



Edited by Mária Orišková

**Curating
'EASTERN EUROPE'
and Beyond:
Art Histories
through
the Exhibition**



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Whose Nostalgia Is Ostalgia? An Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics Survey Exhibition in the New Museum, New York

Edit András

The vast region that reaches eastward from the Elba to the Pacific Ocean, once labeled as a “shadowy” behind the Iron Curtain, apparently has regained its momentum yet again. However, two opposing tendencies are detectable in relation to the art of the ex-East bloc and the dividing between them is not geographical but conceptual. One side is for rediscovering the potential inherent in the region’s art history with the initiative coming from one of the most prestigious Research Institutes in the US, The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.¹ The East coast publisher, MIT, is in the forefront of publishing the art of the Socialist period², while the West coast-based Artmargins provides an online forum for contemporary art and theory coming from the region, without even mentioning the still-existing Slavic or Eastern European Research Centers in the USA. Concerning the situation in Europe, it is true that the Soros Art Centers that supported the art scenes of the ex-satellite countries after the political changes while they recovered from their Soviet dominance have mostly dissolved or lost their significance for now. Central European University (CEU) seems to have forgotten either its initial mission of focusing on the East bloc countries and their specific concerns. Instead it has become one of the many profit-oriented educational institutions, even though its ideal geographical position in Budapest is ideal for becoming a Center of regional studies and networking. The remaining “Soros-headquarter,” Open Society Institute, is rather a closed institute both in its supporting of the art and art history of the region and of disseminating knowledge about it. OSA is the only branch that still stands on the post with its exhibitions on relevant issues. Lately, it is The Erste Foundation in Vienna that has taken over the abandoned positions by establishing Tranzit network and, most of all, by supporting research collaborations, exhibitions and publications.³ Finally, we can’t neglect the intensive research activity that is going on in the countries in question themselves, even if the outcome is not in abundance due to the financial difficulties of museums. Still, despite the obstacles there are some seminal exhibitions

and publications that are based on thorough research, time-consuming classification of archives on iconic figures⁴, artists' collaborations⁵, or periods⁶ and thus provide an insight from inside. All this feverish rewriting process driven by the changed geopolitical construction of the art world now conceived as a conglomerate of simultaneously existing art scenes instead of a hierarchical structure of center with its grand narrative and its margins with their sub-histories. That view, irrespective of being real or imagined, is supported by the advanced theory. One would presuppose that in this climate it is just impossible to keep the good old Cold War stereotypes, clichés and prejudices about art under Socialism alive, and that it is time for a closer and more attentive look, but one would be mistaken; a reversed process, a backlash is evident.

In 2010 black dog publishing (London) came out with a coffee table book within its Artworld series, entitled *Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*. The intention of covering the region concerned is most welcomed and timely; however, unlike the other volumes in the series, this one is authored anonymously and has managed to get away without being bothered by any kind of professional conception, criteria of selection, or vision. Compiled fast, it provides fast food for those who prefer that over nutritious, quality food; you are what you eat.

Even naming is never an innocent, neutral act, but very much a political one, thus we can't overlook the naming procedure. The term *nostalgia*, lately used by foreign scholars to describe the recent stage of memory machinery operating in the region, is very much telling as it clearly suggests a transformation in the process of coping with the Socialist past. By the definition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, nostalgia is "a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition." To put it bluntly, nostalgia it is a waste of time and as such, has a negative connotation. The obvious message is that the ex-center is about to take back the reins of interpretation and control into their own hands. However, of course, considering the current spirit of time, this intention must be camouflaged. The loyalty of those who are in between, those coming from the region but operating outside of its academic circles is shared between the opinion makers and the ex-fellow travelers. This double identification can be well observed in the titles of two books, which came out in the same year with the same editor, Maria Todorova. One of them is *Remembering Communism*⁷ and the other one is *Postcommunist Nostalgia*⁸. The intention to avoid repetition of terms is out of the question, as there was no problem in using the term of Communism, instead of using Socialism which is more commonly used by the locals. The introduction of the nostalgia-book explains that "nostalgia is, very loosely, about some form of remembrance," and that "as a concept it has long ago surpassed the boundaries of the medical profession." Although it also assures us that "nostalgia is no longer treated as the programmatic equivalent of bad memory, as a social disease", it informs us in another place that the term is heavily theorized "mostly critically and negatively for what has been seen as its inherent conservatism and

distance from real history.”⁹ This connotation is exactly what the indigenous scholars are afraid of, the implicit value judgment inherent in the choice of the words. As for the post-Communist nostalgia, she lets us know that the media coverage “treats the phenomenon as a malady.” Although in further analyses, the editor distances herself from this meaning of the word, one cannot avoid harboring a suspicion that behind the choice of the word is its attractiveness for the western audiences in connection to the East, promising possible restoration of the lost dominance of interpretation. One of the essays in the volume, “emphasizing not Ostalgia, per se, but rather Western, liberal discourses about the alleged obsession of the East with its past”¹⁰ provides us with some clue about the necessity of stuffing the region back into the old straitjacket, a hidden desire greatly assisted by words.

Ostalgia, a survey exhibition devoted to the art of Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics from the sixties until now in the New Museum in New York, aims to provide easily digestible summer entertainment for New Yorkers. In the press material the explanation of the title is that it is taken “from the German word ostalgia, a term that emerged in the 1990s to describe a sense of longing and nostalgia for the era before the collapse of the Communist Bloc”. The title of the exhibition along with the selection of artists, and above all, the context created around the works casts a shadow of doubt on the heavy concentration of up-to-date buzzwords used in the text, building up a Potemkin village from hype and chic terms and notions. On the level of rhetoric the exhibition intends „to question the centrality of Western paradigm,” as the opposite intention would be off color nowadays, yet it is smuggled back by the actual curatorship.

The subtitle correctly informs us that the ex Soviet Union is well represented; however, its overwhelming dominance relegates the ex-satellites into a sub-position of giving some extra, exotic flavor to the main course of the feast. It is heavily discussed in what measures the Soviet Union and its satellites could get onto the same platform in the time of Socialism, as it is debated also, if Russia is to be treated separately or under the umbrella of Eastern Europe with the other post-socialist countries after the collapse of Socialism. The term of East-Central Europe, frequent in the scholarly discourse, reminds us of the uneasy feelings connected to the ideologically heavily loaded geopolitical terminology. The selection is trying to be politically correct by choosing at least one artist from almost every country, undeterred by its intention to distance itself from any „cursory overview,” or „traditional format of geographical survey shows,” in which nobody believes in anymore, and indeed, nobody expects either. In the same way it is not a problem involving artists coming from outside of the region, as long as they focus on questions raised by the region. What does matter is the nature of the questions, and if they have any urgency, the relevance of the issues covered, as well as the views and messages conveyed by the show. Four floors, the stairways between the floors, and the lobby of the building should be enough space to take the production seriously.

It is understandable that one of the sources the curatorial text relies on is Nabokov's enchanting memoir, *Speak, Memory*¹¹, as it assists us to capture the feeling of, if not Eastern Europe, at least Russia, if not the Socialist time, at least the period right before that. However, to set it out as a guideline, following its method of recovering "his boyhood Russia" via "both excavation and invention" might be misleading. It makes it hard to avoid the temptation of taking over the position of the artist, instead of the historian. Maybe the hidden fear of being unable to resist the siren's song has led to the practice of the recent research based exhibitions worldwide assuming the position of the historian. No doubt, the region's own interest lies in the time-consuming, thorough, research based comprehensive exhibitions that rely on local knowledge, archives, collections etc. as opposed to the fast and hip shows which impose arbitrary views with the curatorial message: "speed up guys", you can operate and gain success without digging deep, relying mostly on your own personal impressions, not ranging far to seek sources (commercial galleries and friends); why be bothered with accurate philological works if you can impose your own vision on any subject.

Massimiliano Gioni's exhibition follows the path of Nabokov and "is divided between the philological reconstruction of the past and the creation of a new fiction" placing greater emphasis on the fictional part. The magic word, "personal", is about to justify the curatorial freedom and setting aside any scruples or historical rigor and giving the green light to a "chronicle of encounters and journeys – some only in imagination, others in real life..."¹² What then is this personal chronicle about?

The good news is that a number of major artists, such as Bratescu, Bulatov, Chto delat? Group, Grigorescu, Hajas, Iveković, Koller, Kovanda, Ondák, Sala, Stilinović, Toomik etc. are to be seen. As the aim was to bring new names into the picture, those who have established themselves (Kabakov, Abramovic) in the New York art scene, or were seen before locally (Kozyra, Žmijevski), were omitted. The argument is closer to a man-hunter's of a commercial gallery than to a curator's of an exhibition in a museum. The bad news is (beyond the missing names, trends, issues, attitudes) the vastly unbalanced treatment of seminal, dime a dozen, and purely commercial works. The death blow, however, is the overwhelming presence of uncanny and weird pieces providing the visitor with a kind of dark, spooky, shivering experience, reminiscent of Diana Arbus's Coney Island photos with its grotesque figures and wacky atmosphere near the "scream zone" of the Luna Park. Evgeny Antufiev's talismanic doll-like figures made from the teeth of dogs, wolves, and his mother's hair (invoking the landscape that is interesting for the West, described by Oleg Kulik in an interview, as "being atavistic, having vast regions with wild nature, where wolfs live and bears walk on the streets"¹³); Vladimir Arkhipov's huge collection of handmade, bizarre, folkloristic objects fabricated from found items, mostly from garbage; Said Atabekov's video with a child in a cradle whose handle resembles a Kalashnikov rifle; Mirosław Balka's and Thomas Schütte's scary, gloomy figures; Evgenij Kozlov's erotic drawings of his

puberty's voyeuristic sensation and fantasies living in a Soviet kommunalka covering two walls like wallpaper; Anatoly Brusilovsky's and Alexander Lobanov's semi-kitschy, though very popular Soviet "memorabilia" similar to the stock of peddlers, specialized on Cold War; Sergey Zarva's distorted portraits, cover pictures of Ogonyok in 2001 etc. all serve to lead the visitor through this "little shop of horrors," providing mild to moderate thrill with some exotic flavor. By keeping alive the alertness of the audience, the exhibition established a "grey, worn out, depressing, backward" world, the ghost of Socialism, an image not far from the myth nurtured by the West during the Cold War. This is the overall impression the visitors can take along, together with the comforting feeling that the past is not just a foreign country, but actually is identified with foreign countries of others, that have nothing to do with them.

Presented in this temporary version of a chamber of curiosities, even the iconic figures and seminal works gain a strange, twisted meaning, quite different from the local understanding. Filling a whole room with the soc-soft-porno photographs of the darling of the Western art market, Boris Mikhailov paired with Mladen Stilionović's mantra-like, penitence-like work consisting of pages of a dictionary in which he equates every word with a single phrase "pain," reduces the perception of the latter to melodrama. Schütte's skeletal figures, towering like boogie men, surrounded by Michael Schmidt's black and white portraits, empty interiors, abandoned buildings, and archive photos of a world trapped between Fascism and Socialism evoke the sentiment of a cemetery. Hajas's Self Fashion Show, powerful indeed, was made in 1976 under the conditions of the "happiest barrack" of the soc-camp, the goulash-socialism of Hungary, quite unlike the Brezhnevian stagnation, yet calls to mind the air of the fifties, as the 13 mm archival film is presented in a corner near Lenin's portrait. The visitor is not assisted to perceive Olga Chernysova's poetic and touching post-soviet panorama in its depth, when it is located near the "storage of lost and found" of Arkhipov, and that its mirror image on the opposite wall is Simon Starling's Flaga (a Fiat 126 built in Turin, driven to Poland, and reconfigured with Polish parts) also which imposes a superficial interpretation on its surroundings.

The cartoon-like timeline on the upper floor, the catalogue, and the wall texts attempt to supply the visitor with some context and background info. Factually, they are correct, but still, all the interpretation is implanted in a naïve and romantic illusion of artist heroes who were "struggling to free themselves from the conservative vision of art imposed by the regime and its ideology," driven by the ultimate aim of searching for traces of opposition everywhere, even where there were none of them. Networking with artist-friends, witnesses of the old times, makes it even harder to get beyond the surface of the rhetoric of morality and ethics, as it retrospectively polishes the rugged landscape where forgetfulness comes in handy.

The recent scholarship in the post-Socialist countries is about to unravel the tightly woven threads of the plot and the artist's latitude within the societies and to uncover

its complexities. In the inside story, the opposition is not so clear-cut, as quite a lot of artists, among them dissidents and vanguards, collaborated with official institutions, or exhibited in official shows (like Július Koller for example), or even accepted commissions. It is closer to the reality to speak about a sort of tug of war, or a constant negotiation of power between the cultural authorities and the artists, who tried to outsmart censorship, but at the same time, wanted to be seen and to be able to work as well. So, they were the first to find the cracks in the system and invade them.

Generalizing, and totalizing the Russian experience is dangerous, not just because the post-socialist, and especially the post-Soviet states, are annoyed and fed up with being browbeaten into the same straitjacket from which they have already freed themselves, but because this perspective assists to fill the gaps, smoothing and polishing the surface, and covering up irregularities of the past. At this time texture is having urgency, not contours.

One can't agree enough with the good intention of remembering the past, the traces of which "are systematically vanishing," but we have to be keep in mind also that to expose one set of memories, comes with a price of the erasure of other memory tracks. The memory discourse is very much part of the contemporary art scene as well and not because of "the generation who grew up after 1989 to a world of fiction that has become completely severed from its roots and from the past"¹⁴, but, quite the opposite, because even the new generations are affected by the secondary trauma of earlier suppressions and limitations in a region still haunted by the ghost of the past. Coming to terms with the past, however, is greatly obstructed, not just by the negligence of the East in working out and working through its own past, but by the stubborn insistence of the West to maintain old illusions and myths also. Ostalgia is about the latter, a misapprehension that smuggles back the division of East and West as well, despite the commonly accepted notion that this division is has evaporated and is irrelevant for now. The vision, mediated by Ostalgia, surely does not match with the landscape seen by those about whom it purports to represent, and it is not about the East either, but rather about the desire and fantasies of the seemingly still existing West.

I wish to express my gratitude to Barbara Dean for her kind assistance in the English version of the text.

Notes

- 1 Clark's Research and Academic Program's East-Central Europe initiative: a seminar series entitled *Unfolding Narratives: Art Histories in East-Central Europe after 1989*: "Thinking Art History in East-Central Europe", Tallinn, 14 -15 May 2010; "Art History on the Disciplinary Map in East-Central

- Europe”, Brno, 18-19 November 2010; ”Art History Meets Art Theory/Historiography and Theory in East-Central Europe”, Bucharest, 20-21 May 2011.
- 2 Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (eds.), *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991* (MIT Press, 2003); IRWIN (ed.), *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London, 2006).
 - 3 *Gender Check. Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejić, exh. cat. (Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Wien, 2009); *Gender Check: Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejić, ERSTE Foundation and Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010); Zbyněk Baladrán, Vít Havránek (eds.), *Atlas of Transformation* (JRP/ Ringier, 2011); Dóra Hegyi, Sándor Hornyik, Zsuzsa László (eds.), *Parallel Chronologies. “Other” Revolutionary Traditions. How Art Becomes Public. An Exhibition in Newspaper Format* (tranzit.hu, Budapest, 2011), etc.
 - 4 *Július Koller: Vedecko-fantastická retrospektíva / Július Koller: Science-fiction Retrospective* (Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 2010); Marta Dziewanska (ed.), *Ion Grigorescu: In the Body of the Victim* (Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, 2010).
 - 5 Miško Šuvaković, *The Clandestine Histories of the OHO Group* (Zavod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E., Ljuljana, 2010).
 - 6 Edit András (ed.), *Transitland: Video art from Central and Eastern Europe 1989-2009* (Ludwig Museum-Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, 2009); Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (Reaktion Books, London, 2009); Grzegorz Borkowski, Adam Mazur, Monika Branicka (eds.), *New Phenomena in Polish Art after 2000* (Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw, 2007).
 - 7 Maria Todorova (ed.), *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representations* (Social Science Research Council, New York, 2010).
 - 8 Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (eds.), *Postcommunist Nostalgia* (Berghahn Books, Oxford & New York, 2010).
 - 9 Ibid. p. 2.
 - 10 Ibid, pp. 8-9; pp. 17-28.
 - 11 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (Everyman’s Library, New York, 1999).
 - 12 Massimiliano Gioni, ‘Ostalga’, in *Ostalga*, exh. cat. (New Museum, New York, 2011), p. 24.
 - 13 Dmitry Vavilsky, *Scotomizatia, Dialogi s Olegom Kulikom* (AdMarginem, Moscow, 2004), pp. 45 – 46.
 - 14 Gioni op. cit 28.