# e-flux journal


issue #40

12/2012

*e-flux Journal* is a monthly art publication featuring essays and contributions by some of the most engaged artists and thinkers working today. The journal is available online, in PDF format, and in print through a network of distributors.

**Editors**
Julieta Aranda
Brian Kuan Wood
Anton Vidokle

**Managing & Image Editor**
Mariana Silva

**Copy Editor/Proofreader**
Mike Andrews
Phillip Stephen Twilley

**Distribution**
Laura Barlow

**Graphic Design**
Jeff Ramsey

**Layout Generator**
Adam Florin

**PDF Design**
Mengyi Qian

**PDF Generator**
Keyian Vafai

For further information, contact **journal@e-flux.com**

**www.e-flux.com/journal**

Editors

# Editorial

After an all-night conversation with an old friend, you are ready to start the revolution together. But the next day, discussing the finer points over breakfast, you realize *no, it's impossible*—in fact, this friend is actually a fascist. Her sentiment is right but her strategies could be disastrous. In order for the revolution to succeed, you will probably have to kill her. And this friend is thinking the same thing of you—a cowardly ideologue who hides behind an antiquated idea of historical progress in order to feel like a good person. Your grand political project from last night draws closer to the proverbial dustbin. The eggs are delicious. Your friend is as sweet as ever, it would be a real pity to have to kill her over something like this. Maybe you should not be having these conversations in the first place.

You are struck by how, in a single day, your comrade has become your political enemy—your nearly identical, compatible views have become mutually exclusive. Your ideas on class, capital, art, cultural difference, literacy, ethics, life, and the role of the state simultaneously merge and cancel each other out. Time is moving so fast that a revolution has taken place and been recuperated in a matter of hours, and you don't know whether you are going forwards or backwards. You are dizzy; maybe you drank too much.

Now is the time to look carefully at a work by Yoko Ono from 1966 entitled *Play it by Trust*—a chessboard on which all the chess pieces are the same color. To play the game, you must play together, but to what end? Forward movement becomes completely confusing after leaving the safe harbor of a single side. You must play the game using what may be your opponent's pieces, without any sense of direction. There is a feeling of stasis, but in fact you are exhausted from making moves all the time. Historical progress and political movement continue on the board, but in order to play together with an Islamist, a US president, a hipster, a museum director, a techno-libertarian, an artist, a budget-cutting bureaucrat, or a thousand Facebook friends, you must look deeply into your opponent's eyes as she look into yours, and try to understand: What is actually at stake in this strange new game?

—Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle

**X**

**Julieta Aranda** is an artist and an editor of *e-flux journal.*

**Brian Kuan Wood** is an editor of *e-flux journal.*

**Anton Vidokle** is an editor of e-flux journal and chief curator of the 14th Shanghai Biennale: Cosmos Cinema.

Geert Lovink

# What Is the Social in Social Media?

*Headlines, 2012: "Next time you're hiring, forget personality tests, just check out the applicant's Facebook profile instead." – "Stephanie Watanabe spent nearly four hours Thursday night unfriending about 700 of her Facebook friends—and she isn't done yet" – "Facebook apology or jail time: Ohio man gets to choose" – "Study: Facebook users getting less friendly" – "Women tend to have stronger feelings regarding who has access to their personal information" (Mary Madden) – "All dressed up and no place to go" (Wall Street Journal) – "I'm making more of an effort to be social these days, because I don't want to be alone, and I want to meet people" (Cindy Sherman) – "30 percent posted updates that met the American Psychiatric Association's criteria for a symptom of depression, reporting feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness, insomnia or sleeping too much, and difficulty concentrating" – Control your patients: "Do you hire someone in the clinic to look at Facebook all day?" Dr. Moreno asked. "That's not practical and borders on creepy." – "Hunt for Berlin police officer pictured giving Nazi salute on Facebook" – "15-year-old takes to Facebook to curse and complain about her parents. The disgusted father later blasts her laptop with a gun."*

The use of the word "social" in the context of information technology goes back to the very beginnings of cybernetics. It later pops up in the 1980s context of "groupware." The recent materialist school of Friedrich Kittler and others dismissed the use of the word "social" as irrelevant fluff—what computers do is calculate, they do not interfere in human relations. Holistic hippies, on the other hand, have ignored this cynical machine knowledge and have advanced a positive, humanistic view that emphasizes computers as tools for personal liberation. This individualistic emphasis on interface design, usability, and so on was initially matched with an interest in the community aspect of computer networking. Before the "dot-com" venture capitalist takeover of the field in the second half of the 1990s, progressive computing was primarily seen as a tool for collaboration among people.

In a chapter entitled "How Computer Networks Became Social," Sydney media theorist Chris Chesher maps out the historical development of computer networks, from sociometry and social network analysis—an "offline" science (and a field of study that goes back to the 1930s) that examines the dynamics of human networks—to Granowetter's theory of the strengths of weak links in 1973, to Castells's *The Network Society* in 1996, to the current mapping efforts of the techno-scientists that gather under the umbrella of Actor Network Theory.[1] The conceptual leap relevant here concerns the move from groups, lists, forums, and communities to the emphasis on empowering loosely connected individuals in networks.

This shift happened during the neoliberal 1990s and was facilitated by growing computing power, storage capacity, and internet bandwidth, as well as easier interfaces on smaller and smaller (mobile) devices. This is where we enter the Empire of the Social. It must also be said that "the social" could only become technical, and become so successful, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, when state communism no longer posed a (military) threat to free-market capitalism.

Rand Corporation think tank employees brainstorming, 1958. CA, Santa Monica, US. Photo: Leonard Mccombe.

If we want to answer the question of what the "social" in today's "social media" really means, a starting point could be the notion of the disappearance of the social as described by Jean Baudrillard, the French sociologist who theorized the changing role of the subject as consumer. According to Baudrillard, at some point the social lost its historical role and imploded into the media. If the social is no longer the once dangerous mix of politicized proletarians, of the frustrated, unemployed, and dirty clochards that hang out on the streets waiting for the next opportunity to revolt under whatever banner, then how do social elements manifest themselves in the digital networked age?

The "social question" may not have been resolved, but for decades it felt as if it was neutralized. In the West after World War II, instrumental knowledge of how to manage the social was seen as necessary, and this reduced the intellectual range of the question to a somewhat closed circle of professional experts. Now, in the midst of a global economic downturn, can we see a renaissance of the social? Is all this talk about the rise of "social media" just a linguistic coincidence? Can we speak, in the never-ending aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, of a "return of the social"? Is there a growing class awareness, and if so, can it spread electronically? Despite widespread unemployment, growing income disparities, and the Occupy protests, it seems unlikely that we will see a global networked uprising. Protests are successful precisely because they are local, despite their network presence. How can the two separate entities of work and networked communication connect?

We can put such considerations into a larger, strategic context that the "social media question" poses. Do all these neatly administrated contacts and address books at some point spill over and leave the virtual realm, as the popularity of dating sites seems to suggest? Do we only share information, experiences, and emotions, or do we also conspire, as "social swarms," to raid reality in order to create so-called real-world events? Will contacts mutate

into comrades? It seems that social media solves the organizational problems that the suburban baby-boom generation faced fifty years ago: boredom, isolation, depression, and desire. How do we come together, right now? Do we unconsciously fear (or long for) the day when our vital infrastructure breaks down and we really need each other? Or should we read this Simulacrum of the Social as an organized agony over the loss of community after the fragmentation of family, marriage, and friendship? Why do we assemble these ever-growing collections of contacts? Is the Other, relabeled as "friend," nothing more than a future customer or business partner? What new forms of social imaginary exist? At what point does the administration of others mutate into something different altogether? Will "friending" disappear overnight, like so many new media-related practices that vanished in the digital nirvana?

The container concept "social media," describing a fuzzy collection of websites like Facebook, Digg, YouTube, Twitter, and Wikipedia, is not a nostalgic project aimed at reviving the once dangerous potential of "the social," like an angry mob that demands the end of economic inequality. Instead, the social—to remain inside Baudrillard's vocabulary—is reanimated as a simulacrum of its own ability to create meaningful and lasting social relations. Roaming around in virtual global networks, we believe that we are less and less committed to our roles in traditional community formations such as the family, church, and neighborhood. Historical subjects, once defined as citizens or members of a class possessing certain rights, have been transformed into subjects with agency, dynamic actors called "users," customers who complain, and "prosumers." The social is no longer a reference to society—an insight that troubles us theorists and critics who use empirical research to prove that people, despite all their outward behavior, remain firmly embedded in their traditional, local structures.

The social no longer manifests itself primarily as a class, movement, or mob. Neither does it institutionalize itself anymore, as happened during the postwar decades of the welfare state. And even the postmodern phase of disintegration and decay seems over. Nowadays, the social manifests itself as a network. Networked practices emerge outside the walls of twentieth-century institutions, leading to a "corrosion of conformity." The network is the actual shape of the social. What counts—for instance, in politics and business—are the "social facts" as they present themselves through network analysis and its corresponding data visualizations. The institutional part of life is another matter, a realm that quickly falls behind, becoming a parallel universe. It is tempting to remain positive and portray a synthesis, further down the road, between the formalized power structures inside institutions and the growing influence of informal networks. But there is little evidence of this Third Way approach coming to pass. The PR-driven belief that social media will, one day, be integrated is nothing more than New Age optimism in a time of growing tensions over scarce resources. The social, which used to be the glue for repairing historical damage, can quickly turn into unstable, explosive material. A total ban is nearly impossible, even in authoritarian countries. Ignoring social media as background noise also backfires. This is why institutions, from hospitals to universities, hire swarms of temporary consultants to manage social media for them.

Social media fulfill the promise of communication as an exchange; instead of forbidding responses, they demand replies. Similar to an early writing of Baudrillard's, social media can be understood as "reciprocal spaces of speech and response" that lure users to say something, anything.[2] Later, Baudrillard changed his position and no longer believed in the emancipatory aspect of talking back to the media. Restoring the symbolic exchange wasn't enough—and this feature is precisely what social media offer their users as an emancipatory gesture. For the late Baudrillard, what counted was the superior position of the silent majority.

In their 2012 pamphlet *Declaration*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri avoid discussing the larger social dimensions of community, cohesion, and society. What they witness is unconscious slavery: "People sometimes strive for their servitude as if it were their salvation."[3] It is primarily individual entitlement in social media that interests these theorists, not the social at large. "Is it possible that in their voluntary communication and expression, in their blogging and social media practices, people are contributing to instead of contesting repressive forces?" For us, the mediatized, work, and leisure can no longer be separated. But what about the equally obvious productive side of being connected to others?

Hardt and Negri make the mistake of reducing social networking to a media question, as if the internet and smartphones are only used to look up and produce information. Concerning the role of communication, they conclude that "nothing can beat the being together of bodies and the corporeal communication that is the basis of collective political intelligence and action." Social links are probably nothing but fluff, a veritable world of sweet sassiness. In this way, the true nature of social life online remains out of sight, and thus unscrutinized. The meeting of the social and the media doesn't have to be sold as some Hegelian synthesis, a world-historical evolution; however, the strong yet abstract concentration of social activity on today's networked platforms is something that needs to be theorized. Hardt and Negri's call to refuse mediation will have to move further. "We need to make new truths, which can be created by singularities in networks communicating and being there." We need both networking and encampment. In their version of the social, "we swarm like insects" and act as "a decentralized multitude of singularities that communicates horizontally."[4] The actual power structures, and frictions, that emerge out of this constellation have yet to be addressed.


New York city police supply a generator so that victims of hurricane Sandy can charge their cell phones.

The search for the social online—it seems a brave but ultimately unproductive project to look for the remains of nineteenth-century European social theory. This is what makes the "precarious labor" debate about Marx and exploitation on Facebook so tricky.[5] What we need to do instead is take the process of socialization at face value and refrain from well-meaning political intentions (such as the "Facebook revolutions" of the 2011 Arab Spring and the movement of the squares). The workings of social media are subtle, informal, and indirect. How can we understand the social turn in new media, beyond good and evil, as something that is both cold and intimate, as Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz described it in her book *Cold Intimacies*?[6] Literature from the media industry and the IT industry tends to shy away from the question posed here. Virtues such as accessibility and usability do not explain what people are looking for "out there." There are similar limits to the (professional) discourse of trust, which also tries to bridge the informal sphere and the legal sphere of rules and regulations.

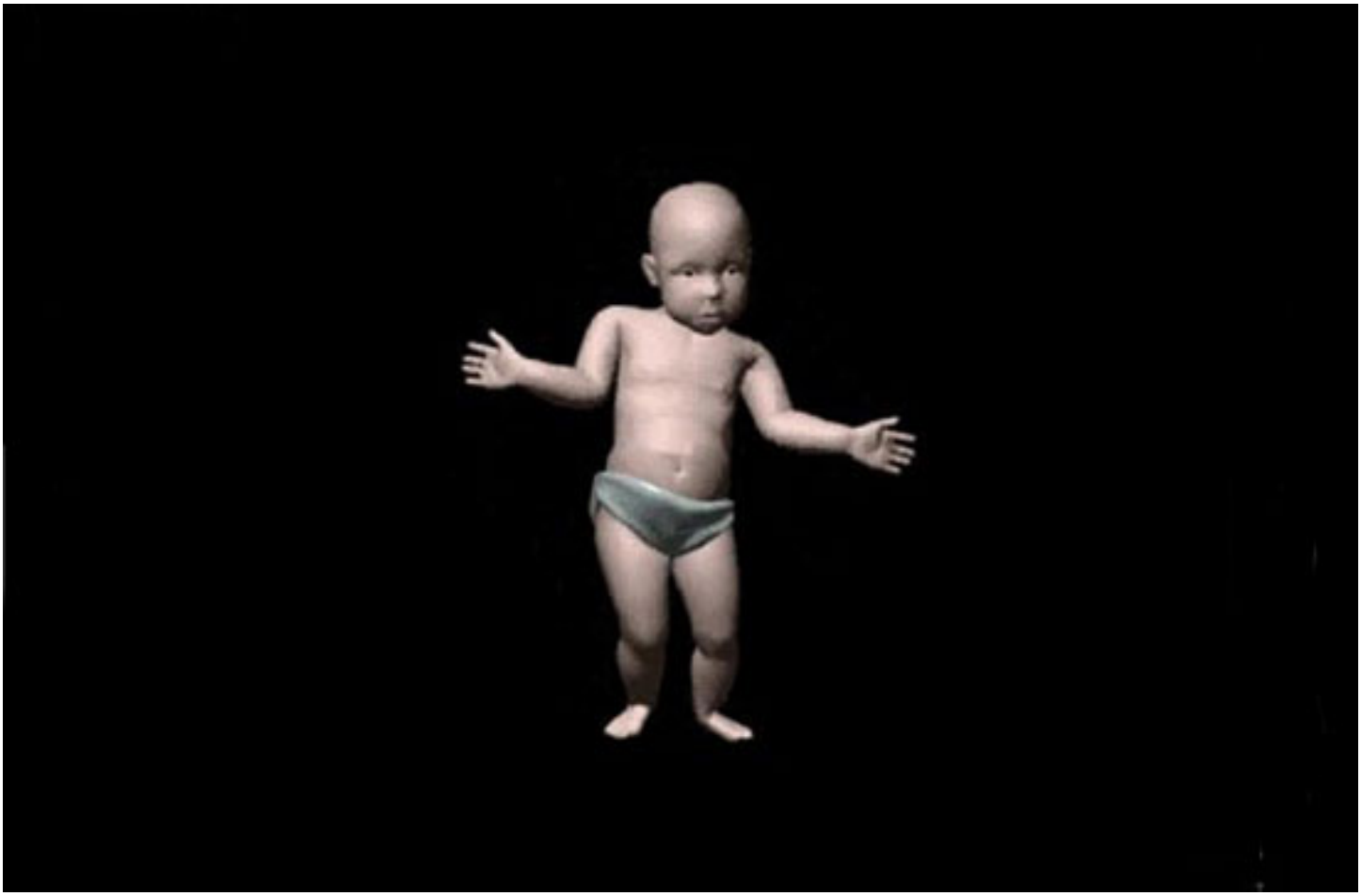
The "obliteration of the social" has not led to a disappearance of sociology, but it has downgraded the importance of social theory in critical debates. A "web sociology" that has freed itself of the real-virtual dichotomies, not limiting its research scope to the "social implications of technology" (such as, for example, internet addiction), could play a critical role in developing a better understanding of how "class analysis" and mediatization are intertwined. As Eva Illouz wrote to me in response to this question: "If sociology has traditionally called on us to exert our shrewdness and vigilance in the art of making distinctions (between use value and exchange value; life world and colonization of the life world, etc.), the challenge that awaits us is to exercise the same vigilance in a social world which consistently defeats these distinctions."[7] Albert Benschop, the Amsterdam pioneer of web sociology and editor of SocioSite.net, proposes that we overcome the real-virtual distinction altogether. He makes an analogy to the Thomas theoreme, a classic theory in sociology, when he says, "If people define networks as real, they are real in their consequences." For Benschop, the internet is not some "second-hand world." The same could be said of the social. There is no second life, with different social rules and conventions. According to Benschop, this is why there is, strictly speaking, no additional discipline necessary.[8] The discussion about the shape of the social relates to all of us; it should not be cooked up—and owned—solely by geeks and startup entrepreneurs. As Johan Sjerpstra puts it:

A gun integrating a 3D-printed part designed by its owner. 3D printing is considered a "prosumer" technology expected to become widespread in the near future.

> Welcome to the social abyss. We can no longer close our eyes for the real existing stupidity out there. We're in it all together. Pierre Levy, please help us out: where is the collective intelligence now that we need it?

The social is not merely the (digital) awareness of the Other, even though the importance of "direct contact" should not be underestimated. There needs to be actual, real, existing interaction. This is the main difference between old broadcast media and the current social network paradigm. "Interpassivity," the concept which points at a perceived growth of the delegation of passions and desires to others (the outsourcing of affect) as discussed, for instance, by Pfaller, Zižek, and van Oenen, is a nice but harmless concept in this (interactive) context.[9] To question the current architectures and cultures of social media is not to be motivated by some kind of hidden, oppressed offline romanticist sentiment. Is there something like a justified feeling of overexposure, not just to information in general but to others as well? We all need a break from the social circus every now and then, but who can afford to cut off ties indefinitely? In the online context, the social requires our constant involvement, in the form of clicking. We need to make the actual link. Machines will not make the vital connection for us, no matter how much we delegate. It is no longer enough to build on your existing social capital. What social media do is algorithmically expand your reach—or at least they promise to.

Instead of merely experiencing our personal history as something that we reconcile with and feel the need to overcome (think of family ties, the village or suburb, school and college, church and colleagues from work), the social is seen as something that we are proud of, that we love to represent and show off. Social networking is experienced in terms of an actual potentiality: I *could* contact this or that person (but I won't). From now on I will indicate my preferred brand (even without being asked). The social is the collective ability to imagine the connected subjects as



Still from the animation "Baby Cha-Cha." The video was considered to be one of the first to go viral at the end of the 1990s.

a temporary unity. The power of connection is felt by many, and the simulations of the social on websites and in graphs are not so much secondary experiences or representations of something real; they are probes into a post-literate world ruled by images.

Martin Heidegger's dictum "We don't call, we are being called" runs empty here.[10] On the internet, bots will contact you regardless, and the status updates of others, relevant or not, will pass before your eyes anyway. The filter failure is real. Once inside the busy flow of social media, the Call to Being comes from software and invites you to reply. This is where the cool and laid-back postmodern indifference of quasi-subversive attitudes comes to an end. It is meaningless not to bother—we are not friends anyway. Why stay on Facebook? Forget Twitter. These are cool statements, but they are now beside the point. The user is no longer in a "state of stupor." The silence of the masses that Baudrillard spoke about has been broken. Social media has been a clever trick to get them talking. We have all been reactivated. The obscenity of common opinions and the everyday prostitution of private details is now firmly embedded in software and in billions of users.

The example Baudrillard used was the opinion poll, which he said undermines "the authentic existence of the social." Baudrillard replaced the sad vision of the masses as an alienated entity with an ironic and object-centered vision. Now, thirty years deeper into the media era, even this vision has become internalized. In the Facebook age, surveys can be done continuously—without people's direct participation in questionnaires and the like—through data mining. These algorithmic calculations run in the background and measure every single click, touch of the keyboard, and use of a keyword. For Baudrillard, this "positive absorption into the transparency of the computer" is even worse than alienation.[11] The public has become a database full of users. The "evil genius of the social" has no other way to express itself than to go back to the streets and squares, guided and witnessed by the multitude of viewpoints that tweeting smartphones and recording digital cameras produce. In the same way that Baudrillard questioned the outcome of opinion polls as a subtle revenge of the common people on the political/media system, we should question the objective truth of the so-called Big Data originating from Google, Twitter, and Facebook. Most of the traffic on social media originates from millions of computers talking to each other. Active participation of ten percent of the

user base is high. These users are assisted by an army of dutiful, hardworking software bots. The rest are inactive accounts. This is what object-oriented philosophy has yet come to terms with: a critique of the useless contingency.

The social media system no longer "plunges us into a state of stupor," as Baudrillard said of media experience decades ago. Instead, it shows us the way to cooler apps and other products that elegantly make us forget yesterday's flavor of the day. We simply click, tap, and drag the platform away, finding something else to distract us. This is how we treat online services: we leave them behind, if possible on abandoned hardware. Within weeks we have forgotten the icon, bookmark, or password. We do not have to revolt against the media of the Web 2.0 era, abandoning it in protest because of allegedly intrusive privacy policies; rather, we can confidently discard it, knowing it will eventually join the good old HTML ghost towns of the nineties.

Here is Baudrillard parsing the situation back in the old media days: "This is our destiny, subjected to opinion polls, information, publicity, statistics: constantly confronted with the anticipated statistical verification of our behavior, absorbed by this permanent refraction of our slightest movements, we are no longer confronted with our own will." He discusses the move towards obscenity that is made in the permanent display of one's own preferences (in our case, on social media platforms). There is a "redundancy of the social," a "continual voyeurism of the group in relation to itself: it must at all times know what it wants ... The social becomes obsessed with itself; through this auto-information, this permanent auto-intoxication."[12]

The difference between the 1980s, when Baudrillard wrote these theses, and thirty years later can be found in the fact that all aspects of life have opened up to the logic of opinion polls. Not only do we have personal opinions about every possible event, idea, or product, but these informal judgments are also valuable to databases and search engines. People start to talk about products of their own accord; they no longer need incentives from outside. Twitter goes for the entire specter of life when it asks, "What's happening?" Everything, even the tiniest info spark provided by the online public, is (potentially) relevant, ready to be earmarked as viral and trending, destined to be data-mined and, once stored, ready to be combined with other details. These devices of capture are totally indifferent to the content of what people say—who cares about your views? That's network relativism: in the end it's all just data, their data, ready to be mined, recombined, and flogged off. "Victor, are you still alive?"[13] This is not about participation, remembrance, and forgetting. What we transmit are the bare signals indicating that we are still alive.

A deconstructivist reading of social media shouldn't venture, once again, to reread the friendship discourse ("from Socrates to Facebook") or to take apart the Online Self. No matter how hard it is to resist the temptation, theorists should shy away from their built-in "interpassive" impulse to call for a break ("book your offline holiday"). This position has played itself out. Instead, we need cybernetics 2.0—initiatives such as a follow-up to the original Macy conferences (1946 to 1953), but this time with the aim of investigating the cultural logic inside social media, inserting self-reflexivity in code, and asking what software architectures could be developed to radically alter the online social experience. We need input from the critical humanities and the social sciences; these disciplines need to start a dialogue with computer science. Are "software studies" initiatives up to such a task? Time will tell. Digital humanities, with its one-sided emphasis on data visualization, working with computer-illiterate humanities scholars as innocent victims, has so far made a bad start in this respect. We do not need more tools; what's required are large research programs run by technologically informed theorists that finally put critical theory in the driver's seat. The submissive attitude in the arts and humanities towards the hard sciences and industries needs to come to an end.

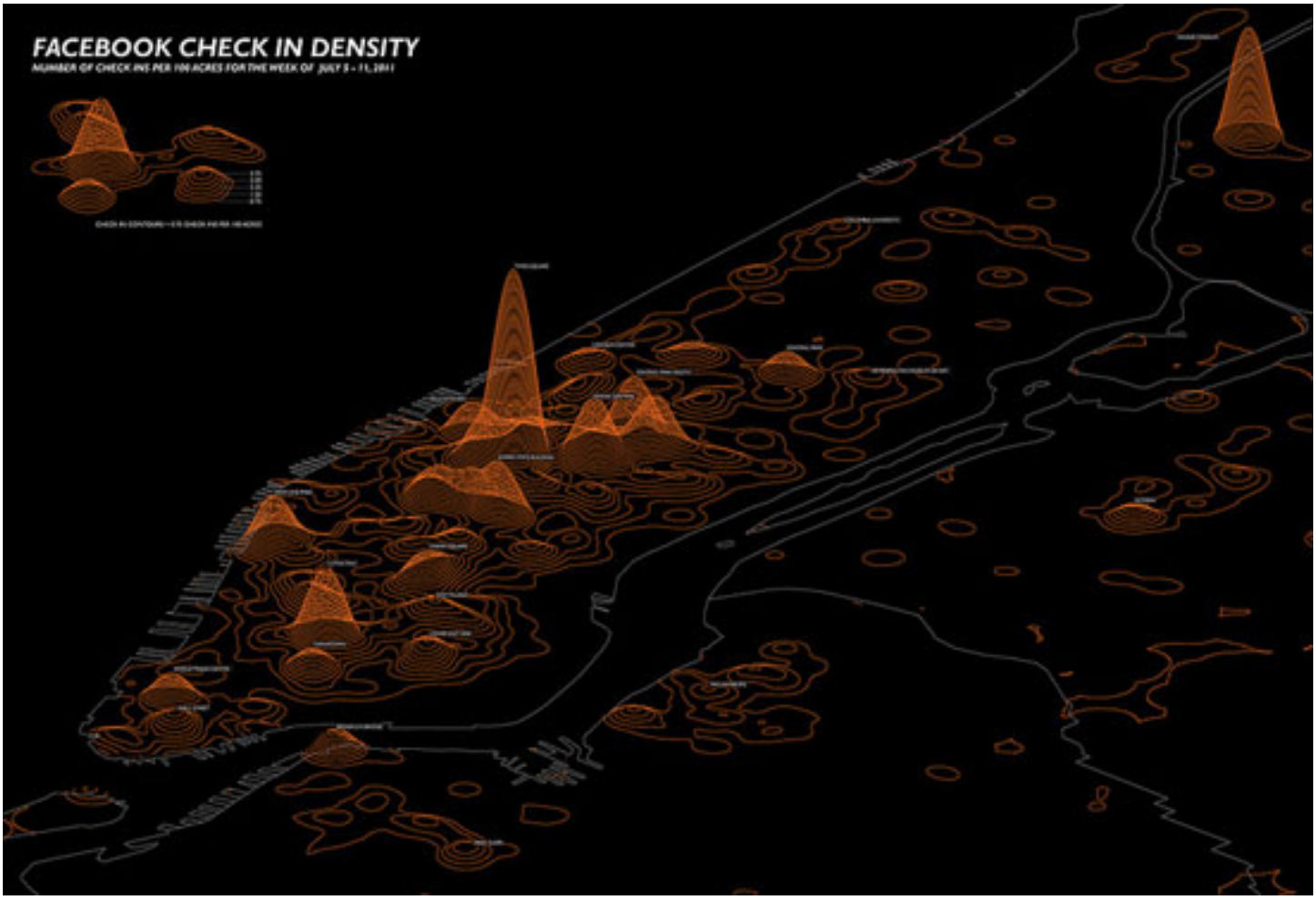
And how can philosophy contribute? The Western male self-disclosing subject no longer needs to be taken apart and contrasted with the liberated cyber-identity or "avatar" that roams around the virtual game worlds. Interesting players in the new media game can be found across the globe, from Africa to Brazil, India, and East Asia. For this, an IT-informed postcolonial theory has yet to be assembled. We should look today's practices of the-social-as-electronic-empathy right in the eyes. How do you shape and administer your online affects? To put it in terms of theory: we need to extend Derrida's questioning of the Western subject to the non-human agency of software (as described by Bruno Latour and followers of his Actor Network Theory). Only then we can get a better understanding of the cultural policy of aggregators, the role of search engines, and the editing wars on Wikipedia.

With its emphasis on Big Data, we can read the "renaissance of the social" in the light of sociology as the "positivist science of society." As of yet there is no critical school in sight that could help us to properly read the social aura of the citizen as user. The term "social" has effectively been neutralized in its cynical reduction to data porn. Reborn as a cool concept in the media debate, the social manifests itself neither as dissent nor as subcultural. The social organizes the self as a techno-cultural entity, a special effect of software, which is rendered addictive by real-time feedback features. In the internet context, the social is neither a reference to the Social Question nor a hidden reminder of socialism as a political program. The social is precisely what it pretends to be: a calculated opportunity in times of distributed communication. In the end, the social turns out to be a graph, a more or less random collection of contacts on your screen that blabber on and on—until you intervene and put your own statement out there.

Thanks to Facebook's simplicity, the online experience is a deeply human experience: the aim is to find the Other, not information. Ideally, the Other is online, right now. Communication works best if it is 24/7, global, mobile, fast, and short. Most appreciated is instantaneous exchange with "friended" users at chat-mode speed. This is social media at its best. We are invited to "burp out the thought you have right now—regardless of its quality, regardless of how it connects to your other thoughts."[14] The social presence of young people is the default here (according to the scholarly literature). We create a social sculpture, and then, as we do with most conceptual and participatory artworks, we abandon it, leaving it to be trashed by anonymous cleaners. This is similar to the faith inherent in all social media: it will be remembered as an individual experience of online community in the post-9/11 decade. And happily forgotten as the next distraction consumes our perpetual present.

It is said that social media has outgrown virtual communities (as described by Howard Rheingold in his 1993 book of the same name), but who really cares about the larger historical picture here? Many doubt whether Facebook and Twitter, in their current manifestations as platforms for the millions, still generate authentic online community experiences. What counts are the trending topics, the next platform, and the latest apps. Silicon Valley historians will one day explain the rise of "social networking sites" out of the ashes of the dot-com crisis, when a handful of survivors from the margins of the e-commerce boom-and-bust reconfigured viable concepts of the Web 1.0 era, stressing the empowerment of the user as content producer. The secret of Web 2.0, which kicked off in 2003, is the combination of (free) uploads of digital material with the ability to comment on other people's efforts. Interactivity always consists of these two components: action and reaction. Chris Cree defines social media as "communication formats publishing user generated content that allow some level of user interaction," a problematic definition that could include most of early computer culture.[15] It is not enough to limit social media to uploading and self-promotion. It is the personal one-to-one feedback and small-scale viral distribution elements that are essential.

As Andrew Keen indicates in *Digital Vertigo* (2012), the social in social media is first and foremost an empty container; he adduces the exemplary hollow platitude that says the internet is "becoming the connective tissue of twenty-first century life." According to Keen, the social is becoming a tidal wave that is flattening everything in its path. Keen warns that we will end up in an anti-social future, characterized by the "loneliness of the isolated man in the connected crowd."[16] Confined inside the software cages of Facebook, Google, and their clones, users are encouraged to reduce their social life to "sharing" information. The self-mediating citizen constantly broadcasts his or her state of being to an amorphous, numb group of "friends." Keen is part of a growing number of (mainly) US critics warning us of the




Facebook check-in density in Manhattan. Times Square represents the highest peak on the map. Copyright: Spatial Information Design Lab, New York.

side effects of extensive social media use. From Sherry Turkle's rant on loneliness, Nicholas Carr's warnings on the loss of brain power and the ability to concentrate, to Evgeny Morozov's critique of the utopian NGO world, to Jaron Lanier's concern over the loss of creativity, what unites these commentators is their avoidance of what the social could alternatively be, were it not defined by Facebook and Twitter. The problem here is the disruptive nature of the social, which returns as a revolt against an unknown and unwanted agenda: vague, populist, radical-Islamist, driven by good-for-nothing memes.

The Other as opportunity, channel, or obstacle? You choose. Never has it been so easy to "auto-quantify" one's personal surroundings. We follow our blog statistics and our Twitter mentions, check out friends of friends on Facebook, or go on eBay to purchase a few hundred "friends" who will then "like" our latest uploaded pictures and start a buzz about our latest outfit. Listen to how Dave Winer sees the future of news: "Start a river, aggregating the feeds of the bloggers you most admire, and the other news sources they read. Share your sources with your readers, understanding that almost no one is purely a source or purely a reader. Mix it all up. Create a soup of ideas and taste it frequently. Connect everyone that's important to you, as fast as you can, as automatically as possible, and put the pedal to the metal and take your foot off the brake."[17] This is how programmers these days loosely glue everything together with code. Connect persons to data objects to persons. That's the social today.

**X**

**Geert Lovink** is a Dutch-Australian media theorist and critic. He is Professor at the European Graduate School, Research Professor at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam, where he is founding director of the Institute of Network Cultures, and Associate Professor in Media Studies (new media), University of Amsterdam. Lovink is author of Dark Fiber (2002), My First Recession (2003) and Zero Comments (2007). He recently co-organized events and publications on Wikipedia research, online video and the culture of search. His forthcoming book investigates the

rise of ‘popular hermeneutics’ inside Web 2.0, large scale comment cultures and the shifting position of new media (studies) inside the humanities.

1
Chris Chesher, "How Computer Networks Became Social," in Chris Chesher, Kate Crawford, and Anne Dunn, *Internet Transformations: Language, Technology, Media and Power* (forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan in 2014).

2
Jean Baudrillard, "The Masses: Implosion of the Social in the Media," *New Literary History* 16:3 (John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 1. See http://www.jstor.org/stable/468841 .

3
All quotes here in and in the next paragraph are from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Declaration* (New York: Argo-Navis, 2012), 18–21.

4
Ibid., 35 (both quotes).

5
See the exchange "The $100bn Facebook question: Will capitalism survive 'value abundance'?" on the nettime email list, early March 2012. Brian Holmes writes there in various postings: "What I have found very limiting in the discourse around so-called web 2.0 is the use of Marx's notion of exploitation in the strict sense, where your labor power is alienated into the production of a commodity and you get an exchange value in return"... "For years I have been dismayed by a very common refusal to think. The dismaying part is that it's based on the work of European history's greatest political philosopher, Karl Marx. It consists in the assertion that social media exploits you, that play is labor, and that Facebook is the new Ford Motor Co." ... "The 'apparatus of capture,' introduced by Deleuze and Guattari and developed into a veritable political economy by the Italian Autonomists and the Multitudes group in Paris, does something very much like that, though without using the concept of exploitation" ... "Social media do not exploit you the way a boss does. It emphatically _does_ sell statistics about the ways you and your friends and correspondents make use of your human faculties and desires, to nasty corporations that do attempt to capture your attention, condition your behavior and separate you from your money. In that sense, it does try to control you and you do create value for it. Yet that is not all that happens. Because you too do something with it, something of your own. The dismaying thing in the theories of playbour, etc, is that they refuse to recognize that all of us, in addition to being exploited and controlled, are overflowing sources of potentially autonomous productive energy. The refusal to think about this—a refusal which mostly circulates on the left, unfortunately—leaves that autonomous potential unexplored and partially unrealized."

6
Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

7
Private email correspondence, March 5, 2012.

8
Albert Benschop, "Virtual Communities." See http://www.sociosite.org/network.php .

9
See Robert Pfaller, *Ästhetik der Interpassivität* (Hamburg: Plilo Fine Arts, 2008) (in German) and Gijs van Oenen, *Nu even niet! Over de interpassieve samenleving* (Amsterdam: van Gennep, 2011) (in Dutch).

10
See Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

11
Jean Baudrillard, "The Masses: Implosion of the Social in the Media," *New Literary History,* 16:3 (John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 5.

12
Ibid., 580.

13
Standard phrase uttered by Professor Professor, a Bavarian character who speaks English with a heavy German accent in the BBC animated series "The Secret Show" from 2007.

14
See http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/25/us/25iht-currents25.html?_r=1 .

15
Read more at http://successcreations.com/438/definition-of-social-media/#ixzz1nJmlQl1c .

16
Andrew Keen, *Digital Vertigo* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 13.

17
See http://scripting.com/stories/2012/02/24/whatNewsMustDo.html .

Zdenka Badovinac, Eda Cufer, Cristina Freire, Boris Groys, Charles Harrison, Vít Havránek, Piotr Piotrowski, and Branka Stipančić

# Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe: Part I

*While the discourse and study of conceptual art in the West is supposedly well-formed, artists in Eastern Europe have worked with a similar formal vocabulary for decades. Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, where I am director, was the first institution in Europe to start systematically collecting works by mostly Eastern European neo-avant-garde artists since the 1990s. Since then, the collection Arteast 2000+ has steadily grown, and yet for many highly complex reasons the history of conceptual art in the West has been systematized, while we are almost without a history in the East.*

*In 2007 I began work on a project on Eastern European conceptualism to attempt to understand this problem. It began with a conference involving Eda Čufer, Cristina Freire, Boris Groys, Charles Harrison, Vít Havránek, Piotr Piotrowski, and Branka Stipančić, where we aimed to define what the term conceptual art actually means in our part of the world by analyzing the sociopolitical context that has informed it, but also by comparing the situation to that of similar experiences shared with Russian and Latin American conceptual art. This required that we first attempt to situate the term "conceptual art" in the most fundamental sense—in terms of how it was defined in Western theory and how was it defined in other places. One of the fundamental differences between the West and the East during the Cold War was the difference between individualism and collectivism. How crucial are these differences in interpreting and perceiving conceptual art in the East, the West, in Poland and Central Europe, in Latin America, but also in the wider framework of the global situation. The 1960s and 1970s marked the crucial starting point for conceptual art, but there is also the question of how it changed in later periods.*

*These were the questions with which we began the first part of the conversation in Ljubljana, published here in this issue of e-flux journal, with the next parts following in later issues. The ultimate aim of the conference was to arrive at a methodology for understanding Eastern European conceptual art, either by developing a discursive system or by articulating a methodology for working around the need to. It is a crucial question, closely tied to the very beginning of conceptual art, of how to negotiate different identities without resorting to the notion of universalism.*

*—Zdenka Badovinac*

**Zdenka Badovinac:** The first question is really the basic question of the term "Conceptual art." Boris, could I ask you to start the discussion about this term? What does it mean? What are its main characteristics? How was it defined in Western theory? And how was it defined in other places?

**Boris Groys:** In Moscow some Russian artists in the 1970s self-identified with this term. I mean the term: Conceptualism, or Conceptual Art. In fact, I wrote a text in 1978 on Moscow Romantic Conceptualism. It was a friendly critique of reception of Conceptualism, of Conceptual art in Moscow—however, a certain circle of artists actually committed themselves to this term—and were praized or criticized by the others as being "Moscow Coceptualists." The term "conceptualism" already has its history and it doesn't make sense to ask if there are true or false conceptualists, like true Christians or false Christians, or if the Soviet communism was or was not actually communism. To a certain degree, this is a kind of scholastic debate. Thus, we can speak of a specific conceptualist school in Moscow. After Stalin's death, from the mid-1950s onward, a certain neo-modernist scene emerged and came to be very influential in big Russian cities. At that time, thousands of artists became very much public figures and professed a certain kind of romantic belief in the power of art, of the artistic individual and subjectivity—through a pretty much second-hand repetition of Russian modern art or Western twentieth-century art. On the one hand, there was a gap between claim and fact; on the other, the neo-modernist claims themselves sounded somewhat obsolete, at least to me. The Moscow conceptualist circle didn't seek so much a critical reflection of official art—official art was already passé and not even a topic of discussion. Rather, it investigated a kind of Van Gogh complex: the figure of the paradigmatic artist as the struggling, suffering individual. The decisive influence came from French structuralism more than from English linguistics (in the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, everybody spoke of Lévi-Strauss, Jacobson, Foucault, and so on) and from Russian formalism, where everything was a statement, everything was language, a move inside a system. Nothing was purely individual or subjective. So people began to act according to their own self-understanding of what it was to be a Conceptual artist. They began to criticize the traditional neo-modernist, neo-romantic artistic claim. There is an analogy to certain Western movements in the 1960s. One can speak of conceptualism in terms of Art & Language's work. However, this is only true to a certain extent. Similarly, we speak of Broodthaers and Haacke as Conceptual artists, as the "first stages" of institutional critique and the critique of subjectivity. I would say that they fit the paradigm only in a vague sense: in looking at art and social conventions in analogy to linguistic activity; in using very critical, almost cynical arguments; and in not using official "high" culture in their artistic practice. I would say that some Russian artists of the 1960s and 1970s also fit in this general paradigm and theoretical framework, with their strategy of conceptual or semi-Conceptual art. So, it is *not* illegitimate to speak about this art as Conceptual, despite the criticism received within these parameters of critique.

**Eda Čufer:** You mention that when this neo-modernist romantic claim appeared, some artists started to become known to the public. I believe that one of the characteristics of the Russian scene was the limited access to the broad public. This circle was pretty much isolated.

**BG:** Well, yes and no. On the one hand, Solzhenitsyn was isolated, and yet as a result everybody read him, so censorship was a kind of advertisement. People also knew of Ernst Neizvestnyi and other artist-dissidents. Sure, the circle of independent unofficial artists was isolated, unable to publish, officially exhibit and so on. At the same time, the Moscow, St. Petersburg, (then Leningrad) public knew the artists very well. People bought their works and visited their ateliers. For example, if you went to Kabakov's studio, you could find the whole political *beau monde*, the wives and daughters of the Politburo members included. If you were inside the 1960s and 1970s inofficial art scene, you had the feeling that it was everywhere.

**EČ:** One issue, if we are to speak about historicizing, is critical reception. One of the very important sources for reconstructing a historical period is reading the reviews of a certain art event. However, this period probably has limited access to this form of reconstruction, since the debate was censored, and in this respect critical reception cannot be comparable to what was going on in the West.

**BG:** Russian conceptualism was not very public, no question about that. Sociologically speaking, it was more like those art movements at the beginning of the twentieth century or the 1920s. These movements were known, people were aware that such terrible manifestations of "decadent" idealism took place. They were in newspapers. However, no archives, extended publications, or systematic reviews exist. However, Russian conceptualism is in fact documented—numerous conversations were recorded by the KGB. All my lectures in official spaces during the 1970s attended by 300 to 500 people were presented to me by the KGB before I left the country. They also exist in private archives, in the archives of art historians, and so on. There are huge photographic archives, as all these exhibitions were photographed, documented—just never published.

**ZB:** But where are most of these archives now?

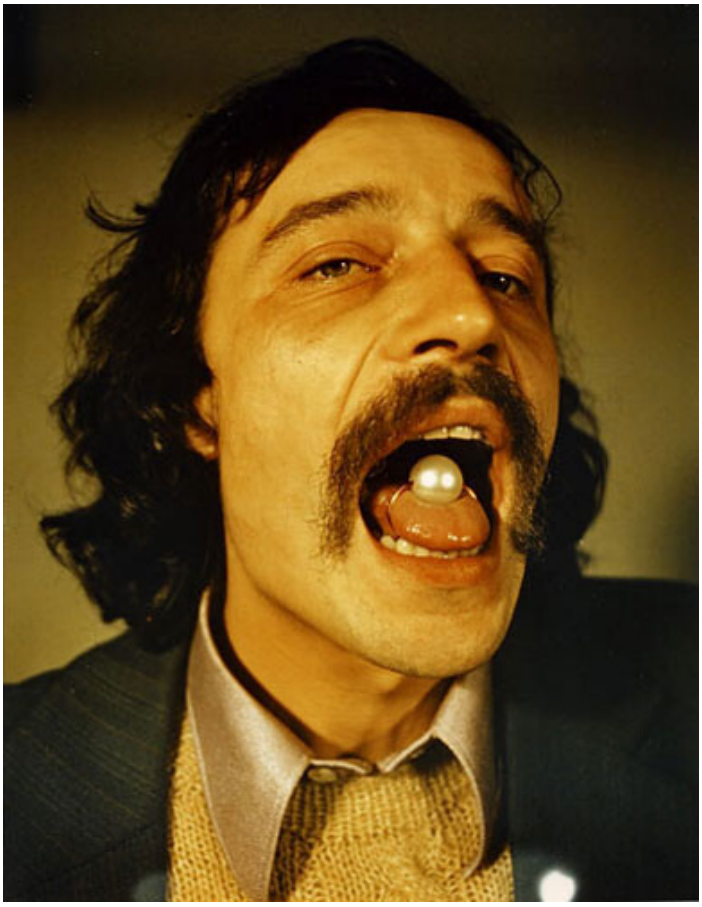
**BG:** Some of the archives came to Zimmerli Museum, at Rutgers University some were bought by "new Russian" collectors full of money. Even the Getty Museum has a lot of material that was never opened. The stuff is there but nobody cares about it. Russia in general is not fashionable. People don't see any potential for using the material to write a PhD dissertation in Russia or the USA. But in the Soviet Union of the 1970s everyone was there, the political and cultural elites and the public in big cities—all were

Zvono/Bell, Biljana Gavranović, Sadko Hadžihasanović, Sejo Cizmić, Narcis Kantardžić, Aleksandar Saša Bukvić, Kemal Hadžić, Sport and Art, 1986.

very much aware of it. Everybody read dissident writers and saw dissident exhibitions. Throw out the image you have of the romantic artist-in-the-basement. They made some money, or at least much more than other people, because they sold their work in the private market while everybody else got a salary. They had ateliers and those were the social spaces at that time. Who had big spaces that could host parties? Only famous artists. So they were unprivileged and privileged at the same time. It was a very ambiguous situation.

**ZB:** Charles, perhaps you would like to comment on the term "Conceptual art" and on what Boris has said. You mentioned that Conceptual art was a reaction to neo-modernism, a relation that was important in the West, but in a very different manner. It would be very interesting to hear what you think of romantic conceptualism. In Slovenia, for example, Tomaž Brejc came up with the term "transcendental conceptualism" in relation to the OHO group.

**Charles Harrison:** For me, Conceptual art has a fairly precise etymology. If you look the term up in an art dictionary, the first mention you get is Henry Flynt's writing about "concept art" in La Monte Young's *Anthology*, published in 1963. I think that's rather irrelevant, because Flynt is really talking about music and mathematics, and if you try to map it onto what Conceptual art actually came to mean, it doesn't quite fit. It was a product of that rather loose, Fluxus-like scene in America in the early 1960s. I believe the most important use of the term was first published in the summer of 1967 in Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." The context in which that appeared is quite important, as it was in the American magazine *Artforum*, the main modernist bible. That 1967 summer issue looked at the American minimalists: one of Paul Morrison's notes on sculpture was published in that issue, a piece by Robert Smithson, Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." But crucially, the issue also included Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood." I speak as somebody who in 1967 was a provincial modernist in England trying to get a grip on what was going on in America and in New York, which for me was the metropolitan center of modernism. That particular moment made it very clear that the modernist mainstream, as it were, had split, and that there was a significant controversy within American modernism. Fried's "Art and Objecthood" was an attempt to stem what he saw as the



Komar & Melamid, Olo, 1975-1977. From the portfolio A Catalogue of Super Objects—Super Comfort for Super People, 1977. Cibachrome Print, 8 x 10 inches. Collection Neuberger Museum of Art.

György Jovánovics, Construction Pressing into the Ceiling. Documentation photograph.

incoming tide of minimalism, or "literalism" as he called it, and to defend a kind of Greenbergian modernism—based on the notion of quality, instantaneity, and experience—against art which took context into consideration.

There was this feeling that something was giving way, that the old order was becoming defensive and dogmatic in an effort to protect its boundaries, and that modernism itself was a type of orthodoxy fraying at the edges. I remember my colleague and friend Michael Baldwin talking about that period. He was an art student in the mid-1960s. "Modernism had become like shifting ground," he said. "You put your foot on it and it would float away from you." The system was breaking up. Sol LeWitt's announcement in 1967 was like the manifesto of a movement. What mattered was not the appearance of the object, but the vitality of the idea, and that was its crucial, distinguishing characteristic. One sentence from his first "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" says: "What the work of art looks like isn't too important." That was a powerful statement in opposition to orthodox modernistic statements, where the result is a consequence of what something looks like and what you feel about how it looks. This whole system of aesthetics was being set aside. That's what the moment of Conceptual art means to me: the realization of schism and collapse—not of a cultural orthodoxy, but an aesthetic one. But of course when the latter gives way, the cultural order is also under threat.

The next significant moment comes with the first issue of *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art*, published in the spring of 1969. This was a group of four young English artists—Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, and Harold Hurrell—identifying with a new avant-garde tendency that had been given a name in America. And the subtitle of the journal disappeared immediately after the first issue, which is significant. This group of people had been talking together since 1965 and formed themselves into a group as Art & Language in 1968. Crucially, artists identified themselves with Conceptual art, and these were artists writing a type of theory. In my view, Conceptual art is the collapse of the boundary between artistic and theoretical practice, the idea that theoretical practice might be a primary artistic

practice. There were two ways of looking at this: either theory had become a primary artistic practice, or theory as art was a type of avant-garde idea. These two interpretation corresponded to a split within Conceptual art itself and Art & Language's particular kind of art. Here, theory becomes a Duchampian readymade and the competition is to play the next most avant-garde idea as an artwork. I associate that with American Conceptual art, and particularly with the position represented by Joseph Kosuth. Art & Language's position was not that of theory as an artistic practice with a smart avant-garde move; it was what you were forced into by the collapse of modernism. If you could no longer identify art with the production of clearly definable objects, as defined in structural terms by a certain physical integrity, but could only define objects conservatively and institutionally, then you didn't know where the edges of artworks were anymore. Not knowing where these are, you push them, whether you like it or not. You can't simply explore this by making avant-garde objects. You have to work out what you're doing and if your practice is the practice of art. Art & Language's position has always been that artistic practice needs to become essayistic, like writing, simply in order to get out of the hole. But within the English Art & Language, that was always seen as a transition—a specific contingent practice, forced by the collapse of modernism and its many authenticating and authorizing systems. To borrow an Art & Language slogan: "If Conceptual art had a future, it was not Conceptual art." This in the third moment, which for me lasts until about 1972, perhaps 1974. The previous moment spans very strictly from 1967 to after 1972. By the 1972 Documenta, it became clear that this moment was over—in this big international avant-garde salon, Conceptual art suddenly became a career move. The movement's contingency and temporary status no longer carried practical virtue. Furthermore, around the late 1980s and early 1990s, the term "Conceptual art" started to be widely applied in journalism and popular curatorship. As a label for anything that wasn't painting or sculpture, it has increasingly become an umbrella term for almost any avant-garde practice associated with cultural dissidents.

Now, when we talk of Eastern Conceptual art, are we, as it were, retrospectively applying a kind of avant-garde validation? Were these practices in the East part of an international breakdown of modernism, which had a different sense and practice than that of the West? Or are we actually identifying a significant common set of strategies and problems? Is there really a common ground, despite the huge political and cultural differences between the contexts? I'm interested in what Boris said, which confirms my suspicions that samizdat modernism wasn't about samizdat, really. When modernism breaks down, it does so in more or less the same way everywhere. That's to say that the aesthetically authorizing processes are giving way, leaving behind whatever authority they may or may not have. On the other hand, I think we have to be very careful not to fall into the wider sense of Conceptual art as a means of ratifying anything that looks like avant-garde practice.

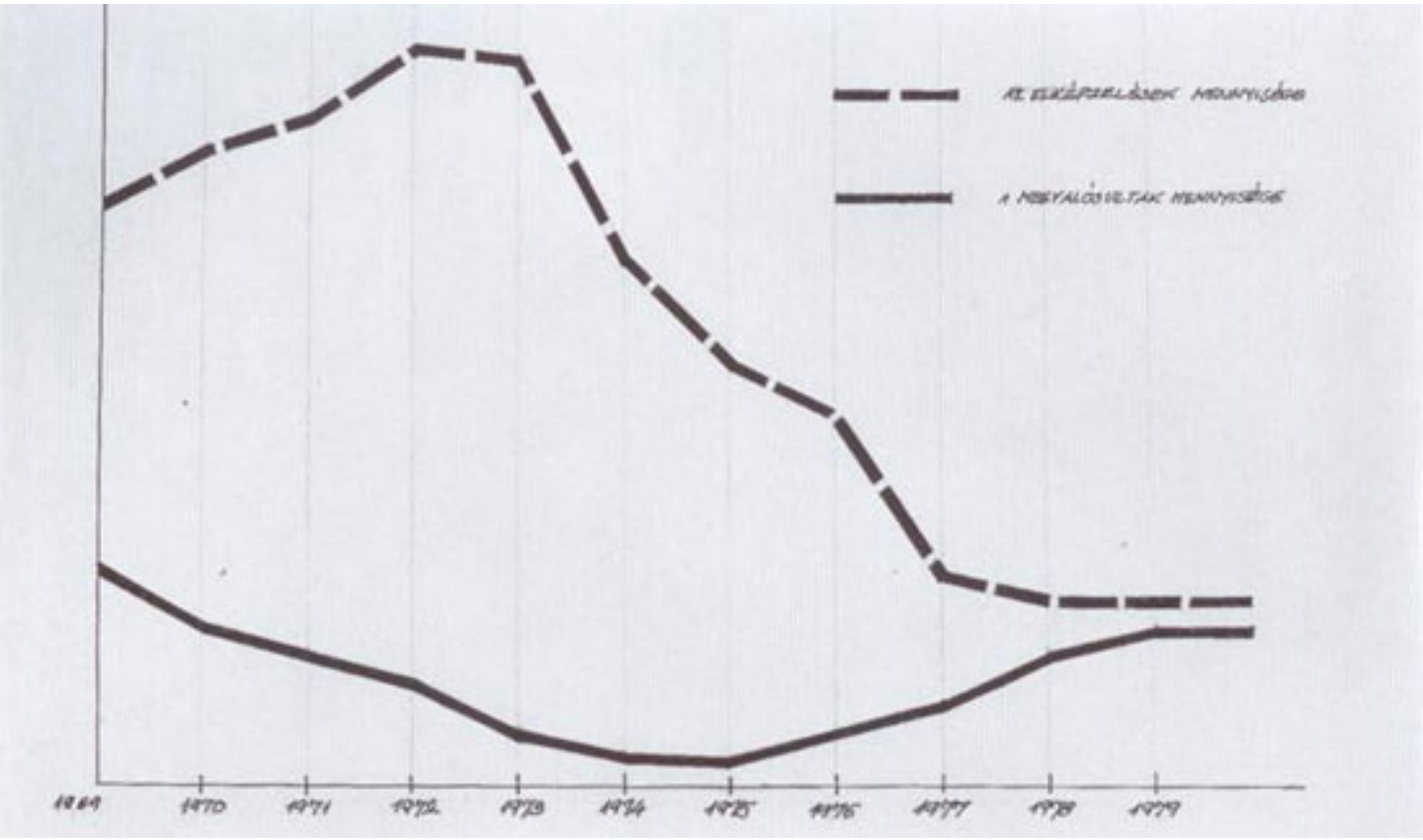
**ZB:** This is the crucial question.

**BG:** That is a really interesting point. In fact, this kind of shift from the form or image to a kind of theoretical interpretation, which was crucial in the 1960s in the work of Conceptual artists, could never have taken place in the Soviet context, where this pure visual form was never taken into consideration. That means that the most recognizable aspect of these Soviet artists' work was primarily their ideological intention.

**CH:** Not that the idea of pure visuality is not ideological ...

**BG:** It was ideological, but immediately recognized and understood as such. That means the political attitude of an artist was the first thing you identified when you saw the work, from the initial Russian avant-garde to the end of the entire period of Soviet art. If you saw something like pure form, it probably meant that the artist was anti-Soviet. The work was based on the premise that ideological content and interpretation were everything. As there was no market, no connoisseurship, the visual quality as such was nothing. At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s people like Kabakov, Komar & Melamid, and others began to diversify, differentiate, and mix these ideological contexts.They started to develop interpretations that were non-pro, non-con, non-anti. It was a deconstructivist practice, which in effect amounted to the same thing as the Western Conceptual art. It was a different kind of shift, from a very strictly ordered ideological system of interpretation to a free-floating, ironical, and deconstructive interpretation. And to invent this type of interpretation, to undermine this strict order of ideology, was the main goal of the artists inside the circle. So, Western and Eastern European practices are comparable on this level, but very different on the other level. There was the market, connoisseurship, and concentration on pure form in the West, while in the East there was a very rigid ideological context with a very rigid system of interpretation.

**CH:** It's easy to fall into the assumption that all the politics is in the East, and in the West we only have a very political modernism. However, it's important to remember that part of the motivation behind the split that was going on in America—to a certain extent mirrored in England—was one between the Left and the Right at the time of the Vietnam War. Those who identified with postmodernism and Conceptual art in America were often members of the Art Workers' Coalition, opponents of the American strategy in Vietnam, the invasion of Cambodia, and so on. They were picketing museums with placards saying "Against War, Racism, and Oppression," and had a strong contingent of feminists. Hard-line modernists, post-painterly abstractionists, were mostly defenders of the American policy in Vietnam. I remember Greenberg



Miklós Erdély,The Proportion of Ideas and Their Realisation, 1979. Diagram, ink on paper, 21x29 cm.

saying at the end of an interview, when he was off the microphone, "I know what we should've done: we should've sent in another 20,000 troops and held them off the Vietnamese coast." Artists like Ken Noland were putting up American flags outside their lofts. There were ideological divisions there, not unrelated to what was going on in the East, although the connections were very hard to trace, just as the politics were hard to trace in Cold War conditions.

**BG:** I remember this very well, in regard to people coming from the West in the 1960s. We felt ourselves close to them aesthetically but not always politically. We were deconstructionists and didn't want to be politically engaged, since this could somehow be a trap, when people took precisely the positions power wanted them to take—even if it is a dissident position. So we tried to escape this kind of framework—not to find a place within it as dissidents, but to question it, to escape the entire ideological framework. And friends who came from the West understood this, although it took them a while. They were very politically motivated at the time and it was difficult for them to understand our attitude, the type of play with the language of power.

**ZB:** I think we agree then that for both sides, the deconstruction of modernism was a very important issue. What Boris said applies to Eastern European countries as well: the question of pure form actually didn't exist in our spaces either. This leads to another important question: How different were our Eastern modernisms? And furthermore, do you think we can maintain the relevance of the other two issues—the dematerialization of the object and institutional critique?

**CH:** One thing that slightly worries me in your representation of Western histories is that there can be an impression that there is an agreed upon narrative. It's not like that at all. There's *October*'s Conceptual art and Benjamin Buchloh's *History of Conceptual Art*, in which the major figures are Broothaers, Buren, Graham, Haacke. And there is the importance of Conceptual art in the inclusion of institutional critique. Finally, there's the Art & Language sense of Conceptual art, an almost philosophical practice that doesn't know whether it's philosophy or art. To quote Michael Baldwin again: "It's art in case it's philosophy, and it's philosophy in case it's art." It is really addressed to a very specific set of problems. These problems may, incidentally, be institutionally critical, but Conceptual art can't help being so—it tends to see institutional critique as something that desperately needs the institutions which it purports to be critiquing and is underwritten by a rather naive politics. In this sense, there are at least two very different histories of Conceptual


Douglas Davis, Komar & Melamid, Questions New York-Moscow-New York, 1977. Collection Getty Museum of Art.

art, perhaps more than two, but these are not usually reconciled. From the point of view of *October*, the kind of Conceptual art that Art & Language represents is modernist, because it is still concerned with issues of internality, with the question "Is this any good?"

**ZB:** I think it's important to find or decide which history from the West we are using.

**CH:** To put the problem in larger terms, one of the things that hangs over our discussion is the question of what art filters for us, what comes up for the count. Do things come up for the count in response to the question "Is this radical?" Or do they instead come up for the count in response to the question "Is this any good?" Are they actually the same question? Are things good because they're radical, or are they radical because they're good? Why are we picking out some things and calling them Conceptual art?

**BG:** I think there are very definitive criteria of difference between conceptual and non-conceptual approaches. On one end, whatever an artist produces is considered a manifestation of his or her subjectivity. On the opposite end, art is understood as being shaped by certain linguistic, social, political, ideological, and interpretative conditions. I would say that the term Conceptual art was applied by many artists and theoreticians in Eastern Europe to mean this second way of looking at things: this critical self-reflection, a certain disbelief in the guiding role of subjectivity, in the possibility of making art outside the system of linguistic and other conventions. Could we say this use of the word is so historically entrenched that we should reject it? I believe this would be unwise. People draw these distinctions for themselves. That is how they experience them. Why should we criticize that?

**ZB:** For us it is important to maintain the problematic nature of the term. I propose we continue to use the term, because it has been used for decades.

**CH:** For instance, Boris is drawing a distinction between, on one hand, a position based on subjectivity, and on the other, a position based on the sense of determination by language and semiological structures. I can't conceive a notion of subjectivity which isn't entirely ringed by linguistic and semiological considerations. We're then left with a bold claim on authenticity, what indeed has driven a lot of avant-garde art for me.

**BG:** I believe this is the real limit and the real divide, one between people who see "I," subjectivity, and so on as a linguistic function, and people who believe in a certain authenticity of art beyond language and its conventions. It is a type of ideological, historical, artistic divide, and this divide was articulated in the term "Conceptual art."

**Piotr Piotrowski:** I would also propose that we keep this term in the exhibition, even if it's unclear in terms of Eastern Europe. This is a methodological question dealing with the history of art in Eastern Europe, not only relating to Conceptual art, but also to the classical avant-garde. For example, Cubism or Futurism mean something different in Russia, Poland, and Hungary than in countries like France or Italy. This syncretism of art historical terminology, applied to Eastern or Central Europe, is crucial to understanding the whole history of art in this region. The same applies to Conceptual art. I am very interested in defining Conceptual art in Central Europe itself, even if the geographical boundaries of Central Europe are unclear. I believe we can define Central Europe, which is a bit different from Russia, in geographical terms, and connect it to this dynamic surrounding artistic terms. This means Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania—even if only in the south—and East Germany as well. So, Conceptual art worked as something like a subversive approach to political realities. The point of departure for defining political realities is the dominance of Socialist Realism, understood as a political means, as propaganda. Importantly, the term "political" was synonymous with a propaganda approach to reality. However, artists answered very differently to this point of departure. In some countries that were relatively free, like Poland after 1956, artists were against Socialist Realism as a propaganda formula, but they did not want to deconstruct the notion of the political. Rather, they wanted to adopt a subversive approach by maintaining the autonomy of art in relation to politics. In Poland, even if Conceptual artists perceived themselves as subversive artists, as anti-totalitarian artists, they still wanted to maintain some things that were connected to the West and to a bourgeois approach to reality, like the autonomy of art. There was a kind of dialectics of modernity in Poland.

Natalia LL/Lach-Lackowicz, Consumer Art, 1972. Muzeum Sztuki Lodz.

By contrast, in Hungary, for example, there was a different experience. Among Conceptual artists, Hungarian neo-avant-garde artists were the only ones to react as a group to the Prague Spring in 1968. They produced something that was directly critical of politics, as Szentjobi did. In the Hungarian media, Conceptual artists or neo-avant-garde artists were more deeply involved in politics than Polish artists. They elaborated political issues in a direct way, in contrast to Polish artists. In Czechoslovakia artists did not address politics directly, particularly after 1968. After everything was seized by the post-1968 "normalization," especially in Slovakia, artists just left the public sphere and turned to nature. Nature was interpreted as a free space, in contrast to the public space of the cities and public institutions. On the other hand, Knížák was not a Conceptual artist, although he produced body art and possibly introduced Fluxus to Czechoslovakia. He was doing a sort of critique of painting as such, both Socialist Realist painting and abstract painting. To him, painting was connected to the

Laibach, Slovenian industrial rock group, 1983. Photo: Duan Gerlica.

establishment. It was hierarchical. Central European artists, with the exception of the Gorgona Group, had a very unique approach. As the Hungarians understood it, art was divided into Socialist Realist painting on the one hand, and abstract painting on the other. The latter was an expression of freedom and liberty; it was a political approach to art. This sort of attitude continued in most countries until the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, except in Hungary.

In short, what was interesting was the recognition of this subversive approach to political reality, although this subversiveness was defined very differently in many countries. It's hard to give an umbrella definition of Central European art. Sometimes there was very little exchange between small countries, and some countries wanted—for psychological reasons—to be compared to the West. The West functioned as a pattern for Conceptual art, and this pattern went from West to East. This produced a diverse and heterogeneous picture of the region. Sometimes we even communicated with people from the other countries via the West. For instance, we spoke English with Czechs instead of our own language, which is very similar to the Czech language. So the West worked as a sort of mirror. This was probably less true in the Soviet Union, where the intellectual and artistic milieus were more autonomous and powerful. They perceived themselves as stronger than smaller groups of artists in countries like, for example, Romania or Hungary. How did Conceptual art work subversively in political reality? The answer is very different in different countries. Also: How did the West work as a mirror or a point of departure for different approaches to different realities?

**ZB:** I think this is one of the crucial questions—whether the West can serve as a measure for us. Maybe that's not a very positive view.

**Cristina Freire:** In Latin America today, all the structures and stories about Conceptual art come from the West, the official ones we were talking about—Fried, Art & Language, Sol LeWitt, and so on. Institutions tell this story as the official history of Conceptual art. But it doesn't really apply to Latin America, where there was more of a political reaction and context. Without this political context, we can't understand what comes after the 1960s, especially 1964. Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and other Latin American countries didn't have the same artistic standing as Europe and the US in this period. You can find some similar strategies, but Latin American artists didn't recognize themselves as Conceptual artists.

**PP:** That's also true for Central Europeans.

**CH:** The problem I have as an art historian is how to define Conceptual art. I can use the wider sense, which is what we're generally using here. In this case, what I understand as Conceptual art becomes one very small component—perhaps central, but just one component among many. Starting in the late 1950s, the breakdown of a set of protocols of art-making, of art and politics, art and ideology, notions about autonomy, whether art is indeed a socially autonomous practice or not—all seemed to be suddenly disputed, up for grabs in practice and theory. Conceptual art can almost be a footnote to that larger movement. In that sense, you can understand why Latin American artists don't want to be called conceptualists. Then there's the second sense, in which Conceptual art is identified historically with the strange connection between philosophical-aesthetic critique and dissidence and subversion, holding onto the philosophical-aesthetic problem at the heart of political dissidence. That is partly what gets seized upon in the East. Identification with Conceptual art in the East is quite important because the sense of ideological critique built into aesthetic critique is crucial, whereas it is not in Latin America. That's a very important difference.

**CF:** I also feel this sense of urgency. Here, we know what happened: the KGB, the secret police in Hungary, they went to exhibitions, took photographs, and made reports. However, in Brazil and Argentina, people were killed or disappeared under military dictatorships. Institutions were not places to use; you had to go to a public space to be anonymous. The idea was not to be an artist but to have others with you. This idea of participation, which Hélio Oiticica was really into, meant that it was very important to not be an artist. The idea of an autonomous work of art really didn't matter at all. We cannot directly compare Latin America to Europe and the US, but we can find zones of contact. Although in Brazil we had a right-wing military dictatorship, and here it was a communist

Lygia Clark, Nostalgia do corpo—objetos relacionais (Nostalgia of the Body—Relational Objects), 1968-88. Photo: Sérgio Zalis.

dictatorship, you can see similar strategies of information circulation and how they created public space despite the political situation. So we need other criteria, not the ones we get from hegemonic history.

**CH:** There's a really important text on provincial art by Luis Camnitzer from 1969. It's about the problem of making art under the regime of modernism. He presents three alternatives: one, you can be a provincial modernist; two, you can try and be independent and produce a kind of folklorish art; or three, you can submit to literature and politics. In a way, he identifies with the third possibility. He

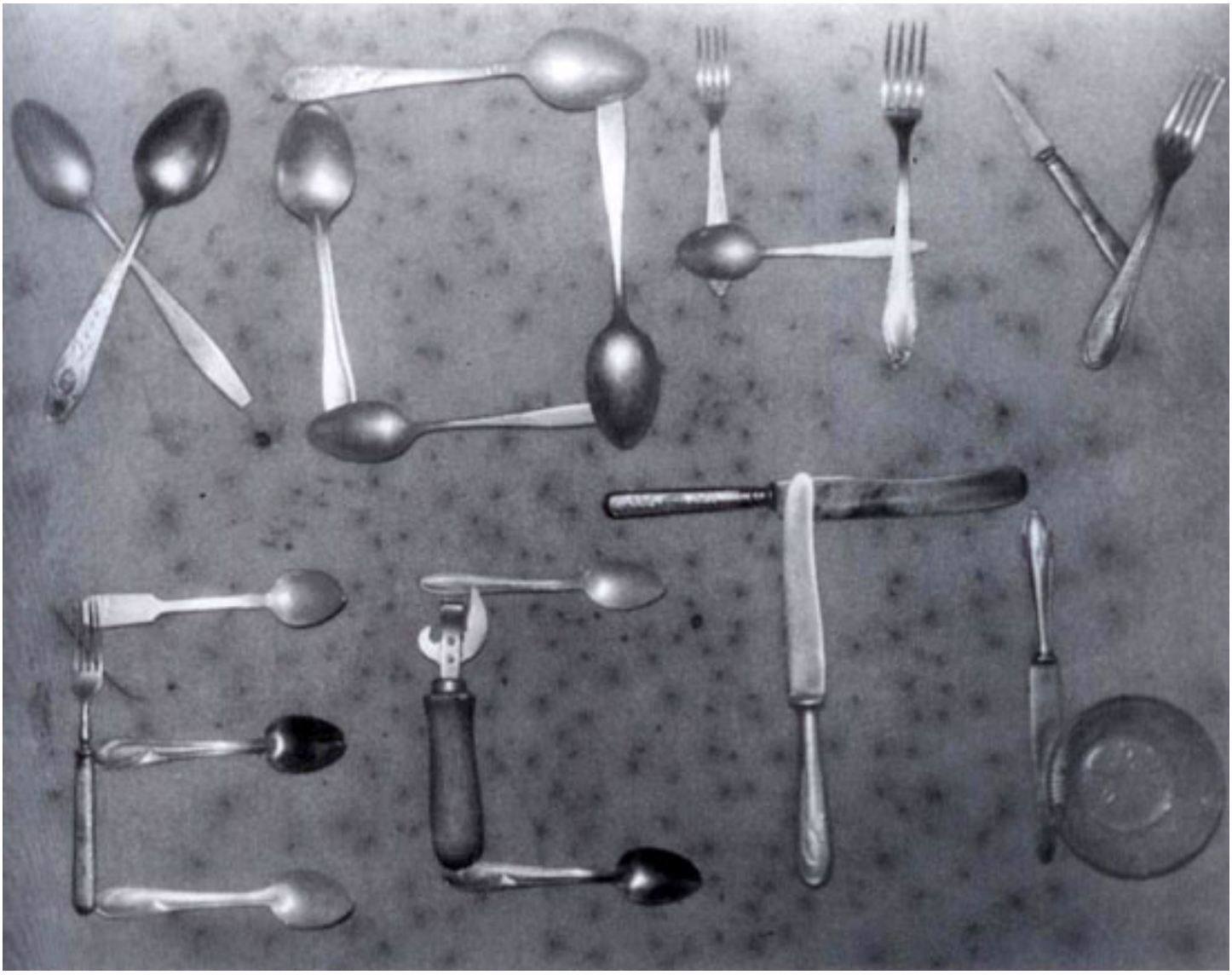
says that radical practice must now be either purely documentary, or guerilla activity. Again, both of those involve anonymity, as you say.

**CF:** In fact, this guerrilla activity was part of Latin American artistic theory. We have a theory of guerrilla art from 1966 onward, I think. Nineteen sixty-eight is an important year too—in Brazil the dictatorship worsened from 1968 until 1983. That's the general context. As art institutions in the East and the West wrote the hegemonic history and actively proliferated it, all the museums of modern art in Brazil and Argentina, which were created during the Cold War, adopted this offical history. Consequently, we know much more about Sol LeWitt than we do about Latin American artists who were making art at the time but have no publications, no catalogues, nothing written about them. When Latin American artists from this period are discussed in the West, they are assimilated into Western art history. To give you a small example: they have now renovated the Museum of Modern Art, where official narrative comes from. They have put up some works by Lygia Clark and Oiticica, the best-known Brazilian artists in the West. Not coincidentally, they are both dead. In my view, placing them in this gallery together with Eva Hesse and Robert Smithson assimilates these Brazilian artists into what was going on at that time in the West. There's no way out of this: the history is spoken and written in English. If we're talking about modernism of the 1920s and 1930s, the priority of Brazilian modern artists was to promote the identity of their country. They represented its exoticism, how it was mixed-race—the stereotypes of what it means to be Brazilian. When this changed, it wasn't followed by the idea of representation. We lack representations of what exactly happened during the military dictatorship. It's not by chance that we don't have archives of visual art from this period. Many artists from this period are poorly documented. Only now are we starting to revise our official memory, because twenty years or so are missing from the historical record.

**PP:** It is important to mention how the West, and particularly South America, was perceived in Eastern Europe. Eastern European artists did not understand the political tensions in the West, because these tensions were connected with the Left, and the Left was associated with the Communist regime. Their perception of the Western neo-avant-garde was a bit narrow, because they did not really buy their political attitudes against the capitalist world, and against the sometimes very bloody dictatorships in Latin America that were fighting communists. This was a paradox that Eastern European artists did not understand. The West worked as a mirror for the East, but it worked as a curved mirror. Eastern European artists wanted to reject political interpretation and attitudes against political institutions and people who were fighting with communism. This is very important and very painful: the lack of leftist critique of the so-called left governments—the communist governments—which were actually not leftist.

**CH:** In Europe, particularly in France, the intellectual ferment that led to May 1968 was part of a long process meant to de-Stalinize Marxism. The artistic Left in Europe was a sort of Trotskyite situationist Left, anti-Stalinist in a sense. I remember very clearly the defeat of the student movement in 1968. In England, the protest was identified particularly with the art schools, in opposition to a kind of authoritarian, provincial modernist schooling. There was a connection between the critique of modernist art education and a situationist political activity involving occupations. However, this very movement helped to produce the long right-wing reaction, particularly in England and America—that is to say, it really worried the authorities. They mistook these student protests for genuine proto-revolutionary action, and made sure they would never happen again. Educational reforms that are still underway, including in the institution where I work, are long-term parts of the process of de-radicalizing education. They've had very deep consequences. New forms of artistic radicalism are perhaps partly a reaction against them, although a rather impotent one. What we see from 1968 onward is increasingly a defeat of the Left and a surge of the Right. In that respect, 1968 is a crucial moment.

**BG:** Perhaps a remark to the relationship between the political and nonpolitical spheres. I remember the reaction to 1968–69 in the conceptual circle in Moscow, and our idea was that art is political, it's a type of propaganda, and you can't dissociate it from its ideological function. Komar & Melamid spoke of Pollock and Hitler as two kinds of decentered, ecstatic leaders; they spoke also about the proclamation of the independence of Greenwich Village by Duchamp, which took place almost at the same time as October revolution. So the initial gesture of considering art as propaganda was absolutely central for our reflections.



Valery Cherkasov, I Want To Eat , 1964. Mixed media, spoons on table.

**X**

*Continued in Conceptual Art and Eastern Europe, Part II*

**Zdenka Badovinac** has been the Director of Moderna galerija, Ljubljana since 1993, now comprised of two museum locations: the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova – MSUM. She has curated numerous exhibitions presenting both Slovenian and international artists, and initiated the first collection of Eastern European art, Moderna galerija's 2000+ Arteast Collection . She has systematically dealt with the processes of redefining history and with the questions of different avant-garde traditions of contemporary art, starting with the exhibition "Body and the East—From the 1960s to the Present" (Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1998; Exit Art, New York, 2001). She continued in 2000 with the first public display of the 2000+ Arteast Collection: "2000+ Arteast Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West" (Moderna galerija, 2000); and then with a series of Arteast Exhibitions, mostly at Moderna galerija: "Form-Specific"(2003); "7 Sins: Ljubljana-Moscow"(2004; co-curated with Victor Misiano and Igor Zabel); "Interrupted Histories" (2006); "Arteast Collection 2000+23" (2006); "The Schengen Women" (Galerija Skuc, Ljubljana, part of the Hosting Moderna galerija!project, 2008). Her other major projects include "unlimited.nl-3" (DeAppel, Amsterdam, 2000), "(un)gemalt, Sammlung Essl, Kunst der Gegenwart" (Klosterneuburg/Vienna, 2002), "ev+a 2004, Imagine Limerick, Open&Invited"; "Democracies/the Tirana Biennale"(Tirana, 2005), "The Schengen Women", Galerija Skuc, (Ljubljana, 2008),

"Museum of Parallel Narratives" in the framework of L'Internationale, MACBA, (Barcelona, 2011) "Present and Presence," MSUM, Ljubljana, 2011 (co-curated with Bojana Piškur and Igor Spanjol). She was the Slovenian Commissioner at the Venice Biennale (1993–1997, 2005) and the Austrian Commissioner at the Sao Paulo Biennial (2002) and is the President of CIMAM, 2010–13.

**Eda Čufer** is a dramaturge, curator and writer. In 1984 she co-founded an art collective NSK based in Ljubljana, Slovenia. She has collaborated with many contemporary theater, dance and visual art groups including the Sisters Scipion Nasice Theater, the dance company En-Knap, the IRWIN group and Marko Peljhan's Project Atol. Her recent writings are mainly concerned with the ideological dimensions of contemporary art and the relationship of political systems to art systems. These have appeared in magazines like Art Forum and Maska, and in books published by MOMA, MIT Press, Revolver, Afterall Books, Sternberg Press, Whitechapel Gallery, and the catalog of the 2009 Istanbul Biennial. She has curated exhibitions in Germany, Austria, and Italy, including In Search of Balkania, Balkan Visions, and Call Me Istanbul. She recently published a history of dance notation systems, and is now working on a new book project, Art as Mousetrap, with the support of a fellowship from the Arts Writers Grant Program of the Andy Warhol Foundation. Now living in the United States, she remains active with many art projects and groups in Europe.

**Cristina Freire** graduated in Psychology from the University of São Paulo (1985), MA in Social Psychology from the University of São Paulo (1990), MA in Museums and Galleries Management, The City University (1996) and PhD in Social Psychology from the University of São Paulo (1995). She is a lecturer at the Institute of Psychology of the USP (2003) and Associate Professor of Contemporary Art Museum of the University of São Paulo. She was Coordinator of the Division of Research in Art, Theory and Criticism of Contemporary Art Museum of the University of São Paulo, from January to December 2005 and March 2006 to August 2010. Since August 2010, and is Vice-Director of the MAC USP.

**Boris Groys** is a philosopher, art critic, essayist, and curator who teaches modern Russian philosophy, French poststructuralism, and contemporary media. He is the Global Distinguished Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University, New York. In addition Groys is Professor for Philosophy and Media Theory at the Academy for Design (Hochschule für Gestaltung) in Karlsruhe since 1994. Together with Peter Weibel he organized Medium Religion, ZKM, Karlsruhe, 2008–2009 on the medial aspect of religion. Groys's work was recently shown in the exhibition Thinking in Loop: Three Videos on Iconoclasm, Ritual and Immortality, apexart, New York, 2008. He also directed The Post-Communist Condition research project at ZKM, Karlsruhe and published Das kommunistische Postskriptum (2005) detailing the findings of the project. Other recent publications include: Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media (2012); Introduction to Antiphilosophy (2012); The Communist Postscripts (2010); Going Public(2010);Art Power (2008); Ilya Kabakov. The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment (2006); Dream Factory Communism: The Visual Culture of the Stalin Period (2004); and The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond (1992). Groys lives and works in New York.

**Charles Harrison** (1942 - 2009), BA Hons (Cantab), MA (Cantab), PhD (London) was a prominent UK art historian who taught Art History for many years and was Emeritus Professor of History and Theory of Art at the Open University. He was tutor in Art History, Open University, 1977–2005, Reader in Art History 1985-1994, Professor of the History & Theory of Art, 1994–2008, Professor Emeritus, 2008–2009; Visiting Professor, University of Chicago 1991 and 1996, Visiting Professor, University of Texas, 1997. In addition to being an academic and art critic he was also a curator and a member of the Art & Language Group. He curated the seminal exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form at the ICA" in 1969. And as a member of Art & Language, community of artists and critics who were its producers and users, he edited their journal Art-Language.

**Vít Havránek** is a theoretician and organizer based in Prague, Czech Republic. He has been working since 2002 as director of the contemporary art initiative Tranzit.cz. In 2007, Havránek co-founded Tranzitdisplay, a resource center for contemporary art, and has since been lecturing on contemporary art at the Academy of Art, Architecture and Design in Prague. He serves as an associate editor of JRP|Ringier art publisher, and was a member of Tranzit.org, one of the three curatorial teams for the European contemporary art biennial Manifesta 8. In addition, he has curated and co-curated exhibitions including *Monument to Transformation*, City Gallery Praguem Prague, Czech Republic (2007-10); and *tranzit–Auditorium, Stage, Backstage, I*, series of exhibitions in three acts, Frankfurter Kunstverein, (2006). Havránek has edited and co-edited *Atlas to Transformation* (JRP|Ringier, 2011), *Jiří Skála* (JRP|Ringier, 2011), *Kateřina Šedá* (JRP|Ringier, 2008), *Jan Mančuška* ( JRP|Ringier/Tranzit series, 2007), *Jiří Kovanda* (JRP|Ringier/Tranzit series, 2007), and others such as *The Need to Document* (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2005). Havránek has written for books and catalogues including *Manifesta 8* (Silvana Editoriale, 2010); *Promesses du passé* (Praha: Kant, 2002); *Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art* (Sternberg Press, CCS Bard, 2008); *Voids* (Centre Pompidou, Kunstalle Bern, 2009); and *Right About Now* (Valiz, 2007), among others.

**Piotr Piotrowski** is Professor Ordinarius and Chair of Modern Art History at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań. From August 2009 to October 2012, he was Director of the National Museum in Warsaw. From 1992

till 1997, Piotrowski was a Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the National Museum, Poznań. He has been a Visiting Professor at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College and several other institutions. Piotrowski is a FORMER WEST Research Advisor and was a fellow at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown earlier this year, where he worked on a book project entitled "New Art – New Democracy in Post-communist Europe." He was also a fellow at, among others, Collegium Budapest, Budapest (2005–2006), the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (2000), Humboldt University, Berlin (1997), and Columbia University, New York City (1994). He has co-organized several exhibitions and projects including: 2000+: The Art from Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 2000 and The Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, 2001. Piotrowski has written extensively on Central European art and culture. His recent books include: Avant-Garde in the Shadow of Yalta. Art in Central-Eastern Europe, 1945–1989 (2009); Art after Politics (2007), among others.

**Branka Stipančić** (Zagreb, 1953) is writer, editor and free-lance curator, living in Zagreb, Croatia. Stipančić is graduate of art history and literature, from the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb. Former positions include curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb 1983-1993, and director of Soros Center for Contemporary Art, Zagreb 1993-1996. Major shows: Mladen Stilinović's retrospective: *Sing!* Museum Ludwig, Budapest, 2011, *You are kindly invited to attend*, Kunstsaele, Berlin, 2010, Mangelos retrospective in Museu Serralves, Porto, 2003. Among the books: *Mladen Stilinović—Zero for Conduct* (Museum of Contemporary Art / Mladen Stilinović, Zagreb, 2013), *Mišljenje je forma energije* (Arkzin / HS AICA, Zagreb, 2007), *Vlado Martek—Poetry in Action* (DelVe, Zagreb, 2010), *Mladen Stilinović—Artist's Books* (Platform Garanti, Istanbul, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2007), *Josip Vaništa—The Time of Gorgona and Post-Gorgona* (Kratis, Zagreb, 2007), *Mangelos nos. 1 to 9 ½* (Museu Serralves, Porto, 2003), *Goran Trbuljak* (MCA, Zagreb, 1996), *Words and Images* (SCCA, Zagreb, 2005).

Anton Vidokle

# In Conversation with Ilya and Emilia Kabakov

**Anton Vidokle:** I'd like to start by asking you about artistic independence. Your oeuvre strikes me as an example of one of the most independent artistic practices, in the sense of being a comprehensive, personal universe of meaning, paradoxically developed in rather totalitarian conditions. It is considered to be more difficult to achieve this in a repressive environment, where speech and artistic expression are curtailed, like the former USSR. Yet it seems to me that this may be actually easier than doing so in our current neoliberal reality, in which mechanisms of containment are more disguised and control is largely economic in nature. Is there a way to preserve artistic independence in a world where everything has changed so much?

**Ilya Kabakov:** We will discuss how the works of an artist coming from the Soviet Union (in the autumn of 1987) were perceived in the "West." This was the time of the end of the Cold War and there was a certain interest in what was going on in the Soviet Union, whether from curators or museum directors or gallery owners. Moreover, this was heating up as a result of the absolute values of the Russian nineteenth century—the creations of composers and writers as well as the Russian avant-garde of the beginning of the twentieth century. Hence, one could say that there was potential attention. On the other hand, it was a full refutation of everything that had been done in graphic art during the Soviet period. So one could say that toward our generation there was a mixture of anticipation, and simultaneously a kind of fundamental skepticism.

It was a very interesting situation in which what was understood to be the world of culture, the human world, was the entire past culture of humanity, and all of that culture was located beyond the bounds of the Soviet state. Frozen eternity that would never end existed inside the Soviet country. Its past was found only in museum-like spaces: libraries, conservatories, museums, and theaters. Actual life was refuted, there was no real life in a material sense, and on the "cultural" level there was sots-realism, created forms that the censors monitored—forms of drawing, dance, folk art, and so on.

Let's return to the image of Mowgli[1], a person who feels disgust toward today's Soviet everyday life, who wants to jump beyond the bounds of that which is crashing down on us in the form of "culture" from reproductions and the television, who wants to go beyond that Soviet abomination; human nature rejected all of this. This is very interesting, because the extreme falsity, lies, and aggression that was in Soviet culture on all sides, from poetry to books and radio, was perceived as something non-human. This was a utopian mythology; we were all supposed to become some kind of Soviet heroes, there

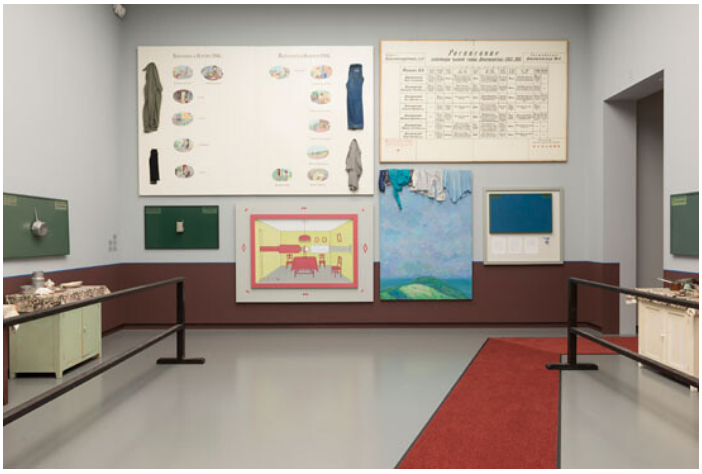

E.A. Permyak, Missing Threads, 1980. Book cover, second edition, with design Ilya Kabakov. LS collection, Nijmegen.

was a battle for quality raging everywhere, a battle for high ideals. In all of this there was something non-human. And for Mowgli, the human was that norm that was being sought for beyond the bounds of daily Soviet reality. Namely, the central point in this conflict between reality and what Mowgli had to imagine, to invent for himself, was in the past world, in the Western world existing beyond the bounds of the Soviet state, in the vanishing Russia of the nineteenth century.

The first, instinctive move was to find out what lies beyond that ideology. The history of humanity was idealized and perceived as the history of people with their own human civilization. But we were living in the world of non-humans, and it was as though this was final and forever. In this sense, there were no distinctions: this is right, and that is wrong. Everything Soviet that was produced is always a lie, an abomination. This was a kind of very important radicalism present in large measure in schools. But to somehow survive in Soviet society, adaptability was assumed as obvious.

There were no warriors, no revolutionaries except for five or six dissidents. Life consisted of two layers, each person was a schizophrenic. Any person—a factory worker, farm worker, intellectual, artist—had a split personality. From childhood, everyone knew what was necessary in order to survive in this country—how you had to lie, how to adapt, what to draw, what to sing, how to dance. By the 1950s, the entire repertoire, the whole menu, was sketched out; by then there were no discussions at all, like there were during Mayakovsky's time. This was so monstrously false, that underneath this bark emerged an autonomous layer of a different kind of human existence. For stealing from the factory, a worker could be very honored inside his own family. He would teach his child decency, but each day he would bring home a stolen sausage or milk. This was the norm in Soviet life. For the external world there was one structure—mostly verbal, chatter, all those meetings, the battle for peace. And then there was "human" life that transpired in the kitchen, among one's close family and friends. In the 1950s, it was possible to talk among one's close friends in kitchens, by that time there was a guarantee that no one would run and tattle about what was discussed there. After the death of the Cannibal[2] this dual life became firmly established, it was recognized by absolutely everyone, including the official organs of the secret police. There was a very strict distinction between public and domestic, kitchen life.

The attempt to find out just what human culture consisted of was mastered in our art school where a few different circles of "self-education" were formed. A group of about five students would get together after their classes and each had his or her own role. There were no teachers at all. This was the natural desire to inhale oxygen, like frogs living at the bottom of the swamp.



Installation view of the exhibition "Lissitzky - Kabakov, Utopia and Reality," Van Abbemuseum, 2012. Photo: Peter Cox.

One student was occupied only with poetry—he would get collections of Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam, Akhmatova,[3] and Western poets. Another, named Daniltsev, was in charge of music education—he collected records. Each had his own house, except for me, I lived at the boarding school dormitory. Khavin—who later became a well-known architect—was in charge of the literary part, and yet another was responsible for theater. Someone else was in charge of philosophy. We formed a circle of those who were initiated in "universal" knowledge. We were very proud that we did not belong to the Soviet world, but rather after school we breathed a different oxygen. This way of living outside of Soviet reality was preserved once we had finished school and transitioned into the institute. We would regularly go to the conservatories, libraries, and theaters. It was a kind of self-emerging, almost intellectual medium. It represented an instinctive attraction toward culture, knowledge, and the desire to find out just what was on the other side, beyond the fence, of the Soviet livestock yard. This naturally turned into a meeting point of the unofficial art world. We were terribly fortunate that in 1957, in Moscow, a circle of poets, artists, and musicians took shape. It was an entire "civilization" of sixty to seventy people. The main question now asked is: "How did you live, on what did you exist?" Each one earned a living somehow—someone illustrated children's books; Andrei Monastyrsky worked in a library. Each person had his own biography of dual existence. In the internal world, no one talked about it, no one complained about how hard it was to live in the Soviet world. We were personages who existed autonomously, poets would read their verses each day in studios. The same kind of characters would come from Leningrad where the same kind of world existed in parallel. Life was unbelievably intensive, although, of course, there were no exhibitions, no galleries, no collectors.

We had our own philosophers, such as Boris Groys, and religious thinkers, Zhenya Shiffers being the most well known. And there was an entire group of musicians, modernists who were also protesting in their own way. There were an enormous number of poets, mostly from Leningrad.

**AV:** I was told that this unofficial sphere was very big, that it had its own commerce. Some things would be purchased on occasion, and it was possible to subsist this way. But this subsistence was oriented toward the West, and the uniqueness of your position, and the position of Moscow conceptualists, was that yours was an opposition within an opposition.

**IK:** That's true, the unofficial art world was not monolithic, it had only one thing in common—this abhorrence of Soviet life and culture. It was like prison, like a camp. Inside of that camp there were lots and lots of barracks that had autonomous and ideologically non-intersecting positions. This was silently recognized by everyone, but there was mutual respect, like among inmates in a prison camp. Each barrack had its own ideology. A few of the barracks were not oriented toward the West. I wrote an entire book about that, where these groups are identified: "The 1960s-70s ... Notes about Unofficial Life in Moscow." Some had the opportunity to make money on account of foreigners. But the conceptual group was not very oriented toward that. The fear of selling to a foreigner, for me, for example, was insane.

**AV:** What kind of consequences could there have been?

**IK:** You were immediately put in jail as a black-market currency speculator. The only thing that there could be was an exchange; you could ask for a camera in exchange.

**Emilia Kabakov:** Any currency operations with foreigners were criminally punishable.

**IK:** Moreover, this entire circle was under the close scrutiny of the KGB. Some were dragged in for interrogation, but some figures weren't touched at all. In the eyes of the officials, it was very important that this was not of an anti-Soviet nature. The concept of art in the West had the quality of a dream about a young man meeting a woman. It was impossible to leave the country; one could only emigrate. The West was perceived as a flourishing cultural civilization. There was a very strong desire in the conceptual circle to orient oneself toward that culture, not

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Mock-up for the Ruhr-Atoll project at Baldeneysee, Essen, 2010.

to compare oneself with the Soviet tradition. I dreamed about doing what would please the West. I was one of those who during the Soviet period was called a groveler of the West. I created my works, thinking about what a Western curator would say about them. For many, the criterion was the artist himself and his ideas—if they were realized, that was enough. I had an inflamed reaction to what an authoritative Western person, an expert, would say about me. For me, the Western history of the arts was the beginning and end of my horizon.

I would fantasize that somewhere there was some sort of world where I would feel at home, like one of them. I was rather indifferent to the opinions of my colleagues. Such an apologetic attitude toward foreigners existed amidst my friends and me over the course of probably thirty years of existence in our unofficial artistic life—from the 1960s through the 1980s. These thirty years passed in isolation except for the rare visits by representatives of the Western "expert" group. The life that had been established in the 1960s monotonously melded into the 1970s and 1980s. The generations of unofficial artists changed, but the lifestyle remained the same. The Brezhnev era was so stable, all connections had been verified, that it seemed that this Soviet "paradise" would last for millennia. Everyone had agreed to such an extent about how, how much, and where to steal, what to say and where to speak. My generation is situated between a generation of fear and a generation of relative calm. Fear remained, but it was understood that if you would only abide all the rules, you wouldn't be touched. The next generation in the conceptual circle was no longer constrained by fear, it was freer, and had fewer phobias and frustrations. I would count Monastyrsky, Zakharov, Albert, Prigov, Sorokin[4] as belonging to that generation. Perhaps there was not such a big difference in age, but the content of their psyche was already different. And the next that we still managed to catch—the Kindergarten home gallery, the Mukhomory group—lived a kind of upbeat, prankish life that did not take Soviet reality into consideration, and they existed in a relatively free world. It is a scale that goes from fear and torsion to the movement of paws and certain kinds of dance. I am talking only about the generations of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. It is believed that the most active work of conceptual artists was in the 1970s, but I am now making a gradation of the psyche from the frightened to the non-frightened. My generation, and that of Bulatov and Vasiliev, had a certain relationship with Soviet rules, signs.


Installation view of the exhibition "Lissitzky - Kabakov, Utopia and Reality," Van Abbemuseum, 2012. Photo: Peter Cox.

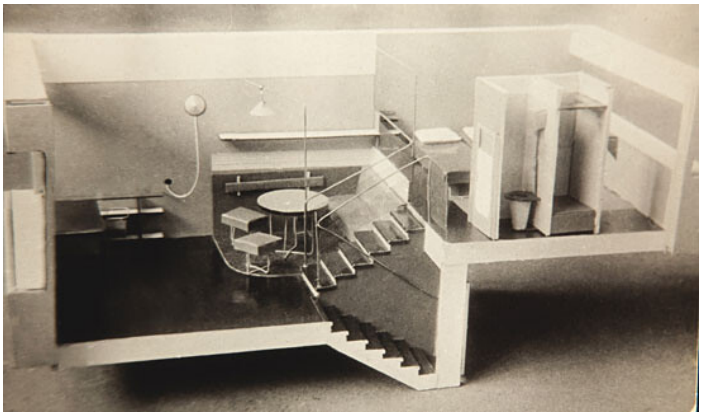
We, like Komar and Melamid, were always reflecting on the presence of Soviet ideological signs. Sots-art emerged as a humorous reaction to the presence of Soviet symbols.

**AV:** Where did you first see the works of Lissitzky or Malevich? How did that take place?

**IK:** I didn't see them at that time. Our education in the art school and institute was constructed in such a way that Western art history was presented up until the Barbizons. There were no Impressionists, Picasso, or Matisse. Our self-education in terms of the visual was sporadic, it was not methodical or thorough. Books on Malevich were not sold, his works were not exhibited, there was only one painting by Kandinsky in the Pushkin Museum and it was presented as the work of a French artist at that, and Antonova[5] hung it up only at the end of the 1970s. Therefore, our education, "knowledge" of the West was formed out of air. A feeling of sensitivity of the nostrils developed, such that given three, four molecules you could catch something in the air that could be Malevich or Kandinsky. This is from the realm of irrational phantoms—like in prison, when a young man hasn't seen a woman, but has conjured her up based on pornographic graffiti.

**AV:** I'd like to ask about your drawings with the Black Square from the end of the 1960s, I think.

**IK:** You are probably referring to *Sitting-in-the-Closet Primakov*. There was no such Black Square in my consciousness at that time. There was a consciousness of the blackness of a closed closet. It is difficult to say what I knew and what I didn't know. Some sort of cultural genetics kicked in and started working. This is a very important and essential moment in today's obliteration of the past. There is no actual object of the dreams of today's generation of extroverts. They react to any external irritant—Putin, Shmutin, their hand twitches because something is bothering it. Our generation is more introverted. It is that which lies in consciousness, in the capacity to develop cultural fantasies, signs. The manipulation of these signs is the fate of the introvert. These images arise at that point when, finding yourself in total isolation, you orient yourself toward the entire cultural field as a whole. This gigantic field of images is the



El Lissitzky, Interior Project for the F-Type Residential Cell. Commune house of the architect M. Ginzburg, 1927. Photo of maquette. Collection State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

country and homeland of the introvert. The extrovert operates differently—everyone is running somewhere, so I am running there, too. For the introvert, it doesn't matter whether he lives in America or Europe, your homeland is the cultural field. It is always in your imagination. It continually functions and produces. This is the fate of people who are detached from actual cultural phenomena, they are involved only with their own imagination. For the introvert, three components are important: memory, fantasy, and reflection. All of these are described as formulas of cultural production—memory about culture, reflection on culture, and imagination of returning to "that" time. Nothing material was ever discussed in our circle—who is living with whom, who bought what, how much it costs, and so on. Only topics of cultural reflection were discussed.

**AV:** When you arrived in Austria, for example, were you disillusioned by the West?

**IK:** Just the opposite! I was fascinated. I had arrived in the real art world. It was a happy time after the end of the Cold War. The Western world met the artist who had arrived from the USSR with high expectations. The Soviet wave had arrived. And according to the law of "waves," it started to ebb at the end of the 1980s through the middle of the 1990s. The same happened later with Thailand, China, and so on. There was huge interest from curators and museum people. I was included in this process as some sort of exotic character.

**AV:** Of an ethnographic nature.

**IK:** Absolutely. Because I had arrived from the USSR, I did not act like a hooligan, I painted, liked them, and looked at Soviet reality through their eyes. This is a very important point—I was not a patriot. I was not a Russian artist who wanted to show Russian art to the West. The conceptual position was to look at Soviet life through the eyes of a "foreigner" who has arrived there.

This was the position of an observer. My installations were well received, because this was a projection of Western consciousness onto a world unfamiliar to the West. Included in my task was to show the ordinary, banal Soviet world, with its communality, language, wretchedness, sentimentality. This view was following in the footsteps of the tradition of the "little person" of the nineteenth century, emanating from Gogol, through Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. This is not the heroic Soviet person, nor the Western superman. This is interest in the simple and banal.

In Western art I was astounded by the unbelievable individualistic isolation, loneliness, and exclusivity, from Pollock to whomever. This was very unpleasant for me. I saw in this the deformation of Western ideology, because the image of the little man comes from the tradition of the Enlightenment. The intellectual in this sense is understood not as a class attribute, but as a certain kind of norm of the individual. He cares, sacrifices, and is compassionate. The Russian intellectual in the image of the nineteenth century is a complete person. Not a noble, but an intellectual, namely a commoner. This tradition entered into the bloody twentieth century and has only vanished entirely just recently. It is the end of the epoch of the intelligentsia.

I think that the only function of art is to support this tradition. I repeat, I am talking in relation to the superman-artist, whose image now exists in the West, a champion in his own area. But when I moved to Austria in 1988, the image of the Western world and modernism was very strong. Now I have major reflections concerning modernism. But twenty-five years ago, I accepted absolutely everything. There was a complete idealization of Western artistic life.

**AV:** Did it ever occur to you that these foreign curators who would visit did not fully understand what you were doing? After all, it is very difficult for a Western person to understand Soviet dematerialization.

**IK:** I completely agree. I perceived a certain interest of the West in this world, but I understood that the context and content of Soviet life was inaccessible to them. But they had heard something. It was important for me that they had an interest in it. For me, this was enough. It was enough for me that they allowed me onstage, but as for what my dance meant there, I was fully aware that they virtually did not understand any of my body movements. What I was saying about my "Western" view of Russia was also an illusion. By that time, the Western view had shifted so much that it is difficult to say whether it was the same as it was during Diagilev's tours. In fact, the West right up to today, in principle, rejects that which was carried out of Soviet Russia. This has a reason. There is an enormous tradition of adaptation of the Western world to distant


El Lissitzky, Pressa Exhibition, 1927. Sketch. Collection Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

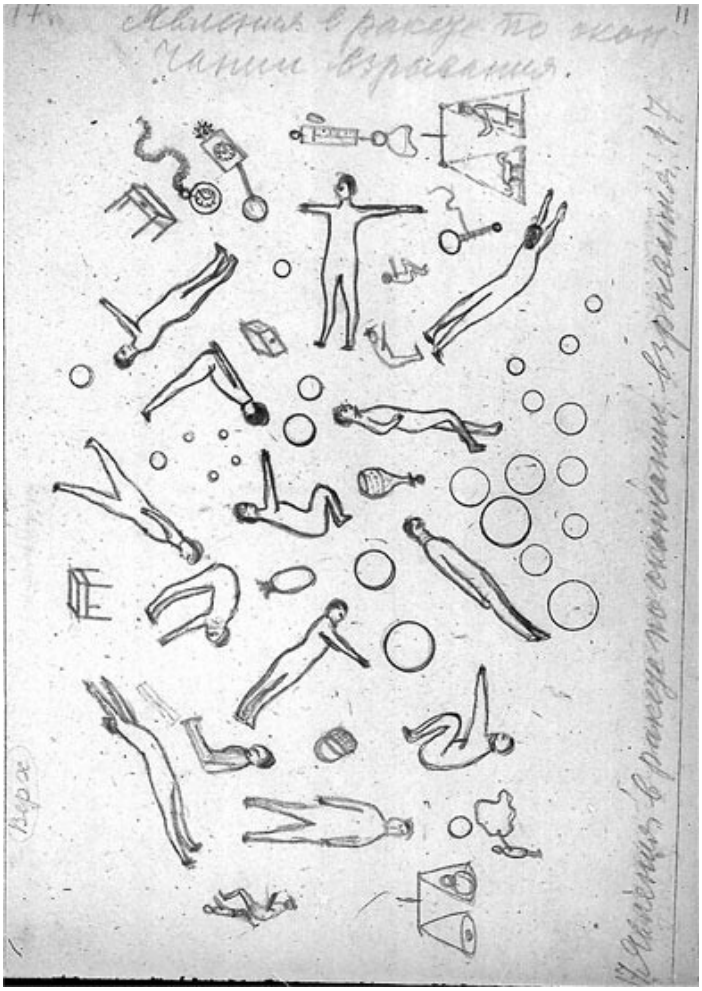
civilizations. There was a Japanese wave, an African, and a Chinese wave. But not a Russian one. After all, you could say that it is the same as ours, only repulsive. Our child too, only lousy. To this day there exists a repulsion and rejection of everything that has come from Soviet Russia.

**AV:** Including the Russian avant-garde?

**IK:** No, of course that is an exception. It is understood as a Russian version of the Western avant-garde. We are getting close to our topic, to Lissitzky. The Russian avant-garde accepted the paradigm of Western artistic evolution, understanding it not as a critical attitude toward the past, but as a normal evolutionary movement. They perceived formal changes in the Western artistic process. By 1905–7, the perception had emerged that the old world had ended.

**AV:** We don't have that perception today.

**IK:** Of course not. Despite the fact that everything has changed, there is no such perception of the end of the old world. The new world was supposed to carry the perception of the cosmic. A new cosmos. All ideas come from the cosmos, and not from social life. The Russian avant-garde believed that a new cosmic era had begun. Technology, steamships, airplanes, steam engines were all perceived to be signs of the cosmos. There was no such cosmism in the West. Italian Futurists come the closest to this, but they are too technological. All the Russian avant-gardists were accomplished visionaries, mystics, from Filonov[6] to Malevich. You have to remember that we were talking about a radical repudiation of the past, of existence, as if it had died. It had rotted, had turned into the Black Square.



Sketch from Tsiolkovsky's 1933 essay "Album of Space Travel." Drawing of people and objects floating around weightless.

**AV:** The cosmos, of course, is also black.

**IK:** For Malevich it was white, for example. And for Lissitzky it was white too. This, of course, represents an unbelievable enthusiasm for the approach of the future. It was seen to take various forms: in linguistic forms, for example, in the work of Kruchenyh and Klebnikov and then Kharms; and in visual forms, in the shape of Suprematism. The degree of cosmism of that epoch is not understood fully. Everyone understood what was happening in the new Russia as a social utopia. Cosmism does not manifest its nature, only in rocket flights. Tsiolkovsky[7] perceived rockets to be a means to deliver things to space cities. It is important to note that the artistic creations of these artists wasn't strictly formalistic, they were not only about art. To a great degree they bore world-building, cosmic experiences. They attempted to illustrate this with their art. You can view Malevich as an illustrator of his mystical ideas. All it takes is to read the texts that he wrote. It is clear that he was in a state of agitation, exaltation from cosmic fantasies. The West poorly perceived this aspect. Western materialism, pragmatism, and rationalism does not want to adapt this artistic thinking. Even though there was an enormous quantity of mystics, such as Klee, for example, in the West.

**AV:** Not cosmic mystics.

**IK:** Not cosmic, but other pilgrims: mystics of the subconscious, that very same ill-fated Surrealism, Dali, and so on. The recognition of modernism as an unwavering artistic doctrine came very late. Essentially it came after the war, when museums of modern art started to appear. At that time, canonized figures took the place of prophets. In the end, a narrow group of formalists was victorious, thanks primarily to Matisse and Picasso. Modernism rejected the ideology of imparting content and transitioned to the realm of pure signs, blotches, scrolls, and commas. This formalization turned out to be the main line of modernist thinking that was in its own way also religious. Modernism lost its content-based meaning. In the end, formalistic emptiness prepared the soil for the appearance of Pop art, which is already the area not of aesthetics, but of ethics and the ethics of cynicism.

**AV:** Isn't there something in common between the cynicism of Pop art and the irony that is contained in your works?

**IK:** Irony is always filled with content. It is always the view of some sort of tradition of something alien. This is the tradition of Romanticism, German Romantics. A romantic was always laughing at something low, something not corresponding to his ideals. But Pop art is cynical in relation to the consumer and modernism ignored it. Since the appearance of Impressionist artists, the artist was liberated from the consumer. The artist is the pure producer. It is production for no one. The consumer remained for the realists. Pop art again appeals to the consumer, but this consumer is not someone the artist respects. Warhol made an important shift—the collector is such a stupid beast who will purchase anything on the level of his own understanding. This is kitsch, comics. He will eat what he is used to eating. But he is not only a beast, but also a snob. Cynical derision toward the buyer forms the basis of this production, and each of the artists of Pop art, beginning with smirks and giggles, ends with factory production. He himself becomes a bourgeois animal. Warhol was very smart at this. His art comments on non-existence, death in life that is ongoing.

[figure splitpage 2012_12_PC85456WEB.jpg
Installation view of the exhibition "Lissitzky - Kabakov, Utopia and Reality," Van Abbemuseum, 2012. Photo: Peter Cox.
]

The theme of the "corpse in life" is very widespread. Beuys is also such a figure, a kind of medium of death. Of course, Warhol is complete despair, he cannot be described merely as cynicism and commercial production, like others, such as Lichtenstein, Rosenquist. I sympathize more with Abstract Expressionism—Rothko and Barnett Newman—that is clear. Barnett Newman very precisely formulates the concept of the lofty. Art is the realm of the elevated. Let's discuss something else for a minute: the artistic gene in the area of art is woven from three threads. The first is the realm of the lofty. Subjects of the lofty dominated in old art. Without it, there was no motivation to draw—the lofty was embedded in the very commission for art, in the plot. The second thread is that of artistry. It is like a certain form of a congenital feeling of harmony and balance. It can have refined and multilayered forms or it can be simple. The sign of artistry is when an artist sees not the details on the painting, but the paining in its entirety, as a whole, consisting of details. So, for example, from this perspective, Ingres is unartistic. For all great artists there exists balance and the domination of the whole. They embody the gene of artistry—Titian, Rembrandt, Michelangelo. But Leonardo is too conceptual and analytical, he does not focus on that integrity of the whole. The third component is humanity and the humanistic. There are no misanthropes among great artists, and plenty of them in modernism.

Returning to Soviet art education: we were taught the heroic history of art. We were shown only the peaks, we were never shown the intervals, the genuine artistic process. Having arrived in the West, I understood that everyone was engaged in the artistic process. And the most interesting thing was that there were no models that you had to follow. That model-based Soviet pedagogy had really infiltrated my psyche—you are already twenty-five years old, and Raphael was your age! The very same thing existed in sports, ballet, and so on. So, why were we talking about this?

We were offered an exhibition at Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven that was to be based, first and foremost, of course, on the comparison of two eras, two epochs: the epoch of the beginning of Soviet power, and the changes at the end of Soviet power, when it became clear what these changes had led to. The main paradigm was hope and the establishment of a new world and the disillusion and insignificance of this world. The father who told us that everything would be okay and the son who said: look, old man, at where you have arrived.

For the exhibition we are presenting the work of Kabakov alongside the work of Lissitzky—who is entirely oriented toward the future; for him, everything is being built. Kabakov is turned toward the evaluation of that which has already been built. The thematization of the eight rooms in the exhibition divides into the different themes of this project. Lissitzky is perceived as a person who is rushing into cosmic space and arranging various types of human activity from that cosmic perspective. Unlike Malevich, he is a Renaissance type. This type is capable of working in many genres, in many professions, of not clamping up. Hence, Lissitzky functions as an artist, an illustrator, an architect, a designer, and a polygraphist, working from drawings to installations. This goes back to the Renaissance, like Leonardo and Michelangelo. Such a universal type is not welcomed in the Western art community today. If you do one thing, you don't need to do another thing. There is this horrifying specialization whereby everything else is perceived to be a hobby. I myself am one of the victims of this corridor system. But in the past, you could get away with this, therefore such a personality like Lissitzky is perceived rather respectfully, but also anachronistically, in terms of various genres of an artist: any genre is perceived as a means to express specific ideas.

These ideas are being expressed literarily, architecturally, visually, objectively, and so forth. In the time of a given "author," a specific genre dominates. I'll tell about myself here: when you do albums, you practically don't produce paintings or installations. It is interesting to look at how this played out for the classics—when Rembrandt is transitioning from paintings to engravings and prints or when Michelangelo rushed headlong from painting to sculpture. Some genres need to rest in you head to be renewed. This is how it was for Lissitzky— *Prouns* were

Installation view of the exhibition "Lissitzky - Kabakov, Utopia and Reality," Van Abbemuseum, 2012. Photo: Peter Cox.

followed by architectural projects, and it is then that he makes his sketches for the Water Stadium.

The Renaissance type is closely connected, it is terrible to say, with the commission, the form of the proposal. The Western artist before the Impressionists in general didn't draw much in his free time, he was overburdened with commissions. They were his stimulus.

**AV:** Now we have the parallel situation when commissions are coming from curators.

**IK:** They are minimal. But in a well-known sense the unofficial art world also had such patrons. For example, the production of Oskar Rabin always had a large number of consumers. However, this is a terrible, ambivalent situation. The artist who knows that he is desired has a hard time hanging on to the podium of freedom. He knows that they want what he has already done. He is afraid to take risks. Although such an artist in demand, like Picasso, improvised a lot. But in a large number of his works there is the stamp of industrial production. The same is true with the later Matisse. It is difficult for me to judge; fortunately, I never found myself in this situation. No one is waiting in line, and it is only thanks to Emilia that somehow something sells.

**AV:** The main question is about the independence of the artist and art. How can this be sustained today, when so much has changed in the world of art? Everyone thinks that it is difficult to preserve independence in a totalitarian situation, but in fact, it could be easier than in the situation we find ourselves in currently.

**IK:** I think that every time has its own repertoire of complexities, difficulties, and its own answers to these challenges. In each epoch, a person finds something that bothers him and there are those who have suggestions for finding solutions and those who think that it is impossible to do anything. During some epochs there is competition; in some epochs it is external pressure, in others it is total freedom that also poses a challenge that is no less terrible. Each epoch has its own challenges.

In observing myself, I understood that I exist in three mismatched ages: youth, middle age, and older age. These differ not only in terms of physiology, but also in terms of entire tasks that a person sets for himself at each age. The young age is the hardest. This is connected with the fact that the goal of this age is to exclaim: "I am here, too!" The inaudibility of one's voice in the stream of others is one of the main phobias, neuroses of the young person. If he didn't get a push in a certain direction from his parents or school, then he is left to his own devices, like a cat thrown in water. In this situation of complete loneliness, he doesn't have a language in which to speak. There is no speech. He has to acquire some form of speech. It is a great fortune if you have a professional skill. The majority of young contemporary artists are doomed, if they don't belong to a school. School is the transition from "I have thought about it" to "I can do this." The shout "I am here!" as a rule embodies some sort of action that brings attention to oneself. Attention not only from one's artistic community, but from the entire socium. This is why the popularity of art actions is widespread. An art action is done in order to find oneself in the art world. Simultaneously, the one performing the action is participating in socio-political life. A very important moment occurs with the mixing of the art scene and social reality. This mixing leads to genuine insanity. An enormous quantity of curators stimulates this activity. The argument in favor of it is usually related to the avant-garde—after all, the avant-gardists are also hooligans. But for the most part, this was a form of protest that was anti-artistic—you paint on a canvas, and I on my own body. Their functioning was located inside the framework of outrageousness, and inside the framework of the artistic medium. Today, this is just an ordinary social protest that has now been ascribed to art. Everything that occurs in social and political space can now in hindsight be ascribed to the artistic realm, whereby the curator, who is the legitimate figure here, can decide what art is. This contamination creates a strange situation that destabilizes the consciousness of the author himself. He is called an artist from the sidelines. The classic example is Courbet who overturned the Vendôme Column. It remained in history, but this act was political hooliganism. As we say, we don't love him as an artist for this. The second example is from my student life. There was a game when students would board a bus and would see who could say the word "shit" loudest in a public place. The last one would shout in a terrible way. This is an example of how social insult counts on being successful in the art community. Both the first actionists, and the art group War/Voina[8] fit right into this tradition.

The second group of people is the tradition of clowning. It is based on the complete ridicule of everything that is happening around us. It is the right to mockery. Many

made use of this: Blue Noses Group and others. The line running from the Leningrad underground was especially powerfully developed in the 1990s.

The third group is very popular and dynamic—these are conversations about art. It attracts a large quantity of intellectually-oriented artists. Chatter itself and conversations replace artistic production. The world of the conceptual groups of the 1970s was also built on dialogues. I find it in these dialogues, the ones that I managed to read, of Brenner, Osmolovsky—and, of course, it is clear that I am a person from a past epoch, and I cannot understand the urgency or today's excitability. But I am deeply convinced that, in principle, this is not a very effective endeavor. The conversations of that very same Monastyrsky were reflections on something that had actually been done. Simply put, conversations about my own notions that the artist should create something that will last in culture are ineffective. In my understanding, the world of culture is juxtaposed or relates tangentially to any social structure. Yes, it feeds on images, irritations, and phobias of the social.

**EK:** It is a reflection on the social, but it is not the social world.

**IK:** All the conversations—avant-gardist, by the way—that are about art as a part of the social process led to an unbelievable primitivization, politicization of artistic results.

When an artist descends into the socium, he must certainly merge with it. This is inevitable. The socium vanquishes him. At the end of Soviet power, the socium had become so unattached from artistic life that it was easy to preserve the autonomy of one's artistic consciousness. Today it seems that the artist can make whatever he pleases. But in fact, this is a professional, precise activity like tennis, having its boundaries, its rules. Each time the game is new, but it is entirely determined by rules. There is no freedom. This is visible from the third, mature age. In the first age it seems that you can do anything. During the second age period, as soon as you have acquired your voice, the task emerges for you to take up a position among your contemporaries. You need to be a participant in the process along with your contemporaries. You need to know what your neighbors are doing, you need to be a member of your own train car. The third period is connected with the feeling that your train car is no longer going anywhere. That other train cars are going places, in different directions.

**EK:** I wouldn't say that the train cars are not going anywhere. Either you've managed to get into this train car or you haven't, and this train car is setting out for the future.

**IK:** Your train is already not moving, even in its own time. Other trains are running, other generations, artists, thoughts, other goals. What happens to an artist in the third, mature age group? It is different for each person. One might muddle along and continue to turn out his products. For the most part what is produced by an artist in this age group is what he managed to achieve in the middle period. Some degrade, grow tired, some are compelled by circumstances to keep producing, like Chagall who was forced by his wife to keep making horrible little bouquets.

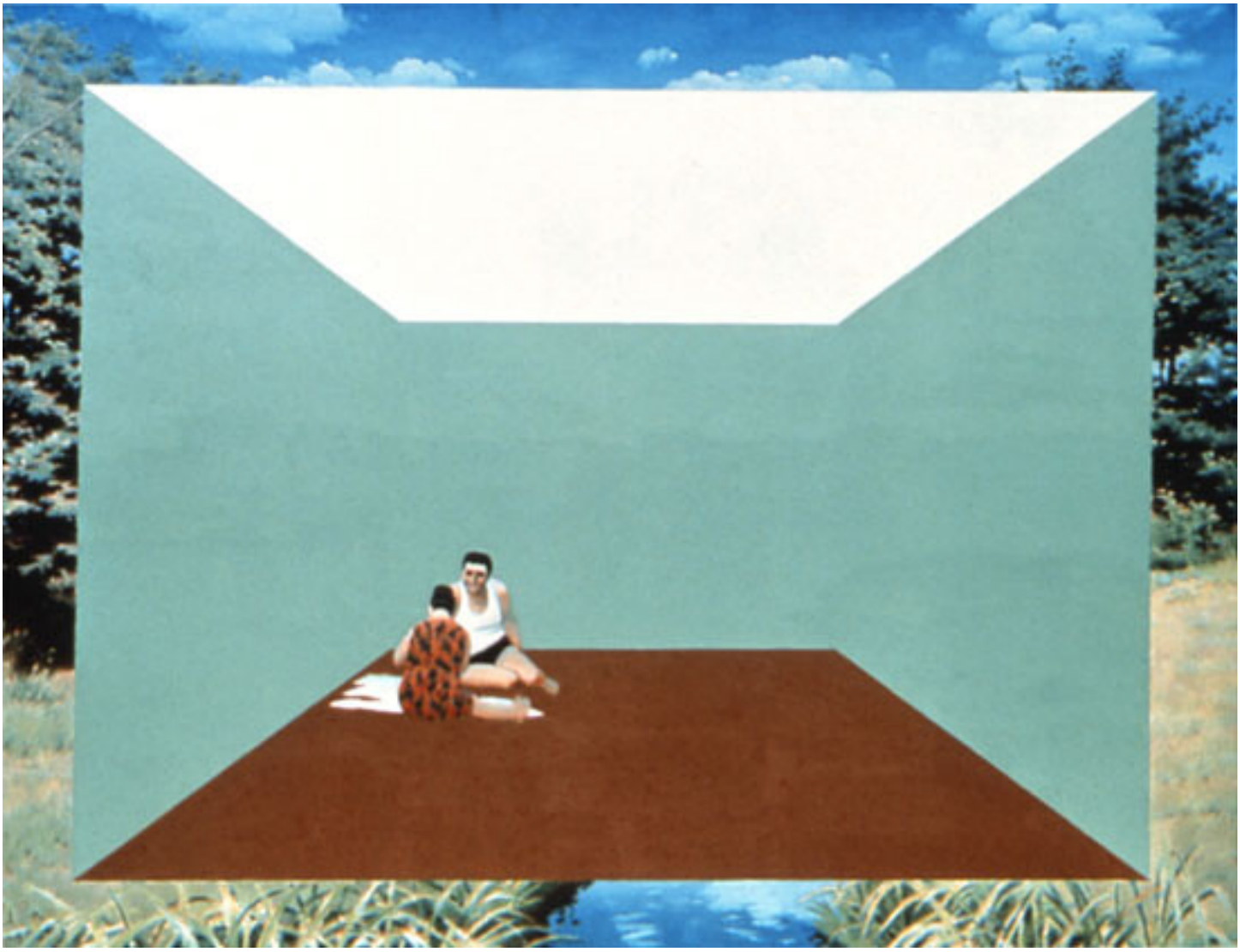
**EK:** But some rare people find a second wind.

**IK:** This is a very unique phenomenon. I was terribly drawn to the past. I even suffered the illusion that the Baroque was the most interesting and relevant period for the future. For me, the Baroque is what Ancient Greece was to the artists of the Renaissance. This is my personal psychosis. When art comes to a dead-end, as in the late Middle Ages, then movement backward usually begins, like during the Renaissance. The rebirth of the past with a new consciousness yielded a phenomenal result. I also see the development of the genetic code that I spoke of earlier toward the revival of the Baroque and Baroque painting. After Modernism what remains for us is the non-confrontational painting, there is no dramatic effect in it. Each person has his own image of the world. The Baroque had a dramatic painting of the world and it has had a nice long "rest." Modernism introduced flatness and then departed from the depths. What begins with Modernism is a tradition of soiling the flat plane of the white canvas, in all kinds of different versions. I am talking about the leveling of depth, but during Modernism "depth" has had a good rest, like in a sanatorium. The Baroque could return the depth to painting and, in turn, the depth of the image to the world. This is a hypothesis, but I am ready to believe it at this point.

**AV:** Many contemporary artists, philosophers have noted that the present moment is distinguished by a sensation of groundlessness. It is as though we are constantly either falling someplace, or we are flying someplace, or disappearing. In your works there is the motif of flight, falling, disappearing. As a result, a kind of disorientation of the normal understanding of subject and object occurs, of time and space, of modernism and modernity.

**IK:** This is connected with an important moment that happened in the last epoch. And in how that epoch differs from many past epochs. Each person has a program. Today's program is how to survive in this world. Every person asks this question. And it is a rather well-known "how": apartment, car, vacation, salary, children, and so on. There is an absolutely normal repertoire of answers to the question "how can one survive in this world?" Everyone knows "how"...

**EK:** Instead of "why."



Erik Bulatov, People in the Landscape, 1976. Oil on canvas, 55 x 71 inches.

**IK:** The question as it was posed in previous times has disappeared. “Why am I living in this world?” It is primitive to such a degree that even the very posing of the question is incomprehensible. But still throughout the twentieth century people asked this question. And in the nineteenth century, they were completely permeated by it. And in previous epochs it was a fundamental question. “How” was an animalistic question. “Why” was a religious question. This meant that your human life was serving something bigger. The question “why” often annuls the program of the question “how.” There is no single answer to the question “why,” but the very posing of such a question transports you to a different realm of existence. From the moment a being starts to ask the question “why,” he becomes human. The majority avoids the answer to the question “why” and “it is better for the children not to know about it,” so as not to upset them. But here we run into difficulties in response to the question “why”: I am either a free individual, or a medium, a servant, an “envoy” like in the work of Kharms, an intermediary of something that I cannot grasp. Then the answer to the question “why” might look like this: I am fulfilling a mission that is many times larger than my small life. Someone needed for me to be born. In some cases, this might be an answer that is entirely cultured. It might be the reproduction of a gene, of an uninterrupted line.

**EK:** A relay.

**IK:** A relay that has summoned me to pass something on to others. Behind my back there is something that was looking after my existence and made sense of it. Not about me physically, but about the meaning of my everyday activity. I am a representative of an infinite cultural process that was there before me.

**EK:** Cultural missionary work.

**IK:** Yes, there is religious missionary work, and there is cultural missionary work. You are convinced that culture

is connected with the secret of our origin, that it has on the one hand a religious nature, and on the other, a playful, aesthetic nature. There is a wonderful example of such a "bridge" in the work of Pushkin. He took the European tradition and invented the Russian literary language. This was his mission. At a young age, you discover that there are no bearings, there is neither sky nor earth. In middle age you grasp at your contemporaries. But in elder age, you come to hear more and more a kind of code of cultural transmission. This period began for me about five years ago already. I hear the past very well, but a kind of indifference towards my contemporaries is emerging.

**X**

This interview is published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum *Lissitzky - Kabakov, Utopia and Reality,* guest-curated by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.

**Anton Vidokle** is an editor of *e-flux journal*.

**Ilya and Emilia Kabakov** are Russian-born, American-based artists that collaborate on environments which fuse elements of the everyday with those of the conceptual. While their work is deeply rooted in the Soviet social and cultural context in which the Kabakovs came of age. Ilya Kabakov began his career as a children's book illustrator during the 1950s. He was part of a group of Conceptual artists in Moscow who worked outside the official Soviet art system. In 1985 he received his first solo show exhibition at Dina Vierny Gallery, Paris, and he moved to the West two years later taking up a six months residency at Kunstverein Graz, Austria. In 1988 Kabakov began working with his future wife Emilia (they were to be married in 1992); from this point onwards, all their work was collaborative. His installations speak as much about conditions in post-Stalinist Russia as they do about the human condition universally. Emilia Kabakov (née Kanevsky) attended the Music College in Irkutsk in addition to studying Spanish language and literature at the Moscow University. She immigrated to Israel in 1973, and moved to New York in 1975, where she worked as a curator and art dealer. Their work has been shown in such venues as the Museum of Modern Art, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Documenta IX, at the Whitney Biennial in 1997 and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg among others. In 1993 they represented Russia at the 45th Venice Biennale with their installation The Red Pavilion. The Kabakovs have also completed many important public commissions throughout Europe and have received a number of honors and awards, including the Oscar Kokoschka Preis, Vienna, in 2002 and the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, Paris, in 1995.

1
The fictional protagonist of Rudyard Kipling's “The Jungle Book” stories, a wild child character who is brought up by a pack of wolves.

2
The fictional protagonist of Rudyard Kipling's “The Jungle Book” stories, a wild child character who is brought up by a pack of wolves.

3
Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelstam and Anna Andreyevna Gorenko were Soviet modernist poets of the first half of the twentieth century, persecuted or disfavored by the regime.

4
For more information on Romantic Conceptualism, see https://www.e-flux.com/journal/29/.

5
Irina Aleksandrovna Antonova, director of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow since 1961.

6
Pavel Filonov, Russian painter contemporary to Malevich.

7
Konstantin Tsiolkovsky was a Soviet Union rocket scientist and pioneer of astronautic theory, which the author developed within a social utopian context.

8
A group of Russian artists and activists engaged in street protest actions. The group constituted in 2008 and are still active today.

Hu Fang

# The Door to Slow Sunset

*1.*

Félix Gonzales-Torres wrote this postcard on August 2nd, 1995. It was one week since he returned to New York, heading next to Miami. “It’s very hot down there, ” he wrote of Miami, “but it’s clean, and it has the most beautiful slow sunsets.”

The following year, Félix González-Torres passed away.

I got the chance to read these words recently from a friend who received this postcard, and I then realized that Félix’s “slow sunsets” live on today.

*2.*

Looking out my window, branches swing into wavy lines with a breeze, its shadows change from one moment to the next under the sun, low frequencies continue to be heard from the sky above this city. The light contours the insignificant bodies of ants crawling on the windowsill and the shadows of trees are captured onto the rockery in the Chinese garden. Rushing pedestrians seal their lips under this light.

*3.*

A kind of floor decoration, with patterns like ocean waves, is becoming popular these days: perhaps it’s meant to relieve our day-to-day stress. The pedestrians rush over the waves, which add a little bit of fun to their strolls. Sometimes we encounter highly ornamental gardens in the areas connecting metro stations to the street. A middle-aged “salary-man,” who pauses to make a phone call, nestles into this garden without even realizing it. There are more and more of these relaxing and ornamental spaces in the city; just like the *bonsai* on the office desk, they offer us a short break. Of course, fundamentally speaking, one can also say that all they offer to us is simple decoration, or the mere creation of an illusion.

But if this is about a desire to rest, then the impulse to rest should be directly related to the origins of architecture and the city. If we say the need to rest urges man of natural (“primitive”) instincts to “make himself a dwelling that protects but does not bury him” (Marc-Antoine Laugier, “An Essay on Architecture,” Paris, 1775), then today this same need to rest is encouraging us to return to nature, although this nature is no longer a primitive one. This nature has turned into an environment filled with eccentric human beings.

*4.*

We cross this city for certain encounters. There are certain expectations in our minds, for which we strive to eliminate or reduce interruptions from reality; the crowded subway, congested roads, anxiety from the passing of time. How should we understand all that happens in the course of moving across a city, and what do these "interruptions in reality" mean for us? Are they to be internalized as a component that we endure or reflect upon in our encounters? How, then, should we learn to meet in the unforeseen turbulence?

It is precisely those interrupted moments that need to be paid attention to, those sudden disconcerting moments that turn into peaceful calm, suggesting a mutually formative, yet ambiguous world that includes our emotions. This reality perhaps grows with conflicts, yet the world has not been troubled by its overall existence.

*5.*

This environment casts, shields, tolerates, and stimulates our existence. Joseph Grima once spoke of this contradiction: for example, an aircraft is one of the most efficient means of transportation, at the same time, it is an enclosed space isolated to the outside world, which may also become a space for our meditation. A discontinuous, non-homogenous, irregular contemporary life system, perhaps a catalyst to nurture what Joseph Grima, Shumon Basar, and Hans Ulrich Obrist call "posthastism," which is comparable to a writing process that's been constantly delayed in time, in an environment created by the progress of time itself. Its pursuit of a particular function of experience far exceeds its own definition. Like the Chinese film director Lou Ye's response, "In posthastism, we do not know what to do, so it is OK not to know."

On June 22, 2012, there was a *Posthastism Encounter* in Beijing, and its energy was then dispersed into the processes of the everyday. The flow of discourses, images, and sounds were of individual encounters of varying spaces and speeds, meantime adjusting to the turbulence of mutual rhythms, which allows time and space to establish a different relationship to us. All kinds of encounters are based on people's everyday practices in between the social and the individual systems that surround them, they are bound to meet: when Jijing Master (Silent Master) demonstrated a slow walk from his everyday practice during the *Posthastism Gathering* at the Pavilion, this became a silent correspondence to the encounter with Olafur Eliasson and his slow movement experiment in the Master of the Nets Garden in Suzhou in February, 2011. Hence, Shumon discovered the relationship between the spiritual brothers Jijing Master and the reclusive novelist Douglas Coupland, who lives in Vancouver and contributed a piece called "If posthastism is the answer, what is the question?"

As the architect Hsieh Ying-chun continued to rush about in the countryside for his "People's Architecture", Zheng Guogu's *Age of Empire* land project grew endlessly in its building and demolitions, and Alan Lau was still on the road between five cities within a week to supply economic consulting; Kang He was editing his novel *The Tale of Entering the City* that has been in the works for the last four years, Wu Na sat in front of her Guqin, started to play, while Yan Jun kept looking for a sound similar to a hummingbird's fluttering wings ... Among the constant frictions and clashes of social and individual bodies, what would these energies create, engender, and change?

With these tangible and intangible encounters, we enter into a context saturated in contradictions and vitalities. Over there, slight changes in thinking would lead to consequential effects in reality, like the butterfly effect. So far, we cannot distinguish its beginning or end; our senses of the progress of time are so limited, and our understanding of haste is as limited as that of posthastism.

*6.*

Each day, you wake up before the city. You watch the city waking up in the frigid morning air, imagining a loved one sleep, at the other end of the ocean. A car's headlight flickers towards a destination through the morning mist. The names of your friends that came to mind vaporize like the early morning dew.

It is the best moment to preserve this illusory beauty—before the arrival of contracts, before the body enters into its work mode—everything seems rather serene. And I had once believed that the color palette of the world is embedded in the first stream of sunshine at dawn, just as I used to believe the secret to music was hidden in notes, which would only be revealed as it is being performed.

**X**

**Hu Fang** is a fiction writer and curator based in Guangzhou and Beijing. He is the co-founder and artistic director of **Vitamin Creative Space** in Guangzhou and *The Pavilion* in Beijing. He has been involved in various international projects including the *documenta 12 magazines* as coordinating editor and Yokohama Triennale 2008 as co-curator. His published novels include *Garden of Mirrored Flowers and New Arcade, Shopping Utopia*.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi

# Nightmares and Screens: Notes on Two Movies

*Don’t Take Shelter*

Curtis’s nightmares are frightening. He dreams of a yellow brownish rain and of a tempest destroying everything, especially his family—his wife and daughter, and their house, one of those depressing comfortable houses scattered in the sad, flat landscape of the American Midwest. Is the nightmare to become his life or is his life already a nightmare? His life seems happy. He loves his wife Samantha and he loves his daughter Hannah, who is deaf. Thankfully, the company he works for gives Curtis good insurance that will cover the surgery to fix Hannah’s hearing. Samantha is a stay-at-home mom who supplements the family income. Money is tight, but thanks to his job, Curtis manages to pay the mortgage on the house.

But during the night, Curtis’s sleep is troubled by premonitions of a catastrophe. He decides to build a storm shelter in his backyard. To build the shelter he needs money. His salary is not enough for the task, so he goes to the bank and asks for a loan. “Beware, my boy,” says the good bank director. “These are difficult times, you have a family, running into debt is dangerous.” But Curtis insists. He needs money to build a shelter and protect his family from the imaginary tempest.

Significantly, director Jeff Nichols sets his movie at the end of 2008, after the Lehman Brothers breakdown. In the contemporary imagination, finance is more and more linked to catastrophic events.

Samantha is worried. Her husband’s behavior is strange. She is alarmed by the loan, and she understands that Curtis has mental problems. She knows that his mother suffers from paranoid schizophrenia.

Then things worsen. In order to dig a hole for the underground shelter, Curtis takes a backhoe from the place where he works. His boss finds out. Curtis is fired. He is now jobless, anguished, on the brink of a nervous breakdown. The shelter is ready, and one night a tornado warning sends him and his family into the shelter. They sleep in the shelter, but the tempest is not the final catastrophe, and the following morning the sky is bright and the neighbors are cleaning up debris.

Samantha persuades Curtis to go see a therapist.

The doctor suggests they take a beach vacation before Curtis begins real therapy. When they get back, he will be more relaxed and ready to start a new life. They go to the beach for a few days.

Curtis is on the beach with his daughter. They are building a sandcastle when the deaf and dumb little girl looks at the horizon and makes the sign of a storm. Curtis turns and looks at the sky: ominous clouds are announcing the most

frightening of storms. Samantha comes out of the house running, and the thick brownish rain of Curtis's nightmares begins to fall. She looks at the ocean, where the tide is pulling back and a tsunami is growing in the distance.

*Take Shelter* recalls Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, not only in the sequences that involve birds attacking humans, but in the inexplicable premonition of an indefinable threat. The premonition gives voice to the present global unconscious, the inner landscape of mankind ravaged by financial predation and coming environmental catastrophe.

Should we take shelter? Should we go to the bank and ask for a loan, and invest in protecting our future? Should we take our premonitions seriously?

Should we accept the idea that paranoia is the proper understanding of a danger we cannot dispel, or should we avoid paranoia?

Nichols answers our questions: investing our energy in building shelter is the way to fall into the trap, to accept the dilemma of depression and catastrophe. When the tempest comes, we won't be home anyway. We'll be too far away from the shelter.

September 11, 2012. Eleven years after the inconceivable explosion of terror, the signs of the tsunami are gathering in Europe. One million people march in Barcelona under the banner of Independent Catalonia, recalling Zagreb in 1992.

No way out, and no shelter in sight. Anti-German hatred is growing in the minds of the population of Southern Europe. The European hope is turning into a nightmare, as Northern Protestants don't want to pay the bill for "lazy" Southern Catholics and Orthodox. Goldman Sachs has sown wind, and now the harvest is ripe for a tempest.

The hope of the Arab Spring is turning into a nightmare, too: Syrian civil war threatens to spread beyond Syrian borders, and Islamists are taking the lead in the anti-Assad insurrection. The Egyptian revolution has been trashed by the democratically elected Islamist government. Israel threatens Iran and Iran threatens Israel, and Hezbollah announces the creation of a special force destined to occupy Northern Israel.

Money is our shelter, the only way to access life. But if you want money you have to simultaneously renounce life. Don't build shelter, it is surely going to be useless. Furthermore, building shelters is the job of those who are preparing the storm.

Stay relaxed. Don't be attached to life, and most of all: don't have hope, that poisonous, addictive drug. Only those who are hopeless know the unspeakable way to happiness.

## *Italian Reality, Frontline of Semiocapital*

> For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set. If a thing happens on television, we have every right to find it fascinating, whatever it is.
>
> —Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Some decades ago, screens started to intrude upon urban space, the house, and daily life. First it was the screen of television, then it was the screen of the computer, then everywhere in the city huge advertising screens filled the space of our visual perception. Then, little by little—or maybe all of a sudden—we entered the screen, and we lost the way back.

The opening shot of *Reality*, a movie by Matteo Garrone, is from the sky. We see Mount Vesuvius, then the city of Naples, then houses and streets, then cars, then a golden coach and coachmen dressed in Baroque style. Then we enter a garden: a wedding party and fancy ball, and people disguised as clowns, everybody taking pictures and filming with video cameras, then Enzo, the hero of the party, who has become famous as a star because he has taken part in the reality show *Il grande Fratello*, the Italian *Big Brother*.

Luciano (Aniello Arena) is a Neapolitan fishmonger who wants to be like Enzo. He wants to be one of the lucky people who enter the House of Big Brother. He approaches Enzo. Later, he goes to Rome for an audition. He starts to believe that he is going to be accepted, that he will enter the screen as a contestant, that he will win and gain fame and fortune for himself and his family.

He does not want to continue his normal life. He sells his fish shop, he gives away the tawdry things of his house, and he squabbles with his wife, who is conscious of the growing madness that is destroying her husband. But time passes, and the TV people don't call. Little by little, Luciano falls into depression. He spends his time watching the lucky winners on TV.

At the end, totally out of his mind, Luciano goes to Rome for a religious ceremony. He finds the Big Brother house and sneaks inside. He peeks at the idiotic activities of the lucky ones who are inside the screen, and he feels that he is happy there, and lies down in a corner of the house.

Then the camera detaches itself, going away, far away, sky high. Luciano is down there, getting smaller and smaller, and at the end he disappears, a small point of light in the

Boat filtering oil-infested water in the Gulf of Mexico after the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, 2010.

darkness of the night.

The fascination with the screen captures the mind, and the capture becomes irreversible, since everything happens in the space of the mind. *Reality* is the ultimate movie about contemporary power. When everybody in Italy is persuaded that Berlusconi has lost his power, Garrone tells us the truth. It's a deception. Berlusconi can be politically defeated, and some consultant from Goldman Sachs can take his place only to pursue the same politics as Berlusconi; a center-left coalition can win the next elections, but Italy will never come out from the screen.

The movie is simultaneously very much in the neorealist style and in the surrealist Baroque style, because Baroque is the reality of modern Italian history.

Those who think that Italy is a backward place—the corrupted side of good neoliberal postmodernity (as the Italian Left thinks)—are totally wrong. They do not understand that the reality of semiocapital is based on optical illusion and deception, on hypertrophy of the image and the inflationary proliferation of language, on the predatory manipulation of exchange (linguistic exchange and economic exchange, mixed together and confused).

Italian absentmindedness, Italian mafia culture, and Italian political corruption are absolutely not exceptions. They are not marginal or backward aspects of the present becoming of the world. On the contrary, Baroque is the style of semiocapitalism, and Italy is the frontline of the world regime of financial dictatorship.

Italy has been the laboratory of power since Benito Mussolini set the Baroque of Italian fascism (the decoration, the show, the simulation) against old Weberian bourgeois capitalism. The old ethically motivated Protestant bourgeoisie, the class that had built industrial modernity, was slowly exiting the scene of power. Italian people, who are deeply fascist because of the cultural and aesthetic history of their country, have not betrayed their mission: they have reclaimed the space of deception, of the phantasmagoria of immaterial semioproduction, whose culmination is financial abstraction.

The anti-fascist resistance was an expression of a small minority of cosmopolitan intellectuals. The '68 decade was

totally un-Italian, and the culture of *Autonomia Operaia* has been the only experience that smacks of cosmopolitan culture in a country that has never come out from the fascist screen.

Berlusconi, who represents the economic interests and the culture of the Sicilian-Milanese mafia, is the continuation of the Baroque style of Mussolini, finding in the TV screen its perfect framework.

In the twentieth century, Italy has been the laboratory of semiocapitalism—intimately Baroque, and intimately fascist.

**X**

**Franco Berardi,** aka "Bifo," founder of the famous Radio Alice in Bologna and an important figure of the Italian Autonomia Movement, is a writer, media theorist, and media activist. He currently teaches Social History of the Media at the Accademia di Brera, Milan. His last book, titled *After the Future,* is published AK Press.