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Synchronicity: Contemporary Europe as a Temporal Project

In a catalogue essay for the 1999 exhibition *After the Wall* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm), Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski directly addressed the condition of Europe:

“At present, when the Russian Parliament has been drafting a resolution about the expansion of the Union of Russia and Belarus with Serbia, another part of former Yugoslavia, Slovenia, is clearly steering itself towards western structures and harbors pro-western ambitions characteristic of Central Europe. Under such circumstances, it is no longer possible to describe Europe using only the political categories of West and East. The ‘grey zone’ of Europe that emerged from the Soviet world (and ‘near-Soviet’ as in the case of Yugoslavia), which ‘already’ does not belong to the East, but is not a part of the West ‘yet,’ or in other words the new Central Europe stretching from the Baltics to the Balkans, may not persist for a long time. It will, in the near future, build new borders, new walls running (like the Berlin Wall) across traditional Central Europe; the new borders of the newly divided Europe may run across the heart of historical Central Europe—between Slovenia and Croatia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, between Poland and Lithuania.”¹

Piotrowski’s statement functions as both prediction and warning—on the one hand, he claims that the historical construct of Central Europe, a mode of identification that had disappeared from the map during the Cold War era, was beginning to (re)emerge a decade after the end of the Cold War; on the other, that its boundaries were unstable, its borders already in a state of (perhaps permanent) flux.

Piotrowski’s comments echo those written fifteen years earlier by Franco-Czech author Milan Kundera in his essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” where he defines Central Europe as “the great common situations that reassemble peoples, regroup them in ever new ways along the imaginary and ever-changing boundaries that mark a realm inhabited by the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition.”² For both Piotrowski and Kundera, it is possible to understand Central Europe not as a defined geographical space, but rather what historian Ole Bouman calls “a synchronized experience in time.”³ Piotrowski’s prophecy would prove true by the time Bouman made his statement; in 2004, eight countries which were formerly part of the Eastern Bloc joined the European Union, in step with the West once again.

Six years after Piotrowski’s Cassandra-like statements about the fate of Europe, Croatian artist Zlatko Kopljar began a series of works in which he, clad in a formal, dark suit and a pair of leather shoes that became progressively more worn out in each image, knelt before five emblematic buildings: the US Capitol (Washington, DC); the Palace of Westminster (London);

¹ Piotr Piotrowski, “The Grey Zone of Europe” in *After the Wall: Art and Culture in post- Communist Europe (Volumes I & II)* (eds. Bojana Pejic and David Elliott) Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999, 36.

² Milan Kundera. “The Tragedy of Central Europe.” *New York Review of Books*, April 26, 1984, 34.

³ Ole Bouman, “Synchronizing Europe,” in *Who if not we should at least try to imagine the future of all this?* (eds. Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder) Amsterdam: Artimo/Gijs Stork, 2004, 155.

the European Parliament (Strasbourg); the State Duma Building (Moscow); and the Great Hall of the People (Beijing). In each of these works, which together form the photographic series *K9 Compassion +* (2005) [Figure 1], the artist is positioned on his knees towards the building, his face is turned away from the viewer. In each image his stance is the same, his head bowed wearily, as if in respect or mourning, a white handkerchief beneath his knees. The increasing wear on the soles of his shoes, which face the viewer, seem to suggest a pilgrimage, tracking the artist's journey from site to site, from nation to nation. He maintains a careful distance from each of the buildings, often kneeling in the public space that surrounds them, or even in the middle of the empty roads that bypass them. Beyond the obvious collection of power at each of these spaces, signified through flags or gates, the mundane, everyday life of the city seems to pervade the images: at the US Capitol, scaffolding encroaches around the edges of the building; at the European Parliament, a bike messenger rushes by, his orange vest blurred. What is clear is that Kopljar does not belong to any of these places; his bowed posture detaches him from the scene, his stillness pulls him out of sync with the world around him.

As the artist notes in his statement about the series, "[Kopljar] is not an artist who globalizes the world by coming from an imperial culture, nor is he an artist who joins the globalizing wave, i.e. he is not an alternative media, web or leftist parainstitutional artist-terrorist. He presents himself as a non-expressive index and, therefore, an indicator of the totalizing wave of globalism, who transforms the planet into a testing ground for biopolitical indexation of the representatives of power."⁴ Kopljar may not belong to any of these places, but he is still entrapped by the shadow they cast, his body in its dark suit a permanent subject of their power.

Despite the less than a decade that separates Piotrowski's prediction from Kopljar's action, the two modes of thinking here present two distinct visions of Europe—and the world. Piotrowski hints at the re-emergence of Central Europe, a liminal space between East and West, while Kopljar—taking up a classic strategy of the Eastern European avant-garde—radically negates the space that Piotrowski promises, replacing the "Grey Zone of Europe" with an act that could be read either as a complete surrender to these centers of global power (embodied through the white handkerchief, a universal symbol of capitulation) or as an embodiment of mourning for the Central Europe that has disappeared between them.⁵ Taken together, these two claims from cultural producers located (East of) Europe, give shape to how questions about power, bodies, nations, and borders are enacted through various temporalities located in the region west of Europe, east of Germany, and north of the Mediterranean Sea.

Hello World

In 2018, with the exhibition "Hello World," Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof presented a revision of their permanent collection. The introductory wall text offered the following stakes:

⁴ "K9 Compassion / 2005." Zlatko Kopljar. Accessed April 24, 2019. <http://zlatkokopljar.com/portfolio/k9-compassion/>

⁵ It is significant that in Kopljar's work, the Croatian artist directly quotes the 2000 work of Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei from the exhibition "Fuck Off" (Eastlink Gallery, Shanghai), though Kopljar inverts the Ai's intentions, shifting the repetitive action from a statement about dissident and independence to one about total dependence.

“How can a collection predominantly committed to the art of Western Europe and North America broaden its scope through non-Western artistic tendencies and a transcultural approach? What would the collection look like today, had a more open and inclusive understanding of art informed its genesis? Against the backdrop of an increasingly globalized present and its attendant opportunities and fault lines, as well as current political crises and cultural conflicts, such a revision is especially urgent.”⁶ The emphasis on political and cultural conflicts underscores the crisis of identity now facing Europe, from both inside and outside of its borders.

The space of the exhibition, which takes place in the museum née train station, is broadly divided: the historic hall of the museum, which is here called “the agora” and the Rieck Halls, formerly the platforms of the station. While the exhibitions in the Rieck Halls trace the trajectory of various national modes of production and the temporal networks that facilitate mobility and exchange between them, I will here focus on the notion of the agora and three specific works that function in dialogue within the space.

The agora has been traditionally known as a central public space in ancient Greek city-states. The agora was a place of gathering, the center of the public life of the city. However, the creation of any center produces margins; the agora, a space for exchange, for commodification, produces exclusions for those who do not belong. The “Hello World” catalogue notes that “the agora enabled the urban community to both develop its identity and preserve order,”⁷ gesturing towards the political function of the space and hinting at the parallels between the theoretical notion of the agora and the very real space of the European Union.

The works contained within the agora of the Hamburger Bahnhof stem from a variety of temporal and spatial origins; artists as varied as Taryn Simon (*A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII, Chapter X*, 2008-11) [Figure 8], Siah Armajani (*Glass Front Porch for Walter Benjamin*, 2001) [Figure 9], Antonio Ole (*Township Wall*, 2001/18) [Figure 10], and Duane Hanson (*Policeman and Rioter*, 1967) [Figure 11] fill the vast space, producing multiple constellations and dialogue between artistic traditions from across the globe. Bruce Nauman’s work, *Indoor Outdoor Seating Arrangement* (1999) [Figure 12] in particular highlights the human aspect of the agora; this work, consisting of four sets of bleachers, facing each other in pairs, that visitors may sit on, creates a real, rather than abstract, space for interaction and dialogue.

Nauman’s piece serves as a point of convergence constructed between three works that elucidate the dynamics of periodization (East of) Europe as discussed previously in this essay: Mladen Stilinović’s (Croatia) iconic pink flag, which claims that *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English is No Artist* (1992), Marjetica Potrč’s (Slovenia) massive assemblage *Carcaras: Growing Houses* (2012), and Goshka Macuga’s (Poland/UK) *Pavilion for International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation* (2016). I argue that each of these works corresponds directly to the “attendant opportunities and fault lines” of the period from which it steps, but when placed together create a new temporal mode of viewing Europe from the perspective of the present.

⁶ Udo Kittelman and Gabriele Knaptein, eds. *Hello World: Revising a Collection*. Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2018. 11.

⁷ *Ibid*, 340.

Stilinović's work [Figure 13], produced in the early years of Europe's "Grey Zone," seems to resonate directly with Fleck's chronology of Eastern European artists working in Western Europe in 1992; political, geographical, and cultural difference is here invoked by the West in order to establish its supremacy. Stilinović draws on the language of the West in order to critique its structures, implicating himself in the process.⁸ The work "combines the authoritative tone of socialist sloganeering with the DIY strategy of handmade protest banners to present a cynical indictment of the Anglo-Western dominance of a purportedly global art world."⁹ Stilinović's work attempts, on a surface level, to critique the structures of the West/Global¹⁰ through its own means, but upon deeper inspection, produces its own difference through materiality. Rather than the traditional cotton or silk, Stilinović's flag is made from cheap, synthetic material, mimicking the forms of the West through the material existence of the East. Here, Stilinović creates a flag for a people with no nation, uniting Eastern Europe as a cite of exclusion under a single banner once again. The artist's strategy of using pink seems to cite David Černý's 1991 public work *Pink Tank* [Figure 14] in Prague, in which the artist spray painted a Soviet memorial in the lurid color. Pink is a color that defies any national or military meaning; at most, its meaning is gendered, signifying man's other. Speaking directly to the West, repeating its own invocations back to it through the material means of the East highlights both the economic disparity between the two spaces in 1992 and questions about what the idea of the nation can mean in the "Grey Zone of Europe."

Marjetica Potrč's work, *Caracas: Growing Houses* from 2012 [Figure 15], is a work that is deeply invested in the idea of concrete space. Made up from a collection of disparate materials—from tree trunks to plastic siding, from columns to empty cases of beer—the work speaks directly to the process of self-organization in the face of the failure of the state. In the author's statement, she comments that "We are not liberated from space. Even in an age when we inhabit digital space and speak in abstractions about private and public space, we are nevertheless dependent on physical space. As sociologists have pointed out, any group that strives for recognition requires a physical space. Placemaking is the creation of such a space. This is where the social reality is constructed—in a place."¹¹ The work functions as a node of privacy within the agora, creating a site of community, a site oriented towards sustaining life. This work, produced in the New Central Europe, within the borders of the EU, attempts to engage in the process of speaking across these new borders from the position of the West to the world at large.

Goshka Macuga's work, *Pavilion for International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation* from 2016 [Figure 16], is a concrete installation which takes the impossible form of an open, brutalist structure, in which six vases or containers, taking the forms of heads of critical thinkers across history—from Rabindranath Tagore to Pussy Riot—are displayed.¹² As the catalogue states, the

⁸ As noted in an interview in Spring of 2018, Dan Byers, curator of the 2013 Carnegie International and close friend of the artist informed me that Stilinović's English was quite poor.

⁹ "Mladen Stilinović." The Carnegie Museum of Art, 2013, ci13.cmoa.org/artwork/3415.

¹⁰ Conflated here as suggested in Piotr Piotrowski's text "Horizontal Art History" (Piotr Piotrowski. "Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde." *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*. Edited by Sascha Bru, et al. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2009. 49-58.)

¹¹ Kittelman, *Hello World*, 376.

¹² It is worth noting that lining the walls of the exhibition are selections from the texts of many of these thinkers, creating a free associative dialogue between the many works in the agora.

International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation was an advisory organization for the League of Nations which sought to diffuse the idea of permanent international collaboration between scholars, artists, writers, teachers, students and school children in all countries.¹³ Despite the apparently utopic, global thrust of the work, it is the identification of the structure as a “pavilion” that introduces tension here; as Zdenka Badovinac writes in her essay “Sites of Sustainability,”

“Pavilions have a specific resonance in the history of exhibitions: they have been used by individual nations for expositions, to present work that testifies to the nation’s sovereignty. The most famous example is the Venice Biennale, where such national displays continue, despite the recent erosion of belief in the sovereignty of individual states, or the purity of national art, and notwithstanding the increased homogenization of the world (and its cynical ideologies of difference). Our use of the form therefore called up further questions. From what position, national or otherwise, do we speak? What, exactly, are we safeguarding when we sustain the specificity of geographic spaces? Is cultural belonging an absolute value, or just another consumer slogan?”¹⁴

Badovinac is also quick to note that pavilions are, by nature, temporary, with no real allegiance to any time, place, or nation. To create a pavilion—an inherently national construct—within the international, globally oriented space of the agora is itself a contradiction; to produce a temporary structure of concrete only furthers this. Perhaps this work can be understood as taking on the contradictory and often unstable identity of the museum itself; a place where historical thought (Tagore) and contemporary action (Pussy Riot) come together to produce meaning.

Taken together, these three works function in line with a chronology of art from the region (East of) Europe. These different modes of thinking are not connected through lived time or geographical space, but rather are institutionalized together in the timeless space of the museum. At first, these works appear to function as individual planets orbiting the sun of Nauman’s space of collection; but another work inserts itself, interrupting the line of vision between Macuga’s work and Potrč’s: Alfredo Jaar’s *(Kindness) of (Strangers)* (2015) [Figure 17] [Figure 18], a work that uses neon vectors to present an abstracted map of the movements of migrants across Europe. Not only abstracted in space (for the map is black, abstracted, negated), but also in time; this is not only a map of the current migratory routes across Europe, activated by the “refugee crisis” from the Balkans to the Schengen Zone, but also of historical modes of migration, trade routes, tracking the pathways of ideas, intellectual and societal exchange that occurred before the division of Europe into two separate spheres in 1945. Bisected by Jaar’s piece, these three works from the (now former) East understand Europe not as the project of the EU, a union of nations, and not as a region pierced through by borders, but as a whole continent, a space of mobility, production, meeting; an agora. Together these works are able to liberate the viewer from their specific space and time, nationality and belonging, constructing a new mode of being. As we meet in the agora, beneath Stilinović’s pink flag, next to Potrč’s house, beside Macuga’s pavilion, we enter into a space where we as individuals, not representatives of nations or histories, experience true synchronicity—a being together in time.

¹³ Ibid, 372

¹⁴ Badovinac, *Comradeship*, 290.

Conclusions

Speaking directly to the condition of his Europe in 2004, Ole Bouman describes the possibility of using culture to produce a new synchronicity:

“Such a culture will certainly not be about aesthetically pleasing, meticulously styled object buildings on superb locations, or about untouched masterpieces of art. Not even about spatial interventions on troublesome spots, aka site-specific art. Something different is called for and the proposition advanced here is that it should no longer be sought in space or matter, but in time. *Culture in Europe’s public space becomes culture in Europe’s public time*. In other words, in the time that we share, the time in which we acknowledge the other and the other can get to know us.”¹⁵

I claim that the production of a culture of shared public time is the aim of the exhibition in the Historic Hall of the Hamburger Bahnhof; this agora, this center of cultural life, is not spatial but instead temporal. Rather than reproducing the binary logic of the spatio-agora, which functions through centers and margins, exclusion and inclusion, the exhibition “Hello World” produces a temporal agora, where synchronicity is once again possible; public space is transformed into public time. As the borders of Europe continue to expand to the East, it will perhaps be possible to understand cultural production in such spaces not as projects located on or between borders, producing difference, but as temporal ones, producing synchronicity.

¹⁵ Bouman, “Synchronizing Europe,” 161.

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