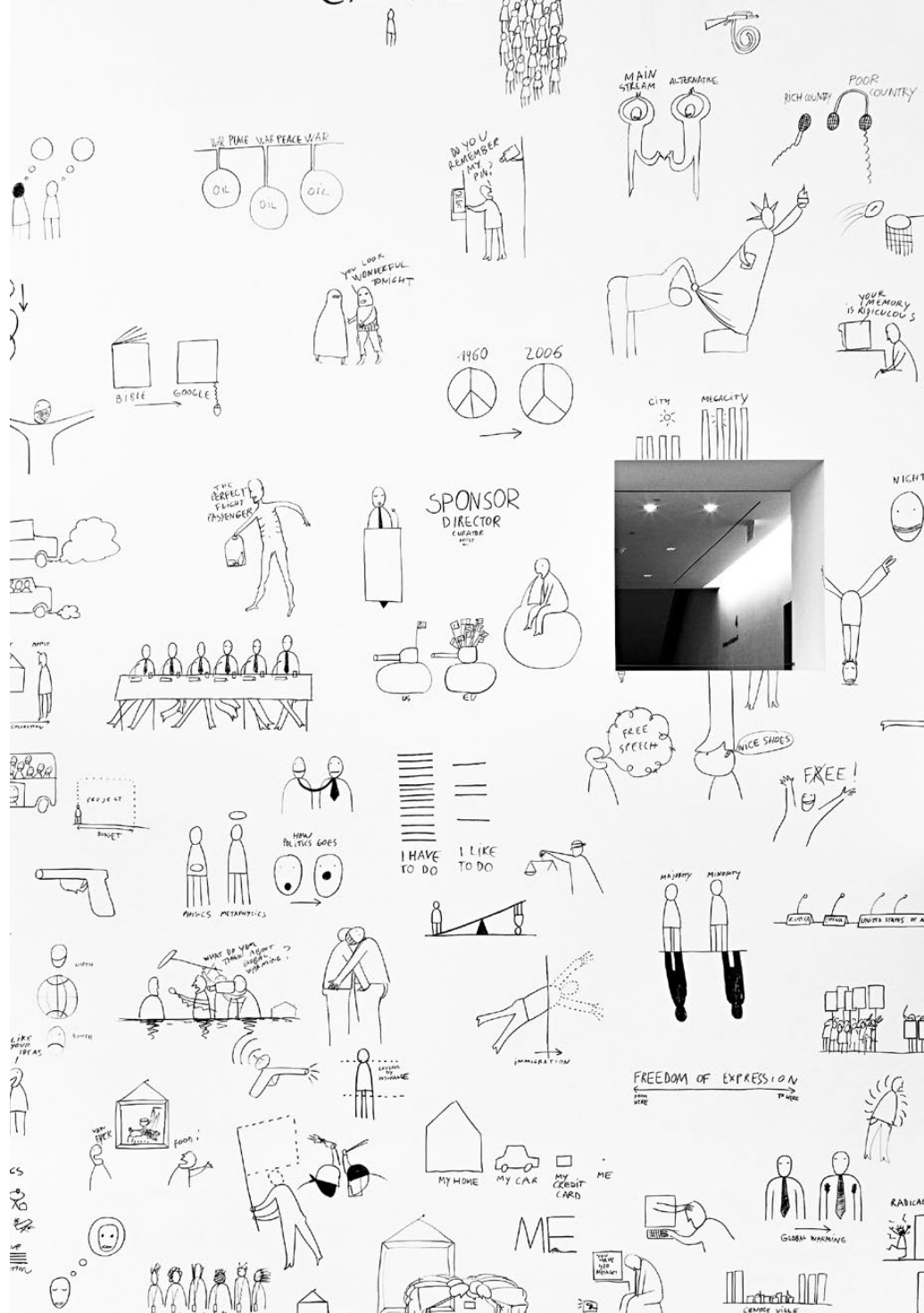


CAPITALISM



Primary Documents

Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology

Edited by Ana Janevski and Roxana Marcoci
with Ksenia Nouril

The Museum of Modern Art
New York

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to evolve unbounded by the dictates of institutionalism, these practices forged new and vital ways “to approach differently the production of art and its position in the public space,” reflecting what Šerban describes as “immense imaginative and theoretical potential”—a potential to which even these practices’ “precariousness and seeming institutional marginality” are, in Šerban’s view, critical. Other writers are less sanguine. Aldo Milohnić chronicles two principal public art actions that took place in Slovenia in the early 2000s. “The transversality of these practices and their hybrid nature enable quick passages from the predominantly artistic into the predominantly political sphere and back,” Milohnić writes. “In combination with creative protest events, this creates a kind of post-Fluxus atmosphere of relative emancipation through experimental practice.” Nevertheless, the one material result of this emancipation is a sense of precariousness, and in contrast to Šerban, Milohnić seems to see in this as much threat as potential, specifically the vulnerabilities of such art-activist practices to reactionary political forces.

Milohnić writes in 2005, four years after 9/11 and during what by then already was a palpable, never-ending “war on terror”; he is specifically commenting on the atmosphere of “security panic” and the concomitant political shift toward curtailing civil liberties. By 2013 this security panic had become a chronic condition while much of the world also reeled from economic calamity. The stakes for collectivist art are higher, as Oleksiy Radynski writes from Ukraine: “Art is entering the fields abandoned by the state in an attempt to repair the devastating effects of neo-capitalist policies and their impact upon social life.” Even as Radynski champions the widespread “community trend” in contemporary art, he wonders why such a thing, seemingly reflective of an innate human impulse toward social collaboration, should seem so remarkable today, only to answer his own question: “It seems that this practice stems from the destruction of social ties between citizens that characterizes the impact of neo-capitalism upon society.” Although Radynski sees art “becoming a sovereign player in the social field,” still it appears to remain uncertain whether art might truly achieve the sovereignty he envisions for it, capable of subverting its “prescribed function in neo-capitalist society, which is to heal the wounds of the devastated society or to serve as an expensive toy for those who perpetrate those wounds.” An extended case study of an art that might be said to satisfy Radynski’s desires for it can be found in Bojana Cvejić’s reflections on the performance collective BADco, the capital letters here forming the Croatian acronym for the phrase “nameless association of authors.” “In the Yugoslav cultural legacy, authorship isn’t branded as personal cultic expression or assigned clearly to one discipline, medium, or genre,” Cvejić writes, limning but one of a number of distinctions she sees as defining the disjuncture between East and West. “BADco’s practice as a self-organized collective [. . .] entails the rotation of responsible roles for each single work according to the varying wishes and concerns of the participating artists, roles that then transform in the course of the working process, rather than following established competencies of the individuals involved.”

Throughout this chapter an interpretive metaphor can be deployed, one that places the movements of performers and dancers acting not unlike visitors in a museum interacting with static artworks—turning, pausing, engaging, releasing, and moving again through space, as an inversion of cultural performers in action on public squares engaging in concert against authoritarian forces to which they must repetitively respond against a concerted effort to seek new possibilities for a culture at large.

Conversation

DMITRY VILENSKY WITH KSENIA NOURIL

KSENIA NOURIL: With the rapid encroachment of right-wing politics across Europe and in the U.S., it can be said that the left is in crisis. In the past, you proposed a solution by “politicizing the cultural field” through mobilizing forms of collective self-organization, such as art soviets or councils that practice—not only espouse—leftist ideals. Could you describe the challenges in adopting and translating these organizational models into art? What is the relationship between art and politics, art and activism, according to Chto Delat, the collective you helped found in 2003?

DMITRY VILENSKY: We never had big illusions about “real leftist” politics. As Alain Badiou said on the day after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, politics has completely lost any idea of true alternatives. We can easily project this onto the art world where we definitely see more and more Clinton-like figures with rather hypocritical approaches toward politics.

The question of what art can do in the absence of true emancipatory politics is very urgent. How can the notorious autonomy of art function to forecast the project of emancipation and equality? I think we—artists and the art world—should provide fewer services aimed at improving the existing disorder of the neoliberal world, leaving that to the vast number of proper NGOs with serious budgets and structures, and instead focus our energies on forming and addressing not-yet-existing communities.

Again in the same speech, Badiou said, “Bernie Sanders was on the side of rational, active, and clear popular subjectivity, oriented beyond the world as it is, even in something which was unclear—unclear, but beyond the world as it is,” and this is precisely what art can and must do.¹ Chto Delat, as a collective, tries to do our best not just to imagine these not-yet-existing communities but also to make them happen in reality. The task is how to find a dialectical balance between autonomy and engagement.

It is interesting to note that we in Russia have a certain “advantage” because we already live in a situation in which “a field called the liberal arts, including contemporary art in all its guises—in its collected, if not collective, articulations” is under threat, as cited by Simon Sheikh.² We have been trying to learn how to exist in this situation for more than a decade and are forever asking ourselves who we are and what we represent.

The answer, which Sheikh offers us, sounds pretty close to describing our marginal position and aesthetic program, which we have been pursuing for a long time: “I do not want to suggest, however, any return to the historical avant-gardes and their resistance to fascism, as fascism today takes other forms, and art must thus also take other forms. It is not really a matter of art becoming propaganda and protest, although I am sure that much great cultural production will now be made in this vein, in opposition. I am, rather, thinking of the arts as a field, of how we will mobilize and find solidarity as art workers in a system that is already undemocratic, and in a democracy under siege.”

KN: History—namely, the histories of the former Soviet Union and of international leftist movements—is a major theme in your practice, specifically

1 — Alain Badiou, “Reflections on the Recent Election,” Verso Books blog post, November 15, 2016: <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2940-alain-badiou-reflections-on-the-recent-election>.

2 — Simon Sheikh, “Art after Trump,” *e-flux conversations* blog post, November 2, 2016: <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/simon-sheikh-art-after-trump/5325>.

in works like the *Songspiel Triptych* (2008–10). Why is it still important for you and for us to think through the history of the Soviet Union more than twenty-five years after its dissolution?

DV: We are very critical towards the history of the Soviet Union, but we always consider the lost chances for true emancipation during this period of history, which need to be discovered and actualized. Today, when fewer and fewer people are able to remember anything, this fight over historical memory comes to the fore. Those who keep fidelity to past events, thus creating possible preconditions for a new one, must reclaim the potential for true emancipatory politics. It would be interesting to reflect on the proletariat—the subject of past emancipations—who now appear lifeless, and their “resurrection,” which is very similar to the idea of zombie politics, and to speculate on how the zombie condition allows us to reveal and approach the current state of the world.

KN: Self-education has been a central tenet of Chto Delat’s work. You established the School of Engaged Art in St. Petersburg in 2013. Seeing this school within a tradition of alternative education, how do you define “engaged art”? How do you relate your contemporary concept of “engaged art” to the historical avant-garde idea of merging art and everyday life?

DV: We believe in not only establishing links to the ideas of historical avant-gardes but also in testing how they might function in a completely new political, economic, and social situation. We are sincere in our understanding of engaged art as a certain form of negation, because it is about breaking with society as it stands today. But engaging means also affirming, because it affirms the constituency of nonexisting people and works to materialize them. This type of engagement calls on society to transform, and we envision this transformation as a struggle for equality, peace, solidarity, and unity. We speak inside the context of a very repressive, exclusionary, xeno-, homo-, and transphobic society, in which basic ideas of economic, gender, and ethnic equality are under threat. How can a marginal community challenge the consensus of the majority? We believe this can be achieved only by demonstrating a vivid example of how society can function otherwise, and why the example should become commonplace. These ideas reflect a complex dynamic of relations between exodus and participation—the exodus creates autonomous spaces that have the possibility to grow and influence society, and to facilitate this growth, they need to accumulate and instrumentalize all possible resources that do not compromise their autonomy. Only by keeping a clear-cut agenda can we gain power to resist the acceleration of the deconstruction of the commons. But why do we keep talking about art? Art is considered something irrelevant, corrupted, and bourgeois—NO!

We need to advocate for a certain belief in art’s power that, despite all traps, still keeps its promise of the transformation of humanity and radical equality for all, dead and alive.

- Yes – to collective practice
- Yes – to autonomy
- Yes – to dignity
- Yes – to militancy
- Yes – to unity in difference
- Yes – to respect and solidarity
- Yes – to equality in inequality
- Yes – to the commons

- Yes – to dialectics
- YES to the arts!

KN: With regard to the centennial of the Russian Revolution in 2017, you have suggested, “There are certain material traces—places and knowledge—which are better accessible through field research.” What would you say is the meaning of the historical Russian Revolution in Putin’s Russia today? I am wondering if you (as an artist, activist, or artist-activist) think something can be done and, if so, what?

DV: Yes, we believe that there are certain material traces of the Russian Revolution that are best accessed through field research, which we practice with our students in the School of Engaged Art, which is open to both Russian and international practitioners.

I am not sure if we will survive until the next radical change that is any true revolution. But that does not mean that, now, until that time, we must obey the current status quo and stop dreaming, working, and challenging the existing order. The moment of the centennial of the Russian Revolution is a good time for us to resist the official version of this event—the reconciliation between all living and dead political forces under a neoconservative, quasi-monarchist power. In this situation one can deliver one simple message: we must not reconcile with these rules, but we must remind people that a revolution has happened and could happen again. The true meaning of revolution must live within us.

KN: You’ve characterized your work as “push[ing] forward a debate about what can be art and what art is.” You’ve also been critical of the political formalism of certain contemporary Russian artists. Could you describe some of the aesthetic devices Chto Delat uses in its work and how you see these advancing your strategies as socially and politically conscious activist-artists?

DV: I, speaking as an individual, and we, speaking for the collective, are rather skeptical about some forms of hermetic political minimalism or abstraction that are major trends in contemporary art in Russia and internationally. We trace our genealogy more to a realist tradition, combined with surrealist and absurdist elements. We have as our motto the rather famous expression by Bertolt Brecht: “educate, entertain, inspire.” We really hope that our works address people who do not have special training in understanding contemporary art. We want to be popular among a wide audience outside the contemporary art world; thus, we are trying to challenge the consensus that prevails in art institutions, which mostly address privileged audiences (or try to reach underprivileged ones but often in a rather irresponsible and hypocritical way). This is not easy because access to the arts is under the control of major institutions, themselves under the influence of corporate sponsors, who are hardly in any position to change this situation.

At the same time, our approach is far from reductivist. We try to construct our works as multilayered formal narratives that can be read differently by different audiences but still maintain a principle of openness to everyone. In our dramatic and tragic situation today, we need to create works that are for the people and with the people. This is a very complex task, but we cannot ignore it anymore. This is the root of any contemporary tragedy, which is our favorite medium. We need to be challenged and to demonstrate the play of irreconcilable forces and fate and not pretend that everything can stay nice forever before it ends. We hope that dialectics start to play a role so things can one day be changed, and people can start to truly believe that together we hold the future in our hands.

As a result, Eastern European cultural identities became combinations of the various national traditions and the international communist tradition. The epoch of historical communism was defined by Stalin's decision to abandon the Leninist pursuit of global communism to focus on building socialism in the Soviet Union. From the beginning it was clear that the socialism-in-one-country program would lead to the rebirth of nationalism—and it did. The socialist camp began to split along national lines: after Soviet communism, one got Yugoslav communism, Chinese communism, Albanian communism, and so on, up through the Eurocommunism of the Italian and French Communist Parties. But this fragmentation did not produce a simple return to the traditional national cultures, understood as specific, even idiosyncratic ways of life. Every particular national communism had a claim to represent the universal and authentic truth of communism, casting the communists of other countries as “revisionists.” Here the analogy is obvious with Christianity, which was also split along national lines during the period of the Reformation and religious wars.

Thus, looking back at their own roots and identities, Eastern European artists found that these identities were mixed or hybrid. This discovery was not, of course, original. In the framework of postcolonial discourse, the topic of mixed, hybrid identity had already been widely debated. But the components of postcolonial hybrid identities were different from the components of Eastern European identities. Postcolonial hybrid identity consisted of non-European national-cultural traditions and European education (English, French, etc.). Thus, postcolonial artists and intellectuals criticized Western dominance and exclusivity, but with the goal of expanding Western cultural institutions to include non-Western traditions and perspectives as well. On the contrary, the goal of the postcommunist Eastern European regimes was the total abolition of communism, and in many cases also the suppression of all forms of communist ideology. Here again we find the strong form of censorship—but this time the censorship was, and still is, directed against the socialist component of postsocialist art and culture. Thus, hybrid Eastern European identities are not to be asserted as such but purified of all their communist remnants to become purely national—and, yes, purely European. This is the basic difference between the postcolonial and postcommunist modes of postmodernism. The core of the standard postcolonial discourse is the struggle against Eurocentricism. The core of the dominating postcommunist discourse is the affirmation of Eurocentricism. Eastern European nations want to become European again, after several decades of separation from Western Europe. The majority of intellectuals and artists of these countries look to their “European,” precommunist past with the goal of finding their cultural roots. In other words, they look to the Europe of the 1930s or even, in the case of some former Soviet republics, the Europe of the end of the nineteenth century—to the time when European states were truly nationalistic and, therefore, from the historical perspective, appear as truly European.

Thus, today, the old line between the West and East reemerges in a different form. The West is not supposed to subtract certain periods of its history from its cultural capital (maybe the only exception here is the German art of the Nazi era). But in the Eastern European countries, communism is largely understood as a mere interruption, interval, or delay in the “normal” development of these countries—a delay which, once it was over, left no traces other than a certain appetite to “make up for lost time” and build capitalism of the Western type. On the right, one speaks about deregulation and the reduction of state bureaucracy. On the left, one protests against state control of public

life. But what are the results of this struggle against the state? The weakening of the modern social state leads also to the subjection of art practices to the rules of the art market. However, open markets are not able to create and sustain such cultural institutions as museums or libraries; this was and today remains a task for nation-states. Of course, one could argue that the internet can be seen as a stateless archive—and that is partially true. But the internet is held in private hands, and thus reflects the cultural identity of the (predominantly American) corporations that own it.

In fact, contemporary globalization is the direct opposite of the modern ideal of internationality, or universality. The world of globalization is not a world of international solidarity or shared cultural values. But neither is globalization a realm of the anonymous “crowd mind,” as it was celebrated by the boosters of postmodernism. Rather, it is the world of global competition, everybody against everybody. This competition pushes the subjects who participate in it to mobilize their own human capital. And human capital, as it was described, for example, by Michel Foucault, is primarily the cultural heritage that is mediated by the family and the milieu in which an individual has grown up. That is why the contemporary logic of globalization, unlike internationalization or universalization of the modernist type, leads to cultural conservatism and the insistence on one's own cultural identity. The combination of economic globalization and extreme cultural conservatism defines the politics and art of our time.

Now, one could argue that contemporary art in general, and many Eastern European artists in particular, try to compensate for this lack of the universal perspective. To cite only very few examples: in Poland, Artur Żmijewski organizes events and creates spaces in which the global controversies of our time can manifest themselves; the Slovenian art group IRWIN develops a project of the international artistic state; in Russia, the group Chto Delat (What is to be done?) thematizes the heritage of communism in our time, and Arseny Zhilyaev reconstructs the cosmic, universalist vision of the early Russian avant-garde.

Contemporary art is often criticized for being too elitist, not open enough to the broader public. But the contrary is the case: today the art milieus are, as a rule, much more open and inclusive than the national societies inside which these milieus operate. The relatively closed art territories are paradoxically more open to the outside world than to the societies that surround these territories. True contemporary art is a territory that accepts everybody and everything—in the middle of a world that, in our time, is becoming increasingly conservative and restrictive.

Summary of Critical Texts

KSENIA NOURIL

“Global” is a catchword often overused to describe our contemporary condition.

Even though international and transnational alliances mark many of today's social, political, and economic activities, a regional perspective remains critical to the writing of Central and Eastern European histories of art. The texts in this chapter speak not only to how Central and Eastern Europe is represented but also investigate the ongoing

relevance of the region's categorization as such, particularly in light of globalization's homogenizing tendencies.

In an essay originally published by *L'Internationale Online*, the virtual platform for the European Union-funded, multi-institutional project *L'Internationale*, Bojana Piškur finds a promising if imperfect model for transnational resistance in the history of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the network of nation-states primarily in South America, Africa, and Asia, but also including Yugoslavia, that formed in 1961 as a “third way” between the East and West blocs. The NAM directed its multifarious activities against imperialism, colonialism, racism, and other forms of hegemonic domination in order to reconfigure social, political, and economic paradigms and rebalance international dynamics of power. Piškur draws out three case studies—the Ljubljana (International) Biennial of Graphic Arts, the International Committee of Artistic Solidarity with Chile, and the Week of Latin America at the Belgrade Student Cultural Center—that embodied a kind of cooperative collectivism in which she sees potential for those seeking to counter the dominant hegemonic forces of globalization today.

Inke Arns and Andreas Broeckmann consider another form of collectivism—the propagation of narratives via media—in their text. While chronicling the significant role of television in announcing major moments of political upheaval in Central and Eastern Europe during the late 1980s and early '90s, they focus particular attention on a range of “minor” media that operated in parallel. Pirate radio stations, samizdat publications, and, later, the internet, provided outlets for alternative and often local perspectives that shaped the same global stories. The text itself, written in 1997, is a product of this phenomenon, as it was circulated via Nettime, an online mailing list that served as an ephemeral locus for Eurocentric intellectual activity well into the early 2000s.

Boris Buden, the artist Luchezar Boyadjiev, and the art collective Slavs and Tatars use the literary devices of allegory, irony, and parody to acerbically assess the impacts of globalization from each writer's local perspective within the broader context of Central and Eastern Europe. In Buden's comical parable, the protagonists try to come to terms with the cyclical nature of history as they attempt to embrace new, postcommunist ideals buoyed by rampant capitalism and neoliberal politics, inviting conflicted reflections on the socialist past. Boyadjiev takes stock of the Bulgarian art scene ten years after the country's integration into the European Union. Now, in light of the gradual disintegration of the European community, how has this alliance affected the visual arts? While independent initiatives thrive, state support is anemic to nonexistent, resulting in imbalances and missed opportunities. In many cases, Bulgarian artists appear to be better off working outside their home country. While Boyadjiev by and large seems to embrace his country's turn to the West, the duo Slavs and Tatars conclude in their manifesto that, instead of hopelessly looking westward, Slavs should embrace their innate connection with the East.

Recalling the tenets of the NAM discussed by Piškur earlier in this chapter, Maja and Reuben Fowkes explore the possibilities inherent in a “liberated concept of Eastern Europe.” Charting the problematics of the use of the geographical designation in the wake of communism's collapse, the writers nevertheless argue for its relevance, specifically in the context of what they describe as a transnational solidarity inflected by the countries' shared historical experience of socialist internationalism. Not antinationalist but postnationalist, this strategy proves prescient at a time when the region—and Europe as a whole—confronts the rise of right-wing nationalist factions.

Cosmin Costinaș and Ekaterina Degot, in their conversation, parse the shift away from a global or even Eurocentric perspective in favor of a reconsideration of Eastern Europe. Seeing the notion of Eastern Europe as a “building block” of the global—a unique part of a diverse whole—Costinaș reiterates the importance of localizing discourses. Taking a slightly more polemical position, Degot warns against the essentialism and even racism of any pro-nationalist proclivities in either Eastern or Western Europe in the postcommunist period. Concluding with a meditation on how the art of Eastern Europe is being incorporated into the international art scene, Costinaș and Degot seem to appreciate the effort while remaining skeptical of its instrumentalization on the platform of “global” art.

Within the post-Soviet context, Ketī Chukhrov critiques the West for attempting to mold Eastern Europe into its idealized image of neoliberal democracy after 1989. She argues that this approach is not only neocolonial but also futile, due to key epistemological differences between the two. Instead, Chukhrov asks us to look at the former Soviet Union on its own terms, which will help to move beyond Cold War binaries based on shallow readings of historical socialism.

Destabilizing established parameters is also central to Tímea Junghaus's text. Ascribing a postcolonial reading to the relationship between Europe and Roma people, Junghaus gives examples of how racial bias has been inscribed in historical representations of Roma in art and culture. She also cites ways Roma artists and curators have asserted new kinds of Roma subjectivities on global platforms by delinking, unlearning, and resisting—radical and subversive strategies that are shared among the transnational networks of the so-called margins.

Closing this chapter, Marina Gržinić's short but powerful text pointedly takes on the neoliberal capitalist ethos of dissolving borders, exposing the imperialist logic underlying the multiculturalism of the 1990s dominant across Europe, including the former Eastern bloc. Instead, Gržinić makes a potent argument for the drawing of borders as perhaps the only effective counter to homogenizing globalization. “[W]e need borders more than ever,” she writes. “[T]o establish a border means to present, to incorporate, to take a clear political stance, to ask for a political act, to draw a line of division that can rearticulate this new world that seems to be without borders . . .”

Conversation

HITO STEYERL WITH ANA JANEVSKI AND ROXANA MARCOCI

ANA JANEVSKI: 1989 is not only considered a pivotal year in the reconfiguration of the world political order, it's often seen as a threshold for all sorts of interrelated social and cultural transformations, the “turn of turns,” as it were. To wit, in your book *Too Much World* [2014], you take 1989—specifically the Romanian uprising that year, when protesters invaded the state TV studios—as the symbolic beginning of a new visual order. Tell us more about the connections you see between those events and today.

HITO STEYERL: After following the Romanian revolution on TV, Vilém Flusser developed the concept of images that do not record a given situation but which project an expected