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The post-national in East European art: from socialist internationalism to transnational communities

With integration in the globalised art world, the ever elusive notion of contemporary East European Art is today becoming increasingly intangible and diverse. The changed circumstances are reflected in the East European art scene which now includes artists that are not necessarily based in their native countries, but may still work with the legacy of shared histories and experiences, artists living in the region, but working internationally without the burden of their own socio-political past, as well as non-native artists, either in collectives or individually, who have settled in the capitals of the former Eastern Bloc, or simply chosen Eastern Europe as the focus of their artistic research. Indicative of the current situation is the fact that artists from Eastern Europe regularly feature in major biennials, are represented as a matter of course by leading international galleries, can be selected for prestigious art prizes, and generally merge with the artistic multitude living precariously in transnational communities around the globe.

The transition undergone by East European art has also been reflected in the preoccupations of contemporary artists. Arguably a distinction can be made between the first post-communist decade, when artists were frequently drawn to explore the grand narratives of memory, trauma and collective identities of the socialist past, and the situation in more recent years, in which artistic involvement with the politics of identity has diversified into new concerns, that are often characterised by a sense of cosmopolitan solidarity. This paper explores the specific trajectory of globalisation in Eastern Europe where some traditions of socialist internationalism are more deeply embedded than the widespread and much discussed ideas of post-colonialist multiculturalism.

From today's perspective, which can also be characterised as the era of "post-transition"[1], due to the fact that on the one hand many of the political goals of the transition have been achieved, while on the other, belief in the utopian promise of transition has given way to a more cynical assessment of economic and social reality in a globalised Eastern Europe, has brought a distinct shift in artistic interests. Symptomatically, while in 1993 Dan Perjovschi had the word "Romania" tattooed on his arm in a performance that affirmed both his national and East European identity, in 2003 he decided to take back this act of identification by having the tattoo removed. His action also pointed to the submersion of national identity, its dispersal within a globalised cultural field in which multiple and fluid forms of belonging coexist. Comment-

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[1] Fowkes (2009: 57–8).

Ill. 1. Dan Perjovschi, *Romania tattoo performance* (1993), courtesy of the artist
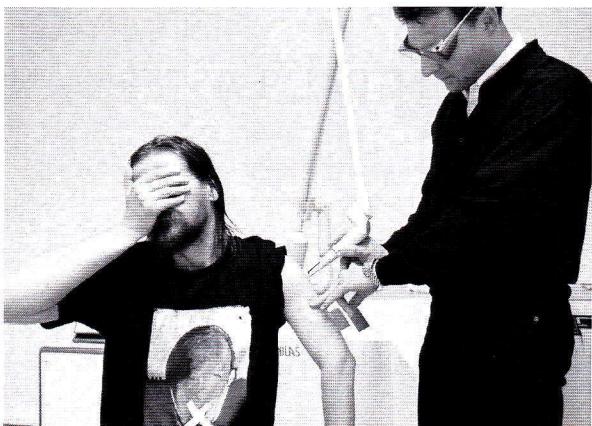
Ill. 2. Dan Perjovschi, *Tattoo removal performance* (2003), courtesy of the artist

ing on the process of tattoo removal using medical lasers, the artist states: "ROMANIA didn't disappear from my body, it only spread itself so as it is no longer visible"[2] (ills. 1–2). This overcoming of crude national identity and the shift towards a more post-national sensitivity should not be understood in opposition to national identity, but rather as leading to more complex and multi-layered forms of belonging.

According to Jürgen Harbermas, the possibility for the post-national is to be found in the emergence of a "cosmopolitan solidarity" that goes "beyond the affective ties of nation, language, place and heritage"[3]. Cosmopolitan solidarity, much like the processes of globalisation, need not be seen as a single phenomenon, but rather takes on different manifestations in particular contexts. In Eastern Europe, such new forms of solidarity that go beyond the logic of the nation, while perhaps still primarily attributable to powerful tendencies within globalisation, also have an important prehistory in the influence of the concept and experience of socialist internationalism.

Socialist internationalism can be approached as a category in socialist thought that found its most famous and emphatic expression in the opening words of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848: "Workers of the world unite!" and was based on the values of liberty, equality and fraternity, with the ultimate aim of creating a world socialist community. It can also be viewed as an element of the historical experience of the working class movements, in which the theory of proletarian solidarity was transformed in

practice into a tool of Soviet domination, and more generally overshadowed by the assertion of statist nationalism. In the context of the post-Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe, socialist internationalism also extended to practical support for anti-colonial struggles in the Third World and a general sympathy for anti-capitalist and popular revolutionary movements around the globe. The legacy of socialist internationalism, which is associated with the creation of "cross-national, global or non-territorial solidarities, communities and organisations of an egalitarian and democratic nature"[4], has the potential to contribute to the development of new forms of global solidarity, based on sympathies that go beyond national limits and narrow economic self-interest and which incorporate the contemporary values of diversity, peace and ecology.

Sensitivity for international solidarity can be located in the work of many East European artists, including prominent members of the neo-avant-garde. Tamás St. Auby's *Czechoslovak Radio 1968* (1969) arose as the artist's response to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, with the artist empathising with the situation facing the people of Prague and expressing admiration for the spirit of resistance represented by the practice of carrying a brick wrapped in newspaper to protest against the crackdown on independent radio stations by the Soviets. An additional irony is that the artist's gesture of genuine solidarity was in stark contrast with the Soviet justification for the invasion on the grounds of defending proletarian internationalism against nationalist deviations. Hungarian conceptual artist Gábor Attalai's contribution to the 1972

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[2] Perjovschi (2003).
[3] Habermas (2000: xiv).

[4] Waterman (1998: 50).

publication *Actuelle Kunst in OstEuropa* was also very much in the egalitarian spirit of socialist internationalism, and was a significant choice for the first Western study on conceptual art in Eastern Europe. He wrote "My best friends are farmers, pilots, engine drivers, road sweepers, hairdressers, meteorologists, mathematicians, postmen, chemists and numerous others"[5], a statement which reminds us of the socialist ideal of a classless society.

Internationalism in Eastern Europe was not just a matter of party policy, Marxist theory, or an existentialist decision, but rather reflected the effect of the conditions of "real existing socialism" on individual circumstances. The spread of an internationalist outlook in artistic circles was to a large extent the result of personal connections made through travel and the existence of informal networks across the Eastern Bloc. Participation in exhibitions and art gatherings in other socialist countries at a time when travel to the West was difficult or impossible, was an opportunity for cross-border friendships and professional relationships to arise, creating sympathies and communities of artistic interests that went beyond the national context[6]. The observation that the conceptualism of the late 60s and early 70s can be considered the first global art movement has a particular meaning in the setting of socialist Eastern Europe, where the creation of informal East-East networks grounded in feelings of solidarity, rather than market-oriented competition, was an important factor in the creation of a specific international alignment among East European neo-avant-garde artists.

Another factor that contributed to the internationalist orientation of East European art, although not necessarily in a socialist direction, was the phenomenon of emigration. There was no return for political exiles, a situation which both gave rise to what Edward Said distinctively described as the sadness of exile and gave rise to complicated identities and divided loyalties for those who had to leave and find new homes[7]. The phenomenon of exile created complications also for national-based art histories in the region, which often found it hard to evaluate the work of artists who left their home country mid-career or position them within the local art canon. One of the preoccupations of

new museums of contemporary art in the region in recent years has been reassess the careers of artists who emigrated during the communist period, which involves negotiation of the gap between international and local reputations.

During the first post-communist decade, internationalism was to a certain extent eclipsed by the rediscovery of national and ethnic identity, which also found its expression in contemporary art. At the same time, although the post-modernism of the 1990s was in general preoccupied with questions of identity, be it of nation, gender or minority, the rise of identity politics in Eastern Europe was also driven by the wish to reconnect with the cultures of neighbouring countries, knowledge of which had been obscured or distorted by the borders erected during the era of state socialism. Identity politics was manifested in a post-modern attitude towards the strategic construction of regional identities, and lay behind the popularisation of categories such as East European art, Baltic art and Balkan art. Paradigmatic of the intertwining of national and East European identities in this period is Kai Kaljo's film *A Loser*, in which the artist herself stands in front of the camera and makes revealing statements such as "I am an Estonian artist" and "I earn $90 a month", followed by a burst of canned laughter, pointing to the predicament facing artists following the collapse of the Soviet Union (ill. 3).

The discovery, or even manufacture, of East European identity in the 1990s was interpreted by many art theorists from the region as a manifestation of Western multiculturalism, the seemingly tolerant and liberal good intentions of which were viewed as a smoke screen for a wave of cultural neo-colonialism. A persuasive articulation of this position came from the Slovenian curator and theorist Igor Zabel, who reflected on the implicit demand that East European artists create work that confirms their identity and origins. He writes: "An Eastern artist now becomes attractive for the West not as somebody producing universal art, but exactly as somebody who reflects his particular condition. He's not only an artist, but particularly a Russian, Polish or Slovene, or simply an Eastern [European] artist[8]. With the end of the Cold War, the interest of the West was no longer in establishing the East through ideological and political differences, but rather through "cultural and civilisational

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5 Fowkes (2009: 672).
6 SocialEast (2010).
7 Said (2000).

8 Zabel (2002: 360).
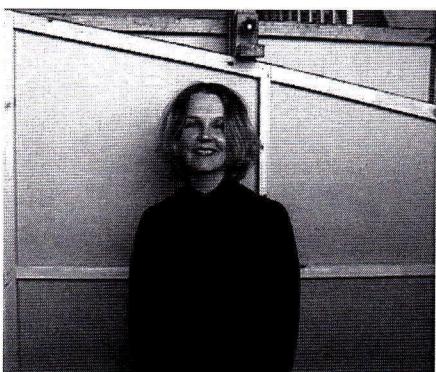
Ill. 3. Kaj Kaljo, *A Loser* (1997), courtesy of the artist

differences"[9]. In a "world marked by otherness"[10], in which difference was loudly celebrated, one particular "other" had a special status, that of the West, which reserved the position of guardian of modern universal values. In his text for the exhibition *After the Wall* (1999), Zabel approvingly quotes Rasheed Araeen's description of the West's use of multiculturalism as a "cultural tool to ethnicise its non-white population in order to administer and control its aspiration for equality", which for Zabel, "corresponds almost literally to the problem of the representational role of Eastern artists"[11]. Multiculturalism reveals itself, in this interpretation, as inseparable from the construction of the post-colonial other, who is allowed to express herself only as so long as she speaks of her own otherness.

In recent years the further development of globalisation has moved the debate, which in terms of East European art was fixated on the binary division between East and West, into new conceptual territory. As Slavoj Žižek has identified, two contradictory processes can be observed in globalisation: on the one hand the West uses globalisation as a form of colonialism, while at the same time, global capitalism as a completely de-localised system, also colonises the whole world, including the West[12]. While in the 1990s it sometimes seemed as if with the end of the Cold War only the East had disappeared, this further phase of globalisation has created critical distance between the notion of the global and the west, so that it is increasingly tempting to talk about the "former" West as well as the former East.

Attempts to resist the implications of this process for the presumed stable category of the West, or in this context the Western art canon, have included insisting on the persistence of spatial hierarchies within the supposedly level playing field of globalisation, with the idea that the West colonises itself in the same way as it does other countries dismissed as an "alibi", or another smokescreen for the continued dominance of the Western model posing as the universal. However, the logic of globalisation and its effect on previously stable art historical divisions is increasingly hard to ignore. Amongst the most persuasive articulations of the dismantling of the universalist Western art historical model comes, perhaps unsurprisingly, from the field of contemporary art. Curator and theorist Okwui Enwezor pertinently describes a situation in which the off-centre principal dominates, and the art world increasingly organised around structures that are "multi-focal multi-local, hetero-temporal and dispersed", articulates a "refusal of the monolithic and rebellion against mono-culturalism"[13].

Enwezor's assertion that globalisation has brought about a "de-centring" and "dispersal" of the universal", and a "break down of cultural or locational hierarchy" would appear to spell the end of the Western dominance of the art historical canon, with similar implications for national art historical narratives. Whereas in the 1990s globalisation was often perceived as something foreign, coming from somewhere else, provoking a desire to defend national culture against economic colonisation, by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the changes in living patterns brought by the internet, mobile phones and cheaper air travel, mean that for many, including participants in the art world, instant communication is always available, and there's no longer any need to wait for a message of endorsement from the West before launching a debate.

East European art is certainly no longer in the situation of the Cold War era, when, as art historian László Beke states, even communication between East European countries happened via the West[14]. Today there are practically no limits to the opportunities available to East European artists to take part on an equal footing with artists from elsewhere in the contemporary art world, nor any theoretical obstacles to East European art historians contribut-

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[9] Zabel (2000: 360).
[10] Zabel (1999: 110).
[11] Zabel (1999: 112).
[12] Žižek (1997: 28–51).

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[13] Enwezor (2009: 31).
[14] Beke (1999: 43).

ing to the formation of new globalised art historical narratives that have cut loose from the constraints of the old familiar Western universalist model. Symptomatic perhaps of this new situation are publications such as Miško Šuvaković's recent book on conceptual art, which was published in Novi Sad, and which makes no distinction in its organisation or coverage between the conceptual art of East and West, with no noticeable difference in the author's approach to writing about representatives of the Western canon, such as Art & Language, and a group from Eastern Europe, such as OHO[15]. It seems that the complexes and about East and West, the passion and recriminations, which so dominated the art discourse of the 1990s, have finally been surpassed. The field is now open for both artists and art historians to interfere with the code, since – in difference to the situation during the era of modernism – the globalised meta-language of art is not owned by the West anymore.

When Roman Ondak was selected for the Czechoslovak Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennial he was aware of the politics of the only post-socialist pavilion that has managed to bridge a geopolitical divide by sharing the space between two now independent countries. He designed an environment entitled *Loop* in which he brought the garden setting surrounding the pavilion into the building, literally reflecting the scenery of trees and shrubs in the vicinity to create a looped reality accessed along a gravel path that passes seamlessly through the building (ill. 4). Through this installation the artist avoided the apparent demands of national representation, as he states: "I'm representing Slovakia in the Czechoslovak Pavilion. But, by doing this work, I don't feel I'm representing the country... it seems as if I'm not here, and my work is not here. I'm playing with the disappearance of the pavilion as it merges into its surroundings". He continues, "I'm in the pavilion, and I'm not completely erasing my nationality, but this is suppressed by the way I participate"[16].

From the clear disengagement from the politics of national representation of the work itself and the artist's avoidance of the simplicity of national identity, the disavowal of the automatic primacy of the national frame is evident. In other words, the Slovak artist representing Slovakia in the competitive

Ill. 4. Roman Ondák, *Loop* (2009), installation view Czech and Slovak pavilion, 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009, Courtesy of the artist

national arena of the Giardini succeeds in what Gayatri Spivak has called "setting limits to mere identitarianism" by refusing to produce "a naturalized, homogenous identity"[17]. In addition, by replanting the shrubs after the biennial closed, the artist gave the pavilion "the smallest possible environmental footprint" and drew attention to the common situation after the end of each biennial, when the Giardini is filled with waste and discarded materials left over from the exhibition installations. The reference to ecological concerns, which necessarily exceed national boundaries and require global collaboration, is another aspect of Ondak's pavilion that points to an interest in emerging forms of post-national solidarity.

The synchronicity of global cultures and the rapid speed of information exchange reinforces another key aspect of globalisation with ramifications for East European art, that of the emergence of new forms of migration. This phenomenon is frequently discussed in an art context in terms of exiles and nomads, and often gives rise to cynicism about the claims for a "utopian nomadism" reserved for the economically privileged[18]. Spivak for example contrasts the "cosmopolitanism of the global elite and the passive exposure to multi-nationality in the everyday of the global underclass"[19]. However, the position of the majority of artists, whether they choose to settle in Prague, Berlin or New York, should perhaps be discussed in terms not of privilege but of the shared *precarité* of unstable and insecure work and living conditions that have become more and more dominant in our "flexible" society.

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[15] Šuvaković (2007).
[16] Ondak (2009).

[17] Spivak (2008: 9).
[18] Demos (2009: 73–88).
[19] Spivak (2008: 237).

Ill. 5. Joanna Rajkowska, *Airways* (2008), courtesy of the artist

The cosmopolitanism of the twenty-first century results as much from practical changes in peoples' lives, brought by developments such as new patterns of migration, the spread of transnational communities and the communicative possibilities of information technology, as it does from the emergence of new global sympathies and concerns around issues such as poverty, anti-war movements and ecology. As one theorist of the post-national puts it, "cosmopolitanism doesn't begin and end with a love of all humanity, but with modest, small scale and undeliberate personal networking"[20]. Cosmopolitanism, which until recently was practically an insult in Marxist parlance, is no longer automatically assumed to be a shallow or artificial form of identity, but can be conceived in more substantial terms as "rooted" or "experiential" cosmopolitanism. A recent publication dealing with the cosmopolitan imagination in an art context, discusses a kind of cosmopolitanism that is "grounded, materially specific and relational", deals with "cultural diversity and movement beyond fixed geo-political borders", and is "premised upon an embodied, embedded, generous and affective form of subjectivity"[21].

It should be emphasised that migration is also happening on the territory of Eastern Europe, where minorities are still discussed in terms of ethnicity, and where the existence of transcultural commu-

nities is rarely acknowledged. Recently, an exhibition of foreign artists who settled in Budapest since 1989 problematised the issue of how to accommodate their work within the nationally-oriented art historical narratives of the post-socialist countries[22]. Equally, Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska used an artist's residency in Hungary to produce a video work that dealt directly with the increasingly multinational and diverse reality of contemporary Eastern Europe and the difficulty of accommodating a historically novel situation within a nationally-oriented social and political order. The film juxtaposes documentation of an extremist rightwing group marching on Budapest's Heroe's Square and footage of an unlikely group of people (foreigners living in Budapest from Syria, Mongolia, Nigeria, Bulgaria, Russia, Serbia, Great Britain and China, along with two gay people, a Jew and two Hungarian extreme nationalists) taking a queasy flight on an old Soviet plane along the Danube Bend. The rather old and unstable plane serves for the artist as a symbol of Hungary itself, and *Airways* (2008) makes us aware of the fragility of the social and political situation, and how easily things could get out of hand[23] (ill. 5).

Like the art created under its name, the notion of Eastern Europe has itself migrated over the last two decades, losing political relevance as the original

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[20] Hannerz (2002: 231).
[21] Meskimmon (2010: 19).

[22] Fowkes (2009).
[23] Rajkowska (2008).

geopolitical designation of the Eastern Blok fades into history. The transformations brought by the entry of even ex-Soviet republics into the European Union and NATO has emptied the old term Eastern Europe of its contested political significance, but perhaps made it a more open and productive category in other ways. Eastern Europe, which is no longer defined by Soviet control, but only by a differentiated historical experience of socialism, remains less loaded than the many associated sub-terms, such as Balkan Art, Baltic Art or even East Central European art, all of which imply geographical exclusions. This liberated concept of Eastern Europe may offer artists a context in which to deal with both major themes associated with the broad heritage of communism and the social and political dilemmas of post-communism, as well as providing a less ideological space in which to explore singular memories, local particularities and global issues of post-national solidarity.

www.translocal.org

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