

Curating the Invisible: Contemporary Art Practices and the Production of Meaning in Eastern Europe

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The point of departure in this article is the issue of contemporary art curatorship, which I try to conceptualise theoretically as one of the main subjects of analysis in contemporary art. More specifically, it addresses the system of art in the area known as 'Eastern Europe', with a particular emphasis on the status of curatorial practices in the postsocialist condition. The problems I explore are focused firstly around the issues of the representation of Eastern Europe and contemporary Eastern European art, in terms of organizing exhibitions in the context of globalisation, and secondly the role of a contemporary art curator as compared to the role performed by a contemporary cultural manager. The question to be raised is related to 'The Image of Eastern Europe' within the functioning of global cultural imperialism, i.e. how do the models of contemporary artistic and especially curatorial practices respond to the up-to-date demands of cultural policy issues related to the area of the former communist/socialist countries in Eastern Europe? The question might also be posed in this way: what has the recent political re-designing of the European map contributed to the establishment of the new ideological questioning of these particular marginalized cultures into the subjects of defined cultural micro-systems? What is important is an attempt to explain the fundamental reason behind the current interest in this region's cultural production and to introduce conclusions which require the necessary transformation of the status of exhibiting practices around 'Eastern European' art with special regard towards the notion of cultural hegemony and principles of appropriation of 'minority cultures'.

The Representation of 'Eastern Europe'

When the state is overly bureaucratic, then the state is taking the role of the gallery and of the museum system.¹

The theoretical premises behind the study of the visual arts are rooted in a complicated interaction between the more general historical vision of Western culture and the particular concerns of an object-oriented discipline. Since the 1960s, however, this uneasily achieved synthesis has been interrogated and expanded, largely through the importation of ideas and philosophies from outside the discipline. In proposing to view Eastern European art as *invisible*, I have chosen not to follow the lead offered by the historically outdated interpretations of nationally conceived art within each of Eastern European countries respectively. Instead, my approach has been inspired by the very

invisibility of the inherent theoretical concepts behind the development of contemporary art practices from Eastern Europe.

The motive for this kind of approach lies in an attempt to identify the strategies coming from those structures in the art world that are professionally oriented towards selective and mediative operations related to the practices of displaying art. Those structures are nowadays found in the roles played by curators as cultural managers. The rising interest in curating exhibitions of contemporary art dealing with the Balkan region, or the South-East European region, or the East European region, emerges from the socio-political features of the area. Recently realized exhibitions, such as *After the Wall* (Stockholm, 1999), *Aspects – Positions* (Vienna - Budapest, 2000), *In Search of Balkania* (Graz, 2002), *Blood and Honey: The Future is in the Balkans* (Klosterneuburg, Vienna, 2003) or *In the Gorges of the Balkans* (Kassel, 2003), are putting in focus in the global art world the relation between the critical art practices in the region and the cultural stereotypes related to it. The strategies that the curators of these exhibitions are using on conceptual as well as on practical levels are actually showing that there is more than one common denominator that is being exploited in order to identify and coordinate the art production related to the former Eastern bloc. The dichotomy between 'the East' and 'the West', itself a component of the globalist ideology, might be an element of the aspirations of its re-articulation within the global world-system. Thus it could be viewed only in reference to the ideological mechanisms which are formed by the very idea of this re-articulation while producing it at the same time.

This kind of analysis requires a deeper look into strict policy demands which determine the existence, development and programming of cultural institutions in general, and influence the ways in which contemporary art is understood in the government reform priorities. The proposed course of analysis is necessary for an adequate treatment of contemporary art and contemporary art exhibitions primarily because of the regulatory and/or legislative changes that need to be introduced and implemented for the benefit of the proper understanding and displaying of both modern and contemporary art from Eastern Europe. Contemporary curatorship is here conceived of as one of the essential elements of resonance of the political, social, economic and cultural changes that have been taking place in the former communist countries of the so-called Eastern bloc (the former Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, ex-Yugoslavia) ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989². The attitude expressed here is provoked by a strong belief that current exhibition practices are but a reflection of the fact that exhibitions have become *the* medium through which most art becomes known and recognised as a *visible* part of contemporary culture. Furthermore, focusing on the current perspectives of the displaying strategies and art production marks out the emergence of new discourses surrounding the exhibition, investigates the politics of display outside of the traditional debates and strictly art historical interpretations, and gets closer to the role of a contemporary art curator (as a selector) and to the role performed by a contemporary cultural manager (as a producer). The theoretical background for

this approach has been provided by relying on the contemporary rethinking of Eastern European aesthetics and art practices in relation to their own political environment, but also in relation to the global overall movements that have positioned them within the specific circumstances, conditioned by the hegemonic rules of superior power systems and their respective institutional representatives and financial tools.

The Role of the Contemporary Art Curator

The traditional view of 'non-Western art' has always been conditioned by the canonical art historical concepts coming from the West, and by the fact that art history developed first as a study of Western art. Here the notion of the West has a double fold meaning. Firstly it refers primarily to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the founding director of one of the world's greatest museum institutions, the Museum of Modern Art in New York. His concept of the history of modern art, as postulated in the 1930s, was an attempt made in order to (re)construct the history of modern art through the famous diagram of the development of Abstract Art, by tracing the origins and development of modern art and showing how one artist and/or one art form influences another. Secondly it also refers to the dominant, over-powerful and capitalism-driven states, in the time of emerging modernism and modernization, giving a unique perspective and a universally accepted formula for the progressive tendencies in the state of modern art ever since Winkelmann and the beginning of contemporary history of art as a scientific discipline.

One of the main reasons for approaching the issue of Eastern European art and culture must be explained from this theoretical standpoint. It designates the existence of the fundamental, extant difference between the 'two Europes' in the very period of the European integrative processes after 1989, and pinpoints the way to encounter the core of the problem related to the issues of contemporary art and culture. My starting point in this respect was the theoretical approach as proposed by Slovenian philosopher, theoretician, video-artist and curator Marina Grzinic, in which she aims at explaining how particular works, artists and groups, conceived of as the Retro-avant-garde triad assumed their relationships with ideology. Here she specifically refers to three art phenomena from former Yugoslavia: Mladen Stilinovic from Zagreb (Croatia), the 80s Kasimir Malevich from Belgrade (Serbia) and the group IRWIN, especially their Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) Embassy projects - from Ljubljana, (Slovenia). She explains why it was possible for them to affirm their socio-political character only in the form of a specific critique of ideology in the field of art, and how this triad, thesis, antithesis and synthesis, might be juxtaposed with Zizek's Hegelian scheme, ideology in-itself, for-itself, and ideology in-and-for itself, as indices of the different concrete historical situations of postsocialism³.

This approach, as Grzinic explains, departs from the fact that "the East has not provided the West with the relevant theoretical and interpretative instruments to recognize the uniqueness, idiosyncrasies, diversity and originality of artistic projects in Eastern Europe", because of which "there is very little

documentation of this history".⁴ The attitude expressed here had thus been provoked by a strong belief that Eastern European art practices lacked the critical theoretical background which would offer and provide critical interpretation and self-reflection on those projects and phenomena. This problem is of crucial importance and overcoming it requires a systematic action towards 'filling the void' of the cultural and theoretical domain of Eastern Europe. This urge for theory was explicitly declared as early as in the 1980s by one of the most prominent contemporary art phenomena in Eastern Europe, the Slovenian movement Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK):

NSK needs theoreticians, thinkers, to verbalize our activities, since we would like the creative act to be accompanied by a certain argumentative discipline, whose opinions and theses also enter the game of creation. Just like a painting, we consider a philosophical work an object, which in the centre of its conceptual constellation raises the question of the conditions and possibilities of awareness in general.⁵

Focusing on historical perspectives of the artistic strategies and art production in Eastern European space provides necessary basic instruments for the elimination of this problem and marks out the emergence of new discourses surrounding these phenomena. Furthermore, apart from the traditional debates and strictly art historical interpretations, it investigates the ideological context of the development of such phenomena and their politics of display, and also - in order to propose the ways for their radical de-politicization⁶ - it strengthens the relationship between art and overall political, social and cultural climate in an area once known as Eastern Bloc. In this respect, the notion of postsocialism is understood as the basic cultural, social and political condition for most of the former Eastern European countries and it reveals the way that the ideology of the socialist and postsocialist system is envisioned through the artistic concepts and visual display coming from this very condition.

The consequences of the differing conditions in which the cultural discourse in the east and the west had developed during the period of the Cold War have also been put into question during the project directed by media theorist and professor Boris Groys and organized under the auspices of the [German Federal Cultural Foundation](#) in cooperation with the Centre for Art and Media (Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie - ZKM) from Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2003 and 2004⁷. Starting from the facts that an art market in the western sense did not exist in the east and that, consequently, conditions for the functioning of art in the east were completely different from those in the west, this project is important because it explores the relation between culture and the marketplace. It poses a simple question: how, now that the transformations in the model of modernization have taken place in the east, will the reality of the marketplace be reflected in theory and art? And what should be done to further the accomplishment of the formulation of a new theoretical discourse, which is faithful to the post-communist situation? This most recent example of a serious

international conference shows another proof of the rethinking of the status and position of contemporary Eastern European art and culture, especially through posing a proper question about the formative critical and theoretical discourses.

My approach is thus established in the contemporary interpretations of the overall political, social, economic and theoretical conditions of the development of specific artistic practices in the so-called Eastern Europe. Being far from the centres of economic power and media promotion, the position of contemporary Eastern European art practices - coming from the marginal position in relation to the dominant art system - is historically grounded in the common heritage of the communist era and the process of political, economic, cultural and identity transition after the communist period. Here I primarily refer to the recent publication edited by Slovenian philosopher Ales Erjavec and entitled *Postmodernism and Postsocialist Condition. Politicized Art under Late Socialism*⁸, which gives a thorough analysis and a critical overview of the reasons that put the art and culture of the former communist countries, including the area of Eastern Europe, in a specific, politically constructed context determined by a dominant common denominator in the last few decades. The dominance of this common (or similar)⁹ political ideology is what determines the primarily *politicized* nature of Eastern European art and sets it apart from the Western art, predominantly conditioned by the principles of the late Capitalism and developments of the art market.

Discussing the possibilities of approaching contemporary curatorial practices from a critical standpoint requires specific emphasis on the questions of legitimisation and cultural appropriation by exhibiting institutions and their strategies of displaying art from today's Eastern Europe. This presupposes the inherent ideological mechanisms of power within the art exhibiting spaces in the contemporary global world, and challenges their operational principles through an attempt to make a set of relations between the institutions of display (museums and galleries) and the bureaucratic system *visible*. By producing the distance towards the myth of the neutrality of the exhibiting space, this idea tends to focus on the system of power as much as on its effects, i.e. its impact on curators, artists, spectators, and the Art System itself, and thus to propose a critical investigation of the postsocialist cultural institutions in terms of their governing the viewer's perception and comprehension of the Power of Display.

Curating and making exhibitions have over the last decades developed into an identifiable *cultural* practice, on the one hand concerned with presenting, reflecting upon and interpreting art-production and on the other with actively producing meaning. The role of a curator is thus being defined through the creative, constructive methods of "making appropriate combinations of people" and thus positioning the dominant values within the structures of power in the world of art and, consequently, imposing control and designing the image of the profession as "artistic" itself. This artistic aspect of contemporary curatorship is not only concerned with curators' visions, the very source of their oniric getting closer to the profession of artists, or the dreams they base their concepts on and develop through further projects and exhibitions. What is really

important in relation to this connection between the curatorial and the artistic work is not only supported by the mutual phantasmatic projections of their invisible ideas towards the visibility of the outside world, but by their mutual interdependence which possibly makes the connection between the functional principles of art and of the entire environmental conditions visible. Therefore, besides the standard notion of an artist in the most traditional sense of the word, another two types of “artists” are growing prominent in today’s art world: one of them being curators, identified as designers of the broad cultural sphere, and the other, cultural managers and/or art administrators, as active organizers or producers of conditions for the adequate functioning of this sphere. The question is how is the global cultural sphere being envisioned and designed with respect to the contemporary curatorial participation in this process? What logic operates behind the very process of an exhibition design and how is it to be formulated in relation to the inclusion of the previously ‘invisible’ areas, such as Eastern Europe, into the visible field of actual art?

This question calls to mind Walter Benjamin’s text from the early 1930s, *The Author as Producer*, where he, while meditating on the relationship between the tendency and quality of a contemporary art work, stressed the difference between the type of an ‘operating’ writer and of an ‘informing’ one. His famous example of Sergei Tretiakov and the tasks he performed in Russian conditions of 1928, at the time of the total collectivization of agriculture, provides Benjamin with the proof of the effective ways of intervention due to the progress in technique, i.e. the tactics, as performed through the effective use of all channels of expression, in view of the technical factors affecting the given situation. Tretiakov as a model of this operating writer provides...

...the most tangible example of the functional interdependency that always, and under all conditions, exists between the correct political tendency and progressive literary technique. (...) His mission is not to report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but to intervene actively. He defines this mission in the account he gives of his own activity.¹⁰

In this text Benjamin searches for an answer to the question of the technique of works, i.e. the one which directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. But what he lacks, according to Gerald Raunig (a Vienna-based philosopher, art theoretician, and a cultural activist in the fields of contemporary philosophy, art theory, political aesthetics and cultural politics), is the reflection on the successful consequences of a politicising art, positive influence of the political in art, something that Benjamin’s dialectical pattern omits by questioning where a project stands *in relation to* its production conditions. Instead, according to Raunig, the question should be: how is it positioned *within* them?, i.e. how is it possible to apply media planned strategies from within the art system itself and transform art production more radically into concrete micro-political intervention?¹¹

This reflection on the author's own position in the production process is of an utmost significance for the better comprehension of the status of the curator in contemporary art system. As Raunig suggests:

...following Tretiakov and co. it would thus be meaningful not to concentrate on the bettering of us humans, but on changing the structures that permit inequalities to exist. An update of a Brecht-Benjamin demand calling for the production apparatus to be supplied without changing it would be: let us not supply the production apparatus, let us change it.¹²

In the 1990s, the concept of the curator-mediator was proposed by Viktor Misiano, a critic and curator based in Moscow. He was formerly the director of the Moscow Contemporary Art Centre, the founder and chief editor of the Moscow Art Magazine and is currently Deputy Director of ROSIZO, the State Centre for Museums and Exhibitions. As one of the curators of the scandalous exhibition *Interpol* (Stockholm, 1996), he was asked to give a comment on the role of the curators nowadays.¹³ His statement is relevant for this analysis because it refers directly to the subject of the ideological and practical reasons for defining one's own position as a curator-mediator: this position is conditioned by the imperative to internalize the Other through the intellectual exchange which only results with an exhibition, though not necessarily. Furthermore, this idea of process or dialogue, as based not only on the involvement of artists but also of non-artists and intellectuals in the broadest terms and shows the necessity for overcoming the idea of homogeneity, since "no unifying concept seems to be possible today". This was proved by the result of the *Interpol* exhibition, which brought the symbolic break between the two worlds - East and West - into the traumatic realm of the Real. The concept of a curator-mediator is here justifiable because of the importance given to someone who is:

...in the middle just to help others to speak with each other, (...) the idea similar to the function of a mediator at a conference, round table or colloquium who is responsible for the topic of the colloquium or for the topic of the exhibition, for bringing together appropriate people, for making appropriate combinations of people. Because if you combine Mr. X with Ms. Y you get one result, but if you add Ms. S you will get a completely different result.¹⁴

What is really imposed on a contemporary curator is not considered in terms of content, but has to do with intervention in the form, in the structures of a micro-political field: instead of work on products (art works, art exhibitions as such), it must be work on the means of production, the very principles and operational instruments supporting the system of art. This is the only way able to provide producers an improved apparatus and incites them to produce. This organising function of curatorship and the way it is translated into actual, contemporary art production, is even more important in an area lacking an efficient market-system and legislative and regulatory policies in the cultural

domain, such is the case with Eastern Europe. This is what makes a contemporary curator close to the role of a cultural manager and annihilates the difference between them.

The critical standpoint about this specific condition, translated into the practical professional standards for management of cultural reality, is what is demanded from a contemporary curator. He/she should keep in mind one simple, but crucial thing: the role of a curator as cultural manager is not only in providing (i.e. constructing) conditions for successful functioning of cultural projects, cultural institutions and the cultural system in general, but first and foremost, in understanding real conditions out of which cultural models are to be developed, by giving a profound critical analysis of current conditions, not only within, but beyond the level of cultural domain, and finally by changing and identifying the status and position of culture within these conditions. This is all in order to overcome the actual obstacles through the invention of practical and successful means of production - the brand new production apparatus which is going to be able to contribute to the changing processes towards a better status of culture on the general level. Art and its display have always been dependent on the systems of value that are usually a resonance of the political, social and economical milieu from which they emerge. The *similarity* among the art practices of Eastern Europe, which might be generally accepted as having a common source in the cultural homogeneity of the communist states up till the end of the twentieth century, is confirmed through a number of exhibitions that have contextualized these practices within the common geo-political framework in the last decade. On the other hand, it is also important to point out inherent *differences* among these practices within the common framework of socialist, late socialist and postsocialist Eastern European art, and dependent on diverse political conditions in each and every Eastern European country respectively. Therefore, the system of value in the contemporary art world must be approached not from the critical discourse about a particular artist or a work of art as a result of his/her own creativity, but from a critically engaging endeavour to understand the overall conditions out of which the notion about the artist in question or the particular work of art is being produced and canonized as valuable or not within the particular system of art. The role of a curator is the starting reference point in this direction, because it reveals the complex nature of the art system the way it is constituted through the network of different power mechanisms.

The question of *who* is allowed to design an exhibition, conference, round table and participate in the organization of an artistic event needs to be reconsidered and pointed out alongside questions of *how* and *why* certain themes and issues are approached. The proper analysis of programming and the decision-making process, as well as the identification of those instances that are dominant in imposing the criteria, especially with regards to curatorial work, are necessary tools for the proper recognition of displaying concepts co-existing next to each other, continually broadening the spectrum of approaches for the presentation of art. If today really any matter can become relevant, depending

on how the curator draws attention to it, then the growth of the curator as cultural manager is a proof that our understanding of the world is based on questionable conventions, often provoked and manipulated by structures of centralized power. In order to reveal these fragmented perceptions, the system of art must open up to new possibilities of comprehension of its proper operational channels.

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¹ M.Grzinic, *Does Contemporary Art Need Museums Anymore?* in CIMAM - The International Committee of ICOM - The International Council of Museums of Modern Art Conference, Budapest, 2000.

² It is important to point out the difference of this symbolical moment in comprehending the essential break of the 'new world', as proposed by Marina Grzinic: "From a Western European or an American point of view, the changes that affected Eastern Europe were symbolically marked by the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. From an ex-Yugoslavian perspective, this point would be the death of Tito in 1980." See: M.Grzinic, 'Retro-Avant-Garde, or Mapping Post-Socialism' in *Fiction Reconstructed: Eastern Europe, Post-Socialism & The Retro-Avant-Garde*, Vienna 2000, 37.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ A.Tronche, 'Interview with IRWIN (Paris 1988)', in Inke Arns (ed.), *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983-2003*, Berlin, Hagen, Belgrade, 2003-2004, 250-251.

⁶ The de-politicization is here conceived as the process of critical deconstruction of various discourses about art which are still imbued with ideology. See: M.Grzinic, 'Retro-Avant-Garde...', 50.

⁷ For further information on this project see: <http://www.postcommunist.de>

⁸ A.Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition. Politicized Art under Late Socialism*, Berkeley 2003.

⁹ The cultural condition in former Yugoslavia, for example, was much more liberal than in any other socialist country, with its self-proclaimed model of self-management socialism and resistance towards the repressive Soviet regime, ever since 1948. After World War II, the country became known as Tito's socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1980), or the second Yugoslavia. There was an initial period of ties with the Soviet political bloc (1945-1948). By the early 1950s, however, with the distancing of Tito's Yugoslavia from the Eastern bloc and the rejection of the USSR's influence on Yugoslav politics and culture, the society opened up to Western modernist art. This was followed by the emergence of self-governing socialism, and a complex, multiethnic federal state (1950-1980) standing, politically, somewhere between the Eastern and Western blocs, building ties with the third world through the movement of non-alignment. See: M.Suvakovic, 'Impossible Histories' in D.Djuric and M.Suvakovic (eds.), *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-Avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*, Boston 2003, 2-35.

¹⁰ W.Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York and Boston 1984, 297-309.

¹¹ G.Raunig, 'Grandparents of Interventionist Art, or Intervention in the Form. Rewriting Walter Benjamin's "Der Autor als Produzent"' in EIPCP, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, <http://www.eipcp.net/>

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ V.Misiano, 'An Interview about the Role of the Curators and the Concept of the Interpol Exhibition' in E.Cufer and V.Misiano (eds.), *Interpol: the art exhibition which divided East and West*, Ljubljana and Moscow 2000, 59-75.

¹⁴ *ibid.*