

©2017

Corina Lucia Apostol

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

DISSIDENT EDUCATION: SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART FROM EASTERN EUROPE (1980-  
PRESENT)

By

CORINA LUCIA APOSTOL

A dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School-New Brunswick  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Art History

Written under the direction of

Jane A. Sharp

And approved by

---

---

---

---

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May 2017

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dissident Education: Socially Engaged Art from Eastern Europe (1980-present)

by CORINA LUCIA APOSTOL

Dissertation Director:

Jane A. Sharp

Contemporary art produced in Eastern Europe at the end of the twentieth century poses distinctive challenges for historians seeking to clarify the social role of the artist within a disintegrating socialist, and nascent capitalist, economy. My thesis identifies and analyzes the effectiveness of a particular mode of politicized art praxis: radical pedagogical initiatives launched within specific art communities in the region from 1980 to the present. My research addresses a newly integrated Europe, a region currently shaped by the economic crisis, growing social inequalities and the rise of nationalist rhetoric. I focus on three artists' groups, (IRWIN with Marina Gržinic from Slovenia, Chto Delat? from Russia, and Lia Perjovschi and Dan Perjovschi from Romania) who created new practices around suppressed topics during periods of political duress. The issues their art raised included gender discrimination, the false construction of national and ethnic identities, the corrupt nature of political power, and the ethics of working under socialism, and capitalism. I show how these artists realized their concerns in the social sphere in an era when they were repressed or crudely denounced by conservative officials. My strategy addresses the broader question of why, and how, artists who came to maturity under repressive political regimes continued to question the transition from socialism to capitalism.

I interpret their artistic activities as a specific type of politicized conceptual practice defined by the artists' shared focus on the process of education--of gaining and sharing knowledge within regional communities. Concerned with education as a form of social justice, and less interested in producing autonomous art objects, the projects I describe and analyze challenge conventional periodization based on art as formal innovation. Drawing on recent scholarship on global contemporary art and on the role of art in social movements, I present new frameworks through which to analyze this art, and its impact on local and international audiences. My dissertation uses the example of socially engaged art projects in Eastern Europe to shift the geography of modern and contemporary art. I demonstrate how this artistic production dislocates Western-centric narratives, by emphasizing the importance of other locales to knowledge production.

My project connects the humanities with political engagement, by exploring the uses of pedagogical art to resist suppression of free speech and human rights, and raise consciousness inside authoritarian regimes and in the aftermath of 1989, a period which is largely ignored by existing scholarship. Now, once again artistic production within increasingly oppressive political regimes has become an outlet for exposing censorship and abuse of power. Since the rule of law and the press continue to be muzzled post-1989, it has been such groups that have engaged the public through critiques of institutions of power in public spaces in Eastern Europe's largest cities. In doing so, they have transformed communities in Bucharest, Ljubljana and St. Petersburg by making available bodies of knowledge through art that defy oppressive structures and engage audiences to imagine the world through other scenarios.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Prof. Jane Sharp for the continuous support of my Ph.D dissertation and related research, for her patience, motivation, and immense knowledge. Her guidance helped me in all the time of research and writing of this thesis. I could not have imagined having a better advisor and mentor for my Ph.D study. Besides my advisor, I would like to thank the rest of my thesis committee: Prof. Andres Mario Zervigon, Prof. Tatiana Flores, and Prof. Sven Spieker, for their insightful comments and encouragement.

My sincere thanks also goes to Lia Perjovschi, Dan Perjovschi, Ion Grigorescu, Dmitry Vilensky, Olga ‘Tsaplya’ Egorova, Natalia ‘Gluklya’ Pershina, Nikolay Oleynikov, Nina Gasteva, Marina Gržinić, Dušan Mandić, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Roman Uranjek, and Borut Vogelnik who provided me an opportunity to interview them for this dissertation, and who gave me access to their personal archives and libraries. Without their precious support it would not be possible to conduct my research. I would also like to thank the Norton and Nancy Dodge Foundation, the Avenir Foundation, the Zimmerli Art Museum, the European Cultural Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Rutgers Graduate School for supporting my research with fellowships and grants that allowed me to complete research abroad and present my work at national conferences. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family, my mother Adriana, my father Silviu, my grandmothers Maria and Liea, my grandfather Ion, as well as my loved ones, Jasmina Tumbas, Anna Rogulina, Betty Jarvis, Ksenia Nouril, Olga Lamm, Claire Menard, and Tay Malloy for their constant support and encouragement.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Illustrations	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Artists Groups and Collectives	16
Chapter Two: Mapping and Networking	34
Chapter Three: The Archive and the Museum	77
Chapter Four: The Activist Club and the School of Engaged Art	126
Conclusion	177
Bibliography	192
Illustrations Chapter Two	202
Illustrations Chapter Three	214
Illustrations Chapter Four	226

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

2.1 IRWIN, Was ist Kunst (What is Art?), installation view, Studio Vipotnik, Ljubljana, 1984	202
2.2 IRWIN, Was ist Kunst (What is Art?), installation view, Bess Cutler gallery, New York, 1988	203
2.3 IRWIN, Malevich Between the Two Wars, mixed media painting, 1984-2001	204
2.4 IRWIN, NSK Embassy Moscow, sign, 1992	205
2.5 NSK Embassy Moscow, setting up the flag at the building of the private apartment at Leninsky Prospekt 12, photograph, 1992	206
2.6 NSK Embassy Moscow, Leninsky Prospekt 12, photograph, 1992	207
2.7 NSK Embassy Moscow, Lecturers Rastko Močnik, Marina Gržinić and Matjaž Berger from Slovenia, Vesna Kesić from Croatia, and Viktor Misiano, Valeri Podoroga, Aleksandr Yakimovich, Tatiana Didenko and Artiom Troitsky from Russia, photograph, 1992	208
2.8 IRWIN, Black Square on the Red Square performance, photograph, 1992	209
2.9 Marina Gržinić, Post-socialism + Retroavant garde + Irwin, film still, 1997	210
2.10 IRWIN & Marina Gržinić, Retroavantgarda, mixed media painting, 2000	211
2.11 IRWIN, eds., East Art Map, book cover, 2006	212
2.12 East Art Map online, website, 2006-present	213
3.13 Lia Perjovschi, Knowledge Museum, installation view, Steirischer Herbst, Graz, 2012	214
3.14 Lia Perjovschi, How to Change the World as an Individual, drawing, 2015	215
3.15 Lia Perjovschi, ZOOM diaPOZITIV, newspaper, 1998	216
3.16 Lia Perjovschi, Sense Mind Map, collage, 1999	217
3.17 Lia Perjovschi, Culture, drawing, 2015	218

3.18 Lia Perjovschi, Performances, poster, 1987-2007	219
3.19 Lia Perjovschi, Knowledge Museum Map, collage, 1999	220
3.20 Lia Perjovschi and Dan Perjovschi, Artist Studio, Sibiu, photograph, 2016	221
3.21 The First International Dada Fair, Berlin, photograph, 1920	222
3.22 Lia Perjovschi, Timelines, Michel Rein Gallery, Paris, photograph, 2015	223
3.23 Lia Perjovschi, Knowledge Museum installation view, Espai d'art contemporani de Castelló, 2010	224
3.24 Lia Perjovschi, Knowledge Museum, installation view, Espai d'art contemporani de Castelló, 2010	225
4.25 Dmitry Vilensky, Old Lady on Lion Bridge, photograph, 1985	226
4.26 Dmitry Vilensky, Returning Home, photograph with mixed media on cardboard, 1984-1988	227
4.27 Dmitry Vilensky, Red City, photograph, 1986-1992	228
4.28 Factory of Found Clothes (FNO), In Memory of Poor Liza performance, photograph, 1996	229
4.29 Dmitry Vilensky and David Riff, eds., When Artists Struggle Together and Debates on the Avant-garde, Chto Delat? Newspaper, 2007-2008	230
4.30 Viktor Popkov, The Builders of Bratsk, painting, 1961	231
4.31 Chto Delat?, The Builders, film still, 2005	232
4.32 Dmitry Vilensky, Perestroika, film still, 2007	233
4.33 Chto Delat?, Perestroika Timeline, installation view, Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporaneo, 2011	234
4.34 Aleksandr Rodchenko, Workers' Club, installation view, International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, Paris, 1925	235
4.35 Chto Delat?, Activists' Club, installation view, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2009	236

4.36 Factory of Found Clothes (FNO), Fragility and Power, installation view, ICA, London, 2010	237
4.37 Chto Delat?, The Rise and Fall of Socialism (1945-1991) Timeline, installation view, New Museum, New York, 2011	238

## Introduction

My project examines the interrelation of sociopolitical change and the visual arts in three former communist countries of Eastern Europe. I focus on contemporary artists who are pursuing political and social ideas, employing pedagogical methods and strategies from political theory, activism, community art, theater and performance art, and social practice.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, my study takes the form of a cross-cultural comparison of three artists' groups that have engaged critically with their local and global contexts over more than three decades (1980 to 2014).<sup>2</sup> My research addresses a Europe recently integrated but currently riven by economic crisis, growing social inequality, the rise of nationalist rhetoric, and the withdrawal of one of its key members. Countering conservative narratives of the post-1989 new global order, which cast the socialist governments of Eastern Europe as the losers of the Cold War and celebrated the capitalist democracies in the West, I consider artists who have constantly challenged the status quo and sought to empower audiences from diverse milieus. My thesis identifies the significance of artistic projects by IRWIN, in collaboration with Marina Gržinić, from Ljubljana, Slovenia (former Yugoslavia); Chto Delat?, from St. Petersburg (former

---

<sup>1</sup> Curator Nato Thompson, describes socially engaged art as art that escapes the rules of formalism, focusing instead on the complex terrain of people in all their complexity. He argues that this type of art is based on language, sociology, pedagogy, urban planning, and anthropology, and deploys skill sets from numerous disciplines under a politics of collaboration. See Nato Thompson, "Socially Engaged Art is a Mess Worth Making," *Architect* magazine, August 2012, pg. 86.

<sup>2</sup> I take Former East to refer to the Soviet-dominated countries of Europe, the Soviet Union, as well as countries like Albania and the former Yugoslavia, which had communist governments but were not under the control of the USSR. Some scholars refer to this region as the Other Europe, meaning the network of countries and peoples that lie to the east of Western European countries. Both of these terms reflect a dominant, Cold-War, Western viewpoint that has been complicated by scholarship on the region.

Leningrad), Russia; and Lia Perjovschi and Dan Perjovschi, from Sibiu, Romania, by closely examining shifts in political circumstances and their impact on art in the late-socialist and post-socialist periods.

The aim of my research is to analyze the reemergence in recent decades of avant-garde practices that sprang from radical political agendas during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I demonstrate here that artists intensified these former strategies to engage audiences in their native locales and internationally during the period of glasnost and perestroika.<sup>3</sup> My research extends to the current capitalist contexts of the above-mentioned regions of Eastern Europe and their respective cosmopolitan centers, where I find these practices, however altered, continuing to challenge social inequalities and exclusions. My project emphasizes the historical importance of their interdisciplinary artistic-educational strategies, including research exhibitions, workshops, lectures, and self-published material that function as sites of inquiry in which pressing sociopolitical issues are negotiated. I argue that each artistic group's creative work, because of its successful integration of the pedagogical thrust, has generated new discourses around major topics suppressed from public discussion: national conflicts, ethnic identities, gender discrimination, the nature of political power, the ethics of socialism and capitalism in everyday life. I show how these artists propelled these issues beyond the discourse on aesthetics and art institutions and into the wider social sphere during times when the artists' concerns, if addressed at all in the conservative official discourse, were

---

<sup>3</sup> From 1985 to 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, instituted a series of ambitious reforms known as "perestroika" (restructuring) and "glasnost" (openness), which were intended to improve the existing Communist system rather than overthrow it. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the implementation of these reforms continued through the early 1990s.

crudely framed. The artistic projects at the core of my study constitute laboratories of knowledge where audiences can learn to see the crisis and instability of world order and avail themselves of the resources to think and act for social justice.

Positing that contemporary art in communist Eastern Europe was motivated by a different set of concerns than its counterparts in the United States and Western Europe, my project proposes a different set of principles to understand it. Concerned with education as a form of social justice rather than with the production of art objects, the projects I describe and analyze challenge conventional periodization based on art as formal innovation.

The projects examined here are *East Art Map*, a book project, symposium, exhibition, and website (2006–present) by IRWIN in collaboration with Marina Gržinić; Chto Delat?'s *Activist Club* (2010) and The School of Engaged Art (2013–present); and Lia Perjovschi's *Contemporary Art Archive / Center for Art Analysis* (1987–2010) and, in collaboration with Dan Perjovschi, her *Knowledge Museum* (1999–present). I show how these artistic endeavors of long duration are historically grounded in the artists' early works and experiences in nonconformist circles in the late-socialist period and how they engage major social themes relevant to local and international audiences. My project uses the example of socially engaged art projects in Eastern Europe to expand the geography of modern and contemporary art. I demonstrate how this artistic production undermines Western-centric narratives by emphasizing the importance of other locales to knowledge production.



I propose a novel understanding of these artists and their significance for global art history. The view I advance challenges the critical scholarship that views these artists as Eastern European manifestations of a Euro-American model of conceptualism defined by artists in secure capitalist societies exploring innovative alternatives to the asceticism of minimalist art and moving away from the privileged art object.<sup>4</sup> The 2001 landmark exhibition *Global Conceptualism* attempted to expand this perspective on Eastern European art production by presenting local conditions as formative. The curators suggested that conceptualism was an international phenomenon, and linked its inception with the leftist, postcolonial social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. However, this enterprise proved difficult as most of the curators as well as the exhibition itself were part of a Eurocentric system. Although my research finds correspondences and commonalities with this model, the distinctive dynamics of cultural production and reception in Romania, the former Yugoslavia, and Russia (the former Soviet Union) support a different set of conclusions regarding the process of cultural globalization. In contrast to the curators of *Global Conceptualism*, I argue that artistic projects from these countries cannot simply be absorbed into a Western-centered canon of art history. By replacing the canonical with the noncanonical, and the formalist with the engaged, the exhibition offered a revisionist account as slanted as the most centrist presentation. Rather, I contend that the impact of dissident artistic knowledges and pedagogies within Eastern Europe on

---

<sup>4</sup> *Global Conceptualism Points of Origin 1950s–1980s* was shown at the Queens Museum of Art, New York, the Walker Art Center Minneapolis, the Miami Art Museum, and the List Visual Arts Center at MIT. The exhibition included 200 works by 130 artists from 28 countries. It was organized by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farber, and Rachel Weiss, together with an international team of curators: Okwei Enwezor, Reiko Tomii & Chiba Shigeo, Claude Gintz, László Beke, Mari Carmen Ramírez, Peter Wollen, Terry Smith, Margarita Tupitsyn, Sun Wan-Kyung, Gao Minglu and Apinan Poshyananda. See Jane Farver, ed., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950-1980s* (New York: Queens Art Museum, 1999).

the Western metropolis is not merely passive and must be situated historically and geopolitically in the framework of the late-socialist and post-socialist periods. I interpret these artists' activities as a specific type of politicized conceptual practice shaped by the artists' shared focus on the process of education—of gaining and sharing knowledge within regional communities.

Given these challenges, my research questions—of who and what are recorded in the archives of history, and by what means—pointed to a critical need to develop research methods and theoretical models concerning the specific context of Eastern European avant-gardes, neo-avant-gardes and non-conformist artists. I argue that by engaging this context, open-structured projects such as those put forth by IRWIN, the Perjovschis, and Chto Delat? carry the potentiality of a shared history Eastern and Western European contemporary art, encompassing a particular set of concerns for scholars, cultural administrators, and artists of Eastern Europe whose art production is still relegated to spaces of exclusion and confusion.

In doing so, I seek to contribute to the scholarship challenging some of the central assumptions behind the concept of an avant-garde as that construct is formulated in mainstream art history and criticism. For example, the influential *Art Since 1900*<sup>5</sup> mentions a few examples of post-war Russian and Eastern European art and avant-garde movements; however these appear to be of minor importance in the larger narrative, which is directed toward the consolidation of a Western-centric canon. Despite their inclusion, artists such as Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky, and Constantin Brâncuși do not

---

<sup>5</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, 2 vols. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005).

significantly alter or expand the canon. Indeed, non-Western artists are presented as being in consensus with an already written avant-garde discourse in the West.<sup>6</sup> Following the editors' logic, cultural life is fully experienced only in centers of economic, technological, and political power. Meanwhile, societies positioned tangentially within the narrative — distant from the hubs of capitalist development—appear less avant-garde, and therefore less contemporary.

In *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Boris Groys remarks that contemporary art today is not just produced but “demonstrates the way in which the contemporary as such shows itself—the act of presenting the present.”<sup>7</sup> In the same volume, Terry Smith states that contemporary involves “a distinctive sense of presentness, of being in the present, of beings who are (that are) present to each other, and to the time they happen to be in.”<sup>8</sup> Like Smith and Groys, I define contemporary art from a historical perspective: that is, contemporary art is coincident with those local manifestations that can find a precise collocation in art history and whose beginning and characteristics are linked to economic and sociopolitical phenomena developed from the end of the 1980s onwards in the globalized world. Within the global art world the diverse world views of post-colonial locales have confronted or challenged that of the center, a process that has historically enriched both sides.

---

<sup>6</sup> Criticism of the influential *Art Since 1990* has been voiced by many non-Western scholars, such as Partha Mitter in “Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,” *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4,(2008): pg. 531–48.

<sup>7</sup> Boris Groys, “The Topology of Contemporary Art,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), pg. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Smith, Introduction, in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), pg. 8.

Acknowledging the now generally recognized problems with “master narratives” of the center, Smith argues that: “new forms of translation need to be found for channeling the world’s friction.” What art history needs to do, he writes, is map “the specific frictions of world making.”<sup>9</sup>

*Art Since 1900* is a symptomatic case study of how critical knowledge of international avant-gardes has become overdetermined by certain elites, who continue to promote a capitalist model of art production. Such biases overlook or dismiss the distinctive economic conditions that prevailed in East European cultural centers, which lacked a market economy in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, in Bucharest, art production was coordinated by the Romanian Artists Union (Uniunea Artiștilor Plastici din România, or UAP), which was controlled by the Ceaușescu regime until the dictator’s execution in December 1989. The government used a mixture of persuasion and coercion to win over Artists Union members and consolidate its power, molding art production to the state’s cultural policy. By 1980 the Union’s leadership had transformed into an elitist body that monopolized resources and privileges, practices that led to protests from the organization’s rank and file members.<sup>10</sup>

In the past two decades, a new generation of scholars has challenged the dominant critical discourse. Indeed, Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson introduce their important anthology by observing: “avant-garde activities in the periphery have to date

---

<sup>9</sup> Terry Smith, Introduction, in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), pg. 11.

<sup>10</sup> See Alice Mocănescu, “Artists and Political Power: The Functioning of the Romanian Artists’ Union during the Ceaușescu Era,” in *Avatars of Intellectuals under Communism*, vol. 2 of *History of Communism in Europe*, eds. Corina Pălășan and Cristian Vasile (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2011), pg. 95–122.

mostly been described in terms of a passive reception of new artistic trends and currents originating in cultural centers such as Paris or Berlin.” The authors emphasize the diversity of cultures and a plurality of avant-gardes that should encourage critics and scholars to resist homogenizing ideologies: “Scholars are stressing the importance of approaching this project from a broader perspective and embrace its heterogeneous manifestations in different locations, ranging from the well-known centers in the Western World to its expressions in Asia, Africa and Latin America.”<sup>11</sup> In the same volume, Éva Forgács and Piotr Piotrowski discuss the topography of the avant-garde in regions traditionally depicted as cultural, geographic, and economic peripheries in Eastern Europe. They suggest that, despite a lingering consensus concerning the international scope of 20th-century avant-gardes, certain of their locations still occupy privileged positions while others are essentially ignored. Moreover, Forgács and Piotrowski argue that because artists working in regions with advanced capitalist economies can claim unique status within the historical present, provincial cultures are thought to remain in the negatively coded process of catching up with history. A premise in which an avant-garde functions as the model of an ideal center illuminating the concerns of artists in diverse geographical and historical provinces or peripheries radically limits the social and political alternatives to such centers. This assumption discourages writers from exploring difference and embracing new options for future research. In the following chapters I show that the avant-garde is complex and plural and cannot be reduced to a center/

---

<sup>11</sup> See Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson, “Rethinking the Topography of the International Avant-Garde,” in *Decentering the Avant-Garde*, eds. Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2012), pg.7–8.

periphery model. By focusing on three alternative centers, my study arrives at a more nuanced understanding of what might be accepted as avant-garde art; it also deepens insight into the sociopolitical history of three former communist countries.

Consequently, my project emphasizes the importance of the artists' early art careers during periods of dictatorship and civil war. Each situation I examine, however particular the context and the specific, state-imposed artistic dogma—reveals similarities in the methods of engagement employed by all three artists' groups. Their approaches center on audience concerns and expectations of life in a post-socialist state. A primary method shared by all is the revival and re-adaptation of early 20th-century avant-garde ideas for creating radical, emancipatory social forms in artistic practice, thus bringing the artistic and political spheres into close dialogue. I describe how each group explored a process of reevaluation and eventually developed pedagogical interests in art and artistic strategies in education. I trace this long-term process and present it as a conceptual arc that includes strategies of self-historicization, innovative forms of archiving, and creating active repositories for artistic research and teaching. As I will elaborate in the following chapters, their approaches differ markedly from the strategies of post-World War II conceptual artists working in the United States and Western Europe, who were interested in exploring transformative ways of feeling and seeing rather than seeking to transform society and creating new forms of collectivity or actively engaging with politics.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> See for example Buchloh's collection of essays which trace the development of neo-avant-garde art practices and the cultural conditions of their production in Europe and the United States after the Second World War. Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-avantgarde and culture industry: essays on European and American art from 1955 to 1975*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

## Methods

The study of Eastern European art from the second half of the 20th century poses a unique set of problems and issues and consequently requires methods different from those required for the study of Western art. The use of comparison by country and region has been used to great success by scholars such as Piotrowski, Susan Reid, David Crowley, Laura Hoptman, and Tomáš Pospiszyl. However, none of these writers have presented comprehensive studies of this region. Piotrowski's *In the Shadow of Yalta*<sup>13</sup> is a groundbreaking publication in its scope, critical approach, engagement with theory and artistic practice, and concern with the wider geopolitical framework of the Cold War. It provides illuminating insights into post-1945 avant-gardes and their discourses in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Romania, and to a lesser extent, Bulgaria. The book considers how socialism(s) and communist ideology changed art production in the East, offering a significant counter-history to the Western version of Cold War art history. In their book *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*,<sup>14</sup> Susan Reid and David Crowley adopted a cross-country comparison method to address more pervasive themes such as style and urban space in Eastern Europe during the Soviet period, investigating the significance of material culture for different groups of people across the Soviet republics. Klara Kemp-Welch and Cristina Freire's introduction to the "Artists' Networks in Latin America and Eastern Europe"

---

<sup>13</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (London: Reaktion Books), 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, (Oxford: Berg), 2000.

issue of ARTMargins<sup>15</sup> proposes that local art scenes that developed under Latin American military dictatorships and Eastern Europe in the 1960s and 1970s were characterized by their commitment to freedom and its furthering through cultural exchange. The editors claim that to the extent that direct exchange was controlled from above, its significance, from below, increased in inverse proportion. Their introduction gives an overview of the transnational networks developed by artists operating outside a market framework, with a view to highlighting the need for scholars to rethink the complexity of past, present and future fields of international artistic exchange.

My project is by no means a comprehensive study of socially engaged art or of the educational turn in artistic practice in the region, but rather will contribute to ongoing investigations. Yet it is the first examination of the particularity of space, or in this case the legacies, opportunities, and histories associated with Bucharest, Ljubljana, and St. Petersburg, enabling me to focus my analysis.

Two additional publications serve as important models for my work: Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl's *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*<sup>16</sup> and IRWIN's *East Art Map*.<sup>17</sup> These volumes provide a series of case studies of significant artworks, reflective essays on projects and exhibitions, as well as primary documents, many made available in English for the first time. In the absence of written criticism on many of these artists and their works, the

---

<sup>15</sup> Cristina Freire and Klara Kemp-Welch, eds. ARTMargins Journal 'Artists' Networks in Latin America and Eastern Europe', June–October 2012, Vol. 1, No. 2–3.

<sup>16</sup> Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl, eds., *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 2002.

<sup>17</sup> IRWIN, eds., *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London: Afterall Books), 2006.



documents published here are crucial to scholars, as they are the only records of these projects' existence. Equally challenging is the way art discourse has focused on fine arts media such as sculpture and painting, and the fact that art historians have only recently begun to reassess the comparative histories of performance art, photography, video, and conceptual art. Furthermore, group interaction and collectivist practices have seldom been addressed in the literature, even though they are a vital component of artistic production in the region. My project redresses this critical omission from the discourse on art as a social and political practice by focusing on just these formats for creative work. Another important model is Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette's *Collectivism after Modernism*,<sup>18</sup> which explores the ways in which artistic collectives and groups continue as influential artistic practices in Europe, Japan, the US, Cuba, and Mexico from the 1960s to the present, despite the persistent dominance of artistic individuality. I also draw on Sidney Tarrow's political opportunity theories,<sup>19</sup> which emphasize the power derived from the interlocking cultural, organizational, and personal resources of social movements during moments of political system-change. These texts provide a crucial comparative framework for the present study. They allow us to revalue the production of experimental, empowering art in the late 1980s and 1990s, as artists were self-organizing in response to official institutional exclusion and censorship—practices still encountered in different degrees in locales in Eastern Europe.

---

<sup>18</sup> Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, eds., *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, rev. 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2011.

My strategic comparisons across regions enable me to engage critically with a particular topic without having to undertake monographic studies or straightforward descriptive art historical chronologies, and allow for a more nuanced understanding of critical art in the region. My methodology also depends on close studies of significant art projects and exhibitions and on my own translations of primary documents, some of which are the sole evidence available of the art projects they record. I also emphasize the role adopted by artists who, by analyzing their own writings and project-sketches for exhibitions, became their own art historians and critics under circumstances of historical duress. Obviously, life in communist Russia, in the former Yugoslavia, and under Ceaușescu's dictatorship in Romania influenced the artists' visual language, but it was not the sole determinant in their artistic development—such an interpretation would only serve to confirm an oversimplified Western understanding of Eastern European art as “critical of the system” or “political.” My project explores in depth the rich and complex culture and history of Eastern Europe before the existence of Iron Curtain and after its fall.

## Chapter Outline

In the first three chapters I provide the historical contexts for the three artists groups under consideration, addressing both common and dissimilar issues relevant to artists working in St. Petersburg, Bucharest, and Ljubljana between 1980 and 1991. I also discuss the history and development of nonconformist art and informal networks in each

of these cities, and explain how those histories created a legacy that the Perjovschis, IRWIN and Chto Delat? drew upon in the following decades. These three chapters are case studies of the artists groups and their major contemporary projects: Perjovschi's Contemporary Art Archive / Center for Art Analysis and Knowledge Museum, IRWIN's East Art Map, and Chto Delat?'s Exhibition as a School and The School of Engaged Art. These educational projects are discussed in the context of the artists' previous art projects. Through a comparison of these works, I intend to reveal both their commonalities, which stem from the similar political and economic situations in which they were developed, and the originality of their individual approaches and strategies, as evinced in the disparate effects they have had on their audiences.

The strategies of engagement differ from one artists group to another owing to the sociopolitical environments of their countries, to their interest in exploring and employing strategies of past avant-garde and political art, the specific cultural histories of each cosmopolitan center, and to the aims they set to achieve. Crucial for each project were the artists' experiences working in nonconformist or informal circles during the Soviet period. At a time when all spaces, public or private, were subject to varying degrees of government control, these artists created spaces for public dialogue.

Furthermore, when they began working as artists, in the 1980s, the former Socialist Bloc was undergoing a period of intense re-adjustment, soaring inflation, and social instability. Issues that each of the artists raised in their works were specific and relevant to their current condition, a result not only of historical legacy, but also of contemporary experiences of Soviet socialism. They were impelled not by the belief, held

by their avant-garde predecessors from the Suprematist, DADA, Constructivist or Surrealist circles, in the power of art to change life, but by frustration over a breakdown of an official support system that was failing them. The Perjovschis, IRWIN and Chto Delat? became part of a generation of post-perestroika artists who found themselves looking for a new aesthetic language that would reflect the reality of the transitional and uncertain state of the world around them. In discussing these three artistic groups both in the context of one another and in their individual socio-historical contexts, I highlight the similarities and differences in their artistic strategies and audience reception alike in order to reveal their uniqueness in the dynamic late and post-socialist periods.

## Chapter 1

### Artists Groups and Collectives

#### 1.1 Historical stakes

Traditionally, art academies pass on and develop artistic styles and approaches. In the United States, leading neo-avant-garde figures became teachers of the next generation of experimental artists. For example, Hans Hofmann and John Cage taught Allan Kaprow, who developed the Happening, citing Jackson Pollock's Action Painting as a foundational influence.<sup>20</sup>

In Eastern Europe,<sup>21</sup> however, under communism, experimental art practices developed outside the academies, whose mission was to teach skills and techniques rather than innovation and critical thinking. In Romania, experimental art was never part of the academic curriculum; news of its existence and developments was mostly transmitted by word-of-mouth. Keeping records related to experimental ideas was dangerous, as such documents could fall into the hands of the secret police, or "Securitate." As Kristine Stiles observed in a landmark study on performance art in Eastern Europe: "Each

---

<sup>20</sup> Kaprow studied at the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts and the New School for Social Research with Hofmann and Cage, respectively. In his 1958 essay "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," Kaprow cited the temporal aspect of Pollock's work as signifying a shift to a new type of art making, one in which painting was abandoned for the more visceral experience of real life and action. See Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1993, pg. 1–9.

<sup>21</sup> I take Eastern Europe to refer to territory under the influence of the former Soviet Union after World War II.. This includes countries such as Albania and the former Yugoslavia, which had communist governments but were not under the direct control of the USSR.

generation was forced to reinvent experimental art for itself. This made it more difficult for experimental art to gain density, weight, gravity or momentum in history.”<sup>22</sup> For example, Romanian conceptual artist Geta Brătescu was to some extent and at certain times informed about current foreign art movements owing to her work at the magazine “Secolul 20” (The 20th Century) and the trips abroad that she was occasionally granted.<sup>23</sup> However, performance artist Ion Grigorescu was rarely aware of what was happening in contemporary art outside the country. His only trip abroad during those years was to Paris in 1977.<sup>24</sup> The consequences of such insularity were significant not only for artists working during the socialist period, but also, and especially, for the following generation. Artists from Eastern Europe are today expected to have the knowledge, and experience necessary to work on the global stage despite the fact that their formal education has not prepared them for this task. Eastern European art academies continue to privilege traditional approaches to painting and sculpture over contemporary art and critical thinking.

Before the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, most artists within its borders had to pursue their practices within the framework of Artists Unions and in conformity with the ideological principles of the socialist states in which they lived. Their work thus served the consolidation of socialist (future communist) societies. However, there were

---

<sup>22</sup> Kristine Stiles, “INSIDE/OUTSIDE: Balancing Between a Dusthole and Eternity,” in *Body and the East: from the 1960s to the Present*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac (Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 1999), p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Under Ceaușescu’s regime, the magazines *Secolul 20* and *Arta* were important sources of information on contemporary art then being produced outside Romania. *Arta* was published by the Artists Union and focused on contemporary fine arts.

<sup>24</sup> Corina L. Apostol and Amy Bryzgel, “Reflections on Artistic Practice in Romania, Then and Now”, Ovidiu Tichindeleanu and Raluca Voinea, eds., *IDEA Arts+Society #45*, Cluj: IDEA Design & Print, November 2014.

exceptions: several artists and artists groups developed alternatives to state-sanctioned art, sometimes even alongside their own conformist practices. These productions, some of which I will analyze in detail in the following chapters, contradict official histories and stand outside the narrative of democratic opposition that emphasizes trauma and repression—experiences not shared by all Eastern Europeans.

The multiple points of view from which the history of this region is regarded are perhaps best understood through Jacques Rancière's concept of "dissensus."<sup>25</sup> Rancière persuasively argues that art is most effective when permitted the full expression of its fundamental tenets: to think for itself, speak its own language, and disagree. Rancière's notion of an ethical turn in art, offers a way to overturn the post-Soviet discourse of victimization and enable a democratic dynamic to prevail over the aesthetics of socially engaged art. The artists groups that I have been researching have created sustained educational and artistic platforms that cultivate the micro-politics of a plurality of voices and betoken democratic aesthetics and politics. The artists write, draw, photograph, and film every day to fulfill their artistic mission and to share their knowledge, perceptions, and experiences with others. These artists are not primarily concerned with the art market; their interest lies in art itself and in civil society. For them, participating in exhibitions in small institutions is just as important as being represented in large art events. They share the belief that art can help audiences see what was once unseen or see differently what was officially regarded from a fresh perspective.

---

<sup>25</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur Emancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008), pg. 70–72.

To illustrate this, I will introduce the socialist-era practices of these three artists groups as well as their legacy in current, post-socialist times. All three groups chose to remain in Eastern Europe under communism, enduring decades of dictatorship—years that were especially grueling under Ceaușescu’s brutal totalitarian regime in Romania. Seeking to unmask social and political realities, all three contest all forms of oppression and engage in critical self-reflection, thus sharing an awareness of their own existence.

In 1985, Lia and Dan Perjovschi opened their apartment in Oradea for informal gatherings of local writers, actors, anthropologists, artists, and curators. Dan, then a graduate of the George Enescu University of the Arts in Iași, and Lia, who would begin her training at the Bucharest National University of Arts in 1987, felt unprepared and constrained by their formal art education.<sup>26</sup> During their student years, they were unaware of any contemporary art movements in Romania that were unaligned with official doctrine. Like many others, they led a life of intellectual confinement. In one of our interviews, Lia explained that they opened their home as a place for discussions in order to create a space for critical thinking and free exchanges at a time when everyday life was extremely precarious and (self) censorship ruled in all aspects of public and private life. The Romanian regime’s power was based on ideological control and the illusion of total

---

<sup>26</sup> “Under different names, the Contemporary Art Archive/ Center for Art Analysis has been active since 1985 in our home in Oradea, in the frame of the experimental studio at Art Academy Bucharest, in our artist studio in Bucharest, and later in national and international museums, galleries, non-profit or artist-run spaces and in the mass media. We began working with an investigative method, searching for sense, hidden and lost ideas, relevant works and authors, and preserving a dizzydent (from dizzy) critical attitude in a context of intellectual stagnation.” Dan and Lia Perjovschi in conversation with the author, August 13, 2010, Bucharest.



surveillance.<sup>27</sup> More often than not, artists exercised self-censorship. Fear of the Other<sup>28</sup> was gradually internalized by Romanians and became the norm in the 1980s.<sup>29</sup> The Perjovschis' initiative was an affirmation of the power that sharing and teaching give to artists and audiences alike. It established an unofficial network that, as the artists described it, was the basis for "a survival strategy."

In 1990, immediately after the 1989 revolution, the Perjovschis secured a studio at no cost in the Scarlat/Robescu building in Bucharest. It was offered to them by the Artists Union on the recommendation of artist Geta Brătescu.<sup>30</sup> They began transforming the space into an archive for books, magazines, and ephemera on international art and culture, as well as a repository for their works (drawings, photographs of performances, installations, art objects, and videos). This archive would become, in 1997, Lia Perjovschi's project "Contemporary Art Archive / Center for Art Analysis" (CAA/CAA), imagined as a tool for critical inquiry and used to engender local and international exchanges among artists, students, and scholars from diverse fields (art history, history,

---

<sup>27</sup> Although the number of secret police engaged in surveillance was not as high as the general public believed, it was still impressive. At the outbreak of the December 1989 Revolution there were 450,000 informers, of whom some 130,000 were active. See Denis Deletant, "Romania," in *A Handbook of the Communist Security Apparatus in East Central Europe 1944–1989*, eds. Krzysztof Persak and Lukasz Kaminski (Warsaw: Institute of National Remembrance, 2005), p. 314. Katherine Verdery cites a tally provided by the Romanian Service of Information (SRI) after 1990: 486,000 informers assisting 39,000 full-time employees. See Katherine Verdery, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2014), pg. 207.

<sup>28</sup> Members of the Frankfurt School and exponents of postmodern philosophy have argued that the process of Othering is related to representations and power acting through knowledge of the Other to achieve a political agenda of domination. See "the Other" in *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, eds. Alan Bullock, Stephen Trombley, 3rd ed., (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), pg. 620.

<sup>29</sup> Corina L. Apostol, "Interview with Lia Perjovschi: Reflections on Artistic Practice in Romania, Then and Now", Ovidiu Tichindeleanu and Raluca Voinea, eds., *IDEA Arts+Society #45*, Cluj: IDEA Design & Print, November 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Brătescu generously gave the Perjovschis the studio she was assigned by the Artists Union in 1990, as she already had a studio in Bucharest.

political science, anthropology, philosophy). The CAA/CAA project is an aesthetic model for an alternative, interdisciplinary institution for art education, a forum for reactivating and recuperating suppressed or missing histories as a result of the pre-1989 segregation. In 2009, Lia Perjovschi started working on and exhibiting *Plans for a Knowledge Museum*, a museum-like installation based on the research files accumulated at CAA, an institution the artist hopes will have its own building one day. This future artist-run museum is projected to move away from the exhibition as spectacle and toward the fostering of learning through the use of an open-structured archival construction. Perjovschi envisions a museum with seven departments reflecting her own interdisciplinary approach to the organization of information: The Body, Art, Culture, The Earth, Knowledge and Education, The Universe, and Science. The installation of *Plans for a Knowledge Museum* consists of drawings, objects, charts, photographs, and prints. Perjovschi conceives of her museum as a mental map, offering a lens onto the processes of selection that reveal her view of cultural practices and their consequences in society, and inviting audiences to participate in a similar process of self-reflection.

The Perjovschis, IRWIN and Chto Delat? are, each in their own way, artist-thinkers in the Deleuzian sense<sup>31</sup>, having in common modes of curiosity, questioning, and analysis realized through a form of artistic creation, as well as an awareness of the complexity of their socio-political conditions, no matter what the consequences. Related to this, they all share a propensity for the written word: they keep journals, write for cultural or political magazines, illustrate texts, and combine images and writing in their

---

<sup>31</sup> Deleuze famously remarked that an artist-thinker's art must make visible invisible forces. Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting and the Arts*, New York: Routledge, 2003.

artistic work. In 2006, the Ljubljana collective IRWIN launched *East Art Map*,<sup>32</sup> a project comprised of a book, an online resource<sup>33</sup>, a symposium, and an exhibition.

Conceptualized in collaboration with other researchers, including Marina Gržinić, *East Art Map* was an artistic platform aimed at critically interpreting discourses and collecting information about East European and Russian Art. For the book, IRWIN invited a curator from each country in the region to select up to ten local artists they considered most important in the development of contemporary art and commissioned a series of art historical texts to contextualize the artists' works. The website functions as an archive in which the audience is emphatically involved in the continual process of negotiating artists and art collectives accumulated over time. IRWIN, the visual arts component of the collective NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst, or New Slovenian Art), emerged at the beginning of the 1980s, after the death of Marshall Josip Broz Tito,<sup>34</sup> Tito's death spurred a period of uncertainty in which power struggles flared between staunch Stalinists and more liberal politicians and violent conflicts arose among Yugoslavia's six republics. Ljubljana's artistic subculture,<sup>35</sup> emerging from the city's Student Cultural and Artistic center (ŠKUC),<sup>36</sup> created unique productions and organizational forms, emphasizing the close-knit nature of culture and politics. In their 2003 "Retro-avantgarde" diagram, analyzed in detail in Chapter 2, IRWIN, in collaboration with

---

<sup>32</sup> IRWIN, *East Art Map*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), 2006.

<sup>33</sup> The East Art Map website can be accessed at this web-address: <http://www.eastartmap.org>

<sup>34</sup> Tito died in May 1980.

<sup>35</sup> In Slovenia, Ljubljana's subculture is also referred to as "The Art of the Eighties."

<sup>36</sup> ŠKUC Gallery was founded by Tanja Brejc and Peter Mlakar in 1978. In the 1980s the directors of the gallery were Barbara Borčič, Marina Gržinić, and IRWIN member Dušan Mandić.

Marina Gržinić,<sup>37</sup> presented the retro-principle approach to aesthetics by constructing context.<sup>38</sup> At the nexus of art, politics, and historiography, IRWIN posited the existence of a retro-avant-garde “Eastern Modernism,” a fictitious movement substantiated with spurious connections between real Slovenian artists. The group thus issued an attack on modernism(s) as constructed by Alfred H. Barr<sup>39</sup> and Clement Greenberg,<sup>40</sup> who put forward their models as universally valid. By adding an Eastern dimension to the concept, IRWIN implied that modernism as it is widely understood is actually a Western modernism and therefore not universal. IRWIN’s aim was to provide a method for presenting a multiplicity of voices of different generations and opposing aesthetic visions to construct an innovative art history that significantly differs from conventional Cold War narratives. IRWIN painted, drew, photographed, and wrote to fulfill their mission as artists and to share this knowledge, their perceptions, and their experiences with others.

---

<sup>37</sup> With theoretical input from Gržinić, IRWIN produced the mixed-media montage *Retroavantgarda* in 2000. It included the following works: Irwin, *Was ist Kunst*, (1984–1998); Dimitrij Bašičević Mangelos, *Tabula rasa, m. 5*, 1951–1956; Avgust Černigoj, *Construction*, 1924; Braco Dimitrijević, *Triptychos Post Historicus*, 1985 (reproduction); Laibach, *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst*, 1983 (exhibition poster); Kasimir Malevich (*Belgrade*), Paintings, 1985; Gledališče Sester Scipion Nasice, *Krst pod Triglavom (Baptism under the Triglav)*, 1985; Jossip Seissel, *Balkanite Stand at Attention*, 1922 (reproduction); Mladen Stilinović, *Exploitation of the Dead*, 1980.

<sup>38</sup> The term “retro-avantgarde” was coined by NSK and Marina Gržinić in 1994, on the occasion of the exhibition *Retroavantgarda* at Moderna Galerija Ljubljana. The term was employed as a strategy for charting the Yugoslav avant-garde from the present to the past, thus from the neo-avant-garde to the historical avant-garde. Therefore, this term is intimately linked with NSK’s art practices and its use of signs from the modern cannon, including the historical avant-garde, national symbols, religious icons, and totalitarian symbols, as well as the texts and manifestos associated with these movements.

<sup>39</sup> Barr’s “Diagram of Stylistic Evolution from 1890 until 1935,” developed in 1936, was central to the definition and derivation of modernism. It lists the European avant-garde movements, such as Cubism, Dada and Surrealism as precursors of the abstract art of modernism. Irwin transferred this scheme onto Yugoslavia, in the form of an inverted family tree of the “retro-avant-garde,” which extends from the neo-avant-garde of the present back to the period of the historical avant-garde.

<sup>40</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (1939): pg. 34–49.

The members of the collective Chto Delat? (What is to be done?),<sup>41</sup> which was officially established in 2003 in Russia, have been active in the dissident milieus of Saint Petersburg since the early 1980s. Dmitry Vilensky, a founding member, began working in experimental photography in 1980 and became well known in camera club circles (these amateur photography clubs were then supported by the state and kept under surveillance), as well as among nonconformist photographers. In 1993, immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he co-founded Photo-Postscriptum, an exhibition and educational space in a private apartment. The enterprise was dedicated to photography, photo-based art, and the history of the medium. That same year, he curated a major exhibition of nonconformist works by Saint Petersburg photographers from the 1980s generation.<sup>42</sup> The feminist founding members of Chto Delat?, Natalya Pershina-Yakimanskaya (Gluklya) and Olga Egorova (Tsaplya), established the Factory of Found Clothes (FNO) in 1995, using what they refer to as artistic forms of social research—installations, performances, videos, texts—to evoke a subjectivity of fragility at odds with the repressive social and political climate.<sup>43</sup> The Factory of Found Clothes conceived of their projects as vehicles of consciousness-raising, exploring and critiquing rules, behavioral norms, and social and psychological inequalities in a deeply patriarchal society. Vilensky and the Factory of Found Clothes joined forces with philosophers,

---

<sup>41</sup> The collective took its name from the title of Nikolay Chernyshevsky's mid-19th century novel proposing an agenda of radical reform in Imperial Russia. Vladimir Lenin used the same title for one of his revolutionary pamphlets from 1902.

<sup>42</sup> Dmitry Vilensky, "St. Petersburg Photo-Postscriptum: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," *IMAGO - Another Eropka Photography*, Winter 95/96, unpaginated.

<sup>43</sup> "Fragility is the source of our common humanity. It can be powerful, it can be transformed into a source of strength. We didn't celebrate weakness as such in our works, rather we made an appeal to tenderness and humanity." Olga Egorova in conversation with the author, July 2014, Saint Petersburg.

activists, and other artists from Saint Petersburg and Moscow to found Chto Delat? in the climate of increasing nationalism and militarization that marked Vladimir Putin's early consolidation of power. In 2013 the collective established the School for Engaged Art, a unique initiative in a country where democratic liberties are under constant threat and critical culture and contemporary art programs, whether academic or self-organized, barely exist. The school offers seminars in modernist art and aesthetics, choreography and body practices, critical writing and English for artists, taught by key local and international figures as well as by the collective's members, themselves.

All three of these artists groups have exhibited their work locally and abroad to critical acclaim, and yet their struggles continue. In 2010, the Perjovschis were forced by the art academy and the artist union to leave their studio in Bucharest. They have since relocated to their native Sibiu. There, in a newly built studio and home, Lia stores her archive, which is frequently open to visitors, and hosts a yearly brainstorming session with key members of the local and international art communities. Having been confined within their national borders until 1990, the Perjovschis now balance traveling abroad for exhibitions, workshops, and seminars with their activities in Romania. IRWIN continues to work in studios in Ljubljana and teach at the local university. They were strong advocates of establishing MSUM (Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova) as the repository of the Moderna Galerija's Artest 2000+ collection, which is made up of art by

Eastern Europeans who for decades were unknown or overlooked.<sup>44</sup> Opened in 2011, the MSUM creates dialogues between works by key artists from Eastern and Western Europe through the installation of the permanent collection, temporary exhibitions, and special programs such as guest speakers and visiting artists. IRWIN's longtime collaborator, Marina Gržinić, continues to write extensively and teaches in Ljubljana and Vienna. IRWIN and Gržinić continue to participate in exhibitions and conferences around the world. As to Chto Delat?, for lack of a permanent studio and school facility, they hold classes in settings ranging from lofts to a self-described antifascist bar near Saint Petersburg's European University. While their school initiative may appear precarious, the collective's long history of publishing and organizing workshops, film screenings, talks, and conferences in adverse political circumstances bodes well for its future prospects.

In conclusion, the educational platforms and institutions that these artists groups' have set up as radical artistic projects represent a form of resistance to conservative local structures and their inflexible rules. The artists employ concepts and formats such as the archive, research, informal education, and interdisciplinarity to facilitate genuine communication and the free exchange of knowledge. Thus, these projects function as artistic forms of dissensus by telling complex stories of history, philosophy, politics, art,

---

<sup>44</sup> "Arteast 2000+ International Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West," an exhibition held at the Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana in 2000, was curated by Zdenka Badovinac in consultation with Viktor Misiano, Piotr Piotrowski, Harald Szeemann, and Igor Zabel. The works exhibited were drawn from the Moderna Galerija's international collection of modern and contemporary art; they were selected with the aim of establishing an East-West dialogue concerning artistic production and global art history.

and everyday life through highly charged yet appealing art installations that affect their audiences by relating to topical political and social issues.

## 1.2 Reengagement with historic avant-garde projects and the educational turn in art<sup>45</sup>

For the purposes of my project, I take the term avant-garde to refer to art that is experimental and pushes the limits of what art is expected to achieve in our daily lives. My use of the term invokes Renato Poggioli's characterization of the avant-garde as remaining slightly outside society in order to critique it, reacting against dominant culture, and also Peter Bürger's theory that avant-garde art attempts to integrate art into everyday life, eliminating distinctions between mass culture and high art.<sup>46</sup> While citing these theorists' views as background for the commonly used term "avant-garde," I will demonstrate the inadequacies of their theories, developed in relation to Western European and American art, for describing the situation of artists creating work in the socialist East, a region that underwent its own unique developments in the late 20th century. By examining in their international context these three case studies of artistic work, produced mostly in isolation before the fall of the Soviet Union, I will explore the implications of their continuous engagement with the projects of early 20th-century avant-gardes. This engagement stemmed from the artists' formative experience in unofficial or nonconformist circles in the Socialist Bloc, and from their re-energizing of the avant-

---

<sup>45</sup> Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson used the expression "educational turn" in 2008. Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds., *Curating and the Educational Turn*, (Amsterdam: Open Editions/De Appel Arts Centre), 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968); Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984).



garde conception of art as an open-ended research project, reclaiming its educational use value and capacity to radically shape society.

Alongside "the avant-garde" and "the contemporary," the "educational turn" enjoys much attention in today's art world. The educational turn in curatorial and art pedagogy has received increasing attention since the 1990s, when developments in cultural studies and neoliberal reforms in many university systems and academies began to have an impact on art education and reception.<sup>47</sup> While its history can be traced back to various forms of didactic art that circulated in the 20th century, the educational turn today refers to an art focused on participation and the social production of alternative forms of knowledge, and is at odds with its capitalist, liberal counterpart, global education.

In Eastern Europe, before the political changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s, knowledge that was forbidden in official school curricula circulated illegally during discussions and lectures at private apartments such as the Perjovschis', as well as in samizdat forms.<sup>48</sup> The predecessors of the educational projects examined in my project are therefore partly indebted to these underground educational formats. Although not all the current instantiations I discuss function as alternatives to the cultural policy of an authoritarian regime, they represent vital educational platforms in a collaboration-based system of practice and theory.

---

<sup>47</sup> See Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, *Curating and the Educational Turn* (London: Open Editions, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> Under socialist rule, samizdat constituted self-publishing. In Eastern Europe such publications circulated domestically and internationally via complex networks that offered theoretical and practical support for dissent outside the host countries. For a comprehensive overview of samizdat, see the landmark anthology edited by Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov, *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Berghahn Books, 2013).

In the following chapters, I show how the above-mentioned projects by the three case study art groups share a focus on education, gaining and sharing knowledge, artistic research, and knowledge production, rather than on producing object-based artwork. I argue that their focus becomes the process itself, as well as the use of discursive, pedagogical methods inside and outside institutional art spaces. I demonstrate how these artists have created un-hierarchical educational platforms for emancipatory knowledge and in the process attracted strong interest and engagement among diverse audiences. Unlike proponents of institutional critique in the United States, who focused on the relationship of arts organizations, big business, and unethical government policies, these artists continue to engage with the lack of critical art organizations and institutional exclusion in their local contexts. At the same time, they are constantly adjusting their critical stance with respect to art institutions embedded in a tight mesh of capital and power on the global stage.

While during the Soviet period a number of artists like the Perjovschis, members of IRWIN, Marina Gržinić, FNO, and Dmitry Vilensky all abandoned traditional art making for alternative forms of expression such as performance, photo-actions, installations, and other nonconformist art practices, this history remains on the margins of academic discourse. This is partly explained by language barriers, and also by a lack of critical literature on experimental art practices in Romania, Slovenia, and Russia. Decades of state control over art making, art history, and art criticism have imperiled the mere existence of a home-grown critical art discourse in the post-communist period. Only

over the past few years have art historians, curators, and critics begun to reassess the histories of nonconformist art in Eastern Europe.

Communist-era, Eastern European scholarship on the artist groups examined in my project is revealingly hard to locate and bears traces of the censorship laws once in effect. Moreover, biographical details and their interpretation, key components of my methodology, were stricken from socialist-era art histories because they were considered inappropriate. In the case of Dan Perjovschi, although reproductions of his works appeared in the Artists Union magazine *Arta*, the accompanying descriptions made no mention of the art's sociopolitical content. Dmitry Vilensky (Chto Delat?) was confined in a mental institution in 1988 for failing to report for military service, which was then compulsory for young men in the Soviet Union. Vilensky's artistic activities were discussed in the press only after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. As for IRWIN, in 1984 the collective was forbidden to perform or show their art publicly; until the end of the decade, they organized illegal exhibitions to which they invited trusted colleagues and friends.

Scholarly interest in the Perjovschis has been growing steadily in post-socialist times, as has commercial interest in their early work. However, Western scholars who have written on their achievement are not fluent in Romanian and have not pursued the archival research that my project will bring to bear on interpretations of their work and its impact. The photographic oeuvres of Vilensky and those in his circle have been theorized only by the artist and fellow photographers. I am the first researcher to have gained access to the Vilensky's personal archive in Berlin. The post-Soviet works of Chto Delat?

members Olga Egorova (Tsaplya) and Natalia Pershina (Glucklya), who have collaborated since 1995, have similarly been ignored in Russian scholarship, except for a few articles in the *Khudoshestvennyi zhurnal* (Moscow Art Journal) and a recent museum catalogue.<sup>49</sup> I am among the few who have visited their studios and interviewed them in Saint Petersburg. Western scholars such as Simon Sheikh and Johan Holten have shown increasing interest in Chto Delat's art projects and publications.<sup>50</sup> However, these authors are not fluent in Russian and do not take into account the artists' perestroika-era experiences, which I argue are foundational. In the case of IRWIN and Marina Gržinić, local scholars have tended to focus on the all-male artists group, ignoring their significant collaborations with Gržinić, an important artist and theoretician.<sup>51</sup> My project will highlight these overlooked projects, emphasizing Gržinić's influence on IRWIN's artistic endeavors. Overall, owing to male dominance over local scholarship, the women artists in my project have been pushed aside, in some cases presented merely as partners of their male colleagues rather than as creators in their own right. My project seeks to reverse or overcome this discrimination.

---

<sup>49</sup> Natalya Pershina-Yakimanskaya (Gluklya) and Nelly Podgorskaya, eds., *Factory of Found Clothes: Utopian Unions* (Moscow: Museum of Modern Art, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Chto Delat?, What is to be done? Survey of the Works of-the Russian collective Chto Delat?, (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), which gives an overview of the Slovenian collective's works.

I contextualize my research with a variety of primary and secondary sources that include my own interviews with the artists<sup>52</sup> and documentation from my participation in their public workshops, seminars and conferences.<sup>53</sup> I investigate the social groups involved in the artists' long-term educational projects and their relationships to them. My multi-pronged strategy addresses the broader question of how artists who came to maturity under repressive political regimes perceive and interpret the still-ongoing transition from socialism to capitalism. Their experience differs fundamentally from that of artists dependent on the art market in the West, and thus requires an interdisciplinary and historically contextualized approach.

Critically deconstructing traditional academic art history, the artistic projects that I focus on changed the focus of the discipline from art-related texts and images to a consideration of the cultural construction of these artifacts and the relationship of artistic practices to seminal social and political events. At stake in my project is the historical understanding of the artists in relation to the other members of their collectives, to their initiatives in times of political crises, and to the global art world of today, in which Cold-War ideologies no longer obtain. My project extends the aspirations of global art history by positioning key art projects not as objects of socialist and post-socialist histories

---

<sup>52</sup> I have interviewed the following artists and their collaborators: Dmitry Vilensky, Tsaplya Olga Egorova, Nikolay Oleynikov, Nina Gasteva (Chto Delat?), June 2012, July 2013, June–August 2014, Saint Petersburg; Dušan Mandić, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Borut Vogelnik (IRWIN), April–June 2014, Ljubljana; Marina Gržinic, April 2014, Ljubljana; Lia Perjovschi and Dan Perjovschi, December 2013, September 2014, Sibiu.

<sup>53</sup> I participated in the following artist-organized events: Brainstorming Marathons, organized by Lia Perjovschi with Dan Perjovschi in Sibiu, September 2013 and September 2014; *Rezist/Exist*, organized by Dan Perjovschi in Bucharest, March 2014; The School of Engaged Art, organized by Chto Delat? in Saint Petersburg, June–August 2014; *Learning Play*, organized by Chto Delat? in Hamburg, July–August 2013; *State in Time*, organized by IRWIN in Vienna, May 2014.

within a predetermined Western canon, but as a set of active inquiries into historical processes, engaging propositions to imagine other scenarios for a changing world.

## Chapter 2

### Mapping and Networking

#### 2.1 Horizontal Art Histories

To understand the nature, claims and consequences of the Ljubljana-based collective IRWIN (part of the larger collective NSK<sup>54</sup>) and the feminist artist and scholar Marina Gržinić<sup>55</sup>, their endeavors should be contextualized as emerging from the particular socio-cultural-political events in 1980s Slovenia.<sup>56</sup> This was the time right after the death of Marshall Josip Broz Tito, which spurred a period of uncertainty, resulting in power struggles between staunch Stalinists and more liberal politicians, a period marked by violent conflicts between the different republics constituting Yugoslavia. After the Tito's death, the communist party wasn't successful in fighting inflation, and ethnic leaders gained powers; Slobodan Milošević in Serbia, Franjo Tuđman in Croatia.

---

<sup>54</sup> Neue Slowenische Kunst (1984– ) is taken from the title of an article by Herwarth Walden on his journal *Der Sturm*, "Junge Slowenische Kunst" (1928). However, the most marked appropriations are taken from the Russian avant-garde, especially the use of the square of Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), as discussed in the following sections.

<sup>55</sup> Marina Gržinić collaborated with IRWIN on numerous projects, including "Back to the USA" (1984) and "NSK Embassy Moscow" (1992). She has also written extensively on the NSK collections. Her key publications on the artists include the following: *Fiction Reconstructed. Eastern Europe, Post-Socialism & the Retro-Avantgarde* (Vienna: Edition Selene, 2000); "Neue Slowenische Kunst," *Impossible Histories: historical avant-gardes, neo-avant-gardes, and post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), pg. 246-269; and "Irwin 1983-2003," in *art-ist: Contemporary Art Magazine* (Istanbul, Turkey), No. 7, September 2003, pg. 7-106.

<sup>56</sup> After the distancing of Tito's Yugoslavia from the Soviet Bloc by the early 1950s, there was a respect for freedom of expression as long as the government was not the target, as well as open borders which allowed international exchange and artists could be engaged in autonomous aesthetics. Dušan Mandič (IRWIN) interview with the author, April 2014, Ljubljana.

This decade was also framed by the Ljubljana sub-cultural movements, as Marina Grižnič reflected on in her key text on the activities of NSK<sup>57</sup>: the formation and dissemination of the multifarious texts, artworks, interventions of NSK together with projects of a young generation of painters, sculptors, photographers, video artists and philosophers.<sup>58</sup> The latter group, especially aesthetic philosophers, brought the histories of the avant-garde to the fore in the Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian languages, a process that was unfolding parallel to the global redefinition of historic avant-gardes. Founded on the work of the Student Cultural and Artistic center in Ljubljana (ŠKUC) and in close collaboration with Radio Student<sup>59</sup> and the critical youth weekly “Mladina,”<sup>60</sup> the Ljubljana subculture<sup>61</sup> created socially engaged artistic productions and cultural

---

<sup>57</sup> Marina Grižnič, “Neue Slowenische Kunst,” Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković eds. , *Impossible Histories*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), pg. 246-248.

<sup>58</sup> One of the most important was the Lacanian school, spearheaded by Slavoj Žižek. The renowned Slovenian philosopher, was one of the first scholars to theorize the practices of Laibach (and later NSK) as over-identification. In interviews, IRWIN has also recognized that they were influenced by attending lectures of the Slovenian Lacanian School in the early 1980s. See Mojca Oblak, “Neue Slowenische Kunst and new Slovenian art”, in *New Art from Eastern Europe: Identity and Conflict*, March-April 1994, Vol.9, No. 3/4, pg. 8-17.

<sup>59</sup> Radio Student was established in 1968, after the student riots in Ljubljana. Students went on strike at Belgrade University in June 1968 after riot police charged into a small group of them fighting with young brigade workers one evening. A full-scale strike quickly spread to the universities of Zagreb, Ljubljana, and Sarajevo. The protest echoed the student unrest unfolding across Western Europe and the United States. Students’ demands for representation in university affairs, and their opposition to growing economic inequalities were similar across these locales. See John R. Lampe, “Tito’s Yugoslavia Descending 1968-1988,” in *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country*, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2000.

<sup>60</sup> Mladina was first founded in 1920 as the official herald of the Youth Section of the Yugoslav Communist Party in Slovenia. After the prohibition of the Communist Party in 1921, the journal kept circulating in a semi-illegal position. After 1945, it was again transformed in the official herald of the Youth Section of the Communist Party of Slovenia. In 1982, the Congress of the Alliance of Socialist Youth of Slovenia decided to transform Mladina into the voice of the growing internal opposition of the young Communists against the mainstream of the Communist Party in Slovenia. In the late 1980s Mladina’s main focus was to promote democratic transformation through political criticism. It exposed political conflicts within Yugoslav society, including a critique of Josip Broz Tito’s legacy, the Federal Government, the Communist Party and the Army. See Benderly Jill and Evan Kraft, *Independent Slovenia: Origins, Movements, Prospects*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 1994.

<sup>61</sup> The Ljubljana subculture is also referred to as “The Art of the Eighties.”



organization forms, which emphasized the closely knit relationship between culture and politics. It is important to note that the alternative or subculture movement was not merely a marginal movement that, ultimately, according to the logic of dominant political ideologies, functioned as a reconfirmation of the centre of power. Rather, as Marina Grižnić observed,<sup>62</sup> one of most significant strategy of the Ljubljana alternative movement consisted, not in finding alternatives to the communist system, but alternatives within it. This marked a deeper change in the cultural and political strategies of the dissident and non-conformist movements of Europe, and more specifically, in Eastern Europe.

The end of the 1970s in Slovenia, commonly referred to in the cultural realm as the end of authoritarian politics,<sup>63</sup> marked a watershed for what had been until then an empty space in art. It was followed by the growth of a new youth subculture, namely punk, which provided a non-conformist and critical energy that bolstered creativity in the 1980s. While contemporaneous and similar in goals with the punk movement in Western Europe and America<sup>64</sup>, the Slovenian alternative culture was more than a style, a fashion or a trend that is co-opted by the dominant ideology. Instead, the Ljubljana subculture signified a reconfiguration of the social and artistic realms. The Slovenian alternative movement of the 1980s introduced context-specific and autonomous productions and

---

<sup>62</sup> Marina Grižnić, "Neue Slowenische Kunst," Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković eds. , *Impossible Histories*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), pg. 246-248.

<sup>63</sup> Marina Grzinic, "Video Art in Slovenia and in the Territory of Ex-Yugoslavia," *Mute Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 7, 1997, availble online: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/video-art-slovenia-and-territory-ex-yugoslavia>, last accessed January 2017

<sup>64</sup> See Dick Hedbidge's cult book on subculture, focusing on Britain's postwar youth subculture styles as symbolic forms of resistance: *The Meaning of Style*, (London: Methuen Publishing), 1979.

organizational forms of culture and art.<sup>65</sup> These were developed independently and in parallel to the existing official, mostly ineffective, cultural systems and channels. These resistant artistic activities represented a direct challenge to official cultural and artistic production, as well as an engagement with the social and political sphere. The non-conformist culture in Ljubljana was dominated by experimental artistic practices such as performance art, video, and popular theatre, and brought about a series of new socialization processes. These included new forms of social activity and non-formal institutional bodies, which marked and defined the Slovene cultural scene. A network of clubs and public meeting places was created, as were new ways of accepting non-conformist social and artistic activities. The coming-out of Ljubljana's male homosexuals, and the forming of gay culture, also happened around this time and Ljubljana was the first organized movement of this kind among the then Socialist countries of Eastern Europe, including the opening of the gay social/art club Magnus 1984, the appearance of a lesbian sub-group within the Lilit's section for women's issues in 1984-85, appeared, and new social movements (e.g., the Section for a Culture of Peace at ŠKUC-Forum, 1985). For all of the above, the 1980s also confirm that Ljubljana earned the title of an urban topos and fostered the creation of the gay culture in the 1990's in Eastern Europe.

The artistic productions of IRWIN and Grižnič were also influenced by the Lacanian psychoanalytical discourse that informed theoretical framework of the Slovene

---

<sup>65</sup> Detailed analyses of non-conformist cultural activities during the 1980s in Ljubljana are provided in the following volumes: Neven Korda, "Alternative Dawns," Nikolai Jeffs, "FV and the 'Third Scene,' 1980-1990," and Petje Grafenauer Krnc "Look for Me in the Damp Basement," all in *FV Alternativa osemdesetih* (FV Alternative Scene of the Eighties), edit. Breda Skrjanec (Ljubljana: Mednarodni gradicni likovni center/ International Centre of Graphic Arts, 2008), respectively pg. 281-343, pg. 345-394, and pg. 395-415.

underground in the 80s. The "Ljubljanska lakanovska šola" (Lacanian school in Ljubljana)<sup>66</sup>, notably known mostly through the work of the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, was crucial for the formation of the theoretical context and fields of interpretation of the Ljubljana's non-conformist scene. It is also important to emphasize that the influence of the non-conformist milieu on this theory was reciprocal, and that the Ljubljana subcultural movement was as well the context that provided a productive terrain for these artists' activities.

In this politically charged cultural milieu, IRWIN was founded in 1984 in Ljubljana, acting within the NSK movement (together with the rock group Laibach, the design group New Collectivism and the theater group Scipion Nascice Sisters). The IRWIN group consists of Dušan Mandić, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Roman Uranjek and Borut Vogelnik. IRWIN's work is based on the "retro-principle," enacting a syncretic coexistence of various artistic styles ranging from national tradition of the historical avant-gardes, to popular national imagery, to the visual production of the totalitarian regimes, as I will demonstrate in the following sections. NSK emerged from the punk rock movement. The first public announcement of the NSK organization took place in 1985 when "Problems" (Problemi), a left-leaning philosophy and sociology journal published by the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis of Ljubljana, devoted a special

---

<sup>66</sup> The school was founded in the late 1970s by young Slovenian followers of the theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, in what was then the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Founding members of the school included Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar and Rastko Močnik. Their main aim was to bring together the philosophy of German idealism, Marxism and psychoanalytic theories as a means of analysis of contemporary social, cultural and political phenomena.

issue to NSK<sup>67</sup>, their statements and manifestoes, charts, reproductions of works, and other related documentation.

However, after three years their cultural activities were prohibited by the Yugoslav government from 1983 to 1987, especially because their performances directly criticized Yugoslavia's suppressed history of fascism and its emerging nationalist sentiments. The names of the groups, NSK and Laibach come from German words, which associated Yugoslav society with the period of the country's occupation by Nazi Germany.<sup>68</sup> Specifically, *Neue Slowenische Kunst* is taken from the title of an article by Herwarth Walden on his journal *Der Sturm*, "Junge Slowenische Kunst" (1928). However, the most marked appropriations are taken from the Russian avant-garde, especially the use of the square of Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), as discussed in the following sections. Meanwhile, Laibach is the German name of Ljubljana, the Slovenian capital city.

NSK's intentionally provocative performances and concerts were often held in full military regalia, with a scenography that reminded both of the political meetings of the Nazi regime and of Marshall Tito's cult of personality. Their bold posters, which were displayed in public briefly before being taken down, showed a man who closely resembled the German dictator Adolph Hitler. One example of a successful performance by NSK was 1989, when the group held an event in Belgrade, then the capital city of

---

<sup>67</sup> *Neue Slowenische Kunst, Problemi* (Ljubljana), No. 6, 1985.

<sup>68</sup> While the parts of former Yugoslavia were under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, German language was regarded as the first foreign language. After the traumatic experience of WWII, the German language was understood in Yugoslavia as the language of the occupier, yet at the same time also as the language of high culture and philosophy, the language of Goethe, Hegel, Mann, and others. Therefore, German isn't solely connected to the Nazi regime.

Yugoslavia. Before the start of the concert, Peter Mlaker, a member of the NSK group made a speech in which he openly referenced a political address made by Slobodan Milošević<sup>69</sup>, the emerging Serbian leader. Mlaker, appropriating Milošević's nationalistic rhetoric, changed the key terms from Serbian (Serbo-Croatian at that time) to German. His intervention intended to show that the speech of Milošević, and in general the power elite in the country, amounted to a nationalistic and ethnocentric tendency similar to Nazi discourses. Mlaker's speech was captured in the documentary "Predictions of Fire" (*Prerokbe ognja*) by the American filmmaker Michael Benson in 1996.<sup>70</sup> The film focused on a decade of radical performances by NSK, positioning their work within the history of Yugoslavia, including the Yugoslav wars and the ongoing trauma experienced by generations of Eastern Europeans raised under totalitarian regimes. The NSK artistic practices shown in the film are geared towards a critical examination of how politics interacts with different facets of artistic creation and how integral ideology is to the understanding of the structure and signification of images.

Marina Grižnič's work was also deeply invested in deconstructing relationships of power and ideology, as well as on gender and sexuality. In her 1982 video-work "Icons of

---

<sup>69</sup> Slobodan Milošević (1941 – 2006) was a Serbian and Yugoslav politician who was the President of Serbia (originally the Socialist Republic of Serbia, a constituent republic within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) from 1989 to 1997 and President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1997 to 2000. He rose to power as Serbian President after he and his supporters claimed need to reform the 1974 Constitution of Yugoslavia due to alleged marginalization of Serbia and political incapacity for Serbia to deter Albanian separatist unrest in the province of Kosovo. In the midst of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, Milošević was charged by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia with war crimes including genocide and crimes against humanity in connection to the wars in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Benson was an American journalist who lived in the region during Slovenia's transition to independence. Benson skillfully interweaves archival material and interviews with NSK's members and their critics, accompanied by illustrations of NSK's artistic works. Michael Benson, *Prerokbe ognja*, 90', Kinetikon Pictures, RTV Slovenija, 1996.

Glamur, Echoes of Death” (Ikone glamurja, odmevi smrti) she collaborated with Dušan Mandić (IRWIN), as well as with artists Aina Smid and Barbara Borcic, under the collective name “The Borders of Control no. 4.” (“Meje kontrole st. 4”).<sup>71</sup> In the video Grižnić portrays a transvestite model who switches through language between genders, talking as ssshe” and then suddenly “he,” while Smid plays a hermaphrodite. In dialogue, they remember their childhood, school years and first sexual experiences. In the video filmed and edited by Mandić, Grižnić’s character is confronted with photographs, slides and performances of the model’s posing for the camera. Through their choice of lighting, framing and editing, the video work draws critically on the avant-garde aesthetics associated with German and American artists and film-makers such as Michael Fassbinder, Rosa von Praunheim and Andy Warhol. This work was one of the first in former Yugoslavia (and in Eastern Europe) to explore politics of sexuality, gender, female pleasure and pornography, dramatizing the institution of masculinity through drag practices in a socialist society. Through performance in front of the camera, “Icons of Glamur, Echoes of Death,” makes a clear political statement in support of lesbians and gender non-conforming people that had been actively persecuted, prosecuted and imprisoned in Eastern Europe, and who did not constitute appropriate subjects for art according to the Yugoslav authorities. Although Ljubljana’s non-conformist milieu was dynamic and productive, in the 1980s, it is important to note that censorship and repression by the government and the official media also grew more frequent. With the unifying figure of Marshall Tito recently deposed and economic hardships intensifying,

---

<sup>71</sup> Meje kontrole st. 4 (Marina Grižnić, Aina Smid, Dusan Mandić and Barbara Borcic), “Ikone glamourja, odmevi smrti,” VHS, color, 11’23”, produced by SKUC-Forum, Ljubljana, 1982.

alternative movements, and especially the Slovene punk culture, were branded as immoral depravity and were made symbolically responsible for the loss of the relative economic and social security of the prior decades.<sup>72</sup>

All in all, the 1980s was a critical decade when artists addressed the oppression and hardship of the people that had been imposed by the Yugoslavian government's tyranny. This extremely fruitful period for engagement of arts with politics presented an alternative and a break with the conservative tradition of Slovenian culture and art. In some historiographical books about the modern tradition in Slovenian Art these non-conformist artistic projects continue to be overlooked. Some of the reasons for these omissions may be that the non-conformist movement was a radical break with the preceding artistic productions in Slovenia, despite the fact that artists were denied opportunities to work and deprived of support of the government which delegitimized their status in society and denied them legal means of self-expression. Over the course of a turbulent decade this artistic movement created a new perception of the concept of art, of its strategy as a political paradigm, and moreover, it connected art with major radical post-modern activities: from mass media culture to technology based image productions.

In the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the collapse of communism across Eastern Europe, the radical cultural reading of the history and present of the nonconformist scene in Ljubljana experienced a lull. In the

---

<sup>72</sup> In 1981, following an order from general secretary of the League of Communists of Slovenia, France Popit, the media and police began a systematic attack on the punk culture, raiding bars, homes, and clubs. The so-called "Nazi punk affair" erupted in November 1981, and came to epitomize the new atmosphere of repression. Popit characterized the Slovene punk movement as drug-ridden and morally distorted at a conference of communal party secretaries in 1981. See Gregor Tomc, "The Politics of Punk," in Jill Benderly and Evan Kraft, eds., *Independent Slovenia: Origins, Movements, Prospects* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pg. 120.

1990s, the country's art scene was characterized by a particular kind of nothingness or absence, which engendered disorientation, as IRWIN observed, not only for artists, scholars, and the public in the West, but also in the East.<sup>73</sup> It was in fact the absence of a transparent art system, which was not only the consequence of socio-political conditions in the Eastern Europe, but a formative part of the official art system in these regions. Instead of an accessible and intelligible model that would allow comparisons on an transnational level, what artists and scholars invested in this region had to make sense of art histories concerned only with locally known narratives about the preceding decade's non-conformist milieu. These narratives were nearly impossible to discern in "the international language of art," as IRWIN pointed out in their Introduction to the project East Art Map, which I will analyze in the following section.<sup>74</sup>

As the following study of IRWIN shows, this segregation is not only local, but international, as it is also the basis of the cannon of Western modern and contemporary art history. The universalizing discourses of survey publications such as *Art since 1900*<sup>75</sup> authored by Yve Alan-Bois, Benjamin Buchloch, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss make extremely little efforts to include critical issues central to Eastern Europe.<sup>76</sup> The survey also glosses over other commonly marginalized regions such as South America or the Middle East. These authors, who have by and large shaped the formation and

---

<sup>73</sup> IRWIN, "General Introduction," in IRWIN, eds., *East Art Map* (London: Afterall, 2006), pg. 11-14.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 71, pg. 11.

<sup>75</sup> Yves-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster & Rosalind Krauss, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, Vol I & II ( New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005).

<sup>76</sup> For an in depth discussion of the cultural politics of exclusion see Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/ Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).



development of critical methodologies of Art History in the United States, frame Eastern Europe as another piece in the riddle of the universal history of art, collapsing obvious differences in milieu and reception. Without abandoning the ideal of a unified history of art, the collectives examined here give reason to question totalizing theories originating in this North American scholarship. One could also posit that their projects presented possibilities for “speaking many languages simultaneously,” thereby undermining the “monolithic voice” of the government in their respective countries with the heteroglossia of artists communicating with one another in multiple verbal and visual languages but in one voice of many dialects.<sup>77</sup>

Indeed, the model of vertical and hierarchical narratives in volumes like *Art since 1900* and canonical textbooks of art history in the United States, has been critiqued and reconfigured by the aforementioned artist groups, as well as a generation of scholars from Eastern Europe writing in the 2000s. Instead of a universal, linear and hierarchical model, the project spearheaded by IRWIN, in collaboration with Marina Grižnić and others, *East Art Map* (EAM; 2006) suggests a multitude of “horizontal art histories.”<sup>78</sup> Syncretic in content, their radical approach to writing multi-centric art histories is based on local narratives, trans-regional influences in Eastern Europe and constant exchanges with the global art world. Their highly original way of thinking about local historiographies is

---

<sup>77</sup> Kristine Stiles has noted: “The struggle between the multiplicity of internal voices and the monolithic voice of external authority breeds trauma.” In “Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies: Representations From Cultures of Trauma,” originally published in *Strategie II: Peuples Méditerranéens* [Paris] 64-65 (July-December 1993): 95-117, reprinted with a new forward in *Talking Gender: Public Images, Personal Journeys, and Political Critiques* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pg. 52

<sup>78</sup> Here I am borrowing a term which the noted Polish art historian and curator Piotr Piotrowski has employed to describe the region. See Piotr Piotrowski, “On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History”, *Umeni/Art*, No. 5, 2008, pg. 378-383.

based on a direct engagement. Informed by their experience in a region that has experienced wars, totalitarian regimes and all types of ideological repression, IRWIN's project embody and enact a discontinuity which cannot be explained nor grafted on the vertical and universalizing model of art history that continues to dominate the scholarship in Western Europe and the United States. Before addressing *East Art Map* itself, I highlight key moments in the evolution of the artistic production and radical cultural strategies that marked these artist's evolution towards creating socially engaged, educational projects with actual consequences for European society. I show that these developments have been informed by collectivity and willingness to participate in actual social and political processes. This constitutes a significant difference from the utopian and largely individualistic nature of historical avant-gardes and postwar neo-avant-gardes in Western Europe and the United States.

## 2.2 What is Art? (Was ist Kunst?)

In their practice, IRWIN established three main criteria for its work, especially in the series *Was ist Kunst?* (What is Art?; 1985): “programmatic eclecticism, the primacy of the group identity over personal identity, and affirmation of the local and the national.”<sup>79</sup> These criteria may be understood as strategic measures that enabled IRWIN to create a frame for their creative working methods. IRWIN's aforementioned group identity is more than the sum or average of the individual identities and energies, rather it originates in their interactions as a new entity of a different order. This is not merely one of the

---

<sup>79</sup> Dušan Mandić and Miran Mohar interview with the author, April 2014, Ljubljana.

fundamental principles behind the functioning of the IRWIN group and the NSK movement. At the same time it is a primary principle of their political theory, which can be linked to the role of the notion of the state in IRWIN's work and in the activities of the NSK as a whole in Eastern Europe.<sup>80</sup> Emerging from a context that had seen former Yugoslavia disintegrating at the end of the 1980s, the rise of nationalisms and ethnic wars, the artists' invocation of the state reveals their deep understanding of the fluid nature of national borders and of the dangers of their dissolution and reconstitution.

At first glance, IRWIN'S art practice seems to be a local version of North American postmodernism<sup>81</sup>. Indeed, in their works IRWIN artists combine quotations from different artistic periods, styles, and movements in a way that is typical of the postmodern art of the 1980s and 1990s in the United States<sup>82</sup>. However, IRWIN's practice is different from Western postmodernism in many significant respects. The emergence of Western postmodernism was not possible in Yugoslavia, nor anywhere else in Eastern Europe, because there was no art market in the region, and the conditions under which art was practiced there were completely different, as highlighted in the previous sections. This meant that the Modernist canon was never established, formalized, and

---

<sup>80</sup> For more on contemporary forms of self-organization within the arts see Stine Hebert and Anne Szefer Karlsen, eds., *Self-Organised* (London: Open Editions, 2013) and Stevphen Shukaitis, *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2009).

<sup>81</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991). Fredric Jameson book seeks to pin down a definition of "postmodernism". The author looks at the postmodern across a wide landscape, from high art to low, from market ideology to architecture, from painting to punk film, from video art to literature. Jameson associates the present with a loss of our connection to history. What remains is a fascination with the present. According to the author, postmodernity has transformed the historical past into a series of emptied-out stylizations that can then be commodified and consumed. The result is the domination of capitalist thinking over all forms of thought.

<sup>82</sup> Kramer, Hilton, "Postmodern: Art and culture in the 1980s," *Quadrant*, Vol. 28, No. 1-2, Jan/Feb 1984, pg. 28-32.

institutionalized in Eastern Europe to the same degree that it was in the West. Even if Modernist trends were tolerated in some Eastern European countries, or even welcomed, as in Yugoslavia, they did not have the same structural power as in the West. What I am referring to is the normative power supported by art institutions with an international reach and capital. Most importantly, art in general, and Modernist art in particular, was never depoliticized to the extent that it was in the West. In the Eastern European countries, public space remained under the control of the state: the postmodern vision of the seemingly free, potentially infinite flow of symbols and signs could never take hold in this region. Signs and symbols were not free-floating but politically charged. The art forms that circulated in the same space were also politically charged. They were never experienced as empty signs that could get their meaning only through their individual artistic use. I will exemplify this crucial difference by looking at IRWIN's use of signs and symbols, and more specifically their strategy of adopting found images that played a key role in their projects. I show how the artists used appropriation as a tool to subversively identify with the discourses of the state and totalitarian ideologies.

IRWIN's early projects such as *What is Art?*<sup>83</sup> (begun in April/May 1985) was created nearly half a decade after Tito's death, when ethnic tensions were at a fever pitch in the soon to be former Yugoslavia.[Ils.2.1]<sup>84</sup> Yugoslavia had been burdened with very

---

<sup>83</sup> The title of the series "Was ist Kunst?" is connected to the eponymous performances in the 1970s by Belgrade-based artist Raša Todosijević. By shouting at his audience the question "Was ist Kunst?" (What is art?) he formulated a radical critique of the art system. During these performances Todosijević got more and more excited while the audience remained cool and passive. As Davor Maticevic, has shown Todosijević shared IRWIN'S critical position towards nationalism and violence during the dissolution of Yugoslavia. See: "A propos d'une exposition," *Avant-gardes Yougoslaves*. (Paris: Association française d'action artistique, 1989). pg. 12.

<sup>84</sup> The Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia dissolved in 1992, just a year after the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

complex and transitional ideologies: communism, nazism<sup>85</sup> and partisan, nationalism and Slavism, as well as ethno-centrism and religious ideologies.<sup>86</sup> Non-conformist art practices in former Yugoslavia region that referred to these ideologies exposed the plurality of possible meanings of symbols, images and signs and its arbitrariness of correspondence to ideologies repressed by authoritative forms of speech.<sup>87</sup>

The IRWIN artists addressed the audience that would be the most receptive, namely the art-viewing public in Ljubljana, and their project attracted significant attention from them.<sup>88</sup> The first semi-public presentation of *What is Art?* took place in a private apartment in the city, and later on in the Mala Galerija where only invited visitors were granted entry.<sup>89</sup> It was exhibited abroad for the first time in 1988, at the Bess Cutler Gallery in New York City. [Ills.2.2]. *What is Art?* consisted of a series of around 50 framed oil paintings. All the paintings bore the collective authorship of IRWIN, none were signed by the individual artists. They featured montages of Socialist Realism, Agitprop and Slovene modernist art of the 1960s. To this IRWIN added archetypal NSK visual signs: the metal worker, the deer, axes, the image of a coffee drinker, cog-wheels,

---

<sup>85</sup> For example the Ustaša, was a Croatian fascist, ultranationalist and terrorist organization, active, in its original form, between 1929 and 1945. Its members murdered hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma and anti-fascist or dissident Croats in Yugoslavia during World War II. Their ideology of the movement was a blend of fascism, Roman Catholicism and Croatian nationalism. See Ladislaus Hory und Martin Broszat, "Der kroatische Ustascha-Staat," Deutsche Verlag-Anstalt, Stuttgart, 1965, pg. 13–38, 75–80.

<sup>86</sup> This is still a marked cultural feature in the former Yugoslavian region, even after the collapse of Yugoslavia.

<sup>87</sup> In Russia or in the Soviet Union, the ideology was the single absolute "utopia," whereas in Yugoslavia it has understood as plural.

<sup>88</sup> "By inviting local theoreticians and artists, and engaging in discussions with the audience, we wanted stimulate an exchange of experiences." Dušan Mandić and Miran Mohar interview with the author, April 2014, Ljubljana.

<sup>89</sup> This was because of the official ban on Laibach, the music group in the NSK collective, between 1983 - 1987.

and the black Malevich cross.<sup>90</sup> The materials used on the paintings were also striking: blood, tar, animal skin, coal, wood, gold-leaf and other metals, giving them an aura of relics. The paintings' heavy frames consisted of black tar, wood and coal, evoking the mining city of Trbovlje, where the original members of NSK hailed from. The city also holds a symbolic meaning, as the space of intense political fights between fascist and communist groups which took place in the 1920s in the mining districts of the Zasavje region (Trbovlje, Zagorje, Hrastnik) in Slovenia.<sup>91</sup>

In the series *What is Art?* one can, from the very beginning, find a number of references that link the series to the concept of the icon.<sup>92</sup> The manner of hanging these pictures (which also alludes to the traditional way of hanging pictures in private, as well as semiprivate and public, rooms) is a direct reference to the way suprematist paintings were presented at Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich's "The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10" in 1915.<sup>93</sup> In that exhibition, the placement of the suprematist paintings suggested the way icons were hung; this was especially true for Malevich's "Black

---

<sup>90</sup> In the former Yugoslavian countries, there are still many new translations of Russian writers of the avant-garde, exhibitions of Russian painters of the avant-garde and performances of Russian dramaturges of the avant-garde.

<sup>91</sup> Mojca Oblak. Neue Slowenische Kunst and New Slovenian Art. In: Art & Design. London. Profile No. 35 / 1994. Theme: New Art From Eastern Europe: Identity and Conflict, pg.13

<sup>92</sup> Further treatment of the relationship between icon painting and Irwin can be found in two essays in the catalog by Inke Arns, ed., *Irwin: Retroprincip* (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2003).

<sup>93</sup> "The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10" (1915) in Petrograd was Malevich's debut exhibition.

Square,”(1915) which was, with total explicitness, presented as an icon<sup>94</sup>, or rather, in the position of an icon<sup>95</sup>.

“Malevich Between the Two Wars,”<sup>96</sup> [Ills.2.3] one of IRWIN’s key paintings from the aforementioned series, engaged with the legacy of Malevich’s Suprematism is a typical example of IRWIN’s conceptual approach to art. The painting brought together traditional academic portraiture, a Malevich suprematist painting<sup>97</sup> (a variations on the cross motif), and a representation of a Nazi sculpture by Arno Breker.<sup>98</sup> The suprematist painting, as pure abstraction, was placed in a context that compelled audiences to read it in an entirely new way. This placement is not as arbitrary or forced as it might seem at first glance. Malevich’s paintings were created on a white background, and in Malevich’s narrative, the first form, a black square, was then split into other shapes and colors and

---

<sup>94</sup> There have been various explanations offered for why Malevich did this, and perhaps it was, in truth, an act of ambivalence. One possible explanation is that the artist intended for Black Square to take the place of the icon and so use suprematist radicalism to demolish the authority of religion. Another view, however, points to the possibility of an actual parallelism between icon painting and Malevich’s suprematism, arguing that Black Square did not supplant the icon but, rather, is itself, in essence, a modern icon.

<sup>95</sup> Icons retain a special status because they are not, in the Russian Orthodox traditions, art as such. For more on icons as threshold as devotion see Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Orleans: Paraclete Press, 2006).

<sup>96</sup> IRWIN, “Malevich Between the Two Wars,” c1984, mixed media including light installation, 39 3/8 x 19 5/8 inches, Collection of Neil K. Rector.

<sup>97</sup> Jane A. Sharp, “The Critical Perception of the 0.10 Exhibition: Malevich and Benua,” *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), pg. 39.

<sup>98</sup> Arno Breker (1900 –1991) was a German sculptor, best known for his public works in Nazi Germany, which were endorsed by the authorities as the antithesis of the so-called “degenerate art..” The neoclassical nature of his work typified Nazi ideals and suited the characteristics of Nazi architecture.

their various combinations.<sup>99</sup> In Malevich's oeuvre the whole process eventually evolved to a white suprematism (white images on a white background), and to the white ground from which it emerged. Conversely, IRWIN's strategy emphasized that there is always a foundation on which concepts and objects are constituted, and that in their own context, there is no empty square. This also meant that Malevich's painting was itself constituted against a certain background. IRWIN's painting demonstrates this by means of the tension between traditional bourgeois painting, avant-garde, and totalitarian art.

IRWIN emphasized that they employed the Malevich cross as a method of translating this culture into consciousness, its non-Western(or Aristorelian) mimesis: "Our culture nails us into the center of the cross, into a crossing point of mad ambitions of the East and West. It is an empty space, geometrically defined, but its significance has never been completely clarified. It is here that we materialize our own ideas".<sup>100</sup>

Deepening the artists' observation, it should be emphasized that appropriations or copies of the Russian avant-garde in Yugoslavia functioned not as a symbol of the communist ideology, but as a symbol of the whole of ideologies which were or have been appropriated throughout the history of Yugoslavia. Almost all of these ideologies in Yugoslavia were brought from the outside, so that the Russian avant-garde was understood as an emblem of the ideological influence from outside. Therefore, through

---

<sup>99</sup> Writing about this single painting, Aleksandra Shatskikh sheds new light on Malevich, the Suprematist movement, and the Russian avant-garde. Shatskikh shows how Malevich devoted his entire life to explicating Black Square's meanings a process that engendered a significant legacy: from the original abstract movement in painting and its theoretical grounding to philosophical treatises, architectural models and a new art pedagogy, and the creation of a new visual environment through decorative applied designs. According to Shatskikh this demonstrated the tremendous potential for innovative shape and thought concentrated in Black Square. Aleksandra Shatskikh, Marian Schwartz tr., *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

<sup>100</sup> New Collectivism, ed., *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (Los Angeles: AMOK Books, 1991), pg. 122.



the re-politicizing of Russian avant-garde the artists underscored the impact that specific ideologies had on the former Yugoslav region. A common method linking Slovenian contemporary groups and Russian avant-garde groups such as the OBERIU<sup>101</sup> was to juxtapose various subjects to the single predicate by the metonymical or synecdochical false logic, so that they imitate the characteristics of the current regime in extreme ways. Their political and ideological situation was reflected in this methodological difference.<sup>102</sup>

In conclusion, the “Was ist Kunst?” paintings dealt with questions of the image as a semantic structure. In its use of images from various levels of the cultural and artistic tradition, IRWIN’s programmatic eclecticism was linked to semantic transformations brought about by the displacement of the image, symbol, or fragment from one context to another and their combination with other similarly displaced images or signs.<sup>103</sup> IRWIN continually operates on the basis that no figure, image, or sign conveys meaning in and of itself; rather, its meaning can be determined only when there is a context in which it is

---

<sup>101</sup> OBERIU (the Union of Real Art or the Association for Real Art) was an avant-garde collective of Russian Futurist writers, musicians, and artists in the 1920s and 1930s. The group coalesced in the context of the intense centralization of Soviet Culture and the decline of the avant garde culture of Leningrad, as leftist groups were becoming increasingly marginalized. Founded in 1928 by Daniil Kharns and Alexander Vvedensky, OBERIU became notorious for provocative performances and theatrical presentations, in venues ranging from theaters and university auditoriums to dormitories and prisons. The group's actions were derided as literary hooliganism in the ever-more conservative press of the late 1920s. It was chastised even more in the early 1930s, and many of its associates were arrested.

<sup>102</sup> There is analogy in the means of resistance to the totalitarian political order at the time adopted by OBERIU members and by IRWIN. See Sylvia Sasse, “Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance” in IRWIN, ed., *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London: Afterall Books, 2006).

<sup>103</sup> “IRWIN has dealt with the subject of icons in their series *Was ist Kunst* since 1984. In direct reference to the Last Futurist Exhibition 0,10, staged in St. Petersburg in 1915, IRWIN presented the pictures of their series in similar ‘Petersburg hanging’ fashion as the Suprematists did, Malevich’s *Black Square* hanging in the corner facing the entrance, the place where one would expect an icon to hang, thus turning it into an icon in its own right and becoming what this painting has been for years: the essential modern icon. Images from different paintings are connected by specific frames that are used to homogenize the diversity of aspects.” Dušan Mandić and Miran Mohar interview with the author, April 2014, Ljubljana.

placed and in which we view it. For IRWIN's work it is, after all, essential that semantic questions be presented as questions about power and strategies of power.

Thus, in the afore-described complex political landscape of the 1980s in Yugoslavia, IRWIN commenced their artistic oeuvre by highlighting the relationships between the avant-garde, modernism, socialist realism and fascist symbolism. As demonstrated, IRWIN's approach was overtly political: the ambiguity conveyed by their paintings was meant to trigger a critical approach in the viewer. IRWIN drew significant attention from the public in Yugoslavia, which was receptive to the avant-garde techniques employed in their installations and performances. The ban and suppression of NSK's artistic activities in this period generated considerable publicity and served as an impetus for IRWIN and other art and performance groups to continue embracing the recycling of topical symbolism from the country's complex history and a group or collective identity instead of working as individual artists. In their interviews with me IRWIN artists observed that they saw the exhibition as a public sphere – a space where different voices could be uttered and heard, and where the diversity of measured opinions would hopefully lead to a consensus – was precluded from the very outset. Their art created a public space for discussion, which grew as a subject of interest not only to art historians and critics, but to the general population.<sup>104</sup>

Living in a socialist country, artists and their audiences shared a close connection to the artistic practices of the early avant-garde from the beginning of historical communism. This integration of communities is quite different from the concepts of an

---

<sup>104</sup> "In the 1990s IRWIN became interested in partly leaving behind the field which is normally defined as art and to directly influencing real life." Dušan Mandić interview with the author, August 2014, Ljubljana.

elite intelligentsia disconnected from general publics in the West. It also constitutes a significant difference from the largely individualistic nature of historical avant-gardes and postwar neo-avant-gardes in the West. For a late-socialist subject, avant-garde motifs such as the afore-analyzed black square of Malevich was not merely a self-referential image that initiated the international zero-style of geometrical abstraction. Rather, in Yugoslavia, similar to other countries in Eastern Europe, the Black Square, as well as other images from the early Russian avant-garde, signified the beginning of the communist era, with all its utopian aspirations. By the same logic, historical realist images didn't function as politically neutral representations of landscapes or city scenes, but symbolized the national tradition that was partially denied and partially ideologically recuperated by the Yugoslav state.<sup>105</sup> The same can be said about late-Modernist art, which was experienced not as a production of empty signifiers, but as a commitment to a Western orientation and Western cultural values. In other words, every use of this vocabulary of images in IRWIN's repertoire manifested not the creative freedom of an individual artist, but a certain political stance within the sociopolitical field in which the artists worked and lived.

### 2.3 Ljubljana -Moscow: Friendships as Informal Institutions

Initially conceived under the name of the "Apt-Art International project," the "NSK Embassy Moscow" was organized in between May 10 and June 10, 1992 in the Russian capital through the efforts of IRWIN, Grižnić, the Russian art critics Viktor

---

<sup>105</sup> The same can be inferred about Socialist Realism and Nazi art.

Misiano, Elena Kurlandzeva and Konstantin Zvezdochetov, in cooperation with the Regina Gallery, and with additional help from a couple of dozens of other Russian and Slovenian artists, curators and critics.<sup>106</sup> [Ills.2.4] The idea of the project was based on the concept of Apt-Art or Apartment Art, a late-soviet tradition initiated by artist Nikita Alekseev of exhibiting art in private apartments to circumvent state censorship.<sup>107</sup> This tradition developed largely out of necessity as public exhibition spaces were essentially closed to the art that did not follow the official ideological-aesthetic line—also in rebellion against the limited access granted by the state, in spaces administered by the Moscow GorCom.<sup>108</sup> IRWIN's first exhibition of the *What is Art?* series was also held in a private Ljubljana apartment, and accompanied by a series of musical performances and communal events. Exhibiting this series in Matjaž Vipotnik's Ljubljana studio in 1985 was dictated by the official three-year ban on NSK between 1984 and 1987. Social conditions of non-conformist art were understood in Russia and Slovenia during the late

---

<sup>106</sup> Lectures during the "NSK Embassy Moscow" were delivered by Rastko Močnik, Marina Gržinić and Matjaž Berger from Slovenia, Vesna Kesić from Croatia, and Viktor Misiano, Valeri Podoroga, Aleksandr Yakimovich, Tatiana Didenko and Artiom Troitsky from Russia. See Eda Čufer, ed., *NSK Embassy Moscow: How the East Sees the East*, (Koper, Slovenia: Loža Gallery, 1993).

<sup>107</sup> Apartment Art was created expressly for exhibition in artists' apartments, as these works of art could not be exhibited publicly, in official exhibitions. Under the exhibiting policy of the Soviet Union from the 1930s onwards, non-conformist art was deprived of any publicity. Only artists whose works complied with the official canon of Socialist Realism participated in art exhibitions organized by the state. The practice of apartment exhibitions which began during the 1970s was an opportunity to break through this isolation. Information about time and place of these exhibitions was passed through word of mouth among a select group of artists, friends and collectors. See "An Apartment Exhibition," Kathrin Becker and Barbara Straka, eds., *Self-Identification: Positions in St. Petersburg Art from 1970 until Today*, (Berlin: DruckVogt GmbH, 1994)

<sup>108</sup> The original series of Apt-Art exhibitions was held at the beginning of the 1980s in the single-room apartment of Nikita Alexeev. These domestic artistic endeavors were not only crucial for the Russian cultural scene, but were among the most innovative art events of the time. A typical Apt-Art show consisted of a "total installation" of texts, paintings, drawings, graphics, collages, objects and photographs. Works by Alexeev and his friends were displayed on the walls, ceiling, on the floor, and were hung in midair. See more in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Margins of Soviet Art: socialist realism to the present* (Milan: Politi, 1989)

socialism in a similar vein, as both a locus of freedom (however conditional, illusory and temporal), and an espousal of limitations as such.

In 1992 when the artists established the *NSK Embassy in Moscow* in apartment No. 24 at Leninsky Prospekt 12, [Ills.2.5] it was a moment of historical collapse, as both Yugoslavia was broken up into nation states and the Soviet Union was dissolved. NSK Embassy was conceptualized by IRWIN as a month long live installation with a program of lectures and public discussions. It did not have the ambition to function as a true political entity. However, as historical systems of national relations came apart, artists on both sides sought out new contacts, allies and friends. As Misiano observed in a later text on these encounters: “In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a palpable feeling among Moscow artists that the era of Apt-Art was essentially over. It seemed to make sense to invite several foreign artists to Moscow to produce a series of collaborative events, thus creating a tribute to the bygone era of Apt-Art experience.”<sup>109</sup> [Ills.2.6] From the Slovenian artists’ point view, it was an opportunity to establish a close collaboration with another region in Eastern Europe. IRWIN and Grižnić were going through a new stage of development, and many new artists had appeared in the Moscow scene that took part in the Apt-Art International discussions: Vadim Fishkin, Yuri Leiderman, Anatoly Osmolovsky, Dimitri Gutov and Oleg Kulik. From the transcripts available of their discussions, it becomes clear that during these exchanges at the NSK Embassy, these artists started to perceive themselves as a new generation, as an integrated body. As

---

<sup>109</sup> Viktor Misiano, “The Institutionalization of Friendship,” 1998, available at [www.irwin.si/texts/institutionalisation](http://www.irwin.si/texts/institutionalisation), accessed 09/01/2016.

Misiano succinctly put it: “Friendship is always a discovery: discovery of the Other and at the same time of the Self.”<sup>110</sup>[Ills.2.7]

*NSK Embassy Moscow* officially opened to the public on May 15 with an exhibition of works by IRWIN as well as other artists associated with NSK, the Croatian artist Mladen Stilinovic, and the Serbian appropriation artist known as Kazimir Malevich from Belgrade<sup>111</sup>. The series of lectures, discussions, exhibitions, performances and other events lasted for roughly four weeks. Most lectures, discussions, and smaller shows took place in the aforementioned private apartment in the center of Moscow, while a larger group exhibition, titled “First-Hand Art,” was organized in the Regina Gallery.<sup>112</sup>

The only time the participants ventured into the public space was during the *Black Square on Red Square* action on June 6. Of all the works produced by Irwin relating to Malevich, “Black Square on Red Square” (1992) is the largest, and one of the best known. [Ills.2.8] Borut Vogeltnik described the action: “In Moscow, we spread out a 22 meter square of black canvas on Red Square in front of the Lenin Mausoleum in such a fashion that, combined with the red of the events the square is named after, it formed a composition, a painting visible from the air. The canvas turned out to be heavier than we had anticipated – too heavy for members of IRWIN alone to carry from the edge of the

---

<sup>110</sup> Viktor Misiano, “The Institutionalization of Friendship,” 1998, available at [www.irwin.si/texts/institutionalisation](http://www.irwin.si/texts/institutionalisation), accessed 09/01/2016.

<sup>111</sup> Kazimir Malech (Belgrade) organized a show that opened in 1985 in a Belgrade apartment. The following year, the same exhibition took place in the Galerija Škuc, Ljubljana (Slovenia), and Art in America published “A Letter from Kazimir Malevich”, a document sent from Belgrade in September 1986. The author of this project stayed anonymous or, more accurately, his names were not important for the understanding of the project. He presented himself merely through the exhibition title or by signing his work with the names of the renowned deceased artist Malevich.

<sup>112</sup> Borut Vogeltnik interview with the author, May 2014, Ljubljana.

square to its designated spot, so numerous friends came to our aid, including many Russian artists. Without a special permit, interventions on Red Square are forbidden, and all who had violated this regulation before us had ended up in police custody. But nobody tried to stop us. When people gathered around the unfurled canvas, a man in (I believe military) uniform even cautioned people not to step on it. After approximately half an hour we folded it up and loaded it back in the van.”

What did laying the Black Square on the Red Square mean in Moscow in 1991 and now? Since the formative stages of *Neue Slowenische Kunst* in Slovenia in the early 1980s, IRWIN’s visual vocabulary had been importantly influenced by the Russian avant-garde in general, and Kazimir Malevich in particular, as discussed above. The impact has been manifold, ranging from IRWIN’s fascination of artworks to the potential the artists saw in repeating them in order to gain insight into where the avant-garde had gone wrong while building the future. But when quoting the avant-gardist Russian Malevich, IRWIN were also referencing the Belgrade conceptual artist Kazimir Malevich. IRWIN’S practice was not only ideological, but also rooted in aesthetic over-identifications. It was not art activism, at least not in the conventional or normative sense, the group maintaining its focus on art and its socio-political consequences, rather than politics per-se.

After this performance, the concluding dialogue among artists on the theme “What Is Art?”, held on June 8th, 1992, was posed both as an urgent question to the participants and as the title of the long-lasting series of works by IRWIN discussed above. The format of the Embassy was a hybrid between a public forum open to everyone

and a semi-private series of events. IRWIN referred to it as “an artist embassy”<sup>113</sup> in our interviews, it did not confer any citizenship rights to its members. All lectures at the Embassy were open to the public. There was a program in a format of a newspaper, which was distributed at the Regina Gallery and through personal networks of the Moscow organizers. The façade of the apartment block on the Leninsky prospect was decorated with the an NSK embassy plate mimicking the design of the actual plaques of diplomatic missions, and two flags bearing the NSK logo.<sup>114</sup> The beginning of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina closely coincided with the opening of the first NSK Embassy in Moscow. Through their conceptual artistic practices, adopting the guise of an embassy, IRWIN sparked debates about national conflicts that were elided after WWII. These conflicts nonetheless erupted violently following the fall of the Berlin Wall, particularly in the former Yugoslavia. In socialist Yugoslavia, public discussions and reflections on national issues were taboo. Long-running national conflicts, from the Balkan Wars in the beginning of the twentieth century through World Wars I and II, were frozen after WWII and then provoked in the beginning of the 1990s by the same politicians who played important roles in socialist Yugoslavia.

The month-long series of lectures, discussions and informal conversations covered these, as well as wide array of pressing topics. Certain critical issues kept resurfacing which attests to their urgency in the post-socialist situation. Among these was the question of what role art and the artist should to play in the immediate future. An

---

<sup>113</sup> Miran Mohar interview with the author, May 2014, Ljubljana

<sup>114</sup> Eda Čufer, ed., *NSK Embassy Moscow: How the East Sees the East*, realized by Irwin in collaboration with Apt- Art International and Regina Gallery (Koper, Slovenia: Loža Gallery, 1993).



interesting exchange happened after the lecture delivered by Marina Gržinić. In her talk on May 26, 1992 she focused on the connections between cultural activism in Ljubljana in the 1980s and political and social changes that ensued. Gržinić made a case for art's political engagement, using NSK as an example of successful political intervention. In the discussion that followed, Embassy participants spoke of the differences in social sensibilities between Moscow and Ljubljana during late socialism.<sup>115</sup>

The discussions at the Moscow Embassy showed not only the difficulty of finding a new paradigm for art but also the differences in the experiences drawn from the post-socialist condition. Namely, Russian participants expressed their uncertainty after the shocking socio-political changes post Soviet Union, while the ex-Yugoslav participants, and especially NSK members, were in search of new modes of sociability. Miran Mohar's (IRWIN) remarks during the conclusion of the aforementioned discussions on June 10th expressed the artists' keen interest new mechanism of sociability. The discussion bore the title *What is Art?* was the Slovenian artists' idea, referring to the largest body of works by IRWIN. Mohar opened the discussion with the following questions: "Who will art be addressed to and how will communication take place within the art system of the East? What will new institutions be like and how will new links be formed?"<sup>116</sup> Although the ensuing discussion veered away from these opening questions, the continued attempts by IRWIN and Gržinić to bring the issue of communication into focus indicated that social

---

<sup>115</sup> Marina Gržinić in conversation with Slovenian and Russian participants of NSK Embassy Moscow. Summary of the Discussion "Was Ist Kunst?," June 8, 1992. IRWIN Archive, Ljubljana, accessed May 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Miran Mohar in conversation with Slovenian and Russian participants of NSK Embassy Moscow. Summary of the Discussion "Was Ist Kunst?," June 8, 1992. IRWIN Archive, Ljubljana, accessed May 2014.

engagement itself appeared as a key problem at this time. Working together during times of large civil movements, the artists did not consider participating in direct political action through parties or institutions, rather they used art and theory in order to answer the question of what kind of state they were living in.

Soviet apt-art represented a center of communication and self-organization for those non-conformist artists whom the state had marginalized. The structure of artistic life in the countries of the Eastern Europe during the Cold War was grounded in the private sphere, while in the present context the legacy of these unofficial, interpersonal networks is often forgotten. The “NSK Embassy Moscow” project did not attempt to achieve a balance between state ideology and the private sphere; rather it suggested that both spheres were but two sides of the same system that were both going to disappear within post-socialist turn to capitalism and the market. IRWIN understood the embassy as a communication tool, encouraging a plurality of voices, positions, and approaches. As a conceptual project, the Embassy delved into the paradox of state identity, in order to ultimately reveal a glimpse of the hidden existing ideological structures that were being dismantled across the Eastern European region.

Indeed the late 1980s and 1990s were characterized by the abandonment of socialism as a dominant ideology and the embrace of capitalist, nationalist and liberal values in Slovenia and across Eastern Europe. Political organizations that formed the backbone of the socialist institutional structure in Slovenia began changing their titles by eliding all references to socialism, proletariat, peoples’ government. Five-point stars, hammers and sickles, and other symbols of socialism were gradually eliminated as well.

Even the very political establishment rebranded itself with new names: the Socialist Youth League of Slovenia (ZSMS) was renamed into Liberal Democratic Party; the League of Communists of Slovenia – the dominant political force in the socialist period – became Democratic Renewal Party in 1989. Local and municipal communist organizations and a large number of societies, clubs, and alliances peripherally associated with the socialist state were following this trend as well.

It is against the background of this political strife, military conflicts, secessionism of republics and regions, rise of nationalism, and distrust in the value of internationalism in politics that IRWIN's Embassy project should be understood. In the time span of *NSK Embassy Moscow* the political and social configuration of Yugoslavia changed drastically. If in 1990 Yugoslavia as a federation still existed (however fractured it was internally), in the second part of 1991 a full-scale civil war was happening in Croatia and Bosnia. When IRWIN started the project, they sought to reflect on their condition as the artists coming from under the Yugoslav-type socialism by entering into dialogue with artists from the former socialist Soviet Union, and by doing so, to possibly get a better sense of the parameters of the idea of Eastern Modernism. They felt the development of modern and contemporary art in the East followed a logic which veers away the notions of progress and the capitalist culture industry in the West.

## 2.4 East Art Map (EAM)

Apt-Art Ljubljana-Moscow was a decisive moment in the IRWIN artists' transformation and reconceptualization of their practice. This month-long event strengthened their observations about the rapidly changing political and cultural conditions in Eastern Europe, which required a qualitatively new way of communicating with the audience and with their cultural, intellectual, political situation in the post-socialist world. A different kind of strategy was required, and the NSK Moscow Embassy was a first possible model for such new platform, as a new "tool of communication."<sup>117</sup>

*East Art Map* (or EAM), a project begun in 2001 and which was published as a book in 2006 by MIT Press in the US and Afterall in Europe<sup>118</sup>, was conceived to continue refining these new tools for communication and to facilitate the process of horizontalization of art histories. [Ills.2.11] I will take *East Art Map* to represent not just the publication which served educational, art historical purposes. I consider it equally significant as an artistic platform aimed at negotiating discourses and collecting information, a non-conventional archive. In concrete terms, this means that I will situate it in the context of the exhibitions and symposia it spurred and also consider the website associated with it, available at <http://www.eastartmap.org>. The latter takes the form of a cyber-archive in which the audience is involved in the constant process of negotiating the names of artists and art collectives it accumulates. The website continues to be active

---

<sup>117</sup> "NSK Embassy was conceptualized by IRWIN as a month long live installation with a program of lectures and public discussions, a tool of communication for building a community that broached urgent questions shared by the entire Eastern European cultural space in the new circumstances." Borut Vogelcnik interview with the author, May 2014, Ljubljana.

<sup>118</sup> IRWIN, eds., *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London: Afterall Books; Cambridge, Mass.: Distributed by the MIT Press, 2006)

today and is structured around three major categories: Artists, Knowledge and News. Most importantly, the resource is open for contributions by its users, who are invited to propose artists and art projects from countries in Eastern Europe they consider crucial since 1945. [Ills.2.12]

A key term elaborated on by IRWIN, Gržinić and others, which informed the structure of the *East Art Map* project was the “retro-avant-garde.”<sup>119</sup> The Slovenian philosopher Aleš Erjavec defined socialist post-avant-gardes and “retro-gardes,” as avant-gardes without their typical orientation to the future. In other words, all other necessary attributes of avant-garde, such as interrelatedness of art with the forms of life and politics, questioning authority, tendency among artists to organize into collectives and express their ideas in manifestoes and philosophical statements, remained. NSK, which in Erjavec’s argument occupied a prominent role, was a typical example of such post-avantgarde (or “retro-garde”) because its utopian space and a mode of existence was not pushed in the future but happened in the present.<sup>120</sup>

A further elaboration of this concept is Gržinić’s video “Post-socialism + Retro avant-garde + IRWIN” (1997)<sup>121</sup>, based on the philosophical text “Mapping Post-socialism” by Gržinić. [Ills.2.10] It represented a philosophical-media reflection about the cultural-artistic and political space and the condition of post-socialism in the territory

---

<sup>119</sup> In one of the exhibition catalogues for the Steiresche Herbst exhibition in Graz, Peter Weibel subsumed the productions of Stilinovic, the 80s Malevich, and IRWIN under the common signifier of “Retro-Avantgarde”. The label was adopted by the trio itself for an exhibition entitled “Retro-avangarda” in Ljubljana (1994).

<sup>120</sup> See: Aleš Erjavec “The Avant-Gardes: From Modernism to Postmodernism,” *Journal of Contemporary Thought* (Baroda, India), Issue 22, Winter 2005, pg. 75-76.

<sup>121</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Post-socialism + Retro avant-garde + IRWIN,” video, Betacam SP PAL, 22’05”, color, produced by TV SLOVENIA, 1997.

of ex-Yugoslavia in the 1980s and 1990s. Three case-studies, IRWIN from Ljubljana , Mladen Stilinović from Zagreb<sup>122</sup> and the artist known only by his artist name, as “Kasimir Malevich from Belgrade,”<sup>123</sup> were presented with their artistic projects. The video emphasized each of these artists’ relation to the socialist and post-socialist ideology, as a type of coding in a specific way the ex-Yugoslav territory. According to Gržinić, “Retro-avant-garda” is the result of this coding process: a specific aesthetic and social movement produced by these artists and some others from Eastern Europe in the recent period. The video is filled and mixed by documentary materials, as well as by statements by philosophers Slavoj Žižek and the German/Austrian Peter Weibel, and with the statements of IRWIN. [Ills.2.9] Gržinić placed these specific artistic productions within the retro-avant-garde movement, suggesting that the referential concept that pulls all this artistic productions together as a movement, and allows audiences to think about them dialectically is ideology. While postmodernism in the West commodifies the utopian potential of avant-garde for the sake of market values, Eastern retro-avant-garde re-invokes the past. In the vision of IRWIN and Gržinić its functioning, especially in the post-WWII period, is inseparable from that of the state and its ideology, whose relevance depends on its capacity of re-invoking and producing its interpretations of the past.

---

<sup>122</sup> Born in Serbia two years after the end of World Word II, Stilinović’s early art career took shape in the political and ideological reality of Tito’s Yugoslavia. Stilinović became a leading figure in Croatia’s “New Art Practice” movement, and a co-founding member of the neo-avantgardist “Group of Six Artists” together with Vlado Martek, Boris Demur, Željko Jerman, Sven Stilinović, and Fedor Vucemilovic, active in Zagreb in the second half of the 1970s.

<sup>123</sup> The project of the Belgrade Malevich, exhibited in Belgrade, Ljubljana (in 1985 and 1986) and in a fragmented version again in Ljubljana in 1994, consisted of the reconstruction of Malevich’s original Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10 held in St. Petersburg from 17 December 1915 to 19 January 1916. It also included a series of new Neo-Suprematist paintings, translating Suprematist elements into the technique of petit-point or combining them with classical reliefs and sculptures.

In their collaborative “Retro-avantgarde” diagram(2003)<sup>124</sup>, IRWIN and Gržinić presented the retro-principle way of working in aesthetics by constructing context, positioning European neo-avantgardes in general, into a narrative that refuses to be neutralized from political and cultural antagonisms.. The term “retro-avantgarde” was coined by NSK and Gržinić in 1994, with the occasion of the exhibition “Retro-avantgarda” at Moderna Galerija Ljubljana. The term was employed as a strategy for charting out the Yugoslav avant-garde, from the present to the past, thus from the neo-avant-garde to the historical avant-garde. Therefore this term is intimately linked with NSK’s art practices and their particular use of signs from the art historical modern cannon, including: the historical avant-garde, national symbols, religious icons, totalitarian symbols , as well as the texts and manifestos associated with these movements. At the nexus of art, politics and writing history, IRWIN posited the existence of “retro-avant-garde” of an “Eastern Modernism,” that was substantiated by making connections between existing Slovenian artists. The group thus polemically challenged modernism(s) as constructed by Alfred Barr’s<sup>125</sup> and Clement Greenberg’s<sup>126</sup>, who in their diagrams and texts put forward their models as universally valid. By adding the

---

<sup>124</sup> IRWIN, with theoretical input from Marina Gržinić, produced the mixed-media montage *Retro-avantgarda* in 2000. It included the following works: IRWIN, *Was ist Kunst?*, (1984-1998); Dimitrij Bašičević Mangelos, *Tabula rasa*, m. 5, 1951-1956; Avgust Černigoj, *Construction*, 1924; Braco Dimitrijević, *Triptychos Post Historicus*, 1985 (reproduction); Laibach, *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst*, 1983 (exhibition poster); Kasimir Malevich (*Belgrade*), Paintings, 1985; Gledališče Sester Scipion Nasice, *Krst pod Triglavom (Baptism under the Triglav)*, 1985; Jossip Seissel, *Balkanite Stand at Attention*, 1922 (reproduction); Mladen Stilinović, *Exploitation of the Dead*, 1980.

<sup>125</sup> I am referring to Alfred H. Barr’s “Diagram of Stylistic Evolution from 1890 until 1935.” This diagram, central to the definition and derivation of modernism was developed in 1936 by the founding director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). It lists the European avant-garde movements as precursors of the abstract art of modernism. IRWIN transferred this scheme onto Yugoslavia, in the form of a inverted family tree of the “retro-avant-garde,” which extends from the neo-avant-garde of the present back to the period of the historical avant-garde. Cite an author who explains the role it plays.

<sup>126</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review*, Vol. 6, No. 5, 1939, pg. 34-49.

Eastern European dimension to the concept, IRWIN and Gržinić wittily demonstrated that modernism is actually a “Western Modernism,” and, therefore, not universal. “Eastern Modernism” whose history, as IRWIN insisted in their projects after 1990, had been informed by collectivity and willingness to participate in actual political processes. This constitutes a significant difference from the utopian and largely individualistic nature of historical avant-gardes and postwar neo-avant-gardes in the West.<sup>127</sup> Unlike the prevailing socio-political discourse in the early 1990s about the disappearance of the East-West divide and the East’s coming into the fold of the West, Irwin here begins to insist on the survival of the difference between the two socio-political spheres, and along with it, on the division of modernism into Western and Eastern.

IRWIN stated that the retro-avantgarde is tasked with healing the traumas of the past by going back to the initial conflicts that caused them.<sup>128</sup> In IRWIN’s view, the key trauma was the failure to find a viable way to implement collectivity into art and into life, where individuals can happily coexist in a communal body. On a larger, political scale, the state often assumed the role of a collectivizing agent; on a smaller and more individual scale, various avant-garde movements tried to find a common denominator for collectivity among individuals. Since both of them – the states that were driven toward collectivism rather than individualism, and the avant-garde movements that emphasized communal values – were cast into doubt by the rhetoric of the market economy and

---

<sup>127</sup> Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse, “Subversive Affirmation: On Mimesis as a Strategy of Resistance,” in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, edit. Irwin (London: Afterall Books, 2006), pg. 452-453.

<sup>128</sup> See, for instance, the following statements: Laibach, “Monumental Retro-Avant-Garde,” 1983, reprinted in *Ausstellung Laibach Kunst: Recapitulation 2009*, exhib. cat., May 26-Aug. 23, 2009 (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2009), pg. 26; Irwin “The Program of the Irwin Group,” 1984, and “Retro Principle,” 1984, both in *Irwin: Retroprincip 1983- 2003*, edit. Inke Arns (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2003), pg. 148 and 150 respectively.



capitalist democracy, the ideas of social construction are currently rare and do not seem viable.

“Eastern Modernism” and the principle of the “retro-avant-garde” constituted a sharp critique of Western historiographies; and evolved into a conceptual, politically self-conscious practice. As described by IRWIN, three imbricated conceptual fields frame the collective’s activities: “geopolitics”—projects like *NSK Embassy* in Moscow and Ghent, Belgium(1993), *NSK Consulates* in Florence, Italy (1993) and Umag, Croatia (1994), *Transnacionala- A Journey from the East to the West* (1996) ; “politics of the artificial person” – founding the collective *Neue Slowenische Kunst*(1984), *NSK State-in-time*, (1993) *Retroavantgarde—Ready-made avant-garde* (1997-2005); and “instrumental politics” - IRWIN’s involvement in introducing works by Eastern European artists into several international collections and *East Art Map*.<sup>129</sup>

The following decades after IRWIN’s early artistic projects only proved that concepts such as “the former Eastern Europe” or “the former Eastern Bloc” refuse to go away. Never asserting that theirs was the all encompassing, definitive narrative, the artists’ aim was to provide a research tool, through which a multiplicity of subjective analyses and voices of distinct generations and opposing aesthetic visions could be presented in an unconventional art history. That platform became *East Art Map*, as it was

---

<sup>129</sup> Inke Arns, “IRWIN Navigator: Retroprincip 1983–2003,” in Inke Arns, *IRWINRetroprincip* (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2003), pg.14-16.

theorized in 1999.<sup>130</sup> As part of the project, the artists invited twenty-five artists, art historians and curators from Eastern Europe to their project, assigning them the task to propose different ways of thinking about the cultural narratives informing the art history of the regions they came from. The twenty-four art historians making the selection were also given the task of choosing ten artists whom they considered representative of the most crucial developments of contemporary art in Eastern Europe. The publication removed artists from a nationalist discourse based on the opposition between the unofficial to the official art world. Instead, the Slovenian collective proposed a work-in-progress and an open-source, transparent system of documenting and theorizing art from the region. The aim of their new matrix was two-fold: that it should be accepted and respected outside the borders of a particular region and that it also undermine the foundations of the Western narratives of art history.

An important part of the project was the symposium “Mind the Map,” in which young researchers from Eastern and Western Europe were brought together to discuss topics related to art from the former Eastern bloc. The symposium, which took place in Leipzig in 2005, was organized by Marina Gržinić, Veronika Darian and Günther Heeg.<sup>131</sup> This forum’s larger theme, informed by the premises of the East Art Map publication, was to act as a multi-media platform for the interpretation and presentation

---

<sup>130</sup> “Through the art project “East Art Map” we sought to plot and make accessible previously unknown areas of postwar art in eastern Europe. Our goal was to plot connections extending beyond national borders and enable comparative analysis. We invited curators, critics, and artists to present important art projects from their respective countries, since November 1999, and created a map of these artistic activities, accessible on the internet. The visitors to the site are able to contribute to the map by changing its topography.” Dušan Mandić and Miran Mohar interview with the author, April 2014, Ljubljana.

<sup>131</sup> See Marina Gržinic, Günther Heeg & Veronika Darian, eds., *Mind the Map! - History is Not Given (A critical anthology based on the Symposium)* (Frankfurt: Revolver, 2006).

of art works and cultural processes emerging from the territories of Eastern Europe over the past fifty years. The symposium was another instance of the artists' engagement to construct a theoretical matrix through which to discuss and disseminate information on artistic practices and socio-cultural realities distinctive in the region. The project overall aimed to bridge the fissures between national cultures of Eastern and Western Europe, the conflicts between historical and neo-avantgardes, and the inter-relatedness of social movements, artistic communities and the theoretical framework of the humanities.

Even after this event, in 2005, the "East Art Museum"<sup>132</sup> exhibition took place at Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in Hagen, Germany. IRWIN curated this exhibition as a means of establishing a Museum of East European Art that would comprise of seminal works of art from these territories, created between 1950 and 2002 and selected from the East Art Map archive. Clearly designed as the Eastern counter-model to the (Western/New York) Museum of Modern Art, this artistic endeavor was not merely a critique of the institutionalization and commodification of art in the West. Its explicit goal was to facilitate the creation of a comprehensive art-historical resource and its corresponding institutional frame in the East.<sup>133</sup> In this IRWIN was successful.

The online version of *East Art Map*, which is active to this day, is another facet of the complex conceptual project-archive to establish a cannon reflective of the interrelationships between Eastern and Western Europe, as well as transnational

---

<sup>132</sup> This project was initiated by Michael Fehr. Also see Michael Fehr, "Constructing History with the Museum: A Proposal for an East Art Museum," *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, IRWIN eds., (London: AfterAll, 2006), pg. 466-471.

<sup>133</sup> See East Art Map Newsletter, No. 6, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2005, available on-line: <http://www.eflux.com/shows/view/2202>.

exchanges in the former. Through the virtual portal “[www.eastartmap.org](http://www.eastartmap.org),” proposals from scholars that have penned art histories of post-WW2 art from Eastern Europe are subject to constant debate. Using visual forums and online submissions not only academics, but also artists, and the general public can bid to supplement, add, delete or replace proposed artists by new ones. This is of course requires meeting certain conditions: presenting persuasive arguments and evidence of data for work to be included or excluded, which is then considered by an international committee of about five artists and scholars.<sup>134</sup> Acknowledging the imperative “History is not given, please help us construct it!” the design and function of the online portal emphasizes the temporary character of historical narration. The process itself revealed the mechanisms of its creation. As IRWIN and Gržinić have emphasized, these Eastern cultural phenomena cannot be explained or subsumed in homogenous, progressive and linear histories of stylistic interdependence, from the past to the present, or from abstract to conceptual art. As in the case of the East Art Map book itself, and the symposium and the museum proposal, the website not only established map of East European Art History. More ambitiously, the artists and critics initiated a productive projection of a related but non-identical structure of a history of art.

---

<sup>134</sup> Although this committee has fluctuated over time, according to the present version of the EAM website they are: Jesa Denegri (former Yugoslavia), Lia Perjovschi (Romania), Anda Rottenberg (Poland), Georg Schöllhammer (Austria) and Christoph Tannert (Germany).

## 2.5 Production of knowledge as resistance

*East Art Map* also represents knowledge production as a strategy for resistance against the commodification of knowledge and ideas in Eastern Europe since the introduction of the market system and integration into the European Union. They have become integrated into part of a small but tangled network of leftist post-socialist theory projects, participating in dialogue both among and within publications, and exploring issues arising from shared experiences, academic conferences and collaborative actions.<sup>135</sup> The 2006 publication articulates nuanced positions on shared struggles across the post-socialist states, while also remaining regionally based and particularized, rooting themselves in local scholarship and issues of art and representation.

Although their mandate was different from Chto Delat?'s and the Perjovschis, their initiatives were united by principles of solidarity, self-organization, collectivism and internationalism, responding to an increasingly capitalist thrust in Eastern European society and politics. The artists' initiatives addressed concerns that extended beyond their shared disillusionment with the failures to advance emancipatory avant-garde ideas, and seek to discover anew their emancipatory potential. In their statements the artists stress the importance of intervention through art practice and theatrical discussion. They remain

---

<sup>135</sup> A number of important Eastern European artists – Artpool (György Galántai, Júlia Klaniczay), Zofija Kulik, Július Koller, and Lia Perjovschi, among others – have devoted a large part of their work to creating artistic repositories that today serve as vitally important sources of knowledge about unofficial art and the conditions of its production in countries under socialism. We can trace the Eastern European tradition of art archives developed by artists out of the need to contextualize their own art practices all the way to the present day. The archives created by the group Irwin, are important not only because they include marginalized traditions but also because they are explicitly concerned with the principles of marginalization and the creation of history.

committed to emancipatory knowledge production. Their artistic endeavors also consciously remain in flux; each collective realizes that their particularized positions and changing responses to the current cultural and political climate will call for different methods at different points in time. While the artists continue to produce print and web material prolifically, they cannot be narrowly defined as publishers or theoreticians. Rather, they define themselves, or act as platforms for the diffusion of knowledge by whatever means suit best. Chto Delat?'s continuing engagements with film and performance reach across Europe and find further outlets in seminars and learning plays, and the Perjovschis exhaustive schedule of academic conferences and workshops entwine the project with the wider world of international theorists and collectives.

And while each project centers on artistic discourse, their relationship to artistic institutions is understandably problematic. Marina Gržinić articulates a profound mistrust of art, affirming that “contemporary art and culture is a very oppressive system of rules and codes, trends and representational forms that are not at all invisible, but on the contrary clearly visible and experienced.”<sup>136</sup> Not satisfied with the local scholarship, she established the publication “Reartikulacija,”<sup>137</sup> which is not a straightforward journal, but “a force of contamination in between art and politics.”<sup>138</sup> This journal acknowledges and examines the relationship between art and neoliberal capitalist power, suggesting that de-linking from ideas of artistic genius can re-articulate artistic theory as a powerful

---

<sup>136</sup> Marina Gržinić interview with the author, May 2014, Ljubljana.

<sup>137</sup> Reartikulacija is an art project by the group Reartikulacija (Marina Gržinic, Stas Kleindienst, Sebastjan Leban and Tanja Passoni) which began in 2007. The group has so far published 13 issues of the journal “Reartikulacija.”

<sup>138</sup> Marina Gržinić interview with the author, May 2014, Ljubljana.

mechanism for social change. Similar arguments were expressed by Dmitry Vilensky (Chto Delat?), who argued that questions of knowledge production and artistic representation are connected, and that these emerge in the struggle to publish a radical newspaper: “It is not enough to simply instrumentalize the institutions of power and push them to do our shows, publish our texts, support our films, but the question is how we can change the structures of domination and subaltern through the production of common knowledge.” I argue that in their works these resisted the political climate under the then existing socialism of the Eastern bloc and the current reinstatement of repressive governments in the region. Instead, they pursued the very non-traditional, experimental modes politicized and banned by the state, remaining in constant dialogue with international art practices from conceptual, and performance art to activist art, experimental art forms that fostered alternative art communities and critiqued the suffocation of personal sovereignty by totalitarian states.

Like many cultural actors in post-socialist Eastern Europe, these socially engaged artistic initiatives struggle with the precarious demands of funding artistic projects, and the problem of operating as oppositional bodies within established government granting structures. For Chto Delat? and the Perjovschis, publishing newspapers is an accessible, low-budget way to circumvent more mainstream fund-raising and questionable capital. Publishing in local languages as well as in English, these artist groups and collectives outline internationalism as a central principle to their organizations for the diffusion of art and political thought in and on Eastern Europe.

*East Art Map*, *Reartikulacija*, the *Chto Delat?* newspaper and Perjovschis' self-published guides, newspapers and timelines represent powerful and well-articulated models for public engagement with recent history, visual culture and anti-oppression activism in the post-socialist states. The artists emphasize that it is important not just how to produce critical knowledge but also how to disseminate it as widely as possible and by this to reactivate the political space upon which to activate the already passivized subject.<sup>139</sup> The artists act in the socio-political space through various forms such as lectures, symposia, art exhibitions and the publication of the journal which is distributed in universities, different art spaces, and NGOs, in Eastern Europe and worldwide. They also use social media platforms and construct web platforms where copies of their publications and documentation of their art projects are published, including transcripts, videos and other media archives of events. Although well aware of the importance of the wider dissemination of radical- critical discourse through the web, the artists also insist on printed material, which represent the materialization of the theoretical discourse they have been producing over these years. This act of materialization of theory, political discourse, art intervention and activism occurred in a depoliticized space of contemporary passivity under capitalism not as an abstract utopia, but as a real intervention and a

---

<sup>139</sup> "Knowledge production is inseparable from the issue of knowledge dissemination – and the provision of common access to knowledge is the most important thing." Dmitry Vilensky interview with the artist, June 2011, St. Petersburg.



formation of the new epistemological field upon which to build alternatives to the capitalist mode of production.<sup>140</sup>

The political dimension of IRWIN's probing artistic strategies was rewarded after 1989 when they began to receive modest financial government support, official recognition that in Eastern Europe they instantiated the global network of experimental art and international artistic collaboration. Embracing online publishing and printed matter as a perpetual bridge to artists worldwide, IRWIN had remained a thorn in the eyes of the authorities, all the while being recognized internationally as artists who altered artistic relations between former Yugoslavia and the world. After all, as IRWIN understood, artists should be part of a network of relationships, irrecoverably involved with, and responsible for, each other. To this day, these artists continue to hold fast to their course.

---

<sup>140</sup> In their interviews with the author, Gržinić and Vilensky insisted on publishing and distributing their journals for free worldwide, as they thought that a radical-critical discourse with the intention of decolonizing knowledge must be accessible to everyone regardless of one's class appurtenance or geopolitical location. Dmitry Vilensky interview with the artist, June 2011, St. Petersburg; Marina Gržinić interview with the author, May 2014, Ljubljana.

## Chapter 3

### The Archive and the Museum

#### 3.1 Self-Historicization and Self-Education in Eastern Europe

In post-1989 Eastern Europe, “self-historicization” has emerged as a powerful artistic strategy. Self-historicization can be conceptualized as an artistic means to repossess the historical past that was censored or discarded before 1989, while putting forth a reexamined artistic subjectivity.<sup>141</sup> This cultural strategy particularly characterizes the work of nonconformist artists who began working in the 1970s and 1980s and feel an urgent need to reclaim the experience of the recent past and to actualize its repressed signifiers in the present.<sup>142</sup> Their approaches range from documentation to self-organization and alternative forms of education. These artistic endeavors are in response to the current negligible support or disregard for modern and contemporary art, as well as for critical practices developed in the region.

---

<sup>141</sup> The term “self-historicization” was introduced by curator Zdenka Badovinac in conjunction with the exhibition that she organized at the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana entitled *Interrupted Histories* (2006), which dealt with the artistic-archiving strategies in the former Eastern bloc. However, in my essay I expand on the notion of “self-historicization” to refer not only to archives but also to models for future institutions and experimental practices, using Lia Perjovschi’s work as a case study. See also Zdenka Badovinac, “Interrupted Histories,” in *Prekinjene zgodovine/Interrupted Histories*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac et al. (Ljubljana: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), unpaginated.

<sup>142</sup> For example, the pioneering exhibition *Arteast 2000+ International Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West* (2000) took place at the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana. It was curated by Zdenka Badovinac with consultation from Viktor Misiano, Piotr Piotrowski, Harald Szeemann, and Igor Zabel. Exhibited works were part of the international collection of modern and contemporary art at the Moderna galerija, aiming to establish a dialogue between the East and the West in regards to artistic production and the global view of art history. It represents the fruits of an extensive collaborative research project with many artists, art historians, critics, and others, which sought to create bridges in contemporary art history that were created through the artificial Cold War division of East and Western Europe that existed until 1989.

Self-historicizations can take concrete form as artists' archives, informal sharing networks, or even unofficial arts organizations and publications. On the one hand, these efforts critically engage with the scarcity of institutional frameworks and platforms for critical discourse around the practices of the artistic Avant-Gardists and Neo-Avant-Gardists in the region, and the deficiencies in the art/educational systems in general.<sup>143</sup> As Jacques Rancière has observed, "The artist [is] a collector, archivist or window-dresser, placing before the visitor's eyes not so much a critical clash of heterogeneous elements as a set of testimonies about a shared history and world."<sup>144</sup> In the spirit of Rancière's artist-as-collector-and-archivist, through self-historicization, artists are able to reclaim severed ties between cultural communities in the former Eastern bloc, faced with the dismantling of Soviet socialism after the fall of the Berlin Wall. By foregrounding the need for documentation, translation, and historical-critical practices in the present, these artists preserve vital pieces of their cultural legacy for contemporary and future artists, curators, critics, and young intellectuals.<sup>145</sup>

For example, some seminal initiatives emerging in Eastern Europe that resist the loss of cultural memory include Hungarian artist Tamás St. Auby's *Portable Intelligence Increase Museum* (2001), an interactive, computer-based exhibition that exposes gaps in

---

<sup>143</sup> The Avant-Garde in art refers to the period of cultural blossoming between 1910 and 1950 in Romania. The neo-Avant-Garde refers to the artists active in unofficial cultural circles from the 1960s until the end of the 1980s.

<sup>144</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 25.

<sup>145</sup> The book edited by the artist collective IRWIN, *East Art Map* (2006), which I will discuss in the next chapter is an example of this strategy. Part of this reader is made up of reports by contributors from all over Eastern and Central Europe, who sketched the particular art history of their localities through discussions of key art projects from the past fifty years. These are supplemented by critical essays on specific topics or movements. IRWIN, eds., *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London and Cambridge, MA: Afterall Books and MIT Press), 2006.

official accounts of Hungarian art of the 1960s and '70s, which the artist has documented. Uzbek artist Vyacheslav Akhunov has created miniature reproductions (in matchboxes) of all his works in *I m2* (1978–2007). Hungarian artist György Galántai's Artpool Research Center in Budapest consists of contemporary international Avant-Garde media and Mail Art from the Soviet period. Polish artist Zofia Kulik's *KwieKulik Archive* in Warsaw documents the works of Polish unofficial artists in the period between 1978 and 1989. Last but not least, Russian artist Vadim Zakharov has assembled documentation related to the Moscow Conceptualists, a group of unofficial Soviet-era artists who have been active for the past forty years.<sup>146</sup>

In this section I focus on aspects of self-historicization, including artists' archives and models for future institutions in the vision of the Romanian artist Lia Perjovschi, who works in collaboration with her partner, Dan Perjovschi. Both artists have been continuously active in the local art scene since the early 1980s and on the international scene since the early 1990s. The artistic practices analyzed in my case study emerged in the aftermath of the Ceaușescu regime in Romania and the conflicts and political

---

<sup>146</sup> For a more comprehensive study of the archival artist project, see Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008). Spieker argues that the use of archives by contemporary artists such as Susan Hiller, Gerhard Richter, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Walid Raad, and Boris Mikhailov challenges the nineteenth-century archive and its objectification of the historical process. Spieker shows that the historical Avant-Gardes used the archive as a laboratory for experimental inquiries into the nature of vision and its relation to time.

upheavals left unresolved in the wake of the December 1989 Romanian Revolution and the Mineriads of the 1990s.<sup>147</sup>

Responding to the social chaos and political confusion of that time, Lia Perjovschi's artistic and educational models are radical institutional and artistic platforms operating at the nexus of art theory, history, politics, science, and philosophy, which examine the construction of the archives of history, collective memory, and human knowledge. I suggest that the artist's Conceptual works emerged from the need to create a space for knowledge and resistance in order to understand Romania's recent past. Before the social and political transformations of the 1989 Revolution, Romanian citizens had little access to outside information. In the wake of the transformations that gripped the country throughout the 1990s, during the so-called transitional period to capitalism and democracy, neo-socialist and liberal political governments succeeded one another in rapid succession. Driven to understand, discuss, and share knowledge with their audiences, Lia and Dan Perjovschi have generated projects that span a heterogeneous realm of information and respond to social problems and needs. Their artistic oeuvre addresses the isolation felt by intellectuals during the dictatorship in Romania, as well as the present-day condition of trying to make sense of the information boom in the digital age.

---

<sup>147</sup> During the period of Soviet Communism, Romania was under the influence of the Soviet Union, which appointed the country's top political leaders. This situation changed with the ascendancy of Nicolae Ceaușescu to the presidency. Ceaușescu pursued a politics of nonalignment with the Soviet Union, forming alliances with Western countries. As a result, the situation in Romania, an authoritarian regime unto its own, differed significantly from the experience of the other Soviet Republics. After the 1989 Revolution, the Mineriads were a series of violent actions of miners from the Valea Jiului region against protesters in Bucharest. The miners were called to squash protests against the National Salvation Front, the ruling political party and its leader Ion Iliescu, the president of Romania in 1990.

### 3.2 Artistic practice before 1989

At the core of Lia Perjovschi's practice is her desire to engage her viewers and compel them to think critically.<sup>148</sup> The artist's specific commitment to this community stems from the historical conditions in which she grew up. In particular, the idea of "community" was first discredited by the repressive living conditions before 1989 and continued to invite scorn throughout the chaotic 1990s. During this time, despite the country's opening up to the international community, the persistence of authoritarian political behavior and general mistrust plagued the nascent civil body in Romania.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, from my experience interviewing visual artists, dancers, curators, and activists, the idea of "community" continues to be a polarizing one in the local cultural scene.<sup>150</sup> Bereft of historical models of genuine solidarity and engagement, which are just now beginning to be rediscovered, contemporary cultural figures associate the term itself with the demonized memory of communism rather than with empowerment. This logic collapses the Soviet economic and political philosophy together with the lived experience

---

<sup>148</sup> See Vlad Morariu, "Intervention through Opposition: Spatiul Public Bucuresti | Public Art Bucharest 2007," *IDEA Arts + Society*, no. 28 (2008): 65–68.

<sup>149</sup> See my essay "Anti-Monuments: Afterlives of Monumentality and Specters of Memory" and also Igor Mocanu's text "The Paradoxical Post-Communist Utopia of Artist-led Spaces in Bucharest" in *Close-Up: Post-Transition Writings*, ed. Tereza Jindrová (Prague: Academy of Fine Arts and Artycok, 2014). These texts engage with issues related to the workings of the contemporary art world in Bucharest post-1989. They examine the ailing of individual local contexts due to negative transformations and privatization, revealing neuralgic spots in the sphere of post-socialist cultural production, and calling attention to difficult realities related to the state of institutions and individual artists in Romania.

<sup>150</sup> See my interviews with artist and activist Veda Popovici and Lia Perjovschi: Corina L. Apostol and Amy Bryzgel, "Reflections on Artistic Practice in Romania: Then and Now," eds Raluca Voinea and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, *IDEA Arts + Society*, no. 45 (November 2014): pg. 92-105.

of the communist dictatorship and the apparatus of state oppression.<sup>151</sup> Further, the local artistic milieu continues to be fragmented, in part due to this multigenerational trauma,<sup>152</sup> which as art historians such as Kristine Stiles have argued, remains unexamined and unhealed.<sup>153</sup>

This traumatic affect is palpable in the case of the archives of the secret police, or Securitate, which remain only partially declassified to the general public.<sup>154</sup> Characterized by surveillance data-gathering and privileged access, and geared toward institutionalized oppression, the Securitate Archives have come to symbolize the disjuncture between official histories and the suppressed narratives that continues to plague emerging democracy in Romania. During the chaos of the Revolution, the secret police attempted to obliterate the archives, but only managed to destroy some of its files. Throughout the 1990s, in order to maintain control over the interpretation of this negative chapter in recent history, Romanian authorities refused to open to the public what remained of the archives. The National Salvation Front, the new political union at the helm of the country, which included former members of the Ceaușescu regime, used

---

<sup>151</sup>On the failure of the construction of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and the development of new forms of authoritarianism in the East European party-states, see Alain Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” *New Left Review*, no. 49 (January–February 2008): pg. 29-49.

<sup>152</sup> A powerful work on the subject of trauma and suppressed histories is Stefan Constantinescu’s video installation *Archive of Pain* (2000), which presents filmed interviews with political prisoners detained in Romania between 1945 and 1965. See also the accompanying catalogue by Lucian Boia, Adrian Cioroianu and Tom Sandqvist, *Archive of Pain* (Stockholm: Pionir Press, 2000).

<sup>153</sup> See Kristine Stiles, “Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies,” *Strategie II: Peuples Méditerranéens* [Paris] 64–65 (July–December 1993): 95–117.

<sup>154</sup> In Romania, the secret police followed the Soviet model, with members supervising the foundation and development of the “Securitate.” In addition, Soviet agents provided training and instruction. See Cristina Vatulescu, “Arresting Biographies: The Secret Police File in the Soviet Union and Romania,” *Comparative Literature* [University of Oregon] 56, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 243–61.

certain files as political leverage and to blackmail the opposition.<sup>155</sup> Since 2008 the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS)<sup>156</sup> has begun to allow access to the archives on an individual basis, while gradually publicizing lists of informers and collaborators. The Securitate Archives are symptomatic of the suppression of recent history and its traumatic aftereffects in Romania, denying healing and reconstruction of a civil society in the post-socialism era.

It is thus significant to compare Lia Perjovschi's aesthetic models and initiatives, which the artist gathered within the framework of an archive, an open studio, an activist base, and future plans for an interactive museum and installation, with the tightly controlled mesh that holds together Romania's recent history and informs its collective identity. For many Romanians, emerging from a deeply traumatic period during which obedience to the dictator and to an ideology of combining nationalism and social control was mandatory, collective identity continued to be fragmented throughout the 1990s, as the signifiers of the past were irretrievable and so not subject to public scrutiny. If the Securitate Archives are a metaphor for the web of silenced voices that continued to be denied the meaning of their recent past, by contrast, Lia Perjovschi's archival and

---

<sup>155</sup> The National Salvation Front (FSN) was the governing body of Romania in the first weeks after the Romanian Revolution of 1989. It subsequently became a political party, and won the 1990 election under the leadership of then-President Ion Iliescu. Iliescu was largely responsible for the Mineriads, inciting the miners from Valea Jiului to come and suppress the largest democratic protest Bucharest had seen since the revolution in December 1989.

<sup>156</sup> As Lavinia Stan argues, there has been little progress in transitional justice in post-1989 Romania since the National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives (CNSAS) was set up in 2000, due to the failure of giving citizens access to the files compiled by the Ceaușescu-era secret police and of publicly identifying the former political police agents and informers. See Lavinia Stan, "Spies, Files and Lies: Explaining the Failure of Access to Securitate Files," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 37, no. 3 (September 2004): 341–59.



museum models stand as recuperative tools for opening up history and enabling viewers to become subjects in and not just objects of their past.

Lia Perjovschi began her artistic practice in the 1980s with performances in her Bucharest apartment that were witnessed and photographed only by Dan Perjovschi.<sup>157</sup> [Ills.3.6] Through performance art, the artists testified to their context, enabling the present-day viewer to see the Ceaușescu regime from two Romanian citizens' perspective of having lived under it.

The performance *Annulment* (September 1989),<sup>158</sup> staged in the Perjovschis' apartment in Oradea,<sup>159</sup> was a critique of social and political conditions, leveled on the threshold of the Romanian Revolution of December 1989. During the performance, with the help of Dan, Lia bound her entire body with inexpensive white medical gauze, a process that rendered her unable to speak or see. Then, as she sat motionless, Dan tied her to the ground with black string. While Lia attempted to break free from these restraints, Dan photographed her. These black-and-white photographs of a seated white figure bound to the floor against a gray background are the only remaining documentation of this performance (save for the artists' own recollections).<sup>160</sup> The artist "whited out" her own identity in the images, gesturing as an anonymous victim of some unknown trauma,

---

<sup>157</sup> Photography was not acknowledged as art during Romanian socialism and thus it was not exhibited.

<sup>158</sup> Lia Perjovschi, *Annulment*, series of six black-and-white photographs mounted on black paper, 1989, Perjovschi Archive, Sibiu.

<sup>159</sup> After Dan Perjovschi finished his studies at the Academy of Arts in Iași, he and Lia began living and working together in a modest apartment in Oradea. At the time, Dan worked as a curator at the Muzeul Țării Crișurilor (Museum of Țara Crișurilor) while Lia worked as a stage designer for a local theater.

<sup>160</sup> "I preferred our apartment as a stage for my performances, because it provided me with a kind of confined, controlled context [...] *Annulment* was also staged in our apartment, and it directed against the entire social and political context at the time. I let myself be tied up by Dan [Perjovschi], the only other person present." Lia Perjovschi interview with the author, September 2014, Sibiu.

who nonetheless is struggling to break free. Lia's performance brought forth a new perspective on life during the regime, one that was far from the official line. It registered one side of reality through an artistic gesture that captured another, adding to contemporary conceptualizations of life under dictatorship. *Annulment* symbolically gave expression to the sentiments of Romanian citizens in the last decade of the Ceaușescu regime, to their feelings of being trapped, isolated, and incapable of movement or communication.

Dan Perjovschi's photographs of the performance appear strikingly similar to those of the Vienna Action Group artist Rudolf Schwarzkogler,<sup>161</sup> who performed his "Actions" in the mid-1960s<sup>162</sup> (his performance photographs were printed in the early 1970s).<sup>163</sup> In *3rd Action*, for example, the artist appears to have wrapped his entire body in gauze bandages and taped his penis and groin with pieces of sticking plaster. The photograph was staged in front of a white background and, similar to Perjovschi's *Annulment*, is characterized by an extreme aesthetic simplicity, complemented by black-and-white photography, which confers a formal clarity to the image. Unlike the works of other Actionists, for whom the experience of public performance was key, *3rd Action* was created without an audience, in front of a camera operated by Ludwig Hoffenreich. Lia Perjovschi and Schwarzkogler share an interest in the body as a site of trauma and

---

<sup>161</sup> Schwarzkogler is one of four Viennese artists who worked under the name Wiener Aktionsgruppe, or Vienna Action Group, in 1965. Hermann Nitsch, Otto Mühl, and Günter Brus created performances, or "Actions," aimed at releasing repressed desires and bringing about a state of cathartic awareness through acts which often subverted traditional authorities and broke taboos.

<sup>162</sup> Schwarzkogler created a total of six Actions, five in 1965 and one in 1966.

<sup>163</sup> Eva Badura-Triska and Hubert Klocker, *Rudolf Schwarzkogler: Leben und Werk*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 1993), 198.

resistance, even though the former was not aware of her predecessor until 1994, when she exhibited at the Kunsthalle Wien and was able to access information about the Viennese Action Group.<sup>164</sup>

Despite the fact that photography played as important a role for Schwarzkogler as it did for Perjovschi, both artists faced significant difficulties in developing their photographs and exhibiting them to a wider audience. In the case of the Viennese artist, the reasons were related to financial precariousness,<sup>165</sup> whereas for Perjovschi, they were due to censorship laws against experimental art practices in Romania during the 1980s. Perjovschi's action symbolically connotes the lack of communication as well as the isolation that the dictatorship imposed on Romanian citizens.<sup>166</sup>

It is not accidental that Perjovschi's action was staged in a private residence, for artists of that period often carried out their work in their homes, usually for a very limited audience made up of people they trusted. These extreme conditions reflect the closure and/or total control of public space in Ceaușescu's Romania, when even hermetic performances were dangerous. Indeed, as Vít Havránek has observed, surveillance was sometimes organized even in "the domestic sphere which people established in their

---

<sup>164</sup> "Christine König Galerie [Vienna] showed my works in 1994, and in the same year I staged the exhibition "Fünf Fenster" for the Kunsthalle at Karlsplatz." Lia Perjovschi interview with the author in Sibiu, December 2014.

<sup>165</sup> There are only few prints that were made during the lifetime of the artist. The larger part of the photographs circulating today was commissioned by his partner Edith Adam, Ludwig Hoffenreich, or the Italian collector Francesco Conz.

<sup>166</sup> Several other Romanian artists produced artworks in which they alluded to the feeling of being trapped, of enclosure, loneliness, and silent resistance, including Geta Brătescu, Tudor Graur, and Ion Grigorescu, however, because of official censorship and resulting self-censorship, they were not aware of each other's artistic projects at the time.

private (albeit state-owned) flats.”<sup>167</sup> Communication outside the borders of these communities was difficult, except for the sporadic Mail Art circles, in which the Perjovschis took part.<sup>168</sup> These discrete and informal exchanges between artists working unofficially in the former Eastern bloc were an attempt to engender an alternative public sphere, one that was sustained through informality and trust, in order to eschew the repressive power of the authorities.<sup>169</sup> In Oradea, where the Perjovschis organized their first open apartment/studio sessions, Dan Perjovschi was part of Atelier 35 Oradea, a platform for young artists<sup>170</sup> straddling the line between “official” art and experimentation. Art historian Magda Cârneci has described Atelier 35 Oradea as “a model of group experimental activism,”<sup>171</sup> whose members managed to stage installations and performances by working as a collective. Lia Perjovschi was never admitted into this group, although scholars such as Cârneci have retrospectively placed her as a key member.

---

<sup>167</sup> Vit Havranek, “The Post-Bipolar Order and the Status of Public and Private under Communism,” in *Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, exh. cat. (Zurich: Jrp Ringier, 2010), 28.

<sup>168</sup> “We made artwork as part of a world-wide Mail Art project launched by Shozo Shimamoto. [...] In 1988 we received such a mail-art multiple on which we drew and signed in ink.” The Perjovschis in conversation with the author, August 13, 2010, Perjovschi Studio, Bucharest. Shimamoto (1928-2013) was one of the most important Japanese contemporary artists, member of the Gutai Group associated to Lyric Abstractionism. Shimamoto made multiples figuring the shape of his own head and sent them to artists worldwide to fill them in and send them back to him.

<sup>169</sup> See Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T Dodge, eds., *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experience 1956–1986* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1995).

<sup>170</sup> Other significant artists included Rudolf Bone, Dorel Gaina, Aniko Gerendi, Laszlo Ujvarrosy and Nicolae Onucsan.

<sup>171</sup> Magda Cârneci, *Experimentul în arta românească! dup! 1960* (Experiment in Romanian Arts since 1960), (Bucharest: CSAC, 1997), 60.

Two months after performing *Annulment*, Lia produced another related performance, entitled *Magic of Gestures (Laces)* (November 1989),<sup>172</sup> at the Academy of Arts in Bucharest, where she organized an unofficial “Experimental Studio.” Unlike *Annulment*, which was an extremely personal action, *Magic of Gestures* involved the artist’s friends and colleagues at the Academy and took a longer amount of time—more than eight hours. Using a simple piece of black string, Lia tied the participants, who were seated in chairs in a circle, to each other, forcing them to have to negotiate individual movements in relation to one another. Some attempted to free themselves, while others remained motionless. The performance was photographed and filmed by one of the artist’s friends.<sup>173</sup> Though bearing similarities to other Conceptual works, such as Brazilian Neo-Concretist<sup>174</sup> artist Lygia Clark’s *Living Sculptures/Nostalgia of the Body* (1969),<sup>175</sup> Perjovschi was interested in the relationships between the participants, and the unpredictable way they negotiated their movements, while Clark’s more choreographed performance highlighted the process of drawing with the body and the tensions within a resulting, sculptural human net. Both performances had political connotations due to the

---

<sup>172</sup> Lia Perjovschi, *Magic of Gestures (Laces)*, film: black-and-white, 1989, 10 minutes, Perjovschi Archive, Sibiu.

<sup>173</sup> “I tied my classmates seated on chairs in a circle, together such that they had to work together to liberate themselves. It was an experiment. I wanted to make visible the ties that hold us together, making us dependent on one another, being destructive or positive. A friend who agreed to be the cameraman arrived eight hours late but nobody left.” Lia Perjovschi interview with the author in Sibiu, December 2014.

<sup>174</sup> The first *Neo-Concretist Exhibition* was held in March 1959 at the Museum of Modern Art of Rio de Janeiro and was followed two years later by an exhibition by the same name at the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo.

<sup>175</sup> Lygia Clark, *Estruturas Vivas / Nostalgia do Corpo* (Living Sculptures / Nostalgia of the Body), series of color photographs by Sérgio Zalis, 1969. In this performance, eight participants formed a net by joining the ends of elastic rubber bands between four people lying down and four people standing. The arrangement corresponded to the drawing of a net. The sequence of movements of the group was similar to a drawing structure, lived through the gestures of the participants. Suely Rolnik, “For a State of Art: The Actuality of Lygia Clark” in *XXIV Bienal de São Paulo*, vol. 1, *Núcleo Histórico: Antropofagia e Histórias de Canibalismo* (São Paulo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1998), 462–67.

similar, yet distinct contexts in which the artists had come of age: the communist dictatorship in Romania in the 1980s and the right-wing military dictatorship in Brazil in the 1960s.<sup>176</sup> I argue that *Magic of Gestures* anticipated the dramatic social dynamic that would unfold one month later during the Revolution, when the Romanian people had to decide which side of the barricades they were on.

*Videograms of a Revolution* (1992),<sup>177</sup> a groundbreaking film by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică uses unedited documentary footage from December 1989 to stage the drama and violence of this pivotal moment in Romanian history, which lasted for ten days, including the fall, attempted flight, and Christmas-day execution of the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena.<sup>178</sup> The filmmakers deftly employed techniques used by the early Avant-Garde Soviet montage artists and filmmakers, such as Sergei Eisenstein in *Oktyabr* (October; 1927),<sup>179</sup> which depicts the Russian Revolution of 1917 from multiple perspectives. Similarly, in *Videograms*, crowds are seen from above, scattering under constant gunfire, while revolutionary leaders vie for the microphone at

---

<sup>176</sup> The military dictatorship worsened in Brazil between 1968 and 1983. During this time, experimental art activities proliferated.

<sup>177</sup> Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, *Videograms of a Revolution*, Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, 1992, video: color, 106 minutes.

<sup>178</sup> *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu* (2010), a more recent movie by Andrei Ujică, begins with the former Romanian dictator's last moments, spent in the ad-hoc tribunal of 1989. Ceaușescu's response to the accusations brought against him by the improvised prosecution committee—such as bringing the country to the brink of disaster and ordering the genocide in Timișoara—is essentially to reject the authority of the court that is demanding a confession of guilt from him. After this accelerated mock trial, which lasted no more than an hour, the couple is taken into a courtyard and executed by a firing squad.

<sup>179</sup> Sergey Eisenstein, *Oktyabr*, Sovkino, 1928, film: black-and-white, 142 minutes.

popular rallies.<sup>180</sup> Unlike *Oktyabr*, whose scenes are meticulous reenactments, *Videograms* relies solely on found footage. This material has been intercut and assembled to self-critically reveal the course of events, including the representation of cameras and monitors within the frame, the voiceover commentary on the historical import of the images, and the relationship of film to history. Two ambivalent sequences at the end of the film are emblematic for the historical moment it represents. A news anchor on the renamed Romanian Free Television<sup>181</sup> fulfills his promise and presents images of the Ceaușescus' gunned-down corpses. After the credits, which include the names of those who shot the original footage, a man emerges from the crowd to address a group of cameras. He denounces the lies of the fallen government, which had divided the Romanian people for decades. This government had veered far from its proclaimed ideal, only benefiting the Ceaușescus and the elite surrounding them. While speaking about how so many children and family members had suffered and died, he breaks down in tears, saying, "I wish you a happy Christmas. Long live free Romania!" The film is important for registering the first moments of televised reports of the actual political situation in the country, without reflecting on the damaging effects of the continuous presence of the media. The Revolution, however, did not bring about a more just and emancipatory social order, for the National Salvation Front took power, leading to more social protests and rebellions.

---

<sup>180</sup> This film reaches a climax in a shootout in which palace windows are illuminated by gunfire, a sequence that distantly evokes the storming of the palace in *Oktyabr*. This image of popular rebellion penetrating the inner circles of power again suggests a curious continuity between the 1917 and 1989 revolutions. Rather than promoting general welfare, however, the inheritors of the 1917 revolution in Romania fell to technological breakdown, non-elected governments, and tyranny.

<sup>181</sup> Formerly this was called "The Television of the Socialist Republic of Romania."

### 3.3 Reconstruction after 1989

Among the most violent episodes after 1989 were the Mineriads of the early 1990s, which represented the equivalent of civil war in Romania. Between June 13 and 15, 1990, mere months after the Revolution's overwhelming display of collective action, some of the bloodiest confrontations occurred in University Square in Bucharest, between peaceful protesters of the Iliescu government and miners from Valea Jiului. In the collective memory, these events would mark this space as one of solidarity for social protests, but also of trauma.<sup>182</sup> In 2007 Dan Perjovschi performatively reenacted the history of violence against young intellectuals and students in this space. His work, entitled *Monument (History/ Hysteria 2)*,<sup>183</sup> was a durational performance that ran from June 13 to 15. Almost ten years ago now, Perjovschi invited artists and dancers to fill in the roles of the perpetrators and the victims, or “hooligans.”<sup>184</sup> During the performance, pairs of characters stood next to each other, frozen in a few different positions—some seemingly confrontational, others peaceful, and still others more difficult to pin down. Standing in front of the University of Bucharest, these human “sculptures” emphasized

---

<sup>182</sup>A more objective approach of the Mineriads has been taken only recently. In 2007 the Romanian anthropologist Alin Rus published a book entitled *Mineriadele. Intre manipulare politic! #i solidaritate muncitoreasc!* (Mineriadele: Between Political Manipulation and Worker Solidarity), a documented chronology of the six mineriades (three in 1990, one in 1991, and two in 1999), along with an analysis of the political and economic contexts in which each one occurred, a critical review of the most important theories used to interpret the phenomenon, and an overview of the symbolic images and role of miners in different historic epochs and countries since the nineteenth century. See Alin Rus, *Mineriadele. Intre manipulare politic! #i solidaritate muncitoreasc!* (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2007).

<sup>183</sup> Dan Perjovschi, *Monument (History/Hysteria 2)*, series of eight color photographs, 2007, Perjovschi Archive, Sibiu. This performance was part of the public art project *Spatial Public Bucure#ti* (Public Art Bucharest; 2007).

<sup>184</sup> “Hooligans” was a term broadly used for the category of intellectuals who were identified at the time of the altercations as enemies of the government.



the ongoing segregation between intellectuals and workers and the banalization of violence in public spaces in Bucharest, which are dominated by aggression, excessive noise, and intolerance.

Back in the 1990s, after the Revolution and the Mineriads, several sociocultural-political organizations emerged to facilitate the formation of a civil society, that is, a network of NGOs and other institutions representing Romanian citizens and their aspirations for a new political path.<sup>185</sup> In these collectives, scholars from the humanities and social sciences played an important role.<sup>186</sup> Due to the distinctive nationalist and purportedly socialist dictatorship in Romania, and the absence of a free-market economy, the struggle between the oppressive state and society was historically constituted through cultural-political alliances rather than through economic-political ones. It is this legacy that shaped political interactions immediately following the collapse of socialism, when Romania had yet to embark on the path to dramatic economic and political transformation.

Along with attempts at opening up these isolated artistic endeavors to one another, cultural communities sought to connect with groups that were emerging from similarly repressive systems, and with artists in Western Europe and the United States,

---

<sup>185</sup> For example, the Group for Social Dialogue, the Civic Alliance, and the Student League, all founded immediately after the revolution, which continue to be active in cities across Romania today. For an analysis of the emergence of a civil society in post-authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, see Jan Kubik and Grzegorz Ekiert, *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989–1993* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

<sup>186</sup> Dan Perjovschi in an email with the author (May 11, 2011) explained that the Group for Social Dialogue was composed mainly of intellectuals, living in Bucharest, working in fields such as literature, history and philosophy, lots of them in “various degrees of dissidence with the communist regime.” Dan Perjovschi became a member in 1996 as he was working at *22 Magazine*, the magazine edited by the Group for Social Dialogue. *22 Magazine* was an opposition magazine and against neo-communist power; in Perjovschi’s view, “Actually it was very right to compensate the communist past and now it is more to the center.”

regions previously out of reach. The Zone Performance Festival,<sup>187</sup> held in Timișoara between 1993 and 2003 by art historian and curator Ileana Pintilie, was a seminal initiative that offered Romanian artists, many of them for the first time, the opportunity to engage with artists from other countries as well as an international audience.<sup>188</sup>

Dan Perjovschi performed one of his most famous works, simply titled *Romania* (1993), at the first festival.<sup>189</sup> It consisted of his getting the name of his native country tattooed in uppercase letters across his right upper arm in front of an audience, who watched in silence. At the time, tattoos were not as popular as they are today and, as Perjovschi recollected, were usually only seen on the bodies of prison inmates and sailors.<sup>190</sup> The performance was emblematic of the state of isolation, frustration, and uncertainty the Romanian people (and artists) continued to experience several years after the opening of the borders in 1990 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The tattoo

---

<sup>187</sup> Performance and body art were the preferred mediums of artists in Romania until the early 2000s. The first large-scale contemporary art events were performance festivals such as Zona, mentioned above, in Timișoara; Periferic în Iași (initiated in 1997 and turned into a biennial in 2003); and the Annart Festival of Living Art in Transylvania (1990–99).

<sup>188</sup> Initiated and organized by the Romanian art historian Ileana Pintilie, the Zone (or Zona) Festival (which consisted of performances, symposia, and workshops) started out as a platform for artists from the former Eastern Bloc (Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia, Russia, and Germany) but soon grew to include artists and scholars from Ireland, Scotland, the United Kingdom, France, Norway, and the United States. For ten years it functioned as a regular artistic platform, even though it was developed in a country with extremely fragile and marginalized sociocultural networks. The Zone Festival was discontinued after 2003, because of insufficient financing. See: <http://www.zonafestival.ro/en/index.htm>, accessed December 13, 2011.

<sup>189</sup> Dan Perjovschi, *Romania*, color film, 1993, Perjovschi archive, Sibiu.

<sup>190</sup> “At the 1993 “Zone” Festival, I performed an anti-performance which, unlike traditional performances, I wanted to last for a lifetime. I let myself be tattooed with the name “Romania,” to rid myself of an obsession. Back then tattoos were not something trendy, but were worn by outcasts, sailors and prisoners.” Dan Perjovschi interview with the author, December 2014, Sibiu.

was a symbolic gesture that symbolized the intimate relationship between the artist and his constant preoccupation with social-critical analysis of the recent past.<sup>191</sup>

At the same festival, Lia Perjovschi performed *I Am Fighting for My Right to Be Different* (1993),<sup>192</sup> in which, over several hours, she treated a full-size, stuffed doll dressed in her own clothes to alternating displays of affection and violence. At times, she lunged her doll-double at members of the audience, who remained passive throughout the performance. This figurative motion constituted a metaphorical pendulum, swinging between power, abuse, and submissive conformity, symptomatic of a community that had yet to come to terms with its recent past and the civil liberties and responsibilities that came with emerging democracy.<sup>193</sup> In 1996 Lia Perjovschi performed this piece again, at the 4th Biennale in St. Petersburg, Russia. Interestingly, the local Russian audience's reaction to her movements were markedly different. As Dan Perjovschi recalled, some participants even lied down next to Lia and her doll-double during the performance, showing solidarity and empathy with the artist and her struggle.<sup>194</sup> Beyond the significance of these performances within the context of the Perjovschis' oeuvre, they were part of a more general and long-standing trend, in which Romanian artists employed

---

<sup>191</sup> In 2002 Dan Perjovschi decided to remove his *Romania* tattoo during another performance, which took place at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany. The performance, during which the ink from the tattoo was somatically assimilated by the artist's body and disappeared, signaled a departure from the artist's regional and national identity into the new political context in Europe.

<sup>192</sup> Lia Perjovschi, *I Am Fighting for My Right to Be Different*, series of black-and-white photographs, 1993, Perjovschi Archive, Sibiu.

<sup>193</sup> For more descriptions of Lia Perjovschi's performances during the 1980s and early 1990s, also see Andrei Codrescu, "The Arts of the Perjovschis," in *States of Mind: Lia and Dan Perjovschi*, ed. Kristine Stiles (Durham, NC: Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, 2007), 115–30.

<sup>194</sup> "A few people said that they enjoyed lying down next to Lia and her doll. Others liked to have black paint on their clothes because it marked them similarly with her." Dan Perjovschi interview with the author in Sibiu, September 2014.

their bodies as an artistic medium. The body was conceptualized as both the surface onto which symbolic value was inscribed, and also as the most readily accessible means for public expression.

Throughout the 1990s, Dan Perjovschi became widely recognized throughout the world for his drawings, which he made on the inside or outside walls and windows of art institutions, at biennales, in periodicals, and in published catalogues. Dan's drawings commented wittily and synthetically on both local and global issues involving art and politics—and their interdependence. Some of his drawings were responses to news stories in the international press, others to the exhibition contexts in which he was invited to participate. Aesthetically, they reflect a formal, Minimalist approach. Though appearing to have been quickly drawn on the walls, pavements, or glass on which they appear, they are not quite as immediate as one might think.<sup>195</sup> The artist's drawings have been superficially described as “simple,” and yet, in fact, they expose complex social and political themes, inserting a space for critical reflection between words and images. The artist creates this space using a dark, biting humor,<sup>196</sup> a tragicomic feature that is a staple of his approach. For example, in the drawing *Bringing Western Values*,<sup>197</sup> a woman

---

<sup>195</sup> Dan Perjovschi's process involves always carrying with him a sketchbook or two in which he lays out his reactions and impressions of sociopolitical events occurring both locally and abroad.

<sup>196</sup> In *Hammer and Tickle*, author Ben Lewis demonstrates how humor, irony and satire were used to criticize and resist official power, thus gaining a political role. See Ben Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008).

<sup>197</sup> Dan Perjovschi, “Bringing Western Values,” white chalk on wall, *White Chalk Dark Issues* exhibition, Kokerei Zollverein, Essen, Germany, 2003. Perjovschi describes the process behind the drawings thusly: “In the coking plant I had to use chalk, which demands a very simple approach; it breaks easily and I had to develop the right technique [...] I lived there for three months [...] It was the time of the Second Gulf War, and I spent the days in an office with the curator Marius Babiaș—a pro-American Romanian sharing a small space with a German who was strongly opposed to US policy. Every day I was confronted with this different point of view.” Catrin Lorch, “Writing on the Wall,” *Frieze*, no. 98 (April 2006): pg. 136-139.

wearing a burka is “transformed” by adopting “Western values,” through shortening her garments to reveal her nude legs and pelvic area. The work, produced in 2003 during the Iraq War, is a comment on the pumped-up rhetoric of the Western democracies that employ such catchphrases partly to justify military interference in the Middle East while claiming to bring “freedom” to its peoples. It also reveals how larger politics are played out on women’s bodies, which are either sexualized or covered up in order to preserve—or protect against—heteronormative, masculine ideologies.

The artist’s approach to drawing can be traced to the Avant-Garde Situationists, who emerged in France after World War II.<sup>198</sup> Eschewing the conventional approaches to art—that is framed paintings exhibited in galleries—the Situationists set out, at the time of the 1968 revolts, to “defamiliarize” their audiences by drawing and writing directly on walls throughout Paris. As Peter Wollen observed, “Their contribution to the revolutionary uprising was remembered mainly through the diffusion and spontaneous expression of Situationist ideas and slogans, in graffiti and in posters [. . .] as well as in serried assaults on the routines of everyday life.”<sup>199</sup> Perjovschi’s decision to make his

---

<sup>198</sup> The Situationist International (SI) was an international European activist art group founded in 1957 that was influential in the strikes of May 1968 in France. Creating visual propaganda (especially slogans, posters, and drawings) was one of their primary activities, and it was intimately tied into the fabric of their movement. Their practice was rooted in both politics and art, in Marxism and the twentieth-century Avant-Garde. They were primarily concerned with the Marxist concepts of commodification, reification, and alienation. See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970), and Guy Debord, Gil Wolman, and Ken Knabb, “A User’s Guide to Détournement,” *Les Lèvres Nues*, no. 8 (May 1956) unpaginated.

<sup>199</sup> Peter Wollen, “Situationist International,” *New Left Review*, no. 174 (1989): 67–93.

drawings, which he sometimes refers to as “intelligent graffiti,”<sup>200</sup> directly in the public domain stems from a similar desire to provoke viewers and raise consciousness.

At the same time, his practice has been fine-tuned by years of working as a graphic artist in his native context. Indeed, in Romania, Perjovschi has been a popular public voice since the early 1990s, contributing short notes and drawings each week to *Revista 22*, an independent political magazine published by the Group for Social Dialogue, a Romanian dissident organization.<sup>201</sup> Members of the group have been thought to represent the victims of the Romanian miners’ savage attack in June 1990 and thus, implicitly, to be themselves the victims and targets of political power. In his works, however, Dan Perjovschi examined the complex and painfully paradoxical context that surrounds social movements in Romania. With the aforementioned performance *Monument (History/ Hysteria 2)*, he identified himself not only as a victim but also as a responsible party in the collective stigmatization and discrediting of the miners as a class, confronting the country’s public’s memory with its recent painful and ambivalent history. I argue that Perjovschi’s performance embodied a shift in his oeuvre—up to this point marked by performances such as *Romania* (1993)—and no longer made reference to his own artistic body, instead choosing to represent the socially engaged public body, calling attention to the biased position from which most accounts of the troubled post-1989 history of Romania have been given.

---

<sup>200</sup> “I work in the museums and on the street, using drawing. My drawings are neither caricature, nor art brut, nor comix, rather they borrow a little from all of them; mine is an intelligent graffiti which is critical, simple and direct.” Dan Perjovschi interview with the author, December 2014, Sibiu.

<sup>201</sup> The Group for Social Dialogue was the first NGO in post-1989 Romania.

### 3.4 The Contemporary Art Archive/Center for Art Analysis and the Knowledge Museum

While grounded in her experience of the intermittent repression and relaxation of the Romanian dictatorship, Lia Perjovschi's oeuvre also shifted from using her body as the main signifier for concepts and emotions to facilitating the critical reception of those ideas through educational-aesthetic models.<sup>202</sup> Dan Perjovschi poignantly described this process when he observed that Lia moved from making "art with her body [. . .] to the research of the body of international art."<sup>203</sup> As Hal Foster has correctly remarked, there is a Deleuzian rhizomic impulse behind a lot of contemporary artists' work.<sup>204</sup> Engaging with collections "through mutations of connection and disconnection," these projects are focused on reimagining, space, deconstructing certain truths, developing research tools, and fostering interaction for future archives.

Using her own Contemporary Art Archive (1997–ongoing) as a tool for critical inquiry,<sup>205</sup> directed at opening the imagination of the viewer, Perjovschi has consistently encouraged local and international exchanges between artists, students, and scholars from all fields seeking to restore the sociocultural connections that were destroyed during the pre-1989 segregation. At the same time, her archive includes original artworks,

---

<sup>202</sup> Here I make the distinction between Communism as an ideology imposed from above by the Soviet Union, and the different political situation built under the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu—who followed a polity to break with the Soviet Union and establish an independent communist nation.

<sup>203</sup> Dan Perjovschi, "Alone for the Others: Lia Perjovschi," in *Again for Tomorrow* (London: Royal College of Art, 2006), 119.

<sup>204</sup> Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 5.

<sup>205</sup> Perjovschi began conceptualizing her Contemporary Art Archive after teaching contemporary art, theory, and practice at Duke University in the fall of 1997. Dan Perjovschi taught a contemporary drawing class at Duke at the same time.

conceptualized as aesthetic models for alternative institutions, forms of reactivating suppressed or missing histories, while always maintaining a critical attitude toward all forms of abuse and repression by state power. These take the form of newspapers (Figure 15) revealingly entitled *ZOOM: diaPOZITIV—, sens, globe 1990–today, short guide—art in public space (ro): some independent positions, and waiting room*; time lines, such as *Subjective Art History from Modernism to present day. Art and its context* (1997–2004); and diagrams—or Mind Maps (1999–2006) [Ills.3.3]. Over the past twenty years, the value of her practice has been recognized internationally for its ability to subvert authority and emancipate audiences to generate their own systems of formulating questions, finding answers, and acting in society.

Describing herself as a “Detective in Art, a Text Jockey, reading, copying, cutting and remixing texts and images,” Perjovschi has stressed repeatedly the desire to recuperate for her community what her generation was denied before 1989.<sup>206</sup> In a 2007 interview with Kristine Stiles, Perjovschi explained that the archive, as she now conceives of it, is a repository of documents and a space for critical thinking and exchange, which was created in 1985.<sup>207</sup> That year, Lia and Dan Perjovschi opened their apartment in Oradea for informal gatherings with local writers, actors, anthropologists, artists, and curators. Although Dan was a graduate of the Academy of Arts in Iași and Lia studied at the Bucharest Academy, both artists confessed to me that they felt unprepared and constrained by their formal education.

---

<sup>206</sup> Dan Perjovschi, “Alone for the Others: Lia Perjovschi,” in *Again for Tomorrow* (London: Royal College of Art, 2006), 119.

<sup>207</sup> Kristine Stiles, “Passages 1992–2007: Interview with Lia Perjovschi,” in *States of Mind*, 176.



In a 1999 performance entitled *Natura Moart!* (Still Life) at the festival Periferic 2 in Iași, Dan commented on the conservative training artists received during the 1980s, which continues to dominate the way art is taught at academies in Romania today. In this piece, he sat at an easel for four hours, painting a still life that included a ceramic teapot, a pitcher, a wooden bowl, and a piece of cloth<sup>208</sup> while the audience watched. The artist thus recalled the conformity and rigidity of academic training in the 1980s,<sup>209</sup> the result of Ceaușescu's 1972 "July Theses," which introduced strict guidelines for all artistic and cultural production in Romania.<sup>210</sup> These measures began to be implemented in 1973, and by the 1980s, artists were even blocked from joining the country's Union of Artists, which at the time was the sole organization with the power to give them the legal means to earn money, have a studio, exhibit, and/or publish a catalogue.

It was in this context, in 1985, during the difficult Ceaușescu dictatorship, when everyday life was extremely precarious and (self) censorship prevalent in all aspects of public and private life,<sup>211</sup> that the Perjovschis conceived of opening their private

---

<sup>208</sup> The objects in the composition were selected and arranged by the artist Matei Bejenaru.

<sup>209</sup> Dan Perjovschi observed that during that period, "Painters did not rebel against the system; they painted what they were told to or they left the country." Dan Perjovschi interview with the author in Sibiu, December 2014.

<sup>210</sup> Ceaușescu introduced the "July Theses" after a trip in 1971 to North Korea. Dennis Deletant makes the case that "it is now clear that this visit aroused in him an admiration for the Cultural Revolution and for the grandiose spectacles dedicated to the cult of personality. The stage-managed adulation of Mao and Kim II Sung, so meticulously choreographed, fired Ceaușescu's imagination and he demanded the same upon his return to Romania." Dennis Deletant, *Romania under Communist Rule* (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies, 1999), 119.

<sup>211</sup> "When I talk to young generations today about censorship committees, I often have to explain that the issue was not that they were cruel. It was simply degrading to have to explain your painting to stupid people. Anything out of the norm was seen as alternative or bad. By formally doing the slightest thing different than what the canon called for, you were already deemed progressive and experimental and potential trouble." Interview with Dan Perjovschi by the author, August 2010, Perjovschis' former studio, Bucharest.

apartment as a way to create a space for critical thinking and open exchange.<sup>212</sup> It was an act of affirmation of the power of sharing and teaching, laying the foundation for an unofficial network that was, as Lia describes, “a survival strategy.”<sup>213</sup> In 1990, immediately after the 1989 Revolution, with the help of the artist Geta Brătescu, the Perjovschis were offered a studio in Bucharest, in the Scarlat/Robescu building, which is now under the auspices of the liberated Union of Artists.<sup>214</sup> They began by transforming this space into an archive for books, magazines, and ephemera on international art and culture, as well as a repository for their own works (drawings, photographs of performances, installations, art objects, and videos). This archive would become the Contemporary Art Archive/Center for Art Analysis (abbreviated by the artist “CAA/CAA”) in 1997, which Lia imagined as a tool for critical inquiry and used to spur local and international interaction between artists, students, and scholars from diverse fields (including art history, architecture, history, political science, anthropology, philosophy, and theater).

Though artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn have engaged in similar practices of collecting and archiving in order to create “spaces for the movement and endlessness of

---

<sup>212</sup> Ovidiu Tichindeleanu argues that as opposed to the official culture industry, apartments in state-owned blocks of flats represented the material foundation of public space under real socialism. Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, “Vampires in the Living Room: A View to What Happened to Eastern Europe after 1989 and Why Real Socialism Still Matters,” in *Asking We Walk: The South as New Political Imaginary*, ed. Corinne Kumar, vol. 3 (Bangalore: Streelekha, 2011).

<sup>213</sup> “The Contemporary Art Archive and the Knowledge Museum are survival strategies. Knowledge is surviving (doing the best you can out of what you have)”. Interview with Lia Perjovschi by the author, August 2010, Perjovschis’ former studio, Bucharest.

<sup>214</sup> During our interview at the Perjovschi studio in Sibiu in December 2013, Lia explained how Bratescu generously bequeath them the studio she was assigned by the Artists Union in 1990, as she already had a studio in Bucharest.

<sup>215</sup> Lia Perjovschi, Contemporary Art Archive/Center for Art Analysis (CAA/CAA), mixed-media installation, 1997–ongoing, Perjovschi Archive, Sibiu.

thinking,”<sup>216</sup> Lia viewed her effort as providing “a platform for ideas, dialogue, communication and empowerment”<sup>217</sup> in a precarious local context. The CAA/CAA is an aesthetic model for an alternative, interdisciplinary institution that not only has filled a gap in art education in the country but also has served as a means of reactivating and recuperating suppressed or missing histories as a result of the pre-1989 segregation. Its epistemological richness contradicts commonly held assumptions about the lack of critical thinking in Eastern Europe, which stem from generalizations about the poverty in the region, repressive state control over social relations, artists’ limited mobility, and a scarcity of information.

Indeed, during its two-decade existence in the art studio building across from the Art University, Perjovschi’s project managed to inspire and educate young artists, curators, philosophers, and art historians. By transmitting seminal knowledge, concepts, and working methods, it engendered a more meaningful intellectual and effective exchange than the university itself. As a resistance strategy in an era of globalization and political confusion and an alternative space for knowledge, it has been celebrated internationally.

---

<sup>216</sup> Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 3–6. Foster’s text focuses on artists whose practices are archival—as either methodology and/or product. He ponders whether archival art may emerge out of lost information and a sense of failure in cultural memory. He cites artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn, Douglas Gordon, Tacita Dean, and Sam Durant, who “seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present.”

<sup>217</sup> “CAA/CAA (Contemporary Art Archive/Center for Art Analysis ) is a contemporary art platform in files focusing on art and its context, art theory and practice, cultural studies and critical theory. A comprehensive (international) database “a voice-activated” capsule of knowledge. A frame and platform for ideas, dialogue, communication and empowerment focusing on issues that reflect the current debate in the art field and new cultural theories — about the social and political relevance of art, its autonomy and its changes.” Interview Lia Perjovschi by the author, August 2010, Perjovschis’ former studio, Bucharest.

Receiving increasing recognition from the artistic community, Lia began to travel extensively throughout Europe, North America, Latin America, and parts of Asia. She was not content with simply observing and reflecting upon those contexts in her works. Together with Dan, she hosted meetings between foreign artists, journalists, theorists, and specialists from all fields and local cultural communities. For Lia, what in 1997 she would coin the “CAA (Contemporary Art Archive)” became an aesthetic model for collecting and organizing information, and the development of critical-thinking tools. Driven by her broad quest for knowledge, she approached these goals from her own experience of having come from Romania, where such timely resources and strategies were simply nonexistent.<sup>218</sup>

The Contemporary Art Archive embodies the artist’s ardent desire to open different spaces of knowledge and self-education. Within the archival artistic practices of artists from Eastern Europe outlined at the beginning of this chapter, Perjovschi presents a rather different, more epistemic view, one that cannot be reduced to a purely Eurocentric narrative of contemporaneity. Although it may be tempting for some scholars to inscribe Perjovschi’s art within a Western historiography of art history, I contend that despite similarities and overlaps with certain Conceptual art projects, it must be understood as an open cultural practice and form, stemming from a place of knowledge

---

<sup>218</sup> See my interview with Lia Perjovschi in Corina L. Apostol and Amy Bryzgel, “Reflections on Artistic Practice in Romania: Then and Now,” eds. Raluca Voinea and Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, *IDEA Arts + Society*, no. 45 (November 2014): 92–94.

that is grounded in the artist's socialist-era and post-socialist experiences.<sup>219</sup> Her maps, diagrams, timelines [Ills.3.10] and collections [Ills.3.4] should be acknowledged as both a project against being provincialized by an art world predicated on high culture, with its authorities and values, and a struggle for liberation.

Further, Perjovschi continues to challenge her audiences to establish their own parameters for analyzing, categorizing, and absorbing the material that she has gathered, allowing the germination of social values and authorless discourses that cannot be contained by power apparatuses. This emancipatory practice stands at the opposite end of the mentality of fear and repression dominating the context from which her practice emerged. At the same time, it is in dialogue with the earlier use by artists of private apartments, where discursive, performative, and experimental art practices unfolded and challenged the limits of censorship under dictatorship.

Using the archive as a basis, as well as the experience of international peers, Perjovschi focused the activities at CAA on analyzing strategies in the Romanian art scene and beyond, supporting innovative programs and critical methodologies and offering a basis for art activism. In 2000 Lia and Dan Perjovschi, together with historian Adrian Cioroianu, were invited to host a show on contemporary art, theater, dance,

---

<sup>219</sup> The concepts "place of knowledge" and "location of experience" stem from key postcolonial ideas such as the locus of enunciation, the emphasis on local histories, and the understanding of the geopolitics of knowledge. Scholarship on artists from Eastern Europe and Latin America, for example, has emphasized these concepts for an understanding of artistic practices in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries from the perspective of the historical experience of real socialism, imagined as a site of difference and contestation, that is distinct from European modernist values and experiences. See Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000), 21–22, 114–16.

music, literature, film, architecture, and politics on national television.<sup>220</sup> Entitled *Totul la Vedere* (Everything on View), the show covered an eclectic pool of topics including the human body, the city, the twenty-first century, center and periphery, the art market, cultural policies, and manipulation. Lia designed the scenography for the show, similar to that of a theater production. In one of her sketches, she emphasized the presence of cameras and lighting devices, which are drawn in thick, black marker over the set and meant as commentary on the relationship between television and history, which holds special significance for Romania's 1989 Revolution, as I have described above. The Perjovschis discontinued their collaboration with the national television station after the return to power of the neo-communist group that the artists and many others had opposed in the 1990s. At the same time, the artists continued to organize many important meetings and discussions in their Bucharest studio, which became a much-needed and rare catalyst for the art scene in Romania.<sup>221</sup>

In 2003 the Contemporary Art Archive began operating under the name “CAA/ CAA (Contemporary Art Archive/Center for Art Analysis). The change in the space's

---

<sup>220</sup> *Everything on View* was produced by Ruxandra Garofeanu and directed by Aurel Badea. It aired every Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., from October to December 2000 on TVR1 (The Romanian National Channel 1).

<sup>221</sup> Between 2000 and 2003 the studio and archive were opened for the following events organized by Lia and Dan: Studio debate on art administration with curator Olga Ștefan; studio visit with young artists from Bucharest, Timișoara, and Iași; studio visit with Zdenka Badovinać, director of Moderna galerija Ljubljana, and artist Ion Grigorescu; studio debate on an art residence in Romania, together with the French Institute and directors of NGOs from Romania; studio visit with ECUMEST students (with Aurora Dediu); studio visit with curator Raluca Voinea and artist Edi Constantin; studio visit with filmmakers Cristi Puiu and Ștefan Constantinescu; studio visit with the curators of *Manifesta 4*: Nuria Enguita Mayo and Iara Boubnova on the young art scene; studio visit with students from the Art Academy Bucharest in Reli Mocanu's class; studio visit with Werner Meyer, director of Kunsthalle Gpppingen; studio visit with art historian Claire Bishop and students from the Royal College of Art's Curatorial Master Class; studio visit with writers Dan Petrescu, Tess Culianu, Ciprian Mihali, and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi; studio lecture on critical thinking with Claire Bishop; studio visit with Alex Farquharson and MA students from the Royal College London's curatorial program; and others. Documented in the Perjovschi archive, Sibiu.

taxonomy marked a shift from the traditional understanding of the archive as a platform for collecting and presenting material to what its actual function had become over time, which is a space for communication, empowerment, reflection, and activism around the social and political relevance of art in context. From group discussions, lectures, presentations, workshops, and exhibitions, Lia channeled educational impetus with sociopolitical engagement, by archiving and collecting, while at the same time, “constructing one’s own context,” as the artist collective IRWIN has stated in their catchy motto.<sup>222</sup> Visitors to the CAA/CAA would receive Perjovschi’s self-published newspapers, in themselves critical tools for commenting on local and international initiatives in the art field. Her art grew from the isolated milieu of 1980s Romania to embrace different kinds of knowledge—from social sciences and technology to the humanities—as well as to respond to and be informed by exhibiting and teaching in countries stretching from the United States and parts of Latin America to European countries (both west and east) and South Korea. In these contexts, the artist engaged local communities through staging installations, giving lectures, and teaching courses on contemporary art, acting as an “artistic diplomat” and engendering links between the cultural communities in Romania and abroad.<sup>223</sup>

---

<sup>222</sup> Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, “Innovative Forms of Archives, Part Two: IRWIN’s East Art Map and Tamás St. Auby’s Portable Intelligence Increase Museum,” *e-flux journal*, no. 16 (May 2010), accessed January 6, 2015, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/innovative-forms-of-archives-part-two-irwin%E2%80%99s-east-art-map-and-tamas-st-auby%E2%80%99s-portable-intelligence-increase-museum/>.

<sup>223</sup> See Lia Perjovschi interview with Barbara Barsch, “. . . I Became a Kind of Detective . . .,” in Barbara Barsch, *Lia Perjovschi: Knowledge Museum Kit* (Manchester, UK: Connerhouse Publications, 2012), 16–21.

Since becoming a self-professed nomad artist, Lia Perjovschi has streamlined the documentation and practices of CAA/CAA into what she calls a “CAA Kit.”<sup>224</sup> Traveling globally with her own Duchampian “*Boîte-en-valise*,”<sup>225</sup> she has invited international audiences to themselves become art detectives—that is, to analyze, judge, learn, and act for the future. Perjovschi’s CAA Kit is comprised of “Detective Materials,” “Time Lines,” [Ills.3.10] and “Mind Maps,” [Ills.3.5] material carefully selected from her archive and centered on certain themes and/or historical events, depending on where it is to be exhibited. Also in this Kit are posters documenting the CAA/CAA’s activities in Bucharest, grounding this model in a commitment to create a culturally engaged community.<sup>226</sup> Below are a few examples that emphasize its role in allowing the public to figure out its own models of analysis and organization of information, ones that correspond to its members’ specific needs and experiences.

For contemporary Romanian art, institutional networks based on transparency are definitely an urgent need and something that the powers of state have handled without consulting the artistic community, or the greater public benefitting from artistic productions. One of the most important debates in which the Perjovschis have been active were those around the problematic establishment of the first National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest (MNAC) within the so-called House of the People (in actuality, meant to be Ceaușescu’s palace), which became the Palace of Parliament in

---

<sup>224</sup> Lia Perjovschi, *CAA Kit*, selected from CAA (Contemporary Art Archive), Perjovschi Archive, Sibiu.

<sup>225</sup> Marcel Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise* is a portable miniature monograph, created in different editions between 1935 and 1970, that includes approximately sixty-nine reproductions of the artist’s work.

<sup>226</sup> Lia Perjovschi, “Research File. CAA Activities, 1990–2000,” black-and-white photocopy, ten pages, Perjovschi Archive, Sibiu.



2004. In the film *In My Beloved Bucharest* (1977),<sup>227</sup> artist Ion Grigorescu documents the aftereffects of the earthquake that struck the city in 1977 and triggered a series of systematic demolitions to make space for Ceaușescu's palace. Using a hidden camera, Grigorescu shot the film from tram no. 26, as it passed through housing areas for factory workers,<sup>228</sup> while revealing the megalomaniacal project of building a new town center on the ruins of a historical one.<sup>229</sup> The artist went on to act as a witness to the destruction, his artistic proofs remaining catalysts for debate around unresolved issues of this violent past once the dictatorship had ended.

Twenty years after Grigorescu, Lia produced an artist newspaper entitled "Detective Draft—The Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest," together with Dan Perjovschi.<sup>230</sup> This publication investigated the context in which the museum was established. It laid out for the general public the raging debates over the use of the space, where artists had been invited to exhibit and which were ignored, all of which revealed the untransparent appointment of its artistic directors. As the artists poignantly remarked:

Between the city and the building empty fields stretch for about a mile. That is exactly the distance between the leaders and the citizens. [ . . . ]  
Absolutely no one was consulted: this is Romania where the process should

---

<sup>227</sup> Ion Grigorescu, *In My Beloved Bucharest*, 1977, Super 8mm film transferred to 16mm, 10 minutes, Grigorescu Archive, Bucharest.

<sup>228</sup> These workers were the class of people supposedly playing the leading role in socialist society in Romania. The film shows their heavy machinery and materials used for constructing the Bucharest subway, identifiable through the letter *M* painted on metal fences around construction sites. The slogans around the sites read "Long Live Communism, the Future of Mankind!" An inscription on a monument declares, "We Have Made the Ultimate Sacrifice for Future Generations."

<sup>229</sup> Alina Serban, "Promises of the past," in *Promises of the past A discontinuous History of Art in Former Eastern Europe*, exh. cat. (Zurich: Jrp Ringier, 2010), 91.

<sup>230</sup> Lia Perjovschi, *Detective Draft*, black-and-white newspaper, published in the context of *On Difference #1 Local Contexts—Hybrid Spaces*, May 20–July 31, 2005, Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart (Bucharest and Stuttgart: CAA/CAA and Württembergischer Kunstverein, 2005), Perjovschi Archive, Sibiu.

be more transparent. The prime minister (an art collector) is quoted as saying about the location: “either here or nowhere . . .” [ . . . ] The museum was established putting all the state [museum] spaces together (6 venues) under the same umbrella. This was the year, 2004, when things were supposed to go the other way, toward decentralizing state power.<sup>231</sup>

Local and international scholars and artists were prompted to respond to the situation. Strongly criticizing the subordination of art to state politics, the publication decried the compromised democratic ideals this signaled in a period in which the sociopolitical climate was expected to move on the path of loosening the centralization of state power. Finally, in the artist’s statement, she called for witnesses, the general public, to react to this historical injustice, providing them with facts and examples for how to act. Lia Perjovschi’s intervention remains a model for exercising one’s moral and ethical conscience through artistic practice that challenges the viewer into thinking politically and stepping outside of passivity. What the artist implicitly emphasized is that in order to act, one must be thoroughly informed, that is, know the terms of the debate in order to adopt a position.

Lia Perjovschi recognized the need of artists at all stages in their creative lives to be in dialogue with the international community and to understand the construction of art history in a global context that includes politics, economy, and science. She responded to this need in her own art and writing. In a collection of texts and images brought together under the title *Subjective Art History from Modernism to Present Day: Art and Its Context* (1997–2004), she organized information on local cultural developments and international

---

<sup>231</sup> Dan and Lia Perjovschi quoted in *States of Mind*, pg. 83–84.

art historiographies.<sup>232</sup> Critically deconstructing the traditional, academic art history from survey textbooks, she changed the focus of the discipline, shifting it toward the cultural construction of texts and images about art in different contexts, and relating artistic practices to seminal social and political events.

In her *Subjective Art History*, Perjovschi included not only artists and their works, but also magazine clippings, film stills, events in the popular media, and snapshots of exhibition spaces and various social and cultural institutions—entities that streamline the dissemination and reception of art. Organized into art historical terms, a time line consisting of dates (from 1826 to 2004), images framed by both identifying information and the artist's comments, quotes about art, and a bibliography, she gave art historians themselves a lesson on teaching art. In a project related to her "Time lines," Perjovschi used diagrams, or what she refers to as "Mind Maps" (1999–2006), to explore and explode concepts constructed from information appearing in different spheres of cultural, social, and political life.<sup>233</sup> As the artist explained, "These works helped me to understand the development of history and then to see how my art also developed in different historical contexts."<sup>234</sup> Mind Maps are drawings consisting of handwritten texts

---

<sup>232</sup> Lia Perjovschi, "Research File. My Subjective Art History, 1997–2004," black-and-white computer printout, thirty-five pages, Perjovschi Archive, Sibiu.

<sup>233</sup> Lia Perjovschi, *Mind Maps (Diagrams)*, 1999–2006, sixty black-ink drawings on paper, Perjovschi Archive, Sibiu. Lia's *Mind Maps (Diagrams)* address the following subjects: "Critical Theory," "Contemporary Literary Theory," "Cognitive Science," "Form Follows Fiction," "Film Studies," "Objects," "History of Art," "Utopia," "Quantum Theory," "Deconstruction," "Projects," "Glossaries," "From Text to Action," "Memory Study," "Postmodern Postmodernity—Modernism Modernity," "Power," "Cool," "Subculture," "Artist," "How to Survive," "Memory," "Trauma," "Space and Time," "Totalitarianism," "Cultural Center 21st Century," "Anthropology," "Detective," "Critical Thinking," "Cultural Theory," "Mind Body," "Communism," "Key Ideas," "Culture Jamming," "Spraycan Art," "Scheme CAA," "Failure," "Cultural Context," "Art Therapy," "Romania," "21st-Century Capitalism," "Noise," "Black Holes," and others.

<sup>234</sup> Kristine Stiles, "Passages 1992–2007: Interview with Lia Perjovschi," in *States of Mind*, 178.

researched by the artist and presented as a network of interconnections and convergences. [Ills.3.2] Each map is organized around a core concept, which is positioned at the center of the composition. Building on the core, which addresses themes such as “Ideology,” “Communism,” “Artist,” “Subculture,” “Space and Time” or simply “?,” the artist charted relationships and comments culled from different media (books, newspapers, artworks, popular culture). She then constructed each diagram by writing down associations and comments that visually revolve like planets in a solar system around a central force.

Perjovschi’s Mind Maps are partly illegible, executed as shorthand mementos, or traces of research. However frustrating this strategy may prove for the viewer and critics, they function as more than evidence of the artist’s extensive knowledge or a simple exercise in deconstruction. Rather, they operate as idiosyncratic structures of language that deny audiences complete understanding. Similar to her Time Lines, they are meant to activate one’s desire to know and to explore beyond mere contemplation by constructing one’s own knowledge models, with an awareness of the semiotic heritage of the concepts at stake.

A new project called “The Knowledge Museum” (KM)<sup>235</sup> [Ills.3.7] encapsulates these various models, framing them into a more comprehensive and unconventional structure. In 2009 Lia Perjovschi started working on and exhibiting “Plans for a Knowledge Museum,” a museum-like installation based on the “Research Files” accrued in the CAA (Contemporary Art Archive). Characterized by an interdisciplinary approach,

---

<sup>235</sup> Lia Perjovschi, *The Knowledge Museum*, mixed-media installation, 2009–ongoing, Perjovschi Archive, Sibiu.

this future artist-run museum is dedicated to moving away from the exhibition as spectacle or a form of entertainment, and toward an open-structured, archival model. Perjovschi envisioned a museum with seven departments: The Body, Art, Culture, The Earth, Knowledge and Education, The Universe and Science, reflecting her own interdisciplinary approach to the organization of information. The installation of “Plans for a Knowledge Museum” comprises the artist’s own drawings (Diagrams, Time Lines, and Mind Maps), as well as objects, charts, photos, and color prints [Ills.3.8]. Most of the objects she and Dan have collected were bought in museum gift shops from around the world, and she uses this material culture also to draw attention to the ways in which art and museums themselves are commodified and marketed. All of these items are loosely grouped, as the project’s “departments” are not mutually exclusive. Instead, the installation invites audiences to embark on an analytical journey, similar to drifting through the recesses of the human brain. Perjovschi’s Knowledge Museum bears similarities with modernist projects such as Aby Warburg’s Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (KBW, Warburg Library of Cultural Studies; built 1925–26), a collection of books, images, and objects arranged as a history of the Renaissance, which demonstrates the influence of antiquity on modern culture through an interdisciplinary approach.<sup>236</sup> Unlike her predecessor, however, Perjovschi is not searching for a single

---

<sup>236</sup> From 1913 to 1929 art historian Aby Warburg, based in Hamburg, produced the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (KBW) and related visual displays surveying the visual survival of Antiquity. Only photographs remain of his work, with reproduced material pinned to Hessian-stretched wooden frames. The frames did not only structure historical material for easier stylistic comparison, but they also helped to create a visual proposal of a constructed historical space. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’image survivante: Histoire de l’art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2001); and Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg’s Atlas of Images* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

historical truth, or an all-encompassing history of an artistic style or period, but instead to subvert the assumption of a unified truth or history. The artist's project does not aim to give her audiences a coherent world view; rather, it shows the conflicts, contradictions, and inequalities present in our world. At the same time, her position is not neutral, for she is on the side of the have-nots, the oppressed, and the marginalized, and from that position, she launches her effective critique of the world order.

Frequently, Dan Perjovschi's engaging drawings occupy the Art Department of Lia's installation of the Knowledge Museum [Ills.3.12]. For example, in their joint installation at the Contemporary Art Space of Castellón, Dan's series of drawings in black marker, entitled *Time Specific*, covered an entire white wall, commenting on national symbols and the fragile state of the Spanish national economy in 2010.<sup>237</sup> *Revoluti ON/OFF*<sup>238</sup> is a play on words, reminding viewers of the social movements in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States that seriously challenged, or even deposed, dictatorial regimes or oppressive governments. This drawing is characterized by a conceptual dynamism that anticipates the social phenomena that may turn the world order upside down and rewrite history. Another related work *Local/Global*<sup>239</sup> juxtaposes two faces, one showing a pair of fangs, and the other, multiple sharp teeth. Underneath the first figure the artist wrote "local," while the latter has "global" written parallel to it.

---

<sup>237</sup> As the title *Time Specific* implies, Perjovschi spent several weeks preparing the exhibition in Spain, during which time he produced sketches for drawings reflecting on his experience.

<sup>238</sup> Dan Perjovschi, *Revoluti ON/OFF*, black-ink drawing on wall, 2010, Espai d'art contemporani de Castelló, Spain.

<sup>239</sup> Dan Perjovschi, "Local/Global," black ink drawing on wall, 2010, Espai d'art contemporani de Castelló, Spain.

Politically charged, this drawing prompts the audience to reflect on the “glocal” political and cultural situations affecting freedoms, autonomy, and the construction of knowledge.

Lia Perjovschi conceives of her museum as a mental map, offering a lens into the processes of selection that inform her view of cultural practices and their consequences in society, and inviting audiences to engage in a similar process of self-reflection. The project reveals her methods of associating objects and concepts, and the building of her understanding of the world through experience in combination with research. This material is laid out for viewers to investigate and use. Enacting notions of self-archiving and openness, the KM is a blueprint for the decentralization of art institutions. This line of critique connects the artist to aforementioned experimental projects, such as Auby’s *Portable Intelligence Increase Museum* and Akhunov’s *I m2*, as well as to Galántai’s *Artpool Art Research Center* in Budapest (1992–ongoing) or the installations of the British collective *Art & Language* beginning in the late 1960s.

Lia Perjovschi’s strategy with regard to exhibition distinguishes her from her predecessors. I suggest that her work is intimately connected to the Dadaist tradition,<sup>240</sup> which emerged in Central Europe during World War I, and whose existence was denied during the Ceaușescu dictatorship.<sup>241</sup> I am referring in particular to these Avant-Gardes’

---

<sup>240</sup> The Dada movement officially began in February 1916, when Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings opened the literary-artistic Cabaret Voltaire in the restaurant Meierei at Spiegelgasse 1 in Zürich. In his journal *Flight out of Time*, Ball described a group of four exotic-looking men who came into the restaurant carrying portfolios and paintings. These artists were Marcel Janco, Tristan Tzara, George Janco, and Janco’s brother Jules, all of whom had recently emigrated from Romania. Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco would become important influences for Dada in Zurich. The scholarship on Dada has charted several cartographies of the forerunners and precursors of Dada. However, the developments in Eastern Europe have received only very little attention. Tom Sandqvist’s unique book *Dada East: The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire* focuses on the cultural and historical contexts in Romania that might have had particular impact on the activities in Zurich. See Tom Sandqvist, *Dada East: The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>241</sup> See Adrian Notz, introduction in *Dada East? The Romanians of Cabaret Voltaire*, exh. cat. (Bucharest: Cabaret Voltaire and E-cart.ro, 2007), 11–12

approach to exhibiting as espoused at the First International Dada Fair in Berlin in 1920 [Ills.3.9], which showcased art objects and drawings that blurred the lines between art and everyday materials. The spacing of the Dadaist art further challenged their audiences to look sideways, and up and down, disturbing the conventional perspective from which painting and sculpture is customarily seen in the gallery. In turn, Perjovschi lays her Mind Maps on the floor, arranges her collections of objects as constellations, builds wooden supports on which to hang bags or T-shirts with slogans, or glues measuring instruments perpendicular to the wall, echoing the Dadaist impulse of prioritizing value and message over artistry. As she herself has stated, “I am for the thinker artists, and not for the maker artist.”<sup>242</sup> Moreover, between 2006 and 2010, the artist was invited to research the Dada avant-garde movement within the historical art space Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. On this occasion she created seven time lines of approximately a hundred diagrams, five of which were exhibited in the form of *leporellos*, and a Mind Map on *Dada/Anti-Art*.<sup>243</sup> Her idea was that these works should be interpreted as parts of research that inspire further research, an ongoing attempt to gather knowledge about Dada, while constantly

---

<sup>242</sup> Lia Perjovschi in interview with the author, December 2013, Sibiu.

<sup>243</sup> These include a twenty-nine-page time line surveying general culture, starting four million years ago in the Stone Age and ending in 2025, of which twenty-five pages are dedicated to understanding Dada. For this, Perjovschi drew on Leah Dickerman’s time line published in the book *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris* which accompanied the Dada exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. A seven-page time line focuses on Romania’s Dada movement and Dada East, putting both into a historical context. A nine-page time line pursues a similar goal by putting anti-art, Dada’s legacy, in a wider historical context. A double-page spread documents the short stay in Cape Town on the occasion of *Dada South?* (2010). The latest time line focuses on Thomas McEvilley’s book *Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism*, which defines anti-art as cognition and ethics. See Leah Dickermann, *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris* (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2008); and Thomas McEvilley’s *Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism* (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 2012).



struggling to analyze the movement and what can be learned from it.<sup>244</sup> Rather than presenting an end product, Perjovschi's Time Lines stake out new territory, presenting the whole diversity and complexity of Dada.

In a 2011 interview with Russian art historian Ekaterina Lazareva, Perjovschi remarked that her knowledge-gathering practices, out of which the CAA and the Knowledge Museum (KM) emerged, are focused more generally on research instruments instead of being concerned solely with local art histories.<sup>245</sup> Building on this observation, I argue that Perjovschi approaches her projects as an implicit critique of the academy and the museum, at the same time that she adapts the language of institutional platforms in order to decentralize their inherently tiered structures. In the Romanian context, her critique is a powerful statement against the practices of the MNAC, encouraging openness, debate, and exchange as opposed to authoritarian practices under which this institution was conceived and still conducts its affairs. To be sure, Perjovschi's Knowledge Museum is based on the artist's conceptual models, but it is the viewer who, by being put in the position of creating his or her own algorithm of interpretation in the search for meaning, completes the project. In the era of mass consumption of digital information and sophisticated online search engines, the artist has developed her own

---

<sup>244</sup> "My project has the ambition to be a voice in the debate on Dadaism. The intention is not only to stress the Dada movement's complex nature by remembering the forgotten question of its Romanian roots, but to reflect on the potential and significance of the concept of 'Dada East' for the Romanian cultural scene. The dialogue between history and the present helps us understand how much Dadaism, and above all its leading artistic personalities, and the strategies and attitudes they practice, have influenced contemporary art and what an important source of inspiration they constitute today." Lia Perjovschi interview with the author, September 2014, Sibiu.

<sup>245</sup> "Lia Perjovschi in Dialogue with Ekaterina Lazareva," in *CriticAtac* (May 12, 2011), accessed December 13 2011, <http://www.criticatac.ro/7112/%E2%80%99Esunt-convinsa-ca-astazi-nu-mai-este-suficient-sa-fii-critic-este-important-sa-propui-ceva-in-schimb-altfel-nu-dai-dovada-decat-de-aroganta-%E2%80%99D/>.

non-consumer-oriented, freely available research tools within a physical archive and collection that invites audience to relate to her artworks as bodies of knowledge.<sup>246</sup>

Laying out her thinking for anyone to learn from and/or respond to, Perjovschi affirms the possibility of action and change in a violent, unjust, and confusing world. Namely, she grapples with approaches to bringing together theory and practice, while asking audiences to do the same. Together with Dan, she opens up spaces for her viewers' and visitors' narratives—and for their interventions. At the same time, her projects resist easy interpretation. They require investment of time, careful consideration, and focused attention. In a way, the interdisciplinary models that form the Knowledge Museum demand a certain endurance—not for just looking, but for actual thinking and acting [Ills. 3.11]. The artist's practice is grounded in trust, and yet she remains skeptical and uncompromising in a period of uncertainty and precariousness both in Romania and in the world. Lia Perjovschi puts her trust in her viewers, showing them the way her mind organizes information and giving them the tools necessary to do more than criticize—to create.

Through her projects, the artist provides her audience with a wealth of information, accumulated over twenty years, based on extensive experience and exchanges with artist and scholars around the world. She also leaves unanswered questions, engendering the desire to know more and to ask for more. Her publications are filled with question marks and exclamation points, while her installations present

---

<sup>246</sup> Okwui Enwezor's *Archive Fever* exhibition in New York explored the ways in which artists have engaged with the archive through practices that critiqued Foucauldian notions of truth, from Land Art artists whose durational artwork relied on recording and documentation to sociopolitical projects by the Atlas Group. Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (New York: International Center of Photography; Gottingen: Steidl, 2008).

everyday objects in plastic bags as evidence for the viewer to open, as an invitation take the information and apply it to societal struggles. Perjovschi never gives her works a definite, self-sufficient meaning, but instead suggests further questions through her unpacking of concepts and situations. It is precisely this rigorous approach to developing intellectual resources, joined with the moral and ethical dimension of her work, that make Lia Perjovschi a vital figure in the Romanian contemporary art scene and a mentor to generations of young artists, curators, and theoreticians around the world. As the artist noted: “In general, I am for engagement (with responsibility) for a better society for all. In art in particular, I am for state institutions to have, at the very least, a minimum budget for contemporary art and professional criteria in a global context. Education (with empathy and modesty) is the key word.”<sup>247</sup>

### 3.5 Engagement with local and international audiences

Lia and Dan Perjovschi continue to act together as powerful advocates for substantial change in the post-1989 period. Between 1997 and 2010, the Contemporary Art Archive (CAA) and the artists’ studio in Bucharest provided a forum for debate for local and international audiences, freeing the Romanian art community from isolation and stagnation. Unfortunately, official state institutions, such as the Art Academy (now the National Art University Bucharest), do not recognize the importance of Perjovschi’s archive as a cultural heritage landmark of international significance. In August 2010 the

---

<sup>247</sup> See Olga Ștefan, “Interview with Dan and Lia Perjovschi,” *ARTMargins Online*, July 2012, accessed October 20, 2012, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/interviews/670-interview-with-dan-and-lia-perjovschi-sibiubucharest>.

artist—along with twenty-two cultural producers working in the studios of the Art Academy—was sent a notice of evacuation under the pretext of the building’s state of decay. The Perjovschis moved the Contemporary Art Archive to their native Sibiu, where it is now housed in a newly built studio. However, before leaving the capital, they invited several artists and scholars—including this author—to visit the empty studio and reflect on its rich history and current precarious position.<sup>248</sup>

As Lia Perjovschi observed then, though the Contemporary Art Archive would be temporarily closed for consulting, the Center for Art Analysis would remain open, as it does not need a physical space in which to exist.<sup>249</sup> Lia’s remark, in conjunction with the disappearance of the Perjovschi studio in Bucharest, shed light on an indelible scar in the urban social fabric. One of city’s most valuable legacies had been all but erased: the theoretical basis of the Archive, and the presence of the artist herself, which contributed to a thriving network of civic-minded individuals and a local critical community. In a period of indiscriminate change, social amnesia, and political confusion, the fate of Perjovschi’s Archive constitutes a warning, calling for collective action against the destruction of cultural heritage in contemporary art in Central Europe.

The case study of Lia Perjovschi’s theoretical and aesthetic models invites a critique of the discipline of history and art history. Namely, the artist’s unconventional renditions of time and events intrinsically question the notion of certainty of historical facts and the linear progression of time applied in related scholarship. As aesthetic

---

<sup>248</sup> This meeting attended by the author at the former Perjovschi studio in Bucharest happened on August 13, 2010.

<sup>249</sup> Interview with Lia Perjovschi, August 2010, Perjovschis’ former studio, Bucharest.

models for broader debates about the shape of history and its creators, the Contemporary Art Archive/Center for Art Analysis and the Knowledge Museum focus on key historical figures and representations of them in the art and politics of the time. Further, as the products of self-historicization—or, as Lia Perjovschi herself puts it, “Subjective Art Histories”<sup>250</sup>—they bring to the fore the complexity of the meaning and distribution of visual images, putting forth innovative ways of seeing in relation to time and memory.

Thus, the artist uses self-historicization while also exceeding it, by suggesting an alternative system of radical criticism of knowledge production and encouraging the viewer to take an active public position in different fields of social activism. The use value of her work has been recognized and developed by generations of artists in Romania, and continues to hold international relevance, as she is invited to organize workshops, teach-ins, and installations around the world, in concert with other international artists from outside her native region.<sup>251</sup>

Since 2012, Lia and Dan Perjovschi have been running an annual project entitled Marathon Meeting/Brainstorming in their new studio space and archive and at Astra Library in Sibiu.<sup>252</sup> Each meeting brings together local and international members of the artistic community to engage in lively debates, moderated by Lia Perjovschi, on contemporary issues. These exchanges are recorded and then edited into a film by the

---

<sup>250</sup> “My projects, such as subjective art history, collection of globes, and mind maps are straightforward in their concept but complex in their implications. I ask the viewer to consider how the construction of history effects the structure of our thoughts and if it is possible for an individual to take control of that process.” Lia Perjovschi interview with the author, September 2014, Sibiu.

<sup>251</sup> For a complete list of Lia Perjovschi’s solo and group exhibitions, see Angelika Nollert, *Solo for Lia Perjovschi: Knowledge Museum Kit* (Nurnberg: Verlag Fur Moderne Kunst, 2012).

<sup>252</sup> The project is supported through a grant from the Erste Foundation and is part of the tranzit.ro network of contemporary art spaces.

artist who also produces a brochure with contributions from the participants and a summary of the discussions. At the second Marathon Meeting/Brainstorming, in September 2013, the debates centered on strategies and tactics for survival in difficult local and global contexts.<sup>253</sup> Perjovschi challenged the participants to answer the question: “How to create autonomous spaces, decent budgets and respect for contemporary art and artists?”<sup>254</sup> The meeting brought together different generations from the independent cultural scene in Romania, presenting an opportunity for a group portrait of the cultural field, uniting pre- and post-1989 forms of resistance and criticism. The participants and the Perjovschis clearly shared the struggle for cultural autonomy, though their world views were different. The younger artists defended their epistemic autonomy of acquired knowledge, practices, and identities, which were not bound to owning or running a space for art and culture. They argued that criticism, resistance, and art practices had to adapt to post-1989 conditions and even embrace their marginality, as a result of the government’s disregard for artists and contemporary art. Coming from a different perspective, Lia Perjovschi emphasized the need for creating spaces for independent cultural practices, for an oppositional consciousness open to anyone who may be interested.<sup>255</sup> The Perjovschis’ Bucharest studio had occupied such a central role in the recent history, serving as an open place of knowledge, one that extended beyond

---

<sup>253</sup> The meeting was attended by artist Alexandru Oglindă, curator Anca Mihuleț, anthropologist Andra Matzal, artist and activist Bogdan Armanu, artist Claudiu Cobilanschi, anthropologist Csilla Könczei, artist Edi Constantin, architect Gabi Roșca, artist Gabi Cosma, artist Larisa Crunțeanu, MAGMA artists’ group—Ágnes Evelin Kispál, Attila Kispál, Baji Vetro, coreographer Mădălina Dan, artist Miklós Szilárd, artist Alex Boguș (Cluj), artist duo Monotremu, artist and curator Ștefan Tiron, artist and activist Veda Popovici, and the artists Lia and Dan Perjovschi.

<sup>254</sup> Lia Perjovschi, ed., *The Artists of an Indifferent Context* (Sibiu: Honterus, 2014), 18.

<sup>255</sup> Lia Perjovschi, ed., *The Artists of an Indifferent Context* (Sibiu: Honterus, 2014), 18.

the physical archive produced by the artist, and as a site of difference and contestation activated by various audiences and practices over the course of two decades. Although the Marathon Meeting/Brainstorming discussions ran into a wall, the exchange of local ideas and surfacing local solidarity among participants were hopeful signs that it helped to instigate some common platform between the participant artists, curators, and philosophers.

The main theme of the September 2014 Meeting/Brainstorming was the global world crisis, civil unrest, protests—economic, environmental, and political—one hundred years after the beginning of World War I. Participants were invited them to think about solutions for societal survival.<sup>256</sup> This was the first international iteration of the project, with curators, artists, writers, anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers hailing from Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Russia, South Africa, Kosovo, Canada, and the United States.<sup>257</sup> The material given to the participants in preparation for the meeting included Dan Perjovschi's black-and-white drawing *Violence*, which depicts a falling figure whose back is crushed by the letter *V*, while the rest of the letters trail away to the upper right of the composition. For the local participants, the images evoked layers of historical conflict in Romania, from the unleashed violence of the 1989 Revolution and the Mineriads of the 1990s to the more recent anti-government protests, which were met with police violence

---

<sup>256</sup> The meeting was attended by the author; curator Iara Boubnova; artist Kathryn Smith; curators Marek Adamov, Hanka Luksu, and Robo Blasko (Zilina); curator Albert Heta; sociologist Enikő Vincze; art historian Cristian Nae; curator Simona Năstac; anthropologist Alexandru Bălăşescu; curator Alina Şerban; and the artists Lia and Dan Perjovschi.

<sup>257</sup> Art historian Kristine Stiles could not be present, although she sent a statement to the group with her answers to Lia's prompt.

on the streets of major cities across the country.<sup>258</sup> The drawing speaks not only to the Romanian context, however, as was evident from the accounts given by presenters from Kosovo, South Africa, and Russia<sup>259</sup> of the crushing of dissent and bloody protests by the arrogant and petty nationalist politicians who have led those countries in the last two decades. While different solutions were presented, from guerrilla action, protests, and petitions to exposing these instances of repression through documentary film, the participants agreed that education and empathy were necessary tools in ending cycles of violence that by now affect almost all societies across the world.

These Marathon /Brainstorming workshops introduced, thanks to Lia Perjovschi's careful selection of topics, key words, and research material for the participants, a complexity of layers that simultaneously capture and emphasize the instability of history, activating the audience member in his or her capacity to act as a critical citizen. Thus, the artist put forth the challenge of imagining different ways of understanding and constructing not only Art History, but also collective History. Taking apart its practices and theoretical models, Perjovschi invites audience members into the challenging game of putting the pieces back together again, and figuring out, in the process, which side they are on.

In conclusion, in so far as Lia Perjovschi and Dan Perjovschi's radical artistic projects take the shape of educational platforms (Center for Art Analysis/Contemporary

---

<sup>258</sup> See Sergiu Gherghina and Sergiu Mişcoiu, "The Failure of Cohabitation: The Institutional Crises in Romania," *East European Politics and Societies* 27, no. 4 (2013), 668–84.

<sup>259</sup> Case studies for the discussions were the current war between Ukraine and Russia, the Roşia Montana protests in 2014, the massacre of South African miners at Marikana in 2012, and the shooting of Kosovo protesters by United Nations peacekeepers in 2007.



Art Archive and institutions the Knowledge Museum, they represent a form of resistance to conservative local structures and their immutable rules, from the University of Arts, to the National Contemporary Art Museum. Concepts and formats such as the archive, research, informal education, and interdisciplinarity have been defined by the artists as subjects, working methods, and concerns that make possible a more sincere form of communication and genuine knowledge exchange, both intellectual and affective. Lia Perjovschi's Archive and Museum projects remain open to the public space, as mediums for knowledge production and information exchange. They are long-term artistic projects initiated not as new museification attempts, but rather as constant thematic reevaluations, reconceptualizations and repositionings within art and society.

While the Contemporary Art Archive/Center for Art Analysis existed in the center of Bucharest, right next door to the Art Academy, it managed to bring together and motivate a host of intellectuals from different backgrounds, including students and young artists.<sup>260</sup> The fact that the Perjovschis lost their studio in August 2010 was perhaps no worse than the situation of other artists who have similarly been expelled from the Scarlat/Robescu artist studios building.<sup>261</sup> However, the fact that the powers that be have taken over this space, glossing over its recent history, is symptomatic for a still-amnesic local community. Since then, Lia Perjovschi has moved her Archive and her Center for Art Analysis and Knowledge to Sibiu, where she continues to welcome international

---

<sup>260</sup> Despite the fact that their studio was situated in the backyard of the Art Academy, the Perjovschis were never invited there to give talks or hold workshops, even though the rich history of artistic and educational events associated with their studio was very well-known in the local and international art communities.

<sup>261</sup> See my account of the eviction and commentary on the value of the Perjovschi studio: "Lia Perjovschi's CAA/CAA (Contemporary Art Archive/ Center for Art Analysis) and the Knowledge Museum," ed. Raluca Voinea, *The Long April. Texts About Art*, no.1 (2011), accessed 09/01/2016.

audiences in a space for transmitting knowledge, for developing concepts, and for history and collective memory. Telling complex stories of history, philosophy, politics, art and everyday life through intricate, yet engaging art installations, Perjovschi's art continues to relate to pressing political and social issues and empower her audiences.

## Chapter 4

### The Activist Club and the School of Engaged Art

Established in 2003 in St. Petersburg, the artist collective Chto Delat?'s founding members include artists Dmitry Vilensky, Olga Egorova (Tsaplya), and Natalia Pershina-Yakimanskaya (Gluklya) who, during the 1980s and 1990s, produced works at the nexus of art, philosophy, political activism, and theory.<sup>262</sup> The collective's name translates "What is to be done?," the title of Nikolay Chernyshevsky's mid-nineteenth-century novel that put forward an agenda of radical reform in Imperial Russia. As Vilensky observed, "Chernyshevsky's novel was a brilliant attempt at writing some sort of a manual on how to construct emancipatory collectives and make them sustainable within a hostile society."<sup>263</sup> It is no coincidence that this radical literary work was invoked by Vladimir Lenin in 1902,<sup>264</sup> when he wrote an eponymous revolutionary pamphlet on class

---

<sup>262</sup> Chto Delat' defines itself as "a self-organized platform for a variety of cultural activities intent on politicizing knowledge production through redefinitions of an engaged autonomy for cultural practice today." Their array of artistic activities is coordinated by a core group including the following members: Olga Egorova (Tsaplya; artist, Petersburg), Artiom Magun (philosopher, Petersburg), Nikolay Oleynikov (artist, Moscow), Natalia Pershina (Gluklya; artist, Petersburg), Nina Gasteva (choreographer), Alexey Penzin (philosopher, Moscow), David Riff (art critic, Moscow), Alexander Skidan (poet and critic, Petersburg), Oxana Timofeeva (philosopher, Moscow), and Dmitry Vilensky (artist, Petersburg). In addition, many Russian and international artists and researchers have participated in different projects realized under the collective name Chto Delat'. Dmitry Vilensky and Tsaplya, in interview with the author, June 2011, St. Petersburg.

<sup>263</sup> Dmitry Vilensky and Gerard Raunig, "An Issue of Organisation: Chto Delat?," *Afterall*, no. 19 (Autumn/Winter 2008): 5-19.

<sup>264</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, "Afterword: Lenin's Choice," in Vladimir Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 169-172. Žižek problematizes Lenin's text ("Burning Questions for Our Movement" is the subtitle of Lenin's "What Is to Be Done?"), emphasizing the tenuous relationship between the spontaneity of the working-class struggle and the necessity for organization.

consciousness, and the conflict between bourgeois and socialist ideologies.<sup>265</sup> Centuries apart, the question “What is to be done?,” with all its historical nuances and positions (anarchist, anarcho-syndicalist, communist, individualist, social-democratic, socialist), functioned as a mnemonic for self-organization of the proletariat through political engagement.<sup>266</sup> Aware of this rich legacy, Chto Delat? focused on issues of knowledge production in the form of the self-organized educational process that I will explore in this chapter.

The collective’s practice defies straightforward categorization, as they engage with various mediums, theories, and strategies to exhibit their works, with the goal of revising and reformulating the shared understanding of Eastern European history, both in their local context and in the Western one, in order to bring to light other narratives of history. As Vilensky observed, “We believe that political and artistic life cannot exist without an archive and historicization: only in relation to the past can we build our

---

<sup>265</sup> Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?* of 1902 distinguishes between bourgeois and socialist ideologies as makers of class consciousness: “The working class spontaneously gravitates towards Socialism, but the more widespread (and continuously revived in the most diverse forms) bourgeois ideology nevertheless imposes itself upon the working class still more.” Vladimir Lenin, *What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions for Our Movement* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1973), 51.

<sup>266</sup> Nikolay Chernyshevsky’s novel *Chto delat? (What Is To Be Done?)*; 1863) describes the existence of oppositional circles to the tsarist power of the times, which, despite being criminalized, managed to formulate some key cultural and philosophical works. Notwithstanding their marginality, they contributed to the triumph over the regime, and continue to inspire artists like Chto Delat?, who look for alternative education models in the current repressive situation in Russia.

politics today.”<sup>267</sup> To achieve this goal, the collective produced newspapers<sup>268</sup> and artworks—videos, radio plays, and performances—staging artistic interventions in cultural domains and institutions, both in Russia and internationally. Chto Delat?’s newspapers and video works were distributed free of charge at exhibitions, demonstrations, and conferences, and through their website [chtodelat.org](http://chtodelat.org). Their polemical artistic projects are methodologically grounded in the working principles of Russian Constructivism, Brechtian theater, Surrealism, and the soviets—an instrumental form of collective self-management initiated during the 1917 Russian Revolution.<sup>269</sup> Chto Delat?’s art and working practices are not just echoes of the past or theoretical references, but rather constitute an attempt to reactivate the utopian vision that these historical endeavors sought to develop—that is, a vision in which an aesthetic experience in a public space can become politicized, and thus build social consciousness.

---

<sup>267</sup> Dmitry Vilensky, “Introduction,” in *Chto Delat?: Time Capsule: An Artistic Report on Catastrophes and Utopias*, eds. Dmitry Vilensky, Tina Lipsky, Bettina Spoerr, exh. cat. (Berlin: Revolver with Vienna Secession, 2014), n.p.

<sup>268</sup> Since 2003 Chto Delat? has been publishing an eponymous newspaper, for the most part bilingual in Russian and English. The editorial process draws artists, activists, critics, and philosophers into debates that result in theoretical essays, art projects, open-source translations, comic strips, photomontages, questionnaires, etc. The publication was established as an attempt to translate the “old school” rhetoric of party publications at the turn of the twentieth century, such as *Iskra* (*The Spark*), to the present-day cultural situation. Chto Delat? seeks ways of addressing different resistant communities and triggering their interest in new forms of knowledge. The newspaper is edited by Dmitry Vilensky in collaboration with members of Chto Delat?, and it appears in two to five issues a year. It is distributed for free, as a takeaway at exhibitions, congresses, social forum, and rallies, thus reaching different audiences. Sometimes it is used as a form of intervention in situations of protests and intellectual debates. For every issue an artist is invited to produce a set of graphics that contributes conceptually to the overall theme.

<sup>269</sup> Chto Delat? works through collective initiatives organized by art soviets, inspired by the councils formed in revolutionary Russia during the early twentieth century. Considering themselves “art soviets,” they want to trigger a new model for the politics of collective work, one based on a synthesis of participatory and representational politics. Chto Delat? was founded on the principles of initiatives and shared responsibilities, functioning as a counter-power that collectively plans, localizes, and executes projects. In addition to conventional artistic and research activities, Chto Delat? also conceives of itself as a new type of institution and community-building tool.

Before I analyze in more detail Chto Delat?'s major projects, such as *Activist Club* (2010) and *The School of Engaged Art* (2013–present), I discuss the collective's formative years in Russia and, in particular, their participation in the St. Petersburg nonconformist artistic circles before and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. I also bring into focus the avant-garde traditions associated with the city that informed the artists' strategies, as well as their readaptation during the Putin regime.

#### 4.1 Nonconformist Artistic Circles in Leningrad before and after 1991

St. Petersburg (also known as Leningrad from Vladimir Lenin's death in 1924 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, when it was renamed St. Petersburg) had once been the urban milieu from which some of the most important avant-garde movements were launched. A main stage of revolution in 1905 and again in 1917, the city was then at the center of events that changed not only the map of Europe but also the cultural and ideological map of the world. During Sergei Diaghilev's Paris theater seasons of *Les Ballets Russes* and after the Bolshevik Revolution, the nexus of avant-garde artists, most notably representatives of the Suprematists, Constructivists, and Productivists taught at the Institute of Artistic Culture, or GINKhUK,<sup>270</sup> and produced an engaged art that, against the background of intense sociopolitical transformations at the beginning of the twentieth century, dramatically changed the way people traditionally understood the

---

<sup>270</sup> GINKhUK (The Institute of Artistic Culture) and the Museum of Artistic Culture in St. Petersburg (then Petrograd) were run by landmark figures in the art world, including Vladimir Tatlin and Nikolay Punin. also Kazimir Malevich's base during the NEP (New Economic Policy), where he and his students continued their pioneering work on color and perception, which they began at the more utopian Suprematist organization UNOVIS in Vitebsk.

artistic process.<sup>271</sup> The mid-to-late 1920s and '30s saw the rise of "Heroic Realism" and the Soviet government's increasing control over artistic production, culminating in the 1934 announcement deeming Socialist Realism the official style of Soviet art. Following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, the monolith of official culture began to erode, as artists began to explore means of expression and subjects banned during the Stalin era.<sup>272</sup>

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, nonconformist artists became more visible locally and abroad in the cultural sphere, and they began to analyze the artistic and historic legacy of the communist regime. Among other pioneering groups was Photo-Postscriptum, an association of photographers who, in 1993, opened an eponymous exhibition space for artistic photography (Photo-Postscriptum Place), which was managed by Vilensky.<sup>273</sup> At that time, the group also launched a series of publications that were uniquely dedicated to promoting and reformulating photography in an art scene and a society that had experienced dramatic changes.<sup>274</sup> The historical avant-garde in

---

<sup>271</sup> See Katerina Clark, *Petersburg the Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). In this book, Clark looks at one of the most creative and dramatic periods of Russian culture, between 1913 and 1931. Clark focuses on the negotiations between the extraordinary environment of the revolution, the utopian striving of politicians and intellectuals, the local cultural system, and the broader context of European and American culture. Her analysis of cultural revolution is viewed through the prism of Petersburg, then one of the cultural capitals of Europe.

<sup>272</sup> See Diane Neumaier, *Beyond Memory: Soviet Nonconformist Photography* (New Brunswick, NJ: Zimmerli Art Museum, 2004). This catalogue, which accompanied an eponymous exhibition at the Zimmerli Art Museum, is one of the first landmark publications to examine the medium's role in the history of nonconformist art from the Soviet Union. *Beyond Memory* shows how innovative conceptual strategies and approaches to form and content were widespread in the Soviet cultural underground. The publication analyzes how late Soviet artists employed irony and invention to make positive use of adverse circumstances.

<sup>273</sup> While Dmitry Vilensky was the main founder and ideologue of Photo-Postscriptum, the association also included photographers: Andrey Chezhin, Ludmila Fedorenko, Alexander Kitaev, Alexey Titarenko, Igor Lebedev, and others.

<sup>274</sup> Dmitry Vilensky, "P.S. Photo-Postscriptum Place Press Release," n.p., Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, New Brunswick, NJ.

Russia had jettisoned the pre-Bolshevik society with abandon and devoted themselves to the affirmation of a new, proletarian-revolutionary understanding of art, life, and politics. While in dialogue with their predecessors, this group of nonconformist<sup>275</sup> photographers, who came to maturity during Gorbachev's perestroika, were instead more intently focused on the repressed and unknown experiences that they had been denied.

Some of the themes they explored include overtly political messages and references critical of the Soviet state and its leadership, which were not recognized by their government as proper subjects for photography. Nonetheless, these photographers sought to reconnect with their social realities by creating a new poetic-photographic language, which I will closely examine in the next sections. Their view of a post-Soviet contemporaneity was constituted by doubt, uncertainty, and hesitation, and yet infused with a need to reflect and analyze the recent past through the medium of photography. These photographers also aspired to transcend national borders and reach international audiences that, due to travel restrictions in the Soviet Union, had long been inaccessible to them.

At the same time, John Jacob observed the nonconformist art from the Soviet Union, of which Margarita Tupitsyn, Victor Tupitsyn, and Boris Groys have written, risks being easily assimilated into Western artistic discourse, as "much Soviet alternative art from the 1950s through the 1980s is precisely positioned by its relation to Renato

---

<sup>275</sup> Scholars such as Alexei Yurchak have criticized the expression "nonconformist artist" as inadequate for characterizing informal artistic groups in the late-Soviet period. I chose to continue using this historical term "nonconformist" in my paper in order to navigate between the discourse of the authoritative party-state and the experimental artistic languages. Instead of keeping these two registers apart, as Cold War accounts of Soviet cultural history have, I bring them together, showing how they have always been directly connected.



Poggioli's maxim that 'avant-garde art can exist only in the type of society that is liberal-democratic from the political point of view, bourgeois-capitalistic from the socioeconomic point of view.'<sup>276</sup>

Therefore, it is important to understand the context and means of production of this body of work, as well as its relevance for its contemporary viewers before speculating on its importance in the field today, more than two decades after the Soviet Union disintegrated. This material, positioned within the traditions of the avant-garde, shows how formally and ideologically it is indebted both to the aesthetic innovations of the early twentieth century in Europe and Russia, while sharing an oppositional politics to official culture, and thus also to the politics of the state. Despite the largely accepted assumption that this photographic material is mostly apolitical and focused on questions of identity and self-identification, considerations of form and content were neither wholly politically neutral nor wholly aligned with a political agenda (as was the case of the historical avant-garde). As Barbara Straka has described, the photograph "lay under the strict norms of style and form in the canon of Socialist Realism, which in looking back, was understood more as a staged photography in the sense of a monumentalization of reality, rather than authentic representation of reality."<sup>277</sup> In line with this argument, this body of work challenged the totality and authority of Socialist Realism, while keeping a

---

<sup>276</sup> John Jacob, "The Crisis in Identification in Soviet Photography," *The Missing Picture: Alternative Contemporary Photography from the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1990), ii.

<sup>277</sup> Barbara Straka, "In Memory of . . . Personal and Artistic Practice with Found Photography," in *Self-Identification: Positions in St. Petersburg Art from 1970 to Today*, by Kathrin Becker, Barbara Straka, and Stadtgalerie im Sophienhof (Berlin: DruckVogt GmbH, 1994), 242.

genuine engagement with the social (and political) life of the Soviet person, as a new artistic language of truth, in the Foucauldian sense of “speaking truth to power.”

Among the critical issues raised by nonconformist photographers associated with Photo-Postscriptum was the role photography might play in the construction of a history that needed revisiting. Related to this, in the late 1980s and '90s, some photographers began to incorporate historical, anonymous, and found photographs into their work. Photographers amassed materials from family collections, estates, journals, secondhand bookshops, and/or archives, as parts of their creative tools.<sup>278</sup> As Straka has noted about this practice, “The use of private and documentary photo archives would have fallen into a variety of tabu zones, and at the same time, photography as art in and of itself, was not taken seriously.”<sup>279</sup>

In 1980 Vilensky began to build a photographic archive, which would become the object of subsequent investigations and installations. In his 1990–92 series *Memories of the City*, he chose to work with images of Leningrad’s street life, shot between 1986 and 1990 [Ills.4.1].<sup>280</sup> He toned the prints using different colors, from green to brown to pinkish-red. The prints’ tones, compositional angles, and close-ups from behind are reminiscent of his predecessors Aleksandr Rodchenko and Boris Ignatovich, who also made skillful use of light, shadows, and tone to draw out the character of their subjects.

---

<sup>278</sup> For more examples of Fedorenko’s restaged found photographs, see Victoria Buivid, Brandon Taylor, John Hansard Gallery, and Photographers’ Gallery, *Photo-Reclamation: New Art from Moscow and Saint Petersburg* (Southampton, UK: John Hansard Gallery, [1995]).

<sup>279</sup> Barbara Straka, “In Memory of . . . Personal and Artistic Practice with Found Photography,” in *Self-Identification: Positions in St. Petersburg Art from 1970 to Today*, by Kathrin Becker, Barbara Straka, and Stadtgalerie im Sophienhof (Berlin: DruckVogt GmbH, 1994), 242.

<sup>280</sup> Dmitry Vilensky, *Memories of the City, 1986-1990*, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union.

At the same time, Vilensky's characters do not show the optimism of a new society, or reflect upon the future liberation through industry and the soviets' power. Rather, they are impoverished locals, walking through a decaying city, trying to make ends meet by selling wares in the street, or children playing in desolate industrial settings or in empty and narrow courtyards. Through his eyes we can see the changing city, the streets, buildings, factories, tram depots, and vacant lots. In this series, an image of the romantic and tragic Peterburgian character is documented, witnessed, and constructed through the deft use of light, color, and dramatic backgrounds [Ills.4.2]. Although, according to the artist, this series follows the tradition of romantic urban photography, these photographs are also social commentaries on the living conditions of the time, and the realities of a society on the edge of despair as a result of drastic economic changes and shortages of basic services and goods. In another series, one focused on official parades and solemn marches, the photographer captured the presence of Socialist Realist art in the city's streets<sup>281</sup> as these spectacles unfolded, reaffirming the figures of the political elite of the time. Together, these series are highly suggestive of the absurdity and contradictions inherent in public spaces of the time, while the use of tones and tints queer the monotonous photographs of everyday life in a deferential way, unsettling official artifices and fixed utopian aspects [Ills.4.3]. In this sense, my argument is aligned with that of Alexei Yurchak, who persuasively argues that the model of Soviet socialism that emerged during perestroika eschewed binary accounts that describe that system as truth and lie, the state and the public, public self and private self. He demonstrates how these accounts

---

<sup>281</sup> Dmitry Vilensky, *Memories of the City, 1986-1990*, Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union.

ignore the fact that for many Soviet citizens, the values, ideals, and realities of socialism were important, although some of these people transgressed and reinterpreted the rules of the socialist state.<sup>282</sup>

While in discord with the state-prescribed artistic cannon, the aforementioned nonconformist photographers did not, as a rule, produce either merely neutral or purely aesthetic works focused solely on formal experimentation. As photographers' representations of the former capital and its peoples displaced the dominant narrative of photojournalism and proposed a more critical look at reality from below, they turned the relationship between Socialist Realism and lived experience inside out. Moreover, they conceived of the photographic medium and history in the same dialectical terms, or as "inside" and "outside." Vilensky's and others' photo archives, as an ever-swelling, enormous photographic body of Soviet experiences, was a local manifestation of this dialectical problem conveyed through the negative and the print. They were at once a reflection of an expanding sense of Soviet temporality and memory, and an expression of the limits of a medium unable to fully contain it.

Yurchak's argument about the transgression of the rules of the state also applies to the official Soviet culture's stronghold on representation, which was challenged by this generation of avant-garde photographers. In the 1920s their predecessors had begun to rebel against "the traditional way of seeing," exploring "a new aesthetics able to express in photography the pathos of [their] new socialist reality,"<sup>283</sup> or a new consciousness. The

---

<sup>282</sup> See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2006.

<sup>283</sup> Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Predosterezheniye" ["Warning"], *Novyi Lef*, no. 2 (1928): 37.

perestroika-generation photographers found artistic ways to contend with their ever-changing world, instead of portraying a static, timeless one. Unlike their avant-garde predecessors, this generation did not express great faith in the new dynamics of society; rather, they conveyed disillusionment, and challenged the official order—driven not by optimism but instead by an urgency to reveal repressed or falsified aspects of their reality.

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, Vilensky wrote that St. Petersburg's contemporary art scene was "not to be seen through the existence of an active art market or the overburdening of the artistic world."<sup>284</sup> Despite its active nonconformist artistic networks, which nevertheless remained all but invisible to the international art world of the time, the city lacked the cultural infrastructure characteristic of modern urban centers in the West.

A shift is important in the discussion toward the building of alternative infrastructure and fostering a sense of community—a facet of the photographers' work that served to leverage the existing power of official institutions in Leningrad, and preserve a space for their practice—in other words, opening a space to create, perpetuating a space to preserve the legacy of nonconformist photography. In this sense, Photo-Postscriptum can be cast in a dialectical relationship between staging critical photographic interventions and the sustenance of critical infrastructure for photography. Its significance lies in the fact that it fostered new forms of artistic experimentation at the intersection of photography, critical theory, and community-building that reached beyond what the official infrastructure was willing to recognize as historically valid.

---

<sup>284</sup> Dmitry Vilensky, "St. Petersburg Photopostscriptum Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," *Imago: Another Erópska Photography* (Winter 95/96): 20.

Even though they did not receive support from the Ministry of Culture at the time, and continued to self-fund their activities through part-time jobs,<sup>285</sup> Photo-Postscriptum photographers started to further broaden their horizons by traveling and exhibiting abroad. From this point on in the 1990s, their work continued to take a more conceptual approach to the medium, while retaining a specific “Leningrad” character. Remaining skeptical of the “endless stream of media images” under consumer capitalism, as he experienced it during the times he visited New York in the 1990s, Vilensky continued to pursue his own investments in the real behind the media or official representations. Maintaining his credo about “the possibility of dramatic transformation of any event,” his later work investigated the possibility of “translation of [our] political experiences into cultural, and backwards.”<sup>286</sup>

While Vilensky and Tsaplya and Gluklya were all working under the shared cultural context of late-Soviet and early Post-Soviet socialism, their works used different strategies to address distinct issues relevant to their specific contexts and audiences. Although all of these artists continued avant-garde traditions in their work, they did so toward different ends, which are unique to the context and communities in which they were working. These distinct situations came to shape not only the artists’ concerns and strategies, but also the viewers’ responses to the manifestations of the artwork.

In 1995, shortly after graduating from the Mukhina Academy of Art and Design in St. Petersburg, Tsaplya and Gluklya co-founded the artists’ collective called the Factory

---

<sup>285</sup> The precariousness of the photographers’ lives and working conditions that was emphasized by my interviewees during interviews and from my experience living and studying in St. Petersburg continues to be a concern, as the state has all but withdrawn from funding photographic institutions such as RosPhoto.

<sup>286</sup> Dmitry Vilensky, in interview with the author, St. Petersburg, July 2013.

of Found Clothes (FNO),<sup>287</sup> using installation, performance, video, text, and “social research” to develop the concept of “fragility,” in regards to exploring relationships between internal and external, private and public [Ills.4.12]. In 2002, on the eve of the formation of Chto Delat?, they republished their manifesto, originally written in 1995, entitled “The place of the artist is by the side of the weak,”<sup>288</sup> in which they synthesized their artistic practices and values over the course of seven years. The manifesto argues for a transformation of the artist’s understanding of the importance of the social and political context of Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

In FNO’s projects, performance played the role of elevating the power of the body and made visible the significance of the individual. Similar to IRWIN and the Perjovschis, these artists began to use their own bodies to address social problems and to engage with the traumatic histories of their times. In discussing their work, Kristine Stiles notes that the body became the “signifying vortex of the contingent relationship between nature (the body) and culture (social constructions).”<sup>289</sup>As the discussion of their

---

<sup>287</sup> Fabrika Nadyonii Odezhdii in Russian. The artists use both the English and Russian abbreviations, FFC and FNO, respectively.

<sup>288</sup> Factory of Found Clothes, “The place of the artist is by the side of the weak,” (1995–2002), Factory of Found Clothes (FNO) private archive, St. Petersburg. The full text of the manifesto: “The place of the artist is on the side of the weak. Fragility is what makes people human, and the overcoming of weakness is what heroes are made of. We don’t celebrate weakness as such, we make an appeal to tenderness and humanity. It’s time that compassion returned to art-making! Compassion—this is trying to understand the vulnerability of the other, and working together to go beyond it. You can’t really call it sentimentality. It’s the freedom of baring your chest on the barricades, fighting for the child in each of us! You say that art is only for the clever, that it’s an intellectual game? That there’s no space left for direct impact, that intense emotions are the province of Hollywood? It’s not true! Because in that case art would be meaningless—cold, unable to extend a helping hand! Art is not an abstract game, but an adventure; not cold rationalism, but a living emotion. The artist is not a mentor or a tutor but a friend; not a genius, but an accomplice. We don’t need didactic social projects, but the desire to help people not to fear themselves anymore, to accept themselves and develop in the way they wish. Society consists of people. It’s only by helping people on the path of self-transformation that we can change society. There is no other way.”

<sup>289</sup> Kristine Stiles, “Survival Ethos and Destruction Art,” *Discourse: Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 14, no. 2 (1992): 90.

performances will show, the body was a political site for many artists from Eastern Europe who, like the Factory of Found Clothes, found themselves emerging from forms of totalitarian regimes that undermined their sovereignty with force.

Performance art in the West is quite different from that which developed in Eastern Europe. Artists in communist countries, required to adhere to the requirements of Socialist Realism, did not undergo the same type of artistic experience; they were not able to experiment, in any official capacity, with alternative media and forms of expression. As performance art was not a traditional genre, like painting or sculpture, it could not be accommodated in the tradition of Socialist Realism. Because it is, as Hubert Clocker has described it, “an ephemeral and participatory event,”<sup>290</sup> it engenders a variety of interpretations, whereas a Socialist Realist work of art was supposed to be unambiguous. It was only with the arrival of the Thaw that artists in the East began to experiment and develop the genre of performance art in a manner specific to their circumstances, meaning that they took into account the limitations on art production that were enforced by the authorities.

Restrictions on the exhibition of art in the St. Petersburg, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, forced artists to find not only alternative ways of expressing themselves, but also alternative spaces in which to show and display their work. These circumstances had an impact on the development of nontraditional genres, such as performance art. In one of their first performances, *In Memory of Poor Lisa* (1995), the

---

<sup>290</sup> Hubert Clocker, “Gesture and the Object. Liberation as Action: A European Component of Performative Art,” in *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949–1979*, ed. Paul Schimmel (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art with Thames and Hudson, 1988), 159.



artists wore matching white dresses and jumped from the Zimnyaya Canvka bridge in St. Petersburg into the Neva river [Ills.4.4]. The performance was inspired by Nikolay Karamzin's short story "Poor Liza" (1792). Liza is a tragic heroine who, after being jilted by her lover, decides to end her life by jumping into a river. In an interview with the author, Tsaplya explained that their performance was dedicated to everyone who had suffered in love. She also recounted how, after their performance, a young woman confessed that upon experiencing their jump into the river she felt that a similar story had happened to her, and yet at the time she could not find an expression for how she felt. Tsaplya remembered that this response made the artists proud of their performance.<sup>291</sup>

In their projects, FNO used clothes and performance as tools to build connections between art and everyday life. The artists' method of using clothes in their projects, which evokes Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics,"<sup>292</sup> is a means for developing new methods of communication with communities outside the art world. However, they were not interested in exploring new forms of sociality in the gallery or the museum. Rather, by addressing the personal stories of their characters, they analyzed the conflict between the inner world of a person and the outer, political system.

---

<sup>291</sup> "Feeling abused, unloved, bad-tempered, but capable of change, of maturity, or a broadening of the soul and communicating with it could make something happen." Interview with Olga Egorova (Tsaplya), July 2013, St. Petersburg.

<sup>292</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* champions art that understands itself as an experimental production of new social bonds, as "the invention of models of sociability" and "conviviality." Bourriaud's arguments for what he calls the "art of the 1990s" is a great improvement over discourses fixated on more traditional, object-based artworks. Bourriaud has been an important advocate for the contemporary tendency to emphasize process, performativity, openness, social contexts, transitivity, and the production of dialogue over the closure of traditional modernist object-oriented work, visuality, and individualism. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 1998).

In the performance and film *Triumph of Fragility* (2002), Gluklya and Tsaplya created an unusual situation for navy cadets (all male) in order to criticize the patriarchal structure of Russian society. Every military cadet given a white dress, a stereotypical and feminine symbol of fragility, to represent the fragility inherent in all human beings, and then asked to march with them along the parade route through St. Petersburg. As the artists later recounted, the cadets were very reluctant at the beginning of the performance to parade holding the small white dresses in front of them. The artists convinced them otherwise, explaining that they were carrying the most important part of themselves: their human vulnerability. Gluklya explained that they managed to persuade them by explaining that the performance was also about the cadets themselves, about finding an expression for the affective part that is common to all human beings.<sup>293</sup>

In their projects, FNO articulated frontiers between the inner world and the outer social structure, making the conflicts between the two visible. They constructed situations that allowed encounters to take place among people from different social groups, namely illegal migrants and ballet dancers, pensioners and students, unemployed young men and women, who would not have the opportunity to meet in everyday life. Gluklya and Tsaplya encouraged processes of self-organization and learned about the capacity of different minorities and marginal communities to cope with difficult life situations. As I demonstrate in the following sections, their artistic practice has had a formative influence

---

<sup>293</sup> “Our concept of fragility is related to compassion, because ‘fragility’ is that sensitivity that an artist needs, in the broadest sense of the word, to perceive people and events. We tried to collaborate with the cadets in our project, so that it’s an experience that can change something for them; this was the most interesting task for us.” Interview with Natalia Pershina (Gluklya), July 2013, St. Petersburg.

on Chto Delat?'s collaborative processes, engagement with audiences, and social commentary on taboo topics both in Russia and abroad.

#### 4.2 The legacy of perestroika and new artistic challenges

When the 1990s came to a close in Russia, it was not just the end of a chaotic decade, but also the contemptible conclusion of a painful era of struggles and disappointment after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The promises of perestroika (1986–91) to open Russian society for redefinition and self-reflection in relation to its recent past<sup>294</sup> were thwarted by a return to Russian nationalism coupled with the strong influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, uniting political leaders in their conservative agendas. Moreover, this reactionary restructuring of all aspects of society in Russia preserved marked inequalities between the majority of the working population and a wealthy minority, despite official rhetoric to the contrary.<sup>295</sup> The artistic and cultural milieus were also caught in this vortex of dramatic changes. Few artists began responding to prescient

---

<sup>294</sup> From 1985 to 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, instituted a series of ambitious reforms known by the term *perestroika* (restructuring), which were meant to upgrade the existing Communist system rather than to overthrow it. These efforts were accompanied by *glasnost* (openness), a policy of revealing and publicly debating ideas, programs, and policies (such as the Gulag, or system of forced labor camps) that previously had been kept secret.

<sup>295</sup> Simon Pirani gives a detailed analysis of the relationship between power and capital in Russia in the 1990s and the 2000s, paying attention to the dramatic conflicts between the government and the billionaire oligarchs. He argues that the state organized the oligarchs in the interests of the property-owning classes, and restored the order it lost in the chaos of the 1990s, in order to manage post-Soviet Russian capitalism and integrate it into the world system. See Simon Pirani, *Change in Putin's Russia* (New York: Pluto Press, 2010).

sociocultural crises<sup>296</sup> with artistic interventions that embodied questions of survival, resistance, and reconstruction, faced with the lasting material failures of socialism and the onslaught of neoliberal renovation<sup>297</sup> marked by alienation and decay—seeping under the fresh paint of an emerging capitalist system. These artistic engagements, similar to those in Slovenia and Romania outlined in the previous chapters, resembled radical projects undertaken during the October Revolution, the First World War in Europe, and the 1960s in Europe and the United States, when political struggles engendered reconfigurations of the symbolic space and re-articulations of the social space<sup>298</sup> through art. A new type of art began to emerge, one indebted to the historical avant-garde examples of Dada, Constructivism, and Situationism, and yet at the same time attuned to the new geopolitical, post-1989 situation, and therefore vastly different from these pioneering movements in art.

---

<sup>296</sup> Irina Aristarkhova gives an overview of the political action within the larger crises of political apathy and representation in post-Soviet Russia in the 1990s, contrasting it with the practices “against the grain of apathy” of the art movement “Moscow Actionism” (Moscovsky Akzionism) and the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers (CSM, Komitet Soldatskikh Materei). See Irina Aristarkhova, “Beyond Representation and Affiliation: Collective Action in Post-Soviet Russia,” in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, eds. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 253–72.

<sup>297</sup> According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, neoliberalism is a modern ideology according to which elites exert their supremacy through the distorted co-optation of progressive language, reason, and science. Presenting itself as both contemporary and self-evident, it contends that the market ought to be free, and any effort to contain it (e.g., assisting people through social programs) is archaic and age backward. Neoliberalism, therefore, champions a radical, unrestrained capitalism “with no other law than that of maximum profit . . . rationalized . . . by the introduction of modern forms of domination such as ‘business administration’ and techniques of manipulation such as market research and advertising.” It furthermore seeks to undermine rights won by workers after decades of social struggle. Proponents of neoliberalism try to convince us that their worldview champions “liberated trade” capable of freeing us from antiquated regulations and ushering in a new era of abundance. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Essence of Neoliberalism*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Paris: Le Monde Diplomatique, 1998): n.p.

<sup>298</sup> As opposed to the majority of Western countries, where political views could be expressed in a variety of public venues, in Eastern Europe articulations of critique of the system had to be expressed privately, or couched in a doublespeak, using metaphor, irony, humor, and sarcasm, during the late socialist period. This gave artists from the region a political role that their peers in the West did not possess. As the society’s pressures for economic, social, and political change built up over time, “these pressures found multivarious outlets—in culture, in religious organizations, even in rock music.” See Sabina Petra Ramet, *Social Currents in Eastern Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 3–5.

On May 24, 2003, the artists, philosophers and activists who founded the platform organized an artistic protest action entitled *We leave the city*,<sup>299</sup> which provided the impetus for their first newspaper issue *Chto Delat?* and solidified their collective identity.<sup>300</sup> The group, which included Tsaplya, Artemy Magun, Gluklya, Alexander Skidan, Vilensky, and other artists, architects, and critics, decided to leave St. Petersburg on the city's three-hundredth anniversary. On this day, the former Russian capital was militarized for pompous celebrations meant to bolster the president Vladimir Putin's consolidation of power in the country. Carrying banners that read "I am leaving St. Petersburg," "St. Petersburg from scratch," and "St. Petersburg from the rooftop," the group marched up Leninsky Prospekt (Lenin Boulevard) to Warshavsky Vokzal (Warsaw train station), where they attempted to board a train. They were prevented from doing so by the police, who saw their action as a disruption of the celebrations and so detained the group. Afterward, the group decided to exit the center of St. Petersburg, with its symbolic power vertical, and conceptually found a new city center on its outskirts.<sup>301</sup> They later subtitled their action "The Re-foundation of St. Petersburg." It was also important for the participants to continue working in a collective, in which a synergy had evolved. This collaborative spirit, in which the sum was greater than its constituent parts, would

---

<sup>299</sup> Chto Delat?, "My uezzhaem iz Peterburga" ["We leave the city" (artists' translation)], Warsaw train station, St. Petersburg, May 2003. This action was filmed by Vilensky.

<sup>300</sup> Chto Delat?, "Chto Delat?" [What Is To Be done?], ed. Dmitry Vilensky (St. Petersburg: self-published, May 2003). Available online: <https://chtodelat.org/b5-announcements/a-6/a-declaration-on-politics-knowledge-and-art-4/>, accessed December 2016.

<sup>301</sup> "Because of the security measures and the way the celebrations were organized, a lot of Petersburg intellectuals wanted to leave the city. We also wanted to leave, but we wanted to make our departure public, to show that we had nothing in common with the official celebrations. . . . We walked for a couple hours, handing out leaflets to passersby and carrying banners with slogans such as 'Petersburg from Scratch.' That was when about ten squad cars showed up. The police explained to us that we were holding an illegal demonstration." Dmitry Vilensky, in interview with the author, St. Petersburg, July 2012.

continue to inspire the artists, who began referring to themselves as art soviets, in the vein of Marx's observation that "when the worker cooperates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality and develops the capabilities of species."<sup>302</sup> The artists would interpret Marx's self-realization of human nature by engaging with social and political life itself as the medium of expression.

The creation of Chto Delat? in 2003 marked the end of revolution and the gradual emergence of a new Bonapartist state. What could have previously passed for self-expression or aristocratic apolitical attitude, showed itself as a bourgeois and individualistic ideology. There was a need for the defense of the spirit of openness that had been taken for granted in the 1990s. In Chto Delat?'s view, this required an identification with the oppressed, not with the elites, with revolution, not evolution.<sup>303</sup> It then followed that Chto Delat? declared their alignment with progressive political actions, engaged thought, and the concretization of artistic innovation, focusing on urgencies in Russian contemporary society and related struggles in the international context.

Many artworks and newspapers by the collective reflected upon Russia's destiny after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The film *Perestroika Songspiel* (2008),<sup>304</sup> the newspaper issues "What Does It Mean to Lose? The Experience of Perestroika" (2008)<sup>305</sup>

---

<sup>302</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1992), 447.

<sup>303</sup> "I believe we must undermine the hegemonic knowledge produced by power by opening up the origins of this knowledge to the culture of oppressed. In this sense the experiences of Lenin's politics are important to study again and again. . ." Dmitry Vilensky in interview with the author, St. Petersburg, July 2012.

<sup>304</sup> Chto Delat?, *Perestroika Songspiel*, film: color, 26 minutes, 2008.

<sup>305</sup> Chto Delat?, "What Does It Mean to Lose? The Experience of Perestroika," ed. Dmitry Vilensky, *Chto Delat?* newspaper, no. 19 (St. Petersburg: self-published, September 2008).

and “Reactionary Times (2007),<sup>306</sup> which I analyze in more detail below, criticized the nature of the transition from freedom to repression taking place in the Russian State. An important debate between philosophers Magun and Boris Kagarlitsky, “The Lessons of Perestroika” (2008),<sup>307</sup> focused on the characterization of perestroika as either a revolution, argued by Magun, or a restoration, argued by Kagarlitsky. Other newspaper issues, such as “Revolution or Resistance” (2004), focused on the possibility of revolutions to come, with their values and dangers, and on the experience of the failed revolutionary moments [Ills.4.5].

Other works examined on the relationship of the collective with similar initiatives from recent Russian history. In *The Builders* (2005),<sup>308</sup> Chto Delat? transferred onto film one of painter Viktor Popkov’s most important works, *The Builders of Bratsk* (1961)[Ills. 4.6].<sup>309</sup> The original painting portrays five workers, four men and a woman, thinking about the conditions of their labor and how it may affect the transformation of society. In 1950–60 Popkov often traveled inside the country, visiting Irkutsk, Bratsk, and other Siberian cities, sites of intensive construction work. These visits inspired the artist to

---

<sup>306</sup> Chto Delat?, “Reactionary Times,” eds. Dmitry Vilensky and David Riff, *Chto Delat?* newspaper, no. 15 (St. Petersburg: self-published, February 2007).

<sup>307</sup> Boris Kagarlitsky and Artemy Magun, “The Lessons of Perestroika,” in “What Does It Mean to Lose? The Experience of Perestroika.”

<sup>308</sup> Chto Delat?, *The Builders*, film: color, 8 minutes, 2005.

<sup>309</sup> Viktor Popkov, “The Builders of Bratsk,” oil on canvas, 1960, Tretyakov State Gallery, Moscow. Chto Delat?’s *The Builders* was screened alongside Popkov’s original painting at the Tretyakov State Gallery in January 2014.

develop what has been described as the “severe style.”<sup>310</sup> Another well-known work, cited by Chto Delat?, depicts workers constructing the Bratsk Hydropower Station. The video by the artists, in turn, is animated by the physical presence of members from the collective in front of the camera, engaged in a similarly self-reflective dialogue about the production of their own work[Ills.4.7]. Building on the interpretation of the painting at the time it was produced, and on the wisdom that culture cannot progress except through exchanges and assimilation of experiences, Chto Delat? brought the faded exponents of the proletariat up close to the contemporary viewer. By interrogating their own position and practice, they opened the viewer’s imagination to construct similar exercises of reflection. In *Builders*, the original composition appears frozen in time, while the organization of the Chto Delat?’s collective oscillates between coming together and moving across different directions—a cultural cooperative connecting private subjectivities to transmutations in social reality.

Other early projects by the collective focused on the post-Soviet public space, in relation to the effects of the economic restructuring and its impact on local communities. Chto Delat?’s project *Drift. Narvskaya Zastava* was an artistic inquiry into one of St.

---

<sup>310</sup> The severe style (*surovyi stil'*) was a striking departure from the norms of socialist realism, particularly as practiced in the postwar years. It replaced the pomp, ceremoniousness, prettiness, and utopian optimism of socialist realism with work that presented a more truthful look at Soviet reality. It often focused on the difficult conditions of Soviet existence and conveyed messages and drew on art forms forbidden throughout Soviet art of the previous thirty years, styles that were rehabilitated under Nikita Khrushchev. The severe style emerged in 1957 and is said to have concluded in the early 1960s (although works were made by its artists for many years afterward), coinciding with the Khrushchev thaw. The thaw began in 1956, the year Khrushchev denounced the Stalin cult of personality as well as his crimes against the Soviet people in his “Secret Speech to the Twentieth Party Congress.” The thaw was an exciting, hopeful period during which, for the first time in many years, Soviet citizens felt free to speak honestly without fear of immediate arrest or execution. It gave citizens a sense of empowerment during the thaw, one that led to the Severe Style. See Susan E. Reid, “The Soviet ‘contemporary style’: a socialist modernism,” *Different modernisms, different avant-gardes. Problems in Central and Eastern European art after World War II*. (Tallinn: Art Museum of Estonia, 2009) and Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).



Petersburg's most fascinating and contradictory neighborhoods. An action that took place in September 2004 for three days, *Drift* was documented extensively in videos and photographs that later served as the basis for other artworks as well as essays. Before the 1917 Russian Revolution, Narvskaya Zastava was part of the city's proletarian outskirts, a historical hotbed of dissent. During the 1920s, the revolutionary government decided to establish the neighborhood as the administrative center of a new, socialist Leningrad. These efforts resulted in some of the most significant ensembles of Constructivist architecture. Chto Delat? engaged with everyday life in the present-day neighborhood, with its social, architectural, and demographic components using contemporary documentary.

The title refers to the French term *derivée* (drift). A praxis that appeared in the context of Situationism in the 1960s,<sup>311</sup> the "drift" is an important means of examining and intervening in social space and a concept in which the St. Petersburg collective was deeply interested. The drift makes it possible to see everyday life beyond the framework of utility coded into the projection of an urban environment.<sup>312</sup> In the moment of drifting, the city can be read as a space of desires stimulated or repressed by the architectural and functional planning of urban space.<sup>313</sup> During their "drift," members of Chto Delat? intensely recorded how some streets, blocks, and/or buildings resonate in terms of emotional state, which feelings they provoke, and which tendencies they hide. As art

---

<sup>311</sup> Elihu, Rubin, "Catch My Drift? Situationist *Dérive* and Urban Pedagogy," *Radical History Review* 2012, no. 114 (2012): 175–90.

<sup>312</sup> Adam Barnard, "The Legacy of the Situationist International: The Production of Situations of Creative Resistance," *Capital & Class* 28, no. 3 (2004): 103–24.

<sup>313</sup> Phil Smith, "The Contemporary Derive: A Partial Review of Issues Concerning the Contemporary Practice of Psychogeography," *Cultural Geographies* 17, no. 1 (2010): 103–22.

critic and curator David Riff recalled, “The participants were motivated by a nearly religious search for Contact, Encounter, or Event, for the imaginary meeting of the left-wing intellectual with the invisible specter of the Worker.” Instead, this encounter, contact, or event did not take place, making the participants aware that their “debates were not so much about the absence or betrayal of the proletariat, but centered on the collective non-action of drifting itself.”<sup>314</sup> In this way, the documentation of the group’s communication in the process of drifting becomes a key part of the project, revealing the private lives of its participants, their associations connected to the places of its examinations, and their comparative analyses, reflections, and disagreements.

The questions raised by the drift, on the limitations of collectivity and its constituency provided an impetus for Chto Delat?’s early critical films, *Angry Sandwich People, or In Praise of Dialectics* (2005),<sup>315</sup> which was filmed in the center of Narvskaya Zastava. While the drift reflected on social space and community long after the abandoning of productivity in the former socialist center of St. Petersburg, the video explores the political potential of public space and activist communities in the present.<sup>316</sup> The collective collaborated with two local activist groups, Worker’s Democracy and the Pyotr Alexeev Resistance Movement, whose members had experience in street politics, demonstrations, and protests, in participating in picket lines and handing out flyers. As the artists explained, these groups “have maintained a basic form of grass-roots political

---

<sup>314</sup> David Riff, “It’s all about the people . . .,” ed. Viktor Misiano, *Moscow Art Magazine Digest*, no. 2 2005/2007: 99–100.

<sup>315</sup> Chto Delat?, *Angry Sandwich People or In Praise of Dialectics*, Olga Egorova (Tsaplya) director, film: color, 8 minutes, 2005.

<sup>316</sup> The site of this visualization would be Stachek Square, from where the striking workers of 1905 marched on the Winter Palace (*stachka* means “strike” in Russian).

culture that has its own aesthetic.”<sup>317</sup> In the video, they are seen holding placards upon which lines from Bertolt Brecht’s poem “In Praise of Dialectics” are written in Russian. The poem raises questions about social injustice and inequality and the collective power that may overcome it. In the film, *Chto Delat?* uses a slide-show montage of the participants, similar to that used in *Builders* (2005). The key difference is that the angry sandwich-people<sup>318</sup> do not speak throughout most of the film, only breaking their silence at the end when they recite Brecht’s poem as a chorus: the silent participants broke out into poetic language, distancing the viewer from the flow of their movements through the square. The effect may be described as what Brecht coined the “alienation effect.”<sup>319</sup>

*Chto Delat?*’s video has the appearance of both a political manifestation and the opposite, a form of artistic advertisement. The chorus at the end, similar to a chorus in an ancient Greek tragedy, is at the same time violent, satirical, and full of hope. The artists encouraged the viewer to identify with the passionate appeal within the poem against injustice, while also enabling him/her to observe from a distance the collective subject that may be able to change the status quo. *Angry Sandwich People* thus addressed the

---

<sup>317</sup> Dmitry Vilensky and Olga Egorova (Tsaplya), in interview with the author, July 2011, St. Petersburg.

<sup>318</sup> In Soviet propaganda, people wearing advertisements, sandwiched between two placards, had served as a symbol of the exploitation of a person’s living labor. In post-Soviet space, working as a “sandwich man” has become a preferred mode of unqualified, low wage employment.

<sup>319</sup> *Verfremdung*—alienation or, strange—is a performance-art concept devised by Bertolt Brecht in 1936. It is also rooted in the Russian Formalist notion and device of *priyom ostraneniya* (making strange), which critic Viktor Shklovsky once described as the essence of all art. Brecht used “*Verfremdung*” as a way of making ordinary events represented onstage seem epic to the audience. His intention was to prevent viewers from losing themselves passively in the characters onstage by “estranging” them from the action and thus provoking them to revolutionize their own lives. Using non-naturalistic scenographies, props, and acting, *Chto Delat?* also seeks ways of creating a “dialectical theater,” by dramatizing Marx’s insights into the mechanics of capitalism and the everyday. They believe their artistic practice will generate a critical attitude that could dispel the passivity underpinning capitalist alienation.

historical problem of failed revolution and the political potential that arises on its ruins, in the public space where it originated, and a century after its first defeat.

The collective has also been actively participating in international exhibitions about the relationship between art and left-wing politics, which have explored the themes of equality versus hierarchy, the quest for social progress versus the maintenance of the status quo, the values of collectivism and solidarity versus individuality and competitiveness, and the development of different forms of production and distribution of knowledge that fight against capitalist alienation.<sup>320</sup> Chto Delat?'s contributions in these institutional spaces are a kind of prismatic process through which the aforementioned themes are constructed and recaptured through the common denominator of the collective. By activating groupthink and developing collective activities, the artists expand conventional spaces of art institutions by questioning their ideological and geo-cultural constellations, together with the institution of art as such. Their ambitious approach has been met locally and internationally with both praise and criticism. Critiques focused on either the absence of art from their projects or, on the contrary, the presence of too much art, depending also on the dominant artistic conjuncture at a particular moment.<sup>321</sup> In the November 2008 issue of their newspaper, "When Artists

---

<sup>320</sup> The exhibition *Art Turning Left* (2010) at Tate Liverpool, co-curated by Francesco Manacorda and Lynn Wray, was the first to examine how the production and reception of art has been influenced by left-wing values, from the French Revolution to the present day. Chto Delat?'s *songspiels* were part of this exhibition.

<sup>321</sup> In her dispatch "A New Order. Reports from Moscow," curator Ekatarina Degot explains how among the younger generation of artists, Chto Delat? is criticized for insufficiently radical artistic politics and opportunism: "When Chto Delat? stresses its commitment to critical art, it might set the accent on critical, but art is what young Russian artists hear first." Ekatarina Degot, "A New Order. Reports from Moscow," *Artforum* (November 2010): 107–10. On the other side of the spectrum, in a review of their solo exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London, Michael Glover wrote in the *Independent*, "I'm careful not to call these things artworks, because they are not artworks." Michael Glover, "Chto Delat? What Is To Be Done? ICA, London," <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/chto-delat-what-is-to-be-done-ica-london-2086845.html>, accessed December 2016.

Struggle Together,”<sup>322</sup> Vilensky and longtime collaborator David Riff<sup>323</sup> outline the collective’s strategy: it is concerned with the materialization and translatability of leftist theory—articulated in artistic practice under post-communist conditions. Part and parcel of this working method is what Vilensky referred to as “the actualization” of the radical emancipatory projects of the avant-garde, looking back to key moments in Russian cultural heritage when aesthetic and political agendas were bound together.<sup>324</sup>

Indeed, for Chto Delat?, historical art institutions are a territory that they temporarily transform and use for their statements. They believe that the “white cube” is one of the spaces in which agitation for their ideas and values is still possible—a place where they can engage the viewer in their own representational games based on emancipatory education. Or, does such a space paradoxically allow the artist to engender a politicized audience through the organization of a didactic narrative? The artists have answered this question with projects that are equally concerned with content, related to social struggles and also to form, testing a new, collective aesthetic experience. As I show

---

<sup>322</sup> In their 2008 newspaper issue, “When Artists Struggle Together,” Chto Delat invited cultural practitioners to discuss the historical forms of art workers’ organizations and their relation to the current conjuncture in society and the art world. In 2010, at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London, the collective organized the learning play “What struggles do we have in common?,” which addressed the cultural field as a battleground where politics, aesthetics, and ideology are constantly facing each other. The play analyzed a typical conflict, a situation in which artists and intellectuals working in the institutional landscape are confronted with activists protesting this participation as a betrayal of political relevance. The participants enacted different nuances of this conflict and suggested to the public different ways to resolve it.

<sup>323</sup> David Riff has written widely on the history and present of contemporary art in Russia as an art critic, contributing to *Flash Art*, *springer* or *Moscow Art Magazine*. He has translated extensively, his most recent project a forthcoming volume of the work of Soviet aesthetic philosopher Mikhail Lifshitz. Riff has collaborated with Chto delat? in their artistic projects and has co-edited the Chto Delat? newspaper (2003–8). He has been involved in other artistic collaborations, such as the Learning Film Group, or the Karl Marx School of the English Language. Riff is a professor at the Rodchenko Moscow School of Photography and Multimedia.

<sup>324</sup> Chto Delat?, “When Artists Struggle Together,” ed. Dmitry Vilensky (St. Petersburg: self-published, November 2008): n.p.

in the following sections, Chto Delat? is also concerned with shifting the meaning and function of the artifact, which they do not intend to be a decorative, silent commodity, but rather a “comradely object,”<sup>325</sup> working toward the radical transformation of everyday life. Telling in this regard is Chto Delat?’s seminal 2009 installation at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven,<sup>326</sup> where the collective engaged with Rodchenko’s 1925 *Workers’ Club* [Ills.4.10].<sup>327</sup> Produced for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris, Rodchenko’s work is a model for the organization of the proletariat in the former USSR: reimagining leisure as a collective, dynamic activity, aimed at education, the production of knowledge, and participation in political life. The artist was a founding member of the Constructivist avant-garde, which understood itself to be fashioning a new world. This entailed new relationships between men and women with respect to each other. It would also involve new relationships between communist subjects and the objects they create. In objectifying their own subjective content, humanity would finally create a world in which it truly felt at home,

---

<sup>325</sup> Constructivist artist Aleksandr Rodchenko wrote, “Our things in our hands must be also equals, also comrades . . .”—in his letter from Paris in 1925. At the time, this missive was interpreted as a call to construct new kinds of objects and, in doing so, to forge new ways of social organizing, to build a new society. Aleksandr Rodchenko, May 4, 1925, Paris, cited in A. N. Lavrent’ev, Jamey Gambrell, and John E. Bowlit, *Aleksandr Rodchenko: Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters and Other Writings* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 169.

<sup>326</sup> Other installation of Chto Delat’s *Activist Club* happened in the framework of the exhibition *Progressive Nostalgia*, curated by Victor Misiano, Centro per l’arte contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, Italy, in 2007. *Activist Club* was also shown at the exhibition *Societe Anonyme*, curated by Thomas Boutoux, Natasa Petresin, and François Piron at Le Plateau, Paris, in 2007, and in the framework of the project *Common House*, curated by Marco Scotini at Teseco Art Foundation in Pisa in 2006.

<sup>327</sup> Aleksander Rodchenko, designed the *Workers’ Club* (in Russian, “Rabochii Klub”) as one of the Soviet exhibits at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris in the summer of 1925. Other Soviet exhibits included Konstantin Mel’nikov’s Soviet pavilion and displays of crafts, graphic design, architectural drawings, and works created at VKhUTEMAS, installed by Rodchenko at the Grand Palais. All of them projected an image of the Soviet Union as civilized and progressive. See Christina Kiaer, “Rodchenko in Paris,” *October* 75 (Winter 1996): 3–35.

not under the command of social and economic forces that appear alien and independent to its own activity.

Consequently, the components of Rodchenko's design served several functions, aiming at educating workers through information technologies. For example, the hinged communal-table surface could be used flat for working or inclined for reading; the chess table revolved to give players access to seating; the collapsible module merged a speaker's rostrum with a screen for slogans and an expandable screen for illustrative material. Rodchenko also included the "Lenin Corner," which emphasized the former leader's goals of worker literacy and active participation in political life.<sup>328</sup>

Petr Kogan, president of the State Academy of the Study of Arts (GAKhN) in Russia, who wrote the catalogue introducing the club's design, declared at the time that those audiences who were aware of the rising tide of the creative classes would appreciate the studied simplicity and severe style of Rodchenko's *Workers' Club*. Kogan strongly believed that this generation of artists-constructors would convey the great importance of the workers' struggle.<sup>329</sup>

Chto Delat? returned to this significant legacy, reinventing the public space and the time spent by audiences in the museum. They created an *Activists' Club*, geared toward active interaction with art, defined as a different economy of time. Chto Delat?'s design includes a cinema area, complete with a study and discussion space, facilitating use of the museum to initiate a discussion forum about the position of art in society.

---

<sup>328</sup> Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 41–89.

<sup>329</sup> Richard Anderson, "Ginés Garrido, Mélnikov en París, 1925," *Cahiers du monde russe* 55, no. 3/4 (2014): 406–10.

Instead of swift consumption, audiences were invited to spend an intensive time reading, watching films, debating, and analyzing, in a space that was at the same time open to new materials brought into its structure by the activated participant-viewer [Ills.4.11]. This art project against reification deftly combined historical efforts to reinvent the object and space of mass consumption, with features characteristic of alternative cultural centers, self-organized political groups, and social forums.

Apart from the cinema space, the installation included several paintings from the Van Abbemuseum's collection in the twentieth-century realist tradition: Charley Toorop's *Volkslogement (People's Lodgings)* from 1928<sup>330</sup> and Jean Brusselmans's *Le bain des vagabonds (The Homeless People's Bath)* from 1936.<sup>331</sup> The paintings hung on the walls, adjacent to the cinema space, which were covered with single pages of Chto Delat? newspaper issues, in a complex wallpaper design. Chto Delat? explained their choice as follows: "Striving to be realists in the authentic, broad sense of the word, we once again repeat Lenin's half-forgotten thesis: 'You can become a communist only when you have enriched your memory with knowledge of all the riches that humanity has created.'"<sup>332</sup>

The collective also produced and distributed a related issue of their newspaper entitled "What Is the Use of Art?."<sup>333</sup> Through this productive question—answered through debates, statements, and visual interventions in the space of about a dozen pages

---

<sup>330</sup> Charley Toorop, *People Lodgings (Figures at Night)*, 1928, oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 78 3/4 inches (100 x 200 cm), Collection of the Van Abbemuseum.

<sup>331</sup> Jean Brusselmans, *Le bain des vagabonds*, 1936, oil on canvas, Collection of the Van Abbemuseum.

<sup>332</sup> Vladimir Lenin, "The Tasks of the Youth Leagues," in *Their Morals and Ours: The Marxist View of Morality*, by Leon Trotsky (Broadway, Australia: Resistance Books, 2010), 78.

<sup>333</sup> Chto Delat?, "What Is the Use of Art?," ed. Dmitry Vilensky (St. Petersburg: self-published, [date](#)), n.p. Available online: <https://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12-48-1/01-25-what-is-the-use-of-art/>, accessed December 2016.



—the artists emphasized the grounding of their practice in avant-garde projects aimed at the radical transformation of society through the reimagining of interpersonal relationships stemming from Marxist thought. Declaring that contemporary art should be on the side of the oppressed,<sup>334</sup> they conceived its function to be the elaboration of instruments of knowledge; their goal was to discern the totality of contradictions governing the social domain of the economic and the political. From the collective's reimagining of the *Worker's Club*, one can also discern another facet of the original avant-garde production that is not obvious from historiographic projects, such as the work of art historian Christina Kiaer in the book *Imagine No Possessions*<sup>335</sup>: It is the political function of art to produce agitation and awake consciousness, as well as to construct mechanisms and structures of political subjectivization that do not correspond to our expectation of the artwork as a clearly defined object or a recognizable style or aesthetic. The creative works produced by Chto Delat? reveal the artists' vivid understanding of these historic experiments, which they actualize in the current context.

---

<sup>334</sup> Olga Egorova (Tsaplya) and Natalia Pershina (Gluklya), *Manifesto*, originally self-published in 1995, re-published in 2003. Available online: <https://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/c1-1-what-is-to-be-done/manifesto/>, accessed December 2016.

<sup>335</sup> Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*. Kiaer analyzes the Constructivist theory of objects as being more than commodities. She analyzes objects produced by Constructivist artists between 1923 and 1925: Vladimir Tatlin's designs for pots and pans, Liubov' Popova's and Varvara Stepanova's fashion designs and textiles, Rodchenko's packaging and advertisements for state-owned businesses (made in collaboration with Vladimir Mayakovsky), and Rodchenko's model for a workers' club. Kiaer shows how these artists formulated the theory of the socialist "object-as-comrade" in their artistic practice. Kiaer argues that the artists broke with the model of the autonomous avant-garde in order to participate in the political project of the Soviet Union.

Three of the collective's video works were shown in the *Activists' Club* in Eindhoven: *Builders* (2004–5), *Angry Sandwich People, or in Praise of Dialectics*<sup>336</sup> (2006), and *Perestroika Songspiel* (2008). In examining these works further, I want to foreground their goal to readapt another avant-garde tradition—the Brechtian method—which the collective has intertwined with the actualization of the Russian heritage of politically engaged practice. In this respect Chto Delat? seems to be in dialogue with American theorist Fredric Jameson's case for the continuing relevance of Brecht's social and political critique, espoused in the former's 1998 oeuvre, *Brecht and Method*.<sup>337</sup> Jameson argues for Brechtian contemporary relevance—not only for some undecided or merely probable future, but at the present moment, in the post–Cold War, global-capitalist paradigm. Emphasizing the themes of division, distance, multiplicity, choice, and contradiction in Brecht's body of work, Jameson fleshes out Brecht's critical reflections on dialectics and his interest in flow and flux, change and the non-eternal. As Jameson

---

<sup>336</sup> The dialectic is central to the philosophy of Karl Marx. Dialectic generally refers to a method of understanding reality and to the nature of that reality. There is nothing static in the world for the dialectical thinker, as everything is in a process of change. In the midst of this dynamic process, the social whole breaks into parts that are opposed to one another. The conflict between them drives toward a resolution that contains a leap into something new. The succession of conflicts and resolutions forms a progressive series, a cumulative and advancing development. The Russian revolutionaries of 1917 sought to apply dialectics to understanding the conflicting forces triggered by the introduction of capitalism. Their aim was to resolve this conflict by jumping into a fundamentally new form of society, that of socialism. These political revolutionaries had their peers in the arts. The rise of the avant-garde in Russia after the revolution was marked by radical experiments in photography, design, and film. The directors Dziga Vertov and Sergey Eisenstein, who also influence Chto Delat?'s practice, were extremely adept at montage, as a dialectical technique of conflict, development, and resolution, one that would define revolutionary cinema. In his 1949 essay "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form" Sergey Eisenstein wrote, "Art is always conflict, (1) according to its social mission, (2) according to its nature, (3) according to its methodology. According to its social mission because: It is art's task to make manifest the contradictions of Being." Sergey Eisenstein, "A Dialectic Approach to Film Form," *Film Form* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 2–3.

<sup>337</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London and New York: Verso, 1998). Jameson argues that Brecht's method should be seen as a process of reflection and self-reflection, reference and self-reference, allowing readers to situate themselves historically, by thinking about themselves in the third person. The author focuses on concepts such as choice, contradiction, distance, multiplicity, and separation in Brecht's work. He singles out *Me-ti; Book of Twists and Turns* as key to understanding Brecht's views on dialectics and his fascination with flow and flux. For Jameson, Brecht stands for transformation of the audience's consciousness while at the same time alienating it, or making it comprehensible by making it strange.

and other scholars have observed, Brecht is performative, instead of prescriptive, in that his plays do not attempt to give definite answers but rather to show the audience how to perform the act of thinking, how to begin looking answers themselves.

Indeed, even before producing *Perestroika Songspiel*, the collective put Brecht on their theoretical map. In 2006 they published an issue of their newspaper entitled “Why Brecht?,”<sup>338</sup> in which they elaborated their investment in linking intellectual thought with action, by building on Brecht’s legacy of analyzing tangible historical circumstances that can lead to collective solidarity and social renewal in times of historical duress. As Tsaplya wrote on Chto Delat?’s use of the *songspiel* form: “We want to show how social and political dynamics are temporary constructs and hence changeable. All our *songspiels* are attempts to create a new form of contemporary tragedy in which people call for unity in order to combat the collapse of society.”<sup>339</sup>

Between 2008 and 2010 Chto Delat? completed a series of collective video works, a *Songspiel Triptych*, which engages audiences in constantly questioning the order of things in society. *Perestroika Songspiel* (2008)<sup>340</sup> was the first in this series. It merges elements from Brechtian *songspiels*<sup>341</sup> together with ancient tragedy in order to initiate a new artistic language of politically charged social critique, with a seminal moment during

---

<sup>338</sup> Chto Delat?, “Why Brecht?,” ed. Dmitry Vilensky (St. Petersburg: self-published, [date](#)), n.p.

<sup>339</sup> Olga Egorova (Tsaplya), in interview with the author, July 2014, St. Petersburg.

<sup>340</sup> Chto Delat?, *Perestroika Songspiel*, film: color, 26 minutes, 2008.

<sup>341</sup> A *songspiel* (a term coined by Bertolt Brecht) is a dialectical musical. Its main dramatis personae are heroes and a choir. As a rule, a *songspiel* is based on real events. The *songspiel* represents a simple model, revealing the hidden mechanisms and forces at work behind these events. The purpose of the *songspiel* is not to explain a situation, but rather to create a construct that viewers can examine independently. *Songspiel* heroes are types, exhibiting a collection of traits. On the one hand, they repeat clichés and commonplaces about the social role they are playing; on the other, they can possess the individuality of a particular person (often showing the characteristics of existing public figures from the media).

the restructuring of the former Soviet Union. Namely, the video focuses on a day of unprecedented uprising and solidarity—August 21, 1991, the civil victory over the Soviet coup d'état, when Communist Party hard-liners attempted to remove then-president Mikhail Gorbachev from power and overturn the latter's reforms, perestroika and glasnost [Ills.4.8].

This period is associated with what Russian-born writer Yurchak describes as “the realities where control, coercion, alienation, fear and moral quandaries were irreducibly mixed with ideals, communal ethics, dignity, creativity, and care for the future.”<sup>342</sup> Yurchak avoids the essentialization of Cold War history by fleshing out the lived realities of Soviet citizens up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Eschewing binary models, the author argues that all discourse is comprised of two dimensions: a constative one that describes reality and a performative one that transforms it and then introduces new effects into the world. The final chapter focuses on the notion of “*stoib*,” an ironic aesthetic that was fostered by individuals' ability to separate the performative and constative meanings of discourse, which Yurchak argues led to the absurdism that became part of the everyday cultural experience. This aesthetic took the detachment of the performative element to an extreme, making the constative dimension irrelevant to demonstrate the absurdity of the system as a whole.<sup>343</sup> Thus, while the constant reproduction of forms led individuals to perceive an unending Soviet system, they were prepared for new ideologies because they had been creating new meanings since the late 1950s, after Stalin's death. Yurchak

---

<sup>342</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More—The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>343</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More—The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 238–318.

disturbs the division between official and unofficial artists and cultural communities—a dichotomy implicit in Cold War scholarship—which perpetuates the “East” versus “West” terminology, with all the rhetorical division between them.

Yurchak’s strategy is echoed in Chto Delat?’s filmic narrative to the extent that it does not merely amount to a re-memorialization of those historical events but rather to a critical deconstruction—in their case, structured along the lines of an ancient tragedy. Its protagonists are an operatic chorus—the embodiment of the general public and five perestroika types: the democrat, the businessman, the revolutionary, the nationalist, and the feminist. Through rhetoric and debate, the actors analyze their actions during these seminal events, reflecting on their positions in society and their struggles to forge a new political path for their country. Based on documentary evidence and witness testimonies of these historical episodes, the video reveals both the political immaturity of the civic body and the subsequent suffocation of their visions. The chorus as well as the five societal representatives directly address the viewer through songs, commentaries, and political slogans—a strategy that Brecht coined “dialectical theatre”—a catalyst for a radical reimagining of subjectivities and social relations.

*Perestroika Songspiel* is closely related to a recurring installation *Perestroika Timeline* [Ills.4.9], produced at the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo in Seville and the Istanbul Biennial in 2009. This graphic and video work, presented in different versions responding to specific spaces, is another instantiation of the aforementioned concept of “crystallization.” It merged the collective *songspiels* with photographic material transferred onto the exhibition walls by collective members Nikolay Oleynikov,

with Thomas Campbell and Vilensky—as a palimpsest of classes, generations, and political actors. The *Songspiel* and the *Timeline* are artistic tools to restage political history: they mark a shift in the traditional understanding of Cold War artistic and/or historical archives that merely present historical events—to engendering a space for reflection and activism for diverse audiences, who can freely access the film online.

In *The Tower* (2009),<sup>344</sup> a later *songspiel*, Chto Delat? focused on the understanding of the more contemporary situation in Russia, when the characters taking the stage have shifted from the 1987–91 *dramatis personae*. The militant, the nationalist, the democrat, the entrepreneur, and the feminist are supplanted by the artist, the gallerist, the oligarch, the priest, and the politician. The film analyzes and critiques present-day Russia through the lens of a significant moment in the history of St. Petersburg: the construction of the enormous Gazprom City skyscraper, the Okhta Center, in the city's harbor, despite widespread public outcry. Unlike in *Perestroika Songspiel*, the chorus does not sing in a unified voice; rather, it splits into confrontational voices. The main characters are set apart from the public, seated at a round table placed on a square white pedestal. Red tentacles made of cloth spread from under the table to the chorus of ordinary people below the pedestal who struggle with them throughout the film. Toward the end, the very same tentacles begin strangling the people. In the final scene, the manager receives a phone call informing him that he and his whole team have been fired.

---

<sup>344</sup> Chto Delat?, *The Tower: A Songspiel*, film: color, 36 minutes, 2009. The film was directed by Olga Egorova (Tsaplya). The music was composed by Mikhail Krutik. Actors include artists, poets, and activists: Anna Vartanyan, Maksim Gudkov, Anna Bulavina, and Pavel Arseniev. Screenplay by Dmitry Vilensky and Tsaplya. The story was written by Vilensky and Tsaplya. The scenography was produced by Natalia Pershina (Gluklya). The choreography was conceived by Nina Gasteva and Tsaplya. The film can be viewed online: <https://vimeo.com/12130035>, accessed December 2016.

Chto Delat?'s film not only reflects on this particular conflict between the St. Petersburg community and the Gazprom manager and his elite but also comments more generally on the social developments in the country in its transformation from communism to capitalism. It reveals growing economic inequalities together with violent nationalism and state apparatuses. By using the format of *songspiels*, Chto Delat? builds a historiography that is opposed to the hegemonic narration of history in Russia. They do not offer audiences a definitive vision in order to replace the dominant understanding of history, but rather incorporate into it another possible vision as part of the same ontology.

Chto Delat?'s years-long venture of fusing cultural positions with Marxist theory continues to evolve through adaptation and alteration among cultural practices, to look to concepts left undeveloped in one avant-garde, medium, or cultural context. Some scholars have described their works as uneven, mixing things together that are not readily compatible.<sup>345</sup> This is to some extent valid, but as founding member Vilensky emphasized, the collective is concerned with developing methods to solve contradictions in real life, "interweaving avant-garde forms with radical content or finding the balance between revolutionary spontaneity and constructive discipline."<sup>346</sup>

As such, Chto Delat? is guided by the visions of politically affiliated avant-gardes from different disciplines to provide a framework for rediscovery that challenges conventional artistic forms. From the very beginning, they suggested reconsidering the avant-garde in an international context. They proposed a return to the discussion around it

---

<sup>345</sup> David Bussel, "Forward, Not Forgetting: On Chto Delat? at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London," *Texte zur Kunst*, "Political Art?," no. 80 (December 2010): 149–270.

<sup>346</sup> Dmitry Vilensky, in interview with the author, July 2011, St. Petersburg.

through a different reading of its composition, which locates the political potential of art within the autonomy of the aesthetic experience and also within the autonomy of art as rooted within the social context: “We would argue that to conceive of the political in art, without a corresponding commitment to the ideas of the avant-garde would diminish both concepts as would conceiving of the avant-garde as purely innovation within the form of art production alone. The radicality of art, therefore, cannot be reduced to its connection to social or political imperatives nor to formal stylistic innovation but must also be understood through its poetic force; its ability to question and destabilize the very notion of the political, social, cultural and artistic.”<sup>347</sup>

In keeping with this approach, Chto Delat?’s practice seeks to displace the subsumption of human relations to the so-called totality of capitalism—by freeing spaces in the viewer’s imagination for situations that fall outside this logic, and enabling him/her to seize the potential for collective political action. As a result, Chto Delat?’s practice is in conflict with the given order, whether with the prohibitive art scene in their native Russia, dominated by powerful institutions and corporate power players, or even the Western institutional spaces that they challenge into politically charged acts of observation and communication with audiences.

---

<sup>347</sup> Corina L. Apostol, “From the Chto Delat Lexicon,” in *Chto Delat? Time Capsule: An Artistic Report on Catastrophes and Utopias*, eds. Bettina Spoer and Dmitry Vilensky, exh. cat. (Berlin: Revolver Verlag with Vienna Secession, 2014), n.p.



An effective demonstration of this was their project for the landmark exhibition *Ostalgia*<sup>348</sup> at the New Museum in New York (2011), in which the collective chose to challenge the concept of “nostalgia,”<sup>349</sup> describing a collective feeling of longing for the period before 1989. They counterpointed this rhetorical appeal to sentimental remembrance of the past with a multimedia chronology that analyzes the recent political history of socialism as a global movement. Entitled *The Rise and Fall of Socialism 1945–1991* [Ills.4.13], the installation realized by Chto Delat? is comprised of films and a well-researched timeline that mixes political, cultural, and social aspects of life under socialism in the former East—by ironically also appending half-forgotten Western interventions into the historical development of this political-economic philosophy. For example, the overthrow of the dictatorship in Nicaragua by the socialist Sandinista Liberation Front in 1979, which was shortly afterward neutralized by the right-wing Contras—in turn materially and politically backed by the US government. The wall paintings by Oleynikov, consisting of dates, political information, geographical details,

---

<sup>348</sup> New Museum director Lisa Phillips explained the scope of the exhibition, “This exhibition is not an authoritative history of the Communist period, but instead seeks to sketch a psychological portrait of the region, and in doing so, expose the myths and memories that unite a range of artists.” Lisa Phillips, “Director’s Forward,” in *Ostalgia*, exh. cat. (New York: New Museum, 2011), 20. This claim brings to mind a host of generalizing characteristics that critics have used time again to describe “Eastern Europe”—in particular, the fascination with the socialist past and its grasp on the (Western) imagination as a *terra incognita*. Other exhibitions that have had a similar agenda include *Beyond Belief: East Central European Contemporary Art* in 1995 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, or more recently, at the Pompidou in 2010—*Les Promesses du passé: Une histoire discontinue de l’art dans l’ex-Europe de l’Est* (The Promises of the Past: A Discontinuous History of Art in the Former Eastern Europe).

<sup>349</sup> *Ostalgie*, or nostalgia for the East was coined in the 1990s by West Germans to define the condition of their Eastern peers, who expressed yearning for the utopias of communism—which seemed to have too quickly vanished from the cultural horizon. Perhaps one of the most famous symbols associated with Ostalgie today is the Berlinease Amplemann (Ampelmännchen), or Little Trafficlight Man, a popular Eastern iteration of the generic human figure found on West German pedestrian crossing lights. In the mid-1990s in the German capital, activists succeeded in restoring the Amplemann in the former East Berlin, protesting against the process of standardization of their cultural heritage according to so-called superior values of the West. It was not just a desire for an exotic “other” lifestyle embodied by the Amplemann symbol, but rather a collective sadness about the death of an idea, of the promise for an egalitarian world.

and landmark historic figures, created a unique visual archive in the expansion of sociopolitical materials and resources, in which diverse strategies of dissent and critical resistance between past and present unfolded. Amounting to more than a collection of facts, images, and videos, *The Rise and Fall of Socialism* put an entirely new perspective on “Ostalgia”—giving it a historical and political dimension that seems to have been evacuated from the installations on the other levels of the exhibition. Chto Delat?’s educational and artistic intervention opened up a productive field for debate: What distinguishes nostalgia from memory in representation? How does the former East reenter History? What are the politics behind laying claim to the cultural traditions of this region in the West? And how do these cultures transform our understanding of the terms *East* and *West*—which continue to transgress their neatly defined theoretical boundaries?

The relevancy of this case study for the global context goes beyond the particular circumstances of the Russian avant-garde tradition and the collapsed socialist utopia at its point of origin. Without reducing historically distinct yet related contexts, I would like to propose that we allow for tangents in the face of common challenges relegated to the social sphere, embedded in the economic and political. One of the orders on which these struggles are manifest is art, through which projects of liberating education and systematic organization can be catalyzed into concretization.

#### 4.4 The School of Engaged Art in St. Petersburg

In Russia, the recently consolidated dictatorship of the Putin presidency, with its militarized-nationalist-orthodox pillars of governance, has strongly discredited the relevance of the philosophy of Marx and even the significance of the October Revolution of 1917. In this context the notion of “communism” has become associated with an outdated regime in poor and authoritarian countries in the former East, “with an excessive push for collectiveness, which ‘goes against human nature,’ as Russian liberals like to say.”<sup>350</sup> At the same time, no one can deny that the current capitalist-democratic order in the European Union and the United States has not achieved its goals.<sup>351</sup>

Russian civic society renounced political action after Putin’s return to power as president in 2013, as many citizens saw politics as already imbricated in the mechanisms of corruption. Furthermore, scholars such as Stephen Kotkin have linked the fragmentation of social struggles and the consolidation of economic inequalities between the majority of the citizens and a wealthy minority.<sup>352</sup> This double bind neutralizes the possibility for a common resistance, of the reclaiming of political positions by workers,

---

<sup>350</sup> The latter opinion is more widespread, and one normally speaks of the state of contemporary East and Central European societies as “post-communist,” assuming that communism had already taken place. In fact, for citizens of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, communism had remained a utopia or a project to realize in the future. See Artemy Magun, “Negativity in Communism: Ontology and Politics,” *Russian Sociological Review* 13, no. 1 (2014): 15.

<sup>351</sup> Journalist Simon Pirani has analyzed the power dynamic in Russia during the presidencies of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev in a recent book. Pirani argues that the economic growth credited to Putin during the oil boom was one-sided. The gap between rich and poor widened, inequalities multiplied. As well as explaining Russia’s economic trajectory, the book provides an account of the social movements that are working against an increasingly authoritarian government to change Russia for the better. See Simon Pirani, *Change in Putin’s Russia: Power, Money and People* (New York: Pluto Press, 2010).

<sup>352</sup> Stephen, Kotkin, “Resistible Rise of Vladimir Putin: Russia’s Nightmare Dressed like a Daydream,” *Foreign Affairs* 94 (March/April 2015): 140.

and of the awareness of a world beyond imperative consumption. Similar conditions can be observed in Russian society today, where the possibility for solidarity is tested by the fragmentation of groups of politically active workers from different domains. One of the biggest challenges engaged cultural activists face is bridging collaborations with local unions and mutual aid groups that oppose Putin's regime. Recognizing the difficult space between theory and practice, Chto Delat? continues to push the limits of this divide. As Louis Althusser observed about the dialectic relationship between theory within the Marxist tradition and practice, "A practice of theory does exist; theory is a specific practice which acts on its own object and ends in its own product: a knowledge."<sup>353</sup> Chto Delat? seems to take on Althusser's concerns, reaffirming engagement and solidarity channeled through culture, which challenges the adequately sensitive, passive cultural spectator into thinking and acting politically.

To this end, in 2013, Chto Delat? initiated a "School of Engaged Art" for young artists based in St. Petersburg. The impetus behind this project was to give emerging Russian artists who could not operate within official institutions for the cultivation and presentation of art such as concert halls, museums, and universities, a creative home and a place to form artistic groups and collectives that engage in experimental artistic practices. Many such collectives have been criminalized, censored, and/or smeared by officials in Russia.<sup>354</sup> Chto Delat?'s guiding axiom in this ambitious project is that art

---

<sup>353</sup> Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: François Maspero, 1969), 173.

<sup>354</sup> While the heritage arts, usually displayed in museums, continue to get support, it is the contemporary artists, art historians, and/or theorists who have difficulties getting their work acknowledged in Russia. The lack of funds for art production, absence of gallery scenes, and deficiency of art markets in Eastern European countries, coupled with still-conservative approaches to education and job shortages thereafter, pose huge challenges.

should not so much be taught as practiced.<sup>355</sup> The collective emphasizes the historical importance of self-education, looking back on twentieth-century projects for models of inspiration, such as UNOVIS in Vitebsk in the 1920s; the Bauhaus; Black Mountain College in the United States in the 1930s through 1950s; and the unofficial circles that formed around a number of dissident artists in the late Soviet period, of which some of the artists in *Chto Delat?* were themselves part.<sup>356</sup> They wanted to investigate and formulate a different kind of artistic education, one more relevant in the context of Russia today. In an environment where basic democratic freedoms are under threat, and the level of violence in society has reached the critical level of civil war, they operate under conditions offering no support for an independent, critical culture, and where there are hardly any academic programs in contemporary art. The founding manifesto for the school explains that engaged art serves “as a reaction to the difficulties of the real world and makes them appear differently from what people could expect.” It continues: “Engaged art differs itself from activism which is always has to deal with efficiency of real politics and media. Engaged art knows how to wait and find its own way how to address people outside the narrow professional art community. Engaged Art is neither the

---

<sup>355</sup> “This is why we started the school—to meet the younger generation and work out together what is happening with art and the subjectivity of artists here and now, in contemporary Russia. Art still remains a special space in which debates about truth can occur.” Dmitry Vilensky, in interview with the author, October 2014, Bucharest.

<sup>356</sup> See a comprehensive list of artist-run schools in Anton Vidokle, “Exhibition as a School in a Divided City,” (2006), republished in Lucy Steeds, ed., *Exhibition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 96–99.

reflection of reality nor the intervention into reality, but the reality of this reflection which add a new dimension into struggle of changing it.”<sup>357</sup>

In Chto Delat?’s view, art can and should take on the processes of our transforming society, and not hide away in the safety of institutional and pedagogical ghettos. Accruing knowledge from a wide range of disciplines, they advocate an artistic education that also appeals to a broad audience, instead of only to narrow groups of professionals. An artistic education that amounts to, as they have formulated it, “a hybrid of poetry and sociology, choreography and street activism, political economy and the sublime, art history and militant research, gender and queer experimentation with dramaturgy, the struggle for the rights of cultural workers with the romantic vision of art as a mission.”<sup>358</sup> This initiative places Chto Delat?’s work in a present-day avant-garde movement of artists, including the Perjovschis and IRWIN, who produce anti-market, socially engaged projects that counter a world in which “we are reduced to an atomized pseudo-community of consumers, our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition.”<sup>359</sup> These artists respond to what Jacques Rancière has conceptualized as the productive contradiction of art’s relationship to social change, characterized by the tension between

---

<sup>357</sup> Chto Delat?, “The School of Engaged Art,” manifesto, October 2014, available online in English and Russian: <https://chtodelat.org/b5-announcements/the-school-for-engaged-art-what-is-it/>, accessed December 2017.

<sup>358</sup> Chto Delat?, “The School of Engaged Art,” manifesto, October 2014, available online in English and Russian: <https://chtodelat.org/b5-announcements/the-school-for-engaged-art-what-is-it/>, accessed December 2017.

<sup>359</sup> Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2004). For Kester, the creative energy of participatory practices de-alienates—a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism. In *Conversation Pieces*, Kester argues that consultative and “dialogic” art necessitates a shift in our understanding of what art is—away from the visual and sensory (which are individual experiences) and toward “discursive exchange and negotiation.” He emphasizes that we should treat communication as an aesthetic form.

faith in art's autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come.<sup>360</sup>

A central role in their school's activity is an "expanded dynamic of collaboration," both for the formation of the collective as a space for creative production, and for the inclusion of other groups of activists, artists, and thinkers depending on the needs of an artistic project. I will analyze the learning play *Nevrossiya* (Not-in-Russia; 2014) and related exhibition, a collaboration between Chto Delat? and their students, to demonstrate how they expanded and redefined notions of collaboration, as well as deconstructed preconceptions of political theory and simplifications of the Russian context and its inherited history today. In February 2014 the students of the school and their Chto Delat? tutors, Tsaplya, Gasteva, Oleynikov, and Vilensky presented *Nevrossiya* in the space of the contemporary art center Fabrika in Moscow. They focused in particular on the issue of violence, a concept closely associated with their society and their country in general. In the artists' view, violence can take different forms: moral condemnation and exclusion, affirmation of norms, control over corporeality, and religious taboos. In particular, Russia is currently a space where forms of aggression are commonplace, and spaces of exclusion dominate, where, in the artists' words, "the violence of repressive, punitive shocks is

---

<sup>360</sup> The attempt to rethink the relation of aesthetics and politics is fundamental to Rancière's thinking. He conceives of modernism as a new "regime" of art, but insists that this is not just an artistic development: it is a much broader social and political change, a radical reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible. However, his analysis of modernism focuses almost entirely on specific artistic developments and particular works of art in the Western European context. Wider social and political changes are only suggested in vague and general terms. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. and introd. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

cultivated by both power and the population at large and has a nearly ritual character.”<sup>361</sup>

In this context, the artists wanted to explore the ability of art to capture the language of violence, and more, to subvert the oppressive status quo through a manifestation of solidarity with the Other. The exhibition’s display featured Chto Delat?’s aforementioned *Tower Songspiel* (2010), focused on the public protest against the construction of the Gazprom City skyscraper in St. Petersburg, and which demonstrated how the ubiquity of different forms of violence shape everyday existence. The film is complemented by the installation *The Russian Woods*, whose protagonists are fantastical popular heroes, who typify societal figures in the country: the Double-Headed Chicken, the Oil-pump Dragon, and the Pipeline Mermaid, the Skyscraper Church, Werewolves with Badges, the “Popular Front” Bear Show, the White House on Chicken’s Legs, and others. The exhibition also featured a series of retrospective posters focusing on lesser-known artistic projects by Chto Delat?. These posters were exhibited in the form of a timeline tracing the group’s trajectory over the course of the last ten years, with its specific events embedded within the larger historic events in Russia and Europe.

In the same framework of the School of Engaged Art, the collective, in collaboration with their students, produced an important performance *Atlas Ustal* (The Atlas Is Tired; 2014).<sup>362</sup> I show how this performance piece reestablishes a political dimension in the public space that engages with the current post-socialist and globalized geopolitical scenario. I frame the artists’ performance as a conceptual space for provoking

---

<sup>361</sup> Chto Delat?, “Nevrossiya,” [Not-in-Russia] (St. Petersburg: self-published, February 2014): n.p. Available online: <https://chtodelat.org/b7-art-projects/new-installation-of-cto-delat-nevrossiya-notinrussia-at-moscow-fabrika-february-2014/>, accessed December 2016.

<sup>362</sup> The author witnessed this performance in St. Petersburg on July 3, 2014.



both the audience and the participants to prove options on the political situation in Russia. Through this specific artistic format, the artists express the responsibility to face the past and revise it in order to open up a generative process for different politics,<sup>363</sup> while also testing the performance itself in order to see how it can respond to the current political deadlock in Russia.

A key indication of the effectiveness of the school's effort, the performance took place during the opening days of the peripatetic Manifesta 10, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art. Indeed, fearing that the exhibition was in danger of being hijacked to uphold the current status quo in Russia, the artists of Chto Delat? publicly withdrew their own project at the last minute. These fears were at least partly materialized.<sup>364</sup> Although Chto Delat did not participate in Manifesta 10, the students of the School of Engaged Art<sup>365</sup> decided to make a statement in an unsanctioned performance that coincided with the pompous celebrations of the 250th anniversary of the establishment of the Hermitage, during which St. Petersburg was militarized, with army troops and increased police presence throughout the city. For their performance, the students chose the portico of the

---

<sup>363</sup> This is a method that Jacques Derrida has coined "re-politicisation" in his book *Spectres of Marx*. Derrida insists that rather than forgetting the past, or interpreting it through the eyes of the fixed main historical narrative, one has to insist on it even more in order to question and revise it. This reestablishes an antinomy that allows the political to diminish the supremacy of one singular world without enemies—as, for instance, Eastern and Western Europe, and the United States. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 24. First published under the title *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1993).

<sup>364</sup> Chto Delat?, "Chto Delat? withdraws from Manifesta 10," open letter, published online, March 20, 2014. Available online: <https://chtodelat.org/b9-texts-2/vilensky/chto-delat-withdraws-from-manifesta-10/>, accessed December 2016.

<sup>365</sup> The students involved in the performance were Sophia Akimova, Alexey Markin, Olga Kuracheva, Anna Isidis, Natalya Nikulenkova, Victoria Kalinina, Anna Tereshkina, Polina Zaslavskaya, Natalya Tseljuba, Anastasya Veprava, Marina Demjanova, Marusya Baturina, Lia Husein-Zade, Lili S. Deil, Evgenia Shirjaeva, Marina Maraeva, Korina Sherbakova, and Roman Osminkin. The performance was rehearsed and actively discussed by the Chto Delat? artists Olga Egorova (Tsaplya), Nina Gasteva, Nikolay Oleynikov, and Dmitry Vilensky.

New Hermitage, an imposing piece of neobaroque architecture. A row of towering caryatids made of black marble hold up the roof of the portico, mimicking the pose of the Titan Atlas, who was condemned by the god Zeus to bear the celestial bodies on his back.<sup>366</sup> The Atlases are a striking feature of Millionnaya Street, which runs adjacent to the Hermitage. Around 250 onlookers gathered in anticipation of the performance, which was announced by word of mouth and on social networks. The artists decided not to ask for official sanction of their collective work. Each student began his/her action by engaging with a part of the portico, mirroring it, returning the Atlases gazes, measuring the site with their own bodies. Gradually they gathered around a stage-like block of marble in the front, flanked by stairs on both sides. Each student came forward, took the position of an Atlas, shouted out his/her experience of the oppression of the state, which was reiterated by the other participants, who played the role of the chorus. After the last iteration, they formed a mighty, trembling mass of unstable Atlases, which resembled a crumbling pedestal. The performance was nervy and rough and genuine, while the sense of collective trust was palpable. It successfully exposed the audience to another dimension of political speech in a tightly controlled public space, without suggesting an alternative, but instead provoking viewers to think, question, and test.

Chto Delat? continued to collaborate with their students on a related film project, entitled *The Excluded. In a Moment of Danger* (2014), which was filmed at the LenDoc Studios in St. Petersburg. The collective worked with the students on all aspects of the film, from the structure to the choreography and the dialogue. *The Excluded* represents a

---

<sup>366</sup> The portico with Atlantes was built by the sculptor Alexander Terebenev and the architect Leo von Klenze in 1830, during the reign of Nicholas I in Russia.

formal shift for the artists. It is not structured in the manner of their earlier *songspiels*, but rather adopts an open-narrative structure in order to engage with the escalating political crisis in Russia. It is also their most collaborative work to date. In a four-channel video installation that runs for an hour, the students reflect on their own sense of perplexity, anger, powerlessness, and exposure to violent events. *The Excluded* is divided into twelve chapters, which begin by defining the performers' temporal and spatial coordinates. Each participant takes recent events as well as important historic moments as points of reference, amounting to a subjective description of the current status quo. The role of social media in contemporary social protests is emphasized: the performers are seen using Twitter, Facebook, VKontakte, and similar platforms to follow the development of political actions and protest movements. The film questions the process of political subjectivation that affects young people, and how they in turn can take responsibility for their own action. The group dynamic is represented on a four-channel video installation, a new format that suggests the heterogeneity of voices, as well as serves as a visual equivalent of the general sense that a catastrophe is unfolding before the viewer's eyes. The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, a victim of Stalin's terror, might have compared their narratives to the heteroglossia of the oppressed, who long to speak for themselves.<sup>367</sup> As Bakhtin observed, in every society there is an ongoing struggle between the attempt of power to impose a uniform language and the attempt of those below to speak in their own dialects, or what he coined "heteroglossia." The struggle

---

<sup>367</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259–422.

between the multiplicity of internal voices and the monolithic voice of external authority is at the core of Chto Delat?'s latest film.

*The Excluded* was first presented at the center of Chto Delat?'s solo exhibition at the Vienna Secession entitled *Between Utopias and Catastrophes*, which represented a mid-career retrospective. The exhibition space was filled with artefacts from the collective's previous exhibitions, as well as films, posters, and photoreproductions of past artistic events, with a focus on those that took place in Russia and were lesser known to European audiences. Insignias, toy soldiers, cardboard cutouts, masks, busts of artists and intellectuals that inspired Chto Delat?', and other items were carefully arranged on two long, rectangular pedestals, acting like scattered remains of a history that has led to the present-day collapse and crisis. The artists' position is that the "catastrophe" has already happened, and that we are already living in the aftermath of a negative revolution. In their exhibition statement, they simply explain, "We lost." The exhibition opened amid rampant militarist expansion against Ukraine and increased repression in Russia. Unlike dissidents from the Soviet era, who felt restricted and persecuted in Russia, and thought they could flee to the West, the artists in Chto Delat? are excluded from Putin's Russia, and yet there is no safe haven for them to escape to. The current world stage is a continuum of economic and political crises, dominated by the clashes between an authoritarian and xenophobic right, such as Putin's, or Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's regime, and a neoliberal and racist right represented by the president of the French National Front Marine Le Pen and the Austrian Freedom Party leader Norbert Hofer. The democracy promised by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain has

not been accomplished. Communism has been defeated and with it, social democracy was replaced by capitalist democracy, while the European welfare state has become obsolete. For Chto Delat?, remaining peaceful while sitting in the eye of the storm in central Europe is not an option. Amid the chaos and turmoil raging all around, hoping things will eventually get better is wishful thinking, as one of the members of the collective Oxana Timofeeva has argued in her “Manifesto for Zombie Communism”: “When we think about the zombie apocalypse, we tend to identify with the survivors (forgetting, for example, that in capitalism one survives at the expense of the other—isn’t this fact already absolutely unbearable?), but what if we are not among those happy survivors? What if we are already on the other side? Forget hope: revolution starts in hell.”<sup>368</sup>

Rather, the question the collective insists upon is how to find ways to engage and question the overall status quo in the middle of the scattered debris of the social, political, and ideological ruins of the twentieth century, when the socialist states have all but disappeared and the neoliberal democracies failed? To begin giving an answer about the territory of art, Chto Delat? works at the confluence of ideology, pedagogy, and aesthetics, insisting on art as a practice, in times when the dominant approach to art-making treats problems as pictures. To return to Jameson, the literary scholar reminds us of art’s tasks to “teach, to move, to delight,” all of which are major concerns of the collective, amid the suffocating debris of history, when art seems to be increasingly rendered decorative and obsolete.

---

<sup>368</sup> Oxana Timofeeva, “Manifesto for Zombie Communism,” published online, 2015. Available online: <http://chtodelat.org/b9-texts-2/timofeeva/oxana-timofeeva-manifesto-for-zombie-communism/>, accessed December 2016.

## Conclusion

A great deal has changed since the fall of the Soviet Union, the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the revolutions taking place in Eastern Europe. As I have shown throughout this dissertation, artists working in the field of socially engaged art in Eastern Europe have raised and continue to pose key contemporary political issues through their long term projects. These artists have overcome the isolation of Eastern Europe from the West during the Cold War, which was not only a political divide, but also a social and cultural one. Although one cannot say that these communist countries were completely cut off from Western Europe and the United States, their development took a distinct path from their Western counterparts, while remaining in dialogue artistic traditions in the West. As such the sources and motivations of artists from the region were quite separate and distinct from the forces driving Western art. Consequently, it is crucial that contemporary art from Eastern Europe be investigated from the perspective of the specific socio-political and cultural environment that shaped it. This is not only the case for art that was produced during the Soviet period, such as that created by Dmitry Vilensky, the Perjovschis and IRWIN but also for post-Soviet art, as we see with the Factory of Found Clothes and Chto Delat?. Since the manifestation of Soviet socialism and communism was different in each country of the former Soviet Union, as well as in the countries of Eastern Europe, each case-study must be examined from within the cultural context of the respective nation.

As I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters of this dissertation, the state-imposed policies with regard to artistic production, specifically that of socialist realism, that, although intended to be universally applied, were implemented differently in each country, as a result of both local governmental attitudes toward the policy, as well as the local tradition that influenced its reception, interpretation and implementation.<sup>369</sup>

Nonetheless, this cultural state policy had produced a significant resistance by the later half of the twentieth century, in the form of a movement of nonconformist artists who developed their art and created alternative spaces to share it with audiences. Their works recreated the forbidden world of those who were forced to disappear from public space, those who were destitute, dispossessed within the context of the mandatory happiness promoted by the Soviet Union. In St. Petersburg, a community of nonconformist artists began to emerge most strongly in the 1970s, as manifested in the Gaz and Nevsky unofficial art exhibitions, and continued in the 1980s with groups such as TEV, the organization of the Fellowship of Experimental Exhibitions (*Tovarishchestvo Eksperimental'nogo Vistavkov*), TEII or the Fellowship of Experimental Art (*Tovarishchestvo Eksperimental'nogo Izobrazitelnogo Iskusstva*), and Vilensky's Photo-Postscriptum place.<sup>370</sup>

---

<sup>369</sup> In Russia the policy had been put into practice since 1934 when the First Congress of Soviet Writers met and Andrei Zhdanov gave a speech strongly endorsing it as the official style of Soviet culture. In Ljubljana and Bucharest, however, owing to both the fact that socialist realism had been introduced later, in the 1950s, and also owing to the cities' logistical and ideological distance from Moscow, the official style never really took hold. Indeed, in neither Yugoslavia nor Romania did socialist realism prove a serious threat to artistic practice. See Jørn, Guldberg, "Socialist realism as institutional practice: observations on the interpretation of the works of art of the Stalin period," *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), pg. 149-177.

<sup>370</sup> Sergei Kovalsky, "Post-Petersburg Art of Leningrad: The Eighties," in ed. Selma Holo, *Keepers of the Flame: The Unofficial Artists of Leningrad*, (University of Southern California: Fisher Gallery, 1990), pg. 28.

While nonconformist art was regarded with disdain by the ideologues who enforced socialist realism, the phenomenon also had varying relevance to the artistic practices in each country and city in question. Romania has a legacy of conceptual art practices dating back to the performances, assemblages, collages, photography and films of Geta Brătescu and Ion Grigorescu in the 1970s. This tendency was carried through the communist period and into the 1990s. Lia Perjovschi's performances and installations are a continuation and development of that tradition. Furthermore, her use of contemporary art-making methods in major projects such as *Contemporary Art Archive/ Center for Art Analysis* (1985-2010) and the *Knowledge Museum* (1999-present) places Romanian contemporary art onto the global art scene. Within Russia, Moscow enjoys a strong tradition of nonconformist art that emerged in the 1970s.<sup>371</sup> In St. Petersburg, the tendency was more toward painting and sculpture.<sup>372</sup> This makes Vilensky's and The Factory of Found Clothes' contributions to the local art scene not only unique, but also highly significant in that they attempted to infuse the city's art scene with ideas and strategies for thinking of post-Soviet identity in artistic terms. Ljubljana, like St. Petersburg, does not have a strong tradition of conceptual art during the Soviet Period. IRWIN and Marina Gržinić are unique among their colleagues, and their message stands out and is delivered more effectively to audiences eager for ideas outside of the everyday norm. Effectively one could call their approach to visual art as performative, insofar as

---

<sup>371</sup> Viktor Tupitsyn has remarked that artists such as Ilya Kabakov and *Collective Actions* "share no aesthetic programs" with their peers in St. Petersburg. Viktor Tupitsyn, "A Journey from Moscow to St. Petersburg – Part I," in ed. Kathrin Becker ed., *Self-Identification: Positions in St. Petersburg Art from 1970 until Today*, (Kiel, Germany: Stadtgalerie im Sophienhof, 1995), pg 121.

<sup>372</sup> The Pushkinskaia-10 Art Centre, "The New Academy of Fine Arts Museum," [http://www.p10.nonmuseum.ru/new%20acadimy/index\\_e.html](http://www.p10.nonmuseum.ru/new%20acadimy/index_e.html), last accessed October 30, 2016.



their work aims to create a new type of discourse. Not only is this a discourse among the symbols and elements in the works of art themselves, but their work, in fact, creates and enables a discourse within the discipline of art history. Their book *East Art Map* (2016) and related website, conferences and exhibitions, aim to create a written history of Eastern European contemporary art where there previously was none, to enlarge the European history of art to include other significant themes and draw attention to forms of inclusion, exclusion, discrimination and the role of capital. IRWIN's long-term project drew attention to these inequalities, as well as took into consideration literacy and poverty in Eastern European countries, while at the same time recognizing that they also exist in Western Europe and the United States as a result of the capitalist-liberal system.

The issues that each post-communist nation was dealing with were also specific and individual. Russia, Slovenia (former Yugoslavia) and Romania each occupied a distinct place both inside and on the periphery of the former Soviet Union, and had diverse relationships with both the system when it was in place, as well as varying responses to its collapse. Moscow was the power center of the Soviet Union, and Russia its founding nation. Although many artists strove to create a Soviet identity, in reality the result was the Russification of other nations at their expense of their own national identities.<sup>373</sup> When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, citizens in other nations in the Soviet Union, such as Romania and Slovenia, were able to reclaim more decisively their identities that had been partly suppressed during the Soviet period.<sup>374</sup> As political

---

<sup>373</sup> Yuri, Slezkine "The USSR as a communal apartment, or how a socialist state promoted ethnic particularism," *Slavic review* 53.2 (1994), pg. 414-452.

<sup>374</sup> Paul Stubbs, "Nationalisms, globalization and civil society in Croatia and Slovenia." *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 19.1 (1996), pg. 1-26.

scientist Iver B. Neumann has argued, Russia was left without a clear idea as to what shape the Russian identity would take, as the country had effectively erased the concept of a Russian identity and replaced it with a Soviet one.<sup>375</sup> Slovenians had maintained a strong national identity during the Soviet Occupation and were quick to recover their sense of identity as a people and a nation. Similarly, Romanian national identity was articulated by the intelligentsia and working classes during the period of communist rule, and in fact a key element of that identity, Romanian Orthodoxy, was important for Romanians post-dictatorship.<sup>376</sup> Consequently, in the post-communist period Romanians have strongly held on to attitudes and tenets supported by the Church, despite the fact that many are indeed in conflict with modern European values.

The struggle toward Romanian independence in the 1980s and 1990s involved both the ousting of the Ceaușescu regime, and a push toward the admission of facts dispelling Soviet claims to the territory of Romania during World War II and demonstrating the illegality of its annexation of the country.<sup>377</sup> Once that occurred, the USSR's claim on Romania was compromised and the country was able to reclaim its status as an independent nation that it had effectively lost with the signing of the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939.<sup>378</sup> Romanians pressed for the uncovering of the truth behind the communist party line through public actions and mass demonstrations, most

---

<sup>375</sup> Iver B Neumann, *Uses of the other: "the East" in European identity formation*, (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1999).

<sup>376</sup> Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu. "The Romanian Orthodox Church and Post-Communist Democratisation." *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 52, no. 8, 2000, pg. 1467–1488.

<sup>377</sup> Katherine Verdery, "The Production and Defense of" the Romanian Nation," 1900 to World War II." *Nationalist ideologies and the production of national cultures* (1990), pg. 81-111.

<sup>378</sup> Silvia Marcu, "The Geopolitics of the Eastern Border of the European Union: The Case of Romania-Moldova-Ukraine." *Geopolitics* 14.3 (2009), pg. 409-432.

notably in the early 1990s, where everyday citizens took to the streets, making their opinions about the government, and their demands for independence, publicly known.<sup>379</sup>

Lia Perjovschi's *Contemporary Art Archive/ Center for Art Analysis* in Bucharest

(1997-2010) both mirrored and participated in these public demonstrations in the realm of art that engaged the changing political climate post-Revolution. Her endeavors opened up the scope of participation, to engage a wider audience than the specifically political events would. While participants in political demonstrations could be arrested or detained by police, Perjovschi's archive and her pedagogical art projects have been and continue to be accessed without fear by any interested viewer, who thereby participated in the artist's exercising of free speech. Because her meetings, brainstorming events and presentations took place outside of the sphere of official politics, audiences did not have to fear repercussions.

In Russia, nonconformist artists had been exploring the inconsistencies between truth and ideology for decades in the late Soviet period. And the uncovering of these untruths did not have the same impact for Russians as it did for Romanians. For Romanians, their whole existence as a nation depended on the revealing of the truth behind appearances, in order to discredit the communist regime and the Soviet occupation. In the immediate post-Soviet period Vilensky, along with other nonconformist photographers and the Factory of Found Clothes, were concerned with other issues, namely, how to re-shape and form a new identity out of the remains of the old Soviet one. For Vilensky, the way to forge this identity was through the creation of a

---

<sup>379</sup> Laura Nistor, "Social Movements in Pre-and Post-December 1989 Romania," *Social Movement Studies in Europe: The State of the Art* 16 (2016), pg. 419.

new photographic language, the visual image and archive would become one of the foundational tools to this end. His approach to working through these problems, however, was quite different from that of the Factory of Found Clothes(FNO). Whereas Gluklya and Tsaplya made performances on the streets of St. Petersburg central to their artistic practice, Vilensky opened his private apartment as a photography gallery where he exhibited his own and other Soviet-era photographers' works, exploring issues of identity, social inequalities and political power.

In Romania, the transition to independence was also different from that experienced in the former Yugoslavia or Russia. The strength of Romanian identity dates back to the time in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when the country was partitioned among three different empires.<sup>380</sup> The Romanian people had fought to reunite their country at the end of World War I only to become subsumed under the Soviet powers after World War II<sup>381</sup>. The orthodox church supported the nascent state in seeking self-determination, and political activists and artists alike found refuge in the nation's churches. After the communist party in Romania was defeated, and Romania was able to have its first free elections since before the war, Romanians still regarded the Church with reverence and clung faithfully to its ideals and tenets. Similarly in Russia, the strong connection between church and state in the Putin era, affected the way Chto Delat? exhibited their films, installations and performances in Russia in the 2000s, as well as when they exhibited at the Vienna Secession in 2014. The fierce reaction of viewers to their work is

---

<sup>380</sup> Raymond, Pearson "Empire, War and the Nation-State in East Central Europe." *Contemporary Nationalism in East Central Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1995, pg. 25-40.

<sup>381</sup> Maria Bucur, "Treznea: Trauma, nationalism and the memory of World War II in Romania." *Rethinking History* 6.1 (2002), pg. 35-55.

evidence of the rigidity of concepts of political authority, the body, and gender in post-communist Russia.

Through installations, performances and their School of Engaged Art, Chto Delat? have mapped a strategy of drawing their audiences viewers in closer to art work, and compelling them to actively engage in a public debate over the relationship between representation and myth, instead of passively assimilating official dogmas. Their 2014 performance *Atlas Ustal* (The Atlas Is Tired; 2014) attracted attention in a manner parallel to political action. These performances occurred in a time when Russian citizens were already not only reconsidering everyday truths that they had been forced to accept, but also challenging them publicly.<sup>382</sup> Chto Delat?'s performances mirrored these changes in everyday society, participating in the exercising of freedom of speech, expression and assembly that were once a promise of Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika. Their performances created a space outside of the political arena for the everyday citizen to contemplate and probe issues that may have otherwise remained untouched by those not actively involved in politics. The *Atlas Ustal* performance took place at a time when Russia was on the verge of great social and political changes with Putin's consolidation of power, thus both the performance and its message are part of this historical moment in contemporary Russia.<sup>383</sup>

IRWIN's *Was ist Kunst?* (What is Art?; 1985) and *NSK Embassy Moscow* (1992) in collaboration with Marina Gržinić were also the product of the great socio-political

---

<sup>382</sup> Graeme B. Robertson, "Managing society: protest, civil society, and regime in Putin's Russia," *Slavic Review* (2009), pg. 528-547.

<sup>383</sup> John P. Willerton, Mikhail Beznosov, Martin Carrier, "Addressing the challenges of Russia's "failing state": the legacy of Gorbachev and the promise of Putin," *Demokratizatsiya* 13.2 (2005), pg. 219.

changes that had occurred at the end of the twentieth century and their consequences for art and culture. Like the Perjovschis, IRWIN and Gržinić were addressing the concerns that their fellow citizens were dealing with in the face of the transition from communist rule to a capitalist, free-market democracy. Their method of engagement, however, was quite different. Although they hoped that the results of their performance and art exhibition would eventually reach the general population in Western Europe, these initial exhibitions and conversations with their peers in Russia were semi-private events that the artists needed to organize in order to investigate art and engagement in post-Soviet Eastern Europe, and use that knowledge to further develop them in the future. Their interventions were an exploration, their aim only to be achieved as part of a long-term plan materialized in East Art Map. It was a way for these artists to understand their own issues with history and identity, and also to channel their questions into the creation of a new method of artistic research would eventually, although not immediately, find their way into the public sphere in an integrated Europe, the United States, and beyond.

IRWIN and Gržinić continue to develop the ideas and concepts that were a result of NSK Embassy Moscow and East Art Map in their art today, as the problem of post-Soviet art historiography has not yet been resolved. While their ambitions were utopian in scope, East Art Map made no claim to having solved the problem of writing Eastern European contemporary art history; it simply remains one important step in the process of creating a horizontal, and open ended artistic research tool.

Similar to both Chto Delat? and IRWIN, with their art the Perjovschis were addressing an art-viewing public abroad and local audiences, exhibiting their work at

their open studio and at major museums in the West and key events such as the Venice Biennale. Lia Perjovschi consciously used quotations from the canon of art history in her work, specifically in her *Subjective Art History* (1999). Her aim in all of her performances and installations from the 1990s, much like IRWIN's, was to get her viewers to reconsider the conventional definitions of the concepts of art and the construction of Cold War history, which to her mind were overly narrow in contemporary society. While those familiar with art historical language, tools and expressions valued her work for the contribution it has made to the discussion of these issues, the general public in Romania was dismissive at the form her work took, disparaging it and refusing to even see it as art. The reaction to her work is an indication of the socio-cultural climate in post-communist Romania, as well as a sign that her work touched upon issues that were relevant to that society, and addressed them in a thought-provoking way. The debates surrounding her work reveals that her strategies were successful in driving people to think about issues that had not been significantly addressed elsewhere.<sup>384</sup>

The nature and shape of the major artistic projects of these three artists, as well as their strategies of engagement and aims, are all separate and distinct results of both the environment in which they were trained as well as the circumstances they found themselves in during the late-Soviet and early post-Soviet period. The audience response, both on an official and unofficial level, also varied with regard to specific country experience and climate.

---

<sup>384</sup> Corina L. Apostol, "Self-archiving and redefining the purpose of visual thinking in Lia Perjovschi's art," Cristian Nae ed., *Conceptualism in Central and Eastern Europe*, Arta #20-21, 2016, pg 68.

While it is tempting to view these works of art through the lens of Western art history, it is important to remember that much of the region that these artists were working in remained relatively closed off from the Western art world during the Cold War. Although many artists in these communist countries were aware of developments taking place in the West, the manner in which they received this information was inconsistent and sporadic: few artists in the East were aware of every artistic trend and development in the West, nor were they aware of the order in which those developments occurred. For example, the situation Lia Perjovschi described in Romania was complex. Thus, scholars from the West may think of Romania when they hear the name Tristan Tsara, but Tsara's association with the avant-garde Dada movement wasn't that well known in Romania during the communist times. The upshot is that the artist described a situation to me where, at least in the 1980s – when she was coming of age as an artist – she was working mainly from instinct: doing things first, and then analyzing them later.<sup>385</sup>

For this reason it remains crucial that we examine these artists in their distinct socio-political environment at the end of and immediately after the Cold War, as well as considering the avant-garde legacy from the twentieth century that they would be relevant to their work. While the artists in this study all share the common background of a communist past, their individual experiences of communism were strikingly different, owing to location and local history. Furthermore their art historical references were also distinct, owing both to local traditions and exposure, or lack thereof, to international

---

<sup>385</sup> Corina L. Apostol, "Self-archiving and redefining the purpose of visual thinking in Lia Perjovschi's art," Cristian Nae ed., *Conceptualism in Central and Eastern Europe*, Arta #20-21, 2016, pg 68.



modernism and post-modernism. It is only by viewing the artists and their work in contrast to one another that we can begin to note the important differences with regard to different regions and areas of Eastern Europe. In this way, we are able to decipher what is distinct about Russian, Romanian or Slovenian artistic production (the final artistic project or result), but also in terms of issues relevant to each respective society, audience addressed, method of engagement, as well as viewer response, each of which is markedly different from state to state, city to city.

This is not to say that the artistic projects discussed in this dissertation are representative of their country of origin. Rather, the combination of variables (art project, audience, artistic strategy, and response) reveal a more nuanced insight into both the Soviet and post-Soviet (communist and post-communist) socio-cultural and socio-political situation in each country. The aforementioned artistic projects, therefore, are instructive both in terms of art and art practices in Eastern Europe and Russia in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as serving as an indication of the social and political climate.

Moreover, my investigation assesses the value of these artists' work in light of a global art market, and the proliferation of biennales and large-scale exhibitions in which they all participated since the 1990s. In doing so, I have avoided the narrow focus and dominant tendency to view the artistic production of these countries solely in comparison to developments in the West. Evaluating the contributions artists make should not reduce to a question of how these works resemble those produced in the West, but rather what the works mean in the context of when and where they were produced. I also analyzed

why the ideas they represent have manifested themselves in these particular forms and why the artists chose certain strategies. The works produced derived from, but also exceeded the combined forces of art historical as well as socio-political legacy.

Consequently, future research should involve the study of these artists and their work not only in their particular local socio-cultural context, but also within the context of neighboring countries and nations with similar Soviet-influenced histories. This is the strategy that has been taken since the end of the Cold War in the fields of sociology, political science, and cultural studies.<sup>386</sup> It follows that the same approach might be similarly informative in the field of art history. By studying the art of these countries comparatively we can begin to understand the subtle differences between the diverse meanings of conceptual art with an educational thrust in Slovenia, Romania and Russia, respectively, as well as the specific issues relevant or not relevant to the artists and their audiences. These subtleties may then be enhanced by a consideration of the works in relation to similar works produced in the West only to point out that the different historical context has produced an art work that may look similar to one created in the West, but is a manifestation and expression of completely different ideas. This comparison yields a refined and expanded definition of avant-gardes and contemporaneity in art history by analyzing European artists that have not, until recently, been included in the discourse.

Given the scarcity of significant written histories, especially within former Soviet Union countries such as Russia and Romania (in Slovenia there has been more

---

<sup>386</sup> Patrick Major and Rana Mitter, "East is East and West is West? Towards a comparative socio-cultural history of the Cold War." *Cold War History* 4.1 (2003), pg. 1-22.

published), careful research involving primary sources, namely the documentation of oral histories from the artists in question, is essential to the evaluation of the art of these former communist countries. Local accounts of art history tend to be limited by their insularity. Accounts from the outside tend to consider the art work from a narrowly Western perspective. My approach is to expand the scope and consider the artists and their work in all of these contexts – the local, the regional and the global, in order to arrive at a complete picture of the relevance and significance of the work in terms of avant-garde and contemporary art.

My dissertation has adopted such a comparative approach, examining the artists and the specific performances in question in terms of their significance in the country of origin, the region, and in terms of art history in general. I have demonstrated how each of these distinct artistic strategies and art works have made impactful contributions to contemporary art and politics. The socially engaged art projects I have analyzed have moved from the margins of the art world to, if not quite its center, then certainly to a central part of the discussion on art, activism and global politics in the 2000s. These artists continue to work against the backdrop of a changing world, one defined by a growing global consciousness or awareness of shared political, and cultural fate and by a shared perception of crisis. *East Art Map* presents compelling art histories from Eastern Europe in different ways, based on a selection of key artworks and artists, allowing local artists, curators and art historians to talk on their own terms about the region's past and its future. *East Art Map* serves as a guidebook through the visual culture of totalitarian and post-totalitarian societies, and it represents the first substantial contemporary art project

ever undertaken by the East on the East. The *Contemporary Art Archive/Center for Art Analysis* and her *Knowledge Museum* offered self-empowerment through access to information and open dialogue in a way that had particular relevance for audiences, and indeed the reaction of viewers to the work of art also indicates its bearing on Romanian society. The socio-political issues that Chto Delat? and their students in the School of Engaged Art were dealing with in Post-Soviet Russia were also of consequence to those in Slovenia and Romania, dealing with re-empowered police states. Each of these artists were maneuvering in the rapidly changing socio-political environments of their localities; their work stands as a testament to that volatile and confusing period. The specific atmosphere in each of their working environments affected the directions each artist group took as they sought diverse responses to these pressures, combining avant-garde artistic tactics with education. Each pedagogical artistic project remains explicitly international, long-term and community based, offering audiences thoughtful attempts to improve social issues.

## Bibliography

*After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe.* Edited by Bojana Pejic. Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999.

*After Perestroika: Kitchenmaids or Stateswomen.* Edited by Margarita Tupitsyn. New York: Independent Curators, 1994.

Andreeva, Ekaterina. *Sots Art: Soviet Artists of the 1970s-1980s.* Australia: Craftsman House, 1995.

*Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity.* Edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.

Conceptualism in Central and Eastern Europe. Edited by Cristian Nae. *Arta* #20-21, 2016.

*Apt Art: The Moscow Vanguard in the 1980s.* Edited by Norton Dodge. Mechanicsville, Maryland: Cremona Foundation, 1985.

*Architectures of Russian Identity 1500 to the Present.* Edited by James Cracraft and Daniel Rowland. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003.

*Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism.* Edited by Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss. 2 vols. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005.

*Art in Revolution: Soviet Art and Design since 1917.* Edited by Oleg Shvidkovsky. London: Hayward Gallery, 1971.

Artists' Networks in Latin America and Eastern Europe, *ARTMargins Journal*. Edited by Cristina Freire and Klara Kemp-Welch. Vol. 1, No. 2–3, June–October 2012.

*Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-party State, 1917-1992.* Edited by Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993.

*Avatars of Intellectuals under Communism*, vol. 2 of *History of Communism in Europe*. Edited by Corina Pălășan and Cristian Vasile. Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2011.

Baigell, Renne, and Matthew Baigell. *Peeling Potatoes, Painting Pictures: Women Artists in Post-Soviet Russia, Estonia, and Latvia: the First Decade*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Benderly, Jill and Kraft, Evan. *Independent Slovenia: Origins, Movements, Prospects*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994.

Berdahl, Daphne, Matti Bunzl, and Martha Lampland. *Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000.

*Between Spring and Summer: Soviet Conceptual Art in the Era of Late Communism*. Edited by Davis A. Ross. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.

*Beyond Invisible Walls: The Psychological Legacy of Soviet Trauma*. Edited by Jacob D. Lindy and Robert Jay Lifton. New York: Routledge, 2001.

*Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present*. Edited by Zdenka Badovinac. Lubljana, Slovenia: Museum of Modern Art, 1998.

Borsody, Stephen. *The New Central Europe: Triumphs and Tragedies*. Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1993.

Bogue, Ronald. *Deleuze on Music, Painting and the Arts*, New York: Routledge, 2003.

Bown, Matthew Cullerne. *Art Under Stalin*. Oxford, England: Phaidon Press, 1991.

Boym, Svetlana. *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Buchloh, Benjamin. *Neo-avantgarde and culture industry: essays on European and American art from 1955 to 1975*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

Buck-Morss, Susan. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: the Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, Ma: MIT Press, 2000.

Bucur, Maria. "Treznea: Trauma, nationalism and the memory of World War II in Romania." *Rethinking History* 6.1 (2002): 35-55.

Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Bussel, David. "Forward, Not Forgetting: On Chto Delat? at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London," *Texte zur Kunst*, "Political Art?", Issue No. 80 (December 2010): pg. 149-270.

*Central Europe: Core or Periphery?* Edited by Christopher Lord. Prague: Copenhagen Business School Press, 2000.

*Chto Delat? Time Capsule: An Artistic Report on Catastrophes and Utopias*. Edited by Bettina Spoer, Tina Lipsky and Dmitry Vilensky. Berlin: Revolver Verlag, 2014.

Chto Delat?. What is to be done? Survey of the Works of-the Russian collective Chto Delat?. Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011.

*Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*. Edited by Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

*Decentering the Avant-Garde*, eds. Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson (Amsterdam/ New York: Rodopi, 2012)

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

Doria, Charles. *Russian Samizdat Art*. New York: Willis Locker & Owens Publishing, 1986.

*Drugoe iskusstvo: Moskva, 1956-1976. Khronike khudozhestvennoi zhizni*, vol, 1. Edited by L. P. Talochkin and I. G. Apatova, 99-120. Moscow: Moskovskaia kollektsiia, 1991.

Dyogot, Ekaterina. "Catastrophe and Hedonism: An Unnostalgic Look at Russian Art of the Last Decade." <http://www.artmargins.com/content/feature/dyogot.html>.

*East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*. Edited by IRWIN. London: Afterall Books, 2006.

*The Enlargement of the European Union*. Edited by Marise Cremona. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Epstein, Mikhail N. *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*. Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995.

Erofeev, Andrei. *Non-Official Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s*. Australia: Craftsman House, 1995.

*EU Expansion to the East: Prospects and Problems*. Edited by Hilary Ingham and Mike Ingham. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2002.

*European Integration in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Unity in Diversity?* Edited by Mary Farrell, Stefano Fella, and Michael Newman. London: Sage Publications, 2002.

*Europeanisation, National Identities and Migration: Changes in Boundary Constructions between Western and Eastern Europe*. Edited by Willfried Spohn and Anna Triandafyllidou. London: Routledge, 2003.

*Exhibition*. Edited by Lucy Steeds. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.

*Factory of Found Clothes: Utopian Unions*. Edited by Natalya Pershina-Yakimanskaya (Gluklya) and Nelly Podgorskaya. Moscow: Museum of Modern Art, 2013.

*From Gulag to Glasnost: Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union*. Edited by Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995.

*FV Alternativa osemdesetih* (FV Alternative Scene of the Eighties). Edited by Breda Skrjanec. Ljubljana: Mednarodni gradicni likovni center/ International Centre of Graphic Arts, 2008.

*Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s*. Edited by Jane Farver and Shigeo Chiba. New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999.

*The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-garde, 1915-1932*. Edited by Jane A. Sharp. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992.

Greenberg, Clement. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (1939): pg. 34–49.



Grzinic, Marina "Video Art in Slovenia and in the Territory of Ex-Yugoslavia," *Mute Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 7, 1997.

Groys, Boris, ed., *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Hazard, Barbara J. *Off Nevsky Prospekt: Life Among Leningrad's Unofficial Artists*. Berkeley, CA: Open Books, 1992.

Hory, Ladislaus and Broszat, Martin. "Der kroatische Ustascha-Staat," *Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt*, Stuttgart, 1965, pg. 13–38

Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986.

*Impossible Histories Historic Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991*. Edited by Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

*Interrupted Histories*. Edited by Zdenka Badovinac. Ljubljana: Museum of Modern Art, 2006.

*It's the Real Thing: Soviet and Post-Soviet Sots Art & American Pop Art*. Edited by Regina Khidekel. Minneapolis: Weisman Art Museum, 1998.

Jameson, Fredric. *Brecht and Method*. London and New York: Verso, 1998.

Kaprow, Allan. *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

*Keepers of the Flame: The Unofficial Artists of Leningrad*. Edited by Selma Holo, University of Southern California: Fisher Gallery, 1990.

Kier, Christina. *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005.

Kind-Kovács, Friederike and Labov, Jessie. *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Berghahn Books, 2013.

Kotkin, Stephen. *Armageddon Averted: the Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Kovalev, Andrei. *Between the Utopias: New Russian Art During and after Perestroika (1985-1993)*. Australia: Craftsman House, 1995.

Kramer, Hilton, "Postmodern: Art and culture in the 1980s," *Quadrant*, Vol. 28, No. 1-2, Jan/Feb 1984, pg. 28-32.

Krupnick, Charles. *Almost NATO: Partners and Players in Central and Eastern European Society*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003.

Lampe, John R. *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

*Language and Nationalism in Europe*. Edited by Stephen Barbour and Cathie Carmichael. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Lenin, Vladimir. *What is to be Done? Burning Questions for our Movement*. Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1973.

Lindey, Christine. *Art in the Cold War*. New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1990.

Magun, Artemy. "Negativity in Communism: Ontology and Politics," *Russian Sociological Review*, Vol. 13, (No. 1, 2014): 9-25.

Major, Patrick and Mitter, Rana. "East is East and West is West? Towards a comparative socio-cultural history of the Cold War." *Cold War History* 4.1 (2003): 1-22.

Marcu, Silvia. "The Geopolitics of the Eastern Border of the European Union: The Case of Romania-Moldova-Ukraine." *Geopolitics* 14.3 (2009): 409-432.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. New York: Penguin, 1992.

McPhee, John. *The Ransom of Russian Art*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994.

Mignolo, Walter. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Misiano, Viktor. "Russian Reality: The End of the Intelligentsia." *Flash Art* 28/189 (Summer 1996): 104-107.

*Modernism and Its Margins: Re-inscribing Cultural Modernity from Spain and Latin America*. Edited by Anthony Geist and Jose Monleon. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Monroe, Alexei. *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005.

Nistor, Laura. "Social Movements in Pre-and Post-December 1989 Romania," *Social Movement Studies in Europe: The State of the Art* 16 (2016): 419

*New Art from the Soviet Union*. Edited by Norton Dodge and Alison Hilton. Washington, DC: Acropolis Books Ltd., 1977.

Oblak, Mojca. Neue Slowenische Kunst and New Slovenian Art. *Art & Design: New Art From Eastern Europe: Identity and Conflict*. No. 35 / 1994.

O'Neill, Paul and Wilson, Mick. *Curating and the Educational Turn*. London: Open Editions, 2010

*Ostalgie*. Edited by Massimiliano Gioni. New York: New Museum, 2011.

Pearson, Raymond. "Empire, War and the Nation-State in East Central Europe." *Contemporary Nationalism in East Central Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan UK (1995): 25-40

*Perspectives on the Enlargement of the European Union*. Edited by Cameron Ross. Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2002.

Piotrowski, Piotr. *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*. London: Reaktion Books, 2011.

Pirani, Simon. *Change in Putin's Russia: Power, Money and People*. NY: Pluto Press, 2010.

Poggioli, Renato. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968.

*Post-Soviet Art and Architecture*. Edited by Alexey Yurasovsky and Sophie Overnden. United Kingdom: Academy Editions, 1994.

*Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*. Edited by Hoptman, Laura, and Tomáš Pospiszyl. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002.

*The Quest for Self-Expression: Painting in Moscow and Leningrad 1965-1990*. Edited by Elena Kornetchuk. Ohio: Columbus Museum of Art, 1990.

Ramet, Sabina Petra. *Social Currents in Eastern Europe*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image*. London and New York: Verso, 2009.

Rancière, Jacques. *Le Spectateur Emancipé*. Paris: La Fabrique, 2008.

Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London and New York: Continuum, 2004.

Riff, David "It's all about the people..." Moscow Art Magazine Digest No. 2(2005/2007): 99-100.

Robertson, Graeme B. "Managing society: protest, civil society, and regime in Putin's Russia," *Slavic Review* (2009): 528-547.

Rodchenko, Aleksandr "Predosterezheniye" ["Warning"], *Novyi Lef*, no. 2, (1928).

*Russian Art Now*. Edited by Peter Noever. Austria: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002.

*Russian Cultural Studies*. Edited by Catriona Kelly and Davis Shepherd. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1998.

*Russian Samizdat Art*. Edited by Charles Doria. New York: Willis Locker & Owens Publishing, 1986.

*Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture*. Edited by Mikhail N. Epstein, Aleksander A. Genis, and Slobodanka M. Vladiv-Glover. New York: Berghahn Books, 1999.

*Self-Identification, Positions in St. Petersburg Art from 1970 to today*. Edited by Barbara Straka, Berlin: DruckVogt GmbH, 1994.

Shukaitis, Stevphen. *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2009.

*Socialist Realism without Shores*. Edited by Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko. Durham, North Carolina, The Duke University Press, 1997.

Spieker, Sven. *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008

Stan, Lavinia and Turcescu, Lucian. "The Romanian Orthodox Church and Post-Communist Democratisation." *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 52, (no. 8, 2000): 1467–1488.

Stites, Richard. *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Stubbs, Paul. "Nationalisms, globalization and civil society in Croatia and Slovenia." *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 19.1 (1996): 1-26

*Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*. Edited by Susan E. Reid, Susan and David Crowley. Oxford, England: Berg, 2000.

Tarrow, Sidney. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011

Thompson, Nato. "Socially Engaged Art is a Mess Worth Making." *Architect* magazine (August 2012): 85-86

Trotsky, Leon. *Their Morals and Ours: The Marxist View of Morality*. Broadway, Australia: Resistance Books, 2010.

Tupitsyn, Margarita. *Margins of Soviet Art: Socialist Realism to the Present*. Milan: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1989.

Tupitsyn, Margarita. *Russian New Wave*. Mechanicsville, MD: Cremona Foundation, Inc., 1981.

Tupitsyn, Margarita. "Unveiling Feminism: Women's Art in the Soviet Union." *Arts Magazine* 65/4 (December 1990): 63-67.

Tupitsyn, Margarita, and Victor Tupitsyn. *Apt Art: Moscow Vanguard in the '80s*. Mechanicsville, MD: Cremona Foundation, Inc., 1985.

Tupitsyn, Victor. "Ideology Mon Amour." *Flash Art* 137 (November-December 1987): 84-88.

Tupitsyn, Victor. "If I Were a Woman: Feminism versus Cultural Patriarchy in Russia." *Third Text* 40 (Autumn 1997): 85-92.

Verdery, Katherine. *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania's Secret Police*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2014.

Verdery, Katherine "The Production and Defense of" the Romanian Nation," 1900 to World War II." Nationalist ideologies and the production of national cultures (1990): 81-111.

Vilensky, Dmitry. "St. Petersburg Photo-Postscriptum: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow." *IMAGO - Another Eropka Photography*. Winter 95/96.

Wallach, Amei. "Censorship in the Soviet Bloc." *Art Journal* (Fall 1991): 75-83.

*Which Identity for Which Europe?* Edited by Antje Herrberg, Antje. Denmark: Aalborg University Press, 1998.

White, Gary. *Forbidden Art: The Postwar Russian Avant-Garde*. New York: Art Publishers, 1998.

Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More – The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

## Chapter Two



Illustration 2.1 IRWIN, Was ist Kunst? (What is art?), installation view. Studio Vipotnik, Ljubljana, 1984



Illustration 2.2 IRWIN, Was ist Kunst?(What is art?), installation view, Bess Cutler gallery, New York, 1988





Illustration 2.3 IRWIN, Malevich Between the Two Wars, mixed media painting, 1984-2001



Illustration 2.4 IRWIN, NSK Embassy Moscow, sign, 1992



Illustration 2.5 NSK Embassy Moscow, setting up the flag at the building of the private apartment at Leninsky Prospekt 12, photograph, 1992



Illustration 2.6 Participants in the NSK Embassy Moscow on Leninsky Prospekt, 1992



Illustration 2.7 Lecturers Rastko Močnik, Marina Gržinić and Matjaž Berger from Slovenia, Vesna Kesić from Croatia, and Viktor Misiano, Valeri Podoroga, Aleksandr Yakimovich, Tatiana Didenko and Artiom Troitsky from Russia, at the NSK Embassy Moscow, 1992





Illustration 2.8 IRWIN, Black Square on the Red Square, performance, 1992



Illustration 2.9 Marina Gržinić, Post-socialism + Retroavant garde + Irwin, film-clip , 1997



Illustration 2.10 IRWIN & Marina Gržinić, Retroavantgarda, mixed media painting, 2000





Illustration 2.11 Cover of East Art Map, edited by IRWIN, published by MIT Press, 2006

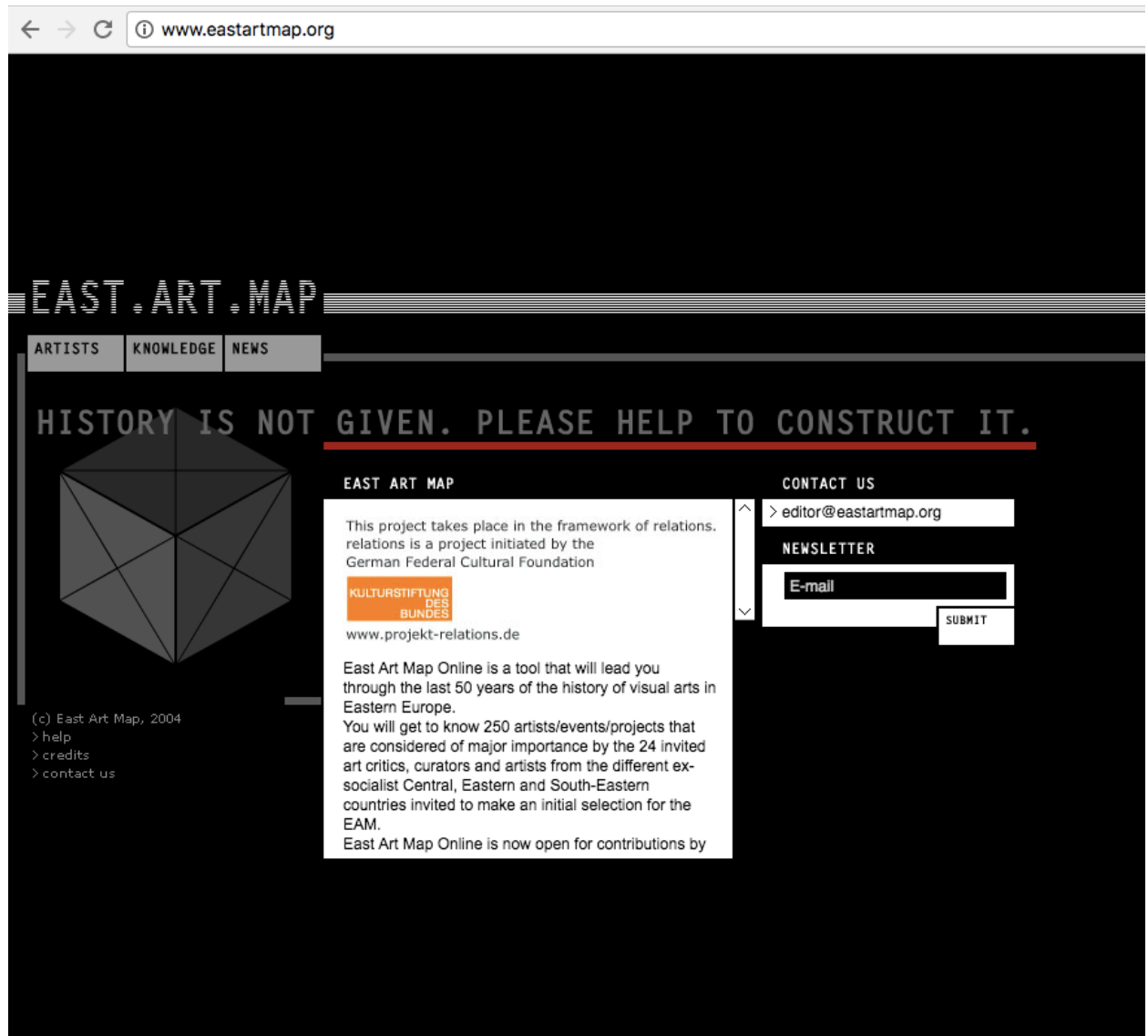


Illustration 2.12 IRWIN, East Art Map online, website, accessed December 2016

## Chapter Three



Illustration 3.1 Lia Perjovschi, Knowledge Museum, installation view, Steirischer Herbst, Graz, 2012

Illustration 3.2 Lia Perjovschi, 'How to Change the World as an Individual' Mind Map, drawing, 2015

**Instalație/Installation** • Sensul comun al instalației se referă la alăturarea picturilor sau la aranjarea obiectelor într-o expoziție. • Mai puțin generic, și mai recent, instalația este o lucrare de artă site-specific (concepută pentru un loc anume). În acest sens, instalația este creată special pentru spațiul unei galerii anume, sau al unui sit exterior, iar componentele sale nu trebuie văzute ca un grup de obiecte ci ca un întreg ansamblu sau environment. Instalația oferă privitorului experiența de a fi înconjurat de artă. • Reprezintă dorința artistului de a extinde zona de practică de la atelier la spațiul public. • Relația dintre un număr de elemente și interacțiunea dintre lucruri și contextul lor. • Limbaj de semne în forme conceptuale variate • Întreprinde a conceptelor • Explorarea contextului social al lucrului. Cind? 1970

**Acțiune** • Artiști-actor. Corpul ca element expresiv. • Grupul Guze 1954 • Terenul gâd pentru lucruri (1960), prezența în interiorul unei galerii sau pe străzile orașului. • Temele preferate: spiritual, estetic, social și politic. Cind? 1950-1970

**Intermedialitate** • Asamblare de elemente performanțive și de performanță activă de performer și de performanță (Alan Kaprow) Cind? 1959

**Eveniment** • Fluxus • Fluxus meata • Diverse acțiuni de creație dintr-o serie de evenimente, cum ar fi Zen, Dada și Fluxus • Fluxus este mai mult o stare de spirit decât un stil. Motivația principală fiind să supere rutina artei și vieții burgheze. Cind? 1960

**Performanță/Performance Art** • Activități artistice prezentate în fața unei audiențe, acompaniate de muzică, dans, poezie, teatru și video. Lucrările au fost inspirate de o varietate de surse artistice vizuale. Cind? 1960

**Body art** • Formă artistică în care corpul artistului este mediul, mai degrabă decât conținutul, a unei lucrări. • Performanțe publice sau private vizuale apoi în documentații foto sau video. • Expresii medievale de sex și droguri, franchele postmoderne în accesorii, au fost re-venite de body art (Robert Abram) • Arte corporale este o mișcare de protest de către artiștii din anii 1960 și 1970 împotriva societății consumului și a valorilor estetice (Francis Fluxus) Cind? 1960-70

**Living Art** • Termen recent ce definește evoluția unor forme de expresie în care corpul este mediul prin care și cu care artistul comunică. • Expresie a disidenței și a intermedialității conceptuale și formale pe care o are experiența artistică în viața de zi cu zi. • Primele artiști care au luat în considerare conceptele și formele pe care creația artistică se bazează. • Sere de performanțe, sau lucrări vizuale la scară mare, cu o durată de câteva minute la care o lucrare performanțivă, sau repetitivă de câteva ore sau zile, sau instalată după câteva luni, sau lucrări prezentate de artă singur sau în grup. • Expresie a dorinței multor artiști de a-și prezenta

**Documentație** • Sensul comun se referă la fotografii, casete video sau materiale scrise legate de o lucrare de artă, expoziție sau serie. • Mai complex, noțiunea de documentare este legată de Arte Conceptuale, în special lucrările de Earth Art și Performance, multe lucrări fiind concepute numai prin documentație. • Cind documentația este făcută de artiști, poate fi considerată o lucrare de artă, deosebită în expoziții și chiar vândută ca artă.

**Expoziție** • „Expoziția a devenit mediul prin care arta a devenit cunoscută. Transformați conștient de artiști și curatori, expoziția a devenit o parte preponderantă și deosebită a culturii contemporane. Târgurile de artă au devenit importante.”

**Galerie** • Cubul alb, rama instalației și performanța artistică

**Loc** • O porțiune particulară de spațiu, ca acesta ocupată de o persoană sau un lucru

nel Bell End of Technology (1960) • Multe lucrări consideră că trecerea de la modernism la postmodernism semnifică o mutare epocă în conștiința conștientă și o schimbare contemporană din ordinea socială și economică. • Apa cum cultura modernă a fost condusă de necesitatea de a găsi temeri este industrială, așa și postmodernismul a fost prin de dorința de acomodare cu era electronică. După cel de-Al Doilea Război Mondial, arta modernă, și teoria de artă, a devenit mai redușivă, mai prescriptivă, mai orientată spre o singură direcție oficială generală. • Un aspect distinct al postmodernismului este dispoziția categoriilor tradiționale. După mai puțin, neo-conceptualismul, neo-ges, neo-abstractismul, alături de postmodernismul de teorie structuralistă. • Postmodernismul și epoca epai imaginile lumii moderne și lucrările artistice care l-au precedat. • Punctul în lumina a de construcții multilogice a vieții reale și a limbajului codat a marilor public media, arta și teorie, istoria, pedagogia, politica (Daniel Weiser) Cind? 1960

**Procesul Art** • Artiștii declară că un proces și aproape rezultatul lui. • Procesul creației este mai mult decât rezultatul. • Artiștii încorporează în și sistem natural în lucrările lor experiența de dragul experienței Cind? 1960-70

**Artă publică/Pubic Art** • În sensul cel mai general, arta publică este simpla artă produsă pentru, și detinută de, comunitate. • Noțiune distinctă de cind dăruirea artă (cavitatea pictate, frescele, catedralele și lucrările comemorative create pentru spațiul public).

**Sound Art** • Artă compusă în principal din sunet și lucrări de artă. Prezență în evenimente vizuale obișnuite, galerii, muzee sau în o reșea pe care audio

**Sesul** • Delimitare tridimensională a unei suprafețe unde obiectele și evenimentele au loc • spații și direcții relative • Creați prin înțelegerea unei suprafețe, sau definiția ei prin culori, linii, funcții.

**Artă și tehnologie/Art and Technology** • High Tech Art • Artă contemporană realizată cu tehnologie sofisticată, incluzând computere, laser, holograme, fotocopii, mașini de scris, transmițători prin satelit.

1960-70 Tehnologia devine subiect stabil al artei moderne • Grupul ZERO fondat în Düsseldorf în '57 • Grupul GRAV (GRAV) fondat la Paris în '60 • Grupul de Artă și Tehnologie (GAT) fondat în '66 la New York, au legătură de artiști și oameni de știință ce au explorat relația dintre artă și tehnologie. • Materia impune elemente de surse, lumina și elemente critice. • De la 1970, Center for Advanced Visual Studies Massachusetts Institute of Technology continuă să promoveze interacțiunea dintre artă și oameni de știință din zona Cambridge. • 1970 a început cu erizismul general de așezarea pe lume, dar curând



Marcel Duchamp 1929



Christian Balthus 1968



Glen Felder 1956



Chris Burden 1967



Magdalena Jetzke 1965



Gary Hill 1990



Per Brown 1994

1  
**diaPOZITIV** (Instalația) curator Lia Perjovschi, aprilie-mai 1998

1: to move with a loud low hum or buzz  
2: to focus a camera or microscope using a special lens that permits the apparent distance of the object to be varied  
3: to increase sharply; to cause to zoom

la artă și mai direct publicului, de a o face să funcționeze în alina muzelor și a galeriilor. Cind? 1990

**Artă Conceptuală** • Formă artistică ce pune stăruie mai presus decât obiectul. Artiștii conceptuali au reacționat împotriva unei artei conceptuale. • Au fost semiosemica, fenomenul, arta, cultura populară, un documentar gândit artistică, sau lucrări de artă care conțin elemente subiective, forme, materialitate, tehnici de surse, contextul social-istoric și intermedialitatea interpretării artistului pe plan de cele ale privitorului. • Conținutul lucrării nu este același lucru cu subiectul ei. Subiectul unei lucrări este doar o parte a conținutului.

**Curator** • Curatori și artiști instituționali și structuri artistice mondiale (chiar dacă și operează într-o instituție sau ca independenți) • Mai mult decât critici de

**Land Art** • Versiune monumentală, minimă și conceptuală, de tratare artistică a peisajului. • Intervensiuni în peisaj și modificări de manieră provizorie sau durabilă, păstrând și schimbându o conținut într-o natură • evitarea muzelor și galeriilor

**Earth Art** • Earth art sau environmental art susține ideea din conceptele artelor 70 • Suport al mișcării ecologice • respinge comercializarea artei • întărește la natură • antiturbism • unii artiști spirituali pentru planetă. Cind? 1960-70

**Media Art** • Artă ce exploatează Mass Media. Cind? 1970

**Muzeu de Artă** • „Casă a artei” • O instituție de joacă cu rol decisiv în determinarea semnificației lucrării de artă (Harold Szeemann)

**Artă politică** • O lucrare este politică dacă oferă perspectivă, direcție sau indicație asupra relațiilor sociale. • În zilele noastre, se referă la lucrări cu subiect politic făcute să critice o stare de fapt.

**Postmodernism** • Post- prefix al altor termeni pentru a însemna după • Termenul postmodernism a apărut în textul lui Da-

tehnologie a apărut să fie asociată cu disrupția mediului, izbucnirea nucleară în Vietnam, accidentele centralelor nucleare ducând la accidente climatice. Cind? 1970

**Light and space Art** • Folosirea radicală a noilor materiale pentru crearea lucrărilor de artă și dematerializarea obiectului artistic • Instalarea ca și Arte Conceptuale, dar cu accent pe senzația de spațiu și mai puțin pe percepția vizuală • Interacțiune științifică sau metafizică. Cind? 1960-70

**Video - Artă video** • Istoriile tehnice • Video art este video făcut de artiști • Video este un mediu și nu un stil • Reprezintă corpul în Artă Media - reprezentarea, materializarea, prezența și absența sa • Mediu de imaginare aproape transparent cu potențial pentru comentariu public • Artiștii au început să folosească video, camera, magnetosco, monitorii și ca material de producție artistică. Cind? 1960

**Zeligist** • Literar: spiritul timpului • Termen introdus de supradintele și gândirea unei ere. • În termenii de artă Z. se referă la caracteristicile care ale unei perioade sau moment • introspecția melancolică a stilului de secol al anilor 1980 • optimismul și experimentul anilor 1960

Illustration 3.3 Lia Perjovschi, ZOOM diaPOZITIV, newspaper, 1998

Illustration 3.4 Lia Perjovschi, 'Sense' Mind Map, collage, 1999



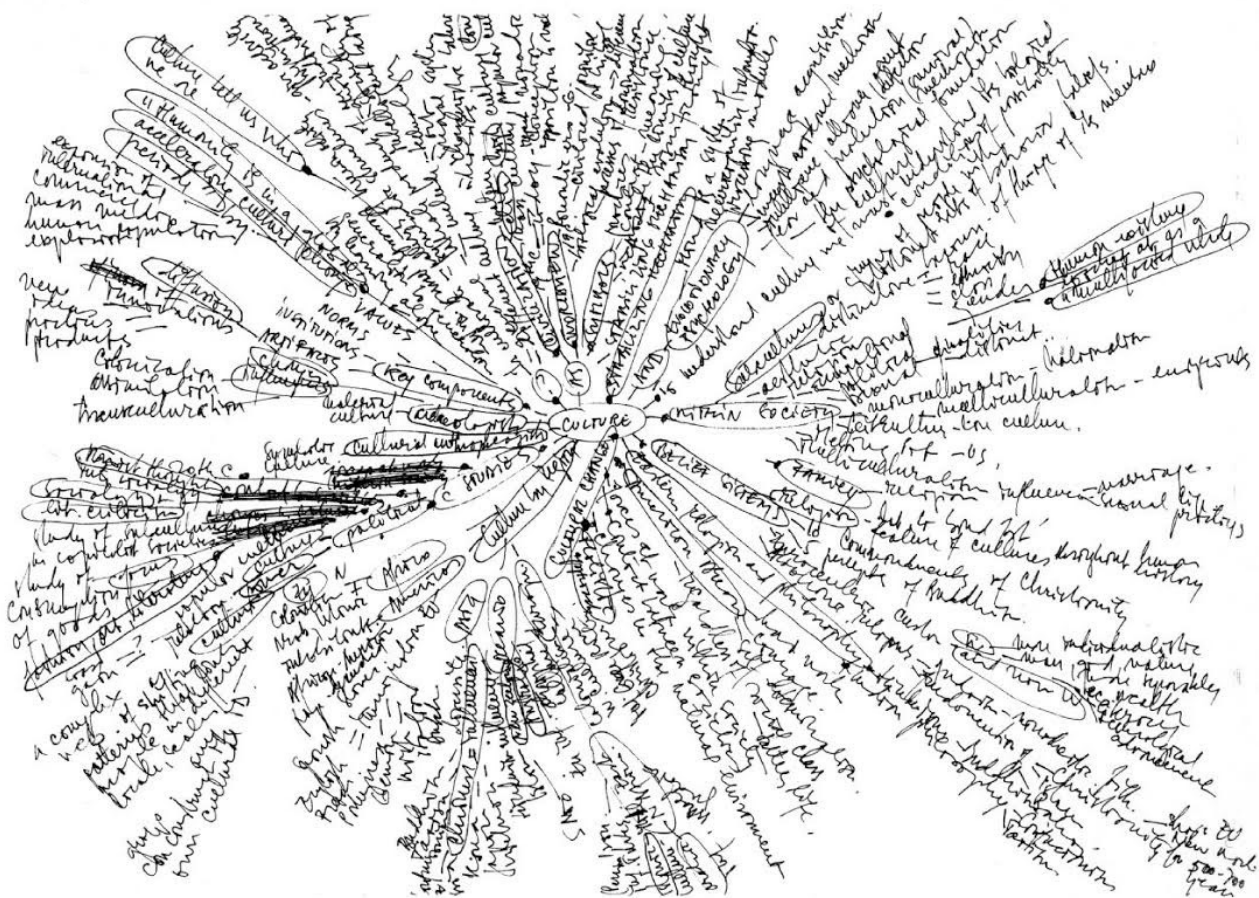


Illustration 3.5 Lia Perjovschi, 'Culture' Mind Map, drawing, 2015



Illustration 3.6 Lia Perjovschi, Performances (1987-2007), poster, 2007



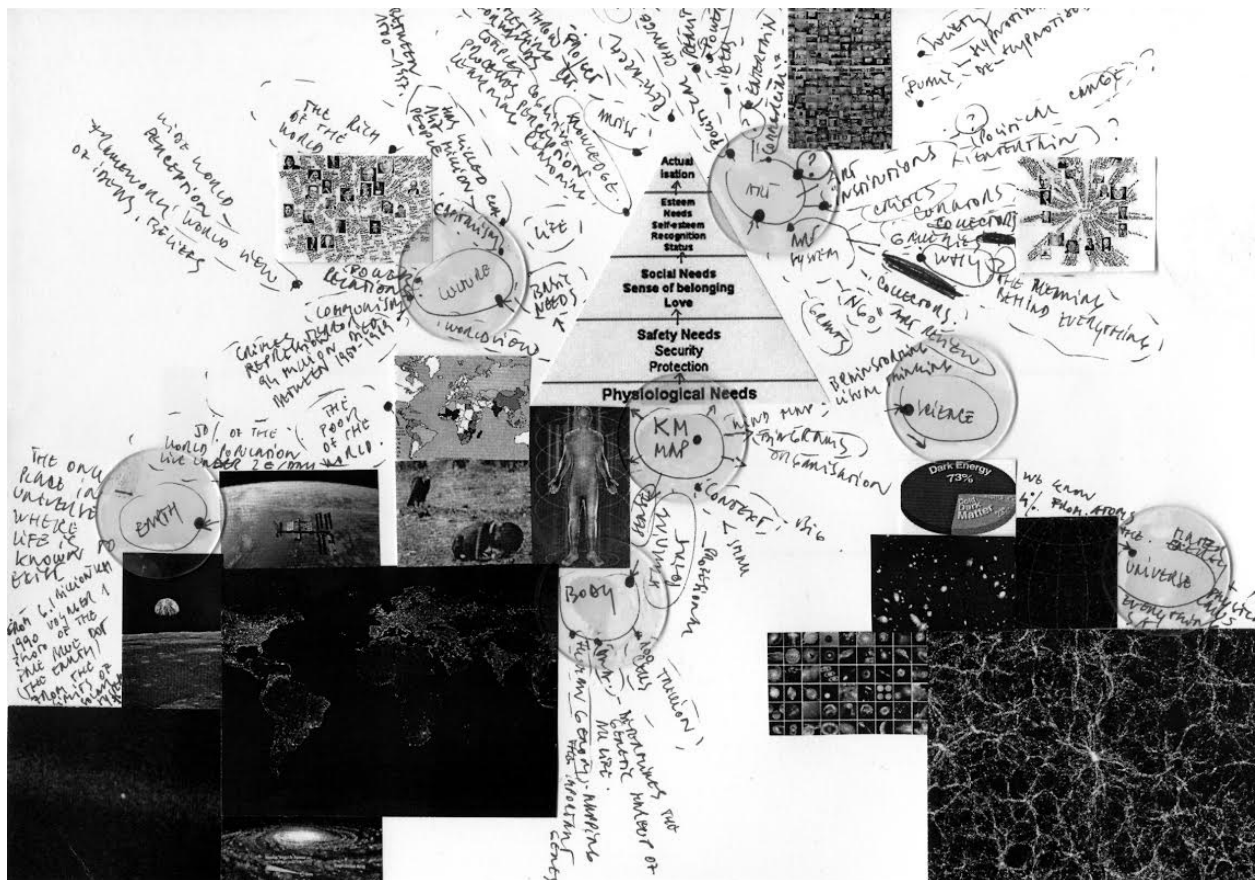


Illustration 3.7 Lia Perjovschi, Knowledge Museum Map, collage, 1999



Illustration 3.8 Lia Perjovschi and Dan Perjovschi, Artist Studio and Archive, Sibiu, 2016



Illustration 3.9 Robert Sennecke, The First International Dada Fair, installation view with artists Hannah Höch, Otto Schmalhausen, Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, Dr Otto Burchard, Margarete Herzfelde, Wieland Herzfelde, Rudolf Schlichter, Mies van der Rohe, Johannes Baader, Berlin, 1920



Illustration 3.10 Lia Perjovschi, *Timelines and Mind Maps*, installation view, Michel Rein Gallery, Paris, 2015

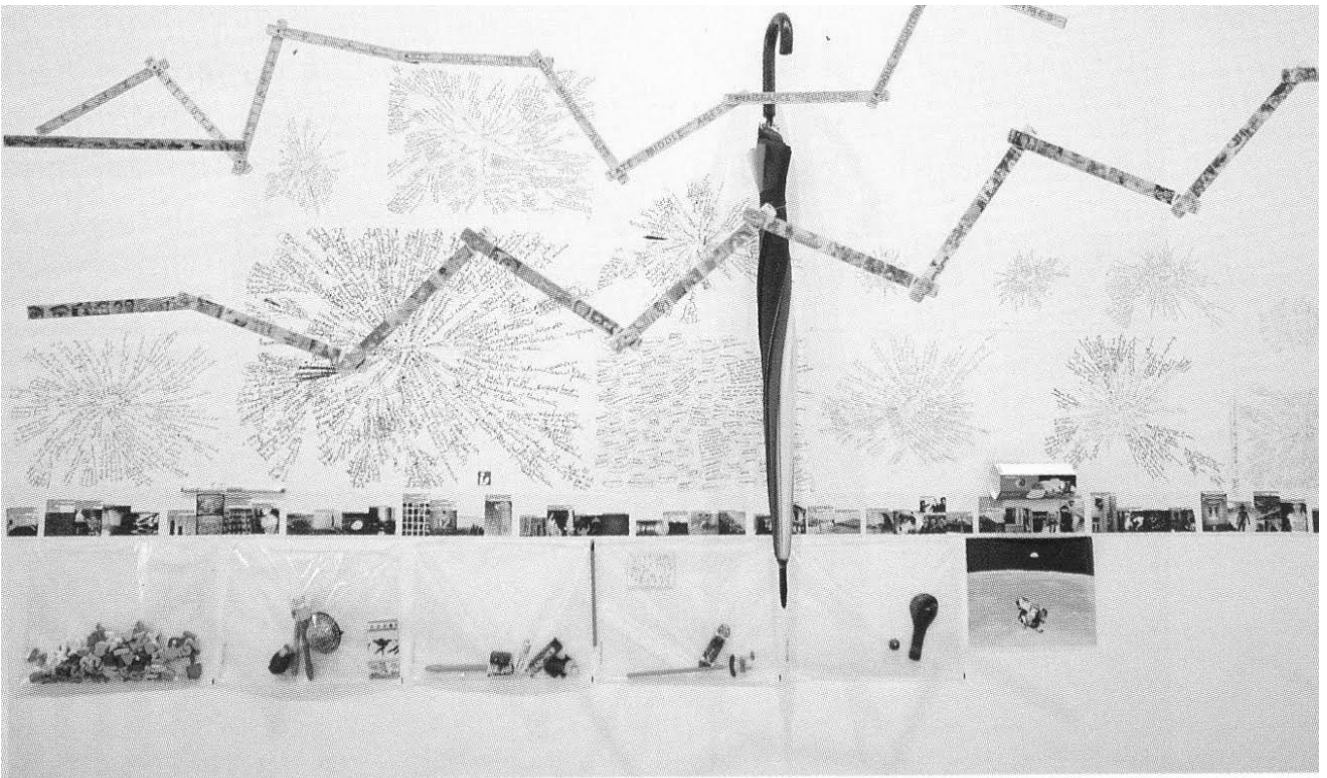


Illustration 3.11 Lia Perjovschi, Knowledge Museum, installation view, Espai d'art contemporani de Castelló, 2010



Illustration 3.12 Lia Perjovschi, Knowledge Museum with drawings by Dan Perjovschi, installation view, Espai d'art contemporani de Castelló, 2010



## Chapter Four



Illustration 4.1 Dmitry Vilensky, Old Lady on Lion Bridge, photograph, Zimmerli Art Museum Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art, 1985



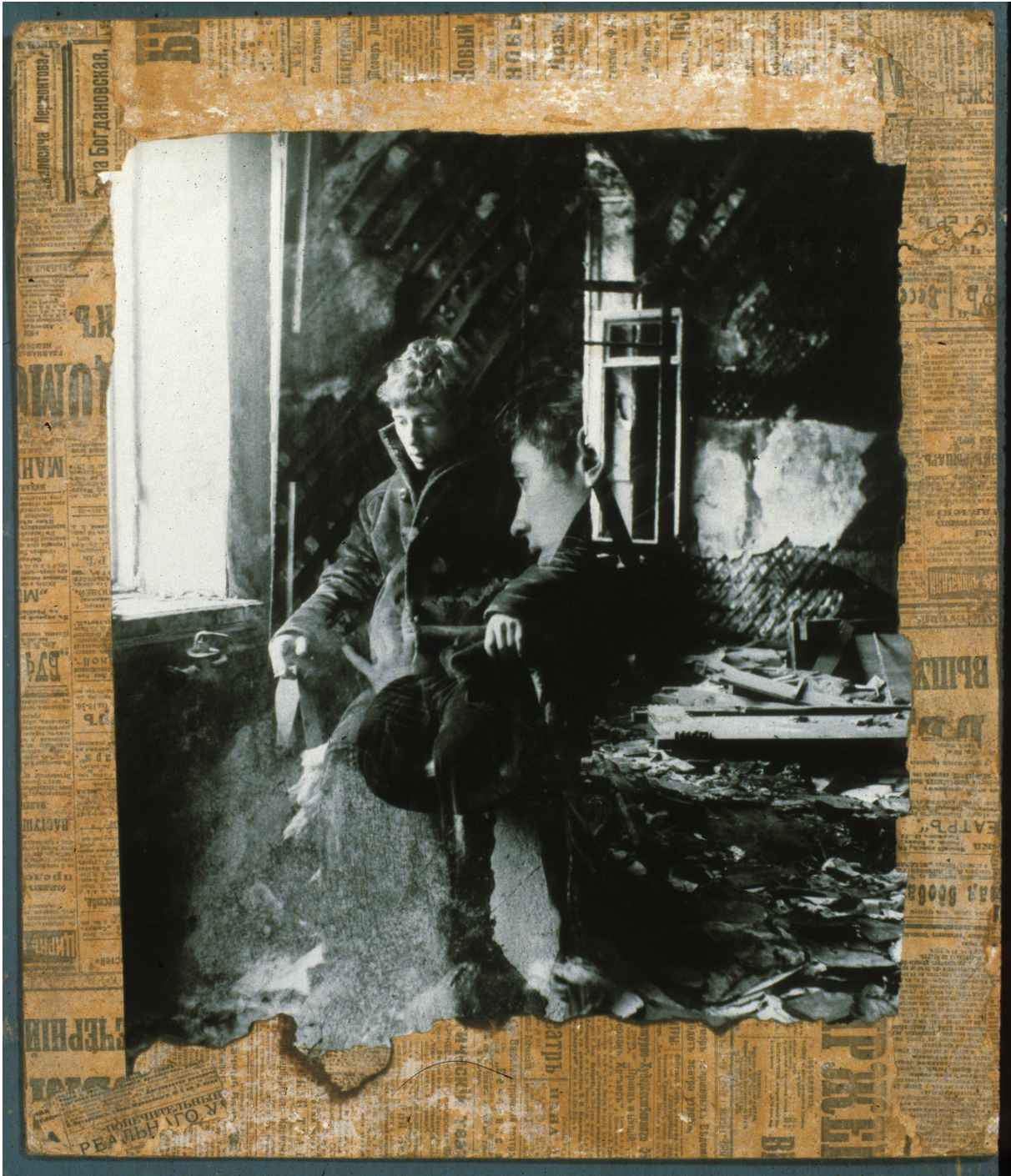


Illustration 4.2 Dmitry Vilensky, *Returning Home*, photograph, burnt newspaper on cardboard, Zimmerli Art Museum Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art, 1984-1988





Illustration 4.3 Dmitry Vilensky, *Red City*, toned photograph, Zimmerli Art Museum Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art, 1986-1992



Illustration 4.4 Factory of Found Clothes (FNO), In Memory of Poor Liza performance, photograph, 1996



# WHEN ARTISTS STRUGGLE TOGETHER



КОГДА ХУДОЖНИКИ БОРЮТСЯ ВМЕСТЕ  
спец. выпуск ноября 2008 / газета "Что делать?" /// special issue / November 2008 newspaper "Chto Delat?"

WHAT A PITY - A DEAD END  
ITS SUCH A LONG WAY  
BACK DOWN...

WE COULD JUST JUMP



ДЕБАТЫ ОБ АВАНГРАДЕ | DEBATES ON THE AVANT-GARDE  
выпуск #11 АВГУСТ 2007 | ГАЗЕТА ПЛАТФОРМЫ "ЧТО ДЕЛАТЬ?"  
ISSUE #17 AUGUST 2007 | NEWSPAPER OF THE PLATFORM "CHTO DELAT? / WHAT IS TO BE DONE?"

Illustration 4.5 Dmitry Vilensky and David Riff, eds., When Artists Struggle Together and Debates on the Avant-garde, Chto Delat? Newspaper, 2007-2008



Illustration 4.6 Viktor Popkov, *The Builders of Bratsk*, painting, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 1961



Illustration 4.7 Chto Delat?, The Builders, film still, 2005





Illustration 4.8 Dmitry Vilensky, *Perestroika*, film still, 2007



Illustration 4.9 Chto Delat?, Perestroika Timeline, installation view, Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporaneo, Sevilla, 2011



Illustration 4.10 Aleksandr Rodchenko, Workers' Club, installation view, International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, Paris, 1925





Illustration 4.11 Chto Delat?, Activists' Club, installation view, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2009



Illustration 4.12 Factory of Found Clothes (FNO), Fragility and Power installation view, ICA, London, 2010



Illustration 4.13 Chto Delat?, The Rise and Fall of Socialism (1945-1991) Timeline, installation view, New Museum, New York, 2011