Create It to Make It: But What Can An International Alliance Do?

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Publication date
2022
Document Version
Final published version

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How is internationalism — more specifically, regional internationalism — practiced as a form of institution building in the East of Europe? Why is the question of internationalism particularly important for a non-Western European art initiative? What is the significance of self-instituting, both in theoretical terms and also in the very act? How is it possible to work transnationally? I will look at these problematics while highlighting their challenges in practice — as I have confronted them through my involvement in the East Europe Biennial Alliance, a recent transnational attempt to build up, from below, a non-existent regional infrastructure to support art and culture in Eastern Europe.

Before going into an analysis of internationalism-as-instituting, I would like to take a detour into more general questions pertaining to how the vessel of internationalism has been envisioned and filled since 1989 in a region peripheral to Western Europe. The case of art history writing in Eastern Europe, how it has tried to align itself in the world, is particularly instructive. One could say that since the 1990s, Eastern European art history writing has been in a permanent identity crisis: caught up in the ongoing limbo of state regime changes; no longer Eastern Bloc and not quite European either.[1] The series of shifting state formations and regime changes, what I have called 'unsteady states'[2], also result in a constant re(en)visioning of one's place and relations in the world. This is what art historian Edit András has referred to as 'permanent intellectual alertness and reflection'.[3] In recent years, also as a corollary to the current regime change of 'illiberal democracies' in the region, Eastern European and

Global South art histories and theories have been put in dialogue as a way to account for the current position and understanding of Eastern European art history. From these endeavours, I would like to contrast here two concepts: 'alter-globalist art history' of art historian Piotr Piotrowski and '(socialist) worldmaking' of architecture historian Łukasz Stanek.

Piotrowski's central contribution to the concept of East European art history writing was to propose a methodology that deconstructs Western-centric art history narratives and at the same time one that treats all art (histories) of the world, including that of the 'West', on an equal footing, but without becoming empty multiculturalism. He coined the term 'horizontal art history' — a utopian vantage point without a centre — to which he also added comparativism, to 'ferret out diversity . . . of seemingly remote areas of art and culture'. [4] Together the horizontal and comparative perspective would amount to an alter-globalist art history — as opposed to global art history — a novel paradigm that would also 'expose repressive practices directed towards margins and peripheries.'[5] While it is crucial to look at, as he proposed, the various trajectories of how and for what reasons, for instance Cubism emerged in Prague and Calcutta around the same time,[6] I believe the main fault line of horizontal and alter-globalist art history is that it in fact has a central vantage point: Eastern Europe. These propositions are not able to go beyond Eastern Europe, as the main question they try to respond to is why art of this region is not part of 'global' art and how this can be mended.

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4   Piotr Piotrowski, 'From Global to Alter-Globalist Art History', *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2015), pp. 125. See also Piotr Piotrowski, 'Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde', in *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, 1, ed. Sascha Bru, et al. (Berlin, 2009), pp. 49–58.
5   Piotrowski, 2015, p. 129.
6   Piotr Piotrowski, 'East European Art Peripheries Facing Post-Colonial Theory', *Nonsite* 12 (2014).

A different approach is offered by Łukasz Stanek, whose main question pertaining to Eastern Europe could be characterized as, in his field of architecture and urbanization history: what role did Eastern European architects play in world architecture, in particular in the Global South during the Cold War? Examining architecture in Accra, Lagos, Baghdad, Abu Dhabi, and Kuwait City, Stanek points out that Cold War urbanization in these cities is a product of complex networks, often competing but also working together, co-produced beyond Cold War trenches by professionals in West Africa and the Middle East, with those from Western Europe, North America, Eastern Europe, countries of the Non-Aligned Movement as well as international institutions.[7] The 'competing visions of global collaboration' is what Stanek refers to as 'worldmaking,' of which globalization, as we know it today, is 'just one among many possibilities of worldmaking,' and of which 'socialist worldmaking' was another possibility.[8] Even while Stanek highlights the ways in which for instance, Baghdad's 20th century urban history cannot be understood without taking into account Eastern European socialist countries contributions to it,[9] the protagonist of his research is *not* Eastern Europe, but the complex system of transnational collaborations as they played out in the Global South during the Cold War — in which Eastern Europe has a place. Therefore Stanek, in a 'view from the South,'[10] attempts to complicate architecture histories of both Eastern Europe and of modern architecture worldwide.

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7   Łukasz Stanek, *Architecture in Global Socialism: Eastern Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East in the Cold War* (Princeton, 2020), p. 4. I would like to thank Łukasz Stanek for the discussions we had on this topic.

8   Stanek, 2020, pp. 303, 30. See also Łukasz Stanek, 'Socialist Worldmaking: The Political Economy of Urban Comparison in the Global Cold War', *Urban Studies* (October 2021).

9   Stanek, 2020, p. 3.

10   Stanek, 2020, p. 303.

The East Europe Biennial Alliance (EEBA), comprising Biennale Matter of Art Prague, Biennale Warszawa, Kyiv Biennial, OFF-Biennale Budapest, and Survival Kit Festival Riga, cannot assume such a worldmaking position. However, what is a *de facto* subject matter of almost all regional, Eastern European — which is international in itself — art initiative, similarly to the challenges of art history writing, is to grapple with what the 'East' and Eastern Europe is, and how to think of it in global terms. As Bartosz Frąckowiak of Biennale Warszawa noted, working with the regional specificities within EEBA means 'not to isolate ourselves in some kind of Eastern European nostalgia or to fetishize this region, but to try and figure out what our links and connections to other regions and other places in the world are'.[11] Another usually overlooked aspect of Eastern European collaborations, which we in EEBA are learning through working with each other, is that there are real differences between postsocialist and post-Soviet states, even though they are of the same, broadly understood region. For instance, Ukraine is not part of the EU while all the other Alliance members are. This is a real barrier that had to be worked through when, for instance, the last edition of the Kyiv Biennial was co-curated by EEBA, especially in the cross-border travel of artworks and finances. When Vasyl Cherepanyn of the Kyiv Biennial and I as a member of OFF-Biennale Budapest gave an interview about EEBA,[12] I formulated a sentence about the emergence of Western-type contemporary art institutions in the 1990s in both postsocialist and post-Soviet contexts – based on my understanding of postsocialist Hungarian history – and Vasyl kindly pointed out that my statement does not hold true for the post-Soviet context, only to the postsocialist.

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11   Zuzana Jakalová, 'To Create a Transnational Structure That Gives More Power In This Hostile Context', *Flash Art – Czech and Slovak Edition*, flashart.cz, 11 November, 2020.
12   Ana-Marija Cvitic, 'New Artistic Narratives in Eastern Europe: The East Europe Biennial Alliance. Interview with Vasyl Cherepanyn and Eszter Szakács,' *Béton Bleu Magazine*, betonblue.org, 7 November 2021.

Yet another facet of internationalism in the East of Europe concerns self-instituting. There is a long history of grassroots institution-building in art — not analogously but somewhat similarly – during the Cold War and in the 1990s as well as in the current 'illiberal' times, particularly in countering the state, its policies, its politics, its infrastructure, and its mandate of the arts. In the context of postsocialist Hungary, where for decades the main sponsor of the arts has been, and is still the state, without any serious alternative sources of local funding, grassroots initiatives and bottom-up institutions almost always take positions crossways to the state. In the case of OFF-Biennale Budapest it means that it today boycotts Hungarian state funding, steers clear of the state-maintained art infrastructure, and builds its own, albeit modest, state-independent infrastructure as a form of resistance. And in lieu of the state and its public funding, infrastructural support — funding, collaborations — for non-profit 'independent', 'alternative' initiatives, most of the time comes from international circuits. As Cherepanyn noted in relation to the Kyiv Biennial, which similarly to OFF-Biennale Budapest, is a bottom-up, not a state or city initiative: 'In the Ukrainian situation, without an international backup, presence and involvement we would be lost. It would be simply impossible and wouldn't even make much sense for us as an institution to conduct anything here'.[13] In contrast to the formative role of the state in the funding of the arts in postsocialist Hungary, in post-Soviet states, including Ukraine, after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, local oligarch capital has become the main sponsor of the arts. Thus, in these 'independent,' 'alternative' initiatives in the East of Europe, internationalism is a cornerstone of self-instituting and of survival as well.

Several scholars have pinpointed the problematics of the cultural field's NGOization — a legal form that grassroots initiatives have to take in order to receive mostly international

funding — as well as the ways in which NGOs are part of 'transnational governmentality'.[14] While in an Eastern European context going outside the state infrastructure and local public funding leaves one with the only option of becoming part of the civil, NGO sphere; yet, in this sense, OFF-Biennale Budapest or the Kyiv Biennial are not 'only' local, bottom-up initiatives, they already operate transnationally if we look at their structures of funding. Another level of this transnational work is the building up of the East Europe Biennial Alliance: inter-institutional and inter-regional, but again grassroots, self-instituted, and not funded. Only its projects have been funded thus far, but not the alliance as a platform. EEBA is the first biennial alliance as such, and as of today, it owns nothing, in fact it is nothing — other than a website and the will of people to collaborate.

In many ways, the bottom-up EEBA — similarly to OFF-Biennale Budapest — is a form of critique, the genre of which is institution-building, and the tools of which are internationalism and the biennial. These self-instituting art initiatives step up in hiatus and initiate infrastructures in place of them. Curator and writer

Simon Sheikh, drawing on the theories of philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, foregrounded the importance of self-instituting, which, as he noted, is not anti-institutional but an attempt to create 'a new language with which to say things, not just saying the same things with new words'.[15] Yet, the real challenge of self-instituting and of creating a new language lies in its practice — if it is really possible to do something novel, not only to imagine the change. Another notion that has been developed to tackle and re-theorize precisely the gaps between 'imagining and actualization'[16] is prefigurative politics, in which a desired future change is enacted (pre-figured) already in the present, in a micro-format, performing the change as if it was already in place. As it has been put forth by law and political theory scholar Davina Cooper, initiatives understood to be prefigurative, as 'everyday utopias . . . work by creating the change they wish to encounter, building and forging new ways of experiencing social and political life.'[17]

Not using the term prefigurative politics, but the conceptually similar notion of 'performative politics', social anthropologist Athena Athanasiou in her essay 'Performing the Institution "As If It Were Possible"', while grounding performative instituting in the Derridian im-possibility, also covers the contradictions inherent in such endeavours.[18] Athanasiou underlines that since institutions are sources of both support and repression, one must work for and against institutionalization: 'with-within-against' institutions.[19] EEBA and its self-instituting members are not without such

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15   Simon Sheikh, 'The Magmas: On Institutions and Instituting', in *How Institutions Think: Between Contemporary Art and Curatorial Discourse*, eds. Paul O'Neill; Lucy Steeds and Mick Wilson (Cambridge, MA, 2017). p. 129.
16   Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Durkham, 2014), p. II.
17   Davina Cooper, 2015, p. 2.
18   Athena Athanasiou, 'Performing the Institution, "As if it were Possible"', in F*ormer West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, eds. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (Cambridge, MA, 2016), pp. 679–692.
19   Athanasiou, 2016, p. 683.

paradoxes either. The most obvious of these contradictions is the format of the biennial itself. Even though OFF-Biennale Budapest and the Kyiv Biennial — and its last edition curated collectively by EEBA — are produced on different grounds than 'traditional biennials', inasmuch as they are grassroots endeavours and there is no stable funding or institution behind them, they reproduce and reconsolidate the biennial format as part of the 'event economy'.[20] Yet, in places like Hungary or Ukraine, where the state is not a (funding) stakeholder in such contemporary art initiatives, doing business as usual — in this case making a simple international biennial — is a most 'radical' and difficult achievement as well as the only sustainable (as it is perennial) institutional experimentation.

It is also important to note that individual EEBA members have different funding structures. OFF-Biennale Budapest is a grassroots civil initiative; Kyiv Biennial is likewise grassroots, produced by the similarly self-organized Visual Culture Research Center in Kyiv; Biennale Warszawa is funded by the City of Warsaw, Biennale Matter of Art Prague is the project of tranzit.cz supported by public funding and the ERSTE Foundation; and Survival Kit Festival Riga is the project of the independent Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art that applies yearly for public funding. These differences are an advantage: this means that members can offer different things to the ecosystem of EEBA, we can support each other in different ways. At the same time, there are limits to the ways of support. One of the harshest reminders I have encountered so far of the need to come up with novel ways of supporting each other was when Biennale Warszawa faced serious attacks from right-wing forces in Poland in 2020. As EEBA, we wanted to come up with something more real than a letter of solidarity, something that can have an effect,

20   Marco Baravalle, 'Alter-Institutions and Art. Between Governance and Autonomy. Capture, Subjectivity, Decolonization, Governance, Acceleration, Queering, Prefigurative Economics', *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest*, joaap.org, October, 2021.

something of an infrastructural support. The Kyiv Biennial offered the idea of refuge, that maybe for instance the biennale in Warsaw could take place in Kyiv if need be, but we came short of an actual strategy of support. One thing was clear, EEBA means more than just a conglomerate for a funding application, it can very well be a lifeline. In fact, one of the main premises we agreed on was that this alliance will not be formed and expanded on the basis of project application for funding, but on our common dedication.

There is no road map of how to work together transnationally in meaningful ways. In EEBA we are currently learning it by doing it. I wish in the art world more time would be spent on being transparent about difficulties and mistakes rather than on pure celebratory recounts. It is not the oversaturation of discourse that builds us but learning from one another, I believe.

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Occasional Groundwork is an alliance of three European biennials EVA (Ireland's Biennial of Contemporary Art), GIBCA (Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Sweden), and LIAF (Lofoten International Art Festival, Norway) that are each concerned with re-proposing the model of the international art biennial. Seeking a rooted infrastructure for the production and dissemination of contemporary art, Occasional Groundwork serves as a peer group for thinking-through the existing and speculative frameworks of organisational practice.

Groundings is the first public initiative of Occasional Groundwork – a series of co-commissioned texts by writers, artists, curators, and academics, exploring themes of internationalism, sustainability, audience, and infrastructure within the context of the contemporary art biennial and the shift in conditions imposed by the ongoing pandemic.

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