

The East and the West of Art: Creators, Institutions, Public, Works

Aleš Erjavec. Research Director in the Institute of Philosophy of the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences in Ljubljana (Slovenia), Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Ljubljana, and Chair of the Department of Cultural Studies in University of Primorska, Faculty of Humanities Koper (Slovenia). President of the Slovenian Society of Aesthetics (1984-1999, 2005-...) and former president (1998-2001) of the International Association for Aesthetics. Author or editor of ten books, the most recent ones being *Towards the Image, Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition. Politicized Art under Late Socialism* and *Love at Last Sight: Avant- Garde, Aesthetics, and the End of Art*. Visiting professor in South Africa, Uppsala, Poland, Nottingham, Hong Kong and Santa Cruz (California).



Let me point out at the very beginning that, in contradistinction to other speakers at this conference, I do not intend to directly speak much about biennials. The first reason is that I am not a curator or an art critic but am concerned mainly with philosophy of art and with cultural critique and theory. There may exist a contradiction in such a self-designation, one similar to that of someone being both an art historian and a theorist of visual culture. But it is also true that such designations reveal deeper tensions within such theoretical endeavors –not to mention within the notion of culture and art *per se*. Such tensions are undoubtedly worthy of our attention, but will be disregarded in this talk.

The second reason is that in the part of Europe that I come from, there are no biennials or similar events, except some short-lived or recent ones, such as the Tirana or the Moscow biennial or some less recent, but conceptually transformed, such as the Cetinje Biennial in Montenegro. When speaking of exhibitions of contemporary art one should, of course, not forget the Ljubljana Manifesta.

So perhaps an introductory, brief, and partial answer to the question why there are hardly any biennials in Eastern and Central Europe may be of interest to you, hopefully to a similar extent as in instances of discussion of places where there actually are big international and influential art biennials and similar cultural and artistic events.

It may also be proper –but perhaps not overly optimistic– to end this conference with a talk not on biennials but on the absence thereof.

But before I discuss this issue, let me explain that the “East” and “Eastern” in my talk and in its title do not refer to Asia as is being –or becoming– increasingly common also in Europe, but to the former socialist countries of Europe, including Russia –and perhaps, maybe somewhat paradoxically, also China.

Europe had its East, but with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the ensuing political and economic changes the European East has been symbolically annihilated, with this geographic place being now designated primarily as the former socialist countries or the new member states of the European Union, with the European East moving farther east, to countries such as Romania and Bulgaria.

In other words, after this region has been designated for decades politically and for centuries geographically as Eastern Europe, the Soviet bloc countries plus Yugoslavia, or Central Europe and the Balkans, it is nowadays called the new states of the European Union plus Russia and the South East Europe. The East of the Eastern Europe has, then, been now moved over to the candidates for the membership in the European Union, promising one day to disappear, once again, as the European East – with this imaginary East then moving further East. Thus, if this process continues, the Eastern Europe may one day actually move to the vicinity of China, thereby merging Eastern Europe with the present-day Asian “East.”

But let me limit this discussion to the present and reiterate that already today it is common in much of Europe to call the East no longer the Eastern Europe but what used to be called the Far East, with Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea and mainland China representing the focus of our interest as concerns the visual arts and architecture.

While we may agree that South Korea, The Philippines or Indonesia and even Taiwan do offer specific forms of contemporary art, it most certainly is China which represents today the main focus of our attention –not only in economic and political senses but also in the cultural one.

Contemporary China witnesses the fact that interesting art emerges in conditions of social tension, of rapid development, of a dynamic and productive collision of domestic and foreign influences –an historical phenomenon which transgresses the simplified and false direct and mechanistic connection and dependency between economy and culture. Much of this is and was true of recent art from Eastern Europe, only that the East European art (with the exception of Russian art) found its audience mainly in Europe, while the Chinese generates today interest globally.

Some critics argue that most of contemporary Chinese art is but an export commodity with little artistic import or social and political impact on domestic public. Even if this would be so –and I think it isn't, for art mostly is an exclusive and limited product and activity– it would not change its universal artistic value.

When it comes to such value I am a traditionalist, perhaps even partly a Hegelian. I believe that art has an existential potential and value, although, of course, there are, especially today, enormous gaps between the term and the notion of art. Or to repeat after Jacques Rancière, it is “necessary (...) to emphasize the existence of historical regimes of identification” of art¹. While art in singular exists only for two centuries this does not prevent it to exist in its various individual singular forms before or after, nor does it have to emerge otherwise than contingently –namely on the basis of similar conditions of possibility.

So, the classical Kantian or analytic question “Is it art?” seems to be of no great importance, although it is true that it is often of primary interest to the public, brought up in the tradition of traditional art and confronted with contemporary art.

What appears to be much more interesting in art is to ascertain whether it enables us to see things and phenomena as if for the first time, does it, as Louis Althusser argued in the seventies, at the same reveal ideology and is its integral part? Does it open my eyes to what I have not seen or have not noticed before or have forgotten? And, does it explore the medium called work or event and thereby open new expressive potentials to art as one of the central forms of human creativity, self-expression and our symbolic appropriation of the world and of our symbolic and imaginary placement in it? Does it invoke in us feelings or thoughts of revolt, disgust, beauty, empathy, rejection or aesthetic appreciation? Does it provoke us to regard it as something belonging and being a part of us or of them?

¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum 2004), p. 51.

But now let me return to biennials.

I must be precise when I say that there are no biennials in what used to be the Eastern part of Europe: there are some recent ones –the one in Moscow has to be mentioned– and some old ones such as the one in the capital of Slovenia, Ljubljana, namely the Ljubljana Graphic Biennial, and there is another one, in Novo Mesto, Slovenia, which opened last month (October 2006) under the title of The Biennial of Slovenian Graphic Art. The Ljubljana Graphic Biennial is encountering huge difficulties: it is financed by the state, has a permanent Graphic Center with good technical facilities, but is being run by people who are more interested in contemporary art than traditional or contemporary graphic art. The Biennial thus attempts to resolve the problem of its *raison d'être* in various ways, some more and other less ingenious –neither of which are to be of our concern here. Perhaps the important fact is that the Ljubljana Graphic Biennial, while possessing a history of more than half a century and being well-known and appreciated among the older generation of graphic artists worldwide, no longer attracts attention of the public, be it local or international, but has become instead a monument to an artistic form that in the opinion of many belongs to a past epoch when it may have contributed to what was then the cultural dominant of the time.

Why, then, are there almost no big art events in this part of the world or of Europe?

To answer this question, one has to revert to the broader issues related to the history and contemporary situation of this territory, which is specific, with this being true not only as concerns the absence of art biennials and similar events. In brief, I shall argue that in this part of Europe, while art has been plentiful and interesting, it was only occasionally promoted and thus made known to the outside public, with the only partial exception to the rule being art from Russia. Under socialism the art market existed partly only in Yugoslavia. The art worlds were small, unconnected, and severed from their Western counterparts.

Let me begin with a quote from S.A. Mansbach's book *Modern Art in Eastern Europe. From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939*: "Why is it that today [the East European] avant-garde figures and movements, which earlier in the [twentieth] century overcame their peripheral location to assume a critical and formative role in the genesis of advanced art, are almost totally forgotten and overlooked? Why, after decades of art-historical scholarship, is our present understanding of the modern movement in general so much more partial that it was a half-century ago, when Western critics, historians, artists, and the educated public were relatively well informed about and indebted to the artistic developments from the Baltic to the Balkans. What happened to eclipse this formative modern art from the general cultural consciousness?"

The retreat into relative historical obscurity was not the result of a Western program of wilful ignorance or of cultural chauvinism. Rather, it was, in large measure, the consequence of political, social, and even cultural developments in each of the respective nations of this vast expanse of eastern Europe"².

As the same author continues, "much of modernism was born on the eastern margins of industrial Europe –dadaism in royal Romania, constructivism in the Tsarist Empire, and uniquely creative forms of cubo-expressionism in Habsburg Bohemia"³.

² S.A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe. From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

This passage illustrates well the general situation as concerns the modernist and avant-garde tradition of the 20th century in what Fredric Jameson has called a decade ago the Second World, and Donald Rumsfeld, more recently, the New Europe. It was called the Second World because it was neither the highly developed First nor the developing Third. Also the name “New Europe” was not as unsuitable as it appeared at the time when Rumsfeld coined the term, for there really was something of the “Wild West” in the “Wild East” of Eastern Europe. It was the colonizing, the pioneering stage of development of market economy, of democratic political institutions, of apprehending that the individual is not the sole value nor is this the collective. This region was in the nineties leaving behind an epoch of provincialism and isolation, depicted well by the Serbian essayist Radomir Konstantinović, who described, in 1969, what he then called “The Philosophy of the Province” and which he perceived as the predominant state of mind of that whole area. As he put it, the world of the province “is a spirit between the tribal as the idealy-singular and the world spirit as the idealy-open. When this spirit speaks of its evil destiny, it speaks of its exclusion from history. (...) The fundamental hypothesis of the province is (...) that it is a spirit which, forgotten by history, attempts now to transform its lack into its privilege, by itself, too, (...) forgetting history, thereby mesmerizing in itself the will to exist on the other side of time”⁴. What Konstantinović was claiming fits well into an extra temporal depiction of Eastern Europe: it is the part of Europe where –especially in the province but, then, everywhere exists nothing but province– life revolves along daily quotidian issues, that we know, in the Russian case, so well from the many plays or novels by Chekhov, Nikolai Gogol or Ivan Bunin or, more recently, from the installations by Ilya Kabakov. At the same time this is the locus of the individual, on the one hand, and of the world, on the other –but with the two never meeting. An artist is always misunderstood; even if he succeeds, his success remains local, provincial, limited in scope and appreciation. And even if he is appreciated and recognized, this happens for the wrong reasons.

In this environment the applicable notion of culture is the one theorized by the eighteenth-century German Romanticist cultural philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. Hence culture is the national culture, and what distinguishes my culture is that it is different from yours. Culture is linked to the nation and both are linked to politics.

Since this is a territory with an enormous number of national cultures –these possessing between 600,000 and more than a hundred million inhabitants– it is always possible to define my own identity in contradistinction to another, namely, by the negation of the latter.

At the same time culture possesses a privileged role, for it is not a part of everyday activities. Culture is a flower in your lapel, and serves the function of enhancing one's social position and national self-image. We are familiar with French and other imperial excesses or those from the colonies, but these were equalled in Russia, where, for example, in the words of Princess Yankova in the 18th century, “it was considered more refined to go [to the theatre] by the personal invitation of the host, and not to one where anyone could go in exchange for money. And who indeed among our intimate friends did not possess his own private theatre?”

⁴ Radomir Konstantinović, *Filosofija palanke* (Belgrade: Nolit 1981), p. 7.

There were serf theatres on 173 estates and serf orchestras on 300 estates, between the late 18th and the early 19th centuries”⁵.

As said, this division into extremely rich and the extremely poor was not typical only of Russia, of course. But anyone familiar with Russia knows the perennial tradition of excess, so well exemplified by the dialogue between two *nouveaux riches* from Yeltsin's time: “The tie that I bought in Moscow has cost me a 1,000 dollars,” says the first, with the other one boasting in response: “Ah, but I have bought the same tie in St. Petersburg and it cost me 2,000 dollars!”

Within this context culture and art have a special mission. As the Russian philosopher Mikhail Epstein claimed in the nineties, “Culture [=art] is not a product of society, but a challenge and alternative to society”⁶. Or, as the Russian painter Erik Bulatov proclaimed, when describing the separation between art and society in Russia: “Our task and the task of our generation is to show that this world depicted as unshakeable, immutable, eternal is not everything. This apparently immutable world is in fact false, ephemeral and untrue. Real existence is to be found on the other side of the boundary. This explains why that space beyond the [painted] picture is so important to me”⁷.

I do not wish to ascribe too much relevance to the somewhat peculiar nature of some of Eastern European and Russian notions about culture and art, related to the tradition of mysticism or the absurd, or claim that there is something unexplainable in this part of the world –or at least, that such unexplainable phenomena exist there to a greater extent than elsewhere. The point that I am making though, is that much of this part of Europe –with Russia being partly a distant segment and, at the same time, perhaps the pinnacle of this universe– has not succeeded in creating a unified cultural environment which would bring together Slavic, or former Hapsburg countries or some other imaginary entity built upon historical myths or realities, nor was such an entity culturally established under socialism. This didn't happen, first of all because there was essentially no persuasive, all pervasive and intellectually influential socialist culture that would be accepted by artists and, secondly, because there were few essential cultural links among various countries of this region or with the rest of the world. It was only with the nineties –in the ex-Yugoslavia this happened a decade before– that this situation started to change.

There was thus little of a cultural common denominator here –either under socialism or before– and here few historic events happened, something that made Hegel proclaim almost two centuries ago that Slavic nations were not historic nations, a thesis repeated by Karl Marx. This may well be true as concerns the events on the battlefields, but is mostly untrue as concerns art and culture.

Indeed, it would seem that in some cases culture and art actually served as replacements for political or economic power. In Slovenia the case for the importance and the special place of culture was articulated in 1932 by the theatre critic Josip Vidmar, who argued that “small Slovenia could excel, not in economy or politics, but in culture and art.

⁵ Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance. A Cultural History of Russia* (London: Penguin 2002), pp. 38-39.

⁶ Mikhail N. Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1995), p. 6.

⁷ Erik Bulatov in, “Interview with Erik Bulatov and Ilya Kabakov, Moscow, July 1987, conducted by Claudia Jolles,” in *Erik Bulatov: Moscow* (London: Parkett Publishers & ICA 1989), p. 42.

From this (...) thinking arose his idea of the 'Slovenian Athens' –the idea that the capital of Slovenia, Ljubljana, could become another Athens or Florence, renowned for its culture, making a mark in the world in this way”⁸.

We find similar ideas in many other countries and artists, such as in the imaginary nation of Russian artists Komar & Melamid from the seventies, of a similar imaginary NSK state of the Slovenian group IRWIN from the late eighties, or in the tradition of “paper architecture” and the “architecture of nothing” of the contemporary Hungarian artist Gábor Bachman who carries on the tradition of Lajos Kassák's “picture architecture” from 1922.

In all these instances we are witnesses to variants of Herder's notion of culture, with art representing its highest form, with this situation being almost an invariant in the last century and a half. I would furthermore argue that in this part of the world not only in the period prior to the emergence of the Soviet world or bloc but also during that epoch and again in the period of its disintegration, at least in the belief of a part of the public art existed as an essential human activity and creation. Under socialism, at least from the late sixties on, art referred not so much to propaganda art and culture but to traditional, classical and intimist artistic forms. Nevertheless, when enunciating such views we have to pay attention to huge differences as regards the situation in different countries.

Mansbach speaks about the first half –until 1939– of the 20th century, noting how between the two wars this region – stretching from the Baltic countries to the Adriatic Sea –possessed its own classical avant-garde, surrealism, expressionism, not to mention Dada and futurism. This culture (with Russia having somewhat different history) then dwindled, its main characters either emigrating or becoming silent in the late thirties and, for obvious reasons, in the forties. Later on they were forgotten because of the on-coming cold war and the tension between modest forms of modernism that many of them practised and the official socialist realist culture.

In the interwar period much art –whether expressionist, surrealist, realist or constructivist– was created in these countries, but it was mainly intended for domestic public. With the advent of *Realsozialismus* the borders closed, and while modernist and avant-garde art was not denigrated as a form of *Entartete Kunst*, it was nonetheless politically criticized and did not get support from the state.

The sixties and even seventies or eighties had to be awaited for a new, innocent and politically ignorant and ignored art to emerge, whether realist, cubist, abstract or conceptual. It developed into what the Serbian art critic Ješa Denegri has appropriately termed “modest modernism”.

In the sixties and in the two decades that followed, especially conceptual art in these countries was both indigenous and often radical. It was also nonpolitical, although this did not prevent it from sometimes being a victim of political repression. In an environment dominated by political ideology, hardly anything except some aspects of personal and intimate life could remain extrinsic to it. It is therefore not surprising that the Czech conceptual artist Milan Knížák, for example, was jailed 300 times simply for carrying out performances in public places. He knew very little of Western conceptual art and thus exclaimed, after seeing publications about conceptual and performance art in the West, that he was happy to see that there were other people in the world like him.

⁸ Aleš Erjavec in, Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2003), p. 136.

In our age of globalism it is impossible –except perhaps in North Korea– to imagine the isolation and lack of communication of those times. There were hundreds and thousands of artists in these countries, many of whom never exhibited outside of their local, regional or national environments. Some of their work has been creative and relevant, although sometimes also but an imitation of the works from the West. Its history remains something to be researched and written. The period of art and culture from the World War II up to approximately 1989 is today one of the least familiar periods of East European art, with the earlier period, as Mansbach notes, also being today hardly much better known.

Until the eighties, much of art of the post-war era employed traditional media for its execution, for the early computer technology was not available. Cinema, on the other hand, allowed film directors to create art films and carry out projects which were as individualistic as those of Fellini. It suffices to remember *Andrei Rublov* by Andrei Tarkovski, the Czech cinema of the sixties, the Yugoslav films of the so-called “Black Wave,” or films such as *WR: Mysteries of Organism* (1971) by Dušan Makavejev.

What I find of special import and unique to these countries –ranging from Russia to Hungary and Slovenia– is the art of artists from what I call the postsocialist period, namely the period of the disintegration of socialism –people akin to Jameson's “vanishing mediator.” Much of the art from the eighties is like that: arising from a period of socialism which highly valued art and allowed it a measure of freedom of expression which exceeded that of other kinds of social discourse, and vanishing in the period when the transformation from socialism into a new social and political system was more or less complete. It is the period that the Russian critic Viktor Misiano locates in Russia at the time of Yeltsin. According to Misiano, “Gorbachov's reform was still based on the ideological starting points and thus needed culture for it to be efficient. We could compare it to the reforms by Felipe Gonzales that followed the decline of the Franco regime, for his reforms were also based on the cultural reform. These are still examples of reforms from the modernistic era. On the other hand are reformers, such as Yeltsin, who completely ignored culture”⁹.

In the second half of the nineties, culture and intellectual activity no longer mattered, what became exclusively important was economic development. In all former socialist countries –Slovenia probably being the last among them, for there this process set in only a few years ago– culture was pushed into the background. Today these countries promote themselves through economic, political and military presence and support, not through culture –except that which can be used unproblematically, this mostly signifying traditional, classical and ethnic culture, namely the established and unproblematic elite culture and popular national culture.

Nonetheless in this same period, namely in the nineties, emerged a new kind of art, very much international, although strongly linked to its cultural and political roots and circumstances. While often marginal at home and internationally promoted only by Western curators such as Harald Szeemann or Peter Weibel, and consisting of a heterogeneous cluster of artistic expressions and significations the latter exceed or avoid the narrow confines of individual personal experiences and acquire the value of universality offered by authentic artworks and events.

⁹ Viktor Misiano in, Eda Čufer, “A conversation with Viktor Misiano,” *Strategies of presentation 2 & 3* (Ljubljana: SCCA – Center for Contemporary Arts Ljubljana 2004), p. 84.

In the sphere of art in the eighties and early nineties –as the primary period of transition– new technologies set in and new, non-traditional ideas arose. An important actor in these processes was George Soros, who founded a number of centres for contemporary art, called “open society” centres. His idea was that by sowing the seeds of an open society in culture, he would promote freedom and democracy as well as different, young and creative artists and their promoters. As he admitted some years ago, in this he partly failed: instead of helping artists develop their own networks and financial resources, his money replaced that formerly given by the socialist state. Inadvertently he also helped erect a network of art centres with an almost identical artistic philosophy and preferences throughout the former Soviet bloc and Yugoslavia. The reason was that people with similar artistic affinities were employed by these centres –whether in Budapest or Riga– thereby privileging a similar kind of art, one that was predominantly installation art and conceptual. Nonetheless, the seeds sowed by the Soros centres were more fruitful than their founder thought, for they created the nuclei for further development of art which was less prone to false internationalism and more inclined toward exploring and expressing local features, no matter how national or global they were.

This art was in search of its audience. Since it could hardly find a public at home where then only traditional art, representing social power and capital flourished, it turned for its public to other countries under similar circumstances or to those localities where a sympathetically inclined ambience could be found –Germany, Austria or Holland, for example. It was mainly then, that these artists discovered that the only way for them to be internationally and globally competitive was to start following the artistic practices already established by the postcolonial artists, namely speaking the global artistic language but articulating, with its help, their indigenous roots, circumstances and ideas, preferably in an ironic manner, thereby discovering a procedure how to “provincialize”¹⁰ –either by subversion or by ignorance– Western European art and culture.

Such artists are partial expatriates, living and working in Western Europe, and occasionally returning home. They are artists on the move, in this respect strongly resembling numerous other artists, be they from Africa or China.

There are, then, at least three reasons why in these countries there are no art biennials: since internationally interesting contemporary art no longer matters, why should there be biennials promoting it, either by the help of the state or individuals or private companies. Thus an exhibition (*Essence of Life Art*) of a large collection of contemporary art from Eastern Europe, was recently created and sponsored by the Croatian pharmaceutical company Pliva.

What thus exist in some of these countries are art exhibitions – hosted either by local museums or galleries – such as the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana with its “Arteast” collection, the exhibition “On Normality. Art in Serbia 1989-2001”, or the 2003/04 exhibition “Berlin-Moscow. 1950-2000.” There were others in Graz, Stockholm and elsewhere, all exhibiting art arising from postsocialist circumstances which thereby receive a very different response and generate much more interest than the art that Mansbach spoke of and which would just as well warrant international attention but has unfortunately so far remained a part of ignored and forgotten East European cultural past.

The second reason for the lack of biennials or similar events is related to what I have just described. Artists from these environments still look to Graz, Berlin, Venice, Kassel or London and New York for recognition. Since in their own

¹⁰ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000).

environments art –theirs or any other– no longer matters much, they look for appreciation and promotion in places where they can get them and where there is a tradition in appreciation of art.

The third reason is that many of these places are too small for large artistic events: there are no cities with private galleries with tradition and there are no big cities capable of generating an interest in this kind of art. What thus happens is what has just been mentioned: this art finds its public mainly abroad, where a great majority of these artworks, whether those by the Slovenian group IRWIN or that of Erik Bulatov or Milan Kunc, find their home in the U.S., France, Germany, Italy, etc.

An already noted phenomenon that occurred during the last two decades was the advent of globalism. As Gerardo Mosquera justly claims, “Globalization is possible only in a world that has been previously reorganized by colonialism”¹¹. This is true, but is it also true of Eastern Europe? Was Eastern Europe colonized by the Soviet Union? To a certain extent, certainly. But can this be claimed of China? Not directly and to a much lesser extent. Or, to put the issue more clearly: may we claim that there exist similarities between the postcolonial and the postsocialist universes? Definitely. Similarities exist but they arise from different historical circumstances. The period of the cold war was a gap in time in the culture of many former socialist cultures. In some others –in China for example– the process was different, for there political influences introduced the western tradition of figurative painting, something that some contemporary or recent Chinese artists have employed with great success.

What has also happened was a “de-modernisation” which coincided with the end of postmodernism, preceded by the ideas of de-differentiation¹² and a search for a re-enchantment of art.¹³ Within the de-modernisation processes of Eastern Europe this meant the rise of traditional and folk culture at the expense of contemporary and avant-garde art and culture, the general view being that the period of modernism was that of a cultural decline and essentially a cultural aberration. What we have to do is return to tradition.

In the former socialist universe of Europe postmodernism was a very productive period, for with its advent the cultural situation in various countries drastically changed. If in the West postmodernism was sometimes viewed as corporate postmodernism and as a conservative backlash against the unfinished project of modernity, in these countries it designated pluralism and openness to new ideas.

In the eighties, following the writings of Charles Jencks, Ihab Hassan, Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, the notion of postmodernism became globally disseminated. In small and peripheral cultures it signified something different from what it meant in large ones. In the former it allowed for the introduction of legitimate eclecticism and hybridization, something very foreign to centralized and totalizing modernism, with these two becoming for the first time not primarily local variants of what existed in the large European cultural centres and intended mainly for local cultural consumption, but globally disseminated phenomena and products, responding to the glocal nature of

¹¹ Gerardo Mosquera, “Alien-Own/Own-Alien; Globalization and Cultural Difference,” *Boundary (From Cuba)*, vol. 29, no. 3 (Fall 2002), p. 163.

¹² See for example Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1990).

¹³ Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson 1991).

globalism, in this following Roland Robertson's claim that globalization is a "twofold process of the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular"¹⁴.

In this respect the situation does not essentially differ when we compare Slovenia and Cuba. Or, as Gerardo Mosquera wrote concerning the Cuban artists of the eighties, "They took excellent advantage of inclusiveness and postmodern plurality"¹⁵. At the same time it was true, as the same author observed, that "Even when imposed by a dominant culture on one that is dominated, cultural appropriation is not a passive phenomenon. The appropriators always transform, resignify, and use in accordance with their own visions and interests"¹⁶.

This appropriation, then, was a procedure which with postmodernism became a legitimate artistic method, thereby pushing marginal and peripheral cultures into the global art context and at the same time dissolving their previous status of late comers. In this way the previous firm borders between large and small, as well as between central and peripheral, lost much of their modernist significance.

This process coincided with the changed status of truth. If we look back at modernism and its aesthetic theories, to Heidegger or Adorno, for example, we shall note the essential ontological status they both ascribe to truth, especially the truth enunciated by art –be it poetry, music or painting. Art that allows for our opening to Being, that allows for authenticity and that offers resistance to the effects of the instrumental reason, of commodification and to culture industry, is the one that offers truth. Interestingly enough, here the differences between these two opposed thinkers of the twentieth century disappear and in their thoughts about the import of art, although articulated in opposing terms, they closely resemble each other.

In the same vein the role of philosophy is to allow the truth to be grasped. It is here that we encounter the recent passage of truth as the correspondence between our perception and thought and their referent into truth as an event. The truth is no longer something out there that we are to acquire, but is something that happens –very much in accordance with Lyotard's description of the sublime in relation to Barnett Newman, where Lyotard exclaims, "But it happens"? Or, in the words of Alain Badiou, "contemporary philosophy has two fundamental axioms.(...) The first is that the metaphysics of truth has become impossible. This axiom is negative. Philosophy can no longer pretend to be what it had for a long time decided to be, that is, a search for truth. The second axiom is that language is the crucial site of thought because that is where the question of meaning is at stake. Consequently, the question of meaning replaces the classical question of truth"¹⁷.

What consequences do this move from truth to meaning has for art? First of all, it means that art no longer requires a referent which would be the precondition for its truth value nor would art serve as its representation. The issue of the "essential copy" is put to rest, now art is all about something else, something well pointed out by Duchamp's irreverent act in 1917, an act whose consequences are still seeping through the walls of acquired aesthetic taste.

¹⁴ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage 1992), pp. 177-178.

¹⁵ Gerardo Mosquera in, Erjavec, op. cit., p. 230.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 231.

¹⁷ Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought* (London: Continuum 2005), pp. 34-35.

It is in this respect that today contemporary art from the former socialist countries closely resembles that of its Western cousins. Some view this as a decline that is visible all over Europe, and which has pushed art away from the previous, namely modernist, existential and truth-related import assigned to it. Some, on the contrary, regard the modern period as a period of “overvaluation of art”¹⁸, to use a phrase by Gérard Genette. Still others claim that art is alive and well in the so-called developing world. If we look at India or Brazil we may find good reasons for such view. Such a view can also be substantiated by the art *from* (but probably not *in*) the former Eastern Europe –as well as from the U.S. or the U.K. as two cultures different from those of much of the continental Europe.

By saying all this I am already implying that today we are bound to speak of the global situation in art and that today the distinctions between the art of the Second World and that of the First or the Third matter only in nuances: while the art of the former socialist countries has retained some of its local flavour, it has also assimilated the contemporary global features which make it distinct, yet also universal. In a similar vein art from the main cultural centres of the world has retained its universalizing features but has at the same time acquired the multicultural or transcultural ones. We have already entered the era of global art where, for example, the Indian artist Pushpamala N offers herself on photographs as an Indian version of Cindy Sherman –and the Indian audience can relate to her work since it is familiar with both, thereby accepting such hybrid works as assimilated versions of domestic postcolonial thematic tradition.

What remains of import when relating to the art of the former socialist countries –with the two exceptions being Russia and China– is the fact that there have been few attempts to document, analyze and promote past art of Eastern Europe, be it the pre-World War I, of the interwar period, or of the socialist period after World War II.

As Mansbach's book witnesses, attempts are being made to bring from oblivion the works and artists from much of the 20th century, be they from Croatia or Latvia, but in this respect much remains to be done.

The period that is better known is that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which created an enormous interest in art and culture of the European East. Although often interpreted superficially and without much knowledge of the actual historical and political circumstances, this interest was crucial for the rise of consciousness elsewhere in Europe about the culture of this region.

This period was followed by the nineties and the expansion of young Eastern European artists on the global stage, a process that still continues. (Although today the main areas of interest are already moving further east, to Central Asia, for example¹⁹).

Crucial is also the theoretical and analytic reflection upon the art of this region –especially that of the socialist era and of the period following it. The former has not yet been researched for part of it is commonly regarded as propaganda art and the other part –modest modernism– has not yet been subjected to proper analysis. As concerns the more recent art much has been written about it in Austria, Germany and Finland, although in this case, just as in the

¹⁸ Gérard Genette, *L'oeuvre de l'art. La relation esthétique* (Paris: Seuil 1997), p. 11.

¹⁹ See for example Valeria Ibraeva et al. (eds.), *The Tamerlane Syndrome. Art and Conflicts in Central Asia* (Milano: Skira 2005).

previous one, the task to reflect upon this art remains largely in the hands of authors from this region. Decontextualization of art from this area is often still a victim to the Cold War mentality of oversimplification.

There are projects emerging that try to remedy this situation. Thus the Slovenian group IRWIN has initiated the project "East Art Map"²⁰ which covers the territory of Eastern Europe and presents its crucial artistic figures, many of them unknown not only to Western public but also to that in their home countries. Similar attempts have been made by some other authors from Serbia, Slovenia, and especially Russia. It is a task that is still in its initial stage but is needed if we want to redraw the traditional artistic canon –partly akin to redrawings occurring now in some postcolonial environments. As Viktor Misiano justly claims: "To the same extent as the emergence of modernisation was adopted as a progressive process, there was also an unified version of the emergence of the system of contemporary art. This is the starting point of the one-sidedness of the museum exhibitions: from the New York MOMA and the Paris Pompidou Centre to the most provincial Western museum they are all repeating a single generally accepted version of the history of contemporary art"²¹.

Nonetheless, today numerous artists and works artistically exploit precisely the repository of classical, modernist or contemporary archive of this "accepted version of the history of contemporary art" creating their own –as in the case of Pushpamala N– versions thereof.

A rewriting of art history in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the world will document artistic endeavours that are today but little known – not only in the former and present West, but also in the former European East. As concerns biennials and similar events, today large scale artistic gatherings mostly depend upon the concept of their curators and upon the global artistic, cultural and political constellation of the temporal coordinates in which such events occur. It may thus really be unnecessary for the present or former Eastern Europe to come up with their own kind of such phenomena. What should be done is look, research, present, contextualize, evaluate, and appreciate what is already there or what is being engendered right now, with this task lying primarily in the hands of specialists and critics from these regions. In this their position is no different from that of the artists that they reflect upon.

Aquesta ponència fou presentada el diumenge dia 12 de novembre de 2006 al Macba, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, amb motiu del II Simposi Internacional de Crítica d'Art, organitzat per l'ACCA.

Esta ponencia se presentó el domingo día 12 de noviembre de 2006 en el Macba, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona, con motivo del II Simposio Internacional de Crítica de Arte, organizado por el ACCA.

This lecture was presented on Sunday, the 12th November 2006 at the MACBA, Barcelona Museum for Contemporary Art, in occasion of the II International Symposium on Art Critics, organized by ACCA.

²⁰ IRWIN (eds.), *East Art Map. Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London: Afterall. Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London 2006).

²¹ Viktor Misiano, "Strategies of exhibiting from modernisation towards de-modernisation," *Strategies of presentation 2 & 3*, p. 72.