in art had been used for an official propaganda purpose. Besides the famous examples of success of *Laterna Magika* at EXPO 1958 Brussels and *Kino-Automat* at EXPO 1967 Montreal, various other audio-visual innovations had been exported and presented in different countries, as far-flung as India, Iran and Japan. Interestingly, some of them, the *Kino-Automat* and *Cinelabyrinth* in particular, manifested a concept of democracy in a form of interactivity—voting and multiple choices—as early as 1967. And

even those aspects were used for propaganda purposes by the Communist state. I could probably argue that contrary to Hungary, where media art had been developed in a discourse of media theory, media art in Czechoslovakia had been developed in an environment where contra-genres—such as *Laterna Magika* vs. private films—competed with each other to win the hearts and minds of citizens, using technology. Overall, the technological development in this Communist country was an advantage for artists when it was used with resilience, wisdom and a sense of humour.

## Romania

In the end of 1989, one of the last remaining totalitarian fortresses was Romania. Only nowadays are we able to see works of Ion Grigorescu, Constantin Flondor and other artists, that were created secretly under Ceaușescu's dictatorship; before December 1989, this was hardly imaginable. The media sensation *en mass* here was the Revolution, which happened in the TV studio for the first time in world history. We saw psychedelic colours (due to a technical problem) that tinted the faces of extremely nervous revolutionaries and ordinary citizens. We saw demagogic telops<sup>16</sup> (a message such as "Royalists poured poison into the water—don't drink the water!") that mysteriously appeared over and over during the broadcasting, the captured son of the dictator brought into the studio, and Ceaușescu's dead face. The impact of these images was such that it seemed no media art would be able to compete with this spectacle. Andrei Ujica and Harun Farocki recognised it too well to have turned the spectacle into a media-theory-based film that analysed different eyes of video cameras that witnessed the Revolution in their *Videograms of Revolution* (1992).

Independent video emerged at a time when the event had hardly ended. Group of Social Dialogue, the main civic group, created a video section, which started producing video news and reports. It later became an independent video studio called Video Est. The studio produced a series of election campaign video for presidential candidate Emil Constantinescu for the first presidential election—the first election campaign video in the country. Another video studio called FAV was more focused on documentary film with artistic flavour, with the help of talented videomakers, such as Vivi Dragan-Văsile and Alexandru Solomon. In the Transylvanian city of Cluj-Napoca, artist Csilla Könczei has produced powerful artistic documentary videos. As seen in these cases, the early years of independent video in Romania saw a trend in artistic documentary.

In 1993, the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts - Bucharest organised the first media art exhibition, *Ex Oriente Lux: Romanian Video Week*.<sup>17</sup> It was also

the first time that artists had an opportunity to participate in an exhibition in Romania in conditions that we perceive as normal practice in the West—an artist submits a proposal, get commissioned, and is able to realise the project according to the plan. The organiser took a somewhat bold step to choose media art for this occasion. For me, it was an opportunity to work with talented Romanian contemporary artists who flexibly and profoundly adapted element of video media in their usual medium. The process of the exhibition was as follows: I first toured different cities across the country for a seminar of video art, and then we called for applications. The first application process revealed a curious phenomenon: the majority of the applicants were Hungarian minority. This seems to have been due to the fact that they lived in the border area, where they could receive Hungarian or Yugoslavian television easier than residents in inner Romania. There had also been more flow of travel (information) among the Hungarian community between Hungary and Romania. Ceaușescu's tight control on the media, and overall the media situation in the region, was thus reflected in a tiny detail like this, and from this perspective, it was worthwhile to try out video as an exhibition subject. Throughout the whole process, artists proved the capacity to cope with any given condition and use it to the maximum. Dan Perjovschi, for example, had already been drawing the hallmark of his work, mini cartoon portraits. For this exhibition, he decided to try the video medium, and because of the unavailability of the larger monitor that he initially requested, he tried out a small video monitor that would scan the portraits. He then elaborated it by using a wireless transmission device.<sup>18</sup>

Artists like Dan Perjovschi make me think of today, the year 2009. They continue what they were doing 20 years ago in their artworks, but in a different environment. They are coping with new problems, such as ever aggressive Capitalism and rising Nationalism. Monitors in the city no longer present a potential: they merely showcase an end game. Back then, video installation struck me as solidity in flux in a metaphorical sense. "Solidity" in that particular circumstance represented a sense of maintaining one's principle, or in artistic terms, a spirit. I believe it was one of the purposes of art at that time—whether it was video installation, single channel video or sound art: it inspired the imagination of artists and the audience, and triggered countless exciting activities. And those activities stimulated and pushed the flux forward. Solidity has been hardly a cultural or theoretical trend for decades. But it did play a significant role in video and media art in Eastern Europe at a time of sensational change. Video installation in Eastern Europe inspired us to re-examine how and under what circumstances early video art was created in each different country and culture. In that study, we might always find "solidity" somewhere.

Bangkok, July, 2009

## Notes

- 1 Temporary Autonomous Zone is a concept that is conceived and promoted by thinker and writer Peter Lamborn Wilson, a.k.a. Hakim Bey. Derived from his book *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (published in 1991 by Autonomedia), the concept is popularly known as TAZ or T.A.Z. The author was initially inspired by esoteric religions in forming this idea of how we can create a non-hierarchical anti-authoritarian society; by combining this with various social phenomena, the concept cemented the base for cyber activists, artists and writers alike to define early cyberspace and net culture.
- 2 Artists from Yugoslavia were able to travel more freely to exhibitions and festivals, as well.
- 3 On Independence Day, 15 March 1989, hundreds of people gathered at Szabadság (Freedom) Square in Budapest, and people led by the de facto opposition parties—31 of them—symbolically occupied the Hungarian Television building. At the staircase of the Television building, actor György Cserhalmi read out the 12 points that demanded free media, free elections, democracy and rule of law, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Symbolic as it was, it became an important event in Hungary, and all of Eastern Europe: opposition groups openly demanded freedom of the media in public.
- 4 Included in *Infermental 8* Tokyo edition.
- 5 *The Media Are With Us! The Role of Television in the Romanian Revolution International Symposium*, Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest (formerly known as Palace of Art), 6-7 April 1990.
- 6 The oldest experimental theatre company in the United States, it was founded by Judith Marina and Julian Beck in 1947 in New York.
- 7 The short film that was filmed then, *Dead Forest* by the group Bulšit film, is included in *Infermental 9* Viennese edition.
- 8 The group was called Video Salon, and members included filmmakers Petr Skala, Tomáš Kepka, Ivan Tatíček, photographers Pavel Scheufler, Pavel Jasanský, Michal Pacina, Jasoň Šilhan, visual artists Lucie Svobodová, Věra Geislerová, Lenka Štarmánová, Kateřina Scheuflerová, Roman Milerský, René Slauka, and architect Miro Dopita. The group was led by Petr Skala from 1993 for a few years, until group activities gradually ceased.
- 9 *Orbis Fictus: New Media in Contemporary Art* [exhibition catalogue], Prague Soros Center for Contemporary Art—Prague 1995-96.
- 10 The exhibition was held from May to June 1990 at U Hybernů and the surrounding area in Prague. It was basically a reconstruction of the situation during the Velvet Revolution in a slightly more artistic setting.
- 11 The exhibition was held 30 November 1995 – 1 January 1996 at Valdstein Riding School, Prague. The participating artists were: Lubor Benda, Veronika Bromová, David Cajthaml/Friedrich Förster, Lubomír Čermák, David Černý, Federico Díaz/Degat, Vojta Dukát, Michal Gabriel, Lucie Svobodová, Milan Guštar, Martin Janíček, Monika Karasová, Pavel Kopřiva, Tomáš Mašín, Robert Novák, Elen Řádová, Tomáš Ruller, Šárka Sedláčková, Zdeněk Sýkora, Silver, Jan Trnka, Janka Vidová-Žáčková, Miloš Vojtěchovský/Tjebbe Van Tijen, Labyrinth.
- 12 Miloš Vojtěchovský and Tjebbe Van Tijen, inspired by the original "Orbis Pictus", created an interactive art project, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus Revised 1991–1995*, presented at the exhibition.
- 13 Laterna Magika is a form of theatre invented by Josef Svoboda and with the collaboration of film director Alfréd Radok, debuted at the EXPO 1958 in Brussels (the Czechoslovak team included Miloš Forman). It later found a permanent base at a theatre in Prague carrying its name. Popular among tourists, it is known for performers going in and out between a projected image and reality. Svoboda's technique is called "Polyekran", later developed into the more complicated "Diapolyekran" and "Polyvize (Polyvision)", and was presented at EXPO 1967 in Montreal. The Czechoslovak Pavilion for EXPO 1967 Montreal presented another innovative attraction, called "Kino-Automat", developed by Radúz Činčera. It is a film screening in which the audience can decide the direction a story will take by voting. Considered as an early interactive media art, it saw huge success and developed into a more elaborated form of cinema, called "Cinelabyrinth". At Cinelabyrinth, a spectator is led on a different path according to a storyline that s/he chooses. It was presented at Flower Expo in Osaka in 1990 and experienced by 2,500,000 spectators.
- 14 Hammid was born as Alexander Hackenschmied in 1907, and when he immigrated to the United States in 1938—after he made several important avant-garde films in Czechoslovakia—he changed his name to Hammid.
- 15 Lubor Benda, *Tamara Searches for Her Husband* (1995).
- 16 Short for Television Opaque Projector; these are captions or ticker-text.
- 17 Exhibition *Ex Oriente Lux*: 24 November – 20 December 1993, Dalles Hall, Bucharest. Participating artists were: Alexandru Antik, Josef Bartha, Judith Egyed, László Ujvárossy, Alexandru Patatics, Lia Perjovschi, Dan Perjovschi, KissPál Szabolcs, subREAL, Sorin Vreme. *The Romanian Video Week*: 25-28 November 1993, Dalles Hall, Bucharest.
- 18 *Scan* (1993).

1. One of the decisive new developments of the last two decades has been the conclusion of the first stage of the history of video. The analogue form of video we had known since the 1960s saw its final days: the tapes were destroyed, and computer servers filled up by the terabyte as the genre migrated to the digital sphere. At the same time, there has been a hitherto unparalleled increase in the creation and dissemination of visual information—one unforeseen even two decades ago in 1989, a decisive year for sea changes in information, and a time of revolutionary change in Eastern Europe: the year that saw the dawn of this new epoch. Even the age of traditional television viewing was then transformed. Today anyone can connect to a myriad of live webcams through a browser, or make films on a telephone, then send it off as a packaged message or put it directly on the net, perhaps as part of a broadcast of current interest. The world wide web made good the promises of television: offering a view through barriers and into the distance. The present-as-barrier has faded into the timeless present. More than just a variety of devices and methods for recording motion pictures became widely available at the end of the 1990s; most people—anyone not isolated from the world of information, that is—now carry live images in their pockets, a situation that goes well beyond the demand for the “internet in every kitchen”. With the press of a few well-chosen buttons, a person localises herself through a string of numbers and begins broadcasting. Both of these stories—the political transformation and the information revolution—were probably observable from any point on the planet (allowing for differences of time zone and emphasis), but it is perhaps worth emphasising that here, in Eastern Europe, the issue involved two different views of the same story.

Images of this period of change are presented in Gusztáv Hámos’ video essay *1989 The Real Power of TV* (1991), which spans the brutal military and police suppression of the Chinese student movement, the great migrations from then East Germany through Hungary to the West, the Prague Spring, the reburial in Budapest of Imre Nagy and the martyrs of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, and the televised Revolution in Romania. Amid enigmatic images of violence and the masses, of human passions and the crumbling structures of power, the camera is given a special place—or more precisely, the one holding it, whether reporter, cinematographer, activist or artist, making multiple copies of a one-time event for the greater public. We see her in action, and we see her obstructed: a uniformed hand covering the lens, or the video signal that breaks up, then goes black—these become the

messages, charged with special meaning, conveyed by a montage constructed like a classical drama, awakening in the viewer a sense of sympathy and fear. And yet (or perhaps for this very reason), the protagonists in the work are not the aforementioned iconic scenes, but a well-chosen individual, one of the countless possible viewers: the author's grandmother. And a professional television news staffer: someone on the other side of it all, one of the people who runs the operation, becoming at that moment a leading character in the news broadcast of Hungarian Television, now that the validity of the end-of-history theory has been called into question by historical events in a way that is clear even to laypeople. The grandmother, Golda Weinberger, comes to be a kind of allegorical figure in history, peeling vegetables, going shopping, watching TV while lying in bed: all popular forms of spending "free time", as the euphemism so indicative of our day puts it; her apartment, her actions, the private space where the flashing television screen illuminates one after another the photographic relics that mark a personal fate congruent with the 20<sup>th</sup> century—all these are elements of the new allegory. She is representative of history, living it, observing it, and falling asleep to it. We see the images, and all the while she says not a word. Her "story", as we experience it, is narrated by her grandson, the director. He steps in to explain, interpret and tell anecdotes, lending a special rhythm and a golden touch to what he considers worth knowing and presenting to the public. The result is described above.

The other protagonist is the professional television journalist Endre Aczél who, along with a few other television commentators, reports on something that is rarely—and on television virtually never—discussed, things that happen off-screen: instructions, directives and personal opinions about the work in question. Aczél was almost fated to do this, given that he was a main player in the broadcast of the televised Revolution in Romania of 19 December 1989, broadcast by Hungarian Television. His role then went beyond the usual job of summarising the news: he was an active participant in events, since these broadcasts reached not only Hungary itself, but also certain areas of Romania where often Romanian news broadcasts were not available in acceptable quality; and even where they were, the Hungarian version offered a confirming alternative.

A central scene in this video essay, particularly for the relationships between private and public (i.e., history), and also for possible interpretations we offer here, is the micro-story of the Christmas fish: that often unavoidably banal, didactic sequence of parallel shots showing the store-bought fish, wrapped in paper, that is brought home and put in the bathtub. Slowly it begins to wriggle around and gulp a few mouthfuls of water. In a while, it comes fully to life. The parallel: the revolutionary masses' intoxicated taste of freedom. Next, following the usual template, the fish gets dressed in kitchen clothes and makes its way

to become the holiday dinner, ending up under the knife. The parallel now: The capture and execution (or rather brutal murder) of the Ceaușescus. It is rare that someone so unforcedly takes such a seemingly cliché-ridden association from mere allegory into a true symbolic realm. Although the result is easily understood and requires no explanation, it still manages to transform itself before our eyes into a polyvalent dramatic symbol. Here we must absolutely sense the presence of true art.

Those few days toward the end of December 1989, broadcast by the new, free Romanian Television and its Hungarian counterpart—we may rightly call this a special moment in the history of television, of the medium itself; not merely because of what the news anchor says in Gusztáv Hámos' video ("nothing in the history of Hungarian Television was ever presented in such detail"), but our perspective today allows us to see that those few days were simultaneously the high point and the end of television. What we had formerly been accustomed to call "television" largely ended with the 1990s themselves, and disappeared completely, everywhere, with the new century. Vilém Flusser, one of the speakers at the April 1990 conference in Budapest entitled *The Media Are With Us!*, says one of the decisive new features of that episode of Romanian Television is this: "There is no reality behind the image. All reality is in the image".<sup>1</sup>

Jolán Árvai and Judit Kopper, the Hungarian producers of *The Power of the News* (a co-production of two now-defunct production studios in Hungary and Germany's ZDF), engaged in an unusual undertaking: for a few years they exclusively funded works that were closer to independent video, or video art, than to any mainstream television. Works produced by the FMS (Young Artists' Studio) and the Fríz Producers' Group that garnered international success include András Wahorn's *Living Creatures of Eastern Europe* (FMS), a Sydney Video Festival prize winner, and Péter Forgács's *Private Hungary*, a series one of whose instalments won the main prize at the Hague *Worldwide Video Festival* in 1990.

As mentioned more than once in Hámos' video, the Communist leadership had no head for the new technological media, and indeed no interest in them; after the political changes, though, the new leaders found television and mass media to be a crucial issue of power. The result was occasionally quite extreme: one thinks of Fred Forest's campaign media for the presidency of Bulgarian Television. Independent production studios were the victims of campaigns for political office, at least in Hungary, where their frequencies were suspended; this, and the launch of commercial television (1997 in Hungary) sealed their fate once and for all.

2. The period from 1988 to 1993, seen through Eastern and Central European eyes, was a time of the disintegration and ultimate end of “existing forms of Socialism” (as the regime referred to itself), in both the private and the public, historical sense—irrevocably, one hopes. The death of dictatorships was an achievement in any case, and naturally inspired a sense of the miraculous; only a few years previously, there had hardly been anyone who would even have imagined that so many Bolshevik-type Soviet systems would disappear with such rapidity. András Sólyom’s video *Funeral (Temetés)*, (1992) may be seen as a memento of this disappearance: a montage from material in the historical archives set to the sound-verse of poet and aesthete Ákos Szilágyi—a “lyric clip”, to use Gábor Bódy’s half-forgotten genre designation.

In retrospect, the quick string of deaths of Soviet Party Secretaries Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko—leaders of the “gerontocracy”, as some termed it at the time—together with the succession of idealised funerals in their wake, can be taken as a set of unmistakable signs. These ceremonies, echoing in the historical consciousness the filmed images of the funerals of Lenin and Stalin, were carried on television in most Communist countries at the time; their absurdity was obvious not only because the central setting in every case was the square in front of the Mausoleum that held Lenin’s mummified body, or because the podium from which speeches were made, and on which the successors stood, was a grave, but because the similarity of the ceremonies through the dramaturgy of ritual inevitably made the whole thing smack of an assembly line. Even Józef Robakowski’s film incorporating the broadcasts of Brezhnev’s funeral contains similar associations, while the relevant section of Hungarian Television’s series *Video World (Videovilág)* with 51 instalments between 1988 and 1993, András Sólyom’s *Regular Funerals Back and Forth (Rendszeres temetések oda-vissza)* makes unmistakable use of this formal allusion.

The micro-history of the last 150 years in Hungary, including the end of Socialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can be symbolically construed from the funerals and reburials that run through this period. Several hundred thousand attended the public reburial, on 16 June 1989, of Prime Minister Imre Nagy, a martyr of the 1956 Revolution,<sup>2</sup> carried live on television, which made the event an indicator to all of the inevitability of change. Sólyom’s video, which opens with archival funeral scenes from Dziga Vertov’s *Three Songs about Lenin*; later, scenes from Hungary—the reburials of Lajos Kossuth and László Rajk, along with the lying in state of Imre Nagy before Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest (formerly known as Palace of Art)—appear interspersed with Soviet documentary and feature films. Here a powerful tension, punctuated by the words of Ákos Szilágyi’s recitation, was created by the contrast between the similarities in the rituals, and the difference in their underlying meaning.

András Sólyom later (in 2005) made another documentary, a longer one that deals more directly with our topic, providing an overview of the changes in society and in (media) art. In this film, *János Kádár’s Last Speech*, another writer, Mihály Kornis, analyses the last, 12 April 1989 speech of János Kádár (recorded but never, in fact, delivered publicly), who had been in power from the putting down of the 1956 Revolution to the mid-1980s. The final scene of the drama (to quote the narration from this film) describes how “on the very day, at the very hour the Supreme Court reconsidered Imre Nagy’s trial and exonerated him—9 o’clock in the morning on 6 July 1989—János Kádár died”. Personal history lined up against historical fact, as if reinforcing Gusztáv Hámos’ interpretation of the grandmother’s thoughts in *1989—The Real Power of TV* (1991), that linked the man’s biological changes as he aged with the corresponding historical phases of the regime that bore his name.

Gusztáv Hámos lives in Berlin. He had an important role in forming the world’s first international magazine in videocassette form, *Infermental*, started by Gábor Bódy. Since 1990, he has been active in many capacities in Hungary, whether teaching at the Intermedia Department of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts, or being shown in numerous installations, exhibitions of his early photographic work, showings of videos and photofilms, and performances, including a review of his oeuvre in 2008 at the Pixel Gallery. In his 1996 video *Berlin Retour*, a young Danish tourist guides us through the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany in seven minutes—in a nutshell, you might say. Naturally Walther Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* plays the leading role<sup>3</sup>; a surprising element of these echoes and explorations of the past is a translucent image object that in a sense allows for the passage between present and past. This object, a moving stereoscopic hologram comprising 125 frames, was on display at *Beyond Art*, a show curated by Peter Weibel in the exhibition space at the C<sup>3</sup>: Center for Culture & Communication, Budapest.<sup>4</sup>

János Sugár’s *Typewriter of the Illiterate* (2001)—clearly already a product of the digital age—uses collected archival materials in an unusual way. The Kalashnikov machine gun, a Soviet Russian product well known worldwide, serves as a quasi-icon; it is the sole constant, stable element in this series of images; around it morph its various users. While *Berlin Retour* confronts us with the still-perceptible traces of the World War II, Sugár’s animation presents us with the wars raging all over the world—an echo of the tableaux of Le Clézio’s ‘There’s a war on; anything can happen.’<sup>5</sup> In an interview with Geert Lovink,<sup>6</sup> Sugár notes that at least 100 million of these simple, deadly weapons were manufactured in the last half century, becoming the symbol of freedom fighters and terrorists alike. János Sugár’s work gives a special place to the moving image and the installation; while these two media are radically different

formally and technically, nonetheless they both acquire an unmistakably individual voice in the hands of the artist. Perhaps one of the most unusual works is the video opera *Immortal Culprits* (1988) (with music by Gábor Litván), whose libretto is modelled on a video machine's user manual. Besides Sugár, only the Vakuum TV Group in Hungary<sup>7</sup> attempted to associate widely disparate genres in its "live television show" and its cabaret, in "scientific theatre" and parodies—until its role was ultimately taken over by DJ and party culture, by the VJ and live coding.

Szabolcs KissPál's *Rever* series contains a piece, *Anthem* (2001), created for the opening of the show *Through Thin and Thick* (*Roszbán, jóban*).<sup>8</sup> Here, five young girls sing the text of the Hungarian national anthem (lyrics composed by Ferenc Kölcsey), to the music of the Romanian national anthem, *Awake, Romanian!* (*Deșteaptă-te, române!*) composed by Anton Pann. The result is an immediately provocative treatment of the anthem that might seem sacrilegious in highly nationalistic circles, but it has its antecedents: Sándor Kardos' 1985 work, an editing of archival footage (a conception of Mihály Kornis) is a collage film in which each word of the Hungarian anthem is spoken by a different person, each removed from the original context; in Gusztáv Hámos' video, *Le Dernier Jour* (*The Last Day*, 1984-85), the lines of the song are set amid a foreign-language context, familiar only from the ritual templates of New Year's Eve celebrations; the explanatory narration in French proves an alienating force, transforming private scenes into almost museum objects. The authenticity of Szabolcs KissPál's version—like that of Hámos—derives from its personal stories of migration and emigration, while the possibility (or impossibility) of crossing borders real and virtual conceals myriad real conflicts that someone born into the European Union might no longer experience as physical limitations, but at most, as mediated, intellectual ones. Here we might be allowed a brief description of another well-known KissPál work *Edging* (2003) (an installation at the NCCA in Moscow in the *Active Image* show, and also shown in Dortmund as a candidate for the Nam June Paik Prize): a shot of the blue sky filled with flying birds—but here, there is a hint of a confrontation between the freedom of the boundless sky and the boundless possibilities for digital manipulation: during editing, clips of the birds' random flittings are arranged to create the effect that they bounce off the edge of the projected image, off of its frame. This, too, is a sort of collection like János Sugár's analogies, where digital technology opens the door to arrangement into a meaningful sequence: while the method for Sugár is the series of Kalashnikovs morphed onto one another in the same spot, for Szabolcs KissPál, it consists of a coordinated ring of entry and exit points of the birds' trajectories in the frame. As a result of this simple, well-chosen, and consistently applied formal boundary, a broad semantic field opens up—as is usually the case with successful works.

Hajnal Németh's video, *Striptease or not?* (2002), uses very different means (but a similarly puritanical form) to achieve its effect. Consisting of basically one single take, the work presents a young woman removing her brassiere in an outdoor location: the Lágymányos Bridge in Budapest. She is also wearing a sleeveless top; the "striptease" goes on under this. Beyond the obvious (and perfectly valid) gender-centric or voyeur-themed interpretations, including the implied connections between the material of this video and the prostitution that flourishes on the local highway roadsides, Hajnal Németh's work is exciting and provocative in a minimalist vein because it presents a little reality show staged in the public space, offering the unusual documentation of a public art action using the tools of private videomaking. Hajnal Németh studied at the Intermedia Department at the University of Fine Arts in Budapest. She has been a member of Eike Berg's Videospace project since its inception in 1999, recently operating a gallery for media art.<sup>9</sup> Besides Videospace, such works are regularly to be seen in Budapest at the Pixel Gallery and from the *Crosstalk* initiative, as well as at the *Mediawave Festival* in Győr; previously also on this list was *Retina* in Szigetvár, which operated until 2003.<sup>10</sup>

3. There is university-level instruction in video art at two institutions in Hungary: the recently renamed Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design (formerly the Hungarian Academy of Applied Arts), where there was a separate Department of Video even prior to its reconstitution. The other such place was the Intermedia Department at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts. The focus here lies not on the teaching of specific techniques, but on the proposed project itself. From simple editing tasks and blue-box exercises to preparing collective remakes and recording events, and extending even to criticism, the spectrum offered is broad enough to transcend mere familiarity with the limits of universally-accessible technology, to focus on the innovative use and creative elaboration of given resources, whatever they may be. (If I were to name all of the graduates who went on to work in video after university, the resulting list would be long. Let me name just a few of them, in no particular order: Ferenc Gróf, Szilvia Seres, Ádám Lendvai, Éva Kozma, Léna Kútvölgyi, Júlia Vécsei, Miklós Mécs and Katarína Šević.) Over the last two decades, the Intermedia Department has been the location for numerous Hungarian and international projects, including the 1991 (pre-internet) *Toronto-Budapest Video Bridge*, the three *Metaforum* conferences,<sup>11</sup> four stagings of the collective action of all-day television viewing entitled *Medium Analysis*,<sup>12</sup> and the *Videology* festival organised jointly with the Institut Français in Budapest,<sup>13</sup> which was an experimental attempt at a second (and to date the latest) retrospective of video art in Hungary since the 1991 *Sub Voce* show.<sup>14</sup> It may be worth adding that the context for *Videology* was an overview of French video art assembled from then-current works (curated by Robert Cahen and Jean-Paul Fargier,

with installations by Jean-François Guiton and Gusztáv Hámos); the first video-installation exhibition of Hungarian work, *Sub Voce*, was curated by Suzanne Mészöly, and presented together with the Dutch video-installation show *Imago: Fin de Siècle in Contemporary Dutch Art*.<sup>15</sup>

When Olia Lilianna, at the 1997 Budapest internet Galaxis,<sup>16</sup> screened her first netfilm from the previous year, *My Boyfriend Came Back from the War*,<sup>17</sup> or when, not long thereafter, Hungarian artists made films for the *Pocket TV (Zsebtévé)* project at the behest of Balázs Beöthy, the change had become clear. (A description of *Pocket TV* reads: “Ten short stories, employing all the advantages and disadvantages of real video, oscillating between the personal and impersonal, public and private, old and new, little and big: the video becomes broadcast—and the screen palm-sized—through a focus not on the new but on the personal; not on the complex but on the accessible. It is a true pocket TV that follows its own rhythm instead of the beat of technological innovation”.<sup>18</sup>) Each new year has brought important change to digital communication. As Zoltán Szegedy-Maszák writes, while in the early days “students’ works for the Web typically exhibited a critical approach influenced by primary experiences with digital media’s hypertext structures”,<sup>19</sup> once we got to the new millennium, a situation arose that might be described as ideal: everyone can put together her own film on her own laptop, and one and the same medium allows the creation, publication, distribution of motion-picture materials, as well as their viewing and access to them. This had never before been the case: everything can be done right at your desk, with no need to leave the room. It is no mere technical change, but in fact a new paradigm, that the film frame has been replaced by the pixel, and the old formats (8, 16 and 35mm; PAL, SECAM, NTSC, U-matic, VHS, Beta, V8, and the rest) have been supplanted by the primacy of compression, coding, and resolution: a film is now one single file—a single image, stored as key frames and the coding of their modifications and changes; the physical, material form is no longer necessary. Naturally, this is all quite fragile, susceptible of being destroyed at the touch of a button. As a result, the issue of preservation acquired immediate urgency with the new media, as it had with the older forms.<sup>20</sup>

The internet, not video, has become the alternative to television. The scheduled broadcast slot is now nothing but a myth, and the dimensions of “live broadcasting” have expanded to become essentially constant, unending. A new kind of television viewer has emerged: the guard behind the security camera; Augustine’s gloss on Paul’s Biblical phrase “through a glass darkly” has taken a new turn: he notes that the Latin *speculum* means “mirror”, and is not to be confused with *specula*—a “watch station”. But today a million guard-eyes, modulations of a single Argus (or Michael Klier’s Giant<sup>21</sup>) try to see clearly a

slice of the world (whether a subway, a department store, a bank, or a traffic intersection) made accessible to paid attention. An understanding of the society of simulacrum and spectacle is offered by Tibor Hajas’ sentence from *The Beauty of Cathode Radiation*, penned in 1978: “There is but one single message, one sole news item”. Nonpaid, voluntary guard-eyes and the multitude of television viewers are a guarantee that the order of the status quo will stand as long as people are sitting before their sets.

When the luxury of off-air time still existed, one of Hungary’s television stations would broadcast a fire flickering in a fireplace in place of the usual test pattern. Today, this is a self-sufficient broadcast: a multitude of web cameras create a new era of specialisation in “television” with their animal, news, sports, tourism, cooking, fashion, music, classic-film, nostalgia, porno, and even “reality” channels. Supplanting “mixed broadcasts” are what we might term “specialised” independent channels, delivered to the home in parallel image streams to which the viewer responds with remote-control visibility, using as a model for her personal mixes the so-called “public-service” and “commercial” stations (the difference between the two being that, in the former, not every broadcast is an advertisement).

*Soap Opera*, a 2004 exhibition held in the Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest, allowed Hungarian artists to respond to the new lay of the land. The show’s curator Attila Nemes<sup>22</sup> formulated its conception thus: “The exhibition consists primarily of recent works that confront issues of everyday media consumption, and offer a critique of electronic media. Media studies these days often use the term ‘soap opera’ to describe the structure of current television culture. Every television show—not just soap operas per se—can be understood as such (a news broadcast, e.g., can be taken as a serially-staged reality)”.<sup>23</sup>

“No one watches” television, goes a frequently-heard declaration, though somehow everyone complains about it in a highly informed fashion. An extreme form of television criticism was the 2006 political demonstration turned brutal, in which crowds besieged the headquarters of the Hungarian Television in Budapest, then vandalised and set fire to it—all shown on television. These events proved a shocking overture to a series of demonstrations that furnished the basis for Csaba Nemes’ *Remake* (2007). Csaba Nemes is a visual artist and prize winner at the aforementioned *Sub Voce* exhibition. He created a number of installations in the early 1990s, which included an active collaboration with Zsolt Veress (for a while they even traded names, in their project *Shared Name*, where each signed his work with the other’s name). Nemes’ current production was originally conceived as a plan for the Hungarian Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale (an analysis of the reasons for its rejection would be beyond the scope of the present summary; its current realisation was perhaps aided by that

scandal). Sponsored by transit.hu as part of its competition *Unrealized Works: Better to Be an Artwork than an Artist*, the completed film series was shown at the 40<sup>th</sup> Hungarian Film Festival and has been supplemented by its own website.

To return to the events: Budapest, 18 September 2006. We stand in front of Television headquarters. All those present (or certainly their fathers and mothers) once learned that, in a revolution, the means of communication should be the first target. This was taught as part of Bolshevik ideology, and is precisely what happened with Hungarian Radio during the 1956 Revolution. (Csaba Nemes writes that Hungarian Television “had already increased its popularity in May of 2006... with a billboard bearing the slogan *If you were a revolutionary, which TV station would you occupy?*”) Those involved in the 2006 incident wanted to gain entry to the Television building—symbolic to them of television in general—to read their petition out loud. Meanwhile, outside the building, the staff from another television station was covering all these events, including the petitioners, in real time. Long before they entered “the TV”, as they called the building, they had been on television. Supplementary motifs included the taking of digital images with cameras and phones before rows of burning cars, with participants and observers alike: unanticipated disaster tourism. These are unselfconscious reflexes of presence: let’s not be left out of history—of the images, that is. Hardly one month later, we could witness a more indirect and enigmatic version of that scene: 23 October 2006 — the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1956 Revolution, Budapest. At that solemn moment of celebration, like vampires in the crypt, the relics of history come to life. One classic quotable here would be Karl Marx’s *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where he writes that history, repeated, becomes comedy—but we may just as well leave that, as the subject is not really all that amusing. Still, historical stage props are undeniably making their way down the Inner Boulevard in Budapest: a tank has left its exhibition pedestal to roll a few hundred yards and make world news.

Csaba Nemes and his colleagues decided on flash video as their technology of choice; also notable is a background of forms reminiscent of comics, animé and manga—of only limited popularity in Hungary—that bears the imprint of music videos. Csaba Nemes writes, “I chose animation as being the least documentary genre, not marked by the ruthless naturalism of technical images. Drawings offer the opportunity for a more general approach. This genre offers the chance for an artistic examination enhanced by its isolation from concrete events; it can condense events documented in moving pictures and analyse them from other perspectives. This approach opens the door for an ironic remake of the annual fall political ‘reality show’”.<sup>24</sup>

This work competed to be shown at the same Venice Biennale where Andreas Fogarasi was the exhibiting artist. Curated by Katalin Timár, the Hungarian

Pavilion won, for its first time in the history of the Biennale, the Golden Lion Prize for the best national pavilion. [An excerpt from the evaluation: “[...] using architecture and cultural history, provocative and poetic parallels have here been drawn between content, the language of images, and the architecture of the exhibit itself. The jury also finds praiseworthy the artist’s approach, which examines modernity—in all its utopian and failed forms—in the context of our shared history”.] The exhibited work was a series of installations under the rubric *Kultur und Freizeit (Culture and Leisure)* that became the basis for a film series on Budapest’s Cultural Centres, as well as a manifestation in their own right (in an interview, Fogarasi notes that he is most interested in the exhibition as medium).<sup>25</sup> The first film in the series is *A Machine for*, filmed in 2006, which examines the Óbuda Educational Centre; this 1975 building, designed by the architect György Kévés, offers some unusual extra features: its slide-roof, moveable walls, and moveable rows of theatre seating. Fogarasi’s film presents the building as an exceptional work of art, and an exceptional historical relic. It is as if the essence of the cultural centre—the Party decree made real—fills the screen with its glow, with a hitherto unseen clarity and sadness. Even on the digital editing desk of our day (despite all efforts) there is still nothing surreal in encountering an exciting modernist building, a designer with an outstanding eye—and a functionality that has undeservedly lost all social context. *Culture and Leisure*: the title is perfectly precise, since these Cultural Centres were the setting for independent film festivals, film clubs and alternative performances. This is still partly true today: we can regard these institutions as free-time centres against the dominance of mass media striving to keep the private citizen at home. Fogarasi’s film (and its success), in any case, seems to prove that Eastern Europe might be comprehensible to more than just those who live here.

In support of this last statement, one can adduce works from the oeuvre of perhaps the most internationally respected artist working in Hungary, Erasmus prize winner Péter Forgács; his installation is on display in 2009 at the Hungarian Pavilion in Venice. Among his works, one might give pride of place to the series *Private Hungary* and to *Danubian Exodus*—the latter being perhaps the most complex archive around, simultaneously a film, an exhibition, and an interactive presence on the world wide web (first shown in Hungary at the Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art).<sup>26</sup> These films outline the parallels between the Jewish and German exoduses: filmed on Captain Andrásovits’ boat on the Danube, they offer a subtle and complex look at the published diaries of individuals, of interest for anyone curious about (Eastern) European history of the last twenty years—indeed of the entire past century—and the way artists think in the Eastern Europe of our day.

Budapest, August 2009

*Translated from the Hungarian by Jim Tucker*

## Notes

- 1 *The Media Were With Us: The Role of Television in the Romanian Revolution*, video documentation of the events and the conference, entitled *The Media Are With Us! (6-7 April 1990*, Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest), Béla Balázs Studio, M2 video, 141 m.; *Von der Bürokratie zur Telekratie. Rumänien im Fernsehen. Ein Symposium aus Budapest*, Keiko Sei, Peter Weibel (eds.), Berlin, Merve Verlag 1990.
- 2 For a detailed treatment of events, see the homepage of the 1956 Institute: "Anatomy of One Day" [www.rev.hu/89](http://www.rev.hu/89)
- 3 Walther Ruttmann, *Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, 1927.
- 4 *Jenseits der Kunst*, Peter Weibel (ed.), Vienna, Passagen Verlag 1996 / *Beyond Art: A Third Culture*, Vienna, New York, Springer 2005.
- 5 J. M. G. Le Clézio, *La Guerre*, Paris, Gallimard 1970.
- 6 "The Typewriter of the Illiterate. Interview with János Sugár", Geert Lovink. 29 May 2003. [www.nettime.org](http://www.nettime.org)
- 7 <http://vakuumtv.c3.hu>
- 8 "Rosszban, jóban..." [Through Thick and Thin], an exhibition of MAMÚ in the Kecskemét Museum, 2001.
- 9 <http://videospace.c3.hu>
- 10 <http://mwave.iq.hu>, [www.crosstalk.hu](http://www.crosstalk.hu)
- 11 [www.c3.hu/intermedia/kronologia/metaforum.html](http://www.c3.hu/intermedia/kronologia/metaforum.html)
- 12 [www.c3.hu/intermedia/kronologia/manalizis3.html](http://www.c3.hu/intermedia/kronologia/manalizis3.html)
- 13 *Vidéologie. Les comédies françaises—Sciences/Fiction*, Institut Français en Hongrie, Budapest, 1997.
- 14 *Sub Voce. Contemporary Hungarian Video Installation*, Soros Center for Contemporary Arts - Budapest, Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest 1991.
- 15 *Imago. Fin de Siècle in Dutch Contemporary Art*, Montevideo, 1990-1993 <http://catalogue.montevideo.nl/event.php?id=595>
- 16 [www.c3.hu/events/98/igalax98/index1.html](http://www.c3.hu/events/98/igalax98/index1.html)
- 17 [www.teleportacia.org/war](http://www.teleportacia.org/war)
- 18 [www.c3.hu/collection/zsebtv/indexhu.html](http://www.c3.hu/collection/zsebtv/indexhu.html)
- 19 [www.intermedia.c3.hu/kut/intermed.html](http://www.intermedia.c3.hu/kut/intermed.html)
- 20 The C³ Foundation, a nonprofit NGO, handles the collection and preservation of video and media artworks in Hungary. C³ has lately been a partner of the EU's GAMA Project: [www.gama-gateway.eu](http://www.gama-gateway.eu)
- 21 Michael Klier, *Der Riese* [The Giant], 1983, video, 82 min.
- 22 Currently of Kitchen Budapest: <http://kitchenbudapest.hu/person/7>
- 23 <http://exindex.hu/index.php?l=hu&page=14&id=50292>
- 24 [www.remake.hu](http://www.remake.hu)
- 25 <http://vernissage.tv/blog/2007/06/29/hungarian-pavilion-la-biennale-di-venezzia>
- 26 [www.danube-exodus.hu](http://www.danube-exodus.hu)

## Tomáš Pospiszl

### Live Coverage of the Past

### National and Personal History through New Media

What really happened? An obvious question that we use when we talk about the past. The ability to recall the past and the ensuing reflection upon past events is a basic human characteristic. The more we remember and manage to learn from the past, the more successful we are. The past itself and the past of our surroundings define our identity and forms the basis of who we are.

Past events do not remain once and for all closed in our memory, but are transformed with the passage of time. The fantasy of total memory absorbing and preserving all perceived sensory data, known from Borges' story *Funes the Memorious*, is in fact extremely far from reality. We forget, we modify experiences as we want to, or through our interpretation of them. An event in our memory can, with time, completely change its meaning. Many things that we have already forgotten, can, however, be suddenly clearly recalled if we encounter something that is somehow connected with the forgotten event. Our relationship to the past was significantly transformed by the spread of inventions such as photography, film, the tape-recorder and video. They have become an important external prolongation of our personal and collective memory. Thanks to these, the appearance of actual events is captured by a mechanical device, whose seemingly objective products can be preserved, duplicated and distributed in a practically limitless manner. Over the past few decades, it has been technically and financially feasible to create various records containing different information about the reality around us. Through mechanical records we vicariously obtain information on events that we did not or could not directly experience. It is no longer possible to speculate about the appearance of historical figures, their voice or the content of what they said. Together with the invention of the mechanical capturing of reality, mass communication media were also created, accompanied by the extreme development of modern propaganda on how to interpret or manipulate incoming information.

The arts, including the fine arts, naturally react to the social reality around us. They also return to the past, which they approach, assess, and work in a variety of ways. In extreme cases, such as the national revival, there occurred a reconstruction of the past, since the information about it was either missing or did not satisfy the ideological requirements of the time. The arts, including literature, film and theatre, are extremely effective tools for historical

reflection. It might therefore surprise us that, especially in recent years, attention has begun to be drawn to the insufficient historical reflection on the relatively recent period—namely the era of Socialist Czechoslovakia.<sup>1</sup>

The political changes in 1989 did not only lead to the collapse of a specific political regime, but of the entire universe of rules and social customs connected to it. The system that existed in the country and in the region for several decades, and which directly influenced human lives and perceptions, crumbled before our very eyes. Until now, only some aspects of this world have found their way into the arts. The question remains to what extent the expectation of such historical reflection is ex-post facto justified.

The character and expressive means of contemporary art has changed. There is no direct equivalent to historical painting that could perform the task of approaching and interpreting the past in an educative way. Following 1989, art is no longer a tool whose task is to capture social changes in a traditional way. It is no longer a means for creating autonomous zones of freedom or an indirect instrument of politics, as was common before 1989. Up to that time in Czech art there existed a latent political level reflecting the lack of freedom, or at least viewers were able to identify this level in it.

Czech art of the emerging generation was before the fateful year of 1989, from today's perspective, incredibly homogenous. It was linked by a longing for independent expression that had the form of generally politicising art, or, on the contrary, by providing an escape from the immediate reality to the world of history and myth.<sup>2</sup>

The traditional easel-painting or sculpture was the prevailing form—installation and video were still at this time very rare. The romantic escape to the past has remained a continuing trend in Czech culture and cannot be immediately explained by political circumstances. The prose of Petr Placák as well as paintings of Jaroslav Róna and the novel *Seven Churches (Sedmikostelí)* by Miloš Urban are clear-cut examples in this regard. They depict journeys to exotic lands, fabricated mythologies, or romantically perceived history.

Generally speaking, however, after 1989 all trends of art broadened. There was no need for limitation due to political repression and the subjects for making art poured out into a broad delta where an examination of one's own identity became one (but by no means the only) of the dominant streams. The general context of a lack of political freedom disappeared and artists naturally turned to matters of a more private nature. The scant interest in the immediate repressive past or even in an analysis of the historically recent social changes

might be due to a number of reasons.<sup>3</sup> Even more attractive than actual and often unflattering history is its idealised, imaginary variant. The result of this, however, is that a trauma from a past that was not effectively treated lingers in society and art.

Following World War I, French art returned to traditional forms and to an idealised past of the provincial France, as interpreted by art historian Romy Golan through a similar trauma.<sup>4</sup> The immediate experience of trench warfare, and its depiction in newspapers and picture magazines, had in her view a strong impact that even for victorious France provoked a wave of nostalgic longings for old values and the art forms related to them.

Even though art stood on the side of the victors after 1989, several decades of Socialist Czechoslovakia were not so easily erased and forgotten. With a more in-depth look at the art produced over the past years, we see that elements of Socialist pop culture or of personal records from those years are among the relatively frequent repertoire of artists born in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> While this use of historical material or direct Socialist iconography does not reflect a clear-cut settling with the past, a rejection of tragic mementoes, it is at first glance characterised above all by nostalgia. Artists do not comment or interpret the past—they first and foremost merely reproduce its mechanical recordings.

Nostalgia is a longing for something that never really existed. It is a sign of uprooting, a futile longing for a life better than the one we are currently living. Perhaps we long for our own childhood, which is why it surprises us that the discussed Czechoslovak artists working with elements of the past were born and grew up during Socialism. The nostalgia of their work is not therefore nostalgia for Socialism, but for their own childhood. These artists often work with the paradox of a happy childhood that from today's perspective may appear less than ideal. An entire generation confronted on a day-to-day basis with various relics from the past, experience similar feelings. "Like a photographic album or antique collection, the past is construed from a group of objects existing in the present. We do not find any common identity between these objects and that to which they relate. Their relation is only made by the memory's will. And from this gap between appearance and identity arises nostalgic longing".<sup>6</sup>

The medium of old amateur and family films is an extremely effective means of moving to the nostalgic past. We come across their use in Czech video art on more than one occasion. An example of this is Jiří David's 1994 work entitled *For My Father*. It was the artist's first foray in the medium of the moving image.<sup>7</sup> The creation of the work was unplanned: David wanted to make a gift

for his ill father. So he transferred father's amateur films with family footage from 1962 onto a video cassette, which he could then play for his father in the hospital. David transferred the film footage to video the fastest way he could: he projected the film onto a screen and recorded it with a video camera.

Purely private footage proved to have an unexpected power. Jiří David edited his father's films down to a roughly 13-minute version intended for public presentation. The resulting video was edited in the simplest possible way—at that time the only way possible for the artist—with a home video recorder and camera. The blurriness of the film is caused by recording the film with a video camera, caused by the camera zooming in on various parts of the projection screen. Another tool employed by the artist was the simple editing and slowing down of the recording by changing the speed of the film reel. If the picture is upside down at one moment or two scenes merge, it is due to a mistake in shooting or a double exposure of the original film material. David added music to the film—songs by Michael Jackson (and Händel played by him) and by the band Enigma. According to the artist, the choice of music was more or less random: in confronting the record of the past, it serves as an element of the present.

The video shows us slowed and blurred shots of people and faces, a jump into the swimming pool, feeding swans at the lake in the park (reminding us of a picture by David with a similar theme from 1991), a half-built housing development. The second half of the video features more shots from the interior of an ordinary living room of the 1960s. We see the details of a woman at the window and we even see a boy at play, whom we assume is the artist as a child. It could, however, just as well be the childhood images of any viewer born between 1950–1980. Although the technical means used were primitive and imperfect, the short video possesses a strong emotive power passed on not only to the members of David's family or to his contemporaries captured in the films, but also has a strong effect on people from different cultural backgrounds. The work is endowed with a kind of universal autobiographical quality that we feel with most home movies and photographs. The viewer is able to adopt memories that are not his own; furthermore, the people in David's video are faceless, owing to the unintended blurriness, and thus it is even easier for us to accept them as our own. Films made by amateur cameras manage to work like a mirror that can delay our reflection by decades. We irrationally feel that we are distant relatives to all those blurry people on the screen, and this nostalgic feeling is passed on to other viewers as well.

Childhood is definitively lost for us, however. We view the passage of time as a form of involuntary exile—we live in the present, but long for the past. And we are reminded of this by the details that the film inexhaustibly provides us with. "Nostalgia is the mediator between the collective and individual memory. We

can imagine the collective memory as a playground, not a cemetery of various individual memories. [...] The collective memory is a void, a non-systematic concept that nevertheless allows us to describe the phenomenology of human experience".<sup>8</sup>

As Susan Sontag perceived, taking pictures has an important ritual function in the family life of modern society. Photography is expanding at the time when the traditional large family is falling apart and in modern atomised family societies, photographs serve as a symbolic expression of wider family relations. They provide us with the illusion that we own our own past.<sup>9</sup> Taking pictures or making films then serves in its own way to fixate and appropriate an object that we capture in this way. Most amateur photography or filmmaking is devoid of artistic ambition, but the impetus for their creation is to establish a relationship of recollection, a potential figure on the aforementioned playground of the individual and collective memory.

Although the video by Janka Vidová from 1998 entitled *On the Size of Meaning*<sup>10</sup> (*O velikosti významu*) also contains historical film footage, we notice a significant shift in contrast to the work of Jiří David. Four years meant a great leap in the development and availability of video technology, but it was also enough for a new generation of artists to appear who can think in the language of the new media—in this case video. *On the Size of Meaning* employs a much greater technical and compositional sophistication, even though it was created without a scenario prepared in advance.

The projection area is divided into two to three side-by-side fields juxtaposing unrelated shots. They are partly details of ordinary objects filmed by the artist and computer-manipulated, such as a key, or a spoon mixing a liquid in a cup. Our attention, however, is captured above all by old amateur films of an everyday character. We see in them a girl on a train, a man walking, a woman running along a street, a couple of girls laughing. The picture is slowed down and sped up. As with the other parts of this video, these shots are colourised. The soundtrack is a separate layer created by the artist: the images are accompanied by an electronic composition that sounds like slow bubbling water.

The artist was given the anonymous films dating from approximately 1964 by her brother-in-law. There is no one in the films that she knows or to whom she is directly related. But she was interested in the immediacy with which people looked into the camera, their authenticity and directness.

Last but not least, she was captivated by the way light and movement were captured on the amateur 8 mm films—which seemed unattainable for a video recording. The film camera is livelier: in contrast to electronic video we are

aware of the physical movement of the reel. It is easier to identify the amateur film camera with the observer's own eye, through which it returns to the past. In the case of the amateur film camera from the early 1960s, we are also aware that it is trigger operated. The film camera thus works not only as a human eye, but becomes almost a living being through a highly subjective operator. We always feel a living person behind the film camera, in contrast to the video camera that can run completely by itself and whose output is a monitor.

The resulting effect of the video *On the Size of Meaning* is the creation of a dream atmosphere, in which things are heaped next to each other that at first glance are unimportant, common, but can have a deeper meaning hidden within. Just like David, Vidová is aware of the power of historical amateur films, but does not need to work with autobiographical footage. Film is for her one of the compositional elements that she knows how to use within the realm of video composition.

Both these examples of artworks evoke the past; they confront it with the present. They understand amateur film recordings as a capturing of the past and do not expect those who shot the films to have stylised or manipulated their content. On the contrary, amateur autobiographical shots are understood as a guarantee of authenticity. At the same time, the manipulation or modification of photographs or film is one of their basic properties. Through choice of composition, shot angle, intentional retouching, editing or digital post-production of the image, we can change the picture as we like. Similar manipulation is all the more effective, since the viewer usually views the photograph or film as objective and unaltered.

We can leave the record of the past in its original form, but we can also try to come into more immediate contact with it by enriching it with elements from our own time layer. Míla Preslová has also worked several times with manipulated historical photography in her work. In her work, *My Eyes of Sisters* (1995), she replaced the eyes of her grandmother and those of her grandmother's sisters on pre-war photographs with her own eyes. Not only did she espouse her family's genealogy, but also transformed the photograph into an effective metaphor of a delaying mirror in which we can find the reflection of our own past. The relationship of the passing of time and photography is also a theme in the work of Slovak artist L'ubo Stacho. Photography can mediate a conversation across space and time. Stacho moved this characteristic from a general to an actual level using a computer to animate wedding photographs of unknown victims of the Holocaust. The people in the photographs then literally speak to us from the resulting video projection.

One of the most remarkable pieces of video art from recent years is the work of Filip Cenek entitled *3 x 2 Minutes after the Assassination* (1998). The artist used for its base a two-minute fragment from Jiří Sequens' film, *Assassination (Atentát)* (1964). This feature film employs a pseudo-documentary style to reconstruct the events and circumstances surrounding the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, the Nazi protector of Bohemia and Moravia during World War II, but is narrated from the position of a Communist interpretation of the given historical event. The film was often broadcast on television and was used directly as a teaching aid in schools, even though it was only one of the possible variants of describing and interpreting historical facts.

Filip Cenek chose one fragment from the film that he re-narrated in three different ways. Instead of Sequens' original panoramic shot of the room of the assassins listening to the radio, Cenek uses a computer programme to move around this scene in much greater detail. His seemingly illogical movement in the scene can bring to mind the movement of the viewer's eye, which instead of following the main protagonists, notices the expression of characters in the background, watches the shadows of people, passes over minute objects on tables and cabinets, but also by way of the movement connects the expressions and faces of the various protagonists of the scene in a sequence that the director certainly did not have in mind. Cenek tries to examine in the given film footage how the scene, or entire film, was constructed and whether it is possible to critique this construction, then to reconstruct it again and in a different way.

Cenek has for several years worked with the theory and practice of non-linear narratives. He is interested in the type of narrative in which the sequence of events is not merely set chronologically, but is created by using other keys that, in addition to the narrative's author, the end viewer himself can create. Similar means of narration that apply predominantly in interactive multimedia works successfully break down our conventional understanding of time and of our place in it. As Cenek himself says, this place is not easily deducible in similar works. "This convention (understanding time in everyday life) maintains time as linear, narrative and without hierarchical distinction. It's a convention that defines 'being' in everyday life as 'one thing after another'". But from another perspective—offered by the fiction model—the time of everyday life is itself organised by various types of temporality, meaning articulated, using the measuring stick of context and intensification. Time in everyday life and the world is not without distinction and hierarchy: it is textual, offered for creating borders and for the interpretation process delimited by our experience with these borders".<sup>11</sup>

As he later states, a simplified linear and non-hierarchical understanding of time would be possible if language did not exist. Language directly affects our life experience and organises it into complex structures. At the same time, we must be aware of the difference between the system of language and its specific manifestations. Speech in itself does not leave any material traces, it exists only within the context of the immediate articulation. In writing, however, a record is created that already exists in time and becomes part of these structures. Film can also be understood as a similar record with which, thanks to new technology, we can enter into a dialogue that spans several decades.

A seemingly formal exercise can have a deeper subtext here: what was the structure of film propaganda, and do we now have the possibility to re-enter history and try to correct it, or at least take an alternative view of it?

Coincidentally, but apparently not completely by chance, another multimedia artist, Richard Fajnor, made use of another film work by Jiří Sequens. In his *Definitively Hidden Images* (1999), he used as material the popular TV series from the late 1970s, *Thirty Cases of Major Zeman*, whose re-release for broadcast at the end of the 1990s prompted a media uproar, because it was considered too propagandistic. Czech Television ended up broadcasting the series, but each episode was supplemented by a discussion or documentary film on how events in the series “really” happened. Richard Fajnor used a vertical line to divide video-recording of the series into two halves. He then reflected a copy of each half with a mirror and assigned it to the original. The result is then played at the same time on two monitors: on one we see only the reflected image of the left half, and on the other the right half. The catchword in the title of the work and the main character refers to Jiří David’s photography series *Hidden Images*, that worked with portraits of famous people in the stated attempt to penetrate deeper into their personalities. A similar method can be found in the work of Richard Fajnor, in which he examines the whole series with a similar test, but with ironic distance both to David as well as to *Major Zeman*.

The appropriation of known films dealing with history is not a novelty of contemporary art or a Czech specialty. We can start by naming the experiments of Douglas Gordon with the films of Alfred Hitchcock or the work of Pierre Huyghe. These works have mostly the character of a formal experiment; in contrast to their Czech counterparts, they lack a strong dose of nostalgia and evaluative charge. Czech artists do not select films by excellent filmmakers such as František Vlácil or the New Wave filmmakers, but are more prone to working with the “second-rate” material of Sequens or with anonymous artists. These films much better reveal for the artist and viewers the principles of

construction of the film work and ideological propaganda. They return together to the world of childhood and youth, naïvety and purity, supported by a simple bipolar vision of reality as presented by the official media.

Photography, film and video become in the work of the aforementioned artists a non-linear, but all the more refined way of coming to terms with the past. They use old films as time capsules that we can open and examine today. Thanks to digital technology, we can even re-enter and change them. Mechanical records thus not only fulfil the dream of going back in time, but also provide us with the illusion of having the option of changing it.

First published: Tomáš Pospiszyl, “Minulost v přímém přenosu. Nová média a národní i osobní historie”, in: *V Muzském mozku, Sborník k 70. narozeninám*, Petra Wittlicha, Lenka Bydžovská, Roman Prahel (eds.), Dolní Břežany, Scriptorium 2002, pp. 163–172.

*Translated from the Czech by Daniel Morgan*

## Notes

- 1 See, for instance, the speech by President Václav Havel on the occasion of the state holiday of 28 October 2001, reprinted with the title “Communism with a Capitalist Coating” in the daily *Lidové noviny* on 29 October 2001, p. 11.
- 2 A remarkable chapter of art that can be directly politically interpreted, which still awaits more thorough processing, remains the short period of use of national symbols that appeared almost at the same time in the work of Jiří David, Tomáš Čiśařovský, Filip Turek and others, who worked with national symbols around 1989.
- 3 Attention should be drawn to the article “Even paranoids can be followed” by Aviezer Tucker in *Revolver* revue no. 17, on the fact that in Czechoslovakia a radical replacement of one elite with another did not occur, but the old personnel pretty much just “changed their jackets” and became part of the new regime. In such a situation, society understandably defends itself against any turbulent discussion on the recent past.
- 4 Romy Golan, *Modernity & Nostalgia. Art and Politics in France between the Wars*, New Haven, CT, London, Yale University Press 1995.
- 5 Let us not forget the slide projections of Petr Pastrňák, the pictures and films of Vít Soukup or the pictures of Ivan Vosecký. The non-conflicting image of the early 1960s was also revived by the theatrical play *Ball* by BSP, echoes or direct citations from the so-called Brussels style became part of one of the trends of contemporary design.
- 6 Susan Stewart, *On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, The Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham, NC, London, Duke University Press 1993, p. 145.
- 7 He worked with historical photographs in paintings since the late 1980s.
- 8 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books 2001, p. 54.
- 9 See Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York, An Anchor Book 1990, pp. 8–9.
- 10 The video’s title was inspired by reading the writings of one of the founders of conceptual art, Joseph Kosuth. Generally speaking, video ponders questions of what is and what is not important in life, how we perceive things and time.
- 11 Filip Cenek, *Notes on Hyperfiction* [thesis], Brno, FaVu 2001, p. 13.

## Călin Dan

### Media Arts Get Media Free

#### A small anthology of older views

### A curatorial crisis

The first sign of normality occurring after December 1989 in the field of the visual arts was the withdrawal of art criticism from what—even if not at Western standards—could be named “the public scene”. In a period of exhibition enthusiasm, when the young were discovering free access to public spaces and the middle-aged rediscovered the pleasure of being together, which had animated their youth in the short-lived freedom of the late 60’s, the only absence were the art critics, as if a sudden sense of culpability paralysed their discourse. The efficiency of art criticism in the last two decades has consisted of a soft but permanent “proofreading” of the art discourses, in order to offer a mirror for self-contemplation in an environment animated only by shadows. Art criticism could never rely on a dynamic system implying an authority based on demand, and thus, it lost its (solely) narcissistic powers as soon as the close-circuit object-commentary exploded. I am afraid that neither artists nor critics realised that the big absence in their mutual understanding was the viewer, called by the populists—“the people”, by the market-oriented ones—“the buyer”, and by the optimists—“the public”. That amorphous “Other” did not really count very much previously, and I wonder if the sudden perception of this failure was the major argument for the “silence of the text”. In that framework, it is easier to explain what the curatorial crisis meant for the local context as a basic reaction against any paternalist attitude reminiscent of the abhorred Communist political context. Romanian artists violently rejected every kind of intrusion into their privacy and any alleged distortion of their initiatives. Adding this to the genuine resentment artists usually feel against people challenging their authority, and also to an entropy characteristic of Romanian psychology for centuries—one can imagine the problems a curator of contemporary art is confronted with here.

### Media failure

Visual arts in Romania have always been suspicious about new(er) media. It is typically the case of the Romanian historical avant-garde—disseminating its ideas all over Europe, without generating any exploration of the creative potential of film or photography—as opposed to all the surrounding countries. The brief de-frost between 1965-71 brought timidly the topic of new media, but this was cut short by a lack of curiosity, both among the public and within

the art scene proper. The occurrence of the Romanian TV Revolution helped to change this attitude. Through the bias of their own tragedy, people discovered both the fascinating power and the implicit manipulative capacities of a medium which had been kept by the Communists in a harmless inertia. From the media fights of 1990, which not only focused on politics, but, I would say, also on the essentiality of post-modern culture—media-dominated, but also media-wise—some consequences developed on the road to democracy. The video-camera and video-editing facilities very soon became a way to fight the oppressive power of centralised television. Significantly enough, two studios were installed by open structures like the Group for Social Dialogue (Grupul pentru Dialog Social—with Studio Est), and the Soros Foundation—Romania (with Fundatia Arte Vizuale—FAV), the third one belonging to the education system (The Theatre and Film Academy—ATF). So, when we talk about “media failure”, it refers to the gap still existing in 1993 between the needs expressed in various, sometimes chaotic ways, by society itself, and the somehow conservative response offered by the art scene, still focusing on traditional media and on a symbolism ranging from Christian Orthodox relics to narcissistic 19<sup>th</sup> century-like contemplations.

### Ex Oriente Lux—the first Romanian video-event

Video art was non-existent in pre-December Romania. But installation was already here—as a preferred medium for the underground scene. And video came also, quite quickly, in 1990, via the young generation of dynamic filmmakers, shifting spontaneously from costly 35 mm production to the more flexible Beta and SVHS tapes. Considering this recent background, it has been relatively easy to convince artists to join a project which needed primarily a transfer of their inner universe from traditional to electronic expression. The project brought new challenges into the local context on many levels: video is a product of collective effort, of mutual acceptance, and this was the main problem for the local artists. Video-installation involves high and low technology, which has always been alien to them. Video—due to its costs—deals with social and economic participation—and this was new for the local investors, not readily convinced by the advantages of cultural sponsorship. Video is first and foremost—media born and media connected—always and despite all distances. This was the principal—if not obvious—goal of *Ex Oriente Lux*. To prove to the sceptical Romanian audience that media are more than consumer goods and potentially more than a political weapon—media comprise the self-definition and self-identification of human beings in the post-industrial, post-totalitarian era. From this, alongside the exhibition itself, an effort to organise a Romanian Video Week also developed, which brought the local public (especially artists, students and media people) into contact with

an assembly of international guest speakers, who lectured about the history of video, and/or the latest issues in the field. Among them, the Romanian specialists made new statements about their relation to media, mainly TV, establishing a refreshing insight into the local and general perceptions of the topics discussed.

### Some fragments falling free in time

Fishy Aquarium. The interesting point in having the Berlin Wall break down was the experimental field opened by this event. From economy to entertainment, and from social structures to military strategy, everything was available for questioning, pressing, doubting, re-shaping, cloning.

The favourite story that the media gave to the anxious Romanians in 1990 was Adam Michnik’s fable about the aquarium. In the vision of that *enfant terrible* of the Polish political avant-garde, the post-Communist environment was to be compared with a fishbowl in which the water has boiled. The impossible task of the post-Commies would be to make use of something that is neither fish-soup, nor a live object for entertainment. The first step in solving the dilemma is to define what is left after boiling the water. It is what scientists call a “culture”, the place of hysterical growth for all kind of biologically inferior species, and therefore the ideal environment for checking on the superior models and on their behaviour.

It is not mere coincidence that a recurrent topic of sci-fi novels is amorphous intelligence, the chaotic plasma hiding structural impulses. Since we live in a post-sci-fi environment, designed very much on the sci-fi predictions of the 1950s and 60s, the aquarium metaphor is more than a coincidence: it is a must in the new strategies of social planning, as they start to reveal themselves with the progression of the millennium. (Model A)

The counterpart of this optimistic, though cynical story is that the after-the-wall experiment is nothing but a spontaneous cloning operation, with no pre-determined goals, using the “culture” metaphor without any programming of the aquarium policies. Instead of a research on the obvious failures and a search for potential improvements of the post-industrial models, we will have only a reproduction of Western society in its accelerated aspects—e.g., artificial growth, consumerism—but without the protective structures of political correctness (as ideology) and social democracy (as an infrastructure) of the old parliamentary systems. (Model B)

Realistically speaking, the general situation in the Central/Eastern/South-Eastern European zone is a mixture (in various proportions) of A and B, as it is, to put it bluntly, all around the European modelled societies, starting with Western Europe itself. What makes the Eastern area more fascinating than, say, South America or Africa is the violent entropy induced by the opening of systems kept in a negentropic status for half a century and more. One can say that the 1989 process was unavoidable, in the sense that the stability of the Communist system was a threat to the parliamentary one, as in a body where an area kept safe from all outside damage channels the infections to the rest of the body, exhausting the whole through its lack of balance.

The result, at first sight, is that entropy works now more violently in the previously closed areas. At the same time, we can say that the aquarium metaphor is not really fitting, in so far as there is no more isolation fence between the East-West systems. It looks like, beyond all theoretical efforts, everybody has embarked on a risky operation, where the aquarium was broken even before anyone could start checking if the water inside it had boiled properly.

Ex Oriente Nihil. "If I were you, I would try to figure out what will it bring to your country", they said to me when I first wanted to produce a video-installation exhibition in Romania. It was in the beginning of 1993 and until then, I had never processed a text on the computer, never sent a fax myself, never approached a photocopy machine, never owned a VCR. My secretary was far more involved than me with the new media, as was my son, since he had received his first Game Boy from a friend of mine in Detroit in 1990.

Yet, I wanted that event to happen without any other reason apparently than the fact that nobody wanted it. And with this, I found a lot of arguments for dropping such a costly event right in the middle of the dead fish aquarium.

I thought that since the old media art was exhausted, at least the new media promised some entertainment. I also thought that the promotion of media would be a kind of healing operation in a country tormented by the role media played in its destiny. After the TV-Revolution, some screen-based art would be diverting, I thought. I also saw the infrastructure of video production growing fast out of the art field, which might be dangerous, both for the media and for art at the same time. And so, I tried to figure out what *Ex Oriente Lux* would bring to my country, besides just the fulfilment of a few ambitions. *Ex Oriente Lux* was the heavy title I gave to the show.

It took place in a former exhibition hall that looked like an abandoned warehouse, in a period of the year when a terrible winter, with heavy snow blizzards and drastic temperatures made everything even worse than expected. A crew was constantly hanging under the ceiling, 10 metres above the floor, in a continuous fight with the icy water dropping on the equipment. I myself bribed generously the people in charge of heating the enormous space. In the end, everything went smoothly.

The success was, modestly speaking, quite high. People are basically interested in monitors displaying something (anything), so people crowded in, despite the transportation problems brought by the unexpected weather. Some of the artists involved in *Ex Oriente Lux* have continued to build a video-centred career. Some were consequently invited to prestigious international manifestations; some works from the exhibition were presented in international shows. What else can a curator ask?

The youth from the Art Academy became hooked on the language of video, and as more and more recognised names on the art scene began to swear to video, the medium became a key-word in the smart gossip of Bucharest and even further around the country. What else could a media promoter want? No matter the level of development of a country, its inhabitants are potential media freaks. This goes for the most remote village in the Pyrenees to the Saharan desert, from the Polar Circle to the Amazonian rainforest. Nevertheless, after spending a month in the darkness of the show, I felt like an Eskimo lost in the Northern night, where nothing happens. My hair started to fall from frustration, and I decided that George Soros was right.

Disney Towns and Prophecy Lands. George Soros was (is) a billionaire and, at the time, my employer within the framework of the Soros Foundation Bucharest, the local arm of his Open Society Fund, a sophisticated charity with worldwide operations, based in New York. His evaluation of my project was mediocre, but he admitted in a public meeting that he could afford to lose US \$100,000 for such an experiment. Latter developments proved that, even if this was so, there was still some grudge behind his words.

Nevertheless, George Soros was right in the sense that the social arguments in which I wrapped the whole event were wishful thinking. The potential interaction between media and video art, the taming of the wild Romanian mediascape via the art of the video—all that was just crap arguments. At the best, video art is a (pious?) lie meant to prove that, even in the context of new media, art continues to play a role in our civilisation. I will not waste my computer time writing about the distribution crisis confronting video art. The

only difference that makes this issue even more frustrating than the general case of art is the fact that video seems to be able to compete on the same ground with the most efficient media—the screen-based ones. But the reality of consumer data just proves to be different. In Romania, the media environment turned from an ideological desert (ante-December 1989) into a complete jungle (post-). Everything began with the printed media, which installed from the very beginning a climate of vulgarity, violence, new age fabulations, and conspiracy theories. The local pulp fictions and the big global truths were blended in a way to flatten the truth and twist the attention of the reader from real issues.

A more nuanced case is that of the radio-scape. A countless spread of independent radio stations mushroomed immediately after the political changes, and Bucharest became shortly one of the most interesting radio cities in Europe. But the soft oppression exercised by the sponsors came immediately. You could tell just by the way music turned from hard core to 60s revival and, worse, to the Muzak of the 80s, which took over the radio business.

The cross media market went from a short testing period to a rapid accumulation of international capital and, through successive buy-sell stunts, it reached an aggressive merger process, endangering the democratic process. It is enlightening to see how the television market opened just in time, after the political/financial alliances were set, by following a model highly predictable after a crossreading of the mass-media issues in previous years. This was about a year after *Ex Oriente Lux*, and all the expectations of that moment were finally dismissed by a reality which refused any contact with the remote artsy vision.

The aquariums installed by the 1989 storm had two kinds of decor in which the dead fish could float happily. One is the tourist landscape, giving flesh, finally, to a Cold War era wet dream (hopeless romance between the Western male hero and the local female blonde in a beyond-the-curtain scenery, preferably in Berlin, Prague or Leningrad/St Petersburg); the other is the wasteland of crisis and disillusion, the places avoided by mass tourism, retaining a specific roughness, inspiring just a few adventurers with humanitarian ambitions. We have here Romania and Albania as paradigms. The ready-to-go-West countries are perceived as “theme park” models, and part of their development is shaped that way. The stagnant ones keep a self-focused behaviour, checking on the Western models with a nagging attitude.

In the first case, the Western model is a past with future values. In the second, it is a past with no future, and the future is something that still has to be invented. This is why imported values are, in the first case, a part of the

process, and in the second, a betrayal. As a recently converted media freak, I had all the chances to become a traitor in my own country, if I could not become a prophet. So, I gave it another try.

Political Correctness, *mon amour*. When I first met the notion of PC, I was puzzled by the aggressive similarity with the smart labels invented by the wizards of the Communist period, back home. I still believe that the concept expresses a mixed ideology, with its positive but also oppressive sides. Yet, since PC is an operating system promoted first of all culturally, it might be interesting to check on its effectiveness through art. With the added spice of more media around. If video is too twisted a way to arouse media attention, we could try the new tool of the internet and moreover, the world wide web, for hosting art events.

Thus, why not use PC as a trigger for another shot at the inertial local art scene? All the issues were there: the homeless, the abandoned children with HIV, the neglected elderly, the drug addicts, the ethnic tensions, the sexual minorities, the physically and mentally handicapped, all in a legal environment with no concern for the rights of the individual in relation to the power(s).

This is the context that fomented *010101...*, as a composite event mixing social activist ambitions, interactive computer language and internet discussion platforms, all revolving around art—as understood/expressed/used by a small group of people from Romania. I will spare the details about the promotional character of the project, the dreams about implementing computer knowledge in the working procedures of mid-generation artists. This was a simulator laboratory promoting Soros Foundation principles, and this time I expected good support to develop such fringe operations combining media and art in an innovative way. “George” was very keen on the Internet, I was told. More than about video, certainly.

CD ROM-ania. Sixteen artists (and artist groups) were invited to work with(in) communities of their choice, on topics involving a potential social inter-reactivity. Those site-specific processes were supposed to be: a) part of a video survey made by the curator in order to document the whole; b) the substance of an interactive computer database, available on the net; c) the core content of a CD-ROM concerning Romanian art-and-society issues.

For this purpose, I travelled across the country with a camera crew, photographers and assistants, participating in events, including the following: one artist let himself be covered by with the dung produced by the cow from his mother’s farm; another persuaded a Gypsy community living in tents to build

up an adobe house; the conversations of a third artist with the professional producers of kitsch painting in his home town; the use by another of a local newspaper as a support for the distribution of his silk-screened fantasies; an art history conference delivered to a group of workers in a truck repair workshop; the campaign of a woman artist against porn graffiti—by covering them with her own versions of stylish penises, etc. For the first time in my life, I felt that being a curator could be entertaining.

The exhibition space was filled with video projectors screening the survey video; the public could browse the digital database on six computers, assisted by the crew who made the design—not better or worse than what one could see elsewhere. The aesthetic of the whole was something between a techno party and a software demo for computer dealers. Some of the projects were weird, some funny, some dull. They were evenly superficial in the social involvement, but what I find more generally important: how can one preserve an artistic identity and still be a disinterested servant of the humble and the neglected? If I remember well, Tolstoy failed in this, too.

In fact, the local environment in Romania is too wild and too complex to be handled through the language of art. With all due respect, art is just decoration in a conflict situation: as the Latin saying states, during the war, the Muses keep silent. And there is a war status in countries where poverty and richness are extreme and co-exist indecently. PC and its annex—the site-specific events later named “relational art”—are just a luxurious failure in contexts of emergency. The society that pays attention to the claims to social efficiency of its PC artists does it as a part of a more sophisticated process of self-delusion, where art activism is a metaphor for the crisis, and not a solution for it.

This also goes for the media, in the sense that the media can play a progressive role only after they are organically absorbed by society as part of the daily practice. Internet communication was a failure in *010101...*, and for a very simple reason: technical limitations. When Paul Brenner made a public demonstration on how the net operates, reaching the censorship database (*The File Cabinet*) installed by Muntadas in the computer of the Randolph Street Gallery—Chicago, the server at the Soros Foundation was blocked for all the other users, in order to let the lines free. Otherwise this kind of admirable “surfing” is hardly possible in a country with a semi-collapsed telephone system.

The global cyber village is a questionable topic in those areas where the computer remains accessible only in an institutionalised context. Therefore, the rejection by my sponsors of point c) in the project (the CD ROM) was also a

significant reaction, very much connected with the limitations of computer use in Romania at that point. Nevertheless, censorship on the basis of economic arguments is as effective as political censorship.

It is hard to estimate what the future will bring, but one thing is clear, punctual events are not pushing the media further, nor the social structures they should be serving.

Revised text from the compilation of: Călin Dan, “Media Arts Get Media Free”, in: *Ex Oriente Lux*, Bucharest, Soros Center for Contemporary Arts - Bucharest 1993, pp. 7-8.; and Călin Dan, “A Right to Virtuality”, in: *In Sight. Media Art from the Middle of Europe*, Nina Czegledy (ed.), Toronto, YYZ Artists’ Outlet 1995, pp. 28–33.

## Katarína Rusnáková

### The Visual Representation of Gender and Sexual Identities in the New Media in Slovakia

In my contribution, I shall focus on two phenomena in contemporary art which fully developed only in the wake of 1989: the boom in the new media—particularly video art—and the appearance of numerous women artists on the art scene, reflecting gender issues in visual art.

The 1990s saw the beginning of a growing visualisation trend manifested in the invasion of visual images into the public and private spheres, with daily life and fragmented postmodern culture serving as a setting for visual culture. Visual technologies are the source of human experience that has become more visual and visualised than ever before.<sup>1</sup> Television is the most efficient mediator of these images: in addition to public channels, the private terrestrial and satellite channels have gained major influence with their strong presence of commercials, mass culture and pop culture. Life today is dynamised by information and communication technologies (primarily computers); clearly, the possibilities for manipulation offered by digital technologies and mass-media strategies offer a degree of reproducibility and fictionalisation of reality that has increased dramatically. The internet, serving for unlimited communication and transfer of pictorial and textual information from the worldwide network, reached Slovakia as a product of globalisation in the second half of the nineties. Film images, video recordings and photographs, as well as billboards and the flood of images in newspapers and other periodicals, primarily women's and fashion magazines, as well as erotic and pornographic magazines, joined the unstable mass-media images. The visuals in most confirm to the conventional concept of the myth of female beauty and gender-attributed roles in harmony with the patriarchal stereotypes. I must stress, however, that the main contribution of the 1990s was the interest in "otherness", connected with the end of the grand narratives and the revision of looking at the linear history of art written by men. Otherness relates to the birth of the discussion on gender and sexual diversity in art, accompanied by the implementation of equal opportunities for women and men in society.

#### The politics of identity

##### *Forms of female subjectivity and the barbie syndrome*

Both female and male artists in Slovakia who tackle questions of gender and sexual subjectivity in the new media draw inspiration from everyday life and reflect their personal experience related to the subjects of intimacy and

domesticity, while removing the division line between private and public. They undermine the patriarchal patterns and practices of representation of women in art and mass media. Frequent strategies include irony, self-irony and parody, which form a basis for the production of critical works based on appropriation and deconstruction.<sup>2</sup> This applies also to Slovakian video art that evolved into an integrating lingua franca, which combines within itself history, documents, fiction, narrative and neo-conceptual positions, uniting them in intercultural crossovers.<sup>3</sup>

Since the second half of the 1960s, the work of Jana Želibská has resonated with the themes of the female body and erotica, also articulated in her video art since the 1990s. In the video installation, *Her View of Him* (1996), Želibská parodies gazing and voyeurism from the woman's perspective by depicting a man showering in a bathroom. This video work, with its erotic perspective, can be seen as a special contribution to the deconstruction of the classical artistic genre of female bathroom scenes created by male artists, and simultaneously a dialogue with the video installation *Interval* (1995) by Bill Viola, also featuring a man in the shower.

The woman artist enters the bathroom one more time. In her video installation, *Sisters II* (1999), a double portrait of teenagers chatting before their evening bath was projected on the wall, the spontaneous communication of the girls intertwined with the nonverbal communication of their touching bodies. The camera focuses alternately on the girls' bodies and close-up on their faces; the dialogue ends with the sisters taking off their underclothes and exhibiting their young erotic bodies. The video projection shows the attributes of the bathroom interior: a stool with a basin of water, towel, a mirror, etc. Želibská interprets with slight irony the coming of age of the girls, studying their identity at the stage of transition between youth and adulthood. The author shows the relative aspects of the cult of female beauty à la Hollywood, as presented by advertising industry, mass media and film in her video installation, *The Diet* (1997). She shows with some irony a girl who compensates her frustrations with food, which, defeatingly, results in her trouble to keep a slim figure. The vicious circle of overeating and disposing of the food takes place at a table; we watch her bulimic fit accompanied by fast music, up to the last detail of her stuffed mouth. Her leftovers can be seen on the floor under the video projection, and a TV set across the room shows a girl trying hard to lose excess weight by exercising. This work shows how social and cultural aspects form the identity of the subject.<sup>4</sup>

The gender stereotypes of two contrasting regimes—Communism and Capitalism—are depicted with sarcasm by Peter Meluzin (1947) in his installation, *Clone Line* (1998), which combines video with computer animation. Communism symbolises the Socialist-Realist cliché: a photograph of the statue, *Worker and Kolkhoz (Collective Farm) Woman* by Soviet sculptor Vera Mukhina, depicts the woman holding a sickle and a man with a hammer in his hand, with the five-pointed star shining brightly in the background. Ten computers on the floor project the identical image from a CD-Rom. Suddenly, it is replaced with the picture of Barbie and Ken, the symbols of consumer Capitalism. The last movement of Beethoven's 6<sup>th</sup> Symphony (*Pastoral*)<sup>5</sup> plays, and these artificial characters dance—they rotate in the same pathetic posture as Mukhina's sculpture. The camera follows the dumb expressions on the faces of Barbie and Ken, and shows the sexual details of their bodies. Finally, the monitors reveal Mukhina's statue once more: an ideology replaces imageology, and everything repeats in a loop. It is obvious that Barbie and Ken are no innocents: these emblems of culture for the masses serve for the sophisticated manipulation of children's thinking in the spirit of long established gender and sexual roles.

The strategies of television commercials<sup>6</sup> that depict women as if they were designed solely for the male gaze, and degrade them to mere sexy property advertising consummable goods are made ironic by Elena Pätöprstá (1960) in her video, *Zapping* (1999). In a refreshing montage, the artist combines fragments of contemporary advertising with found footage of German commercials and quickly alters and repeats individual sequences. She opted for black-and-white in order to unite the present and the past and to suppress the artificiality of appropriated film material. She also incorporated an amusing sequence of a teenager mimicking the manners of fashion models and imitating a pop singer.

One of the most radical artists is Anetta Mona Chişa, who often collaborates with Lucia Tkáčová. Their installation, *Les amies* (2000), evokes the aesthetics of music videoclips, whose visual dynamism corresponds with the youth lifestyle. The authors placed this site-specific video within the setting of the designer fashion ZOE Shop in Bratislava and played it on several monitors. "This video story of superficiality produced in the style of a TV commercial presentation"<sup>7</sup> wipes away the division line between the autonomous and the commercial video. It offers a banal portrait of a girl easily gliding through everyday life; she and her friend Barbie enjoy their consumer lifestyle. Although the authors themselves flirt with a similar style of life, their video film addressed to the ZOE Shop possesses an ironic distance. In the subversive video, *What the Fuck Are You Staring at?!* (2001), Chişa not only undermines the conventional reception of artworks by using subversive elements: she

mainly deconstructs the conventional view of women as submissive beings and overthrows normative models of “female behaviour”. The plot of the action video is simple: an angry, pretty young woman behaves aggressively towards the viewers, and uses vulgar language in English. She is no passive beauty seducing with her appearance and refined poses. To the contrary.

### ***Re-defining male identity***

Peter Rónai, artist of Hungarian origin, living in Bratislava for over thirty years, deflects identity in his autobiographical video/computer works, which contain transnational and transcultural codes. Rónai’s post-photographic self-portrait shown on an LCD monitor is the main element used by the artist to deny his body and to show only his face as an easily readable symbol.<sup>8</sup> He incorporates LCD monitors in everyday household objects, e.g., a travel flask and a supermarket trolley in his video installation, *AutoReverse* (1997), suggesting shopping—the domain of women, with forty portraits of Rónai, from childhood to the present and back again, alternating on the LCD monitor. The video installation *Elastic Reality* (1997) is another example. Here, the artist’s self-portrait on the LCD monitor is built into an oil lamp standing on a reversed ladder—in an upside-down triumphal arch. The sceptical self-ironist watches us from this symbol of light. Time in the video recording flows slowly, and his face distorts into a grimace. Rónai’s work resembles the photomontages of the Dadaists who studied human anatomy in order to laugh at nationalism. Rónai constantly modifies his works and updates his videos especially, demonstrating his creativity, playfulness and elasticity. Although the inflation of self-representation might indicate the artist’s narcissism, in addition to implying self-irony, his self-portraits cast doubt on authority and express uncertainty, vulnerability or failure.

### ***The otherness of sexual minorities***

In connection with the deconstruction of the heterosexual matrix,<sup>9</sup> the re-defining of the term “gaze” in reference to models of lesbian and gay subjectivity has become more pressing.

The videos of feminist artist Anna Daučíková, which she has produced since the mid-90s, encode lesbian sexual orientation. They are an example of queer art, which questions gender stereotypes and patriarchal patterns of thinking. Most of her video works consist in Daučíková’s manipulation of everyday household objects, of profane materials or fragments of her own body. These are used to create ambivalent metaphors and articulate the problems of sensuality and erotic desire. They are connected through ambiguous sexual

associations, with the artist blurring the traditional gender codes and offering her viewers a pluralist’s look at gender. Daučíková has shifted from the themes of the carnal and sexual in relation to erotic desire deprived of a clear gender code<sup>10</sup> towards a more radical reflection; on the one hand, she has reinforced subversity and (self-)irony, and on the other, she has expressed pleasures more explicitly. A typical feature of Daučíková’s videos of ironic character is the linking of tactile creations with a visual aspects (*The Chthonic Greeting to Camilla Paglia*, 1996; *We Care about Your Eyes*, 2002).

### ***Fragments from the periphery: handicapped, social and ethnic minorities***

Feminism and gender-oriented art sympathise also with ethnic, social and handicapped minorities. During her stay in Dessau, Elena Pätoprstá made the documentary video, *Asylum* (1996), showing the way Kurdish women and children lived in the local asylum house, where they spent their time running daily chores and resting. TV news of the bombing of Kurdistan, where their husbands were fighting, interrupted the relative serenity. Pätoprstá captured the group and individual identity of the Kurdish women refugees in the moment when they experienced an existential crisis. The video is an imprint of reality, and the degree of fictionalisation is kept to a minimum.<sup>11</sup>

Since 2002, Pavlína Fichta Čierna has focused on documentary video about people with ambiguous, complicated life stories. The artist usually finds the protagonists of her works on the periphery, beyond the interests of majority society and media attention, such as physically and mentally handicapped women and men, underprivileged outsiders, or young Roma living below poverty line. Their way of life is in considerable contrast with the current consumerist lifestyle characterised by an exclusive orientation towards profit and success. One might even say that the artist has found her own aspect of video-creation, with an art poetica in the documentary video profiles of people from different social groups, characterised by multilayered meanings.

The first in the series of these videos is *Janka Saxonová* (2002), which records one day in the life of a mentally handicapped woman. The slow pace of the film, deliberately interrupted by graininess between the individual video sequences, evokes an ambiguous reading of the term “disorder”. The artist employs documentary optics and monitors the main realms of interest of forty-year-old Saxonová: voluntary work in the centre of Žilina, on the one hand, and insight into the protagonist’s private world and social environment on the other.

*With Maroš* (2003) addresses a handicapped, but viable fifty-year-old man, originally a gardener. When the artist was a child, this man lived in her neighbourhood, and she was always interested in what he thought about during his long walks. Thus, she decided to entrust him with a videocamera and ask him to acquaint the viewers with his everyday route from a family house in a calm district of Žilina, where he lived with his father, to the centre of town and back. It is evident that the slower pace and sometimes uncontrolled shots resulted from the limited "cameraman's skills" of "co-author" Maroš. This video is remarkable by the fact that the protagonist is hardly visually present in its narrative structure. We can only see the shadow and fragments of his body or a large detail of his face in a mirror. On the one hand, this video story tries the viewers' patience and tolerance towards the otherness of handicapped people; on the other hand, it reveals their own limits, often consisting in pseudo-problems.

In this context, the documentary video-diptych, *Tender Reminders*—profiles of a middle-aged man and woman harking back to their childhood, stands out. The first video, entitled *Letter for You* (2005), refers to the programme of the Slovakian television with the same title, by means of which the aging man, who looks homeless, would like to meet his siblings. His miserable life story began in childhood, when his mother abandoned him with two younger siblings. Watching a close-up on the face of this crying man, we realise that the fulfilment of his dream is rather unlikely. To the contrary, the protagonist of the second video, *Report on the Life of Eva Č.* (2005), harks back to her childhood associated with the memories of a loved father, a lawyer. When set against these memories, the image of a middle-aged woman with a similarly neglected appearance recalling her first love, an unfulfilled maternity wish and a great deal of her own failures and unfulfilled dreams provides a tragicomic impression. They indicate that most of her failures were caused by alcohol and a lack of motivation. The snatches of Eva Č.'s monologue are accompanied by the fade-out of a grainy image and modulated sounds evoking delirium or conversation with extraterrestrials.

The video-diptych *Siblings* (2004) focuses on the economic, socio-cultural and social problems typical of the Roma ethnic minority. Čierna reflects on this issue, full of conflicts and neglected essential questions, with apparent empathy and patience.

*Jarka in the Middle* depicts the tragicomic aspects of the everyday life of a protagonist who takes care of three younger siblings. Individual video sequences provide the viewers with a picture of their modest house on the periphery, where they scrape along in poor conditions. The life of these children

is marked by poverty, but even more by the absence of a complete family. The lack of positive examples and neglected upbringing finally results in the delinquency of one of the siblings. He is the protagonist of the second video, entitled *Juvenile David R.*, which is set in prison. Čierna focuses notably in close-up on the face and aspect of this Roma boy—she shows him at various, often strange, and even brutal games in the form of some one-man show, by which he whiles away the time of his sentence. Individual video etudes of David R. are interrupted by fade-out, metaphorically evoking rolling down the shutter. The premises of prison, defined in a minimalist manner, are dominated by a barred window, casting a shadow upon the floor. The overall atmosphere is supplemented with the sound of a typewriter, a reference to the examination. This diptych raises many questions concerning the future of Roma children, who belong to the group of socially disadvantaged and delinquent youth.

### *Images of women and men beyond clichés*

The second principal line of Čierna's video creation is represented by videos depicting women and men from different generations and social backgrounds, who attracted the artist's attention with their unconventional way of life or extraordinary personal story, considerably contrasting with prevailing models and symptoms of modern consumerist society.

*Lady in Blue* (2005), the title of which evokes the paintings of old masters, offers the life story of a seventy-year-old lady, whose memories of childhood and crucial (archetypal) moments of her life—wedding, divorce, the deaths of relatives and parents, or a new relationship—are interwoven with references to the Holocaust. The artist created, through the sole uncut shot, the video profile of a lady in an armchair, modified by computer in a very sophisticated manner. The protagonist calmly talks about the events of her life. This video will grip attention also by the fact that its total time corresponds to the period during which the protagonist smokes one cigarette. The monologue is interrupted by short pauses with the slow passing of time, which give the scene some dignity on the one hand, and on the other hand imply a subtle theatricality.

However, violence, behind which is usually hidden uncontrolled power and unfulfilled desires, is a constant problem of modern society on all levels, from family to interpersonal and social relations. The statement of the protagonist of the video entitled *Reconstruction* (2005) presents a foray into the memories of the traumatising experience of a young mother of three children, who was battered by her own husband. The characteristically ambivalent title, *Reconstruction* expresses several semantic levels of interpretation: firstly, the renovation of a house; secondly, the reconstruction of the scene of the crime

(in this case, a kitchen, where the protagonist's ex-husband attacked her with a knife); and thirdly, the long way this woman will have to take toward the reconstruction of her own life and personality.

With respect to Čierna's solo exhibition with the slightly ironical title, *Three Men for Life* (2003), it should be mentioned that the artist does not view men as objects of sexual desire; to the contrary, she consistently eschews the stereotypes and idealised media images of men well known from advertisements and mass culture. In contrast with this cliché, flourishing especially in patriarchal societies, the artist focuses on everyday life and selects the protagonists of her works from among men from different professional and social classes. Her videos from this cycle (*About Jozef, From Vlado*), mapping the men's subjectivity, open the themes which are rather rare in Slovak visual art and explore problems related to the current issue of men's studies.

She tries to capture the outward identities of the depicted men and, at the same time, to infiltrate into their inner world. Her efforts for the authenticity of expression correspond to the visual language of video. Her author's approach to the subject is close to the aesthetic and technical asceticism of rules, formulated in the Manifesto Dogma 95.<sup>12</sup> This characteristic is also true in the case of videos depicting women and children. Although Čierna's video realism is characterised by a realistic view with the elements of documentary nature, she does not lack a feeling for expressing the multilayered socio-psychological dimensions of her represented subjects.

So far, the last contribution to the category of video profiles of male characters has been the work *Diffused Portrait* (2007). The protagonist of this video is an interesting man, who characterises himself as a domestic man of letters, but who rather gives the impression of an unusual chronicler. With his sense for argument, he verbalises the relevant events of the last three decades, as well as the events from his personal micro-history. In this endless monologue, verging on psychic automatism, the encyclopaedic knowledge of a writer-autodidact are interwoven with his critical views on people, society and politics, as he compares the totalitarian past with current democratic civil society. This double-profile, projected in the form of a divided projection screen, features the psychic disunity of this sixty-year-old invalid pensioner, who was traumatised by his aggressive father in childhood. Although he suffers from agoraphobia—the pathological fear of open space, he is well-informed about current events in the world and in Slovakia from the newspaper and radio. Based on this information, he forms his critical opinions of the current political situation, politicians, church and various institutions representing the structures of power, and he also touches upon questions related to the application of power

within family and interpersonal relations. With respect to the special nature of this video, I find quite fitting the metaphor used by film theorist and critic Peter Mihálik, comparing the projection screen to a book with one endless page, that enables people to write on its surface the entire model of the outer and inner world.<sup>13</sup> In the case of this domestic man of letters, one can recognise that the record on the "endless page" of the screen often expresses an increasing discrepancy between his internal and external world.

The analysed video works testify of the discourse around the representation of sexual and gender identities, which stimulated the birth of a whole series of interesting testimonies throughout 1990s. Not only do they inspire a new outlook on this complex issue: they also inspire the younger generations.

Revised text from the compilation of: Katarína Rusnáková, "The Visual Representation of Gender and Sexual Identities in the New Media in Slovakia", in: *90's + Reflection of the Visual Art at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Jana Geržová, Katarína Kišová (eds.), Bratislava, Slovak Section of AICA—Union of Theorists of Contemporary Fine Art 2003, pp. 70–82; Katarína Rusnáková, "Micro-stories of Everyday Life and Marginal Themes", in: *Pavína Fichta Čierna*, Žilina 2008, pp. 21–25.

*Translated from the Slovakian by Eva Brejová and Janka Jurečková*

## Notes

- 1 *The Visual Culture Reader*, Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), London, New York, Routledge 1998, pp. 3–12.; reprinted in 1999, 2001.
- 2 See Jana Geržová, "Art and the Question of Gender in Slovak Art", in: *n.paradoxa*, no. 8. 2001, pp. 74–82.
- 3 Ursula Frohne: "Video Cult/Ures", in: *Video Cult/Ures. Multimediale Installationen der 90er Jahre*, Karlsruhe, Museum für Neue Kunst, ZKM 1999, p. 20.
- 4 Radislav Matuščík, "Tristichon (Jana Želibská)", in: *60/90* [exhibition catalogue], Bratislava, Soros Center for Contemporary Arts - Bratislava 1998, pp. 58–60.
- 5 Radislav Matuščík, "Video installation/Videoinštalácia Clone Line. Peter Meluzin", in: *Resonances '98 / Rezonancie '98*, Zuzana Bartošová (ed.), Bratislava, AICA 2001, p. 70.
- 6 Advertising strategies often employ women as "disappropriated" subjects, reduced to puppets "without dignity and freedom". Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies/Mor fantázií*, Bratislava, Kalligram 1998, p. 14.
- 7 Michal Moravčík, "What she gives. An interview with the artist Anetta Mona Chiša", in: *Vlna*, no. 6, 2001, p. 81. See also: Juraj Čarný, "The current position of contemporary media art in Slovakia / Aktuálne postavenie súčasného mediálneho umenia na Slovensku", in: *Konceptuálne umenie na zlome tisícročí / Conceptual Art at the Turn of the Millenium / Konceptuális művészet az ezredfordulón*, The proceedings from the international AICA Symposium of Slovak and Hungarian Sections, Budapest—Bratislava, 15–16 October, 2001, p. 111.
- 8 Like Andy Warhol in *Twenty-five Marilyns* (1963), Rónai denies his body to show only his face—an icon (commented K.R.) as a symbol easy to decipher. See: Wendy Lesser, "The Disembodied Body of Marilyn Monroe. View of Men to Women through the Arts / Odtelesnené telo Marilyn Monroe. Pohľad mužov na ženy cez umenie", in: *Aspekt*, no. 1, 1998, p. 269.

- 9 Herta Nagl-Docekal, "Art and Womanliness / Umění a ženskost", in: *Aspekt*, no. 1, 2002, p. 89.
- 10 Hana Vaškovičová, "In-between (Alterita a identita). A conversation with Anna Daučíková", in: *Profil*, no. 2–3, 2000, p. 125.
- 11 Mária Orišková, "Elena Pätoprstá", in: *60/90* [exhibition catalogue], ref. in note 4, p. 64. Elena Pätoprstá was awarded the Film Critics' Award at the International Festival of Documentary Film in Čadca (1996) for her video *Asylum / Azyl*.
- 12 These filmmakers (e.g., led by Lars von Trier) were among those to introduce the use of digital hand-held cameras in commercial contemporary feature film. They called for shooting present, immediate reality in situ, while they insisted on documentary authenticity of scenes, which may be considered a reference to the related practice known from cinéma vérité. The specific version of Dogma 95 realism is aimed at pointing out certain aspects of the ontology of a moving image, namely the photographic presence of the index aspect of a picture. As for the subjects, these filmmakers direct their attention predominantly to the themes favouring outsiders or odd fellows from the social periphery, focusing on people from lower social classes, who often suffer from various illnesses or mental disorders; they take note of the current problems of loneliness and poverty, and they give an account of tragic aspects of existence. Anne Jerslev, "Dogma '95, Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* and the 'Idiot Project'", in: *Realism and "Reality" in Film and Media. Northern Lights, Film and Media Studies Yearbook*, Anne Jerslev (ed.), Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen 2002, pp. 47–53.
- 13 Peter Mihálik, *Kapitoly z filmovej histórie / Chapters of Film History*, Bratislava, Tatran 1983, p. 211.

## Ryszard W. Kluszczyński

### Video Art in Poland

Video art appeared in Poland in the first half of the 1970s, in the artistic circle that assembled around the Film Form Workshop. The most important video artists of this group include Wojciech Bruszewski, Paweł Kwiek, Antoni Mikołajczyk, Józef Robakowski and Ryszard Waško. Their first realisations addressed the function of television from various aspects, a programme broadcast by TV and the role that it played in everyday reality. They analysed a direct transmission or concentrated on the TV-set itself as a new fetish of mass culture.

In addition to the Workshop circle, other artists in Poland also used the medium. Among them were the artists of the Presentation Technique Lab, including Jadwiga and Jacek Singer, Grzegorz Zgraja and Marek Kotaczkowski. The T Group, including Janusz Kotodrubiec, Tomasz Konart, Andrzej Paruzel, Janusz Szczerek and Piotr Weychert, was also active in the period. Artists like these made works that continued the focus on transmission structures, representation/reflection, observation (especially of self) and mechanisms showing how these processes are manipulated. Thus, artists discussed the problem of the influences electronic media exerted on new individual and social views of the world, as well as new mental structures.

Examinations of the interrelations of reality, its audiovisual representation and the audiences that viewed it, predominated in the works of the decade. The productions revealed a relative character of electronic image perception, a blurred boundary between reproduction and creation, and the possibilities of manipulating the perception that resulted from it. A clash of "electronic reality" with knowledge of the world possessed by the audience provoked reflection on both the nature of the medium itself and the limits of human cognizance.

A remarkable number of video works created in the 1970s explored the topic of spatial construction in media and through media. They revealed the relative interrelations of real space and its audiovisual representation, as well as the relativity and the illusiveness of the presentations themselves. These explorations were carried out by means of multifarious techniques, such as combining multiple recordings and transmission processes. Re-recording broadcasts and presenting them in this way revealed the relativity of information delivered by media and the manipulations that reality undergoes in the process of reaching the audience. An interest in the media aspects of video, formed the analytical character of all three genres of this art: videotaping,

video installation and video performance. Despite being identical with television as regards its production, video art treated TV as its direct opposite, and it was characteristic of Polish artists until the end of the 1980s, to distance themselves from television. Apart from its cultural aspect, this collective act also had an explicitly political overtone. In addition to taping performances and many installations, the first pre-interactive video works, those requiring their audiences to participate actively, also appeared in the 1970s. The political events, martial law and its influence on art and artistic institutions, that took place at the beginning of the 1980s brought about the end of an analytical trend in Polish art. Video art underwent a fundamental transformation as well. The conceptual and analytical attitude lost its meaning. The succeeding generation of artists started to use video as a means of self-creation, a powerful tool for expression of beliefs, fears and obsessions. And video art also was characterised by a rebellious attitude against conventions, both artistic and social, and used the techniques of neo-dadaist provocation and de(con)struction.

As a result of this transformation, the video art of the 1980s in Poland developed along two main trajectories. The first was rooted in the traditions of analytical art. The second, at that time expressed most explicitly in the output of Zbigniew Libera and Jerzy Truszkowski, defied this primacy of mind and appealed to emotions and their irrational sources. These works often had a contemplative, meditative character. Later, and largely thanks to Libera, this trend manifested itself in works exploring the themes of power, domination, hierarchical structures, and social and cultural issues concerning strategies of shaping body, mind and imagination. In Libera's productions, a new trend, "critical video art" had its origin.

The beginning of the 1990s brought further changes. Moving electronic images became more dynamic and impetuous, and often quite aggressive. The structure of these works was complicated, multi-dimensional and meandering, with music beginning to play a vital role. These transformations were connected with another parallel development, which could be called "virtualisation". Images rarely referred to the real world, but frequently took on the form of "simulacrum", representations that ascribed neither to reality nor to any of its subjective models. Although these "simulacra" do not enjoy the status of reality, they acquire it secondarily through audience perception. Numerous works stressed the important functions both of music and of virtualisation. Video art was developing in individual forms of artistic expression, mostly videotapes and installations, but also in diverse forms of spatial arrangements, multi-faceted audiovisual structures, and video-concerts. New Polish video art developed quickly post-1989 and in many ways its stylistic attributes evolved from these trends. Aiding this development was the transformation of the

Polish television system, together with the rise of advertising and music video-clips and the expansion of their poetics. The advancing use of computers to make art and the relation to the rock stage further enforced the expansion of these tendencies. Therefore, aesthetic realisations of many videos created by the younger generation of artists of those times, were in close proximity to this paradigm. Apart from this approach, however, there was a parallel attitude with its roots in the avant-garde. This attitude was finding a sense of artistic independence in its resistance against forces reducing diversity to common parameters. It remained in conflict with television aesthetics and instead created individual, distinct poetics.

From the end of the 1980s, distinguishing features that heralded a new wave of Polish video art began to appear, especially in the works produced by Yach-Film Group and by Krzysztof Skarbek. These works displayed a dominance of expression over reflection, emphasised spontaneous, theatre-like creation over concentration. Entertainment seems to be a key characteristic of this trend, as well as a lack of interest in theoretical problems. Artists began to treat the electronic medium more freely than their predecessors, transferring their experience with films to video. They combined the video form with music performances and concerts, or created common platforms that could be shared equally by performance, film and video. The play-like character of these works does not mean that they became less weighty or devoid of expression of their author's viewpoints. The area of concern of these artists was the world of rituals. The vital expression of their works took a new attitude towards reality in its diverse dimensions.

The new wave in Polish video art was heterogeneous. A growing number of artists, artistic centres and festivals substantially increased the number of artistic attitudes, interests, and means of expression. For the first time in the 20-year history of video art in Poland, expression took place in a myriad of ways. Not only was this increase due to the era in which it took place, the time of aesthetic pluralism, but it also resulted from a kind of mental, political and technological unclogging. In this period, and with this diversity, artistic individualities became crystallised. Soon, they took the lead in Polish video art.

Barbara Konopka started to create video art in 1989. Her education and background in music and performance lends her attitude an individual peculiarity and provides her works with a special kind of sensitivity. From the very beginning, she combined dramatism of expression with poetry and sensuality, and developed an interest in the formal visual and technical aspects of video. At the initial stage of her artistic activity, the most striking feature of Konopka's realisations was oneirism, the qualities of a waking dream, which in

an almost natural way settled in the world of her images. Later, she developed a growing interest in parapsychology, astrology, magic and sorcery and these became distinctive traits in her approach. In further works, Konopka addressed the transmission of energy. She used her video realisations both as a vehicle for her own created energies, as well as provoking energetic responses in her audiences. Such psycho-physiological experiences, like a resonance, formed the platform for symbolic interpretations. Eventually, the objects of her interest led the artist towards experiences and problems of the post-biological world.

Educated as a musician, Maciej Walczak regards video as a tool to create more complicated structures. His live audiovisual concerts use a computer, synthesizer and video projector, with prepared "scores" (the program running the computer) providing the base for creating different realisations. His abstract images, as well as his musical compositions, express his fascination with movement, both visible and audible. He introduced coincidence and chance in his artistic process, creating aleatoric structures, and he addressed interactions with the artist, his work at the moment of creation and the audience watching it. The latest projects by Walczak are located in the virtual space of the internet and involve the simultaneous creation of artists that are physically distant from each other. Jacek Szleszyński uses computerisation in interesting ways in his animations. Their dynamics, intriguingly changing rhythm and the fascinating, asymmetrical relations between image and sound attracted the attention of selectors and the juries at many festivals.

Piotr Wyrzykowski's artistic activity does not stop at videotaping. He produces performances and creates installations. His dislike for the material aspect of artifacts led him to make interactive computer installations before moving his works into virtual reality. His interactive project *There is No Body* (1997-99) was put on a website, while *Cyborg's Sex Manual 1.0* (1998-99) was produced on a CD-ROM. Wyrzykowski combines conceptual inspirations having their roots in the 1970s with performance activities typical of the 1980s. Such combinations set in a historical context seem to be characteristic of the most riveting manifestations of contemporary Polish media art (with all its diversity). In the interwoven areas of concept and performance activity, carnality, the body, and its material and virtual determinants play a particularly important role. In Wyrzykowski's approach, the body, consciousness and its reference (i.e., the world) form an entity, which at the same time is information. He also emphasises the borderline between art and non-artistic reality within technical culture. For a few years, this technical context has been an essential aspect of his production. In addition to his individual artistic creations, Wyrzykowski has since 1994 participated fully in the activity of the Central Office for Technical

Culture known by the Polish acronym CUKT. The accomplishments of artists like Konopka, Walczak, Szleszyński and Wyrzykowski introduced the latest digital computer technologies into Polish art. Today, this area is of great interest to the new generation of Polish media artists.

In his videotapes, video installations and video performances, Wojciech Zamiara developed technological innovations unlike the aforementioned artists. In his works, audience attention is drawn to the semantic and emotional aspects of art. It offers them a rare occasion in Polish media art being produced today, to meditate on fundamental existential problems.

Marek Wasilewski's works are concentrated, subtle and filled with the author's feelings. At the same time they are firm, efficiently separating his own environment, his own body, his image and his private spaces from the surrounding world. The artist concentrates on intimate sides of everyday life. In ordinary things and seemingly insignificant events, he finds matter for artistic expression. In Wasilewski's works, there is also a strong inclination to analyse the language of art, a work's internal structure and its relation with the medium.

Izabella Gustowska develops the relations between virtuality (of images) and reality (of physical matter) in her video works. These relations co-create and support one another in meaningful opposition: interior and exterior. Forms (constructions) in her installations remain open, which causes a constant merger of interior and exterior, thus playing a never-ending game—a dialogue between dimensions and space. The flatness of a photo is broken by its three-dimensional background. Neither these pictures, nor light—sometimes appearing not as a vehicle of pictures, but as pure energy—can be limited, closed in a single determined area, thus they create a dynamically moving and changing territory.

However, the most characteristic feature of the new wave in video art of the 1990s seems to be development of a trend that could be called "critical video art", a part of a much broader trend of "critical art". This trend responds to challenges of the present time in Poland to the greatest extent. This approach is represented in works of Katarzyna Kozyra, whose installation, *The Pyramid of Animals* (1993), sparked a struggle over critical art that continues to this day, as well as in works of Alicja Żebrowska, Artur Żmijewski and Anna Baumgart. However, new trends, new attitudes and new types of aesthetics that developed in the 1990s and continued in the new century have not broken the links that connect past and present. Its many innovations apart, there are still phenomena and artists ensuring the continuity of Polish video art.

Józef Robakowski's influence is evident. The characteristic chain: transgression-media-subjectivity-game-energy is present in all his artistic activity over the last 40 years, undergoing only internal changes. The effect his art exerted on the younger generation of artists provided stabilisation, and it created an obvious link between the past and the present. Other factors establishing a link between "new" and "old" video art in Poland can be found in numerous works of various artists and artistic groups, like Łódź Kaliska, Wspólnota Leeżeć and the latest works by Zygmunt Rytko and SuperGroup Azorro.

In one way or another, artists living abroad participated actively in the Polish artistic scene, and thus provided sources of influence. Zbigniew Rybczyński, active in media and multimedia art since 1970, has not produced a significant work in over ten years. Yet he is still regarded as one of the most intriguing media artists. Mirosław Rogala, based in the US since 1979, has produced a series of videotapes and video installations and at present creates interactive art, a domain in which he is considered one of the most outstanding artists in the world. In the 1990s, Jarosław Kapuściński, a US-based musician and a composer, produced a number of computer-aided works combining image and sound and at present he is continuing his artistic activity through (multi-)media performance. Despite living in Canada since 2000, Kinga Araya has remained a presence in Polish exhibitions, creating videotapes, video installations and video performances in the critical trend that deal with subjects of nomadism, transgression and isolation. Master-works of these artists make the picture of Polish video art complete.

Moving forward, Polish video art appears to be undergoing further transformation, with more projects using a multimedia approach. This is evident in much of the work created by the artists that have come of age in the first decade of the 2000s. Bogna Burska, Małgorzata Jabłońska, Anna Niesterowicz, Aleksandra Polisieć, Jan Simon, and artistic groups Grzenda and TwoŻywo all have contributed new experiences and new sensibilities to contemporary audiovisual creation. The image of video- and (multi-)media art in Poland may soon determine, to a considerable extent, these new artistic attitudes.

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*Translated from the Polish by Anna Kurys*

## **Boryana Rossa**

### **Entertainment, Propaganda, Experiment: The Technological and Social Foundations of Creative Work Using Video Technology**

The twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall should have sufficed to make the Eastern European context painfully familiar, at least to the European public. Nevertheless, some aspects of the way this context acquired publicity during the transition period have cast doubt on the effectiveness of this familiarity.

The geopolitical approach to the interpretation of Eastern European art, which gives priority to its geographic location and to the "totalitarian-Socialist legacy" as an explanation for trends in the visual arts is not relevant for me. In this discourse, very little attention has been paid to the contents and the aesthetics of the artworks, which could easily find their place beyond geopolitical regionalism, on the basis of the thinking behind them. These were sidelined as unimportant in comparison with identity (tacitly understood as national identity) and with post-totalitarian trauma. I do not wish to underestimate the importance of the issue of identity, especially in the context of unification in Europe. But the priority given to this factor on a local and international level has led to the exclusion or under-representation of artists who work not primarily on geopolitical themes in the art process.

Numerous clichéd works appeared along with new strategies for success in the area of "identity". In this context, it was rarely possible to achieve meaningful communication at the roots of problems which would turn out to be common to both Eastern and Western Europe. On the basis of these common problems, they could be more easily unified, or at least could communicate more easily, instead of bending under the weight of their painful historical and political burden. Accordingly, before beginning this short review of some video works, mainly from Bulgaria, with some from Russia, I would like to suggest another approach to researching them, which would seem to me to be more appropriate.

### **A transnational and interdisciplinary approach to research on the creative use of video technology**

After the rapid development of globalisation, and especially following the appearance—and prevalence—of the internet, we can hardly speak any longer about any independent or isolated development of some form of national art,

determined by cultural traditions in the framework of a given nation state or even some form of alliance between states. A transnational method should be capable of registering the mutual links and influences between different cultures, and to examine the convergence of meanings and specificities that various artists add to them. Of course the background of each artist is important, but only in so far as it adds new nuances to the issue in question. For example, in the section of this text entitled "Who Holds the Camera", I examine the legacy of women's emancipation in Eastern Europe as essential for the development of various forms of feminist discourse in the context of cultural and political globalisation. Emancipation is not an idiosyncratic problem that Eastern Europe has to overcome, in order to "speak the language" of Western forms of feminism. It is a feminist practice in its own right, with its own strengths and weaknesses.

In this vein, an interesting phenomenon is the growing influence of figures in the art world who live in more than one country and do not accept the identity of the "assimilated" immigrant. These artists weave two or more cultures into their art. There were many such artists during the years of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, and their number is growing and extending westwards. This process gained momentum especially after the inclusion of Eastern European countries in the European Community. These transnational artists appear on the foreign art scene not only as "guests",<sup>1</sup> but also as "long-term or permanent resident foreigners".<sup>2</sup> In this respect, they represent a transnational avant-garde, which works in two or more alien cultures, enriching them with their own experience and drawing from the other.

There is a growing number of apologists for the interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of the arts, especially in academic circles. Classical discipline-based distinctions and the rarely encountered comparative analysis, at least between video and cinema and between video and other art forms, restrict opportunities to examine their mutual influence. Contemporary researchers frequently make the mistake of only considering work with video technologies in the field of so-called "video art" or "new media art". The fact that cinema tends to be placed higher than video art in the critical hierarchy (especially in classic cinema circles) is mainly due to underestimation of technological experiment as an aesthetic and conceptual category. This underestimation means that academic institutes with narrowly specialised cinema syllabuses are slow in integrating new technologies in the training they provide.

In a word, where it was once necessary to establish firm academic definitions of concepts such as "video and media art", any hard and fast distinction between these subjects is now outdated, and the presence of hybrid forms has always cast doubt on the boundaries between them.

## Entertainment, propaganda, experiment: Malevich, Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov

In addition to noting my attitude toward the place of women's emancipation in the context of other forms of feminism, I would like to note the place of the early theory of cinema, created at the time of the Russian avant-garde, in the contemporary development of the moving image on a global scale.

Malevich was one of the most influential artists in the history of European art, especially in Eastern Europe. Supported by his theory of cinema, I will draw attention to a number of technologies and social aspects of the moving image (and especially of work with video), which have been poorly researched.

In general, cinema can be divided into two main categories: entertainment and propaganda. The widely used quotation by Lenin: "Cinema is the most important of all the arts for us",<sup>3</sup> spurred the development of the ideological and educational side of cinema, and for entertainment as a way of attracting the masses. In comparison, in the West, Edison was fully aware of the power of this new medium for propaganda, and also used the cinema for ideological purposes, e.g., in competing with Westinghouse for the construction of an AC electricity network.<sup>4</sup>

Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov are fundamental figures in the history of cinema the world over. Dziga Vertov is traditionally referred to as the "father" of digital montage and documentary cinema. Eisenstein is also referred to as a master of narrative. The criticism by Malevich, however, is not particularly popular, with its rather different view of their work in an article entitled "Painterly Laws in the Problems of Cinema".<sup>5</sup> Malevich created an efficient system for assessing the formal and conceptual qualities of film productions. The system is based on the available cinema technology at the time, on the political use of cinema and on the parallels with Cubo-Futurist painting. In the context of his theory of Suprematism, which focuses attention on the development of science and technology, Malevich appealed for a new form in art that would reflect the new political reality and promote progress in science and technology as essential for political changes.

In Malevich's view, Dziga Vertov genuinely used the new technological (technical) potential of the cine camera and the cutting table, and through them he addressed "the issue of "cine-form" as such. At the time, Malevich associated Eisenstein more with the painting of the Peredvizhiks (Wanderers)<sup>6</sup> than with contemporary painting, because he tried to use methods characteristic of older painterly representation to

achieve the impact he wanted. Although Eisenstein created images reflecting the new political reality, the means he used were not in accordance with the necessities of the new times: "Eisenstein, with all his innovations, is an old *peredviznik*, who seeks not only to introduce something new into film, but also to use all of cinema's technical resources to come up with a picture of the old *peredviznik* variety".<sup>7</sup>

According to Malevich, the so-called "additional element" (прибавочный элемент)<sup>8</sup> existed in Dziga Vertov's work, which defined a leap in a new direction in art, helping it to evolve into the future. In Dziga Vertov's work, "new perceptions emerged which demand new formal arrangements". They are "a new form of expression for contemporary content" which is "pure force and dynamics". Malevich drew attention to the element of "dynamic motion": "[...] Dziga Vertov was the first to raise the new dynamic problem in cinema. All those who are fighting for the honour of cinema should take the risk of making at least one production of a new dynamic film in order to find out that the dynamic is the true food of cinema, its essence".<sup>9</sup> "When we look at 'Eleventh Year', we are present at the emergence of new elements that will, in the end, be interconnected in a single chain, and will express a new form of transmitting a new sensation—will give us a new kind of film hitherto unseen".<sup>10</sup> This "dynamic motion" does not exist in any of the traditional art genres and therefore requires a completely new, hitherto unknown aesthetic and conceptual system. Malevich considered that the contemporary film director should be inspired by Futurist painting, rather than following only the example of the narrative cinema, or narrative painting. According to Malevich, this kind of cinema that reflects the old is tantamount to such accomplishments in visual art as "The Kitty Under the Parasol". Malevich said that "there is more modernity in Russolo's dynamism than in 'Monty Banks Gets Married'".<sup>11</sup> Thus, Malevich compared Dziga Vertov with Giacomo Balla, sharing his concerns that his novelty might not get support from the film critics oriented to the old painterly tradition. He also gave a descriptive explanation of this novelty: "I found a tremendous numbers of elements (frames) of a specifically Cubo-Futurist nature in *The Man With a Movie Camera*. [...] everyone who has seen *The Man With a Movie Camera* remembers a number of episodes attesting to shifts in street and streetcar traffic, all sorts of objects shifting in the various directions of their movement, where the structure of movement goes only further toward the horizon, but also develops vertically. One has to say that the person responsible for the montage of the film magnificently understood the idea or the risk of the new montage, which expresses the shift that did not exist previously".<sup>12</sup>

From this comparison between *peredvizniks* and Cubo-Futurists and Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, it follows that Dziga Vertov was in step with his time and reflected the striving of Soviet people towards technical and political progress, while Eisenstein, despite his revolutionary themes, lagged behind in history

and was unable to use the innovative nature of cinema technologies. This is an interesting analysis, because decades later it can be applied to video and television working methods and to hybrid genres such as video installation, video cinema, etc.

On the basis of this text by Malevich, I would add an "experimental" category to the propaganda and entertainment functions of the moving image. I would classify the experiments as technological, aesthetic and social.

As noted above, the elements of cinema and video should be seen in parallel, and the real interaction between genres can be best seen in experimental cinema, especially those shot on video. I will attempt to examine the convergence of the technological, aesthetic and social elements of experimentation in my works and in those of Oleg Mavromatti, in the context of the Ultrafuturo artist group and the Supernova cinema union.<sup>13</sup> Both groups are representatives of the transnational stratum of artists, which I consider to be still insufficiently researched in the context of its transnationalism.<sup>14</sup>

### Performance art and video; the democratic nature of the video medium; activism

The "performance documentation" genre is often misinterpreted by critics and artists, who do not know whether to classify it as video or as performance art. Thus it became one of the most marginalised of all video genres. In the late 1980s and early 90s, along with the growth in civil activity (i.e., civil protests) on the street, performance art and public actions<sup>15</sup> acquired popularity in Bulgaria and Russia and developed their own unique means of expression, different from those in other countries. Actionism is symbolic of the transition period in both countries.<sup>16</sup> Many of these actions, along with traditional performances, have been filmed on video. The technological, aesthetic and social approaches to the realisation of these videos are rarely examined because most of these productions are the subject of research on the performance itself, not on the video. This "performance art video" production type can be subdivided into the following three general categories:

1. Video performance art;
2. Documentation produced in order to be shown as a production in its own right and therefore developing a unique means of expression;
3. Documentation intended to preserve its status as a document, but turning into a production in its own right,<sup>17</sup> due to the fact that it is impossible to show the documented performance in any other way.

1. Video performance art includes such productions as the video of the present author: *The Moon and the Sunshine* (2000), *Full-Blooded Bread* (2005) by Katya Damyanova, *Double Fault* (2002) by Daniela Kostova, etc. It is characteristic of this category that the action played in front of the camera is not performed to an audience, but is also not directed as in a cinema genre. The action is planned in advance in the same way as a performance. It is filmed and shown with minimal or no editing, which preserves the feeling of continuity in the action.

In the video *The Moon and the Sunshine*, I paint bruises on my body with lipstick and make-up as a kind of sexual self-gratification. A mix of Britney Spears and a new online video shooter game appears on a television in the same room. Along with the main action, the camera "reflects" the interior, which was filmed separately and subsequently edited in. The action concludes with me bandaging my breasts and lying "satisfied" on the bed. The video interprets the idea of pain and the way it differs according to the sexual identity of the person suffering it and the person inflicting it. The bruises are a sign of violence, but they could also be love bites. The intimacy of the personal interaction between myself and the camera, which I repeatedly point towards myself in the frame, creates a feeling of proximity between the viewer as a voyeur and the bruised body. This type of intimacy would be very difficult to create in a real performance, and it justifies the use of video technology.

The methods used by the Ultrafuturo group to create documentation showing the "documented" video in real time together with the performance itself is an extension of this search for intimacy between the audience and the performers. This kind of work by the group falls rather into the second category.

2. Documentation created deliberately as a separate production, registering a public action, a performance in a gallery or public environment, an intervention or a cycle of life, enriched and presented as a video production in its own right.

When the group first started its activities, we decided that the video camera and the video operator should feature as part of the performance. The person doing the documenting is also a performer and part of the artistic process. S/he is also a creator, because the images s/he creates are those which go down in history and present what is happening in a subjective manner. The presence of the documenting person in the fabric of the performance is not typical of performance artists. They usually insist that this person stays out of the "performance area". We do precisely the opposite. We not only include her/him in the entire action, but since 2006, we have further developed this practice using audience participation. The viewer also becomes a "documenting performance artist".

This method was very impressive in the performance entitled *About the Living and the Dead* (2006), in which the theme of the performance was mediated reality and war via remote distance. In this performance, Oleg Mavromatti and I stitched together some previously prepared rubber "wounds" on our bodies using surgical stitches. The wounds were fake, but the blood from the stitching was real. The relationship between the real and the fake was opened to further interpretation by giving the audience the choice of watching the action in reality or watching it through the medium used. The audience were invited to film the action themselves in close-up, operating two video cameras and projecting monumental images on the walls. The distance between the performers and the audience was completely broken down. During the action, we talked with the audience, discussing the meaning of the performance and giving instructions on how they might make the composition of their photographs more convincing, re-creating the action in an exciting and dynamic way. This "lesson" in documentation gave rise to several series of photos and videos which created different impressions and different mythologies about one and the same action, due to the varying characteristics of the cameras and the personal views of the audience members operating them. We have been practising this documentation method until today. It represents our comment on the widespread distribution of digital and video technologies, which gives everyone the opportunity to be not only a "consumer", but also a "producer" of mythologies<sup>18</sup> and of the blog culture, which gives everyone the chance to be "the media".

The works of Oleg Mavromatti in the Supernova Film Union form the basis of his work in Bulgaria and the USA as an independent artist and as a member of the Ultrafuturo group, and they influence the work of other members of the group. Mavromatti and the other Supernova artists employ a unique method of working with actors, referred to as "directed improvisation". This method is a hybrid between performance art and directed action, further developing the Stanislavski method towards increased physiological representation, improvisation and unpredictability, which are characteristic of performance art. Examples include the full-length films *Kokki—The Running Doctor* (1997); *Green Elephant Calf* (1999), directed by Svetlana Baskova, produced by Mavromatti; *The Bastards* (1999), *The Biggest Meat Ball in the World* (2001), directed by Mavromatti, etc. The actors are put in physically and psychologically uncomfortable positions, e.g., in high temperatures, standing on one spot for extended periods, repeating one action over and over again, being left hungry, etc. This is necessary in order for them to enter into the role. They act according to a script prepared in advance. Their speech is stylised according to the character they depict, and they know what they should talk about, but

their dialogue is not written or learned in advance. An additional element is the interaction between the various actors, whose psychological types are selected so as to provoke each other. The plausibility of the pre-written story is reinforced by the real physical experience of the actors, which has the purpose of bringing their work closer to performance art.

The Supernova films are shot on video, and they use the capacity of the medium to generate a feeling of reality. They accommodate numerous formal experiments similar to the creation of a second channel in the video, *The Last Valve* (2004). This video is made by Mavromatti and shows my performance. The first channel shows the real performance, in which I stitch up my labia,<sup>19</sup> while the second channel is received by means of an electromyogram signal from sensors attached to my body. This technological visualisation gives a different view of the body, "deciphering" it in the form of an abstract moving image. In this case, the video and the real action are interdependent; the physiological aspects of the performance and the technological aesthetics of the video are hybridised. In the full-length feature film, *Blind Spot* (Mavromatti), comprising three novellas, the image acquires an abstract flavour with an intense audiovisual rhythm. The viewer feels the schizophrenic consciousness of the protagonist of the first novella by means of a rapid sequence of frames as the hero approaches complete madness. Real streets are turned into a kaleidoscope of iron bars. The third novella makes extensive use of objectives from various apparatus, magnifying glasses and photographic filters specially adapted for the filming process.

Another example of a performance video conceived in the context of video technology is *Fixing Reality* (2004) by Daniela Kostova, in which she films herself wandering around public places in Bulgaria and the USA, carrying a blue screen. During post-production, the blue screen is replaced by a video from each country, where the USA appears in Bulgaria and the Alexander Nevski Cathedral rises up beside the Hudson River. This technique is also used in *Negotiations* (2006),<sup>20</sup> where she dresses in a blue suit, which is replaced by the image behind it in real time, creating a video in which the silhouette of the artist dissolves into the background and becomes "invisible". Using this technological metaphor, the author makes reference to the schizophrenic experience of the stranger, the desire to appear to blend into the background, to become a part of it, but also to preserve her/himself through this mimicry.

3. Performance art which can only exist as documentation after the event, is where I would place Rassim's *Corrections 1 and 2* (1996-98; 2002). For *Correction 1*, he does a year-long performance, subjecting himself to "modification" through body-building, training and taking the necessary

chemicals. Reflecting not only the obsession with a beautiful body or the prestigious appearance of a member of the Bulgarian mafia,<sup>21</sup> he also registers the thirst for non-stop video watching which has given rise to phenomena such as *Big Brother*. Rassim filmed all of his training sessions, helping the viewer to observe the physiological evolution of this transformation, making use of the unique potential of video technology. Another work of this type is *Traffic Control* (2001) by Ivan Moudov, in which he directs the traffic at a crossroads in Austria, dressed as a Bulgarian policeman. Here we can see a play on the external attributes of authority, which command respect even if they are unfamiliar. Although the Austrian drivers are confused by the unfamiliar police uniform, they prefer to comply with his laws. Due to the uniqueness of the situation and the required element of surprise inherent to every street intervention, this performance cannot be repeated, and its life is prolonged by means of the video.

Some of Ultrafuturo's works also belong to the third category of performance documentation, or intervention in a public place outside the performer's control. An example of this is *Wonderful Art* (2005) at the National Art Academy. Here, members of the group made a scale model of *Doors* by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, covering the canvas of the model with their own blood. This takes place during an exhibition by Christo and Jeanne-Claude at the Gallery of the Academy. Commenting on the need for art to make a political statement, the group casts doubt on ostensibly "apolitical" art, which claims to be "merely beautiful".<sup>22</sup>

The video documents the action directly, including our confrontation with security. Outraged security guards and professors repeatedly cover the camera lens. Although this video (along with others of the same type) is classified as "performance art", I believe that the aesthetics and filming technology are unique to such actions and worth researching in the specialised context of video art and cinema. The type of aesthetics where the camera just happens to be there, documenting an exceptional event, arise precisely from this type of documentation. This type of aesthetics depends not only on the presence of a particular person in the right place and at the right time (9/11 is a good example), but also on the presence of a camera, a mobile phone and more recently an iPhone, through which the video appears immediately on YouTube, Facebook or Twitter. Although appropriated a long time ago in commercial cinema from video (*28 Days Later* (2002); *Cloverfield* (2008)), this type of aesthetic seems to have been omitted by many video researchers and is still sidelined into the category of "mere performance documentation" or "nothing in common with video". Of course, here it could be argued which could be considered "art": bad performance documentation by a non-professional, or documentation which is bad because of the unforeseen circumstances in which it was created. In fact, the artists who conduct actions, to a large extent, expect unforeseen circumstances to occur. I would therefore argue that the "defects"

in the documentation resulting from this “material resistance” are converted into a form of aesthetic.

The democratic nature of video and the accessibility of technology, which allows video material to be disseminated on the internet, has been developed by activist formations. The interview genre provides the opportunity for the message of the interview to be shared more broadly. In addition to the Ultrafuturo action, *Memory Picture* (2008), I would mention the work of Ventsislav Zankov, who has published a blog called *Art and Bulgaria*<sup>23</sup> for several years, with interviews giving his view as an alternative to the mainstream perception of art and culture.

### They looks at me, I look at them

The relationship between me, you and the medium has focused Zankov’s attention since his early video productions. He is also one of the first artists in Bulgaria who think of video as an object of sculpture. The hypnotic, authoritarian presence of television is a central theme in the installation entitled *The Last Supper* (1995). Thirteen monitors show the faces of one and the same person talking to his own personalities as replicated on television. This video installation allows media reality to encompass tactile-spatial dimensions, which enhance the tension between the personality and the simulation.

The themes of simulation, expectation and observation were developed in an ironic but painful manner in the two-channel installation entitled *A Movie* (2004) by Krassimir Terziev. He conducts a fake casting session for film extras for a big production at the film centre in Boyana, Sofia. Dressed in suits, the applicants for the film extra job wait to be called up for the casting session, which never happens. The moment of expectation is captured by the artist’s camera, which in fact creates a real film during the time in which the film is “not being shot” and the actors are “not acting”.

The element of observation also exists in Terziev’s video called *A Place (Playground)* (2004). This time, the camera follows immovable objects left behind from a period in the past, which have no hope of finding any significance today. Brightly coloured child-sized aeroplanes, tanks and guns made from metal pipes were probably needed to prepare the new generation for the arms race during the Cold War. The camera makes this arrangement even more unreal, adding to its strangeness by using an unusual camera angle, from which the bodies of these objects transform into abstract geometrical figures. In Oleg Mavromatti’s film, *The Rats are Leaving the Shop* (2002), the camera

becomes a subject of the film. This mini DV-length film shows the real-time suicide of an artist playing his “final performance” before the camera, deliberating about the intrigue and hierarchy in the art world. The main character calculates the time needed to commit suicide (using rat poison), so that the death takes place before the end of the film. The film has not been cut, as in the documentary genre, and is presented to the audience as a real event. The preparatory work with the actor Yavor Kostov aimed to develop a natural interaction between him and the camera and to direct the action as in the theatre.

The dichotomy between documentary and fiction and between the watched and the watcher are transformed into a means of expression in Daniela Kostova’s experimental documentary film, *Body without Organs, Bulgarian Bar* (2005). This is a film about the Bulgarian Bar in New York, an exceptionally popular place for the “mixing” of various cultural identities. This is where a recently popular band, *Gogol Bordello*, whose work is typified by this kind of “mixing”, began its career. Along with the blue suits used in *Negotiations*, Kostova includes footage from old animated films and creates visual metaphors representing the interaction between the personality and totalitarian control, the alien and the familiar, the immigrant and the local. Kostova resolves this tension by observing the eroticism of a musical concert experience, which turns the crowd into a being with a collective identity. In this film, the bodies dissolve their unyielding national-ethnic boundaries to merge into other bodies, which previously considered themselves distinct, before experiencing the joy of fusing into *Bulgarian Bar*. This is how Kostova creates a new metaphor for the molten, plastic emigrant Bulgarian identity, which unifies diversity.

### Who holds the camera?

The question of who creates a particular work of art has a distinct gender aspect. Frequently the element of “who made it” displaces the significance of the work. Gender issues are usually the theme of specific collections. This protects those who do not consider themselves to be associated with them (although in practice everybody is) from having to get acquainted with the issue. Thus, if I mention “gender and video”, this is not intended “only for women”, or only for “gay” artists. Many of the names mentioned above will be positioned in the gender discourse in this part of the text. In addition, here I will mention some of my own works on gender issues in the Socialist cinema of Bulgaria and Russia and their development after 1989. I believe that this historical scrutiny is a way to make use of local contemporary artistic practices in Eastern Europe dedicated to gender issues within the context of international contemporary gender practices, which, in most cases after the early 1990s, have been dominated by Western theories.

The increased presence of women in the field of new media, such as video and photography, in comparison with the more “prestigious” fields of painting and sculpture dominated by men, is a global phenomenon. This is also characteristic of the Bulgarian art scene. The entirely male *XXL* artist circle propagates “new painting”,<sup>24</sup> and experiments in the field of electronic music, video and photography by Zhoru Ruzhev, Gennady Gatev, Ivan Kyuranov<sup>25</sup> and Houben Cherkelov are rather an exception, along with the work of Petko Durmana, who left *XXL* to become one of the founders of InterSpace. In the almost entirely male Institute of Contemporary Art, in which the only female member artist is Mariela Gemisheva, video is more prominent in the person of Krassimir Terziev, Kalin Serapionov (who works almost entirely in this medium) and Ivan Moudov, along with occasional works by Luchezar Boyadjiev, Nedko Solakov and Stefan Nikolaev. At the same time, the prevailing media used by the *8 March* women’s group are photography, installation and video, with painting as a secondary medium. Outside these artistic circles, Daniela Kostova, Zornitsa Sofia, Boryana Ventsislavova, Veronica Tsekova and I had the first significant breakthroughs on the contemporary arts scene mainly in video, photography and performance art, although the first two and myself have master’s degrees in the field of monumental and easel painting.

The economic and cultural conditions for this significant presence of women in the field are similar to those in other countries. What is more interesting for me, however, is the extent to which women’s emancipation, propagated in the Socialist countries (which was the dominant form of feminism from 1944 until 1989), has a role in the themes and strategies of women’s art and of matters concerning gender issues. Emancipation is part of the Communist idea of equality between all human beings, irrespective of their sex, race, nationality, religion or class. For this reason, it does not promote rivalry between the sexes as a method of achieving equality, but rather cooperation for the purposes of “emancipating” human beings and creating a “new human”, free of gender, racial, national or class prejudices.

Unlike Western forms of feminism, which have gradually established the rights of women, emancipation establishes legislation and social programmes to deal with the fundamental problems of inequality between men and women (which the first wave of feminism faced) in a centralised manner. Alexandra Kollontai, the only woman in Lenin’s government, introduced programmes to implement these rights. As in Russia, such programmes were also introduced in Eastern European countries after World War II. At the same time, Kollontai’s ideas of “free love”, which preceded the second wave of feminism by a few decades, were rejected as bourgeois and against family morals. These family morals

were defined as the only true “Communist” morals by Lenin and later by Stalin, and promoted the family as the “building block of society”.

Although effective in the legalisation of many fundamental women’s rights, emancipation has difficulty in coping with everyday problems. The ideology of the family as the “building blocks of society” does not recognise many of the psychological and everyday problems which women encounter in a patriarchal society. This ideology became the reason to maintain patriarchal prejudices, which are highly discriminative against women, along with puritan or patriarchal views of sexuality and hypocrisy in family relations. For this reason, many of the early works of feminism in the area of personal freedom and sexuality found their realisation in the late 1960s, when the slogan “The Personal is Political” acquired significance in the West, while the cult of personality was debunked in Eastern Europe. Despite this “thaw”, society in the Socialist countries, which maintained the idea that women already (!) have equal rights with those of men, remained largely blind to the problems that patriarchal customs create for many women on an everyday and professional level.

The democratic nature of video technology provides opportunities for documentary autobiography to examine personal concerns. All of the women artists mentioned in this text have created at least one work involving their women’s problems on an everyday and on a broader public level. It would be impossible not to mention *The Moon and the Sunlight* again, but I will examine in more detail Daniela Kostova’s early video, *Frame* (2000). Kostova films everyday activities mainly considered as “women’s work”, such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of one’s external appearance. The camera is placed on a tripod, as if it “controls” the activities being carried out. The centre of the image is covered with a black rectangle, which almost hides the action, turning it into nothing more than a “frame” for something more important going on in the black area. The artist uses this minimal interference to comment on the frequently marginal position of women or “the things women do” in comparison with the male, the important, the central factor. In this way, the woman falls into the epicentre of the type of problems which cannot easily be solved by centralised emancipation, and which we can see exaggerated in a critical caricature (or perhaps quite realistically presented?) in the full-length comedy film, *Something Out of Nothing* (От нищо нещо, 1979).

Even if they are involved in gender issues, many women in Eastern Europe avoid calling themselves feminists. Apart from the traditional lack of understanding of the term, among many women on a global level, this refusal is also a reaction against the separatism inherent to some feminist practices (often also indicated by Western women as a reason for “not being feminists”).

Another reason is the fact that the term “feminism” is historically burdened, replaced by “emancipation” at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in order to overcome not only the separatism, but also the bourgeois character of some of the feminist movements of that time, which were only involved in the problems of high-class women, but not those of working-class and peasant women.<sup>26</sup> In 1926, Alexandra Kollontai described how the word “feminism” was used by her comrades, when she was setting up the working women’s representative group in Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution: “The first All-Russian Women’s Congress, which had been called by the bourgeois suffragettes, was scheduled to take place in December of 1908 [...]. I worked with might and main to assure that our women workers, who were to participate in the Congress, emerged as an independent and distinct group. I managed to carry out this plan, but not without opposition. My Party comrades accused me and those women comrades who shared my views of being ‘feminist’, and of placing too much emphasis on matters of concern to women only. At the time, there was still no comprehension of the extraordinarily important role in the struggle devolving upon self-employed professional women. Nevertheless, our will prevailed. A women’s workers’ group came forward at the Congress in St Petersburg with its own programme, and it drew a clear line of demarcation between the bourgeois suffragettes and the women’s liberation movement of the working class in Russia”.<sup>27</sup> Here we can clearly see how the working women had to separate themselves in this particular situation in order to achieve their rights in the political arena.

Since emancipation promotes equality, not opposition or competition with regard to the opposite sex, but rather collaboration between the sexes, it is logical to expect that men would also be involved in helping to resolve women’s—or gender—problems. Western feminist art is almost completely created by women. At the same time, among Bulgarian and Russian Socialist films, we see some produced by men upholding openly feminist (emancipatory) positions.<sup>28</sup>

This involvement of men in gender problems in the 1990s began to diminish with the growth of anti-emancipatory attitudes. The presence of the female body as a commodity spread not only in advertising, but also in art, which in many cases was mistakenly ascribed to sexual liberation. Despite this, there are nevertheless some examples of co-operation between men and women in films dedicated to gender issues. A good example is the conceptual co-operation between Baskova and Mavromatti, who jointly produced films such as *Kokki—The Running Doctor* and *Green Elephant Calf*. Both of these films are radical feminist dissections of personal and official machismo and of phallocracy as a principle in building a power hierarchy. For instance, there is a comic scene in *Kokki—The Running Doctor* in which two drunken men

measure the length of their penises. At the same time, as a result of the third wave of feminism, the activation of gay communities and the unisex techno culture of the 1990s, various new productions applied a completely new language to gender issues. An example is the video *The Last Valve* mentioned above. By symbolically stitching up my own labia, I illustrate an item in the first manifesto of the Ultrafuturo group, which proposes “overcoming sex and all its consequences for humanity”. The performance is also dedicated to the emergence of a new type of living and hybrid semi-living beings, created artificially in bioengineering laboratories as a product of tissue and Cyborg technologies. For these beings, gender is not a basis of discord, because they are not created with any particular biological sexes: they are sexless.<sup>29</sup> Ultrafuturo group predict that under the influence of biotechnology, which allows such beings to be artificially created, the concept of biological sexes and socially constructed gender will undergo change.

## Conclusion

The technological features of video clearly predetermine many of its differences from cinema. At the same time, however, they enrich and broaden the available means of expression. I have not covered all aspects of this technology, but I would like to conclude with a “video” commentary about the propagandist power of the cinema, which influences the consciousness of thousands of viewers through the entertainment industry.

In *On the BG Track* (2002), Krassimir Terziev brings together footage from Western mainstream films that mention Bulgaria, Bulgarians and “Bulgarianness”. The dialogue varies from typical clichés to strange attempts to attach “nationality” to exoticism. Of course, these samples merely contribute to creating a mythology from the unknown. In this way, with a slightly bitter sense of humour, the author comments on the tendency to present the unknown as something exotic, which is not only characteristic of Bulgaria and “Bulgarianness”, but also to any kind of difference, or otherness. In this vein, I hope that my text will serve to straddle the boundaries of the “exotic” and to enter the field of ideas: probably unknown, not because of their exoticism, but because of their ability to impart a new meaning to existing ideas.

Troy, NY, September 2009

*Translated from the Bulgarian by Mark Bossanyi*

## Notes

- 1 The word "guest" defines the status acquired by artists through traditional international cultural exchanges. Such exchanges allow artists to stay in another country for a few weeks or months in the encapsulated environment of an "artist residency" or an "international exhibition", which gives the guest a privileged status. This status does not put the guest in extreme local situations presenting any real challenge to them as foreigners. This makes any communication between different cultures merely superficial and representative.
- 2 There are two types of status given by the immigration authorities to foreigners, which allow artists to experience a foreign culture in depth. They allow artists to encounter various elements of the alien culture in the non-privileged position of an "immigrant". They no longer enjoy the "immunity" of a traditional international cultural exchange. In this way, they encounter the factors which shape the alien culture, not just a representative sample of such factors.
- 3 This phrase originates from a conversation between Lenin and Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was the Commissar of Arts (Комиссар по делам искусств Советской России) in Bolshevik Russia. It has different versions among the Eastern European countries. First published in Grigorii Boltianski, *Lenin and the Cinema*, Moscow, 1925, p. 19. Discussion on the origin of that phrase can also be read here: Victor Vatolin, "Hollywood across Kamenka. Study of the origin and the establishment of film production in Siberia", for the journal *The Notes of the Film Historian* [Киноведческие записки] no. 70, 2005 [www.kinozapiski.ru/article/232](http://www.kinozapiski.ru/article/232)
- 4 In order to win the dispute between General Electric and Westinghouse to introduce DC or AC as a standard in the USA, Edison publicly executed a number of animals in order to demonstrate the deadly power of AC and the risks it presents to consumers. This included filming the execution of the elephant Topsy in Coney Island in 1903. These demonstrations not only led to his success, but also to the invention of the electric chair.
- 5 Kazimir Malevich, "Painterly Laws in the Problems of Cinema" [Живописные законы в проблемах кино], in: *Cinema and Culture* [Кино и культура], no. 7-8, 1992; Margarita Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 147.
- 6 *Peredvizhniks* (wanderers or itinerants): a trend in Russian Realist painting from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was established as a democratic alternative to the dominant academic style, showing the diversity of social reality through the critic's view of contemporary life. Representatives: Vasily Surikov, Valentin Serov, Ilya Repin, Vasily Perov, Mihail Nesterov, Viktor Vasnetsov, etc.
- 7 Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film*, Op. cit., p. 149.
- 8 Kazimir Malevich, *Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting* [Введение в теорию прибавочного элемента в живописи], Collection of essays in 5 volumes, vol. 2, Shatskih (ed.), Moskva Gileya [Шатских, Москва Гилея] 1995-2004.
- 9 Kazimir Malevich, "Painterly Laws in the Problems of Cinema" [Живописные законы в проблемах кино], Op. cit., p. 158.
- 10 Ibid., p. 155.
- 11 Ibid., p. 157.
- 12 Ibid., p. 156.
- 13 Ultrafuturo is an artistic group founded in 2004 and engaged in issues of new technologies and the social, political and ethical dimensions of their application. Its members are Boryana Rossa, Oleg Mavromatti, Anton Terziev, Katya Damyanova and Miroslav Dimitrov. The Supernova Film Union was founded in 1995 in Moscow by Oleg Mavromatti and includes film directors, actors and producers involved in radical low-budget cinema. After the year 2000, Supernova continued to exist in Bulgaria.
- 14 An important representative of Russian Actionism, Mavromatti emigrated from Russia to Bulgaria in the year 2000. We have both lived in the USA for the last three years.
- 15 Action: this term has a different meaning in the history of Western performance. Frequently, the translation of the term "action" in the Western context gives rise to confusion. In the Bulgarian or the Russian context, there has so far been no in-depth study of this term and its meaning apart from those of a few Russian critics and artists such as Andrei Kovalev and Liza Morozova. The approximate meaning of "action" in the Bulgarian and Russian context is an artistic act deliberately organised in advance, or a spontaneous independent or collective artistic act conducted in a public place, which is neither a gallery nor a museum, or if conducted in one of these, it is not the organiser of the act. The purpose of the act is to transmit a message generally to an unprepared audience. The message is frequently social or political in nature.
- 16 Andrei Kovalev, *Russian Actionism 1990-2000* [Российский акционизм 1990-2000], no. 28-29, Moscow, WAM World Art Museum 2007, p. 5.
- 17 Close to Boris Groys's concept: "documentation as a work of art". Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics. From Artwork to Art Documentation", in: *Biomediale*, Dimitry Bulatov (ed.), Kaliningrad, National Centre for Contemporary Art, Yantarny Skaz National Publishing House 2004.
- 18 Mythology "producer" and mythology "consumer" are related to the terms "mythologist" and "reader of myths", used by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, New York, Hill and Wang 1972.
- 19 The meaning of this action is examined in detail in the section, "Who Holds the Camera".
- 20 Together with Olivia Robinson.
- 21 The visible or "performable" aspect of the Bulgarian mafia of the 1990s is associated with Bulgarian wrestlers.
- 22 We reacted to an interview in which Christo and Jeanne-Claude said that their aim was to create beauty and nothing else.
- 23 <http://art-bg.blogspot.com>
- 24 In 1995 and 1999, Houben Cherkelov, one of the members of XXL, organised the collective shows "New Bulgarian Painting", meant to determine the new tendencies. Svilen Stefanov, "Transformation Processes in the Bulgarian Painting of the 1990s. Postmodern Questioning of the 'Traditional Media'?", in the journal *Culture and Critique* (part 3), "The End of Modernity", Albena Vacheva, Georgi Chobanov (eds.), 2003. <http://litternet.bg/publish8/svstefanov/transformaciite.htm>
- 25 The only artist to work mainly in the area of photography.
- 26 Kollontai mentions this ideological and terminological division of emancipation and feminism in her autobiography (in connection with the 1908 Women's Congress).
- 27 Alexandra Kollontai, *Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman, 1926*. [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org)
- 28 Some examples are the Bulgarian films: *Monday Morning*, 1964; *Matriarchy*, 1977; *The She-Wolf*, 1965, and the Russian films: *Girls*, 1961; *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*, 1980; etc.
- 29 Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, "Towards a New Class of Being. The Extended Body", originally presented in *The Transvergence* stream of the ISEA06/Zero1 conference and published in *Intelligent Agent*, vol. 6, no. 2.

## Antonio Geusa

### Video, the Purposeful Outsider

#### A Critical Examination of the History of Video Art in Russia

The term videoart (видеоарт)—a coinage from the English language—entered the Russian art vocabulary in the early 1990s, when the first independent contemporary art galleries appeared in Moscow and legitimated its use. As an artistic practice, video had actually started a few years earlier, with the first consciously artistic tapes made in 1985—Andrey Monastyrsky's *Conversation with a Lamp* is the first instance found so far. Throughout this time, none of the pioneers of the medium—with the exception of the Prometheus Institute in Kazan—used the term video art to define the works that they made with the help of video technology.<sup>1</sup> In its initial years, video was the prerogative of a very small number of practitioners in the art underground—again with the exception of the Prometheus Institute—none of whom were in contact with the others. The ban on private ownership of the means of technological reproduction, imposed by the Soviet authorities, and the high prices of video cameras and recorders, when they did appear on the market, greatly hindered the diffusion of video in the art community—until the collapse of the Soviet Union, which lifted the ban and the prices fell. Tapes made during the Soviet era and immediately after did not circulate in the country and, in some cases, were not even shown to the public. The major difference with the West, where, as Patricia Mellencamp has pointed out, “video” entered the cultural vocabulary of the United States in the mid-1960s as a technology and as a discourse”,<sup>2</sup> was that, in Russia, video entered the vocabulary as a technology, but, crucially, not as a discourse.

David Ross's claim that it was the circulation of the texts written by the early practitioners that facilitated the affirmation of video in the United States—“it is in fact the emergence of the artist's voice—clear, insightful, powerful and fully controlled by the artist—that forms the foundation of video as an art form”<sup>3</sup>—cannot be applied to Russia. Only in a few cases was a production accompanied by written comments. Until the mid-1990s, critics ignored the productions of the early years to such an extent that, when the first independent galleries organised exhibitions with video in the early 1990s, it was believed to be a totally new genre—an “imported product”.

Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rehabilitation of nonconformist practices, a great volume of critical texts appeared, examining the art of Perestroika, particularly Moscow Conceptualism, Sots Art and

Leningrad's New Artists. The main reference sources were the essays, artists' statements or descriptions of artworks that artists and critics had written "in the communal kitchen"—a Russian expression for texts never intended to be printed in state-approved publications—which had circulated in the same way that underground literature and music circulated in any member of the Soviet Bloc—in the form of *samizdat* (clandestine copies). Video was not mentioned in these texts. Monastyrsky's case is exemplary. He did not write about his "performances for the video camera"—the first instances of video art in the country.<sup>4</sup> This was probably because he felt uneasy about "the eye that *was* constantly watching *him*", as he calls the devilish machine standing in front of him. In the video, he admits that the video camera had a controlling power over him to such an extent that he felt he was an actor in the performance, not its author. Furthermore, the novelty of the medium—he did not how to operate it—and the fact that no traces of the performances are left—Sabine Haengen took the tape away with her to Germany and no photographs were taken during the actions—might explain why there are no references to these works in Monastyrsky's writings.

Paradoxically, the few texts about video that existed did not catch critics' attention. The only two cases in the early years of artists writing about their video works—Boris Yukhananov and the Prometheus Institute—were ignored because they were not considered to be part of the nonconformist movement (there is no mention of them in the literature on the contemporary art of Perestroika). Yukhananov's tapes were regarded as alternative cinema, which meant that they were contextualised within the Parallel Cinema movement. The Prometheus Institute from Kazan was a group with no connections to the main underground movements of Leningrad or Moscow; indeed it made use of affiliations to state institutions. Their work was therefore unknown to people writing about art.

In the United States, video was supported from the very outset by publications with wide circulations in the art community. Besides magazines dedicated exclusively to video (and other media arts), such as *Radical Software*, *Afterimage*, *Vidicon* and *Televisions*, many art magazines—*Avalanche* and *Art News* to name just two—published special issues on video. These publications "were critical in promoting a vision of radicalised personal communications, providing an education for the unsophisticated and curious, and identifying a network of fellow enthusiasts".<sup>5</sup> In Soviet Russia, there were no magazines dedicated to contemporary art published in the country and addressed to the wider public. Art magazines in the proper sense of the word were a post-Soviet occurrence. They were very few and were devoted to contemporary art

in general. There was none dedicated exclusively to video art or with a special issue on video.<sup>6</sup> The first articles to mention video were reviews of exhibitions with videos.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the lack of information about the early instances, those texts scrutinising the period before the appearance of the contemporary art gallery, written years afterwards, tend to present partial accounts favouring certain trends and neglecting important issues. They primarily focus on listing the first artists who worked with video, describing the works that they made. They contain very little critical analysis about the impact that video had on art production.<sup>8</sup>

Another idiosyncrasy of Russia is that once the technology became available to artists, there was not a "video revolution". To quote artist Kirill Preobrazhensky, one of the early practitioners, "video entered the art world without much clamour".<sup>9</sup> In a totalitarian country—as Russia was in 1985—video could never be welcomed as a harbinger of change. In the United States, on the other hand, access to portable electronic technology was greeted with enthusiasm. As Chris Hill pointed out: "The manifestos and commentary by those caught up in the early video movement of 1968-1973 reflected an optimism stemming from the belief that real social change was possible; they expressed a commitment to cultural change that bordered on the ecstatic".<sup>10</sup> Bill Viola singles out two streams in American video, existing right from the start—the "group/communal" political committed artists/activists fighting to establish new social relations (Raindance, Videofreex, Ant Farm, Global Village, Teepee Videospace Troupe, TVTV) and the "personal/individual" artists challenging conventional mechanisms of art production and realisation in the exhibition and performance space (Bruce Nauman, Joan Jonas, Les Levine, Eleanor Antin, Richard Serra, Vito Acconci, Peter Campus, Nam June Paik).<sup>11</sup> The street protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s inspired the creations of the first group—also called "political video" by Gene Youngblood.<sup>12</sup> People were holding marches, staging pickets and demonstrations to show their disappointment with the political conservatism of Richard Nixon's presidency and US military aggression in Vietnam. Previously powerless, the minorities were making their voices heard. Non-whites, women and homosexuals formed associations and collectives to demand greater freedom and civil rights. Students questioned the authorities and the government, campaigning for freedom of speech and a more open education system. Video reflected all of this. The communication theories formulated by Marshall McLuhan, Herbert Marcuse, Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Norbert Wiener in those years professed that social change was actually possible by building new channels of information. Denouncing "the asymmetry between media producers/

transmitters and media consumers/receivers” and describing the media “as a ‘consciousness industry’ responsible for the alienation of the individual, the commodification of culture and the centralised control of communications technologies”, their writings spurred activists to rebel and take action.<sup>13</sup> The appearance of the first portable video cameras on the market gave people an effective tool for counter-information and objectivity. Enzensberger praised the use of video as a democratic medium which was able to confer “power to the people”: “For the first time in history the media are making possible mass participation in a social and socialised productive process, the practical means of which are in the hands of the masses themselves. Such a use of them would bring the communications media, which up to now have not deserved the name, into their own. In its present form, equipment like television or film does not serve communication but prevents it. It allows no reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver; technically speaking, it reduces feedback to the lowest point compatible to the system”.<sup>14</sup>

The Russian case proves that modes of video art which have “political videos” as a defining component in their development are not universal. The evolution of the mode is more affected by the local history of a particular community. In Russia, a phase of communal, political production was completely absent. When it did enter the art community, video was not employed as an instrument of resistance and protest or a medium to promote positive change. This could not have been possible in a totalitarian state. American tapes documented what was happening on the streets of the United States; in Soviet Russia, demonstrations—other than parades organised by the Communist Party to commemorate military victories—were strictly forbidden.<sup>15</sup> To avoid the Gulag, all forms of dissidence had to stay underground and develop strategies to protect themselves against the official Union of Artists. Making “political videos” in 1985 would have been illogical; the very act of making a personal performance for a video was “political”. Even if we overlook the objective difficulties of getting hold of the expensive equipment and cassettes, to what audience would these tapes have been addressed? Showing them to the members of the dissident art community who already knew everything about life underground was clearly pointless. To the West? It was strangely easier to smuggle paintings and drawings out of the country than video cassettes. A few artists made their works on “suitcase-sized” canvas or paper to allow foreigners, who had bought or received them as presents, to hide them in their luggage. At customs, the risks of confiscation were much lower than if they had tapes—a medium which, like film, needed the proper authorisation for export.<sup>16</sup>

At the heart of the American political videos lay a confidence that changes could be brought about by building an alternative network of information distribution; video as a democratic instrument was already underpinned by a democratic ideology. Access to cable and satellite television nourished these hopes. From the early 1970s, State Art Councils—particularly the one in New York—gave artists grants, enabling them to use the production facilities of cable and satellite television stations or to start their own independent channels. Barbara London affirms that it was the development of cable television and satellite broadcasting that led artists to think that the world was in fact becoming a global village.<sup>17</sup> The appearance of video technology would not have been enough to start the revolution on its own.

Video did not appear in “Media-Russia”—my equivalent of “Media-America”, as Michael Shamberg defined the complex mass-media apparatus dominating the diffusion of information among the American people in his seminal book *Guerrilla Television* (1974). In Soviet Russia, there were no cable or satellite stations, only state-managed channels where access was out of the question for dissidents. The censorship of the Soviet authorities was too pervasive to be eluded. If Pirate Television had actually aired its programmes, it is very likely that it would have been shut down within a few hours and its producers jailed. Even when the Soviet Union collapsed and cable television appeared in the country, the displacement of the state by the market meant that artists did not get any financial support to use these facilities.

Although political video was not a defining feature of early Russian video art, the same cannot be said for the personal/individual stream. This includes the works made by three amongst the pioneers—the groups Collective Actions, Pirate Television and the Prometheus Institute. “Artist’s video” is a formula that fits Russian history particularly well, because an analysis of the videos produced throughout the first decade shows that video was the medium that Russian artists used, firstly, to speak about themselves as artists and to define their role and function, i.e., to visualise their identity and, secondly, once nonconforming artists gained access to the public space, the medium that helped to define the processes of the realisation of a work of art, particularly the relationship with the public.

The question of self-identity was one of the most important issues for the dissident artist. All forms of individual, expressive subjectivity were banned in Soviet art. The role of an artist was in no way different from that of a factory worker or a peasant. They were all members of the same community and their work had to contribute to the consolidation of the idea of the happiness and prosperity of all citizens living in the Soviet Union. To a certain extent, it can be

said that a Soviet artist was asked to be nothing more than the hand behind the work. The Union of Artists dictated that a work could be started by one painter and completed by another, because what counted most was the depicted subject.

The relationship with the audience is another important issue, especially when we recall that Soviet Russia was a country where the audience—the general public—played no role in underground art. Nothing produced underground went on public display. It was only shown at semi-clandestine exhibitions in flats and studios or not shown at all. Performances were not made before chance passers-by. Only invited guests could assist the performances of Collective Actions and even they were, in most cases, kept away from the main place of action.

Historically, the appearance of video in Russia coincided with Gorbachev's Perestroika, while its affirmation corresponded to the social, economic and political reorganisation of the country after the implosion of the Soviet Union. Video witnessed the end of the underground existence of the nonconformist artists, who came to the surface soon after the opening of the first independent venues devoted to contemporary art. This transition is reflected in the video works made in those years. Although it would be incorrect to say that video was the form that documented this movement in great detail—this could not have happened, given the scarcity of video cameras and recorders, the absence of a distribution network and the lack of supports from the critics—it is to video, more than any other artistic medium, that we should look to get an uncompromised "picture of the author" during the passage from Soviet to post-Soviet times, from Communism to Capitalism, from underground to foreground.

In the works from the Soviet period, this "picture of the author" has to be drawn by deduction, because the tapes were not made for public display. In other words, when they made them, the artists did not believe that the message in their videos would ever be heard. It was only the appearance of independent venues that turned video into a medium able to speak consciously about the role of the artist. Until this happened, most Russians were convinced that the red flag would always fly over the Kremlin. Perestroika was a series of reforms imposed from above, which affected the economic structure of the country. The changes that it brought about, although welcomed by many nonconformists, were not perceived as irreversible or necessarily beneficial. The Thaw of the 1950s had already shown artists that a period of openness could end abruptly, at any moment. There was no reason to believe in permanent changes in the near future. In art, the future belonged to Socialist Realism, with its images of happy people building bridges, skyscrapers and factories. The dissident artists were anchored, instead, to the present. In their works, they exposed the

incongruence of Soviet political propaganda and real life (Sots Art), denounced the illogical ugliness of life in a communal space (Kabakov) or built alternative escapist worlds (New Artists, Monastyrsky, Collective Actions). When it appeared, video was not perceived as a tool that could engage in a dialogue with the audience of the future. The collapse of the Soviet Union happened too quickly to allow that. This lack of faith in the future also explains why copies were not always made.<sup>18</sup>

Video is in a privileged position, compared to other media, for three reasons. The first is based on Rosalind Krauss's intuition that video is, by its own medium-specific characteristics—immediacy, realism and presence—a mirror of the Self. Her "psychological model" in which "the human psyche" is "used as a conduit"<sup>19</sup> is particularly evident in those videos in which artists point the camera at themselves. These are highly personal works which nullify assumptions that what we see is not the truth. Even when they are fiction—e.g., most of Pirate Television's programmes—it is possible to grasp behind them glimpses of the real world, the artists' inner feelings and expectations. The lack of the spectacular—they contain no sophisticated visual effects or other indications of big budgets—engenders a feel of intimacy and warmth, which contributes to their perception as the pages of a personal diary. Secondly, the art market had no influence on video production. Video remained uncontaminated territory. This is particularly important when we consider that the art market was a new occurrence in Russia, only emerging in the final years of Perestroika. In the early 1990s, painting, drawing, sculpture and photography were not immune to the newborn market. Whereas video arrived in the United States at a time when artists were questioning "the traditional art object through non-marketable art forms such as performance, conceptual art, earthworks and body art",<sup>20</sup> and appeared a heaven-sent technology, diffuse through broadcast and infinitely replicable, with which to challenge the status of the object, video appeared in Russia when an art market was barely starting to form. Before Perestroika, foreign collectors interested in nonconformist art bought paintings in secret, directly from the painters.

For many years, video was not a saleable product. Private galleries only started to exhibit video at art fairs in the second half of the 1990s. When they first opened their galleries, owners of commercial spaces did not display much enthusiasm towards video, which was only included as a component of a show, alongside paintings, drawings, sculptures or photographs. It was not the sole work exhibited. The first single-channel video to be shown in Russia—Gia Rigvava's *Don't Believe Them. They Are All Lying* (1993)—was part of a non-profit-making exhibition. Once it became clear that video exerted a strong appeal on the audience, the attitude of these owners changed and they

started to finance video shows, yet it still largely failed to attract the interest of private collectors. Thirdly, video was new. It came without any tradition to revolt against or to conform to. It was new in much the same way as the new independent contemporary art venues. With the end of the censorship and control of the Union of Artists, the underground had lost its *raison d'être*. The production and realisation of a work of art acquired new impulses and new values. New rules had to be written from scratch. Those were years when artists were teaching themselves contemporary art. Through video, the art community acknowledged the presence of a new type of space and a new type of public, ones unknown to the underground generation. Not having any tradition, video was a field where experiments could be carried out without fear of failure. Artists were inexperienced, yet curious enough to explore. This is confirmed when we remember that video developed without the support of any critical discourse. As a consequence, we must proceed with great care in our examination of the works made in those years, without assuming that everything created during and soon after Perestroika had an important aesthetic or cultural value, merely because it was made in the initial period.

As a medium conveying the individuality of the dissident artist, there are as many identities as there are artists who pointed the camera at themselves. It is possible to pinpoint, however, one "general idea". Crucial here is the identity of the nonconformist artist that comes across in video with its first instance as an art practice in Russia—Monastyrsky's *Conversation with a Lamp*. Sitting half-naked and holding a table lamp between his legs, the artist is the only subject of this tape. The disquieting presence of the technology—he confesses that being before the "author's eye" of the video camera is intimidating—makes him feel that he is being tested as an artist. Because he is sitting in front of a video camera, he has to do "something artistic". An underground artist used to being ignored by the official art institutions, someone whose legitimacy as an artist comes from the recognition of his fellow nonconformists, is now asked to prove to an unspecified "entity" that he is an artist. Despite Monastyrsky's claims that the camera scares him, I believe that he does indeed want to speak to the video camera, because the camera gives him the chance to speak about himself, to open up. It does not matter whom he is addressing, as long as he can speak.

As one would expect from a representative of Moscow Conceptualism, Monastyrsky resorts to words. To prove that he is an artist, he speaks about his performances with Collective Actions and reads out poetry—his own verses (a poem about poets reading their works in public) and verses by Russian Romantic poets. Then, with a marker pen, he depicts on his chest the "picture of the author". The grotesque face that he draws belongs to the nonconformist artist. Not one artist in particular, but her/his essence, a deformed difference

is established with Monastyrsky as the specific subject of the tape. By giving this author a face, Monastyrsky is affirming uniqueness—albeit not in the form of a declamation. It is the artist who possesses her/his own identity, which is not determined by how useful s/he is to the common interest of the Soviet community. It is not the face of an artist whose inner world is secondary to the depicted subject, as Socialist Realism wanted art to be. Ultimately, it is the emergence of a need to show (and speak about) the individuality of the artist. This, in my opinion, is the most important feature of Russian video in the early years. Through video, it is possible to see and listen to the artist. It is possible to get closer, to enter her/his world. This is confirmed by Monastyrsky's following video, *Soft Handle*, in which we are actually shown the space where he lives in a long pan around the living room of the artist's flat.

Another common feature of the early years of Russian video art found in Monastyrsky's first video is the way the artist did not present himself as a victim of oppression. The picture of the nonconforming artist that comes from an analysis of the first tapes is not of a dissident. I would even venture to say that the Soviet video artist is apolitical, in terms of thought about the content of the work. It is only in Yukhananov's "video cinema" that it is possible to find direct references to the political climate of Perestroika—the dilemma of staying in Russia or leaving the country forever lying at the basis of *The Game of XO* (1997). However, neither Gorbachev, Stalin or any other Soviet leader is the protagonist or subject of Yukhananov's work. The Sots Artists used irony to deconstruct the myths propagandised by the Soviet authorities, while artists like Kabakov denounced the desolation of the communal space, capturing the urge to escape it. The works of the early practitioners of video, on the contrary, show the solidity of the parallel world(s) in which they themselves lived. They were not repeating the hypocrisy of political propaganda or projecting false images of happiness and prosperity. In their videos, they simply represent their own "kitchens". They speak about the world in which they live and work and imagine themselves as free subjects. Although banned from the public space, the artist is "free" within her/his own world. Seventy years of censorship had, effectively, made the underground a permanent reality with its own ideologies, codes and histories. Nonconformist artists lived in a parallel world which was no less real to them than the real one. For them, life and art were not two separate spheres of existence.

Soviet video artists did not aspire to conquer a new territory or to make their voices heard beyond the boundaries of the underground. Once again, the early video works show that the represented space is not the projection of an ideal world in which they would like to live. Rather, it is as real as the objective world of the state that already encloses them. This is particularly true when we look

at Pirate Television's tapes. Through video, we enter the communal space where Timur Novikov, Yuris Lesnik, Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe and the other members of the group lived and worked. The most evident feature of this space is the sense of freedom. The chaotic nature—real or apparent—of how the programmes are structured conveys the feeling that they were behaving in the way they actually wanted to behave. The "homosexual gloss" was not hidden behind the lines or worn as a mask to entertain the audience. This is simply the way that they were. Within the underground, there was no prohibition on homosexuality.

When the underground ceased to exist following the collapse of the Soviet Union, we witness a shift in the presentation of the "picture of the author". After 1991, video was appropriated as the perfect tool for making declarations. The Cold War had ended and, with it, the dominance of the Union of Artists. Conditions that were in force only a few months before were no longer valid. Private independent galleries were opening and the art market was blooming. Those were times in which, more than ever, artists felt the need to speak out. The whole concept of contemporary art had to be explained to the majority of people, who were not familiar with what the underground had produced during the Soviet era. Unlike literature, which had been widely read as samizdat, works of art had no circulation other than the studio or the flat where the artists lived or worked. A revolution was happening, and it was happening very fast. Almost overnight, Russia became part of the global village of technology, and the global economies of the art market and the wider spheres of capital. Video—the term now includes digital technology, because computers were already acquiring domestic status in the early 1990s—gave artists the long-awaited chance to overcome Russia's geographic borders and to speak to the world. The territory of contemporary art was no longer perceived as a reservation: it had become as wide as the whole planet. Video was celebrated as the art form that could end Russia's isolation and bring it closer to the rest of the art world. This wish is also explained by the fact that, to overcome the language barrier and reach an international audience, many videomakers added titles, and sometimes even subtitles or a voice over, in English. On a practical level, video offered advantages that other media did not possess. A videotape could now travel more easily than other artefacts, such as paintings or sculptures. It could be posted in a small parcel and it did not require any insurance costs. Its being reproducible made the risk of being lost or damaged during transportation irrelevant. Furthermore, the format used in Russia, Pal VHS, was the same as in the rest of Europe and it could also be played in the other countries because many video-players were able to read it.

One might say that the main identity of the post-Soviet video artist is as a preacher. Clearly, each artist has her/his own message to divulge. Video was especially praised for being able to make communication with the audience quicker and more effective. This quality led St Petersburg's New Academicians to resort to new technologies to propagandise the return to Classicism that lay at the heart of their movement. They even made a video version of their manifesto. Video cameras and a computer were able to resurrect the cultural glory of the Czarist past and to allow beauty to defeat the disorder in art brought about by the Russian avant-garde of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, because they could create a product that was mobile and could travel easily (it was also fortunate that their videos had English voiceovers or subtitles). Such an approach proves that becoming part of the global art community meant for some artists looking back at the past before the October Revolution, which in its turn, reflects profoundly conservative sentiments in times when the country was going through radical social, economical and political transformations. With the passage of time and the growing social and economic crisis—rising unemployment, galloping inflation and the withdrawal of welfare benefits—video became indispensable to artists who wanted to make their voices heard. The Moscow Actionists felt that the new society had marginalised artists. They had to shout and behave violently to catch people's attention. Video not only helped in terms of making their presence felt—their tapes were widely exhibited in Russia and abroad as single-channel videos or as part of installations.

The second characteristic of the first decade of Russian video art is the (re-)definition of the artist/audience relationship. Among the pioneers, this is first traceable in the works of the Prometheus Institute, the very first artists to show video installations in Russia. This was possible because they worked for a state educational organisation, the Kazan Aviation Institute, which had the necessary equipment for exhibiting nine video installations in one show. They lay outside the circle of nonconformist art in a city (Kazan) where there was no underground movement, which explains why the authorities allowed their video installations to be exhibited. Such works were not even considered to be art and so were regarded as harmless. Television sets and video players, in Kazan, did not worry the Union of Artists as they might in Moscow or Leningrad. The *Multi-Media* show (1990), where the Prometheus Institute showed its first video installations, marked the acknowledgement of a new type of public other than the sectarian one of the underground. This reflected the need to confront a new audience located outside the necessarily circumscribed boundaries of the underground. In his texts, Bulat Galeev mentions that people were positively surprised and highly amused by what they saw, yet there is no explanation of what the presence and the reaction of the public meant to the artist. Moreover, despite Galeev's assertions that what his group was doing was dissident art,

they benefited from privileges—access to equipment, technical assistance and public venues for exhibiting their works—denied to other nonconformists in the major cities.

The role played by the public in the production and realisation of contemporary art during the years of transition from Soviet to post-Soviet is not covered in the available literature on the Russian contemporary art of the past two decades. After the passage from underground to foreground, the critics and historians analysing the art of this period have continued to apply the same criteria that they used to examine the works of nonconformists when there was no possibility of exhibiting to a wider public. In other words, their analyses focus on the creator and her/his product.

The history of video art offers a new perspective in the analysis of the passage from the Soviet to the post-Soviet. By addressing aspects which have not been fully developed in the available literature—topics related to the realisation of a work of art, particularly the role of the post-Soviet independent art space and the wider public—it asks critics and historians to look at the art produced in those years from the outside. Without denying the complexity of the genre, video would appear to be the medium *par excellence* of the global village. A totalitarian country like Soviet Russia did not become part of the global village until Perestroika dismantled the system that kept its people locked inside their own country. But once the Soviet Union collapsed, it was video that was recognised—first by the artists and only later by the critics—as the most appropriate way of speaking to the world about their own identity.

First published: Antonio Geusa, "Video, the Purposeful Outsider. A Critical Examination of the History of Video Art in Russia", in: *History of Russian Video Art*, vol. 2. Antonio Geusa (ed.), Moscow, Moscow Museum of Modern Art 2009, pp. 7–20.

## Notes

- 1 Andrey Monastyrsky, the Collective Actions group and Boris Yukhananov in Moscow, the Pirate Television collective in Leningrad and the Prometheus Institute in Kazan are the most prominent pioneers in the history of Russian video art. For further information, see *History of Russian Video Art*, vol. 1. Moscow, Moscow Museum of Modern Art 2009.
- 2 Patricia Mellencamp, "Video Politics: Guerrilla TV, Ant Farm, Eternal Frame", in: *Discourse. Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, no. 2. 1988, p.78.
- 3 David A Ross, "Foreword", in: *Illuminating Video. An Essential Guide to Video Art*, Doug Hall, Sally Jo Fifer (eds.), New York, Aperture, Bay Area Video Coalition 1990, p. 11.
- 4 This is how Monastyrsky defined his first attempts with a video camera in an unpublished interview taken in Moscow on 31 August 2005. A detailed description of the story behind the making of *Conversation with a Lamp* can be found in my article Разговаривая с лампой о рождении видеoaрта ["Conversing with a Lamp on the Birth of Video Art"], in: *Арт Хроника [Art Khronika]*, no. 4. 2005, pp. 55–59.

- 5 Chris Hill, "Attention! Production! Audience—Performing Video in the First Decade, 1968-1980", in: *Video Data Bank* (N.D.), Chicago, Video Data Bank 2 May 2005. [www.vdb.org/resources/chrishill.html](http://www.vdb.org/resources/chrishill.html)
- 6 The first issue of a magazine entirely dedicated to video was published in 2005, *8½. Video Art of the New Century*, Antonio Geusa, Mikhail Nikitin (eds.), Moscow, WAM Gallery 2005
- 7 The first issue of the *Moscow Art Magazine*, e.g., contains a detailed review of Gia Rigvava's "video performance", *You Are Helpless, or All in All It Does Not Seem So Bad*, 1993.
- 8 The lack of funding for academic research in contemporary art by educational institutions (there is still no university faculty of media arts in Russia) and private organisations (contributors to art magazines do not always receive payment) probably explains this.
- 9 Interview with Kirill Preobrazhensky, 3 June 2004. In Russian. My translation.
- 10 Hill, Op. cit.
- 11 Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House. Writings 1973–1994*, London, Thames and Hudson 1995, p. 128.
- 12 Steven Durland, "Defining the Image as a Place. A Conversation with Kit Galloway, Sherrie Rabinowitz & Gene Youngblood", in: *High Performance*, no. 37, 1987, p. 48.
- 13 Hill, Op. cit.
- 14 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media", in: *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, John G. Hanhardt (ed.), Layton, UT, Gibbs Smith, Rochester, NY, Visual Studies Workshop Press 1987, p. 98.
- 15 In 1979, David Ross recorded The Nest's performance on tape at the break of dawn in a deserted park on the outskirts of Moscow to prevent arrest and confiscation.
- 16 In 1985, Sabine Haensgen used the diplomatic mail channel of the West German Embassy in Moscow, otherwise the cassettes that she taped during her 1984-85 stay in the capital—among them, *Conversation with a Lamp*—would probably have been lost forever.
- 17 Barbara London, "Independent Video. The First Fifteen Years", *Artforum*, no. 9., 1980, p. 15.
- 18 Video was not, of course, the only area to reflect the identity of the nonconformist artist in this period of transition. The number of early practitioners was too small for it to be regarded as an all-encompassing movement.
- 19 Rosalind Krauss, "Video. The Aesthetics of Narcissism" (1976) in: *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, Op. cit., p. 45.
- 20 Marita Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form. Great Expectation and the Making of a History", in: Hall, Fifer, Op. cit., p. 107.

My essay explores the borderline territory of Russian art, which came into being due to the mutual attraction of two art genres: performance and video. I would like to specify that the term performance is used throughout this text as an universal one, embracing such forms of artistic activity as action art and happening.

The development of performance and video in the last decade has been extremely active and fruitful, taken both independently and in joint artistic projects. Their mutual impact has also been significant as an influence on the art situation as a whole. Therefore it seems essential to sum up the results of their development and to define the range of problems generated by their interaction.

One of the differences between contemporary and classical aesthetics is that the former has replaced an utopian urge for the synthesis of arts with an aggressive expansion and a will to capture more and more new territory. It is worth mentioning that the very concept of performance is borderline in its nature. This is a genre in between visual art and theatre, which is evident, e.g., from RoseLee Goldberg's book on the history of performance.<sup>1</sup> In contemporary aesthetics, the genres balance on an edge: painting is something more than just a picture and performance (meaning rendering, presentation); it is something more than just theatre. Performance has become a tool for avant-garde expansion into new territory. This is the function it performed within Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism and post-War Modernism. The same goes for the interaction of performance and video, which is in essence a new spatial opportunity appropriated by performance for art.

The production based on the performance/video combination has its own history and traditions in the international art process. However, the scholarly classification that could be employed for its description is only at the preliminary stage, because the process of the genres' interaction is too diverse. As corroboration, I can cite the opinion of Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, editors of the collected essays on American video art, *Illuminating Video. Essential Guide to Video Art*.<sup>2</sup> They also consider that such a classification at this stage can be only auctorial and have built their guide on the same principle.

It is significant that while in English-language literature a system of terms has already been formed for the description of video and performance interactions, in the Russian-language texts, however, it is only beginning to

develop. The central concept here is video performance. It is used widely to describe both a record of art actions and a performance made especially for the camera, as well as a work which integrates action into close circuit installation and TV experiments. This concept is narrowed down in such terms as "performance oriented tape" and "tape of actions", which deal with records, and "performance-based video" or "performance-and-video piece", describing works of a more symbiotic nature. There also exists the term "theatrical video performance", which has come into existence in connection with various borderline genre experiments.

I think that either due to the diversification of its forms or because of its experimental character, the concept of video performance is "elusive", possibly because the very terms of video and performance as subjects of operative aesthetics have no rigid definitions. Therefore, I consider it necessary to introduce at least one more datum line, from non-screen to screen video, I will try to discuss video performance.

To me it seems vitally important that non-screen video is made as an experiment, as a test exploring the outlines of a new space for further expansion and capture, while the screen video is more likely to be made for presentation. This does not exclude accomplishment of various kinds of expansion in the screen video, but are usually realised on a more abstract, theoretical level and not as a result of direct action as in actions by those artists who experiment with their own bodies in front of the camera. In their purest form, the non-screen forms of video are a phenomenon that has largely become history, from its heyday in the late 1960s until the early 1970s. At the same time, it was these pioneers of video art that have influenced all further development of this art form and continue to play a significant role in it.

As for screen video, where the authenticity syndrome of the non-screen is gradually being overcome, we also need to separate independent art production, wholly introverted, where performance can be used as the main plot line or in a secondary role, from documentary. The latter can be considerably accomplished in its presentation form, but can still carry the seal of authenticity and serve to relocate an art action from one mode into another. The question remains open to dispute whether documentary can be at all regarded as screen video, i.e., video art or not.

For example, the focus of the Collective Actions group [Коллективные действия] are experiments in artistic expansion, the myths of which are based on numerous witness accounts, pieces of evidence and various kinds of documents. In the view of the system providing storage and representation

of the past, all this documentation is indeed art. Therefore it is painstakingly collected, described and studied. Technically a video recording of the group's actions, although amateur uncut footage, is in fact a most valuable art object, waiting for recognition and involvement of a correct representation ritual. On the other hand, the postmodern object of art shows an enviable evasiveness, like that of a Russian fairytale dough boy, Kolobok, escaping the system's attempt to fix it. The contemporary artist consciously plays with its ephemeral qualities. Nowadays, the fact that this material continues to provoke the question of it being art at all only serves to strengthen its position in contemporary culture.

I believe that the paradigm revealed can be used as an analogy for a rather substantial amount of video material left as a result of art actions of the 1980s and the 90s. Video documenting the intentions of art expansion is automatically acknowledged by the system of representation, becoming a screen form. The difficulty which exists in Russia is a rather imperfect mechanism of acknowledgement. This seems to be the only reason why the footage of the Collective Actions, and the work of Natalia Abalakova and Anatoly Zhigalov, Vadim Zakharov, Alexey Isaev and Sergey Kuskov, Anatoly Osmolovsky, Alexander Brener and Oleg Kulik are not introduced into contemporary Russian art, although they lie on the surface and have recently been exhibited with increasing frequency.

It would be premature, however, to classify this material as conventional video art, as its active position within culture is much more interesting. The problems of auto-recording recurrently feature in the works of various artists, but are far from being recognised, not only in Russia but also on the international scene. As an example, Olga K Kisseleva's *Plane* (2000) is a banal video record rather accurately expressing the special sensuality of the temporal state we experienced.

The union of video and performance that originally emerged in the form of documentation had a crucial influence upon the history of video art both in the West and in Russia. It is thought that Nam June Paik, buying almost the first portable Sony camera, which appeared in 1965, was motivated by the necessity of recording the Fluxus performances in New York. In Russia, an event of similar importance took place, in 1984 or 1985, when Sabine Haensgen brought a video camera to film the Collective Actions' actions.

This reflects the fact that the Russian artistic scene is almost 20 years behind. I do not mean this as a criticism: on the contrary, in Soviet Russia the artistic chronology demonstrates that all innovations were accepted literally "red hot".

The legendary Slepian started experiments with visual art happening as early as the late 1950s, maybe earlier than Allan Kaprow and Jim Dine. Let us take the dynamics of group formation in the field of art actions. The group Movement [движение] was formed in 1962. During the 1970s, actions were performed by such artists as Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Mikhail Roshal, Rimma and Valeriy Gerlovins and the Toadstools [Мухоморы]. The Collective Actions started their actions in 1976, and the performance activities of Totart in 1980. By the 1980s these practices were no longer new for Russia.

Of course, its scope cannot be compared to what was happening in Europe, the USA and Japan. After John Cage and Jackson Pollock opened the post-War way of total freedom of artistic expression, there followed a huge wave of artistic practices based upon personal, bodily involvement of the artist into the element of art. The pioneers here were the Gutai group in Japan, Allan Kaprow and Jim Dine in the USA, Yves Klein and Ben Vautier in France, Piero Manzoni in Italy, Fluxus in Germany, Gilbert & George in the UK, Hermann Nitsch and Rudolf Schwarzkogler in Austria.

What was happening on the Russian art scene, mainly focused on Moscow, was comparable to the Western scene in the sense of the periodisation of modernist development. But technically the Russian artists were not as well equipped. They tried to remedy this with the means of cinema, with Zvezdochytov's films that date from the mid-70s. But these intentions were not fulfilled and the gap in the development of video art is mainly explained by the inadequate material and technical resources.

In the West, the rise of video can be dated from 1965, when relatively cheap Sony cameras appeared on the market. By the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s, Nam June Paik, Vostell, Bruce Nauman, Martha Rosler, Vito Acconci, Ulrike Rosenbach, Valie Export, Wojciech Bruszewski and many others already used video technology to explore a range of problems which can be narrowed down to the idea of physiological, bodily reclamation of video space. Video and television space became a focus of close attention for the artist; therefore, this stage of its development is marked by a great number of formal experiments where performance played a significant role.

Russian artists joined the development of video art during a later stage, when video had stopped being art's *terra incognita*. Artistic thought recognised video as an audiovisual means, as a tool enabling the artist to explore and visualise various aspects of actuality, such as the problems of collective subconscious, dominance and repression, the new temporality, the forming of an identity, and so on.

As an example, Douglas Gordon's *Divided Self* is well-known to all, and particularly in Russia after its screening at the Black Box exhibition. It is formally a minimalist auto-experiment with a camera. But unlike the genre's classics, this video does not read as a self-contained message. The film shows two male arms, one hairy, one shaved, wrestling with each other. Only after studying the background of Gordon's works and having discovered that he works with memory and with the Other, comprising our identity, one can recognise that this performance visualises different entities wrestling within a human being. Then one can appreciate the wit and subtlety with which the Scottish artist has used the form of video performance to visualise and dramatise these subtle substances.

*The Divided Self* is a clear example of the characteristic trend of the genre's development through the late 1980s until the early 90s. Its main features are existential engagement, the return of the plot, narrative and communication. This tendency can be seen in the works of the leading authors of the 1980s and 90s, such as Pierrick Sorin, Matthew Barney, Pipilotti Rist, Douglas Gordon, Sooja Kim, Sam Taylor-Wood, Tracey Emin, Mariko Mori, Paul McCarthy, Peter Land, Katarzyna Kozyra, Christian Jankowski and others.

At the same time, in its formal aspect, video performance starts to acquire the qualities of screen-ness. For the pioneers of video performance, their deeply private interaction with the camera was more important than interaction with the screen, while for the contemporary video artist, this correlation is being revised. Even while working with the camera, an artist takes into account the installation aspect. Screen is viewed as the interface between the artistic experiment and the extraneous spectator within a space. This is a sign of a more complicated concept of the spatial structure that emerged in art due to the formal experiments conducted 30 years ago. I would like to remark upon the development of this concept that promoted the wide spread of the video installation genre.

Russian video artists have entered the stage when the spatial configuration described above has reached a status quo. So the pathos of their experiment is distinctly directed outward onto the screen, and this is frequently rather emphatic. The tendency of this development of pathos has become a significant feature for video performance during the 1990s. Even in such a formal video as *Light in the Tunnel* (1991) by A Alexey Belyaev and Kirill Preobrazhensky, which pays homage to early experiments by Paik and Weibel, there can be traced distinctly a will to establish a social position, to criticise mass-medialisation of war. In Gia Rigvava's work, *They Are All Lying* (1993), the outwardly directed message already dominates. The formal experiment with video performance,

conducted more in the sphere of language, is represented in the work of Oleg Kulik, *The Red Room*, and Maxim Ilyukhin, *The Tunnel* (2001), which should be interpreted in connection with very private allusions present in both works. In my view, this tendency to use video performance to explore social phenomena is most distinct in the work by Dmitry Bulnygin, *Lola* (2000).

The following argument refers to screen video in its main function: representation. Media is used here to relocate art action from the actual form of expression into the representative one. As in the case of Collective Action, this kind of video is a distinct form, an ephemeral documentation which does not claim to be art, but is made in the form of art, including works by Dmitry Gutov, Maria Chuykova and Elena Kovylna. But even in these works, the coupling of performance with video breeds illegitimate meanings. For instance, Dmitry Gutov, while directing an action by the Radek Community in 2000, manipulated the source material, presenting a prank exercise by young art-activists as a conscious protest action, in the spirit of the young fighters for civil rights in the late 1960s. The same element of manipulated editing is characteristic of the works by Chuykova and Kovylna dating from 1999-2001.

In some films, performance is used as only one of the various problems of the visual language. They show how the genre is taken on as if an integral part of video art, e.g., see works by Alexey Isaev, Natalia Borisova, the Bluesoup group (Съиний Суп) and Arano Infante. These videomakers demonstrate a variety of approaches to performance. Alexey Isaev's "movementary" (choreographic) performance filmed in 1993 was included in a syncretical art project exploring the functioning of the collective subconscious in the virtual space. Borisova uses elements of performance in her experiment with the language of psychedelic cinedrama (*Enjoy!* 1998). *The Bluesoup* aesthetics of a sci-fi thriller are driven to such heights of absurdity that the characters' actions can only be interpreted as an artistic conceptual action (*Camouflage*, 1997). Arano Infante's video uses various forms of modernism, performance being one of them (*Homourbanas*, 1998).

It should be noted that nowadays screen video is becoming the most democratic art form. With a situation of inadequate funding of Russian cultural institutions, video has enabled the regional scene to realise effective self-representation in both local and international spheres, allowing this media to experience a revival in the late 1990s. This tendency is illustrated in various works by regional videomakers (Dmitry Bulnygin, Viktor Mizin [both Novosibirsk], the SNK group [Kemerovo]). Comparing works by SNK and by artists from Novosibirsk, the direction of regional video development can be shown distinctly, e.g. in *Insect Art*, 2000. If *Insect Art* shows a wary

criticism and even a kind of squeamishness towards the dominating modernist symptoms in culture, the Novosibirsk circle, on the contrary, demonstrates a fully-fledged and unconditional "clinging integration". The latter appears to be a more successful strategy for abandoning provincial isolation. This strategy conditioned by the influence of Moscow radical performance has also been assimilated by artists of other regional scenes, e.g. Izhevsk (Maxim Verevkin, *Prometheus*, 2001). But in the provinces, this fashionable Moscow "pest" has been critically reinvented and enriched by a special local colour. The regional style is distinguished by a characteristic fusion of radical transgressiveness and simple-mindedness of mass-media invocations, here reinvented as a mighty motivation for contemporary Russian creativity.

I would like to conclude my paper with an analysis of a project from a previous decade, which, while it may not meet the formal criteria of this topic, is interesting to interpret here in a wider sense. In the structure of this project, the factors of interaction and mutual influence of video and performance are filtered out and fixed, making evident some conclusions I could not touch upon in this concise paper. I would like to focus on Oleg Kulik's *The Piglet Gives / Out Presents* (1992). The action took place in a gallery space, in which a pig was killed and pork was divided amongst the attending audience. At first glance, this action looked a little irrelevant and even simple-minded, and so gave rise to heated criticism. But Kulik had one very important intention: not to deconstruct the actual contextuality, but to fix its new configuration, to start building new outposts of artistic expansion, and this intention was not theorised upon by participants of this heated discussion. His gesture was aimed at the information space, to the legitimating force of mass-media, and the use of video installation in the project was in accordance with this. There was no institution that could take such avant-garde experiments under its symbolical jurisdiction, and it could find shelter and recognition only in the space of democratic media, which even to this day has a high level of public reputation.

In this sense, the work demonstrates a specific Russian character. In the West, performance is legitimised by the institutional system (critics and museums), which we in Russia neither had nor have now. In Russia, the legitimisation process is performed by mass-media, and the action at Regina Gallery has vividly demonstrated this cultural reality. *The Piglet* was a forerunner of Moscow radicalism, characterised by mass-media provocation realised by arousing the sacred zones of religion, national identity and the collective subconscious. Therefore, analytical performance has not become relevant in Russia, as, e.g., that of the Collective Actions, where neither mass-media space nor the intellectual performance, e.g., by Douglas Gordon, existed yet. This type of artistic discursivity is still impossible in an art-reflexive space.

*The Piglet Gives Out Presents* and the work of Collective Actions make us recognise that video performance exists without a system in Russia, and for its acknowledgement and classification, a certain hierarchy of relations has yet to form and put everything into an international perspective.

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*Translated from the Russian by Alexandra Litvina*

## Notes

- 1 RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present*, London, Thames & Hudson 2001.
- 2 *Illuminating Video. An Essential Guide to Video Art*, Doug Hall, Sally Jo Fifer (eds.), New York, Aperture 2005.

## Ruben Arevshatyan Glorious Futilities

For Armenia, the process of transition from the Soviet epoch to the new era of independent nation state was marked by serious political and social upheavals. It started from a romantic struggle for democratisation and independence, the rise of a nationalistic wave, the Nagorno-Karabakh War, severe economic crisis followed by a subsequent liberalisation of society, which also brought with itself neo-Liberal trends and neo-Capitalistic effects in socio-cultural development. In the extremely polarised post-ideological Armenian society today, it is possible to follow on different social levels, quite contradictory emotional and perceptive states which in general could be described as a striving to improve the quality of life, offering the idea of “prosperity” as a conception for a better future, experiencing at the same time a certain nostalgia towards the Socialist past. Despite the social and temporal contradictions, those consumptive programmes freely apply/manipulate the conceptions belonging to different social and political world outlooks, which when combined hardly produce an image of rational social order.

If we question what is the main sign that would indicate the shift of epochs in the post-Soviet Armenia, one of the most common answers will definitely concern the change of images. The changes of visual typology that determine the paradigm of new socio-cultural state have touched in fact all aspects of neo-Liberal cultural reality. New characters have intruded into the urban landscapes, the new buildings of neo-Capitalist “wild architecture”, the new pictorial and sculptural monuments that have come to substitute the old symbols of former ideological society, etc.

One such significant example of the substitution of imagery is the huge TV monitor in Yerevan that is displayed in exchange for Lenin’s monument at the Republic Square (formerly Lenin Square). Instead of the static idol that used to be the main ideological symbol of the Soviet epoch, representing both the conception of a “bright future” and centralised totalitarian system, now there is a visual interactive surface of dynamic imagery. Flowing together with the reflections upon the glass surfaces of new urban architecture is the continual drift of pictures appearing on the screen, creating a sense of fleetingness of time and frailty of any meta-narratives. But on the other hand, the kitschy aesthetics and content of local video clips, commercials and political advertisements assert the culturalisation logic of neo-Liberal society by reflecting the “eternal” essence of both national self-consciousness and the consumptive nature of the new society, which is in its early phase of accumulation of capital.

In that endless flow of images, it is possible to follow a general trend vectored to establish and/or define the image of the new "protagonist", which would represent the new epoch. But the establishment of that image paradoxically leans towards the "heroic" images and the "hero-forming" technologies of the past epoch, creating a feeling of *déjà vu* or a sense of backward development of time and history. That queer combination of representational forms also creates a certain dichotomy in the static disposition of the "monumental" electronic device and dynamic multitudes of characters shuffling in a rush on the screen surface, trying to strike static poses but being displaced by the other potential "heroes" waiting in line.

The transformations of the image that were taking place in Armenian contemporary art were also in a certain way connected with changes in the media. The video image not only released the character from static representation, but also shifted the focus onto new aspects of the very logic of perception and formation of the image. By the mid-90s, the appearance of video in the Armenian contemporary art situation, as a new media for representation (first as a part of installations, and later as an autonomous form of art) coincided with the moment of serious reconsideration of the image of the protagonist and subjects of representation in local contemporary art productions.

Since the end of the 1980s until the mid-90s, images and subjects of the revolutionary romantic period prevailed in artistic expression. They were fraught with a zeal to announce the end of history (though judging by their avant-garde gestures and positions, it might seem that they were trying to contradict the old history with a new one) and to fill the perceptive disparity that existed in between reality and its representation, which were now substituted with qualitatively new artistic positions.

The appearance of introverted, contemplative perspectives since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the works and projects made by many artists belonging to different generations could be considered perhaps as a general tendency which strictly distinguishes it from the pathetic intonations of the preceding revolutionary decade, where the artists, besides changing the language of representation, were also trying to consider art as an effective instrument that was able to influence social reality.

In contrast to the evolving "rationalising" trends within neo-Liberal and neo-Conservative culturalisation logic, the new characters and subjects that started to appear in the video works of different artists were now increasingly focused on the re-readings and deconstructions of imposed (by the very same

culturalisation logic) identities, psychological states, complex aesthetic, cultural and perceptual superposition, all considered from the perspective of contemporaneity.

The other important feature that distinguishes those new artistic approaches and which in fact was depicted as a main subject for this video selection, is the apparent accentuation of absurd, futile and irrational actions, contemplations and superpositions that gain different forms, different manifestations and different energetic tensions in the works that were created in the period of 1998–2006.

One of them, however, is an exception in the sense of temporal belonging. Hamlet Hovsepyan's untitled 16mm experimental film made in 1976 (which was converted into video format and presented for the first time in 2005 at his solo exhibition in Yerevan), through the monotonous repeating motion of a man walking around a big rock, visualises the emotional tension of the stagnation of the 1970s, where absurdity of action becomes an allegory for the existential condition, and in a certain sense, the only way out from the situational deadlock. The second untitled video made by Hamlet Hovsepyan in 2006 on the basis of ideas that the artist developed in 1974, is a still image of an electric wooden pillar that was shot today exactly replicating the aesthetic and compositional principles specific to the experimental cinematography of 1970s. The only elements that purposely give away the temporal belonging of the video are the film scratches (the artificiality of which is delicately emphasised) made with a computer program. That laconic image echoes the aesthetics and spirit of the 1970s in its meaningless dramatic tension, which creates feeling of *déjà vu* in the context of the backward development of time.

Another author, Haroutyun Simonian, in his untitled video performance that was produced in 2004 in collaboration with Utopiana Association and Centre pour l'image contemporaine Saint-Gervais, Genève, presents another "meditative" state where the naked artist, during 20 minutes, fights with himself, trying to define the limits of the body and its movements in the social space. His desperate attempts at liberation, which in the consequence of painful falls and hard risings, creates on the one hand a sensation of total hopeless, meaningless situations, and on the other, it discloses deep existential conditions. Another movement of the state of meaninglessness is presented in Sona Abgaryan's untitled video (2006), where the artist is moving in front of the fixed camera in a certain rhythm. These movements cannot be qualified either as dance, gymnastics, struggle (or imitation of struggle), nor as disordered neurotic convulsions. It is possible to see all these aforementioned states in one, which represents personal resistance toward the invisible, absorbing state of systemised harmony.

The meditative state could be described as purposeful, but at the same time, as an obviously futile action entrenched in idiotic manifestation. This comes out in AZAT's *Don't Worry* short video (2001), where the artist presents the simple process of blowing up a balloon, as an ironic reflection upon the social expectations of a "work of art". Grigor Khachatryan's untitled video (1998) presents the process of grave digging in reverse, which concludes with syllogistic speculations on the rational social understandings regarding the meaning of life, contradicting his own "idiotic" position for ratiocination. "At first, I thought I would grow up and become an artist, then I thought that I would grow into an idiot, now I think that I'll die if I grow more. Therefore, when I die I have not become great enough. Therefore when I die, I'll be great. Grigor Khachatryan, a name high and delightful".

In the background of the gradual fragmentation of society, after the fall of the "last hope of an alternative social order" and the reestablishment of neo-Conservative power systems, the development of a new socio-cultural situation evolves trends of backward development, of history at a certain moment starting to evoke social thinking, a sensation of fatality and incapacity to change the binary conception of the world. But the paradox of this new era is in the persistence of past experience and the realisation of the effects that relate to the logic of the society of spectacle. But despite the persistence of that consciousness, the drama of split personality and rapture between conceptions and personal experience leads to the detonations of irrational upsurges.

The video performance *Civic Commotion* (2000) by David Kareyan is an explicit reflection on the split personality, viewed in the context of the backward development of history, expressed through the outburst of the irrational blind fury of a patriarchal man, as a result of bankruptcy and disability of liberating and emancipating conceptions, which had in fact affected not only the consciousness, but also the body of the patriarchal society.

Karine Matsakian, in her untitled video (2002), reflects on the conflict between the contemporary and traditional values of the world. The doll displays acts of conflict as a symbol of maternity. The interrelation of the artist and the doll represents the duality of the game, where the artist, associating herself with the contemporary world, seems to reject traditional heritage, continuing to remain at the same time a daughter and a mother.

Another example of the "meditative" process is represented in Astghik Melkonyan's *Kilikia* (2002) video, where the young artist covers her naked body with arabesque style ornaments (deprived of any symbolic significance) to the tune of one of the most important romantic/patriotic Armenian songs,

"Kilikia". The automatism of process subsequently shifts the very character of the act from illusion of purposefulness to meaninglessness, repeating neurotic movements entrenched in desperation, as well as symbolic and physical disintegration of the body in the imposed stereotyped identities.

In her videos, Diana Hakobyan offers parallels between the games that we usually play in our childhood and life in society, where the person acting in the video is trying to resist by breaking the imposed social conceptions, following at the same time the rules of the game or fusing it as in a certain mystical ritual. The problem of a disparity between essence and phenomenon, which is being filled by imposed conceptions and stereotyped identities rationalised by neo-Conservative, consumptive perspectives on reality, comes out in the videos of several artists. Arman Grigorian's *What is Art and Who Creates It?* (2004) presents philosophical contemplations around inconsistent combinations of ideas and objects. Ignoring the customary form of questions and answers directed to a wide audience, the artist tries to emphasise the reality that lies in between the image and text.

Hovhannes Margaryan, in his *A Hammock Story* (2005), reflects on the subject of image and/or identity formation regarded in the context of cultural and historical narratives. By reinterpreting those narratives through banal conversations or childish games played by adult artists who pretend themselves to be various well-known personages from art history—like Andre Breton or Russian artist Serov, or patron of art Mamontov—in the first part called "'Bourgeoisie rushes' on European and Russian art" (reinterpretation of Serov's painting *The Girl with Peaches*), the artist makes parallels between creativity and contemporaneity, depriving at the same time the subject and the characters from their cultural and historical context. The second episode, where the philosopher tells the little girl the fairytale of the "Scarlet Flower", presents the very mechanism of stereotype imposition. Concluding with the third episode, "March of the Proletariat across the Russian Taiga" depicts a man rhythmically walking across the snow, armed by those imposed stereotypes in a process of hopelessly searching for his unique "own way". It is also possible in other videos to follow the persistence of impartial attitudes upon reality or cultural product or any action due to which the subject of consideration first loses its meaning and symbolic, cultural and contextual significance, and only afterwards starts to turn into a new narrative, gaining new imagery. Tigran Khachatryan's *Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovsky's famous film that was one of the most significant symbols of late Soviet dissident culture and world outlook) belongs to the series of films called *Garage Videos*. Those films are reinterpretations of well-known movies, made by classic directors. The artist re-enacts the film, freeing it from traditional limitations of genre and

style, attaching to it through personification a certain autonomous essence, being interested as he says in the exploration of the perceptual differences of the same film by his and his parent's generations.

Vahram Agahsian's videos present the archaic image of late Soviet Modernist architecture or the image of the Proletarian, presented in a hazy environment, in uncertain construction. This could be perceived as showing certain nostalgic feelings about utopian projects or just anthological views of something that has already lost its significance, but also gives the viewer an opportunity to develop her/his own meaning to the presented futile images and actions.

Today social utopias and revolutionary expectations have been substituted by everyday micro-utopias and mimetic strategies. The impossibility of any direct critical positions against society based on the illusion of marginality, brought with itself the sensation of futility in regard to attempts to overcome the general logic of culturalisation. Many artists on the Armenian contemporary art scene began a process of dramatically reconsidering the role of art and the feasibility of its confrontation against the "rolling mill" of the society of spectacle.

In the artistic approaches presented, the "futility" of any critical positions with regard to the logic of neo-Conservative socio-cultural developments turns into an allegory of an existential condition, a form of creative liberation—a certain method of autonomous resistance against the backward development of history, hoping that the focus on contemporaneity will again one day turn the development of time forward. The solution to the global problem could depend, as in Sona Abgaryan's *Player 13* video, on the most unnoticeable participant, a new protagonist, which continuously contradicts her/his autonomous "glorious futility" (as the main condition of creativity) with large-scale rationalisations, imposed regulations and stereotypes.

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## Mihnea Mircan Monuments to Nothing

*"The post-Communist condition is a project to be realised in its entirety. As with Lyotard's postmodern condition, we find ourselves in a social, political and cultural mutation wherein the past will not cease to come from the future, not in the guise of a ghost, but as everything that we are because of what we were, as everything that we could have been. From this condition of our anterior future, where each of us are neither failed nor fulfilled, just contingent, Communism is as much the name of evil as is post-Communism the name of redemption".<sup>1</sup> (Ciprian Mihali)*

The East awaits its Derridian reconstruction, a system capable, in its oscillations and ramified apertures, of reconciling the destruction of the past with the falsification of the future. The brutal facts and overwhelming statistics, whether recollections or destinies, consumed in the absence of a collective meaning, question the corrupted figures of collective time—be they institutions or monuments—in a polymorphous, mutable synthesis. This reorganises the rapport between Communism, Liberalism and the idea of historical catastrophe in the Eastern political imagination, each as a facet of a complex anachronism. Eastern Europe has produced more history than it could consume, says Winston Churchill, so much so that the East can claim both the role of laboratory for a European future and that of a museum for its political history. It is a geographical parergon, where time and history accelerate and decelerate past each other, where post-Communism and globalisation endlessly complicate each other, a place that will never cease to aspire to its own "truth in history", even if constructed from disjointed, convulsed fragments.

Articulating an ethics of memory has been a stable undercurrent in works by thinkers and artists since the fall of the Iron Curtain. This text pairs projects by Deimantas Narkevičius and Gintaras Dzidziapetris with an investigation of a specific case of the mnemonic, the problematic incarnation of remembrance in monuments. The two artists' compelling critique of traditional monumentality can be read as a way of visualising its reinvention, as a monumentality that is not captive to collective Freudian slips, fabricated narratives or the deformities of political propaganda. Narkevičius and Dzidziapetris engage the apparatus of the monumental, the elisions, collective epiphanies and complicated relation to our forgetfulness that monuments rely on. They invite a reflection on contradictory uses of monuments and on the possibility of a monument that integrates contradiction—dissent, imagination, diverging

purposes, tentative histories—a complicated monument for a complicated state of affairs. Throughout this text, the “monument” has less to do with metaphors of political hostility set in bronze or stone than with the victories, gaps or losses that deserve, today, monumental sites of public negotiation. Fervent debates the world over about what to remember—where, how, and to whose benefit—public works commissioned, defaced or deplored, countless instances of symbolic abuse in public space evince the extent to which monuments are still with us today, as screens for projecting political or social emergencies, for enacting cultural memory. In a broad sense, the two artists’ exploration engages the idea of a monument for the East, a post-ideological construction that interrogates the communal nature of European space and the comprehensiveness of its history, that suspends moral judgment and confuses or conflates winners and losers in the game of politics.

The East as combination of geography, metaphor, and misapprehension appears in *Europe 54° 54′ – 25° 19′*, Deimantas Narkevičius’s first film. The video starts with anodyne shots of Vilnius taken from the window of a moving car, accompanied by a commentary that describes a sudden urge to see the topographic enigma instated at the heart of Lithuania: a French cartographic institute had located the centre of Europe in the vicinity of the capital. The artist travels into political abstraction—both that of the European Union and Lithuania’s projected incorporation in it—while the city progressively dematerialises. The car stops and the camera moves hesitatingly to an unpromising glade, to stumble upon a perfectly anti-climactic mark: instead of an electric storm of political data, there is a stone with a plaque, the empty centre of Europe. The exact position of the centre was later slightly revised by the same institute, while other countries in Central and Eastern Europe have made equally inconsequential findings, and efforts to appease their “map envy” and a desire to belong, which does not preclude the perverse advancement of nationalisms. From this point of view, Narkevičius’s film is oddly prescient. Lithuanian authorities lavished resources upon the site, embellishing it with a monument, a sculpture park, a museum and other tourist industry paraphernalia. Slovakia built an impressive hotel for its own centre of Europe, while the Czech Republic and Poland also found sufficient scientific grounds for acts of monumental self-congratulation. The tension and bathos in *Europe 54° 54′ – 25° 19′* anticipate and mirror these processes of inscription, obliquely describing the politics of Europe as “utopia minus a bottom”,<sup>2</sup> to borrow a phrase from Robert Smithson.

Europe seems to suffer from a severe iconographic deficit, systematically filled up with impossible quantities of cultural bureaucracy. Its effort to establish meaningful links between a common past and, on the other hand,

the economic or military motivations of European expansion is eroded by the derisory; it exhibits emptiness as much as a political function. Its rhetoric has engendered a proliferation of centres and blind spots, points of difficult contact between integration and regional pathos, as inflamed Eurocentrism seems a convenient disguise for the *Sturm und Drang* of nationalism, for séancing with the cultural past and proclaiming the moral imperatives of today. For Narkevičius, the discovery of the underwhelming centre has an existential correlate, retrospectively re-organising his own biography into East and West coordinates, subjecting biography to a doctrine of cardinal points. These encourage, in artist and viewer, a reflection on how the two areas define each other, and what the reciprocity described by their centre might be founded on. Mapping the distance between East and West has always been a crucial matter for the East, a frenzied form of cultural gesticulation, whereby the East deals with its own marginality in a way that unmistakably recalls Achilles from Zeno’s paradox. The East attempts to constitute its identity in relation to what it lacks fundamentally. There has been abundant artistic proof of this constitutive absence in exhibitions throughout the 90s and beyond, while the converse process, by which the West defines itself—in relation to the East, as surplus — remains to be charted.

The monument undone, in both art and life, is the object of Narkevičius’s *Once in the XX Century*, a skilfully edited split with the familiar newsreel iconography of post-1989. The “XX” in the title could either situate the event at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or represent a blank that indicates the repeatability of the event, while the film itself constructs a counter-factuality of repetition and reversal. Footage of the dismantling of the Lenin statue in Vilnius in 1991 is re-arranged to make it look as if the statue were being erected, put (back) on its pedestal for the cheering crowds. This contorted timeline of propaganda and iconoclasm deflects the expectations of the documentary via a subtle comment on mutability—that of monuments and how antagonisms crystallise in them, as well as of the documentary genre itself.

The media representation of social turmoil in Eastern Europe was definitively marked by images of toppled statues. These instances of monumental struggle echoed in the iconographic void left behind by Communist propaganda, populated only by what I would term “sociological puzzles”, large processions of people choreographing pixilated images of revolutionary ambition with their undulating bodies or gestures, and destitute cityscapes, marred by eternal construction sites, on the other hand. With the monument face down on the ground, history was given the most resonant verdict, indicted in the most trenchant terms. Deimantas Narkevičius points out that, “Everyone seemed to

think that removing those objects would lead to immediate changes in society”,<sup>3</sup> to a vast reorganisation of social foundations triggered by the now empty pedestals. Beheading the Communist pantheon equated decapitating evil and ignoring the insidious possibility that Communism, guilt and penance might dissolve in the infra-political texture of society, reform through the reflexes that haunt its lower strata, the somatic life of the social body. The cut-out flag waved by protesters during the Romanian Revolution, for instance, was a formidable image of transparency, not followed by a clarification of history and a reconsolidation of solidarity, while the fact that the same revolution was broadcast live on television did not lead to a “film”, to a director’s cut, but to a profusion of making-of features and DVD bonuses, divested of denouement or resolution. Instead, there are the victims and a monument that looks as if designed by Paul McCarthy on a lesser day.

If all this sounds a little too televisual and mediated, we should recall that the tutelary figures of Eastern monumentality are also figures of mediation. *Worker and Kolkhoz (Collective Farm) Woman* by Vera Mukhina, the emblem of Mosfilm, has survived its own history via a particular representation: the photographs of the 1937 World Exposition in Paris, where it confronts Albert Speer’s German Pavilion. These document monumental stupor, a dense tissue of monumentality where each object holds all others in check, a numb, provisional armistice between divergent absolutisms. The other construction presiding over Eastern monumentality is Vladimir Tatlin’s model for the *Monument of the Third International*. Numerous exercises that aspired to re-found architecture have happened in the shadow of the vertical thrust Tatlin’s tower promised, in tandem with its radiant unfeasibility. The model registered both revolutionary escalation and modernism’s systematic irrationality; it was designed to house the legislature, executive and propaganda ministry of the Comintern, to expose the futility of both the Eiffel Tower and the *Statue of Liberty*, and to provide a vantage position from which the inevitable flow of history towards Communism would become a panorama. Adrift in history, behind and ahead of its time, elegiac model of a monument to a monument, total image of artistic revolution, gigantic scaffold for modernism and self-reflexive Panopticon, event and staple of conjectural histories, it estranges political, technological and economic understandings of utility and function. As Svetlana Boym notes in her essay on the off-modern, while imagining the unrealised model, “it is up to us whether this is a ruinscape or a utopian construction site, whether we should think of it in the past imperfect or in the future perfect”.<sup>4</sup>

Communism’s possession of monumental territory was also grounded in an act of destruction, removing the traces of the bourgeoisie and abruptly halting the production of public space they testified to. The symmetrical reverse of this process in 1989 and throughout the messy decade that followed articulates a complete history of violence, a recurring scenario of conflict between monuments, ideological majorities and minorities—voices that diminish the monument’s forward stride, a systematic “return of the evacuated” that erodes grandeur and projections of totality, violently inscribing multiplicity into the logic of the monument. Monuments come to mark faltering configurations of historiography, ideologies dismantled and claims to eternity disproved. From the collision of self-representations and political vociferation ensue a cohort of mutilated bodies, of monuments torn down, dynamited, powerless, gesticulating towards imprecise futures. As the monument is “de-commissioned”, it leaves behind an amputated comparison, a term against which to measure political or social imbalance, the intensity and effectiveness of counter-action.

Toppled monuments were often gathered in sculpture parks—derogatory assemblages of distorted histories and dictators like the Temporary Museum of Totalitarian Art behind the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the Grūtas Park in Lithuania or the Statue Park (Szoborpark) in Budapest. These have the effect of emphasising the ridicule that monuments as such could barely contain, by folding the sublime body of ideology upon itself, yet do infinitesimal work in furthering an understanding of history, as they pretend to sever necrosis from an otherwise healthy social tissue. The story continues: in June 2007, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia announced a call for proposals for a *Memorial to the Victims of Soviet Occupation* in Riga. The following text accompanied the announcement of the competition: “The ideology of totalitarian Communism and its injuries are still not properly evaluated. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and totalitarian Communist system at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the time has come for this debt to be paid. [...] The Memorial will be a reminder of the people’s resistance, commemorate those who suffered, and admonish future generations against letting ideologies similar to totalitarian Communism return and become weapons of the state policy”.<sup>5</sup> The idea that a “debt” should be “paid” by a monument, even before its realisation, in continuity with the symbolic damage that monuments have performed throughout history.

We can look at Lenin’s choreography in the film by Narkevičius as an ecstatic aerial ballet or as a historical somersault. I favour the latter option: a clownish move, a “Hop-la!”, reminding of Walter Benjamin’s mime, still sitting when the

chair is pulled out, rehearsing the end of civilisation. The somersault oscillates between historical understanding and receding memories; it mimes the Angel of History the other way round, retreating into history while looking menacingly towards the future. Narkevičius's tragicomic inversions and syntactically brilliant incongruity illustrate the ethics of memory hinted at earlier. He equates chronology with a form of falsification, a regime of representation, and re-edits the master narrative by deracinating each scene, disconnecting it from any sense of inevitability. The scenes are drowned in contingency and exposed to their abandoned potentialities. This timeline of propositional history connects to a tradition of reverse play in propaganda films (Jean Pierre Rehm notes the examples of Leni Riefenstahl and Dziga Vertov<sup>6</sup>) and creates a suspension in which scenes await their conclusion. Unhinged causality and a mnemonic code for the chaotic relatedness of incidents are ways of portraying historical crisis. Deimantas Narkevičius rearranges the absent characters, disparities and inversions of history in an emplotment that emerges, in this video, as pure, implacable revisionism—one without ideology and without conclusion.

The "aphasic autonomy" (J.P. Rehm) by which each scene is on the threshold of its historical project, rather than its triumphant completion, open to anticipation and void of prior signification, is applied to the monument in another project by the artist. For the *Skulptur Projekte 2007*, he proposed to move the colossal head of Karl Marx from Chemnitz, formerly Karl-Marx-Stadt, to Munster. Therefore, to subtract the event—the monument's continuous iteration—from the fatality of a conclusion, to upend the script and write open-endedness into the statue. Lenin's "mechanical reversibility" was to become physical displacement for Marx, a visualisation of variable legibility or a purgatory of deferred translation. Made by the Russian artist Lev Kerbel in 1971, the head of Marx evinces a calculated historicist return to the traditions of Soviet Revolutionary art, including its Cubist aspect. The head is 7 metres high, 7 metres wide, 9 metres deep and "says everything",<sup>7</sup> according to its author. Narkevičius's intervention was to function as a study of displacement and dispossession, testing the resilience of associations the sculpture carried in the new context. The move was to occur between Germany's former East and West, from—to simplify things—political territory to politicised sculpture garden, establishing a complicated similarity between the Munster show and, say, the Grūtas Park in Lithuania.

Logistical and ideological impediments, notably the opposition of the Mayor of Chemnitz, prevented the transmutation. Instead, a video assembling found footage and flirting once again with the language of propaganda, documents episodes prior to the installation of the statue. *The Head* (2007) builds an anticipation where the monument is sculpted, prefigured and delayed, never

unveiled, where the thousands supposedly gathered for the inauguration pursue their purposes in all their collective unscriptedness. The monument is pushed back a little, denied eventfulness, replaced by what seems to be its meticulous documentation—in fact, a concatenation of episodes of televisual verisimilitude. Gintaras Dzidziapetris's *Untitled* engages the same possibility from a different angle, by pairing two found postcards with images of the same monument for the Russian army. There is a slight difference between the two shots: the position of the camera varies imperceptibly, the clouds clear up, the position of visitors mounting the staircase that leads up to the monument changes. The young artist takes the infrathin to a monumental scale, and what seems to be a split second separating the two shots—only a split second because of its proximity to eternity—is inundated with time, a time other than the monument's. The monument becomes punctuated by passages, rhythms of visibility, fade-outs. Breached and contaminated, its aspiration to dramatic instantaneity devolves into mundane phenomenology. The juxtaposition of the two postcards complicates the relation between monument and document in yet another sense: would the postcards represent a single entry in an implausible, exhaustive archive of human existence, or two?

Other works by Gintaras Dzidziapetris engage representations of outer space and domesticity, focusing on how these register the ideological fluctuations that traverse contemporary society. With minimal means, *Sputnik* convokes the Cold War and its projections of space, technology and catastrophe. A Russian slide projector, named like a satellite, shows a contemporaneous image of the Earth taken by an American satellite. The superpowers collide in the territory of the work, a territory defined by acts of political bricolage, by a DIY strategy of making its subjective way through an impossible mass of information, contradictory imagery and dim threats. These operations write their way into the episode of the Cold War, history as ceasefire between two potentialities of annihilation, each convincingly displacing the Apocalypse in the collective imagination, yet also outline our general inability to conceive history, which builds to a cathartic culmination. "Sputnik" comments on how we construct and negotiate previsions of obliteration—the final intelligibility of our world—be it the Big Crunch, implosive Doomsday or a slight miscalculation, engendering the gridlock of our interwoven systems and the global shutdown. Yet it also binds the competing phantasms of outer space predominance with the territorialisation of European geopolitics in recent history. It emphasises the fractured confines of European space and the cut that halves it, into two different ways of imagining the elsewhere. Without directly ascribing Dzidziapetris's work this polemic intention, *Sputnik* does function as a powerful counterpoint to the disoriented yet well-meaning drive to reunite Europe, to reconcile those deviating modes of imagination in a profusion of artistic

projects designed to “promote collaboration”, to bridge the gap, in exhibitions and panels to explore the divide, in symposia to analyse or invent common problems, or at least try and speak the same language. Excellent opportunities to appraise each other’s insecurities or perplexities, all these initiatives have strengthened the separation, maintained as a focal point of the difficulty, the awkwardness even, of talking to each other.

In Dzidziapetris’s *Conversation Piece*, actors re-enact a recorded dialogue retrieved from the archives of the KGB, recently made public in Vilnius. The dialogue is anonymous and somewhat superfluous: two men speak of the weather and a missed appointment, which we would be tempted to read as a coded exchange of significant data between informant and political police, or between two informants, or the constant surveillance exercised by an increasingly repressive state against two regular citizens. All these unrealised or equivalent possibilities suggest the extent to which the Communist state had engendered a society of control, had impregnated or created reflexes and contaminated the fabric of solidarity. Conversely, this indicates the discouraging amplitude of an effort to re-imagine a community on the basis of vulnerability, loss and distrust, a society that now looks and behaves like a procession where purveyors and victims walk side by side. The infinitely heterogeneous dimension of daily life, its continuities and discontinuities, is the site where ideologies dig deepest and yet cannot fully grasp. The post-Communist condition is a personal or collective archaeology of everything at the infra-political level, below the threshold of sensitivity of power, where displacements or distortions are stronger and harder to visualise than revolutions and reforms. This is perhaps the place from which to rethink Communism—starting from a multitude of low-resolution images of history and inconclusive data—as well as the monument. Apollinaire’s project of a “monument to nothing” in “*Le Poète Assassiné*” carries a radically political and divergent interpretation: the social processes of solidarity should be laid at its base, at its empty base.

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## Notes

- 1 Ciprian Mihali, “Condiția (post)comunistă a vieții cotidiene” / “The (Post-) Communist Condition of Daily Life”, in: *Dilema Veche*, no. 198, 2007 [www.dilemaveche.ro/index.php?nr=198&cmd=articol&id=7091](http://www.dilemaveche.ro/index.php?nr=198&cmd=articol&id=7091)
- 2 Robert Smithson, “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic”, in: *Artforum*, 1967; re-published in: *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Jack Flam (ed.), Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press 1996, p. 72.
- 3 [www.skulptur-projekte.de/kuenstler/narkevicius](http://www.skulptur-projekte.de/kuenstler/narkevicius)
- 4 Svetlana Boym, *Architecture of the Off-Modern*, Forum Project Publications, Princeton, Princeton Architectural Press 2008, p. 10.
- 5 [www.memorials.lv/en/index.php?parent=3](http://www.memorials.lv/en/index.php?parent=3)
- 6 [www.aprior.org/texts/apm14\\_rehm\\_narkevicius.pdf](http://www.aprior.org/texts/apm14_rehm_narkevicius.pdf)
- 7 Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments. Art in Political Bondage 1870–1997*, London, Reaktion Books 1998, p. 110.

## Edit Andrés

### The Future is Behind Us Flashbacks to the Socialist Past

*"We, rayonists and futurists, do not wish to speak about new or old art, and even less about modern Western art. We leave the old art to die and leave the 'new' art to do battle with it; and incidentally, apart from a battle and a very easy one, the 'new' art cannot advance anything of its own. It is useful to put manure on barren ground, but this dirty work does not interest us. People shout about enemies closing in on them, but in fact, these enemies are, in any case, their closest friends. Their argument with old art long since departed is nothing but a resurrection of the dead, a boring, decadent love of paltriness and a stupid desire to march at the head of contemporary, philistine interests. We are not declaring war, for where can we find an opponent our equal? The future is behind us."<sup>1</sup> (Michail Larionov, Natalya Goncharova)*

#### Utopias die hard and have their afterlife

The Manifesto written by the prominent personalities of the Russian avant-garde has passed on to us crucial points of departure we can rely on while exploring contemporary videos touching upon the issue of the memory of the Socialist past. The hidden message implicit in the above citation is that to foresee the future, we should look back, and we should rather look within instead of observing the horizon. Future and past were not rigid and hierarchical concepts for Larionov and Goncharova. In itself, this is quite a reversal, as the dominant notion of modernity was rather obsessed with continuous progress. As for the geopolitical view of the scene, in their eyes culture originates in the East, and in local traditions: "Long live the beautiful East! We are joining forces with contemporary Eastern artists to work together. We are against the West, which is vulgarising our forms and Eastern forms, and which is bringing down the level of everything".<sup>2</sup> Here, we are at the preliminary claim for deconstructing the Western art canon, and claiming worth for Eastern European art.

Revolutionary Russia was full of competing ideas, visions and fantasies of the future. The era could be conceived as duels of dreams and nightmares on a mass scale. Utopian literature is enormously rich, with its roots in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done* (Что делать), written in 1863, is one of the most influential among the literature, with an explicit vision of future Socialism, the title of which was borrowed by Lenin for the title of his volume

written on his own visions. Obsession with the future was also part of the agenda of his fellow traveller, Lunacharsky. Referring to Richard Stites, he had the following passage concerning the future from the volume of Chernyshevsky engraved onto the wall of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow in 1928: "Have love for it, stride toward it, work on behalf of it, bring it ever nearer, bear what you can from it your present life. The more you can carry from the future into your present life, the more your life will be radiant and good, the richer it will be in happiness and pleasure".<sup>3</sup>

Although Lenin was not a fan of the flourishing genre of utopian science fiction, he was not unlike other daydreamers, with his own dear dreams. H. G. Wells calls him "the Dreamer of the Kremlin" in his book, *Russia in the Shadows* (1921). "For Lenin—quoting his reportage—who like a good orthodox Marxist denounces all 'Utopias', has succumbed at last to a Utopia, the Utopia of the Electricians. He is throwing all his weight into a scheme for the development of great power stations in Russia to serve whole provinces with light, with transport, and industrial power. [...] Can one imagine a more courageous project in a vast flat land of forests and illiterate peasants, with no water power, with no technical skill available, and with trade and industry at last gasp? [...] But their application to Russia is an altogether greater strain upon the constructive imagination. I cannot see anything of the sort happening in this dark crystal of Russia, but this little man at the Kremlin can; he sees the decaying railways replaced by a new electric transport, sees new spreading roadways spreading throughout the land sees a new and happier Communist industrialism arising again. While I talked to him he almost persuaded me to share his vision".<sup>4</sup> Treating electricity as a magic wand roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian literature as well. Chikolev, in an engineer's *Electric Tale* (1895) "speaks about the future world transformed by electricity, which performed miracles of production and also graced everyday life".<sup>5</sup>

Electrification was Lenin's favourite project. The slogan he firmly believed in was that "Communism equals Soviet power plus electrification of the entire country". He wanted all libraries to have the heavy opus of the electrification plan (GOELRO). In the Russian revolutionary years (as in ancient religions), light was a metaphor for progress and the bright future, while darkness represented poverty, bigotry, superstition, backwardness, the hated ancient regime and the past. City light was opposed to rural darkness and stood for heat and shelter in the land of famously cold Russia. It symbolised light, enlightenment, hygiene, knowledge, energy and economic growth.<sup>6</sup> Mayakovsky declared that, "After electricity, I lost interest in nature, as too backward".<sup>7</sup> During the revolutionary era, it was not even uncommon to give the name "Electric" to newborns at the Communist rituals called "Octobering", substituting Christian

baptism, and in the counter calendar, Elijah Day was substituted by Electric Day. Lenin provided electric currents almost with the same magic power as did many Russian peasants. Oleg Kulik's photo series, *The Russian* refers to this almost religious longing to light and heat, while making homage to Lev Tolstoy, another Russian dreamer with alternative visions of the future without machines and cities, referring rather to the past, visualising a kind of nature-bound, pastoral and bucolic peasant heaven. The powerful twosome metaphor has survived into our own time. In the infamous Fulton speech in 1946 given by Winston Churchill (the inventor of the mental marker, the "Iron Curtain" between the two parts of Europe) labelled the "Eastern states of Europe" as a shadowy land. "In the shadow it was possible to imagine vaguely whatever was unhappy or unpleasant, unsettling or alarming, and yet it was also possible not to look too closely, permitted even to look away—for who could look through an iron curtain and discern the shapes enveloped in shadow?"<sup>8</sup>—so well observed by Larry Wolff.

Deimantas Narkevičius's video piece, *Energy Lithuania* (2002) follows the footsteps of these light-adoring, light-worshipping modern pagans, wishing to understand retrospectively this fixation with electricity and everything which comes with it. He mixes documentary footage of Soviet era propaganda films with today's observations. In his revisiting of the past, he smashes the borderline between reality and illusion, and between documentary and pure fiction, and thus he enables one to look at the inside of the operation of the state propaganda machinery. His montage method embarrassingly refuses the clear-cut division between "false" state propaganda and "true" oppositional art, making a statement on collective responsibility on the one hand, and a call for remembrance and analysis of the past on the other hand. Concerning his revisiting the model city Elektrenai, the artist's comment comes thus: "The exemplary model as a promise for something in the future was literally a promise from the past, like the future in the past. I was in Elektrenai before, just after leaving school when I was eighteen years old. You may think it's personal, but it's not. Elektrenai was a collective experience. I did not clearly articulate it, but I was actually looking for a dystopia. It might seem very clear now, but the late 1990s when I started thinking about the work was a period when people were becoming more critical and self-reflective with regard to the Socialist period. This followed the period of refusal in the early 1990s. Then it became clear to me that you cannot avoid contact with the past, whatever that past is".<sup>9</sup>

## Religion-setting: erecting and demolishing monuments

In the competition of predicting and building the future, and of fighting for a position of being able to realise one's ideas, those of the dreams favoured by the Bolsheviks led by Lenin have taken the winning position in Russia. Lenin had yet another favourite project, namely the Monumental Propaganda that came into full swing in the early twenties. He dreamt of a city expressing its history through monuments, the history of the Revolution, Socialist ideas, great thinkers, cultural figures and artists, relocating Campanella's Mediterranean City of the Sun into the Nordic Moscow and Petrograd. As a model, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris served with its self-celebratory statue mania and its claim to connect the achievements of the French Revolution and the Universalist concept of progress and civilisation.<sup>10</sup> Lenin and Lunacharsky lovingly appropriated the idea of self-promotion, replacing the French Revolution with the Great Russian Revolution, adapting the universalistic claim for leading the World into a brighter future now on the path of Communism. Only a few statues were realised, mostly from temporary materials and, despite claims to the contrary, mostly in a very traditional representational style, with the only exception being Tatlin's famous *Monument to the Third International*.

Lenin, following his death, became the God of the Godless religion of Communism, and the substitute for the overthrown monarch, providing the missing link for the social transformation of a basically peasant society. Following the tradition of Christianity, his temple was erected above his resting place and earthy remnants. He was not cremated on the will of Stalin, and against the wishes of his own family and himself. Trotsky also opposed displaying his body, claiming this as the veneration of relics belonging to abolished practices of the Orthodox Church. To preserve his memory and his body, a committee for remembrances was established, and he was embalmed and put on display in front of the Kremlin. Malevich, a leading figure of the Russian avant-garde, a whole-hearted supporter of a full-scale religious cult, proposed a cube for every home to have a sacred art piece, evidently substituting the sacred corner of icons.<sup>11</sup> Religion-setting, a pilgrimage was begun to the tomb: first a wooden, and later a marble mausoleum, designed by the architect Alexei Schusev, a specialist of Orthodox churches. The architect Konstantin Melnikov designed Lenin's sarcophagus. The Commission of Physicians, who conducted an autopsy on Lenin, recommended that his brain be subject to scientific study, which was in accordance with the plan to confer sainthood on him. His body and his brain were put into the service of religion-setting machinery.

Dead bodies have always enjoyed a political life, from the ancient time of the pharaohs, through the trade and frequent movement of saint's relics, until today's sales of organs and body parts, and the heated debate of gene manipulation. Reburials of political personages are done to mark political changes. Bones and corpses became political symbols. Politicised funerals and reburials paved the way to the New Europe.<sup>12</sup> The post-Socialist period witnessed heavy traffic of travelling bodies and corpses. The function of a proper burial and reburial had the very important function of reassessing or rewriting the past and creating or retrieving memory. Body politics helped to signify a new era, marking a change in social visibilities and values, which was part of the larger process of transformation. All post-Socialist countries had their own famous corpse and reburial.<sup>13</sup> Katherine Verdery regards reburials as useful and effective tools for revisiting the past and establishing political legitimacy. According to her, the ceremonial rituals of funerals greatly helped to dramatise the end of an era, and to re-sacralise the political order alongside rejecting the immediate past.<sup>14</sup> Quite obviously, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the question of Lenin's body being removed and buried, or left as it is, was raised again and again in heated debates.

András Sólyom's video-poem, *Funeral* (1992), and his more educational video, *Regular Funerals Back and Forth* (1993), in a way resonate with the attitude and even the style of the revolutionary urban mass spectacles, the "propagandist theatres"<sup>15</sup> in their staged spectacles, and in having a firm belief in the mission of disseminating enlightenment and knowledge for the masses, even if it was counter-knowledge. The video takes as its focus the peculiar phenomenon of the booming business of burials and reburials around the crumbling and cracking of the Wall, and of the Iron Curtain. Its tone is deadly serious, stiff and edgy in accordance with the atmosphere just after the changes. Behind the aim of this dim showdown was the symbolical burial of the very system, making the changes irreversible.

## What is to be done with Monumental Propaganda

Under the reign of Stalin, de-utopianisation was launched in order to prevent the real functions of utopias, namely the comparison with reality. Only one vision was kept alive, mostly with references to the past. The propaganda became monumental indeed, with statues enormous in scale. The rule of the French statue mania of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which opposed erecting statues for living people<sup>16</sup>, was simply set aside. Monstrous figures of Stalin permeated the Soviet Union, and later the satellite countries. The upheaval in 1956 in Hungary started with the collective dismantling of the Stalin statue in Budapest, which was never reconstructed, but replaced by a smaller size Lenin statue, which

was finally removed after the political changes. A good 30 years later, the downfall of statues was among the first signs of the upcoming changes. The former totalitarian space was reclaimed and was transformed again into public spaces of open negotiation.

A few years after the downfall of Socialism, in the midst of the euphoria, Komar and Melamid, Russian émigré artists who had lived in New York since the late 70s, proposed an exhibition running parallel in Moscow and in New York, entitled *Monumental Propaganda*, with an initial call for projects: *What is to be Done with Monumental Propaganda?*<sup>17</sup> They asked Russian and Western artists to offer new ways of using the statues, or to make comments on them, or to give ideas how to transform, how to utilise the militia of suddenly unemployed statues—the losers and social outcasts of the political transformation. They suggested that a Lenin statue be left dangling from cranes in the air, conveying the same ambiguity as Narkevičius's video *Once in the XX Century*, much later.

In 1993, when the project was initiated, it was quite obvious that the real victor was the West, celebrating the collective dismantling of the symbols and icons of its ideological rival on the front pages of newspapers, and on the covers of magazines. Komar & Melamid were well aware of the market value in the West of toppling down the Communist statues and monuments, clearly conveying the message of the victory of the Capitalist ideology in the war of ideas and utopias. They provided satisfaction and amusement for Western audiences. They were actually trapped into a forced trajectory fuelled by their eager wish to avoid falling into the blind spot of the attention and interest of Western audiences, and being threatened to lose their specific charm of being in opposition to the official Soviet culture. The showdown of Socialism buried their privileged position as well, and they reacted immediately. At the same time, their local compatriots behind the ex-Iron Curtain were busy reconstructing their visions for a different future, and were eager to forget the past.

Komar & Melamid stood up as champions and saviours of the Soviet past, but what they really did was to convert the Socialist icons into commercial goodies, mere products of the Capitalist consumer and popular culture. Their humorous irony, ridiculing a failed utopia has never gone deep, but rather remained on the surface [*Lenin Hails a Taxi*]. The attitude of “mickey-mouse-ation” and “macdonald-isation” of the elements of Soviet official culture became very popular, mostly among those Russian artists who had been living abroad as a very effective shortcut for getting attention on the Western art market, slowly expanding into the newly launched Russian market, begun mainly for the nouveau riches. In Russia, the attitude resonated, and there was a strong desire for consumption and material culture after the collapse of the Soviet Union, since it was repressed in the time of collectivist asceticism. Lenin and

all the Socialist symbols became consumerist products, mixed together with the icons of consumerist Capitalism. Besides the statues of Lenin, one of the most famous targets of the “conversion” of monuments was Vera Mukhina's statue, *Worker and Kolkhoz (Collective Farm) Woman*, a gigantic statue atop the Pavilion of the Soviet Union (as its pedestal), at the 1937 World Exposition, which was supposed to overshadow the Pavilion of Nazi Germany.

Sergei Bugaev (nicknamed Afrika), a Leningrad/St Peterburg based artist, tore down a part of the inner thigh of the colossal female figure, a fake symbol of the industrial power of Russia: a hand-crafted wood construction covered by separate sheets of metal, demonstrating the inner controversy of the iconic piece.<sup>18</sup> Afrika built the stolen piece into his large assemblage, entitled *Donalddestruction*. The relic-like, fetishised piece was even given a name, “Agent”,<sup>19</sup> resembling the category used by Freud, that the “memory of trauma acts like a foreign body, which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work”,<sup>20</sup> feasible to be applied to suppressed and unassimilated memories which haunt us, constantly recurring in the form of flashbacks and nightmares.

### An agent that is still at work

Cultural globalisation in the Central-Eastern European region right after the collapse of the Soviet satellite system coincided with a counter-process in this part of Europe, namely with the de-globalisation of the former dominant cultural force, a process of “de-Sovietisation”. In the period of transition, this dual process resulted in cultural turbulence in the disintegrated region, i.e., a special mixture of the remnants of the Socialist era combined with a plethora of new phenomena of the newly globalised Capitalist world. The only similarity still remaining among the countries of the ex-Eastern Bloc was the more or less mutual past and its memory.

In the beginning of the 90s, the satellite countries became free from the colonising foreign power, Soviet-type Socialism. The new democratic countries tried to “clean up” the ideologically polluted public sphere of the powerful images, by demolishing statues, removing icons of the former Socialist culture and renaming streets and squares, i.e., reviving their old names after a half-century period, during which they were named after the figures and events of Soviet history. In Hungary, most of the Socialist statues were placed in the Statue Park (Szoborpark) outside of Budapest, which became a memorial park of the Socialist past. In the same way, Soviet memorials, monuments and statues of cult figures were collected into an isolated field, Grūtas Park in Lithuania, in a pleasant natural terrain. Meanwhile, memorial museums, the

official sites of memory, were established in several countries of the region, long before the related trauma could have healed. In Budapest, this was named the House of Terror, dedicated to the victims of Nazism and Communism; in Prague, the Museum of Communism functions as a special commemorative space; and in Tallinn, there is the Museum of Occupations.

In general, elements of the Socialist past were collected, put together in isolated statue parks or memorial museums in the ex-Soviet-bloc countries, fuelled by the illusion that it is possible to wipe off the dust of the Socialist past and put it aside under quarantine. This illusion, or rather, desire, was usually accompanied by the intention of repressing the trauma of being oppressed for a long time, namely with amnesia. In reality, as usually happens after a trauma, the memory of the Soviet-type globalisation is still with us, haunting us with flashbacks, even if to different degrees in the affected countries. The friendly symbiosis characteristic present in Russia does not apply at all as an attribute of the satellite countries, which are likely to conceive that Soviet-type Socialism was imposed on them and was not their own product. Therefore, the exorcism of Socialism, at least in the first years of the transition, was much more characteristic of their attitude, in which art played a crucial role, and which was also a facet of Sólyom's previously mentioned video.

Albanian artist Anri Sala's video work, *Intervista* (1998), was different in this regard, and functioned as a kind of "cry for help" for a lost generation, as his mother named her own generation, trapped in the dreaming machine that went off track. Its message was that grief and proper mourning are absolutely necessary for survival. By decoding the lost sound connected to the found footage documenting his mother's involvement in the regime, he assists his mother in facing up to her suppressed memory. The video drives the spectator through the stages of recovery, from the initial and total denial through the essential and dramatic "acting out", the confrontation with her past, and begins the recovery by the psychological working-through-process. This message of the video has remained solitary since its release.

After a few years, the Socialist past was forgotten in the Central-Eastern European region. The coping mechanism of the trauma came to a deadlock in the earliest phases of denial and rejection, and consequently, the process of trauma could not move further into a healing phase, which is the last sequence in overcoming the trauma: being able to integrate it into the collective identity. As an aftermath of the inability to carry through the "trauma process", the culture of the Socialist past became a taboo issue. Leaving the past as it is, and not bothering it with excavations and analyses, became a kind of unwritten agreement in the 90s.

The memory work related to the Socialist past is booming nowadays region-wide, after almost two decades following the political changes, and well after even Anri Sala's pioneer work and video.

Deimantas Narkevičius, in his work *Once in the XX Century* (2004) relies on the observation that construction of monuments and their demolition serve the same purpose, as monuments are essential to social self-esteem and identity of the community. He reverses the process of the demolition of a huge statue of Lenin, now in Grūtas Park, and converts it into scenes of erecting the monument. He is keen to capture the drive behind the idolatry, the worship of idols and equally behind the iconoclasm, as the latter is almost an obligatory concomitant phenomenon of every political change.<sup>21</sup> He makes the spectator aware that de-sacralisation (demolishing monuments) and re-sacralisation (erecting monuments) are easily interchangeable. When a monument is in the process of construction, it seems as impermanent as those that are pulled down. At the same time, breaking the taboos of the Socialist past, he pushes the memory machinery into motion. As for the prehistory of the idea, the artist explains that, "We had quite a discussion around the issue of what to do with the former Lenin Square. This was when I did my work with found footage, *Once in the XX Century*. The interesting thing was that some people almost intuitively suggested that perhaps putting Lenin back would not be such a bad idea as it could prevent us from making similar mistakes in the future. I would say that it's not yet possible to have a discussion about the return of such objects. [...] If we were to look at art objects as relics of political regimes, we would need to remove a lot of art from museums, e.g., from the Louvre".<sup>22</sup> He cautiously raises the question of the dissimilar treatment and evaluation of art coming from the East or the West.

### **Crumbling churches of the godless religion**

In the Godless religion of Communism, there has been an urgent need, not only for a new God to be worshipped, but for new rituals and public festivals to substitute church holidays and ceremonies. The church or civic temple for this new religion was the Workers' Club named the Workers' Palace, House of Lenin (following the pattern: House of the Lord), Proletarian House (if shifting the emphasis onto the parish), or Palace of Culture (if the faith gets into the centre in naming). The 1920s witnessed a rush for the building of workers' clubs, housing quasi-religious civic rituals. The city remained the primary concept in the Bolshevik vision of the future, and the club became a city within the city, or even a machine with multiple functions for the complex duty of developing and educating the New Man of the New World.<sup>23</sup>

Under Stalin's reign, these functional small churches used for civic rituals and educational purposes, the idea of which goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century workers' movement, grew into huge cathedrals and palaces alongside megalomaniac—but unrealised—projects, like the Palace of Soviets. With Soviet domination in the Eastern part of Europe, all the dreams and fantasies of the crusaders had to be shared. Cultural Palaces and Workers' Clubs with all kind of local names came into being all around the region.

Artur Żmijewski's *Dream of Warsaw* (2005), a short film on Oskar Hansen's Utopian project for the Cultural Palace in Warsaw, instead of the brutal erasure of the much hated symbol of Soviet dominance in the hearth of the Polish capital city, offers an alternative to its architectural power and control over its environment. Hansen's imaginary paper model of yet another Utopian building is able to correct the disproportions created by the "gift of the Soviet people", at least mentally. The influential architect proposes possible ways to admit our history and our past.

The video series of Andreas Fogarasi, entitled *Kultur and Freizeit* (Culture and Leisure, 2006) on the Workers' Clubs, Houses of Culture and the Amusement Park in Budapest, is eager to capture the very moment of the profane-sanctuary-building-fever, and attempts to comprehend the dreams of another world and let us see the leftovers of an emptied out, rejected culture and the set of illusions, before the whole idea and notion would sink into total oblivion. The works were perceived quite differently by Western audiences and local ones.<sup>24</sup>

At the very beginning of the 90s, Komar & Melamid's idea was to save Socialist Realism by mocking it and taking cheap revenge on the remnants of a failed culture. As they stated: "The state makes a parody of art and tries to appease bad artists, pretending they are creative. Now it's pay-back time for artists, to imitate how the state imitates artistic activity".<sup>25</sup> Shortly after the political changes, Komar & Melamid were fuelled by anger and they made the best of the opportunity and fought back. Doing so, they kept alive the attitude of the misplaced, and the hurt feelings of those excluded from the dominant future-building projects of the Socialist era. Their emotions were projected onto the physical remnants of Socialist culture, monopolising the category of Art and Artists for themselves and for fellow travellers. They were driven by the same attitude as the former state cultural policy, despising those working under the regime. They disapproved of them, simply by labelling them as bad artists, discrediting them in terms of art. In this regard, they behaved exactly like those of the iconoclasts dismantling the statues of the Socialist era, the symbols of the oppressive and hated ideology, even if only in the mental sphere. In the same way as the iconoclasts identified the statues of the epoch as the bodily

substitutes of the oppressors (see the humiliation of the toppled down statues, urinating and defecating on them), Komar & Melamid's anger went against the notions of art of the era, burdening the need for further analysis and deeper understanding.

As opposed to Komar & Melamid's attitude, for David Maljković, a Croatian artist, the winners and the losers of the cultural battle belong equally to the past, endangered to vanish into thin air. The artist-archaeologist reminds us in his video series, *Scene for New Heritage* (2004–06), of the importance of lessons taught by history, and stands up against the forgetting and erasure of the past by excavating and saving artifacts of a sinking culture, remaining conscious of the fact that the most effective iconoclast is Time. His future aliens visiting the Petrova Gora monument have no clue at all about the meaning and function of the "Godless Temple".

### Memorials, monuments or monsters

In accordance with his contemplation about which artworks qualify as being merely political relics and which qualify as art, Narkevičius revisits the art-making process of Karl Marx's giant bronze head, still on display in the former Karl-Marx-Stadt, today Chemnitz, using official propaganda footage. We are offered access into the studio of a Socialist "celebrity", Lev Kerbel, in the video entitled *The Head* (2007), which is a close encounter with the sculptor, trapped in a time of worshipping political and ideological leaders, but getting the pleasure of carving and making the last touch-up on a gigantic head of Marx. Again utilising archival footage, Narkevičius constantly shifts between reality and illusion. The video begins with children's dreams about their future profession, and ends up with a slowed-down camera moving over frozen images, still photos of a faceless crowd blending into a giant applauding machine, into a very similar kind of mass hysteria witnessed in the footage utilised by Anri Sala. His main interest is the Socialist public space, with its remaining statues able to avoid quarantine, isolated as contagious infection from the "healthy society". His original intention was to work with an "existing context", and he planned to move the "monster" from Chemnitz to Munster. As he explains, "We either forgot, or we grew accustomed to squares or public space with monuments or public sculptures all over Eastern Europe. The sculptures have been removed, but city planning often hasn't changed, and the city of Chemnitz is totally planned in relation to that sculpture. Removing this monument for three months would allow people to see the place deprived of its focal point".<sup>26</sup>

Kristina Norman, representative of the youngest generation of artists, also comes from an ex-Soviet Baltic state, but with a different background, having both Russian and Estonian origins, and raised in the newly independent Estonia. She totally lacks the nostalgic feeling towards the past that Narkevičius is slightly captured by, as she faces a different set of problems and tensions tied to a public monument, nicknamed the Bronze Soldier, the symbol of oppression for Estonians, but a sacred memorial for the minority Russians. She is not full of anger, though not contemplating it either as an outsider in the fight over the monument, but rather takes it as a site of projection and as a platform for communication and reconciliation in her video, *Monolith* (2007). It starts with the dramatic music composed by György Ligeti for Stanley Kubrick's 1968 cult movie, *2001–Space Odyssey*, as the statue of the Soldier moves at high speed from outer space towards the Earth, hesitating a bit above the Baltic states, then changing its direction, and finally making a hit into the heart of Tallinn. The spectator is confronted with a collage of hot-tempered interviews on both sides, inter-cut with footage from TV news about the neo-Nazi demonstration for its removal and for saving it, as it functions as a cultic memorial for some, and appears as a forgotten monster in the eyes of others. The playful, partly animated video is about the consequences of the unhealed wounds and scars, injuries of the past, which also haunt the next, "innocent" generation affected by the "secondary trauma". She does not attempt to take sides, but instead proposes confronting the traumatic memories, and to settle a nationwide discussion, making available the healing process to get started. In relation to Tallinn's nationalistic statue-mania, her video carries the message that without proper mourning of past injuries, one is not able to deal with the present predicament of culture.

The current version of the notion of the very influential utopia described in the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, *What is to be Done*, affirmed by a project of the artist group with the same name (Chto delat), of reanimating Popkov's enigmatic painting, entitled *Builders of Bratsk* (2004), made in the lukewarm Socialism of the 60s, is that nothing really could be done. Thus, for now, one possible reading of the concept behind Chto delat's living artwork could be that after the collapse of an oppressive and monstrous system generated by abused and forced utopias has found its alternative in new societies arranged around commodity, capital and nationalistic claims, dreams are again in short supply and in extreme demand—especially those dreams of building a better and just future.

Long Island, NY, August 2009

The preliminary version of this paper was delivered in Łódź in November 2008 on the occasion of the inauguration of m<sup>2</sup>, a new building of Museum Sztuki. I am grateful to Magdalena Ziótkovska for inviting me.

## Notes

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- 4 H. G. Wells, *Russia in the Shadows*, New York, George H. Doran Company 1921, pp. 159–160.
- 5 Stites, Op. cit., p. 30.
- 6 See: Ibid., p. 48.
- 7 Cited by Stites, Ibid., p. 52.
- 8 Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press 1994, p. 1.
- 9 "Deimantas Narkevičius in conversation with Krzysztof Kościuczuk", in: *Working title: Archive, no.1*, Łódź, Muzeum Sztuki 2008, p. 38.
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- 11 Stites, Op. cit., p. 120.
- 12 Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Post-Socialist Change*, New York, Columbia University Press 1999, p. 27–33.
- 13 General Władisław Sikorski's for Poles, Cardinal József Mindszenty, and Imre Nagy for Hungarians, etc.
- 14 Verdery, Op. cit., pp. 27–33.
- 15 Rene Fueoep-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism: An Examination of Cultural Life in the Soviet Union*, New York, Harper & Row Publishers 1965. (The original German language publication was published in 1926.)
- 16 Michalski, Op. cit.
- 17 *Monumental propaganda*, Dore Ashton (ed.), New York, Independent Curators Incorporated 1994.
- 18 The message it intended to convey and its tangible realisation was as controversial as the highly influential Tatlin tower, *Monument to the Third International*, which intended to be the symbol of the world wide victory of Communism, praising advanced technology, but unrealisable with the technology of the epoch, especially under Russian conditions.
- 19 Albert Boime, "Perestroika and the Destabilization of the Soviet Monuments", in: *ARS: Journal of the Institute for the History of Art of the Slovak Academy of Sciences*, Bratislava, 1993, nos. 2–3. p. 215.
- 20 Josef Breuer, Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, New York, Basic Books 2000.
- 21 Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, London, Reaction Books 2007.
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- 23 Stites, Op. cit., pp. 110–11.
- 24 Elaborated in Edit András, "An Agent Still at Work: The Trauma of the Collective Memory of the Socialist Past", in: *Springer* 2008, no. 3. [www.springer.in.at/dyn/heft.php?id=56&pos=1&textid=2103&lang=en](http://www.springer.in.at/dyn/heft.php?id=56&pos=1&textid=2103&lang=en)
- 25 Steven Erlanger, "Mocking Socialist Realism to Save It", in: *The New York Times*, 3 August 1993.
- 26 "Deimantas Narkevičius in conversation with Krzysztof Kościuczuk", Op. cit., p. 36. In fact, a few years earlier, a Hungarian artist duo named Little Warsaw realised a very similar concept of moving the context of the Socialist public sculpture into a trendsetting Western museum for testing their compatibility. See: Edit András, "Transgressing Boundaries [Even Those Marked Out by the Predecessors] in New Genre Conceptual Art", in: *Art after Conceptual Art*, Alexander Alberro, Sabeth Buchmann (eds.), London, The MIT Press, Vienna, Generali Foundation 2006, pp. 163–178.

**Transitland  
Video Archive**

## Project Director's Introduction to the Project and Acknowledgements

*Transitland. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989–2009* is a collaborative archiving project, initiated on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Its main outcome is a selection of 100 single-channel video works, produced in the period 1989–2009 and reflecting the transformations in post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe. *Transitland* is not only the widest-spanning presentation of video art from Central and Eastern Europe, but also a unique attempt to address and reflect upon an extensive period of transformation and changes. The mere breadth of time and geography and the complexity of the transition process are still beyond perception, not only from outside, but also within the region. Alongside the numerous discursive and documentary attempts to describe, analyse and contextualise transition, we believe that a multitude of viewpoints and aspects, presented through the media of video art, will provide a unique asset of aesthetic and critical positions to the current discourse on the transition period.

The initial idea and structure of the project was developed by Joanne Richardson (D-Media, Cluj), David Rych (Berlin) and Katharina Koch (Videoaktiv, Berlin). Launched at the end of 2007, the actual realisation of the project commenced just a year later, with a new crew and re-evaluated approach. It was carried out in partnership with our co-organisers in Budapest and Berlin—Ludwig Museum—Museum of Contemporary Art (with director Barnabás Bencsik), ACAX | Agency for Contemporary Art Exchange (with programme coordinator Rita Kálmán and programme leader Tijana Stepanović) and transmediale festival for arts and culture (artistic director Stephen Kovats) –who joined efforts with InterSpace in this ambitious undertaking.

The project focuses on an extensive and turbulent span of time and space. The territory of “Transitland” comprises nearly half of Europe—both in terms of population and territory. Once called the “Eastern Bloc” without further specification, it was perceived as a somewhat homogeneous, dark side of Europe behind the Iron Curtain. Central and Eastern Europe with different sub-regions now covers 24 post-Socialist European countries. Twenty years ago, this territory belonged to only 9 states. The region was not homogenous then, and is far less so now. The processes that occurred in all these countries differed quite substantially. There were velvet revolution and annoyingly slow evolutionary scenarios, some economies witnessed shock therapy, and others down tempo reforms, in some places there were wars, while others coped with ethnic tensions, and others were perfectly peaceful. Lustration (where

there was such at all) and rewriting of history took different approaches and had various outcomes. So did “democratisation”, the patterns of change in the social tissue, the processes of redistribution of capital, the re-birth of civil society and the development of the new public domain. The transition period in Slovenia, for example, is so very different from that in Armenia.

The period began with the burden of a traumatic past, strong expectations for a brighter future and the feeling that it might take some time—but, as with most things that have beginning, it would have an end as well. But it did not. Twenty years since that beginning, we can definitely say that the most difficult part of the task of pulling the walls down and clearing their remnants is done. Now is the time of “soft changes”, finer tuning and minimising losses in translation. A major factor in that respect is the information and communication flow that in the last two decades accelerated in a way unseen previously. The transition period was accelerated by the unprecedented dynamics of globalisation and the development of new technologies, which have completely re-shaped the understanding of space and time. And video was pretty much the medium of transition. Its wider spread and following boom in Central and Eastern Europe was possible only after the changes and vastly due to the fact that it was the first liberal media of the period. It allowed documenting and contemplating on the phenomena of both political and daily life, and it could well be considered as the strand of visual arts that through its inherent characteristics, kept and reflected recent history to the utmost.

Considering the conditional time-frame of such a 20-year period and its intrinsically unstable nature, the *Transitland* selection is conceived as an archive of specific character—not the only one possible, but rather a provisional one, occupying a particular media (video) and developed through a network of individuals, with extensive knowledge and experience of the localities the project covers. A major consideration for us was to produce an archive of works that are diverse in genre and technique, that engage with a broad variety of topics, and that are accessible and easy to present and tour (hence, single-channel). In view of the complexity of the transition period, the project was not planned as a thorough research, done by a team of just a few distinguished scholars or as a singular curatorial stance. It is a collaborative effort, depending on the professional expertise, but also on the personal curiosity, first-hand experience and intellectual engagement with this specific time period of an impressive list of artists and curators.

With an interest toward including diverse perspectives and views on what works should be considered for such an archive, we addressed curators, art critics and artists. Thanks to the engaged involvement of 44 invited individuals, our

nominators, we were able to obtain more than 350 works for viewing by the project jury. Arta Agani, Edit András, Judit Angel, Željko Blaće, Dunja Blažević, Barbara Borčić, Adam Budak, Juraj Carny, Nina Czegledy, Dieter Daniels, Ana Dević, Margarita Dorovska, Renata Dubinskaitė, Andrei Dureika, Łukasz Gorczyca, Marina Gržinić, Vít Havránek, Kathy Rae Huffman, Raivo Kelomees, Eva Khachatryan, Stephen Kovats, Piotr Krajewski, Margarethe Makovec, Suzana Milevska, Mihnea Mircan, Edi Muka, Nat Muller, Vessela Nozharova, Miklós Peternák, Svetlana Racanovic, Joanne Richardson, Katarína Rusnáková, Stefan Rusu, David Rych, Olga Shishko, Kati Simon, Marko Stamenković, Sophia Tabatadze, Adrien Török, Mara Traumane, Evgeny Umansky, Maria Vassileva, Rarita Zbranca and István Szakáts made an immense contribution to the project, not just by putting up their nominations, but also by helping us get in touch with the artists or directly arranging the provision of the works for selection.

We hoped to have works that are comprehensible and appealing to a broad audience. Some of them are well-known and iconic pieces, even for the audience outside of the region. And we knew we would have works that are unknown to the international art scene, but that deserved its attention. The final selection was made by an international jury with the members: Edit András (art historian and art critic, Research Institute for Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest) Dunja Blažević (director of Sarajevo Center for Contemporary Art), Olga Shishko (director of MediaForum, Moscow), Stephen Kovats (director of transmediale festival for art and digital culture, Berlin) and Kathy Rae Huffman (independent curator, currently living in Berlin). Watching their selection, one should keep in mind that the *Transitland* archive is not a selection of artists, but of works. It does not aim to represent the signature pieces in the development of video art as such, either in Central and Eastern Europe, or in general. One should be aware of the fact that the selection was not guided by any quota principles of representation, beyond that clearly expressed by the jury’s favourable attempt to represent all the countries with at least one piece.

This archive of 100 works is “capsulated” in so-called video jukeboxes, which are browsable and available for research and individual viewing. These are hosted by cultural institutions in Sofia, Berlin and Budapest, and their location can be checked on the project website. The archive is presented in the cities of the project co-organisers in a series of screening programmes and discursive events in 2009, and is scheduled to be toured to further locations in 2010. The website dedicated to the project ([www.transitland.eu](http://www.transitland.eu)) provides brief information for each work in the archive, visually presented with stills and excerpts or the entire video.

As a unique supplement to the archive comes this book, which was viewed as an opportunity for an in-depth comment on the topics presented in the archive and on the medium they occupy. For this volume, special acknowledgement should be given to Edit András, who brought together the remarkable texts and authors the previous pages had to offer. She should be credited for her courage and passion in realising this ambitious publication within the tight time-frame the *Transitland* project could afford.

In view of the development of the project, there are several more names that should necessarily be mentioned—those of devoted colleagues working with the InterSpace Association and institutions whose commitment to the values of *Transitland* helped us a great deal in difficult moments. Project curator Kathy Rae Huffman had beyond the obviously central responsibility in the realisation of such a project, also a significant role during the period when from outside the project seemed to be halted, and in which collaborations were developed. If there is a single node in the entire organisational structure of the project that connected all the individuals mentioned above and all the artists involved in the archive, it is Julia Mercurio, whose commitment and energy for communication and pursuing deadlines for obtaining materials seemed ceaseless. Next to her, it is Milen Hristov, who worked hard on the development of the jukeboxes and the website. Collegium Hungaricum Berlin (with curator Veruschka Baksa-Soós and director János Can Togay) and Goethe-Institut Bulgarien (with director Rudolf Bartsch) were the institutions that hosted *Transitland* meetings and events.

Apart from the human factor involved, such a large-scale project could not have existed without sound financial support. Alongside the major contribution of the Culture 2007–2013 programme of the European Commission, it was the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe, the European Cultural Foundation, the Culture Programme of the Sofia Municipality and the National Cultural Fund (of Hungary), who with their grants made it possible to start the long planned and awaited project implementation. Last, but not least, this project benefited a great deal from the engagement of Aikatherini Xethali, Project Officer at the Culture Unit of the Education Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency, who always found the time to attend to *Transitland* in all stages of its development. Her great efficiency was truly crucial for the revival of the *Transitland* project.

Sofia, August 2009

Margarita Dorovska  
Project Director of InterSpace

## Kathy Rae Huffman

### Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe in the Transitland Video Archive

A unique selection of video work, created since 1989 by Central and Eastern European artists, is presented in the archive *Transitland*. An international jury of experts with extensive experience with Central and Eastern European video selected 95 video works (from several hundred) that were nominated by 50 curators, artists and critics representing the 25 countries in the four main sub regions of the ex-Eastern bloc: the Balkans, the Baltic States, the former USSR, and Central Europe. The final selection<sup>1</sup> shows a representative body of work, created since 1989, produced by artists who have freely reacted to the political and social changes influenced by the political upheaval they experienced. The works reflect the various specific personal, social and political issues of their individual homelands, during the transition to a Capitalist culture. They collectively contribute to our understanding of the reality of the time: the 20 years of evolution since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Before the political changes, contemporary artists living behind the Iron Curtain, especially those exploring any political topics, worked clandestinely to avoid attention. They performed or exhibited their avant-garde works amongst trusted friends. Without imported art supplies, artists resorted to using common materials, found objects, and their bodies for artistic expression. Working without materials and the oppositional character of the underground art resulted in a strongly developed tradition of conceptual work and a deep discourse of ideas. Performance art and the public interventions in the 90s have these essential beginnings.

Because media was carefully controlled throughout the Eastern Bloc, the possession of cameras, recording devices (especially video) and other technology was regarded as highly suspicious, and required some secrecy, or official permit. The most active and earliest use of video in Eastern Europe is generally acknowledged to be in the 1970s. The first experiments were in Slovenia, the former Yugoslavia (with equipment made possible by visitors from The Netherlands, due to the relaxed borders of the former Yugoslavia) and in Hungary (at the Béla Balázs Studio, which acquired b/w open-reel tape and 1/2-inch Sony or Akai recorders in 1976). Early video production also took place in Poland, and was adopted by filmmakers when they could no longer obtain film stock, and by performance artists who found video a new way to explore their actions and a way to send their works abroad (when they could not travel

personally). Although video was practiced in Eastern Europe in the 1970s, it was rare and located in the more active capitals of artistic activity. In general, video arrived in the 1980s, when access to equipment, and contact with video artists in neighbouring countries or the West, provided the conditions.

In the early 1980s, international video festivals became popular gathering places for artists from around the world, namely the *World Wide Video Festival* in Den Hague<sup>2</sup> which was convened by Tom van Vliet; and the *European Media Art Festival*<sup>3</sup> in Osnabrück, Germany, which began as a cross platform film and video festival in 1981. There were other unique events in the 1980s where Eastern European based artists could see video works created in the West, and also participate. These programmes were often organised with the cooperation and support of foreign embassies and sometimes in association with international film festivals. In 1982, *Infermental*'s first edition was introduced, a video magazine that profiled works from Eastern Europe<sup>4</sup>, organised by Gábor Bódy in Budapest. For many in the West, it was an exciting discovery, and introduced new artists to the European media community. *The Alternative Film and Video Festival* in Belgrade began in 1982, as a forum for Yugoslav alternative productions (from 1991 until 2003, the festival ceased operation, and acknowledges that it was the victim of a "decade with very few possibilities or alternatives").

In 1983, in Ljubljana, Slovenia the *International Biennial Video CD* was initiated by Miha Vipotnik and Marie-Claude Vogric<sup>5</sup>, which established video in a public forum of presentations, performance and discussions. Belgrade's *Student Culture Centre* hosted the annual *Spring Video Week*<sup>6</sup> from 1986, which I had the pleasure to attend in 1987. Artists throughout the former Yugoslavia were given access to professional video by the national television in the 1980s, which provided camera operators, editors, and crews for sound and technical assistance. These works were broadcast nationally on the programme *TV Gallery*<sup>7</sup>, produced by Dunja Blažević. Early video productions made with VHS in Yugoslavia were considered "amateur" and not competitive in comparison with more professional productions. But in reality, these experimental half-inch works made with low quality consumer "home video" equipment were highly provocative and exciting. In Russia, *Parallel Cinema*<sup>8</sup> was founded in 1986, with an underground publication, and then in 1987, the first Cine Fantom festival was established in Moscow. In 1989, in Wrocław, Poland, the *WRO Festival*, was founded as the *WRO Sound Basis Visual Art Festival*, featuring various audiovisual art forms. Now called the WRO *International Media Art Biennale*, it celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in May 2009.<sup>9</sup>

All of the video and media events throughout Eastern Europe were produced under extremely limited financial constraints, and were the result of a few dedicated and passionate individuals who persevered, resulting in a critical mass of new work and a growing alternative audience (locally and internationally). Already in the 1980s, video equipment was regularly taken into countries where it was formerly forbidden. It was shared and used by artists, who worked collectively and individually. By the end of the 80s, artists could access higher levels of portable equipment, and their unique style, intensity and content earned international interest in their work. In 1989, *Deconstruction, Quotation & Subversion: Video from Yugoslavia*, a curated programme of video art was presented in New York at Artists Space, and ICA Boston, a result of several visits I made to research and meet artists.<sup>10</sup>

In November 1989, security at the restricted border crossings between East and West Berlin collapsed after massive public demonstrations. This was part of a domino effect taking place throughout the East European countries. The Hungarian border had already allowed the passage of East Germans into Austria earlier in the year, and this relaxed border created public awareness and contributed to the dissolution of the restrictive Iron Curtain and Soviet dominance. Berlin was traditionally an entry portal to the West throughout the Cold War period, making it a destination for artists from all over the Eastern countries. Once the borders opened, the environment for artists changed drastically. Collectors and curators flooded into the formerly closed countries, not often visited because of restrictive import/export regulations. The possibility to travel allowed for a "coming out" for contemporary and experimental art, and the new contacts brought instant success for many artists. Mostly, it was an opportunity to bring extraordinary creative activity—largely of a conceptual nature—into the public realm. I attended the Budapest Art Expo 1991,<sup>11</sup> which introduced several video artists, including the work of Media Research, an active association of media artists who had planned and hosted the international symposium, *The Media Are With Us* in April 1990, about the role of television in the Romanian Revolution.

The 1990s witnessed a huge new expansion of possibilities for using video and media throughout the East. In 1991, *Sub Voce*,<sup>12</sup> a large-scale exhibition of contemporary Hungarian video installations, was the first comprehensive exhibition of its kind in the East. Presented at the Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest, curated by Suzanne Mészöly, it was organised by the Soros Foundation Fine Art Documentation Center. I witnessed this successful public presentation of video art in Budapest, and closely linked birth of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) Network, which was established in Budapest in 1992 with the mandate to establish centres of contemporary

art in the Eastern European capital cities. They were intended to serve a new, informed international audience, and become the entry point for the young non-official generation of artists. In general, SCCAs had an open-door policy to expand knowledge about local cultural histories, as well as to support artists interested in video and new technologies. Curators travelled to the East, and artists travelled to the West, all under the support of the SCCA, in conjunction with CEC ArtsLink. Many artists were supported with their first travel grants and catalogue production. Likewise, many video works were funded, exhibited and archived by the regional SCCA organisations.

As video became widely employed by artists, film festivals in Berlin, Oberhausen and Rotterdam also presented video art, and dedicated video art festivals continued to emerge to present the work of Eastern European artists. In the 1990s, festivals were created in the many “new” countries of the former Eastern Europe. In 1993, the *OSTrananie Festival*<sup>13</sup> was organised by Stephen Kovats, primarily to profile video art from Eastern Europe. It was held at the famous Bauhaus in Dessau, in the former GDR, as a biennial with two additional gatherings, in 1995 and 1997. Another significant event, *The Next Five Minutes*,<sup>14</sup> was first held in Amsterdam in 1993. It focused on tactical television, including contributions about the sometimes violent changes in the Eastern European political landscape, and was broadcast. In 1994, *Meta Forum*<sup>15</sup> was launched in Budapest, organised by Geert Lovink, Diana McCarty and János Sugár. This festival coincided with the beginnings of internet access, and it focused on community, cultural politics, CD-Rom and interactive media. In 1996 the *Dutch Electronic Arts (DEAF) Festival* at V2 in Rotterdam presented the programme, *Media Art in Eastern Europe*, where curators, producers and artists contributed their histories and presented selected screenings.<sup>16</sup> It was at this event that the *Syndicate*<sup>17</sup> was created, a mailing list bringing together artists from around the East European countries, in dialogue over email.

In 1991, the countries of the former Croatia lavia entered a long period of bitter war and national self-interest. Yugoslavia and Slovenia were first in the struggle for independence and sovereignty from Serbian jurisdiction of Yugoslavia, but Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were soon to follow. The longstanding prejudices among the ethnicities and nationalities were the rationale for horrific military incidents and embattled communities. Small digital camcorders, introduced in 1989, had revolutionised video in the West, and they were used as new tools for activists, by artists, journalists and laypeople alike. They allowed activism to be recorded and sometimes broadcast. The small format tapes could be hand-carried by travellers, and were sent out of conflict zones, telling stories from personal perspectives. Video became the primary method of recounting the stories of war, and gave voice to the people caught in the crossfire.

*Videomedeja*<sup>18</sup> began in Novi Sad in 1996 as an annual international festival of video art. Its first occasion coincided with the demonstration marches against the war and ethnic cleansing with Bosnia, and the US sanctions between Novi Sad and Belgrade. The only foreign guests brave enough to travel to the festival (Adèle Eisenstein, Diana McCarty and I) cheered the arriving demonstrators when they arrived to Novi Sad, and with about 3,000 people gathered in the town square, collectively watched a single monitor that screened the video footage just filmed in Belgrade. The *Alternative Film and Video Festival*<sup>19</sup> in Belgrade restarted in 2003 and continues today. Vital was the alternative voice of Radio B92 from Belgrade.<sup>20</sup> Active throughout the 90s, it broadcast under the radar of the authorities until 1999, when the station was (temporarily) closed down. B92 was a community of media activists, transmitted over the internet, regularly giving news on the anti-war demonstrations and the desperate living conditions during UN sanctions. Today, it is an online information portal about Serbia in English. Nearby, *SEAFair*,<sup>21</sup> or *Skopje Electronic Arts Fair*, held annually from 1997 to 2002 in Macedonia, focused on the topics of geography, science and technology, and was organised by SCCA–Skopje director, Melentije Pandilovski. Artists from around Eastern Europe were invited for technical workshops, discussions, performances and demonstrations.

By the turn of the millennium, discussions around issues concerning nationalism, ethnic identity, military war crimes, privatisation, retribution, and legal compliance to qualify for membership in the EU dominated the news in the West and throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The complexity of the economic, political and social status for individuals, along with specific national issues, are addressed in many of the videotapes in the *Transitland* selection. Video, a powerful tool for communication, allows for alternative and individual viewpoints. It is also a medium of contention. The specific issues of the various conflicts around the emergence of political independence in Eastern Europe are vast, and beyond the scope of this text, but they have left a mark on the individual lives of artists. To even attempt to describe the scope of video activity and give a brief history in such a short space is both an unfair task and incomplete.

### The video selection for Transitland

To overview works from 24 countries with different political histories, languages and ethnic backgrounds was a daunting challenge for the jury. There were no categories set up beforehand, no quotas to meet, and no clear predetermined view as to how the works would become a cohesive programme. The guidelines for selection were clearly stated: that representation of the countries established by the EU as Central and Eastern European would be achieved; the dates of production must be observed; that only single channel

video would be considered; and that inclusion of artists from not only the larger more sophisticated centres of video production, but also those from the newly emerging countries, with artists whose voices are rarely heard, would be made. Content was the key issue for selection, and the jury agreed to look favourably at works that reflected the social and cultural events, ideas and responses, in the specific period of transition (1989–2009). Many excellent works were nominated and reviewed that fell outside the content guidelines for transitional reference, and therefore are not included. Nevertheless, all works were reviewed and discussed, making the selection process an active and rewarding experience.

It was only after the final selection was made that an analysis and overview of the *Transitland* juried selection could be attempted. This overview emerged as a response to the works themselves (not from a preset curatorial position), and is a personal response, but one based on the discussions and opinions of the jury members. What each of the works share is a strong, individual voice, expressing an alternative message from the political “machine” of their country, and the ability to portray specific aspects of the transition towards European (Capitalist) culture within a contemporary, artistic framework. There is humour, which can be recognised cross-culturally, in many of the works and there is also sorrow and loss. There is an overall willingness, even an eagerness, to observe and create new narratives. Primarily, as a systematic process to begin a deconstruction of the selection, I have arranged the works into four main categories: Performance, Conceptual, Documentary and what I have termed Artistic License (including animation, music, theatre, poetry). Many of the works fit into more than one category and are structurally complex, but I have attempted to locate the dominant feature of each work, to offer at least a starting point for further discussion.

## Performance

Performance is a traditional form of the avant-garde, and understood throughout Eastern Europe. It is rich in irony. Performance can be as simple as the artist standing before the camera (the audience) and facing personal issues. It can also be the organisation of people, who become actors to perform or to react to instructions with certain parameters, set in place by the artist. What is important about the performance works included in *Transitland* is the variety of style, the scale of artistic activity, and the numerous political interventions made by artists.

Performance works that challenge the political or cultural power structure are created in many ways, and individual performances are the most intimate. Gordana Andjelić-Galić (Bosnia and Herzegovina) marches in isolation, on a deserted road, and fumbles with an armful of large flags, each one representing a past ruling government of her country. There is no audience to applaud her struggle in *Mantra* (2006); Ivan Moudov (Bulgaria) performs in public, dressed as a Bulgarian policeman, conducting traffic in a busy Austrian intersection. The unknown uniform causes some confusion before he is carried off, in the work *Traffic Control* (2001). Martin Zet (Czech Republic), on the other hand, performs directly for the camera, evolving slowly to become a clown while relating the telephone conversation he has had about living on Marxova Ulice (Marx Street) in *Red Daddy* (2003).

Facing the camera to reveal strong female identity is the concern of many female artists. Elena Kovylyna exemplifies the strength of Russian women in *Waltz* (2001). Her performance is an endurance test of her capacity to drink shots of vodka, and initially she appeals to the audience to applaud her, but when her ability to remain standing falters, she becomes pathetic and hopeless. Vodka, which at times has been more available than clean water in Russia, is a social reality that signifies camaraderie. Hajnal Németh (Hungary) performs on the highway, confidently and in very public view, in *Striptease or not?* (2002) The stretch of highway leading into Budapest from Vienna is also known as an active pick-up spot for truck drivers looking to find women for sex. The evolving role of women in transitional society is questioned by the artist. Kai Kaljo (Estonia) explores her position as artist within the changed conditions of predatory Capitalism in *Loser* (1997). It is a test of her integrity to continue to announce her attributes. Natalija Vujošević (Montenegro) tells the video camera her secrets and reveals her private passions, in the performance *Pink Confession* (2001). Each of these video works is an honest attempt to communicate a social truth and a daily reality, and the conditions that inform artistic expression.

Milica Tomić (Serbia) discloses the pain of identity with her performance *I am Milica Tomić*. The work exemplifies the essence of political ethnic cleansing, as one’s identity is ultimately why someone is persecuted, and why another is in power. Boryana Rossa (Bulgaria) conducts another discourse on pain, love and suffering in *The Moon and the Sunshine* (2000). An insight into her deeper feelings, the performance tests her threshold of pain and pleasure. Oleg Mavromatti (Russia) creates a performance video as a work of art in its own right, with *The Last Valve* (2004), a piece that comprises Boryana Rossa’s most intimate work.

The investigation of the environment, and a keen personal reference, concern Călin Dan (Romania) in *Sample City* (2003). This staged endurance performance brings to life a traditional folk character, Păcală (the simpleton, the deceiver). The performer, who carries a door on his back while walking around the various quarters of Bucharest (and meanwhile takes the viewer on a tour), represents this folk legend as a modern day hero. The door being the symbol for “closing it behind you”, or “minding one’s own business”. Good advice in a repressive social context. Mare Tralla (Estonia) re-enacts her childhood curiosity. Her Cold War concept about Westerners, and how they perceive Russians, is acted out in *Feltboots* (2000). Wearing the traditional soft boots, she explores the Western city streets, as the cliché image of a peasant. Instead of attracting attention, she is invisible, no longer a threat as a political enemy. Mariana Vassileva (Bulgaria) also explores her environment in her ongoing video work, *Journal* (1990–2005). The episode reveals her physical exploration of small details in the city, with her hands. It is a sensual, personal method of observation.

The interaction between performers provides an additional level of discourse, and creates a less personal relationship with the viewer, who is positioned to consider the activity being witnessed. In her *Untitled* (2001) work, Sona Abgaryan (Armenia) presents two performers, who interact with each other in an infantile manner. Their baby-like movements bring up issues including naïveté, and the social awkwardness dealing with new cultural practices. Dan Acostioaei, with Ann Wodinski (Romania), presents a male and female, framed in a close-up image, embracing through the balaclavas they wear. No dialogue is necessary to understand *Essential Current Affairs* (2002), as a commentary on violence. Azorro SuperGroup (Poland) performs the work *Everything has been done, I* (2003), a humorous response to artistic practice today. Yael Bartana, an Israeli artist working in Poland, stages the performance *Mary Koszmary* in an empty Warsaw stadium. She mobilises some youths and an actor, to deliver a speech by Sławomir Sierakowski, inviting 3 million Jews to return to Poland. Pavel Braila (Republic of Moldova) invites his mother to cook a traditional dish and send it across the border to his exhibition opening, in *Eurolines Catering of Homesick Cuisine* (2006). This points out the common practice of using coaches to transport food and goods between families. One of the most elaborate performance works, by Tanja Ostojić (Serbia), is a marriage to Klemens Golf (Germany) as part of her bigger project, *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport*. In her work *Crossing Over* (2001), Tanja meets Klemens for the first time in Belgrade. He has answered her internet ad to find a husband in the EU for the purpose of obtaining a passport. It is a personal yet public event that concludes in her eventual move to Germany.

Performance, as a public event, is a powerful intrusion in the normal daily routines that take place everywhere around the world. In Eastern Europe, performance usually refers to political issues. They may be a “happening” like *In the City* (1994), by Anna Janczyszyn-Jaros (Poland); the group intervention *Demonstration* (2000), by the Radek Community & Dmitry Gutov (Russia), or the action by Khinkali Juice, founded by Sophia Tabatadze and Nadia Tsulukidze (Georgia), *Georgian National Anthem* (2006), a humorous performance of the National Anthem of Georgia, performed in the busy roundabout Europe Square.

The orchestration of performers to present the position of social groups and their conditions is clear in several of the videotapes. Vladimir Nikolić (Serbia) manipulates a small group who contradict the religious Orthodox-Christian signing of the cross, in time with a techno beat in *Rhythm* (2001). Adrian Paci (Albania) orchestrates a group of men, who represent the scores of unemployed, and reveals the harmony of social action in *Turn On* (2004), a symbolic act of unity. Rudina Xhaferi (Kosovo) gathers a group of men together who sit in the middle of a busy intersection to discuss the political situation in *So Good to be an Albanian* (2004). Artur Żmijewski (Poland) assembles four groups with different beliefs, all known to be uncompromising, and invites them to a workshop in *Them* (2007). This social experiment performance work evolves and fails to negotiate agreement between their differing perspectives, proving the division and gaps in the post-Socialist society. These performance actions reveal the interactions between people, and accentuate the frustrations and complex references in countries which were formerly extremely restrictive.

## Conceptual works

Conceptual works can be almost anything, but most important is that the “concept” takes priority over all other considerations for the work. They often do not have a clearly defined purpose, and largely exist to posit questions and bring new relationships between otherwise disparate ideas and actions. Video is a tool well suited for artists working in the conceptual tradition, as it is possible to set up idealistic situations, and create fictional events and unlikely realities. Fictitious accounts are also among the many conceptual works that mimic reality, and play on other memories and expectations. Association Apsolutno (Serbia) set about to investigate a mystery and build a pseudo activity in *Absolutely Dead* (1995). Zbyněk Baladrán (Czech Republic) creates a fictitious account of a confrontation between the Communist Manifesto and the utopian ideas of functionalist architect Karel Honzík in the work *Socio-Fiction* (2005–07). A fake re-creation of a Soviet science television programme is the idea behind *xvz* (2003), by Maia Sumbadze and Nika Machaidze (Georgia). Žaneta Vangeli (Macedonia) creates a fictitious persona, who is set up to

represent humanity, in *A Documentary Film about Vladimir Antonov* (1995). Mark Brogan (Serbia) recounts his journey to find a studio, which locates him in a call centre, in the work *In a Remote Corner of Europe* (2008). Using effects and custom technique, Ivan Ladislav Galeta (Croatia) creates the story of a video letter smuggled across a closed border, in *Letter (Dear Zoltán...)* (1992).

The restraints placed on an incident portrayed, either with time, colour or focus, creates another conceptual category of work. An example of restraint is revealed in a humorous work by Oskar Dawicki (Poland) in *Budget Story* (2007). The film lasts until the money runs out, to the astonishment of a well-known Polish actor, while constantly changing exchange rates are exposed in the background. Ana Hušman (Croatia) examines etiquette and cultural patterns of eating in her ironic work, *Lunch* (2008). Using stark, high contrast images, Gintaras Šeputis (Lithuania) examines “the game of life” in *Black—White* (1992). Yury Vassiliev (Russia) explores his country’s passions in *Russian Red* (2001). Krišs Salmanis & Daiga Krūze (Latvia) use the child’s string game cat’s cradle as a metaphor that creates the backdrop for a retelling of history in *Historia* (2001).

Works that are set in unrealistic environments are conceptually contradictory. While they seem logical, they are not. Szabolcs KissPál (Hungary) captures 160 birds who defy our visual reference in *Edging* (2003). Adrian Paci (Albania) creates an interaction between children in a meadow, who see the landscape through broken mirrors, in *Per Speculum* (2006). In Nebojša Šerić Shoba’s (Bosnia and Herzegovina) work *Shovel* (1997), the artist performs the actions of digging a hole, to represent the concept that there is no return. Diana Hakobyan (Armenia), on the other hand, offers options and choices in her work *Untitled* (2007). Based on sidewalk games, she relates art and media to individual play and change.

## Artistic license

Artists invent new styles and alter images to express intention and to experiment with the materials and technologies at their disposal. Artistic License often requires the viewer’s suspension of disbelief, allowing the work to take effect despite having disparate elements. Animation and theatre require this step of acceptance. Music video also operates in the realm of fantasy, as well as the cross media video forms that combine poetry, theatre, opera, dance and drama.

Film Animation represents a strong area of filmmaking, with a longstanding history in Eastern Europe. Video technology, paired with the computer, has built on the tradition to be political and entertaining. Several works offer new ways

to look at old issues. Csaba Nemes (Hungary) uses the Rotoscoping technique, and reworks news footage of the Hungarian riots of the autumn of 2006, bringing a different perspective to the politics of contemporary demonstrators in *Remake* (2007). Michaela Pavlátová (Czech Republic) explores relationships between men and women with her expressive, graphic animation style that uses drawing in *Repeat* (1995). *Independence Day 18* (2001) is the topic of Mārtiņš Ratniņš (Latvia), who deconstructs Latvia’s heraldic symbols using computer animation. The resulting graphic images pulse rhythmically, synchronised with electronic music. Gentian Shkurti (Albania) re-edits the classic animated film and intercuts the video with an alternative destination for Alice, the war zone of Albania, in *Alice in Wonderland* (1998). Music and animation are linked with the work by Aliaksei Tserakhau (Russia). Using a computer morphing technique, a fast-paced montage of political associations is intercut with symbols and coded references, in *Lyapis Trubetskoy-Capital* (2007).

The popularity of music video in the 1980s changed the editing style and intensity of video art. Music is interpreted by artists through a different filter, and is the methodology for several video works in *Transitland*. Chto delat (Russia) choreographs a chorus, who sings the events of 21 August 1991, in *Perestroika Songspiel: The Victory over the Coup* (2008). The coup is analysed within the traditional structure of a Greek tragedy. István Kántor (Hungary) refers to his upbringing in Eastern Europe, while fighting for his rights against heartless property developers in Toronto, in his aggressive musical (*The Never Ending*) *Operetta* (2008). Szabolcs KissPál (Hungary) exposes the ethnic tensions between Hungary and Romania by asking a chorale group to sing the Hungarian national anthem to the melody of the Romanian national anthem, in *Rever (Anthem, 2001)*. Paying homage to the popular musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Damir Nikšić (Bosnia and Herzegovina) exchanges the lyrics in *If I Wasn’t Muslim* (2004), with a tenor’s very convincing performance.

Dramatic works require performance, as well as a concise structure, in the short form used by video artists. Šejla Kamerič (Bosnia and Herzegovina) employs children to play adult roles, and enact the story of the memories in an old family house, in *What do I know* (2007). Marko Kovačič (Slovenia) uses the metaphor of a game of chess to demonstrate the hostility of the war in Bosnia, in *No More Heroes Any More* (1992). Lala Raščić (Bosnia and Herzegovina) constructs a visualisation of an audio drama, using H.G. Well’s satirical references to social surveillance, in her dramatic work *The Invisibles* (2005). David Maljković (Croatia) creates a mythical drama, set in the Petrova Gora Memorial Park, a memorial from World War II that no longer has a relative function, in *Scene for New Heritage* (2004–06).

The digital reworking of film footage, integrated with references to dramatic, poetic, dance and literary works, creates a hybrid documentary style, that demands the appreciation of artistic license. Egon Bunne (Germany) uses Bertold Brecht to frame the events of the opening of the Berlin border to the East, with his work *Alles wandelt sich (Everything Changes)* (1990). Tigran Khachatryan (Armenia) has created garage style videomaking, and re-enacts popular cinema, repurposing the classic sequences in *Stalker* (2004). Vadim Yuryevich Koshkin (Russia) mixes newsreels, historic footage and his own experimental video in *Fucking Electricity* (1993). Sergey Shutov (Russia) uses what he calls “destylisation” to digitally alter and stylise Soviet cinema excerpts, in *Amazing, How Silently It Is—II* (1994). Mirko Simić (Slovenia) creates stylised impressions of the social order to create new dialogues in *Out of Memory* (1994). Marina Gržinić & Aina Šmid (Slovenia) mix film footage and dance to reveal the political tragedy of Kosovo in *Bilocation* (1990).

## Documentary

A Documentary is a “document” of a live event, a visual essay, an edited opinion or declaration of a specific standpoint related to an event or situation. Artists work with real events in an unrestricted and free manner and explore various alternative documentary formats to create unique, sometimes personal perceptions. A traditionally respected format, documentary film also tells stories of real events and observes events. Dziga Vertov’s legacy of the Soviet Kino-Pravda, or “Cinema Truth”, put forth a philosophy that the camera was a device that could capture images more rapidly and with better accuracy than the human eye. His work led to *Cinéma Vérité*, the handheld technique made popular in the 1950s, and used to capture emotional responses to live events. This form is still popular with artists today.

Artists have utilised the archival capability of video, and have been able to draw new relationships between political events and art actions, creating a new form for documentary video. Marina Gržinić & Aina Šmid (Slovenia) masterfully bring an aesthetic connection between the group IRWIN and cultural events taking place in *Postsocialism+Retroavantgarde+IRWIN* (1997). They bring an intellectual discourse together using artistic actions as benchmarks. The project *The City Of Cool—Renaming Streets of Leipzig* (2005), by REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT (Germany), documents the actions of the group in the Plagwitz quarter, and its reinvention as a gallery scene and centre of artistic activity in the city. Rassim (Bulgaria) is an artist who documents his bodybuilding activity, which he sculpts as living art in *Corrections* (1996-98). Dan Mihălțianu (Romania) edits a condensed documentation of the events in Bucharest of December 1989, as heard on the radio, while the daily ritual of

grooming takes place as usual, in *La révolution dans le boudoir* (1999). The creation of visual essays and the observation of the environment are important aspects of documentary form. The works, sometimes referred to as portraits, are generally subjective interpretations of what is seen through the camera lens. Kevin McCoy, an American, observed the East Berlin environment, which he realised would quickly change. His portrait, *Berlin, Capital of the DDR* (1989–1992), is a treatise on memory. Józef Robakowski (Poland) recorded the view from his window over a period of 20 years, creating a portrait of the neighbourhood and the changes that ultimately transpired during the transition, in *From my window 1978–1999* (2000). Aleksandar Spasoski (Macedonia) creates another portrait of a neighbourhood in digitally edited sequences that combine found footage with original material, to create the provocative work *Voyeur* (2008). Mike Stubbs, a British artist collaborating with the German composer Ulf Langheinrich to create a portrait of the East German landscape, left desolate by cast mining and chemical production, in *Gift* (1995).

Revealing portraits of people and places, subREAL (Romania) takes the viewer on a bus ride, at night, through the city of Bucharest, and bears witness to the activity on the bus and outside on the streets, in *Draculand 3* (1993). Krassimir Terziev (Bulgaria) shows us a leisure park outside Sofia, which was planned as a futurist play area for children. The architect’s vision features unlikely objects, like tanks, canons and rockets, in something like a deserted battleground, as an environment for children, in *A Place (Playground)* (2004). Aleksander Komarov (Belarus) takes a careful look at the final days of the Palast der Republik in Berlin, and constructs an idealistic situation in *See You In Disneyland* (2006). András Sólyom (Hungary) creates a mythical documentary of the important funerals of Soviet times, and re-burials of post-Soviet time, in *Funeral* (1992). Nadia Tsulukidze (Georgia), from the perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, creates a visual essay, showing the dark, ruined Soviet factories as a metaphor for ruined ideologies, in *XXI* (2007).

The telling of true stories, using archival footage, found footage, documents, off-air recordings, and mixing these components with original video can create a time capsule, reveal a state of being, and weave personal lives with public information. Gusztáv Hámos (Hungary) mixes an analysis of the TV news of the Romanian Revolution with his grandmother’s stories of living through three wars in his potent personal documentary, *1989—The Real Power of TV* (1991). Adela Jušić (Bosnia and Herzegovina) portrays her struggle to come to terms with her father’s death, and the discovery of his wartime notebook documenting his own victims, in the work, *The Sniper* (2007). Anri Sala (Albania) finds video of a political meeting, which shows his mother (but with no sound). *Intervista* (1998) is the story of how he reconstructs her words, and unravels the mystery

of the political event. Jasmila Žbanić (Bosnia and Herzegovina) tells the story of her work with traumatised children in Sarajevo, and the special case of Balma, who has created a fantasy world for herself, in *After, After* (1997).

The recording of live events captured on video is extraordinary because these are a document of what was experienced by the artist. This format can also bring a feeling of “being there” to the viewer. It allows the real-time of the past and the knowledge of the present to be combined, a special capability of video. Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica (Germany) have created one of the most important documentary works of the transition, *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992). By recording the television broadcast and the events of the occupation of the Bucharest television studio, and incorporating video footage recorded by amateurs—the public witnesses, the drama of the transition is reconstructed. Eva Filova (Slovakia) exposes how a visit from the Pope transforms the city in *Pro Choice* (2003). Kuda.org (Serbia) discloses found footage from a US Airforce plane, downed in Serbia, in *Safe Distance* (2002). Sophia Tabatadze (Georgia) records her impressions of her visit to Georgia, with *Self-Interview as Eastern and Western Europe*.

Informative documents present new and educational material, in traditional film language. Pavel Braila (Republic of Moldova) explains essential differences between Russia and Moldova in *Shoes for Europe* (2002). Goran Dević (Croatia) looks at differences between people, on identity formations and on the very process of constructing an enemy, in *Imported Crows* (2004). Andreas Fogarasi (Hungary) tells the plight of the workers clubs after the fall of related utopias and the fall of Socialism in *A Machine for* (2006). Kaspars Goba (Latvia) reveals a pocket of Russian culture in *Seda. People of the Marsh* (2004). Renata Poljak (Croatia) recalls the genre of “city symphony” films, in *Great Expectations* (2005). Stefan Rusu (Republic of Moldova) explains a Spanish tradition of local winemaking in *Jeres* (2005).

Documentary film is a form that can present a clear viewpoint of the filmmaker as an active agent. The artist’s voice plays an important role in understanding the alternative position to the official view, in both the East and the West. Hristina Ivanoska (Macedonia) recounts the struggle of an individual’s initiative, in *Naming of the Bridge: Rosa Plaveva and Nakie Bajram* (2006). Kristina Norman (Estonia) tells how the media extends the public debate on the leftover monument from Soviet times in an independent post-Soviet country in *Monolith* (2007). In *My America* (2003), Egle Rakauskaite a/k/a RAKĖ (Lithuania) describes her immigrant role as a caregiver. Joanne Richardson (Romania) creates a diary of her memories of Romania and its transition in *In Transit* (2008). Hito Steyerl (Germany) unpacks the history of Potsdamer Platz in *The*

*Empty Centre* (1998). Using found footage, János Sugár (Hungary) constructs an alternative history of the Kalashnikov machine gun, in *Typewriter of the Illiterate* (2001). Krassimir Terziev (Bulgaria) explores the stereotypes of Bulgarians in Western popular culture, specifically in the Hollywood movies in *On the BG Track. 03* (2002). Artur Żmijewski (Poland) documents the last “exhibition” of the Polish architect Oskar Hansen, with *A Dream of Warsaw* (2005).

The symbolic, representational, impressionistic, journalistic, subjective, narrative, informative, humorous and mainly political video works in *Transitland* communicate a diverse message of transition and change. Today, these works can be shown in Eastern European art galleries, festivals and in museums (not only abroad). But they would have been considered subversive and unacceptable in the former Soviet era of censorship and control of art and the media. Now we consider these video works a window into the reality of the New Europe, as well as a view into the lives and histories of the people and places who are all too often forgotten or ignored.

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## Notes

- 1 Together with five commissions, the complete archive contains 100 video works.
- 2 [www.wvfv.nl/0index.html](http://www.wvfv.nl/0index.html)
- 3 [www.emaf.de/\\_emaf/index.php](http://www.emaf.de/_emaf/index.php)
- 4 [www.infermental.de](http://www.infermental.de)
- 5 *Metaphysical Visions: Middle Europe. Deconstruction, Quotation & Subversion: Video from Yugoslavia*, Valerie Smith, Kathy Rae Huffman (eds.), New York, Artists Space 1989, p. 28.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 [www.kuda.org/en/tvgallery](http://www.kuda.org/en/tvgallery)

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# Videography

Compiled by Margarita Dorovska

1989

1989-92

**Kevin McCoy**

Born 1967 in Seattle, WA, United States of America.  
Lives and works in New York, United States of America.

**Berlin, Capital of the DDR | 6'46"**

A Super 8mm film of a walk through East Berlin in 1989 is the starting point for a visual investigation of the nature of memory. A small handful of images circles over and over, obsessive, repetitive, dimly perceived. They are all that remain of an experience of a place that was starting to vanish just as it was about to be seen.



1990

**Egon Bunne**

Born 1952 in Ahlen, Germany, pre-unification West Germany (FRG).  
Lives and works in Wiesbaden, Germany.

**Everything Changes | 7'45"**

As Rudolf Frieling states: "Using Bertolt Brecht's poem 'Alles wandelt sich' (Everything Changes), the artist visualises a very personal view of continuities and confrontations between National Socialist Germany and post-Wall Germany in 1989. With textual inserts and voiceovers (by Wolfgang Neuss), archive and documentary footage (including the fall of the Berlin Wall), the tape creates a dense kaleidoscopic collage of German identity between the Brechtian prologue (Nothing stays the way it is) and the epilogue borrowed from playwright Heiner Müller (Nothing is the way it stays). The tape is characteristic of the resolutely videographic work of Egon Bunne".

For further information on the artists, see: [www.transitland.eu](http://www.transitland.eu)  
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1990

**Marina Gržinić, Aina Šmid**

Marina Gržinić born 1958 in Rijeka, Croatia, the former Yugoslavia. Lives in Ljubljana, Slovenia and works in Ljubljana, Slovenia and Vienna, Austria. | Aina Šmid born 1957 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

**Bilocation | 12'06"**

Bilocation means the residence of the body and soul in two different places at the same time—simultaneously. It is the perfect term for delineating the processes going on in the video medium and for describing the hell and bloody history of Kosovo, a territory in the South of the former Yugoslavia (Serbia). Original documentary material from the civil war in Kosovo in 1989 (Albanians are fighting for basic civil rights against the Serbian nationalistic and hegemonic power) made by TV Slovenia, but never shown publicly, has been used and juxtaposed with the imaginary world of synthetic video images. Fragments of texts used in the video are taken from Roland Barthes's book, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*.



1990-2005

**Mariana Vassileva**

Born 1964 in Dobrich, Bulgaria. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

**Journal | 12'**

Mariana Vassileva feels her way past various locations led by different destinations. She is both adult and child at the same time. This is a method not just of feeling, but also of transforming the contour of the self. Our skin is a border crossing.

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**Gusztáv Hámos**

Born 1955 in Budapest, Hungary. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

**1989—The Real Power of TV | 59'**

In Romania the fighting was not yet over when Hámos, a Hungarian filmmaker living in Berlin, left for Hungary in December 1989, for the first time since he had left his country of birth without permission ten years earlier. He wanted to make a film about censorship in Hungarian Television—about news analysis, newscasters and reading news—that was contrary to the officially sanctioned broadcasts. Day after day, Hámos watched broadcasts from Romania with his grandmother at the dinner table. In this remarkable video essay on what Hámos terms “the real power” of television, his grandmother’s personal point of view is contrasted with the Revolution on TV. Archival news footage—from the 1956 Hungarian uprising and the 1968 Prague Spring, to the events in the Eastern European countries and China in 1989—is interlaced with the comments of television journalists, news presenters and newscasters.



1992

**András Sólyom**

Born 1951 in Budapest, Hungary. Lives and works in Budapest, Hungary.

**Funeral | 7'**

This piece assembles mythical documentary shots of the Soviet funeral cult from 1924, with the burial of Lenin, to the burial of the three general secretaries in the 80s in explosive rhythm. With history condensed into seven minutes, this work is the film funeral of the failed system. The images are built on the spoken poetry of Ákos Szilágyi, with the mystical ritual quotation from István Márta, interchanged with dramatic music (performed by Amadinda)—a recollection of the Soviet Union like a smash in the face.

1992

**Ivan Ladislav Galeta**

Born 1947 in Vinkovci, Croatia, the former Yugoslavia.

Lives and works in Zagreb, Croatia.

**Letter (Dear Zoltán... ) | 4'**

During the Croatian War of Independence, when the borders between Croatia and Serbia were blocked, Branko Ištvančić managed to organise through Budapest the transfer of a video-letter on a VHS tape from a friend, Zoltán Siflis, from Subotica. This intimate media response is an immediate reaction to his letter.



1992

**Marko Kovačič**

Born 1956 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, the former Yugoslavia.

Lives and works in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

**No More Heroes Any More | 18'15''**

A grotesque on the subject of war in Bosnia. A game of chess as a symbolic and performative practice is the core of this video that is intrinsically defined by small mise-en-scènes, transformed mechanical figurines, and the performance of the main protagonists. When war is reality, the game in it is obligatory. It is not an illustration, but rather a commentary on war, on the theatrics of military mechanics. It suggests that war is a [strategic and tactical] game; that weapons are the toys of adults; that people are toys; that at the end, there is always a force that transforms most ordinary competition into a relentless fight for life—or against it. The video is characterised predominantly by sets and props, and not by people. The toys are granted souls, while human characters become or remain, or are subjected to grotesque stereotypes.

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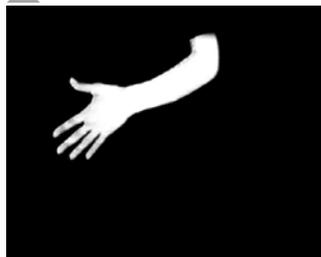
1992

**Gintaras Šeputis**

Born 1967 in Tauragė, Lithuania, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Vilnius, Lithuania.

**Black—White | 4'18"**

Black—white, warm—cold, man—woman... This is an abstract piece, hinting at the great game of life, taking place deep inside us, never seen on the surface—all that remains outside of the shot.



1992

**Harun Farocki, Andrei Ujica**

Harun Farocki born 1944 in Nový Jičín (Neutitschein), Czech Republic, in the then German-annexed Czechoslovakia. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany and Vienna, Austria. | Andrei Ujica born 1951 in Timișoara, Romania. Lives and works in Berlin and Karlsruhe, Germany.

**Videograms of a Revolution | 107'**

As Andrei Ujica states: "The autumn of 1989 is fixed in our memories as a series of visual events: Prague, Berlin, Bucharest. [...] We were watching revolutions. And it was Romania, with its unity of time and place, which delivered the most complete scenario of a revolution. Everything happened in just ten days and in just two cities: the uprising of the people, the overturning of power, the execution of the rulers. [...] the final overthrow took place in Bucharest: in the capital and in front of the cameras. The television station was occupied by demonstrators, stayed on air for around 120 hours and so established a new historical site: the television studio. [...] There may just have been a single camera daring to record events at the outset of the uprising, but there were a hundred filming the following day. Between 21-26 December 1989 (the day of Ceaușescu's last speech until the day of the first television reports of his trial) cameras were at all the most important locations in Bucharest [...] The 20<sup>th</sup> century is filmic. But it is only with the advent of the video camera and the increased possibilities for lengthy and mobile recording it offers that the process of the filmification of history can be completed." The artists reconstruct the visual chronology of these days, aiming to disentangle the mass of images and arrange sequences so as to suggest that for five days, one moved from camera to camera on one and the same reel of film.

1993

**Vadim Yuryevich Koshkin**

Born 1965 in Novosibirsk, Russia, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Moscow, Russia.

**Fucking Electricity/Currents of Death | 4'25"**

*Fucking Electricity* is an impressive example from the early video and media art scene in Russia. Koshkin became interested in video technologies after the fall of the Iron Curtain. After working for TV programmes and joining V. M. Kobrin's Studio of Trick Films and Computer Graphics at the Moscow Institute of Cinematography, in 1993, with the participation of friends, he founded the Studio of Egocentric Peculiarities, which produces experimental video, computer graphics, TV programmes and music videos, as well as the first ever held in Russia Media Festival, *Plodding on through the Midnight Darkness*.



1993

**subREAL**

Founded 1990 in Bucharest, Romania.

Members: Călin Dan (1955), Iosif Király (1957), Dan Mihălțianu (1954).

**Draculand 3 | 13'**

An old bus is driving through the night, Coca Cola ads are glued on dilapidated façades, people are relentlessly chewing gum, gypsy kids are dancing for the camera, shop windows shine with suspicious foods from the Communist period, while people are arguing around Ceaușescu's grave. From time to time, text inserts are feeding obscure information in Latin about the infamous Count Dracula, the Walachia ruler who for centuries kept the European psyche alert. All those disparate images depict a generic country, where the phantoms of a dire past still haunt the present. Both self-deprecating and critical of the Western imagination thirsty for kitsch horror and fake blood, this video is part of a larger body of tactical events meant to bring a twist of humour to the stiff perception of Romania in a post-Wall world.

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**Anna Janczyszyn-Jaros**

Born 1967 in Cracow, Poland. Lives and works in Cracow, Poland.

**In The City | 22'32"**

The video was produced in 1994 as an experimental work showing the documentation of a happening on the streets of Cracow. The viewer can watch the different reactions of the passers-by. The idea of this work was to show what happens when an individual's personality meets social situations like those on the streets of the city, to show the confrontation of an artist with an accidental passer-by. This work was influenced by Eastern European existentialism, Polish happening and the experimental theatre of Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor.



1994

**Mirko Simić**

Born 1965 in Valjevo, Serbia, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

**Out of Memory | 5'07"**

Precise editing and sharp cuts stress the sense of hopelessness and isolation of the world. The main character moves through urban areas, but finally finds himself in the midst of the endlessness of nature, strange and unpredictable. Dreams of a different life are complemented by graphics and computer animation, developed into a visually rich and conceptually old-fashioned video.

1994

**Sergey Shutov**

Born 1955 in Potsdam, Germany (GDR), pre-unification East Germany. Lives and works in Moscow, Russia.

**Amazing, How Silently It Is—II | 4'09"**

The artist's appropriation of old Soviet films, processed by means of computer technologies, finds similarity to a fantastic vision of an alien. It is possible to imagine a story about the humanisation of aliens through implantation of memorable samples of the best of Soviet cinema, while the memory-holder removes both irony and affection. The mechanical vision (of computer, robot or alien) ideally carries out the operation of destylisation, dusting off the temporal patina and transforming old tapes into an amazing stream of beautiful, faultlessly abstract and modern pictures free of any associations.



1995

**Association Apsolutno**

Founded 1993 in Novi Sad, Serbia, the former Yugoslavia; active until 2005. Members: Zoran Pantelić, Dragan Rakić [+ 2009], Bojana Petrić and Dragan Miletić.

**Absolutely Dead | 7'15"**

The video is a pseudo-documentary of a pseudo-investigation into a death case. The victims are two half-built and abandoned trans-oceanic liners, left at the shipyard in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia, between the 1,258<sup>th</sup> and 1,259<sup>th</sup> kilometre of the Danube. The video features the members of Apsolutno as detectives who undertake a detailed investigation into the condition of the ships: the interior of the ships is examined thoroughly, while textual details about the ships appear on the yellow emergency ribbon on the screen. The final conclusion is that it is impossible to state with any certainty the cause of death, but that this is a case of absolute death. In this video, Apsolutno uses the evident condition of the ships as a metaphor for a particular social environment at a particular time.

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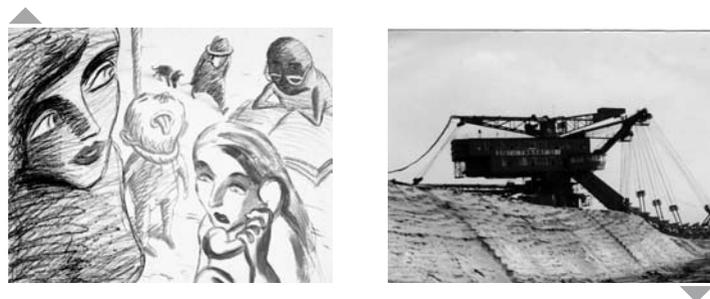
1995

**Michaela Pavlátová**

Born 1961 in Prague, Czech Republic, part of the former Czechoslovakia. Lives and works in Prague, Czech Republic.

**Repeat | 9'**

*Repeat* is a philosophical animation about the relationship between men and women. Many deep running stereotypes exist between men and women. If some of them are broken, many extraordinary absurd complications and changes can occur.



1995

**Mike Stubbs, Ulf Langheinrich**

Mike Stubbs born 1958 in Welwyn Garden City, United Kingdom. Lives and works in Liverpool, United Kingdom. | Ulf Langheinrich born 1960 in Wolfen, Germany, pre-unification West Germany (FRG). Lives and works in Vienna, Austria and Accra, Ghana.

**Gift | 14'**

The area is notorious for its astonishing lunar-like landscape, a product of uncurbed open cast mining and chemical production. Although much of the devastation belongs to a past era of massive state industry, some coal mining continues using vast mechanical diggers made before World War II. The sounds of these industries are the basis for Langheinrich's hypnotic electronic score, while their images are reconstructed into an electrifying impression of a dislocated landscape and community. Implicit in the film is also the tension between the old and the new (post-Unification) East Germany. The old is industrial, monolithic, dirty, inefficient, obsolete, a wasteland: a past to be destroyed and buried. The new is fragmented, avaricious, precarious, anxious and illusive. *Gift* is the German word for *poison*.

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**Žaneta Vangeli**

Born 1963 in Bitola, Macedonia, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Skopje, Macedonia.

**A Documentary Film about Vladimir Antonov | 6'35"**

A simulated documentary about a fictitious person, V. Antonov represents the universality of the human personality. His physical and mental state is revealed through 30 different personalities, which signify his diverse aspects of existence. The viewer gains insight into his complex inner world, becoming a witness to the hero's attempt to transcend Cartesian dualism.



1996

**Rassim**

Krassimir Krastev (Rassim) born 1972 in Orehovitsa, Bulgaria. Lives and works in Sofia, Bulgaria.

**Corrections | 6'**

Between 1996-98, over an 18-month period, the artist corrects or alters his body through bodybuilding. He trains in the gym, takes proteins, vitamins and amino-acids, creating a live sculpture of a contemporary naked body. Since the early 1970s, using one's own body ranks among one of the essential components of most performances. Insisting on the reality of the body was a stance in opposition to an ideological and realistic social mould. In the 1990s, this clearly articulated opposition could no longer be sustained. Through the video documentation of his action piece, Rassim reacts to this drastic and perceptual expulsion of the body's value in Eastern European countries. In achieving the ideal image of the successful person, he points toward the logic of a capitalist value of images. Ultimately, these "corrected" images are again received by the Western art market as part of the tomfoolery of his project's logic.

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**Marina Gržinić, Aina Šmid**

Marina Gržinić born 1958 in Rijeka, Croatia, the former Yugoslavia. Lives in Ljubljana, Slovenia and works in Ljubljana, Slovenia and Vienna, Austria. Aina Šmid born 1957 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

**Post-Socialism+Retroavantgarde+IRWIN | 22'05"**

The video is based on the philosophical text "Mapping Post-Socialism" by Marina Gržinić, that is a kind of philosophical-media reflection (tractate) on the cultural-artistic and political space regarding the condition of post-Socialism in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia in the 1980s and 90s. Three artists, art groups respectively coming from Ljubljana (IRWIN), Zagreb (Mladen Stilinović) and Belgrade (the artist known only by his pseudonym name, as Kasimir Malevich), with their art projects and especially with their relation to the Socialist and post-Socialist ideology code in a specific way with the ex-Yugoslavia space or territory are represented in the video. "Retroavantgarda" is a specific aesthetic and social movement produced by these artists and recently with some others from Eastern Europe. The video consists of some exclusive historical documentary materials and of statements by two important philosophers, the Slovenian Slavoj Žižek and the German/Austrian Peter Weibel.



1997

**Kai Kaljo**

Born 1959 in Tallinn, Estonia, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Tallinn, Estonia.

**Loser | 1'24"**

The artist stands in front of the camera and recites several sentences about her life, like: "Hello, my name is Kai Kaljo, I am an Estonian artist". Every sentence is followed by canned laughter from sitcoms. She introduces the artist as a loser of the newly launched entrepreneur Capitalism centred around financial success.

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**Nebojša Šeric Shoba**

Born 1968 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and New York, United States of America.

**Shovel | 4'34"**

The camera follows the man. He leaves his apartment, descends into the basement. There he grabs the shovel, locks the door, turns the light off. Then he leaves the building. The camera still follows him. He goes to the park, digs a hole in the ground. Then he grabs the camera and buries it into the ground. Very often, people do not have any idea what would happen if they just followed something which at first glance looks harmless. When things become very serious, usually there is no way back.



1997

**Jasmila Žbanić**

Born 1974 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**After, After 1 | 16'**

The work addresses the traumatising of children in Sarajevo as a result of the war. It is based on the question a psychologist asked school children: "What are you afraid of?" The answers to this question show the toll the war took on the psyche of children. In the case of seven-year-old Balma, whom Žbanić focuses on in her film, the horror of a child's experience almost leads to total silence. Žbanić succeeds in giving the little girl a voice and in visualising, in short sequences, the entire tragic dimension of her short life.

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**Anri Sala**

Born 1974 in Tirana, Albania. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

**Intervista | 26'**

While clearing out storage boxes from his Tirana apartment on a trip back to Albania from his studies in Paris in 1997, Anri Sala came across an old reel of film. It showed a Communist Party congress with hundreds of Party members applauding their leader, Enver Hoxha. A young woman was ushered on stage beside him. The film cut to an interview between the woman and a journalist. She spoke for a while, finishing the interview with an embarrassed smile. The woman was Sala's mother, but one thing was missing: there was no soundtrack on the reel. Sala wants to know what his mother was saying. Since no one who was present at the Congress can help him, Sala decides to go to a school for the deaf where a deaf-mute, assisted by a teacher, watches the video, lip-reads, and then transcribes the words.



1998

**Hito Steyerl**

Born 1966 in Munich, Germany, pre-unification West Germany (FRG). Lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

**The Empty Centre | 62'**

*The Empty Centre* reveals the layers of history beneath the construction site at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. Before World War II, it was the centre of Berlin, and the centre of power. During the Cold War, it became an empty minefield, sandwiched between the East and West parts of the city, demarcated by the Berlin Wall. After 1989, when the Wall fell, the death strip, the empty margins on each side of the former border, once again became accessible. The centre returned. Using dissolves of archival material and present-day images, the film engages the viewer in an archaeology of the present. Through its focus on Potsdamer Platz, the film discovers the residue of global power shifts and the simultaneous dismantling and reconstruction of borders. At the same time, it uncovers a history of the racism and exclusion, especially against immigrants and minorities, that have always served to define the notion of the powerful national centre.

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**Gentian Shkurti**

Born 1977 in Mamurras, Albania. Lives and works in Tirana, Albania.

**Alice in Wonderland | 3'33''**

This video edits together clips from Walt Disney's cartoon movie of the same name, along with TV broadcasts of chaos in Albania during the year 1997. It is built as a dialogue between Alice with the door into Wonderland. Alice wants to enter Wonderland (in this case, not the well known one, but Albania), where people have guns and shoot in the air wearing masks. As Alice says: "In my world, everything would be absurd. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it is not. What it is, it wouldn't be, and what it wouldn't be, it would".



1998-99

**Milica Tomić**

Born 1960 in Belgrade, Serbia, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Belgrade, Serbia.

**I am Milica Tomić | 9'58''**

As Yvonne Volkart states: "64 statements are proceeded in the following pattern: 'I am Milica Tomić, I am Korean', 'I am Milica Tomić, I am Norwegian', and so forth. Initially, one can observe that every sentence contains a true and a false statement: yes, that is Milica Tomić, but she is neither Korean nor Norwegian, nor Austrian for that matter. What is explored here is the very formation, the very making of an identity. To state, to pronounce one's identity makes one's identity. We acquire personal identity by acquiring the name, and it is significant that Milica Tomić does not dispute that form of identity in all its arbitrariness. She problematizes the making of an ethnic or national identity, which she sees also as an arbitrary declaration. Also, this identity does not belong to any category of 'feeling', which is usually a way to transcend one's original/inscribed ethnic identity by saying 'I may be Korean if I feel as a Korean, even if I am originally Serbian'. On the contrary, she has rejected any ethnic feeling and explores the whole issue as a rhetorical formation. To paraphrase Laclau and Zac, every identification is constitutively incomplete and will have to be always re-created through new identification acts".

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**Dan Mihălțianu**

Born 1954 in Bucharest, Romania.

Lives and works in Berlin, Germany, Bergen, Norway and Bucharest, Romania.

**La révolution dans le boudoir | 22'54"**

The video juxtaposes live audio recordings from the Romanian radio and television during the December 1989 events in Bucharest with images of daily life (the morning ritual of a man grooming himself), in an attempt to understand the incomprehensible. 1999, ten years later, everything seems to have returned to normality: the people, the city, the society, but clues as to what really happened in those days are still missing. What is left resembles an absurd theatre play. The audio track condenses into 22 minutes the four days between Ceaușescu's flight from the Central Comity of the Romanian Communist Party and the execution of the presidential couple. 22 minutes is also the time required to prepare oneself for a new day. Is a revolution a new beginning, or just a routine fresh start?



2000

**Boryana Rossa**

Born 1972 in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Lives and works in Sofia, Bulgaria and Troy, NY, United States of America.

**The Moon and the Sunshine | 6'06"**

Wounds and bruises are not always the result of violence. Sometimes they are marks of love. Pain (including the physical) is part of human existence—it is part of the life of both men and women; it is part of the act of creation. The difference is that some pain can only be suffered by women, other pain only by men. This is one of the reasons why the artist believes that the good things too, about each of the sexes, are diverse and each has the privilege to be different.

2000

**Mare Tralla**

Born 1967 in Tallinn, Estonia, part of the former Soviet Union.

Lives and works in London, United Kingdom and Tallinn, Estonia.

**Feltboots | 3'10"**

The starting point to this video is an anecdote from the artist's childhood, which asked the question: "Why do Russians wear feltboots?" The answer was: "To silently sneak past the Americans". She was about seven when she first heard the story, and it bothered her. How was it possible that the Americans did not notice? Her childhood thinking missed the political irony and totally excluded the notions of Cold War. It took her almost 20 years to start to understand the different political layers of that simple joke. In this video, she humorously acts out her childhood anecdote in the streets of Columbus, OH, sneaking past the Americans in old soft Russian feltboots. The political situation has changed, there is no more Cold War; yet, to the artist's surprise, she discovers totally new meanings of alienation and political blindness. She is very successful in silently sneaking past the Americans: no one pays any attention. Eastern Europeans have arrived, but it doesn't make any difference: they briefly occupy the space of aliens, before conforming to the Western/American ideal.



2000

**Józef Robakowski**

Born 1939 in Poznań, Poland. Lives and works in Łódź, Poland.

**From My Window 1978-1999 | 20'**

The artist started making this film in 1978, when he got an apartment in the so-called "Manhattan of Łódź" in the centre of town. From time to time, he'd look out the kitchen window with his film or video camera, onto the big courtyard that became the hero of his diary. All sorts of changes and socio-political events went on in the courtyard, independently of his volition. He was also interested in the daily life of the people connected with the courtyard. Now 20 years have gone by since the first frames were shot, and the time preserved on the tape has also become the hero. In 1998, the municipal authorities decided to build a hotel in the beautiful courtyard; construction is under way, and soon the view from the window will be nothing more than part of a hotel wall. That is when he will end this newsreel.

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**Radek Community + Dmitry Gutov**

Radek Community founded 1997 in Moscow, Russia. Members: Maxim Karakulov (1977), David Ter-Oganian (1981), Pavel Mikitenko (1977), Petr Bystrov (1981), Alexander Korneev (1980), Alexey Buldakov (1980), Andrei Serguienko (1977), Vladis Shapovalov (1981). | Dmitry Gutov born 1960 in Moscow, Russia, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Moscow, Russia.

**Demonstration | 8'**

This video shows a performance by the Radek Community (young left radical artists from Moscow). There were few participants, and in order to create a demonstration they chose a crowded place. They gathered at a junction where the pedestrian red light lasts for a long time. When the green light was finally illuminated, a big crowd of people cross the street. At this moment, the artists placed themselves at the head of the crowd and raised placards with absurdist and anarchist slogans. The impression made was that many people were taking part in the demonstration.



2001

**Ivan Moudov**

Born 1975 in Sofia, Bulgaria. Lives and works in Sofia, Bulgaria.

**Traffic Control | 5'59"**

The police in Bulgaria are often a symbol of unregulated power and authority. Laws and even road regulations could be ambiguously treated, and you never know whose rights exactly the policemen are protecting. What was interesting for the artist was what it was like to be "on the other side", to be the one with power, how wearing a uniform could change his position and point of view. He put himself into a situation where for the normal citizens, the artist represented the same authority that he feared. At the same time, the action was totally illegal. In Austria, where laws and regulations are much stricter, and citizens are much more respectful to authorities, the situation was even more interesting. He was wearing the uniform of a Bulgarian policeman, which Austrians cannot identify, but he counted on their respect for the law, no matter who was representing it. The artist entered their system both as a criminal and a person of power.

2001

**Sona Abgaryan**

Born 1979 in Berd, Armenia, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Berd, Armenia.

**Untitled | 4'44"**

Two white-robed characters playfully wrestle with each other. Utopias born from this innocent play drag the world into religious and political conflicts.



2001

**Elena Kovylnina**

Born 1971 in Moscow, Russia, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Moscow, Russia and Paris, France.

**Waltz | 10'**

Waltz was conceived in 2001 and was performed in Germany and subsequently in other European cities. The artist subverts the prevalent clichés of the "Russian woman", whose body became one of the main sources of revenue in the new Capitalist economy of the 1990s. She also subtly comments on a forced "reconciliation" between Russia and the West, the former absolute ideological adversaries. Choosing members of the Western audience to dance, the artist reverses the prevalent aesthetics of failure, empowering herself and symbolically activating what has been repressed. The spectators are invited to dance with the artist, who is otherwise engaged in a strange ritual of decorating herself with military badges, downing shots of vodka, and smashing the empty glasses on the ground, all the while becoming precariously smashed herself. The audience's role gradually shifts: whereas at the beginning of the performance, Kovylnina offers them a pleasant dance, by the end of the piece they're confronted with having to support the slumping, wobbling, nearly incapacitated artist.

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**Szabolcs KissPál**  
Born 1967 in Tîrgu-Mureş, Romania. Lives and works in Budapest, Hungary.

**Rever (Anthem) | 5'10"**

A choir performs an anthem in an empty gallery space. The verses of the Hungarian national anthem are sung to the melody of the Romanian national anthem. The artist emigrated 16 years ago from point A to point B, crossing two borders at the same time. The crossing itself was also doubled by the fact that there were many of his identities involved in it: vernacular and social, subjective and cultural, individual and historical, private and artistic. When asked by some people from point A to take part in a show in point B, he created an anthem which was recorded on video, as no choir was willing to perform it.



2001  
**Tanja Ostojić**  
Born 1972 in Užice, Serbia, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

**CrossingOver | 7'**

The artist started the project *Looking for a Husband with EU Passport* in August 2000. After publishing an ad with this title, she exchanged over 500 letters with numerous applicants from around the world. Following correspondence over six months with a German man, Klemens Golf, their first meeting was arranged as a public performance in the field in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade in 2001. The video documents this meeting with subtitles visualising the search for the other, getting closer to the other, as well as thoughts by strangers who were also about to encounter an intimate relationship. See: [www.van.at/see/tanja](http://www.van.at/see/tanja)



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**Vladimir Nikolić**  
Born 1974 in Belgrade, Serbia, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Belgrade, Serbia.

**Rhythm | 10'45"**

As Branislav Dimitrijević states: "Five people are filmed standing on a stage while making the Orthodox-Christian sign of the Cross, repetitively, following a techno music beat. What is in fact striking in Nikolić's powerful video work is that it brings its viewers back to one of the first ideological formulas, which was written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Blaise Pascal: 'Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe'. Ideology is in material practices, it resides in bodies and their rituals, and Nikolić renders these rituals redundant".

2001  
**Mārtiņš Ratņiks**  
Born 1975 in Saulkrasti, Latvia, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Riga, Latvia.

**Independence Day 18 | 4'**

The title of this computer-based animation refers to Latvia's Declaration of Independence on 18 November 1918. The heraldic symbols of the Latvian coat of arms are deconstructed and are utilised as graphic elements. Signs pulse rhythmically synchronised with electronic music.

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2001

**Krišs Salmanis, Daiga Krūze**

Krišs Salmanis born 1977 in Riga, Latvia, part of the former Soviet Union.  
Daiga Krūze born 1980 in Latvia, part of the former Soviet Union.  
Both live and work in Riga, Latvia.

**Historia | 3'33"**

A young woman offers her version of history, visualising its flow in a way that is not strictly linear and progressive, but contains many curves, turns and ruptures. She inserts herself into the history she describes, and ends in the present moment.



2001

**János Sugár**

Born 1958 in Budapest, Hungary. Lives and works in Budapest, Hungary.

**Typewriter of the Illiterate | 7'30"**

Different countries, cultures and conflicts, all have this weapon in common. Slightly exaggerated, it is the Esperanto of aggression, a status symbol even in the poorest countries. Somalians have a familiar proverb: "I and Somalia against the world, I and my clan against Somalia, I and my family against the clan, I and my brother against the family, I against my brother". Barry Sanders says: "The gun is the typewriter of the illiterate". The development of sophisticated hi-tech weapons systems has had an enormous impact on the economies and politics of the world. However, instead of these expensive weapons, what has actually been in constant use since the late 1940s is the Kalashnikov machine gun.

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2001

**Yury Vassiliev**

Born 1950 in Kingisepp, Russia, part of the former Soviet Union.  
Lives and works in Kaliningrad, Russia.

**Russian Red | 2'32"**

As Ivan Cieczot states: "It seems that in Russia, red is the colour of self-excitement and is magnetic, enchanting. From the formlessness and colourlessness of the environment and the inability to bring into it creative evaluation and definiteness, the Russian soul strives for the extreme energetic condition of boiling. The project *Russian Red* is as multi-composite as our red; it also resists final definitions, is simultaneously passionate and cold. It helps us experience our Russian thought stretching along the wide space of Eastern Europe and beyond, and to distance ourselves from red, keeping faithfulness to it as to the living form of conscious feeling".



2001

**Natalija Vujošević**

Born 1976 in Podgorica, Montenegro, the former Yugoslavia.  
Lives and works in Podgorica, Montenegro.

**Pink Confession | 4'20"**

Asked to make a public presentation of her work for an art workshop in Sarajevo, the artist, terrified of having to speak in public, decides to present herself through this video.

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2002

**Dan Acostioaei**

Born 1974 in Iași, Romania. Lives and works in Iași, Romania.

**Essential Current Affairs | 3'16"**

Wearing balaclavas, a man and a woman attempt a lover's embrace. A depiction of mutual alienation in times that could likewise be characterised as surreal.



2002

**Pavel Braila**

Born 1971 in Chișinău, Republic of Moldova, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany and Chișinău, Republic of Moldova.

**Shoes for Europe | 26'**

The video probes a politically enforced East-West differentiation, against the backdrop of historical transition, as inscribed into the everyday experience of travelling and commuting. In the small frontier train station of Ungheni at the Moldavian-Romanian border, every train stops for three hours and is lifted two meters in the air to change wheels from Russian Gauge used in Moldova to Standard Gauge used in Romania and Western Europe. The trains' laborious passage between East and West (illegally recorded by the artist, since no shooting is allowed in the Moldavian border area) hosts a double fantasy structure of an ever growing desire to gain access to Western Europe, with the prevailing notion demanding the homogenisation of communicative and technological tools to neutralise distance and place. Shot on digital video, two images are projected, mirroring the ever-present subject of how to locate and mediate subjectivity in times of fragmentation, dislocation and a new myth of transnational identity.

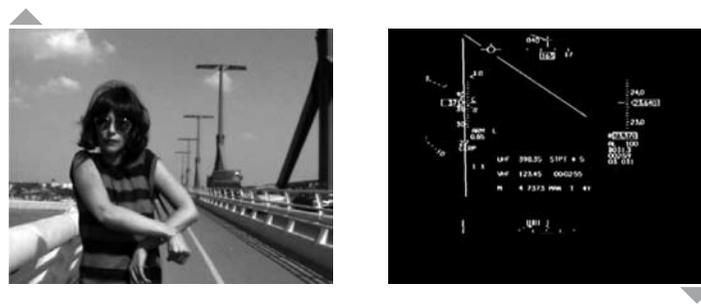
2002

**Hajnal Németh**

Born 1966 in Kiszvárd, Hungary. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

**Striptease or not? | 3'**

*Striptease or not?* is an absurd striptease performance. As art critic Andrea Bordács states: "This genre is normally reserved for the semi-darkness of stuffy night clubs, and the gradual stripping act meant to arouse desire. Németh's act is public: she does the thing in broad daylight against a backdrop of rushing cars on a bridge over the Danube. She takes her sexy red bra off and puts it back on, but all this she does beneath her striped t-shirt. The stripping act, or rather a parody of it, actually occurs; this may make things more mysterious, even if the body remains invisible, and the very essence, the arousal of desire, does not take place in this wholly asexual setting". The performance refers to the new and flourishing post-Socialist phenomenon of roadside prostitution, as well.



2002

**kuda.org**

Founded 2000 in Novi Sad, Serbia.

**Safe Distance | 21'**

Production: USA Air Force (1999); post-production: kuda.org

This videotape was recorded during the NATO air strikes against Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, showing the electronic cockpit of an U.S. Air Force plane. There were four airplanes flying from a NATO-base in Italy to a destination in Yugoslavia. The mission objective was to bomb several targets in the area around the city of Novi Sad. On the way back, after the mission was completed, a plane was shot. The tape (Sony video 8) was found near the crashed plane on Fruška Gora (Frankish Mountain) in the Syrmia region. It shows the electronic cockpit with basic graphical interface and voice communication between pilots. Videotape is a regular document of flight used by command structures to analyse the efficiency and success after every mission. This tape presents the last moments before the plane crashed.

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2002

**Krassimir Terziev**

Born 1969 in Dobrich, Bulgaria. Lives and works in Sofia, Bulgaria.

**On the BG Track.03 | 6'57"**

This video is part of a series of four artworks, based on a collection of excerpts from five feature films, where there are references to Bulgaria, the Bulgarian character, culture, etc. The work is a study on how the moving image industry as mass media deals with the image of "the other", "the unknown", "the exotic" cultures. It is surprising to see a certain strong connection in the references in the films: they all have nothing to do with reality, or interpret it in a weird way. In these films, one can see either the distribution of popular clichés, or fictions created from the Bulgarian identity, a monstrous, grotesque persona.



2003

**Eva Filova**

Born 1968 in Bratislava, Slovakia, part of the former Czechoslovakia.

Lives and works in Bratislava, Slovakia.

**Pro Choice | 2'03"**

The video was shot during the visit by Pope John Paul II to Slovakia. At the same time, the Slovak Parliament re-opened the subject of abortion-proscription. The video reflects paradoxes of Catholic pop-culture: trashy souvenirs, seating for privileged politicians, selling of domestic relics, "altar" cashomat... A few people with "Pro-Choice" T-shirts infiltrated the crowd as the opposition voice.

2003

**Călin Dan**

Born 1955 in Arad, Romania. Lives and works in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

**Sample City | 11'29"**

With sampled image and sound sequences, referring to one another in a precisely calculated rhythmic alternation in four screen frames, Călin Dan draws a portrait of the city of Bucharest. Dilapidated tower blocks next to estates of terraced houses, Roma families camping with their horses and carts in the wastelands in the midst of the city, broken streets and new shopping paradises—the video presents the former Communist Bucharest as a city in upheaval, full of social contradictions and oppositions. Accompanied by Manele (traditional Romanian folk music and local hip-hop), we follow a figure carrying a door on his back through Bucharest. Both "city guide" and city dweller, he is the modern version of Păcală (the simpleton, the deceiver), a popular figure from Romanian folklore. Whenever he plans to leave behind his home and his condition of village fool, the older, wiser brother says: "Don't forget to pull the door after you!" And he does just that, time and again.



2003

**Azorro SuperGroup**

Founded 2001 in Poland. Members: Oskar Dawicki (1971), Igor Krenz (1959), Wojciech Niedzielko (1959) and Lukasz Skapski (1958).

**Everything has been done I | 11'26"**

Members of the Azorro SuperGroup gather to think up a new art project. As the conversation goes on, it turns out that all the best ideas have already been taken.

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**Szabolcs KissPál**

Born 1967 in Tîrgu-Mureş, Romania. Lives and works in Budapest, Hungary.

**Edging | 3'**

The flight of 160 lonely birds against the blue sky, seemingly bouncing back from the edges of the image. If one points the camera towards the sky and hits the red button, a bird might fly across the image frame in the course of time. It may fly in from any direction and may direct its course to any point in space, but the tape may also run out before the bird appears. The event marks two distant points in space that is where the bird has entered and left both the imaginary and the concrete space of the lens' visual pyramid.



2003

**Egle Rakauskaite a/k/a RAKĖ**

Born 1967 in Vilnius, Lithuania, part of the former Soviet Union.

Lives and works in Vilnius, Lithuania.

**My America | 12'**

After having travelled to America to visit her relatives, the artist takes up the job most popular among emigrants: the care of the seriously ill and handicapped, and records this on video tape. She questions the myth of dreams and infinite possibilities, in the country of ultimate Western welfare, by revealing the suppressed, unadvertised aspects of its economic and social structure.

2003

**Maia Sumbadze, Nika Machaidze**

Both born 1972 in Tbilisi, Georgia, part of the former Soviet Union.

Live and work in Tbilisi, Georgia.

**xvz | 12'24''**

xvz is a pseudo scientific documentary, a game in which a group of people connect with each other using digital and electro devices, chemistry and alchemy. This piece reminds the viewer of the daily incarnations of the scientific-technological revolution doctrine and alludes to their post-Communist remnants, harvested in the development of media arts. xvz (I want to know everything)—ironically refers to the Soviet TV programme for kids with the same name. The artists give an opportunity for their generation to return to their childhood and recall, with a smile, the absurdity of the TV programme.



2003

**Martin Zet**

Born 1959 in Prague, Czech Republic, part of the former Czechoslovakia.

Lives and works in Libušín, Czech Republic.

**Red Daddy | 5'14''**

After the political changes in 1989, local Telecom employees called the artist to ask if his street still has the same name, Marxova Ulice (Marx Street). They could not believe that somebody could still stomach living on a street with such a name. The street is one of the last streets in the capitalistic Czech Republic that still bears some relation to the scientific Communism that was taught at school. It is easy to turn red while living on Marx Street (even if turning red makes you in some stages look like a clown).

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2004

**Goran Dević**

Born 1971 in Sisak, Croatia, the former Yugoslavia.  
Lives and works in Zagreb, Croatia.

**Imported Crows | 22'**

This piece deals with neighbourhood and relationships between neighbours. The inhabitants of one building vividly comment on the origins and the destiny of the numerous crows that usually gather on the tree in front of the building. Some of them think that the animals have the right to do what they want, some of them are strongly convinced that crows should be immediately chased out of the area. One claims that the crow is an elegant and sophisticated bird, another replies that it is actually the most awful creation of God, and that actually all of them were imported from somewhere on the occasion of the death of a significant Communist officer in the 1970s. Ultimately, this is a funny story about crows, intertwined with many assumptions about the political conspiracy of Communists, which becomes a metaphor for a politically charged narrative of tolerance. The video refers to scenes in Yugoslav cinematography where politics are mostly discussed within the domestic sphere.



2004

**Kaspars Goba**

Born 1975 in Cēsis, Latvia, part of the former Soviet Union.  
Lives and works in Riga, Latvia.

**Seda: People of the Marsh | 52'**

In Seda, a remote peat miners' town in Latvia, time seems to be frozen in the Soviet era. Built in 1952 and inhabited by a multi-ethnic workforce from different parts of the former USSR, it still preserves intact the inflated style of a Stalinist "shock work" construction project. Culturally, Seda's people feel like a community apart. Their lingua franca is Russian, and their social life is a mixture of Soviet and Russian Orthodox traditions. They do not want the European Union; they want to live in their own state—the Marshland.

2004

**Tigran Khachatryan**

Born 1980 in Yerevan, Armenia, part of the former Soviet Union.  
Lives and works in Yerevan, Armenia.

**Stalker | 12'33"**

This video belongs to the series that the artist has worked on since 2000: reinterpretations of well-known movies made by classic directors. The artist re-enacts the film by freeing it from the traditional limitations of genre and style through personification. Khachatryan presents brutal identifications of common people with examples of high art by using a non-professional photo and video technique. The series of those so-called "garage videos" was meant as anarchistic imitations.



2004

**Adrian Paci**

Born 1969 in Shkoder, Albania. Lives and works in Milan, Italy.

**Turn On | 3'30"**

It presents an exhausting feeling of anticipation that derives from unresolved expectations. In the video, a score of unemployed men who, in typical Mediterranean fashion, assemble on the steps of a square in Shkoder everyday in the hope that someone will employ them. One by one, a parade of their fatigue-marked faces; their expression is sufficient to capture their personal histories, unexpressed energy and lives ruled by waiting. The single portraits develop until the frame widens and each of the characters switches on a generator that stands beside him. Their gestures are slow and somewhat ritualistic. The initial silence gives way to a noise that gradually becomes deafening. Touching in its symbolic beauty, the last frame depicts each man holding a large light bulb which, fed by the generators, radiates light and energy around them.

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2004

**Damir Nikšić**

Born 1970 in Brčko, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Stockholm, Sweden.

**If I Wasn't Muslim | 7'08"**

A sarcastic video, remaking the barn scene from *Fiddler on the Roof*, contemplating the fate of Bosnian Muslims in a Europe of Christian neighbours.



2004

**Krassimir Terziev**

Born 1969 in Dobrich, Bulgaria. Lives and works in Sofia, Bulgaria.

**A Place (Playground) | 12'06"**

A leisure park is in the periphery of the city of Sofia (the Northern Park, Nadezhda district), in a typical working-class neighbourhood. The unique spatial composition is the result of urban planning and the mode of thinking of the Socialist engineer, dating from 1983. It is a bizarre concoction of romantically artificial (planned) hillocks and military strategies. The hillocks are well organised and cut across by canals and ponds which are linked by nostalgic curved footbridges. The highlights of the architectural ensemble are the prop-like tanks, rockets, military airplanes and canons, which are arranged as on a battlefield. All these items are made of modules manufactured from the same material: metal tubes which are painted in the primary colours—yellow, red and blue. These are facilities for children's play—one of the fanciful remnants of ideological urban planning. It is amazing the scale on which people visit the park: every weekend the playground is filled with families with children, unaware of the tragic metaphor they so actively participate in.

2004

**Sophia Tabatadze**

Born 1977 in Tbilisi, Georgia, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany, Rotterdam, The Netherlands and Tbilisi, Georgia.

**Self-Interview as Eastern and Western Europe | 11'**

How far does one want to, or is able to, see the other side of the coin, the side that does not fall within one's own perception? Sophia Tabatadze's video is about how we perceive and interpret the world from our own standpoint only, how we see and experience everything through our own thought processes. Sides change constantly and dramatically over short periods of time, whether it concerns people, architecture or the social and political situations of differing countries. In 2004, when ten new member states joined the European Union, a group of Dutch architects and artists, interested in Soviet and post-Soviet architecture and present living conditions, went on a study trip to Central and Eastern Europe. For Tabatadze, as a Georgian artist, travelling with the group of Dutch architects, it was a striking confrontation: it was the first time that she realised how the whole Eastern Bloc was viewed by the West. The prejudice of "it is only grey there" was very present. The video was shot in a hotel room at the end of the trip, to be shown to the rest of the participants. Questions in the video are based on the comments and questions made during the trip.



2004

**Oleg Mavromatti**

Born 1965 in Volgograd, Russia, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Sofia, Bulgaria and New York, United States of America.

**The Last Valve | 4'33"**

The video of a performance with the same name made by Boryana Rossa and facilitated by Ultrafuturo Collective. In the performance, she stitches up her labia with surgical thread. The performance resides in the intersection of technology, ethics and human/machine identity and is dedicated to the future emergence of a new class of sex-less biological and cyborgian beings artificially created in bio-engineering labs. The real action is shown in the left frame and the right frame is a visualisation of data collected from the body of the performer with the use of EMG while the action was taking place.

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**Rudina Xhaferi**  
Born 1978 in Prishtina, Kosovo, the former Yugoslavia.  
Lives and works in Prishtina, Kosovo.

**So Good to be an Albanian | 5'10"**

A group of men sit, speak and drink in the middle of a busy crossroad. This work is somewhere between a living tableau, a *mise-en-scène* of actors and a paradoxical installation. The artist wanted to present the indifference of the Albanian people, who refuse to accept influences from outside. Such self-mindedness speaks about the weakness, but also of the strength, of a headstrong people, who will not give up their way of living. It also provides a surprise in this indifference, hedonism and the self-contentedness they enjoy while things are going on around them. However, Xhaferi soon realises that when a piece of work is born, it slips away from the control of the artist and reaches different dimensions.



2004-06  
**David Maljković**  
Born 1973 in Rijeka, Croatia, the former Yugoslavia.  
Lives and works in Zagreb, Croatia.

**Scene for New Heritage, I | 4'33"**

Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

This work is the first part of the *Scene for New Heritage Trilogy*, which presents a futuristic world set in the year 2045. A group of people set off on a search for their heritage, where everything seems like a relief. History has become a fictional object and time has created a collective amnesia. They arrive to, for them, an unknown place of powerful historical character marked by the death of the last Croatian king, World War II, the partisan hospital there—to which a monument (Petrova Gora) was dedicated, and then again the war in the 1990s. But all this was no longer visible to them: only the monumentality of the place puzzled them. They move towards recognition. Interestingly, they spoke a language similar to the Ganga folk song, which is performed in a primitive polyphonic rhythm. Recognition of the forgotten place takes time and the ignorance causes nervousness. It seems that the question of heritage will remain unsolved and that their moment is their heritage.

2005  
**Renata Poljak**  
Born 1974 in Split, Croatia, the former Yugoslavia.  
Lives and works in Paris, France, and Split, Croatia.

**Great Expectations | 17'**

Man and architecture speak the same language. Human and architectural violence are the result of the same virus: that of great expectations. The video traces the transformations of Croatian architecture during the past decade and the examples of architectural violence. At the same time, the film reconstructs the development and transformation of violence through three generations of the same patriarchal family line in traditional Dalmatian surroundings, filled with the iconography of the new Croatian transitional Capitalism, wild urbanism, but also post-war social traumas.



2005  
**Lala Raščić**  
Born 1977 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Zagreb, Croatia, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and New Orleans, United States of America.

**The Invisibles | 31'**

The video shows a performance of an audio drama text of the same name. A story of an invisible family planning to go on a vacation is delivered through a conventional narrative structure. The main protagonist is Mrs Invisible, who attempts to regain her lost identity and obtain a passport. This light satire touches upon the absurdities of contemporary society: the bureaucratic mechanisms, collective paranoia and surveillance systems. In this work, the idea of the "invisible" is tied in with the notion of the "other". This work is neither an audio drama nor a video in the full sense; it lingers as the "other" in between the two genres.

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**REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT**

Founded 1996 in Dresden, Germany. Members: Martin Keil (1969), Henrik Mayer (1971)

**The City Of Cool—Renaming Streets of Leipzig | 9'57"**

The city quarter (Plagwitz/Leipzig) is a former industrial area, highly affected by the economic downturn after the system change in East Germany. Nevertheless, it became a hotspot for the international art scene and creative industries since artists, galleries and cultural workers gathered around the premises of a former cotton-spinning factory. The quarter has the appearance of a run-down industrial era, but offers at the same time a variety of free space. The omnipresent vacancy and unused urban wasteland contrasts with initiatives by the inhabitants, a growing art scene, small enterprises and official city planning strategies. By overlaying the historical street names with actual and trendy concepts, attention is drawn to the current development of this district of the city. The temporary re-naming creates a sensibility for the synergies and contradictions that are part of the city development process.



2005

**Stefan Rusu**

Born 1964 in Kâietu, Republic of Moldova, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Chişinău, Republic of Moldova and Bucharest, Romania.

**Jeres | 4'53"**

The film investigates how the production of Jeres wine under the original brand name landed in Soviet Moldova. The technology was developed in Spain, and the secret lies in the fermentation process of the live Jeres spores. A sample of the spores was stolen by a Soviet secret agent in an umbrella handle, a method similar to that used by the Europeans stealing silkworms from China. Distribution of Jeres under this label outside Moldova is prohibited by international law. The fate of the spores preoccupies a group of Moldovan Jeres fans, willing to repair the historical injustice committed after World War II by the Soviet regime and repatriate the spores back to Spain. The story of the Jeres brand relates to the notion of Moldavian identity as a brand, which is an artificial product created through Soviet political engineering techniques that contradict both science and reality. The resemblance is striking, since both brands cannot be promoted or exported abroad.

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2005

**Artur Żmijewski**

Born 1966 in Warsaw, Poland. Lives and works in Warsaw, Poland.

**A Dream of Warsaw | 18'**

This work documents the last exhibition mounted by Oskar Hansen, Polish architect, urban planner, theorist and teacher. He studied in Vilnius and Warsaw in the 1940s and 50s, and travelled across Europe, continuing his education with Fernand Léger, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. He was a member of Team 10. Artur Żmijewski and Pawel Althamer met him at that time and later, in 2004, worked with him on mounting his last exhibition at the Foksal Gallery Foundation. The show proposed a polemic with the obtrusive form of the Stalinist Palace of Culture and Science. Althamer assisted Hansen in mounting the architectural model of a TV tower, which was to counterbalance the palace. Żmijewski was likewise present, and shot this piece documenting their work. Exhausted by a long illness, Hansen passed away soon afterwards, at the time when Żmijewski was editing his film, in which he included scenes from his funeral.



2005

**Zbynek Baladrán**

Born 1973 in Prague, Czech Republic, part of the former Czechoslovakia. Lives and works in Prague, Czech Republic.

**Socio-Fiction | 6'46"**

The film is founded on the confrontation between the *Communist Manifesto* and the utopian ideas of functionalist architect Karel Honzík. Based upon film footage of Socialist Czechoslovakia, a question is posited here regarding the further development of post-Communist countries. The *Communist Manifesto* and the concepts of Karel Honzík, who in the early 60s developed in his literary work the idea of a perfect Communist society as the inevitable goal of cosmic matter, serve as a reflective bridge for considerations directed towards Liberal-Capitalist societies.

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2006

**Gordana Andjelić-Galić**

Born 1949 in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Mantra | 5'12"**

The artist walks down a rarely used road carrying a Bosnian state flag. During her journey, other flags, which historically represented Bosnia and Herzegovina, any of its constitutive nations or from decisive historical periods of ruling ideologies, are handed to her at regular intervals. As the weight of this load gradually grows, it becomes increasingly more difficult to cope with. Towards the end, when the artist is about to pick up the current flag of Bosnia and Herzegovina, formed after the breakdown of former Yugoslavia, flags start falling out of her arms, she collects them, they fall again and so on. The video is accompanied by sound of the new national anthem of Bosnia and Herzegovina, that has existed for the past five to six years without lyrics, because the country's nations have been unable to agree over its contents.



2006

**Pavel Braila**

Born 1971 in Chişinău, Republic of Moldova, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany and Chişinău, Republic of Moldova.

**Eurolines Catering or Homesick Cuisine | 17'**

Invited to participate in the exhibition *How to do things?—In the Middle of (no)where...*, Pavel Braila asked his mother to cook some traditional Moldovan food and send it over for the vernissage. With joy and good humour, the family organised itself to participate in this artistic project. The bag filled with amazing victuals crosses Eastern Europe by bus, using the same route as when immigrants settle in another country.

2006

**Andreas Fogarasi**

Born 1977 in Vienna, Austria. Lives and works in Vienna, Austria.

**A Machine for | 8'**

This video is part of the series *Kultur und Freizeit* (Culture and Leisure) dedicated to cultural and educational centres in Budapest. Based on the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup> century workers' clubs, these began to be built throughout the city in the 1950s and were used for the education, enlightenment and distraction of the working masses. An important part of the unofficial cultural scene of the 1960s–80s, however, also developed to a certain extent within these rigid structures. The general conditions of these institutions have changed radically since 1989: many had to close their doors, while others are still fighting for public support and paying visitors. The architecture of these buildings speaks of programming, the aesthetic and structural ideas of their builders and users, and asks which spaces for culture we claim, how they represent themselves, and which culture we actually mean.



2006

**Hristina Ivanoska**

Born 1974 in Skopje, Macedonia, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Skopje, Macedonia.

**Naming of the Bridge: Rosa Plaveva and Nakie Bajram | 13'08"**

This research-based project presents the artist's experience with the local authorities of the city of Skopje after submitting a proposal for naming the newly built bridge with the names of two women protesters and fellow citizens. This initiative was provoked by the lack of gender sensitivity of the decision making body and the more obvious division of the city between the different ethnic and religious communities. As Suzana Milevska states: "The project is a rare example of an individual initiative that looks at the issue of the veil with a sensitivity unburdened by the conflicts of the past; an attempt to build a bridge between the different stances towards the veil in conflicting intellectual and cultural camps".

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**Khinkali Juice**

Founded 2005. Members: Sophia Tabatadze (1977), Nadia Tsulukidze (1976).

**Georgian National Anthem | 1'34"**

In Georgia one can hear the national anthem not only at official ceremonies, but also at birthday parties, weddings or in parks, between The Beatles' songs. It helps to keep the illusion of independence, while the country in reality is dependent on the EU's and USA's investments and political decisions.



2006

**Aleksander Komarov**

Born in Grodno, Belarus, part of the former Soviet Union. Lives and works in Rotterdam, The Netherlands and Berlin, Germany.

**See you in Disneyland | 13'**

The day of German reunification became the beginning of the end of the Palast der Republik in Berlin, not only historically as end of the era of GDR, but as well for the building as such. Just prior to German reunification in October 1990, the building was found to be contaminated with asbestos and was closed. The video starts with a Dutch radio programme, which reports on the night of 9 November 1989, recorded next to the former border between West and East Berlin, Checkpoint Charlie and in front of the Palast der Republik. It records the celebration and euphoria of people during that night. The artist tries to imagine the event and re-create a flashback and at the same time showing a contemporary image of the Palast der Republik as a protagonist. From the point of view of the late witness, his memory constructs an aesthetic form in which the historical events function as a document of a certain character. In resemblance to the audio file, the film utilises these ideas and expands its visual vocabulary by incorporating new meanings that remind us of the temporality and the fragility of that moment in time. The Palast, which by political decision had to withdraw, now reflects the spiritual reality superior to its own limited time.

2006

**Adrian Paci**

Born 1969 in Shkoder, Albania. Lives and works in Milan, Italy.

**Per Speculum | 6'35"**

This video is not set in a particular time or place, but seems suspended in the indefinite and the paradigmatic. The film's images, though seemingly lighthearted, are interlaced with subtle, symbolic connotations: the breaking of the mirror, in some cultures understood as a harbinger of negativity, in this film marks the onset of a playful game. The title of the film is taken from a passage from Saint Paul's "First Letter to the Corinthians 13:12" (*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face*). In this passage, the theme of human knowledge is explored as well as its limitation as indirect, mediated or specular vision. However, in the film it is precisely this specular nature that allows for the revelation of beauty within nature. The tree itself, portrayed with austere presence, recalls numerous iconographies. From the Jesse Tree, to the philosophical tree, to the figuration of life and genealogy, the tree is perceived as a systematic, living structure that supports and unifies a plurality of existence.



2007

**Yael Bartana**

Born 1970 in Kfar Yehezkel, Israel. Lives and works in Tel-Aviv, Israel and Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

**Mary Koszmary | 10'50"**

Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam and Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw

To the sounds of the Polish national anthem, left-wing publicist Stawomir Sierakowski strides into the huge, empty stadium in Warsaw. In a fire-breathing speech, he asks three million Jews to return to the homeland to help the Poles deal with their nightmares, and invites them to gather together under the thin blanket the Poles stole from a Jewish girl 60 years ago.

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**Oskar Dawicki**  
Born 1971 in Warsaw, Poland. Lives and works in Warsaw, Poland.

**Budget Story | 9'27"**

The screen displays a diminishing amount of money in four currencies—the Polish Zloty, the Swiss Franc, the US Dollar and the Euro, while the viewer observes the production of a film that lasts until its budget runs out. Starring a recognised Polish actor, Jan Nowicki.



2007  
**Diana Hakobyan**  
Born 1974 in Yerevan, Armenia, part of the former Soviet Union.  
Lives and works in Yerevan, Armenia.

**Untitled | 8'13"**

In this work, the artist confronts two images: a children's game in which one must jump on the exact shape when someone calls its name, and a "game" of grownups, which is the war. Colourful screens with kids playing interchange with more graphic, black and white ones, in a confrontation of the two images. With her joyful "toys", light technique and pulsating sound, Hakobyan actually deals with socio-political issues.

2007  
**Adela Jušić**  
Born 1982 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslavia.  
Lives and works in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**The Sniper | 4'11"**

This piece originates from the artist's attempt to face her wartime childhood and the experience of losing her father to a sniper's deadly shot. The aggressor's sniper campaign directed against the civil population of the besieged Sarajevo was an inhuman violation of the rules or customs of war. Jušić's father, a member of the Bosnian Army from the outset of the war on 3 December 1992, was given a combat command to neutralise enemy sniper soldiers. During such an assignment, he was shot himself by a bullet hitting him in the eye. A short time prior to her father's death, Jušić found his notebook where he continuously, over several months, listed how many soldiers he had killed during his (military) sorties. By trying to reconstruct the total number of killed snipers, Adela Jušić confronts herself with the fading but traumatic memory of her soldier father.



2007  
**Šejla Kamerić**  
Born 1976 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslavia.  
Lives and works in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Berlin, Germany.

**What do I know | 15'**

In and around a house, love stories intertwine. One love story leads to another. The ghosts of love are left behind to seek the answers to the same question: "What do I know about love?" The story was written as a memento to other people's loves that the artist had not witnessed. The house in the story is real. All characters are played by children (aged 8 to 14).

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**Csaba Nemes**

Born 1966 in Kisvárda, Hungary. Lives and works in Budapest, Hungary.

**Remake | 25'48"**

An animation series of ten parts dedicated to the street riots that took place in Budapest in autumn 2006. As Maja and Reuben Fowkes state: "The focus of Csaba Nemes's *Remake* is local and particular, in the sense of offering a situated alternative to a superficial global overview. *Remake* zooms in on what could be any part of the planet, but happens to be Budapest, and we are offered a micro-politics of the street and a series of mini-dramas experienced by individuals caught in the midst of the temporary disruption of the urban order on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution".



2007

**Kristina Norman**

Born 1979 in Tallinn, Estonia, part of the former Soviet Union.

Lives and works in Tallinn, Estonia.

**Monolith | 14'58"**

A bronze monolith arrives from Space to Estonia. The small country's inhabitants are forced to take sides regarding the bronze soldier. The result is a conflicted situation, from which people cannot sanely escape. All events are amplified in different media channels. The debate about the planned relocation of a Soviet war memorial is a reflection of the situation within Estonian society and of the relationship between Estonia and Russia. The debate, already heated, is being aggravated further by the way the media report it.

2007

**Aliaksei Tserakhau**

Born 1973 in Minsk, Belarus, part of the former Soviet Union.

Lives and works in Toronto, Canada.

**Lyapis Trubetskoy-Capital | 3'17"**

This is a surrealist Pop Art piece with a cynical view on world politics, created in the high-energy frames of pop music TV channels. Could the apocalypse be near? The work embraces tried and tested technologies with deadly composing and a pint of morphing for good measure.



2007

**Nadia Tsulukidze**

Born 1976 in Tbilisi, Georgia, part of the former Soviet Union.

Lives and works in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

**XXI | 11'13"**

In 21<sup>st</sup> century Georgia, huge rusted mechanisms are still working. Soviet political rhetoric has been replaced by a new national ideology, but the changes are not big: the old mechanisms are the same. Georgia, even as a small country, wants to be powerful and create an empire, like in the old golden times of David Agmashenebeli (12<sup>th</sup> century).

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2007

**Artur Żmijewski**

Born 1966 in Warsaw, Poland. Lives and works in Warsaw, Poland.

**Them | 26'26"**

This work is a film record of an experiment for which Żmijewski convinces representatives of four social groups actively present in the public life of contemporary Poland to gather together in a seven-day workshop to negotiate their disparate, if not opposing, beliefs and political convictions. Each of these factions has secured a reputation as an ideologically uncompromising political group. Members of the neo-nationalist Union of Polish Youth, elderly women representing fundamentalist Catholics, Jewish youth, and left-wing activists of a younger generation each formulate their respective positions through the creation of insignia, painting symbols of their ideologies on a large sheet of paper. They agree to react to each other's creations and the initial comments and critiques soon turn into physical interventions, leading participants to alter the work of one another by overpainting, cutting and burning. These actions escalate gradually, but with a sense of inevitability, into an open confrontation.



2008

**Mark Brogan**

Born 1967 in London, United Kingdom. Lives and works in Belgrade, Serbia.

**In a Remote Corner of Europe | 6'34"**

Having been a studio-based artist living in London, Brogan moves to Belgrade, where he sets up an outsourced call centre as a means to live. This call centre becomes his studio. For this video, he used a recruitment process in his call centre in which he invited job applicants to audition from call centre scripts and to comment on a video of a reconstruction of a training session. He hoped this would provoke the job candidates who were typically passive and unquestioning to reveal a more critical attitude towards this work and the changes it would bring to their lives and identities.

2008

**Chto delat**

Founded 2003 in St Petersburg, Russia. Members: Olga Egorova (Tsaplya, 1968), Dmitry Vitensky (1964), Natalia Pershina (Gluklya, 1969) and Nikolai Oleinikov (1976).

**Perestroika Songspiel. The Victory over the Coup | 26'30"**

The action unfolds on 21 August 1991, after the victory over the restorationist coup. On this day of unprecedented popular uplift, it seemed that democracy had won a final victory in the country and that the people should and would be able to build a new, just society. *Perestroika Songspiel* is structured like an ancient tragedy: its *dramatis personae* are divided into a chorus and a group of five heroes. The heroes are key types generated by the perestroika era, each of them with a particular vision of her/his role in history: a democrat, a businessman, a revolutionary, a nationalist, and a feminist. They act and they dream. They analyse their actions, their place in society, and their vision of the country's political path. The chorus is the incarnation of public opinion. It makes moral judgments on the heroes and it foresees their futures, as if it were gazing on the proceedings from the present day. The work analyses the specific configuration of forces during this supremely important historical moment of contemporary history. It critiques political naïveté while also showing how difficult it is for people to realise their vision of the future together.



2008

**Ana Hušman**

Born 1977 in Zagreb, Croatia, the former Yugoslavia. Lives and works in Zagreb, Croatia.

**Lunch | 17'20"**

The rules of correct behaviour found in books of etiquette present themselves as aiding communication and helping people understand each other. They also claim to help us engage socially with greater ease and self-confidence. These rules are learnt from birth, which is the only way for us to completely internalise them. Their model is found in Western civilisations, and compliance with them makes it easy to discern who is civilised and who is not. The film deals with customs of eating and drinking—specifically with the lunch situation, as communal eating is the central site of showing others our breeding and finesse.

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**István Kántor**

Born 1949 in Budapest, Hungary. Lives and works in Toronto, Canada.

**(The Never Ending) Operetta | 35'**

In this autobiographical semi-fiction, director/performer/artist and ardent activist István Kántor testifies his lifelong socio-political resistance. Kántor's engaging and always ironic, neo-Brechtian musical comedy takes us to a noisy, dusty and stinky industrial neighbourhood, where a conflict in progress takes over the streets due to the invading developers. Exploring the form of the operetta, Kántor tells his story through the lyrics of his own songs mixed with the spoken words of a narrator. Living in a small industrial area dominated by factories, a local neighbourhood activist is trying to fight the ever growing army of developers and save the neighbourhood from gentrification. His militant gang marches through the streets with flags and signs promoting the idea that such sensory effects like bad smells and health hazards like dust can keep the developers away. With this video, Kántor again makes a point that for him video production and everyday life are inseparable, and his main inspiration for the script is always autobiographical and closely relates to his own environment.



2008

**Joanne Richardson**

Born 1968 in Bucharest, Romania. Lives and works in Cluj, Romania.

**In Transit | 30'**

A diary of a journey through space and time, made up of subjective impressions of the present and childhood memories of the past. The artist emigrated from Romania with her family when she was 9, and returned after more than 20 years. In 2007, while travelling across Romania in the year of its EU accession, her monologue reflects on the meaning of transition, the re-writing of history and the relation between images and memory.

2008

**Aleksandar Spasoski**

Born 1974 in Tetovo, Macedonia, the former Yugoslavia.

Lives and works in Munich and Berlin, Germany and Skopje, Macedonia.

**Voyeur | 5'20"**

As stated by Mimi Wehr: "The quintessence of the work is not a mere reporting, but the intuitive experience of a voyeur. [...] He makes use of existent film material and increases its effect by adding his own sequences and composing them anew. Out of his personal experience, he thereby shows scenes of someone wandering the streets at night, of alien cities and gazing into strangers' windows, into strangers' lives. The phenomenal quiet and solitude recalls the ambiance as created by works of Doug Aitken. Both Aitken and Spasoski deal with homelessness, the alien and transitory, and neither of them offers a solution. Correspondingly, the artist makes use of his own compositions, which exhibit impressionist traits. The conjunction and composition of visual and acoustic elements generate a balance with emphasis neither on telling a story, nor scoring a film, nor the simultaneity of both. The sequences shown offer a broad spectrum of potential stories, but the scenes are presented as extracts and then fade out. The viewer does not receive a defined context, but a potpourri of impressions".



2009

**Simon Chang**

Born 1978 in Taipei, Taiwan. Lives and works in Prague, Czech Republic.

**Praha Erotica | 5'01"**

A behind-the-scenes story of the porn industry, the work shows the family lives of actors. As a day job, going to the set and having sex with people one hardly knows is certainly far beyond the imagination of the majority. The work shows how porn actors in this industry juggle between their different roles. It reveals an underground world beneath the beautiful city of Prague and reveals stories of prejudice that society tends to ignore.

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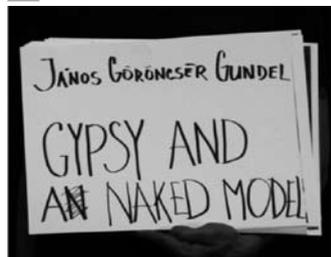
2009

**Ivan Jurica**

Born 1972 in Bratislava, Slovakia, part of the former Czechoslovakia.  
Lives and works in Bratislava, Slovakia and Vienna, Austria.

**1989–2009: Look Back! Boys from Town Healing the Grief of Beautiful Girls | 18'20"**

The title of this video is borrowed from a well known song in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s, performed by a popular Slovak "national" singer. The lyrics not only perfectly represent the current socio-political situation in Slovakia, but could generally be considered as being symptomatic of the 20 years of transition. In combination with known images/videos from the history of Western popular culture, the artist re-contextualises their meaning, putting them in a current social and political context and thus comments on the changes in Eastern Europe between 1989-2009.



2009

**Ruslana Kojouharova, Georgi Ivanov**

Ruslana Kojouharova born 1985 in Sofia, Bulgaria.  
Georgi Ivanov born 1952 in Vidin, Bulgaria. Both live and work in Sofia, Bulgaria.

**The Lost Surplus Valve | 41'**

This video uses found footage from the original screen and TV adaptations of the 1960s, 70s and 80s Bulgarian spy novels, the main character a local version of James Bond. The video follows the adventures Agent Boev goes through during the most important mission in his spy career. The storyline deploys an alternative history—the transition in Eastern Europe is organised by the Communist elites and secret services according to a master plan based on the second and never published volume of *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx.

2009

**Eléonore de Montesquiou**

Born 1970 in Paris, France. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany and Tallin, Estonia.

**Naine (A Woman) | 15'10"**

Naine (*A Woman*) is the fourth installment in Eléonore de Montesquiou's *Na Grane* (the border, the limit) series. The project addresses personal states of being between time and space, between Europe (Estonia) and Russia. It deals with the working situation of the inhabitants of the border region, at the very edge of Europe, with the changes perceived by people who were in their twenties during Perestroika and lost their jobs, as well as by young people who were children at the time but had some sense of the occurring changes.



2009

**Little Warsaw**

Founded 1996 in Budapest, Hungary. Members: András Gálik (1970), Bálint Havas (1971).

**Game of Changes/Episodes 1-2 | 3'24" + 3'24"**

This film includes footage from *The Third (A Harmadik, 1971, BBS)*, a film by Gábor Bódy.

A film essay based on the idea of the "time gap" brings together footage from a 1971 and shots taken in 2009, in which the same character is portrayed. The original film material comes from a black and white experimental feature film, in which we can see a student discussing his relation to the outside world in relation to perception, learning and self-expression. Later on, this student will become a painter and university professor. He is questioned about the same issues 38 years later. How did he relate to the outside world then and now? What is the significance of the changes with respect to the individual and to the context?

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**Appendix**

### **Edit András**

Art historian and art critic, a researcher at the Research Institute for Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest. She holds a PhD in art history (ELTE, Budapest). She has widely published about Central and Eastern European contemporary art, mainly on gender issues, socially engaged art, public art, conceptual art and on art theory related to the transition in the post-Socialist countries. Her latest book entitled *Cultural Cross-dressing. Art in the Ruins of Socialism* (published in Hungarian in 2009, to be published in English) is a summary of her research on the field. She lives in Budapest and in Long Island, NY. <http://editandras.arthistorian.hu>

### **Ruben Arevshatyan**

Artist, art critic, independent curator. Graduated from Yerevan Fine Arts and Theatrical Institute, department of sculpture. Teaches art history at the department of fine arts in the Armenian Open University. Between 1997–2004 artistic director of Hay-Art cultural centre, Yerevan. Since 2005, member of AICA Armenia. Author of numerous critical texts in local and international magazines and publications. His critical articles concern the current problems of Armenian contemporary art, architecture, art theory and art education. Regional correspondent for *Springer* art magazine since 1999. Curator and associate of local and international projects, among others: *Great Atrophy, Parallel Reality, Three Tendencies, Adieu Parajanov, Local Modernities, Sweet 60s*. Lives and works in Yerevan.

### **Giorgio Bertellini**

He is an assistant professor in screen arts and cultures, and romance languages and literatures at the University of Michigan. His edited and co-edited anthologies include *Emir Kusturica* (1995), *The Cinema of Italy* (2004), *Early Cinema and the "National"* (2008), and the forthcoming *Silent Italian Cinema: A Reader*. He is the author of *Emir Kusturica* (1996), *Italy in Early American Cinema: Race, Landscape, and the Picturesque* (2009), and of various essays on race in silent film culture.

### **Konstantin Bokhorov**

He is a Russian art critic and curator. Graduated from the Russian Fine Art Academy in St Petersburg, he holds a PhD. Contributor for *Moscow Art Magazine* and other periodicals. Curator at the Media Art Lab (Moscow). He has organised exhibitions of Russian contemporary art at the Venice Biennial (1996–99), Istanbul Biennial (1997), Sao Paulo Biennial (1997). Russian adviser for Documenta 12 (2007). In the 2000s curated *Subject and Power* (2001), *Davaj! From laboratories of free art in Russia* (2002), *Toward Video Islands* (2005), *Gatekeepers of the New* (2006), *Erwin Wurm: Keep Cool Head* (2008), *Second Dialog* (2009), etc. Lives and works in Moscow.

### **Svetlana Boym**

She is a writer, theorist and media artist. Author of *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), the novel *Ninotchka* (2003), *Territories of Terror: Memories and Mythologies of the Gulag in Contemporary Russian-American Art* (2006), *Architecture of the Off-Modern* (2008), and the upcoming *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea* (2010). Her recent media exhibitions include *Historiar\_Imaginar* in Madrid, Centro de Arte Contemporaneo, CA2M (2009), *The Off-Modern Show* (2009, Copenhagen; Kaunas), *Nostalgic Technologies* (2006, Ljubljana; Cambridge), *Unforeseen Past* (2007, NYC). She has contributed to many journals, including *Art Forum*, *ArtMargins*, *Cabinet*, *Punto de Vista*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Representations*, *Poetics Today*, and *Harper's Magazine*. She wrote a play, *The Woman Who Shot Lenin*, performed at the Charlestown Working Theater in Boston. She teaches comparative literature at Harvard University and is an Associate of the Graduate School of Design. Native of St Petersburg, Russia, she now lives and works in Cambridge, MA, USA. [www.svetlanaboym.com](http://www.svetlanaboym.com)

### **Boris Buden**

He is a writer and cultural critic based in Berlin. He received his PhD in cultural theory from Humboldt University in Berlin. In the 1990s, he served as editor for the magazine *Arkzin*, Zagreb. His essays and articles cover topics of philosophy, politics, cultural and art criticism. He has participated in various conferences and art projects in Western and Eastern Europe, Asia and USA, including Documenta XI. He is the author of *Barikade*, Zagreb (1996–97), *Kaptolski Kolodvor* (Belgrade, 2001), *Der Schacht von Babel* (Berlin, 2004), and *Zone des Übergangs* (Frankfurt am Main, 2009).

### **Călin Dan**

With a background in art history and theory, Călin Dan is an artist combining in his work research and free invention. In the 1990s, he was the artistic director of the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts - Bucharest. Founding member of the art group subREAL. A veteran of b/w photography and of absurdist performance, Dan has received international acclaim with his videos and photographs from the series *Emotional Architecture*. His work has been shown in film festivals (Osnabrück, Oberhausen, Rotterdam), art biennials (Venice, Sao Paolo, Istanbul, Berlin, Sydney), art museums and galleries in Europe, the USA and Australia. In 2000, he received the media prize of the Split Film festival, and in 2001 the prize of Videonale Bonn. His work is found various public collections throughout Europe. His videos are distributed currently by Video Data Bank, Chicago. He was born in Arad, Romania, lives and works in Amsterdam.

### **Margarita Dorovska**

She is curator at InterSpace Association, Sofia. She graduated from University of Sofia, in cultural studies. Since 2005 she has been managing director of Cult.bg Foundation (<http://foundation.cult.bg>). For InterSpace Association, she is founder and curator of the residency programme since 2007, and project director of

*Transitland. Video Art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2009*. In 2009, she will attend Curating Contemporary Art, an MA course at the Royal College of Art, London.

### **Zoran Erić**

He is an art historian, curator and lecturer. He holds a PhD from the Bauhaus University in Weimar. Currently he is working as curator of the Centre for Visual Culture at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade. His research fields include the meeting points of urban geography, spatio-cultural discourse, and theory of radical democracy.

### **Antonio Geusa**

He holds a PhD in media arts (Royal Holloway, University of London, UK), a BA in foreign literatures (University of Bari, Italy), and a BA in media arts (Royal Holloway, University of London, UK). In the past few years, he has been working as an independent curator and critic. He is a widely published author in Russia and abroad. In Russia, he is one of the leading figures in the field of art and new technologies, and Russian video art. From 2005, he is the curator of *Art Digital*, festival of digital arts in Russia. He is currently involved in the project *History of Russian Video Art* for the Moscow MOMA (2007–10).

### **Boris Groys**

He is a leading authority on 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian art, international avant-garde movements, aesthetics and cultural theory. Educated in the Soviet Union, he emigrated to West Germany in 1981 and taught in universities there until 2007. From 2005, he has been Global Distinguished Professor at New York University (NYU). His many books include *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (1992), *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (2006), *Total Enlightenment* (2008), *Art Power* (2008), *Medium Religion. Faith. Geopolitics. Art.* (2009), co-edited with Peter Weibel. In over 150 other publications, he covers topics ranging from 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature to contemporary museum culture. He has also curated numerous exhibitions and has been the recipient of fellowships at institutions in the Soviet Union, Europe and the United States.

### **Marina Gržinić**

She is a philosopher, artist and theoretician. She is Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Institute of Fine Arts, Post-Conceptual Art Practices. She is researcher at the Institute of Philosophy at the ZRC SAZU (Scientific and Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Science and Art) in Ljubljana. She also works as freelance media theorist, art critic and curator. Marina Gržinić's last book is *Re-Politicizing Art, Theory, Representation and New Media Technology* (Vienna, 2008). She has been involved with video art since 1982. In collaboration with Aina Šmid, Marina Gržinić has realised more than 40 video art projects ([www.grzinic-smid.si](http://www.grzinic-smid.si)). She lives in Ljubljana, Slovenia and works in Ljubljana and Vienna, Austria.

### **Kathy Rae Huffman**

She is a freelance curator, networker and media art collector. She is lead curator for the exhibition *Exchange and Evolution*, for the Long Beach Museum of Art (2011–12). She was the international curator for *The Exhibition*, ISEA2009 ([www.isea2009.org](http://www.isea2009.org)), held in Belfast and organised by the University of Ulster. She is co-curator for *prologue\_EST*, an exhibition at the Kunstihoone, Tallinn, Estonia (2011). She has held curatorial posts at the Long Beach Museum of Art, the ICA Boston, and Cornerhouse, Manchester, and was associate professor of electronic art at Rensselaer Polytechnic University, Troy, NY. She received an MFA in exhibition design from California State University—Long Beach in 1980, where she also completed the post-graduate course in Museum Studies. She has written about, consulted for, and coordinated events for a variety of international festivals and organisations since the early 1980s. She co-founded the international online community for women media artists', *FACES* ([www.faces-l.net](http://www.faces-l.net)).

### **Ryszard W. Kluszczyński**

He is a PhD Professor of media and cultural studies at Łódź University, Poland, Chair of Department of media and audiovisual culture. He is Professor of media art and theory at the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. Between 1990–2001, he was the chief curator of Film, Video and Multimedia Arts in the Centre for Contemporary Art—Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw. He curated numerous international art exhibitions and writes about media and multimedia arts, cyberculture, theory of media and communication, information and network society. He critically investigates the issues of contemporary art theory and alternative art. Some of his book publications include: *Information Society. Cyberculture. Multimedia Arts* (2001), *Film—Video—Multimedia. Art of the Moving Picture in the Era of Electronics* (1999), *Images at Large. Study on the History of Media Art in Poland* (1998), *Avant-Garde. Theoretical Study* (1997), *Film—Art of the Great Avant-Garde* (1990).

### **Mihnea Mircan**

He was curator of the exhibition *Sublime Objects* and the *Under Destruction* series of interventions at the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC) in Bucharest, Romania. He was curator of *Low-Budget Monuments*, the Romanian Pavilion at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennial (2007). His latest project is the exhibition *Since we last spoke about monuments* at Stroom Den Haag. He contributes regularly to international publications, and has recently written for monographs of Plamen Dejanoff, Mircea Cantor and Deimantas Narkevičius.

### **Miklós Peternák**

He studied history and art history. He holds a PhD (1994) in new media—art and science. He was a member of the Béla Balázs Studio, Budapest (1981–87), and of the Indigo Group. He has been head of the Intermedia Department at the University of Fine Arts, Budapest since its foundation (1991–), director of C<sup>3</sup>: Center for Culture & Communication ([www.c3.hu](http://www.c3.hu)) since 1997. Organised several exhibitions, including *The Butterfly-Effect* ([www.c3.hu/scca/butterfly](http://www.c3.hu/scca/butterfly)), *Perspective*

([www.c3.hu/perspektiva](http://www.c3.hu/perspektiva)), *Vision* (<http://vision.c3.hu/en/home.html>), *Active Image* ([http://activeimage.c3.hu/index\\_en.html](http://activeimage.c3.hu/index_en.html)). List of publications: [www.c3.hu/~pm/Lives](http://www.c3.hu/~pm/Lives) and works in Budapest.

### **Tomáš Pospiszył**

He is critic, curator and art historian based in Prague. He worked as a curator at the National Gallery in Prague (1997–2002). In 2000 he was a research fellow at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Since 2003, he teaches at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. His publications include the anthology, *Primary Documents; A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, which he edited with Laura Hoptman (2002), *Octobrianaa ruský underground* (2004), and numerous catalogue essays and magazine articles.

### **Boryana Rossa**

She is an interdisciplinary artist and curator. In 2004, together with the Russian artist Oleg Mavromatti, she established Ultrafuturo Collective, engaged with issues of technology, science and their social, political and ethnic implications. Currently Rossa is working on her doctorate in electronic arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY, on Socialist emancipation in Russia and Bulgaria and its influence on contemporary feminisms through a review of the history of Socialist film.

### **Katarína Rusnáková**

She is an art historian, holding a PhD. She is the head of the department of art history at the faculty of visual arts, Academy of Arts, Banská Bystrica (Slovakia). She has curated many exhibitions with accompanying catalogues and has written numerous essays on media art, visual culture, and gender art in journals. Rusnáková is editor of *In the Flow of Moving Images. Anthology on Electronic and Digital Art in the Context of Visual Culture* (2005). She is author of the books: *History and Theory of Media Art in Slovakia* (2006) and *Two Studies: Gender Aspects of Contemporary Visual Arts in Slovakia / Gilles Deleuze and Thinking about the Film Image* (2009).

### **Keiko Sei**

She is writer and curator. After running an organisation for independent video in Japan, she has worked in promoting independent media in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus, and currently in Southeast Asia. Besides the projects she initiated that are described in her essay are: *The Age of Nikola Tesla* (Osnabrück, 1991), *POLITIK-UM/new Engagement* (Prague, 2002). Her video archive was exhibited in Vienna in 1999. She teaches and publishes worldwide, including a collection of essays, *Terminal Landscape* (Czech Republic). In 2003, she founded the Myanmar Moving Image Centre in Burma.

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## Index of Artists and Authors\*

- Abalakova, Natalia 187  
Abgaryan, Sona 195, 198, 236, 263  
Abramović, Marina 67  
Acconci, Vito 48, 173, 188  
Acostioaei, Dan 236, 268  
Aczél, Endre 106  
Agahsian, Vahram 198  
Agamben, Giorgio 43  
Agani, Arta 227  
Aleinikov, Igor 243, 244  
Alexander the Great 67  
Althusser, Louis 19  
Andjelić-Galić, Gordana 235, 282  
András, Edit 11, 13, 14, 209, 221, 227, 228, 299  
Andropov, Yuri Vladimirovich 108  
Angel, Judit 14, 227  
Ant Farm 173, 182  
Antik, Alexandru 103  
Antin, Eleanor 173  
Antonov, Vladimir 238, 255  
Apollinaire, Guillaume 206  
Araya, Kinga 152  
Arendt, Hannah 14, 43  
Arevshatyan, Ruben 12, 193, 198, 299, 308  
Arns, Inke 305, 306, 309  
Ashton, Dore 221  
Association Apsolutno see  
    Zoran Pantelić, Dragan Rakić, Bojana  
    Petrić, Dragan Miletić  
Azorro, SuperGroup see  
    Oskar Dawicki, Igor Krenz, Wojciech  
    Niedzielko, Lukasz Skapski  
Árvai, Jolán 107  
Åsdam, Knut Harald 33  
  
Bachman, Gábor 95  
Bajević, Maja 61, 64  
Baksa-Soós, Veruschka 228  
Baladrán, Zbyněk 237, 281  
Balázs, Béla 95  
Baldessari, John 60  
Balibar, Étienne 74, 77  
Barney, Matthew 189  
Bartha, Josef 103  
Bartana, Yael 236, 285  
  
Barthes, Roland 85, 91, 169, 247  
Bartošová, Zuzana 145  
Bartsch, Rudolf 228  
Baskova, Svetlana 159  
Bataille, Georges 85  
Battcock, Gregory 55  
Baudrillard, Jean 50, 56  
Baumgart, Anna 151  
Beck, Julian 102  
Beke, László 95  
Belyaev, Alexey 189  
Bencsik, Barnabás 225  
Benda, Lubor 102, 103  
Benjamin, Walter 13, 14, 40–43, 203  
Beöthy, Balázs 112  
Berg, Eike 111  
Berger, Sally 55  
Bergman, Ingmar 84  
Bertellini, Giorgio 12, 45, 54, 299  
Bey, Hakim 102  
Bielicky, Michael 99  
Bienert, Dorothee 76  
Blažević, Dunja 68, 227, 230  
Bluesoup Group 190  
Bódy, Gábor 94, 95, 108, 109, 230, 295  
Boime, Albert 221  
Bokhorov, Konstantin 12, 14, 185, 192, 299  
Boltianski, Grigorii 168  
Borčić, Barbara 14, 227, 305, 308, 309  
Borges, Jorge Luis 117  
Borisova, Natalia 190  
Bossanyi, Mark 167  
Bouchard, Donald F. 56  
Boyadjiev, Luchezar 63, 68, 164, 309  
Boym, Svetlana 11, 12, 79, 90, 91, 125, 202,  
    207, 300, 306  
Bowlit, John E. 221  
Braila, Pavel 236, 242, 268, 282  
Brecht, Bertolt 240, 246  
Brenner, Alexander 187  
Breton, Andre 197  
Breuer, Josef 221  
Brezhnev, Leonid Ilyich 108  
Broeckmann, Andreas 305, 309  
Brogan, Mark 238, 290

\* Compiled by Magdolna Rajkai, Judit Szalipszki

- Bromová, Veronika 98, 102  
 Bruszewski, Wojciech 147, 188  
 Budak, Adam 227  
 Buden, Boris 11, 12, 69, 76, 300,  
 Bugaev, Sergei (Afrika) 215  
 Bulatov, Dimitry 169  
 Buldakov, Alexey 190, 237, 262  
 Bulnygin, Dmitry 190  
 Bunne, Egon 240, 246  
 Burska, Bogna 152  
 Bystrov, Petr 190, 237, 262
- Cage, John 188  
 Cahen, Robert 111  
 Cajthaml, David 102  
 Calvino, Italo 87  
 Campus, Peter 173  
 Cannadine, David 14  
 Capone, Al 90  
 Catts, Oron 169  
 Ceaușescu, Nicolae 100, 101, 107, 250, 251, 260  
 Cenek, Filip 123, 125  
 Chang, Simon 293  
 Cherkelov, Houben 164, 169  
 Chernenko, Konstantin Ustinovich 108  
 Chernyshevsky, Nikolay Gavrilovich 209, 210  
 Chikolev, Vladimir 210  
 Chișa, Anetta Mona 139, 145  
 Chobanov, Georgi 169  
 Chto delat see  
   Olga Egorova, Dmitry Vilensky, Natalia  
   Perschina and Nikolai Oleinikov  
 Christo and Jeanne-Claude 161, 169  
 Churchill, Winston 11, 14, 80, 199, 211  
 Chuykova, Maria 190  
 Ciere, Marie 244  
 Císařovský, Tomáš 125  
 Clézio, Jean-Marie Gustave Le 109, 116  
 Collective Actions 94, 176–178, 182,  
 186–188 190–192  
 Comenius, Jan Amos 99  
 Constantinescu, Emil 101  
 Cserhalmi, György 95, 102  
 Czacot, Ivan 267  
 Czegledy, Nina 135, 227, 308  
 Čermák, Lubomír 103  
 Černý, David 103  
 Čierna, Pavlína Fichta 141–145  
 Činčera, Radúz 103
- Damnjanović, Radomir Damnjan 67  
 Damyanova, Katya 158, 168  
 Dan, Călin 13, 103, 127, 236, 241, 251, 271,  
 300, 307  
 Daučíková, Anna 140, 141, 146  
 David, Jiří 98, 119, 120–122, 124, 125  
 Dawicki, Oskar 152, 236, 238, 271, 286  
 Deleuze, Gilles 31, 303  
 Denegri, Jerko 59, 68  
 Denegri, Ješa 67, 68  
 Derrida, Jacques 43, 85, 86, 91  
 Dević, Ana 14, 227  
 Dević, Goran 12, 69, 72, 74, 76, 242, 274  
 Díaz/Degat, Federico 104  
 Dimitrijević, Braco 67  
 Dimitrijević, Branislav 68, 264, 305  
 Dimitrov, Miroslav 168  
 Dine, Jim 188  
 Dopita, Miro 102  
 Dorovska, Margarita 13, 227, 228, 300  
 Dragan, Nuša 60, 68  
 Dragan, Srečo 60, 68  
 Dragan-Vásile, Vivi 101  
 Dubinskaitė, Renata 227  
 Dukát, Vojta 103  
 Dureika, Andrei 227  
 Durland, Steven 183  
 Dziaziapetris, Gintaras 199, 205, 206  
 Đukelić, Nebojša 68
- Egorova, Olga 75, 76, 220, 239, 291  
 Egyed, Judith 103  
 Eisenstein, Adèle 14, 233, 305  
 Eisenstein, Sergei 155–157  
 Elwes, Catherine 306  
 Emin, Tracey 189  
 Enzensberger, Hans Magnus 173, 174, 183  
 Erdély, Miklós 95  
 Erić, Zoran 10, 12, 57, 301  
 Export, Valie 188
- Fajnor, Richard 124  
 Fargier, Jean-Paul 111  
 Farocki, Harun 100, 242, 250  
 Ferri, Jakup 66  
 Fifer, Sally Jo 182, 183, 185, 192, 305  
 Filova, Eva 242, 270  
 Flam, Jack 207  
 Flondor, Constantin 100  
 Flusser, Vilém 99, 107
- Fogarasi, Andreas 114, 115, 218, 242, 283  
 Forest, Fred 107  
 Forgács, Péter 107, 115  
 Forman, Miloš 103  
 Foucault, Michel 31, 33, 45, 50, 53, 54, 56  
 Förster, Friedrich 102, 103  
 Freud, Sigmund 215, 221  
 Friedel, Helmut 59, 68  
 Frieling, Rudolf 43, 246, 306  
 Fritz, Darko 310  
 Frohne, Ursula 145  
 Fueloep-Miller, Rene 221
- Gabriel, Michal 103  
 Galeta, Ivan Ladislav 238, 249  
 Galeev, Bulat 181  
 Gamboni, Dario 221  
 Gálík, András 221, 295  
 Geisterová, Věra 102  
 Gerlovin, Valeriy 188  
 Gerlovin, Rimma 188  
 Geržová, Jana 145  
 Geusa, Antonio 12, 171, 182, 183, 301, 306  
 Gilbert & George 188  
 Gillick, Liam 80  
 Goba, Kaspars 242, 274  
 Golan, Romy 119, 125  
 Goldberg, RoseLee 185, 192, 305  
 Golf, Klemens 236, 265  
 Goncharova, Natalya 209, 221  
 Gorbachev, Mikhail 176, 179  
 Gorczyca, Łukasz 227  
 Gordon, Colin 54  
 Gordon, Douglas 124, 189, 191  
 Goriunova, Olga 14  
 Grammel, Søren 309  
 Grzenda Group 152  
 Grigorescu, Ion 100  
 Gróf, Ferenc 111  
 Grotowski, Jerzy 252  
 Groys, Boris 11, 13, 35, 43, 169, 301  
 Gržinić, Marina 10, 12–14, 17, 32, 45, 48,  
 50–55, 227, 240, 247, 256, 301, 305, 306,  
 308, 309  
 Guattari, Felix 31  
 Guiton, Jean-François 111  
 Guštar, Milan 103  
 Gustowska, Izabella 151  
 Gutai Group 188  
 Gutiérrez, Rodríguez Encarnación 31, 32
- Gutov, Dmitry 190, 237, 262  
 Haensgen, Sabine 172, 183, 187  
 Hajas, Tibor 95, 113  
 Hakobyan, Diana 197, 238, 286  
 Hall, Doug 182, 183, 185, 192, 305  
 Hammid, Alexander (Alexander  
   Hackenschmied) 99, 103  
 Hanhardt, John G. 55, 183  
 Hansen, Oskar 218, 243, 281  
 Hardt, Michael 58, 67  
 Harvey, David 19, 32, 33  
 Hašek, Jaroslav 97  
 Havas, Bálint 221, 295  
 Havel, Olga 97  
 Havel, Václav 97, 125  
 Havránek, Vít 14, 227, 308  
 Hámos, Gusztáv 105, 107, 109–111, 241, 248  
 Händel, George Frideric 120  
 Heidegger, Martin 45–47, 53–55, 71, 77  
 Heiliger, Bernard 45  
 Heller, Joseph 97  
 Herzogenrath, Wulf 43, 68, 306  
 Heydrich, Reinhard 123  
 Hill, Chris 173, 183  
 Hitchcock, Alfred 72, 124  
 Hobbes, Thomas 69, 70, 74, 77  
 Honzík, Karel 237, 281  
 Horitz, Karina 14  
 Hovsepian, Hamlet 195  
 Hoxha, Enver 81, 258  
 Höller, Christian 33  
 Hudson, Michael 22, 23, 32, 33,  
 244, 302, 306  
 Hušman, Ana 238, 291  
 Huyghe, Pierre 124
- Ilyukhin, Maxim 190  
 Infante, Francisco Arana 190  
 IRWIN 55, 240, 256  
 Isaev, Alexey 187, 190, 192  
 Ištvančić, Branko 249  
 Ivanov, Georgi 294  
 Ivanoska, Hristina 242, 283  
 Iveković, Sanja 67, 309  
 Izhevsk (Maxim Verevkin) 191
- Jabłońska, Małgorzata 152  
 Jackson, Michael 120  
 Jameson, Fredric 30, 48, 55

- Janczyszyn-Jaros, Anna 237, 252  
 Janíček, Martin 103  
 Jankowski, Christian 189  
 Jasanský, Pavel 102  
 Jerslev, Anne 146, 306  
 Jirous, Ivan 97  
 Jonas, Joan 173  
 Jurica, Ivan 294  
 Jušić, Adela 241, 287
- Kabakov, Ilya 300  
 Kačírek, Pavel 97  
 Kádár, János 109  
 Kálmán, Rita 14, 225  
 Kamerić, Šejla 20, 239, 287  
 Kant, Immanuel 70, 71  
 Kantor, Tadeusz 252  
 Kántor, István 239, 292  
 Kaprow, Allan 188  
 Kapuściński, Jarostaw 152  
 Karakulov, Maxim 190, 237, 262  
 Karasová, Monika 103  
 Keil, Martin 240, 280  
 Kelomees, Raivo 227  
 Kepka, Tomáš 102  
 Kerbel, Lev 204, 219  
 Kévés, György 115  
 Khachatryan, Eva 14, 227  
 Khachatryan, Grigor 196  
 Khachatryan, Tigran 197, 240, 275  
 Khinkali Juice Group 237, 284  
 Kim, Sooja 189  
 Király, Iosif 103, 241, 251, 299  
 Kisseleva, Olga 187  
 KissPál, Szabolcs 103, 110, 238, 239, 264, 272  
 Klein, Yves 188  
 Klier, Michael 112, 116  
 Kluszczynski, Ryszard W. 12, 147, 152, 302, 309  
 Koch, Katharina 225  
 Kockelmans, Joseph J. 54, 55  
 Koffka, Kurt 54  
 Kohler, Wolfgang 54  
 Kojouharova, Ruslana 294  
 Kollontai, Alexandra 164, 166, 169  
 Kotaczkowski, Marek 147  
 Kotodrubiec, Janusz 147  
 Komar & Melamid see  
 Vitaly Komar, Alexander Melamid  
 Komar, Vitaly 188, 214, 218, 219  
 Komarov, Aleksander 241, 284
- Konart, Tomasz 147  
 Konopatzki, Birgit 32, 307  
 Konopka, Barbara 149–151  
 Kopiliq, Millosh 67  
 Kopper, Judit 96, 107  
 Kopřiva, Pavel 103  
 Korneev, Alexander 190, 237, 262  
 Kornis, Mihály 109, 110  
 Koshkin, Vadim Yuryevich 240, 251  
 Kosuth, Joseph 125  
 Kossuth, Lajos 108  
 Kovač, Žolt 66  
 Kovačič, Marko 239, 249  
 Kovalev, Andrei 169  
 Kovats, Stephen 14, 32, 225, 227, 232, 243, 305  
 Kovylna, Elena 190, 235, 263  
 Kozma, Éva 111  
 Kozyra, Katarzyna 151, 189  
 Kölcsey, Ferenc 110  
 Könczei, Csilla 101  
 Kracauer, Siegfried 39  
 Krajewski, Piotr 227  
 Krastev, Krasimir 255  
 Krauss, Rosalind 47, 48, 55, 177, 183  
 Krenz, Igor 152, 236, 271  
 Kubrick, Stanley 220  
 kuda.org 242, 243, 269  
 Kulik, Oleg 187, 189–191, 211  
 Kundera, Milan 82  
 Kuskov, Sergey 187  
 Kusturica, Emir 48, 55, 298  
 Kútvölgyi, Léna 111  
 Kwiek, Pawet 147
- Labyrinth 103  
 Land, Peter 189  
 Langheinrich, Ulf 241, 254  
 Larionov, Michail 209, 221  
 Lazar Emperor 67  
 Lendvai, Ádám 111  
 Lengel, Laura 32, 305, 308  
 Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich 80, 108, 155, 164, 165, 168, 193, 201, 203, 204, 209, 210–215 217, 248, 299  
 Lesnik, Yuris 180  
 Lesser, Wendy 145  
 Levine, Les 173  
 Libera, Zbigniew 148  
 Ligeti, György 220  
 Liliana, Olia 112
- Lind, Maria 307, 309  
 Little Warsaw see  
 András Gálík, Bálint Havas  
 Litván, Gábor 110  
 Litvina, Alexandra 192  
 London, Barbara 175, 183  
 Lovink, Geert 109, 116, 232, 244  
 Lubonja, Pushkin 82  
 Lubonja, Todi 81, 82, 84  
 Lunacharsky, Anatoly Vasilyevich 168, 210, 212  
 Łódź Kaliska 94, 152
- Machaidze, Nika 237, 273  
 Makovec, Margarethe 14, 227  
 Malevich, Kasimir (Belgrade, 1986) 256  
 Malevich, Kazimir 86, 155–157, 168, 212  
 Maljković, David 219, 239, 278  
 Mamontov, Savva 197  
 Mamyshev-Monroe, Vladislav 180  
 Manet, Édouard 90  
 Manzoni, Piero 188  
 Marcuse, Herbert 173  
 Marina, Judith 102  
 Marković, Nikoleta 66  
 Marković, Milovan De Stil 68  
 Marx, Karl 114, 204, 219, 294  
 Martinis, Dalibor 67  
 Massumi, Brian 75–77  
 Mašín, Tomáš 103  
 Matsakian, Karine 196  
 Matuščík, Radislav 145  
 Mavromatti, Oleg 157, 159, 160, 163, 166, 168, 235, 277, 302  
 Mayer, Henrik 240, 280  
 Mayakovsky, Vladimir Vladimirovich 210  
 Márta, István 248  
 McCarthy, Paul 189, 202  
 McCarty, Diana 232, 233  
 McCoy, Kevin 241, 246  
 McLuhan, Marshall 173  
 Meigh-Andrews, Christopher 306  
 Melamid, Alexander 188, 214, 218, 219  
 Melkonyan, Astghik 196  
 Mellencamp, Patricia 171, 182  
 Metnikov, Konstantin 212  
 Meluzin, Peter 139, 145  
 Mécs, Miklós 111  
 Mészöly, Suzanne 111, 112, 231, 244  
 Michalski, Sergiusz 207, 221, 305  
 Mihali, Ciprian 199, 207
- Mihálik, Peter 145, 146  
 Mihăltianu, Dan 103, 240, 241, 251, 260, 299  
 Mikitenko, Pavel 190, 237, 262  
 Mikotajczyk, Antoni 147  
 Milerský, Roman 102  
 Miletić, Dragan 237, 253  
 Milevska, Suzana 227, 283  
 Miljanović, Mladen 62  
 Mindszenty, József 221  
 Misiano, Viktor 309  
 Mircan, Mihnea 12, 13, 199, 227, 302, 309  
 Mirzoeff, Nicholas 145, 305  
 Mizin, Viktor 190  
 Mocus, Antanas 88  
 Monastyrski, Andrey 171, 172 177–179, 182  
 Montesquiou, Elénore de 295  
 Moravčík, Michal 145  
 Moreira, Alberto 31  
 Morgan, Daniel 125  
 Mori, Mariko 189  
 Morozova, Liza 169  
 Moudov, Ivan 161, 164, 235, 262  
 Movement group 188  
 Muka, Edi 227  
 Mukhina, Vera 139, 202, 215  
 Muller, Nat 227  
 Mundt, Katrin 18  
 Musovik, Oliver 63  
 Müller, Heiner 246
- Nabokov, Vladimir 80, 87, 91  
 Nagy, Imre 95, 98, 105, 108, 109, 221  
 Narkevičius, Deimantas 199–201, 203, 204, 207, 211, 214, 217, 219–221, 302  
 Nastac, Simona 309  
 Nauman, Bruce 173, 188  
 Negri, Antonio 58, 67  
 Nemes, Attila 113  
 Nemes, Csaba 113, 114, 239, 288  
 Nesterov, Mihail 168  
 Neumann, Iver B. 14  
 Neuss, Wolfgang 246  
 New Artists Group 172, 177  
 Németh, Hajnal 111, 235, 269  
 Németh, Ilona 14  
 Niedzielko, Wojciech 152, 236, 271  
 Niesterowicz, Anna 152  
 Nijhoff, Martinus 54  
 Nikolić, Vladimir 66, 237, 264  
 Nikšić, Damir 65, 239, 276

- Niktin, Mikhail 183, 306  
Nitsch, Hermann 188  
Nixon, Richard 173  
Norman, Kristina 220, 242, 288  
Novák, Robert 103  
Novikov, Timur 180  
Nozharova, Vessela 227
- Obilić, Miloš 67  
Oleinikov, Nikolai 75, 76, 220, 239, 291  
Orišková, Mária 146  
Osmolovsky, Anatoly 187  
Ostojić, Tanja 236, 265
- Paci, Adrian 237, 238, 275, 285  
Pacina, Michal 102  
Paik, Nam June 98, 110, 173, 187–189  
Pandilovski, Melentije 233, 305  
Pann, Anton 110  
Pantelić, Zoran 237, 253  
Parallel Cinema movement 172  
Paripović, Neša 67  
Paruzel, Andrzej 147  
Paskali, Irena 62, 64  
Pastrňák, Petr 125  
Patatics, Alexandru 103, 308  
Pavlátová, Michaela 239, 254  
Pätoprstá, Elena 139, 141, 146  
Peeva, Adela 63  
Perjovschi, Dan 101, 103  
Perjovschi, Lia 103  
Perov, Vasily 168  
Pershina, Natalia 75, 75, 220, 239, 291  
Pešánek, Zdeněk 99  
Pešić, Vesna 67  
Paternák, Miklós 11, 12, 95, 105, 227, 302, 309  
Petit, Santiago López 24, 25, 30–32  
Petrić, Bojana 237, 253  
Pilař, Radek 98  
Pirate Television 175, 177, 180, 182  
Placák, Petr 118  
Plastic People of the Universe 97  
Plato 46  
Polisiewicz, Aleksandra 152  
Poljak, Renata 242, 279  
Pollock, Jackson 188  
Popkov, Victor 75, 76, 220  
Popov, Nebojša 67  
Pospiszyl, Tomáš 12, 117, 125, 303, 306  
Preobrazhensky, Kirill 173, 183, 189  
Preslová, Míla 122
- Racanovic, Svetlana 227  
Radek Community, see  
    Maxim Karakulov, David Ter-Oganian,  
    Pavel Mikitenko, Petr Bystrov,  
    Alexander Korneev, Alexey Buldakov,  
    Andrei Serguienko, Vladis Shapovalov,  
    Dmitry Gutov  
Radeva, Daniela 309  
Radok, Alfréd 103  
Rajk, László 95, 108  
Rajk, László, Jr. 95  
Rakauskaite, Egle a/k/a RAKE 242, 272  
Rakić, Dragan 237, 253  
Rama, Edi 81, 87, 88, 90  
Rancière, Jacques 32, 91  
Raščić, Lala 239, 279  
Ratniks, Mārtiņš 239, 265  
Reed, Lou 73, 76  
Rees, Simon 14, 206  
Rehm, Jean Pierre 204, 207  
Repin, Ilya 168  
Ressler, Oliver 306  
REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT see Martin  
Keil and Henrik Mayer  
Révész, László László 95  
Richardson, Joanne 225, 227, 242, 292  
Riefenstahl, Leni 204  
Rigvava, Gia 177, 183, 189  
Rist, Pipilotti 189  
Ristić, Mihailo 67, 68  
Robakowski, Józef 108, 147, 151, 241, 261, 309  
Robinson, Olivia 169  
Rogala, Mirosław 152  
Róna, Jaroslav 118  
Rónai, Peter 140, 145  
Ronduda, Lukasz 306  
Rosenbach, Ulrike 188  
Roshal, Mikhail 188  
Rosler, Martha 188  
Ross, David A. 171, 182, 183  
Rossa, Boryana 11–13, 153, 168, 235,  
    260, 277, 303  
Ruller, Tomáš 103  
Rusnáková, Katarína 12, 137, 145, 227,  
    303, 306, 308  
Rusu, Stefan 227, 242, 280  
Ruttmann, Walthar 109, 116  
Rybczyński, Zbigniew 152  
Rych, David 225, 227  
Rytka, Zygmunt 152  
Řádová, Elen 103
- Sala, Anri 12, 13, 79, 80–84, 86, 87,  
    89–91, 216, 217, 219, 241, 258  
Sala, Valdet 81–84, 87  
Salmanis, Krišs 238, 266  
Saxonová, Janka 141  
Scheufler, Pavel 102  
Scheuflerová, Kateřina 102  
Schmid, Wilhem 31, 33  
Schmidt, Burghart 30, 33  
Schusev, Alexei 212  
Schwarzkogler, Rudolf 188  
Scotini, Marco 309  
Sedláčková, Šárka 103  
Sei, Keiko 11, 13, 93, 116, 303, 309  
Sequens, Jiří 123, 124  
Serapionov, Kalin 164, 309  
Seres, Szilvia 111  
Serguienko, Andrei 190, 237, 262  
Serov, Valentin 168, 197  
Serra, Richard 173  
Shamberg, Michael 175  
Shapovalov, Vladis 190, 237, 262  
Shishko, Olga 14, 227  
Shklovsky, Viktor 87, 88  
Shkurti, Gentian 239, 259  
Shutov, Sergey 240, 253  
Sierakowski, Sławomir 236, 285  
Siflis, Zoltán 249  
Sikorsi, Władisław 221  
Simić, Mirko 240, 252  
Simon, Jan 152  
Simon, Kati 227  
Simonian, Haroutyun 195  
Singer, Jacek 147  
Singer, Jadwiga 147  
Skala, Petr 102  
Skapski, Lukasz 152, 236 271  
Skarbek, Krzysztof 149  
Slapšak, Božidar 67  
Slauka, René 102  
Smetana, Pavel 99  
Smithson, Robert 200, 207  
SNK group 190  
Solomon, Alexandru 101  
Sólyom, András 108, 213, 216, 241, 248  
Sontag, Susan 121, 125  
Sorin, Pierrick 189  
Soros, George 96, 131  
Social Dialogue group 100  
Soukup, Vít 125
- Spasoski, Aleksandar 241, 293  
Stacho, L'ubo 122  
Stamenković, Marko 227  
Stefanov, Svilen 169  
Stepanović, Tijana 14, 225  
Steyerl, Hito 242, 258  
Stilinović, Mladen 66, 256  
Stites, Richard 210, 221  
Stubbs, Mike 241, 254  
Sturken, Marita 183  
subREAL see  
    Călin Dan, Iosif Király, Dan Mihăltianu  
Sugár, János 95, 109, 110, 116, 232, 243, 266  
Sumbadze, Maia 237, 273  
Supernova Film Union 159, 168  
Surikov, Vasily 168  
Svobodová, Lucie 102, 103  
Sýkora, Zdeněk 103  
Szakáts, István 227  
Szczerek, Janusz 147  
Szczerski, Andrzej 14  
Szegedy-Maszák, Zoltán 112  
Szilágyi, Ákos 108, 248  
Szleszyński, Jacek 150, 151  
Šepušis, Gintaras 238, 250  
Šević, Katarina 111  
Šeric, Shoba Nebojša 238, 257  
Šilhan, Jasoň 102  
Šmid, Aina 12, 17, 45, 48, 50–55, 240,  
    247, 256, 301  
Štarmanová, Lenka 102  
Šumić-Riha, Jelica 23, 24, 32  
Švankmajer, Jan 97
- T Group 147  
Tabatadze, Sophia 14, 227, 237, 242, 277, 284  
Tarkovsky, Andrei 197  
Tatiček, Ivan 102  
Tatlin, Vladimir 202, 212, 221  
Taylor-Wood, Sam 189  
Teepee Videospace Troupe, TVTV 173  
Ter-Oganian, David 190, 237, 262  
Terziev, Anton 168  
Terziev, Krassimir 162, 164, 167, 241,  
    243, 270, 276  
The Toadstools 188  
Tijen, Tjebbe Van 103  
Timár, Katalin 114  
Tito, Josip Broz 52, 55, 57  
Tkáčová, Lucia 139

Todorova, Maria 14  
Todosijević, Raša 59, 67, 68  
Togay, János Can 228  
Tolstoy, Lev 134, 211  
Tomić, Milica 61, 235, 259,  
Tozzi, Tommaso 309  
Török, Adrien 227  
Tralla, Mare 236, 261  
Traub, Ilona 32, 307  
Traumane, Mara 227  
Trbuljak, Goran 67  
Trier, Lars von 146  
Trnka, Jan 103  
Trotsky, Leon 212  
Truszkowski, Jerzy 148  
Tserakhau, Aliaksei 239, 289  
Tsulukidze, Nadia 237, 241, 284, 289  
Tucker, Aviezer 125  
Tucker, Jim 115  
Tupitsyn, Margarita 168  
Turek, Filip 125  
TwoŻywo Group 152

Ujjica, Andrei 100, 242, 250  
Ujvárossy, László 103  
Umansky, Evgeny 227  
Union of Artists 174, 176, 178, 180, 181  
Urban, Miloš 118

Vacheva, Albena 169  
Vakuu TV Group 110  
Vančat, Jaroslav 98  
Vangeli, Žaneta 237, 255  
Vanmeenen, Karen 309  
Vasnetsov, Viktor 168  
Vassileva, Maria 227  
Vassileva, Mariana 236, 247  
Vassiliev, Yury 238, 267  
Vaškovičová, Hana 146  
Vašulka, Bohuslav (Woody) 99  
Vattimo, Gianni 54  
Vautier, Ben 188  
Večanski, Vera 66  
Velagić, Tanja 54  
Velikonja, Nataša 31, 32  
Velvet Underground 97  
Verdery, Katherine 213, 221  
Veress, Zsolt 113  
Vertov, Dziga 108, 155, 156, 204, 240  
Vesić, Jelena 68

Vesić, Vesna 64  
Vesna, Viktoria [a/k/a Viktorija  
Vesna Bulajić] 68  
Vécsei, Júlia 111  
Video Salon 98, 102  
Videofreex 173  
Vidová, Janka 103, 121, 122  
Vilensky, Dmitry 75, 76, 220, 239, 297  
Viola, Bill 98, 138, 173, 183  
Vipotnik, Miha 68, 230  
Virno, Paolo 69–71, 73–77  
Vláčil, František 124  
Vliet, Tom van 230  
Vogric, Marie-Claude 230  
Voinea, Raluca 14  
Vojtěchovský, Miloš 99, 103  
Volkart, Yvonne 259  
Vosecký, Ivan 125  
Vostell, Wolf 188  
Vrana, David 99  
Vreme, Sorin 103  
Vujošević, Natalija 235, 267

Wahorn, András 107  
Walczak, Maciej 150, 151  
Warhol, Andy 145  
Wasilewski, Marek 151  
Waśko, Ryszard 147  
Weibel, Peter 109, 116, 189, 243, 256,  
300, 306–308  
Weinberger, Golda 106  
Wells, Herbert George 210, 221  
Wertheimer, Max 54  
Wettengl, Kurt 306  
Weychert, Piotr 147  
Wiener, Norbert 173  
Williams, Raymond 47  
Wodinski, Ann 236  
Wolff, Larry 14, 211, 221  
Wspólnota, Leezeć 152  
Wyrzykowski, Piotr 150, 151

Xethali, Aikatherini 228  
Xhaferi, Rudina 237, 278

Youngblood, Gene 173, 183  
Yukhananov, Boris 172, 179, 182

Zakharov, Vadim 187  
Zamiara, Wojciech 151  
Zappa, Frank 97

Zbranca, Rarita 227  
Zet, Martin 235, 273  
Zeyfang, Florian 306  
Zgraja, Grzegorz 147  
Zhigalov, Anatoly 187  
Ziotkovska, Magdalena 220  
Zurr, Ionat 169  
Zvezdochotov, Konstantin 188  
Žbanić, Jasmila 242, 257  
Żebrowska, Alicja 151  
Želibská, Jana 138, 145  
Žižek, Slavoj 145, 256  
Żmijewski, Artur 151, 218, 237, 243, 281, 290

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