



Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2009

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**record of a seminar**  

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**titled “1968–1989”**  

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**at the Museum**  

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**of Modern Art in**  

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**Warsaw.**  

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# Political upheaval and artistic change

edited by  
Claire Bishop and Marta Dziawańska

# 1968

# 1989





1968–1989

Political upheaval and artistic change

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a three day seminar “1968–1989”  
structured around the following  
keywords: 1968, 1989,  
Participation, Internationalism,  
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# Presentations + Texts

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1968	x		x		
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# Preface

Joanna Mytkowska

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Joanna Mytkowska is director of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, and co-founder of the Foksal Gallery Foundation in Warsaw. Formerly she was a curator at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, where she organized the exhibitions “Les Inquiets” [*The Anxious*, 2008], “Le Nuage Magellan” [*The Magellanic Cloud*, 2007], and “Paweł Althamer” (2006). In 2005 she curated the Polish Pavilion at the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennale, exhibiting *Repetition* by Artur Żmijewski. She is co-curator of “Les Promesses du Passé” [*Promises of the Past*], a major survey of Eastern European art at the Centre Pompidou in 2010.





**It** is with utmost pleasure that we present our first publication, which marks the beginning of the publishing endeavors by the newly established Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. In this initial stage of our existence, we have decided to refrain from issuing catalogues for the numerous exhibitions and artistic events our institution organizes. Instead, we wish to report on the research projects, debates, and discussions organized and moderated by the Museum. This presentation is the first in a series of such publications.

The Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw has been provoking such debates from its very inception. They are, on the one hand, related to the scale and location of the new Museum in the symbolic center of Warsaw. On the other, however, these conversations are a sign of a momentum in art that the institution wants to confront. We are in the midst of an extremely intense period of development and change in Polish art, which has gained an international dimension, and in the international art world. The situation is further accompanied by extensive comparative studies of the revaluation of different phenomena in art history. We are in a time when very different languages, discourses, and outlooks of the past all seem to be legitimate. The experiences of leaving communism, of transformation, of exiting cultural isolation and facing the need to tackle global challenges have appeared seemingly all at once and need to be processed. Not only is Poland and the entire former Eastern Europe losing its extraordinary character, but it also already seems to belong to the “privileged” West, if only economically and politically. It is our duty to share the intellectual responsibility for coming to terms with the postmodern world.

The seminar entitled “1968-1989,” prepared in 2008 by Claire Bishop and the Museum’s team under special care of Marta Dziemarska, was one such extraordinarily vigorous and emotional debate. It was an attempt to find an answer to questions about the differences between the breakthrough year of 1968 in



Western and Eastern Europe; whether 1989 marked the beginning of the end of the division into West and East; and whether the categories of “former West” (recently proposed by Kathrin Rhomberg and Charles Esche<sup>1</sup>) and “former East” are legitimate and what meaning they may have for art history. The issue sparking the most heated disputes involved the engagement of the artist in social and political debates and the ethical requirements of artistic practice. This was apparent both during the discussion about the ball in Zalesie (organized in 1968 by the critics and artists affiliated with Galeria Foksal) and about *[S]elections.pl* (a 2005 group exhibition). It was not the first time that our colleagues from the entire European continent debated the issue of political transformation and the epistemological challenges evoked by these changes.

This was the context in which we discussed the place of the newly established Museum. All comments and reflections (including critical ones) are extremely important for this institution, as they help us define our place, task, and role. The debate made us aware that in order to determine the function of the Museum and the role of contemporary art we cannot limit ourselves to the context of our local history, the trauma of communism, and the shadow cast by the Palace of Culture. New challenges require us to develop a broader international perspective on our own experience. This will not be easy. The conviction, however, that the first phase of transformation in Eastern Europe is complete and behind us—as general and unsure as it may sound—has been established. And this, together with the recognition that our main task is to broaden the horizon, I see as the biggest achievement of this seminar.

I would very much like to thank all the participants in the “1968-1989” seminar—speakers, debaters, and listeners—for having taken part in a debate so formative for the Museum.

Translated by Ewa Kanigowska-Gedroyć

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<sup>1</sup> “Former West” is the name of a long-term research project organized by Maria Hlavajova (BAK Utrecht), Charles Esche (Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven) and Kathrin Rhomberg in collaboration with the Reina Sofia, Madrid, and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. The present publication is a prelude to the “Former West” project.





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# 1968 and 1989 in 2008

Claire Bishop

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Claire Bishop is an art historian and critic based at the CUNY Graduate Center, New York, and is also Visiting Professor at the Royal College of Art, London. Her publications include *Installation Art: A Critical History* (2005) and *Participation* (2006). In 2008 she was co-curator of "Double Agent" at the ICA, London, and edited the catalogue that accompanies it. She is a regular contributor to *Artforum* and a research advisor for the project "Former West."





**The** texts assembled in this book are a selective record of a three-day seminar held at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw in July 2008 and organized by myself and Joanna Mytkowska.<sup>1</sup> The seminar aimed for a comparative reflection on the artistic significance of 1968 (which at the time was being celebrated by Western museums in conferences, film screenings, and exhibitions) and the transformations of 1989 (which is commonly held to be a more significant break for Eastern Europe). Rather than immediately assume that 1968 was more relevant for the West and 1989 for the East, we hoped to construct more nuanced comparisons between these regions.

One starting point for the seminar was the recent publication of two important books. The first is *Art Since 1900* (2004), written by four art historians associated with the American journal *October*—and organized as a chronological series of essays covering the period 1900 to 2000.<sup>2</sup> While the book offers a magisterial overview of twentieth-century art, it downplays the connection between political events and art history, presenting the history of art as a more-or-less autonomous series of developments driven by an internal assessment of its own traditions. Yet the form, distribution, and reception of art is often influenced directly by political upheaval and cultural policy (especially in Europe during the last four decades). On top of this, the authors barely mention Eastern European art, a fact that seems particularly shocking in the wake of 1989, during which time an incredible body of work investigating cultural upheaval and collective memory has been produced. The second book is the other key art historical survey to be published this decade: IRWIN's *East Art Map* (2006), which is the first attempt to provide a comparative overview of the main artistic trends in Eastern Europe and Russia throughout the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> However, organized around essays on specific countries, it tends to keep discussion within discrete national boundaries and to avoid the specific connections between key artists and their Western counterparts—connections that were arguably more important to the development of conceptual and performance practices in the East than relations with artists in neighboring countries, since the lines of communication between Eastern European states were so curtailed in the Cold War period.

My aim in gathering together people in Warsaw was to build on these two publications by thinking about these lines of artistic communication—not only between East and East, but also between East and West—and their relationship to moments of social and political upheaval. To what extent does political change

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Marta Dziewańska and the team at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw for all the enthusiasm and hard work they put into the organization of the seminar and the realization of this publication.

<sup>2</sup> H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.-A. Bois, B.H.D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> IRWIN (eds.), *East Art Map: Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, New York and London: MIT Press and Afterall, 2006.





impact upon the form, medium, and distribution of visual art? How do we explain the differences between artistic practices that appear very similar and yet were produced under very different political and ideological contexts? Is it possible or even desirable, after 1989, to write a *European* art history that brings together East and West? How useful is it to talk about the “former East” and the “former West”? Despite these grand aims, most of the seminar papers focused on differences within various Eastern European countries, although the debates that ensued, some of which have been reprinted here, did include more references to Western Europe.

The seminar was co-ordinated thematically. The first day focused on Internationalism and comprised presentations by Nataša Ilić (curator, Zagreb) on the artist group Exat 51; Attila Tordai-S. (editor, Cluj) on art theory in Romania after 1989; Georg Schöllhammer (editor, Vienna) on avant-garde architecture in the Baltic States and Central Asia; Kathrin Rhomberg (curator, Vienna) on the exhibition “Ausgeträumt...”; Stevan Vuković (curator, Belgrade) on a timeline of events in the ex-Yugoslavian context; and a conversation between Paweł Polit (curator, Warsaw) and Anka Ptaszkowska (critic, Warsaw) on *The Zalesie Ball*, which gave rise to a heated debate on the political status of this early “relational” work. Day two carried the theme Participation and included two papers on participatory strategies in former Czechoslovakia in the 1960s: a silent PowerPoint lecture by Vit Havránek (curator, Prague) and an analysis of audience by Tomáš Pospiszyl (art historian, Prague). Łukasz Ronduda (curator, Warsaw) presented an esoteric form of participation developed by Paweł Freisler in the 1970s. The day ended with a conversation between two Warsaw-based artists, Grzegorz Kowalski and one of his best known students, Artur Żmijewski, on the differences between art and participation across their respective generations. The final day, organized around the theme of Exhibitions and Institutions, comprised papers by Gabriela Świtek (art historian, Warsaw) on Harald Szeemann’s “Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams...”; on IRWIN’s activities before and after 1989 by Borut Vogelnik (artist, Ljubljana); on post-1989 museums of contemporary art in Eastern Europe by Piotr Piotrowski (art historian, Warsaw); and on the Croatian scene in the ‘60s and ‘70s by Ana Janevski (curator, Warsaw). The seminar concluded with Charles Esche (curator, Eindhoven) reflecting on Western Europe’s changed identity as a result of 1989.

Not all of these papers are reproduced in the present volume, partly for reasons of space and partly in the interest of editorial focus. The order has been resequenced, with a navigation tool



designed by Ludovic Balland to indicate the key terms around which the book is now structured: 1968, 1989, Exhibitions & Institutions, Participation, Internationalism, and Former East/Former West. One paper not included in the seminar but included here for its relevance is “Handworks: Yugoslav Gestural Culture and Performance Art” by Branislav Jakovljevic (performance historian, Stanford University), a study of mass spectacle and its relationship to performance art in former Yugoslavia. Likewise the discussion on *The Zalesie Ball* has been supplemented by a longer essay by Luiza Nader (art historian, Warsaw). Finally, it should be noted that the speakers, with the exception of myself and three others, were all from former socialist countries; at a certain point it became a conscious decision not to include speakers from Russia, who will be the focus of a forthcoming seminar at the museum. This attention to activities at one remove from the imperial center was given further expression by inviting the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera to produce a performance as her contribution to the seminar. Her work, titled *Consummated Revolution*, was visible on Defilad Square, outside the Palace of Culture, between 5 and 7 PM during the three days of the seminar. The book opens with Bruguera’s statement about this work and concludes with a section called Archive. The latter is my proposal to the Museum of Modern Art: to include in each of their publications two or three translations of previously unpublished art historical documents from Eastern Europe in order to facilitate comparative research into the artistic production of this region. The two texts in the present volume originated in the former Czechoslovakia: excerpts from the travel diary of Milan Knížák concerning the year he spent in New York in 1968 and a selection of interviews with that generation of artists in Bratislava undertaken by the activist Ján Budaj (who played an instrumental role in the Velvet Revolution of 1989).







# Consummated Revolution (1968–1989)

Tania Bruguera

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Tania Bruguera is an artist who also teaches in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago and at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris. She is the founder and director of Cátedra Arte de Conducta in Havana, the first program of studies for political art in Latin America (2003-2009). Her work has been exhibited extensively in international exhibitions, including Documenta 11 (2002), and the 49th and 51st Venice Biennales. She lives and works in Chicago, Paris, and Havana.

## Proposal

**Materials:** Nine blind persons, some without their glasses, in full military uniforms and boots of the army in the place where the piece is presented; walking sticks; public space—including a specific building—related to 1968 events (for capitalist cities) or to socialist times pre-1989 (for ex-socialist countries); surveillance walks around the space. In the capitalist cities the blind guards propose to people passing by to sleep with them using direct flirtation and explicit calls for sex. In case of affirmative response the performer should have sex with the audience.

**Duration:** minimum of one working-hours day, maximum not determined.

**The performance will not be announced as such by any media.**











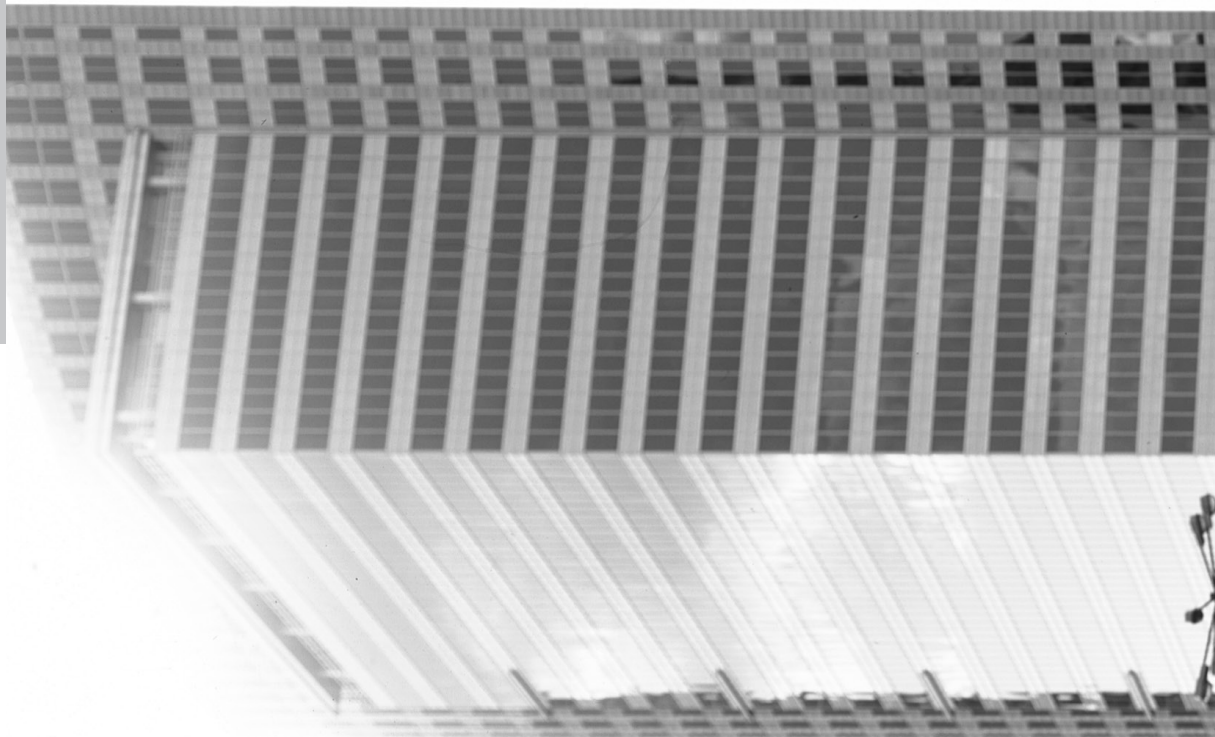
Tania Bruguera, *Consummated Revolution* (1968-1989),  
photo by Jan Smaga, 2008

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Commentary

*Consummated Revolution (1968–1989)* aims to create a connection between two revolutionary moments, that of 1968 and 1989. Both at some point reflected direct democracy, the “desire of the people,” and instances in which governments—for a brief period of time—were destabilized or at least challenged by a group of citizens. While one event happened in a capitalist society and the other one under socialism, in those ideologically opposed social constructions each event created a “moment of admiration” from and for people seeing/portrayed as “enemies.” They were events in which the force of “the people” exceeded the rule of governments, and were simultaneously symbolic and constituted practical changes and consequences. Each was a moment during which governments were forced to rethink and to some degree redirect their politics. What is constructed and what is spontaneous during such intense popular moments? How have such events survived in the collective memory? Do they still hold some impact or are they mere images of past failures or unrealized utopias? What is the real force of a united group of citizens? Can society rise again and deflect history onto revolutionary paths? Is a concept like revolution a consummated element of the past? How can we show love for Revolution?

In this piece love is illustrated in a very direct, non-romantic, and concrete way: solicited sex. The blind persons symbolize the idea of someone loving or wanting something they cannot see and cannot experience completely. The military clothing introduces the idea of institutionalized power to a situation of vulnerability. In capitalist society this piece has an added element: if the blind persons can convince passersby, they can engage in and consummate sexual encounters. The performers’ inability to see whom they are seducing (and with whom are they having sex) appeals to the euphoric elements of revolutionary moments.

The audience will encounter the blind, uniformed performers by chance as they “guard” public spaces or buildings that represent events from 1968 or 1989. The performers’ routes are not planned or otherwise choreographed, so the audience may encounter them singly or in groups.

The time in which the piece takes place—i.e., during a conference on the legacies of 1968 or 1989—underscores the ways in which the performance can become part of the landscape.



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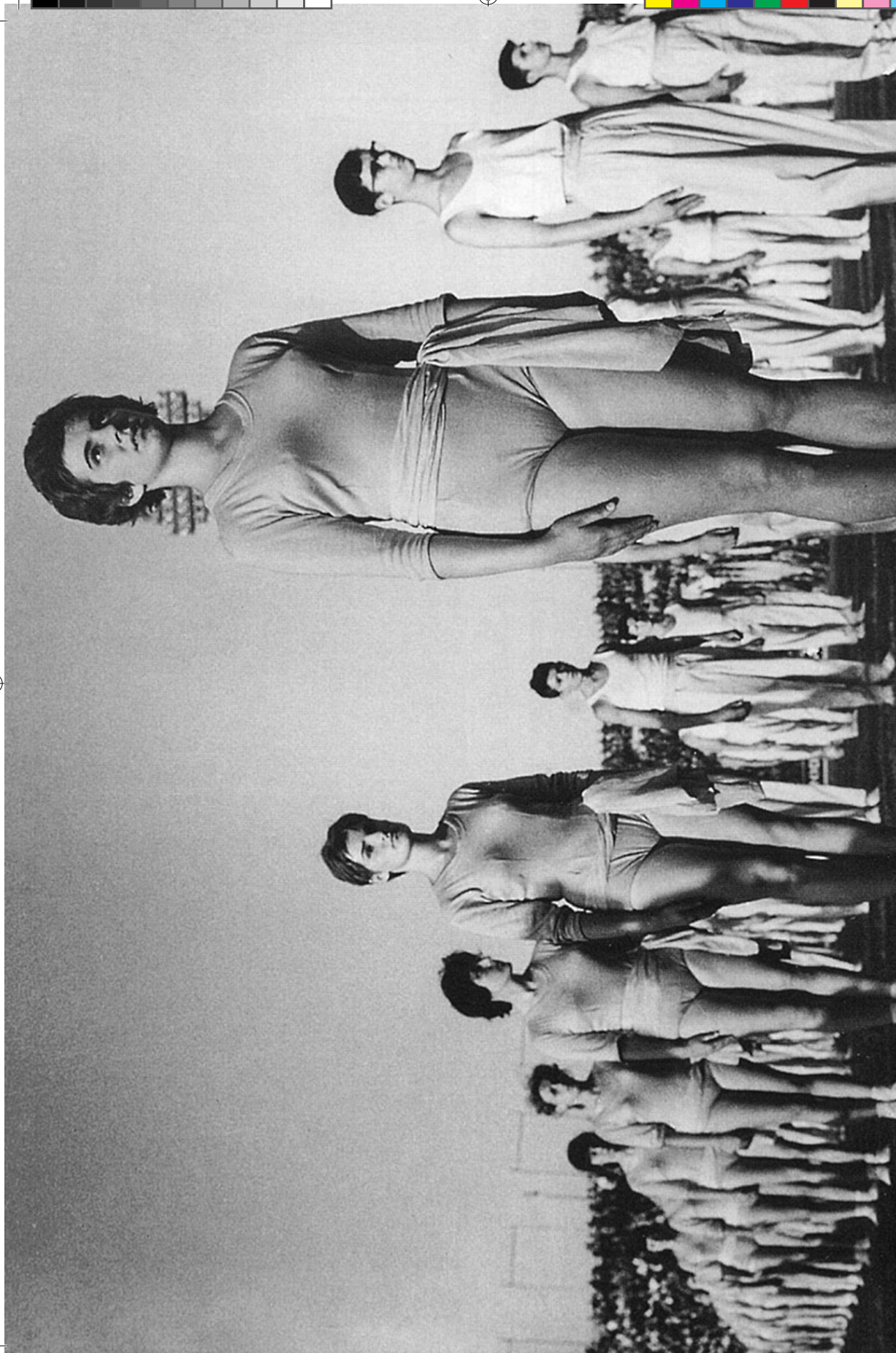
Keywords: 1968 1989 Participation Internationalism  
Former East/Former West Exhibitions & Institutions



Branislav Jakovljević is Assistant Professor in the Drama Department at Stanford University, where he teaches avant-garde and experimental theater, performance theory, and critical theory. His work has been published in theater and arts journals in the US and Europe (*Theatre Journal*, *TDR*, *PAJ*, *Art Journal*, *Theater*). His most recent publication is *Daniil Kharms: Writing and the Event* (2009).

# Handworks: Yugoslav Gestural Culture and Performance Art





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Youth Day Celebration, Belgrade, 1962







Era Miliivojević (with Marina Abramović), *Taping Up the Artist*,  
Student Cultural Center, Belgrade, 1971

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## 1. Two '68s

"I want to tell you how we, in the Balkans, kill rats. We have a method to turn a rat into a wolf..." Marina Abramović narrated her parable about a "Balkan Wolf-Rat" as she scrubbed piles upon piles of fresh beef bones and rinsed them in copper basins positioned on three sides of the gallery space at the 1997 Venice Biennale. Thematically, this performance was a continuation of her performances from two years earlier, *Cleaning the Mirror 1 & 2*, which were also dominated by the baroque pairing of bare bones and a female body.

To an international audience, Abramović's performances from the mid-1990s bore clear reference to the ongoing wars in her native Yugoslavia. At the same time, many of her friends and admirers in Belgrade could easily trace these references beyond the ethnic wars that destroyed their country. She has acknowledged that already in her pre-performance work of the late 1960s there was an evident affinity with the baroque. From these early days, her interest in the baroque was paired with the theme of cleansing. Abramović's first performance piece, *Come Wash with Me [Dodjite da perete sa mnom]*, 1969, also invokes the theme of ritual cleansing. The overall impression is that she wants to purge the baroque, not to celebrate it.

Abramović's interest in performance and body art arose in the wake of the student revolt that took place at Belgrade University in June of 1968. The early work of Abramović, Raša Todosijević, Era Milivojević, and other Belgrade performance artists can be seen as the first visible manifestation of a long and subdued confrontation between ideology and representation in Serbian art and culture in the second half of the twentieth century. They revealed that what was at stake in this conflict were not the general principles of artistic expression (such as socialist realism vs. formalism), but rather the place of the body in Yugoslav art and culture in general. This discord between ideology and the body became visible precisely in the students' revolt of June 1968.

Historians of the student demonstrations that took place that month at Belgrade University are in general agreement about the two distinct phases of the event: the first is limited to the initial revolt that lasted from the eve-



ning of June 2 until the night of June 3, which was marked by spontaneous gatherings and clashes with the police; the second period lasted from June 4 to June 9 and was characterized by the occupation of Belgrade University's facilities and the emergence of an organized student movement. The first two days were an expression of revolt or the desire for emancipation, while the incomplete revolution that followed represents its gradual overturn. The legacy of the first phase is aesthetic, the second ideological. In the years and decades following 1968, it gradually became almost impossible to distinguish between these two phases. However, a close reading of these events in their context demonstrates that the first two days of the students' protest stand apart as an uncalculated, self-scarifying, excessive, and therefore poetic act. The only legitimate inheritor of this bodily poetry of June 2 and 3 is the performance art that emerged on Belgrade's alternative scene in the years following 1968.

## 2. Socialist Baroque

In order to appreciate aesthetic relevance of the events in Yugoslavia in 1968, we have to understand the cultural and social context in which they took place. Art historian Boris Groys expands Walter Benjamin's famous thesis about aestheticization of fascist politics by claiming that socialism, and specifically Stalinism, represents an aesthetic project. In his book *The Total Art of Stalinism* he writes that "although it is with rare exceptions expressed in ethical and political terms, the highest goal in the building of socialism is [...] aesthetic, and socialism itself is regarded as the supreme measure of beauty."<sup>1</sup> Convinced that he is demystifying not only the culture of Stalinism but also the so-called historical avant-garde, Groys establishes a series of unconvincing analogies between Socialist Realism and the Soviet

<sup>1</sup> B. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p.74.





avant-garde, arguing that the “aesthetics of socialist realism” does not obliterate the avant-garde, but instead represents a “radicalization that the avant-garde itself was unable to accomplish”.<sup>2</sup> This is not the place to engage in a detailed analysis of Groys’s argument.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I want only to point out that Socialist Realism is not only an aesthetic, but also, and primarily, an aesthetico-ideological project. As such, it is much closer to a model that by far preceded the avant-gardes from the turn of the twentieth century. The case in point is the baroque.

Approaching the baroque neither as a style nor as an art historical period but as a “historical situation” or “historical complex,” Spanish literary scholar José Antonio Maravall in his book *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure* describes a number of baroque culture’s properties that bear striking similarities to the culture of Socialist Yugoslavia (and other socialist states, most notably USSR). First, Maravall sees baroque societies primarily as post-revolutionary: for him, the baroque is not a continuation of the Renaissance, but its arrest and questioning.<sup>4</sup> Like the seventeenth-century baroque state, the post-revolutionary state in the twentieth century takes as one of its main tasks keeping in check the revolutionary energy that brought it into being. That is why—and this is the second trait—baroque societies, like socialist ones, are in permanent crisis. Maravall goes as far as defining the culture of the baroque as a systematization of a series of responses to a long social crisis.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the entire history of socialist Yugoslavia<sup>6</sup> can be seen as an endless series of crises: political crisis in 1948, economic crisis in 1962, social crisis in 1968, constitutional crisis in 1974.... Fourth, one of Maravall’s most controversial claims is that baroque represents the first mass society in the modern sense of the word. There is, however, a particularly significant connection between seventeenth-century baroque society and socialist Yugoslavia (and USSR): neither establishes an ethnic state. While in the baroque state the mass constitutes, as Maravall puts it, a “proto-nation,” in Yugoslavia it becomes a post-nation of sorts. The fifth trait is the most important for this discussion. Mass activities that were continuously organized in the former Yugoslavia suggest that this society follows the baroque model according to which the state abandons the sim-

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>3</sup> For an informed critique of Groys’ thesis about Stalinism and the avant-garde, see E. Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, pp.44-46.

<sup>4</sup> J. A. Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p.134.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22.

<sup>6</sup> In the course of the twentieth century, the name Yugoslavia was adopted by three states that roughly occupied the same





area, but that were geographically and ideologically very different. In 1929, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, founded in 1918, changed its name to Yugoslavia. The Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia was founded in 1943 and lasted until 1991. Finally, in the 1990s, the union of Serbia and Montenegro was using the name Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In this essay I am dealing primarily with the second or socialist Yugoslavia.

ple principle of ruling by presence in order to adopt the dynamic model of ruling through participation. This culture of “active obedience”<sup>7</sup> is accomplished through a delicate balance of violence and pleasure. When it comes to the baroque, the first is manifested in the emergence of standing armies and the second in the equally emergent concept of culture. The latter consists of an “entire complex of social, artistic, and ideological expedients that were cultivated specifically to maintain authority psychologically over the wills of those who might, as it was feared, be led to take up an opposing position”.<sup>8</sup> That is why Maravall considers “guiding” or “management” as one of the key characteristics of the baroque society. In their works on the baroque, which in part came as a scholarly response to Maravall, Wlad Godzic and John Beverly described this characteristic in a much more direct way: as manipulation.

“Guiding” is inseparable from holding, presumably by the hand. The one who leads holds the hand of the one who is being led. Guiding is handling. It concerns hands: taking hold, seizing, grasping. In his essay “Mainmise” (the French word that covers precisely this territory of hand-related meanings), Jean-François Lyotard writes that “whoever is under *mainmise* of a *manceps* [master, a person who takes something in hand], he is *mancus*, one-handed, he is missing a hand. He’s the one whose hand is missing. To be emancipated in this sense means to escape from the state of lack”.<sup>9</sup> The baroque is the historical complex that establishes the idea of society as the community of the one-handed. The relationship between baroque society and the Yugoslav brand of socialism is not a mere analogy, but a variation that teems with paradoxes. The most striking one is that real socialism, that brotherhood of the one-handed, sees itself as the society in which work, or labor, manual labor, has been emancipated.

### 3. Geopolitics of Gesture

The state is not only a network of institutions, but also a ceremony that perpetually unfolds in front of its citizens. And not only that: this ceremony pulls them in, and they emerge from it more or less transformed. As Russian

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.74.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46.

<sup>9</sup> J.-F. Lyotard, “Mainmise”, *Philosophy Today*, Winter 1992, p.422.



scholar Oksana Bulgakova observes in her book *Factory of Gestures*, a post-revolutionary society such as the Soviet Union unavoidably faces not only economic and political transformations, it undergoes not only a massive change in official verbal communication and artistic idioms, but also a massive transformation of behavior. Class does not leave its imprint only on language, clothing, public places, or tastes, but also on attitudes, manners, and bodies (their movements and gestures). In Russia after the October Revolution, the court etiquette, military postures, and the middle class and its *bon ton* were all replaced by an aggressive egalitarianism. It is, according to Bulgakowa, a whole new “anthropological order” based on stately and military techniques of walking, standing, and sitting.<sup>10</sup> In Yugoslavia, this militarization of the everyday acquired somewhat different form. Its most distinguished manifestation was mass running.

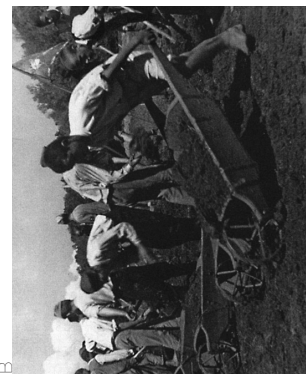
In April 1945, weeks before the capitulation of Nazi Germany, the Central Committee of the Antifascist Youth of Yugoslavia asked its local organizations to join a nationwide relay run as a way of celebrating Marshall Tito’s birthday. In relay running, a baton is passed from hand to hand. It is the only kind of running in which a firm hand is as important as strong legs. Hand, not hands: one-handed running. Precisely this one-handedness guarantees the collectivity of this kind of race. Some 12,500 runners participated in the first mass running in liberated Yugoslavia. From then on, devotion to Tito was measured in numbers of bodies and distance in kilometers: in 1950, 93,000 km and over million runners; in 1951, 128,000 km and 1.5 million runners. The most massive relay run was organized in 1952, when some 1,555,000 runners covered over 130,000 km. In 1957, for the first time, Tito’s baton was greeted by a mass ceremony held on a soccer stadium in Belgrade. On that occasion, Tito suggested that May 25, the unofficial date of his birth, be celebrated as the official Youth Day. He symbolically handed the baton back to the youth, and they responded the following year by starting the relay run from his birthplace, the village of Kumrovec in Croatia. Through this symbolic exchange, time, that is to say history, begins to seep into the geopolitics of the body: every year, the starting point of the relay run was chosen for its symbolic place in the history of Yugoslav revolution or for its relevance for the politics

<sup>10</sup> O. Bulgakowa, *Fabrika zhestov* [Factory of gestures], Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2005, p.210.



B Tito's Baton, 1963

C 3. Youth Work Action, 1950s



of the day. In 1968, the Youth Relay, as it came to be called, began its long journey from the camp of Voluntary Youth Work Brigades on the construction site of a dam on the river Danube. In that way, mass running joined mass digging.<sup>B</sup>

Initially, Youth Work Actions were formed in response to the needs of reconstruction and the industrialization of the country in the aftermath of WWII. Soon, they turned into ideological factories for forging Yugoslavism and socialism. By the mid-1960s, Youth Work Actions were almost non-existent: 1965, the year of the major economic reforms that pushed the country in the direction of a market economy, was the first year without any large-scale summer Youth Work Actions. The tradition was resurrected again in 1968, with the Youth Work Action "New Belgrade." However, this was not a simple return to the past practices. In accordance with the economic overhaul of the country, this was the first time a Youth Work Action was organized as a business venture. If mass running is measured in kilometers, mass digging is measured in cubic meters: that summer, some 5,000 high school students, workers, and peasants removed some 22,000 cubic meters of earth from a railway site, dug some 42,000 cubic meters of earth in the Park of Friendship, and moved some 50,000 cubic meters of dirt from a highway construction site. The first sparks that initiated the student protest came from the conflict between the members of the brigade that worked on the highway and residents of the nearby student dorms.<sup>C</sup>

The initial clash, as I mentioned, took place on June 2. Only a week earlier, the mass celebration of the Youth Day took place in Belgrade's central stadium. Some 8,500 participants and 60,000 spectators were present. Over the years, an unchanging structure was established for this mass spectacle: at the first sight of Tito, who always appeared in his presidential loge at 8 PM on the dot, the performers and audience would greet him with a thunderous exclamation: "Happy birthday!" That year, the mass spectacle began with a cutely disheveled performance of children from primary schools and continued with folklore groups from all parts of the country performing dances. They honored the Olympiad in Mexico City by forming giant Olympic



rings with their bodies. Mass labor was portrayed by the piece “Blacksmiths,” which was performed by students of vocational schools, and the culmination of the entire evening was a mass performance in which soldiers, sailors, and young female students participated. For over two hours, the audience observed the mass body that was running, twisting, jumping, dancing, lining up, dispersing, tumbling, and marching. It began as the joyful body of a child, then turned into an ethnic body, then an athletic body, then a worker’s body, then military body. In short, it constituted a collective body in which the individual disappeared and blended into a geometrized and abstract mass: body-movement, body-image, body-symbol. This semiotized composite body resembles a good-natured, obedient, and mute giant. The penultimate exercise was entitled “Carousel” and was performed by a large group of high school students, who with their gestures responded to questions posed by Mija Aleksic, a popular middle-aged comedian. Asked how they hoped to succeed in life, the kids started kicking soccer balls; and when asked what is fashionable and what do they like to wear, each boy grabbed a girl and lifted her up.<sup>11</sup> Journalists reported that the whole stadium burst in laughter. Laughter from 60,000 mouths is not a mocking laughter, or laughter as a defense mechanism. It is the laughter of self-enjoyment.

Mass running, mass digging, mass exercise: in a word, voluntary discipline.

The events of June 1968 at Belgrade University can be read as a gesture of revolt aimed precisely against this kind of society. Before the first speech was delivered at the School of Philosophy, where students barricaded themselves; before the first poster was hung on its façade; before the first manifesto was printed in the emergency issues of the student newspaper; and before the first letter was sent to the workers, already during the night of June 2 the students made the initial and decisive intervention in the total spectacle of socialist culture in Yugoslavia. That night and the following day, the clashes with the police made visible the bodies that were vulnerable and wounded; emaciated, unregimented bodies that don’t march and don’t exercise in unison. Not the marble bodies of model sportsmen and workers, but the pale bodies of neurotics and the disaffected, the bo-

<sup>11</sup> This is a simple word play: the Serbian word *nositi* means both to “wear” and to “carry.”





dies of the offended, the disregarded, and the marginalized. Even though they misreported the events, the newspapers described these “tired, unshaven faces” and published photographs of the bodies falling under the blows of police batons. These initial violent gestures opened, even for a brief moment, the possibility of scaling the depths of the spectacle called SFR Yugoslavia and its new anthropological order.

#### 4. Love for Fatherland through Gymnastics

It is surprising how little innovation there was in the practices of mass running and mass gymnastics. The strategies employed for the of regulation of crowds came from the arsenal of romantic nationalist movements that date back to the early nineteenth century. According to some eyewitness accounts, the first Tito's Relay (or Youth Relay) was directly inspired by the relay of the Olympic torch, specifically the relay run across Europe on the occasion of the Berlin Olympics in 1936. Historically, mass gymnastics preceded the modern Olympic movement. Its emergence is tied with German *Turnverein*, which Friedrich Ludwig Jahn established in 1811. Guided by the slogan “love for the fatherland through gymnastics,” the *Turnverein* movement promoted the unification of Germany, its emancipation, as it were, from the cultural domination of France, and for the purification of body and soul of young Germans. Already in 1817 Jahn had organized the first mass *Turnverein* festival: a three-day-long procession of nationalist speeches, the demonstration of skills in gymnastics, and the burning of non-German books.<sup>12</sup> Miroslav Tyrš and Jindřich Fügner modeled their Sokol movement on Jahn's *Turnverein*. In Sokol, established in Prague in 1862, national romanticism acquired somewhat different outlines: instead of unification, it promoted the liberation of Czechs from Hapsburg monarchy, and instead of German, it celebrated the spirit of pan-Slavism. Sokols became famous for their mass spectacles, dubbed *slets* (from Czech word *slet*, meaning gathering or flock of birds), the first of which was organized in Prague in 1882 and which gradually spread throughout parts of central Europe populated by Slavs, including the lands of the South Slavs. The Sokol idea was close

<sup>12</sup> C. E. Nolte, *The Sokol in Czech Countries: Training for a Nation*, London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002, p.11.



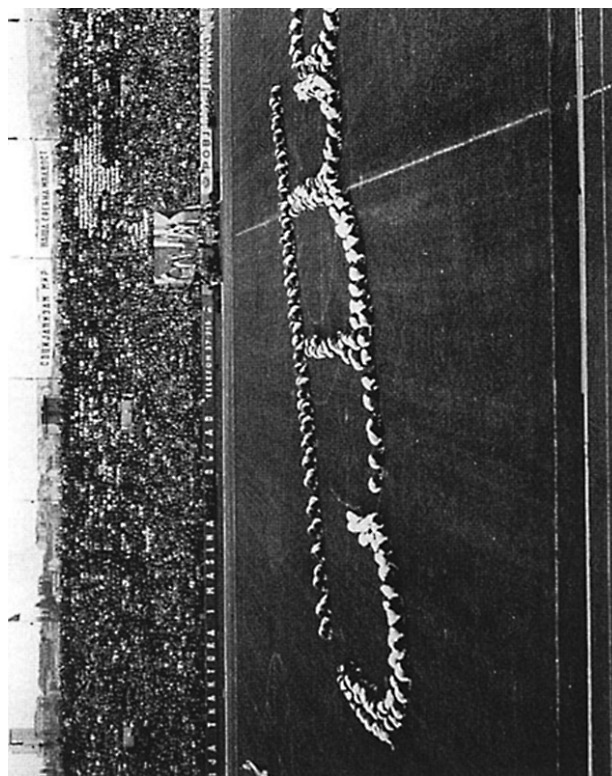


to the idea of Yugoslavism, both during the years that preceded the establishment of Yugoslavia (1918) and during the inter-war period. King Alexander used *slets* in an attempt to forge an integral Yugoslav nation that, as he hoped, would support his centralized state.

If, after WWII and the revolution, centralism and unitarism were considered among the main enemies of the Federative and Socialist Yugoslavia, how are we then to understand manifestations of “love for the fatherland through gymnastics” that took place every May 25? A brief explanation would be that, whereas the integral Yugoslavism of King Alexander was based on the idea of the ethnic coherence of the Yugoslav peoples, the socialist Yugoslavism of President Tito was based on the principle of class. Starting from the premises of the Marxist theory of state, Yugoslavism was seen as a Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the nation, that is, its simultaneous overcoming and preservation. Of course, state ideologues held that this state, perfect as it is, can’t escape the laws of dialectical materialism, according to which the state is the manifestation of class struggle, and as such will “wither away” together with the “withering away” of the class system.<sup>13</sup> In a word, if the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was an emergent state, or the state without a nation, then SFR Yugoslavia was a withering state, or the state in which nations were left without their sovereign states. Of course, the latter is completely foreign to the romantic cultural model that is centered on the nation and national culture. Where does that leave the Youth Day *slet*, that form of collective performance so deeply rooted in romanticism?D

Even though it adapts its general form and performance techniques from the pan-Slavic variant of romanticist gymnastics, the Youth Day is, in its cultural significance, much closer to an earlier model. We should keep in mind that mass performances didn’t begin with the national gymnastics of the romantics. Before Tyrš’s events, Prague’s Hradcani castle witnessed grand spec-

<sup>13</sup> For a range of in-depth discussions of the notion of Yugoslavism, see D. Djokić, *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea 1918-1992*, London: Hurst and Company, 2003.



D Youth Day Celebration, Belgrade, 1959: Performing Tito's Signature

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tacles of a completely different kind. I am referring, of course, to baroque spectacles that first peaked in the Spain of the Golden Age and then spread throughout Europe. Unlike romanticist mass gatherings, baroque festivals were not spectacles of “voluntary discipline” but first and foremost the demonstration of power of certain royal houses.<sup>14</sup> So, for example, in May of 1664 Louis XIV gave a three-day-long festival on the theme of Ariosto’s *Orlando* in honor of his mother Anne of Austria. During this time, there were banquets, contests, and ballet dances. The central spectacle featured an artificial lake built specially for the occasion, in which floated mechanical whales and other sea beasts. The examples of this kind of spectacle are legion. Of course, there are obvious differences between baroque festivals and the annual Youth Day stadium spectacle. I want to make clear that socialist culture is not a simple mixture of the baroque and romanticism. Instead, my point is that it achieves baroque effects by the means of the techniques devised by romanticism.

Both socialist and baroque states harbor a deep conservatism that is tied to a vigorous insistence on progress and innovation. This antinomy generates a number of period- and culture-specific contradictions evident in the visual cultures of baroque and socialism. In both of them, however, this tension between conservatism of purpose and newness of form is reconciled through allegory. It is precisely the allegorical form that makes possible the textualization of a visual spectacle. Bodies merge into images, and images convey meanings. It is a massive coded message that passes through several channels: from the “youth” to the president, who, being the personification of the state, amplifies this message and passes it on to the entire population. Benjamin argues that allegory is “not convention of expression, but expression of convention. At the same time expression of authority, which is secret in accordance with the dignity of its origin, but public in accordance with the extent of its validity”.<sup>15</sup> In this way, baroque culture becomes a text oversaturated with meaning. Here, nothing escapes interpretation. This endless deciphering involves not only texts and symbols, but also all public performances, only to finally engulf even private behavior. Such textual turmoil forecloses any possibility of carving out a position outside of ideological discourse.

<sup>14</sup> See F. A. Toufar, *Sokol: The Czechoslovak National Gymnastic Organization*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1941.

<sup>15</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London: Verso, 1988, p.175.





The bodies in revolt that briefly erupted into the Yugoslav public sphere on that warm June evening in 1968 were the first to subvert the symbolic order in which the proper ideological key guarantees that everything can be represented by everything else. In that poignant moment, the Yugoslavian public met face-to-face with an illegible public body, with a body that refused to be inscribed into the ongoing ideological spectacle. It is the body that is a non-symbol, a non-sign, and its mere appearance caused panic and disbelief. The chronology of the student protest reveals the process of gradual absorption and semiotization of these unreadable bodies. First, on June 2 and 3, there were two clashes between students and riot police in which these bodies were mowed down through acts of excessive public violence without precedent in the history of socialist Yugoslavia. Then came the five-day period during which the students barricaded themselves into university buildings: in effect, it was their withdrawal and concealment from the public eye. On June 9, the seventh day of the strike, Tito addressed the nation in a televised speech in which he admitted that the state and party leadership had made mistakes, and asked students for their help in making necessary corrections. Students read Tito's speech as their victory, even though not one of their demands were met. The strike ended the same evening. In some places, jubilant students danced the "Kozaracko kolo," a traditional dance of the communist guerrilla, which clearly indicated the reintegration of bodies in revolt back into discursive economy of the state. Soon after his televised address to the nation, Tito spoke at the Sixth Congress of Trade Unions in Belgrade. Vigilant reporters noted that he was interrupted by applause no less than thirty-six times.<sup>16</sup> These were not Stalinist "iron clapping" but rather spontaneous ovations and expressions of approval. Sociologists compare this wordless collective performance with exercises of pure coordination. In post-'68 Yugoslavia, applause was the most widespread form of mass performance. And it was the most demanding, since it was executed with one hand only.

In the same way in which the skin on students' bodies burst open under the blows of police batons, the ideological façade of Yugoslavia cracked under the blow of student revolt. In an attempt to express the way in

<sup>16</sup> *NIN* (Nedeljne informative novine), no. 912, June 30, 1968, p.3.



which society reacts to the new, Deleuze and Guattari reached for D. H. Lawrence's metaphor of the umbrella with which the society covers itself, and on which it pictures its firmament with the starry skies and written laws. Then, writes Lawrence, along comes a poet and makes a cut in the firmament, so that for a brief moment free and shining chaos bursts through this crack. Then, the society quickly mends the opening. If the cut is made by the new, therefore that which is incomprehensible and unfathomable, then it is mended by that which is known, repeatable, and understandable. The closure is sealed not only by prohibitions but just as much by permissiveness.<sup>17</sup>

#### 5. Rhythm 10

If, politically, the 1968 student uprising at Belgrade University represented an attempt at emancipation from the ruling ideology, then aesthetically it represented an attempt at emancipation from allegory.

Both baroque and socialist festivals are marked by a disappearance of the audience. From cheering the relay runners to chanting "happy birthday" in the stadium to laughing and clapping, the audience of the Youth Day is an integral part of the spectacle. The disappearance of the audience means the eradication of distance that leads to cessation of observation and free judgment, and, therefore, of the critical attitude. If this total integration of spectators into spectacle can be said to represent the pinnacle of allegorization, then de-allegorization reinstates distance, relationality, and, ultimately, subjectivity. If in allegorical spectacle bodies are invested in a rich ideological text made of images, symbols, and even letters, then de-allegorization is the process of the de-semiotization of the body. The body no longer symbolizes anything but itself, its own materiality and impermanence. If, as Benjamin argues, the "allegorical body wants only to last, and with its entire organism turns towards the eternal," then de-allegorization turns towards the instantaneous, the perishable, and the ephemeral. Further, if allegory strives to achieve an integrated work of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, then de-allegorization strives for fragmentation. On the one hand, an allegorist

<sup>17</sup> Prelom Collective, a Belgrade-based group of art historians and curators, has recently done some very important work on this subject. For more information on Prelom Collective, see <http://www.prelomkolektiv.org>.

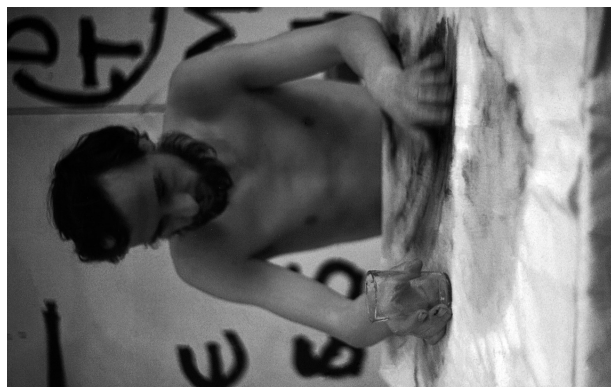




occupies the privileged authorial position that grants him the power to assign meanings to things: “in his *hands*,” writes Benjamin, “the object becomes something different; through it he speaks of something different and for him it becomes a key to the realm of hidden knowledge”.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, a de-allegorist occupies the position that is not privileged, the position of explicitness and vulnerability. If an allegorist can be said to be the master of *ars vivendi* or a sovereign manipulator, then a de-allegorist is a lowly emancipator.

The works of Belgrade performance artists from the early '70s are the sole legitimate continuation of the aesthetic intervention of June 2 and 3, 1968. As I mentioned, by the following year, Marina Abramović, then a young art student, composed (but didn't perform) the piece *Come to Wash with Me*, in which she planned to ask audience members to undress and remain in the gallery space while she washed, dried, and ironed their clothes. In subsequent years, performance artists engaged in dismantling, almost point by point, the allegories that Yugoslav culture oozed incessantly. For instance, in Era Milivojević's performance piece *Taping Up the Artist* [*Oblepljivanje umetnika lepljivom trakom*, 1971], the immobilized female body is directly opposed to the rhythmically moving bodies in *slet* mass performances. <sup>E</sup> In another instance, athletic bodies that exercise in the stadium are contrasted by the ascetic body of Raša Todosijević, who in his performance piece *Drinking Water* [*Pijenje vode*, 1974] gulps water until he can no longer take it and throws up. <sup>F</sup> This investigation of the limits of physical endurance is a significant aspect of a series of performances that Marina Abramović created in the early stage of her career. In the majority of these works the artist brings her physical existence into question. For instance, in *Rhythm 5* [*Ritam 5*, 1974] and *Rhythm 2* [*Ritam 2*, 1974], the artist's body is engaged in actions that threaten to annihilate it. There is one performance from this series that concerns not the entire body, but one of its constituent parts, specifically the hand, and the rep-

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p.184, italics added.



<sup>E</sup> Era Milivojević (with Marina Abramović), *Taping Up the Artist*, Student Cultural Center, Belgrade, 1971  
<sup>F</sup> Raša Todosijević: *Drinking Water*, Student Cultural Center, Belgrade, 1974

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G Youth Day Celebration, Belgrade, 1980  
H Youth Day Celebration, Belgrade, 1962

ertory of gestures that this bodily organ can perform. *Rhythm 10* [*Ritam 10*, 1973] engages in a very specific way the expressive possibilities created by June 1968.<sup>G/H</sup>

In this performance, conceived in Belgrade and first performed at Gallery Richard Demarco in Edinburgh, Abramović kneels on the gallery floor and places in front of her a cassette tape recorder and ten knives of different shapes and sizes. She turns on the recorder. Then she takes a knife into her right hand and places her left hand with outstretched fingers on the gallery floor. She stabs the knife between the thumb and the pointing finger, then, with increasing speed, between the pointing finger and the middle finger, and so on until she stabs herself. With each cut she picks up a new knife and repeats the same series of actions until she cuts herself again. After she has gone through the entire collection of knives, she turns off the recorder, rewinds the tape, and listens attentively to the sound recording of the performance that just took place. Then she repeats the performance with the same knives, trying to achieve the same rhythm and even to repeat the same cuts. In *Rhythm 10* Abramović transplants into an art gallery the test of courage, speed, self-control, precision, and masculinity that is well-known to Balkan shepherds, pupils, and soldiers. This solo performance of self-injury is diametrically opposed to the mass performance of applause. Manipulation of the knife turns into a drama of emancipation—of one hand by another. It takes place not through the initial cutting, but through its repetition. Not through the mending of the cut, but through its re-opening.

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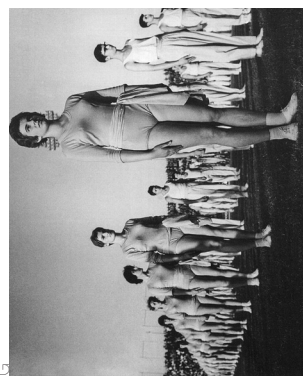
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Ana Janevski is curator at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, where she has organized several exhibitions, most notably “As Soon as I Open My Eyes I See a Film – Experiments in Yugoslav Art in the ’60s and ’70s” (2008). In addition to her work in Warsaw, Janevski has curated exhibitions in Croatia and is a frequent contributor to international publications such as *Flash Art* and *Domus*.

# Art and its Institutional Framework in Croatia after '68





Sanja Iveković, *Triangle*, Zagreb, 1979









Tomislav Gotovac, *Happ Our Happening*, Zagreb, 1967  
photo by Dr. Mihovil Pansini



Tomislav Gotovac, *Streaking* (action, running naked in the city center),  
Belgrade, 1971, photo by Branko Belan

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**The** starting point for this essay was the research for the exhibition “As Soon as I Open my Eyes I See a Film—Experiments in Yugoslav Art in the ’60s and ’70s”, held at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw in 2008.<sup>1</sup> Approaches to the artistic production of this period were based on the thesis that subversive art and radical intellectualism grew out of engagement in small-scale institutional settings, for example the film clubs in Belgrade, Split, and Zagreb, in the 1960s, followed later by student cultural centers in Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Novi Sad. I will try to relate those institutional frameworks to specific examples of artworks, as well as to key exhibition formats during this period, and chart the shifts from the early ’60s to the post-1968 moment, and through the ’70s to the so called New Art Practice.

New Art Practice is the umbrella term for the various critical and radical forms of “new art” that appeared in Yugoslavia after 1968.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary art institutions were established in the country’s major cities from the 1950s onwards as part of a socialist program to create a new modern society. These institutions, along with individual practices and self-organized artistic initiatives, were active partners in promoting changes in the fields of culture and art. This was particularly true during the early phase of New Art Practice, which developed predominantly around galleries of Student Cultural Centres. When speaking about the creation of new institutional forms in former Yugoslavia, touching upon broader political contexts is unavoidable. Actually, the Tito’s model for Yugoslavian socialism, after the break with Stalin in 1948, tried to take advantage of both dominant systems—it promoted both the non-alignment foreign policy favored by the United States and a new form of socialist economy in the self-management system. These complex political changes helped open the country to Western cultural influence and introduced a more general cultural freedom, assuming a modernist paradigm of abstract art as an official art state.

The activities, and even the founding, of the Student Culture Centres recall the student protests of 1968. Those protests began spontaneously as a rebellion against the use of violence by the police during the “New Belgrade ’68” concert. But were not actually directed against the existing

<sup>1</sup> “As Soon as I Open my Eyes I See a Film—Experiments in Yugoslav Art in the ’60s and ’70s”, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, April-June 2008, curator: Ana Janevski, collaboration: Tomasz Fudala.

<sup>2</sup> The title was used for the first time by Marijan Susovski in the preface of the catalogue accompanying the exhibition “The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia 1966-1978”, organized by the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb in 1978.



system, but rather demanded its more consistent implementation. The slogan “Down with the Red Bourgeoisie,” voiced during the June protest of Belgrade University—which was later joined by students in Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Sarajevo—exemplified a more general dissatisfaction with the socio-economic situation and the lack of prospects for young people. The social side effects of growing capitalism under the guise of socialist revolution, as a result of Yugoslav economic reform in 1965, has already been underscored by the Yugoslav films of the so called Black Wave movement, which were censored and bunkered in late '60s and early '70s. It's interesting to note how the student demand for deepening socialist self-management deprived the protests of their power of opposition, emptied out any alternative visions of the future, and enabled Tito to adopt a paternal and patronizing tone in his speeches addressing students through state television. He supported their demands and promised that all their requests will be fulfilled. At any rate, the students' protests represent the first massive act of protest and dissatisfaction, and managed to create a space for freedom of speech; it indicated the *potential* of public association.

At that point, what was the relation between different forms of new critical artistic practices and the formation of new institutions and processes of institutionalisation? The New Art Practice marked the beginning of new forms of art, from the redefinition of exhibition strategies to interventions in public spaces, from the introduction of video to the use of artists' own bodies—all pointed to the abrogation of the distinction between art and life. Such activities emerged and developed quite independently of each other, though they soon merged along a common artistic mentality based on the opposition to traditional and institutionalized forms of art and its presentation.

The aforementioned gallery at the Student Centre in Zagreb played an important role as a magnet for a new generation of artists experimenting in the social sphere, and became an important platform for cooperation among artists in the cities of the former Yugoslavia. The student protest in Zagreb was less incisive than the one in Belgrade, characterized as it was by two opposing forces, a progressive one assembled around the philosophy group





Praxis and a more conservative-nationalist one. The gallery was run by Želimir Košćević, one of the former Yugoslavia's first curators to work outside the museum, who joined artists in questioning the traditional categories and functions of art in gallery spaces. In what follows I will survey the activities of the gallery in order to explain whether its exhibitions influenced the framework of art institutions and how they were able to influence the wider culture.

The key exhibition that defined the new orientation of the gallery featured the Ljubljana conceptual group OHO, whose ambient interventions, with an element that functioned like a Happening, completely transformed the gallery space. OHO's esoteric and conceptual artistic strategies contributed to the paradigmatic shifts in exhibition formats. The next exhibition at the Zagreb student center, "Women and Men" [*Izložba žena i muškaraca*], was presented in 1969 and featured no actual art; the visitors were themselves the subject of the exhibition.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition could be understood as a sign of the dematerialisation of the art object, as a social provocation or experiment, as well as the introduction of a new, innovative curatorial practice.<sup>4</sup>

That same year the gallery announced an open competition for artists working in new materials, offering the possibility to engage with not only the gallery's interior but also the open space in front of it. Among the artists who responded were those who went on to become leading figures in the Croatian art scene, including Sanja Iveković, Dalibor Martinis, and Braco Dimitrijević. Artists created "environments" in the gallery space with the use of poor materials. The step of actually abandoning the exhibition space, or at least its institutional context, was taken only two years later, during a project titled "Suggestion" [*Sugestije*]. It addressed the notion of "exploring the city as a space for plastic happening in order to reach a wider social dimension."<sup>5</sup> This was the setting for the first big portraits in Braco Dimitrijević's celebrated *Casual Passerby* [*Slučajni Prolaznik*] series.

"Suggestion" was only the beginning of a wave of group exhibitions that took place in urban settings. In the same year, 1971, the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb organised the exhibition "Possibilities for 1971" [*Mogućnosti za 1971*], which involved the artists who had exhibited at the

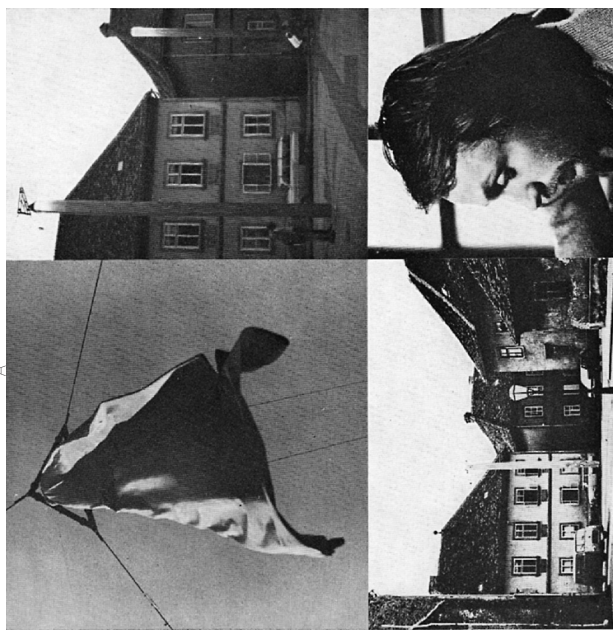
<sup>3</sup> The catalogue declares that at this exhibition "You are the work: you are the figuration... Live here intimately with your ideas, even if you don't have any. Feel according to your own feeling of the social system." Novine Galerije SC, n.8, 1969–1970, reprinted in Želimir Košćević, *Galerija SC*, 1975, Zagreb.

<sup>4</sup> At the Paris Biennale of Youth in 1971, Košćević exhibited unpacked boxes with works under the title *Postal Delivery*.

<sup>5</sup> *Suggestion* was part of the traditional Zagreb Salon, an exhibition that was conceived to give an overview of recent Croatian art.



- A "Possibilities for 1971", Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 1971  
B "Possibilities for 1971", Goran Trbuljak, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 1971



Student Centre along with Goran Trbuljak.<sup>6</sup> A/B According to the catalogue's introduction, the artists in "Possibilities" "turned to immediate reality and the needs of everyday life, producing works that ought to be the property of all citizens and the socialist society."<sup>7</sup> Also that year, nearly the same group of artists created an open-air exhibition in a public park in the city of Karlovac entitled "Gulliver in the Land of Miracles" [*Guliwer u Zemlji Čudesā*].

Those urban interventions were promoted under the idea of the "democratisation" and "socialisation" of art. Bojana Pejić proposes two ways to interpret Sanja Iveković's early public work. Firstly the modernist experience, abstract art in particular, was not socialised enough and as a second point, "young artists who opted for conceptual approach introduces a new social role for the socialist artist, since their interventions in urban environments did not up end in political monuments (at the time resorting exclusively to abstract shapes), or in 'non political' female nudes, which populated Yugoslav modern socialist cities."<sup>8</sup> Thus, exhibiting in public and in alternative spaces did not only represent a rebuke to the gallery system. It was also one outcome of the artists' desire to communicate directly with their surroundings, to be more responsive to the world.

How should we define artists' critical positions in Yugoslavia and especially in Croatia at that time? According to one reading, "The critical work of the artists in the region in former Yugoslavia during this period was not directly focused on the system of museums and galleries. Rather, it was directed at the political and ideological context, creating a more autonomous system of production and distribution of art."<sup>9</sup> Yet artistic criticality was also

<sup>6</sup> The complete list of artists is the following: Boris Bućan, Slobodan Braco Dimitrijević, Sanja Iveković, Jagoda Kaloper, Dalibor Martinis, Davor Tomičić, Goran Trbuljak, Gorki Žuvela.

<sup>7</sup> Davor Matičević, *Mogućnosti za 1971*, Gallery of Contemporary Art Zagreb, 1971

<sup>8</sup> Bojana Pejić, "Public Cuts" in *Sanja Iveković: Selected Works*, Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2008 ↗



9 Ana Dević, *To criticize, charge for service rendered, and be thanked*, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0208/devic/en>.

aimed at the structures and functions of the art system and the modernist paradigm, the latter of which was strongly characteristic of official state art. These figures were not against the communist ideal itself. Or, as Sanja Iveković has suggested, “Artists didn’t position themselves as dissidents. Their critique wasn’t a ‘struggle against dark communist totalitarianism’; they were more inclined to see their practice as the critique of a bureaucratic government that wanted to maintain the status quo at all costs. One can rightfully say that those who were active in the counter-cultural scene at the time took the socialist project much more seriously than the cynical governing political elite.”<sup>10</sup> One could also draw a parallel between the aforementioned student protest and the artistic orientation described by Iveković. Anyhow, the artists of the time were among the first in the communist bloc to examine their own involvement in the surrounding reality and they were the first to promote the idea of an alternative modernization, one that differed from that of socialist authorities, through post-conceptual and neo-avant-garde strategies.

Braco Dimitrijević and Goran Trbuljak redefined the artistic context by asking radical questions about the autonomy of the system of museums and galleries and about the mechanisms by which something is accepted as art. They tested the accidental as a key characteristic of artwork, organizing exhibitions in streets and hallways. For instance, in April 1971, Nena and Braco Dimitrijević organised in a hallway one of the first international exhibitions of conceptual art, titled “At the Moment”.<sup>11</sup> C/D/E At about the same time, in the Student Cultural Centre in Zagreb, Trbuljak presented a poster on which was written *I do not want to show anything new and original*.<sup>12</sup> In the same spirit, he opted

<sup>10</sup> Sanja Iveković in conversation with Antonia Majača, published in the *Collection Book*, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna, 2008. ↗



C/D/E Braco Dimitrijević, *Painting by Krešimir Klika/Slika Krešimira Klika*, 1969

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F Goran Trbuljak, *I do not want to show anything new and original*, 1971

G *Red Peristil*, intervention in public space, Split, 1968

H/I/J Sanja Iveković, *Triangle*, Zagreb, 1979

<sup>11</sup> The exhibition was open for three hours and included works by Giovanni Anselmo, Joseph Beuys, Daniel Buren, Barry Flanagan, Sol Lewitt, and others.

for the most democratic way to find determine whether he was an artist, organizing a *Referendum* in 1972 and asking passers-by to decide the issue. Yet one of the most radical examples of urban artistic intervention is the action *Red Peristyl* [*Crveni peristil*]. <sup>G</sup> In January 1968 a group of anonymous artists painted the main square in the center of Split bright red. The action has become an urban legend, not only in the city but in Croatian art history as well. In fact, the group took the action's name as its own. *Red Peristyl* problematized the issues of anonymity and authorship and took place years before urban interventions were accepted institutionally.

In Yugoslavia in early '70s, few artistic practices were political in the strict sense of supporting the specific goals of social activism. Nevertheless, critical investigations of actual socio-political phenomena and the social atmosphere are present in the works of some artists. Sanja Iveković introduced the female subject in the socialist context, and confronted the ideological apparatus in the context of public space. The key example is her *Triangle* [*Trokut*] performance.<sup>H/I/J/K</sup> In 1979, the artist, during one of President Tito's official visits to Zagreb, simulated masturbation on her balcony as the presidential motorcade moved down the street below. After eighteen minutes a policeman from the official security apparatus interrupted the performance. As an early feminist, the artist tests and shifts the borders between the personal and the public, the erotic and the ideological. Tomislav Gotovac created the first happening in Yugoslavia, *Happ Our Happening* [*Hap naš Happening*], in Zagreb in 1967.<sup>L</sup> He was also the country's first streaker, running naked through Belgrade in 1971.<sup>M</sup> In his radical performances and provocative artistic expressions he tested the boundaries of public space within the socialist state. Many of his actions consisted of simple but charged activities, such as begging, cleaning city spaces, cutting people's hair in public, and shaving—all of which confronted the urban





environment and the socialist-petit-bourgeois moral system with his corporeal figure. By contrast, Mladen Stilinović deciphered ideological structures and revealed the totalitarianism of real existing socialism by assuming and recoding the matrix of its language and signifiers.

New Art Practice was really “new” in that it posed, for the first time, radical questions about the nature and the function of art itself. “The paradox,” noted Iveković, “is that we artists had the serious intentions of ‘democratizing art,’ but the artistic language that we were using was so radical that our audience was really limited.”<sup>12</sup> The authorities regarded the contemporary art scene as marginal in relation to other cultural forms such as film, literature, or public memorial sculpture, which were recognized as legitimate means of artistic expression. This marginal position resulted in art’s relative autonomy, in extended fields of possibilities. The Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb became an active centre and whenever events were presented in alternative spaces to avoid institutional structures, this major art institution contributed by documenting the events. It played an active role in forming the creative contexts for artistic production. Almost all of the artists working in this context in the ’70s had a solo show at the Gallery. Moreover, it contributed to the very early historicization of the artistic practices of that period with two extensive survey exhibitions and catalogues.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the opposition between official and unofficial artistic systems was not as sharply polarized in Socialist Yugoslavia as it was in other Eastern bloc countries. Yet it’s worth remembering that the activities of the so called New Art Practice differed from the institutional critique then gaining traction in the West.<sup>14</sup> There is no simple answer to the question of whether the ruling apparatus merely tolerated these sites of subversion or accepted

<sup>12</sup> Sanja Iveković in conversation with Antonia Majača, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> The first exhibition was “The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia 1966–1978”, in 1978, and the second was *Innovation in Croatian Art*, 1981.

<sup>14</sup> The “first wave” of practice of institutional critique, by such as ↗



K Sanja Iveković, *Triangle*, Zagreb, 1979

L Tomislav Gotovac, *Streaking* (action, running naked in the city center), Belgrade, 1971

M Tomislav Gotovac, *Happ our happening*, Zagreb, 1967

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artists as Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, and Michael Asher, systematically researched how the system of galleries and museum functions, disclaiming its neutrality and emphasizing the presence of hidden economic and political contexts.

them as zones of freedom. The institutionalized margins were in charge of alternative youth culture and formed a platform for critical thinking, but they can also be seen as a kind of ghetto. What is clear is that the conceptual space of former Yugoslavia produced an atmosphere in which interactions between the various art centers proved to be productive, something which cannot be encapsulated within a reductively nationalist approach.

Many artworks and exhibitions of this period haven't been mentioned in the paper. But those we have mentioned indicate how inter-disciplinary loci of discussion and production created space to develop specific artistic elaborations of problems and new artistic patterns of thought, as well as changes in the institutional framework for producing and disseminating art and culture.

Before concluding, it is important to point out that the art history of this period has been marginalized, particularly during the '90s. Critical artistic practices are still not part of the official narratives of local art history. Only recently have efforts to institutionally evaluate and recognize the artistic practices of the '60s and '70s garnered attention. Now we are in the midst of a second step, involving more in-depth research, undertaken mainly by a younger generation of independent curators throughout the region. It's not only about solving the acute question of the canonization of Eastern European art into a "universal system" of Western art, but also about re-writing one's own history and proposing new and original perspectives and insights.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> A few examples: Prelom collective from Belgrade has researched the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade. The research resulted in a publication and exhibition under the title *SKC and Political and Artistic Practices*, offering a more political reading of the Centre. The WHW collective from Zagreb launched a research project *History of Invisible Exhibitions* that deals with lesser-known exhibition practices in Eastern Europe. Curators from Zagreb, Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača, are preparing new research about the Student Centre in Zagreb.



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# [Let me...]

Vit Havránek

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Vit Havránek is an art historian and theorist, curator, and director of the Transit Display Gallery in Prague. He has worked as a curator at the National Gallery Prague and the Municipal Gallery Prague, and is the co-founder of the commissioning agency Pas. He was the co-curator of “Monument to Transformation” (2008) and co-author of *Jiří Kovanda* (2006). He lectures on contemporary art at the Academy of Applied Arts in Prague, and is one of the co-curators of Manifesta 8 (2010).





LET ME

SHARE WITH YOU

SOME OBSERVATIONS,  
IDEAS, imaginative  
constructs

SILENTLY

BECAUSE I THINK THERE IS A DIRECT RELATION  
BETWEEN SPEECH

MY SPEECH IN THIS CASE

AND

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THE DYNAMICS AND THE FORM OF YOUR  
INVOLVEMENT AND INTEREST,  
THE WAY YOU THINK AND REACT

A SILENT PRESENTATION CREATES A PERSONAL SPACE  
FOR THE IMAGINATION  
OR MAYBE  
IF YOU TRIED FOR JUST A MOMENT TO RELAX,  
WHICH IS FINE TOO.  
AND  
AFTER MY PRESENTATION WE WILL DISCUSS WHAT  
PASSED THROUGH YOUR HEADS DURING MY  
PRESENTATION,  
THERE WILL BE TIME FOR IT, AT LEAST SOME  
10 MINUTES

THE TOPIC I WAS ASKED TO TALK ABOUT WAS CERTAIN  
PERFORMANCES, IN VISUAL ART, THAT COULD BE  
CALLED „PARTICIPATORY“  
AND  
I FELT IT MIGHT BE INTERESTING TO SHARE WITH YOU  
A  
HYPOTHESIS ABOUT *THE PRAGUE SPRING OF 1968*  
THAT ARISES FROM MY RECENT READINGS

I WILL START WITH SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE  
PRAGUE SPRING OF 1968  
I WAS BORN IN 1971, TOO LATE TO EXPERIENCE THE  
EVENTS DIRECTLY. MY VERY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE  
FIRST CAME OUT OF THE STORIES AND EVALUATIONS  
TOLD BY MY PARENTS, MY UNCLES AND THEIR  
FRIENDS

AND

I ONLY HEARD THESE STORIES SOME 15 YEARS AFTER  
THE FACT, DURING THE PERIOD OF “NORMALISATION”  
IN THE EIGHTIES  
AT THAT MOMENT THE GENERAL EXPERIENCE OF THE  
PRAGUE SPRING FOR THE GENERATION OF 1968 WAS A  
DEEP TRAUMA OF DISAPPOINTMENT THAT LED TO  
MISTRUST OF ANY KIND OF SOCIALLY SHARED IDEALS,  
AND TO THE FEAR OF PUBLIC EXPRESSION OF  
THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS



FROM 1989 UNTIL NOW THIS TRAUMA OF  
DISAPPOINTMENT HAS PERSISTED  
AND SIMPLY FITS WELL WITH A NEOLIBERAL BELIEF  
THAT

"EVERYBODY HAS TO TAKE CARE OF HIM/HERSELF"

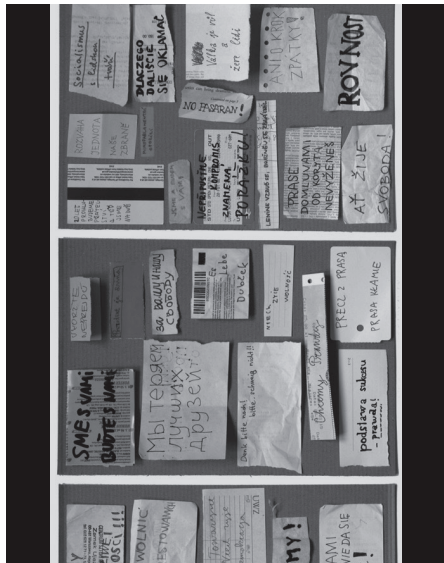
AND

THAT ANY KIND OF SOCIAL POLITICS IS ONLY A SOCIAL  
ENGINEERING



SO PERSONALLY I WOULD LIKE TO GET SOME DISTANCE FROM THIS DEEP  
TRAUMA OF DISAPPOINTMENT THAT PSYCHOANALYSTS COULD COMPARE  
WITH ANXIETY ABOUT WHETHER THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX  
EXISTS – KNOWING ABOUT IT DOESN'T SAVE ANYBODY FROM ITS  
INFLUENCE BUT ONE CAN AT LEAST TREAT ITS MOTIVATIONS MORE  
CLEARLY

I BEGAN TO READ THE BOOKS AND ARTICLES FROM 1967, 1968 AND  
ABOUT "THE PRAGUE SPRING"



IT SEEMS TODAY THAT THE PRAGUE SPRING (IT WAS PRECISELY A  
SPRING) WAS A MOVEMENT LED BY THE REFORMISTS IN THE  
COMMUNIST PARTY WHO WERE APPLYING AND RADICALIZING  
A REFORMIST MOVEMENT THAT STARTED IN 1956 IN THE SOVIET UNION  
BY NIKITTA KRUSHCHEV

THEY OFFERED EVEN MORE RADICAL STATEMENTS THAT BROUGHT IN TO  
CONSIDERATION THE RADICAL REFORM OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM – THE  
DESIRE FOR COMPETITION BETWEEN MORE THAN ONE POLITICAL  
PARTY (COMMUNIST PARTY) CAME FROM PROMINENT INTELLECTUALS  
AND

TOOK PLACE  
DURING OFFICIAL MEETINGS SUCH AS THE 4TH CONGRESS OF THE  
CZECH WRITERS IN 1967



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THIS POSSIBILITY OF DISCUSSING THE REFORM OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM  
DIDN'T MEAN THAT POLITICAL LEADERS (SUCH AS DUBČEK)  
AGREED WITH THE IDEA OF REFORM, BUT IT CREATED  
FOR A SHORT TIME  
FOR 6 TO 10 MONTHS

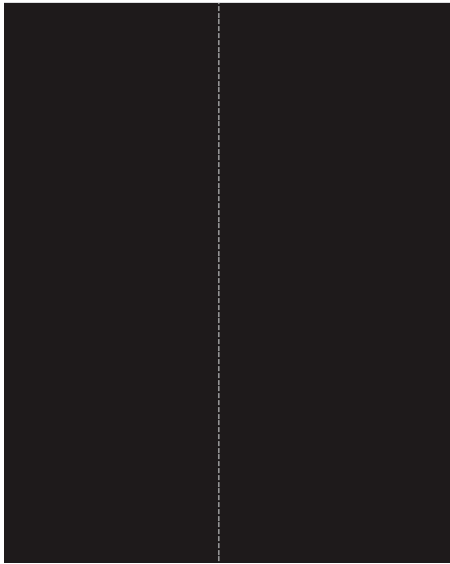
A STRONG AND BROADLY SHARED FEELING OF 'TRUST IN  
REFORMIST POLITICIANS AND THEIR PROGRAM OF "SOCIALISM WITH  
A HUMAN FACE" OR IN MORE RADICAL STATEMENTS OF OPEN POLITICAL  
COMPETITION AND ECONOMIC REFORM.

NONETHELESS MY HYPOTHESIS IS FOLLOW'S: WHILE COMPARING 1968  
IN FRANCE, THE UNITED STATES OR GERMANY WITH  
THE PRAGUE SPRING OF 1968  
WE HAVE TO CONSIDER THE FACT THAT THE PROGRAM  
- THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC AGENDA -  
OF THE PRAGUE SPRING DERIVED FROM AND WAS DRIVEN  
FROM

UP to DOWN  
while in France for example  
IT CAME from the BOTTOM UP



THUS MY CONCLUSION MAY BE TO COMPARE IN THE  
FUTURE THE DIALECTIC OF TRUST IN SOMEONE ELSE  
(THAT DOESN'T HAVE TO FAIL) WITH THE DYNAMICS  
OF THE PROTEST





VLADIMÍR BOUDNÍK  
WAS A PIONEER OF PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCES.

imagine

A man is wearing a long coat and a hat. He draws on the public walls different fantastic images that are based on the forms of natural spots and patches on those same walls. He invites passers-by to join him in drawing.

Vladimír Boudník, actions in the streets of Prague, 1951-1956.

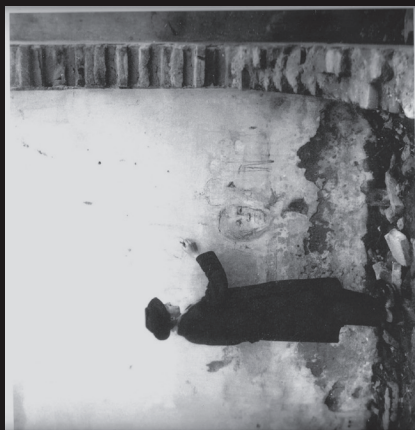
ALEX MLYNÁRČÍK,  
SELECTED PERMANENT MANIFESTATIONS

Mlynářčik has since 1966 introduced protocols for involving the public to participate in artmaking. Since the early '60s he has been fascinated by manifestations of the public imaginary, such as graffiti.

He is an artist who squatted in public toilets. He hung a golden visitors' book for comments and opinions next to seven mirrors bearing the inscriptions

"Homages to St. Anton, Hieronymus Bosch, Gabriel Chevallier, Godot, Michelangelo, Pistoletto, Stano Filko and CO (NH2)2" (The last is the chemical formula of urine). Mlynářčik realized this work on the occasion of the AICA Conference in Prague and Bratislava in 1966.

Alex Mlynářčik, *Permanent Manifestation II, Honours*, 1966.



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### Imagine

A Festival of Snow. Visitors were invited to interpret (i.e. to re-enact or re-create) any already existing artwork in the snow. Among the participants were practicing artists, but anybody *could* participate.

Alex Mlynářčik, Selected Performances *Festival of Snow*, 1970.

Below is the first realization of the *Manifesto of Interpretation* (written by Mlynářčik and Miloš Urbásek), which, among other things, stated:

Interpretation in the visual arts is a new creative dimension. It opens a possibility to restage so called creative gestures by the new realization.

The intensity and quality of the Interpretation reaches new dimensions in time and space.  
The intensity of a new work multiplies the quality of the initial one.  
An Interpreter is the opposite of an epigone.  
The Author – Interpreter (whether a single person or group of people, whether invited or unasked) gives form to the original work.  
His approach depends on different phenomena: from the selection of an artwork to his understanding of it – all is up to his own creative potentiality.  
The form of the interpretation in the field of the visual art can be placed next to the interpretation of music or acting or can be compared with the realization of an architectural design



### Imagine

Mlynářčik and Robert Cyprič decided to make an homage to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nouveau Réalisme in Paris. They went to the municipal cleaning society and asked to be employed for one night. On the night of October 27, 1970 they cleaned the streets of Bratislava.



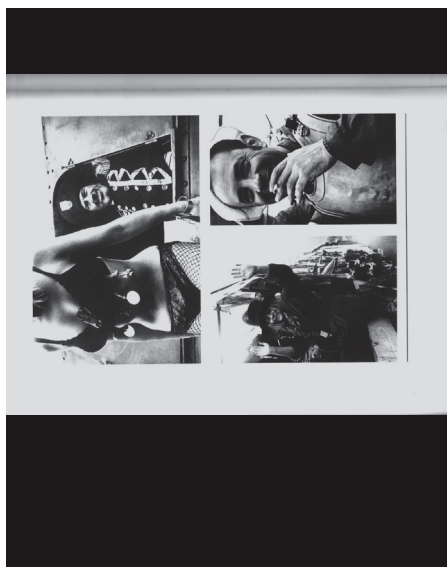
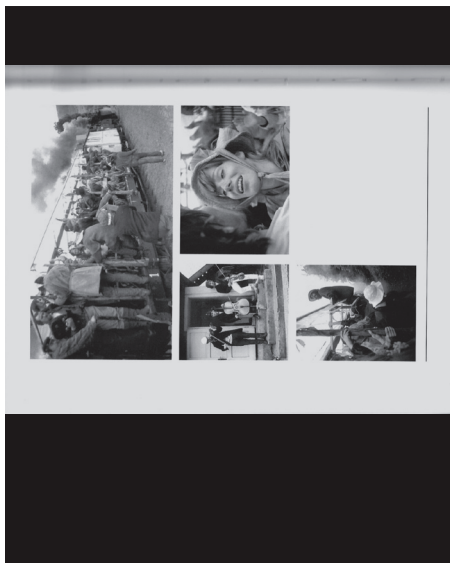
## Imagine

"An action-celebration, on a type of train used for conveying wood called *Gondulák*, which was about to be withdrawn from service. Among the native artists were M. Adamčiak, R. Cyprich, M. Dobeš, V. Jakubík, V. Kordoš, M. Mudroch, D. Tóth, J. Želibská, and M. Urbásek. There Were also foreign artists such as Erik Dietmann, Antoni Miralda, Hideschi Nagasawa, Lev Nusberg, Dorothea Selz, and Christian Tobas, in addition to Mlynárečik's colleagues and friends, some Bratislava-based artists, a few locals, a railway band, and others. The train ride through the Orava countryside on a locomotive that had been 'kinetically adjusted' by M. Dobeš brought many surprises to the participants. A. Miralda and D. Selz prepared the menu in the pink restaurant coach, R. Cyprich placed baskets with carrier pigeons in the 'postal wagon.'

At the stations, which were named after the artists, the participants encountered team projects or interpretations of the works of native or foreign artists. The contributions were understood as an integrated installation with various action elements. *The Day of Joy* offered a wide range of experiences; the chance for active perception of an artwork in a natural environment; the consumption of food and drink; folk dancing; and, at its close, L. Nusberg's fireworks display. In connection with this event Mlynárečik published 'Memorandum v mene totality umenia a života' (Memorandum in the Name of the Totality of Art and Life), which was based on the ideas of the LEF movement – the vision of collective utopia in Russia in the 20s."

Katarína Rusnáková, *Slovak Art 1949–1999*.

Alex Mlynárečik, *Keby všetky vlaky sveta / Deni radosti*  
[If All the Trains in the World / Day of Joy] in Zakamenné in Orava





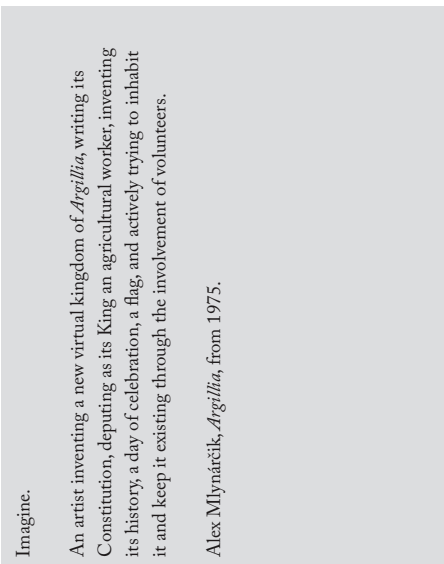
EVKA ŠKADLA – „Jedná k světu“ (Let me...), 1972, Zlín



EVKA ŠKADLA – „Jedná k světu“ (Let me...), 1972, Zlín



Wedding Gifts



Imagine.

An artist inventing a new virtual kingdom of *Argillia*, writing its Constitution, deputing as its King an agricultural worker, inventing its history, a day of celebration, a flag, and actively trying to inhabit it and keep it existing through the involvement of volunteers.

Alex Mlynářík, *Argillia*, from 1975.



# ARGILLIA

hlinená krajina odinakiar  
...  
oslava člověka a života

1975-1976

Organizace: Katedra designu, VŠUP, Praha

Umístění: 300 m<sup>2</sup>, 100 m<sup>2</sup>, 100 m<sup>2</sup>

Číslo: 100/100/100

Číslo: 100/100/100

Číslo: 100/100/100

Číslo: 100/100/100

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The reason why Mlynarcik's work is now regarded with suspicion is that he was a secret police agent during the '60s.

This is the end of my presentation, though it is to be continued,  
Thank you for your attention and I hope the discussion will

Start  
Right  
Now

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Tomáš Pospiszl

Tomáš Pospiszl is an art historian and curator of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Prague. He is co-editor of the anthology *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s* (with Laura Hoptman, 2002), and author of *Octobriana Russian Underground* (2004), the monograph *Alén Diviš* (2005), and *Comparative Study* (2005). He teaches at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU).

# Look Who's Watching: Photographic Documentation of Happenings and Performances in Czechoslovakia





Milan Knižák, *Demonstration for J. M.*, 1965, photo by Zdena Žižková





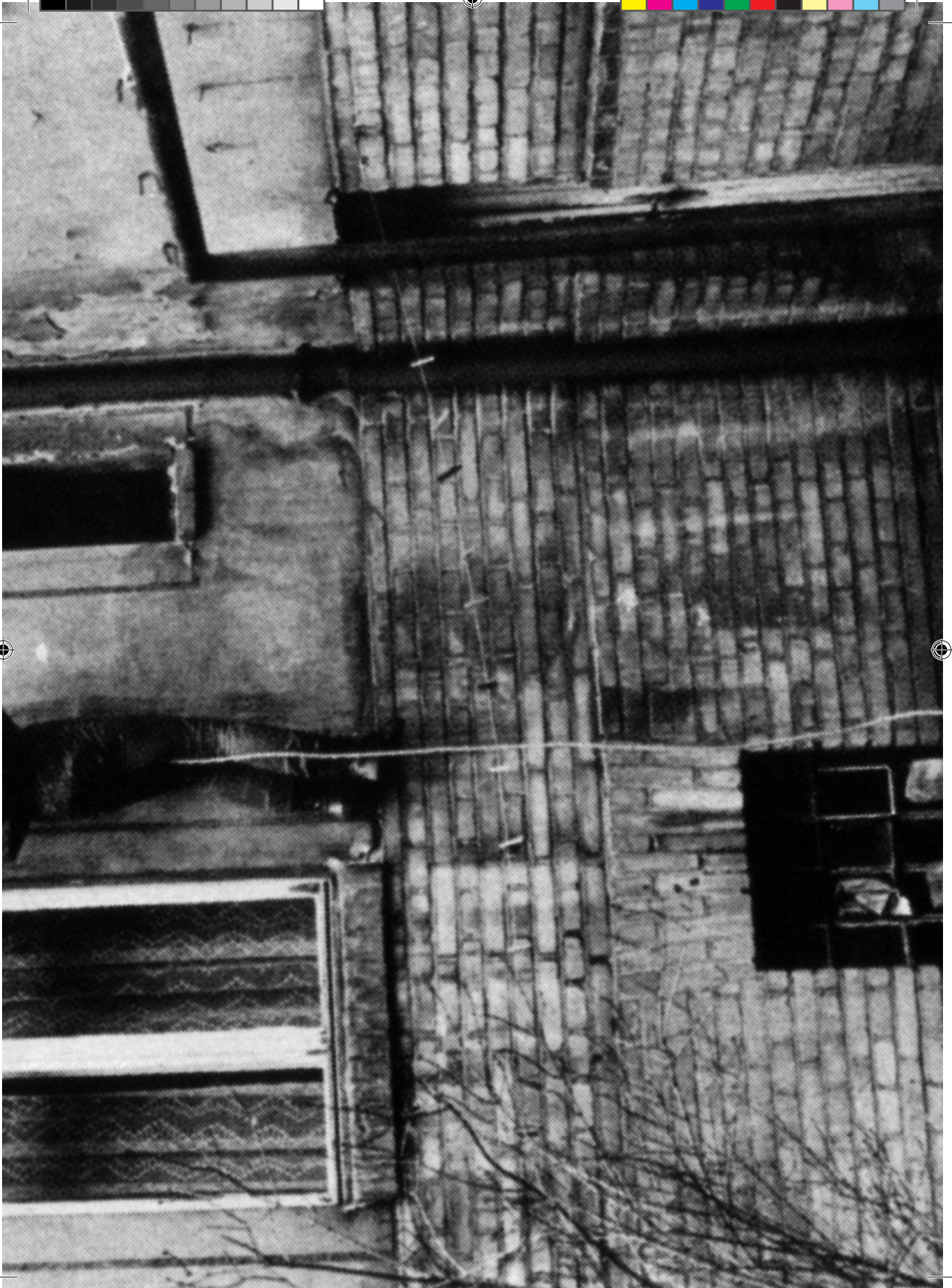
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Jan Mlčoch, *Washing*, 1974











**The** argument of my paper is rather traditional: Art is influenced by its historical context and we have to clarify this context again and again. In recent months I became interested in photographic documentation from happenings and performances that took place in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and 1970s. These photographs include much more than just artists and their works, most notably audiences watching these actions. Onlookers are sometimes more interesting than art itself. Quite often we can discern who is in the audience and what they think of what they're watching.

Let's begin with an action titled *Manifestation of One* [*Demonstrace jednoho*] by Milan Knížák from 1964.<sup>A</sup> It is documented by series of photographs and a text description:

Stand still in a crowd, unfold a piece of paper, stand on it, take off your ordinary clothes and put on something unusual, a jacket half red, half green with a tiny saw hanging from the lapel, a piece of handkerchief pinned to the back. Display a poster on which is written: "I beg the passer-by, if possible, while passing this place to crow." Lie down on a piece of paper, read a book, tear out the finished pages. Then stand up, crumple the paper, burn it, sweep up the ashes carefully, change your clothes, and leave.<sup>1</sup>

Photographs, taken by an unaccredited photographer, document Knížák's accurate execution of his scenario.<sup>2</sup> What I found particularly interesting is that in every photograph we can see not only Knížák, but also his audience. The photographer purposefully juxtaposed performer and his audience in every shot. We can see that from the beginning of the event a small crowd gathered around the artist. They were most likely people who simply walked down the street and were struck by this unusual event happening on the sidewalk. We can see that they're curious, amazed; many are suspicious and some

<sup>1</sup> M. Knížák, *Actions*, Prague: Gallery, 2000, p.36.

<sup>2</sup> Photographs were taken by Zdena Žižková, a close friend of Knížák's girlfriend at that time, Soňa Švecová. Žižková was interested in photography and documented most of actions by Knížák and his friends in the second part of the 1960s.



<sup>A</sup> Milan Knížák, *Manifestation of One*, 1964

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clearly found it funny. We can tell that it is a coincidental group of people. It was an audience unprepared for something like this, but one interested in finding out what is going on. And it is clear that Knížák wanted to approach such an audience, to test their reactions and at the same time test limits of public space. In 1964 the atmosphere in Czechoslovakia was relatively liberal, but there were still many limitations. The reason why this action was not interrupted by the authorities was probably its short duration.

Roughly at the same time, Milan Knížák organized similar events that took place in different places around Prague. Another event, titled *A Walk in the New World. Demonstration for all Senses* [*Procházka po Novém Světě. Demonstrace na všechny smysly*, 1964], was prepared for an invited group of friends, but anyone who happened to be around could participate as well.<sup>B</sup> The audience was to wander through a picturesque neighborhood where Knížák had a studio at that time. Different surprises, assemblages, and games were prepared for the participants. From photographic documentation we can see that there was a clear distinction between performers, dressed in costumes, and guests in casual clothes. They were grouped into two separate crowds, the second following the lead of the first. Another Knížák project, *Demonstrace pro J.M.* [*Demonstration for J. M.*, 1965], took place in a similar environment.<sup>C</sup> The audience was invited to perform simple tasks such as moving objects on the sidewalk or destroying paintings. The documentary photographs suggest a joyful atmosphere, but that sense is belied by the artist's own description of what took place. Here are his words:

Members of the State Security, who arrived in great force already at the beginning of the action, forbid all this, but after a lengthy and explosive discussion I succeeded in persuading them it would take at least one hour to clean up all that mess and this was the guise under which the entire action took place. Therefore, the hectic clearing become a valid and inseparable part of the action.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> M. Knížák, *Some Documentary: 1961-1979*, Berlin: Edition Ars Viva!, 1980, p.80.





It would be probably unfair to call this event a game or a play; it was in fact the cleaning of the playground ordered by the police. Policemen are not recorded in any of existing photographs, but we should be aware of the fact that they were present. The police was an active third party—besides artists and their audience—and had control over the whole action. Here we have an example of a secondary audience of a special kind: a state apparatus that can interpret every strange activity as a threat to its security.<sup>4</sup>

Let's compare these photographs from the mid-1960s with documentation of artists active after 1968, during the time of deepest political and cultural repression in Czechoslovakia. The work of Czech performers like Petr Štembera, Karel Miler, and Jan Mlčoch was much more private, known only to a small number of people. There was usually an audience at their performances, but it was comprised of people that knew each other. Photographic documentation was thus crucial, and developed a distinctive form: a single black-and-white photograph accompanied by a short text description. These performances did not take place in a public space or even in art galleries, but mostly in private apartments or other invite-only locations. Artists from this group often performed in a basement or attic at their workplace, which was the building of the National Gallery in Prague, or in other nontraditional spaces.<sup>5</sup> Usually, five or ten people were present, but sometimes only the artist and a photographer took part. For example, Mlčoch's performance *Myti [Washing]*, which took place in Prague on 20 December 1974, was described by artist in these words: "In the presence of a few friends

<sup>4</sup> "Secondary audience" is a term for the recipients of art from outside of the artistic domain (who are neither artists nor critics—as opposed to "primary audience"). In this particular case, the "secondary audience" was quite specific, as it was composed not only of "ordinary" spectators but also police officers and snitches.

<sup>5</sup> Karel Miler worked at the National Gallery as a curator, Petr Štembera and Jan Mlčoch worked in a depository.



C Milan Knížák, *Demonstration for J. M.*, 1965, photo by Zdena Žižková  
D Jan Mlčoch, *Washing*, 1974

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I washed my whole body, including my hair.”<sup>6</sup> D What we can see in a photograph, which is not credited, is an artist and two of his friends watching him wash himself, in other words something very ordinary, yet very private. One of the viewers, who can be identified as fellow artist Karel Miler, holds a burning candle, as if he was taking part in some semi-religious ceremony. The audience here is put into a voyeuristic position that can be quite uncomfortable for both artist and viewers.

The relationship between performer and audience, which often became tense or even aggressive, is a subject of many performances by this group of artists. Both Petr Štembera and Jan Mlčoch executed performances in which they threatened their viewers. Let us read a description of performance titled *Archer* [*Lukostřelec*] by Petr Štembera that took place in Hradec Králové on 26 November 1977:

In a room full of people (dressed as a Black Shirt), I shot an arrow with a metal tip at a target on a wall, demonstrating the strength of a child's bow. I then dipped a second arrow (which also had a metal tip) into a bottle marked poison, I aimed it at the target but shot into the audience at the other end of the wall.<sup>7</sup> E

In this work Štembera, who was a performer known for putting himself into various dangerous situations, decided to do the opposite and endanger his audience. A more unpleasant situation was the basis for the 1977 performance *Night* [*Noc*] by Jan Mlčoch:

A strange office in a strange building. A girl was brought to this office who did not know what was going to happen. I waited for her there with a tape recorder, camera, and a strong lamp. After an hour of questioning I let her go. She left the building with the other people who were waiting outside.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch: 1970-1980, Prague: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 1997, p.51.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.





This is pretty much a police interrogation, and was probably very unpleasant even if the interrogated person knew it was only a simulation. The other audience members, waiting outside, probably also felt very uncomfortable, unsure if they should intervene, be concerned about their friend, and/or be bored from their passive position. We have to remember that this performance happened in 1977, the year of political unrest and Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia, when police interrogation became a part of life for many people trying to dissent from the totalitarian regime. The artist here also reversed his usual position: He was not to be a subject of watching and scrutinizing, but the opposite. He was the one in control, questioning his audience.

Mlčoch's performances often remind us of police investigations or situations more likely found in a detective novel. In the November 1977 performance *Classic Escape* [*Klasický unik*], Mlčoch "threw out everyone present from a room of a borrowed flat into the corridor and nailed the door down from the inside. With help of a rope, I climbed down to the courtyard and left."<sup>9</sup> F The photo documentation looks like the police reconstruction of a crime scene. This is a description of another Mlčoch work titled *There and Back* [*Tam a zpět*], performed on 24 May, 1976:

I wrote an anonymous letter in which I requested that an assault be carried out on the person described in the letter. I wrote down his name, address, and a basic description to which I added a photograph. I enclosed 100 crowns and promised more when the work was done. I was the person I described. I sent the letter to people who did not know me via an intermediary.<sup>10</sup> G

The photograph that artist decided to use as an illustration of this performance is slightly blurred. It shows a place that looks like an outdoor café, where we imagine the person who has to be assaulted is sitting, unaware of being watched. The blurriness of the photograph reminds us of photo-

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.60.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.57.



F Jan Mlčoch, *Classic Escape*, 1977  
G Jan Mlčoch, *There and Back*, 1976

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graphs from the era made by secret policemen while surveying their suspects. Recently over one million of such photographs were discovered at the archive in the Ministry of Interior Affairs.<sup>11</sup> It is a fascinating mass of images. Their setup and even their aesthetic is sometimes very similar to the works under discussion by these Czech performers. People are watched and photographed doing various cryptic activities in a strange environment. The meaning of their actions is clear only to informed people or to the ones reading a report explaining the situation. One of the photographs from the Secret Police archive depicts the writer Milan Kundera. He is with a woman on a street; she is giving him an envelope.<sup>12</sup> As the series of images continues, he goes to a phone booth and then meets the same woman again. From the attached police report we know that he had received his passport from a friendly clerk and was checking some details concerning his plans to leave the country. What at first looked like a casual meeting of a two friends suddenly has a different meaning.

The audience in the photo documentation of Czech performers from the 1970s is not anonymous. This is not only because we often know them by name and that they know very well that they are taking part in an art action. They also know that the photographs will be seen by large secondary audience and maybe by the police, who can decode them as a disturbance of the peace. They take that risk. Their presence and willingness to be photographed means they become part of the event. They are not people from the street, as in Knížák's happenings. Even if they remain passive during the whole event, they are participants, accomplices. In addition, performers themselves often put their audiences into situations in which the simple acts of being present and watching are emphasized by different symbolic or even aggressive scenarios.

<sup>11</sup> These Secret Police photos were published in: *Praha objektivem tajné policie* [Prague Through the Lens of the Secret Police], Prague: Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, 2009.





Let us examine at the work of Jiří Kovanda, who was very close to the aforementioned group of performers. His style was different, not as confrontational. He also executed some of his performances in public space. They usually comprised something very close to ordinary activities. Sometimes nobody apart from the artist would guess that an artwork was being enacted. For example, a November 1976 piece called *Theatre [Divadlo]* took place at Wenceslas Square, the busiest part of Prague: “I follow a previously written script to the letter. Gestures and movements have been selected so that passers-by will not suspect that they are watching a performance.”<sup>12</sup> I/J The artist touches his nose, moves his head, walks back and forth. Even the photographer who was documenting this action was not fully aware what his friend was doing. When we look at the photographs and read the description, we are placed in a situation similar to the one created by the materials documenting Kundera’s interaction with the passport clerk. We watch someone following a script hidden to the others. We are witnessing something that has a secret meaning. It needs an interpretation: in one case by the police; in the other by artist or art critic. Kovanda’s documentation fittingly takes the form of a police report. There is a date and a place, a description of what happened, and photographic evidence. This would be a classic example of a work that was made for secondary audience.

Probably the most complex work from this period and involving an audience is Kovanda’s 19 October 1977 performance *Attempted Acquaintance [Pokus o seznámení]*, described in the following words: “I invited some friends to watch me trying to make friends with a girl.”<sup>13</sup> K/L/M The group of friends watches an extraordinarily shy artist trying to talk to girls on the Old Town Square. The artist purposely put himself in an awkward situation of being surveilled. The fact of being watched was at that time a normal situation for thousands of other people in Prague. In this case the one being watched is

<sup>12</sup> Jiří Kovanda: *Actions & Installations 1975-2006*, JRP Ringier, Tranzit, Prague and Zurich 2006, p.46.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36.



I/J Jiří Kovanda, *Theatre*, 1976

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trying to perform something very private, very intimate. He may be pushed to it because of the knowledge of external control over his actions.

As a closing remark I would like to emphasize the great change from the time of Milan Knížák's happenings to performances by artists in the 1970s. Milan Knížák was able—although with many limitations—to work in public spaces and to directly approach ordinary passers-by on the streets. In the 1970s, artists could no longer work in a similar way, because there was no public space they could freely use. Therefore they worked in small circles of friends and reached a secondary audience through photographic documentation. Their work reflects the control that the political regime had over people at that time. Audience participation has its symbolic level of very close partnership. A relatively banal situation—due to political reasons artists could not work openly—led to complex strategies for how to overcome this limitation.





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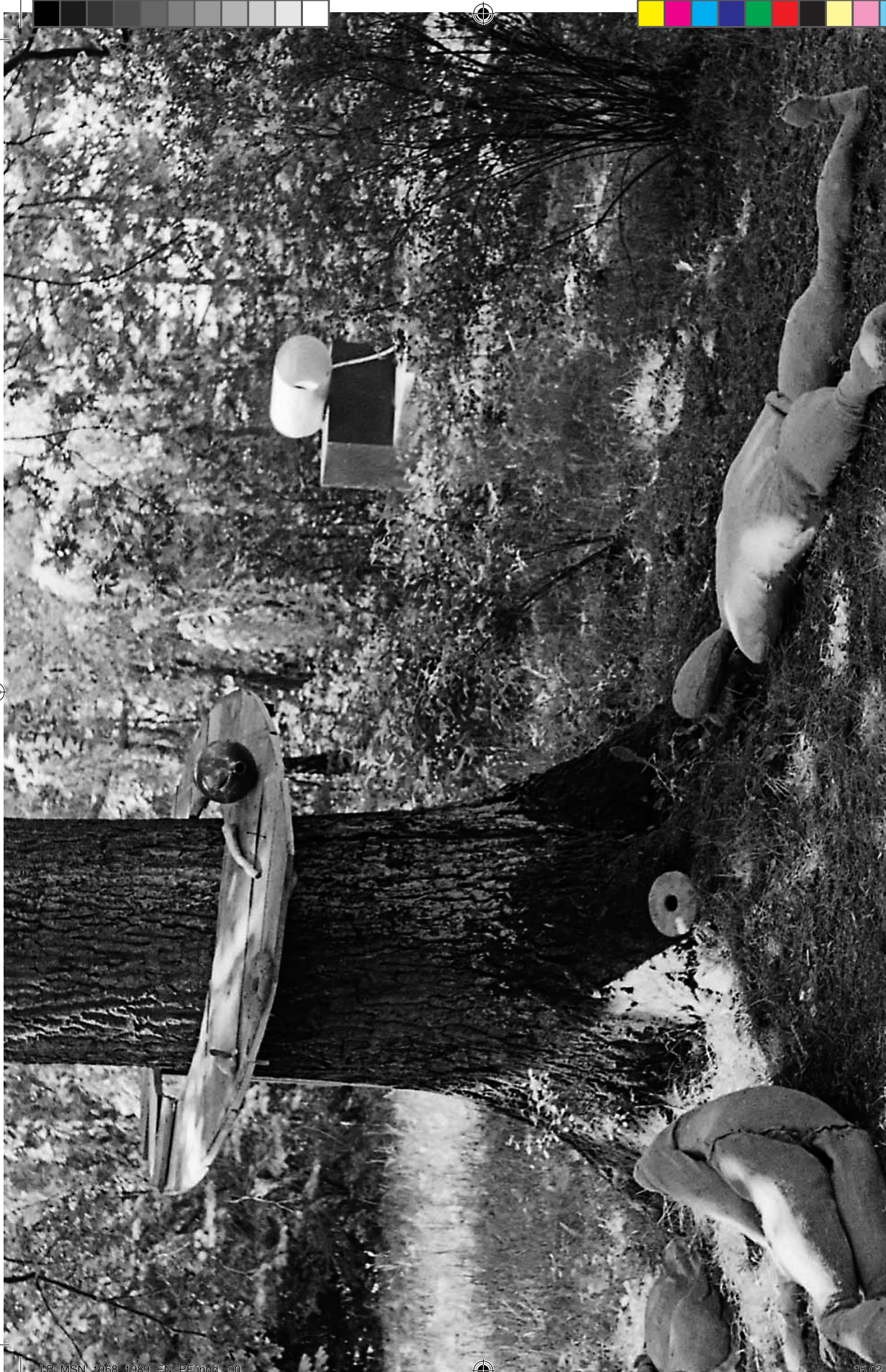


Luiza Nader is an art historian who lectures at the Institute of Art History, University of Warsaw, and wrote her doctoral dissertation on conceptual art in Poland (*Konceptualizm w PRL*, 2009). She has published texts in exhibition catalogues and periodicals, including *Artium Quaestiones*, *Ikonotheke*, *Przegląd Filozoficzny*, *Obieg*, *Springerin*, and in the anthologies *Art after Conceptual Art* (2006) and *Memory/haunting/discourse* (2005).

# Transgressing the Imagination: The Zalesie Ball in 1968







*The Zalesie Ball, photo by Jacek M. Stokłosa, 1968*









Pawel Althamer, *Reanimation* (curator: Pawel Polit), CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 2006, photo by Pawel Polit, 2006



Paweł Althamer, *Reanimation* (curator: Paweł Politt), CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 2006, photo by Paweł Politt, 2006

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*One has never seen the world well if he has not dreamed  
what he was seeing.*  
Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Reverie*

**On** June 2, 1968, a ball was organized in the house of Anka Ptaszkowska and Edward Krasiński under the theme “Farewell to Spring.” The name alluded to the political turmoil that had erupted in Poland in March that year. The consequences of the March events were of dramatic proportions for many Polish intelligentsia; they became a turning point in the lives of numerous people.

The character of the 1968 political events in Poland was thoroughly different from the student demonstrations in France or on university campuses in the United States. According to Andrzej Friszke, the specificity of March '68 in Poland consisted of a combination of social revolt and an internal struggle for position and influence within the communist apparatus of power.<sup>1</sup> The main participants included, on one side, young, liberal intellectuals who contested the political status quo and on the other side, so-called Communist party “partisans” and, young apparatchiks.<sup>2</sup> The direct reason for the student demonstration on March 8, 1968, was the expelling of Adam Michnik and Henryk Szlajfer from Warsaw University. After the event, while the students were dispersing, the university was stormed by police armed with batons, ORMO (civic militia forces), and party militias, who brutally pacified the students and members of academic faculties. That evening and for several more days, the streets of Warsaw saw battles between university students and armed militia forces. Students from Warsaw were joined in solidarity by students from other cities: manifestations of dissent and student strikes took place at almost every academic institution in Poland. The students’ postulates were coherent within the framework of an idealistic form of socialism: they demanded “democratic freedoms” and “freedom of press and demonstration.” The pacification of the student movement with batons and tear gas was accompanied by numerous repressions (arrests, expellings, military drafting), a wave of aggressive anti-intelligentsia and anti-Semitic propaganda, an internal purge within the authority apparatus, and mass work dismissals of people accused of “zionism,” “imperialism,” and “troublemaking.” As a result of the anti-Semitic campaign, around 15,000 people left the country, including scientists, artists, directors, doctors, publishers, and former public officials.<sup>3</sup> According to Janusz Holzer, March 1968 possessed different meanings for different social groups: for “disappointed re-

<sup>1</sup> A. Friszke, *Miejsce Marca 1968 wśród polskich miesięcy*, in K. Rokicki, S. Stępień (eds.), *Oblicza Marca 1968*, Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2004, p.15.

<sup>2</sup> A. Paczkowski, *Pół wieku dziejów Polski 1939-1989*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2000, p.362.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.371.





visionists and positivists, it was the last effort to defend the benefits gained in the post-October '56 de-Stalinization. For students who only remembered Stalinism and 1956 from their childhood, it was a protest against systemic bureaucracy, the propagandist numbing of society and the lack of perspectives. For the "partisans," it was a well-organized provocation reminiscent of a coup d'état, aimed at taking over the Communist Party and government. For the entire Communist party, police, military, and administrative apparatus, it meant the termination of the post-1956 limitations within the authorities, the validation to use physical force as a form of intimidating and disciplining society, especially the youth, and the effort to break up intellectual milieus hostile to Communism."<sup>4</sup> For the generation that treated the 1956 "détente" as a point of reference, March 1968 demonstrated the aggressive, repressive, and totalitarian face of real socialism. It signified a farewell to the illusions and beliefs that some form of evolution and a "socialism with a human face" were possible.

According to Anka Ptaszkowska, the *Farewell to Spring* ball organized by the founders of the Foksal Gallery was planned for several dozen guests—the most prominent Polish avant-garde artists and critics. However, the character of the farewell, analyzed on the basis of the reminiscences of the participants (including Ptaszkowska and Natalia Swolkień) and Jacek M. Stokłosa's photographic documentation, was closer to the Witkacian "farewell to autumn" than to the nostalgic *polonaise*.<sup>5</sup> The provocative party—in a country engulfed in mass "hate scenes" since March—was directed not only at the prohibition of public gatherings, but also, by means of its inadequacy, at Polish martyrology and the feeling of melancholy. Perhaps back then, in June 1968, people were holding balls not only in Zalesie. But it was this "farewell to spring" that consciously created a specific superstructure of meanings, which made the ball not a simple social gathering but essentially a "space without a space," in which the utopia of sovereignty could be effectively played out.

The ball in Zalesie, attended by the intelligentsia who constituted the target of the propaganda attacks (and who, perhaps, contributed to its elitist character), expressed criticism towards its surrounding space and time by using the categories of fun and grotesque. As Geoffrey Harpham writes, grotesques "stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world, of dividing the continuum of experience into knowable particles."<sup>6</sup> By using consciously accepted "harmonic dissonances," the grotesque is an

<sup>4</sup> J. Holzer, "Solidarność" 1980-1981. *Geneza i historia*, Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1984, pp.18-19.

<sup>5</sup> *Farewell to Spring* seems to allude to the title of the famous *polonaise* composed by M.G. Ogiński, entitled "Farewell to Homeland".

<sup>6</sup> G. Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982.



appeal by negation: it situates itself not only in relation to artistic traditions, but primarily in relation to the dominant social consciousness. We may say that in a country slowly recovering from an aggressive anti-Semitic and anti-intelligentsia witch-hunt, this dissonance could indeed be represented by a loud ball organized by the avant-garde artist/critic milieu that incorporated a specific decoration scheme based on repetition, deformation, and exaggeration. On the basis of participants' memories and photographic material, one may carefully state that *The Zalesie Ball* created a two-fold grotesque situation by deploying two similarly fictional "blueprints": on the one hand, a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and, on the other hand, the reality of propaganda language. The decorations, designed by Krasiński, referred to the famous *Luilekkerland* ("lazy luscious land"), which in turn referred to the legendary Cockaigne—the land of plenty. A table encircling a tree with three mannequins sitting beneath it was deformed in such a way that, when seen at a certain angle, it would recreate the perspective shortening effect implemented by Bruegel. A vegetable-filled cart visible in the photos, as well as sausages hanging from trees (as recounted by participants), alluded to the *Schlaraffenland* and related in a perversely compensatory way to the gray, grim reality of food shortages in the Gomulka era. It is worth mentioning that in the 1960s, meat was one of the most sought-after and rationed goods, while the biggest criminal affair, which ended in sentencing the culprits to death, was the so-called "meat affair." In the visual domain, Krasiński's decorations appropriated, exaggerated, and exposed the fictional character of the omnipresent propaganda slogans. They depicted socialism as creating the land of milk and honey and simultaneously proclaimed laziness in the land of "workers." Grotesqueness and the dimension of impossibility were also present in the construction of an enormous bar for giants constructed by the artist Zbigniew Gostomski. As noticed by Paweł Polit, it could have constituted the inspiration for Tadeusz Kantor's conceptual projects from the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Jacek M. Stokłosa's photographs that creatively document the ball in Zalesie were taken in loose reference to Old Master paintings. They depict the ball as an "inverse" reality based on representation and repetition. Stokłosa's photographs also documented the ball as a reality that becomes painting, where "presence" as such—in its temporal shifts, mimetic superproduction, and tension between the events and their "portrayal"—is suspended.

By using repetition (of both Bruegel's work and the propagandist representation of the world) and creating subsequent layers

<sup>7</sup> Paweł Polit's statement during the discussion *What a Ball That Was?! [Co to był za bal?!]*, Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, 12 July 2006. Polit elaborated on this view during the seminar *1968-1989* at the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, July 2008. Polit suggested that the "giants bar" could be interpreted as a Zbigniew Gostomski's humorous response to the magnification method used by Kantor (e.g. in his happening *Letter*); on the other hand, on the occasion of *The Zalesie Ball*, Kantor could have become aware of the political aspect of the magnification process (as suggested by ↗



his projects exhibited at the Wrocław '70 symposium).  
My thanks to Paweł Polit for this information.

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of illusions by means of the grotesque, the ball in Zalesie built a specific space that, to use Michel Foucault's term, could be described as a heterotopia. According to Foucault, the heterotopic space, the classical example of which is the ship, constitutes "another space" that serves a critical function in relation to all other space. A heterotopia suspends, neutralizes, or reverses the experienced relations that it points to or mirrors. Within one real space, they juxtapose several spaces.<sup>8</sup> In the case of *The Zalesie Ball*, the attributes of social and political reality, like everyday shortages of goods, spiraling propaganda, mental subservience, and the lack of perspectives, were reversed into a provocative abundance of goods, freedom, joy, and "lightness of being" for the participants. The space of the ball was delimited but simultaneously permeable for the invited guests—high-profile members of the artistic and intellectual milieu. By way of merrymaking, time became suspended, and the spaces of representation, illusion, and mimetic excess interwoven. This illusion, specific to heterotopia, was critical towards reality as something even more delusive than the "land of joy" set up for that single night.

In relation to the ball, the concept of heterotopia undermines the schematic binary divisions between the public and private sphere in the context of Polish existence under Communism. After 1945, these spaces functioned on the essentially unidentified or even fictional level. The ten-person private meeting in an artist's apartment (the first reception of the international artistic network "NET" in Jarosław Kozłowski's house in 1971) could be treated as a gesture dangerously interfering with the public sphere—completely appropriated by ideology—and brutally disrupted by a police raid. On the other hand, as suggested by Rosalyn Deustche, public space is not given but rather "created," reappearing everywhere there is room for debate and the negotiation of meaning. Understood in this way, public space could not appear in a totalitarian state filling the "empty space" that supports democracy. In a totalitarian or authoritarian state, there was no room for questioning such constructs as "unity" or "society" in places that were usually associated with public space. Thus, perhaps, the questioning moved to spaces that could be defined as private or those which, like *The Zalesie Ball*, defined themselves as private.

The interpretation of *The Zalesie Ball* as a means of "letting off steam" after the March events has already been suggested by

<sup>8</sup> M. Foucault, "Inne przestrzenie" [*Of other spaces*], trans. A. Rejniak-Majewska, *Teksty drugie*, 6 [96] 2005, pp.117-125.





Joanna Mytkowska and Andrzej Przywara in their discussion with Anka Ptaszkowska.<sup>9</sup> According to the interviewers, in the case of the Foksal Gallery milieu, reaction to March '68 can also be seen in their artistic and critical practices—delimiting an autonomous artistic space within which the experience of freedom is possible as well as the gallery's interest in its own condition (the theory of PLACE). Pursuing this idea, I would like to strengthen the claims made by critics as well as propose a slightly differing reading of *The Zalesie Ball*. In *Farewell to Spring* one may notice not only a reaction, but also, and perhaps most importantly, the *working through* and *acting out* of the events occurring since early March. These categories directly relate to both the traumatic experience and effect, as well as touch upon, in my opinion, the aporetic character of resistance in Polish art circa 1968.

According to Jean Laplanche and Jean B. Pontalis, trauma is “an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization.”<sup>10</sup> The essence of trauma is that it always occurs too early, while understanding of it always occurs too late.<sup>11</sup> According to Cathy Caruth, the category of trauma as described by Sigmund Freud, Pierre Janet, or Jacques Lacan confronts us not only with a simple pathology but also with a fundamental enigma concerning the psyche's relation with reality. As Caruth suggests writes: “In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelmingly violent event or events that are not fully grasped when they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, trauma is an aporetic relation: it cannot be experienced consciously; it is always recognized by consciousness too late, and therefore becomes an element that can never become fully integrated into the symbolic order. Further on that subject Agata Bielik-Robson observes “the human ego exists in a state of desynchronization, in the eternal condition of retardation, where nothing happens ‘on time’ [...] [The psyche] oscillates between a trauma, i.e. the primal shock of helplessness, and its symbolic compensation, in which it deals with the experience only after the trauma.”<sup>13</sup> The traumatic event, albeit “impossible” and, by way of its brutal directness, somehow unnoticed, returns in the spiral of compulsive repetitions of *acting out*. Meanwhile, the process of *working through* (*Durch-*

<sup>9</sup> *Farewell to Spring: Anka Ptaszkowska in Conversation with Joanna Mytkowska and Andrzej Przywara*, in Edward Krasiński: *Les Mises en Scene*, Sabine Breitwieser (ed.), Cologne: Walther König, 2007, p.104.

<sup>10</sup> J. Laplanche, J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, London: Karnac Books, 1988, p.465.

<sup>11</sup> A. Bielik-Robson, “Słowo i trauma: czas, narracja, tożsamość”, *Teksty Drugie* 5 [89] 2004, p.25.

<sup>12</sup> C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University ↗





Press, 1996, pp.91-92.

<sup>13</sup> A. Bielik-Robson, *op. cit.*, p.25, 30.

*arbeitung*), although never fully liberated from past events, provides the possibility to obtain a critical distance in relation to the past—a distance that creates a place for the differentiation between past and present, thereby rupturing the compulsion to repeat.

According to Dominick LaCapra, who links historiographic reflection with a psychoanalytical perspective, instances of acting out and working through viewed on the transhistorical level do not constitute a mutual opposition, but rather closely connected forms of memory. Acting out—a compulsive repetitiveness—affects the victims, may affect witnesses and observers, and give rise to so-called *secondary witnesses*, including historians, critics, and artists. Acting out may remain an independent process destructive in its consequences, but may precede or even interweave with instances of working through, which aims at addressing post-traumatic symptoms: taming rather than leveling the traumatic event's effects.<sup>14</sup> In the context of *The Zalesie Ball*, it's important to note that LaCapra claims that working through (in close relation with acting out) may be achieved both through clinical therapy and through critical reflexion, narration, witnessing, acting, or games and play, all of which may possess elements of critical evaluation of the past that open up existence for the future.<sup>15</sup> In the case of play, the proximity of acting out and working through makes it especially difficult to differentiate. Fort/Da—the famous children's game observed and analyzed by Freud—is made up of the repetition and the subsequent reenacting/playing out of the child's separation from her mother. It was, however, unclear for Freud whether the child plays out the scene of the mother's parting or her return, i.e. whether the source of the game was the child's joy arising from meeting her or the sadness created by her departure.<sup>16</sup> *The Zalesie Ball* also seems to possess elements of repetition (in literal reenactment and in symbolic repetition) and a critical distance enabling the integration of images from the past into the framework of the present. Working-through understood as such is not only resistant to the traumatic past and compulsive spiral of repetition, but also, in its efforts towards differentiating between past, present, and future, constitutes a way of adapting to the post-traumatic reality.

Games or merrymaking as a form of reaction to the extreme experience of fear and humiliation had its precedent in earlier 1960s Polish history—here I am referring to the “Hangman's Ball”

<sup>14</sup> See D. LaCapra, *History in Transit*, Ithaca, New York and London: Cornell University Press, 2004, especially the chapters “Experience and Identity” and “History, Psychoanalysis, Critical Theory.” See also “An Interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra” (interviewer: Amos Goldberg), Shoah Resource Center, The International School for Holocaust Studies, [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org).

<sup>15</sup> LaCapra, *op. cit.*, p.102.

<sup>16</sup> Caruth, *op.cit.*, p.65-66.



organized in 1966 to mark the Polish United Workers' Party's ousting of Leszek Kołakowski and Krzysztof Pomian's, two of the party's most critical, "revisionist" members. The ball took place in the apartment of Ryszard Matuszewski and Irena Szymańska and was ironically seen as a "farewell to the party." *The Zalesie Ball* is also reminiscent of another ball—the frenetic party balancing on the borderline between working-through and repetition of a threatening situation as well as feeling of guilt and shame in Jerzy Skolimowski's film *Hands Up* [*Ręce do góry*], made in 1967 but suppressed by the censors for another fourteen years.<sup>17</sup> The reference point for Skolimowski's characters—who play out a spectacle of mutual humiliation and accusation, uncovering the empty spaces of their desires—were traumatic events from their youth: Stalinism and the Holocaust, the latter of which reappears in the film in the form of post-memory.<sup>18</sup> One could say that *The Zalesie Ball* not only *was* play, but also, in a manner similar to Skolimowski's *mise en scene*, *used* play as a way of working through the traumatic events of the recent past, creating a reality bordering with dreams. But it was not a pleasant dream. The fear it instilled was due mainly to its overtly fictional, reenacted aspect: the awareness that it is only a dream, the decorations depicting an abundance of goods, the prone positions of the mannequins (which are more reminiscent of three dead bodies than three tired people after a party). According to Freud, dreams are often understood as an arena for fulfilled desires. In this interpretation, the dream itself causes us to dream on. It is, however, difficult to claim that in the case of *The Zalesie Ball* the perversely compensatory decoration brimming with consumerist excess created an image that the merrymaking critics and artists would have desired. But there exists a radically different answer to the question on the function of sleep. Jacques Lacan claimed that the dream may not necessarily be interpreted as the guardian of sleep, but as the reason for awakening. "In the context of a violent reality, why dream rather than wake up?" asks Caruth, following Lacan.<sup>19</sup> In reference to this question, the ball's onirical character could be interpreted not as the denial of knowledge of a violent reality but as an effort to face it. To put it another way, *The Zalesie Ball* could be understood not as the guardian of the ideological dream, but as a symptom of the delayed process of awakening aimed at identifying paradoxes and delimitations of artistic activity within the politicized space of artistic discourse in Poland.

"We never possessed that which seemed lost," claims Slavoj Žižek, following Lacan. This is partly why I find it difficult to ac-

<sup>17</sup> For obvious reasons, the Zalesie partygoers could not have been acquainted with Skolimowski's film. The film was only given clearance in 1981, when Skolimowski added a prologue, and made it to cinema screens in 1985 (without the prologue). My thanks to David Crowley for the juxtaposition of *The Zalesie Ball* and *Ręce do góry*.

<sup>18</sup> According to LaCapra, post-memory is the memory of events that the individual could not have witnessed first-hand, a type of "inherited" memory. See *History in Transit*, p.88.

<sup>19</sup> Caruth, *op. cit.*, p.94.



cept Weronika Szczawińska's interpretation of *The Zalesie Ball*, who claims in her otherwise intriguing interpretation that the event did not have any subversive consequences and that it can even "be seen as an omen of things to come—the great social sadness, deletion, amnesia, a broken alliance with social reality."<sup>20</sup> I claim that this issue necessitates not only in-depth archival research, but also the construction of a hitherto lacking framework that would allow for the discovery of critical threads in art from 1968 onwards. Nonetheless, artistic practices in Poland after 1968 do not seem beset by a greater lack of memory than those before 1968. Similarly, the issue of "a broken alliance with social reality," which supposedly took place in art after 1968, seems at the very least questionable. In the specific context of the Foksal Gallery, this thesis may even be inverted. In the months following the ball, Foksal Gallery critics and artists were increasingly critical of their own institutionalized character and practices, thereby undermining the "quiet social agreement" between artistic milieus and the ruling establishment, which, as Piotr Piotrowski notices, concerned freedom in formal experiments but eliminated any direct criticism of the authorities.<sup>21</sup> A text published in December 1968—"What Don't We Like About Galeria Foksal?" [*Co nam się nie podoba w Galerii Foksal PSP?*]—can be interpreted as the transgression of the Theory of Place into a discursive concept of space critical of those responsible for creating the artistic domain, as well as of examples of art production, exposition, distribution, and reception produced by the gallery itself.

The need to undermine one's own activity can also be seen in *Winter Assembly* [*Asamblaż zimowy*], which began in early 1969. The project (which included Jerzy Bereś, Zbigniew Gostomski, Tadeusz Kantor, Edward Krasiński, Maria Stangret, and gallery critics) was planned as a series of actions without a clear beginning or end; without an aim, form or structure; and were developed over time and partly set in municipal spaces outside the safety of the gallery. Another Foksal Gallery project, which can be considered a breakthrough not only in the gallery's functioning but also in the Polish art system's late-'60s status quo, took the form of artistic actions headed by gallery critics Druga Grupa and Tadeusz Kantor's students (Tomasz Wawak, Mieczysław Dymny, Stanisław Szczepański) during the *Złote Grono* Symposium in Zielona Góra in 1969. These were *We're not sleeping* [*My nie śpimy*], *Permanent Jury* [*Permanentne Jury*], and Druga Grupa's concept of making copies of the exhibited artworks on a commission basis. Students who refused to sleep, held vigils, and occupied the exhibition space for three days, who sat in field beds and

<sup>20</sup> W. Szczawińska, "Performans 1968: O balu w Zalesiu," *Res Publica Nowa* 3, 2008, p.102.

<sup>21</sup> P. Piotrowski, *Znaczenia modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki w Polsce po 1945 roku* [Meanings of Modernism. Towards the History of Art in Poland after 1945] Poznań: Rebis, 1999, p.125.



hung up slogans visible in the street windows, used passive resistance—impossible to classify as a political action—to demolish the illusion upheld by artistic circles concerning their political neutrality. Similarly, the Permanent Jury, which “assessed” actions by both the students and Druga Grupa (which carried out a systematic superproduction of the contemporary avant-garde art from the exhibition), was a scathing attack on selection mechanisms, hierarchies, and the specific aesthetics of reception produced by the artistic system in Poland at the time. The “final awakening” may be attributed to *The New Foksal Gallery Regulations* [*Nowy Regulamin Galerii Foksal PSP*] written in 1969 by Anka Ptaszkowska, which transformed the gallery into an office informing the public about artistic activities outside its institutionally defined borders. The *New Regulations* exposed the gallery to an unpredictable and risky situation, and made the gallery *space* a space of free transmission of meaning, eliminating the typical division between internal and external. It was deemed too radical and rejected by Tadeusz Kantor, which in turn caused three of the gallery’s founding members—Ptaszkowska, Krasiński, and Henryk Stażewski—to part with it.

Remember that the characters in the aforementioned Skolimowski film work through two overlapping events from their traumatic past—Stalinism and the Holocaust. Guilt and shame seem an inheritance that the film’s four friends attempt to face by going on a looped journey in an animal carriage and participating in exorcisms of truth. Similarly, in the case of *The Zalesie Ball* there is a second, more enigmatic reference “event” (separate from the protests of March). It is Socialist realism or the heritage of Socialist realism in art: the “non-engagement idiom” in which the threat of an ideological instrumentalization of art bred the unwillingness to include art in the political and social transformation process. The Zalesie partygoers repeated and worked through their helplessness as well as the complete defenselessness of the autonomic art idiom in which they had actively participated since 1956. In *Znaczenia modernizmu* [*Meanings of Modernism*], Piotr Piotrowski points to the two-fold character of the category of artistic autonomy—a central category in the post-entente artistic discourse in Poland. Here we are faced with the phenomenon of “relative autonomy”—relative because it is more meaningful than autonomy itself. While analyzing Henryk Stażewski’s post-war art, Piotrowski notices that by not referring to social reality in his art he paradoxically signaled his will to maintain the freedom if not of art itself then at least *within* art. Following Piotrowski and Andrzej Turowski, one





may claim that for the Foksal Gallery artistic and critical milieu, which Stażewski co-founded and supported, the defense of the artwork's autonomy and of artistic language was simultaneously a mode of resistance to the appropriative language of ideologically bound reality.<sup>22</sup> The idea of defending Place, the survival and preservation of universal values, the will to persist despite unfavorable political circumstances, were all part of Gallery Foksal's specific *Weltanschauung* between its creation in June 1966 and March 1968. As Piotrowski writes, "If the [Foksal] Gallery wanted to be close to the avant-garde oeuvre, it could not terminate its activity—it had to defend the language, the *sine qua non* condition for the avant-garde, and could do so only by existing."<sup>23</sup> The Foksal artists and critics were deeply shocked by the police force used on 8 March 1968; some of them joined the protests in the following days. One must, however, notice that apart from "persisting," the Foksal Gallery milieu did not decide to perform any autonomic artistic gesture. I would interpret this numbness as an effect of the excessive violence that the artists observed during the March events. It is worth mentioning here that any direct reference to the brutally pacified student protests or aggressive anti-Semitic propaganda could lead to the closing of any given gallery, especially a vulnerable one like the Foksal Gallery, which existed under the aegis of the Państwowe Przedsiębiorstwo Pracownie Sztuk Plastycznych.<sup>24</sup> As I mentioned before, the fact that the everyday institutional functions remained unchanged in the face of outside events can be understood as a manifestation of art's autonomy and independence in relation to reality and as the defense of the gains made by artistic milieus in the post-October 1956 period: a universalistic, autonomic vision of art. However, this "unchanged" character and inertness seem particularly close to the aforementioned numbness.

The phenomenon of numbness in the face of violent experiences, or even their representation, reverses the entire humanistic, universalist discourse which, as I mentioned earlier, was also embraced by pre-1968 Polish art. As C.J. Dean, the author of a valuable analysis of the phenomenon of indifference, notices, the question "Why disrupt our daily routines for the sake of others?" disrupts faith in the community, in common values, and, I would add, in art as a universe of values.<sup>25</sup> Even if the artists' only recourse was the secure storage of such cherished values as autonomy (if not in art, then of art), paradoxically the lack of any commentary on the Warsaw street riots uncovered these values as even more illusory. In this context, a ball con-

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.130-137.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.136.

<sup>24</sup> Fine Arts Studios (Pracownie Sztuk Plastycznych PSP) was the biggest enterprise in socialist Poland producing ideological "art" works commissioned by the regime in all shapes and sizes: statues, monuments, banners, interior decoration designs, medals, labels, and packaging. Galeria Foksal was able to use the material and technical resources of PSP, namely the workshops and printing house, for its own artistic projects and for printing catalogues, posters, leaflets, or invitations. However, as of ↗



1954, all exhibitions had to be approved by the PSP director, Henryk Urbanowicz.

<sup>25</sup> C. J. Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy After the Holocaust*, Ithaca, New York and London: Cornell University Press, 2004, p.5.

sciously bidding farewell to March bode farewell not only to the events to which the artists and critics were unable to react. It also, or perhaps foremostly, bode farewell to the phantasm of art as an autonomous domain, independent of the authorities, political influence, and ideology.

From this perspective, *The Zalesie Ball* could be considered a symptom of the difficult process of awakening—recurring efforts of “working through” on the borderline of “acting out.” It was an expression of both resistance and, like every “working through,” of adaptation to the post-March political and social reality—two grappling directives of acting that developed from a single source which Andrzej Friszke calls the imperative of persistence.<sup>26</sup> The existence of the gallery was, however, supplemented with projects that could be defined as efforts to trespass the non-written social agreement between artistic circles and the authorities. Friszke notices that attitudes vis-a-vis the People’s Republic of Poland’s political system were complicated and impossible to classify on a systematic level.<sup>27</sup> To paraphrase his views on the intelligentsia’s stance, one may say that it was neither “engagement” nor “non-engagement” that defined the artistic field’s *illusio*, but rather affirmation, adaptation, resistance, and an oppositional stance—with all these standpoints often connected. The transgressive slogans chanted by the protesting Parisian students of 1968—“Power to the imagination!” and “Let’s be realists, demand the impossible”—may well have been close to the hearts of the Zalesie partygoers. But in relation to March 1968 in Poland, imagination was futile; the facts went beyond its ability to represent. As LaCapra writes on the relation between trauma and imagination:

Indeed, when things of an unimaginable magnitude actually occur and phantasms seem to run rampant in ‘ordinary’ reality, what is there for the imagination? To the limited extent it is possible, working through problems in this context may require the attempt to reinforce dimensions of the ‘self’ that can somehow come to terms with and counteract the force of the past, as it returns in the present, in order to further the shaping of a livable future.<sup>28</sup>

Due to its community spirit, *The Zalesie Ball* strengthened the mass “self” and performed transgressions of imagination. Thanks

<sup>26</sup> A. Friszke, *Przystosowanie i opór*, in T. Szarota (ed.), *Komunizm. Ideologia, system, ludzie*, Warszawa: Neriton, Instytut Historii Sztuki PAN, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998, p.181.





to the power of liberated imagination—not through art, but through play—it opposed the post-traumatic reality but also tried to return to it, so that within artistic discourse it could be experienced on time.

Perhaps it was *The Zalesie Ball*'s inherent issues—lack of time, repetition, liberated imagination—as well as its unstable position, impossible to pinpoint explicitly within artistic discourse, that inspired Paweł Polit's paradoxical attempt to re-create it at the Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in 2006.<sup>29</sup> The idea of this event, which returned from the past but which at the same time determined the present, was proposed by Andrzej Przywara and Paweł Polit. Similar to *The Zalesie Ball* itself, the reality of the reconstruction—based on traces, fragments, torn narratives, random meetings, and happy coincidences—undermined the clearly defined “here” and “now,” “there” and “then,” thus creating a time and space for reverie. A reverie which, as Bachelard wrote, “opens himself to the world and the world opens itself to him. One has never seen the world well if he has not dreamed what he was seeing.”<sup>30</sup>

Translated by Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska

<sup>29</sup> “The Zalesie Ball. Reconstruction” [*Bał w Zalesiu. Rekonstrukcja*] – exhibition of the documents on the ball, prepared by Paulina Ołowska and Joanna Zielińska) and *Ożywienie* (Paweł Althamer), curated by Paweł Polit, CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 27 May – 16 July 2006.

<sup>30</sup> G. Bachelard, *Poetics of Reverie*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, p.173.



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# Remarks and Comments: Discussion on

Claire Bishop, Anka Ptaszkowska, Piotr Piotrowski,  
Paweł Polit, Tomáš Pospiszyl, Joanna Mytkowska, Magda Raczyńska 107

Anka Ptaszkowska is an art critic and co-founder of the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw. Since 1970 she has lived in Paris, where she ran Galerie 1–36, then the Vitrine pour l'art actuel. She has lectured in the history of contemporary art at the Fine Arts School in Caen and has published widely in catalogues and periodicals, including *Struktury*, *Wiadomości Plastyczne*, *Współczesność*, and *Art Press*. She has co-organized a number of exhibitions, including “Échange entre artistes 1931–1982, Pologne–USA” (Paris, 1982). She is the author of *Traktat o życiu Krzysztofa Niemczyka na użytek młodych generacji* (Treatise on the life of Krzysztof Niemczyk for the Benefit of Young Generations, 2007) and *Wierzę w wolność, ale nie nazywam się Beethoven* (I Do Believe in Freedom but ain't Beethoven, in print).

Paweł Polit is a curator and art critic. He teaches American art at the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw, and is curator of the Auditorium Public Events Program at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw. Among the exhibitions he has curated there are “Martin Creed” (2004); “Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz: Philosophical Marginalia” (2004); “Conceptual Reflection in Polish Art: Experiences of Discourse: 1965–1975” (1999); and “Peter Downsbrough: Inside” (1994). He has published in exhibition catalogues and in the art periodicals *Kresy*, *Magazyn Sztuki*, *Er(r)go*, and *Obieg*.

Bios of other contributors:

Claire Bishop p. 15, Piotr Piotrowski p. 149, Tomáš Pospiszyl p. 75, Magda Raczyńska p. 205, Joanna Mytkowska p. 11.

## The Zalesie Ball and Participation





Claire Bishop: I would like to ask some questions about 1968 in general, and about the ball in particular. For me the connotations of a ball are aristocratic. In the West a ball is something that only the very rich do. So what does it mean, to adopt the social format of a ball? What made it oppositional?

Anka Ptaszkowska: As a co-organizer of the ball, I can only say that in “socialist” Poland, we partied. That ball was unique, but we partied on an everyday basis. That was our way of resisting. Fun as the underestimated enemy of all authority. I must admit I have never before thought about the “aristocratic” connotation of the ball, but it is perhaps worth taking a closer look at this. Whoever is from a classless society, raise your hands... Maybe a ball entitled *Farewell to Spring*, right after March 1968, was a show of audacity on our part?

Piotr Piotrowski: My comments will concern the ball and its interpretation, and the year 1968 itself. Reacting to psychological trauma in difficult times is nothing new in the history of culture, it appeared already in ancient times, it takes place today and will probably always exist. One way is to organize balls, or more generally - to have fun. But it rarely happens that this type of reaction is understood in political terms, and it is even more rarely called audacious. I understand that an overinterpretation is also a form of interpretation, and such a way of analyzing that experience should be approached with some respect. But I feel that it was a form of escapism rather than a form of engagement or comment vis-à-vis the political situation.

Concerning the year 1968... Poland is perhaps the only country in which a ball is organized in context of '68. And at the same time, art which would comment on those events is not created. In other countries in Central and Eastern Europe - which also experienced socialist realism and underwent the trauma of forced politicization, the identification of Communist propaganda and socially engaged art - the artistic response in terms of artwork production was more explicit. Participants of this conference can tell you a lot about how it looked in Czechoslovakia. The Hungarian artistic reaction to 1968 was also very interesting and intense. Many artists commented the events of Prague Spring: Szentjoby, Lakner, Pauer. So, if the main artistic manifestation of Polish culture in the context of 1968 was a ball, rather than the creation of artistic works and commentaries, this is somehow original and worth noticing.

Anka Ptaszkowska: The term “audacity” is not only not an over-interpretation, it is not even an interpretation. These are sim-

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ple facts. If you are banned from holding meetings consisting of more than three people, then holding a ball for several dozen people is audacious. The ball was also audacious with regard to the atmosphere of mourning among the correctly thinking, patriotic part of society. You are talking about art which would constitute a commentary on history, political history. And we were not interested in commentary, we were interested in reality: acting within reality, and not just commenting on it. We left that to art historians. And we weren't disappointed.

Paweł Polit: It is difficult to give the ball a public dimension, it took place in a private garden. Let me ask about the distinction between private and public.

Anka Ptaszkowska: All this took place between the private space and the very scarce public space. At the time, there were very few public spaces available for independent activities: we tore them away from public control in various ways. Naturally, there existed an fluidity between the two, as well as a very promising exchange. Private space tried to install itself in public space, and vice-versa. For example, Kantor's happenings were not a form of political commentary and had no political intentions, but had a direct and extremely broad (and thus political) effect. Without any information in the press, thanks only to word of mouth, 1500 people showed up on a remote beach in Łazy...<sup>1</sup>

Piotr Piotrowski: But Kantor's *Panoramic Sea Happening* is completely different to the ball - it was located in a public space and was seen as a work of art. I'm simply questioning the uniqueness of the ball as an event, it seems to me that the situation is frequent and well-known in history, that people have fun when the world around them is crumbling.

Anka Ptaszkowska: I would just like to repeat after you, Piotr, that *The Zalesie Ball* was the only ball in the context of socialist countries in 1968. I would prefer that you yourselves judge whether it was an escapist activity, or if it was more engaged - I am not going to hand out keys or pick locks. At the time, nobody thought about today's "historical" analysis of that event, nor - once again following your thought, Piotr - did anyone consider it a work of art. However, in 2006 Paweł Althamer reconstructed the ball in the Ujazdowski Castle gardens. He obviously felt a need to refer to this event. This is worth considering and this is sufficient for me.

Claire Bishop: I would like to ask Paweł about this reconstruction from 2006. Was this reconstruction for the sake of his-

<sup>1</sup> This is where, on August 23, 1967, Tadeusz Kantor organized the *Panoramic Sea Happening* [*Panoramiczny happening morski*]. (Ed.)



torical interest, or to learn something about such sociable events today? What did you try to achieve through that reconstruction?

Paweł Polit: I wanted to document a unique event. I was fascinated with the fact that Anka focused on situationism and anarchism. It was a type of abstraction, while at the same time the ball itself eludes abstraction. I think that this event was important in mocking the official rhetoric used by the authorities. Are there any analogies?

Tomáš Pospiszyl: There is Alex Mlynárčik, who did similar actions in Slovakia in 1960s. But I would like to go back to notion of escapism that was mentioned in a connection with *The Zalesie Ball*. I think that we tend to forget that the society of that time and the whole environment was far from normal. It was a situation where people were prevented from meeting each other. One type of reaction is to go against this situation - have fun, even in the time that we are not supposed to meet and have fun. There was probably a lot of alcohol during this event, but does it make escapist? I don't think so. What was important is that people formed community, a community that decided not to bend in front of authorities. To have a ball was an expression of their autonomous life. There are several similar examples in the Czechoslovak art of that time. Artists had no place to exhibit, so they started to meet in the only section of the public sphere that was free for them. And that was bars. A certain group of artists, so called Křížovnická škola, decided to meet every evening in the bar and play drinking games; it became a social event, conceptual art. Of course if these rituals were repeated everyday, it was a form of demonstrative self destruction as well.

Back to Mlynárčik. His social actions tend to be social rituals derived from celebrations, weddings, etc. Alcohol was also important there as a part of expressing festivity. But it was not a reaction to the political situation of that time. What is also important for Mlynárčik and other artists of that time was the idea of pushing the boundaries of art. The key element of these actions was the appropriation of reality: they were taking already existing situations or rituals and turning them into art. There were some participants that didn't know they were taking part in an art action. They though it was a real wedding, a real train trip, etc.<sup>2</sup>

Magda Raczyńska: To me, the question of the reality regarding contemporary narratives, the contemporary look at what happened in 1968, seems constructive and interesting. How do

<sup>2</sup> See Alex Mlynárčik's actions *Eva's Wedding [Evina Svadba]* in Žilina (1972) and *If All the Trains in the World/Day of Joy [Keby všetky vlaky sveta/Deň radosti]* in Zakamenne, Orava (1971). [Ed.]





we interpret artworks from that time? What is the contemporary role of institutional and political narratives in demarcating the scope of avant-garde? What conditions have to be met for something to be seen as avant-garde, as against other works not being seen as avant-garde?

Joanna Mytkowska: It is indeed interesting why some narratives of 1968 return, while others don't, or haven't yet. The immense interest in this period is obvious. It seems to me that the reconstruction of the ball resulted in part from Paweł Polit's interests, and in part from the interests of artists. So it involves some sort of phenomenon of participation. This type of participation surely interested - it may still interest - Paweł Althamer. I see the interest in this period of history residing in the fact that there are no rules, no regulations. And this is one of the features of the often discussed - both in the context of 1968, and in the context of current artistic practices - phenomenon of participation.



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# Participation: Discussion between Joanna Mytkowska,

Joanna Mytkowska, Grzegorz Kowalski, Artur Żmijewski, Claire Bishop,  
Magda Raczyńska, Anka Ptaszkowska, Piotr Piotrowski, Karol Sienkiewicz 113

Grzegorz Kowalski is a sculptor, performance and installation artist, and art critic. Professor in the Department of Sculpture, Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. His first individual exhibition (the installation *Pocket*) was at the Foksal Gallery in 1968. In the 1970s he joined the Repassage gallery. In his work he has developed specific forms of expression engaging other participants: action-questions (*Would You Like to Return to Your Mother's Womb?* 1981–87), one-off events (*Compilation* 1977), collections (*Suitcases* 1986–1991), and live collages. He has had numerous exhibitions, including “Variants” (Warsaw, 2007), “Sculptors photograph” (Warsaw 2004), “What Does the Dead Man’s Glassy Eye See” (Warsaw 2001–2). An eminent educator, his workshop (called the *Kowalnia* [the Smithy]) has had as students Paweł Althamer, Katarzyna Kozyra, and Artur Żmijewski.

Artur Żmijewski is an artist, critic, curator, and a member of the editorial board of *Krytyka Polityczna*. A graduate of the sculpture department at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw (diploma in the studio of Grzegorz Kowalski in 1995), he was awarded a fellowship at the Gerrit Rietveld Akademie in 1999. He works with installations, objects, and photographs; makes video works and films; and writes (*Applied Social Arts manifesto*, 2007). His film *Repetition* was presented in the Polish Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennial in 2005, and won first prize at the KunstFilmBiennale in Cologne, 2005. His film *Them* (2007) had its première at Documenta 12 in Kassel. His last film, *Democracies* (2009), was shown at Foksal Gallery Foundation, Kunsthau Graz, and Berlin’s DAAD Galerie. In 2009 he had solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and the X Initiative in New York.

Karol Sienkiewicz is a critic and art historian. He graduated in international relations at the Warsaw School of Economics (2005), and in Art History at the University of Warsaw (2007). In 2004–2008 he was the editor of the contemporary art internet magazine *Sekcja*.

Bios of other contributors:

Joanna Mytkowska p. 11, Claire Bishop p. 15, Magda Raczyńska p. 205, Anka Ptaszkowska p. 107, Piotr Piotrowski p. 149.

# Grzegorz Kowalski and Artur Żmijewski







Action by Jacek Markiewicz during *[S]election.pl*,  
CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 2005

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Paweł Althamer, Artur Żmijewski, children's workshop, [S]election.pl,  
CCA Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 2005

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Galeria Foksal after Tadeusz Kantor's happening  
*Rembrandt's Anatomy Lesson*, 1969, photo by Eustachy Kossakowski

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Joanna Mytkowska: I would like to propose a discussion of the [*S]election.pl* [*Wybory.pl*] project that was organized as part of a series of exhibitions entitled “At the Very Centre of Attention” [*W samym centrum uwagi*] at the Centre for Contemporary Art at Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw in 2005.<sup>1</sup> I would like to treat it as an example of a project that expands and complicates the notion of participation. [*S]election.pl* was initiated by Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski. When invited to present their work as part of an effort aimed at recapping the successes of Polish art at the turn of the century, the artists proposed to return to their university experience. They had studied at the atelier of Grzegorz Kowalski at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, where they were a part of a closed group of experimenters. They were particularly interested repeating an exercise from the academy called *Common Space, Private Space* [*Obszar wspólny, obszar własny*] which is based on a dialogue carried out by means of a visual language, and on confronting the work of an individual artist with the evaluation and interventions of the group. As a result, the students from Grzegorz Kowalski’s atelier were invited to participate, as was the professor.

Initially, the project was intended to be a repetition of an old exercise, the results of which would be presented to the viewers. Together with Professor Kowalski, artists worked in separate galleries of the Centre. Gradually, however, they invited a growing number of participants, before finally opening everything up to the public, which was done through two symbolic gestures: they took out the door to the area where they worked and they built a staircase that led from the outside of the museum through a window and directly into the space of the project. From that moment on anybody could be a part of the situation. The invitation, however, was by no means one to leisure. The artists proposed different activities that often required the destruction of the previous participant’s creative expression; the game played with the viewer was neither systematic nor transparent but rather full of digressions and references that were difficult to understand. The activities were often uncoordinated and contradictory, yet required complete involvement and spontaneous reactions. Organized groups of participants, introduced to the project by the participating artists, tested quite well in the situation. These were, for example, the Nowolipie group created by Paweł Althamer, school children, or prostitutes hired by Jacek Markiewicz.<sup>2</sup> A random viewer, however, although invited and expected, could definitely experience a sense of

<sup>1</sup> The series of exhibitions planned for one year and entitled “At the Very Centre of Attention” (Jarosław Suchan was the curator of the entire exhibition) was headed by [*S]election.pl*, a project run by Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski; an exhibition by Katarzyna Kozyra entitled “Punishment and Crime” and an exhibition documenting the activities undertaken in Grzegorz Kowalski’s studio in the framework of *Common Space, Private Space* (prepared by Kowalski and Ewa Witkowska). Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski renounced solo exhibitions for the sake of [*S]election.pl*. Artur Żmijewski wrote: “Althamer ↗





decided to organize an exhibition for his colleagues from the Academy of Fine Arts. Therefore, I did not agree to my solo exhibition - that is, to a division into the better, i.e. those who managed and work as artists, and those who dropped out, the worse - and I took part in Althamer's project. Together we came to the conclusion that the best way out of the situation will be to repeat an exercise from our student times. It later turned out to be a very valuable cognitive experience."

[S]election.pl participants listed in the catalogue: Jacek Adamas, Paweł Althamer, Marek Czarnecki, Monika Dzik, Katarzyna Górna, Katarzyna Kowalska (Koźmik), Grzegorz Kowalski, Katarzyna Kozyra, Jacek Kubicki, Mariusz Maciejewski, Jacek Malinowski, Monika Mamzeta, Jacek Markiewicz, Grzegorz Matusik, Waldemar Mazurek, Mikołaj Miodowski, Anna Mioduszewska, Jędrzej Niestrój, Grzegorz Olech, Monika Osiecka, Piotr Piecko, Tomasz Piłat, Bohdan Ruciński, Magda Rząsa, Marcin Rząsa, Roman Stańczak, Jane Stoykov, Zbigniew Szczepański, Janek Tomza, Artur Żmijewski. The activities also included people not listed above (e.g. Maurycy Gomulicki). See: *At the Very Centre of Attention. Part 1. Punishment and Crime*; [S]election.pl; *Common Space, Private Space. Kowalski's Workshop 1989-1994* [W samym centrum uwagi. Część 1. Katarzyna Kozyra, *Kara i Zbrodnia*; *Wybory.pl*; *Obszar Wspólny, Obszar Własny. Pracownia Kowalskiego 1989-1994*], exhibition catalogue, Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, 4 Nov – 18 Dec 2005, Warszawa 2005; A. Żmijewski, "[S]election.pl. Repetition of the students' exercise *Common Space, Private Space*", *Piktogram*, no. 5/6, 2006, pp.126-144; G. Kowalski, "Grzegorz Kowalski writes to Artur Żmijewski", *Piktogram*, no. 5/6, 2006, pp.147-148 [Ed.]

<sup>2</sup> Multiple Sclerosis sufferers, participants of Paweł Althamer's ceramic workshops at the State Art Centre at Nowolipki Street in Warsaw.

tension, chaos, and disorder. In addition, the effectiveness of participation as a tool was also put to the test: One of the invited participants hung on a gallery wall a poster of the then presidential candidate, Donald Tusk, in a Wehrmacht uniform. This was in the aftermath of a public electoral discourse in Poland in 2005 that revealed a particularly acute conflict between the supporters of transformation and the traditional part of the society. Populism entered the public debate, leading to less-than-polite attempts at discrediting candidates from opposing camps that drew on the atavistic Polish fears (such as





of World War II). The poster mentioned could only be treated as a vulgar electoral slander. This intervention, which appeared in the chaos of different activities and reasons, caused a crisis among the participants. It proposed questions about the limits of the freedom of expression and the sense of participation. I think that this complex project and its legacy is a great starting point for a discussion of the changes in forms of participation since the 1960s, as well as the challenges and limitations of them today.

Claire Bishop: When I visited *[S]election.pl*, it struck me that this was not an exhibition for a secondary audience. There was no option of being a viewer in this exhibition; you could only be a participant. And even if you were a participant, the experience was not aimed towards producing a rewarding exhibition experience in the conventional sense. So my question is about quality: if everything is open and everyone can participate, how do we evaluate the outcome of that participation? And how do we compare it to other situations that are equally 'open'?

Artur Żmijewski: Indeed, it was best to be a participant. We announced it numerous times. By taking the door out of the gallery and by inviting people to workshops we invited them to be participants in this event.

Joanna Mytkowska: I would say that the value of this project also goes beyond the experience of direct participation. *[S]election.pl* effectively undermined both exhibition conventions (i.e. the relationship between the artists and the audience) and institutional structures. The event became an analysis of the sense of participation in itself. Of course, the cost was such that the exhibition became rather hermetic, which was passionately criticized, and rightly so. But there was a substantive positive effect. This project was a reaction to a certain challenge posed by the given situation: the Centre for Contemporary Art wanted to celebrate the international success of Polish art—in a moment of parliamentary elections and the appearance of a deep conflict in Polish society. Those artists who felt that their works are more about describing and improving the world around them rather than having "artistic" successes reacted by creating a project that undermined the institution's proposed starting point. As a result, the public was offered not a chance to bask in Polish artists' success but to partake in a stimulated social discussion with all its conflicts, lack of clarity, stupidity, and filth. This is how I would, more or less, see the context of *[S]election.pl*.

Claire Bishop: I think my question is more methodological. What seems to be interesting in *[S]election.pl* is the principle of the

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participatory structure – and not what results from this structure on the level of visual objects in the exhibition space. It's about dynamic process rather than static results. So my question is: is *[S]election.pl* all about the form? The collapse of content into form?

Joanna Mytkowska: In the case of *[S]election.pl* the form was an instrument. The point of reference and, therefore, the content of the project, was a heated public debate soiled with populism. We can also think of a different context, namely that of a popular culture in which a certain caricature of the idea of participation becomes the desired form of social life. And so an artistic project underlines this caricature-like character.

I would now like to ask Grzegorz Kowalski about the historical context of the phenomenon of participation. How was the idea of participation during the 1960's different from what we have today? Doesn't it perhaps function in other areas of social reality?

Grzegorz Kowalski: In the 1960's, under the conditions of the old socialism, it was a voice that was critical but took the form of a positive proposition—a project of building our environment in a way that would make our life easier and encourage people to be more friendly and creative. The landscape of socialist Poland was dominated by a grey mass of people deprived of dignity. We designed space as much as we designed social situations that were to display the human being not as an anonymous part of the masses but as an empowered individual. Oskar Hansen spoke of making the individual “legible” in “great numbers.” He accepted the participation of a pedestrian in the act of forming public space. The realization of Hansen's concept of the Open Form would be dangerous to an authoritarian regime. The empowerment of people would be a negation of the hegemony of the one and only party of the “working masses.” Participation, therefore, was a sprout of democracy—hence an ideological threat to the regime.

Under the circumstances of regained independence, participation can be an area of abuse. The aggressive power of marketing and commercialization pushes any pro-public endeavor onto the margins. Public space is dominated by the sell/buy formula. There is no agora for people to exchange opinions, no opportunity for mature reflection. Participation means taking part in such an exchange and not a situation in which people feel they can do or say any idiotic thing.

Magda Raczynska: I would like to refer to what Claire and Joanna have said. Participation today permeates all spheres of life, not





only cultural but social and economic spheres as well. The juxtaposition of the “primary” and “secondary” audience in the context of *[S]election.pl* is important in understanding the shift that has taken place between the subjective concept of participation and what is happening today. Is reaching the secondary audience in such a case as *[S]election.pl*, the only goal of an artistic institution, a museum, or a gallery? All of a sudden, it turns out that the quality of an artistic project is evaluated on the basis of whether this product, namely the exhibition, is comprehensible and communicative to a large audience. Thus we are applying the concept of participation just as we would do it in, say, modern corporations and their marketing strategies, which make use of different activities based on participation with the aim to merely increase productivity or work efficiency—and not to boost empowerment.

How did I receive this exhibition? I was not a participant but the project made a huge impression on me. On the one hand, there was chaos. On the other, however, I was impressed by this unbelievable energy, which was tangible. Having sensed it under the layer of white paint that covered up all preceding activities, I knew something important had happened. My own inability to understand what it was, proved to be the most interesting thing of all. I found myself in a situation in which nobody tried to explain anything to me, nobody expected me to understand and translate presented images into specific notions. It was a brave undertaking, and, at the same time, a rare example of a peculiar type of practice in mainstream art institutions, which tend to tame radicalism and go for big shows for mass audiences. I am sure the Museum of Modern Art will also face this dilemma in the future. An interesting question thus appears: how can such provocative projects be realized in the future?

Joanna Mytkowska: This is something very difficult to plan up front: “Right, now we’re doing a provocative project.” This, to my mind, is the most valuable and most effective type of participation, when emotions are stirred and the audience has to react. I suppose that employing an honest approach to socially sensitive issues and then accepting the responsibility for the consequences of such a stance is one way of evoking true participation.

In terms of *[S]election.pl*, however, the participation so designed was possible because the institution, namely the Center for Contemporary Art, resisted the artists. When the institution ceases to resist and lets artists do anything, this





tension evoking emotions and participation has to be built in a different way.

Magda Raczyńska: Can an institution be resisted? In this context, the concept proposed by Irit Rogoff concerning participatory projects and large audiences seems interesting.<sup>3</sup> Rogoff claims that the notion of “access” is not necessarily adequate: What counts is the institutional efficiency gauged by the numbers of viewers coming to Tate Modern with their kids; she therefore proposed a different approach, one of “accessibility.” It means to transform questions generated by institutions and instead pose our own versions. This notion is useful in a discussion, though I don’t know whether it is realistic in the context of the *modus operandi* of art, if only to gauge the example of *[S]election.pl*. A classified ad had to be published in a newspaper so that people would attend.<sup>4</sup> Then they had to be managed, and directed. There is always this blocking of the freedom of participation connected to what is expected of the audience.

Artur Żmijewski: People have to be informed. Otherwise, how are they to know about our plans and about our invitation? It’s true that cooperation between an artist and an institution is based on a common agreement that both are playing for the same stakes and are on the same team. What happened at this exhibition was different. The institution was raped; its stake was lower than ours. And so Paweł and I worked for our own interest and took advantage of this enormously strong medium, the Centre. We were playing our own stakes. We turned the place into a lab in which we tried to develop our own tools and verify what we had been using before. It was a trial by fire to see how it all functions and to form new tools for the future. This was our hidden agenda.

Anka Ptaszkowska: I want to ask whether it is possible to go beyond the formalism, this political verbalism, just as you have gone beyond artistic verbalism or formalism. I would like to refer to the 1960’s. I feel I have the duty to recall the embarrassment at the idea of participation which we experienced at Foksal Gallery, for example. Let me recall Kantor’s happenings, which were seemingly an opening up to the audience and public space. At one point, however, we became aware of the fact that Kantor sees this opening up purely formally, that it is easy and purely mechanical. When he came to this conclusion, he wrote “The end to the so called participation” on the wall of the gallery, just before his *Rembrandt’s Anatomy Lesson* happening. And so back then, in 1969, we were disenchanted with participation as an artistic form.

<sup>3</sup> See I. Rogoff, “Academy as potentiality”, paper during the conference “SUMMIT non-aligned initiatives in education culture”, Berlin, May 2007, <http://summit.kein.org/node/191>.

<sup>4</sup> The artists-curators of *[S]election.pl* posted an advertisement in *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily in which they invited anybody to take part in artistic workshops organized in the framework of the exhibition.



Another example is that of Włodzimierz Borowski, who is perhaps the most subversive artist of that time. His *Syncretic Show* [*Pokaz synkretyczny*] at Foksal Gallery in 1966 was about the reversal of roles and was done in an extremely malicious manner. The viewer was watched by the artist, was blinded and made feel uneasy as a result of losing a safe distance from the work of art. This was an obvious act of disbelief in participation.

Only once did Foksal Gallery let itself forget about the issue of quality and evaluation by trying to open up to anarchistic participation that undermined the status of a work of art. This was by publishing the so called *New Rules* [*Nowy regulamin*] in 1970, which never entered into force but which marked the end of the cooperation of the gallery's founders.

As I understand it, *[S]election.pl* is an expansion and an intensification of the scope of participation. So, just as you have tried to outdistance the artistic formalism of participation can you also cross the political formalism, connected with partisanship or with belonging to a political party? In other words, can you use participation to defend your concept of the world in a very informal, diverse, and unpredictable manner? Can you defend this program of changing the world against partisanship, instilling it in a political agenda which always leads to limitations and compromises?

Artur Żmijewski: The artists that have come from Grzegorz's atelier are ones like Kozyra, for example, who formulated very distinct and very audible postulates of change, such as in our attitude towards animals. We formulated very ethically deep but simultaneously extremely unethical statements about animal rights. She did so in the public sphere. Requesting a response to such a postulate and demanding to be heard is a political activity, a political act. This strategy was also used by Monika Zielińska, for example, who is very deeply involved in the feminist movement. She contributed to the manifestation and presence of feminist views in the public sphere. Katarzyna Górna is another artist presenting her position in the feminist debate. Jacek Markiewicz, a more controversial figure, was more into postulating increased liberalization of lifestyles. Jacek Adamas—another fascinating figure from Grzegorz Kowalski's atelier—recently placed his own private statute at Dworzec Gdański railway station, which was the witness of the exodus of Polish Jews in 1968.<sup>5</sup> All of these have been, to my mind, purely political acts. We also wonder whether we are not making mistakes in our activities. One mistake, or perhaps an

<sup>5</sup> Jacek Adamas, *Untitled*, 2008, plasterboard, wood, foil. "The letter A, approximately two meters tall, was placed against the wall of Gdańsk Railway Station building in Warsaw in close proximity to the plate commemorating the Jewish immigrants of March 1968. Using the foil, plates in the shape of Hebrew letters were attached to the letter A. The object stood by the station without a license for about a month. Despite this, it was neither taken away nor destroyed." in A. Żmijewski, *Drżące ciała. Rozmowy z artystami* [Trembling Bodies: Conversations With Artists], 2nd ed., Warsaw 2008, p.50. Jacek Adamas previously ↗



used the capital letter A at the exhibition [*S]election.pl*.

omission on our part, is the inability to control conflicts. Kozyra, for example, formerly resorted to a strategy of evoking conflicts in the public sphere. This was her strength. Her weakness, however, was that the media took over complete control over the definition of these conflicts. And perhaps we are still not ready to act in line with such a strategy. Even if we are able to draft a framework for a conflict, move the players and convince them to act, then still the conflict remains under the control of somebody else—not the artist, not the gallery, not the critics.

Anka Ptaszkowska: I agree with that completely, and I know that every single act is political. It only depends on the scope of the notion of politics. What I am talking about, and what seems to be very much outdated—dating back as 1920's—is that the artist is responsible for creating change in the world. And I will insist on this, just as I will insist that this is not the same as the political programs as we know them.

And one more thing gets in the way of our communication: the difference between positive and negative activities, or the so called opposition. This oppositional character is enshrined in your activities. In case of positive activities, which are so often connected with participation, there is the mad danger of recuperation. Joanna confirmed this when she spoke of the institutions that resisted. An institution that allows everything, where everything is allowed, makes no sense. Or at least opposing it is not possible.

Piotr Piotrowski: What Anka has just said is very interesting. I beg to differ: the programme to repair the world is anything but passé. I am about to publish Krzysztof Wodiczko's extensive manifesto, which ends with a statement about the return of utopia.<sup>6</sup>

Anka's question can be seen as a trap that art sets for itself, similar to the one which once involved American artists who had thought that paying a five-dollar submission fee opened up the exhibition to all possible projects. This five-dollar fee was, they thought, to guarantee absolute freedom. Only when Duchamp sent his urinal and was rejected was it revealed that it was not enough simply to pay the five dollars. There was a trap.

When you spoke of Tusk's portrait in the Wehrmacht uniform and the controversies this act caused—Grzegorz was against, Artur was for—it seemed to me that the trap of the notion of

<sup>6</sup> See K. Wodiczko, "Miejsce pamięci ofiar 11 września. Propozycja przekształcenia Nowego Jorku w *Miasto ucieczki*", ["Place of Commemoration of the Victims of 9/11. Proposal to transform New York into a *City of Escape*"], *Artium Quaestiones*, No. XIX, Poznań, 2008, pp.243-280.



artistic freedom was again beginning to function. On the one hand we say that freedom is something constitutional to art. On the other, however, we all have our beliefs and convictions. When it comes to politics, our convictions are more or less similar. But what Anka was talking about, to my mind, is that we also have our own beliefs, whereas opening up to politicality is opening up, in the words of Chantal Mouffe, to conflict and dispute. Is such an opening-up possible? This is the question that Ms. Ptaszkowska asked. Is it possible to cross these boundaries? From Joanna's reconstruction and Grzegorz's intervention, I gather that it isn't.

Grzegorz Kowalski: I am generally all for conflict. But one needs to see the goal. It cannot be a conflict for conflict's sake. In the case of the poster of Tusk, there was no goal. The goal was not formulated. A quote was introduced that bore no consequences apart from causing a brawl.

Artur Żmijewski: I was thinking about this poster. A prohibited motif, and a mean, vile trick played on Mr. Tusk by his opponents, appeared in the context of the exhibition. Perhaps this is the weakness of art. Any artistic endeavor, no matter how mean, is interpreted as intended for a good final outcome. Even when Santiago Sierra employed paupers or poorly paid workers in his projects, and put them in humiliating situations, the art world interprets it as criticism of capitalism, economic violence, and exploitation. But perhaps Santiago speaks to us directly. Perhaps he conveys a literal message, with no metaphors? Perhaps his projects represent his hard-line opinion on how capitalism should treat people? This is what I find missing. I want the art scene to be an equivalent of the ideological landscape that we have in politics. If art is seen as social criticism then this criticism is most often associated with a leftist position. What is criticized is how western society and western democracies treat migrants, different nationalities, other religions. This is also a criticism of the economic situation of women, etc. Art has become the Ghandi of our times—we have to defend society's undefended. This is a noble cause but one which eliminates the actual dispute, as those who have a different opinion have no access to this discussion. Paradoxically, there is no conflict in art—instead we have statements and noble manifestos of goodness, kind help, and care. Art has become overly ethical. The one voice that appeared in a rudimentary and degraded form among us, a voice which represented a nationalistic and rightist outlook, was the voice of [Bartłomiej] Kurzeja—a voice represented by means of this vile poster—a political slander.

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Audience: Don't you think that the same mistake is made over and over again? You keep using this 19th-century term, *artist*. And what if we were to say that we are makers of art objects? This is a substantial differentiation as we are touching on social issues, and these are issues that are much more precisely talked about by psychologists, sociologists, etc.—only they are more boring than we are. We do things which are spectacular, and that is why people want to see them. Nobody wants to read a psychology textbook even though it offers a much deeper description of the things we talk about. Why is it that projects such as *[S]election.pl* are not organized by interdisciplinary groups? The reason is so that specialists can control each other and keep each other disciplined. The artistic value of such a participatory program is strictly conventional. A gallery is a place with a mandate to host things that are different. Just like in a film. If we invite everyone to participate then the word “artist” is a redundant burden, as it only causes a split into primary and secondary audiences, into the division between the artist and the rest. If we simply said that we are nothing more than makers of art objects, and that we have the same problems as others, and we do the same things as others only that we present it in a more spectacular manner, I believe the situation would be much clearer.

Magda Raczyńska: I have a feeling that you have just equipped Artur with more arguments, namely that artists are belittled for their actions, no matter how radical they may be, only because they are artists. In Poland there is a set of mechanisms for stifling conflicts generated by artists. I do believe, however, that the very ability to generate conflicts is value in itself. The very moment of introducing a problem into the public sphere—like Kozyra does, for example—is already measurable. The very ability to introduce a new issue into the public discourse is a political ability—take the example of Rancière. And now a question about control: is an artist able to exert control over a conflict which the work has already broken out into the public domain? Is it not enough for the artist to appreciate the moment of the opening of this conflict? Is this control needed? If so, for what?

Artur Żmijewski: Of course I was very glad to see the different postulates formulated by artists and how they have managed to introduce different topics to public discussion. Most of these attempts, however, have ended in failure. The reason was that those who had access to media, or who were more politically powerful and knowledgeable in culture-war strategies, simply





negated the value of these postulates—most often by accusing artists of scandalizing. These people were able to control the course of the conflict by, for example, extinguishing it. And this is what we should learn from our adversaries, so that we know how to defend the validity of an artistic postulate—and not only in the field of art. The artist-gallery relationship is based on the gallery supporting the artist and participating in the conflict in which the artist is involved. So whenever it is the public, the media, or the addressee of the artistic postulate that responds this way, we move beyond the field of art. This does not happen very often, and both artists and galleries are unprepared and scared.

Joanna Mytkowska: And so we have introduced yet another aspect to our discussion of participation. The issue of control leads to a question about the tensions and differences between free participation and directed participation, or even a manipulation of the public. Let me remind you that we have already talked about it on the occasion of the screening of Artur Żmijewski's film *Them*.<sup>7</sup>

Claire Bishop: I want to bring us back to the point of this session, which was to compare participation after 68 with participation after 89. I wanted to go back to Kowalski's statement, that for him participation in the 60's was about constructing a more human environment, and giving people certain tools so that they can bring back dignity to their lives. So, I want to ask Żmijewski if this is still the motive of participation today? Because it seems to me that many of the techniques that you use are driven more to disruption and unpredictability, risk or frustration. So I want to ask to what extent you sympathize or subscribe to the motives that Kowalski articulated?

Artur Żmijewski: I am not against what Grzegorz stated.

Grzegorz Kowalski: The question has probably appeared due to my use of the word *dignity* in my previous comment. In his work, Artur enters the sphere of human dignity. For me, however, it is the goal that is important, the objective, the intention. The generally superior objective is cognition, or *to know* in the broadest sense of the word. It is not about attaining some kind of a direct result, some "product of the exhibition" (as has been suggested here). It is not the product that is important but awareness. Nothing more than "I know" or "we have done something together and we know," and that's all.

Karol Sienkiewicz: I would like to draw your attention to a very important difference between *[S]election.pl* and the exercise *Common Space, Private Space*. Despite the fact that both Artur Żmijewski and Paweł Althamer referred to *Common Space*...

<sup>7</sup> A lecture by Claire Bishop, followed by the first Polish screening of Artur Żmijewski's *Them* took place during the first *Weekend at the Museum* on 25 November 2007.



the exercise as it was treated at the Centre was seriously modified. This modification was first and foremost about introducing destruction, which can on the one hand be seen as a violation of rules, but on the other, however, as a creative elaboration. The prohibition of destruction in *Common Space...* was to counteract the gestures that would halt the process of communication; it was there to protect this process. The process itself takes place in a laboratory-like condition and its objectives are mostly didactic. It is about leaving room for others to express themselves, so that they could have some anchorage. This is even more visible in the *Next* exercise. It's worth remembering, therefore, that there is usually an instance that determines the rules of participation. Some of the participants rejected the rules (or the lack thereof) imposed by Artur during *[S]election.pl*, and so they quit. On the other hand, suspending the rules can lead to a very interesting cognitive situation. Still, however, whether we're talking about *[S]election.pl* or *Common Space...*, we are dealing with a laboratory-like situation. The external elements (the children or the poster) only signaled its existence.

Hansen's type of participation, mentioned by Grzegorz, was something different. In this case the split into *primary* and *secondary audience* no longer bears any significance. Grzegorz spoke of Hansenian participation as of an element of empowering the individual, which was dangerous to the authorities in former times. On the other hand, however, acting in the area of big numbers, at the macro scale, turned out to be a dangerous utopia. For the avant-garde circles in Poland, and definitely for many of Hansen's students, 1968, just like 1970, was a time of great disappointment at the macro scale. It was after all in 1970 that Grzegorz Kowalski decided to end his collaboration with Hansen and quit working on the Continuous Linear System. The changes of those times, however, were the experience of that generation, and were not so much about giving faith as they were about causing doubt. Hansen's students created the Repassage gallery, where any group projects, including the participatory ones, took place among a closed circle of friends. The studio of Jerzy Jarnuszewicz or Kowalski's studio as of the 1980's were similarly exterritorial. The laboratory model is still valid in this studio, although in different socio-political circumstances. Artur was the first to point out its shortcomings. And now my hypothesis and a question: Was 1968 the end of such broad, humanistic understanding of the idea of participation? Or can one still go back to it?





Grzegorz Kowalski: For me personally, this is a marking line. In 1968 I lost any faith I had left in the possibility of doing anything real under socialism, and adopted an opposing attitude.

Joanna Mytkowska: Thank you very much.

Translated by Ewa Kanigowska-Gedroyć and  
Anna Szyjkowska-Piotrowska

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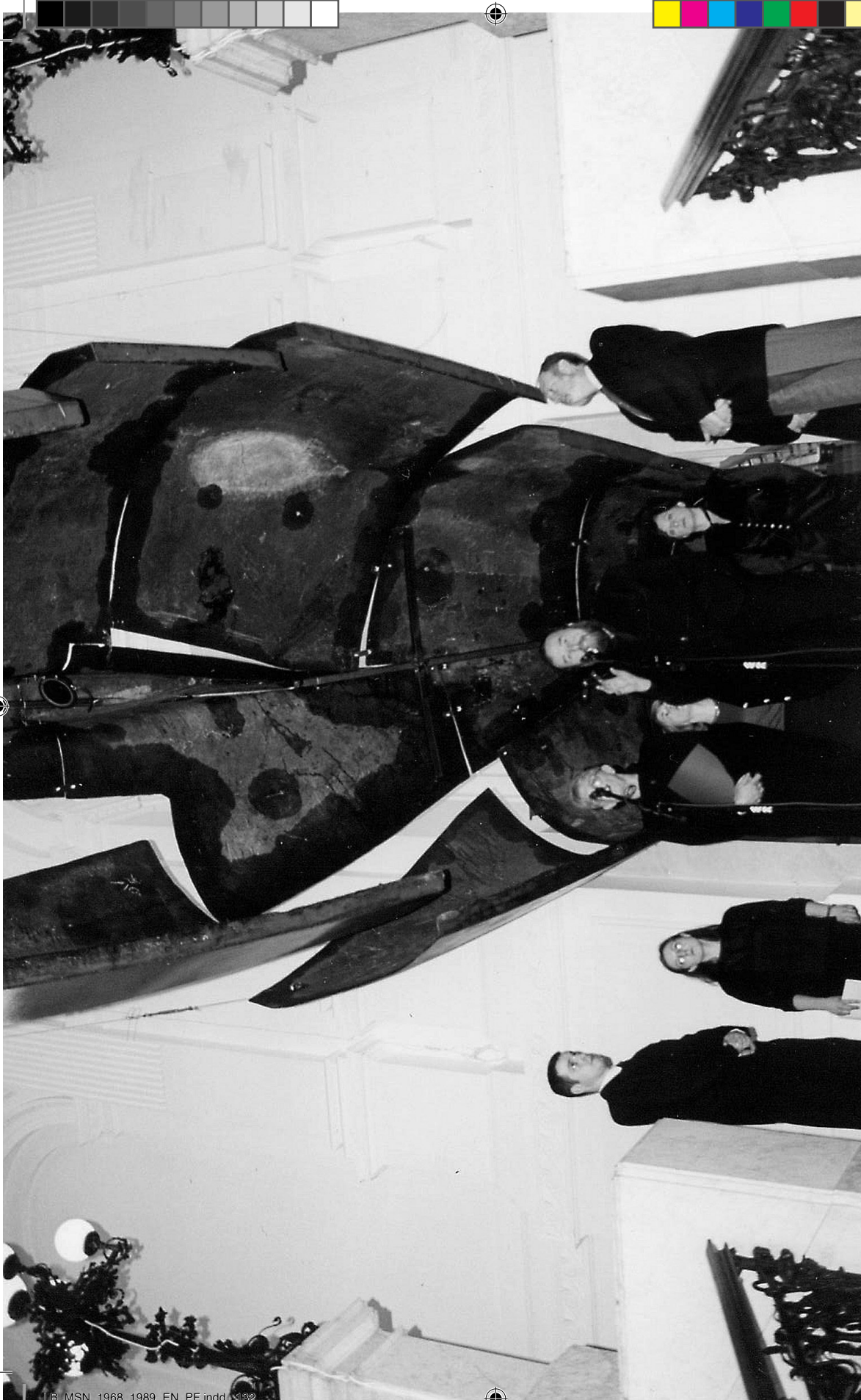




Gabriela Świtek is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Art History, University of Warsaw. She has published on contemporary architecture and art in *The Journal of Architecture*, *Czas Kultury*, and the *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, as well as in anthologies and exhibition catalogues. Since 1999 she has been a curator at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art. She is an author of *Writing on Fragments: Philosophy, Architecture, and the Horizons of Modernity* (2009) and author and editor of *Transfer* (2006); *Zachęta 1860–2000* (2003), and was curator of the Polish Pavilion for the 10th International Exhibition of Architecture in Venice (2006).

# Szeemann in Warsaw, or, the Ethical Function of the Exhibition





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Harald Szeemann opening the show "Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams. You May Find Yourself in Somebody Else's". In the background: *Moby Dick* by Krzysztof Bednarski (1986-1987), 14 December, 2000

Harald Szeemann guiding visitors through "Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams. You May Find Yourself in Somebody Else's", 14 December 2000. In the background: *Panoramic Sea Happening* by Tadeusz Kantor (1967)

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Witold Tomczak attacks Cattelan's *The Ninth Hour* (1999), in "Beware of Exiting 134  
Your Own Dreams...", 21 December, 2000, photo by P. Grzybowski/SE/EAST NEWS









**Between** 15 December 2000 and 28 January 2001 an exhibition curated by Harald Szeemann was presented at Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw. The event's opening and closing dates do not fit the time framework—1968-1989—defined in the title of this seminar at the Museum of Modern Art, and yet Szeemann's exhibition and its reception are symptomatic of the political and cultural changes that took place in one of the countries that emerged from behind the Iron Curtain after 1989. Few people remember the exhibition's correct title. It usually functions in the collective consciousness as the "Szeemann show" or the "jubilee show," because it was the main event commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Zachęta building, erected in 1900, and the founding in 1860 of the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts, known as Zachęta. The curator gave the exhibition a title that doubled as a warning: "Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams. You May Find Yourself in Somebody Else's". It is an aphorism by Stanisław Jerzy Lec, Polish poet, master of the paradox, and author of the famous volume *Unkempt Thoughts*.

What does the Warsaw exhibition by a world-famous curator have to do with the dates 1968 and 1989? Harald Szeemann considered 1968 – or rather the late 1960s – as a "real revolution" during which a new art was born, such as that of Joseph Beuys, Richard Serra, and conceptual art. In March 1969 Szeemann opened at Kunsthalle Bern one of conceptualism's most important exhibitions, "When Attitudes Become Form". Two months later, he organized a less well-known show, "Freunde—Friends—d'Fründe", featuring Karl Gerstner, Dieter Roth, Daniel Spoerri, and André Thomkins, who invited their artist friends. Roth invited Dorothy Iannone, but her paintings were censored before the opening at the other participants' request; the genitals visible in them were covered by brown tape. After a conversation with Roth, Szeemann distanced himself from the act of censorship, but the Kunsthalle board decided to remove Iannone's paintings from the show. The source of controversy was therefore colorfully painted genitals rather than the ambitious ideas of conceptual art. Following that experience, Szeemann left Kunsthalle Bern and became an independent curator.

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No work was censored during the show at Zachęta, but one could have easily sensed trouble when Szeemann decided to present Maurizio Cattelan's *The Ninth Hour* [*La nona ora*], a sculpture of the pope felled by a meteorite, in the largest gallery.<sup>A</sup> Zachęta's then director, Anda Rottenberg, who had invited Szeemann to curate the anniversary exhibition, resigned in 2001 in the wake of a flurry of attacks provoked by the Cattelan piece. (Strange coincidence? Iannone once told the story of the censoring of her works at the Kunsthalle Bern show in conversation with Cattelan.<sup>1</sup>)

The attack on Zachęta unfortunately began even before the Szeemann exhibition. In November 2000, a well-known Polish actor, Daniel Olbrychski, entered the gallery with a saber and slashed several of the photographs in Piotr Uklański's artwork *The Nazis* [*Naziści*]. The November event triggered a series of press articles and media debates about "iconoclastic" contemporary art. An avalanche of criticism was directed even at Julita Wójcik's completely innocent *Potato Peeling* performance [*Obieranie ziemniaków*], which took place at Zachęta's Small Salon in February 2001. The sight of a woman artist dressed in an apron, peeling potatoes and talking to the viewers, proved unacceptable. Everything arranged itself into a logical sequence: "saber—meteorite—potatoes", and numerous commentators depreciating the value of contemporary art stressed that were it not for the scandals, "not a single person would show interest in this stuff."

But let us return to the international dimension of Harald Szeemann's exhibition at Zachęta. Was it a "genuine revolution," a project matching his earlier great exhibitions? This is a question we have not yet found an answer to, busy as we are trying to recover from local scandals and traumas.

<sup>1</sup> M. Cattelan, "Dorothy Iannone: A Revolutionary Life," *Flash Art*, no.247, March-April, 2006, p.81.





## Voices of History

The majority of commentators wrote not about the exhibition and the ideas it presented, but about Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture. Most active in this regard were not art magazines, as might be supposed, but the right-wing Catholic daily *Nasz Dziennik*, which hardly specializes in writing on contemporary art. The headlines usually incorporated the word "scandal," inflected for all possible cases: "another scandal at Zachęta," "let's put an end to scandals." A photograph depicting the right-wing deputy Witold Tomczak, today an MEP, chased by the Zachęta security guards, running towards the Cattelan sculpture to remove the meteorite, won a Photo of the Month press contest.<sup>B</sup> It was Tomczak and Cattelan who became celebrities, not the famous exhibition curator who had invited the artist to present the piece. But the subject of the most severe attacks, including openly anti-Semitic ones, was not the artist or the curator, but Rottenberg, the Zachęta director.

The polemics concerning the Zachęta show revealed the political mechanisms of Poland's public and private-owned media. They also confirmed the suspicion that the contemporary visual arts are not treated as a serious voice in the cultural and social discourse. Contemporary art is one of the most ignored aspects of culture—even by some members of the intellectual elite. It has "marginal significance in the collective consciousness" and can at best serve to illustrate philosophical or literary works. The attacks aimed at Anda Rottenberg ricocheted and hit artists, critics, curators, and art historians who all had to be condemned for being part of "Andaland," as one journalist described the community of persons professionally involved in contemporary art.

The international reception of Szeemann's exhibition likewise focused on the Cattelan sculpture. In March 2001, the *New York Times* reported that the controversial work had been put up for auction. Perhaps the Warsaw show was of marginal significance; it took place between two other major international events that Szeemann managed: the 48th (1999) and 49th (2001) Venice Biennales. The only one of the curator's biographers to have



<sup>B</sup> Warsaw 21st of December 2000, "Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams. You May Find Yourself in Somebody Else's", photo by P. Grzybowski/SE/EAST NEWS

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asked Zachęta National Gallery of Art for information about the Warsaw project was Roman Kurzmeyer.<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition was to be accompanied by a small catalogue featuring a dozen or so installation views. Szeemann was to write short comments for the pieces depicted in these photographs, explaining his choices and the structure of the show. The photographs were selected but the accompanying text was not written before Szeemann passed away. The curator's intentions can be interpreted today only from the photographic documentation and from his comments made at the press conference.

#### Art from Poland, That Is, from Here

The exhibition began in Zachęta's three lower galleries. In the first one, the so-called Small Salon, a 1901 Warsaw peepshow machine was displayed, brought from its original venue at Aleje Jerozolimskie; it presented a set of 48 photographs from Zachęta's history prepared specially for the exhibition. Szeemann designed a podium on which the machine was placed and had the architectural ornaments of the Small Salon's walls and ceiling gilded to create a more nineteenth-century look. On the walls around the peep show he placed a dozen photographs by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy) and Józef Głogowski from the well-known Polish private collection of Stefan Okołowicz and Ewa Franczak.

The next gallery was also meant to resemble an old salon. Szeemann spent a couple of hours creating a floor-to-ceiling arrangement of paintings by Jacek Malczewski. This included the artist's important works characteristic of late-nineteenth-century symbolism (e.g. *Vicious Circle* [*Błędne koło*], 1895-1897) but also Malczewski's fascinating and narcissistic self-portraits. Next to this he placed Wojciech Weiss's *Self-Portrait With Masks* [*Autoportret z maskami*, 1900] and Paweł Althamer's *Self-Portrait* [*Autoportret*, 1993], as well as Władysław Podkowiński's sketch for *Frenzy of Exultations* [*Szał uniesień*, 1893], a painting that caused a scandal when first shown at Zachęta over a hundred years ago because it depicted a naked woman on a frenzied horse. As this short list suggests, *wunderkammer* is not only a

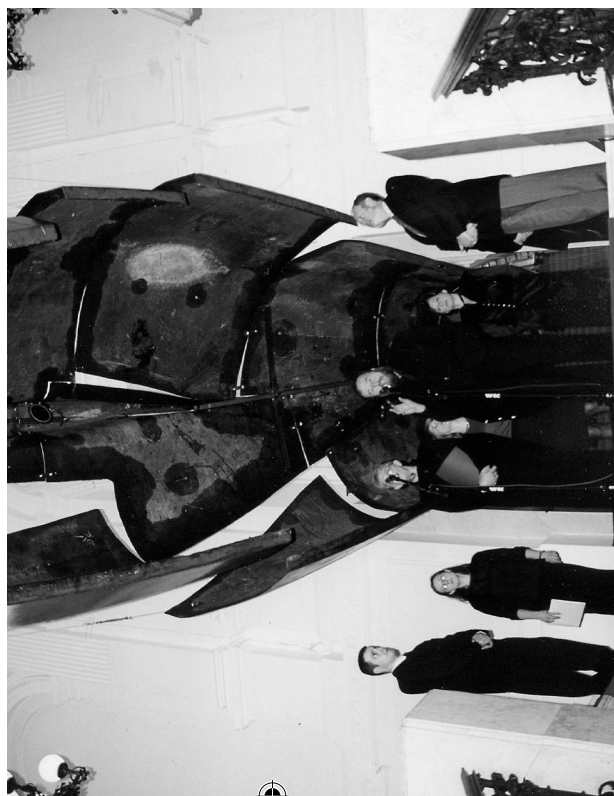
<sup>2</sup> See T. Bezzola, R. Kurzmeyer (eds.), *Harald Szeemann with by through because towards despite: Catalogue of all exhibitions 1957–2005*, Zürich, Vienna, New York: Edition Voldemeer, 2007, pp.664–667.



term used in the title of one of Szeemann's exhibitions. Creating a curio cabinet of works of art, handicraft objects, and pop-culture artifacts is also one of the curator's favorite strategies, one that he also partly employed in Warsaw. This "self-portrait room" also featured a chair designed by Stanisław Wyspiański (1904-1905), a lamp by Jan Szczepkowski (1900), and issues of the artistic-literary periodical *Chimera* from the years 1901-1903 presented in a display case.

Greeting the viewer at the entrance to the next gallery was Althamer's *Man With a Camera* [*Człowiek z kamerą*, 1995], but Witkacy's pastels dominated the space, e.g. *Portrait of Nena Stachurska* [*Portret Neny Stachurskiej*, 1931] and *Encke Comet* [*Kometa Enke*, 1918]. In the middle of the room Szeemann designed a projection space—a green-painted cube that was to appear in the gallery as a "minimalistic sculpture"—where fragments of film adaptations of Witkacy's dramas were screened. Alongside examples of post-war Polish painting in figurative, abstract, and conceptually inflected modes (made by Andrzej Wróblewski, Stanisław Fijałkowski, and Andrzej Dłużniewski), the room also included also two display cabinets with photographic works by Jakob Tuggener (1904-1988), a Swiss photographer, filmmaker, and painter who documented the life of Polish soldiers interned in Switzerland during WWII (*Polenwache* series, 1943). Above one of the cabinets Szeemann hung Leszek Sobocki's *Polonia* (1982), a painting-emblem of the martial-law era.

Hanging in Zachęta's red carpet-lined vestibule was Krzysztof Bednarski's *Moby Dick* (1986-1987). The piece had never previously been shown in such a spectacular manner; critics appreciated both the uniqueness of the sculptural installation as well as the theatricality of the curator's gesture. Stairs led to a gallery that Szeemann had reserved for Mirosław Bałka's installation made specially for the exhibition, the soap floor titled *1120×875×2* (2000). The curator referred to it as a "purgatory" leading to the Matejko Gallery where the Cattelan work was displayed. In its proportions and character, the Matejko Gallery resembles the Kunsthalle Basel space where *The Ninth Hour* was shown in 1999. As in Basel, white walls and a red carpet—



○ Harald Szeemann opening the show "Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams. You May Find Yourself in Somebody Else's". In the background: *Moby Dick* by Krzysztof Bednarski (1986-1987).

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the Polish national colors—served as a background. “Organized chaos” was another of Szeemann’s curatorial strategies. At Zachęta, he let artists—Bałka, Roman Opałka, and Katarzyna Kozyra—“do what they want” in several rooms.

Szeemann was satisfied with the symbolic sequence that arose from the juxtaposition of the La nona ora gallery, Bałka’s “purgatory”, and the passage-way to a space where Opałka had installed his early works on paper, such as *Passing Through the River Styx* [*Przejście przez rzekę Styks*, 1958], and *In Front of Hell’s Gate* [*Przed bramą piekła*, 1958] and five sketches *Towards Counting* [*W stronę liczenia*, 1965]. From this space, the viewer moved to a gallery contrasting the great Polish avant-garde tradition—Henryk Stażewski’s works; a photograph of Henryk Berlewi with his *Mechanotextures* [*Mechanofaktury*] at the Austro-Daimler showroom in Warsaw (1924); a photograph of Władysław Strzemiński’s Neoplastic Room at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź; a photograph of a 1977 installation by Stanisław Dróżdż—with Alina Szapocznikow’s sculptures, such as *Desserts* [*Desery*, 1971], *Teardrop* [*Łza*, 1971], and *Multiple Portrait* [*Portret wielokrotny*, 1967]. It was one of the juxtapositions most widely discussed in the Polish press: “male” constructivism versus “female” figuration, an abstract mind versus a fragmented body, the universal and timeless versus the organic and transient. (One female critic noted that “no Polish curator would ever dare to do anything like this because the juxtaposition is regarded as vulgar.”<sup>3</sup>) Amid those juxtapositions, Edward Krasiński’s blue Scotch tape appeared on the door, leaving the space, as if in defiance of the exhibition’s sequence. From this gallery, the viewer moved to Opałka’s second room, in which the artist displayed ten counting paintings from 1965, including the first one from Łódź’s Muzeum Sztuki, 1965/1 - ∞, *Detail 1* – 35327.

At the entrance to the next room the curator had placed stills from Teresa Murak’s film *Lady’s Smock* (1975), moving from Opałka’s linear time (from one to infinity) to the cyclic, vegetation-like time that characterizes Murak’s works. In the same space Szeemann juxtaposed professional and naïve painting. Edward Dwurnik’s *Meni* (1969) was presented near watercolors by the naïve painter Nikifor (e.g. the 1930s *Cityscape With Eagle Over the Centre Spire*

<sup>3</sup> D. Jarecka, “W nowej reżyserii. Wystawa jubileuszowa sztuki polskiej w Zachęcie,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 15 December 2000, p.16.



[*Pejzaż miejski z orłem nad środkową wieżą*] from the Warsaw Ethnographical Museum). Polish critics know that Dwurnik was inspired by Nikifor, so they did not find the juxtaposition surprising. In the same space Szeemann presented photographs of Tadeusz Kantor's *Panoramic Sea Happening* [*Panoramiczny happening morski*, 1967]<sup>D</sup> and the happening *Rembrandt's Anatomy Lesson* [*Lekcja anatomii według Rembrandta*, 1969] as well as the film *Today Is My Birthday* [*Dziś są moje urodziny*, 1990]. The curator found the latter most fitting for an exhibition commemorating Zachęta's "birthday." The next room had been given to Katarzyna Kozyra, who presented the small version of her 1999 video installation *Rite of Spring* [*Święto wiosny*].

From the white circles of *Rite of Spring*, shown on small monitors, the viewer moved to a space densely filled with posters representing the Polish Poster School and its achievements since the 1950s.<sup>E</sup> Some 400 works were on display there, but the curator decided, in honor of how they're presented publicly, not to have wall labels accompany them. In the middle of the room Szeemann had again allocated a space for film projections. From the very beginning of his work on the Zachęta jubilee exhibition, the curator was interested in the science-fiction current in Polish culture, and especially in filmic adaptations of Stanisław Lem's novels. Paradoxically, though Lem's novels have been translated into many languages, only four of them have been turned into movies. Szeemann ultimately chose to include a Russian adaptation, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972). He also included fragments of two Polish sci-fi movies: Juliusz Machulski's cult comedy *Sexmission* [*Seksmisja*, 1987] and Piotr Szulkin's *O-Bi, O-Ba—the End of Civilization* [*O-Bi, O-Ba—Koniec cywilizacji*, 1984]. These screenings were accompanied by Krzysztof Zanussi's short film *Wrong Address* [*Zły adres*, 1995], a humorous commentary on the specificity of the Polish *Kunstgeographie* that compares two Leonardo da Vinci paintings, the Louvre's *Mona Lisa*, and the Czartoryski Museum in Cracow's *Lady With an Ermine*. Zanussi believes the Lady in the Polish collection is more beautiful than Mona Lisa, but less known. Why? Because she lives at the wrong address.



- <sup>D</sup> Harald Szeemann guiding through "Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams. You May Find Yourself in Somebody Else's", 14 December 2000. In the background: *Panoramic Sea Happening* by Tadeusz Kantor, 1967
- <sup>E</sup> Polish Poster School, "Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams..."

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"In Poland—that is to say, nowhere." This is where Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi* (1896) is set, to which the exhibition's final small gallery was devoted. Szeemann brought to the show his own collection of Jarry's lithographs, including *Ubu in War* (1896) and *Marching Poles* (1898). He also presented Felix Vallotton's woodcut portrait of Jarry (1896) and Pierre Bonnard's lithograph *Soldier of Fortune* (1898). Completing the arrangement were books by Lem, Witkacy, and Bruno Schulz.

#### Wunderkammer Polen?

When in late 1999 Rottenberg asked Szeemann to design an exhibition to commemorate Zachęta's double anniversary, critics and art historians expected an exhibition in the vein of "Austria im Rosennetz" (1996), a panorama of Polish visual culture, or a Szeemann-style *Großausstellung*, a gesamtkunstwerk overwhelming the viewer with the enormity of the works on display, surprising him with artistic and non-artistic discoveries. What they actually found in the exhibition were "provocative contrasts," unusual and non-museological juxtapositions of old and new art, symbolism and realism, abstraction and figuration.<sup>4</sup>

Szeemann had always preferred an art history of "intense intentions" over an art history of masterpieces. "I always try to make a world using today's art. So I don't really have a theme."<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Warsaw project, though, the theme had somehow been "contracted." Szeemann agreed to prepare an exhibition encompassing Polish art of the last one hundred years that would encompass all of the institution's exhibition spaces. The theme therefore was to prepare a major anniversary show at a public art institution whose budget was defined by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. Szeemann made good on his promise—though we can question some of his choices today or the manner in which he worked on the exhibition—and he presented his own interpretation of the Polish art of the last century. He experimented with the idea of an historical exhibition, and yet, despite some surprising juxtapositions, maintained a chronological sequence.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, A. Pieńkos, "Czy mamy własne sny? Po jubileuszu Zachęty," *Res Publica Nowa*, June 2001, pp.67–70; M. Małkowska, "Prowokujące kontrasty," *Rzeczpospolita*, 15 December 2000, p.14.

<sup>5</sup> "Prince of Tides. Robert Storr talks with Harald Szeemann," *Artforum*, May 1999, p.165.





Szeemann gained recognition with exhibitions that required great passion and encyclopedic knowledge to prepare, but confessed, “I’ve never read as much as people think I have. When I curate exhibitions I barely have time to read.”<sup>6</sup> After the Warsaw exhibition some were disappointed that it was not as “revealing” (because it did not discover previously unknown artists), “visionary,” or “national” as “Visionäre Schweiz” (1991); that it was not one in Szeemann’s series of portraits of national cultures, like the subsequent “La Belgique visionnaire” (2005). But Szeemann never created “national” exhibitions, and even if he did, he always redefined the term. “Visionäre Schweiz”, an exhibition commemorating the 700th anniversary of Switzerland, was meant as an homage to all manifestations of artistic activity, not a pompous national picture. Szeemann’s exhibition in the Swiss Pavilion at the 1992 Seville Expo contested the concept of nationality rather than affirming it uncritically; the first work was Ben Vautier’s painting *La Suisse n’existe pas*.

In a similar vein, when we think of the “Austrianness” of Austria, we think of Freud’s psychoanalysis, represented in “Austria im Rosennetz” by the sofa from the analyst’s house at Berggasse 19. The “Polishness” of Poland is defined by the image, omnipresent in the mass media, of the Polish pope, an important part of our national iconography. Selecting the Cattelan piece for the Warsaw show, Szeemann chose an image of Polishness that, according to him, was more visible than any other in the global media culture. And that is why he stuck to his choice to the very end, because the lack of that piece would have meant for him an incomplete, false picture. As Piotr Piotrowski points out, one of the reasons for the violent reception of Cattelan’s sculpture in Poland was a difference in the “modes of seeing”: “Poles ‘do not see’ the Pope lying on the ground, in a position where you can just walk past him or look down at him; here, he is seen on the pedestal and heroized. By showing this work Harald Szeemann reached right into the heart of our perception of reality, revealing its mechanism and as a result also the nature of the national myths being created today.”<sup>7</sup>

A lot has been written about the irreverent and iconoclastic intentions of the author of *The Ninth Hour*, about his “not giving a hoot about the Polish value hierarchies.” But the intentions of the artist and those of the curator

<sup>6</sup> H.-U. Obrist, “Mind over Matter. Interview with Harald Szeemann,” *Artforum*, November 1996, p.167.

<sup>7</sup> P. Piotrowski, “List” in “Spór o Zachętę”, *Znak*, no. 551, April 2001, pp.81–85.



are not always identical. For Szeemann, this was not an exhibition of Cattelan, nor Kozyra, nor Althamer, nor any other artist in particular. Exhibitions such as “Monte Verità” (1978) allowed Szeemann to reevaluate and rewrite the history of what he calls Central Europe—rewrite it through the histories of utopias, obsessions, social and artistic failures, and cultural margins, rather than the histories of domination and military victories. He admitted in one interview that his fascinations ran along the North-South axis rather than the East-West one: Paris-New York, Paris-Berlin, Paris-Moscow, as with Pontus Hulten’s great exhibitions at Centre Pompidou. Attesting to his interest in the North-South axis is also the exhibition “Blut & Honig: Zukunft ist am Balkan” (2003). But was “Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams...” on that axis too? Was it just a hasty improvisation on somebody else’s dreams?

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that the most social and responsible attitude is *philia*, seeking good for the sake of others. It is what holds the *polis* together as a political whole, because it is the basis of a promise—made and kept. The human ability to make promises and keep them is fundamental for all social relations; election pledges are an obvious example of this. To create an exhibition is also to fulfill a promise (through one subject to various contracts) made towards an institution for which we work (even if we do so as an independent curator), towards the featured artists and our collaborators, towards the sponsors financing the project, and towards the public. The curator pledges to prepare the exhibition in a fair manner, to get to know the artists and their works, to research what needs to be researched, to meet the deadlines, and so on. Did Szeemann keep such a promise with his exhibition in Warsaw? What did we really expect from a visit by a renowned international curator? A national exhibition? A media and box-office success? A spotlight on previously marginalized phenomena? That someone would finally discover Polish culture with its more or less known protagonists for the world? Historically, Szeemann has redefined both the meaning of the exhibition in contemporary culture as well as the role of the curator as an author of exhibitions (rather than a custodian of a museum collection), claiming a place previously reserved for the artist. We probably expected that, in the





light of his achievements and experiences to date, Szeemann would perform important revaluations in Polish art. Did that happen? As Mieczysław Porębski aptly noted, Szeemann ignored the “whole virtual paradigm of ‘good’ art, ‘modern’ art that we [the Poles] have been building.”<sup>8</sup>

The promise was made and kept: the exhibition was created, though within a time frame too brief for the curator to learn deeply the local culture. Szeemann visited Warsaw twice, watched many movies, browsed several dozen books and catalogues. The book *Art from Poland 1945–1996*, published by Zachęta in 1997, was not the only source of his choices, as the art zine *Raster* announced in 2001. On the other hand, it needs to be added that back in 2000 *Art from Poland* was the only up-to-date synthesis of post-war Polish art available in English. A foreign culture will remain foreign unless it is translated into other languages. “Visionäre Schweiz” or “Austria im Rosennetz” were narratives about cultures Szeemann was familiar with. “Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams...” was a narrative about somebody else’s unfamiliar dreams. In the first place, Szeemann showed what he knew about Poland as the author of a doctoral dissertation on Alfred Jarry’s pataphysics; as a fan of sci-fi, including Lem’s books; and as a curator-artist, an intelligent interpreter of contemporary visual culture.

Questions about ethics—the artist’s, the curator’s, the director’s—dominated the public debate surrounding the Szeemann exhibition in 2000–2001. But let us return to the question about the ethical function of the exhibition. The fundamental question that curators should ask themselves more frequently—besides the ones about an exhibition’s contents—is why a show is being organized and for whom. We are not talking about money, though the criterion of a “spectacular event” or a “box-office success” has been used with increasing frequency in discussions about the public financing of culture, and it beginning to prevail over other criteria, including artistic ones.

Szeemann’s exhibition was not a spectacular success in terms of box-office proceeds or visitor numbers; far more popular was the preceding show, “The 20th-Century Classics”, which presented ten artists that the respondents of the weekly *Polityka* had voted as the most outstanding international

<sup>8</sup> M. Porębski, “Oniologia”, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 19, 2001, p.273.





artists of the previous century (Picasso, Duchamp, Malevich, Warhol, Beuys, Kandinsky, Brancusi, Bacon, Dali, Mondrian). In this sense, the Szeemann show at Zachęta was not so much an event for the “general public”—though the media response was stronger than ever—as it was an important lesson for Polish critics and art historians. This community, not at all homogeneous, was made aware of a huge chasm between the popular reception of art and contemporary art’s critical potential. The ethical function of exhibitions—with all their critical, axiological, educational, but also entertainment potential—is to reduce, though not forcibly fill in, that chasm. The exhibition prepared by Szeemann did not show popular and familiar art from the Western canon. It’s incontestable value was that it introduced the public to the revision of Polish mythologies.

#### Epilogue in Brussels

A report by the European Parliament’s Legal Committee dated 27 June 2008 stated that the Committee recommended the Parliament to revoke MEP Witold Tomczak’s immunity so that he could stand trial for damaging the *The Ninth Hour* sculpture at Zachęta on 21 December 2000, thus violating Article 288 of the Polish Penal Code. The Committee explains that irrespective of the deputy’s motives, private property was destroyed.

*Fiat iustitia.* But what kind of justice do we expect in the case of Harald Szeemann’s exhibition in Warsaw? It is a paradox that eight years after the events a party involved in the case only financially—the insurance company—is seeking justice in only an administrative sense (i.e. in court). No questions of ethics will arise in this process: court practice shows that moral damage cases are far more complicated. Moral damage, and especially “offense against religious feelings,” has become one of the main ways to attack contemporary art, and especially its so-called “critical” current, in post-1989 Poland. Victims have also sought “historical justice” in Poland after 1989—opening archives, remembering forgotten heroes, “putting right” a history twisted by former regimes. The history of “Beware of Exiting Your Own Dreams. You May Find Yourself in Somebody Else’s” is not simple. The ar-





chives contain many of the voices published in its wake, though not necessarily the most important ones. The story's main protagonist, Harald Szeemann, died in 2005. It would be an act of "historical justice" to write the history of the event, adding to it the voices that are performing revaluations, comparing it to other artistic presentations, and analyzing the ideological determinants of contemporary visual culture. In other words, voices that would find a context for Szeemann's Warsaw exhibition broader than just a "scandal Polish-style."

Translated by Marcin Wawrzyńczak

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Piotr Piotrowski is director of the National Gallery in Warsaw, and was Professor and Chair (1999-2008) of Art History at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The author of numerous essays and books, his recent publications include *Znaczenia modernizmu. W stronę historii sztuki w Polsce po 1945 roku* [Meanings of Modernism. Towards the History of Art in Poland after 1945], (Rebis, 1999), *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (University of Chicago Press, 2009) and *Sztuka według polityki: od Melancholii do Pasji* [Art after Politics: From 'Melancholy' to 'Passion'], (Universitas, 2007). He was a contributor to the exhibition "Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930" (LACMA, 2002) and to the project *East Art Map* (2002). He is a lecturer and fellow-ship holder at numerous universities in the world, and was recently awarded a fellowship at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

# New Museums in East-Central Europe: Between Traumaphobia and Traumaphilia





**The** first starting point of this lecture is the assumption that the past is almost always traumatic. Of course, we know that the degree of the trauma can be differentiated. It is hard to measure, but we know that particular histories are sometimes more or sometimes less traumatic. The second point of departure for this talk is a question of the role of art in the traumatic past, its role in traumatizing the reality in the past, and as a consequence its position in historical memory. Between those two points of reference I would like to discuss the meaning of a few museums of contemporary/modern art in post-communist Europe.

You might of course know that there was no single model of communism in post-World War II Europe. On the contrary, the communist past was experienced differently in almost every country. To draw a general picture of historical differences in post-war East-Central Europe, seen particularly in political context, let us take a quick look at it, since it could be—I hope—very useful here.

The end of the war in 1945 seems in this part of the continent an obvious watershed. It marked the beginning of the Soviet domination in the region, although some countries, especially Czechoslovakia, still maintained forms of parliamentary democracy. In addition, the artistic culture of the region was quite diverse. While in the Baltic states, then Soviet republics, the GDR, Romania, or Yugoslavia, 1945 was the beginning of a truly hard line directed against the independence of art and artists, in Czechoslovakia, as well as in Poland, in the late 1940s the ideological climate still remained fairly moderate. In Czechoslovakia, communists still did not seize all the power and they could not introduce Stalinist cultural policy. In Poland they were in power, despite the appearance of plurality, but they did not want to use it fully (yet), so that art and intellectual debates were comparatively free. Three years later the situation changed completely. The year 1948 was the beginning of the Stalinist hard line policy in culture almost all over central Europe. In Czechoslovakia, as a result of a *coup d'état*, the communists seized full formal power, which did not eliminate all the alternatives in the artistic culture, though they became severely limited or marginalized. In Poland no *coup d'état* was necessary, since the communists fully controlled politics, but in 1949 they also decided to introduce the full control of art by the doctrine of socialist realism as the only and mandatory aesthetic. The only country of the region that did not follow the new course was Yugoslavia, for whom 1948 meant the end of the Soviet domination and the political beginning, in 1951, of the liberalization of culture. The consequences





of that process in the context of art history in Central and Eastern Europe are also quite unique. Namely, that the beginning of post-war Yugoslav modernism soon acquired the status of an official style and as such, was criticized by the neo-avant-garde—in fact already in 1959, when the Gorgona group was founded in Zagreb.

Another significant date was 1956, which in some countries of the region, particularly in Poland and the USSR, brought about a “thaw,” i.e. the beginning of the liberalization of culture as well, while in other countries it did not mean any changes at all. In terms of the cultural policy, the Polish “thaw” had hardly anything in common with the Soviet one: it was virtually an explosion of modern art which, paradoxically, began to function almost in the same institutional frame of the Ideological State Apparatus as the socialist realism had before. The opening of the (second) Exhibition of Modern Art in the Warsaw “Zachęta” Gallery (1957) attracted the most important members of the political establishment, secretaries and ministers, and presented them almost exclusively with abstract art. In Czechoslovakia similar attempts to return to modernism took place not only some time later, but also, quite significantly—both in Prague and in Bratislava—in private apartments or artists’ studios, not in official exhibition halls (“Confrontations”, 1960 [Prague, actually twice] and 1961 [Bratislava]). What is more, at the 1958 Moscow exhibition of the Art of the Socialist Countries (Yugoslavia was not included), all countries presented socialist realism—all except Poland which showed modernist art, spurning the vigorous protests of Soviet comrades and—at the same time—much of the audience’s interest. In the USSR itself the “thaw” was rather marginal, unlike in Poland, lasting only until 1962, with the famous exhibition at the Moscow Manezh, when the organizers deliberately presented to Khrushchev the works of the “abstractionists” displayed on one of the top floors of that best-known Russian exhibition space, almost never visited by the officials. Khrushchev, according to the expectations, became furious, which saved the positions of the official leaders of the artists’ union, put in danger by the pressure of the reformers, and marked an end to feeble artistic liberties. The event triggered a period of oppression, reaction, and stagnation in the Soviet artistic culture, eventually resulting, however, in the rise of an artistic underground mainly in Moscow.

The next turning point was the years 1968-1970. In some countries it was the beginning of the so-called normalization, a retreat from the liberal cultural policy or even oppression. Those took place in Romania, but first of all in Czechoslovakia after the





end of the Prague Spring. In other countries, the same years brought the beginning of the (limited) freedom in art, particularly (again) in Poland after 1970, while the artists of Czechoslovakia had to go underground or disappear from the public sphere. Such was also the situation of Romanians when Nicolai Ceaușescu, first a liberal (from 1965) then dictator, issued the so-called “July theses” on the return to the socialist values in culture. At the same time Poles were allowed to make any art as long as it did not touch on politics.

Finally, the early 1980s brought a change once again, modifying the geography of artistic differences. In Poland it was the time of martial law, while in Hungary the period of “goulash socialism” was in its full bloom, favoring a consumerist version of the socialist state, economic openness to the West, and considerable liberalization of artistic policy. The year 1989 closes the history of the Eastern bloc but opens another one, as diversified as before. The post-communist condition took different forms in different countries which have not been developing according to one and the same schema. On the contrary, due to different national and ethnic traditions, social structures, and paces of economic development in each country the picture of the post-communist Europe is not uniform. For instance, post-communist Poland, with its strong conservatism and Roman Catholicism, respected by all social groups and political parties (including the post-communists...) hardly resembles the liberal and largely atheistic Czech Republic; Russia is quite different from the former GDR; and Slovenia differs from Serbia, though once both belonged to Yugoslavia. Also, Lithuania, a former Soviet republic, is very different from Belarus.

This brief outline demonstrates how diverse the political history of the whole Eastern bloc is and how its artistic culture generated different meanings. Nevertheless, in all cases and to a varying extent the past was traumatic. It means that, looking back, one is always memorizing trauma. We thus live in post-traumatic times, at least in Central Europe. Paraphrasing Roger Luckhurst’s concept of traumaculture, we can call post-communist culture a post-trauma culture.<sup>1</sup> If Luckhurst finds in traumaculture a syndrome of traumaphilia (particularly historical museums, such as the House of Terror in Budapest, or the Museum of Warsaw Uprising, which could be recognized as traumaphilic institutions par excellence), then we can also see post-trauma culture alongside its counterbalance, namely the opposite approach: traumaphobia. In short: we will view museum culture through the dialectics of traumaphilia and traumaphobia. The

<sup>1</sup> R. Luckhurst, “Traumaculture,” *New Formations*, no. 50, Autumn 2003, pp.28-47.



background of both traumaphilia and traumaphobia is something that we can call a negative heritage.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the question here will be how traumaphilia and traumaphobia, as particular approaches to a negative, traumatic heritage, appear and function, and what kind of behavior they provoke in terms of museum practices after 1989.

As everyone knows, the museum is a text, a sort of narrative due to its structure, collection, exhibitions, and so on; it is a discourse, as Mieke Bal has pointed out, or a text—according to Richard Kendall—written by “eloquent walls and argumentative spaces.”<sup>3</sup> Obviously, architecture plays a very important role in such a discourse. Certainly, there are many publications on the relationship between the museum understood as such, and its architecture as sustaining a particular ideological or symbolic meaning. Usually, scholars write on museum architecture from the point of view of the question how architecture frames or even expresses the meaning of a given museum, in other words, how the museum discourse is supported by architecture. What I will be doing here, however, is something else. I am less interested in the text of the museums mentioned below, but in their sub-texts or con-texts, created by not always welcome architecture, or their location—by something, however, which definitely cannot be meaningless. I will discuss the meaning of the particular text, i.e. the particular museum program, in the context of its location, i.e. its reference to the past.

Before we go to the issue let me draw a much more general picture of new museums in Eastern Europe. As you know hundreds of new museums have been erected in Western Europe in recent years. In almost every country one can find new museums, especially museums of modern and contemporary art. Spain seems to have particular experience in this process, since we can observe there something called the Bilbao effect. In almost every city in this country there is a new museum of contemporary art, such as MusAC in León, MACBA in Barcelona, CAC in Malaga, and many others. Sometimes, even, there is no collection for the new museum and the space is almost empty, but the building is supposed to be a good sign of cultural capital of the city. We can see the same in other West European countries, Germany in particular, as well as in America, Japan, and recently in China. The latest, quite bombastic example of museum imperialism is the Abu Dhabi project comprising a Performing Arts Center (Zaha Hadid), a Guggenheim (Frank Gehry), and a Louvre (Jean Nouvel). Finally, we should agree with Walter Grasskamp that the museum is the most successful institution in the globalized world.<sup>4</sup> Such a massive pro-

<sup>2</sup> See: L. Meskell, “Negative Heritage,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 75, no 3, Summer 2002, pp.557-574.

<sup>3</sup> M. Bal, “The Discourse of the Museum,” in R. Greenberg, B.W. Ferguson, and S. Nairne (eds.), *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, pp.201-218. R. Kendall, “Eloquent Walls and Argumentative Spaces: Displaying Late Works of Degas,” in Ch.W. Haxthausen (ed.), *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, Williamstown MA: Clark Art Institute, 2002, p.63.

<sup>4</sup> W. Grasskamp, “The Museum and other Success Stories”



in Cultural Globalisation,” CIMAM 2005 Annual Conference  
*Museums: Intersections in a Global Scene*,  
[http://forumpermanente.incubadora.fapesp.br/portal/  
events/meetings/reports/sessao2](http://forumpermanente.incubadora.fapesp.br/portal/events/meetings/reports/sessao2).

duction of new museums in the world is, unfortunately one might say, incomparable to Eastern Europe. Russia, however, is a special case, since there are many private collectors, and some of them, such as Igor Markin, are going to exhibit their collections, creating private, rather than public museums.

I am going to claim that in Central Europe, in post-communist countries, which have recently joined the EU, there is no Bilbao effect at all, or at least, let's say, that effect is not comparable to the rest of the world, at least to the West. This is due to many reasons, but one seems to be crucial. Public authorities here, both the state and local governments, are used to not paying much attention to museums of contemporary art, and they are simply not interested in such a development. In those countries the economy, as well as social affairs, have been dominated by neo-liberals for whom maybe the best example is Mr. Leszek Balcerowicz's policy in Poland; he served both as the Minister of Finance, and Deputy Prime Minister, actually twice, for a couple of years, and finally was nominated as Chair of the National Bank. His strategies follow World Bank and International Monetary Fund doctrines that are not favorable to the public sector. East European neo-liberal cultural policy is different than that in the West. In the West—as Andrea Fraser argues in her essay on the Guggenheim Bilbao—neo-liberal policy tries to use art institutions in order to transform ineffective industrial areas into highly effective entertainment centers;<sup>5</sup> sometimes such a policy—as Mari Carmen Ramirez has pointed out—uses museums for “brokering identity” in order to create a strategic framework for their economic expansion.<sup>6</sup> In post-communist Europe, however, the cult of a self-governing free market prevents neo-liberal politicians from supporting public culture. There is not enough private capital here—big collectors and a contemporary art market—to put pressure on public institutions and their development; there are not even strategies among businesspeople to deploy culture as a useful economic tool. The exception to this may be Russia, and Moscow in particular before the recent crisis, as well as the unique case of Victor Pinchuk in Kiev, Ukraine, who founded the Art Center there in 2006.

This does not mean, however, that there are no museums of modern and contemporary art in the region. Quite on the contrary.

<sup>5</sup> A. Fraser, “Isn't His a Wonderful Place? A Tour of a Tour of the Guggenheim Bilbao,” in I. Karp, C.A. Kratz, L. Szwaja, and T. Ybarra-Frausto (eds.), *Museum Frictions. Public Cultures/ Global Transformations*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006, pp.135-160.

<sup>6</sup> M.C. Ramirez, “Brokering Identities. Art curators and the politics of cultural representation,” in Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairne (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp.21-38.





The first such public museum was formed in 1932 in Łódź, Poland, and this is one of the oldest such museums in the world (after New York and Hanover). It was funded by Polish constructivists who donated the so-called international collection to the City of Łódź. At the beginning it was a part of a larger municipal museum structure, and now it's called Muzeum Sztuki, or the Art Museum. There is also the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, founded in 1954, which was originally going to open a new building in 2008, but this unfortunately has been postponed; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, erected in 1958; the Museum of Modern Art in Armenia, also 1958, then one of the Soviet republics; and—finally—the Ludwig Museum in Budapest, funded by the end of the 1980s. There are of course more.

I would like to focus here, through the previously mentioned theoretical framework, on four new museums in post-communist Europe: the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest (MNAC), which opened in 2004; KUMU Art Museum in Tallinn, Estonia, which opened in 2006; the National Art Gallery in Vilnius, which was separated from the Lithuanian Art Museum in order to collect and exhibit modern and contemporary art (still in progress); and, last but not least, the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art (also in progress). Let me say just a few words on the museum location in each case. The MNAC is situated in a part of the former People's Palace, a gigantic building (in terms of space, supposedly the third largest in the world after the Pentagon or the CCTV headquarters in Beijing) erected by Nicolae Ceaușescu in the 1980s. The Lithuanian National Gallery of Art will be located in the former Museum of Revolution, one of the most important ideological institutions of the period when Lithuania was one of the Soviet republics. The Warsaw Museum of Modern Art will be placed in front of the Palace of Culture and Science, still the tallest skyscraper in the very heart of the city, a symbol of the Soviet domination through its typical Stalinist architecture, on the one hand, and on the other, through so-called "socialist modernism," along with Świętokrzyska, and Marszałkowska streets. Only KUMU has nothing to do with the communist past in terms of its location. It is placed in a park outside the city in an entirely new building (Pekka Vapaavuori). So, the question I would like to raise here is whether such a location, a particular sub-text or con-text, means something more than just a pragmatic location, whether it is significant or not, and if yes (this is rather obvious) what it does really mean in terms of a relation to the past? In other words, this is a question about the meaning of a hidden relationship between the muse-





ums of modern/contemporary art in post-communist Europe, on the one hand, and the communist past, the memory of the former regime, on the other.

As I have said before, the MNAC, i.e. the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, was opened in the Palace of the People in 2004. Its director, Mihai Oroveanu, wrote in his introduction to the book published at the time:

The term “museum” usually connotes the idea of retrospection and of preservation of already acknowledged values. Yet this is not, in our understanding of the term, the primary function of a museum of contemporary art. Our intention is to turn it into a laboratory; we have opted for a manner of display that is still a novelty here, that is, the “museum in progress” formula, which denominates an institution that does not rest content with building archives and administrating collections in a passive and obliging manner, but proposes stimulating projects, imagines new juxtapositions, new correspondences, participates in a synthesis of contemporary arts, including film, music, literature and dance. Our opening exhibition announces some of the directions we plan to pursue: international dialogue, a challenge to the new media, as well as the recuperation of some of the concerns that are significant for Romanian contemporary art of the last decades.<sup>7</sup>

The crucial words of the director of MNAC are those in which he says that the museum of contemporary art should be a platform of relocating the negative heritage, i.e. the Palace, a symbol of the communist regime in Romania, towards forgetting. Ruxandra Balaci, a chief curator of the museum and also the curator of the first exhibition “Romanian Artists (and not only) love Ceaușescu Palace?!” has added:

The exhibition treats the way the iconography and the symbolism of the “big monster palace” has changed: from the official paintings during Ceaușescu’s time—an oppressive totalitarian symbol, *nomina odiosa*—via established contemporary references such as Ion Grigorescu, SubREAL, Kiraly, Călin Dan, artists of the 90s, up to the young generation that have come to refer with a lot of irony to the Palace as an even *sympa*/absurd symbol of Bucharest. It is about relocating negative memories and feelings into oblivion, it is about a whole new generation that do not feel bound to assume the past of their parents, it is about moving toward the future about forgetting [...] a disastrous past, it is about blame and shame and the need to reconvert those frustrating feelings into something more positive. [...] Museums of contemporary art have tended increas-

<sup>7</sup> M. Oroveanu, *MNAC. The National Museum of Contemporary Art*, Bucharest, 2005, pp.20-21.



ingly to become dynamic laboratories open to the latest creations, as places of creative criticism and lively visual innovation, thus anticipating developments in social realm. [...] MNAC in Ceaușescu's Palace could be indeed an ultra-contemporary challenge.<sup>8</sup>

From the above quotations let me highlight that the MNAC would like to be open to contemporary culture, presenting what's going on in the art scene, rather than the museum looking back to the past; the past itself, as negative heritage, should be forgotten, rather than celebrated, or even analyzed. Thus the museum functions as an exhibition hall, rather than as a museum as such, even if it possesses a collection—mostly socialist realist painting with hundreds of Ceaușescu's portraits obtained from the department of modern art of the National Gallery—but does not like to show it.

The exhibition program justifies such a traumaphobic approach to the past.<sup>9</sup> In the course of recent years the MNAC has held dozens of exhibitions. The first one, already mentioned, was very striking, and to be honest very promising. "Romanian artists (and not only) love the Palace?!" had nothing to do with traumaphobia. On the contrary: it was aimed at working through the communist trauma. The invited artists, both local and international, proposed a sort of game, sometimes very ironical, or even absurd, with this spectacular symbol of Ceaușescu's time. The exhibition gathered not only artworks but also artistic and cultural opinions on the social, ethical, and architectural questions concerning the building that hosts the new museum. Interrogating the history and symbolism of the edifice, the exhibition engaged the viewer-participant in a dialogue about the post-communist condition.<sup>10</sup> That was something that one could and should expect from the new museum in this place, and it supposed to draw a prospect for the future exhibitions, even if it somehow contradicted what both the director and the chief curator said at the opening (quoted above). Whereas the subsequent program has included some artists involved in analyzing the post-communist condition, notably some masters of the Romanian neo-avant-garde (such as Horia Bernea, Geta Bratescu, Roman Cotosman, Ion Grigorescu, and Paul Neagu), most exhibitions were rather traumaphobic, and have followed Oroveanu's and Balaci's statements. If we look through this program we can see many events, mostly of international art, which have nothing to do with the post-communist condition, as announced by the first show: "Art Digital Video" (2005); "Europe in Art—a HGB Group Project", which was a presentation of the bank's contemporary art collection (2005); "Kunstraum Deutschland" (2005); "Deposit", gathering very different contem-

<sup>8</sup> R. Balaci, "Romanian Artists (and not only) love Ceaușescu Palace?!", *ibid.*, pp.36, 40, 41.

<sup>9</sup> See the MNAC Web Page: <http://www.mnac.ro>

<sup>10</sup> See: M.Oroveanu, *MNAC. The National Museum of Contemporary Art*, Bucharest, 2005.





porary art works, sometimes by chance (2005); photographic experiments from the collection of the Institut of Modern Art in Valencia (2006); “Dutch Installation Art” (2006); “Through Popular Art” on Chinese art (2006); Scandinavian video art (2006); contemporary Japanese architecture (2006); some French collections from FRAC (2007); Brazilian videos (2007); works from the collection of the Société Generale in Paris (2007); and others that look like the results of the museum curators’ tourism itinerary. Of course it is quite easy to understand why the museum is presenting this sort of show. What seems to be problematic, however, is highlighted by the question why it has abandoned the critical perspective promised by the inaugural show. Anyway, to forget the trauma, and/or not to analyze the post-traumatic (post-communist) condition is one of the symptoms of traumaphobia.

As you can see from the above list of exhibitions, the MNAC focuses on international mainstream culture. Some of the exhibitions have been even brought from the corporate field, which is, as everyone knows, very active in the contemporary art world. I guess that for this rather poor institution—as far as international museum standards are concerned—it is a very attractive prospect to borrow and present to the local audience collections of various rich corporations. Unfortunately, doing this in such a place as Bucharest Peoples’ Palace—which is one of the *lieux de mémoire* in Romania, as Pierre Nora would say, maybe the most historically significant “place of memory”—suggests not only the economical problems mentioned above, but also an attempt to escape from history and its trauma, to escape from a critical position towards the past. More generally, one could say that this program is simply oriented towards contemporary global art. Maybe there is nothing strange about this. Imitating mainstream art-world practices is quite typical, since—to cite Grasskamp again—museums are the most successful global institutions.<sup>11</sup> However, it might be significant if a museum such as the MNAC focuses almost exclusively on the global art scene and at the same time ignores the past. I am arguing that this is a compensation for its traumatic history.

Following Homi Bhaba, we could call this kind of praxis “mimicry.” Generally it means that if the colonized imitates the colonizer she or he colonizes herself or himself. He or she looks like a colonizer, even “better” than the colonizer, and this difference, or surplus, shows that he or she is colonized, or self-colonized. Of course, in terms of power this is a strategy of the colonizer. The MNAC wants to be more international, worldwide, cosmopolitan, global, in short more western than the West, which finally renders it more provincial, the colonized province indeed.

<sup>11</sup> W. Grasskamp, *op. cit.*





This strategy by the MNAC is quite contradictory to the one of the basic characteristics of the museum, namely its local nature. "Museums are by definition local," as Hans Belting has pointed out; "they ultimately live from the expectation of local audience"; they are "subjected to the comprehension of a local audience"; finally they represent more "the worlds" in plural than the "art world" in singular.<sup>12</sup> The Bucharest Museum, understood both in terms of the discursive statements of its directors as well as in its practice, tells us much about the local even if it does not want to. Of course, the situation there is much more complicated. The museum policy, reconstructed above as sort of "mimicry," a non-critical approach to the imaginary rather than the real art world, is rejected by many local artists and intellectuals. Such a critique deals with a broader question, about which Hans Belting has also written, about the locality of contemporary art. The latter could also be recognized as local, due to the particular historical contexts that created the interpretative frame, which by definition refers to the local culture and local audience, also in the cases in which artists would like to escape from it. Thus the museum of contemporary art in the age of globalization needs to be seen from the local perspective. Such a local character, however, does not mean a representation of its particular heritage, as the right-wing politicians would like to see. Belting understands it as a dynamic relationship between those two dimensions: "local art cannot mean arbitrary definitions that change from one place to another; the local must and will acquire a new meaning in the face of a global world."<sup>13</sup>

Finally, we have two points of reference, particularly in terms of the audience, a sort of contradiction. On the one hand is the local audience, where the museum is rooted, on the other hand is the global audience, particularly that which appeared in the framework of the powerful tourist industry. Of course, not all museums face this problem to the same extent. The MNAC is rather outside of mainstream contemporary tourist interest. It applies mostly to the big western museums, both European and American, such as the Louvre, the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum, the Prado, etc.; it applies also to museums of modern and contemporary art such as MoMA in New York or Tate Modern in London. Each of these institutions has its own local, historical origins; however, each of them plays a very important role in global artistic culture, or consumer culture, due to its collection as well as to its exhibition program, particularly because of huge exhibitions (so-called "blockbusters"). They are in competition with biennales, a typical product of global culture. However, if we com-

<sup>12</sup> H. Belting, "Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age," in P. Weibel, A. Buddensieg (eds.), *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007, pp.30-32.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.





pare museums on the one hand and biennales on the other, we can notice the importance of the former. Biennales, although they are organized in particular places, presumably to improve their cultural definition on the art world map and to promote local culture, are organized by international curators in order to promote biennales themselves, and as such, international, global artistic events, they do not have any local character indeed (with a few exceptions). Their audience is itself international, or global. People, mostly from the so-called art world, as well as tourists, come to see particular shows but do not care for local culture. For the local audience, on the other hand, if it means anything at all, it is at least a sort of the “window” through which one can see the art world; it is a kind of global fiesta without any relation to local culture and the local social structure. By contrast, the museum of contemporary art is double-faced; it reveals its locality, but also in cases where it would like to be as global as possible; it has been created in a particular place, it has its own local history, as well as its local audience. Such museums have the opportunity to be a forum for political debate on the contemporary condition of the world, whether defined as global, post-colonial, or post-communist.

Let's come back now to the main topic. If the MNAC exemplifies a typical traumaphobic museum approach to the past, as I have said before, it is understandable in/by local context, but because of its traumaphobic character it loses the opportunity to be a “political forum.” Let me now draw your attention to sites with the opposite character, namely the KUMU Art Museum in Tallinn and the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius. Let's call them traumaphilic or, at least, let's say that those museums are showing an attempt to overwork the trauma of the past rather than to suppress it as in the case of the MNAC.

Both the location and the architecture of our first example, KUMU, has nothing to do with our considerations. As has already been mentioned, this is the new building placed outside the city and surrounded by a park. Much more important for us is the museum's display. The curator of the permanent exhibition of twentieth-century art, Eha Komissarov, has decided to show socialist realist art, which used to be recognized there as the art of the colonizers, i.e. the Soviets. This decision provoked quite a strong discussion. The museum's opponents have accused the curator of promoting the occupants' culture. That was of course not Komissarov's intention. Rather, she would like to make a historical point of reference for both independent art of the 1970s (Estonia was the second place after Moscow where such an art



ever existed during Soviet times) as well as for contemporary Estonian culture.<sup>14</sup> Without such a framework, Komissarov has argued, neither would be understood, at least not in a proper historical context. This was, indeed, something like a classical psychoanalytical therapy: recover the subjecting by repeating the trauma. In other words, Komissarov was quite aware that suppressing the past, i.e. traumaphobia, would lead to the “discourse of absence” in Dominick LaCapra’s terms, and as such could create a state of disorientation, even confusion.<sup>15</sup> This is why overworking the traumatic past, symbolized here by socialist realism, is so important to regain the historical position of Estonian culture, and to find the right place for it in the present-day world—in other words, to find its identity.

The next example mentioned here, the National Gallery in Vilnius, is quite complicated, since the museum is still in progress. As I have already said, it will be located in the reconstructed former Museum of Revolution of the Lithuanian Soviet Republic. Generally speaking, the Gallery was created as a museum of the twentieth-century art (including contemporary) in 2002, by separating the former division of Lithuanian Art Museum, which in the meantime had incorporated within its structure the Contemporary Art Information Center, previously a part of the George Soros network, which was very active in Central Europe (except Poland) in the 1990s. Its program is very ambitious and consists of collecting modern art as well as presenting temporary exhibitions that stress Lithuanian and international contemporary art production.<sup>16</sup> The mostly local collection, brought from the Lithuanian Art Museum, will be extended. This collection includes local art after 1945, produced under the Soviet occupation, including the so-called art of the occupants, i.e. socialist realism. Both independent and official art production will create a historical point of reference for contemporary art, in the same way as in KUMU. Thus, in contrast to the MNAC in Bucharest, which is more akin to an exhibition hall, the National Gallery in Vilnius will be a museum in terms of an institutional art collection. The most interesting point is of course its future location. Originally, the opening of the new venue was scheduled for 2009, after the renovation and adaptation of the former Museum of Revolution. Unfortunately, in the meantime the Lithuanian government decided to re-construct, or rather to construct, the Lower Castle of Lithuanian Grand Dukes, which historically housed the rulers of this country, which of course needs a huge state subsidy. The government’s financial involvement in this project postponed the opening of the National Gallery.<sup>17</sup> We will see very

<sup>14</sup> See: E. Komissarov, “The Era of Radical Changes. Estonian Art from the End of the Second World War until the Restoration of Estonia’s Independence,” in A. Allas, S. Helms, R. Raudsepp (eds.), *Art Lives in KUMU: The Main Building of the Art Museum of Estonia – KUMU Art Museum*, Tallinn, 2006, pp.97-143.

<sup>15</sup> D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, p.46.

<sup>16</sup> L. Jablonskiene “Lithuanian National Gallery of Art,” a paper delivered at the international conference *Problems in displaying communist art from the second half of the 20th century*, State 7





Art Museum and Goethe-Institut, Riga 2005. I am thankful to the author for giving me an access to her paper, as well as to Elona Lubyte's paper, quoted below.

<sup>17</sup> E. Lubyte, "Lithuanian Art Museum: latest news from the building grounds," a paper delivered at the international conference *Problems in displaying communist art from the second half of the 20th century*, State Art Museum and Goethe-Institut, Riga 2005.

soon if it happens.<sup>18</sup> In the meantime, on the joint initiative of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and the Guggenheim in New York, a new project of the new museum of modern or contemporary art appeared in Vilnius (Zaha Hadid). That seems to be at this point a general idea without any detailed prospect, and as such it would not prevent the opening of the real museum. If it does happen, however, it would be a very interesting approach to the discussion of Russian re-colonization strategy in the region, this time with a little help from a different empire...

Of course we can read this story more on a pragmatic than a semantic level, and say that the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius seems not to care so much about the origins of the future building. What Lolita Jablonskiene, the director of the Gallery, is worried about is that the building is still not in use by the museum, and this is a quite pragmatic question for her. However, to put it in a different way, let me say that both the place as well as the architecture cannot neutralize the past on a deeper, semantic level, cannot avoid possible contextual meaning. What's more, if it realizes a possible collection and permanent exhibition program in which local art will be included, and particularly a historical collection of official art produced under the Soviet domination, we have to conclude that the gallery would offer something closer to a traumaphilic approach to the past, as in Tallinn.

The case of the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art is even more complicated than that of Vilnius. The museum is still in progress, and should be completed around 2014-2015, but in contrast to the one in Vilnius it has neither the historically freighted building nor the social realist collection. It has the location and an architectural project only, which by Polish standards is quite advanced. However, what makes its story more complex in comparison to the other museums discussed is that the framework of the dialectics of tramaphobia/ traumaphilia does not work as clearly as in the previous examples. It is paradoxical to analyze it here, but this is exactly the point. The reason is quite obvious: Polish post-war art, except for socialist realism in the first half of the 1950s—

<sup>18</sup> The National Gallery of Art was opened in June 2009 [Ed.].





perceived right now as the exotic experience of the cultural post-memory rather than the (particular individual) memory—is no longer connected with the communist trauma in collective memory, as it is in Estonia, Lithuania, and Romania. I will take the risk of simplification and say that Poland's experience in the course of many years, beginning from 1956 up till the end of communism in 1989, was rather more joyful than traumatic, excepting a few examples of course. It does not mean, however, that the traumaphilia/traumaphobia reference cannot be used here as an analytical framework. On the contrary, it can be, but it needs a more complex implementation.

As I said earlier, the museum will be built just in the front of the Palace of Culture, on the one hand, and next to the “socialist modernist” architecture of the Świętokrzyska and Marszałkowska streets, on the other. Originally, when the architectural competition was introduced (actually twice, in 2007), the museum building had to counterbalance the surrounding architecture, particularly the Stalinist Palace of Culture and Science, in order to erase the latter's significant position in the urban scheme. To celebrate the decision to construct the museum, which was publicly announced exactly in the place where it will be sited, the lights in the nearby Palace of Culture were switched off. That was a symbolical gesture indicating that new culture, i.e. contemporary art housed by new contemporary architecture, would be able to challenge the historical meaning of this area, and to replace the culture symbolized by Stalinist Palace with that of the museum, i.e. new, international, and modern. Interestingly, the international jury chose Christian Kerez's project, which does not compete with the Palace of Culture; what is more, somehow it also repeats the (socialist) modernist architecture and urban planning around it. After a very severe public discussion about the architectural design, and being under the pressure both by the press (particularly the leading Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*) and the city and state authorities, the director of the museum in progress, Tadeusz Zieliński, who had rejected this decision, finally resigned. The board of advisers did the same, and some members of the board of trustees. Actually, at least some of them had something like a favorite project, which won the special prize in the architectural competition and could compete with the Palace of Culture. In terms of architecture, then, the meaning of the project that won the competition is clear. It definitely does not compete with the surrounding urban planning and architecture, neither the “socialist modernist” nor the “socialist realist” architecture of the Stalinist Palace. In terms of historical trauma embodied in





the communist architecture around it, Kerez's project means neither suppressing nor overworking. However, it is also not a repetition, but rather a correspondence. This can be seen particularly if we consider the "L" shape of the whole building, which has been created in accordance with the decision of Warsaw City Council to try and harmonize the whole area. In short, it is neither traumaphobic, nor traumaphilic. However, paradoxically, it does fit exactly with the character of the Polish memory of communism. To explain this let us try to analyze the premises of the future collection, along with the documents that have been issued before architectural competition was completed.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike MNAC, and along with KUMU and the National Gallery of Art in Vilnius, the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art would like to collect not only contemporary art, i.e. that made after 1989, but (more or less occasionally) historical art, too. This is the point. Let me stress: it looks like the contemporary starts in 1989, the year when communism collapsed. What was before is historical; what it is done after is the present-day. If the museum keeps this date as the radical, sharp point of reference, we could say that this is a quite traumaphobic approach. However, fortunately, it is not. It was decided to add to the collection of contemporary art (i.e. art since 1989), art production from the previous decades, starting from the 1960s, i.e. from the so called post-thaw period identified mostly with neo-avant-garde movements. This is the core of our discussion, since Polish neo-avant-garde art used to be seen not as a victim of communism (as it was in many Eastern bloc countries), often referred to as actual, or real existing socialism, but as something going along with it. This art production was somehow polemical towards the system, but was definitely not a radical critique, and in particular it did not make its critique directly. For the most part it was definitely not traumatic, rather—as I have said before—it was joyful. As you know, there is a quite different historical point of departure from art in Romania, on the one hand, and from Lithuania and Estonia, on the other. Socialist realism ended in Poland in 1956, while in Romania, as well as in the Soviet republics, it was the official doctrine up to the end of communism in 1989. Therefore, to collect historical art means something different in Poland than in other countries of the Eastern bloc (except of Yugoslavia); in short, it is not traumaphilic.

Of course, I am not going to say that Poland, and Polish artists in particular, were free under communism; it was still a sort of prison, even if it was a "velvet" one. If the Poles did not enjoy the system entirely, they also did not fight with it. The result of

<sup>19</sup> The Warsaw Museum of Modern Art archive.



(among other things) such a long-lasting opposition was 1989, and this is also crucial here. It is so not only because that was the turning point from the past to the contemporary, as has been mentioned above, but also for the geographical interest of the museum. The Warsaw Museum of Modern Art in terms of both the collection as well as the exhibition program will be much more interested in Central European art than the museums in Bucharest, Tallinn, and Vilnius. Maybe I am wrong, but I have not found any statements concerning such an interest in the case of the latter. Here, in Warsaw, this prospect of the future activities is quite visible, e.g. the exhibition of Yugoslavian art in 2008, or the conference “1968-1989” and the exhibition of a leading Romanian neo-avant-garde artist, Ion Grigorescu, in the same year, all held in the museum’s temporary space. It means that if such a project would succeed, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw could house the third collection of Central European art, after Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana (2000) and the ERSTE Bank in Vienna (2006). Stressing its geo-historical interests, the museum would like to point to the leading position of Poland in the whole historical process of rejecting communism, as Poland claims, and which used to be almost the official doctrine of Polish foreign policy, and the politics of history.

As we have seen, the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art’s architecture goes well with the premises of the collecting program: it is neither traumaphobic nor traumaphilic. It reveals the soft passage from communism to post-communism in Poland. Since communism for the Poles was not so traumatic, at least not in the same way as for other peoples from the Eastern bloc, the collective memory of the past in this country, to which a history of art belongs, is not so traumatic either. If we can speak of trauma here, it is rather the trauma of the “big change,” or the trauma of the “transitional period,” with a huge wave of poverty and unemployment that emerged as a result of neo-liberal policies of the 1990s, rather than on the so called “past period.”<sup>20</sup> So there is no reason in this country to be either traumaphobic or traumaphilic, since the negative heritage here is only partly negative.

East European communism was a very claustrophobic system. People were not allowed to travel freely or to participate in a world art scene, at least not fully and freely. Nicolae Ceaușescu’s Romania was a particularly severe prison. Now, when Romania is a free country and an EU member, such an interest in the global art scene is a quite understandable reaction to the past. If, however, such an interest fills almost the entire program, and if it is

<sup>20</sup> See P. Sztompka, “The Trauma of Social Change. A Case of Post-communist Societies,” in J.C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, P. Sztompka (eds.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004, pp.155-195; E. András, “An Agent that is still at Work: The Trauma of Collective Memory of the Socialist Past”, in *Writing Central European Art History*, Erste Stiftung Reader #01, available online at [www.erstestiftung.org/patterns-lectures/content/imgs\\_h/Reader.pdf](http://www.erstestiftung.org/patterns-lectures/content/imgs_h/Reader.pdf)



not accompanied by a critical approach to the past, as one would expect in such a place, it is indeed a symptom of traumaphobia. On the other hand we have some former Soviet republics that regained their independence at the very beginning of the 1990s and which are also members of the EU; however, since during the communist time they had no national or state independence, they are seeking a sort of historical identity, filling a historical gap between one independent state (up to the beginning of the 1940s) and the present-day one. Some sort of traumaphilia seems to be very useful for them; to quote LaCapra once more, it can help to avoid “the discourse of absence,” to avoid a state of disorientation, even confusion, and at the same time to create historical memory necessary to build national identity.<sup>21</sup> Poland is in a unique situation. Since a definition of the past in terms of trauma is not so obvious, or even questioned in both political and every-day discourse, the dialectic of traumaphilia/traumaphobia seems to be less useful, at least not in a direct way. However, as we have seen both from the architectural as well as a programming point of view, the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art deals very much with the specificity of the collective memory, to the locality, as it has been mentioned before; even more—it has the political ambition to be the leader of great historical change.

1989

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<sup>21</sup> LaCapra, *op. cit.*, p.46.







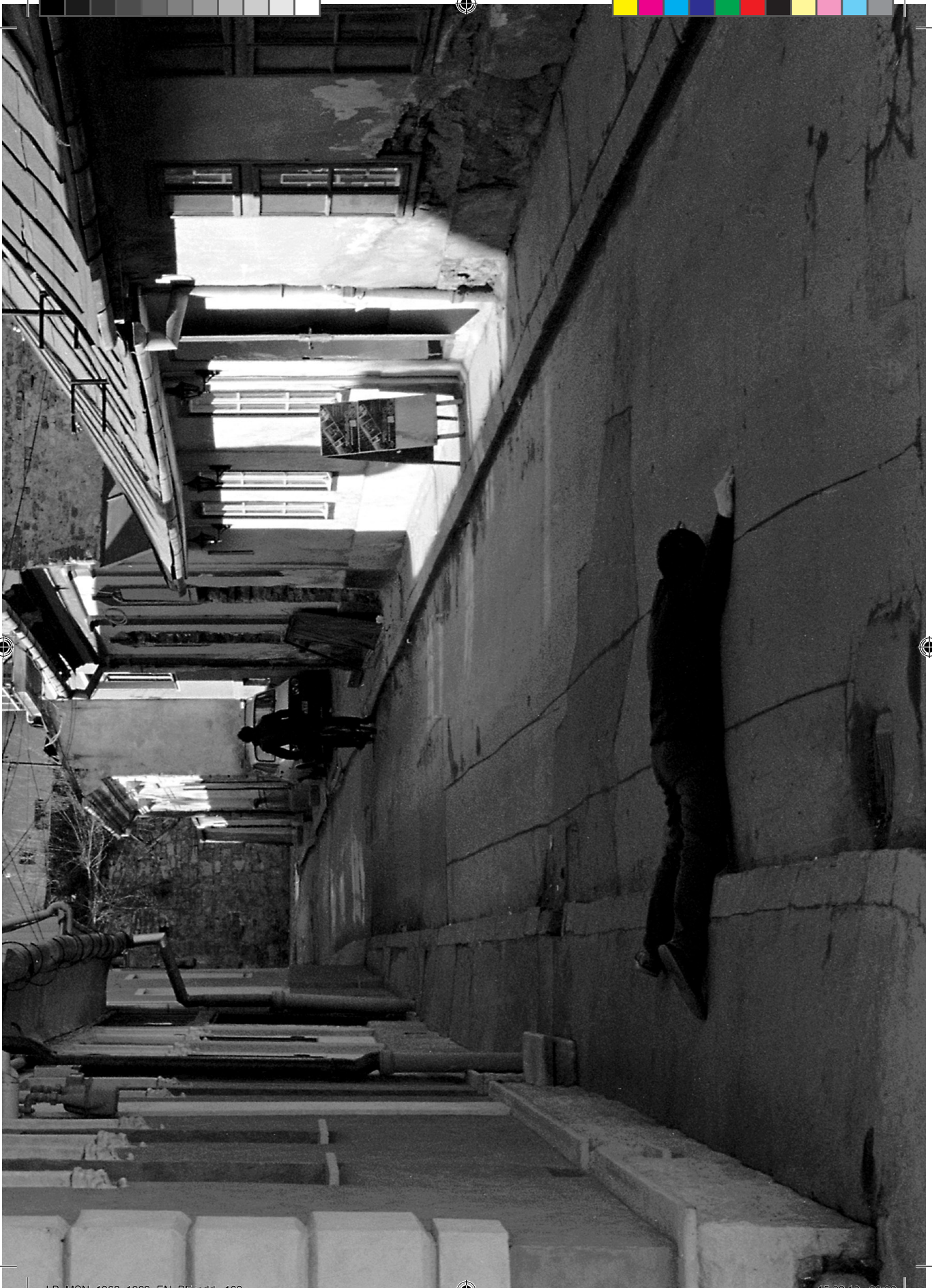
Attila Tordai-S. is a curator and writer based in Cluj, Romania. He was editor of *IDEA Arts + Society* magazine (2003-2008) and of the art magazine *Balkon* (2001-2003). He is the founder and former curator of Protokoll Contemporary Studio in Cluj and has organized numerous international exhibitions including "Unoccupied Territories" (Berlin, 2003) and "Unstable Narratives" (Dortmund, 2002). From 1999-2003 he was a lecturer in art theory and art history at Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj. He also co-curated the 7<sup>th</sup> Periferic Biennial (2006).

# A Rough Sketch of the Context of Art Theory in Post-89 Romania













Debate about Romanian art education, 2002







**There** are two perspectives from which we can discuss the issue of art theory in post-1989 Romania. One is the necessity to analyze and discuss cultural transformations in Eastern Europe immediately after 1989, in order to understand the situation created by the transition from a planned economy to a market economy. In other words, this vantage point would show how art professionals in Eastern Europe understood their own culture in the newly created social context. The other perspective is to examine the expansion of Western cultural practices into Eastern Europe, in order to see how international art and theory took root in with the local cultural ground. The two aspects overlap in many ways, and together with critical theory contributed to the development of contemporary critical art discourse in Romania.

In 1989, it was said that Romania would need at least five, twenty, or even forty years in order to transition to the new reality. But, in fact, right after the political events of that year, a new social, political, and cultural discourse appeared so quickly that to an outside observer it would seem that this discourse had been long prepared and was simply waiting for the right moment to emerge.

The paradox of these conflicting timelines—needing time to transition and engage, and needing no time to transition and engage—can be explained by a few observations on the realities of post-1989 Romania that we can also use as a basis for talking about the state of art theory in Romania's specific cultural context.

In 1989, a large part of Romanian society seemed to have been preparing for years to abandon the old political system. On the other hand, its members had only the vaguest ideas about what would be involved in this political change. As we all know, it had never been a secret that the former communist regime, from the beginning of its existence as a political entity, had taken upon itself the role of a universal transformative force. Trying to cover all fields of social life, from the institutional to the private, the communist social project went hand-in-hand with an assumed revolutionary idea of the ideal. The communist political leaders relentlessly communicated their vision to the population; in other words, they used the



practice of open propaganda. Artists, writers, and theoreticians all had a role in this, whether working with or against the system.

After 1989, the central propaganda system was dismissed, and the Keyword introduced for the collective perception of the new reality, *freedom*, did not really have its own weight. After the ideological era of communism, people were told that they had arrived in a non-ideological age. Besides the new political elite, there was a whole generation of cultural actors who subscribed to this no-ideology discourse. And an entire cultural industry was constructed on the idea of liberation from any kind of universal ideology, which, in the best case, was going to be replaced by pure methodology.

From the perspective of critical theory, one of the strangest results of the political turnover was an incapacitation of self-evaluation. Suddenly, the cultural space was occupied by a desire to have access to information from all over. I would call this a totalitarian consumer-curiosity.

In contrast there was also a culture of knowing everything about one's own life, which gave birth to the idea that, at least as far as the social context is concerned, we are totally "truth holders." There was a situation in which it seemed that Romanians knew everything about their own context and almost nothing about what they wished to access from outside. This created an unimaginable scenario in which it was almost impossible to keep alive your own system of values. It was a situation in which the need to talk about the newly constructed reality in which you were living was not so obvious at all. So, instead of the political context of communism, in which people had been accustomed to differentiating the truth from the so-called "official truth," one now lived with the awareness of knowing too much about what is going on without having any power to change it. And in this condition, with citizens as truth holders, it became very difficult to face questions from inside society regarding society itself.

I believe that the first priority for art theory after 1989 should have been to keep alive a sense of continuity in the cultural field. I am not referring to the continuation of works created as commissions from party officials. I am speaking about addressing questions raised by the new conditions for art







making, the new paradigm of institutionality, and the changes in art production influenced by the political and economic transformations. We all know that the acclaimed non-ideological context was, in fact, the fertile ground for a neo-liberal market economy with its very concrete aims and purposes. Unfortunately, changes in the cultural discourse did not result in a critical approach towards the present time, but rather only in repeated condemnations of the old regime. In Romania, and in Hungary as well, visual arts are considered a marginal or secondary cultural activity. The new right-wing elite that established itself in the 1990s has definitely dominated the past twenty years with its neo-conservative intellectual approach. The result is that, even today, there are no strong cultural platforms that can be a real alternative or challenge to them from a critical leftist perspective.

As in the '90s, it was not the theoretical texts arriving in the country that influenced art production, but the political situation, the neo-liberal economic input, and a few international art shows, some organized with the participation of Romanian artists. From 2004 onward, theoretical texts and international translations have had, in my opinion, less influence on artistic production than the critical fashion and post-communist trends that characterized exhibitions like "The Balkans Trilogy" [*Die Balkan Trilogie*] or "Blood and Honey: Future's in Balkans" [*Blut & Honig: Zukunft ist am Balkan*].<sup>1</sup>

But we have to admit that with the ascension of critical art practice, social criticism, and critical art, critical theory has gained a certain importance. It is clear that when artists become interested in social problems, texts that articulate the same problems theoretically are appreciated anew. Since contemporary art is an industry of which only one component is the work of

<sup>1</sup> "Die Balkan Trilogie" was a series of exhibitions, projects, and discussions that was realized from 2003 until 2005 in the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel and many other sites in the Balkans, curator: René Block; "Blut & Honig: Zukunft ist am Balkan" was the exhibition in Sammlung Essl Kunst der Gegenwart in Vienna, 2003, curator: Harald Szeemann.



- B Dan Perjovschi, *Attila*, wall-drawings, 2004
- C Ioan Godeanu/Construction and Deconstruction Institute, *Temporary Autonomous Zones*, 2003
- D Ioan Godeanu/Construction and Deconstruction Institute, *Romanian Blood*, 2004

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art, the verbal explication of ideas is a necessary factor that no one can neglect if they wish to achieve a serious reputation. (The art market may be free of this verbalization, but recent developments show that increasingly writers and theorists appear in panel discussions together precisely to lift the reputation of their industry as the one that creates artistic discourse.)

This does not mean, however, that theoretical texts can direct artistic production. In Romania, I cannot find any evidence of a good critical art piece that shows direct signs of theoretical influence. I worked many years in a place where artists and theorists met each other regularly, but cooperation was possible only on the level of a shared cause, never on the basis of equal authorship regarding a piece.

Coming back to Romania post-'89, I would say that there are two paradigms for constructing artistic discourse, and that they remain close to each other. One insists on the importance of the post-communist condition and develops a social criticism from the point of view of the historical change (and its political and economical implications). This approach has the ingredient of social criticism and critical art theory and uses international theory and social criticism as an ally and legitimizing power for addressing public opinion in a more-or-less open arena. The other model sees the communist heritage more as an accident in European history and tries to get rid of the communist/post-communist dynamic and the universalistic ideas which the earlier period incorporated as an important factor towards achieving a better society.





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# Total Recall

Borut Vogelnik

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Borut Vogelnik is an artist and founding member of the Slovenian art collective IRWIN, the visual arts wing of NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst). Founded in 1983, IRWIN has participated in numerous international biennials (Istanbul 2005; Sharjah 2005) and group shows ("Privatisations", 2004; "After the Wall", 1999). IRWIN has also edited or initiated numerous publications documenting exhibitions (*Interpol: The Art Exhibition Which Divided East and West*, 2001), their own projects (*How the East Sees the East*, 1993; *Transnacionala*, 2000) and a landmark survey of Eastern European art (*East Art Map*, 2006).

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# INTERPOL

# THE ART EXHIBITION



# WHICH DIVIDED EAST AND WEST

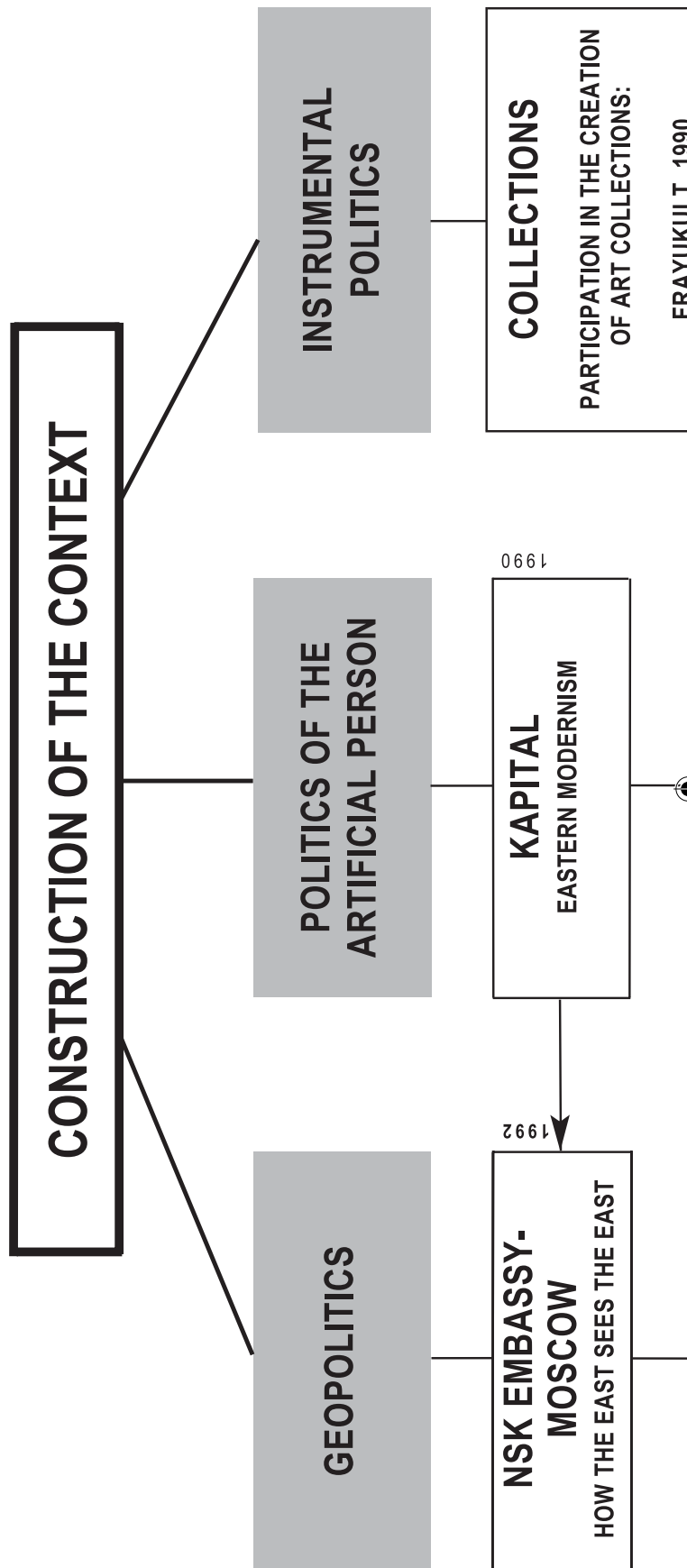
Edited by Eda Čufer and Viktor Misiano



Published by IRWIN, Ljubljana and Moscow Art Magazin



# RETROPRINCIPLE



FRAYUKULT, 1990  
SARAJEVO 2000  
ARTEAST COLLECTION 2000+

OPUS SLOVENIJA  
GROUP OF COLLECTORS

RETROPRINCIPLE  
BOOK EDITIONS:  
KAPITAL  
NSK EMBASSY MOSCOW  
TRANSNACIONALA  
INTERPOL

TRANSFORMATION OF  
NSK TO A STATE  
IN TIME

RETROAVANTGARDE  
READY-MADE AVANTGARDE

TRANSFORMATION OF THE  
WAS IST KUNST SERIES  
INTO ICONS

INTERPOL  
MONITORING

TRANSNACIONALA  
A JOURNEY FROM  
THE EAST TO THE WEST

TOTAL RECALL  
MAPING OF THE EASTERN  
EUROPEAN ART



I am part of IRWIN, a group of artists (myself, Dušan Mandić, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, and Roman Uranjek) that was established in Ljubljana, Slovenia in 1983. IRWIN co-founded, together with the music group Laibach and the Theater of the Sisters of Scipion Nasice [Gledališče Sester Scypion Nasice], the collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) in 1984. We had no desire to escape our own history; rather, we started putting it to use, and not merely as a circumstance of fact but also as one of means. Our key projects in the 1990s were aimed at articulating and constructing the context of IRWIN. Given the practice of interpreting and inscribing (or excluding) things in the art history narrative characteristic of the former socialist territories, as well as the fact that the desired oblivion—if not explicitly but, certainly, implicitly at least—was disrupting the line of any possible historical narration, we made ourselves the point of support. Like Baron Munchausen, we grabbed ourselves by the hair and lifted ourselves up. We decided on the East as the field of reference for our activities out of the following considerations: because we are from the East (although such an assertion is extremely unpopular in Slovenia, it is nevertheless true that, despite certain differences, we were part of the so-called East for nearly half a century; we shared with the East a whole range of characteristic features in the way our society was organized, including the way the operations of the art system were organized; and last but not least, external perspectives also placed us, as a rule, in the East); because even if we wanted to, we could not escape it; because it is impossible to establish communication without first articulating your own position; because in the East it is still possible to intervene in the field of articulation as a “private individual” on levels that are elsewhere in the exclusive domain of institutions; and because such interventions are, thanks to already familiar models, so much like painting from nature that we were prepared to see them, in their uniqueness and beauty, as artefacts.

We have published five books, which were the final products of five projects stretching over the past fourteen years. The start of our work on the first of these, the project *Kapital*, dates back to the period of the socialist system, which had already been transformed by the time we published the book. Meanwhile, the most recent of these projects was published in its

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complete version at a time when Slovenia had already become a full-fledged member of the European Union. These projects, then, literally connect the beginning and end of the period we call “the time of transition.” But this external correspondence is not the only thing that connects this series of projects with the concept of transition. Transformation is the theme and the content of the Retroprinciple book series.

These projects have a number of points in common, but I will highlight only two of the most important ones. All of them were focused on providing reflection on the modern art of the East, and all of them, from the very start, included as an ultimate goal and central artefact the production of a book. In normal circumstances when an artist does not reflect on his work himself, if he fails to articulate it in communication or writing, then somebody else will do it instead. A problem arises when there is no such someone, when the art system in a given area is organized in a way that impedes communication and articulation. Then the only possibility of communicating with contemporary art production is to assume and refer to someone else's extant articulation, written in different circumstances for a different purpose. And if we hold the view that text is not an external objectivizing addendum to art production but an internal, integral part of it, then we have to undertake communication and articulation on our own.

Already with the project *Kapital*, our suspicions were confirmed with regard to the difference in the way the art systems operated in the East and the West (and here we do not mean the differences that were a programmatic consequence of the differing political systems). We were, indeed, being presented with ample evidence that such differences did, beyond a shadow of a doubt, exist in a whole range of empirical facts and minor details—and some not so minor—that shaped the conditions of production. If we take Karl Marx even a little bit seriously, then we cannot avoid the assertion that the conditions of production determine the production itself. A difference in conditions is reflected in a different kind of production. The Retroprinciple book series begins with a thesis about the specific conditions of art production in the East. Through travels to Moscow<sup>1</sup> and across the USA<sup>2</sup> we tried to articulate, in many discussions, this difference, which in the *Interpol* project<sup>3</sup> materialized

<sup>1</sup> From 10 May to 10 June 1992, the artistic action *IRWIN–NSK Embassy*<sup>A</sup> took place in a private Moscow apartment at Leninsky Prospekt, No. 12. The action was organized by Apt-Art International and the Ridzhina Gallery. The *Embassy* was conceptualized as a live installation. Besides the documents and artefacts of NSK and its guests Goran Djordjević, Mladen Stilinović, and Milivoj Bijelić, the central event of the project was a week-long program of lectures and public discussions. The lecturers were Rastko Močnik, Marina Gržinić, and Matjaž Berger from Slovenia and Vesna Kesić from Croatia, as well ↗

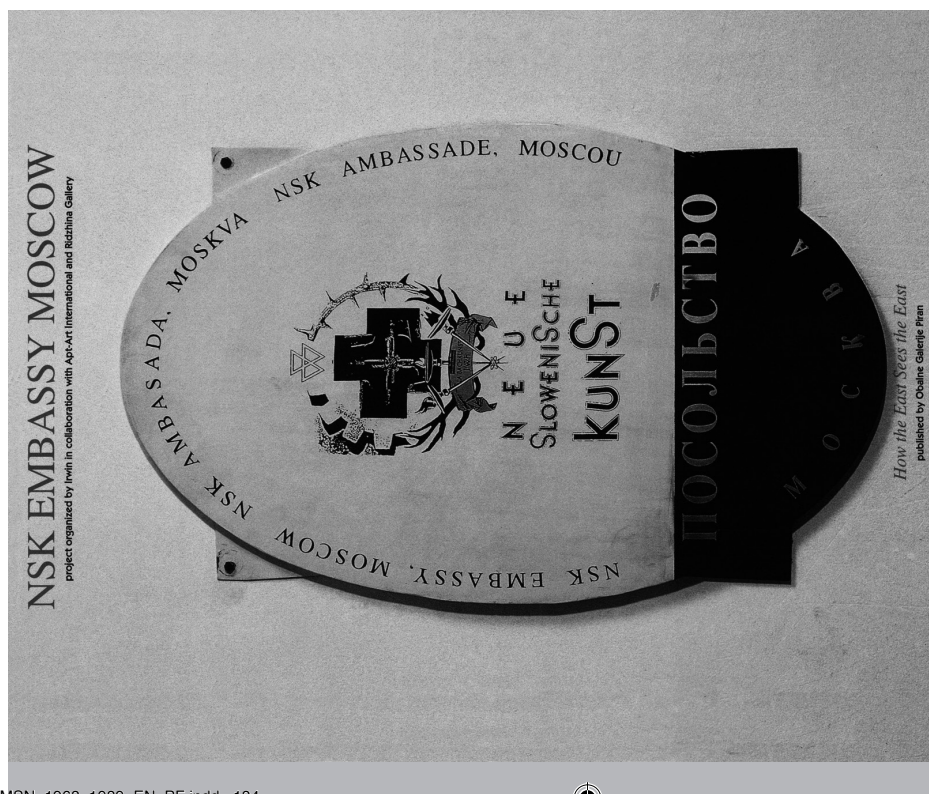




as a number of well-known figures from the Moscow conceptual, media, and philosophical scenes: Viktor Misiano, Valery Podoroga, Aleksandr Yakimovich, Tatyana Didenko, and Artyom Troitsky. The aim of the event was to establish an encounter between the similar social contexts of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia. This meeting between individuals with similar aesthetic and ethical interests, as well as similar social experiences, demonstrated that the topic that aroused the most enthusiastic and most intense debates was the art and culture of the 1980s and the specific role these played in the transformation of Eastern Europe. The resulting publication was *NSK Embassy Moscow: How the East Sees the East*, edited by Eda Čufer and published jointly by IRWIN and Obalne Galerije Piran in 1993.

<sup>2</sup> *Transnacionala* was an art project in which an international group of artists (Aleksander Brener, Vadim Fishkin, Yuri Leiderman, Michael Benson, Eda Čufer, and the five members of IRWIN — Dušan Mandić, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Roman Uranjek, and Borut Vogelnik) set out on a one-month journey across the United States in two recreational vehicles. <sup>B/C</sup> The aim was to discuss various issues during the course of the trip: art, theory, politics and existence itself—all in the context of the contemporary world. On their way, the group stopped in Atlanta, Richmond, Chicago, San Francisco, and Seattle. In co-operation with friends and hosts Mary Jane Jacob, Katharine Gates, Randy Alexander, Charles Krafft, Robin Held, and Larry Reid, a number of artistic events, presentations, and discussions with local art communities were organized. The resulting publication was *Transnacionala*, edited by Eda Čufer and published by ŠOU Ljubljana as part of the series KODA, in 2000.

<sup>3</sup> *Interpol* took a long time to be realized, perhaps too long. <sup>D</sup> But this temporal quality, the self-sustaining duration, was



A NSK Embassy Moscow, *How the East Sees the East*, edited by Eda Čufer, published by Obalne Galerije, Piran, 1993


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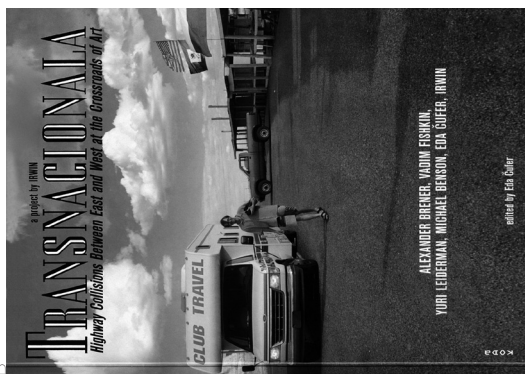
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- B IRWIN, *Transnacionala*, 1995; from left to right: Borut Vogelnik, Roman Uranjek, Vadim Fishkin, Yuri Liederman, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, and Alexander Brener.
- C Eda Čufer (ed.), *Transnacionala*, published by Študentska Založba, Ljubljana, 2000

something fundamentally inherent in the project. The idea for the project comprised several stages. First, the curators chose artists in Moscow and Stockholm. Then, the chosen artists had to choose a partner (or partners) from among their own circle or from anywhere else (these partners did not necessarily have to be artists), and together they would create a project that was required to possess the quality of totality. This meant they had to develop the entire exhibition space of Färgfabriken and not only sections of it. As a result, different projects, coexisting in one space, would automatically come into conflict. This is why the next stage was to be a meeting between all *Interpol* participants, including a discussion that was intended to lead to a compromise. The artists had to find a way to adjust their projects in order to exist peacefully side by side. Another possibility was also considered: the first meeting could result in the projects shifting towards greater interactivity where all the participants became involved in a collective work. That is why an additional meeting, a kind of general rehearsal, was not excluded. See Jan Aman and Viktor Misiano's introduction in *Interpol: The Art Exhibition which Divided East and West*, Ljubljana/Moscow: IRWIN and Moscow Art Magazine, 2001, p.5.

as open conflict. Eventually it became apparent that one of the key differences was precisely a difference in the regulation of communication, articulation, and inscription—which is something that the Retroprinciple books have, to the best of our abilities, attempted to thwart. It follows, then, that this series should now culminate in *East Art Map*, which is a synthesis of the experiences and realizations accumulated over the course of the previous projects.  *East Art Map* deals with the most basic level of organizing information, the drafting of a simple chart of the most important artworks and artists from the area of Europe's East in the period from 1945 to 2000. In Eastern Europe there are, as a rule, no transparent structures in which those events, artworks, and artists that are





significant to the history of art might be organized into a referential system accepted and respected outside the borders of a single given country. Instead, we encounter systems that are closed within national boundaries, most often based on a rationale adapted to local needs, and sometimes even doubled so that alongside official art histories there are whole series of stories and legends about art and artists who opposed the official art world. But written records about such artists are few and fragmented. Comparisons with contemporary Western art and artists are also extremely rare.

A system that is so fragmented prevents, in the first place, any serious possibility of comprehending as a whole the art created during socialist times. Second, it represents a huge problem for artists who not only lack any solid support for their activities, but are also, therefore, compelled to navigate between the local and international art systems. And third, such a system impedes communication among artists, critics, and theoreticians from these countries. Eastern European art requires an in-depth study that will trace its developments, elucidate its complexities, and set it in a wider context. But it seems that the very immensity of such a project makes it very difficult to realize, so that any insistence on a complex, unsimplified presentation inadvertently results in there being no presentation at all.

The aim of *East Art Map* is to display the art from the entire territory of Europe's East, to take artists out of their national frameworks and present them in a uniform scheme. Our objective is not to tell some ultimate truth; rather, it is far more modest and, we hope, more practical. We seek to organize the fundamental relationships between Eastern European artists where these have not been organized, to draft a map and draw up a chart. Today a chart intended to categorize art—the legacy of a classicism that has long been transcended—is rightly seen as something restrictive and, above all, inadequate. And yet, paradoxically, this kind of tabulation, founded in classicism, remains a key tool for orientation, even in the field of art. *East Art Map* is meant to serve as an orientation tool in the still uncharted field of the art of the East. There is no need to emphasize just how crucial it is to have a proper orientation in art, just as in other fields. Whenever some-



▫ Eda Čufer and Viktor Misiano (eds.), *Interpol*, Ljubljana/Moscow: IRWIN and Moscow Art Magazine, 2001

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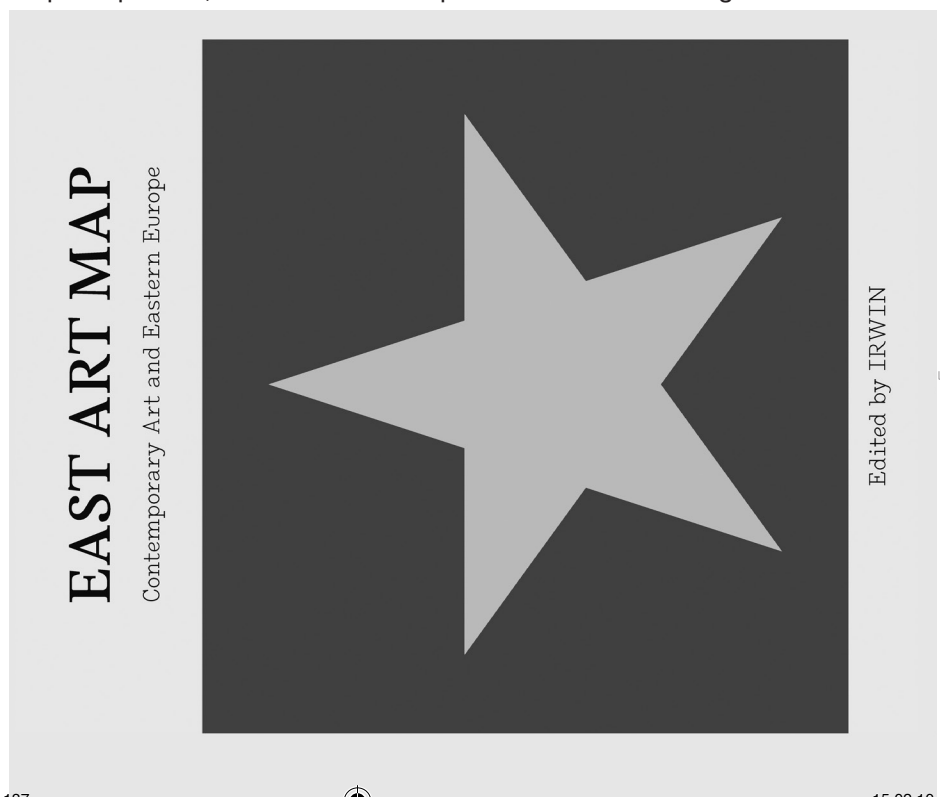




one looks at a work by Joseph Beuys, for example, if she is the least bit familiar with art production, she will instantly perceive it in relation to an entire network of other artworks and artists, among whom Beuys occupies an important place. A map of the art produced for the most part in the West is present in almost everyone's consciousness, at least in its simple outlines. Very rarely does it happen that, when looking at a certain work of art, one does not have at least a basic orientation about its place in the art system.

The opposite is true when it comes to art originating in the East; in most cases, one is at a loss to say just where and how a work belongs. A great deal of effort is required in deciding whether a given work is of real significance for the production of a certain region. This sort of disorientation is the case not only for art lovers from the West, but also for most art lovers in the East. The non-existence of a transparent art system is more than just the consequence of certain conditions in the East; it is, in fact, a constitutive part of the art system in these areas. Instead of a transparent art system that is comparable to others on an international level, what we have to deal with in our region are art-historical narratives that are not, as it were, susceptible to being translated into the international art language. The persistence of local mythologies relates not so much to a lack of knowledge or expertise, but rather to the fear of any realignment in the value system. This is why in our region experts from one country have typically not intervened in the interpretation of the art of another country. This principle, for example, held true even in the territory of the former single state of Yugoslavia, where experts from one constituent republic were reluctant to intervene in the art system of another republic—or rather, this happened only very rarely and then it was, as a rule, considered excessive.

In a desire to transgress closed systems of interpretation and evaluation, *East Art Map* has been organized as a uniform system—this despite the number of countries it encompasses. Given the imperative for intervention, the selection of artists assembled so far is merely the foundation for subsequent phases, which have been planned so as to transgress the borders





of these art fiefdoms on various levels and in concrete ways, to the best of our abilities. Our initial assumption was that the memory or awareness of what has actually influenced the development of art in these local areas exists. We invited twenty-four eminent art critics, curators and artists to present up to ten key art projects from their respective countries that originated over the past fifty years.<sup>4</sup> The choice of the particular artworks, artists and events, the description of the relationships between them, as well as their presentation (sometimes accompanied by a more general text about the specific circumstances of the given country) was always left entirely up to the individual selectors.

As the first step of the second phase, *East Art Map* was transferred to the Internet, where we invited the public to provide additional data that may, indeed, change the map's topography. In this way, we managed to accelerate the collection of data and democratize its organization; make it possible for anyone to collaborate in the creation of a history that unfolds before our eyes; and establish a space and create conditions that will facilitate communication among theoreticians, critics, and others from all over Eastern Europe. Using the material collected thus far—transformed to some degree by the intervention of interested individuals through the Internet presentation and supplemented by commissioned essays—we produced, ultimately, a single, fully integrated publication. We hope this publication serves as a useful source of information for the wider public interested in contemporary art. It surely served us as the basis for an exhibition that took place in October 2005 at the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum.

If experts from the field of art history and theory, or indeed anyone who understands things better than we do, should find that *East Art Map* is somehow lacking or in many ways superficial and imprecise, or that it does not reflect the image that in their opinion should be reflected, then we will have to agree. We have no intention of stubbornly insisting on being right. Just the opposite, since we are well aware of the complexities of the problem we are tackling, as well as our own limitations. Moreover, we do not think it wise, or even possible, to outline such a system once and for all, and we will, of course, be delighted if someone corrects our mistakes. Along

<sup>4</sup> We invited Inke Arns, Vladimir Beskid, Iara Boubnova, Calin Dan, Ekaterina Degot, Branko Dimitrijević, Marina Gržinić, Sirje Helme, Marina Koldobska, Suzana Milevska, Viktor Misiano, Edi Muka, Ana Peraica, Piotr Piotrowski, Branka Stipančić, Janos Sugar, Jiří and Jana Ševčík, Miško Šuvaković, Igor Zabel, and Nermina Zildžo to contribute to *East Art Map*. The initial results of their efforts were published in September 2002 in the magazine *New Moment* (issue No. 20: *Artforum in New Moment*), produced in collaboration between IRWIN and *New Moment* and co-edited by Livia Páldi. The individual selections ↗



were combined into a whole in order to allow for comparative views on the chosen material and to present it in the form of a map that can answer basic “Who? Where? and When?” questions. A CD-ROM for *East Art Map* was also produced, in collaboration with RenderSpace Pristop Interactive from Ljubljana and the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in Hagen, Germany. This version of the project was first presented as part of the *Museutopia* exhibition at KEOM Hagen in June 2002.

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Borut Vogelnik  
Total Recall

with the distinct pleasure of creating such a system, there is also an opportunity rarely afforded artists, one grounded in the very deficiency of the art system in which we operate. In other words, although we love this specific “void,” at the same time we expect—indeed, we demand—that art historians and theoreticians do their jobs properly. Paradoxically, it is just such a demand that opens up this “void”—this still living remnant of the former time—in all its fullness.

Local mythologies, which, as is typical of mythologies, do not support critical examination or comparison, have become deeply interwoven in the social fabric of individual Eastern European countries. Interventions in such structures personally affect a whole range of people, raising questions about their work and credibility or the value of their property. But it is not merely for private and personal reasons that a whole network of individuals strives to preserve local mythologies; there are also many nobler and more general reasons. The long years of isolation of the national art systems have led to many “arrangements” (to put it mildly), so that when the local system is forced to confront the international system various things can happen: certain pillars of national art might lose their shine; the symbolic order might be threatened; and, in smaller nations where culture plays an even more accentuated role in building national self-esteem, one of the props of national pride might be shaken. The problem is not all that simple, squeezed as we are between a Scylla of local self-sufficiency and a Charybdis of risk to national pride. But if we do not want to place ourselves in the position of the peripheral and provincial, which is expected to measure itself against the established standard, against what parades as general and canonical; if we do not want to be robbed of our own history and wish instead to participate in the construction of a future common history—then we will choose Charybdis.

Translated from Slovenian by Rawley Grau





# 1961

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Keywords: ~~1968~~ 1989 Participation Internationalism  
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# Western Europe, for example

Charles Esche

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Charles Esche is a curator, writer, and director of the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, where he has curated many exhibitions, including “Forms of Resistance” (2007). He is co-founder of *Afterall* Journal and Books in London, and co-organizer (with Maria Hlavajova) of the research project “Former West”. He co-curated the 2nd RIWAQ Biennial, Ramallah (2007), the 9th Istanbul Biennial (2005) and the Gwangju Biennale (2002). His essays have been published in an edited volume of his work, *Modest Proposals* (2005), in Turkish and English.





I feel that it is necessary to speak from the point of view of what we are starting to call the “Former West” and how it defined and defended itself in the 1960s and 1970s, the same period as we have been talking about in the “Former East.” It is sometimes very easy, even from the point of view of the former socialist states, to portray the “West” as a kind of normative condition. This is a mark of the success of the Anglo-American hegemony and the extent to which the results of the changes in 1989 were to provide apparent evidence of that rhetoric’s reality. Art was one of the tools that was used to persuade the West internally and its opposition externally of its superiority throughout the Cold War period. This was established, as we know only too well, through the use of U.S. Abstract Expressionism in contrast to the socialist realism of Stalinist visual rhetorics. In simple terms the battle of persuasion was reduced to artistic “autonomy” as guaranteed under a liberal market dispensation versus artistic value put at the service of communist political ideology under socialism. What is interesting about the discussions we have had to date in this conference is the different ways we have been able to see that behind that crude division there were interrupted but consistent flows of exchange and information. If I think here only from Andrzej Wróblewski’s visit to Amsterdam in 1947 and then, twenty-three years later, the inclusion of OHO group in the important exhibition “Information” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it is clear that throughout the early period, there knowledge and contacts reached across the so-called Iron Curtain in Europe and beyond to the United States. The pan-European institution of the Biennial de Paris, which ran from 1959 to 1985, was also crucial in developing these contacts, establishing a mechanism in which artists from around the world could meet and share experiences as well as show their art.

Why then today are we discussing the lack of knowledge in the art world centers of the “former West” of the history of art in the “former East”? Given the extent of the contacts throughout the period, what is it that has created a situation in which artists like Edward Krasiński, OHO, Mladen Stilinović, and Ion Grigorescu needed to be rediscovered by the West in the 1990s in order to have new careers and, it should be added, to be more recognized in their homelands?

The answer undoubtedly lies partly in the history of cultural policy in the socialist regimes in the 1980s and especially in the period immediately before 1989. This is not my field of expertise. However, the answer is also partly a responsibility of the Western art world before 1989 and how it came to its understanding of

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art history. In particular here we have to contend with the ascribing of “quality” and “originality” to the art scene in New York from the 1950s onwards and the supremacy it attempted to assert over competing Western versions of the art world. This has been written about by Serge Guilbaut.<sup>1</sup> Interesting light has also been shed on the early period of New York’s attempted hegemony —as led by Clement Greenberg, who in 1961 wrote, “someday it will have to be told how ‘anti-Stalinism,’ which started out more or less as ‘Trotskyism,’ turned into art for art’s sake and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.”<sup>2</sup> If art for art’s sake is a kind of aesthetic Trotskyism then it is perhaps clear why any engagement with even artists struggling to reform or resist constructively the existing socialist system, rather than those that simply left and rejected it entirely, was impossible to include with the narrative of art for art’s sake.

It might be imagined that the American example of the dismissal of all art production under Stalinism was more nuanced in Western Europe, which was under the military guidance of the U.S. but apparently able to pursue autonomous cultural policies. However, from the late 1960s onwards, it was Western European artists and institutions themselves that were struggling to assert their authority, against the primacy of the United States, as producers of contemporary culture in the context of the increasing internationalization of the art and broader cultural worlds. This West-West battle left little room for the “Former East.” Indeed artists, and to a greater extent curators, from Western Europe seem to have excluded art from the existing socialist states even more rigorously than those in the United States.

To back up my arguments here I want to refer to two significant exhibitions that took place twelve years apart and that both illustrate this condition as well as the changes that it underwent from 1969 to 1981. This research that I am now presenting is very new and only partially finished, therefore I am a little reluctant to announce it here. Nevertheless, it seems so relevant to the topics at hand, coming from another point of view, that I hope you will forgive certain blind assertions or uncertainties. The two exhibitions are well known, almost paradigmatic examples of group shows that left an effect on art history and our understanding of art in the West before 1989. The first is “When Attitudes Become Form”, curated by Harald Szeemann for the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969. This exhibition was originally intended to be a survey of current tendencies in U.S. art and was almost entirely sponsored by the tobacco merchant Philip Morris.

<sup>1</sup> S. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> C. Greenberg, “The Late Thirties in New York,” in Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, New York: Beacon Press, 1961, p.230.



The show was clearly divided between an Italian group, an American group, and a small Dutch contingent that acted to some degree as middlemen. This mirrors the West-West battle that would raise its head with Beuys and the German artists later. It also certainly had political elements—the Italians, through Piero Gilardi, were broadly Maoist while the Americans were apparently rather naïve general leftists. Historians of the show have always focused on the originality of the installation and the way Szeemann invited the artists to do what they wanted in the space at that moment. There has been less focus on why these artists were chosen and what they represented in terms of newly emerging forms of the art market. As I said, I am still trying to unpick the stories behind this but it is clear that the support of Philip Morris and, even more, the support of the Paris gallery of Ileana Sonnabend had a major effect on the selection of artists. If we look at the origins of the artists, we get the following:

- 9 United States
- 9 Italy
- 4 Germany
- 3 Netherlands
- 3 United Kingdom
- 3 France
- 2 Belgium
- 2 Switzerland
- 1 Greece – Jannis Kounellis (who worked in Italy)
- 1 South Africa – Ian Wilson (who worked in the United States)
- 1 Philippines – David Medalla (who worked in London)
- 1 Sweden – Claes Oldenburg (who worked in the United States)

This cast was called, in Charles Harrison's review in *Studio International*, "extremely international."<sup>3</sup> He was making the point that at that time most exhibitions were still constrained within national schools and that national art histories were completely dominant in Western European universities. Nevertheless, if you compared this list with participants in the Biennial de Paris, you would see that the part of the world engaged in what would come to be called "conceptual art" was socialist Central and East Europe. Why was this? Perhaps it is a question that cannot be answered. At the least, however, it must represent a certain blindness on the part of artists and curators to the world east of Vienna and Kassel, something I would call an ideological blind-

<sup>3</sup> C. Harrison, "Against Precedents", *Studio International*, vol.178, September 1969, p.91.





ness. While not directly anti-Stalinist in the broadest sense, Western European artists and curators were unwilling to look at and were incurious about what might be happening on the other side of the political divide. I hope that further research will reveal more, for I believe it is vital for our understanding of the current relations between the “former East” and the “former West” to obtain new perspectives on this defining moment in conceptual practices and to better determine which artistic discoveries were influenced by, preceded, or succeeded each other.

The second show is “Westkunst”, curated in 1981 by Kasper König for the Messegebiet (Trade Fair area) in Cologne. This show was a relatively early attempt to use modern art as part of a city marketing campaign and was also influential on the burgeoning Cologne art scene, helping to foster its connections to the New York artistic milieu of the 1980s. After only twelve years the title of this show presumes a less extreme internationalism than “When Attitudes Become Form”, limiting it (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) to the West. While there is much to say about the naming of the show, the impetus for it apparently came from Laszlo Glozer, an Hungarian émigré who came to Germany in 1956. As König mentioned when asked as part of our research into the “Former West,” “only someone from the East could think up such a title.” Indeed, the second section of the show betrayed the confusion of provincialism and universalism that seems to inhabit the term “Westkunst” by being called “Abstraction as a Global Language” without any apparent irony.

“Westkunst” was significant in other ways, being the first major art exhibition since 1945 to take place outside a regular art institution—crucially, it was held on the site where the Cologne Art Fair was usually presented. It therefore put art and commerce on very equal footing, a fact essential to the planned development of Cologne as the West German art hub, given that the events of 1989 seemed impossible at that time. This attempt to establish Cologne was also another aspect of the West-West cultural competition with the United States. This is made even more clear by the fourth section of the “Westkunst” exhibition, which was not curated by König. Instead it was in a way franchised out to the key galleries of the period, including those run by Michael Werner and Max Hetzler, who were charged with bringing the story of “Westkunst” up to date by presenting art made from 1969 to 1981. As I say, there is much work to be done on this show, but it is clear, I hope, that once again there was an ideological blindness in the midst of this competitive positioning that excluded by default any reference to works from socialist Europe.





Before I close, I would like to explain a little of the background to this talk. Within the publishing house Afterall in London, we are developing a project called *Exhibition Histories* that will document and reflect on major exhibitions from 1955 until today through contemporary and current responses to their significance. These exhibitions include “When Attitudes Become Form”, the 1969 Stedelijk Museum show “Op Losse Schroeven”, and possibly “Westkunst”. Much of the research has been carried out by my colleagues Pablo Lafuente and Lucy Steeds and they should take all credit for the good parts of this text. I am also engaged with Maria Hlavajova and Kathrin Rhomberg on a long-term research project, which will likely result in an exhibition, called “Former West”. It will look at artistic production in Western Europe from 1989 until today in light of the major global political and economic changes that happened in 1989, not only in Europe but in South Africa, China, and elsewhere. We are at the preliminary stages of our research, and currently need to find a definition and understanding of what the West was before it begun to become “former,” just like the East. Such exhibitions as “When Attitudes Become Form” and “Westkunst” form a vital part of that definition.

1989

Keywords: 1968 1989 Participation Internationalism  
Former East/Former West Exhibitions & Institutions





# Ausgeträumt...

Kathrin Rhomberg

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Kathrin Rhomberg is a curator who is currently director of the forthcoming Berlin Biennale 6 (2010), as well as advisor and corresponding member of the Vienna Secession. She was previously the director of the Kölischer Kunstverein, Cologne (2002-2007), curator at the Vienna Secession (1990-2001), and co-founder of the Transit initiative for promoting art in central Europe. She has (co-) curated numerous international exhibitions including Manifesta 3 (2000) and the "Migration" project (2002-2006), and is a co-curator of "Former West."

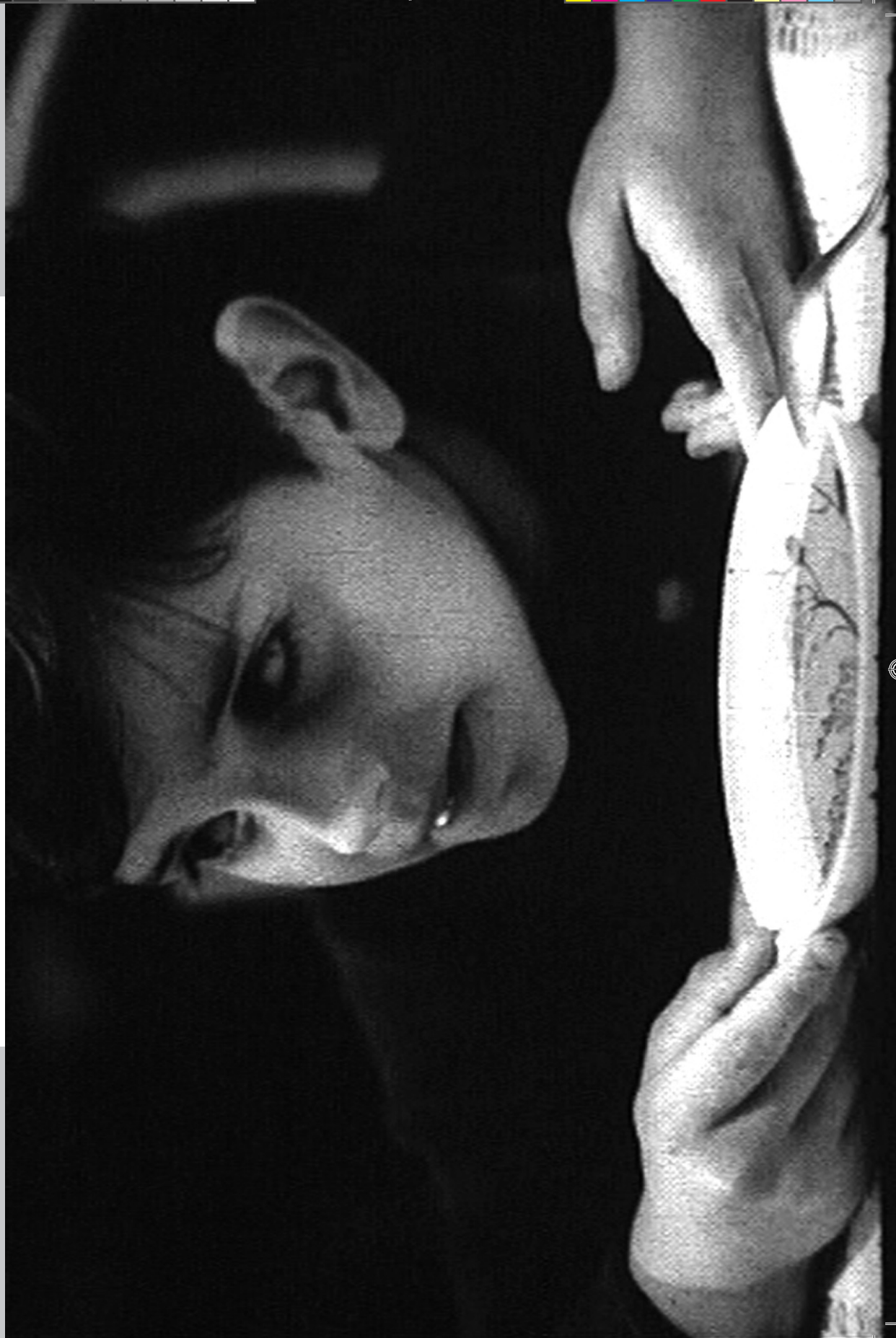
There is no synonym for the German notion of *ausgeträumt* in the English language; it means something like "out of dreams", "disenchanted", or "decidedly stopped dreaming". The exhibition, took place at the Secession in Vienna in 2001 and included works by Pawel Althamer, Joze Barši, Thomas Baumann, Cezary Bodzianowski, Copenhagen Free University (Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen), Josef Dabernig, Ricarda Denzer, Tomislav Gotovac, Renée Green, Elisabeth Grübl, Manfred Grübl, Florian Hecker, Patrick Jolley & Reynold Reynolds, Martin Kaltner, Július Koller, N.I.C.J.O.B., Deimantas Narkevičius, Roman Ondák, George Ovashvilli, Mladen Stilinovic, Werner Würtinger, and Carey Young. Integrated among the art projects were video recordings of conversations with Trinh T. Minh-ha, Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, Reni Hofmüller, Oswald Oberhuber, Egon Bondy, Hakan Gürses, Boris Groys, and Július Koller.





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Cezary Bodzianowski, *The Golden Arm*, The Secession Pavilion,  
Vienna, 2001, photo by Monika Chojnicka













**My** 2001 exhibition “Ausgeträumt...” tried to address the principle atmosphere in the aftermath of the upheaval of 1989, at the end of the 1990s—one of disillusionment, almost resignation—through which the social and political realities of Europe were perceived. This understanding was variously motivated; one’s specific perspective depended on different ways of living. On the one hand, reality seemed to appear far too complex to function under incomprehensible principles, while on the other hand, it was too disappointing and discouraging that all past utopian struggles had been defeated and levelled by capitalistic mechanisms, as though there could be no more willingness to visualize a better society. In the aftermath of the collapse of communism, any formulation or imagining of political and social alternatives runned the risk of appearing unacceptably naive. At the same time, the slogan “the end of history” ran its predictable course right into the minds of those who previously advocated for radical imagination and the possibility of social betterment through steady rationalizing and learning from experience. What seemed to be at stake was the total loss of imaginative power to visualize a better future. If there were any visions on public display, they were retrospective and conservative, idealizing categories like family and religion, and patriarchal values. The “new” as an aesthetic category seemed to have lost its fascination and, above all else, its credit-worthiness. Everything apparently new, in fact, turned out to be a kind of return of something that might have been new a long time ago, but was no longer.

Artistic, curatorial, and institutional praxis was also confronted with this development. It, too, faced a strengthened and accelerated economization and mediatization at the end of the 1990s. The question that the exhibition “Ausgeträumt...” tried to raise was not whether new utopias could be realized but how art could sustain its position within the new social reality, where it is no longer taken for granted that art by itself represents a strong and autonomous value, as it became part of social, political, and economic power, and as such seems to be more and more defined by the economic systems that predetermine the distribution as well as the understanding of art works. What does it mean for art when it becomes part of a dominant world order—especially one in a very radical crisis? Does it have wider cultural relevance? What is the specificity of art and why should we go on working on the field of art? The frequency and casualness of international large exhibitions makes them interchangeable events; this commonness both serves the needs of capitalist economies and at the same time camouflages exhibitions’ increasing insig-

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# 2024

Keywords: 1968 1989 Participation Internationalism  
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Claire Bishop, Kathrin Rhomberg, Magda Raczyńska,  
Borut Vogelink, Piotr Piotrowski

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Magda Raczyńska is a writer, art theorist, and sociologist interested in the interstices of art and politics, the political aspects of cultural practices and non-confrontational forms of subjectivity enacted in public space(s). She graduated from the Department of Sociology at Warsaw University and the Polish Academy of Science (PhD), and from the Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths College (MA in Contemporary Art Theory). She collaborates with the Wyspa Institute of Art, Halart Corporation, and *Obieg* magazine. She currently works at the Polish Cultural Institute in London.

Bios of other contributors:

Claire Bishop p. 15, Kathrin Rhomberg p.197, Borut Vogelink p.177, Piotr Piotrowski p.149.

# Remarks and Comments: Discussion after the Papers by Charles Esche and Kathrin Rhomberg





Claire Bishop: I would like to ask Kathrin Rhomberg if it's possible to date the disillusionment that you mention. Are you positing it as a consistent current in European art, given that your exhibition included the '68 generation and the '89 generation of artists?

Kathrin Rhomberg: It cannot be dated exactly, pinned to one year. It was connected with the developments of the 1990s, which ended in a kind of standstill. After 1989 there were a few years of euphoria and confidence, which did open new perspectives. On the contrary, the end of the West-East conflict was followed by an extension of what had already shaped the West, the globalization of production and markets, finances and corporations, communication systems and culture industries. Such a prosperity through global capitalism and democracy, which made many people believe in a better future, turned out to be an illusion. Political and social reality demonstrated that nationalism and fundamentalism has emerged in response to global capitalism and neoliberalism. Global migrations have not led to an expansion of democratic ideas, but rather to racism and xenophobia as legitimate aspects of public debate. The artistic, curatorial, and institutional praxis has also been confronted with these developments. When, together with Maria Hlavajova, I did the research for Manifesta 3 (Ljubljana, 2000), it became clear to us that there was a strong sense of resignation and disillusionment within the art world both in Former West and also in the Former East. Not only artists, but also theoreticians and curators were expressing it very strongly. It was already in the air. The collapse of the wall, of the socialist system, changed the situation not only in the East (that mechanically became a "Former East"), but also in the West.

Borut Vogelnik: To be disillusioned, you need to have, in the first place, some expectations. Personally, I can imagine what were the expectations of the people freed from totalitarian regimes in the East. But I am curious to know what were the expectations in the West? Can you compare them in light of this disillusionment?

Kathrin Rhomberg: I think there were no expectations in the West. The fall of the wall was generally perceived as a victory for the West. The reunification of Germany, for example, did not lead to the question of how to continue existence in a post-communist era and society. The West simply carried on as if nothing terribly substantial had happened. If there was any kind of expectation in the West, I think it may have been





a hope that the experiences of the East could be connected with the experiences of the West, and that political change could come out of the understanding this would entail.

Magda Raczyńska: There is an important political perspective worth mentioning here. One can say that the interest of the West in the political transformations in Central and Eastern Europe was a consequence of the West being disillusioned with its own democratic development. The East represents both the potential of a new democracy and a lost treasure. There are two ways in which this disillusionment is visible: the unfulfilled hope of the West to compensate for its own democratic deficits by the political (and economic) developments in our region, and the recent disillusionment with the populist developments there.

Kathrin Rhomberg: You might be right that one reason for disillusionment in the West can be seen in the inability of democracy to deal with the new social and economical reality that emerged after 1989. The democratic system revealed its limitations and ended up in a kind of structural and mental standstill. The same thing happened within the Western art system. From the curator's point of view there was a feeling of disillusionment about how the curatorial practices developed in the '90s. It became urgent for me to redefine my engagement with art. The exhibition "Ausgeträumt..." therefore tried not to deal only with the paradigm of disillusionment. It attempted also to emphasize new productive conditions that might be seen as a result of experiences with disillusionment. This includes questioning criticism, resistance, art, and culture in light of the economic and political structures in which they are embedded.

Piotr Piotrowski: In the beginning of the '90s some curatorial practices and art criticism in the West were able to find some expectations in the East: examples of non-conformist art, of art not involved in any commercial situations, that was subversive in a very totalitarian system. So there were some expectations from the West. What happened next, whether those expectations have been fulfilled, is a different question.

As for the "Former West"—I have a problem with this idea. The idea of the former East is much more clear; the Former West is much more complicated. Of course, "Former West" is a very nice and attractive rhetorical expression. Charles Esche is of course right to see 1989 as a crucial date not only for the East, but for the entire world. Something definitely changed at that time. The post-communist condition means something





more than only the collapse of the communism. We have to find a different vocabulary to define the “Former West”. I’m absolutely sure that 1989 is the beginning of the end of the domination of the West, but still we have to remember that in terms of the economy the Western structures are still flourishing and collecting money from the rest of the world.

Secondly, and more importantly, the terms of the language of interpretation and institutional discourse are still Western. We don’t have another language. If we want to analyze the world, we still must rely on the Western tradition of academic or intellectual discourse. To realize this is the beginning of the questioning and critique and even, perhaps, of the real end to the Western domination of the world. But the question is, what remains? Is this the end of the universalism, which was the Western ideology?

If post-colonial ideology or a post-colonial perspective is the new paradigm for describing the world, how can we name the target of post-colonial studies? Since it looks as if its target is the West, maybe we can find a softer concept for the word of the “former,” something deeper. Maybe there is a contradiction in the West that can serve as the beginning for a new discursive paradigm. For instance the contradiction between America and Europe and also the European nations... maybe we need to find something not national, or even international, but trans-international. But I don’t know how we can replace the term “former.” This is the open question, and I think it is very productive.

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Keywords: 1968 1989 Participation Internationalism  
Former East/Former West Exhibitions & Institutions





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# Travel Book

Milan Knížák is a Czech artist born in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, in 1940. He is best known for organizing and performing the first happenings in Czechoslovakia. Knížák was also a member of Fluxus and a director of Fluxus East from 1965. In October 1966 he organized the first Fluxus concert in Prague, in which he appeared together with Ben Vautier, Jeff Berner, Alison Knowles, Serge Oldenbourg, and Dick Higgins. Invited by George Maciunas to the USA in 1968, he participated in Fluxus events there; Maciunas later prepared a publication of Knížák's collected works – the Fluxus Edition. Knížák returned to Czechoslovakia in 1970. During the communist era he was under police surveillance, arrested and later tried together with the music band Plastic People of the Universe (1976). In the 1980s he received numerous fellowships from a number of German institutions (including DAAD in 1979). Between 1990-1997 he was Chancellor at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts, and since 1997 Professor of Intermedia Studies. As of 1999, Milan Knížák has been the General Director of the National Gallery in Prague.





*Cestopisy or “travel book” (first published in Prague in 1990), is a gossip diary written by the Czech artist Milan Knížák during his stay in the USA (1968-1970). The text is a rollercoaster of entertaining opinions on his artist contemporaries, accounts of LSD trips on the West Coast, and erotic fantasies; amongst these are sprinkled views of the New York art world through the eyes of someone whose had hitherto experienced art under quite different ideological conditions. A notable theme throughout the text is the role of the artist in a city where there is a surfeit of artistic production; another is his constant shortage of money and a continual reassessment of how art negotiates the boundary with life in the ‘freedom’ of North America as compared to socialist Czechoslovakia. Throughout the 1960s, Knížák’s main link to the international art world was Fluxus and Happenings; on arrival in New York he was dismayed to find that these tendencies had already become academic. One corollary of this is that he increasingly prioritizes first-hand sensation over cultural analysis, and at one point even infers that the trip has depoliticized him or, at least, diminished his “commitment.”*

*Claire Bishop*





New York. Two familiar postcards and the rest an enormous number of slummy buildings. Here you don't have to hold paper events. The streets, especially on Sundays (they don't sweep them that day at all) are strewn with layers of paper as though they had been covered with a fall of monstrous, dirty snowflakes. So much for perfect packaging techniques. I've never in my life seen paper wasted as much as it is here. Even tin cans are wrapped in paper.

I'm living in Manhattan, near the tallest building in the world, in a flat belonging to an avant-garde photographer, Peter Moore. Those who have seen the Fluxus films (I showed them a couple of times in Bohemia) will certainly recall the extremely slow-motion shots of smoking, winking, smiling, and so on. That was his work. (I remember at the time that someone envied him his camera – so for the record: it wasn't his and it cost him 50 dollars an hour to rent.)

[...]

And the Electric Circus on St Mark's Place?

The most beautiful of all is the entrance stairway. Covered with wild and mysterious pictures in glowing colours that transform everything around them. Even yourself. Like a thousand sculptures by Pešánek. And inside the long-haired guys play rock music. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad, but the environment is fantastic. Several films projected one on top of the other on the walls, eye-chafing strobe lights that separate movements into phases like flickering old films. When I saw it I thought of the Primitives group (a rock group in Prague that is into psychedelic music); their manager, Evzen Fiala, gets a big charge out of stuff like this. Everywhere you can smell marijuana and people dance any way they feel like or don't feel like, or they sit, or they lie, or...

One of the most terrific things about Newyawk is that it's full of fantastic and beautiful absurdities. I'd like to be a millionaire and build a huge house, something like a hangar for a giant space ship, and I'd fill it from top to bottom with all kinds of these fascinating little trivialities. And the clothes! (I've already bought boots with little bells on them and a stetson. And a golden poncho.)



At the fountain there was also a happening going on, organized by a Japanese group led by Kosei Kasaki. They were making some kind of film. A happening in which both the actions of the performers and the reactions of the participants were filmed. I couldn't stick it out til the end. There were too many interesting things going on around. It was only an attraction to amuse the passers-by. And it wasn't even all that attractive. And not even very original. I think there are only two ways of doing an action on the street. Either present it as a kind of fascinating, compelling ceremony, a ritual (which today, however, is very difficult, especially in America). Or simply release some impulse into the flow of everyday life and let it be and affect its surroundings in all the modifications that develop out of it. Do not try to make it exceptional beforehand. But watch out! You have to carefully estimate the quality of the impulse in advance (if you can, of course).

I felt pretty low after all this. The thing is, just before that I had been to the opening of a show by Bob Whitman: Pond. An environment. (Here, I mean in America, I first heard how the word was properly pronounced – invirmint – naturally with that hard American “R” coming from somewhere in the back of the throat). It was an audio-visual milieu created with the help of mirrors, projectors, and a sound system. Very old hat. The only thing about it was that it was big and probably expensive. It was in the Jewish Museum.

I descended on America just when the presidential election campaign was getting into high gear, and so I witnessed the magnificent spontaneous street happenings that the campaign brought with it (with the cooperation of several thousand policemen with helmets and enormous truncheons); I went through a lot of department stores and just riding up and down the escalators was a tremendous happening. So all these artistic programmes tasted like distilled water to me.

I was also at the New School for an evening put together by Ron Gross from the work of Dick Higgins, Jackson Mac Low, and Larry Friedfeld. Dick is already a classic at 30. At times I found it a little embarrassing. It's a fact that in general now there's a kind of ebb tide, a sort of slowing down. I think it's very useful. It's also necessary to recapitulate. Not only to discover. But why for God's sake does the avant-garde become academic so quickly, so rapidly? In the Museum of Modern Art I saw a fantastic Pollock and





a Mathies (they only had one of his exhibited there but it was a magnificent one) and it seemed to me less academic than when Dick Higgins, on a darkened stage, shouts beautifully and savagely (he did it well, his shouting is terrific, and George says that Dick is a good performer – George being Maciunas, I should explain) and then the lights came up and people clapped! And I don't even think he forgot to bow: performer Dick.

I met a lot of people who have names. Allan Kaprow, Ayo, John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, La Monte Young, Oldenburg, Rosenquist, and many, many others. And even more of those people without names, who just move through the streets and drink whiskey and beer in the bars.

Allan Kaprow towers like the Empire State Building above all these people. (Later note: in fact only half an Empire...)

And I mustn't forget Peter Moore, whom I've already mentioned. He's the kindest person in America. Certainly the kindest among those people who have created that thin skin around America that is called art. A micro-layer. Because in America the makers and the consumers of art are practically the same people. Artists create for other artists. Because other artists and their friends are the only ones who are willing to look at or take part in what other people create. Absolutely no-one else is interested. At least not in the art we know a lot about in Czechoslovakia and which is considered excellent and progressive. Of course, looking at American art from Europe is like looking at the Earth from the Moon, because things that have the power to shock in Europe, where progress takes place, are scarcely even noticed within the limits of the law in enormous and corn-filled America.

Not long ago I gave a lecture at the University of Kentucky where the art department is a very odd and enigmatic unit in the eyes of the rest of the faculty. And it's like that everywhere. Art is considered something outside the normal framework of things, yet something you clearly have to respect because anyone you could mention respects it. But it's not essential for life and therefore uninteresting. But let's leave art and come back to New York. Now it's covered in snow. In a day and a night more than half a meter fell. NY was transformed into a dead city. Nothing functioned. The stores didn't open. Cars didn't run, people didn't go to work. Only lone pedestrians walking their dogs and curious and delighted children waded through the snow.





I'd always thought that snow was a problem only in small, backward Czechoslovakia, but it's a hundred times worse in New York. When it snows here, you could make a social revolution.

I've also slightly altered my opinion about American freedom. It's almost ridiculous the things they have laws for here, as if Americans were not adults but a swarm of thoughtless and unreasonable children. (And at times they are). It's against the law to sell beer on Sunday morning. In some places even to drink. To drink at home. You can't walk out of a bar with an open bottle. In some states you can't sit on the sidewalk. You're allowed to have a rifle but no-one's allowed to have a pistol. In other states you have to have a rifle. In some places you can't stand in one spot for more than an hour, in others you can only sing, in yet others only swing, and still in others walk on your cock. I have the feeling there must be a law here that tells you how to use the toilet. For a European, all this seems ridiculous. Also American cities are not cities in the true sense of the word, except for maybe three or four of them. They are only agglomerations of buildings laid out on checkerboard streets. Perhaps only downtown is somewhat, jammed and chaotic, but it's also very dirty.

[...]

I've discovered a huge paradox here. Certainly all of you know how the entry of simple things into art, the rapprochement of art and reality, that modest and noble celebration of the simplest acts, has become glorified and exaggerated. Now it's reached the point where many artists who sweep the stairs claim that they are doing their piece.

So let us bow down, then, to the cleaning ladies, for they are the true artists. Any kind of activity whatever, even the most insignificant, is almost instantaneously stamped with the hallmark of art.

[...]

California is a different America than New York (they say NY isn't America at all and it's true), but at the same time it's a lot different from Indiana, Kentucky, or Colorado or Ohio. It's more open, more natural, but at the same time more surrealistic. Strange, but California art seemed to me far more European than the art in New York. For all the differences, there's something here that we have



in common. In California there are almost no cities (with the exception of San Francisco), only little houses littered all over the place. Los Angeles is the most typical example of this. There are only magnificent, wide freeways and between them, within a radius of almost fifty miles, little houses set out like a huge radish plantation. And in this topographical situation, where people are predestined to live in a kind of isolation because you can't budge without a car, and in which there aren't many public establishments of any description, people, and mainly young people, get together in houses where they play, sing, talk, smoke marijuana, drop acid or mescaline, and screw. And all of this – these house parties – is a very typical thing for Europe, especially Eastern Europe, where there also a problem of space and money and so people are forced to spend their evenings either in cheap crowded pubs or in the house or flat of somebody whose family has just gone away or who is lucky enough to have a little room of his own. But of course in California it struck me as being a lot more natural. Many people leave their flats and their cars unlocked. We went to one house and lay around for three hours and drank the owner's beer before he himself finally showed up. This has a positive effect on people. Of course, I can't imagine life there without marijuana. They smoke marijuana, they drink marijuana tea, they eat marijuana cookies, they chew it, they sing about it, they worship it.

[...]

Also up there (in the mountains) we held a silent all-night vigil which was concluded by an equally silent walk through the awakening woods covered in fresh snowfall. Then Ken and his new girl and I drove back to San Diego to that house with the swimming pool (San Diego is a nice, clean city). And a couple of days later (exactly two days later, in fact) back again to Los Angeles where I began preparing for my lecture. I was supposed to carry out some action with fire, but the fire department withheld permission for it at the last minute so I only jabbered for a while on the podium, gave interviews to the newspapers and radio, and that was that. I won over a lot of people for Aktual [group]. (They've certainly already forgotten about it by now.) And besides \$300 for the trip, another \$150 [for the lecture].

[...]

In Bohemia, Honza Palach has just burned himself. The situation there gets stranger and stranger and a lot of people have com-





mitted themselves to a lot of things and I feel that all that is behind me, has dropped away from me like leaves off a tree. I find it strange. Being committed has always seemed important to me. I had always been somewhere on the pinnacle of desperate and almost pointless commitment and now all I want to do is lose myself in the intricate and bubbling labyrinth of the world. All my grand desires have left me and all I want to do is drift, meet gorgeous girls, good lads, wise old men, stupid cops, stupid people (but not many of them, I've met enough already), ungorgeous girls, trees, stones, smells, feelings, touchings.

[...]

My dreams about Aktual City, rather than having faded away, have become more vivid and insistent. I draw up plans for houses that could be built very cheaply and simply. I'm always thinking of going back home and I try to imagine what everything will be like but all my visions dissolve in a haze of uncertainty. George [Maciunas]'s bankruptcy and the money he owes me have put a spoke in the wheels of a lot of my plans.

[...]

George Maciunas, an expert in nonsense, held a kind of parody of a mass where the mumbling priest, who was introduced by poor Yoshi, my Japanese friend, was served by acolytes in gorilla masks who, with amateur gestures, ate a head of cabbage stolen from the altar where a bird (made by Joe Jones) shat symbolically and where a small statue burned and wine poured out of the leg of an inflatable Superman. The priest tumbled incessantly at the altar. Also something was broken and slightly, very slightly, they annoyed the audience who otherwise sat very obediently in their rows. It was awful. I still can't understand "why"? WHY? It wasn't even fun.

[...]

A new thing by Allan Kaprow came in the mail: Graft. It is labelled "an activity by A.K." It is probably the first work he did after our last debate in Pasadena where we claimed that words like "happening," "event," and so on are disturbing and unnecessary (they are already too established and specialized) and that what we do should be merely a kind of activity which is only that which it is in a given moment. At that time Allan hadn't exactly agreed, but





it must have stuck in his mind. (As early as 1965 a hand-printed publication of Aktual called *Necessary Activity* came out, and all the things we did from that time on were always referred to as activities.) Of course, we didn't call our individual actions activities, but rather everything we did, in order to emphasize that we were not concerned with art as such, but only with a type of activity. In any case, art has the greatest impact when it remains anonymous. I hope that some clever critic will someday point out how quickly things from abroad manage to reach backward Czechoslovakia. It's happened several times already.

[...]

#### Afterword

I've been back now for a couple of months. Jana's a whore. I haven't made any money. I miss Yoshi, that incredibly wonderful person. I've given away half of what I brought back with me. I've gotten into seven fights. One cut eyebrow, two black eyes, plus a lump on my temple. One performance of revived rock music which the police, excuse me, I mean the Public Security Forces, banned. Visited by three men from the State Secret Police. Summoned to secret police headquarters before the twenty-first of August. Beautiful young girls. 15-17. Incredible amounts of disgusting rum. Powerful feelings of animosity mixed with a tremendous, but unobtrusive joy. Hop!

English translation by Paul Wilson,  
previously unpublished.



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# 3SD

Ján Budaj

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Ján Budaj is a Slovak politician, born in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, in 1952. Before 1989 Budaj was a dissident, co-creator of the independent art movement, publisher of underground publications, collaborator with Charter 77 [*Charta 77*] and the Polish political opposition. In the 1970s he organized the Temporary Society of Intense Experiencing [*Dočasnú spoločnosť intenzívneho prežívania*, or HDSiP] that pursued conceptual interventions and other forms of public appearances, such as *The Week of Fictional Culture* in Bratislava. In the 1980s Budaj became an pro-environment activist; he was one of the leaders of the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and co-founder of the VPN opposition movement [*Verejnost proti násiliu* - Public against Violence]. After 1989 he became a politician and a deputy to the Slovak Parliament (1998–2002).





The following excerpts are from Jan Budaj's samizdat publication 3SD ("Three Sunny Days", 1981), which documents a collaborative project between "non-professional theatre artists" and "so-called professional visual artists, especially those who found themselves excluded from official exhibition halls".<sup>1</sup> Planned to take place in May 1980 at the Medical University Gardens, this three-day festival was in keeping with Budaj's street interventions of the late 1970s in that it aimed to create "an authentic public event" and a "situation of contact" – in other words, to propose a public sphere that, under "normalization", had been all but suppressed from memory. The event was publicized and State permission granted, but a fortnight before "Three Sunny Days" was due to take place it was banned and subject to investigations. As Budaj writes:

3SD did not take place. Before the event could materialize, it was cut off in a whirl of hysteria, the real causes of which still remain unclear. We could merely observe its external manifestations: all copies of *Bulletin* were impounded and destroyed and Labyrinth theatre's activity was banned. V-klub, whose professional employees were laid off, met the same fate. Interrogations of 3SD's players and attempts to penalize Labyrinth's director at her workplace, and other measures followed.

A year later, Budaj undertook a series of interviews to take the temperature of artistic feeling in relation to 3SD's aspirations; one of the main themes is the shift of values between the 60s generation and Budaj (who would go on to be a key figure in the Velvet Revolution, and a politician in the post-'89 administration). There are also numerous revealing comments on Western art. Amongst those he interviewed were the Slovak artists Alex Mlynářčík (b.1934) and Julius Koller (1939-2007), whose conversations are reproduced below, along with Budaj's reflections in January 1988 on the second edition of 3SD. More information about Mlynářčík's elaborate participatory gatherings can be found in Vit Havránek's contribution to this volume (pages 64-74). Julius Koller is best known for his photo-conceptual practice organised around the cosmic idea of the "UFO" – unidentified flying object – a flexible acronym used by the artist to refer to his work after 1970 ("Universal Futurological Operations") or, as here, to an artists' sports league ("Unidentified Football Objects").

Claire Bishop

<sup>1</sup> Ján Budaj, "To Open Up", 3SD, 1981, p.1. The other quotations in this introduction are from the same source, pp.1–3. 3SD was then published again in 1988 [Ed., and all following footnotes, with the help of Mira Keratova].







### Conversation in an unrated pub

Gypsies with their flashing rings and a herd of girls, old loiterers, banana crate pickers, and sewer foragers – all these and others – in this unrated pub and all the others around the country – are sitting around uniformly and sadly drinking nothing else but lemonades or letting their throats remain parched. It is Election Day today. The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic organizes its Happsoc today – no drinking, no serving alcohol, no toasting.<sup>2</sup> No wonder the atmosphere that has descended on the city is grim. Those who were drinking last night and slept in this morning – who were filled with remorse but forgave themselves only to hit the streets again with a new taste for more on the tongue – walk around haggardly now and the taste of yesterday makes their tongue sticky. It is the second day of elections. People are loitering about sidewalks, reading election posters in the shopping windows, wondering where to go since today one place is like any other. Even the marketplace, a well-frequented spot on Saturdays, is a drag today. The time to stage an event for millions has come – this is a perfect moment to meet with Alex Mlynarčík.

We are drinking lemonade like everybody else and I am ready to pose questions in a foursome at the marketplace. I wait for the moment when the conversation takes a turn that allows me to ask about the solution to the problem...I really want to write something today – I am poised for a cue to open up the passage to a whole sequence of questions at a fast pace!

The conversation, however, becomes ever more interesting. It actually keeps revolving around the problem I had wanted to discuss so I let it run its course. Mlynarčík talks about his past event called the “Train”.<sup>3</sup> He starts elaborating on how the idea behind it sprang up:

Alex: I was driving through the most idyllic countryside – chimneys smoking, snow everywhere. It made me recall all kinds of fairytales. And suddenly the smallest, tiniest train appeared from the woods looking like a toy, puffing happily as it passed through the valley. What an amazing experience! It made me richer in that moment – I acquired possession of a peculiar experience.

This was what I wanted to present to the participants of the event, but mostly to the villagers for whom the train was an everyday reality. I wanted to grant them a part of that possession I had acquired when I visited them. Since the train’s route was being discontinued I decided to let its last journey be

<sup>2</sup> Happsoc is a reference to a series of collaborative works by Alex Mlynarčík, Stano Filko and Zika Kostrová in 1965. In *Happsoc I*, the city of Bratislava was nominated as a work of art between 2-9 May 1965.

<sup>3</sup> The reference is to Mlynarčík’s manifestation *If All The Trains in the World...* (1972).





dedicated to those who lived alongside it with all its life and to let it be a beautiful, unique experience.

I organized the moment of their joy, surprise, and celebration when the dream train, pink and gold, and overflowing with music, food and drink, pulled into their tiny village. Steeped in a century-long wait for fortune – the fortune embodied in a beautiful and vivacious woman who holds the horn of plenty overflowing with money, gold and flowers – finally the woman enters the village pub, in all her beauty and vivacious nudity. When the dream becomes life, what I call “possession of peculiar experience”, Hanák has a special term for this, “a situation laced with peculiarity”.<sup>4</sup>

Budaj: ...or perhaps: “subtly modelled situation”.

Alex: I believe art can subsist on life, with life and for life. But I do not speak of Art, which has lost its relation to reality in our country and in the world. Even in terms of price. The price of art pieces are very variable and often artificial. Go ahead artist, set up stands with your goods – in front of Slovnaft, Prior, or a train station...<sup>5</sup> At one time I wanted to do it here, at the marketplace. In this regard I like American hotels. They are glass-inhabited sculptures. Everything is aesthetically uniform but functional at the same time, and comfortable. It doesn't give any indication of what part was played by, let's say, visual artists, architects or lift constructors. Everything is anonymous and serves its purpose just like sacral architecture of the past.

An artist is a person working, creative. There is nothing extraordinary about it any longer. What is all the mystification about! And all the sensationalism! Let us consider Christo. In Paris, when stone facades were jet-cleaned by water and sand it was necessary to wrap up buildings such as Notre Dame or Louvre, and others. Christo wraps and packs too and gets big bucks in return. Do you see? I have nothing against him; he is a buddy; he's fine. I am merely looking at the problem as a whole. He wraps and packs (like others, such as the post office...) and sells them for let's say 30 000 francs. They are exhibited in all the Western galleries. You feel it shifts art in a direction where it should not go.

Budaj: I once read an article (about the fence which ran 40 km through farms, and both private and state land) where he said he was after contact with people as he organized the project.

Alex: That's alright. It is only the sale element that does not fit in and which changes the deal.

Budaj: Perhaps he does it to get the money for the next big event...

<sup>4</sup> Dušan Hanák is a Slovak film director; at the time of the interview there was a controversy as one of his most famous films – *Ja milujem, Ty miluješ* [*I Love, You Love*], produced by the state film studios in 1980 – was censored shortly before its public launch and completely prohibited from public exposure until 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Slovnaft is the Slovak petroleum company; Prior is a Slovak department store.



Alex: Yes, that is the crux of the matter – how to make a living? Let's say I make a living working in my profession. I am something of a visual architect. I make lamps or ornamental bars. I do not want to make money by doing art. I want to be free from such a conception of art which entails the whole money machine and work for money.

Budaj: You've promoted contact with the world at great length. You've also opposed the exclusivity of visual and any other art. How does it fit in with the idea of Argillia?<sup>6</sup> You stopped communicating with both the official and unofficial spheres. Only the initiated are familiar with Argillia...

Alex: It's clear now. I understand what you are getting at. Look, I live in this country of my own free will. I could have been somewhere else. But even though I live here I do not have to accept the current situation, let's say the social one. Since 1970, our world has been so greatly permeated with ideology that should you even decide to plant a flower somewhere it is perceived as a political gesture. And if your name is Mlynarčík... Should the problem in my life revolve around ideology, or some incumbent politician, or some regime?

I want to live in transcendence, someplace else, serving other values.

Budaj: Maybe you are right. Maybe in this "match" one can never win by playing either side of the field...

Alex: After all, there are higher gains to consider which don't overlap with superficial worldly planes. Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince* represents a prototype for perceiving life's truths which paves the way to comprehending Argillia. The Little Prince is above the superficial, he dwells in spiritual realms, be these deeper or higher. He is still with us, because he existed before he was created, before Saint-Exupéry himself – there always has been the world of deeper truth, deeper joy...

Budaj: Nonetheless, would you go ahead with happenings aimed at engaging the public, if such an opportunity came up?

Alex: Of course. They are needed and I believe that people would accept them, take interest and participate in them.

Transcribed interview between  
Budaj and Mlynarčík on June 6th, 1981

<sup>6</sup> *Argillia* is the name of an imaginary land founded by Mlynarčík in 1974. A local peasant called Ondrej Krištofik was proclaimed King of Argillia, while Galerie Vincy in Paris was renamed the head of Agence Argillia-Pressé.



## Do you like football? on UFO, Superboys and communication

A year after the debacle at the Medical University Gardens a new collective initiative in the ranks of Slovak modern artists emerged.

They would meet each week and play football. The State Security already knew. The first interrogations took place. It might be something interesting. Moreover, since it was both a homely and a collective endeavor, it couldn't be sidestepped either.

The players decided to take it up a notch. Peter Meluzín organized a derby between two groups who initially played separately: between TJ Lamač and TJ SŠUP Superboys. I managed to get in to watch the return match.

Superboys won the first leg by a high score. The return match was held on May 19, 1981 at the gym of the Secondary School of Applied Arts which was decorated with banners and slogans, and cheering for both teams. All the spectators know the players personally which gives the match a flavor of the world championships where all the players are stars. All the players know the spectators which drives them to want to win. Even the real stars of the world championships, who ride the insane machine that is the sports business driven by Wall Street and the Pentagon, fail to get such a doping. Our players, who get support from quite a different sort of street, marched into the gym accompanied by the march tunes of "zelená je tráva, futbal to je hra...", and paused to let a nice young lady in a folk costume greet the UFO senior member Julius Koller on behalf of the art school.<sup>7</sup> Team captains exchange gifts and flags, while the speakers boom with the names of players, photojournalists pose their questions, and flashes go off. And here comes Rudo Fila and his ceremonious opening kick. 2 × 25 minutes in Slovak art's unprecedented battle for honor and glory sets off. These men, academic artists with the exception of Otis L[aubert], are not used to losing, and here are battling one another. The spectator crowd, mainly art theorists and artists, takes turns cheering for one team, then the other. The gym trembles under a frenetic roaring and whistling. TJ UFO definitely earned its lead by the half-time break, which passes quickly while artistic photographs (doc. Matušík) are sold and anti-doping tests are undertaken. The referee (R. Cyprich) motions to start the second half. The match carries on fair and square. TJ UFO is still in the lead! The match is coming to an end but the players' enthusiasm doesn't subside. In the final moments of the game, the Superboys tied, and the derby ends with a draw, ten-all. Players and spectators alike can finally relax. The evening

<sup>7</sup> "Green is the grass, football is the game to play..."



continues with handing out the prizes and small refreshments. If the match was filled with feats of sophistication, the event's finale overflowed with them. For a more detailed description see the Chronicle of the Match.

Interview with Julius Koller on sports, UFOs,  
and culture a year later

Budaj: How would you interpret the message of "Unidentified Football Objects" to an uninitiated reader?

Koller: The entire initiative was a cultural event.

Budaj: So it is not art after all? In your perception, what is culture and what is art?

Koller: Culture is a wider concept. Art does not involve some elements that culture should contain. In our joint football cultural event, certain artistic elements team up with sport.

I do not have the courage to call an unconventional cultural endeavor 'art'. I would rather leave that up to art theoreticians – let them worry over what art is and isn't.

I, somehow, would not dare to determine it. If we decide to make everything art, we start encountering chaos in evaluating this concept. I experience it every day. What applies here are rather arbitrary measures indeed. Artistic activities in our country and in the West are to an extent multifarious, which inspires helplessness by their sheer diversity. If you wilfully call just about anything art, then... The audience, once again, doesn't trust the theoreticians who profess it to be art; at other times, it [the audience] doesn't believe anything.

Budaj: Such problems didn't touch the public before. The public could not affect artistic taste in the least. In previous centuries, the public was told that it did influence it after all. Since then, art has started shifting. First, it underwent the process of liberation, then decoding, after that it switched media, forms, missions... and these days, it seems, it has become a concept completely devoid of meaning, an amorphous entity...

Koller: I agree. If we assessed the situation we are in and agreed to put it in simplified terms, we could conclude that the concept of art (or what art is) is usually perceived along conventional lines. The capacity of artistic activity, however, transcends such notions by and large. These problems – as to what is what – can be perceived within cultural dimensions. The real problem lies in defining art as a notion. Art has, however, diffused so much – it has approached life – that the





culture of life has gained more importance than skirmishes over what art is and what isn't. As long as art abided by traditional forms of expression – a painting, a sculpture, etc. – it spoke about life, but it did so via medium, in intermediary fashion (in such instances, the issue of selecting a particular medium or form is vitally important), but if artistic activity reacts with life, what gains in importance is the culture of life, not art itself.

Budaj: To continue with this perception of the relationship between culture and art, artistic activity becomes the medium of a novel goal – cultural awareness, or rather, raising the level of cultural awareness, its dissemination, enrichment... I call this process “a change in the level of collective consciousness”. It might sound overly sophisticated, but terms arising from an inflection of cultural awareness in all possible cases (mainly ideological ones) inspire distrust in me. But back to the matter at hand. An artifact (= output of artistic activity) and artistic activity in its own right have started rubbing shoulders, and sometimes become one. Art no longer interacts with life indirectly, through symbols or feelings; it affects it directly. Such art could assume the role of an instrument of social correction; it could experiment with topical conflicts, schemes. It might as well be “an alternative path”, a counterbalancing element, an element leading to a dialogue with preset social structures, with mechanisms of collective manipulation... All of this (collective manipulation, mechanisms of control, the manipulation of consciousness...), I cannot stress this enough, paves the way to an inevitable future with regard to the state of our civilization.

In practice, art appears to be running in two directions. First, there is art with an ambition to interact with life, and to address some specific problem with a more or less current social demand, making it assume a “professional” status. This tendency manifests itself in current American theater groups. They respond on a local level, for example by renewing modern urban environments that are dying and no longer inhabited. They engage in social programs for marginal social groups (activities for drug addicts, ethnic people, the physically handicapped, the unemployed, teenagers from slums, etc).

It resembles activities resulting from the rise in popularity of psychotherapeutic techniques, using artistic means to create situations that serve to correct behavior and deal with conflicts faced by the individual, all of which ensue from the nature of modern life and civilization such as it is.



Then there is the other stream represented by art that holds an ambition to transcend the issue of topicality, which acknowledges its own limitations, as opposed to the recent past. Such a trend signals the recent rise in popularity of the so-called new painting, which stands for nothing more than a demonstrative refusal of a romantic redemption-driven mission; a mission art followed until recently. Even though the “new painting” has a decadent flair about it, it admits the helplessness of art in all the spheres that are not art, and which should not be considered as such. In the end, this kind of behaviour is really sincere. Today, artists openly ask for money and bow down before it, and other driving forces in the world, whereas in the past this was covered up and denounced. Underneath, you can hear the bells of the good old colorful jester’s hat jingling happily, alright.

Please forgive me for the little detour I have taken here, and let’s get back to your perception of culture. The way you described the concept appears to denote an activity relating to the general public to a large extent. So, no exclusiveness – quite the contrary – filling up the void between the problems of the author and the problems of others...

Koller: Yes. An artist, or rather a “cultural worker”, faces new tasks. Even though his/her activity may not be significant to everybody, it tends to open up rather than reduce itself to cultivating its own exclusive aesthetic uniqueness.

Budaj: I think its openness starts with a choice of topics that the activity sets in motion.

Koller: That’s right. Activities of the “cultural worker” are of a more general nature.

Budaj: Your perception of the relationship between art and culture speaks volumes to me.

Koller: I have been using it in my Universal Cultural Futuristic Operations (UFO) since 1970. To describe it very briefly – it transforms phenomena, aspects, and experiences I encounter daily into a cultural activity, while employing a particular artistic touch through selecting, acting, or denominating. In this way, very mundane activities take on an uncommon, peculiar nature – peculiar culture-wise. I see myself as a creator of culture.

Budaj: Do you not consider the use of the term UFO unnecessarily misleading, especially considering you use it as an “umbrella” to deal with such momentous problems. Why not call it – let’s say – Koller’s Cultural Activity?

Koller: UFOs, much like culture, are concepts, or terms, with a capacity to take in an abundance of images and ideas. For





what it's worth, my interest in civilizations, including the alien, is not unique this century. Moreover, UFO is a specific concept widely present in public consciousness – which is why it has become public “property” and everyone owns it one way or another.

Budaj: Do you expect an analogous attitude to your own work?

Koller: I do indeed. We would agree that UFOs make for a juicy tabloid treat. But UFOs are not the answer. Quite the contrary, the issue poses questions, while being open-ended.

Budaj: It is a fact that issues such as UFOs are subject to discussions extending beyond the narrow scientific arena of specialists. The same cannot be said about strictly scientific problems. Do you intend to demonstrate a substantial shift from the specialists' arena towards a lay audience?

It is impossible to direct art exclusively towards the art world or the general public, even though it's necessary to choose between the two when setting the initial frame of focus. For instance, 3SD aimed to put more emphasis on contact with lay audiences. Apropos, since it has come up, what are your opinions on the project?

Koller: I am not completely familiar with the exact outcome of its implementation, but I think it was too much of a temptation to communicate with the public, which obviously led to organizational problems and, ultimately, to it being halted. That kind of project and its realization are too utopian for our country.

Budaj: Why did you want to take part in it then?

Koller: Because along the same conceptual lines, UFOs too are somewhat utopian... Besides, you are asking me this question now, a year after the project, when I'm more experienced.

Budaj: Do you think such methods of communication with the public would have more of a future if the social situation was more favorable?

Koller: These “impossibilities of today”, which seem utopian at the moment can gradually start turning into possibilities. Administrative difficulties when organizing this contact is not the only problem. It is also difficult to attempt to engage such contact with a public whose cultural consciousness is not ready to take it in.



## Epilogue: After seven years

You have read the second edition of 3SD. The first edition came out in a single copy. It was more like an album which only participants and partners of 3SD could view. The caution I had employed on behalf of some of the participants has become superfluous. There is no risk that any of us will be interrogated with regard to 3SD anymore; not because the times have changed so dramatically but simply because everything has been overshadowed by other events into oblivion.

Over time, this album has become a period document. Its content reflects something of the overall concept of 3SD, but also, and perhaps even more so, in its tone and mode of reasoning. The first, more representative publication, reveals that the editor strove to emulate a proper publication that would naturally distance itself from those [publications] that were then, and unfortunately still are, sold in bookstores. This seven years' worth of material inspires a desire to do something; even if it is just to make anything whatever happen. It draws in a final breath of the sixties and that atmosphere when what mattered was whether an act was internally right and not whether and to what extent it was professional.

Bratislava's cultural life lacked analogous happenings in the 1980s (but this lack is not specific only to that time period). The amateur element factor of cultural activities has disappeared; not only from the so-called middle managerial viewpoint (there seem to be no amateurs amid the young "wild" or "new" artists) or in terms of the artistic forms employed, which are not preconditioned by the skilled production of artifacts.

Professionalism has quietly and rightly returned to the pedestal it had occupied in the past. (We have witnessed on many occasions the consequences to which amateurism has been put to use in areas where it did not belong, for example, in running society, the economy, etc.). I nevertheless believe there are spheres where amateurism is a necessary prerequisite. In my opinion, art is one of them.

I do not mean to patronize, as I myself am a layman, but I would like to point out something we once knew but seemed to have forgotten; namely, that amateurism in art determines most of our approach to reality. 'A lay person viewing reality' is how an artist's profession should be described first and foremost. This thesis won't change even after the current critical perspective on avant-garde art of the 19th and 20th centuries. For the contemporary artist, art is not defined as something that would make him part



of a professional or social group. On the contrary, the artist doesn't use his creativity for social legitimation or an "alibi for living", for himself or others. Art is more of an existential choice, rather than existential necessity. A *lay* author, perceived in accordance with the Greek *laikos*, is a person standing freely while facing the world, God, and himself/herself. S/he is an uncontrolled person (in contrast with a notion of *kleros*), who can sever their contacts with art at will and direct their creative potential in other, seemingly non-artistic directions, for example.

A "lay" person finds art creation to be a matter of personal choice, and the artistic space is a field where s/he can demonstrate and experiment with the degree of his/her existential creativity. For this reason, a modern artist no longer considers artisan dexterity to be a necessary prerequisite for creative work.

Art history has increasingly adopted a "lay" approach to creativity alongside the gradual transformation of the artisan into an artist through the extraction of craft elements from classical disciplines, but also by discovering new artistic forms and media that require a non-craft character, such as performance art, artistic events, experimental theater, video, etc.

This is not the time to elaborate on the changes since 1980 that have made obsolete such views on "modernity" and on the interpretation of the "lay person" or "professional". This publication moreover lacks the necessary room to venture such an endeavour. But what I can say for now is that I am sure these changes were neither useless nor momentary. Some years later, I reviewed the documentation of a highly amateur and non-professional event whose publication as you can tell was also amateur, and I realized I wanted to highlight two points. Namely, that allowing professionalism to take its rightful place is equally important as shaking the impression that it should be applied everywhere. The imperfection of amateurism breathes freedom and its errors invoke enthusiasm. Its "inconsistencies" and sketchiness can inspire us. May this reminiscence on 3SD motivate the present-day young specialists to an unprofessionalism and the future professionals to artistic amateurism.

Translated from Slovak by Jana Krajnakova

