

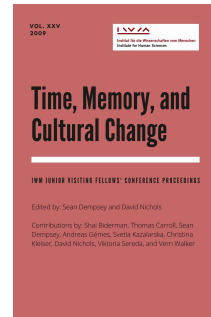
Contemporary Art as *Ars Memoriae*: Curatorial Strategies for Challenging the Post-Communist Condition

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The purportedly “post-modern” inflation of memory, attributable to the acceleration of history, manifests itself not only in the hyper-production of what Pierre Nora has referred to as “sites of memory.” The fall of the Berlin Wall in particular has brought about an unprecedented boom in “memorialist” cultural production such as museums, memorials, memoirs, films, archives, and collections, dealing with the history and memory of the communist totalitarian regimes. The film industry, literature, the performing and the visual arts have been equally caught up in the current upsurge in memory. While the issues of rewriting histories and reconstructing identities in the post-communist societies have been extensively contemplated by scholars in the humanities and the social sciences, the aesthetic response of the visual arts, both Eastern and Western, to the fall of the Iron Curtain, has up to date largely escaped an in-depth scrutiny on the side of cultural studies. The present article looks into the exhibitions of late socialist and post-socialist visual art from Central and Eastern Europe, put on after 1989, as a possible medium for carrying and shaping memories of the recent past. The specific curatorial narratives and artistic practices of facing the communist past, negotiating post-communist identities, and re-positioning of the former East in the new geographies of art are positioned at the center of the analysis.

The underlying assumption is that visual arts might function as a mnemonic tool similar to the classical “art of memory”—as modern-day “memory theaters” where ideas and reflections on the communist past and the post-communist present are staged, thus constituting reference points in the “social frameworks” of collective memory. Furthermore, given the implications of the “visual turn” in the humanities and social sciences of the recent decades, my inference is that the mnemonic power of *visual* artistic and curatorial projects would be stronger than the mnemonic power of a history textbook or that of the captions and labels in a museum of history. The problem of representation in contemporary art, though, is fundamentally different than that in the public museum. Representation strategies, if any, employed by contemporary artists are not as

straightforward as those of public historians working in the museum, but rather ambivalent and obscure. The artwork itself is where a first level of representation could be located. The curatorial project adds a second level of representation—it is at this level that the power of the curator in creating and controlling exhibition narratives and contexts is being exercised. A third figure—that of the collecting institution and the museum in general—adds another level of complexity to the analysis of the politics of memory and the representations inscribed in exhibiting modern and contemporary art from Central and Eastern Europe in the “post-Wall” period.

Why deal with exhibitions rather than with concrete works of art in the first place? The importance of exhibitions as *the* medium through which most contemporary art becomes known and its cultural meanings established and administered has been widely acknowledged. As Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, authors of the *Thinking About Exhibition* anthology, maintain, “[e]xhibitions are primary sites of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained and occasionally deconstructed.”[1] Privileging exhibitions and their curatorial concepts in the analysis is further justified by Boris Groys’ definition of what an artwork stands for today—basically an exhibited object.[2] In Groys’ view contemporary art must be exhibited in the present in order to be considered art at all. From there, it follows that the elementary unit of art today is no longer an artwork as object but, as Groys claims, an art space in which an object is exhibited: the space of an exhibition. Groys pushes the argument further to assert that consequently, “the traditional, sovereign authorship of an individual artist has in fact disappeared”[3]and that it has been replaced by a new regime of authorship—that of multiple authorship, co-shared by artist, curator, gallerist, and funding institution. Under this new regime of authorship, artists are no longer judged by the objects they have produced but by the exhibitions and projects in which they have participated.

The curator notably appeared as a completely new figure on the Eastern and Central European art scene in the post-communist transition period. Although it was usually the art critics, art historians and sometimes artists, who took up this position, they were gradually to adapt to an essentially new system of art production and art presentation while developing it at the same time. Paradoxically, the curator, a figure who is admittedly a product of the (Western) contemporary art system, happened to be a “curator without a system” in the Eastern part of Europe, as Viktor Misiano argued.[4] The power of the curator in the East, however, extended beyond that of constructing intellectual, aesthetic, and practical context for the presentation of art. The lack of an adequate art system turned the new-born East European curator into a one-person orchestra, a “multifunctional mediator,” as Iara Boubnova put it, for he or she had to take up tasks, usually performed by a whole array of institutions in the West: “In a situation that lacks an art market as well as qualified art dealers, local collectors and an educated (used to art) audience, the curator(s) accumulates in his/her hands a lot of the “power” of the connoisseur and the owner, the promoter and the strategist, the ideologist and the manager, as well as, the total communicator.” [5]

The strategy of compensating for the inadequate institutional framework of the art system in the East with temporary platforms for actions and initiatives of self-institutionalization has generated another paradox, as argued by Branislav Dimitrijevic: “[t]he groups of artists, theorists and curators who organized these ‘schools,’ ‘institutes,’ ‘workshops’ and ‘movements’ or have gathered around emerging art magazines, belonged to the non-institutional or anti-institutional opposition yet they themselves acted very seriously to provide structural organization.”[6] Besides the problematic relation of East European curators to the institutionalization of art, the task of curating the East has been further laden with the paradoxical dilemmas of representing East European or post-communist identity, provoked by the power-bound tensions between the East and the West. The curatorial statement of the exhibition *Body and the East* (1998), curated by Zdenka Badovinac, one of the leading Slovenian curators and director of Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, succinctly illuminates these tensions: “If we talk about art creativity in Eastern Europe, which until recently was relatively isolated from the world, as being a separate phenomenon, we risk pushing it even further into the world of otherness. We risk making its otherness even more evident, even within institutionalized frameworks, since we mostly present ourselves— consciously or not—in the way we believe the Other world wants to perceive us. But we would be risking more if we simply forgot about its otherness and presented ourselves—in the spirit of the newly united Europe—as being equal, and if we pointed to those cultural-historical characteristics which comply with the recently very popular slogan that we have always been part of Europe.” [7]. As the examples offered in this article confirm, similar concerns about the “self-colonization”[8] of the East are often guiding the curatorial narratives of East European curators.

Keeping the above considerations on the role and the power of the curator in the East in mind, I have examined the curatorial statements and exhibition concepts of about 200 shows of modern and contemporary art from Eastern and Central Europe, which took place in different parts of the world from the 1980s till today. I have tried to single out a set of “ideal types” of curatorial narratives that have been recurrently brought into play. These stereotypical narratives, along with their variations, are not necessarily excluding each other—on the contrary, they often times overlap and complement each other, in spite of placing the emphasis on different claims.

Heroic Narratives: Artists as “Freedom Fighters”

Heroic narratives are to be found both in Western and Eastern context alike, but they are most common in the United States where many of the Soviet dissident artists emigrated in the 1980s and where several large private collections of non-conformist art from the former Soviet republics are hosted. The Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection at the Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick, N.J., for example, claims to be the largest and the most comprehensive collection of its kind, comprised of more than 20,000 works from some 2,000 artists.[9] The collection and the museum take great pride in embodying “the purest rationale for the creation of art: the struggle for freedom of self-expression in spite of—and in defiance of—a repressive government.”[10] Heroic narratives thus often go hand in hand with strategies of victimization and martyrization, bestowing an aura of sainthood upon the Eastern artists and presenting them as martyrs

in the struggle for freedom of self-expression, unquestionably a major factor in the development of modern art. Not surprisingly, it is the term “non-conformist art” that plays a central role in this narrative. The term itself was introduced in the United States against the term “unofficial art” and the variations on the avant-garde (neo-, post-, retro-, etc.) used in Europe.

Here is how a typical heroic narrative would sound:

“It has not been emphasized nearly enough that the history of nonconformist art is one of the great heroic stories of the last half of this century. It is the story of several generations of artists who had learned their skills in the rigorous state-supported system of training, but who insisted on the kind of interior freedom that was anathema to the authorities... The desire to create from a sense of utter necessity and honesty prompted their refusal to accept the authority of the state in matters of art.” [11]

A representative example of an exhibition based on this premise is the recent *Artists Against the State: Perestroika Revisited* (2006) show at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York, a gallery that prides itself in its historic association with non-conformist Russian artists, dating back to 1976 when it put on an exhibition of smuggled works by the founders of the Soviet Sots Art movement, Alexander Melamid and Vitaly Komar. The concept of *Artists Against the State* focuses on the survival strategies of non-conformist artists:

“Working outside the parameters of government sanctioned art, unofficial artists developed various strategies for survival that ranged from public confrontation to withdrawal into the private sphere. Subject to persecution, the underground existed at great risk . . . Nonconformist art evolved with its own systems of signage characterized by: text and commentary, the deconstruction of Soviet ideology, banalities of daily life, fictional mythologies and shifting truths, and arcane hermeneutics—an anti-utopian conceptualism laced with irony and biting satire.” [12]

Frequent references in the heroic curatorial narratives are the Gulag and Stalinist terror. One of the first exhibitions to address the history and mythology of the Gulag through contemporary art is *Territories of Terror: Mythologies and Memories of the Gulag in Contemporary Russian-American Art* (2007) at the Boston University Art Gallery, curated by Svetlana Boym. Although the artists presented in *Territories of Terror* do not refer directly to the Gulag experience, they offer a space where reflection can take place. The historical context, however, is set by a companion documentary exhibition “GULAG: Soviet Forced Labor Camp and the Struggle for Freedom.”

Post-colonialist Narratives: East versus West

The common use of post-colonialist narratives by curators presenting art from Central and Eastern Europe in the post-socialist period is to be understood in the optics of the problematic relations between the East and the West in the course and in the wake of the Cold War. Post-colonialist curatorial narratives are thus ardently engaged in questioning and problematizing the positions of the center and its peripheries, the mechanisms of

inclusion and exclusion, the construction of otherness, and the negotiation of geopolitical hierarchies and boundaries. The statement by Zdenka Badovinac, quoted earlier in the context of the *Body and the East* (1998) exhibition, testifies to the type of concerns which are often guiding post-colonialist curatorial narratives. The very title of the inaugural First Prague Biennale (2003), *Peripheries Become the Center*, also demonstrates the emancipatory standpoint taken by its curators, pronouncing publicly the dissolution of the dichotomy of the center and periphery concepts and thus alluding to “a liberation of plurality in terms of both identity and artistic practice.”[13] Besides the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Cold War center-periphery model, most frequently quoted among the factors which are to be accounted for the “post-colonial” situation in the former East is the advent of the new information technologies and mass media, as well as the processes of migration and globalization. Whereas these factors are undisputedly influential, the acclaimed reversal of the positions may still remain in the realm of wishful thinking.

A typical post-colonialist narrative on East European art history is likely to run along the following lines:

“... East European art history was first expropriated by Western discourse (as in the example of modernism), denied in nature as art at all (the postmodern refusal of social realism), to be, just recently, spectacularly re-invented by the West. In parallel, East European art history has consequently shown shame (in the example of modernism), self-denial (in the case of social realism, which was not re-evaluated until Boris Groys’ *Dream Factory Communism* exhibition), and an attempt to fit into the master narrative, as if paying for the sin of politicizing art.” [14]

Post-colonialist curatorial narratives and strategies are often of revisionist and deconstructive character, kindred to a postmodernist line of thinking. Deconstruction, however, goes hand in hand with the re-construction of the deconstructed history, to which previously unacceptable images, thoughts, ideas and facts are added. The Slovenian artist and philosopher Marina Gržini? describes the process of re-writing of Eastern art histories as follows:

“What we are interested in is the ‘internal rearticulation’ that is being engendered beyond the neo-colonial positions of the West, the one that lives ‘here’, without being recognized as such. What we are witnessing is a process of mirroring and the reflection of one’s own self and one’s own ‘Eastern’ position, in which the recycling of different histories does not refer to Western but to Eastern positions and conditions.” [15]

Projects that are unmistakably pursuing this goal are the ongoing *East Art Map*, initiated by the Slovenian group Irwin in the late 1990s, and its offspring project – the *Mind the Map!—History is not Given* (2005) symposium and university network, which will be discussed later.

Post-colonialist curatorial narratives of deconstructive-reconstructive nature employ different means of legitimization of the new positions they assert—often through apologetic claims grounded in history’s “injustice” (the East is “lagging behind” the West

because of its totalitarian past), illustrated through the tropes of “severed avant-gardes,” “interrupted” or “impossible histories,” and combined with victimization claims based on accounts of the totalitarian repressions against Eastern artists. Post-colonialist narratives also feature emancipatory art historical claims, which attempt to challenge the postulates of Western art theory, typically presenting socialism as the factor putting an end to modernism, and being essentially “low” culture in comparison to the “high” Western culture of neo- and post-isms.[16] The variations in the arguments intended to restore the East European art’s “high” status abound: tracing historic avant-garde’s origins back to the East; challenging Western modernism’s exceptionality through the notion of co-existence of parallel modernisms in the East and the West; emphasizing the similarities between American Pop Art and Soviet Sots Art; underscoring the concurrent development of conceptual art in the East and the West; interpreting body art, performance practices and conceptual art in the East as innately “progressive” and anti-totalitarian; examining links and contacts of East European second avant-garde artists with Western neo-avant-garde movements such as *Fluxus* and *Wiener Aktionismus*; “rehabilitating” the art of Socialist Realism as a legitimate successor of the early avant-garde, and others. The exhibition *Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of the Stalinist Era* (2003), curated by Boris Groys, author of the influential monograph *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1992), had a particularly strong resonance in endorsing the continuity between Russian historic avant-garde, socialist realism and sots art. This whole array of complementary sub-narratives comes to support the upgrading of the status of East European art in relation to its Western counterpart.

A good example of an exhibition that is inscribed in the post-colonialist discourse is *Living Art—On the Edge of Europe* (2006) at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands. Excerpts from the exhibition’s concept highlight its aim of restoring “justice” to the previously marginalized East European artists, justifiably comparable to their Western European equivalents:

“*Living Art – On the Edge of Europe* (2006) aims to give centre stage to those artists who have not received the artistic recognition they deserve because for too long they had no access to the international art scene (or market). Due to political circumstances they were sidelined from the international artistic canon, but are now once again ready to take up a central position. These artists made important and progressive works in the 1960s and 1970s that exhibit parallels with the works made in Western Europe in the same period and that also supplement them in important ways. In both regions in this period artists were preoccupied more with process than with an end product, working in forms such as performance, conceptual art and Land Art. However, whilst in Western Europe these practices were seen as new developments within the existing artistic climate, in Eastern Europe they were stamped as unofficial art.” [17]

Contextualizing Narratives: No Such Thing as East European Art

Curatorial narratives employing strategies of relativization and (re-)contextualization are often paired with the post-colonialist narratives of mostly deconstructive nature. Contextualizing narratives imply the deconstruction and demythologization of both

regional and national contexts of art production by focusing on the diversity and specificity of local contexts and by introducing country-specific art historical periodizations, marked by historical and political events that influenced the entire Soviet bloc (the events in 1956, 1968, etc.) and country-specific events (such as the Martial Law in Poland in the early 1980s). Such narratives are also based on the divergences in the harshness of the regimes of political repressions in the different countries, on the varying status of artists in society, as well on the specificity of local artistic traditions. Furthermore, contextualizing narratives attempt to break down clear-cut dichotomies by arguing for their relativity. For instance, they are likely to draw attention to the ambiguity of the distinction between official or state art, and unofficial or dissident art, through introducing in-between categories, such as semi-official art or semi-non-conformist art, and by pointing at the compromises that both official and unofficial artists were to make in their work and life.

Instead of underlining the similarities between artistic developments in the East and in the West, which is an approach common for the post-colonialist narratives, contextualizing narratives insist on the specificity of Eastern art in terms of its particular content and context of production, nevertheless acknowledging certain similarities, at least in the realm of artistic forms. Contextualizing curatorial narratives typically focus on the characteristics of artistic practices in culturally and historically distinctive regions such as Central Europe, the Balkans, the Baltics, and the countries of the former Yugoslav Federation.

Exhibitions on Central Europe or *Mitteleuropa* in particular abound in the 1990s and reach their peak at the turn of the millennium, with a large number of them taking place in Vienna, often mixed with the Europeanization hype.[18] Such exhibitions usually start from the premise of Central Europe's vital cultural role at the turn of the 20th century and losing its significance due to the political situation during the Cold War. In the context of these exhibitions Austria is often positioned as a cultural mediator between the East and the West—a position that is sometimes called in question by the critics: “The Austrian example is interesting, because Austria's interest in cultural integration raises the question: is the goal to enable Austria to assert itself as the new and primary centre of the region, as during the period of its imperial splendour, or to form new relationships in this region?”[19]

The Balkans, taken as “the most radical and illustrative theme of East European otherness,”[20] appeared as the specific focus of three internationally renowned curatorial projects—*Blood and Honey: Future's in the Balkans* by Harold Szeemann, *In the Gorges of the Balkans: A Report* by Rene Block, and *In Search of Balkania* by Peter Weibel, all three taking place almost simultaneously in Austria and Germany in 2002 and 2003.

Curatorial narratives providing context for exhibiting the art of the Baltic countries of the period after the Second World War till the present usually point at three specific conditions which are indispensable for its proper understanding: first, the so-called “culture of interruption” implying that developments in this period were not “normal,” but the result of political, social, and cultural interruption; second, the closed regime of

the Baltic republics in comparison to Central European countries such as Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and especially former Yugoslavia; and third, the defensive state of art and culture in the Baltic countries throughout the Soviet period—preservationist rather than assertive in its character. [21]

The exhibition *The Art of the Baltics under the Soviets* (2001) at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., showing works from the holdings of the already mentioned Dodge Collection, sets as its goal the illumination of the specificity of the Baltic context (mostly in comparison to the centers Moscow and Leningrad). The foreword to the exhibition catalogue states this upfront: “The purposes of this publication and its coinciding exhibition are to objectively and broadly document the great variety of artistic alternatives that evolved in the Baltics during the last thirty years of Soviet hegemony—alternatives that often, but not always, countered the officially sanctioned art of Socialist Realism—and to evaluate the greater levels of artistic freedom permissible in the Baltics versus the rigid control over artists exercised by the Soviets in their centers of governmental/military strength: Moscow and Leningrad.”[22]

The curatorial narrative of the exhibition, however, also acknowledges the great cultural diversity within the Baltic region and attempts to examine the diverse ways in which Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian art developed, affected by the closer contacts of Estonia with the Scandinavian countries or the Central European location of Lithuania and its Polish influences, for instance.

The survey exhibition *Quiet Modernism in Lithuania 1962 – 1982* (1997) delves deeper into the Lithuanian context of non-conformist art. The very metaphor of “Quiet Modernism” refers to the nature of the process of dispersion of art in the public and the private sphere and the nature of the resistance of Lithuanian artists to the establishment. The “heroes” of the Lithuanian Quiet Modernism thus were not as radical and ostentatious as some of the non-conformist artists in Moscow and Leningrad, but nonetheless influential in the local scene.

Europeanization Narratives: Artists for Europe

Europeanization narratives were unsurprisingly triggered by the European integration process throughout the 1990s and by the two waves of European enlargement in 2004 and 2007. The first enlargement wave in particular was accompanied by an unprecedented number of projects and campaigns aiming at the presentation of the art and culture of the ten new European Union (EU) members to the old ones.[23] The huge wave of exhibitions on the so-called “New Europe” made use of a specific narrative, very close to the clichéd “European talk”—that of art and culture bridging the differences between the two parts of Europe, culturally and politically divided during the Cold War. A prime example of the Europeanization curatorial narrative is the exhibition *Passage Europe: A Certain Look at Central and East European Art* (2004) at the Musée d’Art Moderne de Saint-Étienne, curated by Lorand Hegyi, who outspokenly highlighted this context: “Shortly before the inauguration of this exhibition, Europe celebrated the official

accession of ten new members to the European Union. This rings in a new chapter in the history of the continent. Separation and mistrust, hostility and tension, will make way—or so we hope—to a new era of construction in a new European community.”[24]

The exhibition’s “modest attempt to contribute to the construction of a new vision of Europe”[25] also underlines the artists’ role in the process of a re-opening and re-establishing of what Hegyi called the “connecting passages of Europe.”[26]

Similarly, a significantly smaller number of projects showcasing contemporary and modern art from Romania and Bulgaria followed in 2007, the most exemplary of which is the exhibition *Plus Two—Contemporary Art from Bulgaria and Romania* at the MKM Center for Modern and Contemporary Art in Duisburg, Germany, straightforwardly intended to mark the two countries’ recent accession to the EU. This in fact is the only common thread that hypothetically links the selected works by Romanian and Bulgarian artists.

Strategies of Historicization and Institutionalization – Mind the Map! History is Not Given!

The efforts made at historicizing, institutionalizing and musealizing East European art have been directly correlated to the post-colonialist ambitions of Eastern artists and curators. The fledgling art market in the East and the interests of the well-established Western art market in the East might have also come into play here. Consequently, the number of collections, archives, museums, art biennials, and research institutes dealing with the presentation, historicization and preservation of the late socialist and post-socialist art of Central and Eastern Europe has dramatically increased in recent years. The major outcome of these undertakings is the establishment of an East European art canon. There is already a steady number of works and artists that are repeatedly represented in the larger topological, thematic and media-focused exhibitions. Furthermore, the apparent monopolist position of a close circle of curators indicates the formation of new centers within the East European art scene, which in turn brings about new tensions and power struggles, this time from within the East.

Indisputably, the largest curatorial project of historicizing East European art is the *East Art Map: A (Re)Construction of the History of Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, initiated by the Slovenian artists’ group Irwin in the late 1990s. The project addressed the lack of a “referential system for the art-historically significant events, artifacts and artists that would be accepted and respected outside the borders of a given country,”[27] which is exhibited in Eastern Europe. The aim of *East Art Map (EAM)*, as its authors assert, is “to present art from the whole space of Eastern Europe, taking artists out of their national frameworks and presenting them in a unified scheme.”[28] Such an aim is justified by the need for an in-depth study mapping the developments of East European art and its complexities and situating it in a larger context. Still, as the members of Irwin acknowledge, their ambitions are not that high: “We do not seek to establish some

ultimate truth; on the contrary, our aims are much more modest and, we hope, more practical: to organize the fundamental relationships between East European artists where these relations have not been organized, to draw a map and create a table.”[29]

Given all its good intentions, the project suffered from an inherent malfunction—although it was envisioned as a “democratic” tool for (re)constructing East European art history and for that purpose provided an Internet platform, open to the public to make submissions and proposals, EAM empowered a selected group of curators to make country-focused selections of artists, with a clear over-presentation of the countries from former Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro) and Russia.[30] This obviously produced a somewhat distorted map, implying a new distribution of hierarchies, although one could also claim that such an over-presentation in fact reflected the relative “weight” of artistic developments in the over-presented countries. Another failure, acknowledged by the authors of the project, was that very few of the selections had been placed in the context of concurrent Western artistic production, which was one of the major tasks set to the selecting curators. Apart from its virtual realization with the Internet, the project also resulted in a “traditional” temporary exhibition, entitled *East Art Museum*, held at the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in Hagen, Germany, in 2005. The *East Art Museum* had been envisioned as a proposal for the establishment of a Museum of Modern East European Art, critically reflecting on the Western model of a museum of modern art, embodied by MOMA in New York.[31]

Another project that operates with the concept of historicization of East European art is the *Interrupted Histories* exhibition (2006) which took place in Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana. The exhibition presented itself as a tool for creating history in the context of the West’s domination in establishing its art history as the only internationally valid canon. The invited artists and groups thus acted themselves as archivists (“of their own and other artists’ projects or of various phenomena in the national history”), curators (“who research their own historical context and establish a comparable framework for various big and little histories”), historians, anthropologists, and ethnologists (“who record current and pertinent phenomena in the interaction between tradition and modernity as well as rapid change in the local landscape”).[32] The purpose of these self-historicizing strategies, however, was “not to establish yet another collective narrative such as the Western world is familiar with.” [33] As Zdenka Badovinac, curator of the show, remarked, “[t]hese artists are not interested in creating a new big history, but are rather interested in the conditions that sustain the tension between small and temporary histories and what is defined as big history.”[34]

The establishment of specialized collections with a focus on the art production from Central and Eastern Europe and the extension of the collecting scope of existing collections to include such artworks have played a defining historicizing and institutionalizing role since, contrary to exhibitions, collections have a more lasting impact on the way art history is being legitimized by framing it in stable narratives.

Kontakt. The Art Collection of Erste Bank Group, set up in 2004, is one of the most ambitious collecting endeavors in this realm. *Kontakt’s* collecting strategy combines elements from the narratives of contextualization (“its aim is to develop a collection with a

sound art-historical and conceptual basis that deals with artistic positions rooted in a specific location and context”), Europeanization (“[the collection] aims to present works that play a decisive role in the formation of a common and unified European art history”), and post-colonialism (“reformulating art history and thus questioning the Western European canon of art”),[35] although for obvious reasons it has also been accused of employing a neo-colonialist approach. The collection vehemently rejects such allegations by organizing exhibitions not only in Austria but also in the countries where the collected artworks originate from, such as this year’s exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade. As Boris Marte, the sponsoring director of Erste Bank, declares, “[o]ne of our primary concerns is that this art should live with the region it comes from, that it should be discussed, that it should continue to work and that it should be integrated and replayed in local context.”[36]

ArtEast 2000+ Collection , started in the 1990s, pursues goals similar to those of *Kontakt* (“to help the idea of Eastern Europe as a blind spot of history to finally disappear from the map of Europe”[37]), the difference, however, being that the initiative comes not from a financial group in the West, but from an art museum in the East—Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana. Despite its seemingly politically correct statements (“[we] dedicate our new collection to the newly established dialogue between the East and the West,”[38] etc.), the collection and the exhibitions based on the works from it have been subjected to harsh criticism from the East. The exhibition *2000 + ArtEast Collection* (2000) in Ljubljana, for instance, which took place in the same year when Ljubljana hosted the third *Manifesta* biennial, did not present a single Slovenian artist, which gave grounds to the critics to interpret it as “prepared precisely for the international audience, counting on *Manifesta* 3 in Ljubljana.”[39] Furthermore, certain ethical issues were raised regarding the method of acquisition of some of the works, particularly in terms of payment and regulations of display.

A range of supplementary narratives go along with the five major lines of reasoning in the curatorial narratives outlined above, such as narratives informed by the concepts of *a-historicity* and *post-historicity*, particularly popular with the “end of history” and “end of art” discourses. Such narratives posit the fall of the Berlin Wall as the new point zero in history and are often coupled with post-colonialist rhetoric implying the dissolution of the center-periphery model into a more complex constellation of power relations and the replacement of “grand narratives” by small and fragmented ones.

One way of interpreting the numerous exhibitions of art from “post-Wall” Europe in the context of the global “memorial fever,” would be to see them as commercially driven phenomena—post-communist nostalgia sells well. What I claim here, however, is that the huge number of post-1989 exhibitions of East European art, organized around the themes of memory, time, temporality, and history, are to be interpreted in the framework of the post-communist politics of memory. The question of who the subject of this politics of memory is needs further examination. One could claim that these exhibitions are merely a selection of genuine artistic positions and statements, “packaged” and presented under a common curatorial umbrella, or that, on the contrary, they are produced under the very concrete “orders” of a given curator or a given institution.[40] The issue of the funding

and sponsoring provided for the curatorial projects under discussion here should not be underestimated either. In spite of the professed independency of the majority of the curators, many of these exhibitions were funded and supported by governmental agencies and foundations (Kulturstiftung des Bundes and Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, Goethe Institutes, KulturKontakt, and others), national ministries of culture and cultural institutes abroad, each pursuing a specific agenda of their own. In other cases, private foundations, banks and companies sponsored the events. Other exhibitions were obviously the outcome of the operations of the network of twenty regional Soros Centers of Contemporary Art, established throughout the region in the early 1990s, which continued to function in different forms after George Soros withdrew his funding around 2000, nevertheless maintaining close relations with each other. Curators and artists associated with these centers are often accused of having taken monopoly over the local and regional art scene and art market—a phenomenon that some, such as Miško Suvakovi?, refer to as “Soros realism.”[41] Another institutional influence in the 2000s, as already underlined, was the process of European integration—the two waves of European enlargement have boosted the presentation of contemporary art from the “new comers,” with the support from a large number of European institutions.

Notwithstanding the diversity of artistic approaches to the socialist past, eventually it is up to the curators to come up with narratives that frame this diversity into a coherent curatorial statement. My claim has been that curators pursue a specific politics of memory through the agendas of their curatorial strategies, supported by institutional frameworks of different kinds. In the end, ironically, the “ideology of the exhibition” might escape the control of its curator. As Miško Suvakovi? wrote, “the ideology of the exhibition is not the order (text) of messages that the authors of the exhibition are projecting and proclaiming in their introductory or accompanying texts; it is that difference between the intended and the unintended, the acceptable and the unacceptable in relation to the public and the tacit scene: the conscious and the unconscious, i.e. the literal and the fictional.”[42] Whereas I acknowledge the inherent fallacy of my methodology, for it is not suited to capture this discrepancy, I am nevertheless of the opinion that starting up on the examination of the “intended” is the logical first step in the analysis, which I have tried to undertake with this research project.

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Notes:

1. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, "Introduction," in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 2.
2. Boris Groys, "Multiple Authorship," in *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, ed. Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 94.
3. Ibid., 96.
4. Viktor Misiano, "Curator without a System," in *After the Wall. Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejic and David Elliott (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999), 137.
5. Iara Boubnova, "In the Local Discourse, as in the International Context," in *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejic and David Elliott (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999), 58.
6. Branislav Dimitrijević, "Even Now I am Not Ashamed of My Communist Past!" in *Privatisations: Contemporary Art from Eastern Europe*, ed. Boris Groys (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2004), 105.
7. Zdenka Badovinac, "Body and the East," in *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac (Ljubljana: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 9.
8. East European cultures are often interpreted as "self-colonizing," i.e. cultures that "import alien values and models of civilisation by themselves and . . . lovingly colonize their own authenticity through these foreign models" Alexander Kiossev, "Notes on Self-Colonising Cultures," in *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejic and David Elliott (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999), 114.
9. The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, "Introduction to the Dodge Collection," <http://zamweb.rutgers.edu/audios/files/Introduction.mp3> (accessed June 22, 2007).
10. Norton T. Dodge and Alla Rosenfeld, eds., *Nonconformist Art: The Soviet Experiment 1956–1986* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 7.
11. Renee Baigell and Matthew Baigell, *Soviet Dissident Artists* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995).
12. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, "Artists Against the State: Perestroika Revisited," http://www.feldmangallery.com/pages/home_frame.html (accessed June 26, 2007).
13. Prague Biennale 1, "Press Release," www.praguebiennale.org/pages/Peripheries_become_the_center.rtf (accessed June 26, 2007).
14. Ana Peraica, "A Corruption of the 'Grand Narrative' of Art," in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irwin (London: Afterall, 2006), 472.

15. Marina Gržini?, “On the Re-Politicisation of Art through Contamination,” in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irwin (London: Afterall, 2006), 484.
16. Peraica, “Corruption,” 475.
17. Electronic Flux Corporation, “Living Art—On the Edge of Europe,” http://www.eflux.com/displayshow.php?file=message_1150498856.txt (accessed June 26, 2007).
18. Among the most remarkable exhibitions of the art of Central Europe are: *Sensitivities—Contemporary Art from Central Europe* (1998), *Aspects / Positions—50 Years of Art in Central Europe, 1949 – 1999* (1999), *KunstRaumMitteleuropa: 12 Positions on Contemporary Art* (2000), *Central: New Art from New Europe* (2001).
19. Dunja Blazevi ?, “West-East Side Story,” in *Passage Europe. Realities, References: A Certain Look at Central and Eastern European Art*, ed. Lorand Hegyi (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2004), 20.
20. Peraica, “Corruption,” 473.
21. Sirje Helme, “Estonia,” in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irwin (London: Afterall, 2006), 199.
22. Phillip Cate, “Preface,” in *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945 – 1991*, ed. Norton T. Dodge and Alla Rosenfeld (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), vii.
23. The list of exhibitions on the so-called “New Europe” throughout the first half of the 2000s is rather extensive: © *Europe Exists*, Thessaloniki, Greece (2003); *Breakthrough: Perspectives on Art from the Ten New Member States*, Hague, The Netherlands (2004); *Instant Europe – Photography and Video from the New Europe*, Passariano – Codroipo (Udine), Italy (2004); *New Video, New Europe: A Survey of Eastern European Video*, Chicago, United States (2004); *Passage Europe: Realities, references*, St. Etienne, France (2004); *The Image of Europe*, Brussels, Belgium (2004); *The New Ten: Contemporary Art from the 10 New Member Nations of the EU*, Duisburg, Vienna, Mannheim, Oostende (2004); *Who if Not We Should at Least Try to Imagine the Future of All This? 7 Episodes on Ex(Changing) Europe*, Budapest, Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam, Ljubljana, Vilnius, Warsaw (2004); *Positioning—In the New Reality of Europe: Art from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary*, Osaka, Japan (2005); *The New Europe. Culture of Mixing and Politics of Representation*, Vienna, Austria (2005); *Central: New Art from New Europe*, Vienna (2005), Sofia (2006); *Check-In Europe: Reflecting Identities in Contemporary Art*, Munich, Germany (2006).
24. Lorand Hegyi, “Connecting Passages: Constructing the Present, Confronting the Past, Reconstructing Europe,” in *Passage Europe. Realities, References: A Certain Look at Central and Eastern European Art*, ed. Lorand Hegyi (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2004), 7.

25. Ibid., 11.

26. Ibid., 10-11.

27. Irwin, "General Introduction," in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irwin (London: Afterall, 2006), 11.

28. Ibid., 12.

29. Ibid., 12.

30. The over-presentation is due to the fact that every selector had a quota of maximum 10 artists, but some countries had more than one selector working on the project.

31. Michael Fehr, "Constructing History with the Museum: A Proposal for an East Art Museum," in *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irwin (London: Afterall, 2006), 471.

32. Zdenka Badovinac, "Interrupted Histories," in *Interrupted Histories: ArtEast Exhibition* (Ljubljana: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 11.

33. Ibid., 11.

34. Ibid., 11.

35. Boris Marte, "We also see our collecting strategy as a political statement," <http://www.kontakt.erstebankgroup.net/report/stories/issue12+story+boris+marte/en> (accessed June 26, 2007).

36. Ibid.

37. Zdenka Badovinac, "Prologue to the Ljubljana Exhibition," in *2000 + ArtEast Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe*, ed. Mika Briški (Vienna: Folio, 2001), 62.

38. Ibid., 59.

39. Marina Gržini?-Mauhler, "Does Contemporary Art Need Museums Anymore?" www.kanazawa21.jp/act/r/02/pdf/marina02_e.pdf (accessed June 22, 2007).

40. In support of the latter comes the observation that the share of works commissioned and specifically produced for a certain exhibition is relatively smaller than the number of "recycled" works, displayed in a larger number of exhibitions. For instance, half of the 23 artists and artist groups participating in *Privatisations* (2004) had already been presented in the *After the Wall* (1999) exhibition, some of them even with the very same works. The recycling of works in different exhibitions, however, might also be interpreted as curatorial maneuvers.

41. Miško Suvakovi?, "The Ideology of Exhibition: On the Ideology of Manifesta," <http://www.ljudmila.org/scca/platforma3/suvakoviceng.htm> (accessed June 22, 2007).

42. Ibid.

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