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CONTEMPORARY ART AND CAPITALIST MODERNIZATION

A TRANSREGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

EDITED BY OCTAVIAN ESANU



Contemporary Art and Capitalist Modernization

This book addresses the art historical category of “contemporary art” from a transregional perspective, but unlike other volumes of its kind, it focuses in on non-Western instantiations of “the contemporary.”

The book concerns itself with the historical conditions in which a radically new mode of artistic production, distribution, and consumption – called “contemporary art” – emerged in some countries of Eastern Europe, the post-Soviet republics of the USSR, India, Latin America, and the Middle East, following both local and broader sociopolitical processes of modernization and neoliberalization. Its main argument is that one cannot fully engage with the idea of the “global contemporary” without also paying careful attention to the particular, local, and/or national symptoms of the contemporary condition. Part I is methodological and theoretical in scope, while Part II is historical and documentary. For the latter, a number of case studies address the emergence of the category “contemporary art” in the context of Lebanon, Egypt, India, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Armenia, and Moldova.

The book will be of interest to scholars working in art history, globalism, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies.

Octavian Esanu is an assistant professor of Art History at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and Curator of AUB Art Galleries.

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Edited by Octavian Esanu

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>A Note on Contributors</i>	xii
 Introduction	 1
OCTAVIAN ESANU	
 PART I	 15
 1 Toward a Historical Understanding of Post-Soviet Presentism	 17
ANGELA HARUTYUNYAN	
 2 The Long-Lasting Present: Art, Duration, and Contemporaneity	 31
PEDRO ERBER	
 3 Periodizing Latin American Art Since the 1960s	 41
KAREN BENEZRA	
 4 <i>Neue östeuropäische Kunst</i> : The Global Contemporary and the Eastern European Retrocontemporary	 57
IVANA BAGO	
 5 Art Form and Nation Form: Contemporary Art and the Postnational Condition	 80
OCTAVIAN ESANU	
 6 Three Questions for Terry Smith: Peripherality, Postmodernity, Multiplicity – Reconceiving the Origins of Contemporary Art	 98
INTERVIEW WITH TERRY SMITH, BY OCTAVIAN ESANU	

PART II	119
Case Study 1 <i>Nove Tendencije 2</i> [New Tendencies 2], Gallery of Contemporary Art Zagreb, 1963 IVANA BAGO	121
Case Study 2 Rabinec Studio: The Commodification of Art in Late Socialist Hungary, 1982–1983 KRISTÓF NAGY	139
Case Study 3 The 3rd Floor Cultural Movement, Yerevan 1987–1994 ANGELA HARUTYUNYAN	153
Case Study 4 The First Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting, Ashkal Alwan Beirut 1995 NATASHA GASPARIAN	169
Case Study 5 CarbonART 96 and The 6th Kilometer, SCCA Chişinău 1996 OCTAVIAN ESANU	184
Case Study 6 Meeting Point, SCCA Sarajevo 1997 AMILA PUZIĆ	206
Case Study 7 Khoj International Artists' Workshop, Khoj International Artists' Association, Modinagar 1997 SABIH AHMED AND NIDA GHOUSE	222
Case Study 8 Janja Žvegelj, <i>Squash</i> : Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana, 1998 TEVŽ LOGAR AND VLADIMIR VIDMAR	236
Case Study 9 Al-Nitaq Festival of Art, Cairo, 2000 and 2001 DINA A. MOHAMED	253
<i>Combined Bibliography and Selected Archival Material</i>	267
<i>Index</i>	281

Figures

1.1	Poster for <i>New Tendencies 2</i> exhibition designed by Ivan Picelj, 1963. Courtesy of Anja Picelj Kosak	126
1.2	Calendar: individuals, groups, and exhibitions, which indirectly or directly preceded the phenomena encompassed by New Tendencies. Page from the exhibition catalog <i>Nove Tendencije 2</i> . Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb	127
1.3	<i>New Tendencies 2</i> , exhibition opening. Getulio Alviani and Eugenio Carmi in front of <i>Fluid Structure</i> (1961) by Gianni Colombo. Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb	127
1.4	<i>New Tendencies 2</i> , exhibition opening. Visitors interacting with artworks. Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb	128
1.5	<i>New Tendencies 2</i> , exhibition questionnaire (Page 1 and 3). Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb	128
1.6	Letter from the organizers of <i>New Tendencies 2</i> . Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb	129
2.1	András Koncz, <i>Rabinec Studio Logo</i> , 1982, print. Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest	146
2.2	“Who is the victim? Who is the culprit? What should be done?” <i>AL (Artpool Letters)</i> , 1983: 18–19. Artpool Art Research Center – Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest	147
2.3	Zsuzsa Simon, Accounting Records 1981–1983. Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest	148
2.4	Tamás Király at an exhibition opening in front of a painting by Károly Kelemen, 1983. Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest	149
2.5	Zsuzsa Simon, Proposal for a Gallery of Contemporary Art (extract), 1980. Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest	150
3.1	Arman Grigoryan, <i>The 3rd Floor</i> poster-painting, 1987, mixed-media. Courtesy of Vardan Azatyan	157
3.2	The 3rd Floor group photograph, 1992. Courtesy of Nazareth Karoyan	158
3.3	The 3rd Floor, Collective Action, Exhibition <i>Plus Minus</i> , 1990. Courtesy of Nazareth Karoyan	158
3.4	Article in <i>Mshakuyt</i> monthly covering the events organized by the members of The 3rd Floor group. <i>Mshakuyt</i> , 2–3 (1989): 54–57. Document in personal archive of Angela Harutyunyan	159
3.5	Arman Grigoryan, <i>Vandal</i> , 1990. Courtesy of Arman Grigoryan	160

viii *Figures*

3.6	The 3rd Floor, <i>Hail to the Union of Artists from the Netherworld: Happening</i> . Performance at the Artists' Union, 1988. Courtesy of Arman Grigoryan	160
3.7	The 3rd Floor, <i>Breakdance</i> , 1987. Performance. Courtesy of Arman Grigoryan	161
3.8	Arman Grigoryan next to his poster-painting <i>Breakdance</i> , 1987. Courtesy of Nazareth Karoyan	162
4.1	Invitation card to <i>The First Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting</i> , 1995. Ashkal Alwan, Beirut	174
4.2	Cover of the <i>Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting</i> catalog, 1995. Ashkal Alwan, Beirut	175
4.3	Ziad Abillama's (right) and Amal Bohsali's (left) projects in the <i>Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting</i> catalog, 1995. Ashkal Alwan, Beirut	176
4.4	Nabil Basbous's sketch of a sculpture executed in the Sanayeh Meeting (left) and Future Television advertisement (right), <i>Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting</i> catalog, 1995. Ashkal Alwan, Beirut	176
4.5	Photograph of a billboard advertisement for Solidere's reconstruction project, 1995. Courtesy of Walid Sadek	177
4.6	Page from <i>Dakhaltu Marra al-Guneina</i> , unpublished pamphlet (edited by Walid Sadek, Ziad Abillama, Rabih Mroue and Bassam Kahwagi) showing "Interview between the editors and Christine Tohme," Beirut, 1995. Courtesy of Walid Sadek	178
4.7	Walid Sadek's project for the Sanayeh Meeting, Beirut, 1995. Courtesy of Walid Sadek and Ashkal Alwan, Beirut	178
4.8	Map of the Sanayeh Garden showing the location of each participant's project. Ashkal Alwan, Beirut	179
5.1	Newspaper ad announcing <i>CarbonART 96</i> camp. <i>Flux</i> , June 1, 1996. KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău	187
5.2	Adina Șoimaru, "The Power to Appreciate 'Modern Art,'" <i>Flux</i> , June 22, 1996. KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău	188
5.3	Review of <i>CarbonART 96</i> artist camp in the Russian-language newspaper <i>Nezavisimaia Moldova</i> (undated). KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău	188
5.4	Cover of <i>CarbonART 96</i> catalog. KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău	189
5.5	<i>CarbornART 96</i> lake exhibition. KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău	190
5.6	Igor Scherbina and Stefan Sadovnikov, <i>Structures</i> , 1996. Performance. KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău	190
5.7	Cover of the <i>Kilometrul 6</i> exhibition catalog featuring Alexandru Tinei's installation <i>Madona Mohana</i> , 1996. KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău	197
5.8	Car-poster for the exhibition <i>Kilometrul 6</i> . KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău	198
5.9	SCCA grant contract, 1996. KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău	198

5.10	Iurie Cibotari, <i>The Guillotine</i> , 1996. Installation. KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chişinău	199
5.11	<i>Dumaite sami</i> [Think for yourself] exhibition review. <i>Nezavisimaia Moldova</i> , November 22, 1996. KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chişinău	200
5.12	SCCA Chişinău questionnaire, 1996. KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chişinău	200
6.1	Cover of <i>Meeting Point</i> exhibition catalog, 1998. Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo	210
6.2	The opening of the first annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art Sarajevo, <i>Meeting Point</i> (1997). Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo	211
6.3	Sketch of the exhibition space (left) and the installation <i>Untitled</i> (right) by Izeta Građević. Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo	211
6.4	Alma Suljević, <i>Annulling Truth</i> , 1997. Installation. Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo	212
6.5	A member of the international jury awards prizes for the best contemporary artwork. Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo	213
6.6	Lecture on video art entitled “Fifty Years of Interactive TV 1935–1998” by the American art critic and curator Kathy Rae Huffman. Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo	214
7.1	Catalog front cover of the 1997 <i>Khoj International Artists’ Workshop</i> , Modinagar. Khoj International Artists’ Association	226
7.2	Exhibition view of artworks produced during the 1997 Khoj International Artists’ Workshop, Modinagar shown at the British Council art gallery in New Delhi. Khoj International Artists’ Association	227
7.3	Anita Dube’s site-specific work made in 1997, Khoj International Artists’ Workshop in Modinagar. Khoj International Artists’ Association	227
7.4	Page from 1997 <i>Khoj International Artists’ Workshop</i> catalog featuring a captioned photograph of the participating artists. Khoj International Artists’ Association	228
7.5	Ludenyi Omega at work during the 1997 Khoj International Artists’ Workshop in Modinagar. Khoj International Artists’ Association	228
7.6	Subodh Gupta’s <i>Untitled</i> in the process of being made during the 1997 Khoj International Artists’ Workshop in Modinagar. Khoj International Artists’ Association	229
8.1	<i>Squash</i> , Invitation Card. Courtesy of Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana	243
8.2	Cover of the Škuc Gallery’s <i>Annual Catalog</i> 1998. Courtesy of the Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana	244
8.3	Igor Zabel delivering his introductory speech. Courtesy of Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana	245
8.4	Audience watching the <i>Squash</i> game. Courtesy of Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana	245
9.1	Front cover of Al-Nitaq Festival of Art 2000 brochure with the emblem of the Festival. Townhouse Gallery, Cairo	258

x *Figures*

- | | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 9.2 | Back cover of Al-Nitaq Festival of Art 2000 brochure showing a map of the locations where the Festival was held. Townhouse Gallery, Cairo | 258 |
| 9.3 | Poster of Al-Nitaq Festival of Art 2001 edition. Townhouse Gallery, Cairo | 259 |
| 9.4 | Program of events and locations. Al-Nitaq Festival of Art in downtown Cairo, 2001. "Al-Nitaq Festival of Art in Downtown Cairo, 15–24 March." <i>Al-Ahram Weekly</i> (March 2001) | 260 |
| 9.5 | Basim Magdy, <i>The Three Angels</i> , 2001. Installation. Townhouse Gallery, Cairo | 260 |
| 9.6 | Hala El Kousy and Graham Waite, <i>Bread Seller</i> (Banners at Downtown Streets), 2000. Installation. Townhouse Gallery, Cairo | 261 |
| 9.7 | Shady El-Noshokaty, <i>Self Annihilation</i> , 2000. Installation at Townhouse Gallery. Courtesy of Shady El-Noshokaty | 261 |

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Beirut and Tokyo
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Introduction

Octavian Esanu

Prelude

Somewhat earlier this century, there was a sudden stir among art historians and art critics, as if they had been taken by surprise. A phrase that had been in frequent use seemed illegally to have crossed over and settled down right next to well-established and respected categories of cultural periodization like “modernism” and “postmodernism.” Art historians, critics, journal editors, one after another, rushed to ask: “What is contemporary art?”¹ As often happens in the history of art and culture, a word or phrase used out of convenience or habit to name some new sensibility or way of art-making is discovered to have been covertly reified or institutionalized. “Contemporary art” – as an idea or as an art historical, critical, or world historical category of periodization – is no exception, even though its story (or theory) is broader in scale due to its direct ties to the processes of globalization. Having sporadically been deployed throughout the twentieth century to identify new artistic practices or to name new art institutions, new forms of patronage, or new selling strategies on the Western art market, the phrase became – by the end of the Cold War – the mascot and emblem of a newly emerging global art system brought under one regime of temporality and obeying a single logic: that of global capital.

Over this past decade discussions about the meaning of this term have proliferated to become a lucrative trend, a wave of events touring the contemporary geography of art under the casual banner phrase: “the contemporary.” This “contemporary” has been examined from a variety of methodological and ideological perspectives. Perhaps the most widespread art historical strategy of dealing with contemporary art is most successfully represented by members of the *October* group. For the latter, “the contemporary” is gradually “discovered,” and then smoothly stirred into the simmering pot of Western modernism and postmodernism along with metanarratives produced by the group itself over the last four decades.² In this process of art historical discovery or recovery, the contemporaneity of art is often understood as the latest terminus in the unfolding of the Western art historical narrative; as art made by prominent *living* artists in the US and Western Europe in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century; or also, gradually, through the careful and selective disclosure and recognition of art made in what was once called the Second or Third world. Certain Octoberists or their direct ancestors have become “pioneers of contemporaneity,” as is the case with Alfred Barr or with Rosalind Krauss, who until not long ago were celebrated as America’s foremost modernists or postmodernists.³ Others sought to “recover” the

2 Introduction

contemporaneity of global art from the grip of Western grand modernist and postmodernist narratives, presenting it as a new global, or even “Global South” artistic phenomenon constituted by completely new conditions of cultural production: blockbuster events, museums, institutions, markets, fairs, biennials and other world sensations (Terry Smith).⁴ There are also views that contemporary art might be something totally new with regard to the Western historical idea of art – that it is the product of a rupture which occurred after “the end of art,” sometime in the 1960s (Arthur Danto), or even that it is the beginning of a new “third system of the arts” reached after 2000 years of premodern art and 200 years of bourgeois-autonomous or modern art (also called in certain studies the “second system of the arts”).⁵ Then there is the theorizing or philosophizing type of critic for whom “contemporary art,” a recent manifestation of the post-1989 “neoliberal” world, is a critically meaningless term, and represents a discourse that must therefore be “constructed” through commitment to a particular philosophy of time, and to a *critical* analysis built upon the post-Hegelian Romantic philosophy of art that saw its culmination in Adorno’s monumental *Aesthetic Theory* (Peter Osborne).⁶

Without lessening the importance of these influential approaches to dealing with “the contemporary,” this edited volume wishes to join these debates from a different perspective. It is the editor’s intention that *Contemporary Art and Capitalist Modernization* suggests that in addition to art historical “discovery,” “recovery,” or critical “construction,” contemporary art (whatever the phrase may or may not mean today) must also be submitted to something resembling deconstruction. There is an urgent need, in other words, to re-examine what already appears basic and familiar: a need to look for a “trace” of what is absent or hidden, of that which is *other* in the discourse of contemporary art. The contributors to this volume do not necessarily follow deconstructive strategies, and the editor uses “deconstruction” in the broader and more permissive sense of a critical evaluation of some of the foundational assumptions of a made or assembled thing. The book starts from the premise that in its global reach, “contemporary art” (as idea, emblem, or label) has already undergone significant construction and reconstruction by powerful historical forces: the rise and spread of global capital and the fall of socialism and the welfare state; transitions to the market and to democracy; the impact of Western developmental industry on former Second- and Third-world art and culture; and many other processes associated with liberalization, deregulation, privatization, marketization, and neoliberalism. In part this book suggests that “the contemporary” was constituted by and alongside these very practices, and that for this reason its major contradictions are especially visible at the peripheries of the Western art world.

The volume does not simply approach contemporary art from a non-Western standpoint. Instead, the editor proposes to critically engage with art’s contemporaneity from the perspective of what the social sciences call “modernization” – the worldwide social transformations spreading and intensifying in the aftermath of WWII. And now, after three decades of intense study of what is often regarded as the failed “socialist modernization” carried forward by the USSR (and of how, for example, artists in the Eastern Bloc or other non-aligned countries heroically resisted or even sabotaged this historical process) this volume proposes a critical re-examination of the impact of global “capitalist modernization” on art. The volume invites the reader to consider the emergence of new artistic forms, institutions, and practices following the introduction of late

capitalist modes of production, circulation, accumulation, and consumption – along with political principles of liberal democracy – in regions of the world that had either chosen or been forced upon an alternative modernity (as in the so-called “postsocialist world”), or in areas once identified as “traditional societies” (as with “postcolonial modernity”). In other words, and in the context of the approaches mentioned above (art historical discovery and recovery, or critico-theoretical construction), this volume proposes to re-examine contemporary art with an eye to the historical phenomena that have directly affected the postsocialist and post- or neo-colonial world caught in the most recent phase of global capitalist development known also as “modernization,” “transition,” “neoliberalization” – a historical phase that is seriously tested today amidst the spring 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic.

Pretext

This volume is partially the product of an encounter between methodologies that took place during an exhibition and conference organized at the American University of Beirut Art Galleries under the title *Contemporary Artistic Revolutions*.⁷ The event encouraged participants to historicize and theorize the paradigm of “contemporary art” from perspectives that less frequently dominate debates on “the contemporary.” As organizer of this event, I invited critics, curators, artists, and art historians from countries including Lebanon, Egypt, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Armenia, Moldova, Hungary, India, and the UK (and was also in dialogue with researchers in Turkey, Chile, Iran, Afghanistan and a number of ex-Soviet Central Asian republics) to discuss the historical, political, and economic conditions under which “contemporary art” – as a distinct mode of artistic production, and/or marker of art historical periodization – emerged, so to speak, or was constructed within the concrete particularities of local art historical contexts. The idea was simple. We all know, more or less, what contemporary art is, was, or should have been when it is presented from a bird’s (or drone’s) eye view at conferences in New York, LA, or London. But, to use one of Slavoj Žižek’s expressions, what about the “stupid particular”?⁸ That is to say, how has contemporary art historically materialized in more peripheral locations, or in contexts marginalized by the universal power of global capital?

At the Beirut conference, the participants worked on a series of case-studies, some of which are included in Part II of this volume. They researched an exhibition, festival, workshop, new type of art institution, or other significant artistic event, and used it to examine a historical shift, transition, or conversion of a previous paradigm (modernism) to what is called contemporary art. Most participants worked within their familiar art historical contexts, albeit with an eye to broader historical processes (for example, the postsocialist “transition” in Eastern Europe, the period following a civil war, the “war on terror” and the Arab Spring in the Middle East, or processes of modernization in general). At a certain point in the conference, one of the Western guests declared that the conference had slipped into what he described as “nationalism.” As organizer, I instantly felt guilty of taking a wrong path, of falling into the arms of the enemy and succumbing to a nationalist-bourgeois false consciousness.

This warning implied that the conference presenters had offered a picture of “the contemporary” that was somewhat too *particular*, or at least distinct from better-

4 Introduction

known or more influential accounts. It is often believed that contemporary art must be discussed in universal terms, and certainly in relation to Western modernity, modernism, and postmodernism (as in the *October* group's model). Or, it is to be presented as a fusion and diffusion of global sensibilities within a postnational multiculturalism produced by a global economic neoliberalization that suddenly broke loose at the "end of history" in 1989 (as per the critical art history of Osborne). And though the conference participants did not ignore such universal frameworks, nor denied the significance of the year 1989 (especially the Eastern Europeans, and the Lebanese whose Civil War at least officially ended in the same year, far from Berlin), they chose to analyze contemporary art *also* in their own national art historical contexts. Participants would presumably have avoided falling into the "nationalist" trap if they had spoken, for example, about the heroic struggles of the historical avant-gardes, the socialist dissidents or the postcolonial modernists (topics that are still topping the charts of Western academia and of the corporate museums), or if at least they had chosen to feature an artist from the former Second or Third world who had "made it" in New York and London. Instead the participants dealt with "obscurities": with names, art scenes, and conditions that are largely unknown or of little interest to the Western-centric art critical apparatus, and against a background of events shaped by radical terminations, conversions, and dissolutions of previous structures by radically new economic and cultural policies, by new conditions, laws, grants, projects and other instruments provided by local or foreign private or governmental benefactors.

But "nationalism" was not the only criticism heard at the conference. Other reactions came from those who did not share the methodological positions of the conference participants. Some in the audience waved objections to historicism, or to the very idea of engaging with the historical conditions of "the Lebanese contemporary," of the "Lebanese past," or any "past" in general. Concepts like "memory," "history," "the past," and "tradition" were used interchangeably and often in relation to "trauma," "mourning," and "disaster." The past was declared beyond reach, with no document or other instrument of time capable of shedding light on it.

This position is particularly strong in Beirut, where the exhibition-conference was organized. Here, a radical form of anti-historicism has evolved to constitute the aesthetic core of the Lebanese contemporary art scene, as it started to consolidate in the 1990s.⁹ Some artists and writers on this scene have dedicated their life-work to critiquing the politics of memory formulated during the post-Civil War reconstruction of Lebanon – amid neoliberal Harirization – arguing that this "memory" is in fact a form of oblivion. Their form of anti-historicism is certainly more diverse, ranging from positions embracing Nietzschean forgetfulness (a reversal of Christian forgiveness), to the Benjaminian view of history as that which confronts the materiality of the present, to various postmodernist postures where knowledge production is understood in terms of play, metahistory, hermeneutics, and textuality, none of which is capable of dealing with social trauma, art history, or any referent in the past or indeed in empirical reality. In Jalal Toufic's *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*,¹⁰ Toufic argues that in the aftermath of a "surpassing disaster" (Hiroshima, post-communism, the Lebanese Civil War) there is an immaterial withdrawal of tradition (or perhaps of "history"), and that tradition is not any more accessible by conventional historical methods. A number of Lebanese artists have given this idea artistic form. They do not simply

reject the historical document but divert it, radically altering and transforming it into art. The result is what I call a “mockument” – a double-edged construction. A mockument is a fiction based on historical material and/or endowed with the status of historical fact. The contrast between a document and a mockument might be explained by the Aristotelian distinction in the *Poetics* between “history” (which concerns itself with the particular of “what [actually] happened”) and “poetry” (which addresses in universal terms “what might happen”). On the Lebanese post-Civil War contemporary art scene, and in the ways in which it reflects on its past, one can say that poetry has taken charge of history, constructing a parallel reality. Many Lebanese artists have successfully created fictionalized accounts based on historical material. Archival photographs and documents have been liberated of their referents and turned into pure aesthetic objects. In this transmutation the particular is converted to the universal, the historical “what happened” to the poetic “what might happen,” (leading to what the historical Romantics called “creations,” and in Leibnitz’s terms we may still call “parallel worlds,” or “possible worlds”).¹¹ If like Francis Bacon we divide human faculties into memory (history), reason (science), and imagination (poetry),¹² then in Lebanese post-Civil War contemporary art, imagination rather than reason has taken control of memory (that is, of tradition and history). The pathos of romantic imagination and of “artistic creation” has in some ways become a path to dissolving complex political, economic, religious, or sectarian divisions into the new religion of contemporary art. To paraphrase Nietzsche: “Art and nothing but [contemporary] art! It is the great means of making life possible . . .”¹³

The romantic-postmodernist admiration for the powers of imagination and “creation,” along with the anti-historicist techniques practiced on and around the Beirut contemporary art scene, have also been embraced by first-world critics who have transformed Lebanese “mockumentary artistic practice” into an ontological ingredient of “our contemporary.”¹⁴

Method

It is partially in response to and in dialogue with such positions that this volume was produced. The book represents a search for a method allowing a broader engagement with contemporary art which could unfold beyond the current frameworks. It seeks to show, first, that scholars have dealt critically with the conditions and contradictions of “the contemporary” in diverse regions of the world, in the context of postsocialism, postcolonialism, and capitalist modernization. Second, the volume aims to suggest that a more particular and historical engagement with contemporary art should not be dismissed as “cultural relativism,” “particularism,” or even “nationalism,” but is in fact useful for current “global art history.” The book, in places, also acts on the assumption that as part of common efforts to construct a truly *critical* discourse of contemporary art, one must reflect more carefully before completely renouncing traditional art historical methods, including the interpretation of documents, monuments, and archives.

Ultimately, the volume concerns itself with the methodological and historical conditions in which a radically new mode of artistic making – called “contemporary art” – takes historical shape in different parts of the globe. The book’s chapters (and especially the “case-studies” in Part II) – dealing with Eastern Europe, the post-

6 Introduction

Soviet republics, the Middle East, or Asia – are to be taken less as empirical evidence of some unknown contemporary art that remains to be discovered than as *points de repère* for imagining the complexity and multiplicity of the manifestations of global contemporaneity that fall through the cracks of metropolitan art history and criticism. The case-studies also come to support the main argument of this book, namely that one cannot fully engage with the idea of contemporary art, which is most often presented as a manifestation of trans- or postnational social experience, without also paying some form of respect to the particular, local, and/or even “national” symptoms of the contemporary condition, as methodologically outdated, or theoretically peripheral as they may be made to appear. It is here – in what were once commonly called the Second and the Third worlds – that global processes of the reproduction of capital and of capitalist modernization are most clearly translated into new artistic practices, audiences, habits, institutions, and ideologies. It is also here that many contradictions of “the contemporary” are most prominent and pervasive.

Parts of the book engage with contemporary art in the context of historical processes most acutely felt at the peripheries of capitalism, and against ideologies that have normalized new relations, modes of production, or artistic values. To adapt and modify a sentence from Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, a quote that might have been used as the epigraph for this book: “something in reality, something back of the veil spun by the interplay of institutions and false needs demands [contemporary] art, and ... it demands an art that speaks for what the veil hides.”¹⁵ We have the most to gain from lifting this veil (to invoke the old-fashioned metaphor of ideology critique and Orientalism) in places where it was woven with the most urgency, as part of the takeover of the national state and cultural institutions by new forces.

It is common knowledge, for example, that what is currently called “contemporary art” in the postsocialist countries of Eastern Europe, and the republics of the former USSR, has been closely linked to the 1990s rhetoric of “transition to democracy” and the market, and above all to the social engineering efforts of philanthropist and businessman George Soros. In the historical context of postsocialism, the term “contemporary art” had a concrete meaning: it served as a vehicle of “freedom” and of many other promises of the Popperian “open society” – the twentieth-century bourgeois utopia that George Soros attempted to build on the historical ruins of socialism. And in the Middle East, contemporary art has been often understood either in economic terms – within the context of the rising power of the local private art galleries (as for example in Cairo where the al-Nitaq Festival presented in this book was launched by a few private art galleries with the goal of freeing art and artists from the control of the state).¹⁶ And in Lebanon, part of the largely untold story of contemporary art involves complex relations with certain Western donors (the Ford Foundation, in particular) that turned to offer generous support to a certain category of Middle Eastern artists following the 9/11 events. Or to take another illustrative example, the first Center for Contemporary Art emerged in Kabul, Afghanistan soon after the invasion of this country by American troops.¹⁷

Contemporary Art and Capitalist Modernization asks, then, whether such global manifestations of “the contemporary” might also be helpful in the art historical “discovery,” “recovery,” or critical “construction” that currently preoccupy our leading critics and art historians. It must be emphasized that “capitalist modernization”

does not necessarily imply that contemporary art was mechanistically “imported” by Western structures operating at the margins of capitalism. Such ideas of “capitalism by design,” popular in Eastern Europe during the 1990s, are now considered outdated.¹⁸ Instead, the relation between contemporary art and capitalist modernization must be regarded in terms of a series of conversions, alterations, and transmutations of artistic energies following ongoing dialogues between local and metropolitan players, between former socialist nonconformists (in Eastern Europe) or the “90s generation” (in the Middle East), and Western museum critics, curators, and donors. The conversion of postcolonial, nonaligned, and/or socialist modernity into neoliberal contemporaneity follows broader processes of liberalization, economic deregulation, and the temporal *degradation* of modern futurity into post-historical presentism, and was fueled by profound anti-socialist, anti-universalist, and anti-modernist resentment. Moreover, and by way of dispelling a common misreading with regard to art’s relation to capitalist development within non-Western contexts – it is not that installation, conceptual, process, or other forms of “new” artistic tendencies did not exist in these regions (they certainly developed in the nonconformist circles of the USSR, in Eastern, or Central Europe, in the “new artistic practices” of Yugoslavia, or in some contexts in the Middle East, above all in Beirut and particularly around AUB).¹⁹ Rather, the conversion into contemporary art has been complete when the last barriers preventing the circulation and allocation of capital, and its accumulation, have been removed, and when cultural producers – often pressed by the need to secure their material subsistence – suddenly find themselves illustrating, willingly or unwillingly, a novel ideological position: individual freedom, the open society, the “war on terror” or on religious fundamentalism (similarly to how abstract expressionists discovered themselves serving the modernization agenda of the State Department during the early days of the Cold War).

As this volume in part suggests, the regional or national iterations of “the contemporary” must not be regarded in their isolated, particular contexts, but as part of broader post-WWII historical processes of capitalist modernization taking place at different times and scales in various transitional regions of the world (starting with the Marshall Plan conversion for Western Europe in the late 1940s; the democratization of South Europe in the 1970s; of Latin America in the 1980s; of Eastern Europe in the 1990s; and of the Middle East in the 1990s and 2000s)²⁰ under US political and cultural hegemony. It is also to be noted that most critical points of global capitalist modernization historically aligns with, and in part overlaps with, the best recognized periodization markers of contemporary art: 1945, 1968, and 1989.²¹ What this suggests is that “the contemporary” is not one sudden rupture or avalanche of new forms of de-bordered cultural “newness” unleashed by capital after 1989.²² Instead, this new global system called “contemporary art” unfolded more gradually, following the logic of neoliberalism, constructed in parallel through multiple dialogues among transnational and local elites. These constructive efforts of global contemporary art developed in a way that recalls what Jamie Peck terms the “constructions of neoliberal reason.”²³ As Peck suggests, there is no one major transition to neoliberalism but multiple transitions that occurred over the course of the second half of the last century, as part of “heart-to-heart” interactions among various forces across the globe. Thus the impact of Milton Friedman’s “Chicago Boys” on Latin American art, and Chile in particular, during the 1970s and 1980s is comparable in scale but does not correspond

8 Introduction

chronologically to the impact of the “Viennese Cold War liberals” (such as Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, or Karl Popper and ultimately George Soros) on Eastern Europe in the 1990s.

Although this volume, unlike others of its kind, addresses contemporary art by focusing on “non-Western” instantiations, it does not do so in isolation from influential art critical and art historical theories and positions on contemporary art. The book seeks to subvert dominant principles of methodological totalization currently prevalent in debates around contemporary art. It leaves behind the most common discursive terrains traversed by the forces that circulate around museums, biennials, world exhibitions, academia, and curators seeking overlooked methodological perspectives and/or exotic instances of “the contemporary.” It trespasses across regional barriers in order to cut new transregional discursive corridors that stretch – for this particular project – through the art historical woodlands of Central and Eastern Europe, the republics of the former Soviet Union, and countries in the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia. It does not do so in order to reveal some unknown aspect of contemporary art, or to offer new answers to the question of what it is in the first place. Neither does it promise to accomplish the impossible task of fully accounting for the global “manifold of sensibilities,” and of national art historical particularities, including nations without countries. Instead, it searches for alternative ways of understanding artistic production, within a wider cultural and historical context inclusive of diverse artistic scenes.

Finally, what the editor regards as the unique methodological approach of the volume may also be used to explain the perspective, structure, and choice of material included in this volume (especially in Part II). The book goes beyond established “regional” or “chronological” typologies favored by art history and criticism over the past decades. It does not discuss contemporary art by remaining within the confines of particular regionalisms (e.g., *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* [2009], *Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe* [2010] from the “Artworld” series, or the *East Art Map* [2006] project). Neither does it follow established art historical chronologies (e.g., “art post-1989,” or “art since 1945”), or even a mix of the two (e.g., MoMA’s *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe* [2018]). Instead the book seeks new ways to connect seemingly heterogeneous temporalities and places by highlighting the material conditions and the common historical processes determining the historical conversion of late and postcolonial modernism, of social and socialist realism, and even of postmodernism into contemporary art, at a time when this new art had not yet entered the circuits of global cultural exchange. The choice to allow for manifold temporalities and artistic contexts in Part II is informed by the view that the shift from “modern” to “contemporary” – and the emergence of “the contemporary” as part of global neoliberal ideology – should not be seen as one clean “break” marked by the year 1989 (the liberal chronological monument to the “end of history”) but should be considered within a longer *durée* and in its complex global multi-dimensionality.²⁴

Before proceeding to discuss the structure of the book and its chapters and case-studies in more detail, it must be emphasized that though this introduction seeks to articulate one or more common denominators (whether “modernization,” “transnational capitalism,” or a “non-” or “post-Western contemporary”) it does not seek to articulate one single thesis, or speak with one voice, given that the volume brings together contributors from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds.

Structure

The book is divided into two parts. Part II derives primarily from the material produced during the exhibition-conference in Beirut, with several additional case-studies commissioned afterwards. Part I was subsequently assembled to offer methodological reflections and conclusions. In opting for this structure, the editor was mainly concerned with how to bring about a reconciliation between the particular, empirical, or “nationalistic” (Part II) and more general, speculative, and internationalist research (Part I). Moreover, the methodological contributions in Part I also aim at placing into question the authority of the document, of the “fact,” and of art historical empiricism that hovers over Part II. In its entirety, the two parts can be seen as a process of mediation between universal factors (temporality, periodization, history, capitalism, the nation-state, and globalism) and on concrete art historical events said to have contributed to the rise of contemporary art within various national contexts and alongside broader socioeconomic change.

The methodological reflections included in Part I consider contemporaneity in light of its most common problematics and topics. Here the contributors concerned themselves with temporality, periodization, and the relation to other ideological frameworks, or in some cases approach contemporaneity from less expected perspectives and discourses. And even though such topics have been common in the ongoing global debates on contemporary art, it is the angle from which the authors have approached them (postsocialism, post- and neo-colonialism, Stalinism, Soviet studies, or Latin American and Asian studies) that constitutes their unique contribution.

In its unity and its contradiction, its consistency and its heterogeneity, the volume hopes to put forward a thesis: that one cannot approach global contemporary art from an arrested perspective or “captured hill.” Instead one must learn to dance, stepping forward, sideways and back, and seeking a possible opening. Part I starts, then, with an invitation to take a look at “the contemporary” from an unusual perspective, that of the Soviet Stalinist experience. Angela Harutyunyan’s chapter “Towards a Historical Understanding of Post-Soviet Presentism” engages with the temporality of contemporaneity from the position of Soviet history (or what used to be called “Sovietology” before this field of area studies was transformed into “transitology,” or “transition to democracy studies”). Harutyunyan provocatively argues for a form of contemporary “presentism” – as proposed by François Hartog, in terms of a new regime of historicity governed by the tyranny of the present²⁵ – that was triggered by Stalin’s takeover and freezing of revolutionary dialectics. Stalin’s regime, in other words, plays a part in the current regime of temporality, for it was among the first significant blockages of “futuraity” (which contemporaneity is often said to be lacking), Leninist or otherwise. Like *Lenin and Buratino* [Pinocchio] in Mark Verlan’s drawing illustrating the cover of this volume, there is a historical moment when revolutionary energy and consciousness makes a turnaround from progressive futurism to concerns over past or present.²⁶ Harutyunyan suggests that in addition to explaining the contemporary in light of the dissolution of futuraity, and/or solely from the perspective of post-WWII Western historical and cultural processes, one can take a step back or sideways to regard both sides of the Cold War, within a wider historical and political frame: both Western and so-called Soviet Marxist ideology and history.

Stalin's role in creating a present without escape must be considered beyond the dominant narratives of Western-centric art criticism. It is from such an angle that Pedro Erber engages with the "contemporaneity of contemporary art" in his chapter in this volume "The Long-Lasting Present: Art, Duration, and Contemporaneity" (Chapter 2). Erber surveys contemporary art across the art historical and critical contexts of Brazil, Japan, and the United States. He deals with the temporality of contemporaneity through the writings of the Brazilian Mario Pedrosa (1900–1981), the Japanese critic Miyakawa Atsushi (1933–1977), and the American modernist Michael Fried (b. 1939). Erber argues that a radical change, led by epochal transformations of art sometimes in the 1960s, resulted in art's "resacralization" (from the secularization of "religious art" in modernism to "art as religion" in contemporaneity). This process, argues Erber, has also been accompanied by temporal shifts or deep transformations in the temporal structure of art, which he analyzes in terms of a new form of duration, understood as infinite delay, and contrasts to the "immediacy," the "here-and-now" moment, of total presentness in modernism. Ultimately, the contemporaneity of art, as it is further discussed by Erber following Fried, is a new experience of history and art, one that replaces the holistic temporality of modernism with a new sense of time based on the logic of event (of what Fried calls literalist "presence") and composed of fragments of experience.

The Thermidorian degeneration of revolutionary futurity under Stalinism (as proposed by Harutyunyan), leading to ruptures in the perception of time, history, art, and politics (as theorized by Erber in the global cultural context of the 1960s) is then carried forward through an engagement with the problematic of periodization in Latin American art since the 1960s. Karen Benezra addresses the issue of periodization by examining the treatment of national self-determination, or the so-called "national question," in certain theories and a few recent exhibitions that historicize Latin American art since the 1960s. Taking as a point of departure a critique of Osborne's historical ontology of postconceptual art, Benezra considers how the national question mediates the relationship between art and the social forms that capital assumes in the work of an older generation of Latin American theorists, such as Ticio Escobar and Néstor García Canclini. At the center of Benezra's engagement with contemporaneity are conflicting accounts of global contemporaneity: on one hand, modernizing aspirations treating the sociocultural particularity of non-US or European art as a condition for its representation within a "universal" art history, and on the other a "metropolitan" critique of the global contemporary as an ideology of the present. We then move to Eastern Europe, where the Stalinist impact on futurity, or Stalin's conflict with socialist leaders over the most "correct" form of socialism, had its ramifications in other regions. Ivana Bago offers a revisionist interpretation of Eastern European contemporary art in terms of "retrocontemporaneity": the emergence of contemporaneity through a process of conversion and objectification of, and distancing from, the communist past. Writing from the position of the former Yugoslavian republics, where progressive (Western-like) art and institutions were part of a unique version of anti-Stalinist worker self-management or "market-socialism," Bago looks for inspiration in postcolonial studies, feminism, and anthropology in order to engage with one problematic aspect of Eastern European art of the 1990s, namely its representation as a *terra incognita* that had to be "discovered" and gifted to the world by the Slovenian group Irwin.

Finally, these transregional engagements with the periodization, the mapping, and the temporality of “the contemporary” in Latin America and/or Eastern Europe are carried forward by further methodological reflections on the relation between the historical categories of “art” and “nation,” and “contemporary art” and the “postnational condition,” in order to conclude Part I with an interview with Terry Smith regarding his past and current perspectives on “the contemporary.”

Part II of the volume rehearses similar ideas but from a more identifiably art historical position. The contributions have been assembled from archival material documents by art historians, researches, curators, and artists from different countries and at various career stages. Each case-study, or case-history, unfolds within the context of a particular national art history, and against the background of wider transnational and global art geographies. The cases draw attention to concrete actors (artists, curators, organizers), the institutional players most actively contributing to the rise of “the contemporary” (both local artist associations and galleries and foreign foundations, such as Soros and the Open Society Institute, the Ford Foundation, Goethe Institute, the Triangle Art Trust), notable events (exhibitions, workshops, festivals, meetings), and their impact on local art scenes. This combination of forces was part of the transition to what we today call “contemporary art.”

The case-studies concern themselves with what one may call “early portents” of contemporary art. Part II also starts from moments of radical rupture within the anti-capitalist camp. Ivana Bago examines the 1963 exhibition *New Tendencies 2*, regarding it in terms of a catalyst of the birth of “contemporary art” in Yugoslavia. Bago insist on an early form of “the contemporary” that has begun to take root at the margins of socialism, or in the market-socialism of non-aligned (and “pro-Western”) Yugoslavia. The case centers on the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, which according to the author was among the earliest institutions in the world to use the term “contemporary art” as we understand it today. One of its meanings reflects the complex intimacies and relations of art to social, economic and market forces (for example, Zagreb Gallery’s “Commercial Department” paralleled the equally new tendencies of certain leading Western art institutions²⁷ – which chose to be called “for contemporary art” in the aftermath of WWII – to outgrow modern art’s historic antagonism toward the market).

As we approach the 1980s, we can see how market and economic rationality more directly affects artistic production in the Eastern Bloc. Kristóf Nagy’s case-study “Rabinec Studio: The Commodification of Art in Late Socialist Hungary, 1982–1983” tells of a Hungarian art historian and group of artists who – one might say – embraced a form of “cultural resistance” to socialist modernization (a kind of “nonconformism”) by setting up the earliest pro-market mechanisms on the Budapest art scene of the early 1980s. And a few years later, we witness the beginning of the disintegration of the USSR and the radical transformations that followed, via the example of Soviet Armenia (case-study by Angela Harutyunyan). A form of artistic protest – launched by perestroika-generation artists in Yerevan – sought inspiration in Western art and culture (in consumer culture, for example, from breakdancing to fashion) in order to discredit the obsolete model of painterly national modernism dominating Soviet Armenia’s Union of Artists. As we reach into the 1990s, we witness the expanding processes of capitalist modernization unfolding on regional and global levels with support from Western private or public institutions (see case-studies dedicated to the impact of the Soros Centers for

12 Introduction

Contemporary Art Network by Amila Puzić and Octavian Esanu). By the late 1990s one witnesses a full process of conversion. The reshaping of cultural policies in favor of the private members of “civil society” created the most favorable institutional conditions for the emergence of “the contemporary.” Tevž Logar and Vladimir Vidmar’s case-study *Janja Žvegelj, Squash* walks us through the transformation of the ex-socialist Škuc (the Student Center in Ljubljana which served as a local hub of alternative cultural practices during the 1980s) into a gallery of contemporary art by the late 1990s.

Leaving Europe behind, we move to the Middle East where similar conversions gradually translate into contemporary art. The end of the Civil War in Lebanon brought about not only Rafic Hariri’s economic reforms but also new forms of artistic production and new formats for art institutions. Natasha Gasparian’s case-study is dedicated to The First Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting, an event in 1995 that led to the foundation of the Ashkal Alwan artists association. Ashkal Alwan has emerged over the past decades as a major player in contemporary art in Beirut and in the Middle East. Dina Aboul Fotouh discusses the Al-Nitaq Festival in Cairo (2000) organized by a host of private art galleries (such as Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo Berlin, Arabesque Art, and Townhouse Gallery) with the goal of loosening the modern state’s political and economic control over Egyptian art. By the turn of the millennium artists supported by public, corporate, non-governmental entities, or small businesses gather on local, regional, subcontinental, or global levels to launch new platforms for the exchange of information and experiences (see Khoj International Artists’ Workshop Modinagar, India by Sabih Ahmed and Nida Ghouse).

What the methodological reflections in Part I, and the case-studies (covering almost half a century and linking regions from early 1960s Yugoslavia to early 2000s Egypt) suggest is that “contemporary art” is the byproduct of gradual economic, political, and cultural transformations unfolding on the global level. These transformations resonate across regions (from Beirut to Budapest and from Yerevan to Cairo) revealing a demand for a new kind of art. This art is fully aware of the new economic or market “reality”; is often “a”- or openly “anti-” political; or it prefers to address more immediate issues, leaving the future, mass or collective politics, class, and national identities behind or aside. The volume, and its contributors, encourage us to think contemporary art between existing discursive boundaries, and in relation to other frames of reference. The becoming of contemporary art, which took place at different rates on national, postnational, and transregional levels, was accompanied by historical alterations in our sense of temporality, periodization, spatiality, or ontology of aesthetic experience. Ultimately, it is the global modernizing force and spirit of late capitalism that has been translated into new artistic practices, behaviors, and habits that we have come now to call: “the contemporary.”

Notes

- 1 I am referring to the question-format titles of some of the early books, journal special issues and roundtables: Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago University Press, 2009); Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, “What Is Contemporary Art? Issue Two,” *e-flux Journal* 12 (2010), www.e-flux.com/journal/12/61332/what-is-contemporary-art-issue-two/; and Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013).

- 2 For an example of stirring “the contemporary” into modernist and postmodernist narratives see Hal Foster, Yve-Alain Bois, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin H. D. Buchloch, and David Joselit, eds., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011). See in particular how art from the USSR or Brazil is carefully added to the Western narrative.
- 3 See for example chapters on Rosalind Krauss and Alfred Barr in Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*
- 4 See Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*
- 5 The first reference is to Arthur Danto, *Art after the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). The “Third System of the Arts” is a reference to Paul Oscar Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study of the History of Aesthetics (I),” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (October 1951): 496–527. See also Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
- 6 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).
- 7 Octavian Esanu, ed., *Contemporary Artistic Revolutions: An Institutional Perspective* (Beirut: AUB Art Galleries, 2017). Exhibition publication. www.aub.edu.lb/art_galleries/Documents/ContemporaryArtisticRevolutions.pdf
- 8 The “stupid particular” is a reference to Slavoj Žižek’s address to Palestinian culture: “It’s not that you are here some stupid limited culture. No, you are the universal! Enemies are making you particular!” See Hanan Toukan, “Picasso Is Mightier than the M16: On Imaging and Imagining Palestine’s Resistance in the Global Community,” in *Cultural Politics* 13, no. 1 (March 2017), 112.
- 9 For the evolution of the Lebanese contemporary art scene see Natasha Gasparian’s case-study in Part II of this volume.
- 10 Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (Beirut: Forthcoming Books, 2009).
- 11 For a discussion of various historical interpretations of the poetic, historic, fictional, and empirical see Shiner, *The Invention of Art*.
- 12 Ibid., 124.
- 13 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York, NY: Random House, 1967), 452.
- 14 See, for example, Osborne’s treatment of “fiction” informed by examples of Lebanese contemporary art in Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*.
- 15 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), 18.
- 16 See in Part II of this volume Dina Aboul Fatouh, “Al-Nitaq Festival of Art, Cairo 2000 and 2001.”
- 17 On this process in the context of Lebanon see for instance Hanan Toukan, “Art, Aid, Affect: Locating the Political in Post-Civil War Lebanon’s Contemporary Cultural Practices” (PhD diss., University of London, 2011), 7. For the rhetoric of open society democracy and freedom in the context of Eastern Europe’s “transition to democracy” and contemporary art see Octavian Esanu, “What Was Contemporary Art?” in *ARTMargins* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 5–28. On the Contemporary Art Center in Afghanistan see for instance interventions by Rahraw Omarzad in Octavian Esanu, “Critical Machines: Art Periodicals Today (Conference Report),” *ARTMargins* 5, no. 3 (October 2016), 32.
- 18 On “capitalism by design” see David Stark and Laszlo Brust, *Postsocialist Pathways: Transforming Politics and Property in East Central Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 19 For an example of “advanced” artistic practices in the Middle East see the activities of John Carswell at AUB during the 1960s. See Octavian Esanu, ed. *Trans-Oriental Monochrome: John Carswell*. Beirut: AUB Art Galleries, 2015. www.aub.edu.lb/art_galleries/Documents/pamphlet-carswell.pdf
- 20 For “transitions” see for example Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (2002), 6.
- 21 For a discussion of these markers see the chapter on periodization in Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*.
- 22 Osborne in particular is insistent on the post-1989 contemporary. Ibid.

14 Introduction

- 23 Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 24 This also recalls Peck's multiple "constructions" of neoliberal reason. For the prominence of the idea of the contemporary as a shift from "late modern," see Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2011).
- 25 François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015).
- 26 In most Soviet depictions, Lenin looks – following the Russian reading convention – from left to right, that is, in anticipation or towards the future. In this 1980s drawing by Mark Verlan, both *Lenin and Buratino* [Pinocchio] look right to left, or into the "past," conveying the degradation of futurity, and the radical turnaround from future-oriented progressivism to the past, or to presentist investment in the preservation of the *status quo*.
- 27 See for instance the Boston ICA, which opened in 1947. See David Ross et al., *Dissent: The Issue of Modern Art in Boston* (Boston Institute of Contemporary Art, 1985); also Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?*

Part I



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1 Toward a Historical Understanding of Post-Soviet Presentism

Angela Harutyunyan

Introduction

The recent debates on world historical periodization in critical theory, philosophy, art history, and theory as well as in historiography have been increasingly engaged with interrogating the “contemporary” either as the cultural face or logic of global capitalism, or as a term possessing a certain conceptual and periodizing power in the wake of the supposed demise of “postmodernity.” Remarkably, these debates – while not confined to any particular field or discipline – have most actively evolved within discussions of art historical periodization: art, in both its mode of production and its institutional status, is thought to have seen a shift first from modernism to postmodernism, and then from “contemporary art” to what some even call “global contemporary art.”¹ What is instructive about these debates is that they situate this shift within the art world in relation to broader epochal changes, even if some voices argue for art’s relative autonomy vis-à-vis world historical periodization. While in this chapter my focus is not art per se, these debates are helpful for historicizing the “contemporary” as a presentist quality of historical time, one which, I argue, cancels historicity.²

By engaging with the recent debates on the historicity of the present and the quality of time in the contemporary, this chapter presents the argument that, if considered from the perspective of the Soviet historical experience, presentism – as the quality of historical time marked by the omnipresence of the present, or by what Terry Smith calls “a permanent seeming aftermath”³ – doesn’t simply arise out of the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and of the Soviet Union in 1991. Instead, the chapter argues that in the post-Soviet condition, contemporary presentism ties together three temporal orders: the long disintegration of the Bolshevik revolutionary project; Stalinist presentism defined by the freezing of the revolutionary dialectic in the space of the Soviet State as a permanent formation; and the neoliberal regime of temporality, where time stands still in the order of deadlines, fiscal “futures,” the exploitation of nature, and the looming planetary ecological catastrophe. After outlining the debates on the contemporary and describing the specificity of presentism in historical theory, the chapter pursues an outline of the specific character of Stalinist presentism. It puts forward the argument that this presentism was to haunt the temporality of life in the Soviet Union beyond Stalinism, where Stalinism is understood as a historical time that results in the teleological fulfillment of historical necessity in the Soviet state identical with the party and the leader. The supposed completion of the logic of history in Stalinism is

analogous to the supposed completion of history in the logic of late capitalism that triumphs in the 1990s as a global condition. Thus this chapter makes the argument that the post-Soviet contemporary was not simply born of the collapse of the USSR and its subsumption into the market economy so much as an already-existing arrest of historical temporality in Stalinism was conjoined with the formation of the neo-liberal project. But if the post-historical ideology of the “end of history” declares history as such to be fiction and narration, in Stalinism the post-historical consciousness is “arrived at” in the name of History. The supposed triumph of History in Stalinism was anchored on a conception of synchronicity between the means of production, the relations of production, and consciousness that guaranteed the completion of socialism (the correspondence of the means and relations of production, as well as consciousness, was ratified in the 1936 Soviet Constitution).

The completion of historical movement in the one Party-State was to facilitate the identification of Stalinism with the Soviet experience as such. This identification was precisely what was taken up by the dissident intelligentsia that acquired a public platform during Gorbachev’s programs of perestroika and glasnost in the 1980s, as a ghost to be expelled. To break from official orthodoxy, the semi-official and unofficial artists sought a rupture from the permanent triumph of history, a breakthrough or escape to the other side of the Curtain, in the consumer paradise of capitalist democracies. But this rupture was a spatial rather than a temporal one. The futurity that the perestroika “avant-gardes” envisioned was ultimately a spatial futurity. The dreamed-of freedom to be actualized was conceived as existing in space rather than in time, as the realized utopia of the *dream-world* of Western freedom and consumerism. Perestroika’s cultural and intellectual “avant-garde” imagined the content of the new art in and through the freedoms and lifestyles denoting all that was non-Soviet. Often, the semi-official and unofficial artists in the Soviet Union sought the form of new art in the styles, methods, and techniques that official Soviet criticism designated as “bourgeois formalism”: abstract expressionism, pop art, minimalism, the *objet trouvé*, performance, and other forms repressed by socialist realism. Nevertheless, at the structural level, this new form of (anti-Soviet) art that in the 1990s would be institutionalized as “contemporary” was prepared in the interstices of the Soviet experience, and was made visible because of glasnost’s calls for transparency and freedom of speech. And as such, it conforms to the late Soviet dissident vision of a contemporary that exists on the other side of the Soviet historical experience, in Western liberal democracies. To be contemporary in the late Soviet and post-Soviet world means to treat the Soviet historical experience as a ghost to be expelled.

The Presentism of the Contemporary

Art historian Bill Roberts distinguishes three approaches in recent debates on the theorization of the temporality of the present, whether a “postmodern” or a “contemporary” present: gradual, differential, and ruptural. To these, I can also add the anachronistic and achronistic approaches that are prevalent in philosophy, cultural studies, and new art history.⁴ The question that is often asked is whether contemporaneity has supplanted postmodernity, and the positive or negative answer determines where the speaker stands in relation to the question of the transformation of the mode of production.⁵ Fredric Jameson still maintains the

formulation of postmodernity as the cultural logic of late capitalism that has gone global since the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁶ This implies that capitalism has not undergone drastic transformations since it entered into its “late” stage marked by globalization, the dominance of the financial and knowledge sectors over the productive economy, and so on. As opposed to this form of periodization, many of those actively involved in the debates on periodization put forward the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, accompanied by intensifying signs of the disintegration of the USSR, as the year of the advent of the contemporary as a world historical condition.⁷

In his article “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity” and subsequent book *What is Contemporary Art?*, Terry Smith views the contemporary as an indeterminately extended present moment.⁸ According to Smith, the contemporary is qualitatively different from both modernity and postmodernity because of the conflicting and plural temporalities of the premodern, modern, and postmodern that coexist within it. If modernity and postmodernity are products of the West, with the first as a broader epochal notion and the second as an outcome of a specifically Euro-American culture, Smith upholds that contemporaneity is a global condition, one that is a mosaic of disjointed temporalities that heterogeneously coexist. According to this view, contemporary is the new modern, but without the future-directedness of the former – the condition of a “permanent-seeming-aftermath.”⁹ If this last formulation might sound like a nightmarish eternal return of the same for some, for Smith it is a liberation from the ruse of history conceived as synonymous with totalitarian ideologies. Unlike Smith, for whom the contemporary is a permanent presence in the post-1989 world, for art historian Alessandro Alberro it has no ontological ground. Instead, the contemporary is an episteme, and the word doubles as a periodization tool that enables thinking about social formations in their structural sense, under the sign of the hegemony of global capital and neo-liberalism.¹⁰ In a Foucauldian move, Alberro proposes thinking about subject positions under this hegemony, both those that reproduce and those that subvert the existing social order.

Philosopher Peter Osborne discusses the contemporary through a philosophical lens, posing the question of the epoch’s consciousness of itself.¹¹ For Osborne the contemporary, as the temporality of transnational capital, is a fiction insofar as it is a conceptual “umbrella” notion that subsumes differentiated temporalities within it, but it is also a reality that structures one’s very engagement with the world. As a historical phenomenon, the contemporary for Osborne is not merely a periodizing concept but a philosophical engagement with time, wherein the three main periods of the contemporary – post-1945 (the advent of US hegemony), the 1960s (the dissolution of high modernism), and post-1989 (the collapse of the Berlin Wall) – represent different intensities of contemporaneity. Unlike Smith’s and Alberro’s approach, Osborne’s is differential: the contemporary, another name for the historical present, is “a temporal unity in disjunction or ... a disjunctive unity of present times.”¹² For Osborne, the contemporary incorporates futurity in the structure of its temporality, even though this futurity is disavowed within and by the very concept of the contemporary. Even if there are differences in the above-mentioned conceptions of the contemporary, they all share a fundamental assumption: the contemporary is the temporality of transnational capital and of the latest stage of globalization. In any of the above theorizations, the contemporary comes to displace the progressive temporality of modern political and aesthetic projects.¹³

Whether one adheres to the Jamesonian formulation of the persistence of postmodernity or conceives of the contemporary as a novel epochal designation that displaces the postmodern, these debates take up the demise of the Soviet bloc as a watershed historical moment. The disintegration of the USSR signals a shift from the Cold-War-era battle of rival ideologies to the post-ideological moment of the so-called “end of history” and the triumph of presentism understood as time emptied out of the past and future alike. It is this presentism that has come to designate contemporaneity, as both a quality of historical time and a theory of history which takes the present as incommensurable with past and future, without a unifying narrative logic and thus precluding the possibility of normative rupture. The quality of our contemporary time is the ruptured time of the perpetual loop of the now that stands as infallibly singular. Whether we adopt postmodernity or the contemporary as a periodizing category for our present, they both share a quality of time that is ultimately presentist, where the present appears as a “permanent-seeming-aftermath.”¹⁴

As recently as the early 2000s, the historian and theorist François Hartog dedicated a book to “presentism” as a conceptual and historical category. In his *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and the Experience of Time*,¹⁵ Hartog discusses the advent of contemporary presentism as a regime of historicity where the present is both “omnipresent and omnipotent.”¹⁶ According to him, presentism is preceded by two modalities of historicity: if before the French Revolution of 1789 the past dominated the future, modern historicity is marked by the domination of the future over the present. The prime example of modern times’ future-directedness for Hartog is the “Manifesto of Futurism” of 1909. However, if one looks at some of the symptomatic shifts in the latter part of the twentieth century (such as the proliferation of heritage discourses and of “global architecture”), it is not hard to detect a transformation from the modern regime of historicity to our contemporary world where historical time is seemingly suspended, and where the present dominates over the past and the future alike. Hartog characterizes presentism as “permanent, elusive, and almost immobile,” though it nevertheless attempts to create its own historical time. Whether we conceive of presentism as an exit from modernity or not, it is clearly, according to Hartog, the crisis condition of modern time.¹⁷ Hartog’s periodization is rather Eurocentric, or perhaps Franco-centric: for him the modern regime of time encompasses 200 years, from the 1789 French Revolution to the 1989 commemoration of the Revolution’s 200-year anniversary, as well as the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Even if descriptively convincing, Hartog’s presentism is not anchored in concrete historical and material forces and their development, and thus remains somewhat “hanging in the air.” In a sense, Hartog updates Reinhart Koselleck’s discussion of historical time in modernity as a specific spatio-temporal conjunction and brings it to the contemporary present, even though his account differs from Koselleck’s more systematic endeavor.

In his influential work *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Koselleck conceives of historical temporality as a relation between the space of experience that is the past and the horizon of expectation that is the future.¹⁸ This spatio-temporal relation of expectation and experience is inversely proportional: the decline of the one brings about the ascent of the other, and this is specifically a modern configuration. If premodern time was dominated by the eschatological prophecies of the end times with a theologically prescribed horizon of expectation, early modern time

brought about the control of politics over the future, where ecclesial prophecies gave way to rational prognoses and to the philosophy of historical processes: "Prognosis produces the time within which and out of which it weaves, whereas apocalyptic prophecy destroys time through its fixation on the End."¹⁹ It is the belief in progress characterized by the acceleration of the future and "its unknown quality" (because it abbreviates the space of our experiences by bringing in perpetually new ones), as well as the delegation of the present to the future,²⁰ that launches the Western world into modernity, or what Koselleck calls *Neuzeit*.

Koselleck's horizon of expectation and space of experience – two interdependent anthropological categories that refer to the human condition as such, without which history is impossible – constitute "the conditions of possibility of real history," and "are, at the same time, conditions of its cognition" that bring past and future together.²¹ Both applicable to empirical historical research and conceivable as meta-historical categories, the space of experience and the horizon of expectation in their asymmetrical interrelation and tension bring out a sense of historical time generated by distance. The horizon of expectation is an outcome of the modern idea of progress. Hence, in *Neuzeit* or in modern times, there is an increasing gap between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation with the latter distancing itself from the former. Modern time, with its belief in progress, brings together experience and expectation, where both are "endowed with a temporal coefficient of change," and where prognoses become the legitimation of political action.²² What this means is that modern history, with its horizon of expectation animated by utopia, and the politics of change are interconnected. This is so because the idea of progress brings about both acceleration in its promise of perpetual renewal and an awareness of differing levels of development between the people and the nations cohabiting different spaces at the same time. This, in turn, creates an impetus "for the active transformation of the world."²³ Here, previous experiences no longer prepare for a future that is indeterminate. Thus it becomes precisely the task of politics to bridge the difference and the gap between experience and expectation.

Koselleck's book in its German original edition came out in 1979, at a time of evolving debates on postmodernism. However, it does not deal with the "postmodern" relations of experience and expectation. It is with Fredric Jameson that we have one of the most potent theorizations of temporality in late capitalism and in postmodernity, which Jameson characterizes as the spatialization of time.²⁴ If we were to put Jameson's thesis in Koselleck's terms, in postmodernity the horizon of expectation collapses into the space of experience. However, Koselleck's theorization appears rather general, since it fails to come to terms with the way in which historical temporality is generated by *concrete* socioeconomic processes in the modern period, which itself requires periodization. While in Koselleck's account "progress" appears as a neutral motor of history that shapes modern time, Jameson's "spatialization of time" brings both concreteness to the experience of time and a differential treatment of it according to the abstract movement of capital itself and the specific appearance it acquires through this movement. According to Jameson:

at the very heart of any account of postmodernity or late capitalism, there is to be found the historically strange and unique phenomenon of a volatilization of

temporality, a dissolution of past and future alike, a kind of contemporary imprisonment in the present – reduction to the body as I call it elsewhere – an existential but also collective loss of historicity in such a way that the future fades away as unthinkable or unimaginable, while the past itself turns into dusty images and Hollywood-type pictures of actors in wigs and the like.²⁵

In all these accounts above, what is clear is that terms like postmodernity, the contemporary, or presentism all refer to a crisis of historical time within and of modernity, which if historicized can be best understood against the backdrop of the failure of twentieth-century revolutionary and humanist projects, and of an end to the possibility of progressive and universal visions of the future. A seminal historical marker for these accounts, one that Koselleck could not account for, was the collapse of the USSR and the expansion of global capital to hitherto unconquered territories.

While agreeing that the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the subsumption of its sphere of influence under global neoliberal capital and liberal democracy, is one key event whose aftermath still weighs heavily over our so-called post-political present, to repeat the argument that this chapter makes, any historical and dialectical account of the contemporary present and the presentism of the contemporary needs to come to terms with the Soviet historical experience. That is to say that the recent accounts of the contemporary or of postmodernity, even if critical of capital's valorization of time, nonetheless unwittingly reproduce the victorious side of the Cold War narrative marked by the triumph of market capitalism and liberal democracy in the 1990s. What is forsaken here is the specificity of the Soviet experience as such. *This chapter presents the argument that, if considered from a Soviet historical perspective, the presentism of the contemporaneity can be seen as an intensification of an already-existing Soviet presentism that, in the post-Soviet sphere, signals the convergence of two homologous temporalities: that of Stalinist presentism on the one hand and the contemporary presentism of neoliberal capitalism (the contemporary as the temporality of transnational capital) on the other.* Thus, the post-Soviet contemporary weaves together the extended temporality of the disintegration of the revolutionary time of the Leninist project with the triumph of Stalinist presentism in instituting the Soviet Party-State as a supposedly trans-historical form – one that abandons the idea of the “withering away” of the state in communism – and finally culminates in the presentism of the global triumph of the market economy and liberal democracy.

This approach calls for a periodization of the Soviet historical experience, one that today is largely considered to be a uniform totality – a conception that both complies with and reproduces the very logic of Stalinism, in that it identifies the Leninist project with Stalinism. This lack of differential treatment of early Soviet history succumbs to the theoretical and practical normalizations of the present. This thesis goes against the prevailing assumptions that historical temporality in the Soviet Union was that of a future-oriented temporality of progress and utopia. Both progress and communism as a utopian horizon are assumed to have served as minimum ideological requirements, since Stalinism, and the character of Stalinist temporality itself, was presentist. However, as opposed to postmodern presentism, Stalinist presentism – the contours of which I outline below – was constituted in the form of a future-directed modern temporality, and was launched in the name of the historical dialectic of progress.

The thesis developed here takes its cue from the historiographical theory developed by art historian Vardan Azatyan in relation to the cultural politics generated in the period of the New Economic Policy in the Soviet 1920s. His article “Timing Against Time: Lost Modernism of the 1920s” discusses the dialectical historical time of the Leninist project throughout the Soviet 1920s and the disintegration of this temporality with Stalinism as indexed in the architecture of Soviet Armenia.²⁶ Azatyan conceives of the process of the disintegration of the Leninist revolutionary project as akin to Marx’s “putrescence of absolute spirit” in *German Ideology*, where the decomposition of the Hegelian spirit is considered as a material process of transformation into new substances.

Ultimately, in its general contours, my argument agrees with Boris Groys that the post-utopian condition is characteristic of post-Stalinism.²⁷ According to Groys, in the aftermath of the ideologically fabricated utopian future as played out in the present, in the wake of Stalin’s death when “*homo sovieticus* wanted most of all to leave the utopia and return to history, there suddenly was the discovery that history no longer existed and there was nowhere to return to,” since the West itself had been ushered into the post-historical condition with postmodernism.²⁸ But my claim also diverges from Groys’s argument that in Stalinism, *homo sovieticus* lived in a utopia and outside of history. Rather than utopia being characteristic of Stalinism, and the post-utopian condition arriving in its aftermath, I argue that Stalinism itself is post-utopian in the way that it appropriates utopia for post-utopian purposes: in Stalinism, the image of the bright future, as actualized in the present, arrives “on the wings” of historical necessity to cancel history itself. And this logic was to recur in various farcical repetitions, especially during Brezhnev’s “developed socialism” of the 1970s. The Soviet state during Stalin’s reign is the incarnation of the triumph of the dialectic of history, one that is beyond historical time in a way that Western postmodernism could not be. This is because Stalinist presentism both *relies on* and *cancels* the revolutionary temporality of the Bolshevik project, whereas postmodernism declares the modern historical temporality of revolutions and progress as mere ideological fictions. It is for this reason that I characterize Stalinism as a form of presentism (since it radically differs from postmodernity) but one with specifically Stalinist characteristics.

How then can one describe the contours of a historical time punctured and enabled by the revolutionary rupture that, as I claim, became subjected to the long process of disintegration initiated in Stalinism? In order to start answering this question, it is necessary to subject key moments within early Soviet history to a historical and theoretical reconsideration: Lenin’s “dictatorship of the proletariat” and “the withering away of the state” in conjunction with the New Economic Policy (1922–1928); Stalin’s Great Break of 1928 or his so-called second revolution; and finally, the consolidation of the Stalinist state in the second part of the 1930s, in conjunction with the notorious *Short Course: History of the Bolshevik Party of the Soviet Union* of 1938, a textbook that cements the Stalinist version of Soviet history.

The Revolution and Historical Time

It is important to grasp the dialectical historical temporality opened up by the October Revolution, and the specific mode of its disintegration with Stalinism, in order to engage with the post-Soviet presentism of the contemporary. Lenin’s 1917 pamphlet *The State and Revolution* offers a glimpse into this temporality prior to

the Revolution, one that was to be validated by the Revolution. The pamphlet is a practical-historical articulation of the dialectical method wherein historical change is said to occur through the unceasing movement of contradictions generated by the material conditions of development, interrupted by revolutionary violence. The revolution, in turn, is both prepared and objectively necessitated by the social and economic processes endemic to capitalism, namely the development of the means of production (which is capitalism's "permanent" revolution), the forces of production (labor as commodity), and the relations of production (the contradiction between labor and capital). Yet this development is neither even nor uniform, and while the temporality of capitalism – as Lenin, following Marx, saw it – is punctured by the surviving afterlives of the previous modes of production, it also carries the seeds of the new one. It is the dialectic of necessity and contingency, the evolutionary development of political forms in response to actual material conditions and their abolition and withering afterlife (*Aufheben*), that characterizes historical movement.²⁹ It is within temporality that the historical necessity of establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat as the most radical available form of democracy ultimately gives way to the withering of the state in communism.

If the accelerated temporality of the revolution both reveals and exacerbates class antagonisms (and in the Russian context, this accelerated revolutionary temporality is not confined to the moment of the October Revolution but also extends to the civil war of 1917–1922, a period known as "war communism"), the transition to a new mode of production – to socialism – is a multilayered and patient struggle that decelerates the fast tempo of the revolutionary tide. Lenin stresses, over and again, the heterogeneous and uneven temporality of extended transformation, as the Soviets were transitioning from the accelerated class struggle of war communism and the militant rhetoric of the civil war years to the period of peaceful reconstruction in the 1920s initiated by the New Economic Policy in 1921. Perhaps Lenin's dialectical conception of historical time as constantly moving, flexible, contradictory, progressive, and non-linear can best be summarized in Marx's lines in a letter to Engels, made famous by Lenin in his 1914 *Karl Marx, A Brief Biographical Sketch with an Exposition of Marxism*. In historical development, "20 years are no more than a day," Marx wrote to Engels, "though later on there may come days in which 20 years are embodied."³⁰ This expansion and contraction of historical time vis-à-vis the abstract calendar is informed by the law of the dialectic, of transformation from quantity to quality: there are periods of slow evolutionary quantitative change that can be interrupted by a sudden eruption that brings about qualitative change.

The 1921 New Economic Policy, a year prior to the declaration of the USSR, introduced elements of the bourgeois mode of production: private trade, ownership of small enterprises, and limited accumulation, all under state control. Ultimately, NEP was not Lenin's deviation from the course of achieving socialism and then communism, but in a way the confirmation of this course: the very Marxian conception of history that was implemented by Lenin in a revolutionary situation conceived of historical time in heterogeneous terms where older modes of production continued their withering afterlife within the ruptured time brought about by the revolution. NEP can be understood as the economic equivalent of Lenin's "withering away of the state." As Azatyan argues, what NEP proposed was a "temporary economy of time" within the fast-racing revolutionary temporality of historical

change. The withering away of the state that Lenin theorized in *The State and Revolution* and that was to succeed the “dictatorship of the proletariat was precisely about using the remnants of the older apparatus towards a new social order that the NEP institutionalized at the level of economic policy.”³¹

On the Desert of Presentism

The temporality of NEP was terminated in 1928 with Stalin’s Great Break which coincided with the institution of the first Five-Year Plan (1928–1932). It is during this time that the infrastructure of Soviet society was being constructed – from social institutions to the consolidation of the political structure in the identification of the Party with the State and – subsequently, as the 1930s rolled forth – with History as such. The formative role that the Great Break played in consolidating Soviet institutions and social relations had an extended impact far beyond the initial five years, right through to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The social and economic processes of the Great Break – characterized by the acceleration of the tempo of socialist construction, the implementation of central and teleological economic planning, sharpened class war, and the so-called cultural revolution – were to prepare the ground for what I have characterized as Stalinist presentism in the latter part of the 1930s, as the social and cultural processes of the Great Break were giving way to the deceleration of both the cultural revolution and class war. Without those processes the final fulfillment of History in Stalin and the Party later in the 1930s could not triumph.

The Great Break, also known in historical scholarship as Stalin’s “Leap Forward,” “The Second Revolution,” or “the Soviet Thermidor,”³² fabricated a revolutionary situation to create a state of pseudo-emergency in order to launch a wholesale and fast-paced transformation of Soviet society in its entirety. The First Five-Year Plan, comprising the large-scale execution of a centrally pre-planned collectivization of agriculture and industrialization in the entire country, was implemented under what Azatyan has called a regime of deadlines that replaced historical time with “timing,” “expelling time from social life.” “In Stalinist politics,” he writes, “there was no time but timing, which itself should be overcome by its even more accelerated modality—‘planning.’” According to Azatyan, whereas NEP relied on “historical consciousness” and on multilayered and non-synchronous historical time, Stalinism relied on “deadline consciousness,” and within Stalinist imperatives there was “no time to give space to time.”³³

The Great Break created the infrastructure of what would be consolidated in the 1930s as Stalinism, but was not yet Stalinism. The First Five-Year Plan’s compression of time could not guarantee the final triumph and completion of the dialectic of history. For this to be achieved, a more synthetic and all-encompassing rhetoric was needed. Stalinist presentism, I argue, is prepared through the acceleration of the stages of historical development throughout the Great Break (1928–1932) in order to arrive at developed socialism as the final historical stage. Here, the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in one country triumphs as a permanent formation, but in the conditions of the coercion of the proletariat by the Party-State, and of the Party-State by Stalin. In the 1930s the alienated state apparatus identified with the Party (in name rather than in function) in turn identified with Stalin, who had become the demiurge of History, with the latter having supposedly dialectically

culminated in the present. The motor of the class war that was driving the Great Break had brought history as a “history of class struggle” to its final completion in “socialism in one country.” It was now time to write the history of the Party. But the triumph of History – and this is the characteristic logic of Stalinist presentism – is not static, and requires constant mobilization, a periodic implementation of the regime of urgency, in order to maintain its claim to incarnating the highest stage of the dialectic of Nature. Here the past is understood as a synthetic appropriation of tradition according to the ideological needs of the present, while the future is the utopian horizon of communism so removed from the possibility of its actualization that it comes to supplant the Biblical paradisiacal afterlife. As opposed to this, Lenin, following Marx and Engels, conceived of communism as the ideal in the real, anchored within historical conditions themselves and made possible by them:

Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.³⁴

With Stalinism and beyond, communism becomes a utopian ideological horizon that needs to be maintained as such by an entire apparatus for the fabrication of the bright future in the present.³⁵ Hence, a full artistic, literary, and cultural arsenal had to be launched under the principles of socialist realism to maintain the illusion that this fabricated reality was more real than reality itself. The Stalinist present compresses the two temporalities of the past and the future into the present: the radical utopian future appears through a synthetic appropriation of various national and world historical traditions actualized as an image, as a simulacrum. In Stalinism, futurity is either infinitely deferred or appears as an image in and of the present. In short, communism remains a horizon within Stalinism, but one that so distant as to be unrealizable. This is the key distinction between the Marxian and Leninist conceptions of communism as an actual possibility and as both real and ideal, and the permanent deferral of communism in Stalinism justified by “socialism in one country” and by external threats to the Soviet Union.

Stalinism shares a fundamental affinity with postmodern presentism in that it requires a vast media apparatus and resources to maintain the illusion of reality while burying reality as a historically evolving movement of material contradictions under thick layers of “simulacra.” But Stalinist presentism also has qualities different from the presentism of the contemporary, or the postmodern *post-histoire*: the Stalinist presentism that freezes dialectical movement into the permanent present does so in the name of the dialectic itself. As opposed to the deconstructive critique of the dialectical view of history as totalizing and potentially totalitarian in post-modern theory, Stalinism “cements” the triumph of the dialectic in the Party-State as a permanent formation. This form of presentism was to haunt the temporality of social life up until the collapse of the Soviet Union. It establishes itself not through the defeat of revolutionary time but through the all-encompassing appropriation and co-option of all revolutionary experience, and does so in the name of Marxism-Leninism. And if in capitalist postmodernity it is the media apparatus and spectacle that acquire the status of reality, Stalinism rules through the transparency of language. Its ideological function is that it is ultimately the rule of rhetoric over

actually existing reality. For ideology to work as a material stratum formative of reality itself, it has to co-opt and re-channel both the experience and the theory of the revolution to legitimize the completion of the historical dialectic. Without Dialectical Materialism as an “outlook and science” at once, the historical justification of Stalinist post-history could not be provided. The special feature of Stalinism, as opposed to all hitherto existing ideologies, is its rejection of one-sidedness, and its synthetic character. This is grounded in Stalinism’s conception of Soviet state socialism as the accomplishment of the historical dialectic as such, and establishes the Soviet monoculture as the highest point of material historical development, one that would encompass all the progressive achievements of hitherto existing human culture.

The final nail on the coffin of the heterogeneous and complex temporality of the early Bolshevik years was the 1938 *Kratkiy Kurs: Istoriya kommunisticheskoi partii sovetского soyuza/bol'shevikov* (*Short Course: History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (VKP(b))) where the party was conceived as the historical embodiment of the triumph of the Revolution in the space of the Soviet state, and where the history of the Revolution itself was rewritten. Full of distortions and falsification, this textbook identified the history of the country with the history of the party, and presented the latter as a history of intraparty struggle. However, if with Khrushchev’s famous denouncement of Stalin in his speech at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, distortions of history would later enter a long and often flawed process of correction and rectification, and even if many of the Bolshevik leaders would be rehabilitated, the impact of the Stalinist version of Dialectical Materialism (officially known as Diamat), as drafted in the *Short Course* by Stalin himself, would persist in Soviet thought until the disintegration of the USSR and beyond. I cannot go into the ways in which Stalinist Diamat underwent various complex fermentations in the decades following Stalinism. What is more important for the purposes of the argument in this chapter is that distortions and purges of the history of the Party could only be justified through the imperatives of historical necessity as enabled by Dialectical Materialism. But for the annihilation of lived history and of dialectical historical time to be conceived as the triumph of History as such, Diamat had to resort to Aristotelian metaphysics to justify the Stalinist state as a permanent formation. And in a typical Stalinist move, we have the annihilation of dialectics in the name of dialectics itself.

While presenting an amalgam of quotations from Marx, Engels, and Lenin, the chapter on Dialectical Materialism, however, introduces a crucial Stalinist “innovation” in the conceptualization of the materialist dialectic, an innovation that is latent and not explicitly stated: while presenting the two basic laws of the dialectic (the law of the transformation of the quantity into quality and the law of the interpenetration of opposites) it omits the final law of the dialectic, the negation of negation, which is the precondition for revolutions conceived as ruptural events. In Stalinist Diamat, history is overdetermined by laws of nature, while revolutions appear as evolutions. “Further, if the passing of slow quantitative changes into rapid and abrupt qualitative changes is a law of development, then it is clear that revolutions made by oppressed classes are a quite natural and inevitable phenomenon.”³⁶ It is this naturalness and inevitability of historical events, including revolutions, that provides the ultimate justification of the Soviet Stalinist state as a historical-transhistorical formation:

the party of the proletariat should not guide itself in its practical activity by casual motives, but by the laws of development of society, and by practical deductions from these laws ... Hence, socialism is converted from a dream of a better future for humanity into a science.³⁷

Thus the Stalinist version of Diamat as philosophy and science at once, a science materialized as a particular social formation, had reached its triumphant fulfillment in the Party-State of the proletariat as a permanent ahistorical formation. The paradox is here: while *rhetorically* insisting on the interpenetration of opposites, and thus also on contradictions and on the law of unceasing movement and negation, Dialectical Materialism as Stalinist orthodoxy froze all further historical development and territorialized movement within the extant Soviet state. Read dialectically, we could say that in this conception, once History had been fulfilled in Stalin's statist formation it accomplished a full circle and rejoined Nature. Here history appears as natural history. Once Diamat triumphed as power, the dialectic was suspended and its past and future ceased to be regarded as ideologically consequential moments in its development. We thus arrive at the Stalinist presentism that was to haunt Soviet historical life up until its disintegration in 1991. If in the period of stagnation (1965–1985) presentism appeared in its most crystallized form as the mummification of the past (including the Stalinist past), in the era of “developed socialism,” Khrushchev's (1953–1964) and Gorbachev's (1985–1991) attempts to return to Lenin and the experience of the revolution failed when confronted with the calcified layers of bureaucracy. If Khrushchev's Thaw which attempted to open up culture and politics to state-managed and tightly controlled liberalization ended with the Brezhnevian coup, Gorbachev's initial attempts to humanize socialism by his return to Lenin opened up the Pandora's box of nationalism and other seemingly repressed sentiments that ultimately culminated in anti-Soviet protests and strife and brought about the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The contemporary in this post-Soviet context is an amalgam of different temporalities at first sight diametrically opposed – the eternal time of the primordial nation, the Stalinist institution of Soviet presentism, and the permanent present of neoliberal globalization with its time-management economy. But all these moments of contemporary's temporality which converse today are qualitatively one and the same, marking the ideology of the post-historical stage that has gradually arrived in the Soviet space since the 1930s. In a way, the post-Soviet contemporary is the post-Stalinist afterlife of Stalinism. But underneath the surface of the neo-liberal post-Stalinist present lingers the repressed modality of the revolutionary time of the 1920s, dormant in the KGB dungeons, in uncovered and unrecoverable archives, in buildings on which the names of those who carried forth this historical temporality are unwittingly preserved, and in the material traces of Soviet modernization.

Notes

- 1 For instance, in the last few years there were a number of advertised university positions for “Global Contemporary Art.” There are also a number of art courses and exhibitions, the most prominent amongst them *The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds After 1989* at ZKM, Karlsruhe.
- 2 For an excellent and comprehensive discussion on the relationship between Jameson's postmodernism and the current debates on the contemporary, see Bill Roberts,

- “Unnaming the System? Retrieving Postmodernism’s Contemporaneity,” *ARTMargins* 4, no. 2 (2015): 3–23.
- 3 See Terry Smith, “Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.
- 4 Amongst those dealing with the question of temporality in art in relation to historical time, or with periodization, are Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013); Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Octavian Esanu, “What Was Contemporary Art?” *ARTMargins* 1, no. 1 (2012); Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Artworld* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Alexander Alberro, “Periodizing Contemporary Art,” www.columbia.edu/cu/arhistory/faculty/Alberro/Periodising-Contemporary-Art.pdf; Boris Groys, “Comrades of Time,” *e-flux* 11 (December 2009), www.e-flux.com/journal/comrades-of-time/; Alexander Nigel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Mieke Bal, “Anachronism for the Sake of History: The Performative Look,” keynote lecture delivered at the AAH 40th Anniversary Conference, RCA, London, 2014; Pedro Erber, “Contemporary and Its Discontents,” *Diacritics* 41, no.1 (2013): 28–48, amongst others.
- 5 For a more thorough discussion of the debates on the contemporary see Angela Harutyunyan, *The Political Aesthetics of the Armenian Avant-Garde: The Journey of the “Painterly Real,” 1987–2004* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 23–28.
- 6 Fredric Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” *New Left Review* 92 (March–April 2015): 101–132.
- 7 These authors include Smith, Osborne, Lee, and others.
- 8 Terry Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2006): 681–707. See also Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*
- 9 Smith, “Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,” 3.
- 10 Alberro, “Periodizing Contemporary Art.”
- 11 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 13 Danto tells the reader that he detected a qualitative break from the logic of modernism when in 1964 he encountered Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*. However, he conceptualized this break only in the early 1980s. Arthur C. Danto, “Approaching the End of Art,” lecture delivered at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1985. Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1998).
- 14 Smith, “Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,” 3.
- 15 I am grateful to Octavian Esanu for introducing me to Hartog’s work.
- 16 François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and the Experience of Time* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), xviii.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 18.
- 18 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004).
- 19 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 258–259.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 266.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).
- 25 Jameson, “The Aesthetics of Singularity,” 120.
- 26 Vardan Azatyan, “Timing against Time: Lost Modernism of the 1920s,” trans. A. Harutyunyan. Unpublished manuscript.
- 27 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond* (London: Verso, 2011).
- 28 *Ibid.*, 110.

- 29 In “Hegel’s Conspectus” Lenin comments on the concept *Aufheben*: “*aufheben*=*ein Ende machen*= *erhalten* (*aufbewahren zugleich*), [supersede = terminate-maintain (simultaneously to preserve)].” Vladimir Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks in Collected Works*, vol. 38 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982), 115.
- 30 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Friedrich Engels und Karl Marx*, vol. 3, (Stuttgart, 1913) p. 127, quoted in Vladimir Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 21, *Karl Marx: A Biographical Sketch With an Exposition of Marxism* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 43–91.
- 31 Azatyan, “Timing against Time.”
- 32 Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936) (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 80.
- 33 Azatyan, “Timing against Time.”
- 34 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1970), 39.
- 35 Koselleck recalls a political joke about the communist horizon: “Communism is already visible on the horizon,” declared Khrushchev in a speech. Question from the floor: “Comrade Khrushchev, what is a ‘horizon?’” “Look it up in a dictionary,” replied Nikita Sergeevich. At home the questioner found the following explanation in a reference work: “Horizon, an apparent line separating the sky from the earth, which retreats as one approaches it.” A. Drozdynski, *Der politische Witz im Ostblok* (Düsseldorf, 1974), 80, quoted in Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 261.
- 36 *Kratkiy Kurs: Istoriya kommunisticheskoi partii sovetskogo soyuza/bol’shevikov* [Short Course: History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (VKP(b))]. First published in English in 1939. Moscow: International Publishers. Quoted from the transcription of Marxists.org. www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1939/x01/
- 37 Ibid.

2 The Long-Lasting Present

Art, Duration, and Contemporaneity

Pedro Erber

What constitutes the contemporaneity of contemporary art? Should we take the “contemporary” here as a simple reference to the historical period in which the art in question is produced or practiced? In this case, is it interchangeable with “present” or “current”? Or perhaps, beyond the sense of historical and chronological determination, the term contemporary indicates here something inherent to the specific way of being of certain works and artistic practices? In the latter case, could it be said that not all art produced in the present is contemporary? Conversely, would we be ready to recognize the existence of contemporary art in the distant past?

In a 2009 *e-flux* article that threads an elusive path between those two alternatives, theorist and art historian Boris Groys defined contemporary art as art that “manifests its own contemporaneity.”¹ Emphasizing that the definition was by no means pleonastic and constituted, but, instead, a somewhat polemical position within the ongoing debate on the contemporaneity of art, Groys added that, in order to be contemporary, it was not enough for an artwork to have been recently made or exposed. He thus defined contemporaneity as an intrinsic characteristic of artworks – of certain artworks, to which he attributed the potential to manifest their own contemporaneity – rather than as just a matter of originating or existing in the present.

Of course, such a definition in no way concludes but rather initiates or invites the debate, since everything depends, as Groys acknowledges, on what is meant by “contemporary.” It is also true that Groys was not the first to associate the contemporaneity of art with a proper mode of being and relating to time. On the contrary, with this gesture, he recuperates a longstanding debate on the temporality of the work of art, a debate that precedes, indeed, the emergence of the expression “contemporary art” as a designation of a certain genre, style, or way of making, exhibiting, and enjoying art. At the same time, Groys’s intervention suggests the imbrication of this art-historical debate with another realm of questioning about the meaning of the contemporary, which marked the intellectual environment of the time, punctuated by the publication of Giorgio Agamben’s influential essay “What is the Contemporary?” the previous year.

In returning once again to this enduring debate on the contemporary, it is not my intention to propose a solution to the problem, closing with a satisfactory answer the discussion about the contemporaneity of art; much less do I aim at providing a final definition of the contemporary in general. More than final answers to such questions, what I am looking for are different avenues of problematization

that may further unfold the issue in its aesthetic, philosophical, and political implications. I do so in this paper by referring the question to a not so distant past: a time in which numerous artists and critics around the globe discerned the emergence of a new paradigm and a new temporality of artistic making and enjoyment. I propose to search for the elements for a problematization of the idea of contemporary art and of contemporaneity as such in the interventions by three major art critics active in the 1960s, who have left their indelible marks in artistic discourse to this day: Mário Pedrosa, Miyakawa Atsushi, and Michael Fried.

The otherwise widely diverging positions that characterize the work of Fried, Pedrosa, and Miyakawa vis-à-vis the art of the 1960s converge in a diagnosis of the emergence of a new temporality of artistic practice and spectatorship, which they conceptualize in terms of *duration*, in opposition to the modernist idea of an absolute, quasi-sacred presence or presentness of the work of art. This shared diagnosis of a new temporality of art – whose resonance can be noted in Groys’s idea of a “prolonged, even potentially infinite period of delay” – signals the emergence of a certain discourse on contemporaneity in 1960s art criticism. More broadly, as I argue elsewhere, it marks the emergence of contemporary art as a discursive category.² Meanwhile, the sharp contrast between the embrace of duration by Pedrosa and Miyakawa on the one hand, and Fried’s staunch rejection of the new temporality of “literalist” art, on the other, is emblematic of a tension that, still today, informs the debate about contemporaneity both within and beyond the field of art. To advance just one prominent example, the affinities between Agamben’s understanding of the contemporary as a form of messianic time in “What is the Contemporary?” and Fried’s defense of modernist art in terms of presentness and grace is rather striking.

Thus, in examining the theoretical interventions by these three art critics in the 1960s, what is at stake is not merely a survey of historical perspectives on the problem of contemporaneity and contemporary art. It is true that the past few decades have witnessed widespread, animated debates on “the contemporary”; the origins of contemporary art and the emergence of what is often called the “global contemporary” have been variously reconsidered and redefined in light of recent historical events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the multiplication of international biennials starting in the 1990s.³ However, when it comes to theorizing contemporaneity as an intrinsic characteristic of certain artworks rather than a chronological marker or genre definition, the critical legacies of 1960s critics such as Miyawaka, Pedrosa, and Fried are not merely relics of the art-historical past but rather part of our long-lasting present.

Postmodern Art

Writing on the work of Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica in 1966, Mário Pedrosa discerned the symptoms of a major art-historical turn, which he interpreted as the end of the cycle of modern art and the emergence of a new paradigm, which he termed “postmodern art.” In describing the basic features of this new cycle, Pedrosa noted that, unlike modern art, whose beginning he located in cubism, postmodern art could no longer be “purely artistic”; this new paradigm of artistic practice expanded beyond the aesthetic realm, becoming, thus, “cultural” in the broadest sense. In contrast to the primacy of aesthetics and the exaltation of plasticity in

modern art, Pedrosa writes, “in this new phase of situation art, anti-art, postmodern art, the reverse is true: properly plastic values tend to be absorbed into the plasticity of perceptual and situational structures.”⁴ Art ceased to occupy a clearly delimited space and came to exist, so to speak, without limits, in the midst of other sociocultural practices and phenomena.

Moreover, in this new art-historical cycle, Pedrosa observed, “Brazil participates not as a modest follower, but as a precursor. The young artists of the old concretism,” he added, “and above all those of neoconcretism, with Lygia Clark in the forefront, in many ways anticipated the op and even the pop movements.”⁵ At stake in this conceptual framework of followers and precursors, in the differentiation between modernity and its aftermath was, among other things, a new mode of temporalization of art in the global panorama, whose emergence Pedrosa discerned before many.

Pedrosa perceived – and enthusiastically welcomed – the profound transformation in the mechanisms of transnational circulation of culture, which finally allowed artists and critics in the supposed periphery to see themselves as precursors of their peers in the cultural capitals of Europe and North America: a transformation, therefore, in the temporality of the global relations of the art world and, more generally, in the transnational flow of culture. This transformation rendered obsolete the understanding of progress as a centrifugal movement from center to periphery; instead, it revealed a situation of transnational contemporaneity, which relativized – even if it did not eliminate – the imbalance of cultural power dynamics between Euroamerica and the rest of the world.

Without explicitly mobilizing the concept of contemporaneity, Pedrosa’s characterization of postmodern art touched upon some of the key aspects of what came to be called contemporary art: the overcoming of the limits of purely aesthetic art by practices that encompassed the broader scope of culture, on the one hand, and, on the other, a profound change in the mechanisms of production and exhibition of art and the geopolitical contemporaneity it brought about. Clearly, at stake in these changes was way more than a superficial variation of style or the emergence of a new genre; indeed, it corresponded to a transformation in the very structure of the work of art.

This structural shift in artistic practice, as Pedrosa understood it, referred first and foremost to a change in the role of the subject in artistic creation. Most crucially, avant-garde artists such as the members of the Rio de Janeiro-based neoconcrete group, including Oiticica, Clark, Lygia Pape, and Amílcar de Castro, among others no longer rejected the role of affect in artistic creation, as did the more orthodox concretists of the previous generation. But neither did they deliberately seek affect, especially individual affect, as was the case, in Pedrosa’s view, with the practitioners of abstract expressionism.

Yet Pedrosa did not describe the neoconcrete proposal as a straightforward synthesis of the two antagonistic currents of expressionist and concrete abstraction of the previous decade. Rather, he contended, neoconcretism brought the problem of abstract art to a new level, from which, outside the canvas, it became an environmental art. This new art called for a “sensual fruition of materials, in which the whole body – which had been previously reduced to the subject of a distant and aristocratic mode of visual perception – participates as a source of total sensoriality.”⁶ Surpassing the primacy of visual perception, neoconcrete art proposed a new, more complex, “total” mode of relationship to the work of art.

This new way of relating to the work of art implied a new temporality of artistic creation; and here the historical importance of neoconcretism according to Pedrosa, who described its crucial maneuver as the incorporation of time into the structure of the concretist artwork. This subtle but fundamental intervention, he argued in a 1967 text, amounted to introducing a “fair dose of subjectivism” into artistic practice, thus subverting concretism’s staunchly objectivist credo.⁷ In the environmental, postmodern art of the neoconcrete movement, time became an essential part of the work. Indeed, this temporal dimension of art, which underpins and manifests itself in the participatory interaction between the spectator and the work, was emphasized again and again by the neoconcretists themselves. Criticizing the “mechanistic” understanding of time that characterized earlier concretism, Oiticica resorts to the concept of “duration” as elaborated by Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in order to explain the neoconcrete understanding of time. Indeed, the Neoconcrete Manifesto conferred a central role to the concept of duration not only in painting and sculpture but also in neoconcrete poetry, in which it argued, “language opens up as duration.”⁸

The idea of duration as an essential characteristic of the temporality of neoconcrete art provides an important counterpoint to what Pedrosa described – and celebrated – years earlier as the “action of presence” of art.⁹ The contrast is even more significant insofar as he located precisely in this “action of presence” the political, revolutionary potential of abstract art. It would not be exaggerated to argue that, to the change that marked the end of modern art and the beginning of postmodernism corresponded a shift in Pedrosa’s perspective on the political potential of art. Only on the basis of this radical shift in his own perspective could Pedrosa embrace the neoconcrete project in its negation of the principles of modern art that he long espoused. As I argue below, this idea of a deep transformation in the temporal structure of art, which announces itself in Pedrosa’s writings in the mid-1960s, assumes even clearer contours in the work of the Japanese critic Miyakawa Atsushi, who discerns in the set of practices of the 1960s avant-gardes the emergence of a new artistic paradigm that he terms, in somewhat premonitory fashion, “contemporary art.”

But before going any further into Miyakawa’s conceptual framework, it is worth mentioning that this idea of a time that extends as duration as opposed to what might be called the “presentism” of modern art is also expressed in Groys’ text quoted above. In defining the contemporary as “a prolonged, even potentially infinite period of delay,”¹⁰ Groys implicitly signals toward the notion of duration – if not in the specific Bergsonian meaning, at least in the common understanding of the word. Marked by this sense of the contemporary as delay, the temporality of contemporary art constitutes itself in opposition to the immediate, total presence of modern art. Such “change in the relation between art and time,” Groys writes, “also changes the temporality of art itself. Art ceases to be present, to create the effect of presence – but it also ceases to be ‘in the present,’ understood as the uniqueness of the here-and-now.”¹¹ Similarly to Pedrosa, Groys characterizes modern art in terms of its effect of presence. But he points out the ambiguity (or breadth of meaning) of such presence, which includes not only a positive dimension – as “effect” or “force” of presence – but also a notion of temporal limit, in the sense of taking place at the instant of here-and-now rather than independently of time.

While proposing a general discussion about contemporary art, “Comrades of Time” is most of all an essay about some recent time-based artistic practices. In other words, Groys proposes to understand the essence of contemporary art – its contemporaneity – on the basis of a theorization of time-based art. In this, he comes somewhat close to the position of Pedrosa and the Brazilian neoconcretists, who emphasized the transformation in the temporal structure of the work as a key point in the new paradigm of artistic practice after modern art. In contrast to modern art, for Groys, the contemporaneity of contemporary art consists no longer of being present “here-and-now,” that is, of being *in* time, but rather of being *with* time.

Taking one of the German translations of the contemporary, *zeitgenössisch*, in its purported literal sense, Groys proposes to understand contemporaneity as the character of being a comrade of time, “collaborating with time, helping time when it has problems, when it has difficulties.”¹² It is clear that one must take Groys’s proposal with a grain of salt (or humor), not just because of the mention of time’s “difficulties,” but also for the way he tweaks the etymology by exchanging the implicit preposition in the comradeship expressed in the German term *zeitgenössisch*: In a literal translation, *Zeitgenössischkeit* would indicate a comradeship with someone *in* time, but not a companionship *with* time itself.

Nonetheless, more than the consistency of Groys’s argument, what interests me here is its direction and, so to speak, its intention. A fundamental decision regarding the essence of contemporaneity as duration is at work here. Groys defines the contemporaneity of contemporary art in terms of its capacity to last and delay: to expand time, thereby transforming temporal scarcity in excess, and thus subtracting itself from the logic of the productivism that determines our historical present. For Groys, it is above all in this sense that art “manifests its own contemporaneity,” thus becoming truly contemporary. But what does it mean to “manifest”? And what does this understanding of the temporality of contemporary art as duration entail?

Duration

Writing in 1963 about the transformations of painting and sculpture in the preceding decade, Miyakawa Atsushi, one of the most influential art critics in postwar Japan, theorized the emergence of a new paradigm in artistic practice; he called this new epoch in artistic expression “contemporary art (*gendai bijutsu*).”¹³ Similarly to Pedrosa, Miyakawa conferred a central role to the idea of duration as the characteristic mode of temporality of the new artistic paradigm. In order to clearly establish the principles of this new mode of artistic expression and to differentiate it from the modern one, Miyakawa established a dichotomy between a fundamental meaning of the contemporary, for which he reserved the Japanese term *gendai*, and its general or vulgar sense, to which he referred with the French adjective *contemporain*. In this regard, Miyakawa writes:

Stated in a paradoxical way, we come to a point where it is no longer possible for us – who have for too long spoken of the contemporary (*contemporain*) as synonymous with the modern – to relegate the contemporary (*gendai*) to the general conception of *contemporain*; not only this, but also a time in which it is necessary, so to say, to redeem, in advance, *gendai* from within the *contemporain*.¹⁴

More than just a matter of genre or stylistics, Miyakawa discerned in the avant-garde experiments of his day an entirely new moment in the history of artistic expression. With this almost premonitory use of the term “contemporary art,” he emphasized the idea of a transformation at the level of the “ontology of expression” (*hyōgenron*) rather than at the merely stylistic level of expressive forms or modes.

Rather than a new historical period in a chronological succession, for Miyakawa, this new paradigm implied a new beginning of time, a new temporal structure. Beyond the modern dichotomy of space and time, the conceptual pair that defined the new temporality unfolded in terms of matter and duration. Contemporary art, he asserted, rendered problematic not only the concept of art as the expression of the subject but also the modern understanding of subjectivity that underpins it. No longer subjective or objective, devoid of any previously given content, in contemporary art the expressive act expresses nothing other than itself.

Like Pedrosa, Miyakawa argued that the new paradigm of artistic expression replaced the subject–object relationship, namely, with a new dialectical encounter between gesture and matter. Yet, he was more careful about the subjectivist implications of the understanding of time as duration. Miyakawa thus referred his usage of the concept of duration to Gaston Bachelard, thus avoiding what he perceived as a certain residue of subjectivism in Bergson’s theoretical framework.

As discussed above, Pedrosa located the emergence of postmodern art in a dialectical overcoming of the dichotomy between the objectivism of the concretist orthodoxy and the subjectivism of Informel. He recognized the role of emotions and “affective states,”¹⁵ – the “affective nature of form,” as he described it in his 1947 thesis¹⁶ – in the new art, yet not as a fundamental element. “Today’s avant-garde artists,” Pedrosa writes, “do not escape this influence [of affective states], like the modern classics, let alone deliberately seek it as did the romantic subjectivists of ‘abstract’ or ‘lyrical expressionism.’”¹⁷ If postmodern art, on the one hand, was not particularly interested in the expression of subjective content, on the other, neither did it seek the objectivity and pure rationality of geometric abstraction. In Oiticica’s *Nuclei* and Lygia Clark’s *Bichos*, as well as in Allan Kaprow’s happenings, Pedrosa contended, what matters most is the transformation of the spectator from a contemplative and static observer into an active participant in the work.

Meanwhile, Miyakawa describes the crucial transformation of artistic practice in the early 1960s as a “descent to the everyday” (*nichijō-sei e no kakō*).¹⁸ He regarded the increasing mixing of media among early 1960s artists and the recourse to industrially produced, everyday-life objects in particular as a highly consequential move, emblematic of a far-reaching transformation of art’s mode of insertion in society. Here, too, Miyakawa comes remarkably close to Pedrosa’s position, which affirmed the “cultural” character of postmodern art beyond the “purely artistic” sphere and its new configuration through what he called “situational structures.” Indeed, a similar observation can also be found in a 1966 text by Oiticica, who identifies his own program of “anti-art” to the phenomenon “sharply formulated by Pedrosa as postmodern art.”¹⁹

Miyakawa, who likewise used the term “anti-art” to refer to the set of practices that heralded the emergence of what he came to call “contemporary art,” states that such practices tended to abandon or overcome the frontier between art and non-art, which characterized the modern paradigm of expression. In doing so, anti-art erased the boundaries separating the sphere of art from its outside. “The

descent to the everyday,” he claimed, “is nothing other than the final annihilation of the frontier between art and non-art. Art can be anything and anything can become art.”²⁰ However, by annihilating the frontier and, as it were, breaching the frame of traditional painting, the distinction between art and non-art is not entirely erased. As Miyakawa puts it, “Although art can be anything and anything can become art, it is not as if art were everything and everything were art.”²¹ Therefore, art does not dissolve in everyday life; the breach of the frame does not mean the disappearance of art, but rather a greater fluidity and radical problematization of its limits.

According to Miyakawa, in bringing art to the sphere of everyday life, the great achievement of anti-art consisted in an “absolute violation” of the sacredness of art: “If we can say that art at one time discarded God and abused beauty, what made this violation possible was the sacralization of art (from religious art to art as religion).” The whole history of modern art, with its medieval, religious legacy, Miyakawa argues, consists of a repeated staging of the “desacralization” of art and in its recurrent “resacralization.”²² This sacred character was what protected and isolated art in a separate temporal sphere from the realm of secular, everyday life. In descending to the realm of everyday life, art strips off its last sacred veil and exposes itself unframed in its contemporaneity. The descent to the everyday as a movement of desacralization thus becomes the inaugural event of contemporary art.

The temporality of contemporary art, understood as duration in the sphere of everyday life, is thus opposed to divine, sacred temporality. Indeed, precisely this sense of everydayness, of a time that lasts and lingers, is one of the crucial aspects of the very idea of the “world,” of the secular time of *saeculum*, as opposed to the divine time of the *nunc stans* as eternity without duration, entirely and purely present in the now.

Grace

In the context of twentieth-century art, the opposition between the sheer presence of modern art and its negation in the emerging paradigm of the new art of the 1960s finds its most cogent expression in the work of the American art critic Michael Fried. Published in 1967, Fried’s landmark essay “Art and Objecthood” sets off as a critical exploration of the main exponents of North American minimalist art. Its aim, however, is set more broadly, as the text sketches a theoretical position regarding the wide range of practices that came to be known as contemporary art. For Fried, more than an episode in the history of taste, minimalist or, as he called it, “literalist” art constituted the expression of a new art-historical condition. In contrast to modernist sculpture and painting, Fried perceived in the “specific objects” of minimalists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris, among others, the traces of a fundamental tendency to abandon art in favor of what he called objecthood. In his visceral attack on the “theatricality” of the new pictorial and sculptural tendencies of the art of his time, Fried outlined an opposition between modern art in its presentness and the duration of literalist art. Although largely parallel to the distinction proposed by Pedrosa and Miyakawa, Fried’s intervention reverses the evaluative sign in both sides, insofar as it dismisses the minimalist avant-garde for threatening the very survival of art.

Like Pedrosa, Fried characterized the new modes of artistic practice emerging in the 1960s as situation-based: In literalist art, Fried argues, “Everything counts – not as part of the object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partially depends.”²³ While modern art subtracts itself from the condition of object, thus transcending, through form, the realm of everyday life – or, to say it with Miyakawa, asserting thereby its sacred character – literalist art affirms itself as object, as a thing in the midst of things, within a completely secularized world. In literalist art, immersed in its own situation, everything counts – including, and crucially so, the spectator whose interaction with the artwork becomes part of the work itself. Participation, in this sense, is inscribed in the work’s objecthood – even if, in the case of the artists discussed by Fried, such participation most often does not take place in an active, physical way as in the case of Clark’s *Bichos*, for instance, but rather in the simple act of observing a minimalist sculpture from different perspectives.

Fried, too, resorts to the concept of duration to describe the temporality of the emerging artistic practices of his time. More precisely, he attributes to literalist art a negative endlessness, in the sense of continuous and indefinite duration: “the experience in question *persists in time*, and the presentiment of endlessness that, I have been claiming, is central to literalist art and theory is essentially a presentiment of endless or indefinite *duration*.”²⁴ In contrast to the purported endlessness of minimalism, Fried describes modernist painting and sculpture in terms of instantaneity and presentness. Modernist art, he argues,

has no duration – not because one in fact experiences a picture by [Kenneth] Noland or [Jules] Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or [Anthony] Caro in no time at all, but because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest²⁵

Referring to Clement Greenberg, Fried defines minimalism in terms of a certain theatrical quality: “a kind of stage presence,” in contrast to the total presentness of modern art in the moment. And he takes this theatrical content of minimalist art as a sort of “declaration of war,” not only against modernist painting, but against art in general – to the point of stating that the survival of art depends, ultimately, on its ability to defeat theater.

But why would this absolute presence – or presentness – of modern art be preferable to literalist duration? Otherwise stated, what is wrong with duration and theatricality that makes it necessary to avoid and fight them at all costs? Or, to say it with Groys, “What is it about the present – the here-and-now – that so interests us?”²⁶ What is so special about this experience of immediate instant presence, about the work of art that presents and presentifies itself entirely and wholly at each moment?

Contemporaneity

Fried’s answer to those questions announces itself discretely already in the epigraph of “Art and Objecthood,” taken from the intellectual historian (and one of the greatest experts in American Puritanism) Perry Miller: “The abiding assurance is that ‘we every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen if we

had seen Him create the world at first.”²⁷ A further development of this answer is openly revealed in the last sentence of “Art and Objecthood”: “We are all literalists during most of our lives. Presentness is grace.”²⁸ Here the presentness of art reveals its religious character; even more significantly, it reveals the affinity between aesthetic contemplation and religious experience. Fried’s staunch defense of modernism, as well as his critical refusal of minimalist art rests on the fear of the disappearance of art – as a certain kind of religious experience – in the midst of everyday, literalist life. Modern art or modernism, in this context, stand for the sacred character of art, through the experience of grace as a total presence in the instant, whose loss Fried detects in the new tendencies of the art of the 1960s.

Albeit in a negative tone, Fried’s diagnosis of minimalist art coincides in most aspects with the description of the temporality of the emerging trends of avant-garde art in the 1960s and their differentiation vis-à-vis modern art elaborated contemporaneously by Pedrosa and Miyakawa. This is also, by the way, the same line of argument that Groys recuperates in affirming the manifest contemporaneity of contemporary art. Each of these texts, each of these authors recognizes in their own way a rupture in the understanding of art as the last refuge of the sacred in an eminently secular world.

While concurring with both Miyakawa and Pedrosa in his diagnosis of the fundamental transformation in the temporality of artistic practice, Fried, however, takes the opposite side. In contrast to the welcoming and, to some extent, celebratory view of duration that characterizes both Miyakawa’s and Pedrosa’s position, Fried condemned minimalism on the basis of its embrace of a temporality characteristic of everyday life and far from the religious experience of absolute presentness. He strives to protect at all costs the sacred dimension of art that Pedrosa and Miyakawa seem willing to relinquish in favor of a new mode of being of (anti-)art no longer separated from the realm of everyday existence. This new mode of being of art, no longer isolated from the temporality of everyday life as duration informs the emergence of contemporary art.

Beyond the realm of art-historical quarrels, this distinction points to a broader question regarding the ways we understand and inhabit our historical present, and regarding the place of art in the contemporary world, which still lingers on in the current debate on the contemporary. For instance, is there, perhaps, more than a mere parallel affinity between this affirmation of the presentness of the work of art as a manifestation of divine grace – this quasi-religious defense of modern art against contemporaneity – and the appeal to a kairological and messianic dimension of time we find in Agamben’s “What is the Contemporary”?²⁹ Here and now, what is the function – aesthetic, philosophical, political – of this recourse to a form of semi-secularized messianism? And what role can there still be reserved for art – for contemporary art – once it relinquishes the function of a secular materialization of sacredness? The survival of contemporary art depends on its ability to defeat grace.

Notes

- 1 Boris Groys, “Comrades of Time,” *e-flux Journal* 11 (December 2009): www.e-flux.com/journal/11/61345/comrades-of-time/.
- 2 See Pedro Erber, *Breaching the Frame. The Rise of Contemporary Art in Brazil and Japan* (Los Angeles, CA: The University of California Press, 2015).

- 3 See Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Weibel, eds., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Karlsruhe and Cambridge, MA: ZKM and MIT Press: 2013).
- 4 Mário Pedrosa, “Arte ambiental, arte pós-moderna, Hélio Oiticica,” in *Acadêmicos e modernos. Textos escolhidos III* (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1998), 355.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., 357.
- 7 Pedrosa, “Da Dissolução do Objeto ao Vanguardismo Brasileiro,” in *Acadêmicos e modernos. Textos escolhidos III* (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1998), 362.
- 8 Ferreira Gullar et al. “Manifesto Neoconcreto [Neoconcrete Manifesto],” in *Suplemento Dominical do Jornal do Brasil*. March 22, 1959. Reprinted in Aracy A. Amaral, *Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro na Arte (1950–62)* [Brazilian Constructive Project in Art: 1950–1962], Exhibition catalog (Rio de Janeiro: Museu de Arte Moderna, 1977), 82.
- 9 Pedrosa, “A Ação de Presença da Arte,” in *Forma e percepção estética. Textos escolhidos II* (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1995), 60.
- 10 Groys, “Comrades of Time.”
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 I discuss this in more length in *Breaching the Frame*, 72–89. On Miyakawa and the discourse of *gendai bijutsu* in postwar Japan see also Reiko Tomii, “Historicizing ‘Contemporary Art’: Some Discursive Practices in *Gendai Bijutsu* in Japan,” *Positions* 12, no. 3. (Winter 2004): 611–641.
- 14 Miyakawa Atsushi, “Anforumeru ikō,” in *Miyakawa Atsushi chosakushū*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, 1980), 17.
- 15 Pedrosa, “Da Natureza Afetiva da Forma na Obra de Arte,” 356.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Miyakawa, “Anforumeru ikō,” 96.
- 18 Ibid., 87–96.
- 19 Oiticica, *Aspiro ao grande labirinto* (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 1986), 82.
- 20 Miyakawa, “Anforumeru ikō,” 96.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 119.
- 23 See Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 24 Ibid., 166. Italics in the original.
- 25 Ibid., 167. Italics in the original.
- 26 Groys, “Comrades of Time.”
- 27 Miller, quoted in Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 148.
- 28 Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 168.
- 29 For a lengthier discussion of Agamben’s concept of the contemporary see Pedro Erber, “Contemporaneity and Its Discontents,” *Diacritics* 41, no.1 (2013), 28–48.

3 Periodizing Latin American Art Since the 1960s

Karen Benezra

Habitando una maraña de nuevas ofertas modernizadoras, nostalgias de utopismos perdidos, erratismos y “sin sentidos” posmodernos en lo social degradado y en atmósferas culturales de desencanto. Viviendo de manera bastante irreal los fragmentos de lo nuevo y de lo viejo, donde preguntarnos por nuestra modernidad, su crisis, sus escenas familiares extinguidas, sus nuevas escenas cotidianas inciertas, es volver a preguntarnos por *la historia del presente*, pero ahora poniendo también en cuestión el humus cultural de cada una de nuestras respuestas.

Nicolás Casullo¹

I.

The issue of periodization does not often appear at a problematic level in histories of Latin American art since the 1960s. This is not to say that the region lacks a corpus of critical literature concerned with defining art in relation to aesthetics, to other social practices, or to non-Western forms of symbolic expression. Nor does there exist a scarcity of discrete national or metropolitan narratives about the beginnings of the present moment in visual art. Since the late 1990s, a growing corpus of academic studies and exhibition catalogs about Latin American art from the 1960s and 1970s has accompanied the latter's worldwide circulation and sale. Periodizing narratives abound and they often trace the beginning of the present in both formal artistic and sociocultural terms, to the exhaustion of state-centered economic modernization policies. Open virtually any exhibition catalog or scholarly history of Latin American in the 1960s and you will find a historical framework predicated on the connection between the exacerbation of class struggle that marked the limit of the twentieth century's modernizing state projects, and the repudiation of ideas about the organicity, self-reflexivity, and social autonomy of modernist works of art. The social and political processes of the period function as the positive, external historical brackets for artistic innovation, just as neo-avant-garde movements express the essence of a static, readymade historical period. Despite this, in Latin America, historical narratives marking the success or failure of the nation-state also bear the discursive and real institutional and ideological weight of modernity as a civilizational project. If art histories cannot avoid periodizing, as Fredric Jameson suggests, nor can they undertake any sort of critical reflection on the historicity or cultural forms of the present without accounting for

the problem of national self-determination mediating the relationship between art and the social forms that capital assumes.

The present chapter attempts to address the issue of national self-determination in the periodization of Latin American art since the 1960s. It takes as its focus two opposing ways in which the national question has come to figure in accounts of global contemporary art: historicist approaches to 1960s neo-avant-garde movements that tend to treat the sociocultural particularity of non-US or European movements as a condition for their representation within a more inclusive or universal history of art; and critiques of the global contemporary as an ideology of the present defined by the geopolitical spatialization of historical time. According to this second framework, the representation of national or local themes functions as a convenient veil for the real transnational infrastructure of global financial capital. If we find the former approach on display in exhibitions of the last two decades dedicated to the global scope of pop and conceptual art, we find the latter illustrated in Peter Osborne's recent books attempting to trace an ontology of contemporary art.

Osborne provides an important critical framework for considering the transnational circulation of post-1960s Latin American art in recent years. At the same time, his proposal tends to conflate the logic of capital with the fictive totality advanced by the global contemporary as the dominant ideology of the present. In spite of the author's intention to supplant or correct what he identifies as the equivocations in Jameson's "late capitalism," not least the suggestion that capital was nearing its end, the notion of capitalist subsumption operative in his critique tends to reproduce the totalizing view of capital that Jameson associates with the 1960s as "the moment when the last vestiges of Nature which survived on into classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the Third World and the unconscious."² The problem, then, is not that Osborne neglects the existence of national or postcolonial modernities or their role in the critique of Eurocentrism. It has to do instead with the way in which his account of the space-time of the present relies on a view of capital or, in his words, "the actual historical processes that underlay the postmodernism's critical demise," alternately as a static and homogenous form of sociopolitical organization and as an effect of the redistribution of geopolitical power following the end of the Cold War.³ The epistemological nature of Osborne's question regarding the conditions of possibility of reflecting on the present marks the methodological limit to his critique of extant periodization of capital or the historical narratives framing the production of non-US or European art since the 1960s. In its attempt to define a periodization adequate to art's possible historical-critical function in the present, Osborne's takes for granted ways in which capital actualizes itself in different but connected social forms of labor and in which the antagonisms and ideologies produced by this process also mediate its expansive reproduction.

This oversight bears on the problem of historicizing Latin American art from the 1960s, or, more specifically, mobilizing the intertwined narratives of economic modernization and national self-determination as vehicles for the critique of the present. After exploring the notion of subsumption at work in Osborne's recent interventions in the first part of the essay, in the second, I contrast Osborne's theory of contemporary art with Ticio Escobar's approach to contemporaneity in *El mito del arte y el mito del pueblo: cuestiones sobre arte popular* (The Myth of

Art and the Myth of the People: Issues in Popular Art, 1987), a work that emerged from the moment of debate around postmodernity and that attempted to reconsider the definition and implication of art and of the people as carriers of a specifically national modernity. Refusing either to romanticize non-capitalist modes of production or to assume the cultural hybridity of Latin American societies as the horizon of present, Escobar's treatment of contemporaneity supposes an understanding of the space of the nation-state as defined by the antagonism among different forms of social labor. Finally, I consider two recent exhibitions of contemporary Latin American art, *Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960–1985* (2017) and *Pop América, 1965–1975* (2018), which share a continental focus and a significant number of works in common but propose opposing ways of periodizing Latin American art from the 1960s.

II.

In recent years, philosopher Peter Osborne has attempted to theorize the possibility of what he calls “an art of contemporaneity” capable of reflecting critically upon history in its current spatialized and geopolitically coded form.⁴ According to Osborne, to the extent that contemporaneity projects the togetherness of different historical times, it also presupposes a disjointed distribution of geopolitical spaces. In his view, if the moment of critical debates around the term “globalization” failed to produce an adequate critical discourse, as theorist John Rajchman has also suggested, Osborne considers that this is the case because they failed to account critically for the impossible subjective position implied by the new role of spatialized global relations.⁵ He argues that as a periodizing term, contemporaneity attempts to capture the presentism of the current moment by projecting the fiction of an empirically universal transindividual subject and installing a false but operative sense of the existential unity of dispersed planetary spaces there where postmodernity had gazed, disillusioned, on their fragmentation:

There is no socially shared subject-position of, or within, our present from the standpoint of which its relational totality could be lived as a whole . . . Nonetheless, the concept of the contemporary functions *as if* there is. That is, it functions as if the speculative horizon of the unity of human history had been reached.⁶

An art adequate to the task of reflecting on these conditions would be one capable of addressing the particular way in which the current moment has structured the relationship between globalization's finite subjective and infinite objective conceptualizations of history.⁷ From this perspective, the contemporary acts as the condition of possibility for the proliferation of historical narratives of the present at the same time that it cancels the critical potential to be found in underlining the plurality of such experiences.

Osborne's intervention represents a potent tool for questioning the consistently national framework and geopolitical or sociopolitical periodizations that prevail in histories of Latin American art since the 1960s. Take, for example, his observations on the specific role assigned to the former Third World in the ideology of the global contemporary exhibition:

Just as political debates about social emancipation and the resistance to capital have tended to focus on what is beyond the scope of the subsumption to value form – either in historically received non-capitalist social formations or inherently (for some, “ontologically”) non-capitalist forms – so debates about artistic avant-gardes have shifted from a constitutive identification with a post-capitalist future immanent in the potentiality of the productive forces developed by capitalism, to the potentiality of practices developed outside, or on the regional margins of, the now globally transnational art market. However, rather than being prospectively projected as actualized in an historical future, the anticipation of which will historically transform the present, such regional avant-gardes are instead projected as realizing their artistic value within the chronological near-future of the international art world itself. That is to say, they function as a kind of pre- or non-capitalist anthropological reserve, which achieves its avant-garde status not via its anticipation of a prospective post-capitalist future, but rather from its prospective subsumption to the art institution itself (ultimately, the art market). Indeed, it is precisely formal subsumption that preserves the possibility of the constitutively contradictory structure of the artwork as at once “autonomous” and “social fact,” from which its critical status derives.⁸

The passage provides a lucid analysis of the ways in which the contemporary often circumscribes the representation of Latin American neo-avant-garde movements. According to these now familiar narratives, in the span of a decade or less, movements like Brazilian Neoconcretismo and Nova Objetividade or the Buenos Aires-based Grupo Arte de los Medios attempted to transcend the formalist concerns of their immediate predecessors, only to see their anti-formalist faith and political commitment extinguished by military coups signaling the purported end of class struggle and with it, art’s socially transformative aspirations. That these same movements became available as possible objects of study and exhibition in the 1990s and early 2000s bears witness to Osborne’s point: the contemporary recodes the futurity of capitalist progress by contorting it within a closed historical topology such that the present of the art market appears retroactively as the inevitable horizon of the avant-garde, just as the latter become the standard bearers for the kind bourgeois nationalism that they aimed to subvert.

Taking a step back from the descriptive capacity of this framework, the passage is also revealing of the role that the concept of subsumption plays in it. The passage forms part a relatively brief development in *Postconceptual Condition* contrasting the forms of temporalization characteristic of the Soviet Constructivist avant-garde, the spatial and temporal recoding of the former under the repetitive pseudo-novelty of consumer capitalism, centered in the Western European metropolis, with contemporaneity’s geographical dispersion of the latter through what Osborne calls “the cultural-political repetition of the national and . . . the regional.”⁹ The argument attempts to shade with greater subtlety the spatialization of time associated with postmodernism. Osborne’s point is that contemporaneity does not cancel these different, supposedly earlier modes, but rather suspends them within itself. Perhaps this is the movement that the passage wishes to identify through the characterization of the contemporary’s relation to previous historical times as one of “formal subsumption.”

Subsumption (formal, real, hybrid and ideal), a term often cited in the context of post-Autonomist discussions of immaterial labor, is one that Marx mentions only in passing in the first volume of *Capital*. However, it is a term, that for good reason, has become a focal point for economists and philosophers interested in accounting for the complexity of the reproduction and relation sustained among different social forms of labor in the absence of any teleological or catastrophist vision of capitalist development. Rather than a historical stage denoting a particular way or mode of production, formal subsumption refers to a social relation that can exist on its own – a “particular” social form, according to Marx – but that also represents a logical moment presupposed by the specifically capitalist mode of accumulating wealth. Marx offers the most developed definition of formal subsumption in the “Results of the Immediate Process of Production.” There, he defines formal subsumption as “the general form of every capitalist process of production” though it can also “be found as a particular form alongside the specifically capitalist mode of production in its developed form.”¹⁰ As Patrick Murray points out, with the term, Marx describes an immaterial but “epochal” shift.¹¹ The labor process remains the same as before but “has become part of the process of capital itself.”¹² Labor comes to serve the sole end of using the capitalist’s money to make more money.¹³ The change is “epochal” in that it represents a change in the face of class domination since now money and legal contracts, rather than direct political power, mediate the relation between wage laborers and the owners of the means of production. This purely formal change in the ends that labor serves thus defines a historically new social form, which is itself predicated on the always contingent process of primitive accumulation creating the historical conditions for the sale and purchase of labor as a commodity. As we can begin to see from this brief gloss on some of Marx’s formulations, the term formal subsumption does more than merely characterize social relations mediated by money. Rather, insofar the qualifier “formal” aims to draw a distinction between the social and technical determinations of capital, Marx’s use of the term subsumption only becomes relevant conceptually in reference to the accumulation of wealth through the extraction of surplus value specific to capitalism.

In the passage from Osborne’s *Postconceptual Condition* above, the author’s critical comments regarding of the romantic view of so-called pre-capitalist social formations in the fields of both art and social theory is well taken, however, the analogy between the subsumption of labor to value form and of Third World cultural particularities to the art market, is misleading. Though the speculative universal subject of contemporaneity, like capital, subordinates and determines the relation among different particularities, Osborne would be the first to point out that for this very reason, contemporaneity represents the ideology of capital specific to the present day rather than a reflection or translation of its ongoing transformation.

Osborne’s claim that contemporary art is postconceptual art attempts to lay the groundwork for recognizing the historically specific forms through which art continues to function as a carrier of the experience of historical time and aesthetic reflection. The “postconceptual condition” seeks to redress what he considers to be the inadequacies of Jameson’s periodization of “late capitalism” just as it underscores art as a site of self-reflexivity distinct from that of scientific reason, a response to Lyotard’s “postmodern condition.” Rejecting the idea of capitalism’s imminent demise implicit in the word “late” – and showing the shifting historical

periods to which it refers in Jameson's formulations – Osborne characterizes the present as one best described by the term “high capitalism,” since, he writes, “we are perhaps only beginning to understand the depths of the mutations of social being that capitalism as a social form involves.”¹⁴

Following Osborne's own intuition in this regard, the use of “formal subsumption” in the passage above both names and suppresses the specifically Marxist or historical-materialist, rather than logical or speculative, connotation of the relation between universals and particulars. Marx's use of the concept potentially allows us to grasp the actual social forms that capital assumes.¹⁵ And yet, as he also acknowledges, Marx does not himself conceptualize any of these actual forms, for example, the relation among capitalist and non-capitalist social relations or the effects of social struggles produced by the process, when describing the logic of capital.¹⁶ It is precisely in this uncharted conceptual territory where Marx's concept of subsumption speaks directly to the roles played by the state and the ongoing struggles over popular sovereignty in defining the face and articulation of monopoly capital in Latin American countries beginning in the last third of the nineteenth century.

Viewing the national question as a site of antagonism mediating capital in the neo-imperial world is more than a marginal historical correction to Osborne's limited view of Western European colonialism and US empire or a translation of his geopolitical spatial framework back into the vocabulary and periodization of capital. It also pertains to his understanding of art's historical conditions for reflection. What Osborne calls the “art industry” of biennials, etc. defines “the contradictions between [art's] immanent artistic logic and its saleability.”¹⁷ The term thus attempts to draw attention to the legitimizing function of the transnational, non-European commercial art spaces as markers of contemporaneity, which, at the same time as they overcode the spatial ontology of the postconceptual artwork, they also mark its immanently social character. Biennials and art fairs have not only increased in number and in the geographical scope of the centers of capital that they inhabit, but, in Osborne's view, they have also tended increasingly toward “the appropriation and standardization of new artistic forms” with increasing speed and in an increasingly close relationships with other instances of the culture industry, such as fashion or tourism.¹⁸ As the author points out, the effect of the art industry on the conditions of art's reflexivity is particularly perverse. It creates the demand for more and more works of supposedly autonomous art but, through this same gesture, anticipates what art is in each instance, thus overcoding the space of indeterminacy where Adorno locates art's potential for reflection on commodity form.

The concept of “art industry” borrows from Horkheimer and Adorno's formulation of “culture industry” the formal relation between the techniques of commodity production and those of the reproduction of the labor force. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the culture industry submits culture to forms and techniques intended to organize and control social life under advanced capitalism, from the bureaucratic administration and homogenization of culture itself, to “the unending sameness [that] governs the relationship to the past.”¹⁹ In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the culture industry serves as yet another instance the tendency of capitalism toward the total administration of society. Adorno adapts the latter concept from Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, which emphasizes the commodity and its illusory effects as the central problem of capitalist society and models the social

objectification of labor produced by exchange relations after Weber's view of rationalization.²⁰ As a form of class domination, the objective abstraction of labor also produces abstraction at a conceptual level. Indicting Kant as an avatar of technical reason, conceptual abstraction, based in the cognitive operation of subsumption, or the representation of a particular under a universal concept, models the objectification of labor under the abstract equivalence commodity exchange.²¹

In contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno's ambition to show the interrelation between technical reason and class domination, Osborne's more focused aim in using the term "art industry" is to highlight the extent to which the culture industry also comprehends the circulation and reception of high art.²² As in the reference to formal subsumption in the previous passage, Osborne's recourse to the notion of the culture industry produces a lucid description of the shift in dynamics of the art market and thus in the conditions of art's relative autonomy between the moment of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and our own. However, as Antonia Birnbaum notes in her review of Osborne's *Anywhere or Not at All*, the key concept of art industry functions alternately as a historical transcendental defining the particular configuration of space and time incorporated within the form of the artwork, and as an instance of the transnational movement of finance capital.²³ Extending Birnbaum's criticism, as a stand-in for the objective movement of capital, the notion of the art industry is also problematic for the way that it limits capital to the realm of circulation, and in this sense, tends to de-historicize the social forms that it assumes. Osborne's attempt to mobilize the contemporary not only as a condition of artistic reflexivity but also as a periodization of capitalism bears directly on the way that he perceives the superfluity or merely particular cultural value of national art histories.

III.

In the Latin American context, the question of art's ability to reflect critically upon the historical narratives of modernity arrived both too early (to catch the eye of Anglophone postcolonial theorists of plural modernities in the 1990s) and too late (to generate a conceptually rigorous critical framework for addressing the ontology or historicity of anti-formalist art on a transnational or regional scale beginning in the 1960s). And yet, these now *démodé* reflections on the accelerated passage from "underdevelopment" to postmodernity also allow us to consider the cultural as well as sociopolitical meaning of modernity mediating the relation between capitalism and art.

Paraguayan critic and curator Ticio Escobar's *El mito del arte y el mito del pueblo: Cuestiones sobre arte popular* (The Myth of Art and the Myth of the People: Issues in Popular Art, 1987), offers a singular intervention into this field. The work gives voice, in the author's words, to the uncanny "contemporaneity" produced by the juxtaposition of historical times and aesthetic regimes long suppressed by the state, in such a way that refuses the embrace of cultural hybridity purportedly generated in the realm of circulation (Néstor García Canclini); the collapse of neo-avant-garde art and heteronomous "postmodernisms" subtracted from and capable of resisting the reifying forces of mass culture (Juan Acha); the advocacy for a notion of artistic avant-gardism predicated, at least rhetorically, on the irreparable fragmentation of the socio-symbolic order and the closure of the present

as a time endowed with futurity (Nelly Richard); or the wholesale rejection of Enlightenment as a product of colonialism (Aníbal Quijano).

The uniqueness of Escobar's position has to do with the way that the potential re-signification of its three title terms both supposes and produces "popular art" as a cultural form at once belonging to and capable of activating the contradictions within a characteristically hybrid and internally hierarchal form of social labor. In *El mito del arte* ... he argues for contemporaneity as a periodizing term in two different senses. In what we might call a first, historicist sense, Escobar advocates for the juxtaposition of high art and popular art, which he defines as indigenous and mestizo symbolic forms that may or may not incorporate elements of mass culture. It is an argument against the normative ideals of artistic autonomy, by which he describes the elevation and separation of art's aesthetic function, or the disinterested contemplation of its appearance, from what he refers to as its poetic function, or its capacity to "reveal" the truth of a given community as an effect upon the common sense.²⁴ Rescuing popular art from its relegated status as artisan craft serves as the first step in redefining and revealing the implication of art, myth and people. In a second sense, contemporaneity does more than simply refer to the objective juxtaposition of different historical ways of producing or interpreting the ethical function of art. Rather, Escobar suggests that contemporaneity would result from the political activation of a disjointed togetherness in time. It is in this ideological-Sorelian, rather than empirical or anthropological sense, that Escobar invites us to understand what he means by myth. Syncretic, non-autonomous forms of expression will have proven themselves to be works of art (in a non-autonomous sense) to the extent that their play on formal conventions will have proven capable of reflecting the residual common sense of a group that will have also come to see itself as a self-determining ethical-political collective through this process.²⁵

El mito del arte ... questions the aestheticism of modern art from within the always already sociopolitical register of class hegemony. In this sense, *El mito del arte* ... does more than simply proffer a particularized sociocultural counterpart to the Adornian reading of the crisis of art's social authority under advanced capitalism. Rather, it performs the universalizing project of the nation-state as a carrier of modernity and as a historically circumscribed way of defining the class and property relations of capital.

We can capture the contours of Escobar's notion of contemporaneity through the comparison with other approaches to the sociocultural and institutional specificities of postmodernity. Arguing against what sociologist José Joaquín Brunner identified as the way in which the always fragmented articulation of social and political modernization produced a regional "exasperation" with modernity, Escobar affirms that the idea of a specifically Latin American postmodernity "has the same problem as that of [the notion] of pre-capitalism: it takes as a parameter an experience that was only partially assumed."²⁶ The same primacy of politics that distinguishes Escobar's position from that of Brunner plays a slightly different role in his gloss on anthropologist Néstor García Canclini's study of indigenous artisan production in Mexico. Escobar affirms García Canclini's argument to the effect that to ask after the survival or autonomy of non-capitalist artisan craft under capitalism is to misunderstand the extent to which class domination is tied to the maintenance of seemingly anachronistic modes of production, in both political and economic terms.²⁷ As Escobar signals, by arguing for the place of non-capitalist modes of

production as necessary for capital's reproduction, García Canclini points to a non-totalizing notion of capital in which the social form that it assumes is necessarily mediated by apparently untimely symbolic forms and the localized play of political power struggles.²⁸ Though Escobar does not develop this insight systematically, his theory of contemporaneity is noteworthy for the way that it attempts to locate the objective social basis for its periodization in a notion of social relations irreducible to the uniformity of the commodity. Within the context of the present essay, Escobar's attempt to question and reconfigure the terms of political modernity, social class, and art also represents a theoretical passage often neglected in the elliptical movement between the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s and their representation in global contemporary art history in recent years.

IV.

Two recent exhibitions, *Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960–1985*, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, in conjunction with the Museo Jumex in Mexico City and the Museo de Arte de Lima, in 2017, and *Pop América, 1965–1975*, organized by Esther Gabara at the Nasher and McNay Art Museums in 2018, illustrate the problem of nationally or regionally bound periodization. The two exhibitions are notable for the implicit or explicit emphasis that they place on the historical and representation of the period grounding their respective frameworks. While *Memories* casts the artistic experimentalism of the 1960s as part of a fugue from the “mirage of European modernity,” in the words of curator Julieta González, *Pop América* presents a partially overlapping set of works as a part of a visual idiom attempting to respond to the effects of transversal processes of modernization and as a vehicle for reflecting upon the neo-imperial relationship connecting the US with Latin America.

Memories claimed to examine “the ways in which Latin American artists from the 1960s through the 1980s responded to the unraveling of the utopian promise of modernization.”²⁹ It thus sought to situate the rupture between modernism and post-modernism, or between art's formal and political concerns – a break often associated with the neo-avant-gardes of the period – as part of a larger “epistemic break from the modern” and as a response to the injustices and failures of developmentalist state economic policies following the end of World War II.³⁰ The exhibition borrowed its historical framework from one first elaborated by the Modernity/Coloniality (MC) working group. Building upon the work of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, the group sought to articulate a postcolonial critique of modernity, taking as its point of departure what it considered to be the insufficiency of Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory for the purposes of capturing the larger cultural or civilizational effects of European colonialism.³¹ The MC group aimed to expand the economic focus of world-system analysis in order to contemplate the psychic, political, and sociocultural faces of this same history.³² In so doing, it also aimed to question the analytical centrality of the nation-state as a telos or horizon that Dependency Theory's emphasis on economic self-determination shared with lineal, Eurocentric models of economic development and nineteenth-century philosophies of history.³³ The group's largely affirmative, rather than critical stance, aimed to shift such discussions away from the exclusive purview of European Enlightenment or the critique of the

modernizing state, often on social scientific terms, by extending the temporal and broader, civilizational consequences of the modernity/coloniality duopoly back to the Conquest of the Americas and inward or upward to the metaphysical bases of reason.

In her catalog essay for *Memories*, González introduces the break with modernist formalism through a similar gesture. Glossing Walter Mignolo on the simultaneous othering and inclusion of non-Western peoples in the “magic” or progress promised by the “Western idea of modernity,” González affirms,

In the cultural field, there appeared to be a realization – concurrent with the geopolitical reorganization of the world taking place at the time and the circulation of Dependency Theory – that an inscription in that mirage called modernity was clearly a double bind.³⁴

With this, González, in this case, attempts to frame the by now familiar trajectory of anti-formalist, avant-gardist gestures among Brazilian neoconcrete and neofigurative artists like Hélio Oiticica, or Antonio Dias, not only as a response to the heightened social and political contradictions engendered by processes of industrialization and urbanization but as a refusal or “delinking” from European modernity. The exhibition mimics the MC’s tendency to de-historicize its own motivations and objects of inquiry, often imputing its own analytical perspective to a positively given but marginalized social subject. In *Memories*, this move is particularly surprising, since it attributes the epistemological fugue from modernity to a canonical group of neo-avant-garde artists and works which, though often anti-imperialist, also served as the foremost theorists and illustrations of modernist negation as the achievement of a specifically national universalism.

Despite its lasting appeal, the MC project (including the continuous transmutation of its name), emerged as an intervention into a broader field of postmodern critique. By conflating it with artistic modernism, the exhibition de-historicizes the problem of defining modernity that provides the context for its own framework. The effect is a kind of unacknowledged performance of postmodern pastiche. Rather than breaking with modernity or the correlative postmodern lament for the lost or unrealized futurity of the 1960s neo-avant-gardes, it instead equates their respective operations of sublation and rupture. Contrary to either movement, the exhibition’s framing suggests the eerie and unquestioned continuity of art. And it does so precisely by negating its claim either to inscribe its objects as a kind of sociocultural difference within the universal history of a particular artistic movement, as is often the pretext for exhibitions of global post-1960s art, or a Eurocentric world history, by asserting the progress of a particular national statehood through a claim on the advancement of its artists’ formal achievements.

Holding both of these movements in abeyance, as its title suggests, *Memories* stakes a claim on the time and subject of history themselves. The exhibition borrows its title from Cuban director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s well-known 1968 film and the novel by Edmundo Desnoes (1965), from which it was adapted. However, the quotation would strike anyone who has seen the film as ironic. The movie weaves together personal memories of its protagonist, Sergio, a writer and the husband and adult son of a bourgeois family that has fled Cuba after the invasion of Playa Girón, and his life, lonely but largely unchanged, in the present moment of

the revolutionary process. The movie's narrative structure is elliptical, in the sense that it pivots the repetition of a slightly altered version of the same memories around two reflections, transmitted as the voiceover of the protagonist's thoughts, in which he defines the term "underdevelopment." In the first of these moments, Sergio comments, condescendingly, on what he calls the "inconsistency" of his young, unenlightened girlfriend, Elena, noting, "That's one of the signs of underdevelopment: the inability to connect things."³⁵ The protagonist's definition suggests an inability to accumulate or reflect on one's own experience. In the second moment, after leaving a conference on "Literature and Underdevelopment," featuring a series of leftist writers and critics, Sergio, envious and despondent, notes his own loneliness and excessive accumulation of memories and now defines "underdevelopment," by contrast, as a social condition, rather than a personal shortcoming: "In underdevelopment nothing has continuity, everything is forgotten. People aren't consistent. But you remember many things, you remember too much. Where's your family, your work, your wife? You're dead. Now it begins, Sergio, your final destruction."³⁶

Though I cannot do justice here to the complexity of the film or Gutiérrez Alea's Brechtian-inspired film theory, *The Dialectic of the Spectator*, it is worth noting that what follows from this second moment is a cinematic disidentification with the protagonist, which proceeds independently from his personal travails or suffering. In the director's own account, rather than portraying Sergio as a hero or anti-hero, Gutiérrez Alea intended for the film as a whole to reveal the contradictions between revolutionary intentions and the persistence of retrograde bourgeois values. Glossing Gutiérrez Alea's *Dialectic*, Bruno Bosteels notes that insofar as the film as a whole addresses the persistence of bourgeois individualism within the revolutionary process, the film's "real object of criticism is the subject as such – in this case, the spectator and not so much the movie's hero or anti-hero."³⁷

The exhibition's reference to the title of Gutiérrez Alea's film is notable for its literality, in other words, for the invocation of collective nostalgia for the futurity promised alternately by capitalist progress or the opposition to it. What is striking about the comparison is not simply the contemporary moment's paralyzing nostalgia juxtaposed with the horizon of a socialist future. As we have seen, briefly, the identification and disidentification between spectator and protagonist leaves little room for the film to register objective social or political processes, like the expropriation of property illustrated briefly toward its conclusion, let alone revolutionary ethical positions like that of Guevara's self-sacrificing "new man," which, it suggests, may not yet exist in the world. If, as its director intended, the revelation of contradictory ethical positions forces the viewer to take a position, by the time of the film's production and release in 1968, that position concerned the negotiation of the Revolution's institutionalization rather than the Jacobin or foquist struggle for power. In other words, the contrast that I wish to signal is not between action and inaction. Rather, following Gutiérrez Alea (and Bosteels), it concerns the subject supposed to remember. The suggestion that the exhibition's spectator shares the memories of underdevelopment on display posits a kind of melodramatic collectivity – a self brought into being, performatively, through the act of accumulating and connecting monuments, films, and works of art from across an entire continent, as part of its own experience. The spectator is interpellated as an individual and, through this operation, made "contemporary," that is, brought into the

fold of a common sense that is not itself the effect of this performative act, but rather a historical present that she is made to believe pre-exists her.³⁸ The exhibition thus provides a fitting illustration of Osborne's definition of contemporaneity as "the moment of disjunction (and hence antagonism) within the disjunctive unity of the historical present and the existential unity of the disjunctiveness of presentness itself."³⁹

In the language of Dependency Theory, the subject supposed to remember is, by definition, "developed" in the sense that it is the neo-colonial benefactor of the Third World's exploitation and subjection to unfair terms of trade. In the language of the Marxist critics of Dependency Theory, the spectator of the exhibition occupies the structurally conflicted position of the so-called national bourgeoisie. Like the structure of Gutiérrez Alea's film, the very works and texts presented in the exhibition reveal the absurdity of suggesting that artistic movements that self-consciously inscribed themselves within a horizon of nation self-determination, occupied a position somehow external to modernity. The claim on such a position represents a variation on the kind of sociocultural particularism that paved the arrival of Latin American neo-avant-garde into an apparent modernity underwritten by the truncated future of contemporaneity.⁴⁰ *Memories* represents an intensification of this trend and thus a particularly striking example of what Osborne describes as the global contemporary's displacement of temporal futurity onto the supposed margins of capital in a movement that is itself predicated on the gallery as the ultimate horizon of politics.⁴¹

Pop América shares with *Memories* an attempt to displace the centrality afforded to the dramatic narrative of neo-avant-garde art and leftist militant movements in the representation of Latin America within the global contemporary canon and to locate the consequences of the artistic experimentalism of the 1960s in a more immediate relation to the geopolitics of capitalist modernity. There where *Memories* "delinks" from European colonialism and modernity, *Pop América* pops America. In her introductory essay, Gabara leaves the definition of "pop" open or indeterminate, emphasizing instead that it produces a reconceptualization of America as an imperial project and common political space. Pop acquires meaning through the "actions" – liberating, consuming, fashioning, etc. – that mediate it, such that the imaginary production of America is also responsible for its onomatopoeic bursting open.

Pop América enters into dialogue with other surveys of pop art's global thrust: the Walker Art Center's *International Pop* (2015) and the Tate Modern's *The World Goes Pop* (2015). While all three exhibitions stress a notion of horizontal circulation and shared visual languages derived from industrial design and commercial culture, each relates the significance of its international scope and shared historical moment to a different notion of world history. In the introductory essay for the Tate Modern exhibition, "Political Pop: An Introduction," Jessica Morgan similarly interprets "Pop" as a verb, though one whose object is art history. If, in Morgan's view, pop signaled the incorporation of pop culture images into high art, it also signaled the irreverent treatment of earlier works of modernism according to lowbrow, leveling pop-culture sensibility, rather than a gesture of formalist negation. Pop thus represents the ultimate contradiction and completion of modernism – to critique popular culture through its own language represented the risk of art simply dissolving into the everyday of consumer capitalism – carried out on

a world-historical scale.⁴² *The World Goes Pop* suggests a chronology marked by the history of art as well as that of commercial consumer culture: “It is difficult to exaggerate the invasion of commercial brands, billboards, photographs, magazines and packaging designs that overwhelmed culture, beginning in the 1960s,” in Morgan’s words.⁴³

The Walker Art Center’s *International Pop* proposes an even more ambitious history of the present. Introducing the catalog’s 74-page visual chronology, Godfre Leung notes,

Running almost exactly parallel to this [the 1960s] transnational period in the history of art, bookended by late modernism and conceptual art’s so-called dematerialization of the art object, is the Bretton Woods Economic System. The end of Bretton Woods in 1973 coincided with a “new spirit of capitalism.” We are still feeling the effects of that shift today, in the form of our volatile global economy and speculation-driven art market.⁴⁴

The chronology of pop art begins with a full-page, high angle photo of André Malraux from 1947 with the images for his *Le musée imaginaire* (The Museum Without Walls) arranged in horizontal rows on the floor in front of him. Rather than marking the culmination of modernism, pop provides something like the irreverent or ironic sensibility of the two decades following World War II, at the same time that the chronology’s juxtaposition of quotations, political events, and journalistic photographs with figures and events in the history of art, presents the supposedly de-centered, global history of the era as an anticipatory and aestheticized postmodern pastiche.

Like these two exhibitions, *Pop América* acknowledges the movement’s alternately local and multidirectional influences, in addition to which it signals the polyvalent ideological ends for which its visual idiom(s) were used. However, what distinguishes *Pop América*’s focus is not only its empirical circumscription within the Western Hemisphere, but the way that this delimitation affects the nature of the relationship it establishes between art and the social and political processes of its era. *Pop América*’s spatial delimitation also suggests an alternate set of periodizations – one that begins with US empire and José Martí’s *nuestroamericanismo* during the second half of the nineteenth century, another, pertinent to the exhibition’s works and the circulation of pop as an idiom, and a third, tacit or implicit one regarding the processes of capitalist modernization that becomes manifest in the title each of the exhibition’s sections and that transpires in the present progressive time of the gerund. In place of a narrative situating Pop as the sign of a break with modernity or incorporation into capitalism, *Pop América* presents a series of overlapping geopolitical, formal visual, and social frameworks.

Despite the fairly loose conventions defining the commonality of the works, the show charges their common thematic concerns and iconography with sustaining the idea of Pop as a formal and historical commonality. In the example that lends its name to the show, the catalog juxtaposes a lithograph on paper by Roy Lichtenstein, titled *Explosion* from *Portfolio 9* (1967) with Hugo Rivera Scott’s collage on cardboard titled *Pop América* (1968). Playing on the idea that Latin American artists borrowed heavily from their better-known US counterparts, both feature Lichtenstein’s dot technique and a starburst pattern in the center of the composition.

However, in place of *Explosion's* concentric uneven circles and eccentric rays, Scott's collage features the words "Pop América" as if to name the concentration or dispersion of energy represented on the opposite page. The juxtaposition of the two works functions like something of a synecdoche for the spatial and temporal framework of the exhibition. If their self-consciously shared or borrowed forms insinuate their togetherness in time, the works are also disjoined by their relation to the conflictive social processes of modernization they share and often represent, more or less directly. More than the simultaneous recourse to an established set of conventions, their contemporaneity depends upon the idea of pop, which Scott illustrates through the incorporation of the word, as a universal phenomenon defined by its concrete local instantiations. It is this idea of pop – and of universalism – that the works are asked to sustain.

Notes

- 1 Nicolás Casullo, "Modernidad: biografía del ensueño y de la crisis," in *El debate modernidad-posmodernidad*, edited by Nicolás Casullo (Buenos Aires: Retórica Ediciones, 2004), 48. "Inhabiting a jungle of new modernizing offers, the nostalgia for lost utopias, erratic movements and postmodern 'nonsense' in the degraded public sphere and in disenchanted cultural ambits. Living in unreal fashion the fragments of the new and the old, where asking after our modernity, its crisis, its extinct family scenes, its new quotidian uncertainties, is to question, once again, the *history of the present* by also placing into doubt the cultural humus of each of our responses." (All translations from Spanish are mine unless otherwise noted.)
- 2 Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," in *The Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso Books, 2008), 513.
- 3 Peter Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition: Critical Essays* (London: Verso, 2018), 11.
- 4 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 28.
- 5 John Rajchman, "The Contemporary: A New Idea?" in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, edited by Armen Avanessian and Luke Skrebowski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 139; Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, 12.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, 8, 14.
- 8 Ibid., 51.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Karl Marx, *Capital*. Translated by Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 1019. For a discussion of this passage, see Patrick Murray, "The Social and Material Transformation of Production by Capital: Formal and Real Subsumption in *Capital*, vol. 1," in *The Constitution of Capital: Essays on Volume 1 of Capital*, edited by Ricardo Bellofiore and Nicola Taylor (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 252.
- 11 Murray, "The Social and Material Transformation of Production," 252.
- 12 Marx, *Capital*, 1019.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, 9.
- 15 Andrés Saenz de Sicilia, "The Problem of Subsumption in Kant, Hegel and Marx" (PhD diss, Kingston University, 2016), 184.
- 16 Ibid., 187.
- 17 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 166.
- 18 Ibid., 167.
- 19 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 104–106.
- 20 Saenz de Sicilia, "The Problem of Subsumption," 206.

- 21 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 65; Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 288; Saenz de Sicilia, "The Problem of Subsumption," 201.
- 22 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 167.
- 23 Antonia Birnbaum, "Extra, Extra, Read all about It! Contemporary Art Is Post-Conceptual Art," *Radical Philosophy* 193 (2014): 34.
- 24 Ticio Escobar, *El mito del arte y el mito del pueblo: cuestiones sobre arte popular* (Santiago: Ediciones Metales Pesados, 2008), 33.
- 25 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 126. Escobar's references to residual cultural elements recalls Raymond Williams's use of the term in order to define forms of "social being and consciousness" that escape the hegemony of the dominant class. Much as one finds in the interrelation among Escobar's three key terms, for Williams as well, the notion of residual forms of consciousness only becomes relevant with respect to an historical vision of class struggle irreducible to the imaginary of the Western European industrial proletariat and bourgeoisie. For Williams, the potential political significance of values or worldviews that remain marginal to the dominant order necessarily finds itself implicated in the struggle between dominant and emergent social classes. If one wished to posit a more dialectical Escobar-beyond-Escobar, one might consider his recent comments comparing the position of the popular as a logical site of negation to that of the French Third Estate. While Escobar posits this position as one of exclusion, an ideological critique of the modern notion of the popular would suggest that liberal democracy operates through the division of the popular as the basis of democratic self-determination and as the poor. In this sense, what liberal political forms exclude is not popular culture or the poor as such but the conflictivity manifested in the difference between the social and its political representation. See Ticio Escobar, "Indigenous Art: The Challenge of the Universal," in *Authoritarianism, Cultural History, and Political Resistance in Latin America*, edited by Federico Pous, Alejandro Quin and Marcelo Vieira (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 91. For a critique of modern concepts of the national-popular basis of sovereignty, see Marilena Chauí, "Sobre lo nacional y lo popular en la cultura," in *Ciudadanía cultural: el derecho a la cultura*, trans. Lucía Tennina and Andrés Bracony (Caseros: RGC Libros, 2013), 21–75. Escobar draws on Chauí's analysis on several occasions in *El mito del arte*.
- 26 Ticio Escobar, "Posmodernismo/pre-capitalismo," *Casa de las Américas* 168 (1988): 15.
- 27 Néstor García Canclini, *Las culturas populares en el capitalismo* (México, DF: Nueva Imagen, 1982), 103–107; Escobar, *El mito del arte*, 173. For a technical appreciation of hybrid subsumption in Capital, see Chapter 3 of Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).
- 28 Escobar, *El mito del arte*, 173. Whereas this same analysis eventually leads García Canclini to affirm the fragmentation and juxtaposition of different modes of expression and production on a flattened, sociocultural plane, Escobar appeals to the residual and emergent myths subsumed under and produced by capital as the conditions for the realization of universalist project not defined by the parameters of the nation-state.
- 29 Kathryn Kanjo, "Introduction and Acknowledgments," in *Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960–1985*, Exhibition catalog (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2018), 6.
- 30 Sharon Lerner, "Shifting the Focus: Underdevelopment and the 'Popular' in the Peruvian Avant-Garde, 1967–1981," in *Memories of Underdevelopment*, 103.
- 31 The idea of the world system attempted to relativize the centrality of industrial capitalism, the framework of the nation-state, and the rigid periodization of modes of production, together with the issue of transition, in favor of the long-durée of supra- or pre-national commercial and financial networks as frameworks for understanding the history of capitalism and the geopolitical power relations that it produced. For a discussion of the Modernity/Coloniality research program in the words of one of the group's members, see Arturo Escobar, "Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise: The Modernity/Coloniality Research Program," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 179–180.

- 32 Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 10. Take, for example, the following statement by anthropologist Arturo Escobar in the first chapter of his critique of Development Theory: "To sum up, I propose to speak of development as a historically singular experience, the creation of a domain of thought and action, by analyzing the characteristics and interrelations of the three axes that define it: the forms of knowledge that refer to it and through which it comes into being and is elaborated into objects, concepts, theories, and the like; the system of power that regulates its practice; and the forms of subjectivity fostered by this discourse, those through which people come to recognize themselves as developed or underdeveloped."
- 33 Ramón Grosfoguel, "Colonial Difference, Geopolitics of Knowledge, and Global Coloniality in the Modern/Colonial Capitalist World-System," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 25 no. 3 (2002): 216, 218. In my discussion of the *Memories of Underdevelopment*, I have not addressed the telling absence of any reference to the highly generative field of Marxist social analysis, which, in the same years, also responded to the contradictions of developmentalism and to the problem of internal class struggle that Dependency Theory neglected. For an intellectual history of these positions, see Jaime Osorio, *Teoría marxista de la dependencia: historia, fundamentos, debates y contribuciones* (México, DF: Itaca, 2016).
- 34 Julieta González et al., "Memories of Underdevelopment: Art and the Decolonial Turn in Latin America, 1960–1985," in *Memories of Underdevelopment*, 31.
- 35 "Continuity Script," 65, cited in Bruno Bosteels, *Marx and Freud in Latin America: Politics, Psychoanalysis and Religion in Times of Terror* (London: Verso, 2012), 101.
- 36 "Continuity Script," 77, cited in Bosteels, *Marx and Freud*, 103.
- 37 Bosteels, *Marx and Freud*, 104.
- 38 Contrast the horizon of the operation proposed by the exhibition with that of the avant-garde manifesto, which, as Martin Puchner has argued, takes its inspiration from the performative emergence of the proletariat as the subject addressed or called forth by the *Communist Manifesto*. See Martin Puchner, *The Poetry of Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 11–22.
- 39 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 24–25.
- 40 Andrea Giunta's *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics*, first published in Spanish in 2001, provides a clear illustration of this historical bait and switch. Her well-known history of the institutional networks of Cold War cultural diplomacy in the 1960s in Argentina underlines the extent to which the perception of Argentinean, alternately as national or as avant-garde, precluded one another. Conformity to a set of changing but highly codified criteria for artistic experimentalism functioned to free art from its local determinations and accede to the historical stage and universal realm of modernity. At the same time, access to this same modernity revealed its own internal fissures – a temporal disjointedness at once plaguing and motivating the demand for art to be ahead of its time. See Andrea Giunta, *Avant-garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties*, trans. Peter Kahn (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 41 Osborne, *Postconceptual Condition*, 51.
- 42 Jessica Morgan, "Political Pop: An Introduction," in *The World Goes Pop*, edited by Jessica Morgan and Flavia Frigeri (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 27. Unsurprisingly, Morgan adds that this gesture of self-consumption presented "a methodological opportunity in global pop, to simultaneously champion populist expression and disavow the media's ideological coinage."
- 43 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 44 Godfre Leung, "International Pop: A Visual Chronology," in *International Pop*, Exhibition catalog (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2015), 11.

4 *Neue östeuropäische Kunst*

The Global Contemporary and the Eastern European Retrocontemporary

Ivana Bago

I hope that those who after some years compile the art history of the nineties will not let the special relationship between the artists of Moscow and Ljubljana go unnoticed.

(Viktor Misiano)¹

The last decade saw numerous attempts to historicize and theorize “contemporary art,” a distinctly indistinct term, which has been around for a while but whose genealogy and rise to prominence cannot reliably be traced.² It seems simply to have landed in the present, like a found object that no one particularly desired but which over time grew into a gigantic vagueness that at some point needed to be explained (away). In the introduction to the *e-flux Journal* issue on contemporary art, the editors evoke this vagueness by stating that “no one is proud to be ‘contemporary,’ and no one is ashamed.”³ Recent theorizations of contemporary art, however, have increasingly taken on a prescriptive tone, positing contemporary art as a horizon, or even a task. They have done so by linking contemporary art to prescriptive theorizations of “contemporaneity,” conceived as an imperative to reckon with the complex “disjunctive unity” of multiple temporalities that constitute the increasingly globalized and transnational world.⁴ Such accounts, most prominently those by Peter Osborne and Terry Smith, rely on the painstaking labor of distinguishing between a contemporary art in the vulgar sense – up to date, marketable, “official contemporary art” – and a critical contemporary art, which both Osborne and Smith call “the art of contemporaneity.”⁵ They also make sure to differentiate what Smith calls the “*coincidence of asynchronous temporalities*” and Osborne the “*differential* historical temporality of the present,” which define contemporaneity, from both the totalizing futurity of modernity and the post-historical presentism of post-modernity.⁶

However, it is due not least to the ambivalences and ambiguities that make for the need to perform those careful demarcations in the first place that contemporaneity can hardly be embraced as a constructive, let alone utopian, project. Indeed, Osborne introduces the contemporary as a theoretically and empirically problematic but “increasingly inevitable” notion, a fiction that is, however, confirmed by the growing interconnectedness under the sign of global capital.⁷ But seen from the perspective of the radical inequalities that still underpin the global distribution of wealth and the production of knowledge and art, the call to join in on the coincidence and disjunctive unity of asynchronous temporalities, and critically reflect on it by way of a “truly contemporary art,”⁸ still resembles the good-old imperative of

catching up with the latest *-isms* distributed from the (still) hegemonic sites of knowledge production. In post-socialist Europe, in particular, where the instituting of a (critical, cutting-edge) contemporary art was literally connected, through the Soros Open Society Foundation, with the instituting of what Boris Buden called the classrooms of democracy for “the children of post-communism,”⁹ no terminological or theoretical acrobatics can alleviate the coloniality inherent in the notion of the contemporary, and its link to the totalizing and presentist capitalist transition.¹⁰

In this chapter, I will recount one instance of an attempt to negotiate the terms of this transition, in which “Eastern Europe” was juxtaposed to “Contemporary Art,” with the aim of creating an *East Art Map*, purportedly on the East’s own terms. By initiating collaborations with Moscow artists and curators in the early 1990s, the Slovenian group Irwin – part of the more expansive art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK, or “New Slovenian Art”) – made a decisive contribution in the creation of such a paradigm of Eastern European art which, in alliance with their principle of ironic “overidentification,” we could also dub *Neue östeuropäische Kunst*, or “New Eastern European Art.”¹¹ Conceived during their *NSK Embassy Moscow* project (1992), *East Art Map* aimed to examine “how the East sees the East,”¹² in order to assert the status of art produced in the formerly socialist East in the face of its simultaneous absence from the Western canon and the art-world’s newly revived interest in it, following 1989. Despite these intentions, however, the project and its offshoots entailed, as I will argue, an evacuation of the historicity of the socialist experience, including the futural temporality of the communist project, in exchange for the sublime of an art historical and epistemic *terra incognita*: an overwhelming historical and historiographical lack that now invited supposedly pioneering discoveries and interpretations of heretofore “parallel,” “invisible,” and “impossible” histories. In Irwin’s terms, the process of Eastern Europe’s transition into the contemporary implied a shift from the “retroavant-garde” – a concept Irwin used to construct an Eastern genealogical tree of avant-garde art – to what could be called the “retrocontemporary”: an accession into the global contemporary of timeless exchange, but only while carrying the sign of the aberrant yet exotic communist past, as a marker of cultural and temporal difference. Surely, Irwin were aware of the terms of the game, and their strategies involved an overidentification with the exoticization of the East by the West, a procedure that some of their Moscow peers were questioning already in 1992, together with Irwin’s presumed role as ambassadors of the East. Ultimately underlying this project and its appeal, I will argue, is a certain teleology of the political or at least epistemological power of contemporary art, which at the same time aligns with the privileged place assigned to art in recent articulations of contemporaneity.

Being in the Present Moment

In his foreword to *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, Charles Esche expresses hope that the publication will “add to our knowledge” of the Eastern European history of art, which he sees as persisting in an unfinished state of “still being discovered.”¹³ In addition to offering such historical insight, *East Art Map* should be taken as a “guidebook on how, as an artist, to steer a path through

totalitarian and post-totalitarian societies.”¹⁴ For this reason, he continues, the historical knowledge obtained on Eastern European art can at the same time teach us “ways of being in the present moment.”¹⁵ But who is this “we,” the subject in possession of “our knowledge” that is diagnosed to be in need of additive intervention in the form of an Eastern European history of art? Is this subject merely the recipient of the new knowledge, or is it also partaking in the process of discovery? And what are the characteristics of “the present moment”? If what the present moment needs is knowledge about artists who steer paths through totalitarianism, should we conclude by analogy that this moment, too, is totalitarian, post-totalitarian, or both? Does it take place at a specific location or does its momentousness subsume any specific locality?

The reader gets no explicit answers to these questions. In order to locate the “we,” the possessor of “our knowledge,” one can reach beyond the text into the signature that legitimates it – the editor of Afterall Books, a publisher based at the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London. It is from this epistemological location that the two modes of being in the (art) world are detected: “being in the present moment” and “still being discovered.” The unsigned illustration on page 17 reveals that this ontological dichotomy is not only temporally but also geographically determined: as the book’s title has promised, we see a map. On the left we see the differentiated topography of Western Europe and North America, presumably inhabited by (artistic) subjects who have reached the bliss of being in the present moment, and on the right, we see the East European *terra incognita*, a frighteningly vast and formless shape completely sunk in black. Looking only at this map without continuing to engage with the rest of the book, the illustration suggests, an adventurous traveler would not even be able to tell where Eastern European artists – should they fail in steering clear of totalitarian terror – could commit suicide by drowning in rivers and where they could do so by jumping off cliffs.¹⁶ Rather than just taking part in this discovery, then, *East Art Map* seems to perform the very first, pioneering steps into the immaculate heart of art historical darkness.

However, we are not dealing here with the typical colonizing journey of Western European exploration and exploitation of unknown non-Western territories. While the publishing company is indeed located by the Thames River, just like Joseph Conrad’s narrator,¹⁷ the explorer is not a Londoner but the Slovenian artist group Irwin, who is the *East Art Map*’s editor and author. In their introduction, Irwin present the book as a culmination of their long-term artistic engagement with the question of Eastern European art history.¹⁸ They diagnose knowledge of this history as lacking, fragmented, non-transparent, closed within national borders, “adapted to local needs,” and imbued with myths and legends, all of which “prevents any serious comprehension of the art as a whole that was created during socialist times.”¹⁹ With the aim of redressing this lack, 23 experts are invited from different Eastern European countries to each select and present ten key artists or artistic phenomena, thus endowing our map with its first coordinates and colors. The second part comprises textual contributions that engage particular thematic concerns, complicating and counteracting the initial totalizing approach. In the introduction, Irwin place special emphasis on the need to establish a comparative reading of Eastern and Western European art histories. Such a bipolar perspective is declared to be another lacuna, indeed a space in which

“a no man’s land continues to exist that divides one half of the continent from the other.”²⁰

These are, then, some of the geological, geopolitical, and epistemological pre-suppositions, aims, and methodologies underlying the work of discovery of Eastern European art histories. It is now possible to answer one of the initial questions and conclude with more certainty that the subject performing the discovery – the Slovenian art group with the help of 23 Eastern European experts – is co-extensive with its object: Eastern European art. Rather than a case of knowing and conquering the Other, then, *East Art Map* is a journey of self-discovery, the results of which are nevertheless presented to the self via the legitimizing authority of Western academic institutions.²¹ In the catalog of the exhibition *Interrupted Histories*, Zdenka Badovinac frames artistic strategies of self-historicization and self-archiving in Eastern Europe, of which *East Art Map* is a prime example, as “the point in which the Other resists its former status as object of observation, classification, and subordination to the modernizing process, and instead transforms into ‘an active Other.’”²² In such a formulation, the alterity of Eastern Europe is construed in the mold of postcolonial discourse, aimed at dismantling the hegemony of the Western canon, for which the Other (and its art) was always merely an object and never a subject. However, from Esche’s and Irwin’s conclusions about the inadequacy of knowledge of Eastern European art, it follows that precisely the opposite is the case in *East Art Map*: the Other was never an object of observation, but had rather lingered in isolation, submerged in darkness. With *East Art Map*, this previously occluded Other indeed turns into “an active Other,” but this activity – whose primary aim is to sweep away the dark cloud from the map and comprehend the “art as a whole [created] during socialist times” – implies *not* that the Other ceases to be, as Badovinac would have it, but instead that it willingly becomes, the “object of observation, classification, and subordination to the modernizing process.”²³

The (self-)modernizing and (self-)objectifying processes at work here are founded upon the primary ideological code of any colonizing logic, which could be described as the primitive accumulation of temporality, and which went hand in hand with the colonial accumulation of capital and wealth. Apart from violently expropriating time in the form of land and slave labor, this temporal colonization constructed its own metaphysics of time as an ideological currency, in the form of Enlightened and Progressive Modernity, against which any other temporal regimes are to be measured and for which they are to be traded.²⁴ If, as Latin American theorists such as Aníbal Quijano have argued, there is no modernity without coloniality, and if coloniality describes the world in which colonialism continues after its “end,”²⁵ contemporaneity is the analog persistence and ultimate globalization of capitalist and colonial modernity, or rather its mimicry under the conditions of the endless “posts-” and “ends” that have been used to characterize the world since the 1970s, and especially since 1989 – postcolonial, postindustrial, postmodern, post-Cold-War, post-historical, post-political, etc. In this *contemporization*, as the oxymoronic promise of the present, the historical temporality of socialist Europe – which, with its anticipation of communism to come, is found not to be simply backward or belated, but in fact pathologically futuristic – had to be erased. Bereft of time, and of its politics of time, Eastern Europe is transformed into a contained space, to be brought into the opulent desert of “being in the present moment.”

With its insistent rhetorical claim to contemporaneity, “contemporary art” is a perfect tool for this temporal and epistemological colonization. The contemporary in contemporary art points to some exceptional, sublime mode of the present, and the presence to be reached as the highest ontological being of art. It has to be obtained, or rejected, but it is not merely given. Is this why the subtitle of *East Art Map* reads “Contemporary Art *and* Eastern Europe” and not “Contemporary Art *in* Eastern Europe”? Contemporary Art remains a distinct entity until the work of discovery is finished, and until Eastern Europe joins “the present moment.”

Neue östeuropäische Kunst: *Historia Interrupta* and the Two-Fold Lack

Indeed, seen from the perspective of Eastern Europe, Octavian Esanu understands contemporary art as “the product of postsocialist transition.”²⁶ A successful completion of the capitalist transition would eliminate the “and” from Irwin’s *East Art Map*’s subtitle, so that contemporary art would be found to be properly nested *in* Eastern Europe, while at the same time, Eastern European progressive art would be launched into the orbit of the global contemporary. In his work, Esanu has analyzed the role of institutions and post-socialist NGO structures in administering the contemporary transition, aided by the interests of global capital and its accompanying liberal ideology of the “open society.”²⁷ However, it is interesting that one of the most significant contributions to this process of contemporization of Eastern European art has come not from an institutional regional network but from the Slovenian artist group Irwin. To be sure, their contribution was institutionally reinforced by their close collaboration with the Modern Art Gallery in Ljubljana (today the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova), but the Gallery’s programmatic orientation was itself greatly impacted by Irwin’s work. This artistic-institutional alliance has made Slovenia – otherwise branded as the least stereotypically “Eastern European” republic of Yugoslavia, itself the least “Eastern European” country of socialist Europe due to its non-aligned position and its strong ties to the West and the Third World – into a key site in the production of the “Eastern European Art” paradigm after 1989.²⁸

This paradigm, as one of the preconditions of Eastern Europe’s contemporization, has found its most stable basis in the dialectics between art and the totalitarian/post-totalitarian society, as Jelena Vesić, Miklavž Komelj, and Nebojša Jovanović, among others, have recently argued.²⁹ Its myth of origin is a story of the artist heroically resisting the repressive state apparatuses engineered by the ominous organism of the Communist Party – a historical battle also implied by the image of the artists “steer[ing] a path through totalitarian and post-totalitarian societies” that appears in the foreword of *East Art Map*.³⁰ However, this trope is inoperative outside of what I find to be Irwin/NSK/Ljubljana Museum’s more formidable contribution: the construction of the sublime of Eastern European (Art) History, whose exotic purchase lies, paradoxically, not in a struggle with overpowering historical actors and events, but rather in the almost erotic fantasy of helplessness in the face of an overwhelming emptiness, darkness, and lack. *Neue östeuropäische Kunst* is the creation of the mystery of a unified, Eastern European artistic *terra incognita*, in order to legitimize the discovery of what was never there

in the first place: a wholeness of “art in socialist times,” pitched to global audiences through the image of the artist enduring totalitarianism.

East Art Map is only a culmination of Irwin’s long-term engagement with the legacy of Eastern European art. Since the early 1990s, their activities became oriented toward transnational connections and collaborative projects that explicitly tackled the East–West dichotomy, specifically in relation to practices of historicization and the institutional promotion and dissemination of “East Art.” Roger Conover and Eda Čufer describe Irwin’s 1997 installation *Retroavantgarde* – which counters Alfred H. Barr’s canonical diagram of the development of abstract art with their own diagram of the genealogy of Yugoslav art, with its roots in the Soviet avant-garde – as

a complex artistic statement reflecting on the absence of a stable historical narrative on modern and contemporary art in Slovenia, Yugoslavia, and in Eastern Europe in general. The artistic achievement of these places never managed to become a part of the Western canon, or even develop its own consistent meta-narrative.³¹

Inke Arns sees Irwin’s work, as well as their development of the “strategy of ‘Eastern Modernism,’” as a response to this “two-fold lack,” identified by Conover and Čufer, namely the absence of a stable historical narrative both within and without the Western canon.³² In her curatorial work, Badovinac has attempted to confront this void, most notably in the exhibition *Interrupted Histories* (2006), which focused on artistic practices of self-historicization in (primarily) Eastern Europe that the artists devised to compensate for the lack of institutional promotion, documentation, preservation, and historicization of their work.³³ With this and similar projects, such as the instituting of the first international collection of Eastern European art (2000+ *Arteast* Collection), the Modern Art Gallery Ljubljana has joined Irwin’s mission to counter what Badovinac detects as the absence of a “fully developed modern art system such as the West knows it” and the resulting “absence of a collective narrative of Eastern European art.”³⁴ Precisely why one should have such a system and such a narrative in the first place is never questioned.

The trope of the *historia interrupta* – the defective intercourse between system and narrative that spawned the barren landscape of the Eastern European art historical *terra incognita* – is thriving beyond the “Ljubljana school” and has had a significant role in buttressing the exotic charms of Eastern European art. Despite their undoubted value as art historical and intellectual resources – the same being true, to be sure, of *East Art Map* and the Modern Art Gallery’s exhibition projects – publications and curatorial projects invoking “impossible histories,” “omitted histories,” “invisible histories,” and “little known stories” similarly play into *East Art Map*’s self-exoticizing figures of darkness, invisibility, opaqueness, gaps, limits, lacunas, myths, rumors, uncertainties, and no-man’s lands, as if reveling in some deep and essential – historical and historiographical – inadequacy, which overpowers even the promise of joy in bringing the obscured object to light.³⁵

Ironically, most of the projects I am referring to here, including those of Irwin and the Modern Art Gallery, are devised by post-Yugoslav critics, artists, and curators. Yugoslavia is certainly *the one* “Eastern European” country which simply cannot fit the narrative of the “two-fold lack,” as it had both a developed system

of art institutions (some of which were very much like those in the West), and a network of locally and internationally engaged curators, critics, art theoreticians and art historians. They not only interpreted, exhibited, and collected contemporary art parallel to its production, but also made decisive contributions to its historicization.³⁶ This network pivoted mainly around the Student Cultural Centers in Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Zagreb. The Zagreb Gallery of Contemporary Art (founded in 1954) and the Belgrade Museum of Contemporary Art (founded in 1965) are also among the first institutions in the world to explicitly embrace “contemporary” (and not “modern”) art as the primary designation of their mission.³⁷ Certainly, “contemporary art” in Yugoslavia is not a post-socialist phenomenon, but one which testifies to its continuous and intense links with the Western “system of art.” To say that “for many highly complex reasons the history of conceptual art in the West has been systematized, while we are almost without a history in the East”³⁸ amounts both to a perpetuation of the myth of the “systematized” status of history in the “West,” as well as to an erasure of the already existing histories of the “East,” especially the project of institutional historicization of Yugoslav conceptual art (or “the new art practice,” as it was called), which started already in the 1970s and was resumed in the 1990s. I do not mean to suggest that the situation is comparable in most other Eastern European countries, but there is a peculiar irony to the fact that the voices crying out *Help! We have no history!* are articulated within (post)Yugoslavia. One can see in a similar light the Slovenian prominence in the efforts to construct the art of the “East,” when, as Žižek notes, Slovenia was “far more Westernized ... than the other federal members [of Yugoslavia] and certainly than any countries in the Soviet Union [*sic*].”³⁹ Žižek goes on to quote his colleague Mladen Dolar on this: “you cannot pretend that we were Czechoslovakia.”⁴⁰

This is precisely what Irwin – and more broadly, the NSK movement – have been “pretending.” The mimicry of the “East” stems on the one hand from Irwin’s artistic interest in the legacy of the Soviet avant-garde, but is on the other a consciously elected tool in their positioning in the global constellation of contemporary art. As the Irwin member Andrej Savski “admits”: “Let me remind you that in the beginning the East didn’t interest us at all. We have to admit that all our early strategies were directed exclusively to the West.”⁴¹ In the meantime, the “East” seems to have become a necessary stop on the way to the “West,” or what is today global contemporaneity. The strategic embracing of the East is by no means a “secret” that I am now unearthing, but rather part of both Irwin/NSK’s unapologetic and to a certain extent subversive agenda of cynically asserting its place in the international world of art.

What Paradox? I See No Problem

Since the 1980s, Irwin has followed the lead of Laibach in its unapologetic and militant announcements of conquering the Western market and, ultimately, its integration with the “global processes of exchange” of the contemporary music and art industries.⁴² In the 1980s, such (seemingly ironic) proclamations were tied to Irwin’s (and Laibach’s/NSK’s) identification – or what Žižek proposed in psychoanalytical terms as the “overidentification” – with Slovenian national culture, and its international ambitions. Since the 1990s, the object of

this strategic (over)identification shifted to the idea of the “East” – with *Neue Slowenische Kunst* transposed into a kind of *Neue östeuropäische Kunst*. The key to the success of their identification was Irwin’s/NSK’s alliance with a number of Moscow artists and curators. As Viktor Misiano writes, speculating on the broader implications that the collaborations between Slovenian and Russian artists hold for Slovenian economic and foreign politics:

The need to reveal its Eastern identity is a natural way for Slovenia to enter the European and global markets of identity. Slovenia perfectly understands that its chance to become the West lies not in demonstrating itself as an absolute West, but in revealing the conventional character of the borders created by the West . . . That is why Russia is so important for Slovenia. It is the light reflected by Russia’s mirror of Otherness that provides an identity to countries which don’t seem very Western to the West otherwise.⁴³

This is certainly not the path that Slovenian politicians and businessmen have taken, but it is one that Irwin and the Gallery of Modern Art Ljubljana have successfully followed – although, it must also be said, as a significant subversion of what the Gallery, as a national museum of modern art, was meant to be.

The journey began in 1992 in Moscow, when a group of Moscow curators and artists (associated with the Rizhina Gallery) invited Irwin to participate in the “Apt-Art International” project, initiated in 1991. With many Russian artists moving on to successful careers in the West from the late 1980s, those who stayed decided to reactivate the tradition of Moscow art events at private apartments, testing the potential of nostalgia for a lost communal life.⁴⁴ According to the organizers, the invitations to Moscow were initially directed at Western artists, conceived as a gesture whereby the individualist Western guests would get a sense of the meaning of community.⁴⁵ However, this East–West encounter proved to be disappointing for both the hosts and the guests.⁴⁶ The invitation of Irwin marked a turning point. They were from the “East” and, as an artist collective, they renounced individuality from the outset.⁴⁷ Irwin responded to the invitation with the project *NSK Embassy Moscow* – the idea that would develop into their long-term and ongoing project *NSK State in Time*. The *Embassy*, whose private-apartment headquarters hosted a series of lectures, presentations, and discussions by Yugoslav (mainly Slovenian) and Russian artists, curators, activists, and philosophers, offered an East–East encounter; in fact, it marked an important stage in Irwin’s path of self-discovery leading toward *East Art Map*. The *NSK Embassy Moscow* publication thus bore the appropriate subtitle: “How the East sees the East.”

A recurring trope in these discussions is the “shared experience” of totalitarianism. A lecture by the Slovenian art theoretician Marina Gržinić exemplifies the voice of the Slovenian-Eastern-European self-historicizing subject, articulating itself through the sublime of the totalitarian wound:

In the second half of the 1980s changes occurred that were generated by NSK and further radicalized our cultural and artistic space. In this period Slovenia underwent some *very totalitarian* processes and witnessed some *very totalitarian* ideological discourses. The political discourse was *so total and totalitarian* that it was possible to be opposed [*sic*] only by some other totality.⁴⁸

The opposition to totalization by means of forming an alternate “totality” refers to NSK’s appropriation of the symbols and the rhetoric of totalitarianism, most notably that of the Nazi regime. This is again a variant of Žižek’s “overidentification,” a term he used to interpret Laibach/NSK as a unique form of artistic opposition, committed to the deployment of the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, and to enacting opposition precisely by simulating ecstatic obedience.⁴⁹ In Alexei Monroe’s formula, it is a striving to be “more X than X itself” (in the case above, fighting totalitarianism by rallying for more, instead of less, totality).⁵⁰ Or, in Željimir Košćević’s graphic version, it is the image of healing by exacerbating the pain: “Like a doubtful child, Irwin stuck its finger into the wound before it was completely healed.”⁵¹

But then, after the attempted healing and a successful dive out of the totalitarian saturation, what is revealed is that the prison had not crumbled, but had only been horrifyingly vacated: “At this moment, we, Moscow and Slovenian artists, are trapped in [a] post-totalitarian vacuum.”⁵² Recorded in 1992, when perhaps celebratory words of liberation would be expected, one encounters statements like this in the discussion transcripts of the *NSK Embassy Moscow* project, appearing as signs of a withdrawal crisis, of artists still nurturing attachment to the now-defeated enemy who alone seems to have given meaning to their existence. In his textual contribution to the publication, Dejan Kršić mercilessly stuck his finger into the barely formed scar on the skin of the post-totalitarian artist: “How can one confront (and come to terms with) the prospect of being an ‘ordinary’ artist, who is not being repressed by the state, but who apparently also has no influence on the public and on society[?]”⁵³ The only solution, according to Kršić, was to stick with the “dissident strategy” of constructing a common Eastern European post-totalitarian subject, as part of a well-designed “marketing strategy.”⁵⁴ Because, Kršić concludes, what most Eastern European artists, including NSK, “really want” is “success in the Western market.”⁵⁵

At the same time, the *NSK Embassy* project reveals that the attitudes and desires of the “Eastern European artists” can hardly be conceived as harmonized. In fact, the recorded discussions of this pioneering “East-East encounter” reveal a significant level of tension, and an attitude of suspicion, if not outright rejection, expressed by a number of Russian participants toward their Slovenian guests. In his lecture, Moscow philosopher Aleksandr Yakimovich stated that from the perspective of “Far East Europe” – that is, from Russia – NSK’s strategy of fighting the system using the system’s own tools can only be recognized as “the Western way of solving our common problems.”⁵⁶ “Catholicism, psychoanalysis, and radical neo-Marxism” are the sources of this logic of “overcoming by capitulation,” whose alleged subversiveness “should find applause in the West which is preoccupied with the problem of refreshing its postmodernism via Eastern Europe.”⁵⁷ He compared Irwin to Nietzsche’s post-historical people, wearing smiles on their faces while playing with the codes of the past. Anything goes, don’t worry, be happy, sit on a rock and let the tigers fight.⁵⁸ Later on in the discussion, the sensitive issue of “business” was broached. Addressing Irwin directly, Yakimovich pointed to “a paradoxical disproportion between the program you’ve presented – which speaks of depersonalization, collectivism and a renunciation of names – and your business method,” asking them whether they were aware of this paradox.⁵⁹ “Alexander, what paradox? I see no problem,” Viktor Misiano intercepted, protecting his Slovenian

guests from what seemed to be turning into a rising tide of allegations and interrogations.⁶⁰ But the audience wanted more, and soon other voices chimed in, citing accusations of postmodernist relativism, as in Anatoly Osmalovsky's comparison of Irwin's paintings to "Western supermarkets," full of images, ideas, and fetishes, which could merely reproduce and not confront the system.⁶¹ Misiano was now explicit, admitting that, after all, he could see a problem: "It seems we have approached a very delicate point where communication hardly remains possible."⁶²

Steer a Path, but to Where?

NSK Embassy Moscow is a precious document of the range of the morning-after-images of post-1991. From the perspective articulated by a number of Moscow participants, there arises the expression of the unbearable lightness of the "post-totalitarian vacuum" and of a frenzied quest for identity, footing, and purpose in the abundant but meaningless supermarket of contemporaneity. The war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, addressed by several Yugoslav speakers who had been invited by Irwin, implicitly revealed this post-totalitarian spleen as a privilege that not all could afford. NSK responded to the disintegration of Yugoslavia into nation-states by creating its own "state in time," in an attempt to build new solidarities and new forms of internationalism, beyond the nationalist framework. Not only nationalism, but also capitalism, posed a new challenge for the "post-totalitarian" artists, and anxieties about the Western art market and postmodernist relativism were repeatedly invoked during the discussions, especially by the Moscow participants. Irwin were concerned more about being co-opted by the emerging art historical and theoretical paradigms for framing Eastern European art in the West, proposing that the East assume control of these narratives and create a large-scale exhibition project of Eastern European art.⁶³ A number of Moscow artists, however, perhaps fearing some kind of *Neue östeuropäische Kunst* conspiracy behind this proposal, saw Irwin in the role of false prophet, who would eventually tip them into the profanity and decadence of the Western art world and its market. Oleg Kulik saw Irwin's works as "a soft defense against the world," as indicated by the "cushions on the frames of their paintings."⁶⁴ He wondered whether Irwin were really the representatives of the East in the West, or in fact the other way around. If they were "real" representatives of the East, "the frames of their paintings would be razor sharp and the contents clear and powerful."⁶⁵ For various Moscow artists, Irwin became the catalyst of a process of articulation of a fantasy of a radicalized East-West divide, of perpetuating the Cold War through art, or of simply maintaining the idea of an enemy, so that art could restore its heroic purpose. Natalya Abalakova acknowledged that NSK's works were indeed "state art," but of a state "that operates only on a diplomatic level."⁶⁶ Disappointed to have found out, in conversations with NSK members, that NSK was in fact loosely organized, without discipline and structure, Anatoly Osmalovsky lamented that the "semi-military" image was just a myth, "a pretext for a collective career."⁶⁷

Throughout this exchange, Irwin spoke little: it assumed the form of a black-squared screen, onto which everyone else projected their fantasies and anxieties.⁶⁸ Irwin member Roman Uranjek picked up on this vibe, noting how he felt "people here expected we would come dressed in military uniforms and march in the

Embassy hailing ‘Heil, Hitler!’”⁶⁹ Miran Mohar engaged in more direct debate, labeling Kulik’s ideas about Irwin as “extremely interesting precisely for [their] incredible naiveté,” which finally induced Kulik to overidentify with this naiveté, stating that if one were to ignore “stupid artists,” and write off those who had “turned to the West,” one would see that only the “naïve ones” remained in the battle.⁷⁰ The conditions of this battle did not allow for “soft tolerance,” but instead promoted a “repressive program,” a “spear” – which is why, even in this discussion, as Kulik sharply pointed out, there was “no real confrontation,” because Irwin were like running water, and the (naïvely heroic) spears directed at them were merely plunging into water: “on one side there’s Don Quixote, and on the other some indefinite being.”⁷¹

The Right to Remain Ambiguous. And Wrong, Too!

Here, Kulik touched on what had been the quintessential Laibach/NSK/Irwin recipe from the start, their signature mix of “overidentification” and ambiguity, or what Žižek described as their “traumatic ambivalence” stemming from the “impossible mixture” of identifications and references, including communism, fascism, nationalism, avant-gardism, folk, pop, modernism, capitalism, industrialism, ruralism, etc.⁷² Under different names, strategies of “overidentification,” together with their play on ambiguity – what Yakimovich called overcoming by capitulating – are by no means unknown in art, and were not pioneered by NSK. They have been especially prominent in feminist art, as well as art aimed at dethroning cultural, gender, sexual, and racial stereotypes. However, in such practices it can usually be presumed that, for example, behind the “masquerade” consisting in the appropriation of sexist visual codes – and despite the ambiguity and the disturbing impossibility of knowing whether the subject is, as Jo Anna Isaak aptly put it, “waving or drowning”⁷³ – there is the feminist artist striving to undo them; behind the idea that obsessive repetition and performance of gender stereotypes can serve to undermine them, there is Judith Butler’s project of dethroning heterosexual hegemony.⁷⁴ What triggers “analytic impotence” before NSK’s analogous strategies is that its “real” artistic and political persona never seems to come through, to the extent that NSK can be seen as an embodiment of the author’s living death: “What we say is: ‘That’s the way it is.’”⁷⁵

And yet all the while, the author’s intention seems to remain intact and is, moreover, heroically redeemed, by the interpretation machine that projects onto the dead body of the author its fantasy of the purposiveness of art. Faced with the “traumatic ambivalence” of NSK’s impossible mixture, we are left to rely on different commentators who have attempted to fix NSK, this floating signifier par excellence, to a particular purpose and to steer it in a particular direction, often by ascribing to it incredible potency and power to shape historical events. Thus NSK, as part of the larger framework of Slovenian social movements in the 1980s, are said to have accelerated democratizing currents and, ultimately, Slovenian independence.⁷⁶ The “poster scandal” revealed the tensions and instabilities between the dogmatic and democratizing currents within the Yugoslav Communist Party and, as a result, the Youth Day Relay was altogether canceled in 1987.⁷⁷ Laibach’s “preemptive reintroduction of [Slovene] national archetypes” and its “paradigm of impossible authority” in Slovenia might have helped prevent the war and

right-wing extremism which plagued other ex-Yugoslav republics that had not received Laibach's "aversion therapy."⁷⁸ The passports of the NSK State created such convincing simulacra of state authority that they helped a number of people emigrate from the besieged Sarajevo.⁷⁹ Even their signature ambivalence is interpreted as inherently political, in Monroe's formulation of NSK's "right to remain ambiguous," described – with recourse to the language of human rights – as a strategy of resistance in the "age of total information awareness and the systematic monitoring of individuals."⁸⁰ Finally, Žižek himself, who otherwise refuses the group's assimilation to a specific political agenda, nonetheless identifies a purposiveness in NSK's traumatic ambivalence:

By means of the elusive character of their desire, of the undecidability as to "where they actually stand," Laibach compels us to take up our position and decide upon *our* desire [whereby it] actually accomplishes the reversal that defines the end of psychoanalytical cure.⁸¹

Laibach, and by extension Irwin/NSK – and, as the following will show, Art – are the pill that we have been looking for.

Che Vuoi [What Do You Want]?!

From the perspective of the present-day oversaturated, post-truth information environment, brimming with decontextualized and manipulated citations of citations, ambiguity and ambivalence can be seen as an elite artistic privilege. Oleg Kulik's "naïve" frustration, his quixotic urge to have this "indefinite being" finally come out and settle it "man to man" so to speak, spear to spear, is thus not really naïve, and cannot be simply written off by declaring a "right to incomprehensibility," regardless of all the potential theoretical and political value of that concept. This is why even a self-identified feminist could over-and-even-*über*-identify with Kulik's masculinist, over-Eastern-European urge to press NSK/Irwin/Laibach/whatever-they-are against the wall and insist, sharply: Who, or what, are you? Who are you working for? Or, better yet, as their master philosopher Žižek (following Lacan) insisted: *Che Vuoi?! [What do you want]*⁸² Because Kulik knows what he wants and he is willing to bite for it.

But what does Kulik "really want," and what is this battle for which he conscripts his army of deliberately naïve artists, Russian Don Quixotes charging forward with their spears? His own answer is, quite anticlimactically: "the development of our art in a state, where everything is dim, where there are no conditions for the physical existence of art."⁸³ After imagining grand purposes and spectacular East–West clashes, the true purpose of "our art" is said to be its development, or even its mere survival. In thus employing, as per Žižek's recipe, NSK's "indefinite being" for the articulation of his own desire, Kulik finds that, after all, he and NSK might be chasing the same thing. Kršić defined this thing as the desire for success on the Western market,⁸⁴ but that does not sound quite right; it is not as simple as that, even if NSK emphatically (over)identify with this aim. Rather, what is truly symptomatic is not that NSK and Eastern European artists want money or even fame, but that they *simply* want to be artists.

NSK have been adamant about this on a number of occasions. For example, “In this project we want to work with Slovene politics and for its benefits. However, our field is art; therefore, we have no specific political intentions.”⁸⁵ “We are artists and not politicians. When the Slovene question is resolved once and for all, we want to finish our lives as artists.”⁸⁶ It could be said, of course, that by overidentifying with Hitler, who espoused similar plans following the final solution of the German question, they in fact reveal the inherent link between art and politics, rather than their separation. However, their overidentification also signals the compensatory role that art has played as a substitute for the impossibility of transformative political action, which amounts to a certain teleology in which art comes to displace politics, or even simulate the satisfaction of unmet social needs. Pushed once more, during the Moscow discussions, to define their position and their politics, Irwin answer: “Ideologically and politically we define ourselves as artists.”⁸⁷ Rather than trying to resolve another traumatic ambivalence here in order to understand our own desires, perhaps we should simply, and finally, take Irwin/NSK at their word. Their ideology is art; their politics is art; they define themselves as artists; everyone else treats them as artists; they look like artists; they play with other artists. But – to recall the lesson Žižek learned from the Marx Brothers – don’t let that fool you: they really are artists!⁸⁸ Or rather, contemporary artists. Which is at the same time what we – their *hypocrite lecteurs*, their audience, their interpreters, their curators, their citizens – want them, and really need them to be, in order to keep our own fantasies of the political power of contemporary art, and its contemporaneity, alive.

Be Coeval!

Recent articulations of contemporaneity as the new historical time that can be best grasped in and through contemporary art endorse the same fantasies, while also positing contemporary art as a sign of a certain promise of geopolitical equality to come as artists join together in the project of worlding the world. Art is construed as a “privileged cultural carrier of contemporaneity,” with the mission to express the structure of the “contemporary itself” (in Osborne’s account), or as responding to the “demands of contemporaneity” by engaging in “long-term, exemplary projects that discern the antinomies of the world as it is ... and that imagine ways of living ethically within them” (in Smith’s).⁸⁹ However, the material and economic inequalities that determine the stakes and membership in this mission still trigger the classical, differential response of “regioning” the contemporary, just as the modern in parallel has been fragmented into its supposedly alternative, peripheral idioms. And so, if the appearance of Eastern European conceptual art at large-scale exhibitions testifies to the existence of what I argued was the region, or even the class, of the *retrocontemporary*, the inclusion of indigenous artists such as the late Annie Pootoogook in the 2006 *Documenta* could be defined as the rare appearance of an *also-contemporary*, an ephemeral and inconsequential acknowledgment that, indeed, there are people in this world who make art in ways that do not originate in the curricula of MFA and curatorial studies programs. On the other hand, the ever-expanding enterprise of the *e-flux* project, with their *super*-subprojects – the most recent of which is the administration of the “.art” internet domain – occupies the singular space of a *supercontemporary*.⁹⁰

In fact, the relative absence of Eastern European artists and curators in the global circulation of contemporary art and academic art historical discourse, together with the economically and politically strenuous conditions under which most art institutions in the “former East” operate – including, *nota bene*, Ljubljana’s Gallery of Modern Art/Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova – testify to the volatile and market-driven terms of the transition into contemporaneity. The appeal of the sublime of the Eastern European *terra incognita* seems to have been spent, and from the perspective of mainstream academia and the contemporary art circuit, Eastern Europe has been subsumed into the Eurocentric paradigm, from which art and art history now desperately seek to delink themselves, with contemporaneity seen as one way to enable such delinking.⁹¹

Articulated as “coevalness,” contemporaneity understood as a coexistence of multiple temporalities arose as a trope in anthropology in the 1980s, as a self-critical gesture of temporal equality and recognition of the dignity of the Other.⁹² However, it could also be seen as a solution to the problem of how to continue making the Other the object of enlightened, academic research without any longer objectifying this Other – to a great extent because the Other no longer allows this objectification – but instead by negotiating terms that would be, or that would seem to be, more equal. In Mark Augé’s *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds* (1999), the framework of “contemporaneous worlds” is a response to the fact of the simultaneously increasing interconnectedness and diversity of the world, but it is also presented as an attempt to solve the crisis of anthropology, whose universalism is at odds with the particularism of the world.⁹³ Similarly, the recent paradigm of global contemporary art is an answer to the crisis of the discipline of art history, which now relies on the recovery of “alternative,” “peripheral” and numerous other modernisms and modernities in order to extricate itself from its elitist and to a great extent racist roots, and is now bowing under the pressure of decolonizing, anti-racist, and counter-hegemonic claims from all over the world.

Osborne’s theorization of contemporary art as postconceptual art constituted by the historical transformations of the ontology of the artwork, which he arrives at by way of North American conceptual art and the Jena Romantics, unabashedly identifies what Dipesh Chakrabarty would call the “provincial” roots of the philosophy of the global contemporary.⁹⁴ That art history is itself still far from radically transforming its grounding developmental narratives is evident also in Smith’s account, despite the fact that he engages a geographically comprehensive scope of artistic production, and despite his alignment with the goal of decolonizing art history and destabilizing the center–periphery binary. After locating the beginnings of contemporary art in the Anglo-American art of the 1960s, where it develops into “official contemporary art,” Smith’s historicization moves on to the post-1989 transnational, postcolonial transition that unveils the non-Western histories of art, presented according to regions, i.e., according to a spatial logic. Finally, once these regions have claimed, so to speak, their parallel and peripheral existence, they are able to access the ultimate stage, “the art of contemporaneity.”⁹⁵ Although Smith does not speak of stages but of currents, given his conceptual and political privileging of the art of contemporaneity, the account reads as teleological, especially since it is underlined by the overall presumption of the global, albeit uneven and unelaborated, transition from the modern to the contemporary.

One cannot be contemporary if one has not first been modern, even if this modernity is defined as “alternative,” “parallel,” “divergent,” etc. In fact, that the explosion of such peripheral modernities has run parallel to the evolving discourse of contemporaneity is more evidence of the convergence between the temporal regimes of modernity and contemporaneity. The art-historical recovery of a supposedly lost and alternative modernity is a precondition for entering the artistic and academic markets, which thrive on the alleged contemporaneity of difference. Rather than a coexistence of disparate temporalities, then, contemporaneity involves the imperative of the contemporary transition, which is well illustrated by the Gallery of Modern Art’s recent transition from a museum of modern art into the museum of contemporary art.⁹⁶ The privileging of time, and the choice of an inherently ambiguous temporal category as a name for the present global reality, perpetuates the philosophical division between time as the quintessential possession of the “West,” and space as a timeless or anachronistic expansion of the “rest.” Like the analog gesture of the enlightened but in fact “horrible gift of freedom,”⁹⁷ the “generous” gesture of temporal equality and coexistence in contemporaneity is one of hegemonic interpellation, which ultimately justifies the status quo.

Millennial Introductions: Yugoslav Art?

How, then, to write (art) history differently? I cannot pretend to have the answer beyond one that is necessarily immanent to the kind of political and epistemic struggles I have been involved with, together with numerous others whose work evidently bears the mark of a certain geopolitical and generational affinity. This text, too, is a result of the process in which one generation of postYugoslav artists, curators, and scholars – who became active in the 2000s – reflected on the work of its older peers, whose work began in the 1980s and the 1990s and who thus happened to be the witnesses and protagonists of the post-socialist contemporary transition. The *East Art Map* generation, lamenting the absence of “East Art” from the “Western canon,” claimed “parallel histories” in order to achieve integration not merely into the global system of art, but into what remained its core ideological presupposition, with its origins in the Cold War – the right, or the freedom, to make (contemporary) art.⁹⁸

The “millennial” generation of art historians, art critics, and curators, to which I also belong, was similarly interpellated by this call for contemporaneity. All trained as art historians in “conservative” ex-socialist art history departments, we turned overnight into “contemporary art curators,” rejecting our former art historical selves as if they were proof of some shameful past. Having shed that skin, we were ready to join the global “curatorial turn” and access the desired ontological mode of “being in the present moment.” However, as it turned out, the present moment was a battle for the past, in which histories and art histories were used and abused for various political and ideological claims. What seemed to be needed was to make another (art) historical turn, in order to address the assimilation of the past into the sublime of contemporaneity. This is how, at least in the post-Yugoslav context, the paradigms of “Eastern European Art,” as well as “Balkan art” and “South-East-European art,” were supplanted by the newly emerging epistemic object: “Yugoslav art.”⁹⁹

In the introduction to the exhibition catalog *Political Practices of (Post)Yugoslav Art*, members of the Prelom collective Jelena Vesić and Dušan Grlja state that the main aim of the project is to resist the dominant discourses that read the art of socialist Yugoslavia either through the paradigm of dissident resistance to the totalitarian communist regimes of the East Bloc (whereby the specificities of the Yugoslav socialist project are ignored), and/or through local constructs of national culture, whereby:

Yugoslav art is chopped up and redistributed into a series of national histories of art, founded on the narrative of “liberating” individual artistic contributions from the “communist repression” and their simultaneous “return” to the embrace of a particular national culture, thereby participating in the process of consolidation of the new nation-states.¹⁰⁰

The negation of this double negation of Yugoslav (art) history has gone hand in hand with an affirmation of a number of idiosyncratic Yugoslav legacies, such as the World War II partisan struggle, socialist self-management, and non-alignment, as well as the foregrounding of the institutional infrastructure that enabled the development of contemporary art in Yugoslavia, since the 1950s and long before the post-socialist transition.¹⁰¹ It could be argued that this is simply another over-identification with the way that Yugoslav socialism branded itself internationally during the golden period of the 1960s, which drew numerous Western intellectuals and scholars to become intrigued by Yugoslav exceptionalism. According to Žižek, this is “a kind of Western leftist construct of the ‘East,’” which he identifies in the work of Alain Badiou, with its “illusions” and idealizations of Yugoslav self-management and non-alignment.¹⁰²

Whatever the outcomes and consequences of these new, ongoing historicizations may be, they are the result of a return to local histories and concerns, the sort of return that is a trope in the histories of (post/de)coloniality: artists and intellectuals reverting from their initial ambition of integrating with the “West,” or in this case, the art of global contemporaneity, and returning “home,” to contend once again with the question of difference and origins. Twentieth-century Yugoslav history is full of such returns, from Ivan Meštrović’s *Kosovo Cycle* (1908–1910) devised during his study in Vienna, to the Fauve painter in Miroslav Krleža’s modernist novel *The Return of Philip Latinowicz* (1932), who returns home from Paris tortured by the disintegration and fragmentation of his life and vision in the European metropolis. Or, in another example, writing about the painter Marino Tartaglia’s return from Italy, where he was happily enjoying his “organic” relationship with coloristic expressionism, art historian Božidar Gagro notes a sudden interruption and change of direction in Tartaglia’s style upon his return, as if “some unfulfilled obligations have surfaced in the midst of his development.”¹⁰³ To these lists of returns, we can now add the return to the signifier “Yugoslav” in theorizing and historicizing the art production of the region, following the contraction of Yugoslav art historiography by means of a series of post-war national-historiographical entrenchments of the 1990s, and its parallel decomposition within the heart of darkness of the *East Art Map* and global contemporaneity. One should certainly echo Gagro, and ask about the nature of the “unfulfilled obligations” to which this return is a response.

It seems to me that those obligations cannot be simply local, but rather they converge with the transnational, counter-hegemonic challenge to the “end of history” which has come to the fore particularly following the 2008 financial crisis, as well as the resurgence of social protests and movements in the past decade – which made Alain Badiou enthusiastically declare the “rebirth of history”¹⁰⁴ – and which testify to a transnational awakening from the presentist, post-historical slumber. Rather than contemporaneity, whether seen as presentism or the multiplicity of divergent historical times, perhaps we could embrace the idea of such a rebirth, or return of transformative, counter-hegemonic agency – marked by a pluriversality of indigenous, decolonial, anti-racist, socialist, ecological, queer, and feminist claims – even if only, as Osborne would have it, as fiction, as a regulative idea. For the time being.

Notes

- 1 Viktor Misiano, “Institutionalization of Friendship,” in *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983–2003*, ed. Inke Arns (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2003), 168.
- 2 See Terry Smith’s overview of the multiple historical origins, uses and meanings of “contemporary art,” as well as its art historical interpretations in Terry Smith, “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 92, no. 4 (2010): 366–383. For the Contemporary Art Society founded in London in 1910, for example, it meant acquiring works “not more than twenty years old,” while the French use of *l’art contemporain* in the first half of the twentieth-century encompassed art since the Revolution, which was thus construed as the originating point of the contemporary.
- 3 Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, “What Is Contemporary Art? Issue Two,” *e-flux Journal* 12 (2010), www.e-flux.com/journal/12/61332/what-is-contemporary-art-issue-two/.
- 4 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 17.
- 5 “[I]t is the *convergence* and *mutual conditioning* of historical transformations in the ontology of the artwork (Chapters 2 and 4) and the social relations of art space (Chapter 6) ... that makes contemporary art possible, in the emphatic sense of an art of contemporaneity,” Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, 28. Acknowledging its theoretically and empirically problematic character, Osborne posits contemporaneity as both a fiction (a regulative idea in the Kantian sense), and a task, a utopian idea, in which art becomes “a privileged cultural carrier of contemporaneity” tasked with expressing something of the structure of the “contemporary itself,” *Ibid.*, 28. Smith defines “the art of contemporaneity” as the art capable of addressing the pertinent global issues of the present, one that he contrasts with the brand name “Contemporary Art,” which, in his earlier texts, he also called “official contemporary art.” See Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King, 2011), and Terry Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (2006): 681–707.
- 6 Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” 703. Original emphasis. Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 22. Obviously, I am focusing here on the convergences between the two accounts, which does not do justice to the individual agendas and methods of the two projects.
- 7 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 22–26; 34.
- 8 Smith uses this formulation in Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” 692.
- 9 Boris Buden, “Children of Postcommunism,” *Radical Philosophy* 159 (2010): 18–25.
- 10 See Octavian Esanu, “What Was Contemporary Art,” *ARTMargins* 1, no. 1 (2012): 5–28; Kristóf Nagy, “From Fringe Interest to Hegemony: The Emergence of the Soros Network in Eastern Europe,” in *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present*, eds. Beáta Hock and Anu Allas (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 53.

- 11 Neue Slowenische Kunst was formed in 1984, by the joining of the music and multimedia group Laibach, the visual arts group Irwin, and the theater group Scipion Nasice Sisters Theater. See NSK from Kapital to Capital: *Neue Slowenische Kunst – an Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia*, eds. Zdenka Badovinac, Eda Čufer and Anthony Gardner (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015).
- 12 Eda Čufer, ed., *NSK Embassy Moscow: How the East Sees the East* (Koper: Loža Gallery, 1993).
- 13 Charles Esche, “Foreword,” in *East Art Map. Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irwin (London: Afterall, 2006), 10.
- 14 Ibid., 10.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 The darkness of the map evokes the “terrible coldness” that encapsulates Poland in the imaginary of a French “madame” in Wysława Szymborska’s poem “Vocabulary”: “‘*La Pologne? La Pologne?* Isn’t it terribly cold there,’ she asked ... ‘Madame,’” I want to reply, “my people’s poets do all their writing in mittens ... He who wishes to drown himself must have an ax at hand to cut the ice.” Wysława Szymborska, “Vocabulary,” in *View with a Grain of Sand. Selected Poems*, trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), 17.
- 17 The reference is to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Charles Marlow, an English seaman, tells his story to his friends on a boat anchored on the Thames.
- 18 Irwin, “General Introduction,” in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irwin (London: Afterall, 2006), 11. This agenda is analogous to the mission of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, which evolved out of the Fine Arts Documentation Center set up in Budapest in 1984. This, as Nagy has shown, was arranged to best serve the needs of Western academics and curators, amounting to what he calls “academic colonization.” Nagy, “From Fringe Interest to Hegemony,” 59. Indeed, some scholars, such as Steven Mansbach, complained of the slowness and inefficiency of the Center’s work, citing provisional choices of artists, and the need to enhance the “responsiveness to the needs of Western scholars and curators.” Mansbach, cited in Nagy, 58.
- 19 Irwin, “General Introduction,” 11.
- 20 Ibid., 14.
- 21 Besides Afterall Books as publisher, another major academic institution, the MIT Press (Cambridge, MA) is involved in the project as the book’s distributor.
- 22 Zdenka Badovinac, cited in Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, “The Archival Tendency. The Case of Irwin,” in *Removed from the Crowd. Unexpected Encounters I*, eds. Ivana Bago, Antonia Majača, and Vesna Vuković (Zagreb: BLOK/Delve, 2011), 63.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 See Walter Mignolo, “(De)Coloniality at Large | Time and the Colonial Difference,” *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 149–180.
- 25 Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–178.
- 26 Esanu, “What Was Contemporary Art,” 8.
- 27 Ibid. See also Nagy, “From Fringe Interest to Hegemony.”
- 28 This is well illustrated by a recent edited volume on “curating Eastern Europe,” which barely features a contribution that does not mention – when it doesn’t explicitly focus on – Irwin and the Ljubljana Museum and their projects pertaining to historicizing, promoting, and collecting Eastern European art. See Mária Orišková, ed., *Curating “EASTERN EUROPE” and Beyond: Art Histories Through the Exhibition* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013). Also, the section on Eastern European art in Smith’s volume *Contemporary Art: World Currents* abounds with bibliographical references to Slovenian sources. Smith, *Contemporary Art*, 84–115.
- 29 Jelena Vesić, “The Annual Summit of Non-Aligned Art Historians,” in *Extending the Dialogue. Essays by Igor Zabel Award Laureates, Grant Recipients, and Jury Members, 2008–2014*, ed. Urška Jurman, Christiane Erharter, and Rawley Grau (Ljubljana: Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory, 2016), 28–51. Nebojša Jovanović,

- "Gender and Sexuality in the Classical Yugoslav Cinema, 1947–1962" (PhD diss., Central European University, 2014). Miklavž Komelj, "The Function of the Signifier 'Totalitarianism' in the Constitution of the 'East Art' Field," in *Retracing Images: Visual Culture After Yugoslavia*, eds. Daniel Šuber and Slobodan Karamanić (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 55–79.
- 30 Esche, "Foreword," 10. It is interesting to compare Esche's introduction to Ernesto Laclau's introduction to Slavoj Žižek's *Sublime Object of Ideology*, which was published in 1989 and marked, according to Mladen Dolar, "the moment of the arrival of Slovenian philosophy on a global stage." Mladen Dolar, cited in Jones Irwin and Helena Motoh, *Žižek and His Contemporaries: On the Emergence of the Slovenian Lacan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). Dolar points to the relevance of Laclau's introduction for the reception of Žižek's works among Western leftists. For Laclau, "one of the most 'original features' of the 'Slovenian Lacanian school' is its 'insistent reference to the ideological-political field' as well as its outline of 'the main characteristics of radical democratic struggles in Eastern European societies.'" The relevance of the Ljubljana school, according to Laclau, reaches beyond Slovenia, and is essential reading for all who are seeking to "address the problem of constructing a democratic socialist political project in a post-Marxist age." Ernesto Laclau, cited in Irwin and Motoh, 118.
 - 31 Roger Conover and Eda Čufer, cited in Inke Arns, "Irwin Navigator: Retroprincip 1983–2003," in *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983–2003*, ed. Inke Arns (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2003), 14. For more on the concept of "retroavantgarde," see Marina Gržinić, "Retroavantgarde or Mapping Postsocialism," in *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983–2003*, 216–221.
 - 32 Arns, 14. Ibid. Irwin first introduce the term "Eastern Modernism" in 1990, in the context of their exhibition series *Kapital*.
 - 33 Tamara Soban, ed., *Interrupted Histories. Arteast Exhibition* (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija Ljubljana, 2006).
 - 34 Zdenka Badovinac, "The Museum of Contemporary Art," in *Curating "EASTERN EUROPE" and Beyond*, 101.
 - 35 Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković eds., *Impossible Histories: Historic Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-gardes, and Post-Avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006); *Parallel Chronologies – Invisible Histories of Exhibitions*, in the framework of the project "Recuperating the Invisible Past," <http://hu.tranzit.org/en/project/0/2011-05-17/parallel-chronologies—invisible-history-of-exhibitions>; Margit Rosen, ed., *A Little-Known Story about a Movement, a Magazine, and the Computer's Arrival in Art: New Tendencies and Bit International, 1961–1973* (The MIT Press, 2011); Miško Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group* (Ljubljana: Zavod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E, 2010); Kuda.org, ed., *Omitted History* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006). Unlike *Interrupted Histories* (2005), other Gallery of Modern Art exhibitions did not frame themselves by means of the trope of missing histories, but they used other ways "orientalizing" methods, such as overidentifying with the "sins" of the "Slavic soul": collectivism, utopianism, masochism, cynicism, laziness, unprofessionalism and love of the West in *Seven Sins: Ljubljana-Moscow* (curated by Badovinac, Viktor Misiano and Igor Zabel in 2004). Similarly, the catalog of the *Body and the East* exhibition featured a tin can encircled by a set of red stars, and suggestive of the invisible imprisonment of the artist body behind the Iron Curtain (*Body and the East*, curated by Zdenka Badovinac in 1998).
 - 36 The most important historicizing exhibitions, all accompanied by publications, were: *Examples of Conceptual Art in Yugoslavia*, curated by Ješa Denegri and Biljana Tomić (Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1971); *Documents on Post-Object Phenomena in Yugoslav Art 1968–1973* (Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1973); Nena Dimitrijević, *Gorgona* (Zagreb: Nena Dimitrijević, Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1977); and key exhibitions that constructed and historicized the overall phenomenon of the Yugoslav "new art practice": Marijan Susovski, *New Art Practice in Yugoslavia 1968–1978* (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1978); Davor Matičević, *Innovations in Croatian Art of the Seventies* (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1982); and Ješa Denegri, ed., *New Art in Serbia 1970–1980. Individuals, groups, phenomena*

- (Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983). On this see Jelena Vesić, "The three exhibitions – Simultaneity of promotion and historization of New Art Practices (From Alternative Spaces to the Museum and Back)," <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/the-three-exhibitions-simultaneity-of-promotion-and-historization-of-new-art-practices-from-an-alternative-spaces-to-the-museum-and-back/>.
- 37 The founding of the Belgrade museum dates back to 1958, when it was conceived as the Museum of Modern Art, but in 1965, the museum opened its doors to the public as the Museum of Contemporary Art. See Dejan Sretenović, ed. *Prilozi za istoriju muzeja savremene umetnosti* [Contributions to the History of the Museum of Contemporary Art] (Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2016). As already noted, the notion of the contemporary was used throughout the twentieth century, and with different meanings (in fact, from 1929 to 1935 there existed another Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, in the then Kingdom of Yugoslavia). However, the "contemporary" of Zagreb and Belgrade's Gallery/Museum of Contemporary Art was much in line with the way the notion is understood today. Both of these institutions promoted and historicized conceptual and experimental art practices, and continued to conceptualize their programs in close communication with the contemporary art scenes in Western Europe and the US. For an elaboration of this, see also my case study on *New Tendencies 2* exhibition in Part II of this volume.
 - 38 Zdenka Badovinac, in Zdenka Badovinac, Eda Čufer, Cristina Freire, Boris Groys, Charles Harrison, Vít Havránek, Piotr Piotrowski, and Branka Stipančić, "Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part I," *e-flux Journal* 40 (2012), www.e-flux.com/journal/conceptual-art-and-eastern-europe-part-i/.
 - 39 Helena Motoh and Jones Irwin, "From Lacan to Hegel. Interview with Slavoj Žižek," in *Žižek and His Contemporaries*, eds. Irwin and Motoh, 126.
 - 40 Ibid.
 - 41 Andrej Savski, cited in Eda Čufer, "The Symptom of the Vehicle," in Inke Arns, *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983–2003*, 191.
 - 42 "One more thing: in the future, NSK and IRWIN will expand and intensify the radius of their activities outside of state borders and will adapt their strategy at home accordingly. This, however, does not mean that we shall no longer make our appearance in these regions. What it does mean is that we shall be present in a different, more universal way. By coincidence and simultaneously with our first more comprehensive presentation in Ljubljana, we are witnessing the first major exhibitions of our paintings in the New World, at the Bess Cutler Gallery, New York, and another in the New-New World, in Australia's Sydney. Thus, we are symbolically torn between three worlds." Irwin, speech on the occasion of their first exhibition at Equina Gallery, Ljubljana, 1988, cited in *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, ed. New Collectivism (Los Angeles, CA: Amok Books, 1991), 10.
 - 43 Misiano, "Institutionalization of Friendship," 174.
 - 44 See the February 1991 invitation letter to Irwin signed by Lena Kurlandzeva, Viktor Misiano, and Konstantin Zvezdochiotov, in "Correspondence," in *NSK Embassy Moscow*, 7.
 - 45 Ibid.
 - 46 See Viktor Misiano's account of this in "Summary of the Discussion. Two Concepts: Apt=Art and Irwin-NSK Embassy Moscow," in *NSK Embassy Moscow*, 48–49, as well as the ensuing discussion, which reveals this staged West-East encounter as fraught with frictions and misunderstandings, including the most tragicomic one, when a Western artist felt "provoked" by the "community" visiting his studio, asking to be left alone in the safety of his "creative intimacy," until the work was ready to be shown to the interested public.
 - 47 Ibid.
 - 48 Marina Gržinić, "Art and Culture in the 80s. The Slovenian Situation," in *NSK Embassy Moscow*, 37. My emphasis.
 - 49 Slavoj Žižek, "Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?," in *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983–2003*, 49–50.

- 50 Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 67.
- 51 Želimir Košćević, "The Group Irwin and Neue Slowenische Kunst" [1989], in *Irwin: Retroprincip. 1983–2003*, 67.
- 52 Andrei Kovalev, cited in "Summary of the Discussion Following the Lecture of Marina Gržinić," in *NSK Embassy Moscow*, 41.
- 53 Dejan Kršić, "The Times They Are a Changing," *Ibid.*, 35.
- 54 *Ibid.*
- 55 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 56 Aleksandr Yakimovich, "The Cultural Codes of Totalitarianism," *Ibid.*, 23.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 Aleksandr Yakimovich, in "Summary of the Discussion Following the Lecture of Aleksandr Yakimovich," *Ibid.*, 28.
- 60 Viktor Misiano, *Ibid.*, 29.
- 61 Anatoly Osmalovsky, *Ibid.*, 31.
- 62 Viktor Misiano, *Ibid.*
- 63 See "A Conversation with Iosif Bakshtein," *Ibid.*, 91.
- 64 Oleg Kulik, in "Summary of the Discussion. Two Concepts: Apt-Art and Irwin-NSK Embassy Moscow," *Ibid.*, 59.
- 65 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 66 Natalya Abalakova, in *Ibid.*, 61.
- 67 Anatoly Osmalovsky, in *Ibid.*, 58–59.
- 68 Misiano rationalized (or perhaps teased) their silence, placing it in sync with the concept of the project: the function of an embassy is "not only to present a state, but also to collect data and information on the host state. And it seems that the ambassadors listen and write a lot and speak little." Misiano, in *Ibid.*, 54.
- 69 Roman Uranjek, in *Ibid.*, 61.
- 70 Miran Mohar, Oleg Kulik, in *Ibid.*, 61–62.
- 71 Kulik, *Ibid.*, 62.
- 72 See Žižek's discussion of this in an interview in Irwin and Motoh, *Žižek and His Contemporaries*, 141.
- 73 "Like the swimmer in Stevie Smith's poem 'Not Waving, but Drowning,' the masquerader can't be sure [the viewers] won't think she is just waving, when really she's drowning." Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 196. In his film *Bamboozled* (2002), Spike Lee is investigating precisely the dangers of holding on to a belief in the subversiveness of ambiguity and, what in the language of NSK, we would call "overidentification" without also taking a stand.
- 74 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).
- 75 Laibach, cited in *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, 54.
- 76 Marina Gržinić, "Art and Culture in the 80s. The Slovenian Situation," in *NSK Embassy Moscow*, 37.
- 77 Lilijana Stepančić, "The Poster Scandal: New Collectivism and the 1987 Youth Day" [1994], in *Irwin: Retroprincip*, 44–48. In 1987, New Collectivism, a branch of Neue Slowenische Kunst, won the competition for the official poster of the Youth Relay, a relay race dedicated to Yugoslavia's first president, Josip Broz Tito. The scandal exploded after it was established that the poster appropriated a motif from a 1936 Nazi propaganda painting by Richard Klein, replacing the Nazi flag with a Yugoslav one.
- 78 Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 147–149.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 255.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 269. Monroe discusses this as a theme throughout the book, starting from Laibach's own assertion of the "right to incomprehensibility" (66).
- 81 Slavoj Žižek, cited in *Ibid.*, 78.
- 82 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

- 83 Kulik, in "Summary of the Discussion. Two Concepts: Apt=Art and Irwin-NSK Embassy Moscow," in *NSK Embassy Moscow*, 62.
- 84 Kršić, "The Times They Are a Changing," in *Ibid*, 35.
- 85 Irwin, cited in Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 110.
- 86 NSK, cited in *Ibid*.
- 87 Miran Mohar, cited in *NSK Embassy Moscow*, 28.
- 88 Among many jokes that Žižek uses in his work is the Marx Brothers's famous one from *Duck Soup* (1933): "Gentlemen ... Chicolini here may talk like an idiot, and look like an idiot, but don't let that fool you ... He really is an idiot."
- 89 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 28; Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," 696.
- 90 See their projects *Supercommunity* (<http://supercommunity.e-flux.com>) and *Superhumanity* (www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/). On the .art domain, see Edward Helmore, "Can .art domain give the art business an online boost?," *Guardian*, March 12, 2017, accessed January 20, 2020, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/mar/12/art-internet-suffix-business.
- 91 I wrote the first version of this essay in 2013, when it was presented at the graduate student conference "Why Art History Matters" at Princeton University, and today, I wonder if my critique is directed at something that barely exists anymore. Meanwhile, Moderna Galerija has itself moved on, to projects that seek more transnational alliances (such as *L'internationale*, www.internationaleonline.org), as well as research into the specifically Yugoslav, rather than Eastern European, artistic and political heritage. Also, research on Eastern European art has taken a new turn, taking a transnational and transhistorical approach, instead of being limited to the socialist period. See Beáta Hock and Anu Allas, eds., *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).
- 92 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983).
- 93 Marc Augé, *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds* (Stanford University Press, 1999). Augé is referenced in Terry Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Duke University Press, 2009), 9.
- 94 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 95 Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*.
- 96 In 2011, the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (+MSUM) was launched in a new building in Ljubljana, while Moderna Galerija (MG+) continues to exist under this name and in the old location, resulting in the joining, but also an explicit separation, of the "modern" and "contemporary" agenda, marked by the equation MG +MSUM. That parallel modernities are a precondition for joining global contemporaneity is also reflected in Badovinac's account of the trajectory of the Ljubljana Museum. According to Badovinac, when in 2000 the Moderna Galerija supplemented its largely national collection by creating the international, largely Eastern European, 2000+ Arteast Collection, "it performed a pioneering work in the self-definition of the art of the former socialist countries. When the Moderna Galerija involved itself in the production not only of its own local context but also that of the pertinent international context, only then did it become a museum of contemporary art." Badovinac, "The Museum of Contemporary Art," 105.
- 97 Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010).
- 98 This remains true even in the more recent accounts, written by the proponents of the first post-socialist generation, such as Piotr Piotrowski's *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, whose measuring rod for the success and failure of post-communist democracies is precisely the freedom of speech, as embodied in the varying degrees of freedom to make art in different post-communist countries, diagnosed as still more or less imprisoned by the ghosts of the communist mentality. Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012).

- 99 The project *Political Practices of (Post)Yugoslav Art* – developed by Prelom kolektiv (Belgrade), in collaboration with WHW/What, How, and for Whom (Zagreb), kuda.org (Novi Sad), SCCA Sarajevo, and with the further participation of Delve | Institute for Duration, Location and Variables (Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača, Zagreb), Ana Janevski (currently based in New York), and Miklavž Komelj (Ljubljana) – is an example of the project that brought together new research and interpretations, as well as political mobilizations of Yugoslav art. See Jelena Vesić and Zorana Dojić, eds., *Political Practices of (Post-) Yugoslav Art: Retrospective 01* (Belgrade: Prelom Kolektiv, 2010).
- 100 Jelena Vesić and Dušan Grlja, “Political Practices of (Post-) Yugoslav Art: Retrospective 01,” in *Political Practices of (Post-)Yugoslav Art*, 8.
- 101 See, among others – to cite only some scholarly monographs, amid the growing body of research – Branislav Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016); Armin Medosch, *New Tendencies: Art At the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961–1978)* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016); Gal Kirn, *Partisan Ruptures. Self-Management, Market Reform and the Spectre of Socialist Yugoslavia* (London: Pluto Press, 2019); Bojana Videkanić, *Nonaligned Modernism. Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2020).
- 102 Žižek, in Helena Motoh and Jones Irwin, “From Lacan to Hegel. Interview with Slavoj Žižek,” 125.
- 103 Božidar Gagro, “Periferna Struktura. Od Karasa Do Exata.” *Život umjetnosti* 1 (1966): 18. In this text, Gagro theorizes “our art” as marked by what he calls a “peripheral structure,” an aesthetics that embraces retardation, hybridity, and otherness.
- 104 Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History* (London: Verso, 2012).

5 Art Form and Nation Form

Contemporary Art and the Postnational Condition

Octavian Esanu

Art – in its modern, autonomous sense, with aesthetic contemplation as its distinct form of experience – is a product of modern bourgeois capitalism. So are the nation state, and nationalist ideologies. Art and nation have developed in historical parallel over the past two centuries, supporting and constructing each other (not surprisingly, their most important institutions – the museum and the prison – emerge and evolve contemporaneously with one another). But what is the nature of the relation between art and nation today, when capitalism has eroded and distorted the basic values, ideals, and forms of the classic bourgeois age? What does it become, when both art- and nation-forms are said to have reached their historical limits, in popular debates about the “end of art,” or the so-called “postnational condition”? These are some of the issues that this chapter will address – with its primary concern for what used to be called the “Second” and the “Third world.” Over the past decades, critics from these “worlds” – the world of postsocialism that sees itself as the “close Other”¹ of European modernity, and that of postcolonialism, traditionally defined as the exotic, or the “remote Other” – have worked to formulate positions on the nature of artistic practices. The historical experiences of postsocialism and postcolonialism are very different, of course, and yet practitioners from both camps have often sought, if not one method, then at least a common ground from which to pose questions both about art and critical methods for dealing with it.

The goal of this chapter is two-fold. First, it raises methodological concern over how to theorize contemporary art under current global circumstances of trans- or postnational capitalism. It then overviews the historical categories of “art” and “nation,” as they evolve in the modern bourgeois age of industrial capitalism, in order to further discuss contemporary art in the context of the so-called postnational condition.

A “Diagonal” Critique

For mainstream neo-Marxian academic art criticism, the category of the nation is often code for “bourgeois,” since national struggle can only serve the interests of bourgeois elites. Therefore, every approach to the national is instantly perceived as “conservative” (obstructing the course of general progress and class liberation), or “irrational” (since the bourgeois nation state is presumably no longer a significant category for postnational global capitalism), and even “fascist” (for fascism is ultimately an intensified and final form of nationalism). But can we completely ignore the “national question” – given that it remains unsettled by the

post-Enlightenment political discourses of Marxism and liberalism? Can we bypass the category of nation, for instance, when talking today about the contemporaneity of art in the historical contexts of postcolonialism, postsocialism, post-Sovietism, or the Global South? The “global contemporary” faces problems similar, perhaps, to those dealt with by postcolonial and subaltern studies as they fought over the past decades for the right to periodize and situate their national modernisms and postmodernisms on their own terms.² Or it may be that current debates on the contemporaneity of art are also in dire need of some form of “epistemic decoloniality,” “decolonizing methodologies,” or “epistemic freedom” from first-world theoretical frameworks, concepts, and voices?

The question of how to position contemporary art with regard to the category of the “nation” is not only methodological but also political. It involves questions of agency, empowerment, hegemony, and representation. Hans Belting once made a pronouncement about the “two voices” of art history – that of the West and that of the East – hoping that the two would blend in harmony with the coming together of the world.³ In conditions of globalization these voices have intersected, or even blended and disappeared in the cacophony of world cultural production. Belting’s “two voices” emphasize different directions in contemporary art history: a “vertical” one, which is the hierarchical, value-driven Western art history, and the “horizontal” one, which is seeking to compensate for the unequal treatment of the latter by the former. Piotr Piotrowski proposed his alternative “horizontal art history” that would do justice to the “Second” (and “Third”) voices of postsocialist and postcolonial critiques against the hegemonic “vertical” narrative.⁴ One may notice that Piotrowski’s “horizontal art history” resonates with how Benedict Anderson identified nationalism: “*horizontal* communities imagined along territorial, linguistic, and ethnic lines”⁵ (a definition discussed in more detail below). We may also note in passing that this “horizontality” is constantly challenged when it intersects the “vertical,” or the “first-voice,” of art history, its interests, and institutions.

One could also consider vertical and horizontal art histories in terms of “external” and “internal” critiques.⁶ External critique imposes art-world concepts and methods (by means of what is often called Artspeak, or International Art English) upon the manifold of global artistic experience. External critique acts from outside, assuming the hegemonic “bird’s eye view” on a manifold that it wants to control, by establishing discursive boundaries, fencing off and exploiting its most “important” themes and motives, setting up periodization markers, and generally situating “contemporary art” (as well as the “modern,” or in the past, the “postmodern”) within the firm grasp of Western cultural history. Ultimately, the external (or vertically-driven) critique replicates the spatial extension of the capitalist market. It is part of the mode of production, where the history of art is constituted by the law of value through multiple chains leading from the supplier to the central office, to the CEO and shareholders.

And then one may associate Belting’s “second voice,” and Piotrowski’s “horizontal art history,” with “internal” critique. For the latter, art is approached – if not from the “frog’s perspective” – then certainly within a narrower perimeter of national or regional borders, or the positions of local agents whose main goal is to self-analyze and to understand their own actions with regard to practices of culture and domination. Internal critique can also be performed externally, by the compassionate Western anthropologist and ethnographer.

What seems to be lacking with regard to current debates on contemporary is a “diagonal,” or immanent, critique, that dialectically links the main concerns of the two other dimensions. An immanent critique of contemporary art would find its point of departure in what all “voices” have in common: to begin with, capitalist oppression, transnational networks of circulation of symbolic and financial capital, and the common ideological universes of which art today is the most immediate product. An immanent critique would address the formal elements, artistic devices, and ontologies of the artwork, or analyze the contradictions within the *concrete* social practices that sustain the “fiction” of contemporary art. It would study artistic production not only at the moment of its fall – when certain art products enter global (or Western) networks of consumption – but also as part of the disruptive dynamics of post- or neo-colonial struggle, of nation-building, of postsocialist commodification, of world policing and post-9/11, or as the outcome of capitalist modernization, NGOization, developmentalism, privatization, deregulations.

In such an immanent approach to contemporary art the “nation form” or the national question would come to play a crucial role. In a “diagonal” approach, one historicizes and theorizes contemporary art from the position of full immersion within a more diverse (and complex) ideological field. After all, critics studying contemporary art from a non-first-voice perspective must not only draw attention to common interpretative tools (such as subjectivity, identity, freedom, history, class, capitalism, modes and relations of production, and so forth) but must also account for the strong discursive currents shaping their unique ideological universes. Those immersed in these universes are often torn by political and methodological divisions, with Hans Belting’s “two voices” playing simultaneously in their heads. They have to choose how to approach artistic production – treat it as derivative or byproduct of universal categories (history, progress, modernity, capitalism), under one negative totality called “capitalism,” or surrender to the rhetoric of “otherness,” where nation and nationalism have been a major line of defense against imperial domination. For critics dealing with contemporary art in non-Western regions, one question that has loomed over their fields of inquiry is whether they should start from some particular norm, code, or mode of economic and cultural reproduction (the so-called culturalist perspective), or adopt a universalist faith, acknowledging only One World, which is split and riven by the forces of capitalism.⁷ From this latter perspective, nationalism and nation itself is a capitalist invention,⁸ and so are art and aesthetic experience.

These are some of the concerns that serve as a point of departure in this methodological reflection upon the relation between contemporary art and nationalism. I look at this problematic from the perspective of “nation form” and “art form.” The term “form,” applied to both art and nation, connotes a modern, universal, and modular validity and applicability across different cultures and societies.⁹ Both nation and art owe their modern meanings to the liberal traditions of the Western Enlightenment, which conceived of them in terms of universal mediums for delivering the fruits of progress and reason to the whole world. The nation form refers to the state machinery of governing and administration, to its main agents (the postman, policeman, schoolteacher), and to state bureaucratic institutions and forms of governing. The modern autonomous art form has its own institutional mechanisms (the museum, the national gallery, the art academy) and its technologies of representation (artistic styles, schools, themes, genres), deployed for the construction of

a national narrative, identity, or culture. Interactions between art and nation forms can more recently be observed in the postcolonial world, where they have been constructed simultaneously and often by the same persons.¹⁰ The historical art form and the nation state, for example, emerge in some areas of the Middle East simultaneously, during the first half of the twentieth century (and for other countries after World War II). Here the introduction of the art academy and of the museum, the formation of national or regional Unions (of Arab Artists), and the popularization of the main genres of fine arts (portraiture of the most prominent *nahda* intellectuals, the nude as the expression of a renaissance and decolonial independence, the national landscape and its distinct lines and color) have unfolded in parallel with the establishment of a national judiciary, an executive office, and administrative, electoral, and economic norms and regulations.

Before I turn to the relation between what has been understood as contemporary art, nation, and the postnational condition, I take a quick detour in order to situate the nation and art forms within a historical context. Art (as an autonomous institution of modern bourgeois capitalism) and nation (or what Benedict Anderson identified in terms of *horizontal* communities *imagined* along territorial, linguistic, and ethnic lines) developed in historical parallel under conditions of industrial and monopoly capitalism.¹¹

Nation Form and Art Form

The ideas both of “nation” and of “art” are said to have taken their modern forms around the same time and in the same place. Art history, aesthetics, the social sciences, and intellectual and general history point to late eighteenth-century Western Europe as the birthplace of the ideas of nation (and nationalism) and Art (with a capital A, as an autonomous institution of bourgeois society). But in order to render their distinct modern meanings, both concepts required one or more additional words. In the case of “nation,” it was the concept of “state” (as in the term nation state), and also of “people” (as in the equation nation = state = people). In the case of art it was the qualifier “fine” (as in the phrase “fine arts”), with variations including “beautiful” or “polite” (as in the “Polite arts”).¹² But *nation* states and *fine* arts have many other things in common besides their historical time and place of origin. From their coeval emergence as universal “modular” modern forms (following Etienne Balibar’s “nation form,” and accordingly “art form”) both designate processes of modern centralization and standardization. For the nation state or nation form, it is the centralization of markets, general taxation, education, administration, and the need to produce modern subjectivities (the “people”). For the art form (and what Oscar Kristeller called the “modern system of the arts”) it is the standardization of taste, along with other cultured habits. The modern art form achieves the centralization of the sensible through the establishment of its institutions (the museum, the opera house, the theater), as well as through the cultivation of various forms of behavior. In the late eighteenth-century theater, for example, the aristocracy is no longer allowed to set foot on the stage, nor is the “polite public” permitted to blow their noses and defile the floors of the galleries, or touch artifacts on display in the museums.¹³ For the art form there is also the establishment of normalized art education (national art academies); the emergence of a discipline solely dedicated to the study of taste and beauty (aesthetics); the

establishment of a hierarchy of genres and their modes of display (in art history, as well as in the salon style of exhibition, genre painting goes on top, followed by portraits, while the landscape and still lifes are hung at the very bottom, indicating their low carrying capacity as mediums of the spiritual or national consciousness). The central aesthetic categories at the time – harmony, equilibrium, symmetrical composition, and beauty – reveal the ideological aspirations of the new hegemonic class. Both nation and art forms are means and devices of a bourgeois order breaking out of feudal despotism.

But these are not the only similarities. Take for instance the very common belief that nations (or nation states) and art (in its autonomous sense) are universal and atemporal phenomena, rather than products of history; or that a modern person must have a nationality in the same way in which today, in this age of creative capitalism, everyone is believed to be in possession of certain unique artistic aptitudes (for making money or art, or both). In the current global neoliberal order of aestheticized or performative capitalism, Joseph Beuys' statement that "everyone is an artist" sounds as normal as the fact that everyone is expected to be a citizen of a nation state (a human right in fact provided for by Article 15 of the 1948 Human Rights Declaration). One can imagine a similar Declaration affording universal talents to everyone. Art and nation are comparable not only in their similarities but also in their differences, in the contradictions and ambiguities present at their respective moments of birth. For the nation state, one such ambiguity is the conflictual opposition between "state" and "nation" (either states come into existence first and autonomously through a process of nationalization of the state, or states come into existence by a process of national liberation against national states that already existed).¹⁴ As far as the contradictions of "fine arts" go, these are also to be found somewhere in between the terms "fine" and "arts," or in the separation of artisanal production and of crafts from the so-called "disinterested" or autonomous art of the late eighteenth century.¹⁵ This particular split generated another great doubt about the place and *role* of art in the modern bourgeois society.

The comparison between the modern forms of nation and art, as they evolve together in modernity, can also be analyzed in formal terms, or in terms of political geographies. The modern system of the arts means, first of all, establishing clear boundaries between the fine arts. At the moment of their "birth," each art was in search of a universal principle, but also of its distinct particularity. Each art had to have something in common with the other arts in the modern system (as in the Abbé Batteux's eighteenth-century definition of painting as "*une poesie muette*"), or at least a common principle of imitating nature, while each also had to locate its end in itself, in contrast to the mechanical arts.¹⁶ And simultaneously, each art sought a unique principle of differentiation, its unique terrain, so to speak, or "territorial sovereignty" in accordance with a distinct medium, set of materials, or essence. This is close to the way in which eighteenth-century European thinkers argued that nations were the product of a particular (natural and historic) landscape. Herder (building on Montesquieu) linked the character of the nations to language and the terrains that they inhabited (mountains created hunters, spread out terrains produced shepherds and peasants, and so forth).¹⁷ Herder's Central European romantic nationalism, and the idea of building a distinct national culture, or rooting the spirit of the nation in a language or in its distinct physical environment

("Every nation contain[ed] the center of its happiness within itself")¹⁸ resonated with Lessing's call to protect the intrinsic qualities of each art by preserving their fundamental differences and establishing clear boundaries between the arts (poetry is sound in *time*, and painting is about figures and colors in *space*). To jump somewhat ahead, at the height of decolonization and the emergence of new nations in Africa and Asia in the mid-twentieth century, Clement Greenberg called for a new Laocoön. Voicing "purist" concerns and rejecting the confusion of the arts, he called for the "suppression of the mediums" and for the preservation of each art's identity, defining painting, for instance, in terms of its "flatness" and the materiality of paint and canvas.¹⁹ Seeking to ground each art in its distinct language, intrinsic laws, primary material, senses, or medium (a formalist search for an *a priori* immediateness or "in-itselfness") goes in parallel with the changing geography of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century world map, redrawn in accordance with the principle of "nationalism" and grounded in the formal security of national sovereignty, of its unique language, territory, culture, or religions.

The contradictions inherent in the nation form, and art form, are especially evident when seen from the perspective of progressive discourses like Marxism or liberalism. In Marxism, for example, the problem of the nation (or what the Second International Marxists called the "national question") has been around since the beginning of this emancipatory tradition. Marx and Engels themselves did not produce a very elaborate theory of the national, and neither of the "artistic question," but the core of the emancipatory potential of Marxism has permitted multiple followers to develop a rich array of positions with regard to proletarian internationalism, liberal national separatism, and the role of art within these processes.²⁰ Bourgeois modern liberalism, on the other hand, did produce a coherent theory of the nation, but it lacked a normative aesthetic theory, a so-called "liberal aesthetics," which would be comparable to what is commonly known as "Marxist aesthetics," "Communist aesthetics," or "Fascist aesthetics." This lack may have something to do with the bourgeois eagerness to keep art within a separate autonomic realm in order to perform what Herbert Marcuse called the "affirmative character of culture." The latter unconditionally affirms an abstract universality of freedom, beauty, soul, and truth in order to conceal, but also to delay or even to annul, any concrete change in the material conditions of life.²¹

The complicated relation of Marxism to the category of the nation state has sometimes been explained in light of the two opposing directions of world history facing this emancipatory theory at the time of its emergence: revolutionary cosmopolitanism and nationalism.²² It is difficult to appoint the right "subject of history" when it comes to choosing between national independence and class struggle. The national question has been one of Marxism's most troubling problems, leading many to describe its attempt to answer this question as a "misadventure," "logical impasse," "modern Janus," or even a "failure."²³ But perhaps, as Benedict Anderson suggests, it is wrong to classify nationalism in terms of an ideology, like liberalism or fascism; it might be treated instead as a "neurosis" (as Tom Nairn proposes), or a pathology of the modern development of history.²⁴ Anderson recommends that we treat nationalism more as we do such concepts as "religion" or "kinship." From this perspective, nationalism is a secular residue of a pre-Enlightened, religious system of thought, articulating modern horizontal fraternities following the demise of Christian forms of communality.²⁵

One might extend Anderson's understanding of nationalism to the modern art form. Like nationalism, or nations – the imagined communities that arose when older ideas of fatality or death had lost their grasp on humanity – the “modern system of the arts” is a radical transformation; in fact it is a hierarchized separation of certain forms of art-making from the undifferentiated order of the old regime, where the sciences, mechanical arts, painting, music, and other activities were all massed together.²⁶ As stated earlier, the phrase “fine arts” carries with it a contradiction between “art” (as general skill and human activity distinct from Nature, as art was understood from ancient times on) and the qualifier “fine.” The latter is a capitalist value added to distinct practices, separated into an autonomous elitist realm of bourgeois culture supposedly free of practical needs and solely dedicated to contemplative “disinterested” pleasures. Fine arts can be seen as a secular transformation of diverse premodern spheres of human activities, from artisanal and collective to individual authorial genius, occurring along with changes in modes of social and artistic production; as a gradual loss of folkloric culture following modern industrialization and the migration of peasants to cities; or as a “Copernican revolution” in the arts related to the rise of the discipline of aesthetics, which dismisses any use or utility of art in favor of pure contemplative and introspective practices that open new transcendental realms or promise a higher spiritual truth and beauty.²⁷

The modern nation and art forms did not only evolve in parallel, but also overlapped and interpenetrated on many occasions and at many levels. From the moment of their separation from the crafts, science, and general utility, the *fine* arts actively engage in the construction of “imagined communities,” offering the nation states their technologies of representation – visualizing the national narrative through genre painting, depicting its heroes in portraiture, or working out the particularities of the national landscape. The state, on the other hand, lent its narrative and name to the formation of “national” artistic schools and traditions. For the purpose of efficient construction of the story of the nation and of the national identity, art has to coordinate and prioritize its themes, motifs, and genres. The hierarchy is negotiated along class lines – as for example when artists, patrons, and connoisseurs in eighteenth-century Britain debated which genre was more appropriate for the construction of the image of the nation: history painting, supported by the rising middle-class financial bourgeoisie, or portraiture, favored by the aristocracy.²⁸ During and after the fall of empires leading to the emergence of new nation states, art historians disputed the universal and the particular nature of aesthetic sensibility and artistic expression. After the collapse of the Habsburg empire, for example, representatives of the Vienna School of art history engaged in a lasting debate over the true nature and origins of Czech art: was it transnational or national, Germanic or Slavic, *Orient oder Rom*, a universalistic or a particular expression of national Czech identity?²⁹ It is at such moments of historical rupture that both nation form and art forms are most thoroughly questioned.

Historical change and revolution brought forward numerous political and aesthetic “negators” of both art and nation forms. The latter is persistently questioned and debated on the Left: from Rosa Luxemburg to Leon Trotsky and from Lenin to Stalin. Early Trotsky called for the complete abandonment of national separatism and of the nation state in favor of proletarian internationalism. He saw in the nation form a purely cultural entity that would one day be dissolved into

a “Republican United States of Europe.”³⁰ The modern system of art had its own skeptics, doubters, and mockers. In fact, avant-garde mockery, romantic irony, and passion for the absurd inscribed suspicion and doubt into the very foundations of bourgeois institution of art. The modernist and “historical” avant-garde of the early twentieth century put the final nail in the coffin of the eighteenth-century system of the arts. Along with the critique of norms, conventions, and aesthetic stereotypes, the French, German, Swiss, Romanian, Hungarian, Russian, Polish, Serbian, and many other national avant-gardes also denounced borders, boundaries, and nation-based artistic traditions. They regarded the dissolution of nation and of traditional art forms in terms of historical necessity. El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg wrote in the editorial of the journal *Vesch'* that “the commonality of tasks and means among artists from different countries is not an accident, a dogma, or a fashion but a necessary property indicative of mankind’s growing maturity. Art today is INTERNATIONAL despite local and particular symptoms and features.”³¹ And the non-affiliated Marxists understood the Internationality of modernism in terms of erecting a “New Church of Art” that “would not fall upon a discriminatory principle, individual-nationalist in nature, but upon spirit, upon metaphysics, both all-comprehensive.”³² The erosion of the boundaries of distinct arts go hand in hand with the dissolutions of national borders. Adorno’s late essays on “art and the arts” (“Die Kunst und die Künste,” 1967) is concerned with this dissolution of the arts, which evolved from distinct crafts but failed to “abide by the discipline of zones that ha[d] once been established.”³³ Adorno sees this process of erosion in terms of a diffusion of the stimuli of the senses, which are also under siege by mass culture and the culture industry. “Music inclines toward the graphic arts in its notation,” and “painting no longer wishes to confine itself to mere surfaces,” while “sculpture has ceased to respect the boundaries between sculpture and architecture.”³⁴ Ultimately, “art disappears because the utopia encoded in every work of art has been fulfilled ... This is why the arts eat away at one another.”³⁵

There is no better place to examine the dynamics of nation form and art form than in the colonial and postcolonial contexts. The latter overlaps historically with the dissolution of the modern art form. If European art and nation forms change under pressure from the internationalist programs of the historical avant-garde – whose utopian task of merging art and life, has been falsely fulfilled, or sublated, in socialist realism and culture industry – in many postcolonial contexts art and nation turn into weapons against imperial domination. In past decades postcolonial art history studied how certain artistic genres, mediums, or styles have been developed in the context of anti-colonialism. The progress of academic painting in the nineteenth century India, for example, has been regarded as a symptom of colonial rule. Painterly academism was countered by the Indian cubism in the first half of the twentieth century. The latter was explained in terms of an aesthetic critique of academism, understood as an institution of colonial rule.³⁶ And in the Middle East, the first generation of Arab artists (known as “pioneers” or “forerunners” in Egypt and Lebanon) – most of whom went to study the fine arts in colonial capitals – have infused the art forms, genres, styles, and mediums with nativist and nationalist narratives (Pharaonism, Phoenicianism, Syrianism, Berberism). They incorporated the newly learned art form into their struggle for colonial independence, using it for cultural modernization, for nation-building and the construction of modern

national narrative.³⁷ And if, for example, in eighteenth-century Western Europe the hegemonic bourgeois class found the genre of history painting to be most efficient in the construction of the national narrative, in early twentieth-century colonial Middle East (in particular in Lebanon and Egypt) it has been the portraiture (of illustrious *nahda* intellectuals), or even the nude. The latter was regarded as a very efficient tool in the process of inventing a new nation.³⁸ Here nation and art are locked into a dialectical interdependence, constructing each other and forming other relations in the meantime. From the mid- to second half of the last century, nation and art plays an even larger part in the process of postcolonial independence. At the height of the processes of nation-building (1940s–1970s) the art and nation evolve within an antagonistic atmosphere of the Cold War. But now, artists in the Third World have to choose between mutually excluding versions of modernity and modernization: between capitalist modernization and modernism offered by the State Department with its rhetoric of individual freedom, and the Communist modernization led by the USSR and culturally implemented through such mechanisms as the Third World Solidarity movement or the World Festivals of Youth and Students.³⁹

Adorno's famous opening sentence in *Aesthetic Theory* about art's loss of self-evidence (in respect to its relation to the world, its inner life, or even its right to exist) can be as successfully be applied to the concept of the nation state. The gradual demise of nation and art, since their interrelated development from the late eighteenth century, is part of the erosion of what was once the "essentially universal" principles of these forms. For the nation state, it is the failure to sustain the claim that national sovereignty is based strictly on territorial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, or religious principles; and for Art, the erosion manifests in a general skepticism that art could or should be delimited by material, media, sensual, stylistic, or by national boundaries. With the crisis of grand narratives, universals, and hierarchies, the assumptions about art and nation are about to change under pressure from political and historical forces.

Contemporary Art and the Postnational Condition

This brings us back to the methodological aporia that motivated this chapter in the first place. The nation and art forms can now be discussed with regard to the present. The contradictions and alterations to which the two forms have been subjected by the forces of history are inscribed in the prevalent phrases of our times as: "contemporary art" and the "postnational condition."⁴⁰ Both convey radical changes to which these classical forms have been subjected by historical forces: decolonialization, neo-colonialism, postsocialism, change in the modes of production, economic liberalization, migration, tourism, regional conflicts. New practices of international, economic, financial, and corporate governance established in the aftermath of World War II altered not only the conventional norms of national sovereignty, but also the very conditions of art-making and display. Art, and its institutions, have gradually shifted from the national to the inter-, trans-, or postnational modes of operation. In the past decades, what is regarded as authentic art, has been made or shown within de-nationalized contexts (of regional and global art biennials and world exhibitions), or in response to curatorial agendas and with support from de-nationalized forms of patronage (corporate multinational capital,

and for non-Western artists American or Western forms of philanthrocapitalism operating on a global scale).

Before proceeding further, it may be helpful to make a quick stop in order to draw attention to two terms used with regard to contemporary art. The words “international” and “transnational” are often encountered in the context of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art criticism, having been used sometimes synonymously and sometimes with different meanings. Those who chose to differentiate between the two, pointed out to their belonging to different ideological universes. While “international” holds a strong position within the vocabulary of progressive modernism – occupying a central place in the emancipatory rhetoric of Marxism, by calling to both political and artistic solidarity across national borders (as in the earlier quoted examples of Luxemburg and Trotsky, or Lissitzky’s and Ehrenburg) – “transnational” has been in use more recently within certain circles of academic globalization studies. The contrasting opposition between the two spatial terms is felt when they are carried onto the ideological battlefields of post-Cold-War Eastern Europe. Piotr Piotrowski, for example, associated the term “international” with the “utopian universalism” of the Western academia, and their so-called “vertical art history.” He borrowed from postcolonial studies the word “transnational” proposing it to Eastern Europeans as a new device for articulating a so-called “horizontal art history.”⁴¹ For the latter, “transnationality” is the opportunity to affirm national and cultural “marginality” and presence against hegemonic discourses articulated at the Western centers of knowledge. Regardless of their ideological valences, both terms point to the spaces of artistic production and consumption as being shifted farther and farther away, or taking place in the interstices or the cracks of the national states.

The “internationality” and “transnationality” of late-twentieth-century art are also key factors behind the crises of both art and nation forms. For the nation, this crisis articulated or described also in such terms as translocal and multinational, post-Westphalian, post-sovereign, or counter-national geographies and constellations is ultimately a crisis of national sovereignty.⁴² Globalization made it possible to articulate forms of sociality unfolding beyond and outside territorial or national boundaries; as it also became possible to make art using categories other than that of the modern system of the arts (painting, sculpture, graphic arts, etc.) The crisis of the art form has its own expressions and idioms, but the ones that are most popular perhaps have evolved along Hegel’s “end of art” prophesy. According to the latter, art completed its historical mission and is incapable of carrying the complex modern spirit toward absolute knowledge of itself. One can extend Hegel’s end of art thesis to the category of nation, and imagine the latter as having also reached its most perfect form.⁴³ Viewed through the Hegelian prism, both art and nation appear as two heroes of the same novel, or a German *Bildungsroman*. Both protagonists reached the highest point on their personal journeys to self-realization. They are complete and cannot be developed further, which does not mean that they will cease to exist. Like the main characters of a famous *Bildungsroman* – be it Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, Hegel’s Spirit in the *Phenomenology*, or Adorno and Horkheimer’s Reason, in the *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* – the historical forms “art” and “nation” reached their own teleological ends, completing their formal determination. To paraphrase Arthur Danto, both forms turned from mediums (“through which a higher reality made itself present”) into objects,⁴⁴ from a state

of becoming to that of being. Beyond this point neither art nor nation can further evolve but will live in a sort of fairytale state of “and they lived happily ever after.”⁴⁵ The art form (determined and arrested in “contemporary art”), and the nation form (in the “postnational condition”) fulfilled their historical missions. For Danto, the art form has actualized its main historical purposes when it has reached its highest degree of imitation of reality (in the nineteenth-century forms of realism), or when it grasped its own conditions of possibility (in the Duchampian ready-made). The nation form has attained its “object” status when new conditions for formulating horizontal forms of sociality or brotherhood have been made possible (as in, the European Union or global market). But for reaching their ends, and for inhabiting an eternal state, both art and nation forms had to sacrifice some key aspects of their modern conditions. For art, it is its autonomy, and for nation its sovereignty. While national sovereignty is affected by transnational capital, multinational corporations, and trade agreements, the conditions of contemporary art’s conceptuality and autonomy is increasingly determined by the de-spatialized, denationalized speculative logic of the global biennial, the corporate spectacle, and the patron’s “art-loving” efforts (be it the Western hedge fund manager, the Eastern oligarch, or the twenty-first-century Gulf State sheikh and princess). The crises of art’s autonomy and of nation’s sovereignty are also revealed in their formal dimensions, in the dissolution and fusion of boundaries, territories, languages and mediums (as again in the case of European Union for the nation form) and through the disintegration of the arts, or the rise of what late-twentieth-century critics called intermedia, multimedia, postmedia, or art’s postconceptual condition.

It is not only a matter of the deformation of these historical forms – the fragmentation of the nation form into the postnational, and of the modern art form into intermedia or postmedia constellations and conditions. It is also the relation between the two forms, art, and nation, that has taken on meanings different from before. Today contemporary art is often a critique of nationalism, of the nation state, and of national culture. It does not anymore participate in the construction of the national form, but provides platforms for critique in the name of various transnational or postnational ideologies. One may even say that contemporary art has become the aesthetic identity of a new transnational class, straddling national borders. This, again, is most visible in the former “Third” and “Second” worlds. It is here that one encounters the counter-national elite of the contemporary art “scene,” for the most part positioning itself against traditional cultures, or nationalist ideologies (be it Arabic nationalism, or Islamism in the Middle East, or various forms of religious and national populism in Eastern Europe).

But the nation form has not totally disappeared from the agenda of transnational contemporary art. During the 1980s, Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad held a debate on the pages of *Social Text*.⁴⁶ The dispute concerned the relation between literature (and/or art) and nation with respect to three-world theories and to postmodernism. Jameson argued that Western cultures must be understood in terms of a split between the private and the public, the poetical and political, the domain of sexuality and/or the unconscious and that of the public or class struggle (in short, a split defined by the opposition “Freud vs. Marx”).⁴⁷ “Third world” literary production, on the other hand, has staged a radically different relation between personal and political. This relation is not articulated in terms of classes (Marx) but by its recourse to national allegory. “All third-world-texts are necessarily ... allegorical,”

writes Jameson, and “are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*.”⁴⁸ In his response, Ahmad highlights certain problematic aspects of Jameson’s position, protesting first of all the term “Third World Literature” itself, which not only frames certain cultures in terms of their “Otherness,” but also homogenizes a very complex and broad field of cultural and artistic production. He also questions Jameson’s insistence on the lack of any private–public separation in the Third World, arguing that such a separation does exist, especially among writers or intellectuals. It is not only in the “Third World,” Ahmad continues, that authors articulate their cultural identity exclusively through recourse to national allegories – citing examples of American literature that make use of the national form.⁴⁹

Ahmad’s contentions are convincing. As a Marxist, he argued, Jameson should discuss world literature on the basis not of pre-established categories (such as the “Third World”) but of the assumption that there is only one world, one of capitalist exploitation, where the struggle between capital and labor is at different historical stages, or in different modes of production. As difficult as it may be not to agree with Ahmad’s response, one also cannot completely disregard Jameson’s thesis. In his dialectical articulation of the three worlds, Jameson takes up the “First” and “Third Worlds” (leaving out the “Second”) in order to discuss these worlds’ literary production in accordance with Hegel’s master and slave dialectics. Today, almost four decades later, one might say that the dialectics of History have proven Jameson right, for its forces have obliterated the false form of emancipation embodied in the “Second World” of Soviet socialism, restoring the tabula rasa of history and the eternal struggle between capital and labor. The “Second World” – split again into classes, and assimilated into the global workforce – now sells its labor power within traditional markets. But for both former Third and former Second worlds, the category of nation has remained an important and potent symbol. The dispute continues in ongoing debates between postcolonial and first-world Marxists regarding the character of national struggle (whether national struggle is autonomous and separate from class struggle, or it must be associated with one class – the bourgeoisie),⁵⁰ and in disputations among various factions of “peripheral” Marxism and post-Marxism on the “national question” (some branches of the Communist Parties of Lebanon and Syria, for example, still debate their alliances in the ongoing Syrian Civil War, whether to traditional Second World actors like Russia [ex-USSR], Iran, or Syria, or to traditional colonizers like Western Europe, the USA, and Israel).

The national form also plays an important part in contemporary art. The national allegory has become a form of exchange within the global market of symbolic goods. Rastko Močnik, commenting on the relation between contemporary art and nationalism, suggests that “identity is the poor artist’s survival strategy,” calling national identity an “extra-artistic cheating device,” and denouncing its class chauvinism.⁵¹ But identity, to modify this slightly, can as easily be called the Third- and Second-world artist’s survival strategy, or cheating device. One cannot think today of emerging, or established, artists from the so-called Third or Second worlds who did not have at some point to play their “national identity” card. In Eastern Europe one refers to “local identities for sale,”⁵² as reliance on local or national identity has become the main condition for transcending national boundaries and participating in the global grant economy of contemporary art. National identity is the hard currency in which symbolic exchanges between artists of

different worlds often take place. National identity is the price of becoming a transnational or global artist. First-world artists, on the other hand, rarely feel the need to put art up for sale that invokes their national identities in order to qualify for funding or to be taken seriously as an artist. First-world contemporary art is still largely about public (class) or private (individuality and identity) politics. Jameson's "national allegory," then, still plays an important role in understanding global symbolic circulation. This is perhaps because nation, and nationalism, are precisely *imaginary* constructs, obsessive historical fantasies, or even neuroses (as suggested by Nairn), and their symptoms for this reason are highly resistant to analysis and treatment.

But it is not only the nation form that is used as a token of exchange in the post-national art market. Art, too, has been used as a vehicle for the fruits of progress and reason. If, in the mid-twentieth century, artistic production and display were orchestrated within the confines of national boundaries, processes of global neoliberalization in the late 1980s have drastically altered artistic interactions. A new type of cultural cartography emerges, where artistic production and exchange gradually seeps through the cracks of the national state, and across its permeable borders.⁵³ In the context of postsocialism, for example, during the 1990s, or in the Middle East after 9/11, "contemporary art" has been instrumentalized to promote democracy and the rule of law and/or market.⁵⁴ Art has again become a medium of ideology, and contemporary art has in many cases been an index of capitalist modernization – a barometer of integration of a given country into the global market. (One can evaluate or measure the contemporary art scene of a certain country by how well-integrated this country is in the global market). Since the decline of European colonialism, American modernization theory has designed tools and institutions for softer modes of dominance and better control of social, economic, natural, and cultural environments.⁵⁵

What passes today as "contemporary art" in many corners of the globe can very often be seen as part of these "advanced" modes of ideological domination. The cooperation between contemporary art and transnational networks of capitalist modernization is manifest at the level of artistic form. This claim can be illustrated by a particular tendency in global contemporary art that I will call "NGO aesthetics." The latter refers to contemporary art that has incorporated – critically or uncritically, consciously, or unconsciously – a non-governmental organization mode of production into its artistic projects. The unconscious transference, or the direct enactment, of this global mode of operation clearly manifests when artists are inspired, or compelled, to form non-profit art organizations (or mimic "limited" corporate structures) in order to carry out their artistic activities. There are multiple archives, for example, that have spread over the past decade in certain parts of the Middle East. These initiatives have used Western grants to collect and digitize documents and artifacts from the public domain in order then to make the material available to researchers, often as a paid service. On other occasions artists replicate the format and principle of developmentalism, its logic of growth, and its rational solutions and humanitarian relief directly into their works (an example of this kind of art can be found in the work of the Danish group Superflex, and its projects in Africa). Artists in the Second and Third world have also assimilated the NGO mode of production when they respond critically or ironically to the impact of developmentalism on their national or cultural environments (there are many

examples, but Aditya Novali's 2014 "NGACO – Solution For Nation" can serve as an illustration). NGO Aesthetics is just one manifestation of contemporary art as it occurs in the fissures of the nation state form, amidst postnational geographies and constellations constituted by the various forces of late transnational capitalism: from economic developmentalism to new institutionalism and from philanthrocapitalism to communism by capital.

It is difficult to end this chapter with a firm, conclusive tone, with a paragraph wrapping everything up in accordance with the norms of rhetoric. The long-standing relation between art and nationalism, or between the crucial political categories of class and nation; the eternal opposition of the universal and the particular; or the need felt within certain circles for a more diagonal, or immanent, critique to mediate between "vertical" and "horizontal" art criticism or history – all of these issues are inevitably at the heart of any theorizing or historicizing of the global contemporary. A conclusion, proper, could only take place after some divine or historic turn, as in the radical fictional twist of a modernist plot where the writer-protagonist is able to end his unfinished story only when brought before the firing squad. For those writing today on the transnational contemporaneity of art, and due to cultural distance and/or historical nearness, explanations always sound suspicious and conclusions premature. One thing, however, is clear. Contemporary art is the name for the crisis of the modern bourgeois form, as it melts under the total logic of late neoliberal capitalism (along with other man- and non-man-made forms, melting today due to excessive exploitation of resources). But contemporary art also means the end of one story. Hegel's "end of art" prophecy can be, or has already been, interpreted, as the end of a particular universalist narrative – molded by the theological tropes of German Protestantism – of self-realization of the Western spirit. But this may also mean the end of one "story of art," or a farewell to the idea that postnational contemporary art – unlike modernism in the past – can only be grasped from some particular position within the Western academic market. This challenge to hegemony is not new. In the past, postcolonial studies have articulated powerful critiques with respect to cultural and knowledge production in the Third World. But under current conditions, also marked by the dissolution and absorption of the "Second world," the problem of addressing the global contemporaneity of art – its "spread," for example, following processes of capitalist modernization – or the history of modernism earlier on, has acquired new methodological dimensions. The total neoliberalization of the world in the aftermath of socialism poses old problems of hegemony and domination, but under the new label of "contemporary art." And if the contemporaneity of art means a particular historical condition of multiple opinions, modes, and forms of expression, production, consumption, autonomy, and sovereignty, then its discourse must also accommodate positions originating in other ideological universes.

Notes

- 1 For the origins of the term "close Other" see Piotr Piotrowski, "Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde," in *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, eds., Sascha Bru et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 52.
- 2 See for example Geeta Kapur, "When Was Modernism in Indian Art?" *Journal of Arts and Ideas* no. 27–28, (1995).
- 3 For "two voices" of art history see Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 61.

- 4 For “horizontal art history” see Piotrowski, “Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde.”
- 5 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).
- 6 For “external,” “internal,” and “immanent” critiques see Titus Stahl, “What is Immanent Critique?” in *SSRN Working Papers* (2013). <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2357957> or doi: 10.2139/ssrn.2357957.
- 7 This is Aijaz Ahmad’s response to Fredric Jameson’s view on “third world literature.” Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” *Social Text* 17, (Fall 1987). See also Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” in *Social Text*, no. 15 (Autumn 1986).
- 8 For nationalism as product of capitalism see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
- 9 I was inspired to use the term “art form” by Etienne Balibar’s “Nation Form: History and Ideology” in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 86–106; See also Immanuel Wallerstein, “The National and Universal: Can There Be Such a Thing as a World Culture?” in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System; Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- 10 Some examples from the Middle East should include such pioneers of Lebanese art as Georges Corm (1896–1971). The latter advocated classical humanist art and modern art institutions as primary conditions for establishing the independent nation state of Lebanon. Another example is the white Russian émigré painter Boris Novikoff (1888–1966). Novikoff escaped the October Revolution, settling in the Middle East and working in a government position while painting and/or inventing the Lebanese “national” landscape in his free time. On Georges Corm’s activities see Georges G. Corm, *Georges Daoud Corm: Un Peintre du Liban* (Beirut: Édition Librairie Antoine, 2007); Georges G. Corm, *Les archives du peintre Georges Daoud Corm entre 1915–1971: combats pour les arts et la culture au Liban* (Kaslik: Pusek, 2009). On the role of the “nude” see Kirsten Scheid, “Necessary Nudes: *hadatha* and *mu’asara* in the Lives of Modern Lebanese,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010); see also Octavian Esanu, ed., *Art, Awakening and Modernity in the Middle East: The Arab Nude* (Routledge, 2018).
- 11 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
- 12 There are many works treating the emergence of the modern idea of art in the eighteenth century. For this study I have consulted the following sources: Paul Oscar Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study of the History of Aesthetics,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (October 1951): 496–527; Peter Kivy, *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2001). Both Kivy and Kristeller provide ample bibliographies of the historical sources. There is even a larger body of scholarly literature on the history of the concept of “nation” and “nation state.” In my research I drew primarily on the following: Balibar “Nation Form: History and Ideology”; Wallerstein, “The National and Universal” Eric Hobsbawm *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Ernest Renan, “What Is a Nation?” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge 1990), 8–23; Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1998).
- 13 On the process of cultivation see chapter “Learning Aesthetic Behavior,” in Shiner, *The Invention of Art*.
- 14 See Balibar, “Nation Form,” 331.
- 15 On the separation of “artisan” from “artist” see in particular Shiner, *The Invention of Art*.
- 16 Abbé Batteux, *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (1746) quoted in Kristeller, “The Modern History of the Arts” (Part II), 20–21, f. 189.
- 17 For Herder see William A. Wilson, “Herder, Folklore and Romantic, Nationalism,” in *Journal of Popular Culture* 6 (1978): 822–823; Robert R. Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism* (New York, NY: Octagon Books, 1966).

- 18 Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism*, 509.
- 19 See Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1771); Clement Greenberg, "Towards a New Laocoon," *Partisan Review* 7, no. 4 (July–August 1940).
- 20 There exist many sources on the relation between Marxism and nationalism. For an overview of the major positions on the national question – from Marx and Engels to Luxemburg, Trotsky, Austrian Marxism, Lenin and Stalin – see Michael Löwy, "The Marxists and the National Question," *New Left Review* 96 (March–April 1976): 81–100. The scholarship on the relation between Marxism and art is more modest. For Marx and Engels' intention to write an aesthetic theory see Stefan Morawski in Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds., *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels on Literature and Art* (New York, NY: International General, 1973), 5. There is a very rich body of literature dedicated to the interpretation of Marx and Engels' thoughts on art. Stefan Morawski's "Introduction" to *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels on Literature and Art* contains a separate bibliographical section that lists the main sources. Special notice goes to Soviet philosopher Mikhail Lifshitz's pioneering work in this field, namely *Marks i Engel's ob iskusstve* [Marx and Engels on Art] (Moscow: Sovetskaiia Literatura, 1933).
- 21 On the relation of bourgeois liberalism to nationalism see Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 24–26. On the primarily economic logic of liberalism see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, transl. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
- 22 Balibar, "The Nation Form," 333.
- 23 For "misfortune" see Balibar in "Nation Form," and for "modern Janus," and "failure" see Chapter 3 in James Blaut, *The National Question: Decolonizing the Theory of Nationalism* (London: Zed Books, 1987) as well as Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London: New Left Books, 1977).
- 24 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 49.
- 25 Ibid., 52.
- 26 For the separation of fine arts see Kristeller, "The Modern History of the Arts (Part I)," 526; Kivy, *Philosophies of Art*, 4–5.
- 27 On the "Copernican revolution" see M. H. Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1989), 140.
- 28 See Cynthia Roman, "Art and Nation in Eighteenth Century Britain," in *A Companion to British Art: 1600 to Present*, eds., Dana Arnold and David Peters Corbett (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 201–202. See also Part 4, "Nationhood," in *A Companion to British Art: 1600 to Present*.
- 29 For an example of such earlier debates see Marta Filipova, "Between East and West: The Vienna School and the Idea of Czechoslovak Art," *Journal of Art Historiography* 8 (June 2013). <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/muthesius.pdf>.
- 30 Michael Löwy, "The Marxists and the National Question," *New Left Review* 96 (March–April 1976): 90.
- 31 El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, Editorial: "Blokada Rossii Konchaetsea," in *Vesch'/Gegenstand/Objet* no. 1–2 (March–April 1922): 1. Translations from Russian by author.
- 32 Felix Aderca, "Conversations with Lucian Blaga," in *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes 1910–1930*, eds., Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 546.
- 33 Theodor Adorno, "Art and the Arts," in *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford University Press, 2003), 370.
- 34 Ibid., 368–371.
- 35 Ibid., 387.
- 36 For the Indian context see Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922–47* (Reaktion Books, 2007).

- 37 For the role of fine arts in the project of nation-building in the Middle East see Esanu ed. *Art Awakening and Modernity in the Middle East*; Octavian Esanu and Kirsten Scheid, eds., *The Arab Nude: The Artist as Awakener* (Beirut: AUB Art Galleries, 2015). Exhibition publication. http://website.aub.edu.lb/art_galleries/current/Documents/nude-publication.pdf
- 38 I am referring to such early Arab art practitioners as Khalil Saleeby (1870–1928), Daoud Corm (1852–1930), Georges D. Corm (1897–1971), Moustapha Farroukh (1901–1957), Omar Onsi (1901–1969) in French mandate Lebanon or Mahmud Mukhtar (1891–1934), Mohamed Naji (1888–1956), Mahmud Sa'id (1897–1964), and Ragheb Ayad (1892–1982), in the Egyptian context. See corresponding chapters in Esanu, ed., *Art Awakening and Modernity in the Middle East*.
- 39 For an example of American Cold War cultural policy and Abstract Expressionism in the Middle East see the case of John Ferren at the Kennedy Center in Beirut. Sarah Rogers, "The Artist as Cultural Diplomat: John Ferren in Beirut, 1963–64," *American Art* 25, no. 1, (Spring 2011): 112–123. For a discussion of the role of Youth and Students Festivals see, for example, James M. Jennings, "The Moscow Youth Festival (July 28, 1957–August 11, 1957)" (Master thesis, University of Virginia, 1959).
- 40 There is a large body of literature with different methodologies on the postnational condition. For a discussion of postnationality from the perspective of globalization studies see: Arjun Appadurai, "Sovereignty without Territoriality: Notes for a Postnational Geography," in *The Geography of Identity*, ed. Patricia Yaeger (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 40–58; Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory Culture Society* 7, no. 2–3 (1990), doi: 10.1177/026327690007002017. For other approaches to the postnational see Jurgen Habermas, *Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. M. Pensky (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, [1998] 2001); Ulf Hedetoft and Mette Hjort, eds., *The Postnational Self: Belonging and Identity* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
- 41 See Piotrowski's differentiation of the two terms along universal or Western vs. particular or horizontal art history line. Piotrowski, "Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde," 57–58.
- 42 See the writings of Arjun Appadurai.
- 43 Boris Buden discusses contemporary art and nationalism along similar lines. See Boris Buden, "Why Not? Art and Contemporary Nationalism," in *Contemporary Art and Nationalism: Critical Reader*, eds., Minna Henriksson and Sezgin Boynik (Prishtina: MM & EXIT, Contemporary Art Institute, 2007).
- 44 See Arthur Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," *History and Theory* 37, no. 4 (December 1998), 130.
- 45 Ibid., 128.
- 46 Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986); and Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (Fall 1987).
- 47 Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism."
- 48 Ibid., 69, italics in original.
- 49 Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory.'"
- 50 For the "national question" is the perspective of a postcolonial struggle see Blaut, *The National Question*.
- 51 See Rastko Močnik, "Identity and the Arts," in *Contemporary Art and Nationalism* [unpaginated].
- 52 Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 37.
- 53 The change is obvious in the formats of presentation of international art from different periods. Compare, for example, old catalogs of international exhibitions designed according to the principle of one-artist-one-country. Compare for instance "Contemporary Art of 79 Countries" (organized by IBM Corporation in 1939), for the New York World Fair, to catalogs from the 1980s and 1990s, such as *Magiciens de la terre*, exhibition catalog (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne–Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989) or

in the context of Eastern Europe, *After the Wall – Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe*, exhibition catalog (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999).

- 54 For Middle East see Hanan Toukan, “Art, Aid, Affect: Locating the Political in Post-Civil War Lebanon’s Contemporary Cultural Practices” (PhD diss., University of London, 2011). For Eastern Europe see Chapter 4 in Octavian Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The “Collective Actions” Group before and after 1989* (Budapest: Central University Press, 2013).
- 55 One definition of modernization: a “process by which historically evolved institutions are adapted to the rapidly changing functions that reflect the unprecedented increase in man’s knowledge, permitting control over his environment.” C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization: A Study in Comparative History* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1966), 7. There is a very substantial body of literature on the ideology of American modernization theories. See, firstly, Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

6 Three Questions for Terry Smith

Peripherality, Postmodernity, Multiplicity – Reconceiving the Origins of Contemporary Art

Interview with Terry Smith, by Octavian Esanu

Dear Terry,

Thank you for agreeing to answer a few questions for this volume. You have been a prolific writer working on “contemporary art” – or what you prefer to call in broader terms “our contemporaneity” – for a long time. Today the number of publications dedicated to this topic has increased to include a wide array of positions and opinions. This volume joins these debates, and it wants to do so from certain slightly different, and it seems to me, less explored directions. It does not simply want to deal with contemporaneity from a non-Western, or non-Euroamerican perspective (showing, for instance, what kind of art exists at peripheries), but it engages with contemporary art critically and in the context of historical processes of capitalist modernization. In Marxian terms this relates to the development and introduction of the capitalist mode of production and consumption into regions of the world that had either chosen – or had imposed upon them – an alternative modernity (as in the so-called “post-communist world”), or into areas once identified as “traditional societies” (which is often the case with the so-called “postcolonial modernity”). This is at least my position as editor of this book.

Therefore, many contributors to this volume do not simply deal with problems of art or aesthetics, but with history, and with the rise of a new artistic consciousness and of infrastructures used for making and distributing what we call today “contemporary art.” I apologize if my questions seem too long, but I have designed them to invite answers that correspond with the direction of this book.

Question 1

You have been among the earliest art historians to ask the question, “What is contemporary art?” What made you ask this question, and when? Could this sensibility and early interest be taken as a manifestation of some form of “peripherality” (I am referring to your Australian background, of course)? I have been following your engagement with “contemporary art” from your earlier projects, like the 2001 Critical Issues Series at Artspace Sydney that was titled: *What Is Contemporary Art? Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity and Art to Come*.¹ Are there other early writings about “contemporary art” that we should know about?

Terry Smith (TS): Thank you for these questions. I must say that I like the main lines of inquiry in this book, which wants to critique contemporary art in its

dominant forms, and do so from perspectives developed within the “post-communist” and “postcolonial” zones into which neoliberalism quickly moved to seize control after 1989 – with, I would say mostly, and inevitably, a cascade or melting glacier of disastrous results. It interests me that almost all of the “case studies” in the book focus on an artwork, or action, or event, or art space that appears in a suspended or “post” moment located in these zones. Each asks essentially the same question: Is this when we can say that contemporary art first appeared, was imagined or prefigured, or was actually created, in this place? Was this when and where our art became contemporary? If so, did the kinds of artistic contemporaneity manifest in these moments represent the arrival and embrace of neoliberal values first and foremost, or were they a reassertion of an earlier, local act of artistic inventiveness, or did they contain the seeds of another kind of critical practice – perhaps a sovereign one that is also a shared transnationality, in a word, a genuine contemporaneity – that might, indeed should, be pursued today? Could they, perhaps, be all of these things at once? If so, what was the mix, how did it change, what could it become?

Perhaps I am over-simplifying, or over-stating, the goals of the book. But I will try to answer your questions with them in mind. The first set of questions turns on the paradox – which you have acutely intuited – that a full grasp of “peripherality” is central to what it is to be contemporary in any meaningful sense. That is to say, to live consciously in our present, to think today, to make art in these our times, as well as to exhibit it, to interpret it, and to understand it, is *also*, and necessarily, to experience its inequities and exclusions. I think that this is true for all of us, no matter the specifics of our situation. Yet these specifics are also crucial. For me, they arise directly out of that Australian background you mention. Readers will know – or, at least, I hope that they will know – that Australia is a Southern continent belonging to the Indigenous people who have lived on it for over 60,000 years. In the late eighteenth century, colonizers imposed a layering of British law across it while maintaining institutional ties of all kinds to their homeland. These included cultural ones: for the most part, artists trained in London, exhibited there, sold their work there, and depended on whatever recognition the center offered.

Some personal anecdotes might make “peripherality” more real as a context before I respond in a less personal way. These experiences are by no means unique to me. They are the specifics shared by my entire generation. I was born at the end of World War II, into a family that had emigrated from Ireland and then England a century earlier, lured by the Gold Rushes. I spent my first five years in a country town that was peripheral to the state capital, Melbourne. The family moved to a suburb of that city, from which I eventually won a scholarship to attend the main public high school. Ditto to enter the University of Melbourne, where I had the good fortune to be taught by fine philosophers and literary critics, and by art historians steeped in British connoisseurship, Vienna School art history, and a homegrown Marxist nationalism. Wow! Look at this amazing, so wide world of minds and times! Yet I also knew – it was the mid-1960s – that the art and literature coming out of the United States, and the film coming from Europe, especially France, Italy, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, was pushing London into a secondary position. This meant that Australian artists were twice removed from mainstreams of modern art, even more from the sources of avant-garde vitality, which were being filtered by what we came to see as the compromised timidity of even the most up-to-date

English artists. Previous generations to mine largely accepted this state of being peripheral to what was already provincial. But by 1968, when I started writing about art, my artist friends and critical colleagues had come to hate this doubling of an already despised “cultural cringe.” Our imagined solution was to learn what we could about the most avant-garde art being made in the centers – now being circulated much more quickly, especially through magazines, journals and traveling shows – then make works that, we thought, would be even more radically innovative. We wanted, that is, to become contemporary with these leading artists, and then be even more contemporary. We also wanted to be seen to be doing both, by those same artists and their critical supporters. Good luck with that!

You ask about relevant writings before 2001. There were several local texts, part of a long-running debate within art discourse in Australia. The one that picks up most of these issues and sees them more broadly is “The Provincialism Problem” essay published in *Artforum* in 1974.² I wrote it while in New York on a fellowship provided by the Harkness family to young scholars and a few artists from the UK and its colonies. The essay is regularly reprinted, often cited, and still constantly commented upon (including by me), so I will rehearse only the points relevant to your question.³ After a few months in New York, studying at the Institute of Fine Arts, at Columbia, in an early iteration of the Whitney ISP, and hanging around MoMA, while at the same time moonlighting as a member of Art & Language, I realized that this artworld, much-fabled from a distance, was, for all its attractions, a conflicted, hierarchical yet fragile structure that was provincial in its attitudes, values, and behaviors. New York was also, I understood, the fading center of what I now saw to be a worldwide system of smaller but essentially similar provincial art centers in many other cities elsewhere. It was no coincidence that Emmanuel Wallerstein and Samir Amin, looking at parallel phenomena on a much larger scale, arrived at their ideas at the same time. Like the world’s economic and geopolitical systems, inequity was built in. Even the short list of “art stars” celebrated at the center were soon replaced, as institutionalized avant-gardism rolled along. Although hell-bent on generating breakthrough innovation, we were, in fact, all locked into positions within an unbreakable bind, one that provincialized everyone concerned.

Looking back, we might say, as we did not say then, that this system meant that no-one had a chance of becoming truly, equally contemporary. It was the same kind of systemic confinement operating throughout most postwar societies. “Repressive tolerance,” Herbert Marcuse called it, speaking of Western democracies; elsewhere, the repression was intolerant. Both kinds incited radical political movements, feminism, those of the ethnic minorities, and the black struggle for equal rights. These desires to change the situation fundamentally had their impacts on artists. But there were also forces for change coming from inside late modern art, in a kind of indirect parallelism, most evident, I believe, in conceptualism. This idea will surprise some readers, so let me spell it out. In its most searching forms, conceptualism questioned not only the concept of art (although it did that first) but also asked, on what grounds should art be made at all? This was a question that could be put by artists and others – critics, curators, and theorists, and by what were then understood as audiences – located anywhere in the world, at every point in the system, no matter what their circumstances. Unlimited kinds of art could result, many previously unimaginable ideas, relationships, different designs for

living, no longer subservient to the previous structures of power. Accountable yes, but only to themselves, and to those emerging around them. Questioning of this kind, it was hoped, had the most potential for breaking open the bind.

In Australia, we sometimes call this perspective “Antipodean.” It takes on, as a badge of pride, the European term for people who live in an upside-down world. Unlike them, however, we assume that, despite and because of our starting point, we can transform the world as a whole, or at least some significant parts of it. In this important sense, it is not a retreat into parochialism, an embrace of some kind of nativism. Quite the contrary. The larger point was, and is, that we all live in such a world, that we do so in our own ways, and that we should have the right to transform it for the good of all.

I felt this during the early and mid-1970s, called for it at the end of “The Provincialism Problem,” and in subsequent work and writings. As did many others. Notably Luiz Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss in their 1999 exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s to 1980s* at the Queens Museum, New York. They distinguished between Conceptual Art, which they saw as “an essentially formalist practice developed in the wake of minimalism,” and “a broader attitudinal expression” which “in radically reducing the role of the art object, re-imagined the possibilities of art vis-à-vis the social, political, and economic realities in which it was made.”⁴ As a member of Art & Language, I found the first part to be an outrageously reductive reading of conceptualism in the US and Europe. But the contrast between Conceptual Art and conceptualism, however technically specious, opened the door to art from the rest of the world that used conceptualist questioning as its critical strategy in contesting local forms of Cold War imperialism and more recent neoliberal globalization. It was this world-connectedness more than the independent invention of native kinds of conceptualism that I highlighted in my essay for the catalog, “Peripheries in Motion: Conceptualism and Conceptual Art in Australia and New Zealand.”⁵ Both are ways of responding to contemporaneous differencing in the world around you, and to making an art that would be consequential locally. Contemporaneity and differentiation had begun to count within the growing circuitry of international exhibitions, especially the biennials, which had recently begun to proliferate. They were a form designed precisely to showcase contrasts between familiarity and difference, between art from here and art from elsewhere. Speaking more generally, it is no accident that, since the 1990s, “conceptual” and “contemporary” have consistently been the most-used shorthand words for most of the art being made, whatever other distinctions may be used to arrive at more precise descriptions of it.

How is this relevant to your question about why I started asking, “What is contemporary art?” so insistently in the years around 2000? In his brilliant introduction to my collected essays on Conceptual Art and conceptualism, *One and Five Ideas*, Robert Bailey nails it, more clearly than I can. Let me read to you what he says:

Conceptualism’s ultimate significance, then, in Smith’s account, is its role in the shift from modern to contemporary art – that is where it effects its most widespread reconceptualization of art. The result is not a homogeneous and globally shared conception of art but a proliferation of different conceptions of art during the latter half of the twentieth century that, because of their conceptualist interest in conception, mutually recognize one another even as they differ.

Art came to be contemporary, according to Smith's claim, because artists everywhere began to partake in a worldwide effort to rethink art. Such an effort was, of course, distinct in each locality, but in its most basic ambition, it was the same: to find new conceptions of art.⁶

Underlying this general idea is a strange, impossible, contrarian object: "A theory of conceptualism" that I began to think about in the 1970s, and have refined since, especially in the essays in the *One and Five Ideas* book. Briefly, I posit a three-part unfolding, at once dialectical and deconstructive, tracking stages before conceptual art was identified as an art movement, during its brief ascendancy around 1970, and then through its long (and continuing) afterlife:

1. At its various beginnings, conceptualism was a set of practices for interrogating what it was for perceiving subjects and perceived objects to be in the world (that is, it was an inquiry into the minimal situations in which art might be possible).
2. Conceptualism then became a further integrated set of practices for interrogating the conditions under which the first interrogation becomes possible and necessary (that is, an inquiry into the maximal conditions for art to be thought).
3. The conditions – social, languaged, cultural, and political – of practices (1) and (2) were problematized, as was communicative exchange as such (that is, inquiry became an active engagement in the pragmatic conditions that might generate a defeasible sociality).⁷

Looking back, this inside-out positing of a concept about conceptualism in art (including conceptual art as phase 2) seems a methodological move on a par with my proposing, later, an even stranger proposition, this time an art historical idea: the layered, contested flows of three currents within "global" contemporary art. And, to ratchet up yet again, this time to a worldly scale, it parallels my more recent recognition of the three currents of world picturing, the unstable structuring that results from the processes of world questioning, that, I believe, condition – and constantly recompose – our contemporaneity.⁸ We can come back to these, and the connections between them, if you wish.

I should probably also add that by "shift" I did not, and still do not, mean an instant conversion of everybody from one kind of art to another, but rather something closer to what Thomas Kuhn identified when he defined "paradigm shifts" in the history of science.⁹ You know, like when Einstein's papers on relativity troubled the entire edifice of Newtonian physics, and then quantum theory did the same to relativity. I have always been moved by the story of Einstein walking through the streets of Bern, disturbed but fascinated by the fact that the clock faces on the town hall, the railway station, and in shops selling timepieces, as I think they were called then, each showed a somewhat different time. Relativity, every day, on his way to work at the patent office.¹⁰ Paradigm shifts do not happen like a sudden storm, with the whole world changing at once from state A to state B. Observations about small things that don't fit the bigger picture accumulate until they require us to see that that picture can no longer encompass everything. It then starts to fragment, sections implode, the whole shakes, but parts of it

still work well enough. Meanwhile, the lineaments of other, large-scale frameworks begin to appear. They are taken up in what seems at first an inchoate manner, often in the peripheries. Bern, in Einstein's case. To me, we are still going through that phase, with the contemporary difference that none of the big pictures – on any of the scales, from the local to the planetary – will ever again form into a totalized world picture. My ideas about the three currents in contemporary thought, life, and art come into play here.

Of course, the global provincial art system fought back during the 1980s, becoming ascendant during the 1990s, as it became crucial to the high culture of the globalizers. In Western artworlds, we saw this in the embrace by many but by no means all artists of an anything-goes postmodernism, the ubiquity of spectacle, the monetization of artworks, and the increasingly transactional nature of all relationships ... these had their impacts everywhere, becoming the most evident face of market-defined, institutionalized "Contemporary Art."

Question 2

One distinctive aspect of current debates on contemporaneity has perhaps to do with the confusion or disagreement about periodization labels. I remember during my doctorate years (around 2003–2004) – when I was dealing with these issues in the context of Eastern Europe – I used to discuss periodization labels, such as "postmodernism" or "contemporary art," with Fredric Jameson. In fact, he was the one to direct me to your work and to your engagement with "the contemporary" around the time of your Pittsburgh conference.¹¹ As we know, there are disagreements between you two regarding periodization terms. His commitment to "postmodernity" seems to be in line with his political commitment. On the other hand, you see "postmodernism" as a short-lived reaction to modernism during the 1970s and 1980s, and then call postmodernism "an outmoded term, a temporary place-holder that is no longer adequate ..."¹²

Following high modernity, there has been a certain difficulty with terms – something one will not commonly find in "modernism." For the latter, the debates have primarily revolved around different chronologies, such as when "modern art" began and when it ended. What follows after modernity, on the other hand, seems more confusing: some regard contemporary art along a Hegelian trajectory as an "art after the end of art" (Arthur Danto); others, like Jameson, are more invested in postmodernity as the cultural logic of late capitalism or are even invoking a post-contemporaneity. For you, and I am again judging by some of your writings, contemporary art is more of a style; in fact, you call it an "art-historical period style" comparable to those in modernism (realism, impressionism, etc.).

TS: I want to devote most of this answer to the first questions, about Fredric Jameson and postmodernism, but let me quickly correct some points in your last paragraph. An art historiographical caveat: modern art discourse during the twentieth century abounded with terms, most of them contradictory and confusing. "Modernism" was one of them, but was rarely used until the mid-1960s, when Clement Greenberg launched a narrow understanding of it during a Voice of America broadcast in 1960.¹³ This viewpoint still echoes in the US today, whereas in most parts of the world "modernism" is applied to any art that seems (or seemed, if it is historical) to be in some sense more "advanced" or "up to date" than the art made

in that place before it. This usage is the opposite from Greenbergian reductivism. It is so expansionist as to be equally misleading.

More importantly, your last sentence states only part of my position on periodization. I argue that it is precisely, and only, certain elements of what I discern as the first of three currents in contemporary art that follow the logic of art historical periodization: Remodernism, the Sensationalists, and Spectacle Art and Architecture. We will discuss these in more detail when I respond to your next question. One might add to this list even more short-lived mini movements such as neo-geo, post-internet art, etc., etc. These are explicit carry-overs, reworkings, even renovations of earlier modernisms. The fact that they proliferate mostly within the main art centers, and do so for diminishing amounts of time, is, to me, just one sign among many that contemporary art is post-avantgarde. It has been since the 1980s. There will be no more Next Big Things (as Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art were). There are and will be many smaller things, and many more of them. This is because contemporary art operates according to a different, larger, “beyond art” (postconceptual) logic, that of differential multiplicity. Certainly, the art of the second current – of what I call transitional transnationality – challenges the inherited Western tropes of art history, so to that extent is still entangled with them. But it is mainly about independence, sovereignty, achieved contemporaneity. The artists of the third current, immersed in contemporary visual cultures, are mostly indifferent to post-Cold War geopolitical tropes and care less about art history more generally, although sometimes they do about a past moment, if it pops into view and seems interesting. I will elaborate on these currents in my next answer. The main point is that differential multiplicity prevails today. It is a function of deeper, world-transforming forces, those of our contemporary condition. My commitment to critical contemporaneity, you will see as I respond to your questions, is in line with my political commitments.

Turning to Fred Jameson. We all owe him an enormous debt. I have had the privilege of spending some time with him, on various occasions, but most memorably during a year at Duke University in 1997 and then again when I was at the National Humanities Center, North Carolina, in 2007–2008. I will never forget visiting his home in the countryside outside Durham, an Edward Hopper-style farmhouse in a wheat field, for a Thanksgiving meal, along with the editors of the *Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. We entered the building and stood in awe, as we could see immediately that every wall was lined with books, and that arrayed around the fireplace were hundreds of volumes, in multiple languages, each an edition of a work by Karl Marx.

To many readers, this might read like a scene from a distant past. Although I am ten years younger than Fred, we both experienced a time (the 1950s, the 1960s), formative for us, when modernization theory, the very idea of modernity as the biggest picture of the forces changing the world, was being advanced, by influential sociologists such as Daniel Bell and political scientists such as Walt Rostow. Of course, we saw straightaway that this was, in effect, a softer version of what was the real driver: predatory postwar capitalism, led by US companies. From Marxist perspectives, this was mystification 101, and was attacked as such. Even their enemies ritually concede that Marx and Engels were the outstanding analysts of capitalism during their time, and that many of their followers did the same for subsequent mutations, but this body of theory, with its absurd claim to be “post-

industrial” and “post-ideological,” sought greater, superior explanatory power. By the 1980s, however, as it achieved orthodoxy in the imperial centers, in the international agencies such as the UN, found adherents in the former colonies, in South America, in Africa and Asia, and was paralleled in the USSR, a different critical approach became necessary. I think of it as a strategy of substitution, a kind of “critical re-description” whereby you provide an account of the phenomenon – in this case, modernity in general, the forces of modernization, the experience of being modern, and modernist art practice and theory – that is better, more compelling, more informative, more accurate, than those offered by the apologists for orthodoxy. You do so, if you can, on the sites where powerful definitions are usually disseminated. You speak, in a relatively neutral, “objective” tone, from within the languages of modernity discourse, including those of postmodernism and poststructuralism. Although not badged as such – indeed, it presents itself as simply what is the case – your account is radical, critical, revolutionary (that is, Marxist) in its fundamental dimensions, and, you intend and hope, its effects. Of course, you risk becoming compromised, and of being accused of it. These are the trade-offs.

A small example. Published in 1996, the 34 volumes of the *Dictionary of Art* aspired to be an exhaustive encyclopedia, with entries by recognized experts on every known artist, architect, artistic technique, art center, and art concept (4,100 articles by 6,700 contributors from 120 countries). Fifteen years in the making, it combined a strong sense of the relative importance of artists, mediums, places, and ideas within a hierarchical, European-based, historical structure – reflected most sharply in the length of entries assigned to them – and a recognition that visual art of note and interest had been made throughout the world and across time. If Michelangelo was celebrated in a 30-page essay, over forty percent of the entries were devoted to non-Western subjects. Asked to write the entry on modernism, I insisted that it be accompanied by an entry on modernity. I wanted to make sure that the Communist Manifesto would be cited somewhere in those 34 volumes! The editors objected that such a subject was more suited to a dictionary of sociology, history, or politics, but they conceded in the end. Not least because I begin my “definition” of modernism with this:

Modernism. Term applied to the invention and the effective pursuit of artistic strategies that seek not just close but essential connections to the powerful forces of social MODERNITY. The responses of modernists to modernity range from triumphal celebration to agonized condemnation and differ in mode from direct picturing of the impacts of modernization to extreme renovations of purely artistic assumptions and practice. Such strategies – pursued by artists working individually or, often, in groups, as well as by critics, historians and theorists – occur in all of the arts, although in disjunctive forms and across varying historical trajectories. They have been strongest in painting, design and the MODERN MOVEMENT in architecture, highly significant in literature and in music, but quite muted in the crafts. They have echoes in aspects of commercial and popular culture. Despite being intermittent in their occurrence and unsystematic in nature, these strategies have been most effective in Europe and its colonies from the mid-19th century and in the USA from the early 20th, moving from the margins to the centre of visual cultures, from reactive radicality to institutionalized normality.¹⁴

The capital letters link to another entry. My next one began with these words:

Modernity. Term applied to the cultural condition in which the seemingly absolute necessity of innovation becomes a primary fact of life, work and thought. Modernity appeared first in Europe in the 16th century and became dominant in the mid-19th century, with enormous consequences for colonized non-European countries and for residual cultural formations in Europe. It has been described as the first truly “world” culture, universalizing in its ambitions and impact. Modernity is more than merely the state of being modern or the opposition between old and new. This article discusses the nature of modernity and its relation to art.¹⁵

Twenty-five years later, these entries remain in both the print and online editions. They are part of a ubiquitous reference tool, used even by institutions that embody modernist orthodoxy. It amuses me that even MoMA uses these entries for its online and actual visitors. Of course, they may not care, or even be paying attention to what is actually said in such a simple convenience.

A more significant example of an attempted strategic substitution, I think, is Fred’s idea that “postmodernism” expressed the “cultural logic” of “late capitalism.” During the 1990s, this was, to me and many others, the best big picture, the only viable “theory of everything” that saw with critical clarity the structural homologies between economic and cultural domains, that provided what he called a “cognitive mapping” of the base- and super-structure dynamic previously articulated by Raymond Williams.¹⁶ I think Jameson was actually describing postmodernity as late capital’s general condition, not postmodernism, which quickly became devalued by the spectacular superficialities performed in its name (in art, architecture, and theory). He should have switched to “postmodernity” as the term for his general theory, as David Harvey soon did.¹⁷ I recall putting that point to him in 1997, and receiving a grumpy assent, with remarks about it being too late to rename all the material that was out there already.¹⁸ He soon stretches postmodernity beyond what was becoming difficult to call “late capital” (because its self-destruction kept turning out to enable it still further, somewhere in the world) to encompass neoliberalism and globalization.¹⁹ Both he and Harvey were striving to save Marxism, leavened with many useful insights from poststructuralism, as the most relevant ground for critical analysis against the usual postmodernist claims that all of the modern “master narratives” had had their day, which left the field exposed to anything-goes and thus complicit contemporaneity. They also wanted to keep the door open for some future – at that moment hard to imagine – utopian politics, despite mounting evidence of the appalling failures of “actually existing socialism,” especially in what had only just become the former Soviet sphere. I was on board with all of that.

One difference between us was that Jameson’s theory of postmodernism mapped awkwardly on to the transformations in artistic practice that I was charting. In his great essay of 1984, “Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capital,” he is, of course, right about Warhol foregrounding late capital’s commodity fetishism. But then I recall he goes on to say if these works are not powerful and critical political statements, he does not know what would be. If they are not, he says, then one would have to wonder whether political, critical art was possible in

postmodernism.²⁰ Well, might he have wondered, because, apart from the race riot images, and the “Death in America” works of the early 1960s, Warhol was not simply ambivalent about commodity fetishism, he was right into it, more and more as he went on.²¹ If Fred was beguiled by Warhol (as so many others have been, and still are), he was unmatched in his articulation of what counts, and what discounts itself, as a realist art. He still is, as a brilliant recent essay on Karl Ove Knausgaard demonstrates.²²

As the 1990s unfolded, however, even these great world-historical theory-machines began to show their age. On the one hand, globalization was rampant, neoliberalism seemed to be winning, commodity capitalism was everywhere (even in China), and reactionary politics were in the ascendancy. In artworlds, postmodern banality (think Koons) and Young British shock jocks and jockettes fed these forces, creating a climate of anticipation, of emptying the future and forgetting the past as we waited, open-mouthed, for the next dose of art as entertainment. This was certainly contemporary, as it was constantly arriving, but it was empty, vacuous even, hungry for superficiality, resistant to anything that might stick, or obstruct, or ask a searching question. This is what I think of whenever I hear the phrase “the contemporary.” To me, it is a classic empty signifier, waiting to be filled by something, anything, except substantive content. Presentism is a kind of black hole. No reconceptualization is going on. Everything that happens becomes the same, and at the same time, amounts to nothing much. These attitudes, and this kind of contemporary art, seemed prevalent at the turn of the millennium. All of my efforts at that time, including the Artspace essay you mentioned earlier, were directed against them.

In those days I was also in intensive conversation with Jacques Derrida about “(democracy) to come.” He was seeking to engage, deconstructively, with pressing issues of European and, soon, world politics.²³ We talked about the ways in which contemporary art might be at its most contemporary when it was an “art to come.” In the preface to the 2001 essay you mention, *What is Contemporary Art? Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity, and Art to Come*, I cited a colleague’s shocked disbelief at my claim to be “a Marxist and a Deconstructionist.” Of course, this was, and is, an impossible methodological pairing, but I think, in their different ways, both Jameson and Derrida sought to put both into contention in order to find the weapons to tackle the antinomies of the time. In the conversations with Derrida I caught glimpses of another paradigm shift, of movement that even the most subtle “postmodern” and “poststructuralist” thinking was failing to see. I was also following Fred’s famous injunction “Always historicize!” I still try to draw on both legacies, thus the dialectic evoked in the title of my latest book, *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art*, which opens with a reprint of that essay from 2001.²⁴

At that time, however, changes seemed to be occurring on every register, too many for “postmodernity” to capture. In my country, the most significant artistic transformation was the becoming-contemporary of Indigenous art by Aboriginal Australians, often those working in remote communities. Multiple temporalities were in play: those of the moment, knowledges from the Dreaming, the modern history of colonization, and projective relationships between all of these. People tried to bring this art under every current art-historical label. The problem was that they all fitted, and none of them did. By 2000, this art was eclipsing the work of

even the Australian artists who were active on international circuits (most of whom were postmodernists), and it had begun to be the kind of art for which the country was best known abroad. It reversed Australian colonialism and it turned the cultural logic of provincialism on its head. It generated cross-cultural hybrids that have since changed the field of what it is to make art in Australia.²⁵

Parallel projects, other unexpected, historical flippings, seemed to occur in many parts of the world in the last decades of the twentieth century. I am thinking of the temporalities at play in postcolonial Africa, its eclecticism with respect to traditional imagery, available modernisms, and the forging of new forms. And the “invented histories” in Central and Eastern Europe that arose in post-Soviet times, such as Group Irwin’s *East Art Map*, Goran Djordjevic’s modernist fictions, Marina Gržinić’s (East of) Europe critique, and the remarkable curatorial and museological projects of Igor Zabel and Zdenka Badovinac at the Moderna Galerija and Metelkova in Ljubljana since the early 1990s.²⁶ You could say that these were postmodern strategies adopted from the West, which is half-true, and were oriented Westward, also half-true. But disqualifying the work because it engaged its contexts is too easy and is banal politics. Such complaints ignore the substantive achievements of these artists and curators, which are based on transforming their adoptions and adaptations into unique hybrids with a critical purchase and a transnational relevance. Such carping also takes for granted a local institutional setting, hard-won and rare, that invites rather than discourages deinstitutionalization.

Let me conclude an already too long answer by briefly mentioning one or two more of the factors that led to the conference in Pittsburgh in 2004 that you mention. Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee, and I posed this question: “In the aftermath of modernity, and with the passing of the postmodern, how are we to know and show what it is to live in the conditions of contemporaneity?”²⁷ The conference was adjacent to the Carnegie International Exhibition of that year, thus the emphasis on “showing” as well as “knowing,” and our subtitle *Antinomies of Art and Culture*. By proposing that we begin from within contemporaneity understood as a condition – not as a phase within modernity, or another name for postmodernity, certainly not as a historical period, nor an episteme – we were expressing resistance towards the closures of any kind of periodization. Recent events had made this imperative. It is hard, now, to recall the impact on the West of the 9/11 attacks. They seemed to open up the world’s pattern of power to unknowable chaos, and, in the same moment, insist on the priority of massively reductive fundamentalisms. Both sets of forces, both sides, converged on each other, as if they desired to be locked in place, like an explosion in freeze-frame, forever. It was a dialectical image of pure contemporaneity.²⁸

As you know, bin Laden first envisaged an assault on buildings in the US as he watched the bombing of Beirut by the American navy in 1982. The 9/11 attacks sent an unmistakable message: we, the Rest of the World, are your contemporaries; we too, are an unstoppable world-historical force; we will shape the future in contestation with you, from now on, forever. President George W. Bush got the message: his administration’s response was equally total, and eternalizing. The “war on terror,” entirely concentrated on the immanency of threat, was envisaged as a global machinery that would surveil, in principle, everything and everyone, wherever you are, at any time, and forever, in order to track you down, and, if you are

deemed a threat, eliminate you, instantly. Trump's assassination of the Iranian general Soleimani is a clumsy echo of this hubristic yet instantly flat-footed policy. The "war on terror" was fought in the interests of shock doctrine, crony capitalism that depended on promoting "creative destruction" at home and abroad, while maintaining a rigid governmentality, locked into late modern models of cultural conservatism at home and, in foreign policy, "realism" or "new sovereigntism" as a response to what they saw as a worldwide "clash of civilizations."²⁹ There are several distinct conceptions of modernity in contemporaneous play here, as Martin Jacques, among many others, has pointed out.³⁰ Nevertheless, this mix is what the regimes represented by Bush and Deng Xiaoping had in common then, and what those led by Li Xianting and Donald Trump share, even more ominously, today. Yet another reversal of what used to be the historical grain. Reactionary modernity, you might believe, is becoming contemporary again.

Question 3

A question about method, which seems to be particularly relevant when treating "contemporary art" as an "art of the world," or an art that "comes *from* the whole world," and "tries to imagine the world *as a differentiated yet inevitably connected whole*."³¹ I quote here one of your definitions of contemporary art from your 2011 book, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, where you also made an enormous effort in trying to grasp the multitude of shifts to contemporaneity on a *world* level. Thus your book is structured by regions and then by countries (I am listing from your table of contents the world regions: Euroamerica and Eastern Europe; South and Central America and the Caribbean; China and East Asia; India, South and Southeast Asia; Oceania; Africa; West Asia).

My question is, are you not concerned that such an approach may be too ambitious given the amount of knowledge and number of histories, cultures, languages, dialects, traditions, rituals, and religions involved? Don't you think that trying to grasp the conditions of the "art of the world" from a one-point perspective may be slightly utopian – in that good old "modernist" sense? This is also the problem of "global art history," it seems to me, for here too Western scholars often aspire to grasp the world's universality that could maybe only be made possible by some highly-technological-multi-cultural-*collective* effort of the kind made by Wikipedia? TS: Of course. But you have overlooked the very last words in *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, a "Note of Thanks" which addresses these issues directly. That is easy to do. I wrote it as the last paragraph of the Introduction, but it did not fit the page format, so it appears at the very end of the book. Let me quote it to you:

It will be obvious that this volume treats developments in art in many more parts of the world than is common in such texts. One individual cannot hope to grasp the depths of another culture, nor the richness of more than a few languages, so I acknowledge debts to scholars all over the world, especially to those dedicated to making the art of their countries known abroad – however reluctantly, but mercifully for me, nearly always in English. Without them, this enterprise could have scarcely begun. I share their concern with the inherent Euro-centrism of what has been dubbed "globish,"

so I have tried throughout to convey the main thrust of the narratives put forward by outstanding interpreters of art in each country and region. In nearly every case their views were forged in contest with other local interpretations, and different understandings of the operations of art internationally. These, too, I have tried to indicate. Of course, all such interpretations undergo constant revision, as situations change, as current art and sociopolitical realignments make even the most recent past seem different than what it was when directly experienced. The historical scope of each chapter attempts to capture these shifts as far as possible. I have made no effort to impose a meta-narrative, save that transparently set out in the introductory notes. My account is, I believe, built on respect for the local, as must be every genuine consciousness of contemporaneity.³²

While the book draws on decades of experience in artworlds in many parts of the world, I researched much of it, and wrote parts of it during 2007–2008 while at the National Humanities Center, which is located in what might be thought to be a peripheral place in the US, that is, in Durham, North Carolina. But this is a peripherality that is very connected to other ex-centric peripheries, each with a kind of global reach. I have already evoked Fredric Jameson's presence there. In stark contrast, neighboring the HRC in the Research Triangle Park were 170 or so "global companies," from IBM to "security" firms that supplemented the Iraq invasion. This proximity made long, contemplative walks in the forest there an interesting experience. For my purposes, however, the most important connectedness – more so than the Internet, itself a precondition for such books – was the remarkable service provided by the HRC librarians: they were able to borrow, at speed, publications of all kinds from anywhere in the world. For example, I could review a simply printed catalog of an exhibition in Damascus of feminist art by Syrian women, and that of Afshan Ketabchi's solo show in Tehran in 2004, as well as in-house booklets produced for art school-only exhibitions of work by women artists in Saudi Arabia. As a theme for one chapter, I was trying to look past the obvious point that in contemporary art in the Middle East, especially its diaspora, women artists (Shirin Neshat most evidently) were unusually prominent. How true was this in the region itself? It turned out that during the modern period, in most countries, only the most highly placed women were able to become exhibiting artists, and that subsequently this situation varied markedly from place to place. By 2000 this was changing to some degree, although still mostly for women artists in the diaspora.

Your remark about my having a "one-point perspective" is itself narrowly conceived. As you have been hearing throughout this conversation, I track the vicissitudes of three currents in contemporary art, the multiple interactions between them, and the hybrid spin-offs of those interactions. That is certainly a meta-narrative, but it is obviously multi-perspectival, as the first two currents are in an irresolvable dialectical opposition, and the third is antinomic to both, while the hybrid spin-offs are supplementary to the whole ensemble. The impossible conjunction of Marxism and deconstruction is still here. I argue that the world's current historical conjuncture requires it, as we try to register its continual supplementation.³³

There is, of course, an implicit politics built into any textbook. Above all, the authority of the publisher, in this case one of the English-speaking world's great conglomerates. And the authority of the author, speaking from a prestigious chair at a leading university in the US. As well, the practical limits, such as no more than 400 illustrations, might leave a sense that the canon is being reinforced, no matter how many unconventional works one might include. Finally, there is the awareness that the book is shaping courses being taught at universities and schools in many places around the world, bringing them under the hegemony. All these are factors destined to invite the kinds of resistances evident in your question. Fair enough. The option, however, is to leave the field to the prevailing powers: those of the market, the traditional institutions, and the relatively orthodox interpreters, speaking from and for the main centers. Instead, I go back to the substitutive strategy I outlined earlier. These days, survey textbooks have to have a globalist, or "global art history" framework built into them, or at least appear to do so. Yet they can, I believe, be used to propagate anti-globalist perspectives. Not just in the statements made in the text – in my case, overtly, throughout the introduction, and then in the chapters, one after the other – but also in their structure. The trade-off, again.

Contemporary Art: World Currents is actually structured in what is, I hope, a more subtle way than you depict in your question. It adopts a regionalist approach to local artworlds, using an oceans and continents framework, a kind of heuristic geography, to identify regions.³⁴ I treat developments in late modern art in the Euroamerican regions first, precisely because they set agendas for change throughout most of the rest of the world in the postwar period. While we have increasingly come to see that the art, the ideas, and the institutions in that region were less dominant than they appeared to be, they were nonetheless, as I argued in "The Provincialism Problem," systemically powerful. They were believed to be so by almost all agents at the time, no matter where they were in the world.

So, in the book I describe the transformations in late modern art (note the Mandelstam, Jamesonian echoes here) in their own terms, but also (for the first time, I believe) quiz them as to the kinds of contemporaneity that they evinced, and look closely for the ways in which they prefigured some elements within contemporary art, especially its clustering of different temporalities. I found that there is usually one element of this kind, one among several others that remain modern. For the Situationists, it was the emphasis on contra-spectacle yet highly temporary situatedness; for the Gutai group, it was concreteness; for Kaprow and the Happenings artists, for performance art, it was eventfulness, the being-there of the artists, their bodies in space as raw materials, and the audience, the immediacy of the lived experience for all involved. We also find contemporaneity in pop art's in-your-face simplicity of address; in minimalism's concentrated "what you see is what you see"; while in earth or land art, "deep time" is either disturbed or celebrated, and thus made present to the visitor. Conceptualism, as I said earlier, was committed to reconceiving art as such, but it sometimes did so (famously in Joseph Kosuth's works) by inviting a very quick bait-and-switch between image and idea. Political artists engaged directly with the public politics of the moment. Among them, feminist artists, while making art that foregrounded the immediacy and validity of women's experience, demanded acknowledgment as equals to their male counterparts, that is, they insisted on being contemporaries. This struggle continues, as it does for artists of color, and minority artists everywhere, and is far from over.

Overall, this part of the book charts how contemporary art was prefigured in elements of late modern, avant-garde art in Euroamerica.

After these preliminaries, the first part of the book outlines how fully-fledged contemporary art emerged in the Euroamerican world region, from the 1980s onwards. I deliberately started with the evocation, by German artists on both sides of the Wall, of wartime memories that had been repressed during the postwar period; went on to other archivists of such memories, such as Christian Boltanski; the restlessness of leading postmodernists, from Clemente through Salle to Basquiat; the sharp critiques of consumer culture offered by the critical postmodernists in the US; and the shock tactics of the Young British Artists, to me part of a larger tendency I label “Retro-Sensationalism.” Another substantial tendency within this current is what I call “Remodernism,” the reaching back, by artists earlier committed to open-form experimentality, to earlier modernist modes in an effort to renovate them: Richard Serra’s installation-sculptures are the most obvious, and persistent, example of this kind of continuity-via-reversion. There are many others: the British sculptors, the German “big” photographers, Jeff Wall’s art historicism. I also speak of Spectacle in the work of these artists (to whom we must add Matthew Barney), and in that of the architects who facilitated the museumization of these developments: Frank Gehry especially, one of the “starchitects,” masters and mistresses of elegant, crowd-pulling excess. These artists and architects did indeed turn Contemporary Art into a style, as you noted in an earlier question, and are the main carriers of one of its most powerful currents. But the same cannot be said of the artists discussed in the rest of the book, the two-thirds of it devoted to art sourced outside of Euroamerica, or which no longer takes remodernizing artworlds as agenda-setting centers.

The second part of the book takes off into other regions, tracing the transitions from traditional and modern art into contemporary modes in each place. As far as I could, I began with work by Indigenous artists, as colonization was, and is, what they had in common, as is often said. I accepted the reality that in each region one civilizational and eventually cultural formation usually had been dominant up to and including the modern era, when it became the preeminent nation in the area. Our contemporary condition has, however, opened up this pattern of power. In some cases, traditional factors of sheer size and historical weight mean that China, for example, continues to dominate the north Asia region, as does India in South Asia. In other regions, the power of Russia in relation to its former Soviet satellites waned as some of them moved towards membership of the EU and NATO, but it may wax again, in modified forms. Nevertheless, the local differences turn out to be more consequential than the few large-scale patterns that exist, none of which fit every situation.

We are in the midst of issues central to the project of your book. My take is that the overall shift to contemporary art was not a foreordained process but an incremental occurrence, an accumulation of local differences, a transition that is still going on, one that is likely to be never-ending, precisely because of its multiplicity. I found that distinct stories about the shift existed in each region, crucially shaped by their experiences of colonization. It is no surprise that, in most places, several story lines compete. Think of the 22 nations that constitute the region, usually called Latin America and the Caribbean, for example. There are Indigenous histories, millennia-long, and still in play. There are varied histories of colonization, with residual but

still powerful connections to the old imperial centers, however faded, and now provincial, those centers might be today. The local colonists have legacies six centuries in duration, including major *mestizo* and *mestiza* ones. Everyone cites Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as "an imagined community," it's canonical, but too many of us forget his other main argument, that the first imaginings of a separate community of this kind were those of the later-generation colonizers in South America who sought some degree of autonomy from distant, often incompetent, metropolitan governance while they went about the business of securing their interests inside the colonies themselves.³⁵ The modern nation state, in this sense, begins less from revolutionary violence against the aristocrats – that was to come, in Europe itself – more from the violence of land grabs, slavery, and systemic exploitation of Indigenous peoples and resources inside the South American colonies.

When can we speak, sensibly, of *modernist* art in this region? Obviously, the Mexican mural movement was a major part of a conscious nation-building enterprise from the 1920s onwards. It was *modernizing* in this clear sense, a major tendency within Modern art more generally. But Rivera deliberately stepped back from the remarkable Cubist paintings he did in Paris, in order to reach a broader audience. Meanwhile, Siqueiros sought a bolder synthesis of readable imagery and dynamic structures. Orozco even more so, while tackling more complex content, ambiguous politics, and reflexive affects – this mix was modernist, in my view. A similar set of modernist ambitions appears, sporadically, in the work of certain artists and groups, all across the continent and region, during the early and middle decades of the twentieth century: I am thinking of Xul Solar in Buenos Aires; Amando Reverón in Macuto, Venezuela; Vicente do Rego Monteiro in Rio and Recife; Joaquín Torres-García in Montevideo; Oswald de Andrade, Tarsila do Amaral, and the Antropofagists; and Group Madí in Argentina and Uruguay. The sporadic, and chancy, nature of these eruptions attests to the relative fragility of high modernist culture in the Americas at these times (true for the US as well). It was mainly an upper-class enterprise, practiced by members of the comprador elites, all of them cosmopolitans, well-connected to developments in Europe. It exemplifies Nestor Canclini's arguments that these elites were able to "enter and leave" modernity as it suited the cultural forces in play in their societies, each of which was partially and selectively modernizing, in its own way, according to its circumstances.³⁶

The most recent narrative about Latin American art argues that, since the 1950s and especially by the 1960s, modernist innovation was concentrated in major cities throughout the region – accumulating into avant-garde movements involving several artists, backed by state galleries and collectors – that paralleled and on occasion outstripped that being pursued in Europe. Mari-Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea argued this case, powerfully, in their major exhibition, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in America*, in 2004, at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts.³⁷ I was glad that they involved me in the debates about the show, and in the launch of the major infrastructural initiative, the International Center for the Arts of the Americas, which is based at that museum.³⁸ There are some fascinating, very complex interests in the art historical narratives that contest each other here. Mari-Carmen was schooled in Puerto Rico and the US, Héctor in Mexico. Both are classic Latin American *pensadores*. They bring this rich and volatile legacy to all that they do. Their argument is now widely accepted by historians of modern and contemporary art.

There is a pattern here, as we think of artistic developments throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Relatively sporadic and rare occurrences of avant-garde breakthroughs, often announced by manifestos, often from the peripheries, are followed by a concentration of artists in major cities, which leads to a degree of institutionalization (museums, markets, schools). Artworlds, we usually call them – and have done so, since the 1960s. In turn, this very structure provokes a slew of resistant, anti-institutional practices. These often originate in towns peripheral to the main centers.³⁹ Eventually, they are accommodated by the central art institutions, and shared with broader publics. The ensemble is fragile, and depends on constant, often radical renewal – of some of its parts, at least. The pattern plays out in different ways in each place throughout the world (including, again, the US: New York has only been able to act as a meta-artworld, as Ian McLean calls it, since the 1970s).⁴⁰ Simon Krell names them “situated modernisms,” which seems right to me as an account of how contemporary curators and historians of modern art see the historical situation today.⁴¹

Something like this is the meta-narrative of the “multiple modernities” project within current art historical studies. Researchers are rapidly filling in the picture. We are getting close to answering these key questions: Does the “multiple modernities” picture of modern art evolving differentially, yet with some connectivity, at the various art-producing sites around the world during the past two centuries accurately identify the major art historical causes of the densely networked globality, multiplicity, and diversity evident in contemporary art? Does this picture adequately articulate the uneven complexities of the worldwide move, in recent decades, into contemporary art? But we are not there yet. It will take, as you say, more work on the details, undertaken by many more people, for the total picture to emerge, for the paradigm to shift into a new place.⁴²

Meanwhile, we have to be watchful for self-deceiving anachronism. In recent decades, as these local patterns continue to evolve, more and more artists and other art-world agents are, while they rely on continuing legacies established by their predecessors, also able to establish a presence in artworlds elsewhere, in other localities, in regional centers, and even in global cities. There is a natural tendency on the part of younger historians to read this recent freedom of movement and increase in agency back into historical pasts, to see signs of it in the lives and work of the artists they study, to wish it for their artists, when it was not, in fact, as readily present. We need to respect the actuality of their struggles, not its mythology.

Zooming out again to your question about my approach, it seems to me that the “multiple modernities” project is, precisely, tracking the emergence and evolution of art within what I call the transnational transition, the second current of contemporary art, within decolonization as it has been playing out throughout the world since the 1950s. The central chapters of *Contemporary Art: World Currents* are devoted to the same task: showing how the various local traditional, modern, and modernist art tendencies became contemporary – in so far as I could, given the state of research, publication, and exhibition that my colleagues have achieved.

As you also know, I also discern a third current in contemporary art, the most recent, most emphatically emergent one. Let sketch it briefly, for readers who may not be aware of the argument, as my overall approach comes into view only with the three currents, and their constant interaction, in mind. The artists whose work I group into this third current are mostly of a younger generation than those who

shaped the first two. Their geopolitical world picture is less shaped by echoes of Cold War antagonisms, more by new media connectivity, the distributed chaos of global adjacency. They explore concerns – about self-fashioning within competing arrays of fixed and chimerical identities, their immediation within network cultures, economic precarity, uncertain futurity, and the facts of already occurring global warming – that they feel personally yet share with others, particularly of their generation, throughout an increasingly connected, yet politically fissured, and physically fragile world. The final chapters of *Contemporary Art: World Currents* are devoted to these issues. Each begins with discussions of work by artists of the previous generation who were active in Euroamerica, China, and elsewhere yet took critical, worldly, politically engaged perspectives. For world picturing I discuss the work of Chen Zhen, Allan Sekula, and Thomas Hirschhorn, before going on to artists such as Zoe Leonard, Paul Chan, Mark Bradford, and Santiago Sierra. In the chapter on climate change I begin with Helen and Newton Harrison, Charles Ross, Andy Goldsworthy, Maya Lin, and others as a prelude to the work of Olafur Eliasson, The Institute for Figuring, Marjetica Potrč, Michael Rakowitz, Trevor Paglen, Patricia Piccinini, and Emily Floyd. Considering social media and temporalities, I begin with iCinema, Pierre Huyghe, Candide Breitz, and Alfredo Jaar followed by that of Blast Theory, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Tacita Dean, Isaac Julien, and Fiona Tan. I say more about this evolving current in more recent books, such as *Art to Come* (2019), but they focus on art beyond the scope of this book.

Returning, finally, to your point about perspective and one's speaking position. It is true I am enormously enabled by my personal and professional locations being primarily in Pittsburgh, Sydney, New York, and, in the summer for EGS seminars, Saas-Fee, Switzerland. Does this automatically make my approach a mainstream, Westernist imposition? Inevitably, in some of its dimensions. But there are others in play. While I articulate this story as a set of historical hypotheses about how art is developing in and through our times, I argue that these artistic developments are themselves manifestations of deeper currents that are also discernable in geopolitics, cultural shifts, the movements of peoples, changes in the climate, and in the evolution of the earth. These are not what Michel-Rolfe Touillot calls "North Atlantic universals."⁴³ Nor are they subjective fantasies. On the contrary, they are the processes through which the world questions itself. None of us can invent any of this. It is the world as it is; it is that which is the case; it is the world as it presents itself to itself, including but not especially to us. No one can succeed in narrowing it, to serve their perceived interests, no matter how hard they try.

As the quotation at the beginning of this answer makes clear, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* was written in the third person plural, not singular. I am one among several other artists, critics, historians, and writers about art today, including you and the contributors to this book, who are filling in the details of the world's self-mapping when it comes to the practice of art, the art of curating, of criticism, theorization, and art history as a discipline. You are right to imply that few other people are in the position, or crazy enough, to take on the role of making explicit the meta-narrative that underlies, and shapes, what is a vast collective enterprise. I have been disappointed in that regard, particularly by my generation of art historians. Some younger people are beginning to take it on, I am glad to say: Christine Ross in Montreal, for example, and perhaps David Joselit and Alexander Alberro, who have work in progress.⁴⁴ The larger, discipline-wide, but

more likely interdisciplinary enterprise will, in the end, tell the real story. But it will always need generalists, and connection-makers, to offer ideas that make sense of the particulars, and to steer the discourse away from the attractions of the quick sale and the comforting narrative. And from retreat into particularity, where only small-scale change is possible.

Of course, I try to weigh the evidentiary scales against the conventional canons, towards the art that embraces criticality, freedom, revolution. Doubtless, this is a kind of utopianism about (at least some) of the art to come. You cite my characterization of drives within contemporary art as being *of* the world (as a differentiated and connected whole). But I also say – as the other elements of the syllogism – that, wherever one is located, one is necessarily receiving art *from* the (rest of) the world, and that one's own art reaches *to* (other parts of) the world. If it is truly contemporary, an art to come, it will be an art *for* the world, the world as it should become. This, too, is utopian, but it has left modern utopias (and especially modernist ones) far behind. It is directed towards the creation of the kind of planetary consciousness that the world needs now. I believe that this is coming about through processes of world questioning, some that have been with us for decades, centuries even, but many are being freshly-minted all the time. They emerge within the currents, but the most suggestive ones are being generated between these currents. Here is a world question: Is this conjunction bringing into being yet another contrary, antinomic, impossible theoretical object: the contemporary composition? The short answer: yes, as it must.

Notes

- 1 Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art? Contemporary Art, Contemporaneity and Art to Come*, Critical Issues Series 6 (Sydney: Artspace Visual Art Center Ltd, 2001) [unpaginated].
- 2 Terry Smith, "The Provincialism Problem," *Artforum* 13, no. 1 (September 1974): 54–59.
- 3 Terry Smith, "The Provincialism Problem: Then and Now," *ARTMargins* 6, no. 1 (February 2017): 6–32.
- 4 Luiz Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss, *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s to 1980s* (New York, NY: Queens Museum, 1999), viii.
- 5 Terry Smith, "Peripheries in Motion: Conceptualism and Conceptual Art in Australia and New Zealand," in *Global Conceptualism*, eds. Camnitzer, Farver, and Weiss, 87–95.
- 6 Terry Smith, *One and Five Ideas: On Conceptual Art and Conceptualism*, ed. Robert Bailey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 26.
- 7 The most succinct formulation may be found in Terry Smith, "One and Three Ideas," *e-flux Journal* 29 (November 2011): 51–58; www.e-flux.com/journal/one-and-three-ideas-conceptualism-before-during-and-after-conceptual-art/
- 8 A parallel inquiry has been pursued by Peter Osborne in books such as *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013) and *The Postconceptual Condition* (London: Verso, 2018).
- 9 Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
- 10 See Peter Galison, *Einstein's Clocks, Poincaré's Map: Empires of Time* (New York, NY: Norton, 2003).
- 11 I am referring to the 2004 symposium "Modernity ≠ Contemporaneity: Antinomies of Art and Culture after the Twentieth Century," which was organized at the University of Pittsburgh and materialized in the volume *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity,*

- Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 12 Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011), 11.
- 13 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," [1960] in *Clement Greenberg, the Collected Essays and Criticism*: vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85–93.
- 14 Jane Turner ed., *The Dictionary of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 777–778; at doi: 10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T058785.
- 15 Jane Turner ed., *The Dictionary of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 778–779; at doi: 10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T058788.
- 16 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press [1991], 2003); Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *New Left Review*, no. 82 (November 1973): 3–16; also in his *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980): 30–49.
- 17 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Social Change* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1992).
- 18 In his 1994 book *The Seeds of Time*, Jameson acknowledges that postmodernism had become a style within cultural fields, and therefore its life will be limited, while insisting that postmodernity remains the best general term for post-Fordism or late capitalism. See Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 185, 203. In 2015 he admits that "the word I should have used was not postmodernism but postmodernity: for I had in mind not a style but a historical period, one in which all kinds of things, from economics to politics, from the arts to technology, from daily life to international relations, had changed for good," "The Aesthetics of Singularity," *New Left Review*, no. 92 (March–April 2015), 101–132, 104.
- 19 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 210. By 2002, in his *A Singular Modernity*, Jameson had dropped the term "postmodernism" altogether, while retaining postmodernity as his preferred concept for historicizing the globalized, neo-liberal present. Alexander Dunst provides a forensic review of the shifts in Jameson's thinking during this period in "Late Jameson, or, After the Eternality of the Present," *New Formations* 65 (Autumn, 2008): 105–118.
- 20 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 9.
- 21 Jameson goes on to accurately identify a "waning of affect" in postmodern culture, and acutely sees Warhol's earlier work, such as the electric chairs series, as thematizing it. In his essay "Enervation, Viscerality: The Fate of the Image in Modernity," introduction to *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era*, ed. Terry Smith (Sydney: Power Publications; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1–38, Smith reads this as an enervation effect.
- 22 Fredric Jameson, "Itemised," *London Review of Books* 40, no. 21 (September 2018), at www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n21/fredric-jameson/itemised.
- 23 As he does in Paul Patton and Terry Smith eds., Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction Engaged: The Sydney Seminars* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2001.)
- 24 Terry Smith, *Art to Come: Histories of Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). The Introduction to this book contextualizes Smith's writings within the situation around 2000 in further detail.
- 25 See "Country, Indigeneity, Sovereignty: Australian Aboriginal Art," in Smith, *Art to Come*, 156–197.
- 26 Aleš Erjavec ed., *Postmodernism and the Postcolonial: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Marina Gržinić, *Situated Contemporary Art Practices: Art, Theory, and Activism from (the East) of Europe* (Frankfurt am Main and Ljubljana: Revolver and ZRC, 2004); Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder ed., *Who If Not We Should at Least Try to Image the Future of All This? 7 Episodes on (Ex)changing Europe* (Amsterdam: Artimo/Gijs Stork, 2004); Zdenka Badovinac, *Comradeship: Curating Art in Post-Socialist Europe* (New York, NY: Independent Curators International, 2019).

- 27 Smith, Enwezor, and Condee eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, xiii.
- 28 Having arrived in the US on September 10, for a year-long fellowship at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, Smith ditched his plan to look for the sources of modernist abstraction in the dislocative structures of vision, the *subjectiles*, in late nineteenth-, early twentieth-century art, and instead devoted the following years to tracking the impacts of 9/11 on architectural practice and theory. The result was Terry Smith, *The Architecture of Aftermath* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- 29 See, respectively, Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York, NY: Picador, 2007); Peter J. Spiro, "The New Sovereignists: American Exceptionalism and Its False Prophets," *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 6 (November–December 2000): 9–15; and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996).
- 30 Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New World Order* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2009).
- 31 Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, 23.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 348.
- 33 These methodological points are discussed in more detail in Terry Smith, *The Contemporary Composition* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016), and in the concluding chapters to *Art to Come*.
- 34 Smith used Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigan, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997) as a guide.
- 35 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [1983] (London: Verso, rev. ed. 2016).
- 36 Nestor Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* [1995] (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
- 37 Mari-Carmen Ramírez and Héctor Olea eds, *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press for the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, 2004).
- 38 Héctor Olea and Mari-Carmen Ramírez eds., *Versions and Inversions: Perspectives on Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* (Houston, TX: Museum of Fine Arts, 2006).
- 39 See also Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).
- 40 Ian McLean, "The World Art Artworld," *World Art* 1, no. 2 (September 2011): 161–169.
- 41 Simon Knell, "Modernisms; Curating Art's Past in the Global Present," in *The Contemporary Museum; Shaping Museums for the Global Now*, ed. Simon Knell (London: Routledge, 2019), 31.
- 42 Smith examines these questions in detail in "Art History's Work-in-pro(re)gress 1: Reflections upon the Multiple Modernities project," in *New Histories of Art in the Global Postwar Era: Multiple Modernisms*, eds. Flavia Frigeri and Kristian Handberg (London: Routledge, 2020).
- 43 Michel-Rolph Trouillet, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 35. He explicitly discusses "fictions" such as Modernity in these terms.
- 44 The introduction and Chapter 12 of *Art to Come* are devoted to these questions.

Part II



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Case Study 1

Nove Tendencije 2 [New Tendencies 2], Gallery of Contemporary Art Zagreb, 1963

By Ivana Bago

Exhibition Title

Nove Tendencije 2 [New Tendencies 2]

Location and Date

Zagreb, Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, August 1–September 15, 1963.

Organizers

Almir Mavignier (painter), Matko Meštrović (art critic), Radoslav Putar (art critic), Božo Bek (gallery director), Boris Kelemen (gallery curator).

Organization

Galerija suvremene umjetnosti [Gallery of Contemporary Art]

Artists

Marc Adrian, Vojin Bakić, Martha Boto, Enrico Castellani, Andreas Christen, Toni Costa, Carlos Cruz-Diez, Hugo Rodolfo Demarco, Piero Dorazio, Equipo 57 (Juan Cuenca, Ángel Duarte, José Duarte, Augustín Ibarrola, Juan Serrano), Héctor García-Miranda, Karl Gerstner, Getulio, Gerhard von Graevenitz, Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (Julio Le Parc, François Morellet, Garcia Rossi, Francisco Sobrino, Joël Stein, Yvaral), Gruppo N (Alberto Biasi, Ennio Chiggio, Edoardo Landi, Manfredo Massironi), Gruppo T (Giovanni Anceschi, Davide Boriani, Gianni Colombo, Gabriele de Vecchi, Grazia Varisco), Dieter Hacker, Rudolf Kärer, Julije Knifer, Vlado Kristl, Heinz Mack, Enzo Mari, Almir Mavignier, Gotthart Müller, Herbert Oehm, Henk Peeters, Ivan Picelj, Otto Piene, Uli Pohl, Karl Reinhartz, Vjenceslav Richter, Helge Sommerrock, Aleksandar Srnec, Klaus Staudt, Miroslav Šutej, Paul Talman, Luis Tomasello, Günther Uecker, Gregorio Vardanega, Ludwig Wilding, Walter Zehring.

Exhibition Catalog and Publications

Nove Tendencije 2 [New Tendencies 2], Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 1963; François Molnár and François Morellet, *Nove Tendencije 2. Za progresivnu apstraktnu umjetnost* [New Tendencies 2. For a progressive abstract art], Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 1963.

Introduction

New Tendencies, an international art movement anchored in a series of exhibitions and symposia that took place between 1961 and 1973 at the Galerija Suvremene Umjetnosti [Gallery of Contemporary Art] in Zagreb, occupies a legendary place within Croatian and Yugoslav art histories, marking a time when the local art scene was not only on a par with international developments, but acted as a leading protagonist in instituting new trends and posing critical questions on the relations between art, science, and society. In the words of art critic Ješa Denegri, the first *New Tendencies* exhibition was “probably the only moment when an international artistic avant-garde of its time saw its first gathering in an exhibition initiated and organized by experts who worked in one of our cultural institutions and around it.”¹ The exhibition brought together artists from different parts of Europe working in the field of what would soon fit under a number of different terminological umbrellas – gestalt art, kinetic art, programmed art, op-art, neo-constructivist art – and who were mainly unaware of each other’s experiments. For this reason, the event was marked by a sense of discovery and a belief that something truly novel and transformative was taking place in the field of art – which at the same time also implied, or rather called for, a new social reality. This programmatic character of the New Tendencies movement became explicit only in the second exhibition, in 1963, which will therefore be more closely analyzed here and proposed as the catalyst of the birth of “contemporary art” in Yugoslavia. However, the paradigm of contemporary art it expounded was in contradiction to the dominant trends in Western Europe and North America, and was also imbricated in the utopian potential of the Yugoslav search for an authentic socialism.

New Tendencies were a result of the visit of the Brazilian painter Almir Mavigner to Zagreb in 1960, where he encountered a number of Zagreb critics and curators who all shared the same dissatisfaction with the art being shown at the Venice Biennale that year – predominantly Art Informel, an already well-established paradigm within European art institutions and the art market. The idea for the first *New Tendencies* exhibition (1961) developed out of Mavigner’s proposal to present new ideas emerging in the studio experiments of artists such as Heinz Mack and Otto Piene (members of the Zero group in Germany), François Morellet in France, Gruppo N [Group N], and Enrico Castellani and Piero Manzoni of *Azimuth* magazine in Italy. The work of Zagreb artists such as Julije Knifer, Ivan Picelj, Aleksandar Srnec (the latter two members of group Exat 51, which pioneered abstract art in Yugoslavia in the early 1950s) showed that like-minded experiments were also taking place in the local context. Such experiments enjoyed the enthusiastic support of art critics Matko Meštrović and Radoslav Putar, who were among the organizers of all five *New Tendencies* exhibitions between 1961 and 1973.² In the period between the first and second exhibition, New Tendencies was perceived as a movement, whose participants sought to delineate its aesthetic and ideological boundaries by writing manifestoes and organizing smaller exhibitions. Most protagonists of the first exhibition reappeared in the second one, with the addition of many new names, including four new local participants. What brought their works together was an approach to art-making grounded in the idea of “scientification of art,” or art conceived as “visual research.” In practice, this included experiments with mathematically devised

geometric patterns, the use of industrial materials, and play with light, movement, and optical effects. The anonymity implied by the calculated, abstract forms and the mass-produced materials was seen to be in radical opposition to the individualism expounded by the dominant tendencies of the 1950s, such as Informel, lyrical abstraction, and abstract expressionism. Already in 1959, Matko Meštrović defined such art as nothing but “lyrical flickering,” which defies any effort toward an active participation in society, and instead identifies the fatality of its individual destiny with the vague laws of the cosmos.³

Contrary to that, the series of short artists’ statements published in the catalog testify to a will to create, as Ivan Picelj wrote, a “concrete,” “constructive,” and “active” art, which “direct(s) creative forces to positive social action,” and which is “international and universal.”⁴ Karl Gestner placed an emphasis on the viewer, noting that this kind of “social art” is “for everyone” and “especially for the spectator, who wants to be a partner in a work of art.”⁵ Gestalt theory and its emphasis on the interaction between the form and the observing consciousness, Giulio Carlo Argan’s notion of “art as research” and Umberto Eco’s notion of the “open work” were familiar references to New Tendencies participants, and industrial production (including reproduction and multiples) was seen as one of the means of achieving art that was affordable and accessible to everyone. The aim was to demystify art, as the members of GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel) explicitly called for in one of their manifestoes that preceded the second exhibition.⁶ However, there was a healthy dose of self-critique and an awareness of the obstacles that all those aims implied. François Morellet admitted that the “Nouvelle Tendance” was turning into an art fashion that would inspire social housing facades and table mats, but still he concluded, rather dramatically, that the principles promoted by the movement represented “the ultimate hope.”⁷ Gruppo N pointed to the rift between art and society, noting that the relation between the artist and artwork had to be transformed before an analogous change in the relation between art and society could take place. The art market was identified as the main obstacle to such a change.⁸

The lack of an art market in socialist Yugoslavia thus meant at least a temporary removal of this obstacle. Following the 1948 Tito-Stalin break and Yugoslavia’s expulsion from the COMINFORM, the country was left in an uncomfortable position, without an economic and political ally in the Cold War, but it ultimately resolved this situation by claiming neutrality and co-founding the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, together with the decolonizing countries of the Third World. Yugoslav communists also proclaimed a return to the original principles of Marxism, by devising and implementing the politics of economic self-management, in which workers governed the companies and the factories, while the state was meant to “wither away.”⁹ The state also relinquished its authority over matters of art, instructing that all matters of style, form, and content should be resolved in a “battle of opinions.”¹⁰ Such an idiosyncratic politics – a promise of socialism purged of the stain of Stalinism – brought the country numerous fans in the international arena, and particularly among the artists who identified with the leftist agenda.

This agenda was more or less explicitly articulated in the second *New Tendencies* exhibition. In his introductory text, the curator Matko Meštrović identified “equal distribution of all material and spiritual goods” as the fundamental social problem.

Art and science should thus both work – and work together – toward overcoming their alienation from the average human being, even if this means the abolishing of art as a separate social activity. The programmatic text “For a Progressive Abstract Art” by François Molnár and François Morellet, published as an appendix to the catalog, sought to articulate a productive relationship between Marxism and abstract art, albeit by creating a dogmatic binary that distinguished progressive from reactionary abstract art. However, from the perspective of the cultural Cold War in which abstraction ended up being used as the symbol of the “free world,” such Marxist appropriation of abstract art is of exceptional significance. This move naturally also entailed the reactivation of the tradition of the Soviet and European avant-garde, which was listed in the catalog’s “Calendar” that traced the precedents of the New Tendencies movement. In short, and as Ješa Denegri has astutely noted, Zagreb did not merely offer its organizational resources to the participants in the emergent international avant-garde in Zagreb, but “first of all ideological and political conditions,” so that the very initiation of the movement in Zagreb, in Yugoslavia in the early 1960s was also understood as a “political act.”¹¹

The enthusiasm about the idiosyncratic Yugoslav path to socialism would dissipate by the late 1960s, when all its contradictions, including its heavy reliance on Western loans and an increasing economic liberalization coupled with an acute problem of unemployment, would come to the fore. Similar contradictions were obvious in the development of New Tendencies and the increasingly successful and profitable art careers of many of its participants. In fact, as a result of the financial pressures and the idea of partial self-financing that “self-management” and the democratization of cultural institutions entailed, in 1961 the Gallery of Contemporary Art founded its own “Commercial Department.” As Ana Kutleša’s research has shown, this was a clear sign of the introduction of market principles into cultural institutions, as the basic function of the Department was to “place high-quality artistic creations on both the domestic and foreign markets.”¹² However, all these processes were just beginning to take shape behind the scenes, and for a brief moment, between 1961 and 1963 and the first two *New Tendencies* exhibitions, there existed the idea that a new art, independent of both the market and the state, could arise in what also promised to be a new society.

The discourse of New Tendencies does not involve an explicit elaboration of the idea of “contemporary art” – in fact, the movement insisted on abandoning the very notion of art in favor of “visual research.” However, the New Tendencies’ emphasis on art’s participation in addressing the contemporary issues of the world, its call for the demystification and democratization of art, its blurring of the boundaries between different artistic media, the advocacy of collective work, as well as the emphasis on “program” and not execution, its openness to theory, technology and science, its internationalism, all recall key facets of what is today known as contemporary art, and whose historical evolution is often linked to changes that arose with conceptual art. The history of New Tendencies, however, reveals that it qualifies for an analogous place in the genealogies of contemporary art, and one that presented a promise of a different kind of “contemporary,” a non-aligned, yet decidedly leftist and market-free contemporary.

Finally, “contemporary art” (*suvremena umjetnost*) was obviously stated to be the mission of the institution that hosted New Tendencies, the Gallery of Contemporary

Art (Galerija suvremene umjetnosti) in Zagreb. Founded in 1954, it was among the first institutions in the world to use “contemporary art” as part of its name. Peter Osborne states this fact as support for his claim that “the distinction between modern and contemporary was first stabilized after 1945 not in Western art history, but in Eastern Europe, as part of the Soviet reaction against the categories of modernity and modernism.”¹³ This was, however, not part of the agenda of the Zagreb Gallery (and today Museum) of Contemporary Art, which came into being in the early 1950s, following Yugoslavia’s exit from the Eastern Bloc and the consequent abandoning of the paradigm of socialist realism and the triumph of modern art in sync with the latest Western European trends.

The founding of the Gallery of Contemporary Art in 1954 did imply an opposition to the “modern” (*moderno*) but only as an opposition to the existing Gallery of Modern Art in Zagreb (Moderna Galerija), operating within the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts. In the monograph celebrating the first 30 years of the Gallery of Contemporary Art, Božidar Gagro wrote:

The contemporary vs. modern! ... the foregrounding of contemporaneity in the place of the otherwise satisfactory concept of modernity, which was already present in the name of the Academy’s Gallery [i.e., the Gallery of Modern Art], embodied from the start both a practical and programmatic thesis ... that the new gallery would promote “contemporary” things, those which belong to the times that are now and that are yet to be, but at the same time it contained an implicit thesis that the program of the Gallery of Modern Art was not contemporary!¹⁴

The terms modern and contemporary thus seem to have been interchangeable for the Gallery of Contemporary Art: the contemporary was merely the present-day life of the tradition of the modern. The Gallery of Contemporary Art was, according to the same author, to be

open to experiment, to an innovation and restoration of artistic expression, open to contemporaneity and the tradition of modernity, to an art which had only gained its citizenship rights in the early 1950s in the Western world. And in the socialist world, to which Yugoslavia, despite the break with Stalinism, belonged, this kind of art represented a new, previously negatively marked phenomenon.¹⁵

This link between the Gallery’s idea of contemporaneity and Western modernity is revealed clearly by one of the landmark exhibitions staged by the Gallery in the 1950s: *Suvremena umjetnost I: didaktička izložba: apstraktna umjetnost* (Contemporary Art I: didactic exhibition: abstract art), which opened in 1957 and which traveled to a number of other towns and cities in Yugoslavia. The “didactic” aspect of the exhibition clearly meant to prepare the Yugoslav audiences for what the “contemporary” in the Gallery’s title implied, as it presented them with the illustrated history of abstract art since the late nineteenth century. However, this history was the canonical Western history of modern art, opening with the translated reproduction of Alfred J. Barr’s diagram of modern art and recounting the birth of resistance to realism at the end of the nineteenth century. The catalog

text cited the French painter and critic Michel Seuphor, who instructed the viewer to give in to the “song” of painting: “Let it guide us and let us open our senses, let us abandon our intellectual baggage in order to freely enjoy: and our reason that guides us will not suffer in the process.”¹⁶ Obviously, such an invitation to a free joyride is a far cry from the idea of a socialist, and especially Soviet socialist, aesthetics. It is also in complete opposition to the aesthetics of *New Tendencies*, which aimed precisely to bring back the “intellectual baggage” in order to halt the “lyrical flickering” of late modern Western European and American abstract art.

If judged by the evidence cited above, Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb did not arise as a socialist opposition to this kind of individualized and anti-rational modernism, originating in the West. However, with the inauguration of the *New Tendencies* exhibitions, and especially its 1963 edition, it clearly positioned itself as the leading voice in formulating an alternative to it. And it was then that this voice became implicated in the quest for a political alternative, an authentic Yugoslav socialism.

Selected Archival Documents and Artist Projects



Figure 1.1 Poster for *New Tendencies 2* exhibition designed by Ivan Picelj, 1963. Courtesy of Anja Picelj Kosak

pojedinci, grupe i izložbe koji su indirektno ili direktno prethodili pojavama u okviru novih tendencija.

- 1914. — giacomo balla: plastico mobile
- 1915. — vladimir jevgrafovič tatlin: kontrareljefi
- 1920. — marcel duchamp: staklene ploče u rotaciji
- 1921. — johansen: konstrukcija u ravnoteži
- 1926. — josef albers: transformacije na plohi
- 1930. — moholy-nagy: svjetlosni rekvizit
- 1931. — wladyslaw strzeminski: unističke kompozicije
- 1932. — alexander calder: dancing torpedo shape
- 1933. — bruno munari: nepotrebna mašina br. 2.
- 1935. — moholy-nagy: prostorni modulator
- 1938. — victor vasarely: studija pokreta
- 1941. — o harriet heiner: kinetička skulptura
- 1943. — piet mondrian: victory boogie woogie
- 1948. — jean tingely: prva geometrijska djela s motorom
- 1951. — zagreb, osnovana grupa »exat 51«
- 1952. — milano, galerija annunciata: izložba »mac« djela u kretanju, promjenljive slike, prostorni modulatori
- 1953. — jaacov agam: slike u pokretu i promjenljive slike
- 1953. — pol bury: slika u pokretu
- 1953. — bruno munari: direktne i polarizirane projekcije
- 1955. — charles eames: »do nothing« — mašina sa sunčanim motorom
- 1955. — paris, galerija denise rené: izložba »pokrete«
- 1956. — enzo mari: djela sa višestrukim efektima
- 1956. — karl gerstner: tangencijalni ekscenter
- 1957. — paris, osnovana grupa »equipo 57«
- 1959. — len lye: opipljiva skulptura u pokretu
- 1959. — antwerpen galerija g 58 hessenhuis: izložba — vision in motion
- 1959. — paris, prva izložba pokretljivih i umnoženih djela »mat«
- 1960. — bruno munari: kontinuirane strukture
- 1960. — diter rot: promjenljiva djela
- 1960. — r. j. soto: djela s kinetičkim efektom
- 1960. — milano, galerija danese: izložba pokretljivih i umnoženih djela »mat«
- 1960. — padova, osnovana grupa n
- 1960. — paris, osnovana grupa za istraživanje vizuelne umjetnosti
- 1960. — milano, galerija pater: izložba miriorama 1.
- 1960. — milano, galerija danese: izložba pokretljivih i umnoženih djela mat
- 1960. — zürich, kunstgewerbemuseum: izložba kinetička umjetnost
- 1960. — tokyo, nacionalni muzej moderne umjetnosti: projekcije polarizirane svjetlosti (bruno munari) uz elektronsku muziku (toru takemitsu)
- 1961. — amsterdam, stedelijk museum, izložba: bewogen beweging
- 1961. — zagreb, gradska galerija suvremene umjetnosti: izložba nove tendencije 1.
- 1961. — stockholm, moderna museet: rörelse i konsten
- 1961. — copenhagen, louisiana museum, izložba: bevagelse i kunsten
- 1961. — tokyo, galerija minami: izložba grupa t.
- 1962. — milano, venecija, rim, trst, düsseldorf
izložba: programirana umjetnost.
- 1963. — milano, torino, izložba s one strane slikarstva i skulpture

Figure 1.2 Calendar: individuals, groups, and exhibitions, which indirectly or directly preceded the phenomena encompassed by New Tendencies. Page from the exhibition catalog *Nove Tendencije 2*.

Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb



Figure 1.3 *New Tendencies 2*, exhibition opening. Getulio Alviani and Eugenio Carmi in front of *Fluid Structure* (1961) by Gianni Colombo.

Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

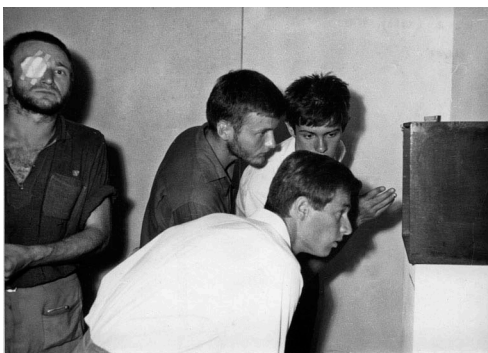


Figure 1.4 *New Tendencies 2*, exhibition opening. Visitors interacting with artworks. Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

<p style="text-align: center;">I</p> <p>1/ Kako gledate na radove koji su prisutni na ovoj izložbi? Smatrate li ih umjetničkim djelima? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne djelima avangarde? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne zanimljivim istraživanjima? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne tradicionalnom umjetnošću? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne igrarijama? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne bezvrijednim djelima? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne ili za što? <u>AKTUELNO</u> <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne</p> <p>2/ Koja bi po Vašem mišljenju bila idealna namjena ovih radova i gdje bi bilo njihovo mjesto? u muzejima? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne umjetničkim galerijama? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne javnim zgradama? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne privatnim kolekcijama? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne stambenim zgradama? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne u primijenjenoj umjetnosti? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne u Vašem stanu? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne ili gdje? <u>ARHITEKTURA</u> <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne</p> <p>3/ Kakva se veza uspostavlja između Vas i ovih radova? racionalna? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne osjećajna? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne prije svega vizuelna? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne nikakva? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne ili kakva? <u>ETOS</u> <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne</p> <p>4/ Kako se odnosite prema izložbi? sa simpatijom? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne indiferentno? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne s mržnjom? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne radošću? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne ispunja li Vas nekim? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne osvrjeđuje li Vas? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne uzbuđuje li Vas? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne ili kako? <u>OPTIMIZMA</u> <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">III</p> <p>9/ Označite 5 djela koja ste najviše zapazili: 1. <u>TRAV. BOSTA</u> 2. <u>KARL BECHHART</u> 3. <u>COUL - NEI</u> 4. <u>MAKS ADAMIAN</u> 5. <u>STIVULO</u> <u>JULIO LE PAPE</u></p> <p>10/ Označite tri djela koja Vam se najmanje sviđaju: 1. <u>.....</u> 2. <u>.....</u> 3. <u>.....</u></p> <p>11/ Još nekoliko pitanja: vjerujete li u usamljenog i izoliranog umjetnika? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne smatrate li akt stvaranja likovnih djela nekim nadnaravnim? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne prihvaćate li kategoriju "umjetničko djelo"? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne jeste li za tradicionalne umjetničke oblike /elike i skulpture/? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne gledate li ove radove sa stanališta <u>političkog</u> ili antičističkog odnošenja? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne mislite li da bi ova istraživanja kao jednostavn ljudska aktivnost mogla naći svoje mjesto u društvu? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne da li Vas nestabilnost ovih nedefiniranih djela udaljuje od Vašeg uobičajenog načina vrednovanja? <input checked="" type="radio"/> da <input type="radio"/> ne</p> <p>Vaše zanimanje: <u>TEHNI. SARADNIK</u> dob: <u>27</u> mjesto boravka: <u>ZAGREB</u></p>
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Figure 1.5 *New Tendencies 2*, exhibition questionnaire (Page 1 and 3). Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

The exhibition questionnaire asked the audience to decide whether or not they considered the exhibited works to be art, examples of research, amusement, or worthless deeds; what the ideal function of these artworks should be and what their proper place is; what kind of relation they had toward the works and the exhibition, including what associations the works incited in them; which works they liked the best and which the least. The last questionnaire item posed general questions, such as: "Do you believe in

the lonesome and isolated artist?," or "Do you believe that this kind of research ... could find its place in society?" The survey also included information on occupation, age, and place of residence – the illustrated example was filled by a 37-year-old "technical assistant" from Zagreb.

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN
ZAGREB
Katarinin trg 2 - Yougoslavie

"Nouvelles tendances II^o"
août-15 septembre 1963

Zagreb, le 25 mai 1963

Cher Monsieur,

Nous avons plaisir de vous communiquer que nous nous trouvons de nouveau en condition de pouvoir reprendre le travail d'organiser l'Exposition "Nouvelles tendances II^o" qui, par suite des difficultés inattendues, a été remise. Maintenant, tous les problèmes résolus, nous vous prions de bien vouloir nous prêter votre confiance et de reconfirmer votre participation, sous les mêmes conditions comme précédemment, à l'Exposition "Nouvelles tendances II^o" qui se tiendra du 1 août au 15 septembre et qui probablement au mois d'octobre sera transporté à Venise. Nous avons besoin de votre avis d'adhésion renouvelé qui doit nous être présenté jusqu'au 15 juin. Les ouvrages doivent parvenir à Zagreb jusqu'au 10 juillet au plus tard. Le feuille d'avis d'adhésion et les formulaires ici adjoints doivent vous servir en cas que vous ne les aviez pas remplis avant ou que vous avez l'intention de changer votre notification de l'ouvrage. Veuillez agréer, cher Monsieur, l'assurance de notre haute considération.

SECRETARIAT:

Božo Bek
Matko Meštrović
Radoslav Putar

Figure 1.6 Letter from the organizers of *New Tendencies 2*.
Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb

The letter happily informed the participants that the work on the exhibition *New Tendencies 2* could be resumed, following the resolution of “unexpected difficulties.” The exhibition was planned to open in May 1963, but following the distress caused by a speech in which Yugoslavia’s president Josip Broz Tito spoke out against abstract art, plans were temporarily halted, and the exhibition opened in August 1963 instead.

Selected Periodical Reviews and Catalog Texts

Untitled (excerpt)

Matko Meštrović

Nove Tendencije 2 [New Tendencies 2] Gallery of Contemporary Art, Zagreb, 1963¹⁷

The text by the Croatian art critic Matko Meštrović, one of the organizers of the New Tendencies exhibitions, appeared without title in the introduction to the catalog of the second exhibition, in 1963. One of the key programmatic texts of the movement, it was cited in several exhibition catalogs that followed the Zagreb exhibition, and translated into Italian, French, and German. The author himself later renamed the text as “The Ideology of the New Tendencies,” which is how it is mostly known today. The text presents the key ideas behind the New Tendencies movement, and elaborates its vision of the new relationship between art, science, and society.

...

In the graded complexity and multilayers of current problematics the first things we encounter are the incompetence of the human mind and the limitations of imaginative power, which go completely astray and do not succeed in creating an adequate and corresponding picture of the actual world in its entirety and a sense of its multifold movements. These characteristics fragment and fall to pieces due to the increasing loss of human freedom, thereby permitting an inadmissible difference of enormous proportions to arise between what a human performs and what a human might become. In spite of the beginnings of overcoming them that are already visible in a great part of the world, it is precisely such conditions that determine that the measure of free human participation in the fate of the world is still minimal; that historical, ideological and social problem complexes are in human heads divided by thick partition walls, and that science, society, and art are realities of fictions as such.

...

However, it is science with all its successes that demonstrates how estranged it is from man, as a representative of its kind, and how alienated one human can become from another; to what extent does science, having lost the totality of its purpose, neglect the modest measure of human needs and reduce the dimension of human spiritual existence to a level incomparably ignoble, when we measure its true capabilities with what it currently delivers.

...

The general state of not being adjusted is shared by art as well in its causes, its appearance, its meaning, and its sense, which it cannot lose regardless of what form it assumes. Art has a sense even when its pure expressiveness in the form of the ethical sense of extreme human confrontation with the insoluble; it has a sense

and it is appellative when it takes the form of a provocative appearance or nihilistic excesses; it has a markedly constructive sense especially when it is expressed as a positive attempt at understanding historical realities and the laws of transformation and existence of the world and society: when, in the quest for its sense, art seeks ways to extend its energies into immediate social action. However, even without such pronounced intent, art is capable of meaning and of marking even the most imperceptible movements and shifts in tectonic disturbances of social structures and the fissures in petrified mental schemes. Art is the first to sense a new time within time; it is also capable of self-provocation and self-irony when its permitted social boundaries are narrow, and capable of meaning its meaninglessness when sense is not enabled. And, finally, who can deny that art is the first to point to what is decaying and to participate in the process, even if it is self-related, and it is the first to herald what should be expected and built, even if this will be hostile to art. Art is the first to sacrifice its illusions.

...

The New Tendencies emerged spontaneously in this climate that was first felt by Old Europe. A positive relationship toward scientific insights is a tradition of pioneers of modern architecture, of Neoplasticists, of Bauhaus followers. Although this tradition had not lived to the full, it stayed alive. Alive was also the reliance on the potentially transformative power of technology and industrialization, while the deeply rooted concepts of Karl Marx's doctrine made the approach to social changes and problems constructive. That is why in Europe the first criticism and the first opposition to elements for demystification of the notion of art and artistic creation were possible. There was a demand to debunk the dominant influence of the art market, which speculated with art, treating it contradictorily both as a myth and as a commodity. The striving to overcome individualism along with the spirit of collective work was also possible; a progressive political orientation was clearly expressed. The problem complex of art was not focused on the issue of a unique work of art, but on plastic-visual research, with the aim of determining the objective psychophysical bases of the plastic phenomenon and visual perception, in this way a priori excluding any possibility of including subjectivism, individualism, and romanticism, which burdened all traditional aesthetic systems. It is understandable that also the principles of industrial production as the most efficient instrument and the means of rapid socialization of material and spiritual values were resolutely accepted, so the attempt was made to conceive artworks in those terms in order to make them reproducible and accessible.

...

Precisely in this sense an effective role for art as an active cognition instrument and integrative element of all our insights is possible; also possible is the visualization of scientific reality, not in an objectivistic, but in a *processual* sense, which is the only open and vivid way of reflecting the world and to which, in order to be effective, any kind of thinking about the world should be adjusted.

...

On this level, logically, the very notion of art must undergo a decisive change and be erased as such, while art should be subjected to necessary *scientization*. ... Namely, art must develop along lines that will increasingly diminish the components

of expression, while its psychological and social origins will emerge less and less from the necessary emotional juxtaposition to social conditions, that is, it will break out in a compensatory way as an incarnation of fundamental difference within which an individual is helpless and unprotected.

...

Here the difference between art and science is in a way abolished in its present sharp division, but perhaps not entirely. A problem arises regarding the issue of purpose; not only of art, but also of science. It is clear that the particular purpose of art diminishes simultaneously with the dissolution, that is, vanishing of the notion of art, but that can happen only in proportion to the realization of the social purposefulness of science. Namely, on that principal demand of actual history, on that process as the only one that enables the way to total awareness of the world, depends the possibility of transformation of the artistic act into a social act and vice versa, which means the abolition of the necessity of art as a separate social phenomenon.

...

Art must perform a breakthrough into the extra-poetical and extra-human sphere, because today, without that action the human sphere cannot be enriched.

Artist Statements (excerpt)

Nove Tendencije 2 [New Tendencies 2]¹⁸

Marc Adrian

What seems to me to be of the greatest importance today are no longer the links between elements but the links of the links between them, their variability, their constant and variable data.

Nothing is complete.

Getulio Alviani

There could be one, or a hundred, objects; if there were a thousand, it would mean they could be simultaneously available to a thousand spectators all at once, each of whom would have one to explore; and they could all be identical, but each person would, of course, see different light images.

...

Our present energy has as its goal to place a man in a space larger than that given by the constraints of history.

Convention has always had great historic importance, and it must be abolished.

Equipo 57

Our work represents a contribution to aesthetic theories, which maintain that one can organize space according to a system of laws that excludes all caprices in their usage.

Karl Gerstner

Production and distribution of paintings on an industrial basis, therefore a social art.

For everyone.

Especially for the spectator, who wants to be a partner in a work of art.

Gruppo N

Many of those who work in or around the *New Tendencies* are aware of a real contrast between the society that comes into contact with research in visual or programmed art, and on the other hand, the social structure that the researchers would wish to address. It has been said: The relationship of artist and work has been turned upside down (with the elimination of the cult of personality and the myth of creation, and therefore the unique, stable subjective work) even before there has been a corresponding revolution in the relationship between artist and society. Our group is currently asking itself the following questions: Is it or is it not increasingly clear that the way the relationship between artist and society is dependent on the art market is imposing on the groups within New Tendencies limits that are almost insuperable when trying to achieve real freedom for research? Perhaps all the necessary conditions for a real transformation of the “art market” system are not present, and, as is by a conjuring trick, research carried out by the New Tendencies groups will be absorbed into the system? Is or is not the limitation that flows from that possibility so great that it prevents a genuine revolution in the artist-society relationship, and allows it only to be modified?

Rudolf Kämmer

This is why the “objective” pictures of tomorrow may also be a kind of collective product.

Julio le Parc

From the conceptual point of view, the notion of programming (often used in the New Tendencies) includes a way to understand, produce, and present unstable works. It has to do with predicting in advance all the conditions of the work’s process, clearly determining its modalities so that it can be free to produce itself in space and time, subject to the foreseen circumstances of both determinant and indeterminate quality, which come from the environment in which it produces itself and from the activated or active participation of the spectator. A multitude of similar aspects will follow; the spectator will see one view, which will always include enough visualization to perceive the unstable totality.

François Morellet

Is the *Nouvelle Tendance* a fashion? Are we *de luxe* artisans? Are we going to inspire the facades of social housing, music hall shows, and table mats?

Yes.

A little.

But for me the New Tendency is also: faith in progress, the demystification of art, systematic experimentation, a step toward a science of art, the ultimate hope.

Ivan Picelj

Subjected to higher structural order, active art should contain all the elements that will make it part of this entire order, on the scale man-planet-space.

...

It should be a particle able to become the landscape of our life – our reality
It is our need, our goal
It is not sensory
It is concrete
It is constructive
It is active
It should direct creative forces to positive social action
It should be present everywhere
It is imperceptible
It is international and universal
It will transform our visual habits in the direction of
Perceiving structure, order, and wholeness in relations

Uli Pohl

The anonymity of the material Plexiglas and its processing technology facilitates structures and orders from which my subjectivity is then purged.

...

My objects conceal nothing; they are open to all viewers. They neither instruct nor advocate.

Vjenceslav Richter

I rather support a wide-scope and long-term construction of homogeneity in visual art, in its structure and orientation, able to consistently follow and build up a new visual world. This requires equally long-lasting memory and sensitivity for everything that is born and recognized as useful.

Günther Uecker

The projections of today are the circumstances of tomorrow. That which exists in our imagination belongs to the being of man.

...

I use mechanical means so as to overcome the subjective gesture, to objectivize, and to create a situation of freedom.

Ludwig Wilding

We no longer stand outside the pictorial event but are at the center of it; we have become actors; most recently this perception has led to the development of the kinetic picture.

Yvaral

The comparison between our research and scientific work has made us aware of the deficiency that we wish to end: it concerns terminology. While scientific terminology is well-defined and leaves no room for interpreting errors, ours was only accessible to a minority until now. Because we desire to be understood, we wish to fill this gap. This is why we have already made some contacts that will multiply in the future with representatives from all disciplines of scientific research. As such, the ideas will become clearer; the goals will be attained in a more efficient manner. And it is not utopian to think that in future decades a vast synthesis will operate among the confrontation of our ideas and discoveries and those of the savants.

“Pour un art abstrait progressif” [For a progressive abstract art] (excerpt)

François Molnár and François Morellet

Nove Tendencije 2. za progresivnu apstraktnu umjetnost [New Tendencies 2. For a progressive abstract art]¹⁹

François Molnár and François Morellet were among the eleven artists who co-founded the Centre de Recherche d'Art Visuel (Visual Art Research Center) in Paris in 1960, later renamed Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV – Visual Art Research Group). Although Molnár and his partner Vera – both Hungarian artists who came to Paris in 1952 from Budapest – left the group due to theoretical and ideological disagreements almost immediately after it was founded, Molnár stayed connected to Morellet, and this treatise on abstract art was one result of their collaboration. It was published as a separate offprint in the framework of the New Tendencies 2 exhibition, and it aimed to theorize abstract art in line with the theoretical frameworks of dialectical materialism, Marxist aesthetics, and the then emerging information aesthetics as formulated by the German philosopher Max Bense.

...

It must be said here and now that the word “abstract” is badly chosen. It is not a question of abstraction, and hence an impoverishment of the real, against which the Marxist classics rightly battled. Some theorists even claim that it is precisely the opposite.

...

In fact, abstract art does not necessarily involve abandoning the theory of “reflection” in Marxist aesthetics. It would be naïve to imagine that this theory demands that the real world must be reflected in art in an absolutely faithful way; that would be indeed impossible.

...

Socialist realism is one logical avenue in a didactic aesthetic. It is important first to note that realism draws on an extensive body of research carried out since the Renaissance – on perspective, composition, the relationship between colors, etc. – and that it can exist effectively only on the basis of these past discoveries. Socialist realism, emerging from prior experimentation, is itself only one example of the possible applications of art for a given moment. Though we do not intend to discuss the effectiveness of socialist realism at specific moments for particular societies, it seems to us that in the future we may hope for much more from a new form of visual art. The real history of humanity is only now beginning, as Marx said. Man free from alienation, liberated from the class struggle, would be able to turn to an art free of all constraints. We would then be able freely to delight in a free art. In that way, art would genuinely become “the highest pleasure man may offer himself,” as Marx wished.

Progressive and Non-Progressive Abstract Art

One of these tendencies would be subjectivist, agnostic, mystificatory; in short, it would be a continuation of the old Romantic school, in only slightly new garb, but barely concealing the most glaring aspects of reactionary thought. This tendency is obviously addressed to a tiny “elite,” sometimes including only the artist alone.

The opposite tendency would be progressive. It would reject all forms of romanticism. It would try to demystify art with the help of science, and create a new, more universal form of art, which it would try to integrate, by all available means, into the life of society. This Manichean division of abstract art is clearly schematic. In reality, we repeat, we have here a complex dialectical process among different groups and subgroups. One may also find a certain degree of antagonism within a single artist.

Notes

- 1 Jerko Denegri, *Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije. Umjetnost konstruktivnog pristupa* [Exat 51 and New Tendencies. The art of the constructive approach] (Horetzky: Zagreb, 2000), 213.
- 2 Although generally referred to as the *New Tendencies* exhibitions, only the first two, in 1961 and 1963, were held under this title. The third exhibition, which took place in 1965, used the name in the singular form, *New Tendency*, reflecting the movement's ambition towards a greater coherence. The final two exhibitions returned the plural but took out the prefix “new,” pointing to the fact that one could no longer speak of novelty, although *Tendencies 4* in 1968 in fact included a significant innovation – a focus on the relationship between computers and art, followed by the launching of the new magazine *bit international*, whose first issues focused on the topic of “the theory of informations [sic] and the new aesthetics.” *Tendencies 5* (1973), the last exhibition, brought together the two currents of the movement, here defined as “constructive visual research” and “computer visual research,” while adding a third one, “conceptual art,” and thus delineating the development of contemporary art in the 1960s, where conceptual art marks both the continuities and the breaks with earlier paradigms. For a reading that situates these continuities and breaks within the transition from the Fordist to the post-Fordist mode of production, see Armin Medosch, *New Tendencies: Art At the Threshold of the Information Revolution (1961–1978)* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

- 3 Ljiljana Kolečnik, *Između istoka i zapada. Hrvatska umjetnost i likovna kritika 50-ih godina* [Between the East and the West. Croatian Art and Criticism in the 1950s] (Zagreb: Institute for Art History, 2006), 282.
- 4 Ivan Picelj, in *Nove Tendencije 2* [New Tendencies 2], Exhibition catalog (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1963). The English translation is cited in the section "Artists' Commentaries," in *A Little-Known Story about a Movement, a Magazine, and the Computer's Arrival in Art: New Tendencies and Bit International, 1961–1973*, edited by Margit Rosen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 123.
- 5 Karl Gestner in "Artists' Commentaries," in *A Little-Known Story about a Movement*, edited by Rosen, 122.
- 6 GRAV, "Assez de mystifications," flyer distributed during the 1961 Paris Biennial. Reprinted in *Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel. Stratégies de participation. 1960–1968* [Visual Art Research Group. Participation strategies. 1960–1968], Exhibition catalog (Grenoble: Magasin – Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble).
- 7 François Morellet in "Artists' Commentaries," in *A Little-Known Story about a Movement*, edited by Rosen, 123.
- 8 Gruppo N, *Ibid.*, 122.
- 9 For a study on the relationship between self-management and art production in Yugoslavia, see Branislav Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016).
- 10 For the development of Yugoslav postwar cultural politics and the critical discourse on art, and its transformations after 1948, see Kolečnik, *Između istoka i zapada*.
- 11 Denegri, *Exat 51 i Nove Tendencije* (365). See also Ljiljana Kolečnik, "A Decade of Freedom, Hope and Lost Illusions. Yugoslav Society in the 1960s as a Framework for New Tendencies," *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti* 34 (2010): 211–224.
- 12 Ana Kutleša, "Culture on the Market – The Gallery of Contemporary Art in the Early 1960s," in *Performing the Museum: The Reader*, edited by Aleksandra Sekulić (Novi Sad: Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, 2016), 161.
- 13 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 18.
- 14 Božidar Gagro, "Foreword," in *U susret Muzeju suvremene umjetnosti. 30 godina Galerije suvremene umjetnosti* [In Anticipation of the Museum of Contemporary Art. 30 Years of the Gallery of Contemporary Art] (Zagreb: Galerije Grada Zagreba, 1986), xi.
- 15 *Ibid.* This is significantly different than the opposition between modern and contemporary implied in the renaming of the Boston Institute of Modern Art as The Institute of Contemporary Art in 1948. As Richard Meyer has demonstrated, this gesture of renaming, which symbolized the liberation of the Institute from its dependence on the New York Museum of Modern Art, also implied an agenda of asserting American culture, and liberating it from the dominance of continental influence, which the New York MoMA established as the basis of the canon of modern art. The notion of the contemporary was presented as a neutral, all-encompassing term, able to embrace a variety of artistic and arts-and-crafts production that was to be accessible to the broader American public, in contrast with MoMA's mystification of modern art and its growing alienation from the public. See Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 191–258. In this sense, paradoxically, and contrary to the Zagreb Museum, it is Boston's move of asserting contemporary art which ends up having something in common with the socialist realist denunciation of the decadence of modern art and its own quest for an art that can mobilize the people (with the crucial difference, however, that the Boston version implied no idea of political mobilization, but merely satisfying the broad interests of the public).
- 16 *Suvremena umjetnost I. Didaktička izložba: apstraktna umjetnost* [Contemporary art 1. Didactic exhibition: abstract art] (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1957), 56.
- 17 The English translation cited here was excerpted from Margit Rosen, ed., *A Little-Known Story about a Movement, a Magazine, and the Computer's Arrival in Art*. Reprinted with the kind permission of the author.

- 18 Published in *Nove Tendencije 2* [New Tendencies 2]. The English translations are reproduced from Rosen ed., *A Little-Known Story about a Movement*, 122–124.
- 19 Published in François Molnár, François Morellet, *Nove Tendencije 2. za progresivnu apstraktnu umjetnost* [New tendencies 2. For a progressive abstract art] (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1963). The excerpts cited here are from Rosen ed., *A Little-Known Story about a Movement*, 136–139.

Case Study 2

Rabinec Studio: The Commodification of Art in Late Socialist Hungary, 1982–1983

By Kristóf Nagy

Topic

Rabinec Studio

Location and Date

Budapest, Hungary, 1982–1983

Core Members of Rabinec Studio

Zsuzsa Simon (1943–2015), Ákos Birkás (1941–2018), Zsigmond Károlyi (b. 1952), Károly Kelemen (b. 1948), Lóránt Méhes (b. 1951), and János Vető (b. 1953)

Introduction

During the early 1980s – in the wake of the introduction and strengthening of new market mechanisms in state-socialist Hungary – the art historian Zsuzsa Simon (1943–2015) initiated a project called Rabinec Studio, a for-profit art cooperative intended to help Hungarian artists sell their works.¹ Rabinec Studio was the first private and for-profit gallery of contemporary art to be established by artists, or members of the Hungarian art scene, rather than by a commercial or state structure. Although Rabinec Studio was only active for a short period of five months, and the art firm was not very successful in economic terms, it serves as a good case study for understanding the intrusion of market relations and the changing attitude toward art in Hungary during the 1980s. The art historical case of Rabinec Studio marks a radical change and a new direction toward the commercialization of Hungarian progressive or unofficial art.

In this study I will focus on the activities of Rabinec Studio in 1982–1983. I argue that the Studio clearly marks a shift toward a new condition of art. It is not simply a matter of a new ideology imported from the West (by an external actor such as the Soros Foundation)² but that the political and economic transformations in 1980s Hungary also impacted the artistic scene. I will examine not only the history of the short-lived Rabinec Studio but also the ideological and moral beliefs of its founding members, who were motivated by the conviction that establishing a for-profit gallery in a late socialist context was a vanguard artistic gesture. Additionally, I will address the question of how the commercial project of Rabinec Studio intertwined with other political, economic, and artistic changes, and with a rhetoric of personal liberation, freedom, and individual recognition.

The introduction of market mechanisms and principles was a common feature of post-1968 Hungarian socialism. Faced with the structural problems of Soviet style planning, the government adopted open market relations in an attempt to strengthen the socialist economy. In the early 1970s a program called “New Economic Mechanism” aimed at restructuring the Hungarian economy by giving more space to private market initiatives. Given that the program was only partially realized and that the international political-economic environment was growing harsher, the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party launched a second wave of economic renovations. As a consequence, by the early 1980s the Hungarian economy had already incorporated a range of Western free-market techniques. The Party adopted a new attitude toward the market. It ceased seeing in the free market an ideological enemy of socialism and justified it in strictly technical terms as a new mechanism for solving urgent problems. A coalition was forged between the young Kádárist economists and the technocratic managers of late socialist-era companies.³ Consequently, 1980 is considered the year that Hungary began to integrate into the capitalist world economy, a process fueled both by internal structural changes and by global processes of capital accumulation and circulation.⁴ However, as a result of internal and external market pressure, Hungary became directly dependent on international loans taken from the capitalist world. Active integration into the global economy resulted in a growing debt burden, leading to a series of austerity policies. Financial cuts went hand in hand with the introduction of market mechanisms, and these economic and political changes also left a strong impact on Hungarian art and culture.

Drastic economic transformations and the adoption of free market principles also found a wide resonance in the Hungarian cultural scene. During a cultural debate in 1981, participants discussed whether the ongoing market reforms would eventually lead to the commodification of Hungarian socialist culture.⁵ The majority of participants denied that art and culture could attain commodity status in the context of new market reforms. The very fact that such public discourses took place indicates the degree to which, already in the early 1980s, economic and political changes had become a matter of prevalent discussion among artists.⁶ The austerity policies introduced at the end of the 1970s also made more space for discussions regarding new market mechanisms in art and culture. The discussions were supported by an emerging faction of cultural economists who insistently criticized state planning, and prioritized decentralization and market-mechanisms designed specifically for the field of culture. Judit Csehák, the deputy prime minister of Hungary, also debated cultural policies during the late 1980s, insisting that the state political apparatus would not interfere in cultural matters at the level of artistic style or form. Yet, the state still reserved its right to influence cultural production through the distribution of funding.⁷ Consequently, the late socialist Hungarian state changed its strategy for controlling culture. The state policed culture not by applying direct political or ideological pressure but by adopting the logic of the market and establishing financial control. During the last decade of Hungarian socialism – following the decline of the aesthetic, ethical, and political governance of the cultural field – the state exercised market-derived control over art.

New austerity policies imposed by transnational financial institutions, along with the introduction of market-based mechanisms in the governance of culture, brought radical structural changes in the field of visual arts. A new state-enterprise called Generalart was launched in 1983 with the goal of selling contemporary Hungarian art to primarily Western buyers. Generalart was a new model of artist organization that attempted to cultivate a market for Hungarian art not only in Hungary but also abroad. It did not purchase artworks but took a commission after mediating the sale. Another novelty of the market reforms were the so-called *artists' working communities* [művészeti alkotóközösség], introduced following the example of the *economic working communities* [gazdasági munkaközösség] launched a year earlier in 1982. The small-scale private firms adopted a corporate model, thus opening a new economic window of opportunity for artists within the larger state-socialist economy. These communities (resembling cooperatives in the perestroika-era USSR) provided a more hospitable environment for business initiatives.⁸ They gave artists not only the right to self-organize (independently of the state artists' associations) but also to trade, sell, or exchange their artworks. Such transformations in the official framework of cultural production, along with the formation of for-profit art cooperatives and companies such as Generalart, attested to a radical change in the cultural policies of late socialism.

Rabinec Studio

The art historian Zsuzsa Simon and a number of artists working at the peripheries of official Hungarian culture formed Rabinec Studio in 1982.⁹ For the group the establishment of an artists' cooperative was both a form of resistance to the state and an economic opportunity. The Studio saw its main role in terms of introducing

new market relations and gaining access to new channels of symbolic and material recognition. They targeted local and foreign buyers of art. Its statement of purpose highlighted such notions as “individuality” and “success” – two key values associated with bourgeois ideology and the market. The statutes of the “Rabinec artists’ working community” defined its purpose as “fostering individual artistic achievements and individual success (both moral and material).”¹⁰ The artists envisioned the work of the Studio in the format of a self-managed art gallery, which they believed would secure a higher degree of financial remuneration and artistic recognition for its core members. The Rabinec artists were also part of the New Painting international movement popular during the 1980s. New Painting was regarded by some critics as a conservative trend advocating a return to figuration after the radical neo-avant-garde practices of the previous decades. It was a return to the materiality of paint and canvas that was strongly supported by the major players of the international art market, a convergence that boosted Rabinec members’ confidence in the market and in the pursuit of economic prosperity.

While their chief organizer, Zsuzsa Simon, wanted to launch a successful for-profit art enterprise, other members did not have the knowledge or market skill to operate a for-profit gallery. In 1979, a few years before establishing Rabinec Studio, Simon organized several art events in her flat, where artists discussed the possibility and modes of introducing market relations in the local artistic scene.¹¹ By early 1980 they had submitted a proposal for a gallery of contemporary art to several state authorities. They approached the Art Fund, which provided state subsidies for artists; the Institute for Popular Education, which funded several nonconformist artistic projects; and the recently established Budapest Fine Arts Directorate. Their applications were not successful and did not lead to an economic cooperation with the state. Simon was becoming more and more involved in the business of art dealing, attracting other artists to her initiative. From 1981 to 1982 she managed her private firm under the name “Zsuzsa Simon Office.” The unregistered firm operated in a rented flat where she organized temporary exhibitions for sale. Simon acted primarily as an art dealer, still in the narrow or pre-capitalist sense, for she took only a 20% commission from each sale.¹²

In parallel with her art-dealing activities, Simon and other artists started preparation for the new economic operations of Rabinec Studio. During its short existence (one year and five months) the Zsuzsa Simon Office had a total turnover of 50,000 forints (5,000 euros today). The total revenue of Rabinec Studio, which lasted for less than five months from November 1982 to March 1983, was 34,000 forints (3,000 euros). Rabinec Studio’s business model was different from that of the Zsuzsa Simon Office. Artists received 60% from sales of their works and Simon received 20%. The rest went to the artist Károly Kelemen (b. 1948), who owned the flat where Rabinec Studio operated. While the Zsuzsa Simon Office was only slightly unprofitable, Rabinec Studio was a complete financial failure. Simon explained this failure in terms of lack of investment and the very slow rate of sales. Additionally, the income was coming from only a few people. According to the bookkeeping of the Zsuzsa Simon Office, most of the artworks were bought by the collector Imre Kulcsár. Rabinec Studio’s bookkeeping, on the other hand, did not include the names of its customers.¹³

Overall, the Rabinec Studio project failed to make a breakthrough and to change the economic conditions for artists. On the one hand, the Studio aimed at creating a market for progressive Hungarian contemporary art and changing the status of art in late socialist society. Art was to become a product in the market (under socialism, art was not regarded as a product of profitable exchange). On the other hand, the Zsuzsa Simon Office and Rabinec Studio were not purely economic enterprises, which can be seen from their limited financial turnover. Both initiatives also had strong ideological motivations. In the case of Rabinec Studio it was a new ideology that played a central part in setting up this project. Internal archival documents indicate that in the early phases of planning and preparation, during their extensive brainstorming and exchanges about the project, their aims were not strictly economic. The project also had political elements that were critical of the role and place of art in the socialist context.

Simon, for example, firmly believed that progressive Hungarian artists' interests coincided with the new values of the market, although she was also aware of the multiple difficulties in realizing such a new alliance. Simon writes in the early 1980s:

Until now the problem was that there were no prospects, exhibitions were juried, there was a leader, and there was a directive. Now when exhibitions are not juried, there is no leader, but something is still problematic for us. Of course this is perfectly understandable, we have no practice of freedom.¹⁴

In statements like this, Simon not only equates market relations with freedom, but also insists on the urgent need to engage in a pedagogical process through which artists would learn and cultivate new market skills, abilities, and competencies. In other words, it was not enough to change the material conditions of the artists by creating an art market, but there was also an urgent need to educate them. The artists who participated in Rabinec Studio instantly felt this necessity. Ákos Vörösvári (b. 1948) for example, in his response to Simon's statement quoted above, adopted a more pro-market stance, criticizing Simon for not focusing enough on market objectives and for dealing instead with matters of public education.¹⁵

Simon's early-1980s ideas about the necessity of an art market and the role of a for-profit art gallery system were most clearly outlined in her two texts produced for Rabinec Studio members' internal use. In one text titled "Is it already an actual gallery?"¹⁶ she emphasized the importance of the private business initiative and of the self-sustaining nature of the art gallery. Writing about her new art-related practice, Simon shares her excitement for individual effort and business risk-taking. She not only presents risk-taking as an inevitable part of running a for-profit art gallery, but also highlights its positive and constructive aspects. In her text discussing some of the main motives for founding Rabinec Studio, she presents business activity as a means of self-development and personal fulfillment. In another text titled "Art Manager Q&A,"¹⁷ the private gallery emerges as an element of Simon's vocation, a frame of reference in which the market conjures moral values, primarily those of liberty and the potential for self-realization of the individual.

Ideas of individual liberty were taking shape not only in the new context of market relations introduced during late socialism, but also following hegemonic artistic trends at the time. The so-called "New Painting," regarded as one of the

emerging artistic tendencies of the 1980s, was also practiced and cultivated by the members of Rabinec Studio. New Painting (also known as Transavantgarde in Italy, or Pattern and Decoration in the USA) was understood at the time as a return to painting. Seen as generally overlooked by the dematerializing art practices of the preceding decades, painting was proposed to have returned to the major Western museums and commercial galleries. This return – also fostered and encouraged by the art markets¹⁸ – was inspiring for the members of Rabinec Studio. In one of her letters, Simon mentions the Holly Solomon Gallery (one of the key galleries in New York City to sell Pattern and Decoration) as its main role model. In the letter Simon also shares her impressions of the Venice Biennale of 1982, voicing her enthusiasm for the return to painting in the West and the exhaustion of the spirit of the neo-avant-garde.¹⁹

Rabinec Studio artists embraced the affirmative spirit of the New Painting movement along with its hostility to the politicized neo-avant-garde practices of the 1960s–1970s. Against the critical worldview of the international neo-avant-garde, Simon proposed an apolitical credo. In sharp opposition to the countercultural attitudes of the previous decades, Simon stated that Rabinec “should not fight for peace, because peace is simply there.”²⁰ The apolitical approach was reconcilable with the commodification of culture, since art (and New Painting in particular) was not anymore considered a tool or field of social struggle but as an object of taste, decoration, or consumption. In this spirit Simon proposed “Today is a Beautiful Day” as the motto of Rabinec Studio, suggesting that its publication feature reassuring, relaxing, affirmative short texts under the same title.²¹ Lóránd Hegyi (b. 1954), another Hungarian art historian encouraging New Painting tendencies during the 1980s, also applied similarly apolitical arguments when he framed these trends as New Sensibility and New Subjectivity. From such a perspective of normalizing and effacing art’s political potential we can draw a broader conclusion with regard to the late socialist context. In late socialist Hungary, numerous artists and intellectuals regarded both New Painting aesthetics and new market mechanisms as a source of personal liberation in overcoming the conflict between the state-socialist regime and countercultural, neo-avant-garde art. For the same reason such political dissidents as György Konrád (the author of *Antipolitics*)²² were critical of the apolitical nature of postmodern art, seeing the danger that it could be incorporated by state-socialism.²³

The rise of New Painting in Hungary, along with the spread of free market mechanisms, encouraged Simon to promote new forms of art-making. She urged the members of the Studio to perform postmodernist and post-avant-garde gestures, later admitting that the group did not produce enough postmodernist works, or “new” paintings. Simon saw the urge to make more postmodern art in terms of a competition, arguing that if the Studio did not do it, others would.²⁴ Members proclaimed the death of the neo-avant-garde and the birth of Hungarian postmodernism in lectures delivered by the former neo-avant-garde artist Ákos Birkás (1941–2018), which took place at Rabinec Studio in December 1982.²⁵ Simon saw a direct relation between the death of the neo-avant-garde, the rise of postmodernism, and the foundation of Rabinec Studio. She argued that an art gallery should focus on selling, for selling is a great post-avant-garde idea: business and postmodernist art made a great couple.²⁶

Thinking in aesthetic and economic terms, Simon encouraged the artists Zsigmond Károlyi (b. 1952) and Károly Kelemen to abandon their monochrome paintings and

switch to a more colorful style. Her reason was that color is more saleable, “more liberating,” and better reflects the break with the social and political ethos of the neo-avant-garde.²⁷ Her arguments in favor of New Painting intertwined economic and aesthetic motives, market objectives, and art historical positions. As Simon recalled in 2008: “Rabinec aimed to demonstrate that it was possible to fulfill an artistic mission and to engage in free trade all at the same time.”²⁸

The members opted for an apolitical stance in the hope of gaining quick official recognition. The latter was needed so they could operate legally within the growing marketization of the Hungarian economy. This was a radical shift from the earlier position of the group. During their early meetings in 1979 it was not yet evident what kind of gallery the artists wanted. They debated between an economic model, which would adopt an apolitical stance, or one that would be critical toward the socialist state.²⁹ In these early debates the members of the group were still caught between conflictual propositions: a strictly for-profit gallery, or a gallery basing its operation on a political and aesthetic position, even at the cost of conflict with the socialist state.³⁰ Ultimately, economic motives prevailed.

In spite of their apolitical stance, Rabinec Studio was also scrutinized by the Hungarian secret services. The attention was due to the fact that in the preparatory phase of the Studio, the artist György Galántai (b. 1941) signed the official letter members sent to the Art Fund. Currently only one secret service report (from 1983) written entirely on the activities of Rabinec Studio is known. The report indirectly confirms the success of the Studio in remaining apolitical, concluding that despite the presence of numerous dissident intellectuals including Galántai, “at the vernissage there were no hostile lectures and manifestations, and even the non-juried exhibition pieces were not objectionable.”³¹

During her short-lived engagement with the art business, Simon actively tried to establish international connections. Her attempts failed because during the early 1980s Hungary was not yet completely opened or integrated into world markets. Simon did not have contacts with foreign art institutions. She and the members of Rabinec Studio were not the only artists in Hungary who tried to popularize the new tendencies in Hungarian painting. They were, however, the only artists who sought to justify and establish a direct relation between new trends in the art of the 1980s and emerging free market exchanges. Such important critics as Lóránd Hegyi (b. 1954) and Katalin Néray (1941–2007) also made attempts to propagate Hungarian New Painting abroad. Néray (who served from 1984 as director of the Kunsthalle Budapest and was also appointed commissioner of the Hungarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale) made significant efforts in this direction. Hegyi, who theorized Hungarian New Painting in terms of a “New Sensibility,” believed that he could be more successful in embracing the new economic and cultural politics of the state given his non-political affiliations. Around this time several new international actors, such as the Ludwig Foundation and the Soros Foundation, appear in Hungary. These so-called “Westerners” also engaged in the field of contemporary art by popularizing a range of market-oriented practices. Thus the Czech-born American collector Meda Mládek approached both the state art company Generalart and Zsuzsa Simon with the purpose of establishing a for-profit gallery in Budapest. According to archival material, both were open to Mládek’s proposal, hoping in this way to raise some foreign capital. The attempt failed primarily because during 1984–1985 Mládek

became involved in the establishment of the Soros Fine Arts Documentation Center, which followed George Soros's non-profit vision and ideas about changing society through art.³²

To conclude, the activities of Simon and of Rabinec Studio can be seen as a paradigmatic case that reveals how new free market tendencies shaped the field of cultural production during the early 1980s. The rise of the entrepreneurial approach toward progressive art was not in conflict with the latest state-socialist cultural policies. Both the socialist state and the emerging civil society were gradually moving in the same direction. And although the local art scene was becoming more and more competitive and market-oriented, neither Simon nor the members of Rabinec Studio could truly benefit from the new trends due to their inability to attract capital or to establish business connections with the international art world. It is only toward the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, with the emergence of Western players and full economic privatization, deregulation, and inclusion of Hungary into the circulation of global capital, that market tendencies were fully implemented. The economic and managerial program proposed by Simon, interlaced with the apolitical aesthetics of New Painting, played a significant historical role in the transition from socialism. Their activities contributed to the construction of a new image of the postsocialist contemporary artist as a free entrepreneur and active player on the market.

Selected Archival Documents and Artist Projects



Figure 2.1 András Koncz, *Rabinec Studio Logo*, 1982, print.
Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest

In 1982 András Koncz, associated in the early 1980s with the emerging New Painting movement, painted a triptych version of the Rabinec Studio logo. This emblem reflects Rabinec Studio's concern for economic serenity, depicting calmness under a rising sun above the mountains. The landscape with a whale in the foreground projects a state of idyllic normality. The motto "This day is a beautiful day," in the upper semicircle, was suggested by Zsuzsa Simon who believed it expressed the aspirations of a conscious return to colorful painting.

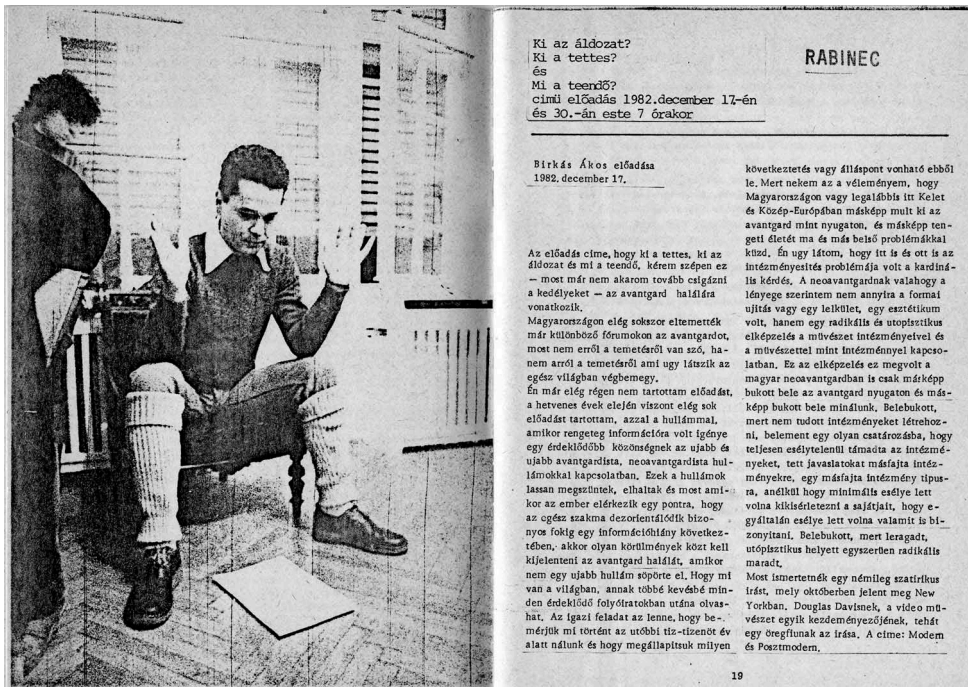


Figure 2.2 "Who is the victim? Who is the culprit? What should be done?" *AL (Artpool Letters)*, 1983: 18–19.

Artpool Art Research Center – Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

Ákos Birkás, one of the founders of Rabinec Studio, held two lectures in December 1982. In these lectures (delivered under the titles "Who is the Victim? Who is the Culprit? What Should be Done?" and "The Death of the Avant-Garde") he spoke about the emergence of postmodernism. Birkás argued that neo-avant-garde art had failed in both the East and the West, but for different reasons. In the West the neo-avant-garde failed because of its institutionalization, and in the East it was unsuccessful because it could not create its own institutions but only opposed the dominant ones. The two lectures were published in January 1983, in the first issue of the samizdat art magazine *AL (Artpool Letters)*. *AL* was run by György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay, who stated that they had decided to launch the magazine after listening to these groundbreaking lectures.

[illegible]

Figure 2.3 Zsuzsa Simon, Accounting Records 1981–1983.

Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest

Zsuzsa Simon kept detailed bookkeeping of all her art transactions. Simon listed all the revenues and expenses of her art-dealing enterprises performed between June 1981 and March 1983. This is a crucial document for exploring the business model of the Zsuzsa Simon Office and of Rabinec Studio. The handwritten pages – donated by Simon to the Library and Archive of Műcsarnok where she worked for decades – document every sale and sometimes include the names of buyers.



Figure 2.4 Tamás Király at an exhibition opening in front of a painting by Károly Kelemen, 1983.

Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest

Rabinec Studio's vernissages aimed at attracting audiences wider than the narrow circles of contemporary artists usually attending exhibition openings. While these vernissages did not become major events of high or official society, they attracted important dissident intellectuals and underground cultural producers. In this photo the experimental fashion designer Tamás Király (1952–2013) stands in front of a painting by Károly Kelemen.

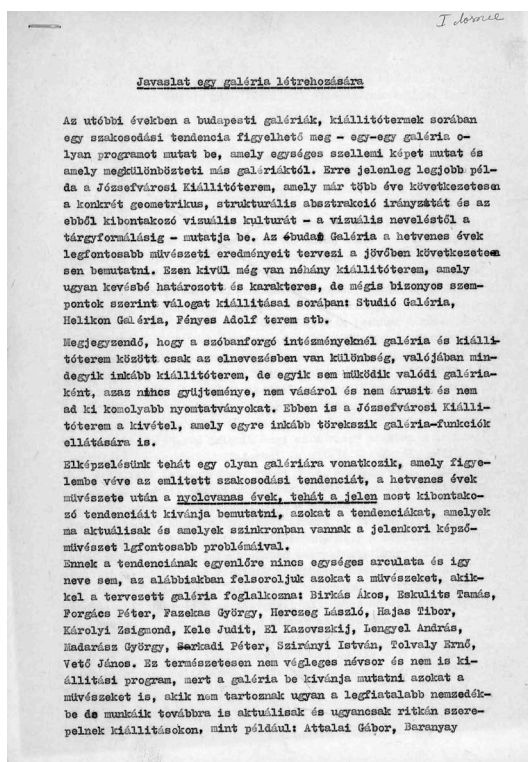


Figure 2.5 Zsuzsa Simon, Proposal for a Gallery of Contemporary Art (extract), 1980.

Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest

For Zsuzsa Simon the idea of establishing a gallery came first, and its for-profit realization came only later. In 1979–1980 Simon, consulting with numerous artists, first approached several state organizations with the intention of securing funding for the planned gallery. For these state authorities Simon outlined a proposal for a gallery of contemporary art for which art dealing is only a side profile. Nevertheless this plan was rejected by the authorities, and consequently Simon turned toward an entirely market-oriented model that was materialized in Rabinec Studio. Although in her 1980 proposal contemporary art and market ideas were not yet as closely intertwined as they would appear later when she started Rabinec Studio, some tendencies toward the marketization of art are already clearly present here.

Notes

- 1 Many Hungarian artists were involved in the preparatory phase of Rabinec Studio and the art-dealing activities of Zsuzsa Simon. The core members of the Studio, however besides Simon, are considered to be the following artists: Ákos Birkás (1941–2018), Zsigmond Károlyi (b. 1952), Károly Kelemen (b. 1948), Lóránt Méhes (b. 1951), and János Vető (b. 1953).

- 2 See Kristóf Nagy, "From Fringe Interest to Hegemony: The Emergence of the Soros Network in Eastern Europe," in *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present*, eds. Beáta Hock and Anu Allas (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).
- 3 Márk Éber and Ágnes Gagyí, "Class and Social Structure in Hungarian Sociology," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29, no. 3 (2015): 598–609.
- 4 Tamás Geröcs and András Pinkasz, "Debt-Ridden Development on Europe's Eastern Periphery," in *Global Inequalities in World-Systems Perspective: Theoretical Debates and Methodological Innovations*, eds. Manuela Boatcă, Andrea Komlosy and Hans-Heinrich Nolte (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 131–153.
- 5 The "Is culture a commodity?" debate fit into the pattern of state-socialist public debates, taking place in newspapers, magazines, and journals and providing space for a variety on standpoints. This debate ran in the magazines *Kritika* and *Szakszervezeti Szemle* (Trade Union Review) and included diverse arguments, from Marxist aesthetics to the controversies on entrepreneurial socialism. The debate was edited into a volume in 1986 with some additional essays written by intellectuals and technocrats close to the party line.
- 6 György Radnai, *Áru-e a kultúra?* (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1986).
- 7 "Meg kell újítani a művészetek támogatási rendszerét," *Népszava*, September 25, 1987, 9.
- 8 Judit Bodnár, "Assembling the Square: Social Transformation in Public Space and the Broken Mirage of the Second Economy in Postsocialist Budapest," *Slavic Review* 57, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 507–511.
- 9 The most extensive survey of Simon's oeuvre can be found in the following obituary: Kata Balázs, "Töredékek egy könyvtáros galerista életművéről. Emlékezés Simon Zsuzsára (1943–2015)," *tranzitblog.hu*, April 5, 2016, <http://tranzitblog.hu/toredekek-egy-konyvtaros-galerista-életművéről/>
- 10 All translations are from Hungarian and are my own, unless otherwise indicated. Draft of the statutes of the "Rabinec artists' working community," B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 11 János Szoboszlai, "A Rabinec Galéria," in *A modern poszt-jai*, ed. Katalin Keserü (Budapest: ELTE, 1994), 249–252.
- 12 Circular No. 2. by Zsuzsa Simon, B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 13 Bookkeeping of the Zsuzsa Simon Office and of Rabinec Studio, B85.377, Folder 18, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 14 Circular No. 3. by Zsuzsa Simon, B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 15 Answer to the text "Is it already an actual gallery?" by Ákos Vörösváry, July 20, 1982, B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 16 "Is it already an actual gallery?" by Zsuzsa Simon, B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 17 "Art manager Q&A" by Zsuzsa Simon, B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 18 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October* 6, no. 1, (1981): 39–68. Regarding similar Eastern European examples see Łukasz Gorczyce, "The Polish Chic and the middle class. Andrzej Bonarski's exhibitions in the years 1986–1991," in *Rejected Heritage. Polish Art of the 1980s*, ed. Karol Sienkiewicz (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 32–44.
- 19 Circular No. 2. by Zsuzsa Simon, B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 20 Circular No. 1. on the publication of the "Rabinec" Gallery by Zsuzsa Simon, May 26, 1982, B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 21 Circular No. 1. on the publication of the "Rabinec" Gallery by Zsuzsa Simon, May 26, 1982, B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Műcsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 22 This volume was published as a samizdat in 1986. György Konrád, *Antipolitika* (Budapest: AB Kiadó, 1986).

- 23 György Konrád, "Visszapillantás 1985-ben az értelmiség osztályhatalmára," in Konrád, György, *Európa köldökén: Esszék, 1979–1989* (Budapest: Magvető, 1990), 274.
- 24 Circular No. 3. by Zsuzsa Simon, B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Mücsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 25 Ákos Birkás, "Ki az áldozat? Ki a tettes? és Mi a teendő?" *Artpool Letters* no. 3 (1983), www.artpool.hu/Al/al01/Birkas1.html; Ákos Birkás, "Az avantgárd halála," *Artpool Letters* no. 3 (1983), www.artpool.hu/Al/al01/Birkas2.html.
- 26 Circular No. 2. by Zsuzsa Simon, B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Mücsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 27 Circular No. 2. by Zsuzsa Simon, B85.377, Folder 10, Zsuzsa Simon fonds, Mücsarnok Library and Archive, Budapest.
- 28 Zsuzsa Simon, "Méhes Lóránt Zuzu, a festő," *Balkon*, 16, no. 6 (2008): 10–21.
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- 32 Kristóf Nagy, "From Fringe Interest to Hegemony."

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Case Study 3

The 3rd Floor Cultural Movement, Yerevan 1987–1994

By Angela Harutyunyan

Exhibition Title

The 3rd Floor

Location and Date

Artists' Union, Yerevan, Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, 1987

Organizers

Arman Grigoryan, Nazareth Karoyan, Kiki, and others

Participants

Ashot-Ashot (Ashot Ghazaryan), Heriqnaz Galstyan, Arman Grigoryan, Ara Hovsepian, Kiki, Karineh Matsakyan, Karo Mkrtchyan, Arax Nerkararyan, Sev (Henrik Khachatryan), and dozens of others – artists, writers, film-makers, composers, and dancers.

Introduction

Arman Grigoryan (a young artist of the perestroika generation) made a poster-painting (Figure 3.1). The work was used to announce the annual youth exhibition *The 3rd Floor* organized at the Soviet Armenian Artists' Union in 1987. A group of young artists launched the event in Yerevan on their initiative.¹ Juxtaposing two regimes of flatness – that of abstract painting and of the mechanically reproduced poster – Grigoryan's poster-painting provided the essential information that any piece of advertising should communicate. "The 3rd Floor," a name that was initially chosen to indicate the location where the youth exhibition was to take place (on the third floor of the Union of Artists headquarters) turned into a cultural movement.

In Grigoryan's poster-painting, the text "The 3rd Floor" runs horizontally across the painting on a yellow banner, along with the dates of various activities associated with this exhibition handwritten on paper and glued to the painting. Grigoryan's mixed-media poster-painting incorporates a painterly gesture made visible through energetic brushstrokes and flat color-fields overlaid on the painting's surface and accompanied on the bottom by collaged-on practical information. The words "Youth Exhibition" are painted on a white background imitating an oversized stamp and overlaid with other black scribbled gestural marks. The artist's signature "A" is enclosed in a circle resembling an anarchist symbol. The upper left side of the painting is crowned with the stenciled heads of two youths; one of them wears a headband – the accouterment of a breakdancer, and a signifier of Soviet counter-culture in the years of perestroika. The two regimes of flatness competing in the poster-painting, in turn, stand for two ideological regimes – that of Western liberalism signified by abstract expressionism, and of Soviet state socialism marked by the aesthetics of the propaganda poster. It is my argument in this introduction to the cultural movement *The 3rd Floor* and its first exhibition that the advent of "contemporary art" in Armenia can be located at the intersection between what the community of young Soviet Armenian artists of the perestroika generation perceived as the *dreamworld* of Western liberal freedom and consumer culture, and Gorbachev's attempts to reform state socialism. And in this dynamic, the former was enabled by the latter, as the Armenian artists received the "West" through the optics of late Soviet subcultural youth, as it became more accessible during the Gorbachev's era.

Grigoryan's poster announced the first exhibition of the Soviet Armenian cultural movement that lasted until 1994. Inspired by Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms (1984–1991) and its appeal to glasnost, or transparency (1986–1991), a group of artists decided to shock and thus maybe reform the local Union of Artists. This first event was more of a festival than a coherent exhibition, as it took place in the conference hall located on the third floor of the Union of Artists, a space not designated for exhibitions. It was the location of their first convention that gave the movement its name. The 3rd Floor movement began to form when several young artists were invited to be part of the youth division of the Union in 1987. Inspired by social changes brought about by perestroika reforms they felt they had a mandate to organize and provide content for the annual youth exhibition, which would attract a larger public, and a social responsibility to breath a fresh gasp of air into an otherwise stagnant institution, a bastion of official Soviet Armenian art (Figure 3.2).

The Unions of Artists were organizational structures of artistic production, representation, and reception in the USSR. Along with other professional Unions, such as those of architects, writers, and composers, they were instituted in the Soviet Union throughout the 1930s and subsequently went through multiple reorganizations. Structurally, the Union was set up with a secretary at the top, followed by an administrative council and a secretariat that oversaw the work of individual sections divided according to disciplines of painting, sculpture, decorative arts, and graphic arts. All artistic and administrative decisions were made collectively through committees, or at Congresses of all Artists of the Union. In addition, each Union had a production fund responsible for allocating commissions to its members and overseeing the acquisition of new works. Generally, the Unions were by and for members only, although the annual youth exhibitions were also open to non-members, the products of whose creative practice, if approved, could be bought by the state. To become a member of a Union, an artist had to have graduated from an art school and be able to demonstrate proven, relevant skill and artistic talent. These structures were highly hierarchical, and by the 1970s, they were functioning through well-established schemas and dogmas, which gave the illusion of open debate and discussion but which in fact was taking place within officially sanctioned parameters.

The establishment of The 3rd Floor at the margins of the Union of Artists' institutional structure in 1987 was also the result of a radical change in the statute of the Union. The change made possible the inclusion of many young artists (some of whom will later be part of The 3rd Floor movement) into the Youth Section of this organization. Their incorporation into the official art institution, while they continued to act at its margins as the cultural vanguard of the new epoch, placed them within the trajectory of the discourse of glasnost, and as part of the official perestroika reforms that gave voice to the intelligentsia alienated by a stagnant bureaucracy. The movement did not only follow the official program launched by Gorbachev to reform the state institutions, but its events and gestures structurally and formally rhymed with the most direct outcome of the politics of glasnost: the protests, pickets, demonstrations, and strikes materialized in public spaces such as parks and squares. Formally, these were temporary, and process-based events. Similarly, the exhibitions organized by The 3rd Floor were all-inclusive, performative and time-based events operating within what art historian Vardan Azatyan calls "the making of history within the regime of urgency."² Arman Grigoryan, the ideologue and main organizer of the movement and the author of the poster-painting mentioned above, confirmed this in 1989 when he declared: "Art should be urgent and not leave [anyone] indifferent."³

The young artists associated with The 3rd Floor used the opportunity to be part of the official Soviet artistic establishment, placing at the heart of their agenda the issue of direct communication with the public and of de-bureaucratization of art's distribution. They challenged the traditional representational content of the Union's youth exhibitions, which provided opportunities to young artists to exhibit as long as they affirmed and reproduced the inherited styles, techniques, and rules of composition that had exclusively favored figuration. The young artists involved in the movement aimed at nothing less than institutional transformation, and by extension, a redefinition of art itself. The artists Grigoryan, Kiki (Grigor Mikaelyan), and art critic Nazareth Karoyan took advantage of the Union of Artists' 1987 invitation. They organized a ten-day process-based event where "anyone and anybody could present themselves or be presented as artists, stressing the urgency of

communication which can only be resolved between art and reality.”⁴ In this, they opposed and critiqued the established Union of Artists’ policies of selecting the participating artists for annual exhibitions exclusively through state-organized committees, aiming thus at reforming the very institutional structure of the Union both in terms of its politics and aesthetics.

Ideologically, The 3rd Floor movement presented a mixture of romantic liberalism, nationalism, and libertarianism, with anarchist dreams of omnipotence and contradictory ideologies that often worked hand in hand. It is not accidental that throughout the six years of its loose existence, approximately 50 artists (according to Nazareth Karoyan’s calculation) participated in the events related to, or organized by, the movement. Through its broad strategies, which bring to mind the Wagnerian notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, The 3rd Floor had the ambition “to make up for the lack of a contemporary art discourse [by means of] a limited number of exhibitions.”⁵

The artists participating in the movement actively appropriated Western signs and symbols that were often a mixture of high art and middle- to low-brow cultural icons: from Joseph Beuys to the rock band Black Sabbath to the worship of American blue jeans and Marlboro cigarettes. The members romanticized these symbols to the degree that they came to denote ideals of individual freedom and autonomy. The critique of the Soviet ideology through the appropriation of other (i.e., Western) signs of consumer culture situates The 3rd Floor within the intellectual climate of the late Soviet and socialist intelligentsia’s romantic alliance with bourgeois democracy. In the practices of The 3rd Floor these ideals were understood from an artistic perspective: the citizen’s freedom was equal to that of the artist’s “absolute and universal right to mix different artistic styles and images on the surface of the canvas.”⁶ If the ideal of Soviet socialist realism was based upon a series of prescribed and recommended images, for The 3rd Floor, autonomy meant aesthetic anarchism, understood as the right to mix the images and styles of high and low culture. The aesthetic anarchism that formed the core of this artistic movement and its method of exhibition-making was combined with the relativization of all value and the dismantling of hierarchies. This anarchic impulse corresponds to the then ongoing constitution of the late Soviet subject as an autonomous agent devoid of social responsibility. In opposition to the collective subject produced in Soviet ideological discourse (even though this discourse became a mere façade in late Soviet years), The 3rd Floor insisted on individualism. In their war against banality, be it ideological banality or everyday banality, they emphasized the need to be uncommon.

The 3rd Floor’s movement’s exhibitions stretched the very borders of art practice to include poetry readings, music performances, and breakdance. The poster-painting, for example, announces the following events taking place throughout the exhibition *3rd Floor*: “[a meeting] with painters and breakdancers,” “[a meeting] with the composers of the philharmonic,” “poetry,” “Jazz avant-garde,” and so on. In Armenia, The 3rd Floor’s understanding of art – as a sphere of dreaming about political and social ideals – has become paradigmatic of and even synonymous with contemporary art as such, and here painting served as a conduit to these ideals.

It is not unimportant that the very first poster announcing their exhibition was a large painting. In this project, instead of approaching the poster-painting, and by extent the exhibition that it announces, as the origin of the contemporary, these are

instead taken as focal points, among possible others, through which one might be able to make the “contemporary” appear as a historical condition. The 3rd Floor’s 1987 inaugural exhibition is a productive case study for the contemporary since it encapsulates the contradictions of the “epoch of changes” in late Soviet years, brought about by the policies of perestroika and glasnost. First and foremost, and as already mentioned, ideologically, the painting-poster is an epitome of “contemporary art” as that which stands for the desires for liberal democracy and the Western consumer *dreamworld*, a trajectory pursued by The 3rd Floor in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In terms of its media and technique, the painting-poster signals the clash of the painterly gesture as the ideal of subjective freedom, and the aesthetics of mechanical reproduction. Structurally, the exhibition that the poster inaugurated, at the margins of an official state-run art institution – such as the Union of Artists – yet evolving in its margins, was to become paradigmatic for contemporary art in Armenia in the 1990s and 2000s – officially sanctioned, yet antagonistic to the national cultural discourse.

What follows in this case study are several archival images representing The 3rd Floor’s artistic practices as well as excerpts from a cover dedicated to the movement in an official cultural monthly.

Selected Archival Documents and Artist Projects

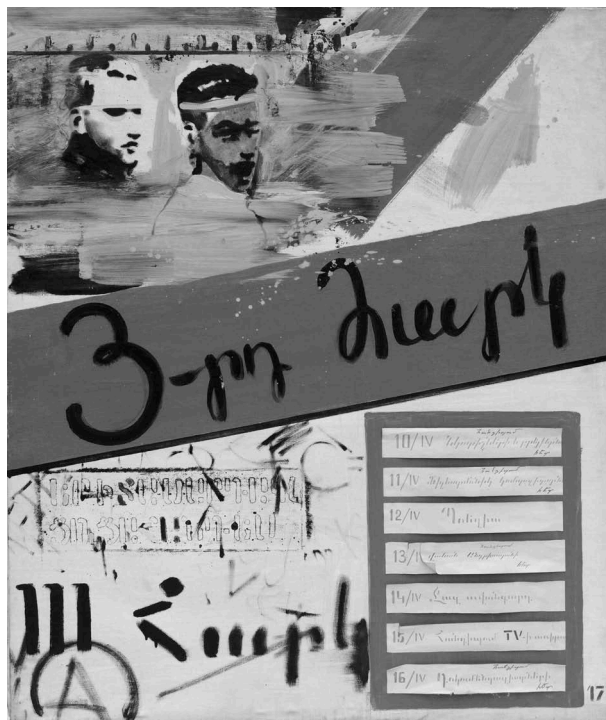


Figure 3.1 Arman Grigoryan, *The 3rd Floor* poster-painting, 1987, mixed-media.

Courtesy of Vardan Azatyan



Figure 3.2 The 3rd Floor group photograph, 1992.

Courtesy of Nazareth Karoyan



Figure 3.3 The 3rd Floor, Collective Action, Exhibition *Plus Minus*, 1990.

Courtesy of Nazareth Karoyan

In 1987, prior to *The 3rd Floor* exhibition and the discussions following it, Nazareth Karoyan first discovered and then meticulously categorized the garbage accumulated under the roof of the Museum of Modern Art in Yerevan. Then he created an inventory of the items collected and presented this inventory in a Union of Artists' official meeting, to the distress of many of those present. It is interesting that

garbage, as a signifier of contradictions buried behind the beautiful façade of official cultural politics, was not merely revealed but categorized and itemized. Karoyan's structuralist interest was not only in the binaries that shaped life in the late Soviet years but the categorization and display of these very binaries as a procuratorial gesture. The photograph is from a similar action performed collectively by the members of the movement in 1990.

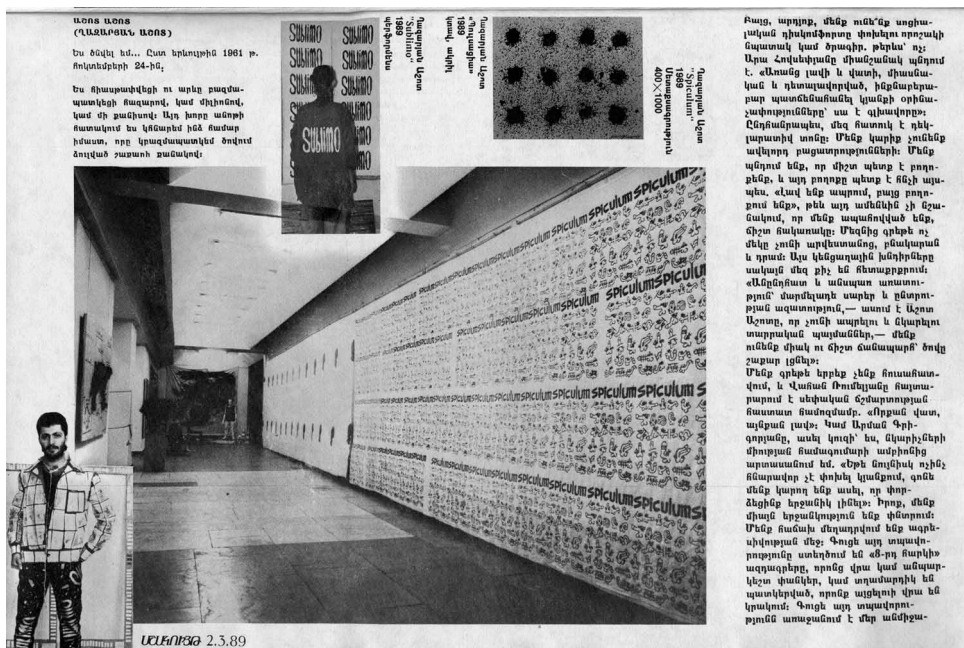


Figure 3.4 Article in *Mshakuyt* monthly covering the events organized by the members of The 3rd Floor group. *Mshakuyt*, 2-3 (1989): 54-57.

Document in personal archive of Angela Harutyunyan

The 1989 double issues of the monthly magazine *Mshakuyt* (Culture) offered The 3rd Floor members space to represent themselves through statements and artworks. In a particular rubric entitled “Open Doors” – a section devoted to breaking “the dogmas of truth” and to establishing a dialogue with the younger generation – many young artists were invited to express their opinions. These opinions were juxtaposed with two cautionary editorials signed by the art critic Nazareth Karoyan.

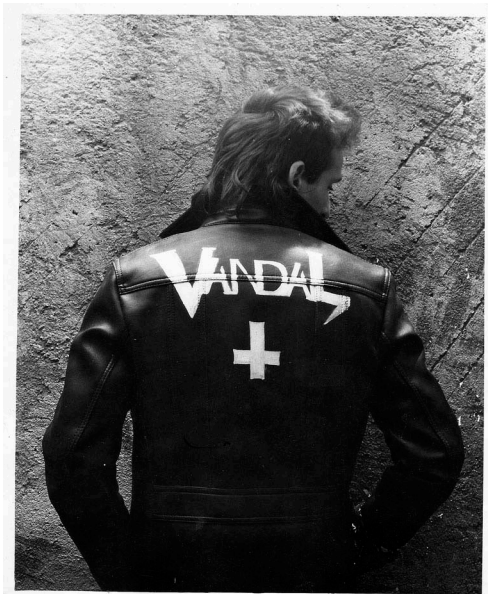


Figure 3.5 Arman Grigoryan, *Vandal*, 1990.

Courtesy of Arman Grigoryan

Truthful to the anarchic-libertarian ideas that Grigoryan adhered to, in 1990, he adapted the nickname Vandal.



Figure 3.6 The 3rd Floor, *Hail to the Union of Artists from the Netherworld: Happening*. Performance at the Artists' Union, 1988.

Courtesy of Arman Grigoryan

In the autumn of 1988, The 3rd Floor artists, dressed up as resurrected ghosts like their heavy metal heroes – the musicians from the groups Black Sabbath and Kiss (rock music played a considerable role in perestroika youth culture) – walked into one of the Union of Artists' conventional exhibitions and declared the death of official art. In this happening, recorded under two different titles – *Official Art Has Died* and *Hail to the Union of Artists from the Netherworld* – they walked silently through the exhibition hall, viewed the paintings hung on the walls, and with the realization of the symptomatic significance of their action, took photographs of themselves in various groupings and positions and walked out. Simply known as the “happening,” this event reflected several key aspects of the movement's practice: it revealed that the various members of the movement had conflicting understandings of the action, thus reinforcing the assumption that The 3rd Floor did not propose a coherent and unified aesthetic program or agenda. It re-enacted their belief in the incommensurability of art as a space for free creation and the official institution ruled by the tyranny of banality: if art was the collectively constructed dream of the underground heroes, the institution was the conventional domain of a properly dead and officially sanctioned reality (the dead heroes of the netherworld were more alive than what belonged to the social world above the ground). Formally, the tone of the happening was aggressive, oppositional, declarative, and devoid of prescriptive content.

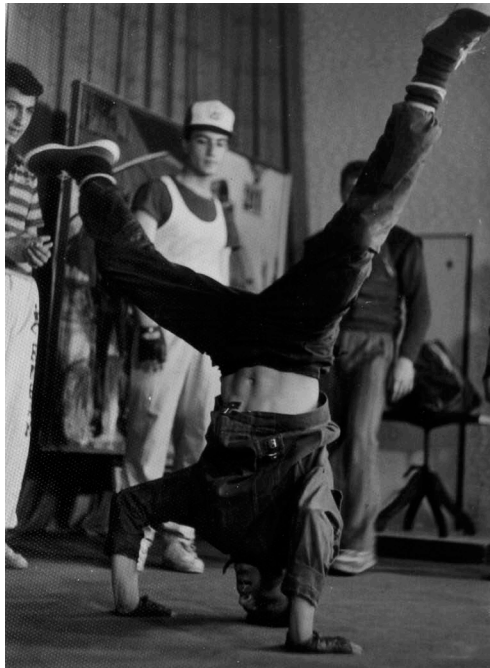


Figure 3.7 The 3rd Floor, *Breakdance*, 1987. Performance.

Courtesy of Arman Grigoryan



Figure 3.8 Arman Grigoryan next to his poster-painting *Breakdance*, 1987.
Courtesy of Nazareth Karoyan

For the 1987 exhibition *The 3rd Floor*, Grigoryan invited writers, musicians, and breakdancers to promote the idea that the youth exhibition is an unhindered space for free creativity. Grigoryan's paintings often depict various real and imagined counter-cultural figures (gays, punks, nudes – there are also breakdancers), thus hinting toward an imaginary and romanticized outside to Soviet cultural politics.

A Selection of Material Dedicated to The 3rd Floor Movement

In Mshakuyt magazine special issue dedicated to The 3rd Floor, Nazareth Karoyan situates the movement within the avant-garde tradition of refusé art, providing a large number of images of individual members' artworks. The aim of this section was to present various phenomena of contemporary reality that were "out of the norm" and "out of the ordinary." These phrases have been and are still being applied by journalists, cultural bureaucrats, and other members of the public in order to designate contemporary art practices and to normalize contemporary art as out of the norm. Below there is a selection of statements from this seven-page publication.

"Open Doors" from the introduction to magazine's rubric (excerpt)

Nazareth Karoyan

Mshakuyt monthly, March 2, 1989

Translations and adaptations by Angela Harutyunyan

"Open doors" is an unregulated platform for free speech on unregulated cultural phenomena. It is not a secret that for years we haven't noticed, or have tried not to notice unacceptable phenomena in our culture and in the art milieu, phenomena that are today called "unofficial." We haven't noticed. Period. We have naively convinced ourselves and the public that if "official" and "serious" art criticism and cultural criticism

don't react to these phenomena, then they cannot exist. They can't exist. Period. At most, "serious" art and cultural criticism have recorded distinct elements and expressions of the complex of inferiority of these "unofficial" phenomena with self-satisfying forgiveness; and these records could be premonitions of their growth [sic]. Let's confess that when confronted with such phenomena, first and foremost, we try to exclude and suppress them without trying to grasp their internal structure while fitting them into our stereotypical cultural understandings. When these don't fit, we reject them. In a surprising logic, the claims to democratization run ahead of our practical life,⁷ wherein each model for social-cultural development and progress should follow as a logical result of, and not precede, our objective social-cultural life. And perhaps here we can look for the reasons for the not-so-smooth processes through which these high and progressive models are made operational. As a result, when confronting the ossified and reified social and often official "uniform" barrier, our higher ideas and initiatives of social reconstruction vanish. And it happens so that with sad consistency we perpetuate the old but not good "tradition" of incommensurability between word and action, in this case by publicly declaring the high ideas of pluralism and divergence of opinions while continuing to apply the infamous principle of "the right to one voice." This is so in the sphere of culture as well.

And thus, "Open Doors" is an attempt to overcome the barrier of "uniform" truths, to listen to the other's voice and opinion even if one doesn't share it. First and foremost, what interests us from a culturalogical perspective, are phenomena of "deregulated" culture as a fact of the relationship between "culture and the public." In its inaugural publication, "Open Doors" presents The 3rd Floor cultural movement.

The 3rd Floor Manifesto

Objective art,
no art,
tired art,
not serious art,
poor,
miserable,
wretched,
mangy,
unneeded,
full-bellied,
cooked-prepared,
naked art,
militaristic art,
unsuccessful art,
morbid art,
cold,
adjusted,
independent art
for art sale,
spoiled art,
homicidal art, dead art.
10.19.1988

*Special Editorial Dedicated to the Presentation of The 3rd Floor (excerpt)*Editorial⁸*Mshakuyt* monthly, March 2, 1989

Art audiences and specialists in Yerevan have been hearing about the group The 3rd Floor with increasing frequency. And as with all new phenomena, and so it is in this case, opinions are contradictory, and at times polarized. The status of the group, using a fashionable word, is informal. But in this case, what is significant is the content of its activities, and the aesthetic position it has adopted. The group has already organized a number of exhibitions – in Yerevan, Penevejis, Leninakan, and Vilnius. Several of its members participated in the all-Soviet congress of avant-garde artists in the Estonian town of Narva in 1988. But wider art audiences were exposed to the group thanks to the largest exhibition yet organized in Yerevan as part of the traditional youth exhibitions, with the non-traditional name 666. The first edition of “Open Doors” does not only allow a close acquaintance with the particularities of the young artists’ work but, so to speak, allows one to relate to the artistic credo of these young men⁹ with unmediated immediacy, to accept or not to accept them, to unconditionally admire or reject them, that is to become their interlocutor, sympathizer or an opponent.

So, The 3rd Floor, 13 boys of varied ages, creative orientations, and why not, creative potentialities and talent have gathered under one roof in order to say something different, rebellious, in an “unregulated” manner.

Thus, we give the floor to The 3rd Floor.

3rd Floor. Who are They. “Words of a Sympathetic Art Critic”¹⁰ (excerpt)

Nazareth Karoyan

When speaking to them and trying to find out what brought them together, the answer is, “the desire to exhibit together.” An art lover familiar with their work will first find this answer confusing. Confusing, because in terms of artistic practice, one cannot speak about stylistic coherence. Judge for yourself: how can directions as aesthetically, chronologically, and social-psychologically opposed as elitism and pop-artism (this is a constructed but in this case, applicable term), constructivism and expressionism, technocratism and archaism, abstractionism that reveals radical subjectivism and the radical objectivism of objects, coexist? And when eclecticism is an artistic principle, several of these terms simply cohabit in one work.

...

The exhibition, the desire to “exhibit together,” is exclusively an aim, rather than a means. In this case, we are not dealing with an *artistic and aesthetic phenomenon but with a social and cultural one*, a factor that is fully expressed not only in the manifesto articulating art’s social being but also in the name of the movement – “The 3rd Floor.”

The idea of the name came from the process of organization of their first exhibition. In the spring of 1987, a group of youths led by the painter Arman Grigoryan approached the then administration of the Armenian Artists’ Union with a proposal to organize an exhibition. And this proposal expressed discontent with the annual

youth exhibition that had just finished. The administration came forward and agreed to give the youth one of the halls of the Armenian Artists' Union. But since all the exhibition halls were booked with pre-scheduled official events, they were given the third floor, which was a conference hall, and not meant for exhibitions. ... During the first period of the group's activities, what is stressed perhaps with a hint of self-irony is the idea of having themselves being viewed as a social appendage by others.

The exhibition as an aim, this means that the inherent value of each artwork is secondary in relation to the exhibition as a whole. The importance of a separate work stretches as far as its participation in the fact of the creation of the "exhibitionary" whole. ... The 3rd Floor encompasses representatives from almost all avant-garde movements from the landscape of Armenian contemporary fine arts – from variations of abstract art to conceptual art, from pop art to transavantgarde. In this multicolor panorama, individual stylistic forms seem to counter-balance one another.

...

The formation of The 3rd Floor's social and cultural understanding was triggered by certain peculiarities of our country's cultural reality. The main factor that brought the guys [*sic*] to collaboration was not merely the shared aesthetic taste but a particular need for a social disposition. And this disposition, this expression of alternative cultural consciousness, is nothing else but a defense reaction in relation to the official ideology and its corresponding aesthetic platform that does not tolerate dissent.

...

Isn't the individualism that art acquired with the greatest sacrifice, the price that it is ready to pay for the sharp turn away from stagnation – a malaise facing contemporary mankind and one that found its corresponding expression in culture – toward dialogue, toward the reparation of severed human bonds! In any case, The 3rd Floor is proof of this.

The "Open Doors" publication also included a short self-biography by each artist, a statement, and reproductions of the artist's work.

Self-biographies

Poghosyan Sahak

Struggle for the sake of destroying all kinds of borders and barriers. A fundamental freedom of mind and spirit.

Hajyan Armen

I adhere to abstract expressionism. For me, color itself is a figure, and I aim to discover it within the limits of a given moment, outside of reality, but in connection with it. The canvas needs to be organized immediately, with spontaneously born layers, and be destroyed unexpectedly.

Terzyan Karapet

Art is mystery. The artwork that has the ability to surprise is a perfect one. For me, what is important in art is the divine conception and ceaseless movement which does not obey a rule, is free and boundless.

Gevorgyan Armen

I have no concept since anything definitive results in limits.

Karine Matsakyan

Art as . . .
Art as a worldview
Art as a means of contact
Art as mercy
Art as creed
Art as protest
Art as relation
Art as guidance
Art as memory, as
being principled, as idea
Consistency and certainty
Clean [it] with care, carefully, with synthetic
cotton so not to leave a residue of morality

Artists' Statements

The world is absurd. The absurd is intensified in art and ceases to be absurd.

Sev Henrik (Khachatryan Henrik)

I love the action on the canvas, free, spontaneous, fast, unrepeatable; in that moment I become the executioner of a mysterious and secret force, and as a result ART is born.

Kiki

Protest is important for me, protest against myself and my lifestyle. To be glad that reality itself is absurd and to accept the absurd as life.

Petrosyan Armen

I consider art as communication whose criterion is to fascinate me. For me, in art there are no such categories as good or bad, old and new, high and low, permissible and impermissible. Life is a possibility for choice, and I try to be happy.

Grigoryan Arman

I got disappointed, and multiplied the sun by a thousand or a million, or by some other number. At the bottom of that deep pot I will invent meaning for myself which I will multiply by the amount of sugar dissolved in the sea.

Ashot-Ashot (Ghazaryan Ashot)

I think that the depiction of form in painting should be simple, holistic, and definite. Art is based on a series of contingencies, and out of these contingencies high art is born. The artist is someone who goes from the limit to the limitless.

Rumelyan Vahan

I don't separate art from life. What I do gives me a possibility to live (generally and particularly) by coalescing that which does not coalesce.

Hovsepyan Ara

Art is the subjective expression of
abstract objective phenomena.
And the more subjective it is,
the more objective is its say.
I am for the most terse speech.
Color and line,
With color and line,
From color and line,
For color and line,
I am with them,
For them,
From them.

Mkrtchyan Karo

Opinion: We welcome your courage. We are glad that a rebellious, free-minded, and rational generation is growing.

(A group of employees of the State Art Gallery, October 3, 1989.)

***Simply An Editorial Comment Without The Self-Righteous Claim
To One's Own Truth (excerpt)***

Editorial

Mshakuyt monthly, March 2, 1989

If The 3rd Floor artistic phenomenon already exists – as, it had fought for its right to exist with irrational fervor – and, if it has entered our artistic, cultural and culturalogical system, and why not, our social everyday, with its unsmooth and prickly ribs, and if only one exhibition of these guys can gather as many as 5,000 people in ten days, thus turning into a cultural fact-phenomenon from merely an artistic one, and as much as it is ambiguous, obviously imbalanced from an artistic perspective, as much as it does not fit into the system of “certain” artistic criteria, then we need to come to terms with this fact. Let's accept that they don't have the “right to speak first,” and a knowledgeable eye will immediately detect many outside borrowings that are unfit for our national culture. Moreover they present certain worrying tendencies threatening the development of that culture (and especially the tendency to reject the continuity of cultural tradition). Still The 3rd Floor exists and is a reality in our artistic life. Thus, we need to unburden ourselves from the “ostrich complex,” to take our heads out of the sand and notice it, examine and analyze it, and most importantly, and in spite of rebellious and unjustified declarativeness in that phenomenon, to come to terms with it on the principle of

treating them as equals, and not with the self-satisfying forgiveness of the one who knows, but instead trying to understand it using its own models and criteria.

Notes

- 1 My monograph informs part of this Introduction. See Angela Harutyunyan, *The Political Aesthetics of the Armenian Avant-garde: The Journey of the Painterly Real* (Manchester University Press, 2017).
- 2 “Cucahandesy vorpes aprelakerp” [Exhibition as a mode of life]. In *Selection of Documents from the 3rd Floor*, ed. Vardan Azatyan, forthcoming, publisher unknown.
- 3 Arman Grigoryan, “3rd hark: Irenk irenc masin” [3rd Floor: Them about Them-Selves], *Mshakuyt* 2–3 (1989), 54–57.
- 4 Arman Grigoryan, “Nor hayatsq: Irakanutyun ev arvest” [New Vision: Reality and Art], in *Hayastani jamanakakic arvest, 1980–1995* [Contemporary Art of Armenia, 1980–1995] (Moscow’s Central House of Artists, 1995), 5–12.
- 5 Vardan Azatyan, “Art Communities, Public Spaces, and Collective Actions in Armenian Contemporary Art,” in Mel Jordan and Malcolm Miles eds., *Art, Theory, Post-Socialism* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008), 46.
- 6 Anonymous editorial, “Cucadrum e 3rd harky,” (The 3rd Floor Shows) *Arvest* 11–12 (1992), 3–8.
- 7 The Armenian word *arorya*, literally translated as “the everyday,” has semantic affinities with the Russian word *byt*. The literal translation “everyday” does not express the semantic nuances of the original, hence I chose to replace it with “practical life” or “life practice,” which is closer to the original meaning.
- 8 The editorial is anonymous and is presumably by the then editor of the journal Gevorg Harutyunyan.
- 9 Even though there were several female members that played major roles in the movement such as Karine Matsakyan, Araks Nerkararyan, and Heriqnaz Galstyan, the members of the movement continued to be referred to as “the guys.” Perhaps this was due to the masculinist bravado and the declarative tone adopted by The 3rd Floor.
- 10 Due to space constraints this article by Nazareth Karoyan dedicated to The 3rd Floor movement has been abridged. Karoyan’s article was one of the first attempts by an art critic affiliated with the movement to situate the latter’s practice historically, and in this case, within the avant-garde tradition of negation.

Case Study 4

The First Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting, Ashkal Alwan Beirut 1995

By Natasha Gasparian

Exhibition Title

The First Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting

Location and Date

René Mouawad (Sanayeh) Garden, Beirut, October 5–8, 1995

Organizers

Christine Tohme, Marwan Rechmaoui, and Rania Tabbara

Organization

Ashkal Alwan: Lebanese Association for the Plastic Arts

Artists

Loulwa Abdel Baki, Ghassan Abdel Nour, Ziad Abillama, Ibrahim Abou Khalil, Rami Barakat, Anachar Basbous, Nabil Basbous, Sami Basbous, Amal Bohsali, Samer Chalfoun, Dina Charara, Nelly Chemaly, Flavia Codsí, Marc-Henri Ghorra, Georges Haddad, Nabil Helou, Aram Jughian, Rim El-Jundi, Bassam Kahwagi, Charles Khoury, Ghassan Kitmitto, Rafik Majzoub, Leila Mroueh, Marc Naaman, Jean-Marc Nahas, Marwan Rechmaoui, Walid Sadek, Nadia Safeddine, Marwan Saleh, the Ultraviolet Group, Alain Vassoyan, Cherine Yazbeck, Bassem Zeitouni

Exhibition Catalog

Christine Tohme, ed., *The First Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting* [Liqā' al-Sanayeh al-Tashkili al-Awwal] (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan Lebanese Association for the Plastic Arts, 1995). Texts by Christine Tohme and Kamal Mouzawak

Introduction

The First Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting refers to a group of workshops and an exhibition that took place over three days (October 5–8, 1995) in the René Mouawad Garden, located in the Sanayeh district of Beirut. It was the first of several public events organized by Ashkal Alwan (Lebanese Association for the Plastic Arts) between 1995 and 2000, which also included the “Sioufi Garden Project” (1997), the “Corniche Project” (1999), and the “Hamra Street Project” (2000). The “Sanayeh Meeting,” however, constituted a turning point in local institutional practices; it was a historical threshold that marked stylistic, formal, generational distinctions, and differences in modes of production and consumption of art. As the first event of its kind after the declaration of the end of the Lebanese Civil War, the Sanayeh Meeting brought together artists of a variety of ages, backgrounds, and formal training. Its main declared goal was to reclaim the public space that was inaccessible during the 15 years-long war. The event left a mark in Lebanese art history. The Sanayeh Meeting is regarded today as the art historical event that sorted artists into those, who would later be recognized as “contemporary artists,” and the local painters and sculptors who continued working in the tradition of the fine arts. The latter are today considered part of a different epoch. Selected for its purported neutrality and location (a middle point between West and East Beirut) the Sanayeh Garden bears the name of the late president René Mouawad. The president only served 17 days in office when a bomb was detonated near his motorcade passing through the Sanayeh area in 1989. The city officials chose to commemorate this political figure, by having his name inscribed upon the public site closest to the location of his death, ignoring, however, other equally significant events. One such excluded event – in addition to the Sanayeh Meeting bringing together 38 local artists – was the death of Ibrahim Tarraf in 1983, (who is said to have been hanged three times in the Sanayeh Garden until he died). Tarraf was accused of having killed and decapitated his landlady, Mrs. Mathilda Bahour and her son Marcel in 1979. At his trial, the defense declared him unfit to plead or stand trial due to his insanity, while the prosecution argued that his motivation was sectarian, as he belonged to a different religious sect than that of the victims. Of the many artists invited to participate in the Sanayeh Meeting, Ziad Abillama (b. 1969) and Walid Sadek (b. 1966) were specifically interested in “excavating” such historical events, to use the Foucauldian term upon which Sadek relies – that is, to dig out material that had been ignored or forgotten and to propose an alternative interpretation, for example, of Ibrahim Tarraf’s death.¹ In his contribution to the garden project, Sadek specifically dealt with Tarraf’s public execution. His work, *Nisfou Rajoulin Youbal’itou Fi Thiyabina Ayyouha Al-Sada* (Gentlemen, Half-a-Man Wriggles in Our Clothes), also titled in short as *Half-a-Man*, approached the garden, not as a neutral space, but rather as “a congested place brimming with the violence of random punitive acts.”² The artwork, made up of several frames of texts and images, each as an individual segment that folded like an accordion, was hung on the tines of the fence around the garden – alluding, specifically to Tarraf’s death, but also more generally to the *jouissance* involved in such violent acts: “to hanging, to acts of surgical precision, to pleasure and to torture.”³

Independently of the Sanayeh event, the two artists along with Bassam Kahwagi (b. 1963) and Rabih Mroue (b. 1967) produced two issues of a small publication titled *Dakhaltu Marra al-Guneina* (Once I Entered Little Heaven), where they playfully articulated their concerns with the epistemological violence involved in the writing of history (Figure 4.6).⁴ They dedicated one of the issues to the Sanayeh Meeting, and commented on the levity with which its organizers and the participating artists, approached the garden for their project. One photograph in the second issue occupies an entire page: a woman with her back turned carries a child who looks at the viewer. At the bottom of the page, a caption and an image of the cartoon character Handala are added to elucidate that in the summer of 1982 Palestinian refugees were sheltered in the Sanayeh Garden due to the Israeli invasion of the south of Lebanon. The underlying question the artists pose here is: “How can a group of artists enter a historically loaded site and treat it as though it were a blank slate?” In other words, how can one look to the future if the past is forgotten?

In his 2007 essay “Place at Last,” Walid Sadek writes about the artworks his contemporaries displayed at the Sanayeh Meeting. He singles out his own work, as well as Ziad Abillama’s and Bassam Kahwagi’s contributions, highlighting their performative gestures which he sees as conveying a reluctance to represent: a tendency to elude and ultimately displace any referent manifest in many of the artworks.⁵ In both his catalog entry for the Sanayeh Meeting, and in the only art object that he contributed to the event, Abillama takes issue specifically with the “analogy between the garden and the nation, as well as that between the artist and the citizen.”⁶ Abillama’s project, which he was later forced to cancel, involved a questionnaire where he asked each artist to lend him 30 cm² of their individually allocated space, in order to include anything that he deemed appropriate. Abillama’s gesture caused much dispute, as only one participating artist, Amal Bohsali allowed him to place a metal box on her plot in the garden. The nation-garden analogy was already implicit in the invitation to participate in the Sanayeh Garden event, insofar as the organizers treated the garden as a neutral space and as an opportunity for a reconciliatory encounter between the artists, the artworks, the public, and the city. Many of the artists welcomed the project “precisely in order for them to critically interrogate the possibilities of resuming living, being citizens and making art after a civil war.”⁷ While Abillama, Kahwagi and Sadek were perhaps the most critical toward the assumptions and ramifications of the Sanayeh Meeting, there was a range of works, artistic practices and responses which need to be given their due in order to fathom the stakes for those participating.

Most of the 38 artists involved in the *First Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting* were present throughout the full three days of the public event (Figure 4.8).⁸ While some produced their objects in advance, and only came to display them in the garden, other artists conducted the entire artmaking process in the garden.⁹ Whether intentionally or due to the event running behind schedule, the artistic process was given priority over the display of discrete art objects. From today’s perspective and available documentation, the Sanayeh Meeting appears to have been a spontaneous event. Marwan Rechmaoui (b. 1964) gathered the artists he knew, Rania Tabbara found sponsors, and Christine Tohme tied up loose ends.¹⁰ Most of the artists that collaborated with the organizers did not have

clearly defined roles. Of the 38 artists, nine were working as a collective called *Jama'at ma fawq al-Banafsaj* (The Ultraviolet Group). The members of this group coalesced around Mohammad Chamseddine, a professor of fine arts at the Lebanese University.¹¹ They were in fact Chamseddine's students and friends: artists, poets, and writers who were drinking, thinking, and traveling around their small country which they did not know due to the civil war. The installation that this group presented in the Sanayeh Garden came about as a byproduct of their daily interactions.¹² There was also another category of artists who did not officially participate, but who collaborated with and supported other artists in the project. For instance, Rabi' Mroue, who had contributed to the Guneina pamphlet, also performed a musical piece on a wind instrument in Flavia Codsi's (b. 1961) straw tunnel installation.¹³ It is to be observed that in 1995 Beirut did not yet have any spaces dedicated to the display of art; neither had international curators set foot in the city.¹⁴ The event was therefore instantly noticed by the local media. Moreover, artists like Dina Charara worked for Future Television (a station founded by then-Prime Minister of Lebanon, Rafic Hariri in 1993), which had also been the main sponsor of the event covering it also on their morning show *'Alam al-Sabah*.

Unlike prior art events organized at the time – such as, *Salon Des Artistes et Decorateurs* (1996) organized by Solidere (the private joint-stock company in charge of the postwar development of Beirut whose primary shareholder was Hariri) or, the 1992 one-artist installation *San Balech* [Where are we?] launched by Zaid Abillama in the town of Antelias – the Sanayeh Meeting offers a glimpse into the new possibilities available to a larger number of artists after the civil war. It also highlights the dangers that some foresaw. While the *Salon Des Artistes et Decorateurs* represented Solidere's private interest in using art as a promotion vehicle for their economic activities, and Abillama's *San Balech* was the work of an individual artist, the Sanayeh Meeting was the first group event of contemporary art bringing together a heterogeneity of forms, media, people and styles of artworks.

I would also like to draw attention to the fact that after this event, only a few artists were re-categorized as “contemporary artists of the postwar generation.”¹⁵ Many of the projects displayed at the Sanayeh Meeting were process-based, ephemeral, and site-specific, and included performances, installations, and video art. The Ultraviolet Group's contribution of toilet plungers placed on an elevated glass pane is an instance of ready-made or early installation art. One can even divide the Sanayeh works according to, such recent art critical concepts as, “skill” and “deskilling,” or “conceptual” vs. older categories, such as “manual” works made in the tradition of the fine arts (paintings, sculptures). Many of the works in the former category can be interpreted today as “singular gestures” that were not intended to be repeated. To this belongs the example of the Ultraviolet Group, whose plungers were presented as tools used to clear the “blockage of war,” as symbolized restrictions on individual mobility and the obstruction of historical movement. In more recent terms, their gestures were presented, by way of its form, as a singular aesthetic act.¹⁶ In the latter category of fine arts fall such works as Anachar Basbous's concrete sculpture. His work also happened to remain in the Sanayeh Garden until the garden's renovation by the private company Azadea Group in 2012.

One may see the event as splitting the artistic scene into a small group of artists practicing “contemporary art,” and the majority of the artists who would later only display in fine arts galleries, or even cease to make art entirely and fade into oblivion. The Ultraviolet Group collective, for example, disbanded shortly afterward and did not become part of the “postwar generation.”

In conclusion, there is also an institutional argument to be made with regard to the historical significance of the Sanayeh Meeting. Back in 2006 Stephen Wright claimed that Beirut art’s scene was “proto-institutional,” by which he meant that on the one hand, there was a lack of infrastructure for contemporary art, and on the other hand, artistic practices and discourses were widely and commonly present.¹⁷ It is perhaps more precise to argue against Wright and claim that, despite the lack of infrastructure, the artists themselves already embodied the institution of contemporary art in their discourses and practices, many of whom had a “transnational” status by way of “their career trajectories, formal strategies and multilingual work.”¹⁸ This is also evident in the role that the organizers performed in the Sanayeh Meeting. It is also to be mentioned that the event contributed to Ashkal Alwan’s becoming one of the key institutional players on the Lebanese and regional contemporary art scene – as the Association subsequently evolved through multiple phases of development and modes of artistic organization that lie beyond the scope of this study. Although the introductory text of the Sanayeh Meeting catalog reads today like an intimate letter of acknowledgments addressed by Tohme to the friends and co-organizers who aided her in staging the event, from a historical perspective one could discern in her statement a “proto-curatorial gesture.” Her introduction claims that the main purpose of the meeting was to implement a collective artistic vision for the event, while resisting the idea that Ashkal Alwan should become an artistic movement or embrace any political agenda. In setting the event apart from other artistic styles or movements, the introduction distances the Sanayeh Meeting project from the art of pre- and mid-civil war Lebanese modernism. While it would be inappropriate to suggest that the meeting was a conscious gesture of breaking with the past, it does signal a shift that can be understood in artistic, aesthetic, political terms; as gestures of singular aesthetics or proposals and projections, as some of the artworks did not materialize beyond catalog sketches, they were all nonetheless framed within one collective vision concerned with engaging the public. While the Sanayeh Meeting was a spontaneous and informal affair, it was an early instance of a Lebanese contemporary art event where a wide range of practices converged. It represents the attempts of those who were putting forth propositions on how to live in post-war Beirut, as well as those who were critical of the premise of the project itself.

Selected Archival Documents and Artist Projects

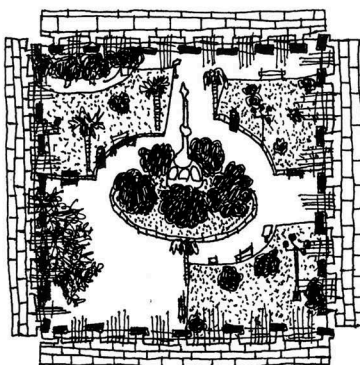
الجمعية اللبنانية للفنون التشكيلية

(أشكال ألوان)

بالتنسليق مع دائرة الحداثة

تدعوكم إلى

لقاء الصنائع التشكيلية الأول



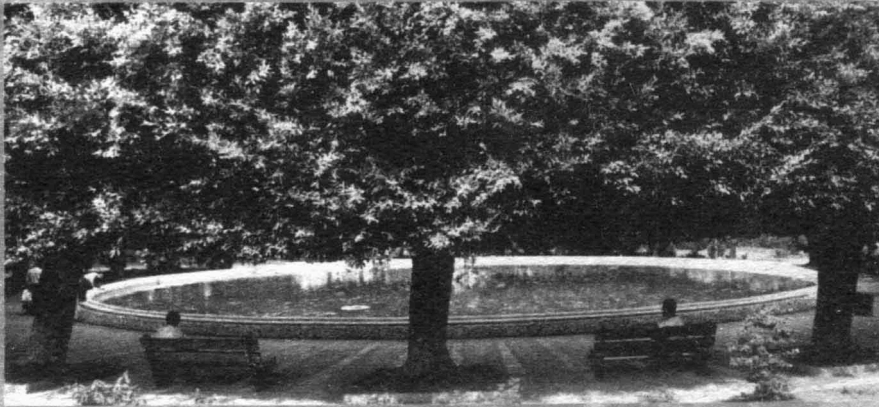
حديقة الصنائع - رينيه محوض • من ٥ إلى ٨ تشرين الأول
من العاشرة صباحاً إلى العاشرة مساءً

Figure 4.1 Invitation card to *The First Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting*, 1995. Ashkal Alwan, Beirut.

أشكال ألوان

الجمعية اللبنانية للفنون التشكيلية

لقاء الصنائع التشكيلي الأول



حديقة الصنائع - رينيه معوض • ٥ - ٨ تشرين الأول ١٩٩٥

Figure 4.2 Cover of the *Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting* catalog, 1995. Ashkal Alwan, Beirut.



Figure 4.3 Ziad Abillama's (right) and Amal Bohsali's (left) projects in the *Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting* catalog, 1995. Ashkal Alwan, Beirut.

Spread from the catalog showing Ziad Abillama's critical intervention includes a self-portrait with the "stain" of the Lebanese map planted on his face like a scar, a conversation with "Lama" which alternates between French and Arabic, ramblings on sovereignty, and a questionnaire which was presented to some of the participating artists with an illustration of the toilet of Louis XIV. On the left is a sketch of Amal Bohsali's "makblou'at" (creatures) and a short statement.



Figure 4.4 Nabil Basbous's sketch of a sculpture executed in the *Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting* (left) and Future Television advertisement (right), *Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting* catalog, 1995. Ashkal Alwan, Beirut.

Spread from catalog showing a Future Television advertisement on the right, and Nabil Basbous's sketch of a sculpture he executed for the Sanayeh Meeting on the left.



Figure 4.5 Photograph of a billboard advertisement for Solidere's reconstruction project, 1995. Courtesy of Walid Sadek.

This 1995 photograph of a billboard advertising Solidere's reconstruction projects in downtown Beirut seemed to be announcing many new possibilities for the populace and the artists participating in the Sanayeh event. In reality, the reconstruction project was later denounced by many artists for instrumentalizing the memory of the war, in addition to gentrifying and privatizing the downtown area of the city.



Figure 4.6 Page from *Dakhaltu Marra al-Guneima*, unpublished pamphlet (edited by Walid Sadek, Ziad Abillama, Rabih Mroue and Bassam Kahwagi) showing “Interview between the editors and Christine Tohme,” Beirut, 1995.

Courtesy of Walid Sadek.

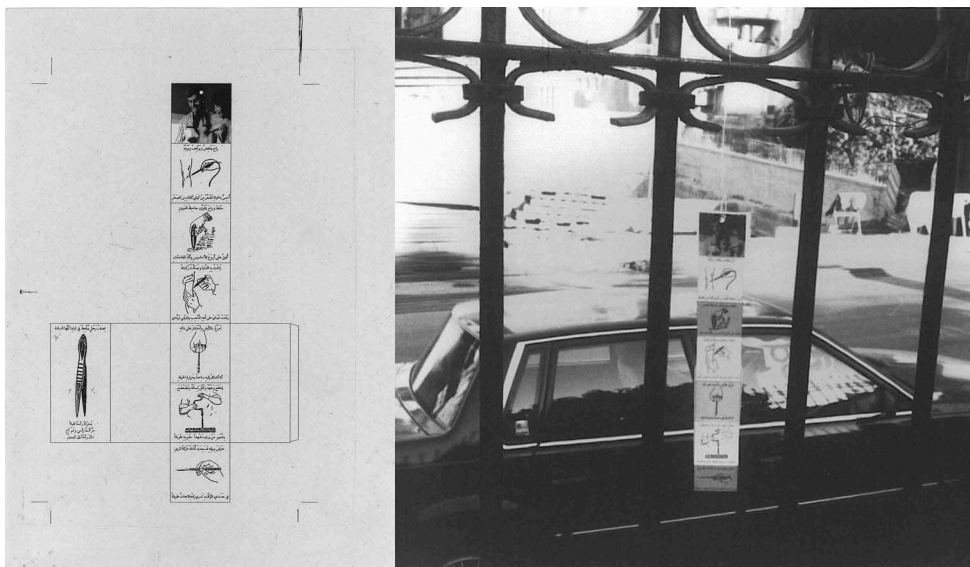


Figure 4.7 Walid Sadek’s project for the Sanayeh Meeting, Beirut, 1995.

Courtesy of Walid Sadek and Ashkal Alwan, Beirut.

Cardboard (left) from which a series of frames was cut out and pleated. It was hung from the tined metal fence at the garden's periphery (right). Seven of the eight frames contain images of instruments with two phrases which alternate between first- and third-person accounts of pain and pleasure. The top frame is an appropriated image from a Lifebuoy soap advertisement.

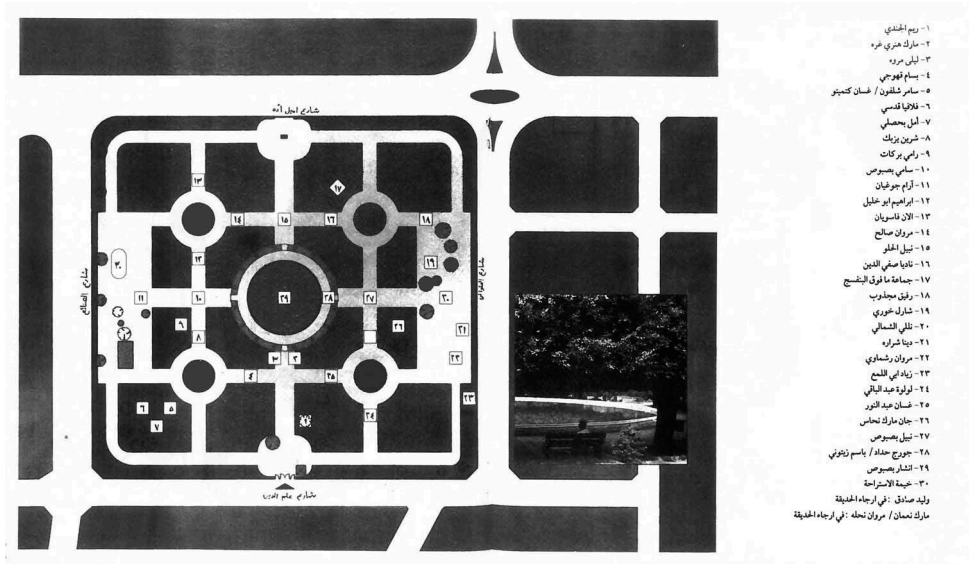


Figure 4.8 Map of the Sanayeh Garden showing the location of each participant's project. Ashkal Alwan, Beirut.

Selected Periodical Reviews and Catalog Texts

Loopholes for Friends

Christine Tohme

Tohme, ed. *Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting*

Translated by Natasha Gasparian

My friends: I listen to their love much more than I do their advice, thankfully. If it had not been so, I would have listened to the first piece of advice given me by the first friend I met that day last July, which would have prevented me from moving forward with this project: the project of turning the Sanayeh Garden – for which I hold pre-emptive rights, being its neighbor – into a plastic arts workshop, where three-dimensional works of art can be created for days.¹⁹ No more, but no less.

...

The consensus among my friends, who were at first shocked by the idea of the project and tried – out of affection – to dissuade me, was broken by: Marwan Rechmaoui and Rania Tabbara.

We had nothing but enthusiasm for the idea – the feeling began to assume a more definite form when we started taking the necessary administrative and practical measures. We founded an association under the name “Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts” (Ashkal Alwan), and then contacted the Governor of Beirut, the Department of Public Gardens, and finally the artists who we felt were receptive to the idea. Between then and now, more has happened than I can remember, but there is no need to remember or mention any of it anyway.

The one thing that must be said is that the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts (Ashkal Alwan) is in no way a “plastic arts political party”; it is simply a framework that allows for the organization of art gatherings (principally, of the plastic arts) – period.

If we are satisfied with such a limited definition, it is not just because Ashkal Alwan still has its baby teeth. It is also, primarily and ultimately, because what we all agree on at Ashkal Alwan – by the way, how many are we now, Marwan? Rania? – exceeds our individual artistic choices and extends toward the desire for human communication around the feast of art and its celebration. That is what we hope to achieve with our gathering at the Sanayeh Garden.

If I call it a “gathering,” it is not in an effort to appear humble, but rather because to use more restrictive terms would seem to me inappropriate. Indeed, this is not an exhibition in the conventional sense, since the “artworks” displayed have not been brought here in their finished form, but will instead be created on location, taking into account the conditions and demands of the setting. At times, it goes even beyond this, especially when it comes to those artists who have designed their work to incorporate elements present in the garden (plants or inanimate objects), in such complete harmony that the artwork would not hold any meaning without it. The gathering in Sanayeh is therefore not an exhibition, but neither is it an atelier of plastic arts in the narrow sense, as it is taking place in a public space open to the curiosity of those who feel “unconcerned.” And although it is being held in an open-air public space, we do not wish the event to turn into a carnival, in the cheap, vulgar sense. Indeed, we feel that the work we mean to do there is rooted in genuine stakes, not in a superficial desire for whimsical decoration.

...

We are well aware that this gathering will not be devoid of gaps. Perhaps we could cite the fact that Ashkal Alwan was only recently created, and that we struggled with “limited time” (and when was time unlimited?!), as mitigating circumstances, but not as excuses or justifications.

With joy in our hearts, we hope such gaps will allow new friends to find their way toward us.

Intimate Scene in Sanayeh Garden: Four Days of Artists Doing Their Thing (excerpt)

Laure Ghorayeb

Annahar, October 6, 1995

Translated by Natasha Gasparian

An art workshop is taking place all day long (from 10am to 10pm) in the Sanayeh Garden for the next four days. Sculptors, artists, amateurs, and young talents are all taking part in a unique experiment. They are each working with raw materials to produce a statue, composition, or structure, in a style that, for the most part, has been modern, uncomplicated and unpretentious. On the first night, the Sanayeh Garden was in an intimate state, with some young people sitting on wooden benches and others near the fountains. Some were sitting on the ledge of the brightly lit, large, circular pool, where the shadow of a monument filtered through the spray of water emanating from the pool's central fountain. And all over the garden, there were small spaces that were still lit where young men and women could be seen working on different things. They each had their own tools and materials, and they were focused on their work while photographers, journalists, and curious visitors swarmed all around them. Most of the pieces were still incomplete, but we were particularly struck by the work of Amal Bohsali, who was hanging different cut-out animal shapes all over a large black net. Nadia Safieddine, for her part, was completing a statue to which she had added some metal ornamentation. Nabil Helou had just completed his own metal sculpture, which he had started working on before moving it to the garden. As for Marwan Rechmaoui, he was welding iron to form structures shaped like high-voltage transmission towers with which he had not finished working. Nelly Chemaly was giving a television interview while her sculpture, made of cedarwood and metal rods, seemed to shine. Issuing from the tips of its metal rods, warm lights shone through the darkness of the large garden and the onlookers' hearts.

Discussion: The Garden and the Innocence We Seek

Conversation among Bassam Kahwagi, Walid Sadek, Ziad Abillama and Rabih Mroue

Published in Walid Sadek, Ziad Abillama, Rabih Mroue, and Bassam Kahwagi. *Dakhaltu Marra al-Guneina* [Once I Entered Little Heaven] (Beirut, 1995)

Translated by and Natasha Gasparian

- It seems to me that this exhibition is asking the Garden to rise to a level where it can open itself up to accommodate a group of people who have all lived through the war in different ways and from various viewpoints.
- The garden here plays an antithetical role to that of an art gallery. In fact, it negates it completely, in its tireless effort to be a "public square" where people are allowed to gather. Yet I wonder about the limits of such a "public square," and the extent of the freedom promised us by the garden. What I mean is: where does such freedom begin, and where does it end?
- Your question – about limits and what they encompass, about what is not allowed beyond their ambit – is a necessary one. It perhaps stirs something in all of us, but I myself feel the need to oppose this line of thought – if only temporarily – in order to allow for the construction of a "garden" that exceeds all notions of boundaries or the law.
- Clarify further.
- I mean that, in this exhibition, the garden is nothing but a space for a desired innocence. It promises each participant an innocence of their own, both old and new. It is as if this exhibition, or manifestation, is characterized by

a “ritual cleansing” through which the space that is this garden and all its believers are made clean.

- Perhaps those who answered the call and agreed to participate are all advocates of “cleanliness” to begin with.
- Indeed. It is only natural to disclose the intimate relationship between artists and “clean” stances openly. You might note that, throughout the ages, speaking openly of this relationship has always been considered normal.
- Yes, and the same goes for the relationship between art and nature.²⁰ It is wished that their relationship is solid and conjunctive to the extreme. . . . The garden here recalls this romantic tendency, where art flourishes in the bosom of living nature. That is why it will be. . . .
- Just a moment, please. Firstly, this manifestation is taking place within a closed space that is the opposite of what might be suggested by the geography, design and nature of the location. It is withdrawn unto itself, as if it needed to wear a mask to shield itself from its own blatant fragility. I’m surprised, for instance, at how expressions like “see you in the garden” or “let’s meet in the garden” have become so commonplace that they are used between people who don’t even know each other. This is why meeting here has become such a friendly affair, like gathering at a family home. And all this during such a short time, and in a place that has been scarred by history, with political and social phases and milestones that have altered its function and changed its meaning.
- It seems to me, and to others, that this garden used to represent a neutral space in the heart of the city before the war. But then, during the war, this space was violated, and its neutrality was lost.
- It’s as if you were telling us that the garden was once part of the ideal Beirut. You remind me of those romantics who yearn to revive Beirut’s past and bring back its Golden Age.
- Let’s go back to the beginning. Does the participation of artists in this exhibition represent a partial restoration of the role that was taken away from this garden, and an attempt to reproduce the function of this “space”? Are we somehow returning it to a renewed virginal state?
- I would say that there has always been a group of people who would claim to be restoring the garden’s role, even during the war. And every time, the garden would only reflect the ideas of each particular group.
- I would like to focus on the word “claim,” because it places all those who have come here as conquerors or invaders, whether they were artists or militiamen, and it submits all that they have done under critical scrutiny. Yet what could accidentally result from this is a single coherent legend: the legend of the garden. Herein lies the danger.
- What you’re calling “accidental” is precisely the result of the seductive notion of the garden as a nucleus, in the sense you mentioned. . . .
- I feel like we’re talking about Beirut.
- Let’s not talk about Beirut. What do you mean by “nucleus”?
- What I’m calling a “nucleus” is an apolitical entity free from the burden of history, or in other words a pre-lingual entity, which makes it ontological.
- What?
- “Like I’m telling you” – it’s not difficult, just conniving.
- How so?

- Listen, let this be an open invitation to revel in playfulness and trickery amid this festival of celebration. Let's be clamorous and dance, let's drink until we're intoxicated, while we wait for the red spot on the white background, and after that. . . .
- "Let her rip!"
- Are you making fun? Stop it!

Notes

- 1 Walid Sadek, "From Excavation to Dispersion: Configurations of Installation Art in Post-War Lebanon," in *Tamass: Contemporary Arab Representations: Beirut/Lebanon*. Reproduced in *Mute* 1:26 (Summer/Autumn 2003).
- 2 Walid Sadek, "Place at Last," *Art Journal* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2007).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The translation of the publication's title is provided by Walid Sadek in his text "Place at Last."
- 5 Sadek, "Place at Last," 38.
- 6 For a more detailed analysis on the analogy between the garden and the nation, see Sadek, "Place at Last."
- 7 Ibid., 38.
- 8 'Alam al-Sabah. "Liqa' fi Hadiqat al-Sanayeh." Aired October 8, 1995, on Future Television, Beirut.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Natasha Gasparian interview with Rania Tabbara (unpublished). Beirut, December 2016.
- 11 Natasha Gasparian interview with Fadi Tofeili (unpublished). Beirut, January 2017. Also refer to catalog for titles and occupations of the various members of the group.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Natasha Gasparian interview with Amal Bohsali (unpublished). Beirut, January 2017.
- 14 In 1992, Saleh Barakat had founded *Agial*, the only commercial art gallery operating in Beirut during this period. However, its program was largely focused on painting and sculpture in the *beaux arts* tradition, and did not feature work by the young artists of the Sanayeh Meeting. Its mission at the time was to resume the artistic activities of the pre-Civil War period.
- 15 Hanan Toukan has written a salient piece on this shift, specifically with respect to foreign funding and the NGOization of the art world. In this article, I trace this shift in aesthetic terms, before such funding had become available. See Hanan Toukan, "On Being the Other in Post-Civil War Lebanon: Aid and the Politics of Art in Processes of Contemporary Cultural Production," *Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (2010): 118–161.
- 16 For a diagnosis of the predominance of one-off artistic gestures in contemporary installation art, see Fredric Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," *New Left Review* no. 92 (April 2015): 101–132.
- 17 Stephen Wright, "Territories of Difference: Excerpts from an E-Mail Exchange between Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz, and Walid Sadek," in *Out of Beirut* (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006), 58.
- 18 Sarah Rogers, "Out of History: Postwar Art in Beirut," *Art Journal* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 18.
- 19 By stating that she holds "pre-emptive rights" (*haq al-shafa*), Tohme implies that the Sanayeh Garden is dear to her. Her message is intended as light-hearted and humorous, but it is also symptomatic of the emergence of the discourse of human rights, which came to replace in the 1990s the former discourse of commitment.
- 20 From Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711): First follow Nature, and your judgment frame/By her just standard, which is still the same:/Unerring Nature, still divinely bright/One clear, unchang'd, and universal light,/Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,/At once the source, and end, and test of Art. (This footnote was included in the original text by the authors of *Guneina*).

Case Study 5

CarbonART 96 and The 6th Kilometer, SCCA Chișinău 1996

By Octavian Esanu

Exhibition Title

CarbonART 96 (Artist Camp)

Location and Date

Sadova, Călărași, Moldova, 1996

Curator

Octavian Esanu

Exhibition Coordinators

Dan Spataru
Corina Cotorobai

Advisory Board

Constantin Ciobanu, Eleonora Barabas, Alexandru Șchiopu

Organization

Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) Chișinău

Artists

Pavel Braila, Ion Bulibaș, Iurie Cibotari, Dumitru Culicovschi, Lilia Dragnev, Leo Dumitrașcu, Veaceslav Druța, Alexandru Ermurachi, Lucia Macari, Severina Nedelciuc, Ștefan Sadovnikov, Mircea Pușcaș, Gabriel Scoarță, Igor Scerbina, Vlad Tabac, Alexandru Tinei, Mark Verlan, Ghenadie Vasiliev

Exhibition Catalog

Octavian Esanu, ed., *CarbonaART 96* (Chișinău: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1997). Exhibition catalog. Texts by Vladimir Bulat and Octavian Esanu

Introduction

The artist colony called *CarbonART* took shape in the summer of 1996 in an abandoned Soviet Young Pioneers summer camp near Sadova (Călărași, Moldova). *CarbonART 96* was first of its kind in Moldova, and even though “artist camps” or literally “camps of creation” (as these artist retreats or colonies were often called: *tăbără de creație* in Romanian, or *tvorcheskii lager* in Russian) were fairly common in the USSR and other socialist and non-socialist states, this one differed in specifically targeting and inviting “artists who worked with new concepts and modes of artistic expression,” as the newspaper ad posted by the organizer – the recently founded Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) Chișinău – stated (Figure 5.1). The SCCA Chișinău rented the Young Pioneers camp, providing full accommodation, transportation, artist materials, and equipment to the selected artists. The SCCA’s intention was to attract mainly young and fresh graduates of local art schools, but also more mature artists, and encourage them to work in what was at that time only beginning to be called “contemporary art.” In Moldova, like in other states and republics of the former USSR, the latter was recognized and distinguished from the traditional fine arts by the range of new artistic media: video or computer art and photography, ephemeral art forms such as performance, happening and other body-related artistic practices, installation, and land art. On a more pragmatic level, the main and most urgent aim of this camp was to prepare the local artistic community and its audience for the first annual exhibition of the SCCA Chișinău, planned to open in the fall of the same year (see next case study *The 6th Kilometer*). This annual exhibition was regarded as the most important annual event, with a dedicated budget line and assigned key personnel, for most of the contemporary art centers established by the activist billionaire George Soros throughout postsocialist Eastern Europe (there were 20 Soros centers in total).¹

Moldovan artists’ encounter with what began to be known at the time as “contemporary art” was somewhat different from that of their colleagues in other Central and Eastern European countries, though still comparable to the situation in other capitals of the former USSR where the SCCAs began their activities in the mid-1990s. What made the Moldovan encounter unique lay in the relation of contemporary art to modernism, high modernism, and postmodernity, or what socialist art histories once called “non-conformism” or “unofficial art.” Moldovan semi-unofficial art (represented by such painters as Mihai Greco, Eleonora Romanescu, Andrei Sârbu, Mihai Țăruș, or Iurie Horovschi, and many others) reduced itself primarily to the fine arts. Even those who soon emerged to be called contemporary artists – above all Mark Verlan, but also to a certain degree the artists of the exhibition *Căutări* [Search] 90, Ștefan Sadovnikov, Igor Scerbina, or other members of the Fantom group – were for the most part painters. Their aesthetic resistance to socialist realism was formulated primarily in pictorial terms, and “post-medium” works were rare, or at best undocumented and as yet unresearched (with the exception of Mark Verlan). In other Eastern European countries, and in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tallinn, or Riga, by contrast, the newly formed Soros and non-Soros centers for contemporary art built upon the heritage of the rich local socialist unofficial art scene made official after the fall of the Berlin Wall (employing, for instance, the former “unofficial” art historians as the first art managers, curators and directors of their SCCAs). In Moldova – along with a few other countries or republics of the USSR – the Soros center played a more crucial role, serving as a jump starter for processes of modernization of local artistic discourse and practice.

The main task of *CarbonART 96* camp was to spur and inspire the young artists by offering them information on available technological and material possibilities for the production of radically new forms of art, or to put it simply, the sort of artworks that could not be seen at the time in Chişinău's main exhibition spaces. The SCCA Chişinău provided, first of all, video and photo equipment and every other form of material that was requested by the artist, as well as transportation, full accommodation, and food; Western art magazines such as *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Parket*, *Texte zur Kunst*, as sources of inspiration; and knowledge in the format of a series of seminars, including one led by the video art curator Hugo van Valkenburg on the history of video art in Holland, and one by the local art critic Constantin Ciobanu on the concept of the "open work," as described in Umberto Eco's 1962 *Opera Aperta*, drawing a comparison with Karl Popper's vision of the "open society" in his 1945 book of the same title.

What it was that the curator and the organizers set themselves to accomplish was incorporated in the name of this artist retreat. Quoting from the *Romanian Encyclopedia*, and turning toward natural sciences, they chose one of the most abundant chemical element in the universe, carbon, which "forms more compounds than all the other elements combined," to inspire artists to make "natural" works of art (for example land or earth art) and to pay closer attention to the processes of art-making. The title was also meant to evoke carbonization, hinting at artistic forms seen not as enduring objects but as perishable and ephemeral artistic gestures. Art could be seen not as the production of objects but of processes, behaviors, attitudes, and their recording through video or photographic documentation.

CarbonART 96's reception evinced controversy. While embraced and welcomed by many local critics as an efficient means of modernizing of local artistic discourse by having it join (after half a century of Soviet isolation) the "progressive forces" on the globe, *CarbonART 96* was criticized by "conservative" or nationalist intellectuals, and most forcefully by the Sadova peasants who for three weeks had to witness people of all ages and genders running naked through their forest and backyards. The socialists and conservatives saw in this event the internationalization of American corporate interest ("selling Xerox machines under the pretense of freedom of speech") or a direct intervention in if not a cultural contamination of traditional values with grant money offered by a financial speculator. For the organizers, *CarbonART 96* became one of SCCA Chişinău's longest-running projects, and was held every summer up until the mid-2000s. Over this time, the curator and the SCCA witnessed the process of natural selection leading to the formation of a local contemporary art scene: from an initially homogenous group of artists, only a few took contemporary art seriously, embracing a new medium and practice and systematically questioning existing practices, taking English language courses, or learning the secrets of self-promotion and grant writing. The rest of the participants resisted this temptation, withdrawing back into fine arts (ceramics, tapestry, the good old canvas, and paint) or design. The Soros Center (while it was fully funded) was itself seen with suspicion as a "nest," to use a local idiomatic expression, that channeled grants to only a few artists – to those known as "contemporary artists" who traveled abroad to present the success of the postsocialist transition or democratization to a select Western public. The center itself was often perceived as a "foreign" cultural institution that did not serve local cultural interests.

Selected Archival Documents and Artist Projects

carbonART
CASA DE CREATIE PENTRU PLASTICIENI

CarbonART

Soros pentru artă contemporană organizează Tabăra de vară pentru artiști CarbonART (Arta în aer liber).

Perioada de desfășurare:
3 săptămâni, (21 zile)

Plasticienii, care abordează concepte și metode inovatoare de exprimare artistică sunt invitați să se adreseze la Centrul Soros pentru artă contemporană pentru a fi înscrși pe lista participanților.

Selectarea participanților se va face în baza proiectelor înaintate care vor include conceptul de bază și tehnica executării lucrării.

Informații la tel. 222507
265587
264225

str. ARMENEASCA 20,
or. CHIȘINĂU. 2012
MOLDOVA.

Persoanele de contact:
Octavian Esanu
Dan Spătaru

Data limită de prezentare a cererilor și proiectelor de participare la lucrările Taberei
14 iunie.

Figure 5.1 Newspaper ad announcing *CarbonART 96* camp. *Flux*, June 1, 1996.
KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău

The advertisement invited artists to submit projects in order to be considered for an artist camp organized by the Soros Center for Contemporary Art Chișinău. It informs artists of the event's focus on *plein air* art, but also suggests that those who practice, or wish to practice new methods of artistic expression are particularly encouraged to apply.

dimpotrivă, mecanizatorii nu mai sunt în modă - depun documentele în special cei care au nevoie de nu fac parte din „eu” sunt oarecum solicitați, oricum, mai mult decât savanții, să zicem.

Alina BRADU

Cumetrii i-au fixat finului o nouă întâlnire pentru 24 iulie. La locul vechi, desigur, în parlament.

Corneliu RADU

Puterea de a aprecia “ARTA MODERNĂ”

cultură

Sadova a devenit un punct de atracție pentru artiștii din Republica Moldova. Aici s-au adunat într-o tabără de creație mai mult de 20 de plasticieni, critici de artă, studenți ai Institutului de Arte și ai Academiei de Teatru și Film din București. Tabăra de creație de la Sadova, care a reunit adepți ai noilor modalități de expresie, constituie primul proiect al Centrului de Artă Contemporană din cadrul Fundației Soros Moldova.

Judecând după modul în care s-au izolat în sânul naturii, după

instalațiile speciale pe care le-au creat, transformând pădurea într-o expoziție în aer liber, se poate trage concluzia că artiștii s-au simțit extraordinar de bine. Un oaspete de vază al taberei, invitat pentru a participa la seminarul ce a avut ca temă fenomenul Video Art, a fost Hugo van Valkenburg, expert din Olanda. 17 iulie a fost declarată de “comunitatea taberei” “ziua ușilor deschise”, în care li s-a permis membrilor Comisiei Centrului de Artă Contemporană (C. Ciobanu și L. Barbaș - critici de artă), ziaristilor și tuturor curioșilor să admire ceea ce se numește

“arta modernă”. Acesta nu a fost decât începutul. În orice caz, ideea contează foarte mult mai ales atunci când nu more. După toate probabilitățile, în toamna acestui an ne vom delecta vizitând expoziția “Kilometrul 6” care va fi organizată ca un omagiu adus creării Centrului de Artă Contemporană. Cele mai bune lucrări, realizate de sculptorul Mircea Pușcașu, plasticienii Mareș Verlan și Igor Șerbina, studenții Alexandru Ermurache și Nicu Bulibaș, se vor număra printre exponatele ce ne vor delecta în toamnă...

Adina ȘOIMARU



Hugo van Valkenburg explică originalitatea fenomenului ARTEI VIDEO

Figure 5.2 Adina Șoimaru, “The Power to Appreciate ‘Modern Art,’” *Flux*, June 22, 1996.

KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău

This newspaper review by Adina Șoimaru titled “The Power to Appreciate ‘Modern Art,’” focuses its attention on the video art seminar delivered by the Dutch curator Hugo van Valkenburg. Caption under the photograph: “Hugo van Valkenburg explains the originality of the Video Art phenomenon.”



Figure 5.3 Review of CarbonART 96 artist camp in the Russian-language newspaper *Nezavisimaya Moldova* (undated).

KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău

In this review titled “The Second Coming of Video Art,” the author takes an ironic stance toward the event, its participants and the organizers, emphasizing that the artistic practices presented by these young artists as new and “avant-garde” were in fact established long ago in the West. The author ironizes on how these Moldovan artists try to present 20-year-old Western art media such as performance art, happening, installation, and video art as new.

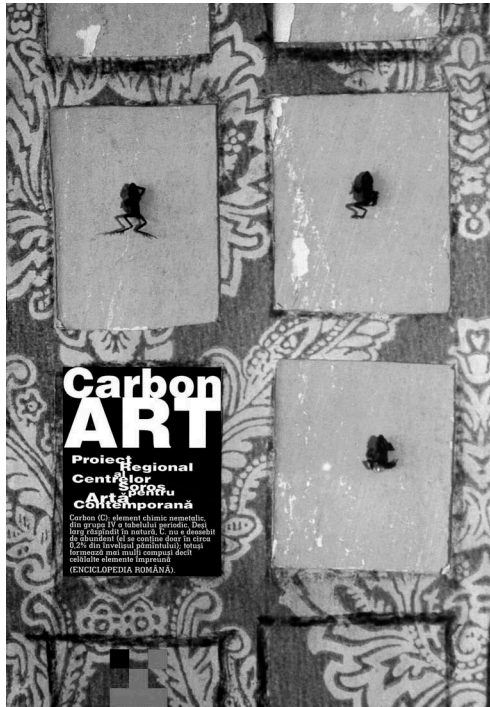


Figure 5.4 Cover of *CarbonART 96* catalog.

KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău

The cover of the *CarbonART 96* catalog specified that the artist camp was a regional project of the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network. As such, it also invited artists from such neighboring countries as Romania and Ukraine. Artists from Odessa (Ukraine) and Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca (Romania) participated in the later 1997 edition of this camp. *CarbonART* summer camps were organized for more than ten editions, through the mid-2000s.

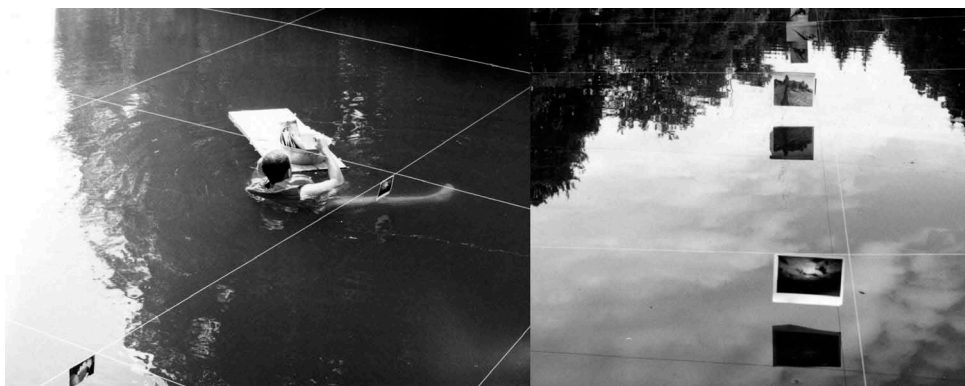


Figure 5.5 CarbornART 96 lake exhibition.

KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău

Another example of collective intervention was this exhibition organized on the surface of the lake by Mark Verlan. Visitors had to jump in the water to see the artworks (mainly photography and documentation). Rope, on which artists hung documents of their artworks, was installed over the surface of the lake.



Figure 5.6 Igor Scherbina and Ștefan Sadovnikov, *Structures*, 1996. Performance.

KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău

Selected Periodical Reviews and Catalog Texts

Artist Colony in Sadova – An Adventure, A Provocation for the Future (excerpt)²

Eleonora Barabas

ArtHoc November 1, 1996

Translated by Iulian Robu

The well-known statement “all genres are good except for the dull ones” surely has been confirmed by the creative camp [artist colony] *CarbonART*, organized in Sadova,

Republic of Moldova, in the middle of the forest. The actions, installations and performances created in nature's lap by the young visual artists, students and graduates of the State Institute of Arts, the A. Plamadeala College and the Theatre and Film Academy in Bucharest brought about disjunctions, responses, dialogue, and emulation.

For decades, art in Moldova has been developed in a marginalized context, in circumstances of an informational deficit, and at a time when new ways of expression were common in Western art, here they were considered an offense to the main values of socialist art. Allowing only for the development of art in one direction, that of socialist realism, Soviet state officials vehemently rejected any of the "innovative" artistic methods of the twentieth-century world avant-garde. This situation can only be overcome by allowing a true freedom of artistic creation. Such an atmosphere has appeared only after the collapse of the Socialist regime. The process of realization of the necessity of reconnecting to the universal circuits of art and culture, of being part of a global spirit, could only evolve gradually. In the late 1980s, in the context of several Moldovan exhibitions, there emerge the first works made with more recent artistic vocabulary and showing the influence of photorealism, surrealism, abstract or pop art. Very innovative in this regard, for instance, has been the exhibition "Căutări 90" (Search 90) which in addition to painting also displayed the earliest forms of installation art in the Moldovan fine arts. As a matter of fact "Căutări 90" was in principle the beginning of avant-garde art in Moldova.

With all of this said, the avant-garde continues to be ignored and rejected to this day. This caused some nonconformist painters such as Andrei Sârbu, Mihai Țăruș and Iurie Horovschi to leave and assert themselves first abroad (in Moscow and Sweden), and only after to be recognized also in Moldova.

The Sadova colony, in my opinion, is a testing ground for video art, a testing that has been made possible to a great extent by the establishment of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art Chișinău. The latter not only financed this kind of art, but also offered young artists the rare opportunity of listening to seminars about video art, held by the Dutch critic and curator of video art Hugo van Valkenburg. Here in Sadova, the young artists had the opportunity to stimulate their vocation for experiment, to try their powers in almost all artistic languages and media. The artists' approach was placed under the sign of youthful enthusiasm, of the feverishness of searching out their own profile, their own identity.

The presence must also be mentioned of older artists (Genady Vasiliev, Ștefan Sadovnikov) who have greater nonconformist artistic experience, and who acted as spiritual mentors for the younger artists.

In my opinion, there was not a clear avant-garde program at Sadova. Most of the participants were aware that they were following a well-trodden path. And yet, in spite of this, artists have managed to present outstanding works. Of course, we should also mention that it is the deficit of information that can explain why certain efforts reinvent artworks that have already been invented a long time ago ...

If Art – Then Modern (excerpt)

Alexandru Șchiopu
ArtHoc November 1, 1996
Translated by Iulian Robu

Every attempt to know begins with a close study of the experimental conditions in which this knowledge takes place (R. Berger). This observation can be considered from two angles – that of the process of writing this text, and that of the creation of the open air artist colony *CarbonART*, organized by the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art in Moldova. The colony is a very welcomed event but also a good pretext for reflection and analysis. And, like every pioneering work, it caught the attention of both the artists and the public.

This summer the artistic retreat at Sadova offered the possibility to discover and learn about an ambiguous world, a world where pictures are changing, and with this change it transforms both the order or the genre of the work of art and its function. The *CarbonART* camp offered its participants the possibility to create “visual metaphors” but most specially to enact the emancipation of artistic means of expression.

Having been conceived as an attempt to express an Eastern European mentality by means of the available forms of artistic expression found today in the toolbox of modern art, the Sadova camp played the role of an “ice breaker” with regard to the local traditionalism that has dominated exhibition practice until now. The fact that there are artists capable of a less conformist art is proven by the exhibitions of such artists as Mark Verlan and others. In other words this project cannot pretend to be an absolute premiere in the Bessarabian space. It is this author’s opinion that *CarbonART* has played the role of “making official” a modern vision and spirit of art, and a form of “legalization” for such artists like Alexander Tinei, Igor Scerbina, Ștefan Sadovnic.

...

The success or failure of the Sadova camp cannot be categorically judged by taking only into account its specificity and innovation. We certainly have the occasion to make some general remarks with regard to this event. Art in general is nothing else than a representation of the problematic and the truth of human nature, which is expressed in artistic forms that answer to the necessity of the spirit.

So here is then one rhetorical question: is installation and performance art answering to this necessity of the human spirit? Did we indeed witness a subjective expression of an objective context, or were we just invited to observe a list of modes of expression that have been established long ago? Of course, there are no clear answers to such questions.

To understand these new means of expression does not require a simple comparison with some previous accomplishment, or the use of the powers of persuasion as a criterion of judgment to find an adequate relation between idea and expression. If in traditional painting a comparison is possible (“this could look more or less like Dutch Golden Age painting”) then in contemporary non-figurative art the artist has many possibilities to elude external influences. The broad spectrum of artistic media, as well as the urgency for “originality,” allows us to affirm that originality was not a point of departure but one of arrival for the artists at *CarbonART*.

...

Now it may be the right moment to make a few generalizations and define three types of artworks produced in this artist colony in the middle of the Sadova forest. To the first type belong a few works that seem to have been made for a gallery. These works have a more intimate spatial conception, and when placed in nature they do not subvert it but engage the viewer’s imagination in such a way as to question the limits of the natural context. The second type is related to the first and has the pretext of engaging natural objects and spaces. The third type of

artworks are “actions” and “performances.” The latter offered the true possibility or necessity of engaging the viewer in the process of the creative act.

All three categories of works presented in the final day of this artist camp seem to have one element in common – play. Most of the artists resort to play as a form of communication with their spectators; it is play, as mode of action, as mode of organization, as mode of engaging with the material ...

The Power to Appreciate “Modern Art”

Adina Șoimaru

Flux, June 22, 1996

Translated by Octavian Esanu

This summer Sadova has become the point of attraction for artists from the Republic of Moldova. Here about 20 artists, critics of art, and students from the Chișinău State Institute of Arts and the Bucharest Theater and Film Academy have joined together into an artist colony. The colony, organized in Sadova, reunited adepts of the newest forms of artistic expression, and it is the first project of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art established by the Soros Foundation Moldova.

Judging from how these artists have isolated themselves in the heart of the forest, from the special installations that they have created turning the entire forest into a *plein air* exhibition, it can be concluded that the artists felt very good to be there. The special guest Hugo van Valkenburg was invited from Holland to lecture on the phenomenon of video art. On July 17, the artists opened the doors to visitors from outside, inviting the jury members of the SCCA Chișinău (the art critics – Constantin Ciobanu and Eleonora Barbas), as well as to journalists and all those interested in admiring what is called “modern art.”

But this was only the beginning. In any case, this idea of gathering the most daring artists counts very much, especially when it refuses to die. It is highly probable that in the fall we will have the chance to enjoy again this kind of art by visiting the exhibition *Kilometrul 6* (The 6th Kilometer). This exhibition will celebrate the creation of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art Chișinău. The best works created by the sculptor Mircea Pușcaș and the artists Mark Verlan and Igor Scherbina, and by the students Alexandru Ermurache and Nicu Bulibaș, will be among the artworks exhibited in the fall.

Exhibition Title

Kilometrul 6 (The 6th Kilometer)

Location and Date

Chişinău, Moldova (1996)

Curator

Octavian Esanu

Exhibition Coordinators

Dan Spataru

Olga Rusu

Advisory Board

Constantin Ciobanu, Eleonora Barabas, Alexandru Şchiopu

Organization

Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) Chişinău

Artists

Pavel Braila, Ion Bulibaş, Iurie Cibotari, Lilia Dragnev, Victor Doroşenko, Veaceslav Druţa, Alexandru Ermurachi, Lucia Macari, Mircea Puşcaş, Ştefan Sadovnikov, Igor Scerbina, Alexandru Şchiopu, Valentin Țărnă, Alexandru Tinei, Mark Verlan

Exhibition Catalog

Octavian Esanu, ed., *Kilometru 6/The 6th Kilommeter* (Chişinău: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1997). Texts by Constantin Ciobanu, Vladimir Bulat, Bradley Adams, Constantin Prut

Introduction

The first annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (Chişinău) opened on November 14, 1996 in the main exhibition hall of the Union of Artists of Moldova under the title *Kilometrul 6* (The 6th Kilometer). Most of the participating artists had already been part of the *CarbonART 96* artist camp, and a few of the exhibited works were in fact produced during that summer retreat (see *CarbonART 96*). For this first annual exhibition, the SCCA rented the Union of Artists' main exhibition hall, and commissioned works by way of offering grants to a select group of Moldovan artists. The latter were intended exclusively for the production and display of works of *contemporary art*, as this phrase was inscribed in the name and the mission statement of the newly established art center. The selection of artists was made by the curator and staff and approved by the SCCA Chişinău "Advisory board," in full accordance with the equal opportunities policies established by the Open Society Institute and the regional director of the SCCA Network.

SCCA Chişinău opened its office in the spring of 1996. This center for contemporary art was part of a larger system of centers which together formed the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network. The Network had been a regional project of the Open Society Institute launched by George Soros and the Soros Foundation in most of the postsocialist countries and republics of the former USSR. Its mission was not only to modernize artistic discourse by encouraging the most innovative art forms, or by facilitating access to information about the most recent Western art, but also to promote artists and help them join Western art world circuits and markets. The SCCA Network, which grew out of a small documentation program initiated in Budapest, Hungary in 1985, spread out widely during the 1990s, leading to the opening of 18 SCCAs in most of the administrative or cultural capitals of the countries once behind the Iron Curtain. The activities and budgets of these centers were structured according to major categories including the Documentation Program, Grants for Artists (Figure 5.9), and the SCCA Annual Exhibition. While the Documentation Program allocated a special budget for the research, collection, documentation, and the production of art historical knowledge of local artistic practices and artists (especially of those known as "unofficial art" under socialism), and the Artists Grants program offered artists monetary support (mostly for such promotional purposes as participating in international art exhibitions, producing a catalog, or photographic and video services and the making of artist portfolios), the main goal of the Annual Exhibition was to showcase a range of artistic media that were not sufficiently explored within local artistic scenes. Most of the annual exhibitions, therefore, organized throughout Eastern Europe during the 1990s by the SCCA Network, also showcased a wide range of the newest Western consumer electronics, computers, and telecommunication equipment, via video art, computer art and multimedia, ephemeral artistic practices relying heavily on computer documentation. The director and the staff of each center were encouraged to seek technical partnerships and sponsorships from local vendors of Western electronic equipment and providers of communication services.

The organizers chose the title *The 6th Kilometer* in order to suggest that the exhibition's main goal was to put on display art forms that had appeared in Moldova six years after the proclamation of its sovereignty in 1990. This former republic of the USSR had no strong tradition of unofficial art – and, unlike many other SCCAs in the

network, neither the staff of the SCCA Chişinău, nor the artists engaged in its first events (with a few exceptions), had been regularly exposed to or were part of any unofficial art grouping. Instances of aesthetic resistance to socialist realism were articulated on canvases, but were quickly compelled to seek more liberal artistic milieus in Moscow, Leningrad, or the capitals of the Baltic republics (Mihai Țăruş and Iurie Horovschi serve as good examples). With the collapse of the USSR and the proclamation of independence, the inertia of the local artistic scene led it to assert its originality primarily in pictorial terms, by resorting to formal or self-referential abstraction. When referentiality was invoked, it was articulated in terms of a nationalistic critique of the Soviet project; any initial forays into non-fine-arts and/or conceptual idioms that might have made a previous appearance still await documentary and art historical investigation. Most importantly, works in the so-called “postmedium condition” (that is, artistic explorations of digital, electronic and communication technologies or ephemeral art forms) have been largely absent. Therefore the SCCA Chişinău saw its primary task in accelerating the pace by encouraging artists to tackle the new artistic media, knowledge of which started to arrive together with the Western art magazines brought over by American and Western European private and governmental agencies and foundations.

The 6th Kilometer was the center’s main event of 1996, and an opportunity to present to the public the latest forms of local “contemporary” artistic production. All the artworks – with the exception of a few performances – were specifically commissioned for the exhibition and fully supported from the Annual Exhibition budget of SCCA Chişinău. The exhibition was very widely attended, with viewers completely filling the main hall of the Union of Artists. Many in the audience were bemused to find at the opening an artist giving free haircuts to those who needed or desired one (Mark Verlan, *Free Haircut*); a life-size guillotine whose blade was replaced by a TV set that showed violent images from one of Chişinău’s abattoirs (Iurie Cibotari, *The Guillotine*, Figure 5.10); a painting made from dirt, sand, and glowing neon tubes that in the artist’s understanding mixed the lasting patina of local tradition with the translucent quality of contemporary advertising (Igor Scerbina, *Metaphysical Painting*). On the occasion of this exhibition a conference was organized under the title “The Open Work,” inspired by Umberto Eco’s 1962 *Opera Aperta*.

The reaction of viewers and the press to this event was mixed. While some called the artists and the exhibition organizers “buffoons” paid by a rich American to entertain the destitute local crowd, others, and especially guest art critics from Moldova and Romania, acknowledged the importance of this event, seeing in it the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the local visual arts. Within a wider context, and from the curator’s and organizers’ perspective, it soon became clear that contemporary art – as it was promoted and funded in Eastern Europe by various Western funds during the 1990s – was also a way of measuring the success of the transition from socialism to market democracy, a transition toward a new image envisioned in terms of an “Open Society,” to recall the title of Karl Popper’s work, used as a handbook for setting in place the policies of the Soros Foundation. Moreover, contemporary art as practiced in the postsocialist countries at that time also had a distinct ethnographic quality to it. This was soon learned from the export of Moldovan contemporary art to various international venues where it was expected to prove the success of the “democratic” transition. For instance, *The 6th Kilometer*’s most praised installation, *The Guillotine* has become the success story of SCCA Chişinău, having been requested and sent on multiple occasions to represent “Moldovan contemporary art”

at various exhibitions in the West. This ethnographic quality was an important feature of contemporary art at that time, and it is still noticeable in certain Eastern European or other non-Western regions of the world. A term deployed by the leader of the Collective Actions group in Moscow, Andrei Monastyrsky (which Monastyrsky used specifically with regard to the practice of Moscow Conceptualism, but which can be extended to the wider postsocialist context) is particularly relevant. The term is “local-lore-ness” (*kraevednost*), referring to a common practice in the 1990s, when conceptual art from Moscow was shown in Western exhibitions not under the generic term “conceptual art,” but as exotic instances of something called “Russian conceptual art.”³ This specificity – be it “Russian conceptual art” or “Moldovan contemporary art” – indicated that these works were seen as a contribution not to a universal contemporary practice common in the late twentieth century, but as a distinct and distant specimen of such a practice that only resonated within a certain artistic context far away from the Western art capitals. This showed the asynchronous character of postsocialist art, its contemporaneity (to use Terry Smith’s words) contemporaneous only with itself⁴ and the particular context where it emerged; not yet a global contemporaneity of artistic means and forms, if the latter were even possible.

Selected Archival Documents and Artist Projects

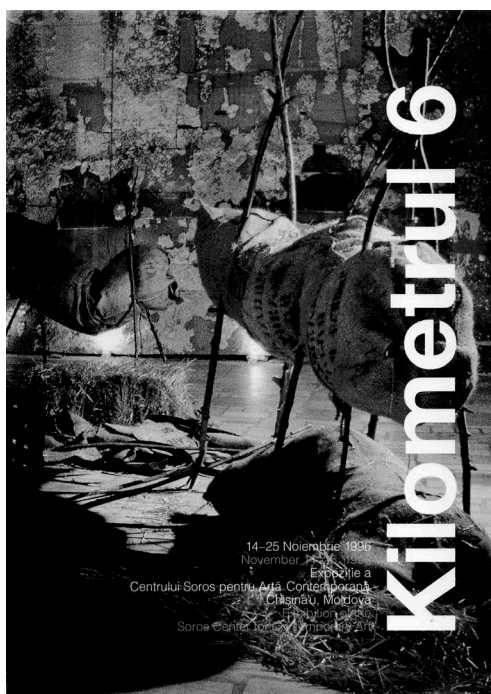


Figure 5.7 Cover of the *Kilometrul 6* exhibition catalog featuring Alexandru Tinei’s installation *Madona Mohana*, 1996.

KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău

Figure 5.8 Car-poster for the exhibition *Kilometrul 6*.

KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău

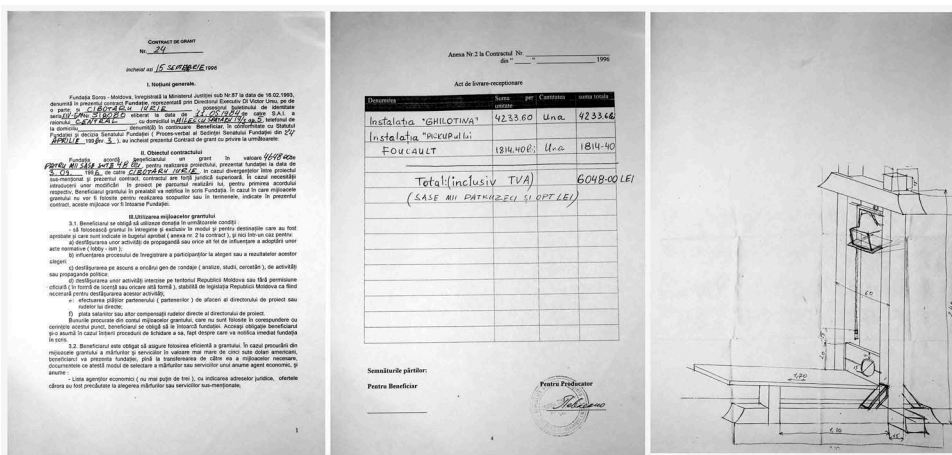


Figure 5.9 SCCA grant contract, 1996.

KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău

SCCA Contract for artist grant offered to Iurie Cibotari for the production of his video work *The Guillotine*. The contract specifies among other things that the money cannot be used for propaganda reasons, or for interfering in a democratic election or in legal processes (lobbying), or for promoting a particular political agenda.



Iurie CIBOTARU „GHILOTINA”
lemn, TV/video VHS, electromotor,
2500x2000x400mm.

Lucrarea pornește de la o consemnare științifică, întâlnită de autor, care denotă faptul că, după decapitare, un scurt timp creierul uman este conștient de ceea ce se petrece în jur. Astfel, artistul simulează trăirile celui supus decapitării. Substituind cuțitul cu un televizor, el transformă odiosul instrument de execuție într-o armă a secolului nostru. „Decapitatul” urmărește timp de 14 sec. secvențe filmate negativ: mașini, câini, animale împia-
te etc. Putem califica această instalație ca interactivă, deoarece spectatorul participă direct în ea.

GUILLOTINE
wood, TV/Video VHS, electric
motor. 2500x2000x400mm

The work emerged from a scientific archive, found by the author, which shows that the human brain is aware of what is going on for a short time after decapitation. Through this work the artist simulates the sufferings and experiences of the decapitated person. By replacing the knife with a TV he transforms the horrid instrument into a weapon of our century. “The decapitated person” watches for 14 seconds negatively filmed sequences: cars, dogs, stuffed animals, etc. We can qualify this installation as interactive because the spectator directly takes part in it as an indispensable component.



GHILOTINA
(detalii)

GUILLOTINE
(details)



Figure 5.10 Iurie Cibotari, *The Guillotine*, 1996. Installation.

KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chișinău

Page from *The 6th Kilometer* catalog showing people interacting with Iurie Cibotari's installation *The Guillotine* (1996).



Figure 5.11 Dumaite sami [Think for yourself] exhibition review. Nezavisimaaia Moldova, November 22, 1996.

KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chişinău

EVALUAREA EXPOZITIEI KILOMETRUL 6
EVALUATION FOR EXHIBITION 6 KILOMETRE

Care este impresia dvs. generală despre expoziție? *Neinteresantă, puțin interesantă, interesantă, foarte interesantă*
What is your overall impression of the exhibition? *Not interesting, a little interesting, interesting, very interesting*

Schimbă expoziția ideea dvs. de artă? *Da, nu, posibil. Dacă da, cum?*
Does the exhibition challenge your idea of what art is? *Yes, no, maybe. If so, how?*

Răspundeți, vă rugăm, la întrebările următoare și motivați răspunsurile:
Please list your responses to the following questions and elaborate:

Există vreo lucrare printre cele expuse, care în opinia dvs. *nu* este artă?
Are there any projects exhibited that you think are *not* art?

Există vreo lucrare care v-a plăcut mai mult?
Are there any projects that you feel are particularly strong?

Sint lucrări pe care le găsiți deranjante?
Are there any projects that you find disturbing?

Frumoasă?
Beautiful?

Interesantă?
Interesting?

EVALUAREA EXPOZITIEI KILOMETRUL 6
EVALUATION FOR EXHIBITION 6 KILOMETRE

Care este impresia dvs. generală despre expoziție? *Neinteresantă, puțin interesantă, interesantă, foarte interesantă*
What is your overall impression of the exhibition? *Not interesting, a little interesting, interesting, very interesting*

Schimbă expoziția ideea dvs. de artă? *Da, nu, posibil. Dacă da, cum?*
Does the exhibition challenge your idea of what art is? *Yes, no, maybe. If so, how?*

Răspundeți, vă rugăm, la întrebările următoare și motivați răspunsurile:
Please list your responses to the following questions and elaborate:

Există vreo lucrare printre cele expuse, care în opinia dvs. *nu* este artă?
Are there any projects exhibited that you think are *not* art?

Există vreo lucrare care v-a plăcut mai mult?
Are there any projects that you feel are particularly strong?

Sint lucrări pe care le găsiți deranjante?
Are there any projects that you find disturbing?

Frumoasă?
Beautiful?

Interesantă?
Interesting?

Figure 5.12 SCCA Chişinău questionnaire, 1996.

KSA:K – Centrul pentru artă contemporană, Chişinău

A questionnaire distributed by SCCA Chişinău at the opening of *The 6th Kilometer*, asking the spectators their opinion of this exhibition. Some of the questions and answers on the examples above read as follows: “Q: What is your opinion of the exhibition? A (left): Very interesting. A (right): Somewhat interesting.” “Q: Does the exhibition challenge your idea of what art is? A (left): Yes. A (right): Maybe.” “Q: Was there any work that you thought was not art? A (left): Everything is art. A (right): All that is made is art.” Most of the respondents chose Iurii Cibotari’s installation *The Guillotine* as the best work of the exhibition.

Selected Periodical Reviews and Catalog Texts

“Buffoons and Philanthropists” (excerpt)

Vasile Rotaru

Săptămâna (Chişinău), December 13, 1996

Translated by Octavian Esanu

Not long ago, in the hall of the Union of Artists (a Union that has recently suffered the same fate as the industrial giants of former socialist times), the annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art was inaugurated, titled: *The 6th Kilometer*.

The exhibition put on display works by certain students from the Art Institute, in other words some debutants. And therefore, since these youngsters have used their works to declare their courage and their nonconformist attitude, I will do the same, keeping up to their standards, and try to be as frank as possible.

High art has always been a product of material abundance, and an inverted relation does not work in this case. In all historical epochs there were individuals whose means were much larger than their needs. And in many cases these individuals supported a large number of people who did not belong to their immediate family. One less traditional example is the Mongol Huns or the Turkish Sultans. It is in fact the case of all feudal land owners whose income from their lands was far greater than the appetites of the most numerous families. Therefore, each feudal land owner also had a second family: his court. And for those who were not part of this court, and who did not have access to inestimable resources, for this category of people – they were entertained by the buffoon. Some were dwarfs, some were humpbacked or distinguished themselves from the crowd by other deformities, and all together could have been recognized by their distinct clothes or ridiculous accessories. (Sometimes, however, these jokers were smarter than their masters.) I started with this historical evocation because my first impression from the opening of *The 6th Kilometer* was that of a buffoonery. A buffoonery without a public.

The modern philanthropists who have the means and the possibilities, of which the Mongol Huns could have only dreamed, tend to be smarter than those artists for whom they create opportunities to self-express. In making these statements I am well informed, because I read one of the books of George Soros. In the meantime this multi-billionaire who is looking for socially acceptable ways to spend his money, which are much greater than the necessities of a single person, did not make the worst choice. The things exhibited at *The 6th Kilometer* correspond to the category “contemporary art.”

Right at the entrance of the exhibition there were laid flat on the floor a series of photographs showing a sample of facial physiognomy whose owner stood next to it, inviting all viewers to step on it. Those who desired were invited to lay down under the “blade” of an improvised guillotine, and here the blade was in fact replaced by a TV set. In another instance the viewer was invited to look through a keyhole at a TV screen which, as it turned out, showed the crown of this person’s own head.

...

Someone once remarked that true art can only be recognized by the back. If you feel a chill in your back – that’s it: it’s art. The criteria of “contemporary art” seems to lie in a different place: in the vestibular system. If you feel your head spinning then you can rest assured this is contemporary art. Or, if you feel like vomiting – it is a masterpiece. At *The 6th Kilometer* I did feel my head spinning but I did not encounter a masterpiece. Is this good or bad? Stanislaw Jerzy Lem once observed that dots must be placed only under question marks.

Chişinău, “6th Kilometer” (extract)

Pavel Şuşara

Libertatea (Bucharest), December 3, 1996

Translated by Octavian Esanu

Although they just opened this year, the Soros Center for Contemporary Art Chişinău started their activities in full force. In July of this year they organized an artist camp (*tăbără de creație*, in Romanian) to practice installation and performance art under the title *CarbonART*, and in November they opened the first exhibition of alternative art. As a matter of fact, the artist camp served as a general rehearsal for the annual exhibition, since it prepared for the exhibition a significant number of works. The event expresses the particular situation of the Bessarabian artistic scene in that it had to make a decisive leap from a profoundly traditional art, marked to an equal degree by ideology and ethnography, to a true international experimentalism that unfolds within the context of true freedom.

This leap without precedent, from a conventional iconography and an overused pictorial language toward the experiment, which presupposes the learning of so many components of the post-industrial society, is in itself an achievement that must be taken into account. Regardless of the artists’ individual motivations, what can be observed in these artists’ comportment is their aspiration to start a dialogue and their readiness to open themselves without prejudice toward the major problems of the contemporary world. And even if these artistic forms on their own will not define the spirit of the century, their presence in the post-totalitarian space is absolutely necessary as simply an exercise in liberation.

The exhibition in Chişinău, which opened in the largest art gallery in town, managed to offer an image of a new artistic comportment and a different kind of moral engagement. Bringing together exclusively young artists, and in some cases even art students, the exhibition could be seen as a synthesis of multiple forms of artistic expression. Under its unconventional title, *The 6th Kilometer*, were brought together such artistic forms as installation art, video installation, video art, performance, body art and happening.

“6th Kilometer: The First Exhibition of ‘Open Works’”

Rodica Iuncu

Flux (Chişinău), November 22, 1996

Translated by Octavian Esanu

The Soros Center for Contemporary Art opened its first exhibition of “open works” under the title *The 6th Kilometer* in Chişinău last Thursday (November 14). The exhibition, which is taking place in the main exhibition hall of the Union of Artists of Moldova, brought together artworks produced by the most innovative and nontraditional artistic means, putting into use the concept, new for us, of the “open work,” that is the work of art which is permanently modified and never finished. In accordance with the declaration of the organizers of this exhibition,

the event does not pretend to mobilize all the artists of Moldova or to pronounce a verdict regarding the state of things in the local visual arts but to facilitate instead the familiarization of the public with the new movements in modern art.

Thus in *The 6th Kilometer* exhibition painters, photographers, stage designers all participated, most of whom are part of the youngest generation of artists, and most of whom had expressed a desire to experiment and make “open works.” Their artworks (just a few titles of which include “The Guillotine,” “Conflict,” “Sheep,” “Communication,” and “Mysterious Chair”) have adopted new languages of artistic expression that differ from the ones encountered in traditional art; their works also reveal the intention to be part of the general evolution of modern art, and to recover an entire epoch which, in light of historical conditions, has been missed.

Asked to comment on the opening of this exhibition of “open works,” the Bucharest University art historian and author of many studies and of the well-known *Dictionary of Modern Art* (1982) Dr. Constantin Prut has remarked that “the exhibition signals the beginning of entering into normality.” Constantin Prut also commented on the particular mobility of these young Moldovan artists who in wishing to escape a cultural complex, but also thanks to their spontaneity and personal talent, have succeeded in applying the morphologies of new art. Dr. Prut also observed that even though the event took place with a certain delay, the exhibition managed to recuperate an epoch, a state, an attitude which is no doubt a step forward toward freedom.

Wreck or Recovery? (extract)

Vladimir Bulat

Esanu, ed., *Kilometru 6/The 6th Kilometer*

Translated by Mihai Cepoi

In the inert, conservative and aesthetically unproductive environment of Chişinău this exhibition of alternative art has been perceived not only as a cultural event but most likely as an excuse to run away from the state of isolation that dominates the local artistic scene. It must be said that the jump from the academic, populist, or

agreeable type of exhibition – as most of them have been so far in our cultural space – to the opening of *The 6th Kilometer* on November 14 is huge and overwhelming. The originality of this leap consists in burning down the stages of development, of eluding the temporal phases of trial and experimentation or of jumping over intermediate transitional stages. This exhibition intended to outline a panorama (even though a schematic one) of artistic stages of development in post-World-War-II art, showing instances of video art, performance art, happening, installation art, photography, land, or earth art. These are means of artistic expression long familiar in the West or even subjects of study in the Western schools of art. Here in Moldova, these alternative forms of art have been, on the one hand, prohibited and persecuted by the Soviet state but on the other hand, there was no full motivation for them to initiate their existence. In the West there has been a close and tense relation between art and the problematic of the post-industrial society, in between the Western social and cultural-spiritual contexts, whereas in the East artists have not yet fully engaged with these complex relations. ... The SCCA Network (with branches in Central and Eastern Europe) comes to make up for this lack, which it does by softening the transition to new artistic idioms and facilitating access to the problematic of the contemporary art world.

The 6th Kilometer – aside from all its imperfections and banalities that are common to every new beginning – constitutes the act of birth and officialization of local alternative art. But the event also means presenting some creative reserves among young artists, reserves that could not have been made known to us in another context. Fortunately, the ice was broken.

The Exhibition

As a metaphor, Igor Scerbina's installation entitled *The Door* is almost null. It represents a tomb with a door that invites us to mimic the perverse gesture of a spy (that is of looking through a peephole inside a room). What we see there is the image of our own curiosity projected on a monitor by a tiny video camera installed behind the spectator's back. It is a work that acquires sense only at the moment when it contains the spectator, who is also the "beneficiary" contemplating his own image. But he sees only his verso, his back.

The ridiculousness of modern means of communication has been investigated (very convincingly) by Veaceslav Druța through his machinery installation called *Foucault's Pick-Up* (a title inspired perhaps by the book *Foucault's Pendulum*.) The work represents a complicated and funny mechanism that produces loud monotony and confusion, a truly Babel-like uproar. The turntable needle or the stylus, which is supposed to follow the grooves of the record in reading the inscribed sound, instead makes sudden movements or runs chaotically over the whole surface of the record, attacking its materiality. It is an almost perfect device, in the sterility of its actions, but no less interesting from the point of view of the artist's forced intervention into the complicated meshes of the contemporary world.

...

A real revelation of this exhibition, without any doubt, remains Iurie Cibotari's project *The Guillotine*. The work is particularly interesting from the perspective of how the artist has placed the spectator in relation to the image. The spectator is

not situated in the usual position – that of facing the TV screen – but by laying on his back, with his head caught under a wooden bar thus unable to oppose the aggression of the TV images. Cibotari created this installation based on his conviction that today television is not just a way of entertaining oneself and having good time, but that this contemporary electronic medium has irrevocably stolen the sense of time, trying to substitute itself for human existence.

The 6th Kilometer is the signal of a new beginning, the start of a race whose length and duration may as much depend on the subsequent condition of our society as on our artists' creative potential, or their ability to avoid staying put, and avoiding as much as possible the commonplaces of artistic practice and form.

Notes

- 1 For a description of the SCCA Network see also Nina Czegledy and Andrea Szekeres, "Agents of Change: The Contemporary Art Centers of the Soros Foundation and C3," in *Third Text* 23: 3 (2009), 251–259.
- 2 This material was published in *ArtHoc*, which was the periodical publication of SCCA Chişinău fully dedicated to contemporary art. It appeared from 1996 to the early 2000s under different editors.
- 3 For *kraevednost'* [local-lore-ness] see Andrei Monastriski's *Slovar' terminov moskovskoi kontseptual'noi shkoly* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1999). For an English translation of this Dictionary see Appendix in Octavian Esanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The "Collective Actions" Group before and after 1989* (Budapest: Central University Press, 2013), 315.
- 4 Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2009).

Case Study 6

Meeting Point, SCCA Sarajevo, 1997

By Amila Puzić

Exhibition Title

Meeting Point

Location and Date

Summer Garden Ćulhan, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, July 24–September 12, 1997

Curator

Dunja Blažević (SCCA director)

Exhibition Coordinators

Lejla Hodžić (visual art)

Enes Zlatar (video and new media)

Advisory Board

Meliha Husedžinović (Chairwoman), Izeta Građević, Fuad Hadžihalilović, Ibrahim Krzović, Sadudin Musabegović

Organization

Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) Sarajevo

Artists

Gordana Anđelić-Galić, Maja Bajević, Adis Bakrač, Amer Bakšić, Nikša Barišić, Ajdin Bašić, Aida Begić, Eldina Begić, Nedžad Begović, Suzana Cerić, Almas Ćorović, Danica Dakić, Andrej Đerković, Amra Džinalija, Alma Fazlić, Zlatan Filipović, Izeta Građević, Jusuf Hadžifejzović, Admir Halilović, Lejla Hodžić, Amra Kalender, Saša Kaljanac, Šejla Kamerić, Smail Kapetanović, Dinno Kassalo, Danilo Kreso, Almir Kurt, Fikret Libovac, Timur Makarević, Amer Mržljak, Narcisa Muškić, Edin Numankadić, Salim Obralić, Ata Omerbašić, Mirza Pašić, Nusret Pašić, Samir Plasto, Daniel Premec, Faruk Šabanović, Anela Šabić, Ljiljana Šaković, Adi Sarajlić, Nebojša Šerić Šoba, Selimir Sokolović, Alma Suljević, Ameli Tančica, Danis Tanović, Leila Teftedarija, Slaven Tolj (Dubrovnik, Croatia), TRIO (Bojan and Dada Hadžihalilović), Dejan Vekić, Enes Zlatar, Amra Zulfikarpašić, Jasmila Žbanić

Exhibition Catalog

Dunja Blažević, ed., *Meeting Point* (Sarajevo: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1998). Texts by Dunja Blažević, Meliha Husedžinović, Michael Tarantino, Kathy Rae Huffman, and Sadudin Musabegović

Introduction

The first annual exhibition organized by the Soros Center for Contemporary Art Sarajevo (SCCA Sarajevo) titled *Meeting Point* (July 24–September 12, 1997) was conceived as a three-month-long art workshop set in the historically and architecturally context-specific Summer Garden Ćulhan,¹ in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The initiative for *Meeting Point* was started by a group of young artists from various disciplines gathered around SCCA Sarajevo from its first days. They were also the ones to discover the Art Center Summer Garden Ćulhan, whose owners were very open to new art projects, wishing the place to become something more than just a city cafe.² Those intervening at the Ćulhan must consider their relation to its spatial-architectural disposition and its present social function – as a meeting point.

The curator of the exhibition, Dunja Blažević, invited 55 artists to show 30 art interventions, installations, and performances, and 20 video artworks. All the artworks were commissioned after a public competition and fully paid for from the annual exhibition budget of SCCA Sarajevo. Most of the video works were produced during the siege of Sarajevo (April 5, 1992–February 29, 1996) and presenting these home videos aimed to raise awareness of the value of artistic experience during the war and the existential condition of people at that time of social crisis. The selection of artworks was conducted by Ognjenka Finci, Meliha Husedžinović, and Rajka Mandić, while the selectors for video works were Dunja Blažević, Sadudin Musabegović, and Pjer Žalica. A number of artists from Bosnia and Herzegovina who lived abroad were also invited to participate. The international jury for the art interventions consisted of Željko Košćević, Michael Tarantino, and Ugo Vlaisavljević, while Kathy Rae Huffman, Sanja Iveković, and Mike Stubbs were members of the international jury for video works. Upon completion of the exhibition, the jury gave awards in both sections: the first award (a prize of 1,000 USD) for the best installation was given to Eldina Begić for *Meeting Point*, and the prize for the best video was awarded to Jasmila Žbanić for her works *Autobiography* (1995) and *After, After* (1997). Special prizes were also awarded to Alma Fazlić for her installation *Place for Waiting*, Jusuf Hadžifejzović for the performance *Grand Sarajevo Depot Performance*, Amra Zulfikarpašić and Nikša Barišić for the intervention *Soap Opera*, and Suzana Cerić, Leila Teftedarija, and Anela Šabić for the installation *Wash and Go*. Special awards for video works were given to Zlatan Filipović for *The Road in Between*, Nebojša Šerić Šoba for *The Shovel*, Timur Makarević and Amer Mržljak for *Mindless*, and the special award for documentary video was given to Adi Sarajlić and Saša Kaljanac for *Streets of Fire*. The jury's commendation went to all other participating artists for the production of video artworks during the extreme conditions under the siege.

A series of lectures and video screenings about the specifics of video as an artistic medium were held from July 25–30, 1997, in the City Gallery Collegium Artisticum. Kathy Rae Huffman lectured on the topic of “Fifty Years of Interactive Television, 1935–1985,” and on “Cyber-intimacy” (July 25 and 26); Sanja Iveković made the presentation “The Heroic Phase of Video in the Former Yugoslavia – A Retrospective of Works” (July 28); Slavko Kačunko gave the talk titled “Video in Germany” (July 28–29); Vera Kopicl and Vesna Rajčić presented the first

women's video festival *VideoMedeja* in Novi Sad (July 29); and Doug Aubrey, a member of the video group Pictorial Heroes, screened some of the group's works made in the 1980s (July 30).

The exhibition had the following objectives: to establish a contemporary art scene in the specific conditions of postwar Sarajevo, and to encourage a new genre of urban-oriented exhibitions.³ The SCCA's intention was to bring together different generations of artists – focusing on women as well as young students from the Academy of Fine Arts in Sarajevo – who would seek to abolish the boundaries between art and everyday life by using public art practices such as site-specific, context-specific, collaborative, or participatory art, and new media such as installations, interventions, video works, and performances.⁴ The most important result of this process was a synthesis, i.e., a meeting point of artists of the older and middle generation, and those who were appearing on the art scene for the first time and who had nothing behind them except their own traumatic life-experience of growing up and maturing in the war.⁵ This concept of the meeting point was realized in the form of art workshops, seminars, lectures, and discussions, and it shifted the limits and definition of exhibition itself, replacing traditional exhibiting forms with types of artistic production “not sufficiently explored”⁶ within the local contemporary art scene. The entire exhibition was a kind of experiment that aimed at challenging the Ćulhan garden, as well as offering possibilities of interaction and participation to a larger number of artists.

Compared to the prewar period, the postwar contemporary art scene in Sarajevo was significantly reduced and damaged in the material, institutional, and professional sense. It was not only the art infrastructure that was destroyed physically, but also the entire system of art. The country depended on donations from abroad, and art and culture were left with almost no funding.⁷ Therefore the mission of the *Meeting Point* was oriented toward giving financial and professional support to new art productions, initiatives and projects that didn't have any official institutional support.

The end of the war and return to “normal” life is disciplining art. Its need for socializing is being lost; it is returning to its “natural place,” to schools, ateliers, galleries. The old hierarchical system is being put back in place. MEETING POINT proposes a repeat departure into the public, social space that seeks change in artistic thinking and communication with “the casual passer-by.”⁸

The exhibition itself tried to open up a new, alternative art space, complementing what already existed but had neither its own space nor a clear public articulation.

The artistic practices that occur in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the late 1990s should first of all be understood and considered with regard to a particular economic, political, social, and cultural framework. While in the wider international context the emancipatory potential of the critical practices of the 1990s is often incorporated into the makeup of art institutions, contributing to the spread of cultural influences, similar efforts in the Bosnia and Herzegovinian context do not share the same starting point. So-called independent, self-organized curatorial and art collectives, usually assembled into NGOs as basic production units, also represented a completely new phenomenon,

and found almost no historical connection with art practices in prewar Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sarajevo as the capital.⁹ The Soros Center for Contemporary Art opened in Sarajevo after the war (1996), and it was one of the last in the network of 20 centers launched by the Open Society Fund in Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁰ The Soros center proposed, in the broadest sense, a new form of association, patronage, and financing of the local art scene. The local scene lacked its own resources and was entirely dependent on this type of funding brought about by the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s.¹¹ The transition led to notable changes in art production and dissemination, bringing in transformations which deserve a wider elaboration that overcomes the framework of this case study.

The main mission of the Soros Center, as stated above, was to encourage the young artists by offering them information and available infrastructure, as well as equipment and material support for new production. The SCCA Sarajevo focused on some of the most acute problems of contemporary art, problems that were fairly similar to those faced by other Central and Eastern European countries at that time. The Center sought to bridge the information gap and the distance between center and periphery, connecting artists with the world, exchanging information, establishing links with other artists from the Bosnian diaspora, forming a new art scene by kick-starting new proposals and projects that would gather and focus scattered creative energy. The Center also provided full financial and organizational support to individuals and collectives that were neither recognized nor appreciated as legitimate art.¹²

In order to achieve new and strengthen existing cooperation, the Center has been continuously trying to connect local actors with artists and cultural centers both in the region and abroad, as well as to promote local artists, and those who emigrated during the war. Although the Center had a very important, almost pioneering, transformative role in the process of building a postwar contemporary art scene, it also served as a platform for the promotion of local artists in the wider regional and international context. Many, especially young and middle-aged artists, that started their careers under the umbrella of the SCCA Sarajevo became a part of Western art world circuits and markets.

The Center achieved cooperation and exchange with artists and organizations from the Republic of Srpska, which was an important aspect for establishing an inter-Soros centers cooperation in the local contemporary art scene.¹³ The cooperation lasted till the end of the century when Soros gradually reduced funds to the SCCA Network. Since the year 2000, following the decrease in funding for the SCCA Sarajevo, one witnessed a revival of art institutions invested in national cultural practice, as well as the spread of numerous independent, highly fragmented, and underfunded private artistic and curatorial initiatives. This situation is maintained by the complex political situation which further polarizes activities and cooperation in the culture and art scene in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Given the complex situation in which the Bosnia and Herzegovina cultural institutions find themselves after the war, the independent scene did not become an important cultural and critical power in society – a situation that was different from that encountered in other post-Yugoslav countries.

The role of SCCA Sarajevo during the second half of the 1990s should not be seen as merely a filler of the cracks in the system, even though the Center for Contemporary Art often did a job which was largely ignored by local institutions. The

appropriation of state and institutional roles by non-institutional, independent curatorial, and art collectives not only plays a corrective role in the cultural field, but establishes a different model of critical action, one that is not devoid of its own contradictions and failures. After the withdrawal of Soros funding in the early 2000s, a change in activity, modes of action, and operation of the Centre became evident. Since then the SCCA Sarajevo has been dependent on the financial support of local and international donors, having often been forced to make questionable compromises and alliances in order to secure its existence.

(Translated by Aida Čengić)

Selected Archival Documents and Artist Projects

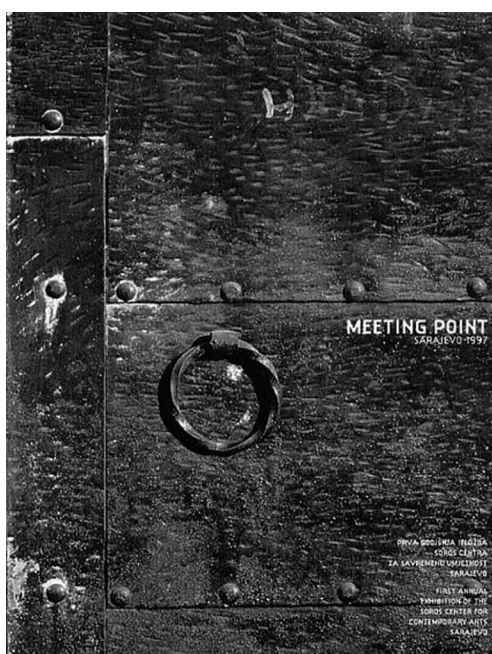


Figure 6.1 Cover of *Meeting Point* exhibition catalog, 1998.
Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo

The overall curatorial framework aimed at setting up a meeting place for artists and the audience of passersby and citizens of this city: a meeting place where artists would present their projects to the public, and work and intervene in public space, and where artists from Sarajevo and their fellows living abroad could work together, along with regional and international artists and cultural workers.



Figure 6.2 The opening of the first annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art Sarajevo, *Meeting Point* (1997).

Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo

The opening of *Meeting Point* took place in the Summer Garden Ćulhan, Sarajevo. The exhibition was widely attended during the three months (July 24–September 12, 1997) with thousands of people – from casual passersby to art audiences and the participants – dropping by daily to see new set-ups and artworks. The exhibition became a real meeting point, a place for encounters and socialization.

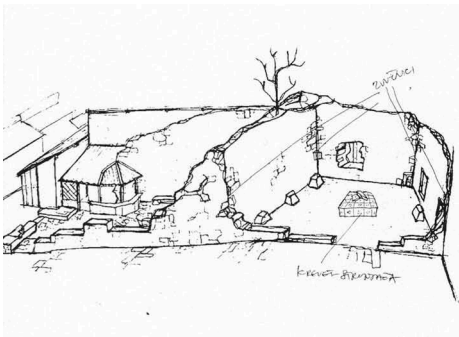


Figure 6.3 Sketch of the exhibition space (left) and the installation *Untitled* (right) by Izeta Građević.

Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo

[The] work speaks about Sarajevo in a manner deprived of history, naming, and the institutionalized sentimentality which is attached to its name. For a sound-portrait of Sarajevo, the author chose familiar and everyday sounds recorded in various locations in the city, and then broadcasted in the empty “room” of the thick-walled Ćulhan Garden. *Meeting Point* (SCCA Sarajevo, 1998).



Figure 6.4 Alma Suljević, *Annulling Truth*, 1997. Installation.

Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo

Inspired by the fact that there are three million mines in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the author intends to abolish this truth, symbolically removing mines from the original mine maps out on the floor of the Ćulhan. Alma Suljević ritually writes her traumatic memories around the maps; she circles the houses in which lived her friends, relatives, acquaintances. *Meeting Point* (SCCA Sarajevo, 1998)



Figure 6.5 A member of the international jury awards prizes for the best contemporary artwork.

Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo

The members of the international jury (Kathy Rae Huffman [New York], art critic and freelance curator; Sanja Iveković [Zagreb], artist; and Mike Stubbs [Liverpool], artist and curator) awarded the best video work prize to Jasmila Žbanić for her *Autobiography* (1995) and *After After* (1997). From the exhibition catalog:

The jury commends all the participants for creating video works in war conditions. We were aware of the courage of each and every artist in attempting to document his or her own ideas and surroundings. We hope this collective voice will have further exposure, and want to let you know we will advocate your work in our individual countries and to our colleagues around the world.

Meeting Point (SCCA Sarajevo, 1998)



Figure 6.6 Lecture on video art entitled “Fifty Years of Interactive TV 1935–1998” by the American art critic and curator Kathy Rae Huffman.

Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, Sarajevo

Selected Periodical Reviews and Catalog Texts

Think Space (excerpt)

Nermina Omerbegović

Oslobođenje, September 14, 1997

Translated by Aida Čengić

On the occasion of the first annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA), *Meeting Point*, we talked with the director of the Center, art historian Dunja Blažević.

– *Why Meeting Point?*

– *Why Meeting Point?* Because the Soros Center for Contemporary Art organizes its annual exhibition every year. So that’s the first reason. We chose the theme *Meeting Point* because we do not have our own gallery space, and we thought we should do something else – in order for the art scene to open and expand. We have chosen the theme of *Meeting Point* simply to emphasize that it was about a public space open for the public, and by coincidence we were offered the space of the Art Center Summer Garden Ćulhan, and we thought it was ideal

...

– *In some way, each annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art also represents the identity card of the Center. Following current events, how could you describe the identity card of the Sarajevo Center?*

– Each Soros Center for Contemporary Art, although they all work under the same basic preconditions, meaning their tasks are the same, has its own peculiarities because it operates in different local contexts. Our identity card, our, let's say, art policy is the collection of documents, the processing of documents, making artist files, a library, grants. . . . Already donations and the exhibition demonstrate what the strategic orientation of our Center is, and that is to support and help financially and professionally those initiatives and projects that broaden the notion of art, and open and articulate a new art scene. Of course, this is necessary in every environment, and especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sarajevo, as a cultural center after the war. In this situation, with narrowed possibilities, when art life is reduced to survival despite all efforts, it is necessary to encourage, motivate, give some new propositions – in order to actually see a potential that is at our disposal here. Namely, there are for sure other needs, other initiatives that could not be realized in addition to what we knew there already was and what was worthwhile as an artistic achievement in this environment, i.e., what was going on in some kinds of classical art form. Considering our resources, we were also limited. Nevertheless we said: "Well, we're going to target what neither the institutions nor those who finance art can push through at this point; we're going to do it."

– *Everyone had equal conditions for participation in Meeting Point, regardless of whether they were professors at the Academy of Fine Arts or its students?*

– Well, I find it normal. We expected resistance from the academic institutions, because the rule that says students cannot exhibit is still in place. However, since this is not a traditional exhibition, there was not any objection from the Academy, and also the older artists, artists of other generations, absolutely accepted equal participation in the whole project, which made us particularly pleased. Of course, the greatest interest and the most projects and proposals came from young people and mainly students.

The selection committee chose the works not by status and the prominence of the names, but by the relevance of the project. What I find good and a reason for not meeting resistance is the fact that propositions for this exhibition were conceived for one particular ambiance and one particular context. Therefore, these are contextual, ambient works and one could not just bring a completed work. Something that was made in a studio and brought there had to take into consideration the space, context and historical references of the space, the atmosphere, and its social function, its role today.

Grand Sarajevo Depot Performance. Intervention *Waitressing* and the work of Jusuf Hadžifejzović presented at the first annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art

A. Marić

Oslobođenje, September 3, 1997

Translated by Aida Čengić

There were two performances in the final part of the annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art titled *Meeting Point* on Monday, September 1. From 6pm visitors of the Art Center Summer Garden Ćulhan had the opportunity to witness an intervention called *Waitressing* by the artists Suzana Cerić, Anela Šabić, and Leila Teftedarija. The performance of these three young Sarajevo artists lasted throughout the evening, and the main objective was to earn some money. *Waitressing* relies on the work of Jusuf Hadžifejzović's *Sarajevo Depot Cafe*, presented at the Energoinvest Gallery in 1990, when the artist poured and sold drinks, turning this activity into an art act. In this way, Leila, Suzana and Anela say that it does not pay off to be an artist. "If society does not value the work of the artist, he then uses the work that society values," they said. The intervention is virtually undetectable, because it is actually a part of everyday life. The only tangible effect is the earnings. At 8pm the performance titled *Grand Sarajevo Depot Performance* by Jusuf Hadžifejzović started. This artist is a pioneer of avant-garde art in the region. Hadžifejzović's *Grand Sarajevo Depot Performance* is very difficult to describe. It was a combination of tradition, ritual, and the avant-garde, a combination of the material and the spiritual. The performance starts with the ritual "*salijevanje strave*" [pouring out of fear]¹⁴ which releases a person, in this case the artist, of fear. "I try to identify the thought through with the observed, in collusion with my own deposited experience, in order to melt with my breath the frozen shadow from the bristling reality," says the artist about his performance.

All Stories are Already Told. Interview with the Academy of Fine Arts student Eldina Begić on her being awarded the first prize at the SCCA Sarajevo exhibition *Meeting Point*

Nermina Omerbegović

Oslobođenje, September 12, 1997

Translated by Aida Čengić

The first annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Art, *Meeting Point*, showed what Sarajevo creators can offer, regardless of whether they were students or professors of the Academy of Fine Arts. However, the exhibition was dominated by the youth, as evidenced by the fact that the work *Meeting Point*, by the student of the Academy Eldina Begić, was pronounced the best in the competition of the 30 interventions in the space. This was the immediate cause for an interview with this young artist.

– *Your work brings creatures from a different world – the penguins – within the walls of Ćulhan. Why did you decide on this type of visualization of this space?*

– My work, in fact, is not [about] penguins; this is my reaction to the space. In this case, the penguins are only the medium. Many have asked me – why penguins. Here, I do not see the penguins really, they are only my means of reacting to the space, but they have nothing to do with the context of this space. This is simply my purely visual reaction. Contemporary art emphasizes concept. I do not disapprove of concept as concept, but I think it should not come before an impulse. That is, for a person to make a story, and use it as a starting point. There is no reason; all the stories are already told. I do not want to create a philosophy –

people can read Plato and Kant, they do not need to watch my work in order to understand something. I think there is no need to provide any verbal message, because I have no right to do so, nobody has the right to do so. We are not some higher truth so that we could say something is like this or like that. After all, we are people and we cannot give substantive responses, we can only highlight. We can emphasize so that a person alone finds his or her responses. So, this reaction of mine in this space was supposed to provoke something subjective, some feeling, instinct.

– So, there is no place for “interpretation” – penguins from a cold sea in the stove house of a hamam?

– It is rather about something that can be both irrational and rational; everything is left to subjective observations. In fact, I did not know that my intervention would be so interactive in space. I think you can never plan if a work will achieve this or not. Usually artists foresee this possibility, and then give some guidelines to viewers. This time, it was unforced; it was just there in the space. I was watching people who came and most often I saw how pleasantly surprised they were.

– These days, your name could be seen in the booklet for the play *The Lonely Crowd*, the project of the Sarajevo-Mostar School of Puppetry. Do you see yourself also in theater?

– It is possible, but I cannot say that it would be exactly puppet theater, more likely the stage in general. However, I cannot plan anything because the situation is very difficult in Sarajevo theaters. In addition, the Academy of Performing Arts and the Academy of Fine Arts cooperate very little, and the students have a different view of it all – they stick to the clichés, in both cases. Usually the students of the Art Academy emphasize symbolism when making a stage set while at the Drama Academy everything is more realistic.

Meeting Point, in addition to showing what kind of creative potential we have at our disposal, has opened up another question: until when the students of the Academy of Fine Arts will be prevented from exhibiting. Namely, at the Sarajevo Academy of Fine Arts the law that says that students do not have the right to public presentation, and which has long been obsolete at many academies in the world, is still in force. It is up to the management of the Academy to decide whether exceptions like *Meeting Point* would become the norm.

Untitled (excerpt)

Meliha Husedžinović

Dunja Blažević, ed. *Meeting Point*. Sarajevo: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1998 Exhibition Catalog

Thirty selected authors offered a whole spectrum of events and a view of their works: whether in the upper or lower space, on the walls which surrounded it, on its stone curbs and in its niches, on the ground and in the air, on tables and between tables, in the surrounding passageways and on the surrounding roofs. The frame of artistic discipline started from the rare sculptures, paintings, photographs, and videos, over to installations and assemblages consisting of the most diverse of materials – fabricated

and partially fabricated, found or especially-for-the-occasion made objects – to performances and conceptual works. ... The space was envisaged in ways which presented both extremely simple as well as very complex situations: from those that didn't look for any kind of philosophical explanation, those strictly literal, to those in which was shown a certain distance toward both the historical and the present-day function of the space, as well with speech in allusions, associations, sophisticated vocabulary, insinuated with both visible and invisible layers. The sequence of the installations and their authors, their combination and intertwining, contents and confrontation, actions and reactions, unfolded throughout the 50 days in several small, almost closed systems, characterized by consistent ideas, over which at times were confronted the sensibilities of two generations – professor and student – one toward the other, collaborating and complementing each other

...

This kind of approach to the space and theme shifted with the group of installations whose authors oriented themselves to the principle of seriality and multiplicity in the placement and formal arrangement of the elements which helped one, in an allegorical fashion, engage with the place and memories of its historical residuum. That group of authors was the most numerous as well as the most homogeneous in their expression of similar meditations about the space, and they were mostly design students Eldina Begić, Ata Omerbašić, Alma Fazlić and some of the doyens of the Sarajevo art scene: Nusret Pašić, Fikret Libovac, and Amra Zulfikarpašić with Nikša Barišić

...

Within the sequence of these scenarios were also found the works of three authors who further widened the spectrum of their until recently exclusively painterly orientation. Edin Numankadić and Salim Obralić hinted at this in a few earlier exhibitions, but Gordana Anđelić-Galić showed this for the first time.

...

A few of the artists offered invented objects or installations which depended on the visual and architectural characteristics of the space, but without reference to formal and functional memories of the place ... This refusal was created by Alma Suljević by taking possession of the ground, diagramming it with maps of minefields in Bosnia and Herzegovina, expressing in that way engaged reflections on the present consequences of one brutal time ... Maja Bajević, with a kind of mobile (cross-sectioned violins with saws in place of bows, which were set in motion by electric motors, all accompanied by the striking sounds of her own voice on tape), presented a serious, powerful and cautionary installation, which provoked a strong and suggestive experience. ... The possibility for shaping light or shaping with light was offered by some of the surrounding spaces. This was taken advantage of by Danica Dakić and Amer Bakšić (he also used one niche), that in the author's own spirit of poetry, they offered a meeting with Madame X or with the shadow of a figure. ... Šejla Kamerić offered her work as a reaction to the space and as an inventive dialog of two realities, as well as a meeting of two construction principles: the human and the natural.

...

These are the authors and actions that, during the course of 50 days, created an exceptional atmosphere in one specific part of the city and in one of its spaces. In games of this type, played for the first time in our art at the meeting point, there was a presence of a critical mass of women's works, but not with some possible feminist specificity in "program-executive" and "poetically-meaningful" consequences ... The special importance of *Meeting Point* is also that it promoted the future generation of artists who must now begin taking out their positions on the artistic scene and defining their own artistic front. ...

Video from Bosnia: A Meeting Point of Memory and Reality (excerpt)

Kathy Rae Huffman

Dunja Blažević, ed. *Meeting Point*. Sarajevo: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1998 Exhibition Catalog

The 20 video works presented at *Meeting Point*, the first annual exhibition of the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts Sarajevo (July 24–27, 1997), gave voice and presence to the young artists of Bosnia. The selection, which represents a number of poetic, artistic and documentary-style works, is evidence that the first generation of media artists – after UN peace-keeping forces became residents – to emerge in Sarajevo. Their desire to communicate is strong, and through their personal stories they show life as it is, without apology. The works show Sarajevo is the central metaphor.. for absolute possibility!

Meeting Point video artists are the survivors of the siege of Sarajevo, experienced by most while they were still teenagers. Whether or not they were in the city itself during the war, or safely sheltered abroad, each and every one suffered loss.

...

The *Meeting Point* video program also includes works by artists who were working on their videotapes during the war, at a time when they probably did not know what would happen next, or if they would live to finish them. Some works were finished abroad; others were not finished until after 1995. Although there is no stated theme, or title to the program, it clearly represents the mental experiences of those who lived through the long and devastating war in which no Bosnian – of Muslim, Croat or Serbian descent – escaped family tragedy. This was a war of war-crimes, and terrible devastation, especially upon the Muslims (by both Croatian and Serbian military raiders). The story was told to us time and time again on international television news reports. From the first assaults in the spring of 1992, the collective consciousness of the residents of Sarajevo began to accumulate. Those who remained beheld unspeakable and brutal incidents. The numbers of foreign correspondents, observers, humanitarian workers (especially through Soros-funded projects) and camera crews also grew. The world watched passively, all the while, and waited. Meanwhile, the armored vehicles of the UN observers delivered (and then safely returned) many heads-of-state into to the "mean streets" of Sarajevo.

"... in 1995, I realized that I survived the war..."
Jasmila Žbanić, in Autobiography 1995.

Now that Sarajevo has ceased being a critical war zone, and has become occupied under foreign military control, the residents live in a peculiar twilight zone. They can create, take hot baths and evening walks again. They go to school, drink beer in bars, and even attend the occasional benefit concert by radical pop stars (U2, for example). But, besides the minor annoyance of having the water turned off during the day, using monopoly money (a kind of military scrip) and having irregular telephone service, the youth population suffers from unemployment, and have limited travel possibilities because of severe visa restrictions. Their neighbors don't want them, and the European countries have their fill of "refugees" and no longer grant visas to Bosnians without extenuating circumstances. Peace has been declared, and Bosnia has lost its "most favored charity" status on the front pages of newspapers around the world. Still, hundreds of foreign NGOs and special humanitarian efforts continue throughout Bosnia, especially the psychological treatment of the survivors of war camps.

Notes

- 1 Ćulhan is located in the ruins of the sixteenth-century Turkish *hamam* in the Baščaršija (the Turkish "čaršija" means "head," "summit," "main," or "real") bazaar. "Ćulhan" (a Turkish word) was the place where water was heated in this former men's and women's *hamam* (Turkish baths).
- 2 Dunja Blažević, "Foreword," in *Meeting Point*, Exhibition catalog (Sarajevo: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1998), [unpaginated].
- 3 The attention attributed to public space could be considered in light of the changing role of 1990s artistic practices, and the emergence of a new genre of "public art." See Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995).
- 4 It is important to note the significant forays into public space that took place during the siege of Sarajevo. Several site-specific interventions and context-related exhibitions were organized in the damaged public space of the city, such as: *Spirituality and Destruction* (May–December 1992) launched by Zoran Bogdanović and Ante Jurić in the Post Office building and in the Church of Saint Vincent, and *Witnesses of Existence* (December 1992–April 1993) realized by Nusret Pašić, Zoran Bogdanović, Ante Jurić, Petar Waldegg, Mustafa Skopljak, Edin Numankadić, Sanjin Jukić and Radoslav Tadić in the destroyed former Sutjeska Cinema (Obala Art Center).
- 5 Blažević, "Foreword," *Meeting Point*.
- 6 This phrase is from the mission statement of the Annual Exhibition Program within the SCCA Network.
- 7 Dunja Blažević points out that the end of the war also brought a restoration of classical academic art production, and traditional art forms. Blažević, "Foreword," *Meeting Point*.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Unlike other centers in former Yugoslavia, especially Zagreb, Belgrade and Ljubljana, Sarajevo did not have a strong and independent art scene. There were only a few collectives and individuals (e.g., Dunja Blažević) who were connected to the New Art Practice in the former Yugoslavia during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. See Marijan Susovski, ed., *The New Art Practice in Yugoslavia: 1966–1978* (Zagreb: Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1978).
- 10 On June 17, 1991, George Soros and Ante Marković, the Prime Minister of Yugoslavia, signed an agreement founding the Soros Yugoslavia Foundation. In 1992, Soros and the Open Society Fund (OSI) established separate foundations, at first in Croatia and Slovenia, then Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in early 1993, while the Soros Foundation of Yugoslavia continued (until February 1996) to operate under that name in Serbia (including Vojvodina and Kosovo) and Montenegro. OSI was primarily

oriented towards humanitarian support, fighting for human rights, and seeking justice for war crimes. See George Soros, "Introduction," in *Building Open Society in the Western Balkans 1991–2011: The Story of the Open Society Foundation's Activities During a Time of Transformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia*, ed. Chuck Sudetic (New York, NY: Open Society Foundation, 2011), 6–10.

- 11 Considering this new model of production in Croatia, Vesna Vuković wrote: "While the institutions are losing every social function and the non-institutional art scene is waging war against the nationalist ideology, a new model of production – a project financing – has been introduced. The non-institutional scene, without its own resources, is entirely dependent on this type of financing, and neo-liberal reforms, first slowly then faster and faster, have been changing the configuration of the institutional field since the 2000s: a process of liquidation of public infrastructure has started through pressuring for commodification of resources and public institutions' services and through gradual withdrawal of the state from the public funding." Vesna Vuković, "No(c)turn(e) of the Social?" in *Tracing the Public*, eds. Anja Bogojević and Amila Puzić (Weimar: Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Faculty of Art and Design, 2015), 76.
- 12 Dunja Blažević, "Oni dolaze," in *Maxumim*, Exhibition catalog (Center for Contemporary Art, Sarajevo, January 2000), 3–4. Although these strategies and activities were stated in the "mission" of the Center, one must not overlook the fact that imperatives regarding these and similar activities were set in all Eastern European centers of this type. Their individual differences thus should be considered within specific socio-political and economic circumstances.
- 13 Bosnia and Herzegovina is a compound state, which in line with the General Framework Agreement for Peace in BiH (the Dayton Agreement, November 21, 1995, Ohio, US), consists of two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska, and Brčko District.
- 14 Author's note: *salijevanje strave* is often translated as "fear pouring," or "casting out fear" and is part of an ancient ritual popular in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other countries from the region.

Case Study 7

Khoj International Artists' Workshop, Khoj International Artists' Association, Modinagar 1997

By Sabih Ahmed and Nida Ghouse

Workshop Title

Khoj International Artists' Workshop

Location and Date

Sikribagh, Modinagar, Uttar Pradesh, India, November 1997

Working Group

Ajay Desai, Anita Dube, Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, Prithpal S. Ladi, Manisha Parekh, and Pooja Sood.

Workshop Coordination and Support

Robert Loder (Triangle Arts Trust)
Anna Kindersley (Triangle Arts Trust)
Pooja Sood (Eicher Gallery)

Organization

Khoj International Artists' Association

Founding Patrons

Triangle Arts Trust
Dayawati Modi Foundation

Participants

Muhammed Cader (Sri Lanka), Simon Callery (United Kingdom), Ajay Desai (Delhi, India), Walter D'Souza (Ahmedabad, India), Anita Dube (Delhi, India), Luis Gómez (Cuba), Subodh Gupta (Delhi, India), Stephen Hughes (United Kingdom), Yoba Jonathan (Namibia), David Koloane (South Africa), Jyotee Kolte (Mumbai, India), Prithpal S. Ladi (Delhi, India), Omega Ludenyi (Kenya), Surendran Nair (Baroda, India), Manisha Parekh (Delhi, India), Gargi Raina (Baroda, India), C.K.

Rajan (Hyderabad, India), Sudarshan Shetty (Mumbai, India), Rini Tandon (Australia), Wendy Teakel (Australia), and Radhika Vaidyanathan (Chennai, India)

Funding and Support

The Dayawati Modi Foundation for Art, Culture and Education; Triangle Arts Trust; Eicher Gallery (New Delhi); The Commonwealth Foundation (UK); The British Council (New Delhi, London, and Nairobi); Intach, UK Trust; Robert Loder CBE; Ebrahim Elkazi; Anand Agarwal (ABC Corporation); Camlin Ltd.; Heart Foundation; Vadehra Art Gallery; Dr. Ashok Rajgopal; Jindal Strips Ltd.; Mohit Gupta; Lalit Nirual; Nitin Bhayana; Austrian Embassy (New Delhi); O.P. Jain; IPAN; Malvika Poddar; Vijay Gupta (VKGN Associates); Canberra School of Art (Australia); ArtsACT; Vikas Rathi; Sita Theruchelvam (Colombo); The Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK); Pratibimb Communications Pvt. Ltd.; Ludwig Foundation (Cuba)

Exhibition Catalog

Khoj International Artists' Association. *Khoj '97. Khoj International Artists' Workshop*, New Delhi, 1998. Texts by Ajay Desai, Anita Dube, Anna Kindersley

Introduction

Prefatory remark: This case study has been written around the emergence of an art institution in India that seemed most pertinent for the inquiries of the current exhibition and conference. The authors would like to state that this by no means is representative of a longer, more multifarious history of independent artist-run spaces in the region that mobilized their own definitions of what is contemporary, what it means to be international, and strategies of claiming artistic autonomy.¹

The first *Khoj International Artists' Workshop* (hereafter referred to as *Khoj '97*) took place over the course of two weeks in the winter of 1997 in Sikri-bagh, a 25-acre estate located at the edge of the industrial township of Modinagar, some 55 kilometers east of New Delhi. Extricated from the material and ideological protocols of their studio and gallery spaces, and temporarily relocated to an old family bungalow in the vicinity of derelict factories, a group of 22 mid-career artists, almost half of whom had been flown in from abroad, came together to encounter and engage each others' practices through the process of producing and exhibiting new site-specific works, in a dynamic and makeshift collaborative environment.

By all accounts, the genesis of *Khoj '97* lay in the mission of the Triangle Arts Trust (currently known as the Triangle Network, and hereafter referred to as Triangle). Established in 1982 by Anthony Caro and Robert Loder and registered as a charity in London that same year, Triangle originated as a one-off two-week artist-led workshop in upstate New York with 25 participating artists from the US, the UK, and Canada. By 2017, it has evolved into a network of art organizations with studio, residency, exhibition, education, and outreach programs operating in nearly 40 countries across the globe.² In the years prior to the formation of the *Khoj '97* working group, a number of its members had been individually invited by Triangle to partake in its workshops in the US and the UK, and also in Zambia, Namibia, and South Africa. The unanticipated consequences of this unmediated exposure to artists from unfamiliar cultural contexts was a fundamental aspect of the experience. With its purpose of promoting artists as organizers and its emphasis on process rather than product,³ the two-week artist-led workshop had remained the primary medium of "learning by exchange" within Triangle, and in their respective contributions to the *Khoj '97* catalog, Anita Dube and Ajay Desai describe how, they got "hooked not only on the concept but also to the responsibility of setting up the first one in India."⁴

While consistently acknowledging Triangle's methodological influence and its institutional support, the *Khoj '97* working group, which comprised six Delhi-based artists and cultural manager, Pooja Sood, considered itself an independent artist-run initiative that had "started off unexpectedly" (Dube), coming together "out of circumstances rather than by design" (Desai). These words suggest a sense of self-determination, a claim of ownership over that moment of emergence, without which, as Robert Loder has elsewhere noted, workshops seldom repeated themselves. The short catalog entry by Anna Kindersley – *Khoj '97* international workshop coordinator and a Triangle representative – throws another angle onto questions of intention and agency. Triangle conducted a preliminary trip to Delhi

in 1994 to meet artists in and around the city, and another in 1996 during which the *Khoj* '97 working group came into being.⁵ These visits were jointly funded by Triangle and the Dayawati Modi Foundation for Art, Culture and Education (hereafter referred to as the Dayawati Modi Foundation). The latter had followed Kindersley's "involvement in workshops in Africa with interest and we discussed setting up a similar initiative in India."⁶ The Dayawati Modi Foundation proceeded to become the primary local patron, providing the venue to host the annual *Khoj International Artists' Workshop* in Modinagar for the next five years. Kindersley's acquaintance with the Modi family dated back to 1987.

With an aim

to function as an experimental art-laboratory that would bring artists together from different parts of the country, from the sub continent [sic] and from around the globe, [by] setting up a co-operative non-hierarchical work situation where dialogue, exchange and transfer of information, energy and skills could take place as an intensely lived experience (Dube)

Khoj '97 was "a success quite beyond our expectations" (Desai). The workshop format did in fact produce a dialogical structure, a kind of commons, a space for earnest play (see Jain's *India Today* review) and "irresponsible experimentation" (see Kapur's contribution to *The KHOJ Book*), exposing artists to cultural and political differences while encouraging them to extend the boundaries of their own practices. The artists worked with whatever they could find, and the quasi-colonial feudal-style bungalow with its outhouses, gardens, pond, and fields was primed for environmental sculptures, performative gestures, and site-specificity. The markets, factories, foundries, and junkyards that lay beyond the precincts of the property were mined for low-tech resources and popular commodities, and led to the involvement of industrial and artisanal labor in the process of art-making. "The poverty of means adopted at the *Khoj* workshops, the consciously depleted objecthood of artworks with a quotient of wit sorely lacking in the Indian art world, gave us what we are accustomed to call *alternate art practice*," Geeta Kapur wrote on the occasion of *Khoj*'s 20-year anniversary.⁷

The "Open Day" of *Khoj* '97 drew a crowd of "[o]ver 300 people ... from Delhi ... and some who came had never been to an art exhibition before." The event had an air of novelty as "the art experience inscribe[d] itself within site and space and vice versa ... [like] a somewhat arbitrarily distributed treasure-hunt of subliminal meanings." By 2001, "the annual pilgrimage to Modinagar had become a part of an increasingly lively contemporary art scene," but "the site had become almost too familiar" and there was a feeling that "[s]omething new was needed."⁸ It was time for the *Khoj International Artists' Association* to reinvent itself and move on.

Selected Archival Documents and Artist Projects

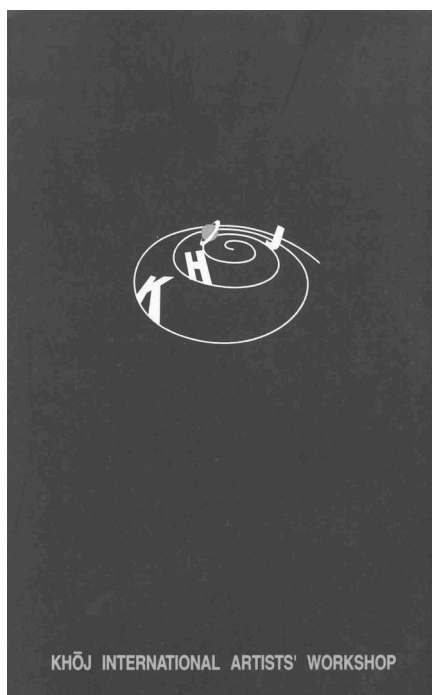


Figure 7.1 Catalog front cover of the 1997 *Khoj International Artists' Workshop*, Modinagar. Khoj International Artists' Association.



Figure 7.2 Exhibition view of artworks produced during the 1997 Khoj International Artists' Workshop, Modinagar shown at the British Council art gallery in New Delhi.
Khoj International Artists' Association.



Figure 7.3 Anita Dube's site-specific work made in 1997, Khoj International Artists' Workshop in Modinagar.
Khoj International Artists' Association.



Figure 7.4 Page from 1997 *Khoj International Artists' Workshop* catalog featuring a captioned photograph of the participating artists.
 Khoj International Artists' Association.



Figure 7.5 Ludyeni Omega at work during the 1997 Khoj International Artists' Workshop in Modinagar.
 Khoj International Artists' Association.



Figure 7.6 Subodh Gupta's *Untitled* in the process of being made during the 1997 Khoj International Artists' Workshop in Modinagar.

Khoj International Artists' Association.

Selected Periodical Reviews and Catalog Texts

Khoj: The Search Within (excerpt)

Anita Dube

Khoj '97. Khoj International Artists' Workshop, New Delhi, 1998

It started of [sic] unexpectedly as one by one some of us were asked if we would participate in International [sic] workshops in Zambia, in the UK, in Namibia, in South Africa, in New York, etc.

And before we realized it, we were hooked not only on the concept but also to the responsibility of setting up the first one in India using our (happy) experiences and imagining a happier one here on home ground which we could tint with our knowledge of a particular context and forge into something significant with our commitment and sheer hard work.

This was Khoj '97, our difficult coming together, [a] test of our varying capacities; ideologically synchronous as well as diachronous, but focused toward an autonomous open-ended umbrella organization led by artists for artists. Our aim was basically to function as an experimental art laboratory that would bring artists together from different parts of the country, from the subcontinent and from around the globe, setting up a cooperative non-hierarchical work situation where dialogue, exchange and transfer of information, energy and skills could take place

as an intensely lived experience. Khoj is an emblem of our vision of working together in difficult situations, somehow pushing against the establishment grain under the rubric of creating sensitizing encounters, opening up insularities and closures to address the binary polarizations that have hardened into unchangeable positions both inside and outside.

Khoj then is a search that seeks to question through an Art Workshop these divides: The urban vs. the provincial: the postmodern vs. the modern: the local vs. the global: the male vs. the female: the left vs. the right: the visible vs. the invisible – on the basis of class and privilege in our cultural spaces, as also the absence of a dialogue with our subcontinental neighbors – Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Khoj also seeks a non-Euro-American tilt within cultural discourse, more connected within cultural discourse, more connected with contemporary art practices/practitioners in Africa, the Asia Pacific, Latin America, China, Australia, etc. to assist each other's processes of cultural empowerment and assertions of specific locations as vital and meaningful. Khoj is a process: dynamic, changing, evolving both structurally and conceptually, that sees itself as an alternative. One among many, a group initiative that functions outside state or institutional control, outside bureaucratic apathy and the cynical market-driven art scene. Khoj believes that it is critically different.

The cooperative structure of Khoj has been conceptually modeled on successful workshops in Africa and the UK. The first of these – the Triangle Workshop in Munroe, New York State was started in 1982 by the sculptor Anthony Caro and the collector Robert Loder. Subsequently in 1985 [there was] Thupelo, another workshop started in Johannesburg, through the initiative of South African Artists. This played a significant role in bringing together artists from different regions and backgrounds during the apartheid years. Thereafter workshops mushroomed in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique, Zambia, Senegal, Jamaica, and in the UK. Like Khoj, flagged off in India in November 1997, new workshops are being inaugurated elsewhere in Cuba, Australia, Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria. All these have been guided by the Triangle Arts Trust based in London, whose mission it is to expand the workshop network. Khoj in India now is linked to this active international workshops chain which is a kind of movement with a vast primary network in Africa. Its direction is toward an empowerment of third world artists and their multicultural bonding outside a white bias, for an exchange and flow of information along lines. A spirit of fostering respect for cultural, linguistic, geopolitical, sexual, and racial difference is the philosophical core of these workshops, as is the opening up of platforms and spaces to the hitherto unseen and unheard. Khoj celebrates the ingrained liberation impulse within this workshop structure and seeks to make it more and more historically sensitive, context and need specific; hands-on, barrier-less, and open-ended.

With lights illuminating the Delhi skyline and crackers creating a din, Khoj started to happen on Diwali night at the party to celebrate the arrival of early overseas artists and friends from different parts of India. The fact that we had done it, that Khoj would happen despite all odds, suddenly got to all of us from the working group there. One by one came, Yoba Jonathan from Namibia; David Kolaone from South Africa; Ludenyi Omega from Kenya; Simon Callery, Stephen Hughes, and Anna Kindersley from London. Wendy Teakel landed from Australia; Mohammad Cader from Sri Lanka, and a little later Rini Tandon from Austria, Luis

Gómez from Cuba; and Iftikhar Dadi from Pakistan. Ten of them in total – our overseas artists with their different otherness-myths, that two weeks of an intensive workshop was to somewhat wear out. And 12 of us from India were there to speak in our multiple tongues of a plurality that not be easily packaged into pan-Indian terms. Ajay Desai, Subodh Gupta, Manisha Parekh, Prithpal Singh Ladi and Anita Dube were from Delhi and from the working group. There was [sic] also Jyotee Kolte and Sudershan Shetty from Mumbai. Gargi Raina and Surendran Nair from Baroda, Radhika Vaiyanathan from Chennai, Walter D'Souza from Ahmedabad, and C.K. Rajan from Hyderabad.

Modinagar was where we were heading, 55 kms [sic] from Delhi, a town that had grown around a group of industries founded by the late Gujarmal Modi in the Nehruvian days of independent India. There was Sikribagh, the venue for Khoj, an old bungalow built in a quasi-colonial feudal style. Amidst acres of land, mango trees and a pond – an idyll in the midst of the now decaying industrial city, a refuge in some ways for concentrated work but nevertheless close to the feverish reality of a small town and its changing fortunes. Generously offered to Khoj for the workshop by S.K. Modi, Sikribagh was to create encounters of many kinds. The first for the group was a chance meeting with Aas Mohammad, an entrepreneur with a small foundry and forging workshop along with ancillary assembling units. A skilled and practical craftsman, Aas and his brother Yasin were to become the technical mainstays of the workshop assisting almost every artist to realize what they had impetuously imagined.

Report

Ajay Desai, Workshop Coordinator

Khoj '97. Khoj International Artists' Workshop, New Delhi, 1998

We established KHOJ, an independent artist-led initiative with the aim of creating a dynamic platform for cross-cultural encounters, interactions, and collaboration to break new ground in the visual arts.

The KHOJ working group came together out of circumstances rather than by design. Having individually experienced international workshops invited by the Triangle Arts Trust in different parts of the world, we decided to establish a similar encounter in India.

Anna Kindersley and Robert Loder of the Triangle Arts Trust, London, visited us in the winter of 1996. They were willing to help us with contacts and consultancy, and thus the seed for Khoj was sown. Triangle Arts Trust put us in touch with Mr. S.K. Modi of the Dayawati Modi Foundation who had shown interest in the idea and who graciously agreed to host the event. Having registered ourselves as an autonomous non-profit society, we felt we were off on a running start.

Eicher Gallery came along next with their generous offer to use their office facilities. This eased our burden in a big way and allowed us to get on with the rest of it.

Equipped as we were with major support from the above mentioned organizations, trouble hit us when we set out looking for funds for travel costs, materials, per diems, and the host of the other expenses involved in a project as large and complex as this. Our experience has revealed a sad lack of institutional support we

received for innovative cultural projects. New ideas seem to be supported by a small handful of individuals and there is only so much an individual can do. We also saw that support for the arts from the corporate world (with the rare exception) tended to be extremely conservative in nature. My ??? [sic] to them is that even if there is a precious past that needs to be preserved, surely we must also invest in the future yet to unfold, by building a resilient and open present.

Surprisingly while we received help from many generous individuals in India, the larger institutional support we received came from outside the country as may be seen from the list of sponsors. We do hope we shall not have to seek so far from home next time. There were times when it seemed that this workshop would never happen; that perhaps we had taken on the impossible. The immense fund-raising effort was yielding only trickles, with the time running short. Global networking and local organizations on this scale was alien territory for us; and within the working group there were personal tragedies, a newborn baby, harried parents, and overworked parties, but it all fell into place in the end.

As for the event itself: it was a success quite beyond our expectations. The warmth and energy generated among the participants, the excellent infrastructural support from the Dayawati Modi Foundation and the spectacular venue left nothing to be desired. So did we think of the delectable fare dished out by the caterers in the kitchen who had us swooning. Well looked after, we just got along with our work and a lot was achieved. The town of Modinagar at whose edge we were entered the workshop in various ways. Everything from industrial junkyards to heaps of cowdung, and the local marketplace with its “low-tech” wonders became a source for materials and ideas. So did the site itself, in response to which a lot of work was done. A range of local skills found their way into the workshop when artists collaborated with metal casters, carpenters, a basket weaver, a charpoi weaver; at one point Stephen Hughes from the UK was even negotiating with a local butcher to realize his work! When this did not work out, he worked something out with a local sign board painter instead. One of Anita Dube’s ideas involved the services of a bird catcher (!) but that didn’t work out either. All kinds of natural materials available on site were used. The interaction between the workshop, the venue, and the locals couldn’t have been more complete.

Being outside the confines of the studio seemed to have liberated something within for most of the artists: the freedom to experiment with the unfamiliar. For me personally, and for many of the participants, the event triggered movements in new directions, leaving us with something enriching and enduring. This in itself is reason enough for the workshop to continue as an annual event.

Further, there were slide shows and discussions every evening. Talks would continue late into the night: interminable exchanges across cultures, the bridging of vast gulfs, the meeting of minds, the savoring of differences. We had invited guest artists on three evenings who shared their work and experience with us: Sheba Chhachhi, Vivan Sundaram, Gulammohamad Sheikh and Satish Sharma[,] who brought with them a range of perspectives and attitudes that helped in further widening the space of the workshop. All this went into the making of an encounter that was on the one hand intense and exhausting, while on the other, utterly rejuvenating.

We have since received from participants, letters and reports from across the world testifying to the fact that the experiences they had were transformative, lasting, and special.

It would therefore seem that events such as these are important and necessary for the growth of an art scene that is open and dynamic, interactively engaged with the global art scenario. Surely, greater local support than we encountered on this our first experience is due to initiatives such as these; so instead of remaining isolated from the rest of the world, we contribute positively toward a common yet heterogeneous cultured future based on cooperation, exchange and an appreciation of all that is unique to each society.

Report

Anna Kindersley, International Workshop Coordinator

Khoj '97. Khoj International Artists' Workshop (New Delhi, 1998)

"Whatever you think you can do or believe you can do, begin it. Action has magic, grace and power in it."

Following a wonderful introduction to India in 1987, teaching at Dayawati Modi Public School near Rae Bareilly, Satish and Abha Modi followed my involvement in workshops in Africa with interest and we discussed setting up a similar initiative in India. Supported by Triangle Arts Trust and the Dayawati Modi Foundation, David Koloane and myself had a fascinating trip in 1994, meeting and seeing the work of many artists from Delhi and outside the city.

Over the next two years, Triangle Arts Trust arranged for artists from Delhi to go to workshops in Africa and the UK. These artists formed the Khoj working group during my second visit in 1996 with Robert Loder. The essential support of the Dayawati Modi Foundation together with the commitment and energy of the core group, particularly Ajay Desai and Manisha Parekh, ensured that the workshop was an unprecedented success.

The workshop took place in the open and inspiring setting of the formal gardens of Sikri Bagh situated on the edge of Modinagar, an industrial town north of Delhi. Twenty-two artists worked together for the first time from countries including Namibia, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Cuba, Australia.

"Khoj" (Urdu): "to quest" or "to search." The quest was challenging and enlightening through the meeting of artists from different cultures and continents. Spiraling energy in the midst of meaningful exchange and dialogue over the two weeks. It was a time of learning about oneself and new friends from different corners of the globe without agendas or labels. A catalyst for opening oneself up (the workshop can touch all senses and emotions) and for experimenting with new processes and media. Moving forward into new possibilities.

While the experience has particular significance to each person and for some it is a revelation, there is a pervading spirit of togetherness: moving toward a common unspoken goal. Process is the essence of the workshop: the process of making art, creating change, discovering and forging new links with like-minded artists who live on the other side of the world.

"Material Obsession," (*excerpt*)

Madhu Jain

India Today magazine, November 24, 1997

The two-week international artists' workshop, aptly called Khoj, has been organized by the artists themselves with corporate support. There are a dozen Indian artists and ten from nine other countries. But what is interesting is how different this generation of Indian artists is from previous ones and how similar they are to artists from Namibia, Australia, the United Kingdom, Austria, Pakistan, Cuba, Sri Lanka, and Kenya.

What binds them is their relationship with the object. It is a material obsession and a romance with found objects. The sacred cows of High Art have long been put to pasture. It's an "anything goes" world, with the artist as Prospero, conjuring up anything – no matter how far or how mundane; even sacred or profane – which finds a place in his personal pictorial vocabulary. Having offloaded both the post-colonial baggage of artists who sought alternatives in indigenous or folk art, as well as the guilt of those who changed the colors of their palette according to what is happening in Paris or London, this generation has no ready-made maps for their journeys.

Moreover, for most of the younger Indian artists there are no longer any hierarchies of medium or subject. Oil and watercolors or marble and bronze are as heavyweight or light as papier mâché, fiberglass, terracotta, polyester, jute, grass, or even videotape. The world's really their oyster. And they are as free as magpies – to pick up whatever catches their fancy from the vast cultural storehouse of images, techniques, symbols and histories of the world. Just as a Picasso, Matisse or Gauguin might have refueled themselves in, respectively, Africa, North Africa and Tahiti, these raiders of other worlds are comfortable with their borrowings.

...

As for the Indian artist, the bridge leads in all directions: from the kitsch and vibrancy of the marketplace and mass culture to vestiges from High Art of the temple to whatever strikes his fantasy the world over.

Notes and Diary Entries; Robert Loder's diary, November 1997, (extract)

Robert Loder

Triangle: Variety of Experience around Artists' Workshops and Residencies (London: Triangle Arts Trust, 2007), 174–176

In the morning preparations were made for the Open Day, which started at noon. We had no idea how many people were coming but to be on the safe side the Modi family, who had lent the site for the workshop, had lain lunch for 250 people in a tent in the Sikribagh garden. As it turned out these preparations were barely sufficient. Over 300 people braved the journey from Delhi.

The work took everyone by surprise and some who came had never been to an art exhibition before. The whole 5-acre garden had been used and guests made their way from one site to another. Very few materials, other than those available locally, had been used and this fact perhaps gave the occasion a feeling of the locality. On the whole the work was widely praised despite being experimental and in many cases site-specific. The quality most appreciated was the liveliness of the work, which comes out well in an article published in *India Today* which devoted a double-page spread in its edition of November 19 to the Khoj workshop.

Robert Loder on the Khoj Workshop Open Day in Modinagar:

There was considerable interest from the press and much favorable comment about the quality of the work made at this workshop. But at the same time Khoj at Sikri-bagh Modinagar is 5 years old. The dramatic impact that it had in the first years is now part of the history of contemporary art in India. Many of the artists who formed the first Khoj working group are now established international artists – Anita Dube, Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, and others. While virtually all the artists I spoke with seem to have had a very intense and memorable experience I also had a sense among artists from India that the site had become almost too familiar and that it may be time to move on.

Notes

- 1 For further references, see Nancy Adanjania's "Probing the Khojness of Khoj," in Pooja Sood, ed., *The KHOJ Book of Contemporary Indian Art, 1997–2007* (Noida, India: Collins, 2010), 83–99.
- 2 Many of these member organizations are outcomes of Triangle-initiated workshops, while others emerged on their own; each is self-governed and often functions in response to the needs of the local art scene.
- 3 For Triangle, the objective of the workshops was "to counterbalance the tendency of the Western art world to put the emphasis on the object and its marketing rather than on the creative process itself." In contextualizing the advent of *Khoj* in the late 1990s against the backdrop of India's economic liberalization which began in the early 1990s, Nancy Adanjania writes, "The time was ripe to replace the gallery object with the project and the market with the community." Nancy Adanjania, "Probing the Khojness of Khoj," in Sood, ed., *The KHOJ Book*, 94.
- 4 See Anita Dube's and Ajay Desai's contributions to the *Khoj '97* catalog.
- 5 In the Acknowledgements section that opens the *Khoj '97* catalog, the working group, too, credits Anna Kindersley and Robert Loder, without whom they "would never have come together," and expresses gratitude to them for "introducing us to the idea, enthusing us and urging us along when we felt hopeless . . ."
- 6 See Kindersley's contribution to the *Khoj '97* catalog.
- 7 See Geeta Kapur, "A Phenomenology of Encounters at Khoj," in Sood ed., *The KHOJ Book*, 46–69.
- 8 See contributions of Loder, Kapur, and Sood for these quotations.

Case Study 8

Janja Žvegelj, *Squash*

Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana, 1998

By Tevž Logar and Vladimir Vidmar

Exhibition Title

Squash

Artist

Janja Žvegelj (b. 1967)

Curator

Gregor Podnar

Location and Date

Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana, March 25–31, 1998

Organization

Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Exhibition Catalog

Gregor Podnar ed., *Letni katalog Galerije Škuc 1998/Annual Catalog 1998* (Ljubljana: Škuc Gallery 1999)

Introduction

Škuc Gallery: From an Alternative Hub to a White Cube

The long history of Škuc Gallery encompasses several neuralgic spots that signify crucial moments of transformation in the history of the Yugoslav and Slovenian art scene. The first of these turning points coincides with the establishment of the gallery: the late 1970s marks the end of the heroic end of the neo-avant-garde experiment in Yugoslav art, and the beginning of the more historicist and eclectic art of the 1980s. The founding of Škuc Gallery in 1978 in the framework of an existing Student Cultural Artistic Center (*Studentski kulturni center*, or ŠKUC)¹ reflects this very vividly: the gallery itself was inaugurated with an exhibition of the OHO group – the Slovene conceptualist collective active in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Around this time OHO ceased to produce art and chose instead to work on the merger of art with life, a project that they carried out in the Šempas commune. Škuc exhibited OHO in the period after its dissolution, thus setting its course toward the legacy of progressive avant-gardist practices and their aftermath in Yugoslav conceptualism. In this way the opening of the gallery symbolically marked the end of the neo-avant-garde and announced the 1980s.

The vivacious period of the 1980s in the life of the Škuc Gallery was on the one hand characterized by constant cross-referencing of Yugoslav conceptual art practices from different parts of the country, along with surveys of new generations of local painters and sculptors. On the other hand the gallery offered its space to various glorified subcultural activities. The gallery premises at Stari trg 21, where it still operates today, were a hub for subcultural experimentation in the visual arts, video, music, and publishing, with prominent *acteurs* from different fields working closely together. These activities were socially engaged and progressive, indirectly critical although rarely directly confrontational in their relations with the decaying Yugoslav socialist system, which was nevertheless tolerant of their activities. These progressive cultural activities proved highly effective in creating new audiences, and in attracting to the gallery premises many of those who were interested in contemporary culture. The fact that Škuc saw its function as that of a social space should be underlined. One of the movements that was closely connected to Škuc and was crucial in creating new audiences through connecting culture and politics was the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) movement. On the one hand their projects introduced a new cultural context through a re-questioning of the aesthetic and ethical standards of socialist culture and identity, but on the other hand they formulated a collective mode and system of operating that significantly contributed to a reconfiguration of the social and artistic arena. Regardless of the unsurpassed intensity of cultural events of all sorts, the functioning of Škuc Gallery throughout the 1980s went almost wholly without financial support from any official authority. Apart from being given the space, the functioning of the gallery was based mostly on the enthusiastic volunteer work of the more or less permanent gallery staff and of artists. It is important to stress this point in order both to underline the specific structure of Škuc compared to Student Cultural Centers in Zagreb and Belgrade,² as well as to indicate the next major

turning point in the history of the gallery that occurred in the 1990s, and is the subject of this case study.

What interests us here is the gradual transformation of Škuc from a largely unsupported cultural hub – with loose organizational principles, committed to versatile artistic experiments in the fields of visual art, video, music, and publishing – into a professionally-run contemporary art space with clearly defined staff roles and increasingly curatorial program guidelines. This period of gradual transformation, which occurred in the 1990s, must be examined in relation to the radical changes taking place in the socioeconomic system, brought about by the newly attained independence of Slovenia and the development of its institutions and (cultural) policies, not disregarding the wider regional and international context.

New Cultural Policies, New Institutional Models

Parallel with the then epochal ideological switch to a new single nation-state with an economic foundation in the free market, changes were implemented in the field of cultural policy. While socialist Yugoslavia supported its cultural scene(s) and their institutions following a social democratic model of state regulation, the 1990s saw a series of attempts to liberalize cultural policies. This notwithstanding, it seems that the cultural policy of the 1990s was in constant fluctuation between the desire to defy the use of culture as an ideological battlefield, and the need of the recently established nation state to legitimize itself by building a narrative of national culture.

This issue was tackled by Maja Breznik, in the most comprehensive account of Slovene cultural policy to date.³ Breznik sees the root of the problem in the unclear formulation of the term “public interest” at the time of the 1994 and 2002 “Implementation of the Public Interest in the Field of Culture Act.” While initially defining the public interest only technically through a list of goals, the Culture Act eventually defined public interest as the interest of the state, while naming civil society as its partner in this process.⁴ This in practice meant that representatives of civil society were invited and – at the same time – uninvited to participate in decision-making processes on various boards and committees, instrumentalized at the state’s discretion in the process of legitimizing the functioning of the young Slovene democracy. This becomes even more evident when we consider that the Culture Act explicitly distinguished between public institutions and public cultural programs, the former being regularly and fully funded, while the latter having to reapply for funding every three to four years and being granted only partial funding. In rough terms these are the contours of the Slovene cultural scene as they are re-drawn during the 1990s: on one side, public institutions continue largely to function structurally unaltered in the extended realm of the state (or municipal authorities), while other segments of the cultural scene (associations and private institutions) play the part of civil society, summoned by the state to take their designated role and participate in (and thus legitimize) the democratic ritual.

The Škuc Gallery falls into the second category in the dichotomy of the Slovene cultural scene. The gallery was rather underfunded in the 1980s (unlike its counterparts in Zagreb and Belgrade) given that the Yugoslav legislature mostly inhibited

the establishment of associations and independent institutions. Changes in the Slovenian cultural policies during the 1990s meant that the gallery could apply for, and be granted, more or less permanent funding. The new legislature and (although often only symbolic) participation in the creation of cultural policies played a crucial role in the re-articulation of Škuc's internal dynamics, its objectives and goals, and only partly its structure.

Alenka Pirman, who took over the gallery in 1992, initiated its transformation from a "cultural center" into a "gallery space." In other words, the space itself was radically redefined. What was once a social space that mixed various cultural elements (a bookstore, vintage vinyl shop, an exhibition space and bar) was now being gradually tidied up into a "serious" exhibition venue. One of the more decisive moves in that direction was eliminating the bar that operated within the gallery premises, making it a popular gathering spot, but also giving it the shabby, bohemian aura of an alternative den. This was undertaken by the gallery artistic director in the early 1990s, Alenka Pirman, whose organizational spirit and determination to make the functioning of the gallery more serious and transparent marks the first stage of Škuc's switch from an alternative hub of varied cultural production into a white cube. The changes Pirman introduced were primarily focused on the organizational, logistic, and financial aspects of Škuc's operation, since Pirman (an artist by profession) felt uncomfortable venturing toward determined curatorial decisions. Thus the process of selecting exhibitions remained rather "democratic" in including very diverse artistic approaches. In spite of her "curatorial reserve," Pirman understood well that the whole infrastructure for the new, contemporary art paradigm in Slovenia still needed to be set up. For this reason she was a very active initiator and organizer of many initiatives that greatly benefited the local scene. One of the most important of these initiatives during her term with Škuc was the establishment of the World of Art School for Critics and Curators, which still remains the only course in Slovenia to offer specialization in the field of contemporary art to young art professionals. Pirman was well aware that the optimistic period of the early 1990s should be used to lay sound foundations for new Slovene contemporary culture.

What Alenka Pirman did for the Škuc Gallery (and the local contemporary art scene in general) in terms of optimizing its organization, her successor Gregor Podnar did in curatorial terms. Having been schooled in Germany, Podnar was the first protagonist of the Slovene art scene to receive specific training in contemporary art (since most local curators were art history graduates from what was, at that time, a very conservative Art History Department at the Ljubljana Faculty of Arts). Podnar very self-assuredly took over the process of bringing the gallery up to date with what was going on internationally, both in terms of new profiles (contemporary art curator, gallerist), and artistic practices and approaches. He felt no reluctance in setting a firm program course for Škuc, at the same time skillfully giving it consistency by connecting it with Škuc's own exhibition history. "Neo-conceptualism" in its many forms was the name of the game in the late 1990s, and Podnar was well aware of the plentiful points of reference for this art practice in Škuc's past. These points included the 1978 inaugural exhibition of the romantic conceptualist OHO group, and numerous other exhibitions of Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian protagonists of the New Art Practice⁵ during the 1980s, or even Pirman's presentation of the young generation of Slovene artists in the early 1990s

who distanced themselves from both New Image Painting and the alternative scene of the previous decade. Podnar was also keen to promote the socially aware, dialogical, and participatory dimension of progressive 1990s art practices. In taking an openly active role in the conceptualization and production of artistic projects and exhibitions, Podnar was, together with Igor Zabel and Zdenka Badovinac from Moderna Galerija, an essential protagonist in the introduction and adaptation of the “curatorial turn” into the local art scene. This included a more pronounced international course for the gallery program, which coincided with the keen interest of international contemporary art circles in the artistic production of the region. Opening toward international art circles in turn meant internalizing new phenomena and protocols of the contemporary art world through new networks, establishing multicultural collaborations, crossing borders, and exploring new “identities.” According to Igor Zabel,⁶ this was a time when the region was confronted with the old modernist concern for the exhaustion of high art, and when this happens modernism searches for exotic primary energies on the periphery, which had not yet been entirely molded and professionalized by the art world. Thus in the second half of the 1990s the Škuc Gallery saw a completion of “the great turn” toward the paradigm of contemporary art.⁷

Case Study: *Squash*

The exceptionality of Janja Žvegelj’s project *Squash* comes not from its “fitting the bill” or being representative of the most progressive tendencies in Slovene art of the 1990s, but by its virtue of being both critical of the paradigm it came to represent and self-ironic in its inevitable complacency with regard to the new system.

The event took place in March 1998 at the Škuc Gallery, where the artist and gallery artistic director Gregor Podnar played a game of squash. For this purpose they made use of one of its elongated rooms which they turned into a squash court, with a stand for the spectators in front of it. A camera filmed and broadcasted the event on a TV monitor placed in one of streets facing the gallery windows. A chart was placed on the wall where the players could keep score; next to it was a cup for the winner. The event started with an opening speech by Igor Zabel, chief curator of Moderna Galerija, Slovenia’s central institution for modern and contemporary art – who, together with its director Zdenka Badovinac, played a crucial role in making Moderna one of Europe’s most renowned institutions in its reflective and critical approach to contemporary art. Zabel also symbolically closed the event by presenting the winner with the cup.

Squash, an emblematic art project for the most progressive line in Slovenian art of the 1990s, presents a duel between the Artist and the Curator, with the Critic’s interpretative accompaniment. What immediately strikes us in this event is the literal directness in dealing with this proverbial opposition in contemporary art: the artist vs. curator. These differences in the positions of power were to be “legitimized” by the result of the game – a friendly and playful game, but a competition nevertheless, which Podnar won, while Zabel as critic, having touched upon the question of institutional framing in his introductory speech, finally solidified the results by presenting Podnar with the prize. It is as if the work strove to condense its reflection of the art system into a point of transition toward a new paradigm

with a new power diagram. But to stop here would only mean scratching the surface in reading this work.

One of the key points about *Squash* was made by Igor Zabel in his comments in the announcement text, published in Škuc's 1998 annual catalog. Here he refers twice to the project as "the transmission of reality into realism,"⁸ only partly explaining it in terms of transforming the gallery "into a non-gallery space, although in such a way that it still remains a gallery, and the court – despite its reality – is *mimesis*, image."⁹ This is an important point for Janja Žvegelj, especially under the auspices of the institutional critique that she came to represent in curatorial discourse. Symptomatically for the 1990s and in sharp contrast with the 1980s, institutional critique is not articulated here as a systematic critique of ideology, but is rather a question posed by the artist to herself on how a position of critique can be formulated from a position from within the system. Compared with the radical and systematic institutional critique undertaken by the NSK in the 1980s, which aimed at the system in its wider political and ideological implications and from an external, antagonistic position, things were much more slippery now. While the NSK used strategies of overidentification, forming their own parallel system, Janja Žvegelj and her generation approached institutional critique from the opposing end; where the NSK were antagonistic to the system, Žvegelj's generation found itself in the uncomfortable position of being representative of the new paradigm that the system now wanted to conform to. Hence the immediacy and directness of the project: with the artist's and curator's physical presence in the front, there was no distance or reserve. We were all in this together and up to our necks in it.

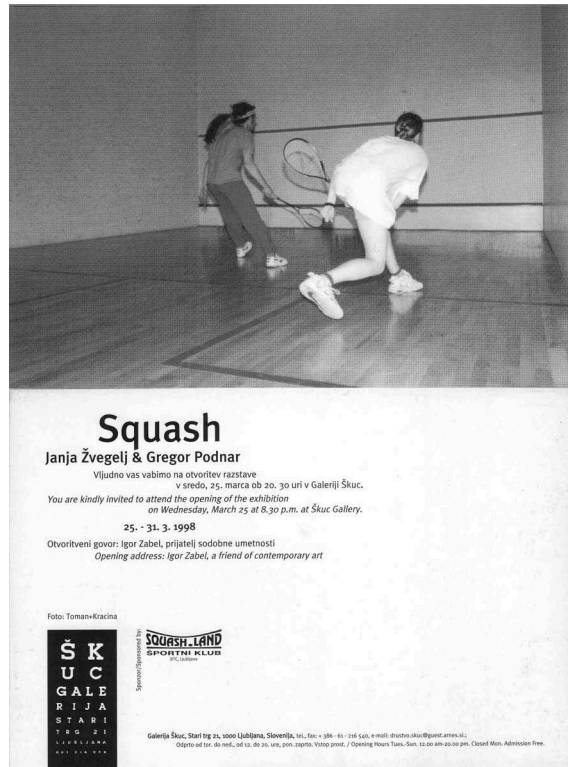
A parallel for this can be seen in the institutional transformation of the Škuc Gallery: from a marginal, outsider position, without permanent funding or institutional support, often in strenuous (although not openly confrontational) relations with the authorities during the 1980s and early 1990s, to a systematically funded, professionally-run gallery space by the end of the century. Initially an alternative subcultural hub, Škuc was now funded as part of a growing network of art spaces and occasionally summoned to partake in the decision-making processes of cultural policy. In a way, it was institutionally reinvented by the new democratic state as its counterpart, civil society. But even in this, the fate of the new generation of 1990s artists and of Škuc can be read in parallel. While artists such as Janja Žvegelj were acknowledged by art institutions as key players in contemporary art in its critical and reflective capacities, the lack of constructive cultural policy prevented them from ever being able to live off their artistic work, forcing them into ever more precarious and flexible positions within the system. Simultaneously, the acknowledgment by the state of independent art spaces such as Škuc brought about their financial dependency and ever more servile relations with regard to the demands of the increasingly neoliberal logic being imposed on the local cultural scene.

There is another important implication of *Squash* for 1990s Slovenian art, albeit a more formal one, that arises from Zabel's emphasis on Žvegelj's transmission of reality into realism. We are dealing here with a specific, subtle attempt at institutional critique which arises from the concrete, conflicting position the artist finds herself in and which has to do more with self-critique than with exposing the system. The question of how to articulate this critique without succumbing to the conventions of the art system is phrased in a self-ironic *mise-en-scène* of a game

the artist willingly enters. And in this respect it has less to do with challenging the established positions of power and more with challenging artists' modes of challenging. On this level, Žvegelj winning the game would not change much. The project is therefore a self-reflection, a condensed contemplation on the possibility of formulating a critique of a system that anticipates, welcomes, and neutralizes any possibility of subversion. What is more, it utilizes our attempts to transgress it, makes constant transgression an imperative, a *modus operandi*. It is this *perpetuum mobile* of critique and transgression that makes us ever more creative, flexible, and productive in reproducing the system we are aiming to subvert.

Realism is often perceived as the intent to most accurately and precisely represent reality or the "outside" world. But we need only remember that the most programmatic painting of artistic realism, Gustave Courbet's *The Painter's Studio*, is in fact an allegory, or as Courbet puts it, "a real allegory." The realism Zabel mentions (and never fully explains) in connection to Žvegelj's work is not one based on the metaphysical binarity of the inside and the outside. The oxymoron "real allegory" does what oxymorons do best, imply a paradox. The paradox of the outside being a part of the inside, as is the case of the game of squash in the gallery, makes it something ambivalent, both out of place and oddly fitting. This condensed reflection on the intertwinement of the "inside" and "outside" as the innermost trauma of institutional critique serves as the focal point of Žvegelj's project. Not long after *Squash*, Janja Žvegelj decided to give up being an artist. In 2000 the curatorial team of Manifesta, taking place in Ljubljana that year, asked for her project proposal, to which she (ironically?) responded that she was without inspiration. It was her last artistic statement to this day. But rather than interpret it as an act of defeatism, we should see it as a refusal of the insider position, regardless of the impossibility of an outside, a radical jump into the abyss of the impossibility-of-not-being me.¹⁰

Selected Archival Documents and Artist Projects



Squash

Janja Žvegelj & Gregor Podnar

Vijudno vas vabimo na otvoritev razstave
v sredo, 25. marca ob 20. 30 uri v Galeriji Škuc.
You are kindly invited to attend the opening of the exhibition
on Wednesday, March 25 at 8.30 p.m. at Škuc Gallery.

25. - 31. 3. 1998

Otvoritveni govor: Igor Zabel, prijatelj sodobne umetnosti
Opening address: Igor Zabel, a friend of contemporary art

Foto: Toman+Kracina



Galerija Škuc, Start trg 21, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija, tel./fax + 386 - 61 - 216 540, e-mail: druzbo@skuc.si
Odprto od tor. do ned., od 12. do 20. ure, pon. zaprto. / Opening Hours: Tues.-Sun, 12.00 am-20.00 pm, Closed Mon. Admission Free.

Figure 8.1 *Squash*, Invitation Card.

Courtesy of Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana

The original invitation card for the opening of the exhibition, showing Janja Žvegelj and Gregor Podnar playing squash at a sport club.



Figure 8.2 Cover of the Škuc Gallery's *Annual Catalog* 1998.
Courtesy of the Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana

Annual catalogs were a common feature of Škuc throughout the 1990s, providing an invaluable source of information on the gallery's operation, its program, and international collaborations. The catalogs usually featured a general introductory text by the artistic director, and texts and photos of the gallery's exhibitions and other projects, with information on the participating artists at the end. The last yearly catalog was published in 2000, thus symbolically marking the end of the "golden 1990s," a period of great optimism and favorable production circumstances on the Slovene art scene.



Figure 8.3 Igor Zabel delivering his introductory speech.

Courtesy of Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana

Catalog entry on *Squash* featuring Zabel's opening speech, to which he added very long comments in footnotes. The comments do not present a clear thesis on the project, but are rather a collection of remarks, observations, and teasers, leaving the audience/reader with the task of developing them.



Figure 8.4 Audience watching the *Squash* game.

Courtesy of Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana

Selected Periodical Reviews and Catalog Texts

Considering her short career as an artist and relatively small number of works, Janja Žvegelj's projects were highly regarded by the local art scene as hugely important reflections on both the material and the institutional foundations of art. In her project Tourist (1996), instead of putting on a show at the library of a small Slovene town, she arrived there as a visitor and inserted photos of her visits into randomly chosen books. The work is a complex reflection on materiality and presence, and one of most intriguing explorations on the role of a spectator in the triad artist-artwork-spectator in Slovene art. Žvegelj's works are nevertheless often discussed in relation with body art practices (notably in the Gender Check and Body and the East exhibition catalogs). In the case of Squash (1998): the project is based on the artist's and curator's workout, their physical exertion – making the curator, who is usually mostly present through his intellectual input, physically engaged. The notion of the body is more at the forefront in Studio (1995), a project executed at the Kapelica Gallery in Ljubljana, where the naked artist sculpted the image of the gallery curator, who sat for her fully clothed. Although the interpreters commonly put the emphasis on the institutional dimensions of her projects, in terms of both the protocols of the institution of art and the art institution, Žvegelj's work is a complex investigation of the phenomenology of art as an intricate and paradoxical grid of forces and relations.

*Dear Guests, Dear Friends of Contemporary Art!*¹¹

Squash, Škuc Gallery: Igor Zabel's Opening Speech, with his Comments

Igor Zabel

Podnar, ed. *Letni katalog Galerie Škuc 1998*

It gives me great pleasure tonight to welcome you to this unusual event¹² prepared by Janja Žvegelj, one of the most interesting phenomena in contemporary Slovene art (the term phenomenon is used deliberately),¹³ and Gregor Podnar, artistic director of the Škuc Gallery, who will abandon his professional distance as gallery manager and curator for the day, and also show his body and not only his soul.¹⁴

And now, instead of speaking immediately about the artists, allow me to ask myself what am I actually doing here. What makes my appearance sensible?

First, I want to refute two possibilities: it is not a question of pedagogy¹⁵ or of decoration.¹⁶ Let me presume: the opening speech is necessary to strengthen the institutional framework, the framework of the "institution of art" in which the current event is taking place – a similar role is being performed by the gallery premises itself, and by the invitation cards which you have received, and so on.

(Another option is that it presents irony, or criticism, of the institutional system, but I will leave it aside as not so interesting.)¹⁷

My next question is: Why it is necessary to have an institutional framework? One could say that it has a twofold function, but actually it is the double aspect of one and the same thing. What is it?

1. With its emphasis on the institutional framework, the game of squash – together with the court – placed into gallery premises emphasizes its heterogeneous nature,

the fact that it is something unusual for a gallery context. Artistic production is one thing; the game of squash is something else. The emphases are laid on this difference, on this heterogeneity and also on the fact that the gallery premises are semantically revalued.¹⁸

2. On the other hand, it is not simply a game of squash but, rather, the fact that this game has been chosen as an artistic thesis. True, the game will be real, but this reality will change into realism, into presentation/representation.¹⁹ (Not only realism, in fact, but also expressionism, for the shape of the court could well have been taken from Doctor Caligari ...) ²⁰

In short, I am here to enable the change of real bodies in the game, in the sense of the staging of reality – and this constitutes a thesis, a text that we can start to read.²¹

I wish both artists success and great sporting enjoyment, and I hope the spectators have a lot of fun, too.

Notes

- Igor Zabel, a friend of contemporary art, gave the opening speech.
- The project was financially supported by the Department of Culture of the city of Ljubljana.
- The project was sponsored by the SQUASH LAND sports club, Ljubljana.

Exhibition Strategies in the 1990s: A Few Examples from Slovenia (excerpt)

Igor Zabel

World of Art. Theories of Display. Almanac. Ljubljana: Open Society Institute, Slovenia – SCCA Ljubljana, 1998

Introductory Note

“Strategy” is a word we tend to use with some frequency and sovereignty when talking about contemporary art, e.g., “art strategies,” “the strategy of audience relations,” “exhibition strategies,” and in similar contexts. These and comparable words have become such an obvious component of artistic jargon that we consider their meanings obvious as well. Still, perhaps it would not be entirely out of place here to begin by looking up the actual meaning of “strategy.”

If we investigate the origin of the word, we see that it stems from the military. Such is also its etymology, as it originates from the Greek words *stratos* (army) and *agein* (to lead); *strategos* therefore means military commander. Besides its narrower meaning of actually leading an army, the term “strategy” also encompasses the broader meaning of skillful and prudent handling of affairs in an unarmed battle, e.g., political, and finally in the figurative sense: of the serious handling of matters, particularly those directed toward a purpose. It seems that it is this figurative meaning or term that fits the idea or concept of “the strategy of exhibiting.” Nevertheless, the general usage of a term such as “strategy” certainly indicates that the art field is not neutral, that it is saturated with a kind of “agon,” therefore competition, conflict or even struggle and that its main meaning (although not always entirely explicit) is also a “battlefield.”

Exhibiting or displaying work that is on view for the public always implies a kind of strategic relationship, even if the work is wholly anonymous and self-contained and if the exhibition space seems completely neutral (the so-called “white cube” for example, only seems neutral as it is related to a specific public, institutional network, group of experts and collectors). Art as such can only realize itself in relation to an audience and it is precisely in the act of defining this relationship that we unavoidably encounter a kind of global strategic idea, an idea that determines the individual aspects of the work appearing in public, from the “exhibition design” details (the position, lighting, dominant, or marginal positions, etc.) to the question of which institutional (or non-institutional) space to mount the work in, for which public it is primarily targeted, and the like. In short, in the most general sense of the term, “exhibition strategy” is this global concept, a sensible collection of procedures and approaches aimed at ensuring that the work will be seen in the right light by the right viewer.

In this essay, I do not intend to deal with this broader notion which is a component of every exhibition. I would rather confine myself to art that expounds and perhaps even incorporates this dimension in its effect. Such projects all consciously revoke the dualism between the artwork and the act of exhibiting. In short, the work is no longer a kind of autonomous given for which suitable surroundings must be found and organized. Rather, it occurs within the tight and dynamic relationships between the artifacts, surroundings, viewer, curator, institutional framework and so on. Artists, work, surroundings, audience, institutions – these are not abstract entities, but are defined by ideological, political, class, gender, linguistic, and other factors and their discrepancies; and this expounds the “agon” that among other things demands a strategic approach in exhibiting art.

I suppose this is the approach toward “exhibition strategies” that is particularly characteristic of what we call the “art in the nineties.” By this, I do not mean to say that exhibition strategies are also entirely a thing of the 1990s, on the contrary. The numerous strategic approaches appearing over these past few years were developed much earlier in the 1980s, 1970s, and 1960s and even earlier. The 1990s have reaffirmed, appropriated, and adapted these approaches and incorporated them into a different context and has given them a somewhat different meaning.

Up to now I have spoken about the strategic aspects of exhibitions as if they only concerned the artist in his or her relation toward the exhibition space, institutions, and audience. But just as a field of “agon,” the field of art is an area in which different interests cross paths, thus resulting in the development and cross-breeding of different strategies. When speaking about exhibition strategies, besides mentioning the artists, we must, at the very least, also mention the curator and exhibiting institution which in line with their strategic interests can also firmly define the context of an exhibition and manner of putting the work on display and in doing so this importantly influences the meaning of the work.

...

Art in the 1990s is often no longer considered as a production of autonomous or even purely aesthetic pieces. It consciously operates within various social and historical contexts and establishes a reflexive or even directly active relation toward them. This does not necessarily mean that such pieces must be realized outside of the gallery; on the contrary, sometimes they make good use of the

traditional exhibition site. For example, within these “neutral” exhibition surroundings it is possible to create different or even incompatible surroundings, whereby the effect of such pieces is often based on this incompatibility and incongruity of codes itself.

...

Some artists brought even more heterogeneous spaces into the gallery. Janja Žvegelj organized a squash court in the Škuc Gallery (as a response to the unusual shapes and measurements of the gallery rooms) at which she actually played a tournament with the gallery’s artistic director. These features should probably have not only been read as *ready-made* art; they were an about-turn in which the artist (who was not actually a professional squash player) exposed herself, at the same time bringing onto the scene the gallery’s art director – an element of power who ordinarily does not perform in front of an audience in such a direct manner. By introducing *squash* to the gallery the established relations of power were also shifted – at least as long as the tournament went on. And so it is understandable that the artist so strongly emphasized the gallery’s institutional framework of her project, even including a ceremonial opening speech.

Stressing the Extent of the Body as an Answer to the Terrible Fall into Culture (excerpt)

Jurij V. Krpan

Joseph Backstein, Zdenka Badovinac, and Mika Briški, eds., *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present* (Ljubljana: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 170–171

The developed forms of performance which are concerned with the body, presented in the thematic series at the Kapelica Gallery, build on the experimental character of body art performances from the 1960s and 1970s, in which the possibilities and boundaries of the medium are rediscovered, in which the distance to the ultimate cut – death – is sought. Today, this boundary is not topical in the sense of initiation or exorcistic rituals, but as a beaten path with which the political, or those myths which are instrumentalized by large ideological systems, frighten us. Today, in these performances, these myths fall.

...

In the first, Janja Žvegelj set her body as diametrically opposed to institutions: she pledges it as a guarantee. On the one hand, her vulnerable body in the process of creation – production of a work of art – on the other hand, the aseptic, neutral institution of a gallery. The project began with the production of a statue of a custodian, which she publicly sculpted in the gallery, to which she moved her studio for a number of days. When the portrait had been modeled, she ritually cast it in plaster. She carried out this concluding act of the birth of a sculpture naked in the intimacy of the closed gallery, which further increased the tension and sexual charge, since the normal, routine act projected into the future of some possible exhibition in the gallery, was transformed into an impossible sexual act between the living artist and the dead materiality of the institution. In the exhibition, which lasted a further 14 days, the event cited was reminiscent of the destruction of the studio, and the video of the final act – of necrophiliac pornography.

Notes

- 1 The Student Cultural Artistic Center (ŠKUC) was officially established in 1972 by the Student Association of Yugoslavia. ŠKUC was the third in a series of establishments of student cultural centers in Yugoslavia, following the ones in Zagreb (established in 1957, inaugurated in 1959) and Belgrade (founded in 1968, inaugurated in 1971). Although all three shared the vision of promoting and supporting progressive, experimental art tendencies, there is a considerable difference in structure between ŠKUC in Ljubljana on the one side, and SC Zagreb and SKC Belgrade on the other. While the latter were attached to the existing university institutional apparatus, which facilitated their financial and logistic consolidation, ŠKUC in Ljubljana had no such fixed affiliation and in organizational terms functioned much more clandestinely.
- 2 Unlike the Student Center Gallery in Zagreb and the Student Cultural Center Gallery in Belgrade Škuc Gallery Ljubljana functioned without official funding until the 1990s.
- 3 Maja Breznik, *Kulturni revizionizem: kultura med neoliberalizmom in socialno odgovorno politiko* (Ljubljana: Mirovni institut, 2004).
- 4 Ibid., 59–61.
- 5 The “New Art Practice” is a term that refers to the generation of artists in the former Yugoslavia active between 1966 and 1978. Their practices introduced an important rupture with the modernist tradition of the fine arts, replacing studio-based practice with social engagement. Moreover, in the wake of the social and political changes that took place after 1968, artists began to use ephemeral and subversive media (at the time), including photography, video, actions, photocopies, and experimental film and text, venturing out of the shelter of institutions into nature or the streets.
- 6 Igor Zabel, “Abstracts from the panel discussion” in “What is to Be Done With ‘Balkan art?’” special issue. *Platforma SCCA* 4, (September 2005), 92.
- 7 This was in no way an easy task that took place overnight, quite the opposite – it took almost the whole decade. At the beginning of the 1990s key positions in the Slovene art system, especially in public institutions, were still held by proponents of either belated modernism or postmodernist tendencies which were often openly hostile to the non-object, processual, relational, and communicative processes of the 1990s.
- 8 Gregor Podnar, ed. *Letni katalog Galerie Škuc 1998/Annual catalogue of the ŠKUC gallery 1998* (Ljubljana: Galerija ŠKUC, 1999), 23.
- 9 Ibid., 25.
- 10 Miklavž Komelj, “Fernando Pessoa v partizanskem taboru,” in *Nujnost poezije* (Koper: Hyperion, 2010), 134.
- 11 The following text reproduces the words of introduction that I read – in my capacity as official speaker and friend of contemporary art – to the audience of the opening of the *Squash* project by Janja Žvegelj by the Škuc Gallery in Ljubljana. Apart from a number of smaller stylistic and orthographic corrections, it is an exact transcription from my notebook. The spoken version was nearly – but not literally the same.
- 12 It is a good idea to give a short description of the *Squash* project in order to understand it. A squash court was arranged in the Škuc Gallery (the artist and the gallery artistic director wanted the court to resemble as much as possible the given standards of a normal squash court; the outline and dimensions of the court, however were rather unusual because of the shape of the gallery), and a stand for spectators in front of it. The artist Janja Žvegelj and the artistic director of the gallery played squash. A camera transmitted the developments on the court to a television monitor placed in the window of the gallery so that the event could be watched from the street as well. On the wall there was a desk for the results and the cup for the winner. The speech at the opening ceremony was part of the project. At the end of the exhibition I had the honour of handing the cup, in a small circle, to Gregor Podnar.
- 13 The term “phenomenon” is used in a strictly positive sense: I wished to point to the dimension of her work, which could be called genuinely unconventional. (I am glad that now and then we can find other “phenomena” besides her in the contemporary Slovene art world.) When I say unconventional, I mean primarily her active distrust in

ceremonies within the art system; I believe that it comes from the fact that she has been taking this system seriously at the level of content (a system that can mediate statements, research, etc.) but not form (i.e. she does not subordinate her work and procedures to customary patterns simply to make an artistic career for its own sake). When I become somewhat acquainted with the “great art world,” one of the big surprises for me was the recognition that artists considered to be unconventional or even critical of the system were behaving and acting in very conventional ways. I certainly do not wish to deny that this is often beneficial for production, for it enables conditions in which it can develop and flourish, and is more acceptable for those people who communicate with these artists. But, as psychoanalysts would say, nevertheless ...

- 14 I said “soul,” for although the curator is usually physically present at least at the opening of the exhibition, he/she frequently steps “in front” of us only indirectly (with the selection, combination, emplacement and organization of “light” enlightening the works – which is to be understood in both literal and metaphorical senses) – that is, by means of the Other. On the other hand, the artist is present also “physically,” in a certain sense, through his/her works, even if he/she does not attend the exhibition at all. For this reason I later refer to both actors of the great competition as artists, which should be taken *cum grano salis*, of course. The curator found it necessary to state that he did not assent to such a designation. I still think, however, that it is unavoidable, for this competition was not only about squash, not about posing the question of how far the already-extensive notion of art can still be stretched and what it can comprise, but also about mixing and shaking (hmm, “deconstructing”?) the established positions and functions within the art world. As to the game itself, I personally had the feeling that the players are rather good, but someone remarked that they played “like amateurs.” Well, let us say that they did. The point was not in presenting a high-level exhibition in the game of squash, but rather in the conscious decision for exhibitionism (which demands a measure of courage and risk in relation to others and to the self). I presume that they tried their best, for they knew that people were watching them; but they played as they could, and they brought to the stage what is usually hidden or overlooked in daily affairs. (This is what I later call the transmission of reality into realism).
- 15 I suppose my principal role was not to instruct the audience how to understand the project – I could do it, of course (and I could not avoid taking a few preliminary steps in this direction), however, more important than the spoken words was the fact that I – a representative of the art establishment, as it were – spoke at all.
- 16 I do not believe that anybody would want to take advantage of my figure as such to decorate an event; more likely the opening ceremonies are sometimes organized as a sort of indispensable cake decoration.
- 17 I could be even more direct and say that it seems to be banal: to organize the institutional framework only to show our own distance from it. On the contrary, I think that the institutional framework as something serious and defining was urgent from the reasonable justification of the project, and that even the ironically shining polish over it did not try to hide this fact. (I have already said that Janja Žvegelj has been taking the institution of art seriously in terms of content but not form.) On the other hand it certainly represents a direct criticism of the system, or the roles within it, but is much subtler, more direct, and thus, as it were, more radical (“at the root.”) The artist combined three instances (artist, curator/gallery artistic director and critic/interpreter) in a position that is – if we look at it correctly – absurd and comical. The artist and the curator stand in their sports gear on an undersized court of impossible shapes, and watch the sophisticated Ljubljana art public, while the critic tries to fight his way through the ritual of the opening speech, asking himself what on earth he is doing there. Janja Žvegelj organized a situation that is not only absurd, since it turns customary relationships and roles upside down, but also truly distressing for all the participants (although they take everything with joy and good humor), since it makes them embarrassed. If the point is criticism (well, it is), then ... (then what? The other day I cut the sentence here, but now I have no idea what I wanted to say.)
- 18 “Semantically revalued” and similar serious jargon terms are used consciously – that is what is expected from a critic (although I could afford a bit of theater, I took the

ceremony essentially very seriously; namely, with her project the artist put me in a position similarly ambiguous to that of the curator only that my role cost me much less physical effort than was expended by both actors). However, it only denotes the fact that the gallery is changed into a non-gallery space, although in such a way that it still remains a gallery, and the court – despite its reality – is mimesis, image. Here we deal with the controversial model of distance and reception that actually governs the entire *Squash* project.

- 19 And it is precisely this relationship that the artist brought out on to the stage and transformed into a game. This game is primarily something that both actors do with goodwill, and also with quite a good deal of courage and frankness, as friend. Who will outdo the other competitor? One of them will win in the end – as witnessed by the cup waiting on the shelf. And the critic will give a short speech at the final ceremony, and interpret, maybe even encode, and place the event with a text in the catalog. That's how it goes.
- 20 The court narrowed towards one side so that the wall into which the players were hitting the ball was very small. This has the peculiar sense of fleeting perspective, which was even emphasized with a relatively narrow corridor crammed with the two quickly moving bodies.
- 21 A classical trick: first you circle around with essential problems but when you reach the point where you should really start interpretation, you drop everything (or, diplomatically, "leave it to the viewers.") Nevertheless, I have merely pointed – both in the speech and in the later appended notes – to certain dimensions that could be considered in connection with the *Squash* project. For instance: the criticism of the system – not systematic and ideological but deriving directly from the distress and embarrassment of the artist acting as a participant in this system, and as an active nonconformist at the same time. How could she delude and use the system to formulate something – well, how should I say – essential, and how could she prevent this from dispersing according to the scheme of patterns and conventions. This is the part I would call self-reflective: the statement that deals with possibilities and circumstances of this statement. But there is another aspect that I would call contextual (we have to understand, of course, that the identity of Janja Žvegelj as an artist is not something outward, formal or merely a condition of some inner essence or substance, but defines the identity itself; hence, perhaps, her personal involvement in reflections about the system). And this contextual aspect, in my eyes, is the squash game itself.

Case Study 9

Al-Nitaq Festival of Art, Cairo, 2000 and 2001

By Dina A. Mohamed

Event Title

Al-Nitaq Festival of Art

Location and Date

Downtown Cairo, January 20–27, 2000 (first edition) and March 15–24, 2001 (second edition)

Organizers

Galleries Espace Karim Francis, Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo Berlin Art Gallery, Arabesque Art Gallery, and Townhouse Gallery

Introduction

In the year 2000, with all the excitement accompanying the new millennium and its promises, a group of private galleries in Egypt found it necessary to start an independent art festival to encourage and promote the latest artistic and cultural productions found at the time in Cairo. As it is almost impossible to pinpoint the beginning of what is called contemporary art in Egypt, I would like to propose Al-Nitaq Festival as a pivotal moment and one possible point of departure for understanding what would later be described as the contemporary art scene of Cairo. The name “Al-Nitaq” (sometimes translated as “Neighborhood”) is explained in English in terms of “a strap, range, enclosure, and most poignantly, Orion’s belt. Geographically, Nitaq describes a tentative triangle bordered by three downtown thoroughfares: Tahrir St., Sherif St. and Champollion St.”¹

Al-Nitaq has become one of the most celebrated art-related events of the recent past in Egypt, as the Festival succeeded in shedding light on new art forms and encouraging a broader understanding of art. Another reason the event was memorable is the heated debates it generated around its organizers, the artists who participated, and the art that was produced during or for the Festival.

Al-Nitaq managed to grip the attention of the art circles of the time, highlighting new artists and new forms (mostly video and installation art) as the art of the era. The Festival’s first edition was launched by five different private galleries all located in downtown Cairo: Galleries Espace Karim Francis, Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo Berlin Art Gallery, Arabesque Art Gallery, and Townhouse Gallery. The first edition was completely self-funded by these galleries and took place over the period of a week at the end of January 2000. The second edition of Al-Nitaq took place in March 2001. For this latter edition, the organizers expanded the Festival to be more inclusive of different forms of art such as music, poetry, and film. The second edition of Al-Nitaq contained more works displayed over more than 20 locations, including culture venues and public places. The 2001 edition also attracted international donors (such as the Ford Foundation, Pro-Helvetia, and the Goethe Institute) with some also contributing to the expansion of the Festival. Moreover, the second edition of Al-Nitaq was designed to open on the same day as the International Cairo Biennial, the most important and prestigious international art event in Cairo at that time. Many viewed this decision as a direct challenge of state hegemony over art and culture. The Cairo Biennial, which was inaugurated by the Egyptian state in 1984, had as its primary goal showcasing Egypt’s role as an international exhibition site for progressive Arab art.

The foreign funding,² and the fact that the Festival took place in parallel with the Cairo Biennial, formed the main points of attack against Al-Nitaq and its organizers. Some of the attacks came from nationalist newspapers highlighting Al-Nitaq as a foreign conspiracy against Egyptian culture, or accusing the artists of inauthenticity and of imitating Western art styles. Today it might seem strange that some forces went that far in attacking the new art festival. To understand these accusations one must comprehend the political and cultural atmosphere of the time. After the 1952 military coup, and in accordance with the new nationalist-socialist ideology, the state confiscated (nationalized) most of the organizations working in the culture sector. In 1956, the leaders of the revolution, or coup, created a Supreme Council for Art and Literature (transformed in 1980 into the Supreme Council of Culture). In 1958, the new state created the first Ministry of Culture in Egypt with

the aim of regulating, supporting, and subsidizing Egyptian cultural production. It wasn't until 1974, with the so-called "open doors" policy, and later with the 1978 Camp-David Treaty – which marked a clear shift in state ideology toward joining the Western capitalist camp – that Egypt adhered to open economic policies, thus reopening the doors of culture to the private sector.

In the mid-1970s, the Mashrabiya Gallery was the first private gallery to open in downtown Cairo. It was conceived as an independent art space that operated out of the reach of the Ministry of Culture. By the 1990s, many private galleries were already in place and a new art scene was starting to take shape. Some saw in this shift a liberation of art and the start of a new art scene in Cairo. To quote Karim Francis:

Most art structures and institutions were nationalized during the revolution. Many were overtaken and run by government officials, even army officers, in other words, persons who knew nothing about the business of art. Now, however, there are many private groups, private societies, businessmen, and individuals bound by an interest in art. They follow artists' careers and trends, even if they are not that familiar with art. We already have art sponsors in Cairo, whose support could be instrumental in, for instance, building important collections or providing financial support for galleries and artists. Artists need this in order to work under good conditions. Overall, there is a whole new art scene in Cairo that is in a state of effervescence.³

After 1952, the most dominant discussions revolved around postcolonial identity and independence from Western influences. Art production, placed under the domination of the Ministry of Culture, was influenced by the state nationalistic discourse stressing such notions as "Egyptian identity" and "authenticity." With the beginning of the new millennium, in the era of globalization and transnational formation of the new world order, these nationalistic and postcolonial ideas were faced with true challenges. Much of the criticism of the Al-Nitaq Festival was shaped by these changes in the internal cultural debates. Prevalent among them was the frequent accusation brought against artists that they were "Westernized," or the characterization of their work as lacking in "Egyptian authenticity." The Festival's organizers were repeatedly accused of accepting foreign grants, or of poisoning the local art scene and contaminating the "purity" of Egyptian identity with foreign influences. However, many artists who participated in Al-Nitaq did not really adhere to the distinction between global and local art; many were trying to go beyond the cultural politics of the nation state, keeping a clear interest in the daily life of Cairo, its problems and contradictions, or were invested in the deconstruction of "Egyptian identity." Iman Issa, one of the artists referred to as part of this new art-scene generation, blamed some of the attacks on Al-Nitaq on the generation gap. She wrote, in answer to an article published in the government-run newspaper *Al-Ahram*:

From the start, modern Egyptian art has been derivative of European art movements like the impressionists, cubists, surrealists, and social realists. That modern Egyptian art uses languages that are not originally Egyptian does not necessarily diminish its authenticity. Artists like Youssef Sida integrate the warm colors and

distorted perspectives of the Fauvist school that Matisse typifies, yet still manage to express individual experiences. The new generation of artists and their audience relate to and experience international influences differently than the audience of the pioneers. So perhaps the cool response of some artists to the contemporary spirit that dominated the Festival is the result of a generation gap.⁴

On the other hand, many other critics were supportive of Al-Nitaq. They perceived the Festival as a rebellious act against the full control of the state and of its Ministry of Culture over the Egyptian art scene. Within these circles the Festival was acknowledged as a milestone for many Egyptian artists, of the so-called “90s generation,” contributing to their international recognition.⁵ Before Al-Nitaq it was only the Ministry of Culture that had represented Egyptian art in international biennials and festivals. Some see the international recognition that the “90s generation” of artists received as a great accomplishment of the Festival. The Festival was celebrated as the beginning of a new era in the art world, where there were independent exhibition spaces that could guarantee more freedom for the new artists and a wide diversity of new artistic media and forms.⁶ However, it is also true that many of the artists who exhibited in the Festival had also previously exhibited in governmental venues. Tharwat El-Bahar, Director of the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art, commented on the Festival’s celebrated escape from state domination over artistic production, describing it rather as “baseless criticism of the public sector,” which, to him, was not necessarily against the transition from modern to contemporary art.⁷ As a matter of fact, the private galleries that organized the Festival were definitely able to escape the power dynamics and the network control exercised by the Ministry at that time, especially over the international representation of Egyptian artists, which added a new question to the heated debate: “Who has the right to speak for Egypt?” Shortly after the Festival, some of the visual artists who exhibited in Al-Nitaq exhibited their work in Beirut and then in Holland under the title “Cairo Modern Art in Holland.” This happened thanks to the support of the Townhouse Gallery founder William Wells. Farouk Hosni, the Egyptian Minister of Culture at that time, commented on this by saying:

Let William Wells take whatever young artists he wants. I don’t care that he takes the salon alumni, you can’t deprive any artist of his freedom ... they are welcomed to exhibit in Amsterdam or Beirut. But not in the name of Egypt, that is absolutely unacceptable⁸

Many reviewers saw in the agenda of Al-Nitaq Festival a clear political end – an attempt to challenge the hegemony of the state and of the Ministry of Culture. Well, the director of the Townhouse Gallery, denied such political accusations, stating to the reporters: “I am not trying to be political in any way.”⁹ It is difficult to tell what the original intentions were, but there is no doubt that the Festival created a new wave in culture policy and established a new artistic paradigm in Cairo, a paradigm that escaped from the conservative scene patronized by the Ministry of Culture. The Festival succeeded in establishing new channels for artistic production and distribution, channels set far away from the state bureaucracy, which was often accused of chronic inefficiency and corruption. Later some writers including Nat Muller argued that the rift between the state-run institutions and the foreign-

funded independent art scene resulted in a fragmented artistic community.¹⁰ When asked about the structure of the art scene in Cairo around 1998, Karim Francis asserted that no such structure was in place.¹¹ The artists were divided, and there was no support system of critics, galleries, art writers, or non-governmental educational programs to construct a strong art scene. It was obvious that the kind of structure and relations promoted by the Festival was greatly needed, and breaking free of state control over cultural production might have been a necessary step.

The Festival is believed to have resulted in major gains for contemporary, post-2000 artistic practices in Egypt. First, it became possible to win independence from the state and grant more freedom to the new artists, thus contributing to the establishment of new venues and channels for the distribution of new media and non-commercial forms of visual art. Second, the Festival contributed to the international recognition of Egyptian contemporary art abroad. This point can, however, be questioned in terms of the Festival's effects on the nature of art that was produced. As the Egyptian Ministry of Culture was accused of promoting outdated ideas of art that reflected only the ideology of the state, the new institutions launched by the Festival had to face the same accusation of promoting a certain art or aesthetics in line with the sources of its funding.

Finally, the Festival led to the establishment of a new structure of support for artistic production, one that is still continuously challenged and criticized today in Egypt. With the new regime that came to power after the coup of 2013, this independent art scene is facing great challenges to its survival. Under the new military dictatorship, the state has been cracking down on foreign funding for all NGOs and institutions, increasing censorship, or even interfering directly and closing some art centers. The Townhouse Gallery was one of the first art spaces to face a long legal battle in 2016 in order to be able to keep its space. With no doubt, after all these regressions from what the new art structure initiated by the Festival has achieved, the current battles are definitely a true test for the success of the past 15 years of work in the field of contemporary artistic production. The question now is to what extent the new order, represented by the creators and supporters of Al-Nitaq, is able to improve and maintain an art scene that can defend itself against the dictatorial regime and protect what it has achieved.

Selected Archival Documents and Artist Projects



Figure 9.1 Front cover of Al-Nitaq Festival of Art 2000 brochure with the emblem of the Festival. Townhouse Gallery, Cairo.



Figure 9.2 Back cover of Al-Nitaq Festival of Art 2000 brochure showing a map of the locations where the Festival was held. Townhouse Gallery, Cairo.

The most revolutionary idea of Al-Nitaq was to occupy the streets of downtown Cairo with art. The artists installed and performed in the streets, cafes, shops, and outside, as well as inside different cultural centers and even hotels. A map of the different locations and venues were printed on the back of the brochure as a guide for the touring public.



Figure 9.3 Poster of Al-Nitaq Festival of Art 2001 edition. Townhouse Gallery, Cairo.

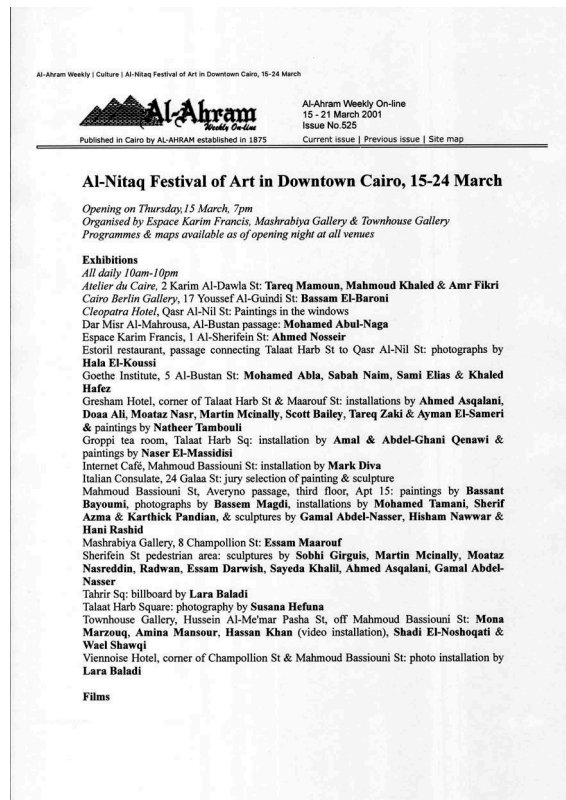


Figure 9.4 Program of events and locations. Al-Nitaq Festival of Art in downtown Cairo, 2001. "Al-Nitaq Festival of Art in Downtown Cairo, 15-24 March." *Al-Ahram Weekly* (March 2001).



Figure 9.5 Basim Magdy, *The Three Angels*, 2001. Installation. Townhouse Gallery, Cairo.



Figure 9.6 Hala El Kousy and Graham Waite, *Bread Seller* (Banners at Downtown Streets), 2000. Installation. Townhouse Gallery, Cairo.

Hala El Kousy and Graham Waite's work was exhibited in a narrow alley in downtown Cairo populated by bread carriers on bicycles. The banner in the middle says, "this job causes me shoulder, back, and abdomen pain."



Figure 9.7 Shady El-Noshokaty, *Self Annihilation*, 2000. Installation at Townhouse Gallery. Courtesy of Shady El-Noshokaty.

Shady El-Noshokaty became known during the Festival for his practice of installation art, a relatively controversial medium at the time. In the first Al-Nitaq of 2000, Shady

installed his work entitled *Self Annihilation* at the Townhouse Gallery. Iman Essa wrote at the time: “Art is traditionally something that is consumed, purchased and brought into a collector’s home or office. Conceptual installation and video art on display at the Festival challenge this notion, because its only context is the gallery. Debate about the validity of installation is animated internationally, and now this discussion has begun in Egypt. Employing installation rhetoric, Shady El-Noshokaty joined in at the Townhouse Gallery. *Self Annihilation* consists of a half-burned frond [sic] dressing screen juxtaposed with a TV set that features flames in the midst of water. The installation is elaborated with a lacy white dress drawn on a blackboard that hangs on the right side of the room. Known for incorporating aspects of works by other artists like Eva Hesse, Shady’s dress mimics the ghostly images of painter Adam Fuss. Notions of mortality, recreation and transformation cloud the work. The mortal viewer becomes the immediate subject of El-Noshokaty’s work, so that signifier and signified are unified by the integration of the viewer into the work.”¹²

Selected Periodical Reviews and Catalog Texts

Townhouse Gallery. Art Scene Egypt (excerpt)

Negar Azimi

Nafas Art Magazine, August 2004

The Nitaq Festival, held in both 2000 and 2001, would serve as perhaps the most palpable sign that the Egyptian art scene as we knew it had been shaken up. An initiative of three independent galleries (Karim Francis, Mashrabia, and the Townhouse), the downtown arts festival was unprecedented in the degree of excitement it created in the city, and importantly, the view it provided as to the tendencies of a new generation of artists working within idioms that defied prevailing notions of contemporaneity. Engineered to start on the very day of the 2001 Cairo Biennale’s opening, the second Nitaq in particular served as an “off” version in every sense of the term. While the Biennale was characterized by a reliance on tradition both in concept and curation, Nitaq would prove most unconventional, shaking up stagnant conceptions surrounding the use of space, medium, and the potential for dematerialization of the art object. Like true post-modernists, the preferred avenue of expression for the artists at Nitaq was a multi-media installation executed with conceptualist tendencies. A number of the Nitaq artists, Lara Baladi, Amina Mansour, Hassan Khan, Wael Shawky, and Mona Marzouk among them, have since gone on to exhibit widely internationally.

While the Nitaq initiative fizzled after the second year amidst ambiguously messy cultural politics, a number of events have been initiated that have recreated that energy.

It’s Your Life Charlie Brown

Youssef Rakha and Nur Elmessiri

Al-Abram Weekly, March 22, 2001

Last Thursday saw the opening of Nitaq, the annual, downtown gallery-focused arts event, now in its second, expanded incarnation. Nitaq is an ambiguous word in Arabic meaning strap, range, enclosure, and most poignantly, Orion's belt. Geographically, Nitaq describes a tentative triangle bordered by three downtown thoroughfares: Tahrir St., Sherif St., and Champollion St. Visually, it was supposed to operate both in and out of doors; yet except for a banner encircling the top of Groppi's and posters outside most, not all venues, the latter dimension is nowhere in evidence. On the opening night, however, the absence of outdoor art did not prevent Nitaq from generating rare gallery-going energy.

Such energy explains the ineffable, barely perceptible transformation that beset the streets. Orion's belt is one thing. It is quite another to be able to walk downtown at night, holding a bright pink blow-up bunny and a camera, and not feel out of place. For three hours at least, droves of art lovers – perhaps they were merely event lovers – charged quietly among the crowds, bunny in hand, appearing and disappearing as they slipped in and out of venues. They included: “intellectuals” normally to be found at Grillon and Zahrat Al-Bustan, conventional-looking middle-aged men from Heliopolis and Abbasiya, arts students in packs, cultured European expatriates, downtown aficionados from across the class spectrum and several dozen Western-educated young men and women about town. Under the subtle yet unmistakable influence of Nitaq, the trip from Townhouse Gallery to Mashrabiya Gallery – by way of any or all of a dozen more venues within walking distance – assumed a feebly momentous dimension. Bunny and camera alike seemed like the gadgets of a magic world enticing the usual downtown crowd into its folds.

This realm might sensibly be identified with art. Yet the creative intervention in question was more about what art can do to its surroundings than about the art itself. Ahmed Nosseir, whose paintings occupied the whole of Espace Karim Francis, employed thick, haphazard brushstrokes and aggressively arbitrary color schemes to rework a theme involving three witches and a threatening sky, over and over. On the first floor of the Townhouse, Amina Mansour's multi-media, three-dimensional objects might have been quaint and evocative, but Mona Marzouq's acrylic paintings and geometric, space-age sculptures – in white or fluorescent colors – were far too stark and simplistic to be interesting. At the Mashrabiya, Essam Marouf's female figures – employing an impressionist technique to achieve something closer to pop art – looked like diffuse, subdued posters, seen through an overcast screen. They comprised many versions of the same painting: a sad, detached, and dreamlike vision of impossible womanhood. Installations captured the mood of the opening night and the dynamics of Nitaq – its more engrossing aspect – more effectively. In the Townhouse alone, Shadi El-Noshokaty, Hassan Khan, and Wael Shawqi dealt respectively with family history, personal identity as an aspect of everyday life, and the clash of indigenous and contemporary culture. Constructed respectively in white, black, and gray, all three installations incorporated elements of Egyptian culture, employed video, and invited the viewer to explore and discover. Each offering comprised an invasion of the space available to it, an attempt at virtual reality in which sheer magnitude was instrumental. Across Mahmoud Bassiouni St., by contrast, Lara Baladi's feeling for one abandoned and decrepit floor of the old Viennoise Hotel was passive and unobtrusive. The space was effortlessly transformed into a dim reservoir of hackneyed, mostly Western mementos. In the brightest room, Baladi placed her trademark photographic

collage, parts of which reappeared elsewhere, blown up and isolated. As one roamed, apparently purposelessly, fellow viewers turned into shadows, and appeared to be part of the installation. A giant pink blow-up bunny leered over the shoulders of one man, rising above dozens of identical little bunnies: pass the man and he will hand you one.

In the Goethe Institute Gallery, alongside Dina El-Gharib, Khaled Hafiz, Sabah Naim, and Sami Elias, Mohamed Ablā's variations on the theme of matrimony were less inspired than his wedding anniversary celebration – a unique open-air "installation" that occurred simultaneously outside. To coincide with the opening, Ablā organized a conventional wedding, complete with *kosha* (the "throne" on which the bride sits next to a formally dressed groom), bridal dress, and (deafening) popular band. For those to whom Greek Club fare ("Electronic, Folk and Rap Music") might have been too artsy, the spectacle of Ablā dancing to traditional wedding numbers and recent pop hits was the alternative.

It was a lot of fun, this dashing about, this doing of the circuit, this being an atom, an iota of energy in the Orion's belt (*nitaq*) constituted by spaces configured and joined by familiar faces. Although the clubbiness of it all did occasionally get a tad too smug, the Nitaq – galleries, cultural centers, spaces (in Groppi's, the Viennoise, the Gresham) temporarily opened up once again to the breath of life (love, warm hellos, genuine good-to-see-yous, catty remarks, and, most of all, palpable hard work, loving effort, toil, and anxiety) – was beautifully embedded in the *wist el-balad* (downtown) of Cairo that the *wist el-balad* crowd so love. Catty remarks included a friend greeting another with "Darling you're probably the nicest thing I will have seen this evening," an acquaintance telling another "It's all so moving, isn't it?" within earshot of someone with a maudlin propensity to feel moved, and an artist remarking that another artist's work was "Frieda Kahlo without the irony." The cattiness, though, was borderline: tongue in cheek – but not; damning with faint praise – but not.

What pray tell is an installation? Lucy of the *Peanuts* crowd, Linus's bossy sister, lover of Ludwig (and hence of music, and hence of the arts), and erstwhile cruelly realist therapist would – should Charlie on one of his 5-cents-a-visit sessions pose the question – answer: "It's your life, Charlie Brown." A late Elizabethan genius in one of his bleaker moods said about life that it was "a tale told by an idiot"; on another occasion, suspending value judgment, he dubbed the world a "stage." "Life," a late Victorian playwright, essayist and author of children's stories said, "imitates art."

Opening night of the Nitaq Festival, itself an installation of sorts, was a "production" blurring the lines between art and life, theater and the quotidian, private space and public space. Downtown Cairo, magnanimous as ever, allowed it all to unfold, festively and unobtrusively at the same time. Groppi regulars drinking tea did not bat a lid, as if it happened every night this streaming in of artsy trend-setter types into the restaurant space that had been closed for years and that had now been turned into a stage fit for Sinatra. And in the Goethe car park, arty and non-arty alike legitimated Mohamed Ablā's performance? wedding? wedding anniversary? by sitting in the wooden chairs, drinking tea, wishing the couple *alf mabrouk* – and enjoying themselves and the loving spirit immensely. Thousand-year-old Cairo hosted an it's-as-contemporary-as-you-can-get arts festival as if she had been doing this sort of thing from the day she was born. And, in many ways,

she has: she is, after all, as some of her lovers know her, the Queen Mother of all installations.

Our point of departure was a beautifully recently repainted interior which was not so precious that one could not have a good laugh within its walls. Have a good laugh we did – about ourselves, about the concept of “installation.” What, one thought, could be more endearingly contrived, more impossibly fabricated than a home lovingly put together, a life lived on the straight and narrow path between illusion and reality, so brief (one-act, one-man) and yet so overloaded with meaning?

A home is an installation, a stage upon which one manifestation of the hard work of living unfolds, the props of which (bits and pieces, things acquired, notes hastily scribbled, newspaper clippings) survive the passing away of the magpie-like bricoleur who had put the thing together. This much was suggested a couple of summers ago by Pierre Sioufi’s *Passe temps* art happening, which had taken place in the staircase of his home, an edifice on Tahrir Square.

A home, the place in which one installs oneself, is a gallery of sorts; conversely, given the right spirit, a gallery can be a home. One felt at home in Nitaq and, in the light of the hard work involved in getting the Nitaq thing together, one was glad to be at home, in Cairo, on its streets full of signs which may be followed or – as in Dina Gharib’s witty collages and Sabah Naim’s artwork carefully wrought from such “refuse” as old newspapers – enjoyed simply for their formal properties.

Festival Nitaq was – and is – beautiful. And, thanks to the more troubled works (for example, Hassan Khan’s video installation, Bassam El-Baroni’s paintings), it did not get so charming that one forgot the underside of all the gaiety. For every moment of glamor, a grimy man-handled banknote; for every sated Greek Club reveler, an empty stomach; for every one of “the beautiful people,” a distressed, grieving soul; for every “I,” a host of dearly departed; for every writer waxing lyrical about feeling at home on the streets of Downtown Cairo, a homeless family, a jobless father, a refugee.

Something about Cairo that does not allow one, even while reveling in it all, to forget the facts of life. And thank God for that.

Egypt in the Twentieth-Century C.E. (excerpt)

Marilu Knode

New Art Examiner, July/August 2000

For the recent downtown arts festival Al-Nitaq (or “Neighborhood”) the first collaborative festival of its kind combining artists from different disciplines presenting their works in traditional and non-traditional venues – El-Noshokaty create the mournful installation *Self Annihilation Haunted by his Soul Dress*. A white chalk drawing on a school blackboard of transparent child’s dress, a darkened room held a charred wood screen, and besides it a video image of the screen fire and floating in the Nile at sunset. The viewer immediately responds to what appears to be its political reading: El-Noshokaty is destroying the screen behind which women in the Middle East are hidden from the outside world. The artists intended simply to illustrate the notion that in order to create energy, something has to be transformed or destroyed. This subtle installation underscores the problem with a form (installation) adapted from the West but applied unevenly in a different context. While grasping the shell of the form, El-

Noshokaty often stops short of the refinement necessary for such delicate subjects, or, occasionally evidences the excessive busy work that plagues most installations in Cairo. Where the sum does not always reflect the interest of the parts. The great operative significance of his ideas are often not able to struggle to the surface buried as they can be in the layers of symbolic objects that pass for history.

Notes

- 1 See Youssef Rakha and Nur Elmessiri, "It's your life, Charlie Brown," in *Al-Ahram Weekly* (March 22, 2001).
- 2 On the issue of foreign funding for culture, which does not yet directly relate to Al-Nitaq but to the period that the Festival inaugurated, see Ahmed Naji, "The Bourgeoisie, Real Estate, and Nation-Building, or How the Egyptian and Middle Eastern Art Markets Operate" (Part 2), in *Mada Masr* (May 13, 2015), www.madamasr.com/en/2015/05/13/feature/culture; Laura U. Marks, *Hanan Al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 36; Kerstin Pinther, Larissa Förster and Christian Hanussek, eds., *Afropolis: City Media Art* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2012), 112.
- 3 Olu Oguibe, "Cairo: Interview with Karim Francis," in *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 11–12, (2000).
- 4 Iman Essa, "Contemporary Voices: Cairo's First Arts Festival – Al Nitaq," in *Medina Magazine* (March–April 2000), 84–87.
- 5 On the issue of the formation of the "90s generation" of artists and international recognition see Pat Binder and Gerhard Haupt, "The Art Scene and Curators in Egypt: Interview with the independent curator Mai Abu El Dahab on current developments in Egypt," in *Nafas Art Magazine* (March 2005); <http://u-in-u.com/nafas/articles/2005/curators-in-egypt/>; Prita S. Meier, "Territorial Struggles: Cairo and Contemporary Art," in *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 18 (Spring/Summer, 2003); Jessica Winegar, "Cultural Sovereignty in a Global Art Economy: Egyptian Cultural Policy and the New Western Interest in Art from the Middle East," in *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 2 (2005).
- 6 See for example Geoffret Craig, "Abstract Value," in *American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt* (April 2007), www.amcham.org.eg/publications/business-monthly/issues/88/April-2007/457/.
- 7 Essa, "Contemporary Voices: Cairo's First Arts Festival – Al Nitaq."
- 8 Meier, "Territorial Struggles," 86–91.
- 9 Carey Lovelace, "Cairo Blues," *artnet.com* magazine reviews (2004), 2016, www.artnet.com/magazine/reviews/lovelace/lovelace12-30-03.asp.
- 10 Nat Muller, *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2009), 16.
- 11 Oguibe, "Cairo: Interview with Karim Francis."
- 12 Essa, "Contemporary Voices: Cairo's First Arts Festival – Al Nitaq."

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Index

- 3rd Floor Movement, The 153–168
9/11 6, 82, 92, 108, 118
90s generation, The 7, 256, 266
1989 2, 4, 7–8, 17, 19–20, 58, 60–61, 70,
99, 155, 159, 170
- Abillama, Ziad 169–172, 176, 178, 181; *see*
also San Balech
- Adorno, Theodor (*Aesthetic Theory*) 2, 6,
46–47, 88–89
- aesthetics 32, 41, 83, 85, 93, 98, 126,
135, 156–157, 257; and Communist
aesthetics 85; and information aesthetics
135–136; and Marxist aesthetics 85, 98,
135; and NGO aesthetics 93; aesthetics of
singularity 117, 173
- Agamben, Giorgio (*Cos'è il*
contemporâneo?) 31–32, 39
- Ahmad, Aijaz (“Jameson’s Rhetoric of
Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’”
90–91
- Anderson, Benedict (*Imagined*
Communities) 81, 83, 85–86, 113
- Arabesque Art Gallery (Cairo) 12, 253–254
- Arab Spring 3
- art: and abstract art 33–34, 62, 121, 122,
124–126, 130, 136–137, 165; and
abstract expressionism 7, 18, 33, 36, 123,
165; and actions 34, 52, 190, 193,
218–219, 250; and Arab art 83, 96, 254;
and art as enterprise 69, 109, 141, 142,
148; and Art Informel 36, 122–123; and
art-laboratory 225, 229; and computer art
136, 138, 185, 195; and cubism 32, 87;
and earth art 204; and fauvism 72, 256;
and genre painting 84, 86; and happenings
36, 111, 160–161, 189, 202, 204, 234,
265; and high art 48, 52, 156, 167, 234,
240; and installation 7, 62, 112, 172, 183,
185, 189, 192, 196, 199, 200–202,
204–205, 207, 211–212, 218, 254,
260–262, 264–265; and intermedia 90,
204; and land art 111, 185–186; and
Latin American art 7, 10, 41–56, 113; and
Middle Eastern art 6–8, 12, 83, 87–88,
90, 92, 94, 96, 97; and minimalism 18,
38–39, 101, 104, 111; and multimedia 90,
195; and new media 115, 208, 257; and
nude 83, 88, 162; and official art 141,
155, 161, 237, 254–257; and performance
art 18, 50, 111, 160, 185, 189, 190, 192,
202, 204, 207, 215–216, 249, 264; and
photography 185, 190, 204, 250; and
pop art 18, 52–53, 111, 165, 263; and
process or ephemeral art 69, 155,
171–172, 185–186, 195–196, 224–225,
230, 233, 235, 250; and programmed art
122, 133; and science 123–125, 132; and
surrealism 191, 255; and video art 172,
185–186, 188–189, 191, 193, 196, 198,
202, 204, 206–208, 212–219, 237–238,
249–250, 262
- Art & Language (group) 100–101
- art criticism 10, 32, 80, 89, 93, 162
- art history 4–6, 8, 10–11, 17, 49, 52, 57,
70–71, 81, 83–84, 86, 87, 89, 94, 99,
104, 109, 111, 115, 125, 170, 239;
and Eastern European art histories
60–61, 78; and ex-socialist art history
71; and global (contemporary) art
history 5, 109, 111; and horizontal
art history 80–82, 89, 94, 96; and
Lebanese art history 94, 170; and
metropolitan art history 6, 10, 41;
and national art history 4, 6, 8–11,
42–43, 49, 53, 72, 81–84, 88–89, 93;
and new art history 18, 33, 37; and
postcolonial art history 4–5, 8, 81, 87–89,
91, 99; and vertical art history 89; and
voices of art history 81–83, 93; and
Vienna School of Art History 86, 95, 99
- Art Fund (Budapest) 142, 145
- art industry 46–47
- art in public space 14
- artists grants 4, 92, 186, 195, 215, 255

- “Art and Objecthood” 10, 32, 37–39, 40;
see also Michael Fried
 Ashkal Alwan Artists Association (Beirut)
 12, 169–183
 AUB (American University of Beirut) 7, 96
 Augé, Mark (*An Anthropology for
 Contemporaneous Worlds*) 70, 78
 Australia 98–101, 107–108, 230, 233–234
 authenticity 88, 254–255
 autonomy 2, 17, 41, 44, 46–48, 80, 82–84,
 86, 90, 93, 156, 229, 248
 avant-garde 4, 18, 33, 34, 36–37, 44, 56,
 62–63, 87, 99–100, 112–114, 122, 124,
 156, 162, 164–165, 189, 191, 216; and
 death of the neo-avant-garde 144; and his-
 torical avant-garde 87, 124; and Latin
 American neo-avant-garde 41–42, 44, 47,
 49, 50, 52; and neo-avant-garde 34,
 36–37, 39, 42, 44, 47, 50, 52, 142, 144,
 147, 237; and Perestroika avant-gardes
 11, 18, 154; and retroavantgarde 62, 75;
 and Soviet avant-garde 62–63, 124, 164,
 191; and transavantgarde 144, 165
 Badiou, Alain (*The Rebirth of History*)
 72–73
 Badovinac, Zdenka 60, 62, 75, 76, 78,
 108, 240, 249
 Belting, Hans 81–82, 93
 Bergson, Henri 34, 36
 Berlin Wall 17, 19–20, 32, 185
 Beuys, Joseph 84, 156
 Blažević, Dunja 207, 214, 217, 219, 220
 Bolshevism 17, 23, 27
 bourgeois nationalism 3, 44, 80, 83–86,
 91, 93, 95
 Brazilian Neoconcretismo 44
 Brezhnev, Leonid 23, 28
 Breznik, Maja 238, 250
 Cairo Berlin Art Gallery (Cairo) 253–254
Cairo Modern Art in Holland
 (exhibition) 256
 capitalism: and capitalism by design 7, 13;
 commodity capitalism 24, 46–47, 107;
 and high capitalism 45–46; and late cap-
 italism 12, 18–19, 21, 42, 45, 103; and neo-
 liberal capitalism 7–8, 17, 22, 84, 93, 107;
 and multinational capitalism 88–89, 94,
 96; and philanthrocapitalism 6, 89, 93,
 201; and transnational capitalism 7, 19,
 22, 42, 44, 46, 47, 53, 82, 89, 90, 104
 Caro, Anthony 38, 224, 230
 Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan
 (SCAA) 3, 6, 13
 Cibotari, Iurie (*Guillotine, The*) 194, 196,
 198–199, 205
 civil society 12, 146, 238, 241
 Clark, Lygia 33, 36
 Cold War 1, 7, 8–9, 22, 56, 66, 71, 88, 96,
 101, 104, 115, 123–124
 colonialism 3–5, 7–10, 42–43, 46–50,
 52, 55–56, 58, 60, 70, 72–73, 80–83,
 87–89, 91, 92–93, 98–99, 108, 225, 231,
 234, 255
 communism 4, 22, 24, 26, 30, 58, 60, 67, 93
 communism by capital 93
 Communist Manifesto, The 56, 105
 Communist Party 27, 61, 67
 concretism 33–34
 conceptual art 42, 53, 63, 69, 70, 100–102,
 104, 111, 124, 165, 197, 237, 239
 contemporary art: and “also-contemporary”
 69; and Armenian contemporary art 154,
 156, 162, 168; and contemporary art as
gendai bijutsu 35, 40; and contemporary
 art as fiction 5, 13, 18, 19, 23, 43, 57, 73,
 82; and first-world contemporary 5, 81,
 92; and genealogies of the contemporary
 58, 124; and Egyptian contemporary art
 254, 257, 266; and global contemporary
 art 17, 28, 42, 49, 70, 92, 102; and Hun-
 garian contemporary art 143, 145, 150;
 and Indian contemporary art 225, 230,
 235; and Lebanese
 contemporary art 4, 13, 169–183; and
 Moldovan contemporary art 196–197,
 202, 204; and “official” contemporary art
 57, 70, 73; and new paradigm 3, 32, 34,
 35–37, 58, 61, 70, 72, 102, 107, 114,
 122, 125, 239–241, 256; and postnational
 contemporary art 4, 6, 80, 83, 88, 90, 93;
 and Bosnia and Herzegovina contem-
 porary art scene 207–209, 211, 215; and Slo-
 venian contemporary art 58, 60–61, 237,
 240–241; supercontemporary 69, 78; and
 third system of the arts, the 2, 13; and
 vehicle of freedom 6, 71, 78, 186; Yugo-
 slav contemporary art 11, 72, 122
 cooperative structure 140–141, 230
 corporate world 4, 88, 90, 92, 232, 234
 critique 81–82, 93–94
 culture industry 46–47, 87
 cultural policies 12, 141, 146, 238–239
 curator 3, 7–8, 11, 47, 49, 58, 62–64,
 69–71, 88, 100, 108, 114, 122, 123, 159,
 172–173, 185–186, 196, 207, 208–210,
 213, 238–239, 240–242, 246, 248,
 251–252, 266
 Danto, Arthur (*Art after the End of Art*) 2,
 89–90, 103
Dakhaltu Marra al-Guneina [Once I Entered
 Little Heaven] 171, 178, 181

- Dayawati Modi Foundation for Art, Culture and Education 222, 223, 225, 231–233
 democratization 124, 163, 186
 dematerialization 53, 262
 deskilling 86, 155, 172, 229, 231
 developmentalism 2–3, 7, 21, 24–25, 27–28, 43–45, 48–49, 51, 56, 62, 68, 70, 72, 82, 85, 88, 92–93, 98, 109, 111, 113–115, 122, 124, 136, 143, 163, 168, 172, 173, 191, 204, 238, 248; and Dependency Theory 49–50, 52; and non-governmental organizations (NGO) 12, 92–93, 257; and NGOization 82, 183; and underdevelopment 43, 47, 49, 51, 55, 56
 dialectical materialism 27–28, 135
Dictionary of Art 105, 117
 dissent 4, 18, 65, 72, 144, 145, 149, 165
East Art Map 8, 58–64, 71–72, 108; *see also* Irwin
 Eastern Europe 2, 3–8, 10–11, 57–73, 78, 89, 91, 97, 103, 108–109, 125, 185, 192, 195–197, 204, 209; and Eastern Europe as *terra incognita* 10, 58–59, 61–62, 70
 Eastern European art 4, 10, 57–71, 74, 78, 89–90, 125, 151, 185, 192, 195, 209
 East-West divide 62, 66
 Eco, Umberto (*Opera Aperta* [the Open Work]) 123, 186, 196
 Egyptian authenticity 253–262
 Egyptian Revolution 1952 254
 Eicher Gallery (New Delhi) 222, 231
 empowerment of third world artists 230–231
 end of art, the 2, 80, 89, 93, 103
 epistemological colonization 61, 81, 161
 Escobar, Ticio (*The Myth of Art and the Myth of the People*) 10, 42, 47, 55
 Feminism 10, 67–68, 73, 100, 110, 219
 film 50–52, 99, 191, 240, 250, 254
 finance 47, 82, 86, 88, 124, 140–143, 186, 209–210, 215, 237, 239, 241, 255
 fine arts 83–84, 86–87, 95–96, 142, 146, 165, 170, 172, 173, 185, 186, 191
 first Five-Year Plan 1928–1932, the 25–26
 First Sanayeh Plastic Arts Meeting (Beirut) 12, 169–183
 Ford Foundation 6, 11, 254
 Fordism and post-Fordism 117, 136
 formalism and anti-formalism 18, 44, 47, 50, 52, 85
 freedom 6–7, 18, 71, 78, 81, 82, 85, 88, 114, 116, 130, 133, 134, 140, 143, 156–157, 165, 181, 186, 191, 202, 232, 256–257
 French Revolution (1789) 20
 Fried, Michael (“Art and Objecthood”) 37–40
 Future television (Beirut) 172, 176–177
 future 7, 9–10, 12, 14, 17–23, 26, 28, 44, 48, 50–52, 57–58, 60, 76, 106–108, 115, 135–136, 171, 190, 219, 232–233, 249; *see also* past, present, temporality
 Galleries Espace Karim Francis (Cairo) 253–254, 263
 Gallery of Contemporary Art [*Galerija Suvremene Umjetnosti*] Zagreb 121, 122, 125
 Gallery of Modern Art [*Moderna Galerija*] Ljubljana 78, 108, 240
 Gallery of Modern Art [*Moderna Galerija*] Zagreb 125
 Generalart (Budapest) 141, 145
 global art history 5, 109, 111
 Global South, The 2, 81
 Goethe Institute 11, 254, 264
 Gorbachev, Michail 18, 28, 154–155
 Greenberg, Clement 38, 85, 103–104
 Grigoryan, Arman 154–155, 157, 160–162, 164, 166
 Groys, Boris 23, 31–32, 34–35, 38–39
 Hariri, Rafic 4, 12, 172
 Hartog, François (*Regimes of Historicity*) 9, 20
 Harvey, David 106
 Hayek, Friedrich von 8
 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 2, 23, 30, 89, 91, 93, 103; and “the end of art” 2, 103; and master and slave dialectics 89, 91
 history: and “end of history” 4, 8, 18, 20, 73; and historicism 4–5, 42, 48, 112, 237; and history versus poetry 5; and historicity 9, 17, 20, 22, 41, 47, 58; and *historia interrupta* 61–62; and post-history 27; and “rebirth of history” 73, 79
 Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*) 46–47, 89
 Human Rights Declaration (1948) 84
 Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party 140–146
 ideology 6, 8, 9–10, 18, 27–28, 42, 43, 45, 51, 61, 69, 85, 92, 108, 114, 130, 140, 142–143, 156, 165, 202, 255, 257
 institutionalization 1–3, 6, 10–12, 17–18, 25, 28, 41, 44, 48, 51, 60–63, 70, 72–73, 80–83, 87–88, 92–94, 99–100, 103, 105–106, 106, 111, 114, 122, 124–125, 141, 145, 147, 155–157, 161, 170, 173, 186, 208–210, 212, 215, 221, 224, 230–232, 238–239, 240–242, 246,

- 248–251, 255–257; and institutional critique 241–242
 International Cairo Biennial 254–256
 internationalism 66, 86, 124
 international jury (SCCA) 207, 213; *see also* prizes and juries for contemporary art
 Iron Curtain *see* Berlin Wall; 1989
 Irwin (artist group) 10, 58–79
 Jameson, Fredric 18, 20–21, 28, 41–42, 45–46, 54, 90–94, 103–108, 110–111; and aesthetics of singularity 20, 29, 172, 183; and “Always historicize!” 107; and cognitive mapping 106; and national allegory 90–92, 94; and *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capital* 21, 28, 42, 103, 106–107; and spatialization of time 21, 42–44; and Third World literature 90–94
 Judd, Donald 37
 Kaprow, Allan 36, 111
 Karoyan, Nazareth 153, 155, 158–159, 162
 Khoj International Artists’ Workshop (Modinagar) 12, 222–235
 Kiki (Grigor Mikaelyan) 153, 155, 166
 Koselleck, Reinhart (*Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*) 20–22, 30
 Kristeller, Oscar: “The Modern System of the Arts” 83, 94
 Kulik, Oleg 66–68
 Khrushchev, Nikita 27–28; *see also* Twentieth Party Congress 1956, The
 Latin America 1, 7, 8, 11, 41–56, 230
 Lebanese Civil War 4–5, 169–183
 Lenin, Vladimir 9, 14, 22–30, 86, 95, 164
 Lichtenstein, Roy 53
 line between art and life, the 87, 264
 literalism 10, 32, 37, 38–39; *see also* theatricality
 Ludwig Foundation 145, 223
 Lukács, Georg (*History and Class Consciousness*) 46
 Lyotard, Jean-François (*The Postmodern Condition*) 45
 margins 2, 6–7, 11, 44, 52, 98, 101, 103, 105, 110, 141, 155, 157
 market 1–2, 44–45, 47, 53, 63, 64–66, 70–71, 92, 122–124, 131, 133, 140–150, 195–196, 209, 230, 234, 238, 266
 marketing strategy 65, 235
 Marcuse, Herbert “The Affirmative Character of Culture” 85; and repressive tolerance 67, 100
 Marshall Plan, The 7
 Mashrabia Gallery (Cairo) 12, 253–255, 263
 Meeting Point 206–222; *see also* SCCA Sarajevo
 Ministry of Culture in Egypt 254
 Molnar, François and François Morellet 124, 135
 Monastyrsky, Andrei 197
 Morris, Robert 37
 Museum of Modern Egyptian Art 256
 Miyakawa, Atsushi 10, 32, 34–39
 modernity 3–4, 7, 21, 33, 41, 43, 47–50, 52–55, 57, 60, 71, 80, 82, 84, 103–106, 108–109, 113, 116, 125; and alternative modernity 3, 71, 98; and colonial modernity 3, 60, 71, 96; and peripheral modernities 70–71; and Socialist modernity 3, 7, 23; and Western modernity 4, 7, 21, 41, 50, 53, 60, 71, 109, 125; *see also* modernism and modernization
 modernism 1, 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 17, 19, 23, 39, 49, 50, 52–53, 62, 67, 70, 81, 87–90, 93, 104, 108, 114, 125–126, 173, 185; and remodernism 104, 112
Modernity and Contemporaneity: Antinomies of Art and Culture after the Twentieth Century (the Pittsburgh conference) 29, 103
 modern system of the arts, the 13, 83–84, 86–87, 89, 94; *see also* third system of the arts, the
 modernization 2–3, 5–8, 11, 28, 41–42, 49, 53–54, 87–88, 92–93, 97–98, 104–105; and capitalist modernization 3, 5–7, 53, 88, 92, 93, 98; and socialist modernization 4, 7, 11, 62, 71–72, 126, 144; and postcolonial modernization 3–4, 5, 7–8, 42, 49, 60, 81, 83, 87–89, 99, 108, 255
 money 45, 68, 84, 186, 198, 201, 216, 220
Mshakuyt (magazine) 159, 162, 164, 167–168
 Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova 61, 70, 78; *see also* Modern Art Gallery (Ljubljana)
 Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb *see* Gallery of Contemporary Art Zagreb
 Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade 63, 76
 Museum of Modern Art Yerevan 158
 music 63, 74, 86, 87, 105, 133, 156, 161, 172, 237, 238, 254, 264
nahda 83, 88
 nation 3–11, 21, 26, 28, 32–33, 41–43, 46–50, 52, 55, 59, 63–64, 66–67, 72, 80–97, 99, 105, 112–113, 156–157, 167,

- 171, 183, 186, 196, 209, 238, 254–255;
and critique of nationalism 3–5, 28, 44,
66, 90; and horizontal communities 81,
83, 94; and internationalism 9, 44, 52–53,
66, 81, 85, 86–89, 96, 108, 122–124,
134, 136, 140, 142, 144–146, 186,
208–209, 224, 230, 234, 235, 240, 244,
254, 256–257; and Marxism and national-
ism 81, 85, 91; and nationalist ideology 9,
10, 42, 92, 221, 254–256; and nation
form 80–92; and national question, the
10, 42, 46, 82, 85; and national allegory
90–92; and national identity 83, 85–86,
90, 92; and national self-determination
10, 42, 52; and national sovereignty 46,
84, 88–89, 90; and nativism 87, 101; and
postnational condition, the 4, 6, 80–98;
and transnationalism 22, 33, 44, 46–47,
53, 57, 62, 70, 73, 82, 90, 92–93, 99,
104, 108, 114, 141, 173
- New Art Practices (Yugoslavia) 6–7, 12, 76,
239, 250
- Neue östeuropäische Kunst* (New Eastern
European art) 57–80
- Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) 58, 64, 74,
237; and Irwin 10, 58, 60–73, 108; and
Laibach 63, 65, 67–68; and Scipion
Nasice Sisters Theater 74
- New Eastern European art *see* *Neue östeuro-
päische Kunst*
- New Economic Mechanism (Hungary)
140–144
- New Tendencies (Yugoslavia) 11, 76,
121–136
- New Tendencies* (exhibitions) 121–136
- neoconcretism 33–34, 44
- neoliberalism 2–4, 7–8, 14, 17, 22, 28, 84,
93, 99, 101, 106–107, 241, 250; and cul-
ture 238, 250; and deregulation 7, 82,
146; and entrepreneurialism 146, 151;
and free market 140–146, 238; and privat-
ization 2, 82, 146, 177
- New Economic Policy (NEP) 23
- al-Nitaq Festival of Art (Cairo) 6, 12,
253–266
- Non-Aligned Movement 123, 124
- non-governmental organizations (NGO) 12,
61, 92–93, 257
- Nova Objetividade 44
- October Revolution (1917) 23–24
- OHO group 75, 237, 239
- Oiticica, Hélio 32–34, 36, 50
- Osborne, Peter 2, 4, 10, 19, 42–47, 52, 57,
69–70, 73, 125; and postconceptual con-
dition, the 10, 44–46
- open society 6–7, 13, 61, 186; *see also* Karl
Popper
- Open Society Institute, OSI 6, 11, 58, 140,
145, 195–197; *see also* Soros Foundation
- open doors policy 159, 162–165, 255
- open work *see* Eco, Umberto (*Opera Aperta*
[the Open Work])
- Orientalism 6, 75
- Other, the 2, 4, 60, 64, 70, 79, 82, 91, 94,
163, 183, 231, 251; and “an active
Other” 60; and “close Other” 80;
and “remote Other” 80; and occluded
Other 60
- Overidentification 58, 63, 65, 67, 69, 77, 241
- Pape, Lygia 33
- past 4–5, 9–10, 20–23, 26, 28, 31–32, 58,
65, 71, 93, 104, 107, 110, 136, 171, 182,
232, 254; *see also* future, present:
temporality
- patronage 17, 88, 209
- Pedrosa, Mario 10, 32, 40
- perestroika 11, 18, 141, 154–155, 157, 161
- periodization 1, 3, 7, 9–13, 17, 19–20,
21–22, 41–56, 81, 103–104, 108; *see also*
temporality
- Piotrowski, Piotr 81, 89, 93–94
- pioneers and forerunners 1, 87, 94, 185, 256
- Podnar, Gregor 236–250
- poetry 5, 34, 85, 156, 218, 254
- politics 4, 10, 12, 21, 23, 25, 28, 48, 52,
60, 64, 69, 92, 105–108, 111, 113,
123, 144–145, 155–156, 159, 162, 253,
255, 262
- Popper, Karl (*The Open Society*) 6, 8,
186, 196
- popular culture 10, 52–53, 55, 105, 112,
154–156; and American blue jeans 156;
and Black Sabbath (band) 156, 161; and
breakdance 154, 156, 161–162; and elec-
tronic music 264; and heavy metal 161;
and Kiss (band) 161; and rap music 264;
and Marlboro cigarettes 156; and rock
music 156, 161; and punks 162; and Sin-
atra, Frank 264; and U2 (band) 220
- postcolonialism *see* colonialism
- postconceptual condition 10, 44–46, 54, 70,
90, 104; *see also* Osborne, Peter
- postsocialism *see* socialism
- postmodernism 1, 4–5, 8, 13, 17–18, 19,
20–21, 22–23, 26, 28, 32–34, 36, 42–44,
45, 47–48, 50, 54, 60, 65–66, 81, 98, 103,
105–117, 144, 147, 185, 230
- present 4, 10, 17–28, 31–41, 42–54, 57–59,
68, 71, 84, 89, 99, 117, 132, 232; *see also*
future, past, temporality

- presentism 7, 9, 17–29, 34, 43, 57, 73, 107
 private business 65, 78, 141–148, 255
 private galleries 143, 254–256
 prizes and juries for contemporary art *also*
 international jury (SCCA) 207, 213
 public art 208, 220
- Rabinec Studio 11, 139–151; *see also*
 Zsuzsa Simon
 ready-made, the 90, 172, 234, 249
 realism 8, 18, 26, 87, 103, 109, 125,
 136, 156, 185, 191, 196, 241, 242,
 247, 251
 René Mouawad Garden (Beirut) 169–170
 Romanticism 2, 5, 36, 45, 70, 84, 87, 131,
 136, 156, 182, 239
 rupture 2, 10–11, 18, 20, 23, 24, 39,
 49, 50, 86
 Russia 24, 64–69, 87, 91, 94, 112,
 168, 185, 197
- Sadek, Walid 169–183
San Balech 172; *see also* Abillama, Ziad
 Sarajevo Academy of Fine Arts 208,
 215–216
 self-historicization and self-archiving
 60–62
 self-management *see* Yugoslav socialism
 siege of Sarajevo, the 207, 219
 S.K. Modi, Sikribagh 231
 Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana 12, 236–252
 socialism 2, 5–6, 9–11, 18, 23–24, 25–28,
 72, 80–81, 88, 91–93, 106, 122–126,
 140–146, 154, 195–197; and communism
 4, 10, 22, 24–27, 58, 60, 67, 72–73, 85,
 88, 91, 93, 98–99; and developed social-
 ism 23–28; and Hungarian socialism 11,
 140–151; and socialism in one country 26;
 and state socialism 2, 26–27, 140–144;
 and Yugoslav socialism 10–11, 72,
 122–126
 Solidere 4, 172, 177
 Soros Centers for Contemporary Art
 Network (SCCA) 104, 194–196,
 204–205, 209, 220; and SCCA Annual
 Exhibition Program 185, 195–196, 201,
 207, 211, 215–220; and SCCA Chişinău
 (also KSA:K, centrul pentru arta contem-
 porana) 184–205; and SCCA Documenta-
 tion Program 195; and SCCA Grants for
 Artists 195; SCCA Sarajevo 206–221; and
 Soros Fine Arts Documentation Center –
 Budapest 146
 Soros, George 6, 8, 146, 185, 195, 201,
 220–221
 Soros Foundation 140, 145, 193, 195–196,
 205, 220; *see also* Open Society Institute,
 (OSI)
 Soviet Armenian Artists' Union 154–164
 Soviet Constitution 18, 156
 Soviet Young Pioneers summer camp 185
Squash 236–252; *see also* Žvegelj, Janja
 Stalin 10, 17–29, 86, 123, 125
 Student Cultural Artistic Center (*Studentski*
 kulturni center, ŠKUC) 12, 63, 208, 215,
 237, 250
 subsumption 18, 22, 42, 44–47, 55
 Supreme Council for Art and Literature
 Egypt 254
- temporality 1, 9–12, 17–29, 31–39, 57–60;
 and being in time/being with time 35; and
 comrade of time 35; and duration 10,
 31–39, 113; and here-and-now (*also*
 immediacy) 10, 34–35, 38, 111, 164, 241;
 and *neuzeit* 21; and modern temporality
 22; and presence/presentness 10, 19, 32,
 34, 37–39; and *zeitgenössisch* 35; *see also*
 future; past; present
 theatricality 10, 32, 37–39; *see also*
 literalism
 third system of the arts, the 2, 13, 94; *see*
 also second, or modern system of the arts
 Third World Solidarity movement 88
 Tito, Josip Broz 77, 123, 130
 Tito-Stalin break 123
 totalitarianism 19, 26, 59, 61–62, 64–66,
 72, 75, 202
 Townhouse Gallery (Cairo) 12, 253–63
 Transavantgarde 144, 165
 transition 2–3, 6–7, 13, 58, 61, 72, 104,
 136, 146, 186, 196, 204, 209; and transi-
 tion to contemporary art 11, 70–71, 112,
 114, 241, 256; and transitology or transi-
 tion to democracy studies 9; transition to
 socialism 24; *see also* democratization;
 modernization
 Triangle Arts Trust 11, 222–234
 Trotsky, Leon 86, 89
- Union of Artists 11, 83, 154–158, 161,
 195–196, 196, 201, 203
 unofficial art 11, 18, 140, 149, 162–163,
 185, 195–196
 USSR 2, 6–7, 11, 19–20, 24, 27, 88, 91,
 141, 155, 195–196
- Venice Biennale 122, 144, 145
 Verlan, Mark 9, 14, 184, 190, 192–196
VideoMedeja Festival 208

- war communism 24
- War on Terror 3, 7, 108–109
- Wallerstein, Immanuel: and World Systems Theory 49, 100
- Warhol, Andy 106–107
- Wells, William 256
- Westernization 63, 115, 186, 255
- Western Enlightenment 48–49, 81–82, 89
- Williams, Raymond 55
- World Festivals of Youth and Students 88, 96
- Zabel, Igor 108, 240–250
- Žižek, Slavoj 3, 13, 75
- Zsuzsa Simon 139–151; *see also* Rabinec Studio
- Žvegelj, Janja 12, 236–250



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