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# Eastern European Time-Based Art During and After Communism

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EASTERN EUROPEAN TIME-BASED ART  
DURING AND AFTER COMMUNISM

K. McBRIDE

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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EASTERN EUROPEAN TIME-BASED ART DURING AND AFTER  
COMMUNISM.

by

KENNETH McBRIDE

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth

In partial fulfilment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Dartington College Of Arts

July 2010

## ABSTRACT

KENNETH McBRIDE

### EASTERN EUROPEAN TIME-BASED ART DURING AND AFTER COMMUNISM.

Soviet-era Communism was a project of emergence that failed to realise its Utopian ambition. Nevertheless, it created an unprecedented simulacrum whose visual language was appropriated by a number of artists as a readymade. This artistic response to everyday reality shaped an unofficial narrative of the Communist epoch. Operating beyond the official realm these artists were subject to varying degrees of censorship, and their activities led to what became known as 'non-official' art. Non-official artists suffered from inferior materials, lack of exposure, and were forced to radicalize their methods of production. Without official support the everyday domestic realm and a diverse range of outdoor sites became sites of production. The primary arena, however, and the one that would become the most politicized, was the artist's body that often acted as one or both material and surface.

On the one hand the thesis takes the Communist context as a common platform from which to discuss time-based art practices in Eastern Europe while, on the other, it proposes that such a general view is worthless since it does not pay sufficient attention to the particular conditions within each bloc country. While the former serves as a reference for artistic response in a wide view, the latter provokes a deeper, more contextualised, understanding of the social, political, and cultural conditions that ultimately shaped non-official art. To understand fully the effect of the Communist past also involves analysing it through the lens of the present day. A number of works produced pre- and post-1989 are analysed that offer insights into the past, its disintegration, and the transition period.

The theoretical and critical thrust is shaped from primary research material gathered from artists, intellectuals, and critics throughout the region, so as to most clearly reflect its own contemporaneous and unfolding discourse. It builds on these key sources and underscores the difficulties faced when trying to locate the works within existing art history canons.

Together with this written element, a further two curatorial strands complete the form of the thesis. A website has been created that reflects the thesis enquiry, three re-enactments of historical works are undertaken as a strategy that allows for a more experiential understanding of context, and three new performances devised by the author in response to the contexts researched complete the work. The thesis was written throughout Eastern Europe, and primarily in Poland where the author lives and works.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.**

When I was growing up in Scotland in the 1960-70s, Communism was given as a secret world. A long held interest in this context developed over the years and reached maturity during the period of writing this thesis. In 2004 I relocated to Poland in an effort to connect with artists, critics, and intellectuals, and to more fully appreciate the complex structures of Eastern Europe. Participation as an artist in a number of events in the region and beyond enriched the experience, as did a teaching post in the Academy of Fine Arts, Krakow, Poland. I wish to express my sincere appreciation of the generous financial support provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council over the period of research. Additionally, Arts Council England (South West) is due like gratitude for supporting the genesis of the agora8.org digital project, and for research travel funding. European Cultural Foundation further supported research and network trips to Belgrade and Novi Sad. Methods Network provided a bursary that enabled the presentation of early research at the 2006 Digital Rights for Humanities and Arts (DRHA) conference at Dartington, UK, making it possible to test the work among peers. Similarly, Future of Imagination festival in Singapore extended an invitation to co-chair a conference on the role of the nude body in performance art that permitted a presentation on Eastern European artists. Dr. Claire Donovan acted as lead supervisor while Professor Artur Tajber, as second supervisor, created the part-time lecturing position in the Department of Intermedia within the Academy of Fine Arts, Kraków, that provided a solid contextual base for the testing and presentation of knowledge of areas of the research. Very special thanks go to all the artists, critics, and historians who shared their work and

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION and WORD COUNT.

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award.

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<u>Re-enactment 2</u> .....	<i>Lenin in Warsaw</i> (2009). Warsaw National Museum.
<u>Re-enactment 3</u> .....	<i>One Minute Silence for Performers</i> (2009). Giswil Turbine Hall, Switzerland.
<u>Performance 1</u> .....	<i>Meant Lament</i> (2006). Piotrkow Tribunalska, Poland.
<u>Performance 2</u> .....	<i>Tutaj Między Teraz</i> (Here Between Now) (2008). Tarnów Culture Days, Poland.
<u>Performance 3</u> .....	<i>Requiem for the Line</i> (2009). Giswil Turbine Hall, Switzerland.
<u>Interview</u> .....	Lee Wen interviews the author (2007). Festival of Imagination, Singapore.
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## Introduction.

### 1. What and where is Eastern Europe?

Spectacle in the latter part of 20th century Europe is characterised, perhaps most of all, by a single event: the 1989 breaching of the Berlin Wall that signalled the collapse of the Communist system in Europe. Played out as a live event in a cold November, the sight of hundreds, then thousands, millions, of people gathering from all over the world to protest and chip away at the Wall, making holes and passages so both sides could join together in celebration became, in the Western continent at least, the abiding image of the times<sup>1</sup>. Simultaneously, thanks to advances in satellite technology, it was beamed around the world on live television and witnessed by tens of millions more<sup>2</sup>. It seemed for a short while that the freezing and reunification of Europe had been condensed into a single historic televisual moment, and one might be forgiven for being carried away by the moment and thinking that the collapse of Communism simply returned Europe to a natural state of things, a historic spectacle where the will of the people had triumphed, overnight, over the forces of oppression. For the people of Eastern Europe, who had fought a decades-long struggle against the oppressive forces of Communism to arrive at this

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<sup>1</sup> The Tiananmen Square Massacre in China had occurred in June the same year so it is doubtful if events in Berlin overshadowed the gravity of events in China throughout the Asian continent.

<sup>2</sup> Applying the emergence of satellite technology to the domestic realm had been championed by the United States since the 1960s as a means to instill civil unrest in foreign countries. The broadcasting of western soap operas and cultural content alongside information was seen as a way to influence people so that they would bring about resistance and change themselves. In other words, a new front in hostilities was perceived that, in certain contexts, could do away with the need for traditional invasion. In the 1964 Committee on Foreign Affairs paper, *Winning the Cold War: The American ideological offensive*, they stated that, "Certain foreign policy objectives can be best pursued by dealing directly with the people of foreign countries, rather than with their governments. Through the use of modern instruments and technologies of communications, it is possible today to reach large and influential sections of national populations... to influence their attitudes, to motivate them to particular courses of actions. These groups, in turn, are capable of exerting, noticeable, even decisive pressure on their governments". See, Morley & Robbins.

point, the Autumn of Nations was nothing less than a miracle. History, however, also has a terrible knack of forgetting.

Although linked together by an overarching ideology each country developed its unique brand of politics that was a mix of exported hard-line Soviet rule and "homegrown socialist experiments of one kind or another" (Hoptman & Pospiszyl, (eds.) 2002, p.9). While some enjoyed a *peaceful transition to democracy, and all at different times to each other*, others were drawn out in blood, most notably, the 1989 Romanian revolution. Gržinić (2004) demonstrates further that, despite the mythic status that surrounds 1989, from an ex-Yugoslav perspective it was the death in 1980 of President Josip Tito<sup>3</sup> that marked the arrival of a new epoch, one that would be marked by a gradual but chronic descent into the hell of incendiary nationalisms and ethnic conflict. Hoptman and Pospiszyl (2002) present the case of Russia; that despite having their own unique history and culture, they were inextricably linked to Eastern Europe through the Communist project. Thus the thesis includes Russia within its frame of reference. In seeking a definition of 'Eastern Europe' that will serve the thesis, we discard any notion of Eastern Europe being one place, one culture, one time. We assert instead that, while 'East' and 'West' were essentially mythological structures created at the Yalta

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<sup>3</sup> On May 4, 1980 Tito died in Ljubljana after a long battle with his health and was buried in Belgrade in The House of Flowers. 209 delegates from 127 different world nations attended his funeral, making it the largest funeral of any political figure in the 20th century. The funeral procession attendees included Margaret Thatcher, Yasser Arafat, Saddam Hussein and Leonid Brezhnev among others.

conference in 1945<sup>4</sup>, the resulting histories “are produced under the sign of ‘not being the West’” (Sandomirskaia, 2007). Similarly, when we apply the words ‘Communist’ and ‘Communism’ to Eastern Europe we do so from an ideological perspective while, in reality, it was much closer to State capitalism. That is, that the Communist governments exclusively managed the means of production while, from a Marxist perspective at least, Communism advocates the people’s control of the means of production. While the secret world of Communist Europe is gradually becoming more widely known to the rest of the world through documentary films and history book best-sellers<sup>5</sup> the representation of its art practices is altogether less adequate. The fragmented nature of both the Communist sphere and the unstable transition period that followed its collapse makes the task of analysing Eastern European art practices infinitely more complex than any Western European equivalent would be. The Slovenian art group, Irwin, illustrate this contrast by applying an analogy regarding the problem of locating artistic production in Eastern Europe to Joseph Beuys : mention the name Beuys to anyone familiar with his work and they would “instantly perceive it in relation to an entire network of other artworks and artists, among whom Beuys occupies an important place” (Irwin, 2004). Conversely, the opposite is true if we reference an Eastern European artist since “one is at a loss to say just where and in what way such-and-such a work belongs” (Irwin, 2004). One of the many

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<sup>4</sup> In 1945, following the end of WW2, Britain, America, and Russia met at the Yalta Conference to draw up the administrative authorities of Europe. The geo-political division of the world was irrevocably decided at Yalta as a consequence of the Second World War. It set out to redraw the European map according to economic and political ‘zones of influence’. The subsequent carve up saw the Soviet Union administering the territory between East Germany and Russia, as far north as the Baltic coastline and south to the Mediterranean Sea. America held on to West Berlin. Russia itself did not come under the Yalta agreement since it remained one of the powers deciding the fate and administration of Europe. Nonetheless it is fair to say that for artists in the Soviet Union this was of no comfort and certainly did not bring any privilege.

<sup>5</sup> The historian Norman Davis is an example of this popularizing of European histories.

reasons for this, they claim, is not only as a result of the secretive nature by which non-official artists practised but was, "rather a constitutive part of the art system in these territories" (Irwin, 2004). Therefore, the emergence of a self-historicisation industry, such as the Irwin project belongs to, is highly significant and much needed, although a lack of knowledge is also attributable to the ambivalence and dominance of Western European art canons,

Even though Central [Eastern] Europe is nearby, the West did not reveal any serious interest in the art of its close neighbors before 1989 (Piotrowski, 2003).

However, it is not only within Western Europe that these histories remain elusive. Pospiszyl (2003) shows that within the region itself there is a large and eager audience who seek to discover what were to a large extent works produced clandestinely within their own, and neighbouring, countries. Therefore, we may question how these works might fit into existing European art histories or whether an altogether different method of reading and positioning is required. It is a concern that artists and art historians are being faced with in an enlarged, and increasingly enlarging, Europe: chiefly, its complexity in terms of how to approach the interfaces of cultural and historical spaces, and art histories and their representations. The issue is an extremely complex one, not only because of the conditions imposed upon artists and artistic production but also because understanding requires the acquisition of knowledge about context,

What is recounted... happened in distant, closed countries that, at least in the case of the Soviet Union, virtually did not exist on the artistic map of the world from the 1930's until the 1980's (Kabakov, cited in, Hoptman. & Pospiszyl, (eds.) 2002, pp. 7-8).



The accelerated pace of our globalized world seems recklessly prone at times to prefixing the context 'post-' to everything in its rush to create new discourses. And, quite rightly, a fair degree of doubt is cast on the validity of this practice since it inherently suggests that we are no longer 'there' but are somewhere 'new', and thus we must develop new stratagems accordingly. Therefore, in our search to find a legitimate way to talk about the post-Communist period the thesis adopts the definition offered by Emilia Palonen as being, "the era that started in the late Soviet sponsored period and that which stills bears the legacy of the previous era" (Palonen, 2008, p. 219). Altogether then, it is not simply a matter of (colonial) art history being updated or rewritten to become more inclusive, or accommodating, of a still emerging history of practices emanating from Eastern Europe. What is required is a commitment to engage the intersections of these art histories - the social, political, and cultural conditions under which artists operated - and to understand Eastern Europe as having a unique history of art practices that are vying to find their place alongside other global histories.

This thesis has been charged with bringing some order to this fractured state of affairs, and to contribute uniquely to our understanding of time-based art practices by teasing out inter-relationships between framed contexts, named conditions, and assumed behaviors. Time-based art has been singled out as the field of practice most capable of communicating temporal and corporeal experience (action art and performance art); an engagement with environmental impermanence (installation); and the deconstruction of the past in order to more fully understand our present (video and re-enactment). A number of such works have been selected for

analysis and are contextualized in relation to historical 'milestones', or events that, in one way or another, affected the internal dynamics of Eastern Europe, the effects of which resonated through the lives of artists. These milestones are not presented as anywhere near a complete guide to the complex history of the Soviet-era in Europe but, rather, they act as contextual frames that will assist the analysis of why particular artists produced particular works at particular times and how these works were produced. We will see as we move along that the activities of art and artists share a state of emergence with the contexts from which they sprung, and that we are wholly reliant on these contexts to ascertain the work's meaning. We will understand them as exemplar examples of what became known as non-official art, that is, art that dissented in one way or another from the official realm as was promoted by the ideologically dominant political discourse.

At this point it will be useful to set out the primary questions that the thesis will engage with.

1. What was the past, how did it impact on artistic production, and how did artists respond to it?
2. What is the status of trace documents (image, film, and text) through which we know these works, and what insights into context do they offer beyond mere representation of visual acts?
3. What strategies do artists employ that allow new readings of the past for our present age, and what forms of memory are being engaged?
4. How did artists respond to the disintegration of the Balkan region? And how did artists throughout Eastern Europe respond to the transition process?

By approaching these questions as a sequence of chapters in this written element, we will see that they are overall linked to our enquiry into the Communist and post-Communist context. The thesis will demonstrate its analysis of selected works and make clear its unique contribution to our understanding and knowledge of these art practices and to the historicization process of Eastern European art.

## **2. Methodologies and Curatorial Strategies.**

Since this written element is only one part of the thesis we will pause now to draw an outline of the methodologies and strategies that the project overall engages. A three-pronged curatorial model has been conceived that contributes new knowledge to the field in three ways: first, there is this written element set out in this introduction and in the following chapters. Second, the thesis has created a unique Internet resource that contains the thesis and displays the works featured alongside available primary research materials. Third, the re-enactment by this author of a small number of historical works from the Eastern European past that we have come to know through their lingering traces. Regarding what constitutes trace the thesis proposes it as comprising those documents that exist as relics of past works and which prove the work's existence and sheds light on past events, for example, a photograph or text. These traces are the mediated experience of works that prove that they happened in other places and in other times. While the issue of trace is complex and deserving of its own research study, we can assert that trace allows us to create a particular archaeology of absent realities. Trace documents carry not only the artistic and ideological references that "the document absorbs from society and carries in itself" (Guéniot, 2009, p. 4) but are also capable of revealing what is not shown, whether unintentionally or by design. Trace can be employed as a strategy taken by artists in situations where dialogue with others is proscribed, trace can act as a basic recording of the physical state of an artwork within the time and space of the art event, or trace can be appended to an already performed work in order to

complete its meaning. Thus, the status of trace can vary widely from one artist to another, and from one work to another, so that eventually we come to view it as "a contested subject and medium in itself" (Merewether, 2006). In regard to the first two elements of written survey and visual display, we can say that, alongside trace documents, additional material has been collected from a range of other sources, including artists, theorists, critics, curators, as well as discussions between artists and this author. The process of collecting these primary sources placed great emphasis on collecting voices from within the region itself so as to be reflexive of its own contemporaneous discourses and histories. If, "the understanding of cultural production begins with the revelation of its sources" (Hoptman & Pospiszyl, (eds.) 2002, pp, 10-11), then the use of indigenous material locates the thesis in far closer proximity to a credible historicization process of Eastern European art than would have been possible to achieve if it had relied on Western European sources. While there are many levels to this argument it would be timely to recall the example of Beuys proposed earlier by Irwin. While Western European art history is, in comparison, 'given', through the meticulous documentation and referencing of aesthetic disciplines, networks, and countries, in Eastern Europe no such cartography or canonicity exists<sup>6</sup>. While non-official art production did not lend itself to an active historicizing process, due in part to its clandestine nature, inter-regional networks operated differently from those in the West: travel was severely restricted in most countries, ruling out opportunities for foreign exchange and exhibition

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to consider the effects of Yalta on art produced in the West. Art historian Piotr Piotrowski considers it to similarly have a character of being political even if "less seen... in the West art was in the shadow of Yalta also" (Piotrowski, 2009).

support. Similarly, the lack of any art market in Eastern Europe produced different values through which work was made and would be judged.

The creation of this nonconformist tradition was impelled by the fact that an outsider in the Soviet empire stood alone against a tremendous state machine, a great Leviathan that threatened to engulf him. To preserve one's identity in this situation, one had to create a separate value system, including a system of aesthetic values (Bakshtein, 1995, cited in (eds.) Rosenfeld & Dodge, p. 332).

Thus the value of a work of art was not determined by trend or categorization but "in its interpretation, its message. We do not judge the object, but what it tells us" (Ilya Kabakov, 1995). Kabakov points to an even more fundamental problem where, "deprived of a genuine viewer, critic, or historian the artist himself [had to] guess what his work meant 'objectively'" (Kabakov, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 8). It follows then that, if in our present day there is no coherent strategy, or strategies, through which to approach these practices, or more accurately, the contextualizing of these practices, artists will stay "deprived of a genuine viewer" (Kabakov, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 8). The 1994 exhibition of Eastern European art *Europa, Europa*<sup>7</sup> in Bonn has been roundly criticized for its disregard to context. It brought together a range of artists from the 'East' but made no distinction as to places other than they weren't from the 'West'. Further, work from the pre-Yalta era was displayed alongside post-Yalta work, thus disregarding a pivotal turning point in both European history and the subsequent conditions for artistic production (Piotrowski, 2006). *Europa, Europa* is considered the paradigm that all later shows of Eastern European art were set against since,

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<sup>7</sup> The exhibition was held at Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik, Bonn, 1994.

It inscribed itself in the perspective of its mythology: into the myth of European universalism as a neutral tool of writing art history... and showed that there was no "other Europe," just Europe (Piotrowski, 2006).

A paradox appears then: the fact that such an exhibition could even take place shows that there is interest in the works despite the disregard to context. That is, while it is relatively simple to exhibit works to a willing viewer it is altogether another matter to equip the viewer adequately so they can discuss them reflexively. The case of *Europa, Europa* demonstrates that, in the hands of some curators, "art from Eastern Europe is still often approached... as an obscure margin" (Pachmanová, 2003). However, it can be from the "powerful position" (Piotrowski, 2001) of these margins that a critical discourse with the centre can be created. What is required is to find a language that will allow an analysis of these histories that reflect their unique contexts. It is a task that we must acknowledge carries an innate sense of impossibility since, "a system fragmented to such an extent, first of all, prevents any serious possibility of comprehending the art created during socialist times as a whole" (Irwin, 2004). At the same time, however, this thesis is only one system or proposition among several more, each of which contributes positively to a research community that is passionate about how we read artistic activity from what was Eastern Europe.

In the past the agora was the public meeting place of civil society; people would meet to discuss matters of interest, goods would be sold, and entertainment would hold forth. It was, overall, a socializing realm defined by its own contributors. More recently the agora has been "invaded, colonised and destroyed by totalitarianism" (Martin, 2000), and the exchange of ideas, cultural activity, and economic markets censored; a set

of prohibitions that led to a state of withering. In the post-Communist world it is interesting to conceptualise a rebuilding of the agora as the site where the historicizing of Eastern European art takes place. When this thesis talks about curating, or displaying, art works what it actually means is that it is putting forward a form of exhibition (Piotrowski, 2001). Piotrowski<sup>8</sup>, who has written at length on post-colonialism in relation to the west's reading of Eastern European art, points us to one meaning of the word 'exhibition' as "submitting for inspection, a public examination" (Piotrowski, 2001). He shows that, after the collapse of the Communist system, art from Eastern Europe was subject to a "sort of inspection... from the 'other' side of the continent; knocking unexpectedly on the doors of the 'right' side of Europe" (Piotrowski, 2001). The point he is making is an entirely valid one: power lies in the domain of the 'examiners' and it doesn't help to have examiners, such as in our example of *Europa, Europa*, who are not knowledgeable, or are disregarding, of context. Zdenka Badovinac proposes that Eastern European artists do not necessarily wish to be included in already existing systems but to be a part of a new, and bolder, system,

When Eastern European artists raise questions of their own history of art or history of ideas, this is not because they are striving for the right to be included in the already existing system of canonical history. What they want is a new and different system of history in general. That is why the question of redefining history is not a question of identity, but a question of the priorities of today, one of which is also a possible global history, or better, a new system of different possible histories. The active difference of Eastern European artists is in their fight against amnesia, against forgetting a past that doesn't fit in with the current political or commercialised forms of communication (Badovinac, 2007).

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<sup>8</sup> Piotrowski is one of the selectors for East.Art.Map



Piotrowski proposes one solution where art histories may be broken down into horizontal frames, for example, "around some particular key dates in both a history of art and politics, such as 1956, 1968-70, and 1980" (Piotrowski, 2001, p. 209). While this shares some sensibilities with the thesis there is a different point of departure in our interests. The most critical aspect the thesis adheres to in its analysis of Eastern European art is that each country developed their own particular discourses and practices in relation to the unique social, political, and cultural conditions they were subject to.

As an example we can take the case of Czechoslovakia in the late 1960-70s. Following the brutal suppression of the Prague Spring, Czechoslovakian borders were effectively sealed to the import of western art and ideas whereas, in Poland, the government actively promoted cultural relations with the west, at least on an incoming basis and, crucially, as Piotrowski (2006) reveals, imposed no restrictions on art historical research. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that artists had different frames of local references to respond to. Piotrowski's idea remains close to the thesis however and interestingly invites an analogy: while the Polish trade union *Solidarność* was built around a horizontal structure, and was thus able to forge links with other party organisations and become an extremely effective opposition, Communism itself was a vertical political system (Machin, 1983). This impacted on many fronts including artists' networks, which have been shown to suffer from a lack of horizontal maturity. However, in our present age we must also acknowledge that the modes of preservation and display of art have now substantially entered the digital age and allow us to solve, retrospectively

at least, a part of Kabakov's problem concerning a "genuine viewer" (Kabakov, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 8).



[Fig. 1] Kenny McBride. (2009) agora8.org website banner. Photo: Kenny McBride

With this in mind the thesis has constructed an Internet resource - *agora8.org Contemporary Art Histories From Eastern Europe, Time-Based* - to display a number of works and materials gathered during the research period and around which the thesis has been conceptualised [Fig. 1]. It thus acts as both a curated space and a platform for the thesis. The word 'agora' as a project name was chosen to reflect the conceptual reasons mentioned earlier and actively supports the argument for art historicization outwith the dominant western model. '8' is adjoined to denote the eternal dialogue in art. It shares similar sensibilities with a small number of exemplar web resources such as *Art Margins*, *i\_CAN*, *SocialEast Forum*, and *East.Art.Map*, the latter which extends the invitation, "History is not given, please help to construct it" (Irwin, 2001). Published as a periodical three times a year *Art Margins* reflects the "processes of differentiation that continue to shape contemporary art in the region today" (*Art Margins*, 1999), and has been the primary online source for the thesis. *East.Art.Map* aims at, "(re)constructing the history of art in Eastern Europe between 1945 and the present beyond ex-Socialist 'official' chronicles" (*East.Art.Map*, 2001). *i\_CAN* acts as an, "open platform for

cross-cultural exchange and collaboration throughout East-Central Europe" (i\_CAN, 1999), and SocialEast Forum offers, "a platform for innovative, transnational research on the art and visual culture of Eastern Europe " (Social East Forum, 2006). All, however, clearly aim to fill gaps in knowledge and to counteract the lack of traditional print publications in the field. There are, of course, many other Internet sources engaging with the field of study but they are, on the whole, far less technologically mature and not curated around such defined frames of enquiry. Chief among these are the primary sources that the thesis draws on and that are, on the whole, either published online as individual articles or as part of an exhibition archive. Furthermore, they are overwhelmingly and chaotically spread over many websites so that the researcher must traverse a minefield of search results, only and often to arrive at less than complete information. agora8.org displays material in such a way as to reveal the primary sources that the thesis prioritizes between art and its social, political, and cultural contexts. It thus reflects a unique curatorial remit. That is, that it treats each artistic production as a unique work that has emerged from an individual's argument with particular contexts and the imposed order that they were subject to, and which impacted on their means of production. It does not situate work within chrono-frames as Piotrowski and East.Art.Map do, although it does support a horizontal structuring of history, but privileges the unique individual's exposure and response to landmark events, the 'milestones' we encountered earlier. It does not imagine that one work of art could ever speak authoritatively about an entire system spread fractiously across a vast area and timeframe, and that contains within it diverse demographics. It does

believe, however, that one artist can respond to a locally lived and experienced situation in such a way that their activity reveals their own individual emergence within a larger historical process of emergence. We will come to understand the Utopian drive behind the Communist project as a project of emergence distinct from any other contemporary ideology. When we view these manifestations now we approach them from a contemporary spatial reference that allows archaeology of the past, a "trying to figure out from the ruins what really happened" (Abramović, 2005). Captured in images they become, in our present day, the mediated experience of the past. Arns (2007) argues that the mediated realm allows history to be all around us, to be ever present, whilst authenticity of the past is prone to a weakening through the status imposed upon the image as the bearer of events. A more embodied, or experiential, relationship with what lies beyond mediated representation means to enter the image and to create it anew, to interpret and place a, "previously recorded gesture into a completely altered reality" (Klímová, 2006, p. 7). The third pillar of the thesis' curation examines re-enactment as an artistic strategy through the author's practical engagement with four works from the Eastern European past. By choosing to re-enact historical works of other artists a particular aspect of dialogism is acknowledged within trace documents that forces a blurring of the roles of artist and spectator. This can be as true of corporeal experience as it of empathy. We will understand these re-enactments as a mechanism that allows an experiential discourse with works that have influenced this author in one way or another even although they were not witnessed as live events. On a secondary level these re-enactments compliment the author's

longstanding interest in performance as a mechanism through which to engage notions of memorial and requiem. Whichever way the viewer approaches and responds to these works one fact presents itself clearly: re-enactments demonstrate how historical work can be transferred from “the original environment in terms of exterior [to] a different socio-political context and a different period” (Pospiszyl, 2005:74). These concerns will be fully analysed when we look at the works in detail further on. The author has selected the following three performances for re-enactment,

1. Karel Miler (1977) *Close to the Clouds*. Prague region, Czechoslovakia.
2. Nenad Bogdanovic (1984). *A Minute of Silence for Performances*. Odzaci, FYR/Serbia.
3. Balint Szombathy (1972). *Lenin in Budapest*. Budapest, Hungary.

A further three performances have been devised by the author in response to the histories and materials unearthed during the research period.

1. *Meant Lament* (2006). Piotrkow Tribunalska, Poland.
2. *Tutaj Między Teraz* (Here Between Now). (2008). Tarnow, Poland.
3. *Requiem for The Line* (2009). Giswil, Switzerland.

In order to allow the main body of the text to flow more freely the documentation of these re-enactments and performances are set out within their own section, both in the written element and on the website.

### 3. Defining the Communist Project as Emergence.

We will now turn our attention to Communism as a universalist system not designed for leaving. The truth, in fact, is quite the opposite; it was designed for arrival. The real deceit of Communism was to make citizens believe that in order to create the future Utopia all life meanwhile must be directed towards its construction,

Future generations will enjoy social justice at the cost of a cynical acceptance of an outrageous historical injustice – the exclusion of all past generations from Socialist, or Communist, society (Groys, 2006, p.14).

In his analysis of emergence Mikhail Bakhtin identifies one unique model where, "man's individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence" (Bakhtin et al, 1986, p. 23). Bakhtin contrasts this type of emergence as the character of a world in progress against a world that is "ready made and basically quite stable" (Bakhtin et al, 1986, p. 23). In order to draw a critical distinction between the 'ready made' and 'stable' world that, for the purpose of illustration, we will propose as western democracy, and the 'unmade' and 'unstable' ideological world of Utopian-minded ideology, we can say that the Communist Utopian project was entirely a project of historical emergence. That is to say that, since the fundamental aim of the Communist project, Utopia, did not exist actually or physically in any shape or form but, rather, was conceived entirely as one actively generating its own process of becoming, it was thus concerned with erasing all previous histories of the world in order that its own inner logic would take on flesh.

They [the Communists] cling to their own conception of man, which recognizes as human only those individuals who are willing to live in the realization of an idea whose future is yet to be implemented (Chalupecký, 1949, cited in (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 35).

As Groys demonstrates, "we must say that Communism is a universal futuristic project... in the name of the future, not of the past" (Groys, 2003). Thus, when we consider non-official art within the Eastern European context we can understand it as a movement that, "emerges along with the world and reflects the historical emergence of the world itself" (Bakhtin et al, 1986, p. 23). In other words, the artistic productions of non-official artists are a kind of heteroglossia: at one and the same time they act independently from the dominant discourse by rejecting propagandist whim while, at the same time, they are absolutely dependent on that discourse for their meaning. In Bakhtinian terms the dominant and ideological language of the State is a "centripetal force" (ed. Morris, 1994, p. 15) that unifies their sloganeering as the one and only truth. Monologic by nature, it neither invites nor engages criticism or dialogue, but proposes itself as the sole "unitary perception of truth" (ed. Morris, 1994, p. 15). Without the possibility for dialogism there exists only monologism. What defines the character of heteroglossia, on the other hand, is that by being a "centrifugal force... [it] stratifies and fragments ideological thought into multiple views of the world" (ed. Morris, 1994, p. 15). Heteroglossia is, "saturated with ideology" (ed. Holquist, 1981, p. 274) and produces "multiple views" that are always linked to the dominant discourse through an oppositional and antagonistic quality. That is, they do not, and cannot, exist in any other way than as products of their relationship to the dominant discourse. In the examples of works that we will look at we will

see that they all share this quality of heteroglossia: they all "aimed sharply and polemically against the official language" (ed. Morris, 1994, p. 115). Thus, each work exhibits, and relies on, its total context as the driving force that has sprung from within an axiology of heteroglossia. Emergence as a discourse, then, is a common denominator in both the ideology of the Communist system and the artistic manifestations we will look at, although the purposes for applying it is at odds one with the other. We may illustrate this by saying that, in art activity, emergence is what allows process to be an ongoing event, that it demands a permanent repositioning of oneself against the closed and localized world of ideology (Ippolita, 2009). Furthermore, and crucial to our understanding of emergence in relation to the non-official artist, is that it is wholly grounded in where it is coming from. In this critical point it is at variance to the project of Communism. In order to convince the masses that the future Utopia was a cause of which to be proud and to actively participate in, the Soviet's undertook the most extravagant propaganda campaign in the history of the world. Groys, in his curatorial essay that accompanied the exhibition *Dream Factory Communism*<sup>9</sup> frames it thus,

The art of Stalinist Socialist Realism was a huge promotion campaign beating the drum for the building of Communism. Communist agitation, which is far closer to Western commercial advertising than to Nazi propaganda, was not aimed at a limited target group but rather called on all mankind to purchase a product named Communism (Groys & Hollein (eds.), 2004).

The following chapter examines how artists tackled this 'promotion campaign' through appropriation of its symbols and images, and how this method produced its own non-official narrative of the Communist project.

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<sup>9</sup> The exhibition was held at Shirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt 24 September 2003 - 4 January 2004.



## Chapter 1. The Communist Simulacrum as a Ready Made.

*Artists: Komar and Melamid (Soviet Union/USA), Ilya Kabakov (Soviet Union/USA)*

When Nikita Khrushchev visited the United States in 1959 it is said that high on his list of priorities was a visit to Disneyland. Russian theorist Mikhail Epstein speculates whether this was fueled by a desire to see whether, "Americans had succeeded in creating as perfect a simulation of reality as the Soviet model" (Epstein, 1995) since, quite clearly, the ability to produce a model of reality made them masters of simulacra. While Khrushchev was denied his wish on security grounds much of the simulacrum that he controlled would become appropriated by a number of Russian artists, most notably by Sots Art and later the Moscow Conceptualist movement. As we have seen, heteroglossia is indexically linked to the dominant discourse and thus any art produced within it also bears the 'language' of that discourse. While 1970s Pop Art in the west emerged as a critique of the over-production of consumer culture, in Russia the pioneering artist duo Komar and Melamid formed the Sots Art movement. This was an appropriation of the art of Socialist Realism<sup>10</sup> and was, "concerned with the over-production of ideology" (Komar & Melamid, 1978, p. 2). And like their Pop Art contemporaries, the practice of Komar and Melamid incorporates a wide range of disciplines including painting, objects, text, and performance, as well as a declared fondness for all

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<sup>10</sup> The naming and impetus behind 'Socialist Realism' is widely attributed to Maxim Gorky who in 1934, largely as a reaction to the greater restrictions of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers group who wrote about industrial or agricultural workers, set out four key principles that would define Socialist Realism and allow them to write about things other than industry and labour. These were that it must verify reality, must promote collectivism as the central unifying feature of man, be optimistic, and educational. See, Sruve.G. '*Russian Literature under Lenin and Stalin: 1917-1953*' (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971)

things conceptual,

The West still accepts the idea of the artist as an individual. We work together as a unit and express no personal cause of our own, but a social tendency (Komar and Melamid, cited in Miller-Keller, 1978, p. 2).

Even if only one of us creates some of the projects and works, we usually sign them together. We are not just an artist, we are a movement (Komar & Melamid, 2009).

Their *détournement* of the symbols of the Soviet's "huge promotion campaign" (Groys, 2004) took the symbolic language of totalitarian power, subjected it to an antagonistic critique, and re-presented it using the same stylistic language associated with Socialist Realism. They shared with American Pop Art the fundamental purpose of revealing an "understanding of modern life and the products of mass civilization" (Komar & Melamid, 1978). Sots Art, then, was a unique blend of Dada, Socialist Realism, and mass culture, and where the mass culture was the ideologically driven Soviet simulacrum. The appeal of Sots Art lay in its strong sense of irony and the ability to make official Socialist Realism a "phenomena of opposition" (Titu, 2003). Their antagonistic heteroglossia produced the likeness of a "real" social realist artist who, owing to absolute imbecility, just brought all the ideological directives to a logical end" (Kovalev, 2002). In 1972 they were expelled from the powerful Union of Graphic Artists, Youth Division, for "the distortion of Soviet reality and nonconformity with the principles of Socialist Realism" (Komar & Melamid, cited in Miller-Keller, 1978, p. 4). As a result they were subjected to State surveillance, denied employment opportunities, studio space, and could only purchase poor quality materials (Matrix, 1978, p. 2).

While it is one thing to *détourner* two-dimensional images into new images

that critique the discourse of the original, it is an altogether different thing to perform antagonism in a live sense. In their 1974 performance, *Hamburgers Made Out of the Newspaper Pravda*, presented in a Moscow apartment, Komar and Melamid make an ironic play on the title of the Russian newspaper *Pravda* (Truth) by approaching it from a literal point [Fig. 2].



[Fig. 2] Komar & Melamid. (1974) *Hamburgers Made Out of the Newspaper 'Pravda'*. [Moscow, private apartment]. Photo: Valentin Serov.

Identifying truth as having a nourishing quality while the newspaper is, paradoxically, an organ of the State, they demonstrated to their audience how to prepare 'hamburgers' made from copies of *Pravda*. Taking the

State's claim that ideology was food for the people Komar and Melamid, quite literally, set about meeting the reasonable demands of the audience: citizens want to be fed. They ground up copies of the newspaper in a meat grinder and fed them to the audience (Dyogot, 2000). In his analysis of Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin distinguishes the grotesque body as one that is incomplete and in contrast to the completed classical body that is an entity separate from all other bodies. While the classical body of high antiquity is thus disconnected from the world at large, the grotesque body is wholly alive in the emergence of the world, it is a "body in the act of becoming" (ed. Morris, 1994, p. 233). Bakhtin wrote at length on the intention of the official body to destroy the individual body and in so doing drew attention to the Russian context of the body as a terrorized body, an "object of violence" (Bakshtein, cited in (ed.) Badovinac, 1999, p. 145). Through the act of laughter and eating the incomplete grotesque body can overcome forces of oppression (ed. Morris, 1994, p. 195). By incorporating external material structures, and through joining with others, the grotesque body transgresses its own limits and makes the world whole. The "triumphal banquet" (ed. Morris, 1994, p. 229) of the newspaper *Pravda* is served as a metaphor of ideological oppression to the assembled crowd that the incomplete body can devour,

The encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth... Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself (ed. Morris, 1994, p. 228).

And, since "no meal can be sad... [the feast] is equivalent to "conception and birth" (ed. Morris, 1994, p. 230). This social body breaks from the boundaries set by the body of the State; it takes the organ of the State into

itself and devours it. It is a transgressive act that it is unique to the heteroglot since the State cannot likewise adopt the concerns of those it considers to be dissenting of its discourse. Dyogot (2000) shows that through this theatrical setting they, "demonstrate their subversive identification with the authorities... to represent the Soviet citizen's banal daily fare" (Dyogot, 2000). In the same year they made the performance *Art Belongs to the People*, again in a private apartment [Fig.3].



[Fig. 3] Komar & Melamid. (1974) *Art Belongs to the People*. [Moscow, private apartment]. Photo: The artists.

Set against a background of nationalist music, Komar and Melamid mimicked the Soviet police and shouted orders into microphones to four

“artistically untrained people to create huge patriotic canvases” (Komar, 2009). The police had caught wind of the performance and burst into the apartment,

They asked us about anti-Soviet pagan rituals. Luckily, Alex [Melamid], as the owner of the apartment, was not detained in the Moscow police office. It was the first time in my life that I spent the night under arrest. In the morning, without any explanation, we were all freed (Komar, 2009).

In 1976, after a number of their works had been smuggled out of Russia by visiting western critics, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York hosted their first American show. The Soviet authorities, however, had refused them travel permits to personally attend. In a defiant response Komar and Melamid played an original musical composition, *Passport from Codes*, in a Moscow apartment [Fig. 4].



[Fig. 4] Komar & Melamid with Charlotte Moorman. (1976) *Passport: Codes*. [Moscow, private apartment and with guests in fifteen cities around the world]. Photo: Peggy Kaplan.

They had formulated a unique coding system that they applied to the visa restrictions printed within the Russian passport and thereby arrived at the notation (Miller-Keller, 1978, p.3). Simultaneously, in fifteen countries around the world friends and followers played the same composition (Komar and Melamid, 2009). The theatricality in Komar and Melamid's performances is made even more festive since they took place within private apartments. And, if we step back a few years, we will understand why the work was located within the domestic realm and not in an official institution.

Although Khrushchev denounced Stalin and his personality cult at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in 1956 he still retained the machinery

of the secret service and the familiar language of ideology. Nonetheless, a moderate thaw in relations between artists and the State occurred and, at Khrushchev's behest, Alexander Solzhenitsyn published his 1962 groundbreaking novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a record of one day in the life of a falsely accused former soldier man in one of Stalin's Gulag's. A number of artists responded to the favorable change in conditions and became emboldened enough to publicly emerge as a dissident art movement, whereas previously, under Stalin, they would simply have been exiled, imprisoned, or disappeared. Khrushchev had worked to improve the neglect in housing conditions and a consequence of this was that artists began to get their own studios, or shared spaces, with colleagues where they would practice and show their work to one another. At this time outdoor exhibitions and samizdat's (dissident publications of prohibited literature and poetry) were the primary means of artists showing work to one another. It was also, at the same time, a period when dissent activity could transgress into the realm of conformity with the principles of the State (Kagarlitsky, 2002). It would turn out to be a short-lived romance. On December 1st 1962, Khrushchev attended the outdoor opening of the 30th anniversary exhibition of the Moscow Union of Artists. On show were abstract works by the artists of the Left whose individualistic expressionism represented the liberalism of the 'thaw'. Khrushchev was in a difficult position: should he support what had come to be seen as products of a progressive society, or should he criticize them as decadent manifestations influenced by exterior forces. In the end he found a third way: he judged them to be "private psycho-pathological distortions of the public conscience" (Erofeev, cited in (eds.) Hoptman &



Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 42). The authorities had stopped applying the clinical terminology that Stalin had favoured when judging 'individualistic' art but they hadn't given up trying to heal the social body (Erofeev, cited in (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 42). At that point it became apparent that any hope of a sustained liberalization of cultural practices had been shortly lived and, in the ensuing re-regulation of culture by the State, artists now found themselves once more increasingly isolated and unable to exhibit their works through the official channels. They responded to this exclusion from official culture by creating a 'second culture' that acted counter to the official realm but, crucially, not in the sense of an opposition. We will later come to understand how this second culture would be theorized and applied effectively in Czechoslovakia following the suppression of the 1968 Prague Spring. The 1962 exhibition became the accepted date when 'non-official art' was born. And, while no explicit order was given, the message that resonated throughout the entire Communist region was that artists were expected to create works that would promote the Communist project. And, since individualist expression was the antithesis of the Communist project, artists who chose to pursue an individualist path outwith this standard were roundly cut off from any institutional support whatsoever, and remained so until the system collapsed almost thirty years later<sup>11</sup> (Erofeev, 2002). While Scammell notes that an "informal movement" (Scammell, cited in (eds.) Rosenfeld & Dodge, 1995, p. 49) had existed from 1956 until about 1986, this thesis considers Erofeev's (2002) description of Khrushchev's 'thaw' period, that saw many artists frequently cross the lines of official and non-official practice, and its ending

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<sup>11</sup> While there were marked differences in the application of this rule between the different bloc countries it was, nevertheless, adopted overall.

with Khrushchev's denouncement of the 1962 exhibition, as the most authoritative origin of non-official art.



[Fig. 5] Bulldozer exhibition, Moscow, 1974. Photo: New York Times.

By the mid-1970s the movement had attracted widespread attention internationally, not least because of the success of Komar and Melamid, whose works had been smuggled out of Russia to the United States, and who had been kept abreast of developments in the west by the artist and Newsweek critic Douglas Davies (Miller-Keller, 1978, p. 2) in his frequent visits to Moscow. The authorities bent to increasing cultural pressure and worked to find a more rational relationship with non-official artists. What triggered this unprecedented climb-down was the destruction of a non-

official art exhibition that had been set up on waste ground in the Beliaevo suburb of Moscow in September 1974 [Fig. 5]. Western critics, who had been in attendance, condemned it for its savagery: bulldozers were driven through the exhibition and the remains set on fire.



[Fig. 6] Komar & Melamid. (1974) *Double Self Portrait*. [Moscow, private apartment]. Photo: The artists.

Amongst the works had been the painting *Double Self Portrait* by Komar and Melamid in which they were portrayed, in a Socialist Realism style, as Lenin and Stalin [Fig. 6]. Somewhat ironically it was the KGB who were given the task of managing this new relationship with the non-official realm (Erofeev, cited in (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 42). Following the attack artists withdrew and regrouped once more to the domestic realm since,

No matter what the forms and situations in which non-official art made its appearance in artistic life, a room in the communal flat remained, as of old, its habitual abode (Erofeev, cited in (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 42).

Families and strangers shared facilities within these communal apartments in line with the ideological aim of creating a distinct model of collective living. Occasionally it happened that a group of artists managed to share such a place and would refer to it as their 'barracks', as in the case of the Sretensky Boulevard Group whose members included Ilya Kabakov, Eduard Shteinberg, Vladimir Yankilevsky, and Viktor Pivovarov. Kabakov and Bulatov would later become key figures in the Moscow Conceptualist movement (Kharitonova, 2007). Alongside the domesticity of everyday family life these apartments became distinguished by a specific cultural representation that was forged from its total context, in the dialogic relations of multiple realities. While artists in the west theorized the blurring of boundaries between art and everyday life, non-official artists in the Soviet Union quite simply lived it, attempting to carve out a space within communal living where they could produce art. Their art, therefore, was not found in intellectualizing reality but in manipulating it towards artistic survival. Ilya Kabakov recalls these almost futile attempts,

For God's sake, move away a little! Don't you see I'm working! Why must you put the soup right here, Mom? (Kabakov, 1987, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 43).

Erofeev illustrates further that, amidst the blurring of artist clutter and domestic utensils, "there was no distance, not even a symbolic one" (Erofeev, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 43). The context proved key to the character of nonofficial art having an, "intentionally pitiful form" (Erofeev, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl,

2002, p. 43). Indeed, not only did the context make it impossible to apply sophisticated methods to their artistic productions but also it would have been considered, "absurd to hold forth in a high style at home, in one's family" (Erofeev, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 43). Instead they fashioned their art more from the collective downbeat realism of everyday life. They took inspiration from the insignificant and monotonous routines of everyday Soviet life that were, "made taboo not because of their potential political explosiveness, but because of their sheer ordinariness, their all-too-human scale" (Boym, 1999). In other words, it would be ridiculous to create magnificent objects and abstract worlds from within an intergenerational environment where people were washing, cooking, minding babies, seeing children off to school, the artist minding to turn the cooker off in ten minutes irrespective of what they were doing, clearing a space amongst their work for the family dinner and, somehow, managing the relationship between a chaotically domestic realm and the simulacrum of the State. Instead, artists avoided making any grandiose or pompous gesture. This everyday material base is exemplified in Kabakov's 1980 time-based performative painting, *Schedule of Slop Pail Dumping* [Fig. 7] in which the ritualistic emptying of the communal slops over a six-year period is documented. Similarly, the non-existence of any art market dictated to some extent a rejection of object-based work since there was no buyer and no place to store them. In the 1980s this would create a movement called *Aptart* (literally, art in apartments) in which artists from a range of disciplines and styles were united under a common investigation into the relations between art and reality.

За чистотой!		Расписание выноса поддонной бедра на дому № 24 подвезд. 6 улицы и.л. Бардина ЖЭБ № 8 Бауманского р-на.					
		Владимир Рубин	Мария Ларина	Андрей Козлов	Виктор Мухоморов	Александр Давыдов	
1979 г.	1	Александр И. А.	Андрей И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	2	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	3	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
1980 г.	1	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	2	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	3	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
1981 г.	1	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	2	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	3	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
1982 г.	1	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	2	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	3	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
1983 г.	1	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	2	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	3	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
1984 г.	1	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	2	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	
	3	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	Александр И. А.	

[Fig. 7] Ilya Kabakov. (1980) *Schedule of Slop Pail Dumping*. [Moscow, private apartment]. Photo: Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

Often working collaboratively it was a device that allowed them to “dethrone the myth of the artist as a demiurge, an enigmatic lone genius” (Abalakova & Zhigalov, 1982). Truth, and the act of being honest with oneself and one’s context, was the prerequisite requirement from which to create: art became a form of existence and a reflection of that existence, a pursuit of reality then, rather than a mastering of technique. Erofeev contrasts the “intentionally pitiful form” (Erofeev, cited in (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 43) of nonofficial art produced in the communal apartment environment with the productive spaces of the West,

It bears little resemblance to any form of well-adjusted commodity production, a manufacture whereby the market is regularly supplied with standard-quality goods. This creativity was rather like playing music at home: it may be very skillful, and the musician may be talented, but it still does not go beyond being a mixture of a divertissement and an emotional confession; it is always improvisation, a hint at the possibility of a high-standard performance, which is out of place in the privacy of the home (Erofeev, cited in (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 43).

Paradoxically, the very fact that artists drew almost exclusively on these experiences meant that, over time, they fashioned an intensely vibrant artistic movement that, retrospectively, would be seen to have authored a comprehensive non-official narrative of Soviet ideology. If Lenin was "our landscape, and we painted it" (Melamid, cited in, Paperny, 2000) then the entire Communist project was one gigantic readymade that awaited the artist's signature.

When we consider how this non-official narrative came into being we are reminded of Baudrillard's definition of postmodernism as a simulacrum where representation precedes and determines the real so that, "never again will the real have the chance to produce itself" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2). Epstein locates two waves of postmodernism that he distinguishes as unique to the Soviet context. While Socialist Realism lacked the, "ironic self-consciousness of mature postmodernism" (Epstein, 1995) and thus cannot strictly be categorized as such, it can neither be considered unconnected from it since it attempted to create a hyperreality which is, "neither truthful nor false but consists of ideas which *become* reality for millions of people" (Epstein, 1995). A second wave of Modernism arrived in the 1960s that bore nostalgia for the futurism and surrealism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Artistic movements in the 1970-80s, such as Sots Art and the Moscow Conceptualists, were largely unaware of Modernism whose legacy had eluded them due to Stalin's rejection of it in favor of Socialist Realism. Instead, and, "in opposition to the "neo-modernist" generation of the sixties" (Epstein, 1995), they aired their own nostalgia for the Soviet lifestyle as depicted in Socialist Realism, and "which provides them with congenial ideological material for their conceptual works" (Epstein, 1995).

They considered Socialist Realism to be similar to the historical avant-garde through a preponderance of, "highly conventional semiotic devices, sets of clichés and idioms that are devoid of any personal emphasis or intentional self-expression" (Epstein, 1995). Beginning with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian avant-garde generation the construction of such a world was, "completed by the government itself" (Dyogot, 2000). Thus, this second wave of postmodernism, that included artists and critics such as Ilya Kabakov, Komar and Melamid, and Boris Groys, pitted the 'non-existence' of the individual body against the nostalgia and glory radiating from the propaganda materials that promoted a collective body and a Utopian future. Even Russian Conceptualism had, "dutifully reflected the Soviet art by acknowledging and examining its decisions, particularly its decision to favor total figurative representation" (Dyogot, 2000) and, when the system collapsed in the early 1990s, Russia was able at last to enter a third phase of postmodernism. This phase would reveal the precedence of the simulacrum, that is, the real of the Soviet era would be seen to have already existed in what had been banned while foreign activity came to be introduced to a wide audience. While the death of Stalin weakened the status of Socialist Realism, not least because much of it had included Stalin himself, and artists questioned the role of art in the service the State, it underwent what amounted to a revival in the early 1960s that was linked to advances in technology.

Possibly the most spectacular event of the Khrushchev era was that he presided over the world's first manned space flight in 1961. Two years after Yuri Gagarin's tremendous feat Valentina Tereshkova followed as the first woman in space. Gagarin's achievement has become one of the most



enduring images of Russia, after Lenin, and Stalin. The iconic images of the smiling, heroic cosmonaut and his rocket propelled the ordinary Soviet citizen to dream of new worlds. Of course, distraction of the masses from their "dreary and banal" (Dyogot, 2000) everyday life was a partly intended aim of the propaganda, but the images also spoke as never before of the Communist Utopian ambition. Ilya Kabakov would most critically appropriate this imagery of the fantastic voyage in his installation, *The Man Who Flew into Space From His Apartment*, 1968-1988 [Fig. 8]. The installation tells the story of a lonely dreamer who, clearly inspired by the goals of the Soviet space programme, was not willing to wait for a future Utopia to arrive. But first, however, it is necessary for us to understand the relation of the Soviet space programme to the Communist project, so we can properly analyse Kabakov's installation.



[Fig. 8] Ilya Kabakov. (1968-1988) *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* [Moscow private apartment and Robert Feldman Gallery New York]. Photo: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée d' Art Moderne, Paris

The Soviet space programme emerged from both a desire to understand the “role and impact of modernization within traditional religion and culture” (Scharff & Dusek, 2003, pp. 551-552) and as a critique of the Communist project that many saw as potentially flawed. Among those who sought answers were Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and it was to the 19<sup>th</sup> century theorist, physician, and founding member of the mystic occult group, *The Russian Cosmists*, Nikolai Fyodorovic Fyodorov (1828-1903) that they looked for answers<sup>12</sup>. In his seminal tract, *Philosophy of the Common Task*, Fedorov, theorized that there were two causes for death. First, there is the internal incapacity of the human organism for infinite self-renewal and, second, there is the destructive character of the external environment. A regulation therefore was required to bring a “transformation of the blind course of nature into one that is rational” (Fedorov, cited in, Semenova and Gachev, 2006). He urged Russia to harness instead its military and national powers towards conquering nature since, if that could be achieved, weather could be controlled and harvests and solar energy would be in bountiful supply. He further proposed that if mankind were able to harness electromagnetic energy, and use that energy to regulate earth’s motion in space, then earth could be used as a launch pad towards other worlds (Bartos & Boym, 2001). Overpopulation problems could then be solved through colonizing other worlds.

The Earth is the cradle of humanity, but one cannot live in a cradle forever! (Tsiolkovsky, cited in Bartos & Boym, 2001, p. 85).

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<sup>12</sup> Fedorov was the illegitimate son of Prince Pavel Ivanovich Gagarin and Elisaveta Ivanova, a woman of lower-class nobility. He was a deeply spiritual man and gave away all that he had so he would not be distracted from his work. He is credited with promoting feminist concerns into his theories, for example, the the emancipation of women from the domestic realm and to be able to enjoy social life, and its sexual choices, on an equal basis with men.

Fedorov, a morally driven visionary without precedent, was essentially altruistic in his quest. He sought ways not to conquer out of violence, prestige, or material wealth, but out of provision for the people. He had been greatly inspired by the resurrection of Christ and considered that the 'common task' of humankind was to protect those who ultimately could not protect themselves – the dead,

Christianity has not fully saved the world, because it has not been fully assimilated. [Christianity] is not simply a doctrine of redemption, but the very task of redemption (Fedorov, cited in Perry, 2005).

Fedorov theorized that, not only would deep space travel assist in the locating of remaining particles of the dead that still float in the universe, but that it would also hold the key to a scientific reconstituting, or resurrection, of human beings (Bartos & Boym, 2001). Nowadays, Fedorov's theories are seen in relation to cloning and the idea of space travel as part of a larger transhuman evolution. Following the death of Stalin the interest in space flight that he had suppressed was revived so that, when it finally arrived in 1957, "Sputnik was not a shock to Soviet citizens but instead the realization of an old idea" (Elhefnawy, 2007). Russian physicist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935), who was the father of human spaceflight and founder of the Biocosmists had been a former student of Fedorov and was installed as head of the Soviet space programme. Influenced by his mentor Fedorov, and supported by his Biocosmist-Immoralist friends, Tsiolkovsky became convinced that Communism would utterly fail if science continued to allow primitive death. He believed that only through scientific progress could human beings achieve immortality and, since Communism was a future project, it was obvious that without a concerted

effort to achieve scientific resurrection Communist society would fail those who had given their lives to its construction. The Biocosmists certainly believed this and published a manifesto declaring that,

We view as essential and real human rights man's right to existence (immortality, resurrection, rejuvenation) and to freedom of movement in the cosmic realms (as opposed to the supposed rights proclaimed in the declaration of the bourgeois revolution of 1789) (Biocosmists, cited in, Groys, 2006, p. 18).

Thus, only when all the peoples who had contributed in past times to the building of the Communist Utopia were resurrected into a "true social solidarity" (Groys, 2006, p. 18) would the system be able to realise its commitments to society and thus unleash its true potential. Tsiolkovsky's main interest was for "humanity to become a space civilization" (Tsiolkovsky, cited in, Informatics, 2009).

*The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* was first shown in Moscow in 1968 in Kabakov's rooftop studio, and many years later transported to the Robert Feldman Gallery in New York,

I built the installation *The Man Who Flew into Space* in the corner. I glued Soviet posters from inside of it and I would take it down after each showing for fear that they would drop in, understand, and that would be "the end of everything" (Kabakov, 1995, p. 162).

It consists of a 1:1 scale model of a typical room in a Socialist housing blok, a world within a world. On the walls are posters and slogans that narrate the Soviet space programme – the hero-cosmonauts, the rockets that would reach into far-off worlds, and the texts of a revolutionary society, "*For Soviet Science - Glory!*" (GlobalSecurity.org, 2001) [Fig. 9]. A small single bed lies disheveled and empty, dust and debris fallen upon it. To the side of the bed, a diorama shows us where this apartment building is located in relation to the many similar others in the neighborhood. There

are lines carefully drawn against the sky that amass around this one particular apartment. A piece of wire shoots beyond the sky and directs our gaze to an apparatus that is suspended from the ceiling. Made of springs and belts and something that resembles a harness we view it as some type of catapult.



[Fig. 9] Soviet Agitprop poster. (1961). Special commemoration poster of Yuri Gagarin's flight. The text in the upper left-hand says, "For Soviet Science -Glory!" The lower right-hand corner says, "Glory to the Soviet People--and the First Cosmonaut!". Behind Gagarin is the Soviet 'space road' that tells of the first achievement in 1959 when Lunik 2 impacted the Moon, and the second was Gagarin's mission in 1961. Gagarin is holding the metal ball delivered to the lunar surface by Lunik 2 in 1959. Photo: Rebecca Weiss.

Above it, there is a hole in the ceiling and, below, the floor is littered with

wreckage from the ceiling and explains the rubble on the bed. And, while there is no one here now, no physically present character, we are faced with a corporeal absence that privileges human consciousness over the human body. Our absent character has disappeared through the hole by a great force and into the cosmos. Or at least, that seems to have been his intention. We do not know if he was successful or not in his quest, or whether he has simply crashed to earth: there is nothing that informs us of his fate. Groys (2006) proposes that our character's faith lay in mapping enormous currents of natural energy, strong enough to thrust him far into space, and for which he has so obviously and painstakingly studied and whose arrival he has wearily awaited. We know that the universe operates in this agitated and energetic manner and can thus understand that the lines on the diorama represent energy currents that have been precisely charted by our character with the intention to capitalize them as his trajectory to the cosmos. We don't know how long he waited for this time or what his thoughts were because he has left no note. We cannot enter the room. An 'official' text informs us that the authorities have boarded up the room, it has become a 'crime' scene. Notes from his neighbors inform us that he was a quiet man. Only the iconography on the walls and the diorama privies us to his intense engagement with space. Has our character then, quite literally flown to the cosmos? And if so, why? Boris Groys, who has written at length on Kabakov's works, emphasizes the artist's role as being akin to that of a detective who turns "his attention to the material traces of the man's disappearance in order to discover what has happened" (Groys, 2006, p. 19). He further observes that, characteristically, both Kabakov the artist and the characters of his

installations, while exclusively distinct from each other nevertheless are linked to one another by their similar experience of living in an ideological system. In other words, Kabakov the artist seeks to speak from outside the narrative while in fact being firmly inside it since there is no other way to, “tell the story of personal liberation other than those which the collective Utopian narrative has always had to offer” (Groys, 2006, p. 22). Thus, to speak of Utopia within any context means to indexically reference it and therefore to become a part of that narrative: only those promoting the Utopian narrative, and those protesting or criticizing it, understand it because they are the ones who are in it<sup>13</sup>.

Describing or documenting a Utopia means creating that Utopia. And anyone who embarks on a Utopian narrative cannot help but feel that they are heir to all the Utopian projects and narratives of the past (Groys, 2002, p. 21).

Our character would surely not have gone to all this trouble if he had not been enchanted in the first place by the Soviet space narrative, which is, in fact, the narrative of Communist Utopia. For him, the narrative had become too enchanting and too powerful to remain simply as a narrative of emergence: he simply could not wait any longer for Utopia, for its intense beauty has dimmed even further the sense of despair and isolation that imbues its parallel earth bound narrative that he *has* experienced. We can return to our earlier observation that Communism was not designed for leaving, but for arrival. Our character has quite clearly defied this aspect of

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<sup>13</sup> Emerging from people's frustrations with the ideology and conditions in the East, dreams of flying and departing the communist 'cradle' were not solely confined to rocketry and distant planets but were manifest also in the skylines over Berlin. The Strelzyk and Wetzel families of East Germany, inspired by a television programme on hot air ballooning, established an escape plan based on the principles established by France's pioneering Montgolfier brothers in the 1780s. Their contraption consisted of a cast-iron platform with posts at the corners for handholds and rope anchors with four propane gas cylinders secured in the center. Their wives stitched a 72ft diameter envelope made out of 60 different pieces of curtains, bed sheets, and random scraps. In spring 1979 the four traveled to a field 25 miles beyond Berlin, boarded the craft and soared to 8,000ft, crossed the border at 6,000ft, and dropped from 100ft to the ground in West Germany. The two families became instant heroes in the west (as did many escapees) where they were offered food, clothing, jobs and housing. Museums vied to exhibit their homemade craft.

the Communist project and decided that, in fact, he must leave *in order* to arrive. In so doing he has managed to do what the Communist project failed to do and Kabakov, the citizen-artist, has preceded any requirement for Communism's ultimate manifestation since it had already become real "for millions of people" (Epstein, 1995).

Somewhat mirroring the remarkable flight of our character, Groys (2002) remarks on how Kabakov's installation reflects on the transportation of the installation from Moscow to New York. Kabakov himself has said that,

For the first time I had brought the atmosphere of our world to another world, it's the first (successful) experiment with the 'total installation" (Kabakov, 1995, p. 162).

While we don't know if our character has been successful we do know the fate of the Russian cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev<sup>14</sup>. Rocketed to the space station *Mir* under the presidency of Mikhail Gorbachev, Krikalev was still up there and largely forgotten when Boris Yeltsin took control of the crumbling Soviet Empire. In December 1991, however, when the Soviet Union was dissolved into a galaxy of independent states news was relayed to Krikalev that the map of the Soviet Union had been altered: "the Baltic States have changed color" (Soviet Mission Control, cited in Horton, 1999). When he finally returned to earth in March 1992 after more than 300 days orbiting the earth, the Soviet Union had collapsed. The media dubbed Krikalev, "the last Soviet citizen" (Copp, 2002).

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<sup>14</sup> Continuing the theme of the Soviet space programme the East German television programme *Unser Sandmännchen* (Little Sandman) lulled the nation's children to sleep every night amidst an array of futuristic vehicles, flying machines, and communist propaganda that "showed the future optimism, technical development and solidarity" (See, Jacobsen, 2005).



## Chapter 2. A Fiery Lens Aims at Surface.

*Artists: Stefan Bertalan (Romania), ÜTÖ Gustáv (Romania), Karel Miler (Czechoslovakia), Kollektivnye Deistvia (Collective Actions, Soviet Union/Russia), Stefan Bertalan (Romania) Tomáš Ruller (Czechoslovakia)*

In March 1965 the American beat poet Allen Ginsberg, who coined the term 'flower power', arrived in Prague at the invitation of students at the city's Charles University<sup>15</sup>. His presence sparked a huge flurry of interest and his demeanor, half hippy half guru, galvanized huge crowds to his poetry readings in the small theatres of Prague and Bratislava, nourishing the already germinating seeds of dissent that were in the air. The crowds saw in Ginsberg a radical socialist who was making a timely visit that coincided with a groundswell of resistance to a system that was at odds with the will of the people. The hopes were that Ginsberg, a prominent figure in the human rights movement, would solicit support on the world stage<sup>16</sup>. Kusin (1978) shows that what was being sought wasn't the overthrow of the system but the reforming of it, and most especially the replacing of the quasi-authoritarian Communist Party General Secretary and President of Czechoslovakia Antonín Novotný who had taken Czechoslovakia down a path of economic ruin. By 1968 radio stations had abandoned much of their official programming and replaced it with western rock and roll. Czechoslovak society "strongly mirrored the Western [1968] movement" (Kern, cited in, Breuer, 2008) but the ways in which they

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<sup>15</sup> Ginsberg had just been expelled from Cuba for claiming that he had slept with Fidel Castro's brother Raul. For an interesting account of Prague at that time as seen through an alternative music lens see,

'*The Plastic People of the Universe*' by Joseph Yanosik (Perfect Sound Forever: March 1996) Available at: <http://www.furious.com/perfect/pulnoc.html>

<sup>16</sup> Novotný was appalled by Ginsberg and instructed the secret police to arrest him on alleged public decency violations, ostensibly, drugs and drunkenness. While in custody his hotel room was burgled and his 'morally dangerous' writings confiscated, and subsequently expelled from the country on May 7th 1965.

reacted against the establishment differed from those in the west,

The major difference lay in the fact that the Czechs did not believe in revolutionary ideas. So the Western students considered the Czech students as "merely" reformers, while the Czechs tended to view them a little as crazy radicals (Kern, cited in, Breuer, 2008).

Substantial pressure was being applied to the government and Novotný's subsequent reaction backfired. He increased censorship laws and sacked anyone he considered to hold liberal ideas, no matter how marginal. Prague officials, however, felt he had overreacted and ousted him, replacing him with Alexander Dubček who they considered able to steer the country out of Novotný's disaster that had seen prices rise and wages fall. Dubček promoted towards closer ties with the west and a more tolerant and open society; 'socialism with a human face'<sup>17</sup>. Between March and August 1968 he brought a short-lived period of liberalism to Czechoslovakia that came to be known as the 'Prague Spring'. Czech and Slovak were federalized into separate republics, thus easing tensions between two distinct groups of people, and travel restrictions and censorship laws for individuals and the media were rolled back. Dubček publically stated that, "we shall have to remove everything that strangles artistic and scientific creativeness" (Dubček, cited in, Rechcigl, 2008, p. 58). The Soviets, who were still attempting to control the new, progressive, wave in the arts and media following Khrushchev's 1956 de-Stalinization programme, and having lost all their hard-line allies in Dubček's reordering of the government, feared a regional spread of liberalism and internal democratization. They reacted with violent measures and, on August 21<sup>st</sup>, invaded Czechoslovakia with 175,000 tanks and troops of the Warsaw

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<sup>17</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev would allude to this concept almost two decades later in his *perestroika* period.

Pact. 'Operation Danube' claimed around 100 Czechoslovak lives (Williams, 1997), sealed the borders with the west, removed Dubček<sup>18</sup> any stopped his reforms dead<sup>19</sup>. In a cruel and bitter twist of irony the image of the Russians as liberators of the 1945 Nazi occupation was changed overnight and forever,

All at once the liberators were occupying their country. That put an end to sympathy for the Russians. And hope all but died that the system could be reformed (Breuer, 2008).

The West was criticized for failing to seize the opportunity to support an internal democratization of Communism. The Czechoslovakian people were thus dealt a crushing blow on both sides: they would serve again the Soviet master, but, this time around, they would also be aliens to a western world that they had pinned a great deal of their hope on. Czechoslovak society began to realise that what the Soviet's claimed had been the single most threat to the Communist project had, ironically, become equally true of their own personal dreams. Their future was clear: "it depended not only on the lot prepared for them by others, but also on their own judgement" (Palouš, cited in, (eds.) Bucar & Barnett, 2005:261). Research (Pilař, 2001) shows that artists and intellectuals were increasingly victimised, jailed, expelled, and put under house arrest, prompting the formation of the Czech human rights organisation, Charta 77. In the same year the Czechoslovakian political activist and mathematician Václav Benda published a samizdat titled *Parallel Polis* in which he urged a cessation of activities directed towards the overthrow or

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<sup>18</sup> Dubček was demoted to a forestry job and constantly followed by secret police. Stories abound about how he would ride the tram to work and offer up his seat to the equally weary security personnel who followed him.

<sup>19</sup> A list of resistance strategies to the occupation included; changing road signs to confuse troops, warning troops not to drink water because 'counter-revolutionaries' had poisoned it, but in the end even their best efforts were crushed. See, VanHise (n.d.) *Nonviolence in Czechoslovakia, 1968*.

reform of the ruling system (Pilař, 2001). Essential to his thesis was that parallel institutions would be more receptive to human needs and one day may even replace the governing institutions<sup>20</sup>. Benda's proposal was taken up and theorized by the musician Ivan Martin Jirous<sup>21</sup> who coined the term 'second culture' as a clear indication that artistic and spiritual freedom should not be sought through engagement with either official politics or the "shadowy establishment of Charter 77" (Pilař, 2001), but rather should aim for,

A culture independent of official channels of communication, of social appreciation and of the hierarchy of values, determined by the establishment (Jirous, cited in, Pilař, 2001).

Jirous was convinced that the purpose of second culture was not to destroy the already existing system since this would only lead to it being subsumed by another system. Rather, a second culture based on "complete socializing" (Kahout, 2006) would ignore it altogether and instead promote "a mental attitude of intellectuals and artists who consciously and critically determine their own stance towards the world in which they live" (Jirous, cited in Pilař, 1998).

Following the suppression of the Prague Spring the country entered a twenty-year period of 'normalization' that saw around half a million people "robbed of the opportunity to engage in any intellectual activity whatsoever" (Breuer, 2008). State support was withdrawn for all non-official artistic practices, thus effectively banning the 'new' practices such as conceptual art and land art (Keratová, 2008). In Czechoslovakia, and

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<sup>20</sup> For his efforts Benda was imprisoned and the state clamped down on any hint of such structures.

<sup>21</sup> Ivan Jirous was the artistic director of the seminal Czechoslovakian psychedelic underground band The Plastic People of the Universe. He was a prominent organizer in the Czech underground.

elsewhere in the region, a number of artists responded to an intensified authoritarianism by forging new methods of production, and where the theatricality of performance art gave way to the more concentrated character of action art. These actions became more like intensely private rituals where only the camera lens or, sometimes, a few family members or close friends would be present. It is no mistake to say that, with the exception of these few trusted friends and family, people remained largely unaware of the works until after 1989, and that today they are still being discovered as both artworks in their own right and as traces of a heteroglossiac past. Employing a basic form of documentary recording these works often imparted an autobiographical note. The uncertainty of not knowing if their works would ever be seen beyond these small private circles contributed to the biggest problem of all; an enormous amount of works simply weren't documented, "We weren't always able to have photographic materials" (Uto, 2008).

This period ushered in a very real shift towards the body as primary material so that the mirror that had once been held up to the west was now turned onto and into the self. The body became both the external, material site of action and the interiority of social, artistic, and political subjectivity. At times it would become a "surface that contrasted with the opaque artist's 'interior'" (Piotrowski, 1998) upon or over which "other materials were passed" (Pintilie, 2001). We can contrast the appeal of the body to both artists and the Communist system: while the works of artists emerged from their own concrete bodies as reflections of an unfolding historical process, the discourse of power employs the more abstract and metaphorical language such as, "'the body of the institution,' 'state organs,'

or 'the hand of justice'" (Pejić, cited in, Kaiarzynna, 1999, p. 17). Despite the ban, or perhaps more accurately because of it, these shifts in material ordering resulted in a number of striking works that brought a new and often violent dimension to what would be called 'Eastern European Body art'<sup>22</sup> The artist's body became a "last frontier" (Weibgen, 2009) in the battle between the individual and the State.

*To assert control over one's body was to deny that control to the authorities... There was no radical declaration of individuality in Communist Czechoslovakia that did not also imply a radical critique of the state (Weibgen, 2009).*

Both representational and actual violence onto the body placed the artist within a complex that was part human part divine, where the interrogation of context became a spiritual quest and a mystic act that counteracted the depersonalised space of power. With the outlawing of contemporary practices and the forced manoeuvres of non-official artistic activity in general, it was to ritual-like actions that artists turned. Artists had fallen under greater State scrutiny, making it especially difficult to produce work in urban centres since their activities might unintentionally implicate passersby. During the 1970-80s the Czechoslovakian artist Karl Miler produced a series of interventions that he carried out with as little visual distraction to the environment as possible.

*I was close to the minimalist sentiment, which was linked to corporeality... not allowing myself to do anything with my body, which could be even simpler (Miler, cited in Klímová, 2006, p. 49).*

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<sup>22</sup> However, Piotrowski (2006) demonstrates that this terminology is a problem inasmuch as 'Body art' was primarily an American construct and, even although it was applied to art actions in Eastern Europe it makes little sense.

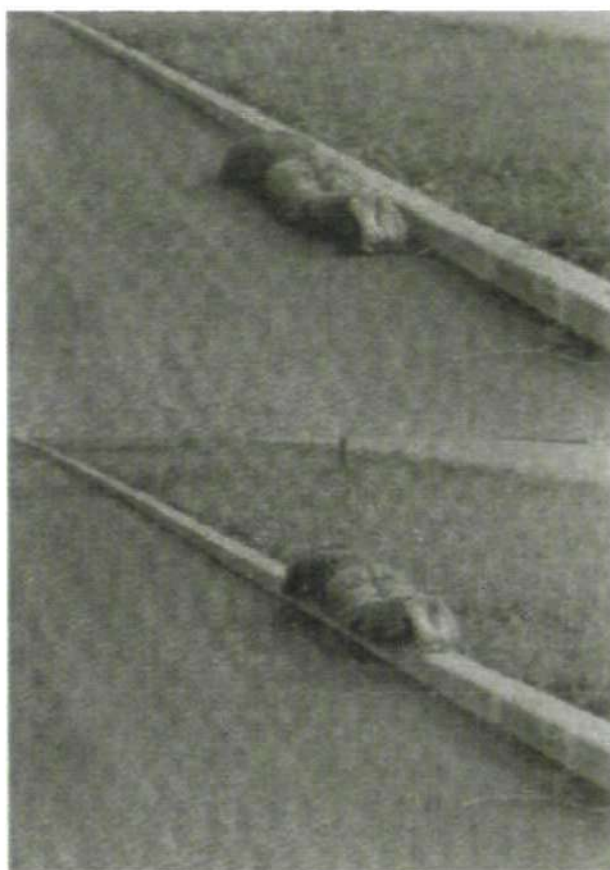
"The term [body art] was adopted in Eastern Europe at the time but was differently defined and interpreted. And people were informed about them in a very different way. Yugoslavs were completely in the know about art trends in the west, whereas in Romania or Hungary there were many difficulties to have an idea about them. In those countries if someone wanted to access information then they did it with the help of Polish literature, particularly Czechs and Hungarians. The reason was that in Poland there was no censorship of art historical research, in contrast to Czechoslovakia where the authorities were particularly strict in this regard" (Piotrowski & Mayer, 2006)

His actions verged on invisibility, barely noticed but for the presence of a photographer and his camera whose own actions drew most attention to Miler. Often acting on a spur of the moment decision he would simply begin a sequence of gestures that created meaning on two distinct levels. On the one hand there was his own bodily experiencing of gesticulation in space and, on the other, how that experience that would be passed over to the viewer in the form of a trace of the action, the documentary photograph. Miler contrasts the 'non-artistic' photograph to a carefully composed image: the non-artistic photograph privileges the idea and sense of eventness in such a way that the viewer experiences the work in a different way than the artist does,

[The non-artistic photograph] has the same power as the event itself. My own experience is related to my body and only I can experience it physically, everyone else relies on their eyes, they don't participate physically (Miler, cited in, Klímová, 2006, p.49).

In his 1972 action *Either/Or* Miler lays face down beside a pavement kerb, and then he lays face down on top of it [Fig. 10]. He was concerned not only to use the corporeality of his body but also to activate the body as little as possible. Two photographs of these actions appear at first glance to be the same but when viewed "once, twice and a third time, then they'll [the viewer] notice that the photographs change in a certain way". (Miler, cited in Klímová, 2006, p. 50). Pospiszyl demonstrates that conditions in Czechoslovakia at the time forced Miler to make the action in a remote place because to lie on the ground in a city centre would have been "perceived as provocation" (Pospiszyl, cited in, Klímová, 2006, p. 75). Even so, and despite his attempts to not draw any attention, Miler was, like many others, subjected to police interrogation to determine if his actions were hostile to the State (Klímová, 2006).

The Communist ideology was the State. Our way of thinking was different from it, that's why it was hostile to the state. Our thinking was against the manner in which things were presented to us in newspapers, on the radio, we tried to look at it from another angle. We didn't feel any borderlines (Miler, cited in Klímová, 2006, p. 55).



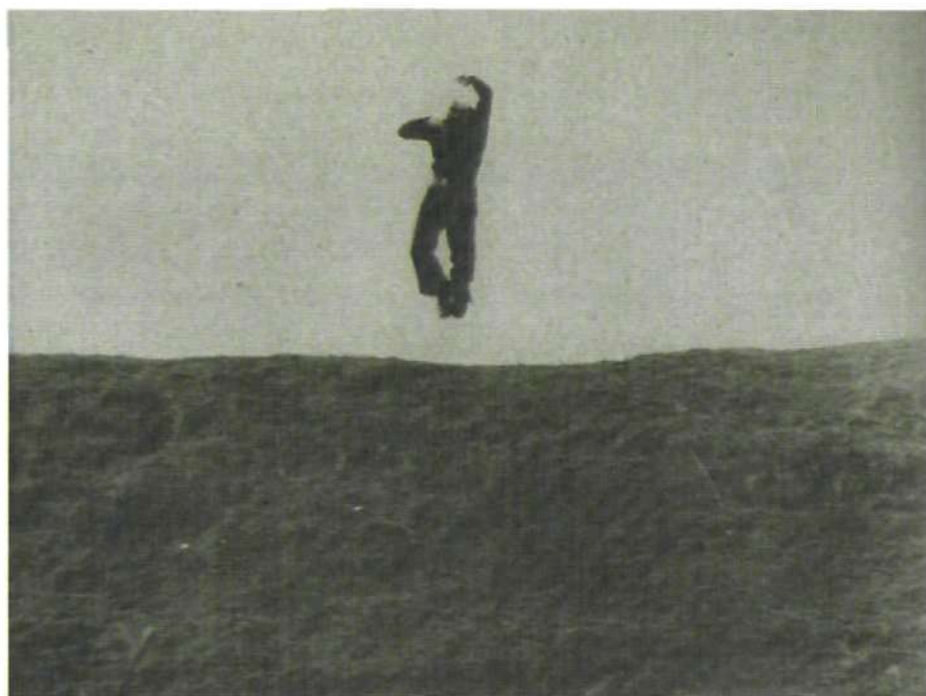
[Fig. 10] Karl Miler. (1972) *Either/Or*. [Prague]. Photo: The artist.

Miler's *Either/Or* illustrates this latter claim by clearly demonstrating Communist divisionism through an art action. A simple kerbstone becomes representational: Miler relates that "the Communists kept dividing the world by the Iron Curtain: Socialism's here, Capitalism there" (Miler, cited in Klímová, 2006, p.55). However, in his 1977 action *Close to the Clouds*, that this author has re-enacted as part of the thesis, Miler shows us that the artist can transcend even these harsh earthly pressures [Fig. 11]. A photograph shows him jumping from the earth and, although still subject to gravity he is, nonetheless, momentarily released from the world below.



Unlike Kabakov's lonely character, who chose to launch himself into the cosmos, Miler elects to remain within the world and to find his own way through history.

It is within everyone's possibility to be closer to the clouds. It is not necessary to dream; it suffices to jump up a bit. It is not a poetic metaphor, but a normal, everyday activity pointing to our limits (Miler, cited in Badovinac, 1998, p. 52).



[Fig. 11] Karl Miler. (1972) *Close to the Clouds*. [Prague region]. Photo: The artist.

It has been argued that Miler's work is "almost completely ignoring symbolic meanings" (Ševčík, cited in Badovinac, 1998, p. 46), yet both *Either/Or* and *Close to the Clouds* are at odds with Ševčík's critique. *Close to the Clouds* is a most graceful gesture, exuberant in its defiance of the oppressive conditions from which it has sprung, a flight of free expression. Miler shows us that there are no lines drawn by man that can change a simple reality: as he leaps the world spins and he too spins with it. He lands in the same place and the same historic time. He illustrates that

there is the gravity of context and there is the gravity of the human condition.

In September 1968 the Polish accountant and former Home Army soldier Ryszard Siwiec performed self-immolation in Warsaw's packed Dziesięciolecia Stadium (10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Stadium) during a harvest festival. [Fig. 12]



[Fig. 12] Ryszard Siwiec. (1968) *Ryszard Siwiec Performing Self-Immolation*. [Warsaw]. Photo: Anon.

The action was so immediate that some who were passing failed to register it. A film<sup>23</sup> shows him fending off confused bystanders who rush to his aid fearing he has either had an accident, or is mad and a threat to others. Siwiec does his best to fight them off but is eventually overcome, his body weakened by burning. When they have succeeded in dousing the flames and Siwiec stands, charred, in front of them, we feel an awareness creeping upon those who intervened that perhaps this man has something important to say and that they should permit him his moment. Flanked by a mass of clearly distraught onlookers and police he delivers an

<sup>23</sup> Newsreels were not broadcast until months after the event, and only came to light after 1989.

impassioned speech in which he (presumably) recites his speech recorded at home a few days before,

People, people! Pull yourselves together! Young people, the future of the nation, don't let yourselves be murdered every twenty years...Don't be murdered for this or another group of people, [for] total authority. People, don't forget the world's most beautiful word: mother! People, who maybe hold a spark of humanity, human feelings, pull yourselves together. Hear my cry. The cry of a simple man. A cry to the nation. Love one's own and other's freedom, over everything! Over your own life, pull yourselves together, it's not too late (Siwec, You Tube, 2008).

Research (Anderman et al, 1985, p.110) shows that Siwec, a father of five, left a number of tape recordings and notes that laid out his opposition to the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and Poland's participation in it. He died in hospital three days later, and after 1989 was posthumously decorated by Poland, Slovakia, and Czech Republic<sup>24</sup>. A few months later, in January 1969, Czechoslovakian student activist Jan Palach died after performing a more celebrated self-immolation ritual in Prague's Wenceslas Square in a similar protest<sup>25</sup>. Almost twenty years later, in 1988, when the effects of 'normalization' were still being felt, the Czechoslovakian artist Tomáš Ruller was denied permission to travel to participate in Germany's prestigious Documenta event. In a Prague suburb he responded by producing the performance '8.8.88' that, to this day, remains the single most terrifying image of state containment. [Fig. 13] Struggling with the alienating landscape of depersonalized housing bloks, that serves as powerful metaphor of the condition imposed on the social body, he is seen

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<sup>24</sup> Because Poland's President at the time, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, was a former Communist Party dignitary, the family of Siwec refused to accept the (2003) Order of Polonia Restituta Commander's Cross award. His other awards include; (2001) Order of Tomáš Garrique Masaryk, from the President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel; and (2006) Order of the White Double Cross, from the President of Slovakia, Ivan Gašparovič

<sup>25</sup> The remains of Jan Palach were exhumed by the secret police, cremated, and sent to his mother's house in the countryside where she was forbidden to bury them in the local churchyard until 1974, an act that most brutally reasserted the State's hold on the domestic realm.

stumbling, his back aflame, towards a large murky puddle where his body collapses and, we assume, the flames are doused. A witness is seen close by.



[Fig. 13] Tomáš Ruller (1988) 8.8.88. [Opatov]. Photo: The artist.

It is most interesting to notice that she appears to be frozen in time, and in disbelief, while the image of Ruller remains undeniably in motion. It creates a sense that the witness bears the frozen weight of the past while Ruller appears as an active present. It remains the single most chilling performance art testament to the length of time that this long and sustained period of cultural isolation and suppression lasted in Czechoslovakia. It is extraordinary that an artist would go to such lengths to invoke the sense of despair felt. The apparent violence of the action would be impossible to comprehend if we had no understanding of the context it was developed in. Ruller is not making an appeal against the decision to refuse him a travel document, nor is he seeking some cathartic healing. Rather, he embodies a raging and expellant fire that seeks, in its moment of flaming destruction, to consume and suffocate the order

imposed on the individual cell within the social body in order that it can then be set free to join in the world proper. It is the fire of frustration and of despair; it seeks to consume the oxygen of the system, to shut it down in all finality.

Of course, the difference between Siwiec, Palach, and Ruller, is that Ruller never intended to kill himself. He no doubt considered his action meticulously, perhaps pacing the distance beforehand and calculated that he would be able to begin and complete the action with the absolute minimum of danger to himself. He may have worn protective clothing underneath, or used a form of trickery of flame that would contribute to the power of the image yet keep him safe from harm. He may have done all these things, or none of them, since the image we are presented with, as the trace of the action, does not contribute any of this knowledge. In its transmission the sadism of a body so exhausted in its everyday frustrated protest manifests its desolation through the metaphor of self-immolation. 'Immolate', from the Latin 'immolare', means sacrifice, and, while in itself it does not indicate burning, many religions and practices throughout history have linked them together. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century French Jesuit priests would burn areas of their own limbs to signify the suffering of Christ on the cross, while the Buddhist scholar Thich Nhat Hahn (1965) shows that the ritual burning of incense on one's body has long been a form of vow taking in the history of Buddhism. The self-immolation of Ruller, however, transcends religious practice to become a symbol of the huge cultural separation of the individual artist from the ideology of the State. The act of burning oneself is to demonstrate that the convictions held are of the utmost importance and carry with them a consequence of action. For

Ruller, the aim was not to extinguish his life, but to be seen to burn. What he was really seeking to achieve was a profound conveyance of his determination that the huge cultural gulf between the people and the State would never be resolved by containment. In this respect he has consciously chosen the act of self-immolation as a signifier of a resistance to the violence of ideology. Nahn, in his open letter to Martin Luther King observed that, to the Vietnamese Buddhist monks who protested the Vietnam War by self-immolation, "the act of burning and burning to death is only a matter of degrees" (Hahn, 1965). Thus, Ruller's highly symbolic action shows the portrayal of self-immolation as more intense than the heat of fire itself. And because he was not 'actually' practicing self-immolation we can imagine that he was, at least for a few moments, traumatized. It is not at all a tolerable thing to do, to set oneself on fire in a public space. It is beyond any understanding of normal, everyday, social behaviour. And we know from the long history of self-immolation that one who would practice it would not be traumatized but, rather, would be in complete control of their actions through adherence to a rigorous set of disciplinary constructs that would effectively guide the execution of the purposeful act. The traumatised individual, on the other hand, behaves in an irrational way that is unpredictable and wholly unknown. There is no gradual decent into hell, for hell has already come. Instinctive reactions, whose clarity often later astonish, assume full responsibility for protection. Until such a time as help arrives (in any form) there is no other guarding or deflecting the assault but the instincts of the Self, and that Self might as well be an alien body for all its unfamiliarity. And thus the body that undertakes an act such as Ruller does, does so partly from a place outside

of the self. That is, from a place outside of his 'known', or public, identity, that which the state has imposed. He has, quite simply, become an individual. And a primary quality of the individual is volition, the human will. Yet in order to perform the act fully there is a requirement of witness and, in this case, it goes beyond the currents of everyday morality and infuses the unwilling spectator with an unreasonable level of reciprocal trauma. This is most obviously seen in the figure of the girl a short distance away. We can only guess as to her condition during these long agonizing moments that Ruller burns in front of her. The image of Palach's self-immolation is ingrained in the Czech psyche<sup>26</sup>. It is reasonable therefore to imagine that Ruller's action activates this collective memory and thus brings context to the traumatised mind of the witness. However, there are others too who see the body on fire, who view it from a boundary space, and we are a part of this crowd. Our relationship to the image affords us a choice. We can approach it either as a distancing screen through which we manage our relationship to suffering, or as a mechanism by which we come to a more compassionate understanding of the world. In this boundary space, that separates spectacle from spectation, we are simultaneously with Ruller as a surface, and as the trace that bears witness to the past.

Romania's Communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu<sup>27</sup> vehemently opposed the 1968 Soviet intervention into Czechoslovakia and publically threatened

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<sup>26</sup> A memorial stone honours his martyrdom in the centre of Prague

<sup>27</sup> The Ceaușescu regime (1965-1989) proposed a strict model of citizenship built upon an abusive labor economy coupled with an equally abusive policy of forced human reproduction in order to fuel that labor, the result of which was the explosion of the well publicized orphanage system which served only to attract further abuses. At first courted as the maverick Soviet State by the West as it was highly critical of Soviet influence, Ceaușescu was rewarded with overseas State visits. His increasingly erratic behaviour caused his foreign backers (including Great Britain and the United States) to drop him. He then became obsessed with clearing all the country's foreign debt incurred during the courtship. A policy of refusing to spend hard currency resulted in, among many things, grossly inadequate medical provision and the most basic of general health care.

to meet any such action against Romania with force. Moreover however, the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia was an opportunity for Ceaușescu to push ahead with his own unique personality cult in Eastern Europe, and to reaffirm his doctrine for the arts. At the Third National Conference of the Union of Plastic Artists in Bucharest in 1968 Ceaușescu insisted that the old tenets of Socialist Realism were still valid, and that the "the common factor in Socialist art is the Marxist-Leninist philosophical outlook," and that art has been given the task "of enlightening the mind and thoughts of the popular masses" (Ceaușescu, cited in, Open Society Archives, 1995). He rebranded Socialist Realism as Socialist Humanism, a re-wording that was supposed to account for a mix of Socialist content but that would also reflect national characteristics. Ordering artists to portray "specific national features" (Ceaușescu, cited in, Open Society Archives, 1995) he roundly attacked individualist expression as a capitalist evil devoid of human and social content that "tries to isolate the artists from the main recipient of their creation - the viewers at large, the people" (Ceaușescu, cited in, Open Society Archives, 1995). At the same conference Ceaușescu stated that, "it goes without saying that creative freedom is guaranteed in our society" (Ceaușescu, cited in, Open Society Archives, 1995) yet only a few months later declared "only madmen could question the vitality of socialism in Romania" (Ceaușescu, cited in, Tismaneanu, 2008). This statement would become the official rationalization that allowed for the routine use of psychiatry against non-official artists and intellectuals.

Stefan Bertalan and Constantin Flondor founded The Sigma Group in Timisoara, 1970-78. The first Romanian experimental art group, their



activities "were a mixture of study and emotion, where 'group solitude' made the investigations authentic" (Balaci, 2003). Research (Balaci, 2003) shows that these were ephemeral projects where photography and moving image were both material substance and a means of recording the body in time. Bertalan would become Romania's best-known 'land artist' through his signature interventions that promoted a deep ecological sensibility to the world around him: "the hymn of an inner growth's cyclical return" (Pintilie, 2005). He would attach paper and textiles to trees and branches and wait for light and weather to compose forms upon them. Seeking to illustrate the two principal reactions to Communism as "either to accuse history, or evade it" (Babeti, cited in (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 53), Babeti draws a harrowing picture of Bertalan as "the exemplar of his fellow beings' neurosis" (Babeti, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 55). The oppressive conditions in Romania had led Bertalan to be certain that he was being spied on at every moment,

I am being watched at every step, watched through those holes... Disguised as tractor operators and lumberjacks, they prevented me from drawing, even up in the mountains at Rasinari... While I was working in the Apuseni Mountains an airplane followed my every move during the whole time I was there (Babeti, cited in (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 54).

Throughout Ceaușescu's brutalizing reign the Transylvanian Ütő Gustáv bore a defiant slogan born of oppression: "The artist is free" (Ütő, 2008). Transylvania is a multiethnic region with its own languages distinct from the Romance language of Romania but Ceaușescu forbade anything but Romanian to be spoken. Ütő's is a quarrelsome dialogue, one that is not confined only to the censorship of art but also to cultural identity. He questions and attacks all systems of power, all the dangerous Utopia's that

seek to bring about an inhumane order, imposing laws and carrying them out with the weapons of terror and trauma. Born in Sepsiszentgyörgy (St. George), Transylvania, in 1958, more than thirty years of his life was lived under Communist rule. As early as the 1970's he chose to make art actions and instigated a number of sporadic events with other artists beyond the borders of the city. These happenings intended to be held beyond the eyes and ears of the feared Securitate, the security police, but with an estimated one in every five persons in the country coerced into being an informer to the State such aims were impossible to realise. From 1977 to 1989 Ütö would plan meetings with students, artists, and intellectuals, in secret and beyond the reaches of the regime,

We would gather in forests and by the shore of Saint Ann Lake to discuss our freedom - as human beings, as individuals. But it was only a sentiment of freedom. We weren't really free and we didn't really believe we could be either, as a people or as a culture. The important thing was that we believed the artist was free, that was what we had to believe in (Ütö, 2008).

Overshadowed by an informant-culture that was manipulated by the regime these gatherings would be in constant danger of being discovered and punished. The fleeting optimism and kindredship that these small groups enjoyed was always eclipsed on their return to the towns as individuals were questioned by the Securitate about their comments spoken at the lake: "Why did you say such a thing about Ceauşescu at the lake? Why are you interested in these Western ideas? These ideas and artistic expressions are decadent, they are not good for the Party" (Ütö, 2008). Ütö remembers his sleep at night being disturbed if he spoke to five people in one day, "I would toss and turn wondering which of the five I maybe shouldn't have spoken to, that was the reality of the terror" (Ütö, 2008). The outcome of this cult of social and psychic terror was that many

students were permanently dismissed from their studies and, because they now had a record of anti-State behaviour, no employer would take them on. Effectively made outcasts in their own land, many would leave their homeland to find work in the black economies of Europe and North America: members of an unofficial, forced exile. Unable to criticize the State for fear of being marked unpatriotic, and thereby endangering their personal and family lives, their lot was to endure a disorienting social experience of inside and outside. Out of position with the State, and by extension their country, they could no more feel 'national' than they could feel international: 'foreignness' became them during the Ceaușescu epoch. Increasingly artists began operating beyond any immediate audience and undertook actions to camera. These were not for display in their own time but with the aim that one day they would be able to share them with other artists.

After making the action I would hurry home to develop the film, examine the results and feel good about myself – that they [the State] couldn't beat me. Then I would quickly hide them somewhere secret, hoping one day to be able to show them to other artists (Ütö, 2008).

Research (Babeti, cited in, (eds.) Pospiszyl & Hoptman, 2002) informs us that the origins of Romanian action art can be traced to the early 1960's when a growing number of painters reacted against the official school of Socialist Realism. Abandoning representation of the human figure they increasingly "abandoned direct corporeal presence and revealed their alternative, which was the image mediated by photography or the moving picture" (Pintilie, 2001). Our understanding of this change in practice can be extended to account for the increased intolerance of Ceaușescu's system and the constant threat of beatings, social ostracization,

punishment upon the artists family, or 'rehabilitation' in his psychiatric hospitals. A recurring motif in the work of Ütő Gustáv is the *Living Statue*, an ongoing series of actions begun in 1981 and documented in hundreds of photographs. [Fig. 14] The artist performs a headstand for the duration of one minute in different sites: a bridge, a roadside, a jetty, the borders of towns and countries. At these division lines, that mark the separation between one territory and another, the body of the artist transmits a particular discourse; it becomes at once both the subject and the object of the action. The subject presents the arrest, or suspension, of the subjective experience while, at the same time, we clearly understand that the bio-object lives and breathes, has cognition, a consciousness, and the free will to transform everyday subjectivity into a condition of stasis.



[Fig. 14] Ütő Gustáv. (1981-ongoing) *Living Statue*. [Various locations worldwide]. Photo: Konya Reka.

Behind its seemingly playful gesture, however, lies an act of defiance: subjectivity to the forces of authoritarian rule transgresses to the divine. The given and imposed order of space is challenged, it is turned on its head much like the very young child sees the world before ocular recognition merges with consciousness. For the artist to manifest himself thus reveals not only a refusal to accept the unjust official law, but also the desire to see the world through the eyes of a child, an innocence that is far

removed from the politicized and ideological world. It is a manifestation of the individuality of the artist to choose to see the world, as he wants it to be, if only for an ephemeral moment. While the physical body present is not free to wander in the world, to marvel at creation and dwell with strangers, chained as it is to the decadence and privation of Ceaușescu's ideology, the spirit is set free to see the world as if for the first time. To stand on one's head is only possible for a short period of time, but as short as that is it is enough to reveal a time-base of action that imparts a particular understanding of the constraining context it was made in. Implicit within the action is the awareness that hemorrhage and explosion is close. It becomes then, an illustration of the upright, subjective, context. The fear instilled in artists by the Ceaușescu regime necessitated that a well-developed economy of time and coherence was employed within art actions. Whereas Ceaușescu's Socialist Humanism would portray the figure of a peasant in the field as a symbol of national prosperity and collectivism, here we have the artist himself set within a similar landscape but upside down within it. The rotation of the body underscores the non-cooperation with the official realm and attacks its absurdity.

Similarly to our previous examples, the work of the highly influential Moscow based group *Kollektivnye Deistvia*<sup>28</sup> (Collective Actions, formed in Moscow in 1975) introduces us to a confrontation with the Communist project, and in this case, with the nature of collectivization. *Kollektivnye Deistvia* captures our attention on two fronts. Firstly, within their name we are immediately introduced to what Tupitsyn cites as the emergence of a

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<sup>28</sup> The group has a fairly flexible structure that has seen its composition change at times but chiefly its main members have been Nikita Alekseev, Georgii Klezvalter, Andrei Monastrysky, Nikolai Panitkov, Igor Makarevich, Elena Elagina and Sergei Romashko.

“contractual communality’ [or] ‘optional communalization” (Tupitsyn, cited in, (eds.) Rosenfeld & Dodge, 1995, p. 87) that is distinct to official, ideologically driven, collectivism. Somewhat mirroring the socializing principles of Czechoslovakia’s second culture movement, he notes a counter approach to the official realm became, “the ecological niche for Muscovite alternative art over the course of three decades – right up to perestroika” (Tupitsyn, cited in, (eds.) Rosenfeld & Dodge, 1995, p. 87). Secondly, a transgressive role is ascribed to the audience where the passive experience of viewing is replaced by an active participation in the authoring of the work and its ontology. The replacing of audience with participant in performance (and art more generally) is most emphatically revealed historically in the democratised art promoted by Happenings. In Happenings there is no attention given to extravagant technique or material form but rather it acts as an abstract and aesthetic reflection of the spirit of those involved, including the audience. It is, of course, human nature to wish to express individuality, as too is the need to belong to a group, and to contribute to the group, since individually we do not possess the collective ability that is required to shape our world. Karl Marx understood the need for individual freedom as an essential component of a fair society but was determined that such liberty could only exist if a conscious human control was exerted over social and, in his view, economic relations. Wood (1985) shows that Marx’s idea of freedom exists solely within a collective, or community, and “cannot be attained by retreating into oneself or by the exercise of one’s self-determination within the confines of a jealously guarded ‘private domain” (Wood, 1985, p. 52). Thus, a collective action implies that those involved in it are linked together

through a common purpose, and will jointly resolve to accomplish its aims on an equal and interdependent basis.

The performances of *Kollektivnye Deistvia* are first experienced by invitations received by a small number of selected people, and later through the meticulous retrieval and editing of its documentation. Possibly their most well-known works are in the series *Trips Out Of Town* (1976-ongoing) that, until the mid-1990s when it underwent development, took place in a field on the outskirts of Moscow<sup>29</sup>. The theorist of the group, Andrej Monastyrsky, refers this aspect of journey and encounter to the restrictions on travel that were in place at the time in the Soviet Union,

Since travelling is restricted in Russia we decided to initiate [travelling] it by going outside and constructing imaginary 'cities', that is our performances (Monastyrsky, cited in, Godfrey, 1998, p. 268).

Participants would be instructed to take a train ride to a nearby station and to then walk towards a designated space within the field. On arrival at their predetermined destination the participants are faced with an expanse of 'emptiness' that after a short time is animated by a number of careful and precise maneuvers involving both the members of *Kollektivnye Deistvia* and the participants. A ringing electric bell or tape recorder buried under snow or earth is a recurring motif, "the 'sounding' of silence" (Pritchard, 2006). The appearance of group members and the audience at specific times and places becomes marked by a critique of our sensate experiencing of the world through choreographed encounters with presence and absence. It considers what has been lost to us in the modern world,

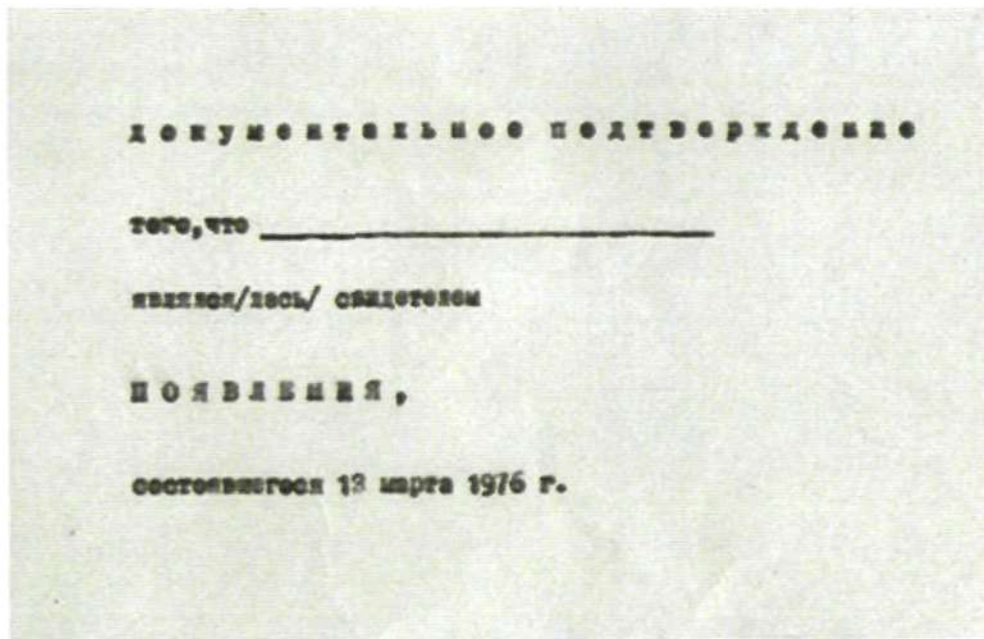
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<sup>29</sup> When the field was cleared for development the 'trips' were staged at an urban roundabout and an urban forest.



In everyday life, the apparition of people and objects near us does not excite the slightest spiritual emotion. This action has been planned with the aim of bringing back this emotion (Monastrysky, cited in Pritchard, 2006).

A series of pre-written instructions are delivered to the participants at the scene that tell them, for example, to walk as they unravel a ball of string or sturdy thread until it runs out. Their walk leads them past 'appearances' of group members that are imperceptible to the others, and often also to the other group members, and then into the darkness of the woods. As the events draw to a close participants are presented with a document that verifies that they were there. 'The appearance of X in Y at Z time and date' [Fig. 15], or, at other times, drawings, maps, or photographs are presented as trace documents.



[Fig. 15] Kollektivnye Deistvia (Collective Actions). (1976-ongoing) *Trips Out of Town: Participant's Card*. [Moscow region]. Photo: Kollektivnye Deistvia.

The latter, that apparently show them at the time they entered the field, and one at a time, would have been impossible to do technically at the time (it was before the digital era) so, on a previous day the group members had gone to the field and photographed themselves from a far

off distance in the places the instructions would later lead the participant viewers to. The intent was to introduce mystery and a sense of the uncanny: it *could* have been me standing there since I have definitely been in that place and stood in that spot. This engagement with time and place slippage is further examined in *Slogan 1977*, [Fig. 16] an event where the group tied a 1m x 10m banner between trees that read,

I do not complain about anything and I almost like it here, although I have never been here before and know nothing about this place (Kollektivnye Deistvia, 1977).

And later, in April 1978, [Fig. 17] a 1m x 12m banner was tied between more trees,

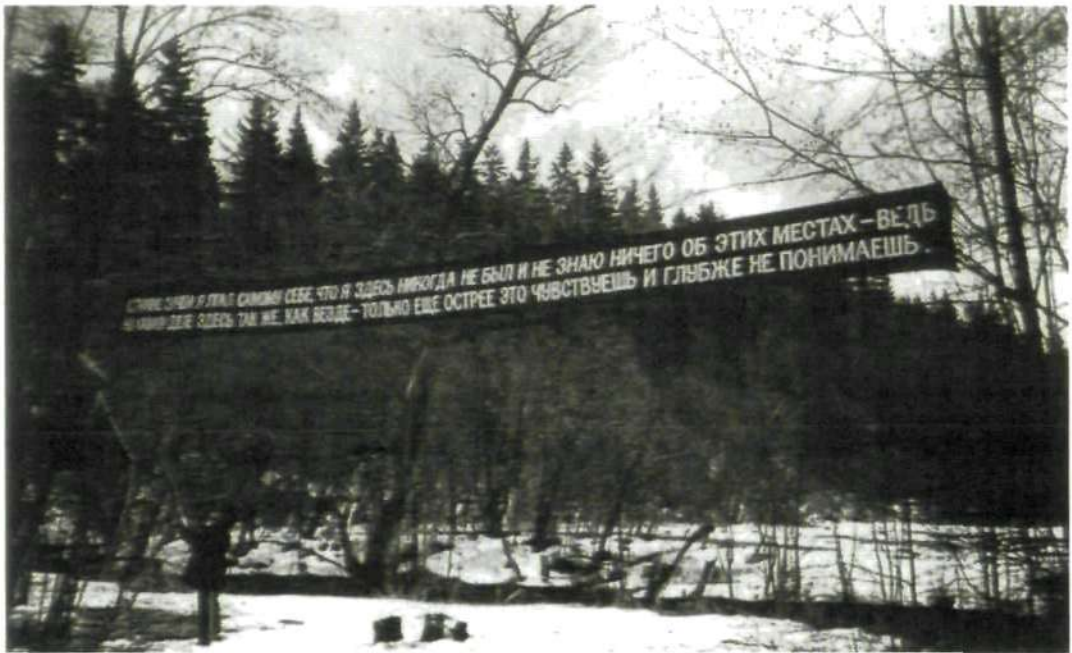
I wonder why I lied to myself that I had never been here and was totally ignorant of this place – in fact, it's just like anywhere else here, only the feeling is stronger and incomprehension deeper (Kollektivnye Deistvia, 1978).

The interesting point to these works is that the location of the texts has changed while the conceptual strategy and poetic sense remains clear. Similarly, the buried bell or tape recorder has neither been announced to the participant-viewers, nor can be seen. The expectation among the participants tends towards the ocular and compels them to take in all of their surroundings. Since they do not know that they are in close proximity to the bell, and are dwelling still at that moment in a visually-biased world, they may credibly expect an appearance by the group or to see visual elements installed somewhere within the landscape. The looking for clues, the straining of eyes, overwhelms the senses through their absence to the point that everything visible begins to slowly merge with other sensoria until the sound of the ringing bell enters the consciousness, as part of the environment. The challenge set upon the proximity senses confronts the

hegemonic status of the visual world that assumes that everything can be knowable. The pre-modern world was a place of mysticism and magic, where elemental phenomena were regularly experienced as a part of everyday life. Kollektivnye Deistvia's contemporary reactivation of the supernatural, or strangeness, then acts as "facts of art opposed to facts of reality that cannot be explained but only interpreted" (Groys, 1979). A similar path is tread where ritual affords an "almost mystical practice [that] completely coincides in time with its cold, analytical study. These functions are absolutely simultaneous and just as absolutely at odds with each other" (Dyogot, 2000). As we have previously learned, the Communist structure did



[Fig. 16] Kollektivnye Deistvia (Collective Actions). (1977) *Slogan 77*. [Moscow region]. Photo: Kollektivnye Deistvia.



[Fig. 17] Kollektivnye Deistvia (Collective Actions). (1978) *Slogan 78*. [Moscow region]. Photo: Kollektivnye Deistvia.

not allow an art market. This accounts to some degree for the re-emergence of a mystic sensibility that characterizes the practices of the Moscow Conceptualist movement since, “only artists like us can survive here because we do not make ‘things’, but rather perceive art as one form of existence” (Monastyrsky, cited in, Godfrey, 1998, p. 269).

The laborious and pitiless linear time of the official realm is cast aside for the same reasons that official collectivism is opposed: neither allows for the multiplicity of histories that are contained within a single event. Any group of individuals will differ in their accounting of a historic act or performed event despite having jointly witnessed it. Kollektivnye Deistvia encourages this responsibility of reporting in the participants, ensuring that the individual and collective experience of the audience is implicated directly in the historicizing of the work. [Fig. 18] The intention, we might say, is to reflect personal and historical change in the world through a dialogic interaction of different consciousnesses. The press release for the

1997 exhibition of their documentation, held at Exit Art in New York<sup>30</sup>

frames it thus,

The peculiarity of Soviet performance lies in its attempt to demonstrate the conditional mood of the perception as such and the evolution of various stereotypes of human behavior against the background of official ideology... Linking performance with ritual, the Collective Actions performances were spiritual acts aimed to create an atmosphere of unanimity among the participants and to serve as a vehicle for directing consciousness outside the boundaries of intellect (Backstein & Elagina, 1997).



[Fig. 18] Kollektivnye Deistvia (Collective Actions). (1977) *Participants during a performance*. [Moscow region]. Photo: Kollektivnye Deistvia.

In the written accounts of the performances, constructed from the notes of both the group and the participants, we can see that the texts are not so concerned with factual detail but with “the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of those who took part in them - and as a result, they had a strongly narrative, literary character” (Groys, 2002, p. 109) This is especially pertinent since actions are developed and unfold in such a way that not all present can directly witness. This is the crucial point; there is

<sup>30</sup> The exhibition was held at Exit Art, New York, July 18 - September 20, 1997

no collectivism capable of one unitary truth for the collective is a hybrid public that contains contradictory consciousnesses. The point relates to truth, and about how we construct meaning from what we know to be there against what we might think is there, or are persuaded by others to believe is there or not. The ecology of a Kollektivnye Deistvia performance is constructed through a series of predetermined actions undertaken by various people present in one time and space, but in such a way that not everything can be experienced by any one single person. The structure of this temporary collective projects a responsibility to each member to share his or her unique experience so that overall sense can be constructed. Requesting the participants to write down their experience then becomes one way through which they reach interpretation, as is the compiling and editing of the other documentary traces after the event. This interpretative method merges with the predetermined, written instructions and reveals a central tenet in Kollektivnye Deistvia's ethos; in order to prolong the life of the work each person, participant and artist, must acknowledge their experience as both a uniquely individual contribution and an experience that in itself is worthless. It mirrors Kahout's (2008) "complete socializing" of second culture and defies the unworkable logic of Communist ideology. That is, that there can be no privileging of one singular experience over another because all experiences are required to complete the work but at the same time each person must be recognized as having their own unique role to play in a process of a historical emergence. Set against the backdrop of the Communist project, that by its own philosophy is defined as emergence, Kollektivnye Deistvia encourage us to question why any such incompleteness might be capable of making a comprehensive record

of anything. At best we can say that history creates narrative based on incomplete information. Discovering that in fact they hadn't actually experienced everything because each person had their own version of the event, and then discovering that other people had missed some of what they had experienced, sets a requirement for a new model of reading history. That is, that the more voices that can contribute sense about the past the better equipped we will be to understand it, and its effects upon the present.

### Chapter 3. Turning over the Graves.

*Artists: Irina Botea (Romania), Anri Sala (Albania), Monika Sosnowska (Poland).*

For the people of Eastern Europe to even believe that such a night in Berlin in 1989 would come had increasingly taken on the character of fantasy: no one really believed it would ever arrive. The problem with such helpless dreaming is that when fantasy becomes flesh it can come in such traumatic proportion that it is very often followed by amnesia. This condition can be understood to operate on two distinct levels: on the one hand, many who lived through Communism have disengaged from talking about the past as a way to avoid revisiting cultural trauma and, on the other, there are the generations too young to have any real memory of it and who often consider the stories of the older generations to be too fantastic to be true. Marada, in his analysis of cultural trauma, proposes that Cold War Communism deserves the same level of attention that is given to the Holocaust and African-American slavery, since "it is the historical case upon which this concept can perhaps be even more readily applied" (Marada, 2007, p. 8). The paradox that lies in the collapse of Communism is that, while reunification opened the East and West sides of Europe to one another, it also bore "an intensified generational cleavage in its wake" (Marada, 2007, p. 3). Palonen (2008) has earlier demonstrated the extent to which the legacy of the Communist past impacts on the present day so that, when we talk about cultural trauma or cultural amnesia we are, in fact, dealing with an intergenerational problem. At the same time, now that we are able to look at the past from a twenty-year distance and, we should emphasize, increasingly via the acceleration in



technological advances that itself defines the pace of our historical perspectives, it is easy to think that the Communist era has simply melted into an abstract relation of the simulacrum. But the process of emergence is complex and porous, and transition can be likened to an open wound. Relations between the individual and the State have been re-drawn and with it the spaces of memory have been realigned. Nations have lost their assumed privilege to memorialise for us as we are inclined towards a deeper analysis of the past and the rules by which it is written. Spaces once solely in the domain of the State have been activated through a diverse range of political and civilizing activity and encounter where representations of revitalized cultural ethnicities have replaced the ideological fetish icon so beloved of the Communist parades<sup>31</sup>. A binary has been created: people have no wish for this recent past to be publically raised or analysed, while whatever capital it might contain is clearly oriented towards western touristic initiatives<sup>32</sup> and entrepreneurial political gain<sup>33</sup>. The Communist kitsch that replaced the Communist experience neither promotes reconciliation nor acknowledges trauma, but simply repackages the simulacrum while self-serving politicians treat the past with a level of contempt that is itself thoroughly contemptible. The fundamental problem with this binary is that it leaves no space for the memories of the

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<sup>31</sup> See, Balint Szombathy's 1972 performance, *Lenin in Budapest*

<sup>32</sup> For example, there are 'Crazy Communist Tours' in Krakow, Budapest, and Prague.

<sup>33</sup> In Poland the PiS (Law and Justice) party, led by the ultra-Catholic and homophobic Kaczynski twins, went on a highly publicised and resource-heavy witch hunt for communist collaborators and informers while shouting down instructions from Brussels to become more open in line with reforms set by the European Union.

actual people who are most in need of reconciliation<sup>34</sup>. The binary simply contributes to the erasure of the past, towards a condition of amnesia that has come to characterize much of the post-Communist condition. Clearly, it is one thing to talk of history but quite another thing to talk of memory.

Scribner suggests that, "what both capital and Communism first sought to exploit as a productive capacity, cultural practice might reclaim as collective memory" (Scribner, 2005, p. 6). In recent years a number of artists have engaged with this discourse of memory and memorialising of the past and carved out new ways of re-reading history. Some have embraced advances in modern technologies that allow an updating and adjustment to the traditional performance of storytelling through which the past has historically been handed from one generation to another. Video is at the frontline of this change, partly because of an influx of cheap cameras and the relative ease by which anyone can effectively apply the required skills in a short space of time. Simple editing processes allow a multiple layering of histories from which new meaning can be constructed. Others prefer more tactile sensoria where the physical act of remembering merges with the emotive realm of memory. This chapter examines a

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<sup>34</sup> The Czech Sociologist Radim Marada (2007) categorizes the trauma that accompanied the transition from communist to post-communist society into three distinct parts:

*"First, there has been the question of who was guilty for the widespread injustice of the communist regime, from imprisoning people for stating publicly their political views opposing the policies of the Communist Party and the regime in general, to withholding passports or making it impossible to pursue a career for which one was qualified or to study at a university or even a high school. Who was responsible for creating the atmosphere of fear, docility, and opportunism of a large part of the population? Second, there has been the more immediate concern with people's past, when new elites and leaders were looked for after the regime change, not only in politics, but also in the media, at schools and universities, in the state bureaucracy and other institutions. How to find someone reliable when those who were qualified for these positions had often been part of the old communist "nomenclature" or too close to it? How to recognize the true proponents of the old regime from those who just played the game and did not harm anyone directly, at least? And third, the question of guilt arises as many problems of transition towards and of the new liberal democratic regime are attributed to the communist heritage. Who is to be accused of the current problems in political life, the economy, and social relations, which we could have avoided if only we had not started with the burdens the corrupt communist regime?"*

number of works made after regime change that make us consider how the past is remembered and what it means to us in our present age.

Contemporary approaches to the analysis of the past and the role of memory in it overwhelmingly privileges the individual and the community over the State. Law (2007) shows that the essential task of what we call 'cultural memory' is to fill a gap "between the anthropological mining of memory and traditional historiography" (Law, 2007, p. 7). While the latter proposes that we can know the past through the collected sets of data that authenticate it, and to some extent is capable of recreating it, it is therefore necessarily concerned with what *happened* in the past. On the other hand, with cultural memory we can say that the object of study is not what took place in these other times but,

The various tasks memory undertakes: healing, denial, revision, invention, recreation and re-creation, forgetting... Remembering the past can be a creative process, and situating oneself in a shared temporal web is a necessary part of being in a society (Law, 2007, p. 7)

While traditional forms of re-enactment can be understood as driven by a desire to imagine oneself in some historical past or, in the case of the scientific world, to recreate a crime scene for forensic examination, in contemporary art the impetus comes from an altogether different reference. This orientation does not seek to recreate history for history's sake but to analyse "the relevance of what happened in the past for the here and now" (Arns, 2007). As has been demonstrated in the introduction a characteristic of our increasingly mediated world is that we mistrust the "authenticity" (Arns, 2007) of what the image actually means since technology allows history to be omnipresent. Re-enactment presents itself

as a strategy fit to analyse the image in the artist's own spatial plane, and to arrive at an understanding of what the images we see "might mean concretely to us, if we were to experience these situations personally" (Arns, 2007). While restorative nostalgia seeks to reconstruct the past, reflexive nostalgia, conversely, reflects the authority and time of the past and allows it to be prospective towards the future (Boym, 2001).



[Fig. 19] Irina Botea. (a) (2006) *Auditions for a Revolution*. [Chicago, School of the Arts Institute]. Photo: Irina Botea.



[Fig. 20] Irina Botea. (b) (2006) *Auditions for a Revolution*. [Chicago, School of the Arts Institute]. Photo: Irina Botea.

In her 2006 video, *Auditions for a Revolution*, Irina Botea (Romania) engaged student actors from the School of the Arts in Chicago in a re-enactment of the historic siege of the Bucharest television station by the leaders of the Christmas 1989 Romanian revolution. [Figs. 19, 20]. The Romanian revolution, that overthrew the brutalizing Ceaușescu regime, differed significantly from the other revolutions that took place throughout Europe as the Communist system crumbled. While these had been more or less peaceful affairs the Romanian experience was marked by violence and bloodshed in which over 1,000 protesters were killed (Siani-Davies, 2005, p. 97). And, unlike the media coverage of events in Berlin that were filmed almost exclusively from the western side of the Wall, the cameras in Bucharest were rolling live in the studio and relaying images and statements of the those who would become important players in the post-revolutionary governing body. The television became an organ of the revolution. At the time, however, their faces were not known to the wider public so the broadcasts came across as having “no coherent structure” (Maierian, 2006, p. 27), where the roles of reporter and citizen-revolutionary were confused. Maierian (2006) demonstrates how on-camera news read by the reporters was interrupted by short speeches making it difficult to distinguish between appeals and facts,

*Sergiu Nicolaescu* [A well-known Romanian film director]: Now, we have here Mircea Dinescu [poet and dissident], whom we do not know unfortunately by face, only by voice [From Radio Free Europe broadcasts]. Few months ago, he was fired from “Romania Literara” magazine, as a result of an interview against the dictator, granted to the French newspaper “Liberation”. He was arrested at his residence...Please...

*Mircea Dinescu:* I will make a short statement for the country. I am addressing now the workers, the peasants, the intellectuals and especially the students, to whom the entire country is thankful for their blood and life sacrifice from this heroic days...Do not leave your television sets! They are very important...Tonight, let's hope that till tonight...We make a call to the leadership of the army. Some high representatives should come here...from the Army and from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Be with us! Speak to the army and to the people! Workers, intellectuals...come to the Romanian Television. We will put together a declaration for the people...

*Voice:* The manifestations should continue...

*Dinescu:* Manifestations...Calm, be calm, calm...The people won in Romania.

*Voice:* The manifestations should continue...

*Dinescu:* The Romanian people rediscovered his present and his future that is so important in these moments..." (Maierean, 2006).

Botea set herself the task of recreating the scenes from these original newsreels sixteen years after their broadcast from Bucharest. She analysed the original footage frame by frame and subjected her actors to a precise duplication. She shot her footage using the same type of camera and film as the original and then transferred it to digital media for the editing and presentation process. She chose a split screen presentation so we become viewers of both the original and the reenactment. We watch as the actor's progress from clumsy awkwardness to acquiring a real commitment with the project as knowledge of events embolden them. While Botea has gone to considerable lengths to find forms in the American landscape that correlate to those in the newsreels, her primary concern is not to simply recreate, forensically, the Bucharest television environment. While the tension evident in the re-structuring of place serves to draw out our analysis of the context, what it is that is being re-enacted, it is in her coaching in Romanian language skills that we begin to realize that there is a metaphor at work. The discomfort of the American actors attempting to grasp Romanian fluency clearly signals an allegory of

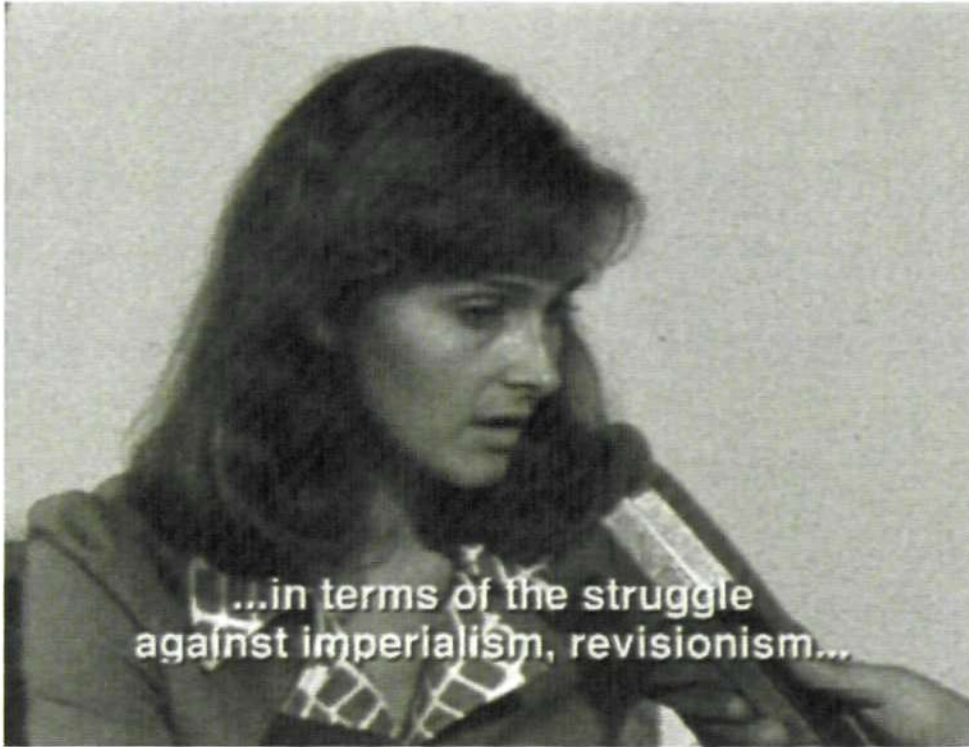
the difficulties involved in interpreting history. Although Botea had been physically present in Bucharest at the time of the revolution she was not in the television studio at the time the broadcast was made, and so her knowledge springs from the same mediated space as it does to us. By attempting to “re-insert herself into the endless sequences of images and events that comprise history” (Arns, 2007) Botea experiences more fully the social effect on the present day. The Romanian revolution has spawned a significant culture of claim and counter-claim as to its legitimacy as a revolution vis-à-vis a coup d'état, and it is these events as much as the historically mediated that “have etched themselves indelibly into the collective memory” (Arns, 2007) that Botea has tackled in her attempts at authenticity in *Auditions for a Revolution*.

We understand that this form of memory functions as counter-memory thanks chiefly to Michel Foucault's (1980) research into how the discourse of power is shaped. His favouring of the term 'archaeology' rather than 'history' underscores his attempt to break with traditional views of historiography since history does “not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 162). Bouchard refers to Foucault's counter memory as “other voices which have remained silent for so long” (Bouchard (ed.), cited in, Foucault, 1980a, p. 17), and thus are able to “confiscate, at least temporarily, power to speak on the specific issues” (Misztal, 2003, p. 65). Counter memory, then, can be understood as a counter discourse that allows us to concentrate on localized experiences by reframing the dominant narrative. As such, counter memory is not the “content of a memory itself, but rather the role a particular memory is playing in a larger construct of remembrance” (Law,

2007, p. 8). And there is no more 'localized' context than the relationship between a mother and son. It is this dynamic that lies at the heart of Anri Sala's 1998 video work *Intervista*. [Figs. 20, 21] The story begins on his return to the family home in Tirana during a break in his film studies in Paris. Looking through some family belongings he finds an unprocessed 16mm film reel in plastic wrapping. His parents have long forgotten of its existence and neither of them can remember its content or the circumstances of its making. Holding the film up to the light he sees the face of his mother as a young woman delivering what looks like a speech. Sala, with no projector to view the film on, examines the negative by hand and, frame by frame, sees a young woman of around thirty years of age who is, unmistakably, his mother. Curious, he waits until his return to Paris to begin restoring the film when, to his astonishment, he watches his mother deliver what appears to be an impassioned speech at the 1977 Albanian Youth Congress, immediately next to Enver Hoxha, the Secretary of the Albanian Communist Party. Sala's problem was that there was no sound and therefore he had no idea what she was saying. Sala's 'detective story' begins in earnest when his mother says she cannot remember the date of the interview contained in the film but identifies the interviewer as Pushkin Lubonja. Lubonja says he does not remember the woman, Valdet, from the more than 2,000 interviews he conducted because they were designed to reflect the Party, not the individual subject, and thus were "foreseeable and so were the answers" (Lubonja, cited in Boym, 2009). Sala then traces the sound engineer who can't help him either but, undeterred, he carries on his quest and hires lip readers from a school for deaf and dumb children to help recover the 'lost words' of his



mother.



[Fig. 21] Anri Sala. (1998) *Intervista*. [Tirana, private apartment]. Photo: Anri Sala.

The instantaneity offered by digital technologies is at odds with Sala's early specialism as a fresco painting at Tirana's art school (Boym, 2009). When approaching the fresco it is necessary that the artist has prepared a well thought out drawing beforehand since the medium does not lend itself to change or correction in the same way as other forms of painting do. Painting onto wet plaster takes great skill, as does the application of each new area of plaster so that it matches exactly those previously applied. Each day the performance of the fresco painter is re-enacted bit by bit as the painting grows toward completion, and this makes time a primary material in the work. We could say, in fact, that it is the antithesis of the modern world. Sala has carefully applied these skills in his transference to video as his preferred medium of choice and doesn't seek to hide the

process as conventional documentary does (Boym, 2009) but, rather, elects to reveal it as the key to the past. Hence, there is no discussion with the camera by Valdet. Instead, Sala takes an off-camera approach that reveals the tension and love in the relationship between mother and son. When the film is finally restored he arranges to show it his mother. Valdet is confronted with the 'text' of ideology against the age of her experience; it is an exemplary exercise in reconnecting "the visual archive to its proper temporal context" (Enwezor, 2008). The video shows Valdet confronting the Communist ideals of her younger self while considering the contemporary chaos of Albania as the economy collapses in real time and civil unrest manifests itself on the streets. The video, "in equal parts documentary, memoir and mystery" (Godfrey et al, 2005, p. 46), is imbued with intense psychological drama and a sense of memorializing something that, over the years, his mother had forgotten. The film draws to a close with his mother reflecting that, "we were living in a deaf and dumb system... I think we've passed on to you the ability to doubt. Because you must always question the truth" (Sala, 1998). However, there is more to Sala's work than memorializing his mother's lost words. Majaca and Bago show that "every new telling of a story perfects its narrative but also rearranges, edits and moves it further from its original, authentic plot" (Majaca & Bago, 2007). When Sala shows his mother some early progress he has made on her Communist Youth Congress speech her embarrassed reaction is to suggest that he has made an error in the interpretation process,

This meeting was held to express a clear support of the country in the struggle against imperialism and revisionism and the two superpowers, which is only possible if the youth unites under the

guardianship of the Communist party (Sala, *Intervista*, 1998).

It's absurd... not the ideology but the grammar. I know how to express myself (Sala, *Intervista*, 1998).

Sala's relocation of the plot from the Youth Congress to the domestic realm, and of Valdet from Hoxha's side to the living room sofa where she watches the video, confronts the erasure and amnesia of the past not so much in a critical way but as a strategy that embraces Law's various tasks of memory; "healing, denial, revision, invention, recreation and re-creation, forgetting... situated in a shared temporal web" (Law, 2007, p. 7). It is, overall, an inter-generational text. We understand the reenactments of Botea and Sala to engage Boym's notion of reflexive nostalgia, where the possibility of nostalgia acts not in a reconstructive manner but as "prospective towards the future" (Boym, 2001). Returning to our topic of counter memory then, we can locate these re-enactments within a subverting of the dominant memory that, in this case, was a mediated historical memory, and that neither Sala nor Botea were concerned so much with confirming or validating the past, but with a questioning of the present.



[Fig. 22] Anri Sala. (b) (1998) *Intervista*. [Tirana, private apartment]. Photo: Anri Sala.

The stone columns of Lenin and Marx, and all the way down to the lesser Party officials that occupied the streets and squares, as efficient in their occupation as any physical army, are now gone. What remains physically of the Communist past are the traces of the rapid growth in industry following WW2 that saw large segments of Polish society migrate to the cities from rural areas. In order to accommodate these recent settlers a new type of 'osiedle' (settlement) was needed. The modernist, Soviet-styled architecture of high-rise tower blocks became the model, with each osiedle containing a number of buildings that individually came to be known as a 'blok'<sup>35</sup>. This particular form of Soviet modernism was determined most of all by producing a basic, functional habitat characterized by undecorated, bolted-together, Plattenbau slabs that gave

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<sup>35</sup> Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski turned the osiedle into a metaphor of the human condition onto in his 1989 *Decalogue* series.

them a dour, depersonalized appearance. The architectural installations of Monika Sosnowska communicate the memory of this "bastardized version of modernity imposed on Poland by its Communist administrators" (Kalinowska, 2005). Sosnowska belongs to the generation whose lives have straddled a near equal split between Communist and post-Communist times, and was part of the first generation to graduate from art school under the new political reality. She allows her anti-architecture to speak of the "traumatic experience" (Szczerski, 2007) of the Communist past that continues to resonate in the present, so that they act as "tropes of the memory discourse" (Vidler, 1994, p. 178). If the content of Polish modernity was determined by the conditions of the nation's stateless existence throughout the nineteenth century, its form grew out of the processes that took place in the aftermath of the Communist takeover of power (Kalinowska, 2005). Never quite completed due to material shortages these bloks were constructed in often absurd ways: common stairways painted in muted colour, corridors often leading nowhere, kitchens without windows, a maze of exposed hot water pipes running throughout the rooms often with no means to regulate them and, almost exclusively, all fitted with beautiful, rolling, wooden parquet flooring that imbues them with a grandeur at odds with their erstwhile function. It was common practice for inhabitants to redesign corridors and hallways in an effort to salvage storage space that had been mysteriously omitted from their design. Architecture critic Grzegorz Piątek (2009) laments that, in the rush to rebuild Poland amidst a period of high economic growth, present day Polish architects are not interested in "discussing and arguing or dealing with critical architecture which would attempt... a critical reflection

of the surrounding world" (Piątek, 2009). One reason he cites for this is the generation of young architects who grew up on "cheap air flights and Skype [and who's] perverse" (Piątek, 2009) engagement with this form of Communist-era architecture does not pay due attention to the ecology of its past. Rather, he condemns it for contributing to the destruction of an architectural and social heritage by not preserving landmark buildings that are part of the nation's memory: "when architecture falls silent, fine arts become its conscience" (Piątek, 2009). Sosnowska's installations are designed to be physically experienced; they are unexpected and strange misrepresentations of scale that disorient the visitor, exaggerating but not parodying the original. If there is an exaggeration, it is that she attempts to manifest the hallucinatory qualities of these bloks that were at one and the same time home, uncanny and, externally at least, depersonalized spaces where residents lived in a "Kafkaesque situation in which architecture starts to control human emotions and becomes a medium of oppression" (Gorzadek, 2004). In place of utilitarian function Sosnowska introduces "chaos and uncertainty instead" (Sosnowska, cited in Jeffrey, 2007).

I am especially interested in the moments when architectural space starts to acquire the aspects of the mental one (Sosnowska, cited in Gorzadek, 2004).

The idea is to question reality, not just absorb it. I'm not really inventing, or creating fantastic images. Rather, I am manipulating things that I remember, things that I have found in reality (Sosnowska, cited in Jeffrey, 2007).

In *Untitled* (2003) an L-shaped green and white corridor narrows as the body passes through it, producing a sense of anxiety that is heightened when we come across a number of doors that are seen partly open. [Fig.

23].



[Fig. 23] Monika Sosnowska. (2003) *Untitled*. [Istanbul Biennial]. Photo: universes-in-universe.

The interior of the 2003 work, *Corridor*, is painted stark white and divided by six pairs of doors. [Fig. 24, 25]. The attention to emotional response is acute in the ordering of space and place. It reveals a condition explicit in the work's form that allows memory to assume a physical flesh of an anxiety associated with this chaotic, imported, and imposed architecture. Sosnowska has allowed herself to, "quote the fragments of the PRL [People's Republic of Poland]" (Szczerski, 2007) as a method that permits her to take an anti-architecture stance: by creating aesthetically beautiful, minimalist works apparently devoid of function, she draws attention to how function can act actively against the people it was in fact intended to serve. By extending the memory of a 'bastardized' architecture composed of a "claustrophobic labyrinth of corridors, architectural decorations falling apart, or ruined walls" (Szczerski, 2007), she juxtaposes the dislocation of the past with the present day and presents an architecture of the "post-

Communist era of shattered dreams" (Szczerski, 2007). We can call these installations 're-enacted architectures', not in a way that mirrors the experience of everyday life in the People's Republic of Poland but, rather, as the flesh of "dead ends and false starts" (Jeffrey, 2007) that embodies the memories of the failed Communist Utopia<sup>36</sup>.



[Fig. 24] Monika Sosnowska. (2003) *Corridor*. [Art-Basel, Basel 2008]. Photo: designboom.



<sup>36</sup> Vidler (1994) demonstrates that modernist architecture, inherited from futurism, ironically sought to erase any sense of the past from its architecture. The irony is that, while Sosnowska's installations generally end up destroyed after exhibition (Sosnowska, 2006), the osiedle's and bloks that remain standing undergo mass exterior renovation throughout Poland, receiving cosmetic facelifts, more optimistic colour schemes, and the roads and paths that maze around them re-laid decoratively and with tree-plantings.



[Fig. 25] Monika Sosnowska. (2003) *Corridor*. [Art-Basel, Basel 2008]. Photo: designboom.

If the works of Sots Art and Ilya Kabakov illustrate how heteroglossia operated in relation to the dominant ideology through their appropriation of the Socialist Realism lifestyle, in the post-Communist era there is no such readymade simulacrum that artists can agitate. Despite the continuing reverberation of the Communist past (Palonen, 2008) heteroglossia, as an analytical discourse, has been replaced by the alienation and individualism that characterizes the accelerated transition into a global system of democracy. It is, in many ways, the antithesis of a collectivizing culture. It is no longer a time of emergence, as was the Communist project, but a moment in time when people gape at the wreckage wrought by the clash between the old and new worlds of Europe. In the post-Communist era there are no more heroes. Neither has there been much time to adjust. Research shows that Warsaw is the biggest building site in Europe (PCRF, 2009), a continuous development project throwing up futuristic structures<sup>37</sup>. The pace of change is breathtaking but the cost is being left for future generations to lament. Glass and steel towers rise skyward side-by-side with the now dwarfed osiedle's. The new shiny crowns extend the ceiling of dreams and fill the empty holes in the sky where the giants of Communism once looked down upon their subjects. [Fig. 26].

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<sup>37</sup> Warsaw is, of course, a unique example that also incorporates the wholesale destruction of the city by Nazi Germany. Berlin is classed as the second biggest building site in Europe (PCRF, 2009).



[Fig. 26] Warsaw skyline (2009). Photo: Michel Zacharz.

In 2006, in New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Sosnowska installed, *The Hole*, a jagged puncture in the (false) ceiling with shattered debris lying below. [Fig. 27]. Somewhat reminiscent of Kabakov's installation, *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment*, it differs in one critical aspect. While Kabakov's hero was propelled by the Utopian drive to the cosmos, and Kabakov by a critique of it, Sosnowska's hole has been made from the outside in. We know this because the debris consists of forms that, if forensically pieced together, would not account for the "shapes of prisms, rhombuses, or other geometrical figures" (Sosnowska, 2006) that lie on the floor. And why would forms that contain within them cosmic properties appear to have crashed through the hole and into the room from space? With neither simulacrum nor cosmic space to fly into there is only "a small piece of well-illuminated ceiling" (Sosnowska, 2006) to ponder. The answer is located in a metaphor of the post-Communist condition: while spaces of memory are being sharply erased in the headlong rush into an "atmosphere of curiosity and potential, but in the end, impossible damage" (Sosnowska, 2006), the installation reveals the new reality as "something that from a distance looks like a recognizable thing, but on looking closer, becomes something else" (Sosnowska, 2009).

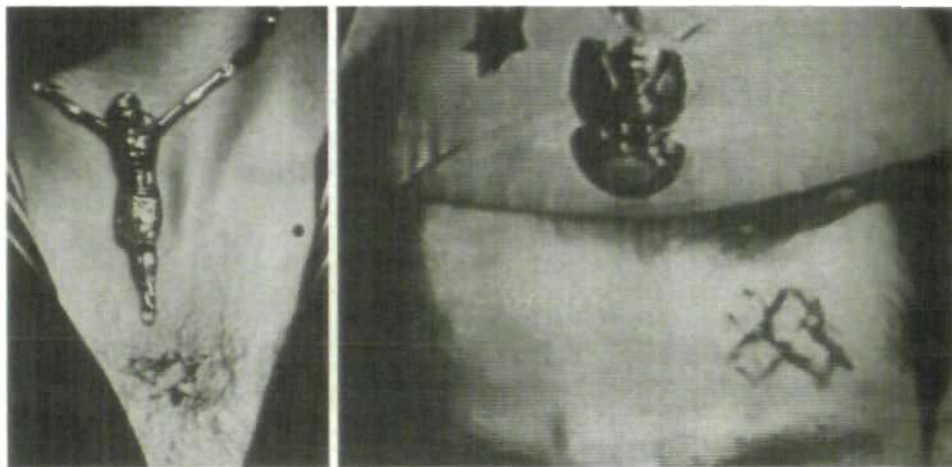


[Fig. 27] Monika Sosnowska. (2006) *The Hole*. [New York Museum of Modern Art]. Photo: Jasmie Park.

#### Chapter 4. Identities of Transition and Disintegration.

Artists: NSK (Slovenia/FYR), Raši Todosijević (Serbia/FYR), association APSOLUTNO (Serbia/FYR), Weekend Art (Croatia/FYR), Ive Tabar (Slovenia/FYR), Jerzy Truszkowski (Poland).

If the cosmic shapes that litter the floor of Sosnowska's installation invite us to speculate as to why they have appeared in the room, in the present day, we might likewise wonder what similar symbols would signify if they were carved into the flesh of a contemporary artist. This is what the Polish artist Jerzy Truszkowski did in his 1987 action, *The Farewell to Europe*, manifest two days before he was due to begin his national service. He went to visit his friend and fellow artist Zbigniew Libera, and it was within this domestic setting that the action unfolded. He donned his father's WW2 field-cap and affixed to it a grey pentagonal star and a crowned eagle, the national symbol of pre-war Poland<sup>38</sup>. Near his temple he carved a cross with a scalpel into his flesh. [Figs. 28].



[Fig. 28] Jerzy Truszkowski. (1987) *The Farewell to Europe*. [Pabianice, private apartment]. Photo: Truszkowski/Libera.

Around his neck he wore a crucifix and below it he carved a pentagram

<sup>38</sup> The crowned eagle is an emblem of prewar Poland. During the Communist era the crown was removed and only returned after 1989.

star into his flesh<sup>39</sup>. He completed the ritual by cutting away at his moustache with the blade. Initially this visual imagery possibly conjures an impression of the “clash and purpose” (Leszkowicz, 1999) of ideologies but, on closer analysis, the action mirrors a general ‘death of everything’ disposition that accompanies the encroaching end of an epoch. The cross is a universal symbol from the most ancient times, a cosmic axis that displays infinite expansion in every direction. It is reasonable, then, to view Truszkowski’s complex composition as a *fin-de-siècle*, mirroring the degenerative end of the Communist era, and anticipating an approaching end. Ritual always accompanies a new beginning: the artist bids farewell to an ordinary life before entering the military body.

The action was made at the onset of the last two years of Communism that saw increased social unrest pile intensified pressure on a weakened Polish government. Curtis (1992) demonstrates that Poland enjoyed a privileged conduit that ran between the Vatican, the Polish people, and the outside world, that opened vital new lines of communication and created a real sense of hope, not only in Poland but also throughout Eastern Europe. By 1987, assisted by the globally recognizable symbols of the trade union *Solidarność* and the cross, something inevitable and

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<sup>39</sup> In other manifestations Truszkowski incorporates a wide body of symbolic references, including the swastika.

unavoidable was in the air<sup>40</sup>. Long before the Soviet's adopted the cosmic pentagram to represent the five social groups that would guide Russia to the Communist Utopia - the peasants, the workers, the army, the intellectuals, and the youth - early Christians considered it representational of the five wounds of Christ. While Truszkowski "confronted these symbols with the pain of his own flesh being cut with a scalpel" (Sitkowska, cited in Dziamski, 1999), it would be incorrect to consider that the action embodied only a personal rite. If it were simply a juxtapositional evaluation of the militarism of the State and the State's militarization, or dehumanization, of the individual then the action would not capture our interest since, as we know, existing terrors will only be replaced by new terrors. But, since the work was performed to video camera, and with loud music for a soundtrack, we must assume that he intended an audience for it at some later time. Thus, what he has done is present very clearly the body as a surface; the body becomes the self-image in itself (in much the same way as Tomáš Ruller has done in *8.8.88*). Thus, it belongs to a long line of violence of the image that, in the history of the avant-garde, "is nothing other than a staged martyrdom of the image that replaced the Christian image of martyrdom" (Groys, 2007). Truszkowski eroticizes the image of martyrdom through the sacrifice of his own blood: the aspect of "self-

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<sup>40</sup> In 1979 the triumphal return of Pope John Paul II (elected one year before) to Poland had "boosted the Polish cultural self-image and focused international attention on Poland's political and spiritual struggles" (Curtis, 1992). In the following year the Church offered crucial moral support to the first officially recognized trade union movement in the Soviet bloc, *Solidarność*, while at the same calling for peaceful protest. This ability to communicate at the highest levels while commanding respect on the street put the Church in an incredibly powerful position (and having a Polish Pope even more so), so much so that the government requested its help in establishing a dialog with the workers. The 1989 success of *Solidarność* in the first free elections witnessed the homecoming of the pact that had been formed between the unions and the Church when the latter began a coordinated intervention into the lives and welfare of the entire social body, by asserting itself in an authoritarian manner into every area and corner of public life. In 1989 virtually every significant public organization in Poland saw the church as a partner in its activities and decisions, (Curtis, 1992) and sought from the newly elected government a guarantee of the right to religious education and the right to life beginning at conception, that was, essentially, a that resulted in a trade-off of human rights.

crucifixion is ambivalent" (Truszkowski, 1989) as the Polish flag is drawn in blood upon the white artist's body.

Of course, is it not only ancient symbols that have been appropriated, art too has, "not yet overcome the conflict brought about by the rapid and efficient assimilation of historical avant-garde movements in the systems of totalitarian states" (Cufer & Irwin, 1992). The Slovenian artist collective NSK (*Neue Slowenische Kunst*) formed in the early 1980s against a totalitarian background, and grew through the collapse of Communism and the violent and incendiary rise of nationalism throughout the South East European region. This would spiral out of control when Slobodan Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman assumed power in Serbia and Croatia respectively. On assuming power Tudjman rolled out the paraphernalia of the Ustaše<sup>41</sup> - the flag, national emblem, and swastikas - of the country's fascist past as a WW2 Nazi puppet state, while some Croats armed themselves with *Srbosjek* knives (Serb cutters) that had been specially designed for the Ustaše in WW2 to facilitate the speedy throat cutting of prisoners of war. In 1990, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany, and alongside the "new political, ideological and economic re-organisation of Europe" (Cufer & Irwin, 1992), NSK changed its form from an organisation into a "Utopian virtual state without concrete territory" (Cufer & Irwin, 1992). Since the NSK collective encompasses philosophy, design, the visual arts, film, and postmodern theatre, it is not so much united by common practices or disciplines<sup>42</sup> but through common interests; the deconstruction of political space, representations and re-presentations of

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<sup>41</sup> The Nazi-era secret police and death squads.

<sup>42</sup> Their collective practices include rock music (Laibach), postmodern theatre (*Sestry Scipiona Nascice/Noordung*), design (New Collectivism), the visual arts and film (Irwin, *Retrovision*) and the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy (Peter Mlakar).

power and history, and a physical return to the symbolic language of totalitarian ideology and the avant-garde in order to investigate and reveal the links between them. Operating as an "abstract organism" (Cufer & Irwin, 1992) situated within the already existing socio-political realm of Europe their discourse is representative of both East and West European contemporary social, political, and cultural histories. With the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, Slovenia formed a kingdom with Serbia and Croatia. In 1941, the occupying Nazi Fascist regime assimilated the areas outwith Italian Fascist control within the Nazi framework and then, as a result of the regional carve up at the 1945 Yalta conference Slovenia became a part of the Soviet empire. The engagement with these histories is clearly assimilated in NSK productions. It is what authorizes their heterogeneous choice of symbols appropriated from the cultural and political landscapes of national and European history, Socialist Realism and Nazi art, Italian Futurism and Soviet Constructivism, and legitimizes their intervention "in the impossible historical 'continuity' of Slovenian and, more generally speaking, Yugoslav and European art (Gržinić, cited in, eds. Djurić & Šuvaković, 2003). There are also direct references to conceptual art of Duchamp, Fluxus, and Beuys (Monroe, 2005). During the period of Nazi occupation the Slovenian capital Ljubljana was renamed Laibach. In 1980 the name Laibach was adopted by the music representation in NSK, a spectacular creation based on an over-appropriation, or "over-identification" (Žižek, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 287), of totalitarian fascist and Communist imagery. [Figs. 29, 30]. In fact their over-identification with the images and rituals is so total that "there are thoughts that NSK predicted the Balkan



bloodbath” (Mlakar & Greg, 2002), and many came to believe that there must be a subversive ploy in their work, an ironic comment on the past because, surely, they could never truly identify with it.

The critical answer to this is, of course, that Laibach “does not function as an answer but a question” (Žižek, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 287). Thus, there is no ironical distance or cynical superstructure that might prove acceptable but, rather, the “artistic procedure of Neue Slowenische Kunst [is] based on the premise that traumas from the past affecting the present and the future can be healed only by returning to the initial conflicts (Cufer & Irwin, 1992). There is then, only what is offered for consumption; an over-identification



[Fig. 29, 30] Laibach. *Promotional images*. [London and Slovenia]. Photo: NSK.

with the symbolic language of totalitarian power that “suspends its efficiency” (Žižek, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002: 285-287), and the appropriation of the symbols with “no differentiating between” Stalinism or Nazism (Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 257).

Laibach grew out of a context in which the spectacularly complex

discourses and institutions of self-management pervaded all sections of public and private life. Laibach's response was to incorporate the all-pervasive "noise" of the system into a traumatic multimedia spectacle that completely disoriented the authority (Monroe, 2005).

The NSK logo reveals this discourse since its origins are located within a hybrid legacy of Malevich and the Nazi swastika. By revealing the "hidden transgression behind the official ideology" (NSK, 1996) they show that which "normally should be suppressed for the social order to function unquestioned" (Richardson, 2000). They become "more total than totalitarianism" (Groys, 1991). Their eclectic appropriation of "signs, images, symbols, and forms of rhetoric" (Arns, 2002) together becomes a retrospective identification of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of the "artistic, political, religious or technological 'salvation Utopias' of the 20th century" (Arns, 2002).

Modern states continue to be preoccupied with the question of how to collectivize and socialize the individual, whereas avant-garde movements tried to solve the question of how to individualize the collective (NSK, cited in, (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002: 301).

Defining the characteristics of transition in the former Yugoslavia, then, is fraught with difficulties since the end of Communism was so swiftly followed by war and disintegration. When it arrived the descent into hell was swift and thorough, leaving what had been hard won by Tito's policy of non-alignment and neutrality with Russia and the Cold War in shreds.

Nobody knows what actually happened with Communism in the former Yugoslavia, since there was no radical ideological demobilisation in the country (Stretenovic, 1996).

Following Tito's 1948 refusal to succumb to the hegemony of the Soviet

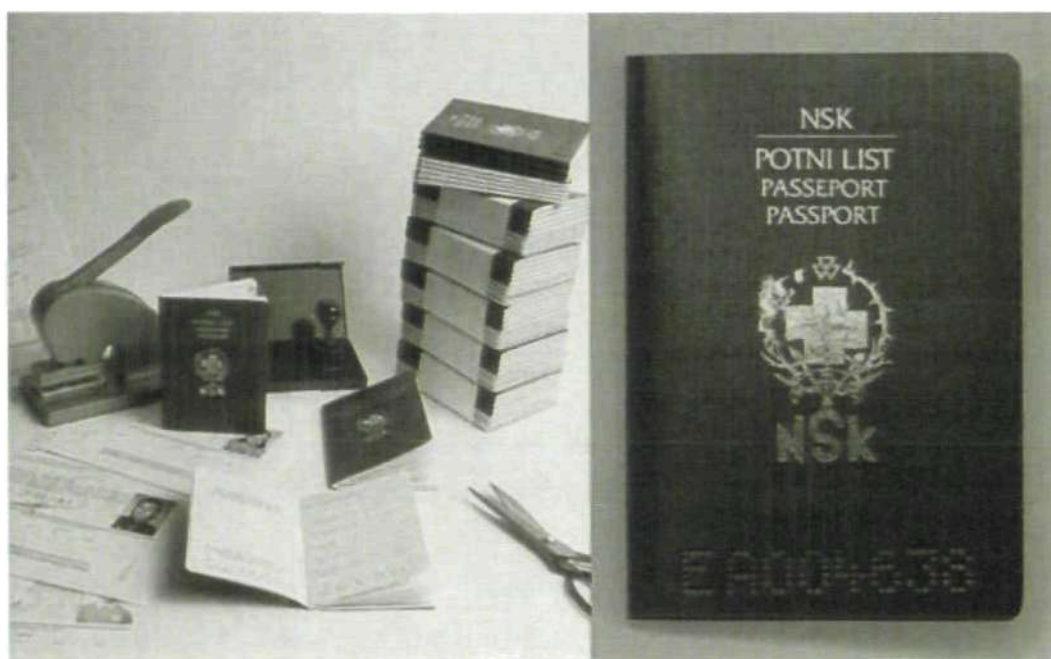
Union, Yugoslavia implemented the most liberal reforms of the Communist era but took the longest route out of it. It had opened its borders to both its citizens and foreigners in 1965, had enjoyed close cultural ties with the west, played host to a number of international artists, and saw its artists receive reciprocal invitations to present work overseas. However, support for non-official artists was no better than elsewhere: the conservatism of Socialist Realism and a presumed dislike of a perceived western influence meant non-official culture was neglected by institutions. As Gržinić (2004) demonstrated in the introduction, while the West defines the separation between the Communist and post-Communist era in relation to the fall of the Berlin Wall, for the people of the former Yugoslavia it was Tito's death in 1980 that brought about a regional collapse. As a response to the brutalizing disintegration and incendiary nationalism of the Yugoslav Republic, *NSK - State in Time*, was founded in 1990, with the NSK collective becoming its first citizens. Reacting to the emerging crisis of territory and identity in the Balkans it was conceptualised as a virtual state existing without territory, an "extra territorial State" (NSK State, 1992) that can be activated at will in any place, globally, and in peaceful co-existence within already existing systems.

The NSK State denies in its fundamental acts the categories of fixed territory, the principle of national borders, and advocates the law of transnationality (Cufer & Irwin, 1992).

From a certain point of view, every artist serves a state. We said that, whatever we do, we are going to be state artists, so let's create our own state (NSK, cited in, Wolfson, 2003).

Passports and flags bear the *NSK – State in Time* insignia and temporary embassies are established in different countries and in a variety of places

that including private apartments, hotels, and cultural institutions. [Fig. 31]. Responding to invitations to present work they pushed the conservative expectation of the exhibition format by opening NSK embassies in Moscow, Sarajevo, Ghent and Berlin, before even the new Slovenian government managed to do so (NSK, cited in, Wolfson, 2003). The Moscow embassy was established in a private apartment, but not with the intention of mirroring the socializing and communicative nature of the Apt-Art movement that we looked at in chapter 1. [Fig. 32]. While Apt-Art, Sots Art, and the Moscow Conceptualists, colonized the domestic realm around "the self organization of the most excluded" (Gržinić, 1997) the NSK embassy manifest itself, not as an equilibrium in the opposition between the totalitarian ideology and the "non-ideological" private, untainted sphere" (Gržinić, 1997) but as "two sides of the same coin that are both going to disappear with post-socialist democracy" (Žižek, 1994, p. 26).



[Fig. 31] NSK (1990) *NSK Passports*. [Ljubljana]. Photo: NSK.



[Fig. 32] NSK (1992). *NSK State, Moscow Embassy* [Moscow private apartment]. Photo: Jože Suhadolnik.

In November 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> 1995, while war was being fought in Bosnia-Herzegovina, they transformed the Sarajevo National Theatre building into a NSK State embassy. An official plaque was installed at a welcoming ceremony followed by speeches, lectures, and exhibitions. It would be the best-attended cultural event in the country since the start of the war (Laibach, 1995). The NSK Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy delivered a lecture on 'The Apocalypse of Europe and Possible Deliverance', videos were shown, art work was displayed, and Laibach played two concerts, one either side of the signing of the Dayton Peace Accord "which meant [they] were more than a merely symbolic conclusion to the European leg of Laibach's tour in support of the "NATO" (Laibach, 1995). Confusion among border officials was running high since Yugoslavian borders were being dismantled on a seemingly daily basis. NSK – State in Time issued diplomatic passports to 350 people, many of who were able to flee the war in Bosnia- Herzegovina.

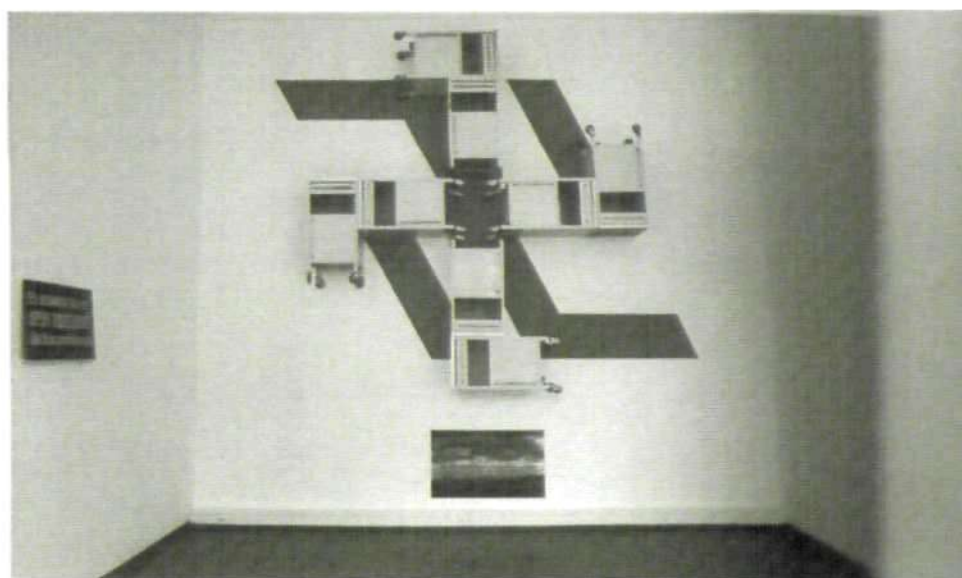
We gave passports to people, for instance in Sarajevo. They couldn't use Bosnian passports, but some of them managed to

sneak out with NSK diplomatic passports. I even entered the UK once with an NSK passport (Wolfson, 2003).

In 1998 IRWIN, the visual art arm of NSK, propelled the NSK - State in Time project further by organizing collaborations between the institution of art and the institution of national armies. The first response came from a major in the Albanian army, himself an artist, and who agreed to have his army wear NSK – State in Time armbands and to carry the flag despite apparently showing an allegiance to another country. The Albanian collaboration was subsequently followed by cooperation with the national armies of Croatia, Italy, Austria, Montenegro, the Czech Republic, and Pristina. While it may be tempting to see NSK State as a parallel institution to the official realm the matter is more urgent and complex than that since, during the transition and disintegration of Yugoslavia, there was no institution to be parallel to (Richardson, 2000). While NSK are profoundly involved in re-reading and re-presenting histories, and use the symbols and symbolic violence of these histories in an embodied manner that goes beyond mere representation, they differ significantly from the examples of the Moscow Conceptualist and Sots Art movements we looked at in chapter one, who contributed to a non-official narrative of the past by revealing their emerging present. While we have earlier noted Baudrillard's thesis that the postmodernist simulacrum precedes and determines the real so that "never again will the real have the chance to produce itself" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2), with NSK we can say that they attempt "to free the present and change the future via the reworking of past Utopianisms and historical wounds" (Monroe, 2005, p. 120).



[Fig. 33] Raši Todosijević. (a) (1994) *Gott liebt die Serben (God Loves the Serbs)*. [Copenhagen, Kulturbot]. Photo: The artist.



[Fig. 34] Raši Todosijević. (b) (1998) *Gott liebt die Serben (God Loves the Serbs)*. [Berlin, IFA Gallery]. Photo: The artist.

An early influence on NSK is the Belgrade-based artist Raši Todosijević. Beginning in the 1970s he began titling his works in German “for its sternness, and to criticize the totalitarian spirit” (Todosijević, 2005). During the 1980-90s he produced a large body of installations, *Gott liebt die Serben (God Loves the Serbs)*, that arranged ordinary domestic objects; wardrobes, suitcases, cabinets, in the form of a swastika that he installed

in the room or attached to the gallery wall. [Figs. 33, 34]. On one occasion the President of the Republic of Austria was photographed standing under one of his swastikas: "It seems incredible that he consented while if I had drawn it on a wall in the city I would have been arrested" (Todosijević, 2003). His use of the swastika has "more to do with Duchamp than politics" (Todosijević, 2005) and, while that might be somewhat understating it, it nevertheless raises the question of the secondary authoring of symbols that fill them with meaning beyond their origin, such as was done by both perpetrators and victims of Nazism.



[Fig. 35] Raši Todosijević. (c) (1998) *Gott liebt die Serben (God Loves the Serbs)*. [Belgrade, Museum of Contemporary Art]. Photo: The artist.

Employing visual codes that are designed to disturb, alarm, and draw attention to the contemporary spectacle Todosijević's confrontational practice becomes physically directed in the 1998 Happening, *Gott liebt die Serben*, realised in the Museum of 25<sup>th</sup> May<sup>43</sup>. [Fig. 35]. Chatting with one another over beer and beans, around tables set out in swastika form with a

<sup>43</sup> The museum is part of the Josip Broz Tito Memorial Center and home to the House of Flowers, where Tito's body lies. (1892-1980).



background soundtrack of nationalist songs, "the idea of the swastika's geometry to be eaten by life, dirt, primitive guzzling wasn't perceived – nothing" (Todosijevic, 2003). He is simultaneously shocked by the lack of response to a referent to the recent, violent past yet, at the same time, is happy to mythologize himself through the paradox of nationalism and the personality cult of leaders; the wine labels and notices that form part of the installations bear the text, *Thank You, Raši Todosijević* (Todosijević, 2002) While a great ideological divide separates the Soviet regime from Nazi Germany's Socialism, we can nevertheless find ready links between them on a socio-cultural level; they both shared an obsession with institutionalizing art in the service of ideology. Both Soviet Socialist Realism and Nazi Socialist art shared similarities in the portrayal of "revolutionary romanticism" (Zhdanov, cited in Taylor & van der Will, 1990, p. 7) by promoting collectivist culture and a 'positive' and 'healthy' heroism in daily life. Set against the dramatic backdrop of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century wars in Yugoslavia, the ten-year durational performance *Weekend Art: Hallelujah the Hill* convincingly marks its own time through the cycle of seasons<sup>44</sup>. [Figs. 36, 37] An inter-generational work directed by Aleksandar Battista Ilic in collaboration with the artists Ivana Keser and Tomislav Gotovac, it is built around their ritual Sunday hikes on the Medvednica mountain on the outskirts of Zagreb between 1996-2000. It locates the performers as subjects in an apparent dissertation, a "film realised in slides" (Battista Ilic, 2000) while objectively they are acknowledging the endless cycles of destruction that characterise the

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<sup>44</sup> The project encompasses a 10-year duration that includes the 5 years of Sunday hikes on Medvednica mountain and 5 years performing trace and other activities including mail, poster, and postcard act and the *Weekend Art* film composed of hundreds of still images.

natural and human world. Battista Ilic's passion for film directs the compositions and captures them in stunning light and serenity<sup>45</sup>. Aesthetic and practical decisions govern the work and indicate the logistics of Battista Ilic setting up his camera and self-timer and running to the others to complete the pose. They stand on the highest peak and look directly across the skyline, lie huddled together in a river stream, have fun in the snow, pick fruit from branches, play hide and seek behind trees, pick their way through lush foliage, hang onto their hats in the wind, and rest in the shade of trees.



[Figs. 36, 37] Aleksandar Battista Ilic (a) (1996-2005). *Weekend Art: Hallelujah the Hill*. [Medvednica Mountain]. Photo: Aleksandar Battista Ilic.

<sup>45</sup> The performed 'scenes' are partly informed the 1963 Aldofas Meks film, *Hallelujah the Hills*, that tells the story of two men who pursue their love of the same woman but who are ultimately rejected in favour of a third, less intelligent, man.



[Figs. 38] Aleksandar Battista Ilic (1996-2005). (c) Performing Trace: *Weekend Art: Hallelujah the Hill*. [Kyoto and Dublin]. Photo: Aleksandar Battista Ilic.

It is exquisite and precious, a “hymn to nature” (Battista Ilic, 1999), an Eden high above the earthly world of daily chores and responsibilities that grinds on below. It is also, however, the antithesis of the revolutionary spirit that characterizes Socialist Realism and Nazi Socialist and that depicts often-similar imagery. *Weekend Art* is not representing a simulacrum however, but an “aesthetic resistance to horror” (Battista Ilic, 1999) that is set within its own disintegrating context. For down below the Medvednica mountain, down on that earthly world, the hugely complex and provocative issue of identity throughout the former Yugoslav republic means that there isn’t just one war in one country between opposing cultures and faiths. There are multiple, simultaneous wars affecting everyone in the region, and that, to this day, still affect everyone in the region. They affected the *Weekend Art* artists up on the mountain, and they affected people thousands of miles away as nightly projections onto their television

screens. The poetic of *Weekend Art* is a bitter one that compels us to contemplate whether “destructivity [is] so deeply embedded in us, inescapably there because it is in the entire cosmos?” (Metzger, 1996).

Here the weekend is not a time for communing with nature and meeting friends, but a time for artistic expression of the dramas tearing the region apart (Battista Ilic, cited in (eds.) Hoptman & Pospiszyl, 2002, p. 192).

The performance exists both in the fixed space and time of the weekend walks and in the subsequent performing of the documentation. [Fig. 38]. From literally thousands of slides that make up the project ‘film’, over 500 were selected and projected far from the mountain and onto the artists’ nude bodies in front of audiences in other countries. The performing of this primary material as trace of the artist’s experience of war externalizes the body’s scarred interiority and becomes the sign of the experience. Unlike Komar and Melamid’s performance of ingesting the world so as to conquer it and defeat the forces of oppression, *Weekend Art* acknowledges the destructive forces that rage around its process and that, unable to defeat the world of violence, they can simply only externalise their interior wounds.

In their 1999 essay *The Semiotics of Confusion* the artist collective association APSOLUTNO unpack the visual codes of a region where identity is being actively dismantled in the time of war. In 1995-1998 they undertook field research throughout Novi Sad and Belgrade to discover the “absolutely real facts” (Apsolutno, 1999) from which they could map the disintegration of the Federal Republic. They located these facts in the national and transnational symbols that pervade the social context. Flags, border-markers, coat-of-arms, national and state symbols, banknotes, passports and other official documents and paraphernalia were all

documented. Its purpose was to reveal the state of flux through changing allegiances, the desire to be culturally and ethnically rooted, through the many changing symbols and other visual signals.

Taking 'absolutely real facts' as a starting point for our interventions, we turned the familiar, usual, or even marginal, which is often no longer even perceived, into something unusual, out of the ordinary, and worth further exploration (Apsolutno, 1999).

They show that in 1990 Croatia dropped the term 'Socialist' from the country's identity, rid themselves of the red star from the national flag and changed their Coat-of-Arms. Slovenia, in the following year, followed much the same path. The new flags, which were in actual fact the same flag but without the red star, were adopted and raised while both countries were still a part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. A number of disputes emerged between countries over the naming, or claiming, of territories represented within these new flags. Greece protested that the Vergina Sun, the central symbol proposed for the new flag for Macedonia, was a Greek cultural symbol. They disputed the right to name the new state of Macedonia as such with the row finally resolved under a 1995 UN agreement that ruled that Macedonia would be known as 'The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' and were required to design a new flag within 30 days. The essay's semiotic journey travels through these changing places and identities and documents how individual allegiances and bewilderment contributed to this confusion through the marking, masking, changing, and altering of car licence plates. [Fig. 39]. The most frequent action they came across was the covering over, defacing or destroying, of the red star. Other people elected to keep the red star but added an unofficial sticker that showed their loyalty to the Serbian nation. Others chose the historic Serbian national coat-of-arms, the European

Union, a red heart, or displayed their loyalty to a region over nation. To varying degrees these actions display both playful interventions and deeply held nationalist tendencies yet critically reveal an awareness of context. In their very recent past these people may very possibly have been arrested for vandalizing the ideological symbol but now, removed from the Communist identity, they communicate publically their confusion and the requirement of a new identity. Apsolutno demonstrate that this form of a social communication interprets what "the semiotic reality imposed by the establishment communicates to them" (Apsolutno, 1999).



[Fig. 39] association APSOLUTNO (1999) *The Semiotics of Confusion*. [Novi Sad]. Photo: association APSOLUTNO.

Given the fluid nature of change over the time of writing, 1995-1998, a certain amount of arbitrariness affects the findings. But it doesn't detract from an interesting methodology that "reflects (sometimes follows, sometimes anticipates) events in the social and political sphere" (Apsolutno, 1999). By the time of its publication the essay reveals a series of startling changes in the visual landscape that reflects, and often predicts, how identities throughout the region had changed in simultaneity with political and geographic change. *The Semiotics of Confusion* then, is an essay-in-time (and thus time-based) since, "the state of affairs in this area is still in flux and as we are writing, the confusion is only being multiplied" (Apsolutno, 1999)

In 1991, when Slovenia declared independence from the Federal Republic of Yugoslav, the transitional government signed a constitution upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms. Eight months later, in February 1992, they undertook the radical action of 'administrative genocide', or 'civil death', that resulted in some 30,000 residents being erased from the national registers. Around 12,000 fled the country but the 18,305 who remained became subject to what Gržinić (2008) equates with a 'state of exception', that is, when 'normal' laws are suspended for categories of people. Blitz (2006 p. 459) demonstrates that in their efforts to create a Slovenian republic in opposition to the former Yugoslavia, and to reinforce the specificity of the Slovene nation by channeling public opinion against the 'Southerners', Slovenia sought to reposition themselves as a European state 'outside' the Balkans, and the new Republic concocted an action against so-called 'new minorities' including ethnic Serbs, ethnic Croats, ethnic Bosnian Muslims, ethnic Albanian Kosovans, and ethnic Roma. Under Yugoslav law people throughout the region could live and work anywhere and the idea of legal citizenship to a particular state was, by and large, conceptual since a dualistic system of citizenship operating between state and republic afforded a wider structure where the choice of residence bore no legal consequence (Blitz, 2006, p. 460).

This group, who became known as the *Izbrisani* (the erased), was targeted for not having Slovenian ancestry (Fussell, 2004) despite having legally worked and lived in Slovenia for many years. In June 1992 many woke one morning to find that they were without legal status, that they could not work, receive healthcare or medical benefits, drive, legally travel, and that their children were turned away at school gates, pensions had stopped,

and some lost their homes: they had become foreigners in their own land. While the erased have been cast beyond the protection and privilege of the state Arendt, conversely, notes that the 'ordinary' criminal still possesses an identity within the law and as such, is a "respectable person" (Arendt, 1951, p. 302) who is entitled to normal legal protections. In other words, the transgression is that the Izbrisani are not criminals but rather the 'criminal' is found in the categorization. It is almost impossible not to locate the consequences of the action in the foreshadowing of the mass displacements that would become the lasting, televisual, image of the Balkan conflict. Gržinić, in her essay on the "illness" of contemporary society notes that,

The 18,305 'erased' who remain in Slovenia exist between two deaths: the physical – since without papers they cannot function – and the symbolic, resulting from the horrific psychological pressure of being expelled from the social context, cut off from their own families and from all manifestations of public life (Gržinić, 2008).

Hull & Conyers, (2006) demonstrate that the roots of 'civil death' are traceable to, at least, ancient Greece and Rome when the State decreed that those who had committed tremendous crimes of *infamia* (ignominy) would be subject to a withdrawal of the status of citizenship. The Latin expression *damnatio memoriae* (damnation of memory) relates to the conscious act of erasing every trace of a person as if they had never existed. In recent times we famously know of Stalin's directions during the period of his Great Purge that ordered the removal of any trace of his opponents from books, portraits, and photographs<sup>46</sup>. Zorn (cited in Blitz,

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<sup>46</sup> Ironically, when Khrushchev came to power and publically denounced Stalin's personality cult, he edited Stalin out of propaganda films and the city he renamed Stalingrad was renamed Volgograd. The practice was common throughout the communist region.



2006, p. 464) demonstrates how, in our identity-document driven contemporary world, we could add numerous other actions that would be administered in cases of civil death, such as the inability to open or administer a bank account, apply for a passport, take out a mobile phone subscription, or register a vehicle or business. Among other consequences would be the forced break up of the family unit, the infringement of a child's right to live with its family, not being able to choose a place of residence, loss of employment and the inability to gain employment, and the prevention of free cross-border movement resulting in an imposed status of refugee or internally displaced person. Additionally when officials stopped the Izbrisani in the street for identity checks they further marked their status by cutting their passport on the top right corner (Fussell, 2004). Civil death then is a grave suspension of all human rights that leaves the 'erased' citizen with no recourse to legal representation.

Slovenian artist Ive Tabar's 1997 performance, *Intubation*, acts as a metaphor of this grave suspension. An intubation is a medical procedure where a plastic pipe is forcefully passed through the trachea of a medically induced unconscious body to protect the patient's airway and provide a means for mechanical ventilation. The process relies on human strength to push the pipe through tissue and so carries significant risk alongside the close observation of the subsequent mechanical respiration. In 1997 Tabar lay down on a medical trolley in Galerija Kapelica, Ljubljana. He was accompanied by a team of seven medical professionals including an anaesthetist who induced Tabar into a state of unconsciousness. [Fig. 40]. During a general anaesthetic the vast majority of the muscles in the body are unable to move, including the paralyzed diaphragm that has to be filled

with air. A ventilator then 'breathes' for the patient by pumping air through the tube and into the lungs. The heart is the one exception to the paralysis and will continue to beat on its own throughout. Tabar added to the drama by arranging to have artificial smoke fill the gallery so that "the audience's process of identification also occurred on the level of breathing difficulties" (Krpan, cited in Badovinac, 1999, p. 186). The audience, watching in growing silence, suddenly have a disturbing aural realisation that Tabar's breath has given way to a machine. The body is now suspended. Within the procedure there are three stages: anaesthetization, intubation, and resuscitation. The first two elements require invasive intervention into the body; a wounding that runs deep into the interior and registers a trauma. (Even a pinprick on a finger registers shock.)

If trauma can be said to be similar to hallucination in so much as events place the subject, the individual or social group, in a state of suspension beyond reason then we could suppose that the experience of the Izbrisani people, here metaphorized in the three stages of Tabar's medical procedure, is simultaneously hallucinatory and traumatic. Revival, resuscitation, and resurrection are inextricably linked to the meaning of death: resuscitation assumes the body is dead while resurrection judges it to be. We can propose that to go beyond the confinement of a deep wound requires a form of resurrection through which the body is made whole again. If we extend the metaphor we can say that people who are subject to civil death would require resurrection whereas the 'ordinary' criminal would require resuscitation, a revival in the form of rehabilitation.



[Fig. 40] Ive Tabar. (1997) *Intubation*. [Ljubljana, Galerija S.O.U. Kapelica]. Photo: The artist.

Veridical space is where dreams or hallucinations coincide with reality. It suggests a territory of unspecified duration wherein the wound is both seen and is being acted on. It becomes a shared place of convalescence, its future in the hands of a number of agents. Kunst (2005) and Krpan (1999) have proposed Tabar's works as enquiries and statements into the obsolescence of the human body in relation to its dependency and interdependency on machines, or technologies. Writing about contemporary artists' use of the body as material, Kunst draws similarities to the "excess bodies of the 60's" (Kunst, 2005) with that of recent performance art. The similarities stop there, however, because the "strategic politics and tactical power are completely different" (Kunst, 2005). The popular notion that the borders of the body are moveable and unstable have given way to a state of interdependence that does not allow us "to pin our gaze to the image of the body, but forces us to constantly invent the body together with the performance artist" (Kunst, 2005). While it is true that Tabar explores this technological interdependence, and in his everyday life is an intensive case nurse, this thesis proposes a different take than has previously been

recorded: the invasive interventions into Tabar's body, and the associated traumas, invoke the violence wrought on the Slovene social body, and the region more generally. The state, cutting into its citizenry in order to shape an ethnically Slovene identity, thus created a state of exception where the laws that should govern all citizens have in fact been suspended for those it considers unwell. The Izbrisani body has been paralyzed; it is 'put under', and their own breath denied them in order that a mythic historical identity can be revived through narcissism that, in this case, is embodied in the interests of a 'new' state. In *Intubation*, Tabar, albeit ephemerally, manifests himself similar to the NSK principle of an "abstract organism" (Cufer & Irwin, 1992) in order to more effectively reveal "past Utopianisms and historical wounds" (Monroe, 2005, p. 120) whose consequences impact on the present day. The clattering sound of mechanical breathing could easily fit with Laibach's ritualistic beats: it is the sound of the specter of the European past haunting the present.

## **Conclusion. Impossible Histories.**

*Artists: Paweł Althamer (Poland).*

The various processes undertaken in the course of researching this thesis ultimately come together to yield a quantifiable outcome that aims to contribute new and distinct knowledge to the field. The collecting of voices and examples of practice, and the understanding and appreciation of the interdependence of social, cultural, and political contexts have been filtered into an end result that is, at the end of the day, in fact an inspection or examination. The nature of this examination takes the form of a critical analysis of art practices in relation to the Communist behemoth, both in its 20<sup>th</sup> century application throughout Eastern Europe and the residual DNA that is a part of the post-Communist condition. In our case the examination has three fronts. The first is this written element that aims at the traditional academic audience. It is then followed by the [agora8.org](http://agora8.org) website that displays the thesis and related materials to a more diverse global audience and thirdly, by the author's re-enactment of historic works and the production of new performances as response to the total context. At this point, therefore, it will be timely to recap the main points of this examination and draw attention to what the project has achieved in order to underline its contribution to knowledge.

The histories of art and artists that have been explored belong as elements of an ideological text of which much remains to be written. What we can say, however, is that there is a common thread that underlines all the work; whether in dissent to the official realm or as comment on the new post-Communist epoch all act upon this text from a position of being

firmly within it, they are all dependent on it for meaning. The multiplicity of these still emergent voices will continue to provide heteroglossiac archaeology of the inter-generational Communist project. In the work of NSK, Anri Sala, Irina Botea, and Monika Sosnowska, what is acknowledged most of all is this aspect of the historical significance of inter-generational relations, between Communist and post-Communist generations, and who exist within familial constructs. The magnitude of this porous *inter-historical* social context is, alongside the struggle to comprehend non-market art, the single most stumbling block for the Western researcher to hurdle and, indeed, often doesn't appear at all in their discussions on East European art.

This thesis has ordered itself around a specific curatorial rationale that allows a multi-layered investigation into framed contexts, named conditions, and assumed behaviors. These contexts, conditions, and behaviors all share a common purpose; the analysis of Eastern European art production in the face of the many significant challenges raised both within the Communist and post-Communist epochs. It has attempted to demonstrate that, while the Communist project sought to develop universally, and was thus made known through a spectacular "promotion campaign" (Groys, 2004), the non-official art practices that emerged from a heteroglossiac culture, that often shared discourse if not method, ultimately produced a legitimate and authoritative counter-narrative. It has further shown that these narratives continue to inform the present day. As such, then, what has been the charge of this thesis has been an excavation and interpretation of this ideological text from the universal strategies of geo-politics to the dissenting domestic realm. It has

demonstrated the regional dialects, so to speak, of this ideological text and proposed that the only coherent way to analyze these histories is to be mindful of difference throughout the region and, most concretely, to understand the region as not one place, one time but rather as a very rich tapestry of histories that must be approached horizontally.

As noted earlier, when this thesis talks about curation it has done so in the context of an inspection, or an examination. That the word 'curation' is etymologically linked to 'cure' suggests to some extent that art needs help from the curator to become visible. The processes involved in arriving at this final outcome involved attending to the tasks of acquiring various sets of data, and the selection and presenting of material. The fact that there were, so to speak, three distinct audiences to consider (institutional examiner/library researcher, online researcher/interested visitor, and art audience/artist) meant that this material had to be balanced to each audience in such a way that, despite the different needs of each, it would always appear enlightening and accessible. Drawing from extensive field research, that involved discussions with a number of the featured artists, this curated selection of exemplar works operates as a responsive critical appraisal, and offers plentiful access to particular histories and practices that shed new light on a still emerging field. As such it is a work that is itself complete while also pointing to further research areas and, of course, the various continuing and unfolding narratives. The aim then has been to stylistically exhibit a thesis that demonstrates how individual artists emerged within the non-individualized context of the Communist context, and how they continue to apply these narratives in the post-Communist sphere that is, of course, now a global one. The citizens of what the West

called Eastern Europe are now global citizens, and the West is now a "post-West" (Ash, 2005).

With regard to the trace documents around which the thesis was constructed we can reaffirm the earlier claim that, as archeological or analytical sets of data, these traces demonstrate the existence of ideology, a resistance to it, as well as to the legitimacy and the authority of the non-official narrative. The histories that remain to be written are, in the many ways that we have come to understand them, ones of impossibility. A lack of coherence in archival practice at the time created a chaotic situation from which only some of the past will ever be knowable. However, there are also other histories to be written, and these are the ones that artists in the post-Communist era are making contemporaneously. The thesis has displayed a number of these works with the intent to reveal the strains of a collective DNA that carries on from the previous ideology.

In terms of quantifiable audience statistics the project website has fulfilled its role successfully; at the time of writing there have been 27,650 visitors, with interest coming from all corners of the world. Moreover, it is the one part of the thesis that is not required to end at publication deadline but rather is able to be adjusted over time, and thus will allow new material to be added to it as and when it seems relevant. In many ways the most challenging curatorial strand was the re-enactment of historical works. While it is infinitely more difficult to assess the contribution to knowledge to the wider community of these re-enactments they nevertheless proved to be a most effective chronotope. Through this demonstrated commitment to go beyond the historical image and to make it anew a privileged position arises where discussion with the original artists, as well as other artists



more generally, brings with it its own aspect of authority and authenticity of the past. That is, that the consequences of re-enactments not only bring present sense to a difficult past but also they contribute to the analysis and commentary of the Communist narrative. They illustrate how that narrative does not simply end with the collapse of a system but continues in a different manner, (including as re-enacted performances). While the small set of self-authored performances might be said to have been responses to the enquiring mind and thus are intellectually driven manifestations it was, ultimately, the performing of re-enactments that most ably engaged the foreignness of the past. Artists, even when acknowledging the influence of other artists, tend to view their work as future-progressive. Conversely, with these re-enactments the methodology necessarily engaged a retrograde movement in order to arrive at the present. The same is true of any research that is enquiring of the Communist past.

As part of its hypothesis the thesis has time and again pointed out that any meaningful study of the histories it has engaged with requires a working knowledge of the contexts that the work was produced under; the subsequent contexts of the transition and post-Communist (and post-West) periods, and how these all together form new narratives. Thus it emphatically proposes that existing Western models of art history and canon are, to almost all intent and purpose, inapplicable when analyzing the character and history of these artists and their works. When the East is approached without this fundamental understanding a particular confusion, or mindset, emerges; why is the art that was produced in Eastern Europe devoid of the aesthetic concerns such as marks Western European art and, if Eastern Europe is now free of its Communist past then why are its

artist's not embracing Western values in art, i.e. the art market? This way of thinking is unhelpful, and rather absurd on three main counts. First, it sees only the former West as having been the legitimate universal system by viewing, somewhat condescendingly, Communism as the one single barrier to the manifestation of a universal West rather than the West being its own barrier, through its colonialist past, to any universality. Second, it fails to address an ideological porosity where non-official and official art would often meet, and without the agitation that the outsider may imagine. The thesis has demonstrated most clearly this aspect in its discussion of the domestic realm in the Soviet Union, and in the case of Czechoslovakia around the time of 1968 Prague Spring where a reforming of the system was being sought and not, as is often mistakenly assumed, an overthrow of the system. Third, it entirely misses the fundamental difference in how art is produced: art in the service of the State fulfils an ideological aim and becomes both the language and the illustration of the ideological text. Even today, with the stand out exception of Moscow, there is no significant art market in Eastern Europe and thus the production of art, and the training of artists, operates entirely differently. Rather than the East offloading its monumental history as if it never happened which is, after all, the very action undertaken by the Soviet Communists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, post-Communist artists legitimately mine the various sets of discourse which a great deal of their social, or collective, DNA relies on. The production we have looked at has ranged widely over scale and response: from the domestic setting of Sots Art and Ilya Kabakov, through strategizing the photographic recording of actions as both proof of action and as material discourse, to the collectivizing activities of second culture

and the creation of an artwork's meaning (Kollektivnye Deistvia), and beyond into the post-Communist era when artists began to interpret the experiences of the past using the new technological tools, like video, that had become available and which aided the analyzing of context in a documentary manner. It has also necessarily engaged the very processes of art historicization by which we know, and will further come to know, the works in relation to both a former ideological and a post- ideological narrative. That a collapsed system can also be said to have a post-ideological narrative may require some clarification. While the much larger question of what happens to the heteroglot when ideology fails is material for a further research study, the shorter, more punctuated, reasoning lies in recalling our definition of post-Communist artistic activity as being that which continues to bear the traces, or legacy, of the former era. Recent production that refers to the ideological past remains heteroglossiac as a post-ideological narrative since, clearly, the past is still activating the present. Not least does this become most apparent in attempts to make sense of a formerly closed outside world that is now a shared, globalised space: how to position oneself in the wider community. A timely example of this re-positioning is the 2009 large-scale social sculpture, or interventionist trans-global journey, *Wspólna Sprawa* (Common Task), by the Polish artist Paweł Althamer conceived for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the collapse of Communism in Europe [Fig. 41].



[Fig. 41] Paweł Althamer (2009) *Wspólna Sprawa / Common Task*.  
Photo: The artist.

Composed of a series of documented social activities featuring Althamer's family and friends from the Bródno housing estate in Warsaw who, adorned in gold space suits, represent a modern-day osiedle are photographed roaming over urban landscapes, desert wastelands, seats of political power, traveling point to point on a specially designed golden airplane to various parts of the world including Brussels, Oxford, Brasilia, and Mali. The project operates optimistically within a formula that invokes the Soviet-era Utopian space drive yet simultaneously seeks new ways for this intergenerational collective, as representative of all post-Communist societies and communities, to experience the global public space.

There is then a very real need to return to the proposition again and again that the East is in need their own narratives by which to reflect upon the past, the present, and the future. The East's entry into the globalised market also brings with it the possibility of applying to its history the

uniqueness of vision that is the domain of the outsider, as is the case with the authoring of this thesis. This does, however, bear a cautionary note, and it is this; the West European acceleration of time has a different nature to the East European model. While the former is rooted in a consumer driven culture that is proven able to shift its position with relative ease, since non-fixity is after all part of its condition, the situation in the East is markedly different. This relates to a proposition that (at least) two sets of distinct postmodernisms, or post-histories, are at play and that they manifest themselves in a difference between the sense of, postmodernism itself. While Western postmodernism has much to do with the troubled ghosts of an externalised colonialism, in the East the experience was fixed more on self-colonisation, and the imposition and the appropriation of the images and symbols and language of an ideology that pervaded all aspects of social, political, and cultural life. If the former somehow manages to manoeuvre more fluidly through the past, although by no means redemptive, conversely in the East contemporary society still seeks a healing from its very recent internalised past. So that when the West speaks somewhat impatiently of a twenty-year distance since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism in Europe, they are talking about their concept of 'closure' from their own accelerated position of time which is ignoring of the traumas of its neighbours' recent past that is still present and haunting all areas of social and political life. The transition into a global capitalist model becomes then a transition that is both generational and intergenerational, making it every bit as much a historical project as the Communist project itself was.

A number of writers, including Boris Groys (cited in, Hlavajova, M. & Winder, J. (eds.), 2004. pp. 163-174) have rightly understood the Communist project as one whose radicalism has equivalence with the rise of Christian states in medieval Europe, where the Communist Utopia is somewhat likened to the future-world kingdom of God. By harnessing art in the service of ideology, and free from any art market, they managed to create a radically different art system, and an altogether different role for art. If the post-Communist epoch can be likened to a 'here between now' time then the twin pillars of now would be the activation of the many tasks of memory and their impact on the present, and a continuing collectivist discourse, or common task, by which the post-Communist condition proceeds towards its global present. In 2009 the BBC produced a documentary history series titled, *The Lost World of Communism*, and yet a more accurate title might have been, *The Found World of Communism*, since the message it projected was a universal one. In fact it is no mistake to say that it was the most globally visualized ideology, or creation, ever produced. The universal Communist project, of which the Eastern European past is only a part, dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century in all corners of the world. It is within one of these corners in this vast realm of image and counter-image, official and non-official spheres, epoch and post-epoch histories, that the thesis agitates towards a more coherent understanding of the past, its agency on the present, and its enriching of contemporary art history. The primary outcome then has been to curate a carefully selected prism of work that allows the illumination of named conditions, framed contexts, and assumed behaviors.

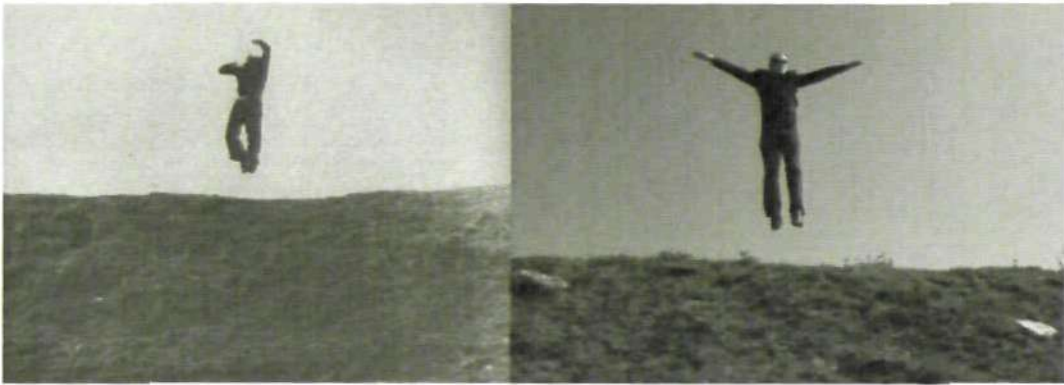
## Performance and Re-enactments by the Author.

### Re-enactment 1 [Figs. 42, 43]

*Close to the Clouds* (2009). Warsaw.

Original: Karel Miler (1977) *Close to the Clouds*. Prague.

We know the 1977 action by Karel Miler, '*Close to the Clouds*' from a photograph that shows him jumping in mid-air. Still subject to gravity he is, nonetheless, momentarily released from earthly pressures.



[Figs. 42, 43]\_Photo: The artist, Pawel Kwasniewski.

My objective in re-enacting this work was to share a cosmic space, for the briefest of moments, with all the artists I have researched throughout the project. It is a simple gesture where the image is surface but the sentiment is held within the body's interiority.

**Re-enactment 2 [Figs. 44, 45]**

*One Minute Silence for Performers* (2009). Giswil.

Original: Nenad Bogdanovic (1984). *A Minute of Silence for Performances*.



[Figs. 44, 45] Photo: Nenad Bogdanovic, Georg Anderhub.

I had been thinking for a long time how I could memorialize those artists who lost their sanity during the Communist era. I realised that this action by Bogdanovic contained all the elements that I could hope to conceptualise myself. Traditionally the minute of silence marks a memorializing for someone or something. Bogdanovic's action picks up this ritual and infuses it with a collectivism that allows him to portray a notion of family. It is an affectionate action towards a state of interdependence and solidarity between artists. Bogdanovic made the action to camera in 1984, a halfway point between Tito's death in 1980 and the events of 1989. He is seen alone in front of a camera, holding a clock. He intended that it would assume its correct form as a dialogic ploy when others view the photograph. His unique minute is extended over time



and space, and enters our present age, to show an artistic collectivism that is not dependent on a physical closeness to others but on a condition of empathy. It shares sensibilities with the activities of Ütő Gustáv who hoped that he would be able "one day... to show them to other artists" (Ütő, 2008).

Action.

Stand in one spot. Ask for a minute's silence for all the artists who lost their minds through doctrine and medical intervention.

Place the clock on the floor.

### Re-enactment 3 [Figs. 46, 47]

*Lenin in Warsaw* (2009). Warsaw.

Original: Balint Szombathy (1972). *Lenin in Budapest*. Budapest.

A major concern in approaching a re-enactment of this work by Balint Szombathy was how to avoid a misinterpretation on the part of the viewer regarding what the image of Lenin represents. In post-Communist Europe there are a plethora of hostels, bars, and nightclubs named after aspects of Sovietology; Lenin, Propaganda, and Nostalgia, are just such a few examples. Thus, if I were to walk through the streets holding a poster of Lenin, as Szombathy did, an almost inevitable line of questioning about what I am trying to sell or promote could be reasonably anticipated, and therefore would muddy the work. Szombathy's 1972 performance intended to deprive the image of Lenin of "its fetish function... by placing it within the mundane trivia of life in real socialism" (Djurić & Šuvaković, (eds.) 2003, p. 252). It thus sought a transgression into the realm of advertising. In our present age, however, 'brand Lenin' has a different appeal, and one that simultaneously contracts both nostalgia and erasure so that, as a result, Szombathy's original meaning and sense would be lost. Lenin himself, or rather his body, is preserved in the Red Square mausoleum and been visited by more than 150 million since it was first displayed in 1924 (Pronina, 2000). He has become both a tourist attraction and a Communist relic of the simulacrum. I was interested in placing an iconic image of Lenin within a national museum's Socialist Realism collection in a post-Communist country, to relocate Lenin to the cultural arm of Communist ideology. The action is a re-siting of Lenin within the context of a socio-

cultural past, within the official house of relics, and far from the new fetish it has acquired in contemporary European neo-capitalist societies.



[Figs. 46] Photo: The artist.



[Figs. 47] Photo: Tomasz Jeriorowski.

The action was very simple: stand in the Socialist Realism room in Warsaw's National Museum with an image of Lenin. However, due to the sensitive nature of the materials – Socialist Realism, Lenin, post-Communism – permission and assistance was sought. The Socialist Realism collection is a recent experiment in the museum. Between 1955 and until very recently these works were never shown in public. Piotr Piotrowski, who was recently appointed the Director of the National Museum, supported the intervention.

**Performance 1. [Figs. 48 - 53]**

*Meant Lament* (2007). Piotrkow Tribunalska, Poland. Duration, 4 hours.

A meditation on the loss of generations as a result of all conflicts, generations past and never to be present. Walking at the same pace as I do with my son who only recently learned to walk. Finding things that don't belong in the ground, how to remember these, and how long can I touch them.



[Figs. 48, 49, 50] Photos: Nenad Bogdanovic,. [Fig. 51] Photo: Kai Lam.

The otherwise nondescript town of Piotrkow Tribunalska was the site of the first Nazi ghetto in Poland. My interest lay in creating a work that did not refer explicitly to this context. I was concerned only with the acts of memory and memorializing victims of conflict. Over time a slow walk disturbs the earth and reveals a number of forensic gloves. Remove

gloves one at a time, walk and display them in various different gestures of the hand. Lay glove on the outer edge of the table. Repeat until all gloves are taken from the soil and their placing on the tale forms a crown. Remove foreign objects (twigs, shards of clay, etc) from the earth that supports the fountain. Slowly and carefully clean and lay them on the gloves until they appear as hands: veined palms, and bruised. Sit on a chair in front of each fish head and pass breath onto each 50 times. 100 blows. Place a spoon in the mouth of one fish. Lean the chair into the table at the other end. Walk counter-clockwise and exit the space.



[Figs. 52, 53] Photos: Nenad Bogdanovic.

**Performance 2. [Figs. 54 - 57]**

*Tutaj Między Teraz* (Here Between Now). (2008). BWA Tarnow, Poland.  
Duration, 4 hours.

Gallery text: The camera takes only a second to capture a moment in time, but within these moments there are multiplicities of context, of personal and collective histories and memories. The photographs for this performance were all taken by photographers employed in the service of the State and with the intention that they would be selected for publication as postcards. However, none of them were ever used because the authorities decided they did not best reflect the socialist society. In this respect we might consider them to be subversive, although that was never the intention.



[Figs. 54 - 57] Photos: Swiatek.

Nevertheless a poetic subversion does exist in the eyes of the photographers who seemed more interested in capturing the remarkable and often mundane moments that make up everyday life.

We might wonder what were the subjects of the images thinking at the time, what did their actions involve that we cannot see, and, from where have they come, where do they go, and what are they doing now? Did they stay, did they migrate, are they alive, have they died, did they make new life? Likewise, what has happened to the places portrayed? Do they still exist, and what do they look like now? At the same time as these photographs were taken I was growing up in Scotland. I remember new broadcasts and films portrayed Eastern Europe as a place that was always grey, always cold, the people miserable, poor and hungry. But the photographs in the performance show a very different side. Both ideologies, then, appear significantly distorted. *Here Between Now* is a performance of collected memory – the audience and myself. This memory may assume a poetic remembrance, a real and actual social heritage beyond institutional control. Because these images are very different from the image of Poland that I experienced through the news and films of my youth I use my breath as a material to connect and commune with these histories and contexts. I expect to reach a point where my body is exhausted. Maybe it will not be possible to complete the task of reanimating these histories through my breath: my body may fail at a certain limit. Or I may find strength in the meditation I have put myself into.

The timeframe is 4 hours,



Action.

Stand close to one gallery wall and naked from waist up. Turn on recording of birdsongs. Birdsongs are like metaphors for histories - for nesting, community, migration, and faraway places. I wonder how many of these people, or their families, are now living their lives in different lands, in different continents.

Turn on projector. Allow the front of the body to act as a surface for projected images. Each time a new image appears blow up another balloon. 240 images. 240 balloons, black and white. 1 balloon every minute for four hours.

In the end I blew for three hours and sat for the last.

The world around us is in constant flux. Only breath, memories, and hope sustain us and make us what we are: unique and individually human.

### Performance 3. [Figs. 58-64]

*Requiem for The Line* (2009). Giswil, Switzerland. Duration, 1 hour.

In a vast turbine hall there is a long table dressed in white cloth. In the middle of the table a mound of earth. At the end of the table on one side are a number of dying flies, some are already dead. At either end of the table, only white cloth. At each end of the table there is a wooden chair. Beyond the table near the middle of the hall there is an installation of a broken wall. The wall has just been broken with a hammer. The metaphor is obvious.



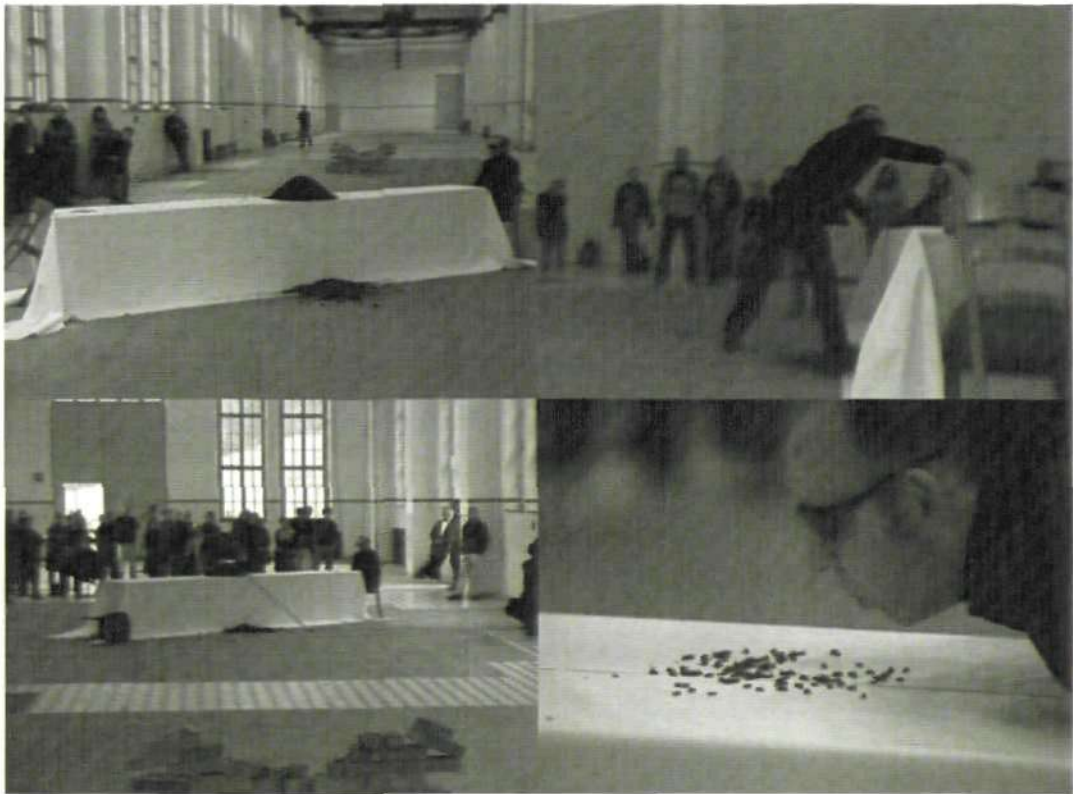
[Figs. 58-60] Photos: Georg Anderhub.

#### Action 1.

Sit on a chair at empty end of table. Think of emptiness. Stand. Knock chair over. Pause.

#### Action 2.

Walk. Take steel tape measure from pocket, walk slowly around table, slowly unwinding the measure. Out. In. Out. Allow the sound to be dominant. In, out, in. Out. Crash tapes against concrete and air. Repeat. Slow, fast. Hurl tape over mound of earth. Speak first lines of Ryszard Siwiec's 1968 speech in Warsaw 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Stadium when he performed self-immolation, "*People! People! Pull yourselves together. Young people, the future of the nation, don't let yourselves be murdered every twenty years*".



[Figs. 61, 63]. Photos: Tamara Las Pechuga. [Figs. 62, 64]. Photos: Georg Anderhub.

Pause.

Walk. Take second steel tape measure from pocket, walk slowly around table, slowly unwinding the measure. Out. In. Out. Allow the sound to be dominant. In, out, in. Out. Crash tapes against concrete and air. Repeat. Slow, fast. Hurl tape over mound of earth. Speak more lines of Siwiec's 1968 speech, "*People! People! Pull yourselves together. Remember the world's most beautiful word: Mother!*"

Pause.

Walk.

Action 3.

Stop walking. Sit on chair. Think of the flies. Think of the "foreignness of the fly to any fixed order of things" (Groys, 1992). Think of how Kabakov proposes that the Soviet Union was the "first modern society to disappear". Pass breath onto the dead and dying flies.

Stand.

Pause.

Knock chair over.

Walk.

## Appendix A.

### agora8.org

We may propose that agora8.org and the works that it features are linked through a conduit of memory, in both a human and a technological sense; they are located within the places where data and aesthetics meet. As such we can say that human memory of the past and the digital database of the present day share a similar function of the storage of records. 21<sup>st</sup> century databases might be regarded as technological successors to the humanly scribed archives of past times, while the memory required for preservation is measured now in technological terms - HDD, MB, GB, and so on. By far the major difference from the repository of former times and the present digital age is in how knowledge develops across the sprawling networks of cyber-space. In a more human sense we might consider it to perform similarly to the historical agora in that it is a discursive space.

While the author of this thesis lives in, but is not native to, Eastern Europe then it might be reasonable to question the interest displayed in these places and their art histories. A fascination with discovering what were essentially secret worlds that lay on the other side of the Western propaganda that the author remembers pre-1989 led to organizing a performance art festival in Poznan, Poland, in 2001 as part of an undergraduate contextual enquiry project. This afforded a close study of art practices and, more importantly, offered initial ways in to individuals and networks. While this brought some privileged access to artists, it must also be noted that it was met with some incredulity also. Initially this was difficult to understand and its sense only became apparent years later: in

the introduction the thesis reveals the lack of knowledge inter-regionally about artistic production that was a result of both immature networks and as "a constitutive part of the art system in these territories" (Irwin, 2004).

The author developed contacts over the years through participation as an artist in a number of performance art festivals internationally that, at times, included artists from Eastern Europe. The Arts and Humanities Research Council 'professionalized' the interest through a doctoral studies award and, by applying a mixture of brawn and etiquette, access to these histories became more generous and artists who had seemed very remote began to prove accessible. A lot of focus was given to deep Internet research, a tact that counteracted the lack of available English-language publications in Poland. In such a way material was collected, analysed, and questions asked of the contributors.

With limited finances available the idea of an exhibition in which to display the works, in the traditional sense, was ruled out. However, finances were not the only consideration in this decision, but rather it seemed to be not so practical to hold one exhibition in one place for the simple reason that it would be impossible to justify the choice of that place. That is to say that, with contributing artists spread over many countries (and in the case of those who had emigrated, many continents) how would it be possible to make a decision on one single place? Perhaps the exhibition could have toured and more funding could have been forthcoming but, at the end of the day, an exhibition has a very limited audience in relation to the possibilities of the Internet. Further, exhibitions privilege ocular hegemony yet it is within texts and critical writing tied to these histories that the most

important, and interesting, materials and resources are found. Once the decision was made, the next step was to think of a project name and acquire the necessary skills to build the site. The choice of agora and 8 has been explained in the introduction to the thesis, and skills were acquired in Dreamweaver software.

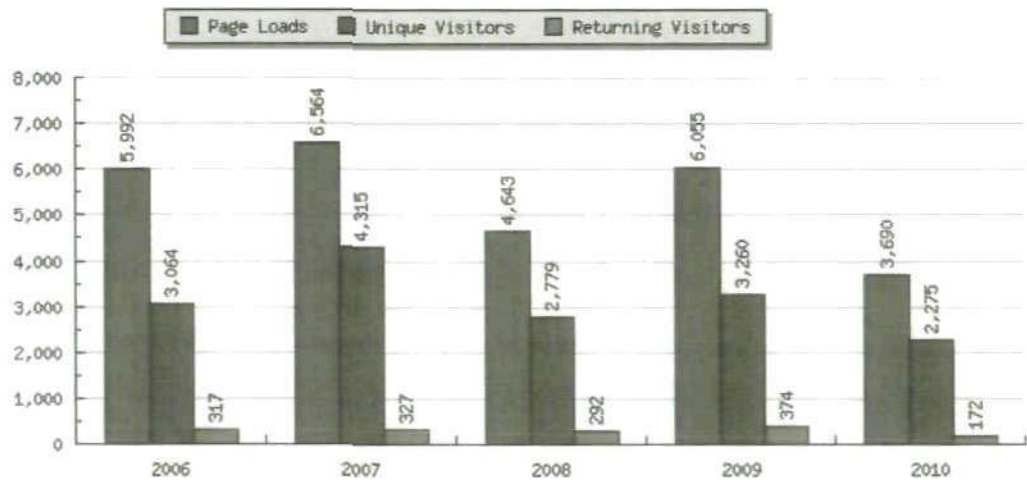
agora8.org is able to offer significant global exposure to a small number of artists. Some of these artists have clearly been denied a recognition that, were it were not for the conditions they were forced to operate in, they would enjoy in European contemporary art history. However, that said, agora8 contributes more to a critical, and contextual, re-reading of works that happened in other places and in other times. For the viewer it offers access to high quality engaged works that, in some cases, otherwise might remain unseen, or at best are scattered throughout the web with no curatorial remit. Opportunities are afforded the viewer to remotely explore cross-border experiences and foster an understanding of art activity within specific social, political, and cultural contexts. As it stands agora8.org reflects the research process by selecting the primary sources that are available to publish online. Some material is unique to agora8.org while others have been republished with permission from other sites. It aims towards coherence of a research enquiry rather than as a traditional exhibition or magazine format. It is, nonetheless, an exhibition set in an education context, an exhibition as school.

The space/time compression of the Internet age allows a bypass of the bureaucracy of institutions and to reach an audience in every corner of the world. Administratively, agora8.org tracks every visitor to the site and, to

date, the works have been viewed in 31 countries, including 1 that appears as 'unknown'. There have been more than 27,650 page loads (excluding pages accessed during the period of construction), with around 16,000 'unique' visitors. [Fig. 65]. A 'unique' visitor represents the amount of individual visitors but does not reflect the individual pages that they viewed, or how many times. agora8.org has a voluntary subscription base of several hundred.

There is no doubt that the process involved in acquiring the presented materials has enriched the author's understanding of what is an incredibly complex yet compelling field of study, and thus it is viewed as a generative template for future, expanded, research.

The website is hosted on the servers of the Academy of Fine Arts, Kraków, Poland.



[Fig. 65] agora8.org Statistics graph (2006-2010) showing unique visitors and page loads. Source: Statcounter.com.



## **Appendix B. Biographies of Primary Sources: Artists and Thinkers.**

### **association APSOLUTNO** (FYR/Serbia).

Founded in 1993 in Novi Sad, Yugoslavia. The production of the association is created through collaboration of its four members, Zoran Pantelic, Dragan Rakic, Bojana Petric and Dragan Miletic. APSOLUTNO started in the field of fine arts and gradually extended to incorporate not only artistic but also cultural, social, and political aspects. The work of APSOLUTNO is based on an interdisciplinary research into reality with the aim to make it open to new readings.

### **Zdenka Badovinac** (b.1958, FYR/Slovenia)

Director of the Moderna Galerija Ljubljana. Critic, theorist, curator.

### **Mikhail Bakhtin** (1895-1975. Russia).

Born into a revolutionary Russia and the single-voiced address of authoritarian regimes, Bakhtin was victimized more than once under Stalin's frequent purges against artists and intellectuals. He was sent into exile in Siberia and then Kazakhstan. This fact alone no doubt informed much of his central trope, dialogue, since the language of revolution is essentially monologic. He spawned many admirers who created the Bakhtin circle. Essential to our understanding and approach to Bakhtin lies in his philosophy, and that often it is difficult to tell what he wrote and what was written in his name by the Bakhtin Circle members.

### **Aleksandar Battista Ilic** (b.1965. FYR/Croatia).

Initiated the 10-year performance project Weekend Art: Hallelujah the Hill with in collaboration with Ivana Keser and Tomislav Gotovac.

Multidisciplinary artist, cultural activist, and is, along with Ivana Keser, the initiator of Community Art; Project leadership of Zagreb – Cultural Kapital of Europe 3000.

**Nenad Bogdanovic** (b. 1955, FYR/Serbia).

In 1993 Nenad Bogdanovic began a body of work titled Man Gallery that protested against the commodification of art and the privileging of the object over human experience. He engaged with the effects of conflict and cultural embargos set against Serbia by declaring his body to be a site for the production and display of art. He organizes the annual IMAF Performance Art Festival and is Director of MAS Gallery. Between 1984-88 he published the Mail Art magazines 'Total' and 'Second Manifesto'. He represented Serbia at the Venice Biennial in 2003.

**Irina Botea** (b. 1970, Romania).

Graduated in Bucharest and Boston with double MFA in Fine Art. Represented Romania at the Venice Biennial in 2005.

**Kollektivnye Deistvia** (Collective Actions) (Russia).

Formed in Moscow in the early 1970s they have become, along with Ilya Kabakov, the leading exponents of the Moscow Conceptualist movement.

**Boris Groys** (b.1947, East Germany).

Philosopher, essayist, art critic, media theorist, and an internationally acclaimed expert on late-Soviet postmodern art and literature, as well as on the Russian avant-garde. His writings engage the wildly disparate traditions of French poststructuralism and modern Russian philosophy. He

is author of an influential body of essays and books, including, 'The Total Art of Stalin' (Princeton, 1992). His work is credited with introducing Western readers to Russian postmodernist writers. In the 1970's, while living in Russia, he coined the term 'Moscow conceptualism'.

**Marina Gržinić** (b.1958, FYR/Slovenia).

Media theorist and curator. Has published five books and numerous articles. Among her books are, 'Fiction Reconstructed: Eastern Europe, Post-Socialism and the Retro-Avant-Garde' (Edition Selene, 2000).

**Ilya Kabakov** (b.1933, Ukraine).

Kabakov was a member of the official Union of Soviet Artists, and employed as an illustrator of children's books. He worked in his official role for half the year and spent the remaining six months producing his own non-official works. He is widely regarded as one of the greatest living artists, and has completed hundreds of installations. All his work can really only be understood with knowledge of the Communist context as it is, in fact, a narrative of those times.

**Irwin** (FYR/Slovenia).

Creators of 'East Art Map' and members of NSK. It was Irwin who propelled NSK into collaborations with national armies.

**Barbora Klímová** (b. 1977, Brno, Czech Republic).

Recipient of the Jindrich Chalupecký award for emerging critical talent.

**Komar and Melamid** (b. 1943 and 1945, Moscow, Russia).

Credited with founding the Sots Art movement in Russia, Komar & Melamid met while art students in Moscow. From an early stage in their collaboration they were subject to official bans and surveillance, having attracted attention for appropriating Communist propaganda and ideology as a readymade. They became US citizens in 1978.

**Bojana Kunst** (FYR/Slovenia).

Philosopher and performance theoretician, and a member of the editorial board of Maska Magazine and Performance Research. Her essays have been published widely, and her books include, 'Impossible Body' (Ljubljana 1999) and 'Dangerous Connections: Body, Philosophy and Relation to the Artificial' (Ljubljana, 2004).

**Česlovas Lukensas** (b. 1959, Lithuania).

Artist, writer, organizer. Outspoken critic of both the old and new political reality.

**Karel Miler** (b.1940. Czechoslovakia).

Leading performance artist in the non-official Czechoslovakian art movement.

**NSK** (FYR/Slovenia).

NSK collective is made up of Irwin, Laibach, New Collectivism, and Noordung.

**Bojana Pejić** (FYR/Serbia).

Previously the curator of the Belgrade Student Cultural Centre (SKC) and the editor of the art theory journal MOMENT. She was co-curator of the 1999-2001 exhibition "After the Wall. Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe".

**Piotr Piotrowski** (b.1952, Poland).

Chair of Modern Art History at the Art History Department, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland. Highly awarded author of numerous books and texts He has advised and co-organized a number of exhibitions and projects including: '2000+: The Art from Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West' (Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2000) and 'The Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930' (LACMA, Los Angeles, 2001). Piotrowski believes that, "to organize an exhibition is to write the history of art."

**Tomáš Ruller** (b.1957, Czechoslovakia).

Before 1989 was active in the non-official art movement in Czechoslovakia. Since 1989 has presented extensively on the international stage. Recipient of a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. Heads the Intermedia Department at Brno Academy of Art.

**Anri Sala** (b. 1974, Albania).

Gained immediate success on graduating from Film Studies in Paris with his work *Intervista*. Recipient of numerous awards and grants. Represented Albania at the 1999, 2001, and 2003, Venice Biennial's.

**Monika Sosnowska** (b. 1972, Poland).

Sosnowska belongs to the generation who first graduated from art school under the new democratic system. She found immediate success and has since exhibited in many of the major galleries worldwide. She represented Poland at the 2003 Venice Biennial.

**Balint Szombathy** (b. 1950, FYR/Hungary).

A founding member (1968) of influential Yugoslav group Bosch+Bosch, Balint Szombathy helped advance the idea of art-as-practice, devised theoretical models of urbanity, and was active both in the Mail Art and Body Art movements. He has created and contextualised many unique performances, and written essays on art as well as the disintegration of Yugoslavia. A monograph study of his work was published in 2006.

**Ive Tabar** (FYR/Slovenia). Tabar works as a nurse in the intensive care department of his local hospital where he constantly faces situations bordering between life and death. This informs his practice in place of any formal art training.

**Raši Todosijević** (b. 1945, FYR/Serbia).

Leading member of the Belgrade non-official art movement and internationally recognized avant-gardist. From his seminal actions in the 1970's 'Was ist Kunst?', texts on art, 'Edinburgh Statement - Who Profits from Art, and Who Gains From it Honestly?' (1975), and through the Installation series 'Gott Liebt die Serben' (God Loves the Serbs) of the 1980's and 1990's Rasa Todosijevic has consistently challenged the role

and responsibility of art and artist, offering existence as both context and material to juxtapose authoritarian language and nationalisms.

**Jerzy Truszkowski** (b. 1961, Poland).

Leading figure in Polish performance art best known for his appropriation of the symbolic language of power.

**Ütö Gustáv** (b. 1958, Romania).

Lived for more than thirty years of his life subject to Ceausescu's extreme totalitarian regime. Following the coup d'état of 1989 he organised an annual performance festival at St. Anne Lake in Transylvania that acted as a bridge between east and west. He has been active in action art since the 1970s.

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Interview with Kenny McBride by Lee Wen. Curator and Artist.  
Festival of Imagination. Singapore. 5 August 2007

**Lee Wen (LW):** You have the reputation of doing durational performances that often incorporates creating an environmental installation within specific spaces. How do the performances you create relate to the installation?

**Kenny McBride: (KM):** On a very simple level they serve to heighten the effect of a series of actions over a period of time and space, and how these visually relate one to the other. More fully they offer a space of contemplation and personal meeting with events that have occurred in the world, in history. I mean that some events really trouble me, that I have difficulty getting beyond them and have a great need to 'meet' them. Often these become material discourse in my works, for example the body of works *I Want to Experience What I Understand. I-IV* that focused on two histories of very recent mass murder – that of the schoolchildren and teachers in Beslan, and of the Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica.

I don't think any of this is particularly obvious to the viewer of the work, and it's not really something I want to continually refer them to although I might employ media images that represent them. I feel it's possible to be moved by such events but to open up the whole question of compassion beyond any one particular instance. Also during that time I was really enquiring into whether the mediated image of violence and suffering brings us closer to an understanding and a compassionate relation to the subject or whether they serve as some kind of distancing screen (and here I refer to Susan Sontag) through which we manage a relationship to suffering.



So by using elements and processes of both performance and installation I am able to translate different experiences – the lived and the mediated - and receptions of occurrences into actions and visual phenomena, and introduce them together, slowly and precisely, over time so as to create an environment that can best be understood as a site of being and becoming. To move forward in such a way is in fact a process of emergence. I like to think of the works as 'manifestActions'.

LW: It seems that you do not care for presenting the 20-30 minutes performances that other artists often do at festivals. Can you let us know why it is important to make long durational performances?

KM: I have made a number of works within the 20-30 minute frame. In fact just before FOI I will present one in Krakow. In the past they were self-contained pieces but now I approach them as 'test' performances for the longer pieces, to see how something might work, or not, in a 'live' environment. Then I will broaden and incorporate these within the durational works having had the opportunity to try them out. That's how the passing of breath onto the fish heads appeared in the piece *Meant Lament*. Originally in the test performance the action lasted about 15 minutes but this was later extended to one hour.

That town, Piotrkow Tribunalska, is the site of the first Nazi ghetto in Poland. I walked in circles on top of a ring of soil, stopping now and again to retrieve gloves from the earth. I would place these on the edge of the table and then dig out twigs and leaves and other foreign objects from the soil and lay them on the gloves until they took the appearance of veins

and bruises and lifelines. In the centre of the table, banked by earth and the two fish heads, I had a small fountain. The act of passing my breath to these heads, so close to water, was a very simple way for me to remember those who had gone and the subsequent generations that would never be with us.

But essentially I began to feel that I wasn't able to fully explore the materials – physical and mental and spiritual - I was working with within such a limited timeframe (of 20-30 minutes). I began to approach duration as a means to be with the work in such a way that I could engage certain elements of its discourse in a lived, experiential way that gets close to an inhabitation, rather than another representation.

Also I am very interested in repeating particular actions within a piece as a way to intensify my relationship to a particular material discourse. Because I live with the work for quite a while before I actually present it in a performed context I find this method helps in forming some kind of community to my relationship with the subject. Of course it doesn't always work that way but certainly I always approach duration as a meditative and encountering space.

LW: Are you satisfied with the durational done under the limitations of festivals or do you have any comments about working within different festival formats?

KM: The greatest difficulty often is the lack of an audience because generally I have the experience that I am programmed beyond the core event that will be made up of a number of 20-30 minute pieces and so I may be working in the daytime before the evening's main event. Although I

have to say that working in such a way takes me beyond the art audience as such and facilitates a remote dialogue with the other workers in the town or city where I am. It demands a different kind of engagement than the shorter, more audience-accessible pieces. It's also hard for the programmers and the audience. I am always very surprised when someone stays, for example stays in the site for the entire 4 hours or however long it is. It's really something special when that happens, and it changes the dynamic significantly. It truly becomes not mine, not theirs, but our dialogue. But on saying that I'm interested mostly in how meaning is constructed through the fragmentary experience of viewing, and in the multiplicity of context that arises from it. Occasionally I present work beyond the festival event where I am the sole artist but the issues essentially remain the same.

I had a fantastic experience in Toronto last year at 7a\*11d event where I was programmed between two weekends of performances. I was offered a significant space for three days to make work in and so I made the work *Past Now Present* over these days. It was really interesting and valuable for me to see the relational dynamics of performance and installation operating over that breadth of time. I was able to significantly slow things down.

LW: As the focus of your research is in Eastern European performance art, could you share with us briefly what drove you in that direction and perhaps also what you have found out since you began (when) until now?

KM: Well really the focus is on East and South East European time-based production so it also incorporates video and installation practices, and I

include contributions from elsewhere in the fields of culture to sharpen the focus – critical texts, and so on.

But it stemmed from my own participation in performance meetings in these regions and through this I became aware that a lot of work, pre- and post-1989, was somehow 'invisible' in its sense to the West. It seemed that the earlier works had in many ways been put into some cultural basement through the eagerness of governments and culture industries to embrace a speedy exit from the Communist past. It's a big problem of course because these regions are so rich in their own particular histories of avant-garde and radical art practices, but how do we include them in existing art canons. And the institutions were seldom supportive in the sense of collecting these works as they were seen to be subversive and not follow the Party line of Socialist Realism. But this is pertinent also to work post-1989 because the problem always exists for artists – how and where to show work and who is going to show it beyond its immediate context.

As a way to disseminate a lot of my research, which has been collected from personal contact with the artists, I started the online magazine <http://www.agora8.org> as a digital curation and preservation project holding examples of contemporary art practices. It aims to provide access to past events through adoption of a particular behavior towards archival culture that generates a re-animation and examination of time-based and contextual art practices. So it engages with works that happened in other places in other times while simultaneously providing access to an audience that could not be physically present in the space and time of production.

LW: Could you talk about your work or experiences working in Eastern Europe in relationship to some Eastern European artists you have encountered?

KM: The biggest problem I have found is that there is a lack of critical writing, most acutely in the historical works. This is probably due primarily to conditions under which work was produced, its clandestine or underground nature, but also because access to contemporary theoretical texts just wasn't available as it had been in the west, or in translation. And it seems to me that, with a few vanguard exceptions, critical writing wasn't held to be terribly important. Although to some extent it's being redressed now. Also there was also the tendency by the system to take a fairly traditional and conservative approach to the art academy. But I certainly don't mean to generalize. But always I find I walk a thin line between presenting artists' works accurately within their own time and space and not over theorizing them simply because of this lack of critical writings. It's a question of curation and how much the curator is a facilitator or seeks to lead by their own voice. I like to think that the artists I'm working with see the project as an act of protest and resistance to the new cultural dictators.

Introductory address. IMAF 7 Festival. Odzaci. Serbia. 2005.

Encountering the Encounter.

A primary purpose of any art meeting is that the artist/spectator dynamic shapes an identifying space of and among people, a *hacienda* where those already settled and those who visit may enter into purposeful encounter, prompting debates and meditation. Among these meditations there is always what it means to come from afar, and the effects and responsibilities of instilling the social continuum - that otherwise and normally manages everyday life by a different sensibility - with a sense of a new, ephemeral society. This is something both sides share equally - where one goes to, and conversely, who one meets arriving is the nexus of human encounter. For those who visit an other's place there always exists expectations indexically linked to subjective cultural reference and surprise at what is found there, including sometimes the problematic of discovering one's own inert prejudices. When do others become Others? How do we approach the Other - those people who command such unattractive labels as 'demons', 'foreigners', 'outsiders'... What happens when we come to a place where there are no Others, where we find ourselves all to be Others? Does our cherished reason recoil when we find ourselves questioning how to be with Others? By going beyond ethnographic fetish and anthropologic gaze through having a (purposeful) physical meeting we begin to answer these questions of the human condition.

In this televisual epoch, where all too often the sum knowledge of others can be formed from newsreels of events distant from one's own reality, it can be difficult to find the will or time to properly research a context that

has been prejudicially given to us. The media screen through which we manage our relationship to the world also offers erasure of these geo-hallucinations as quickly as they come to us. It is a disturbing phenomenon of our times that demands of us a great exorcism to go beyond the mediated world and treat the image as a physical space.

Interrupting this simulation is a critical aspect of the annual IMAF performance art meeting in Odzaci. It's objective is to assist in looking beyond the routines and terrors of everyday life to engage each others culture and individual consciousness in celebration and tolerance of distinct particularities, doubts, questions, robust or incorrigible theories on morality, existence, flux, and human bondage. Now in its 7<sup>th</sup> manifestation IMAF offers a place where artists from different corners of the world converge for a few days and, in simultaneity and solidarity with local citizens, set about the creation of a temporary society: encountering the encounter.