“We are now in the second decade of the West taking interest in art from ‘other’ places. There are many reasons for this development, including the fall of communism in the early 1990s, the ensuing new geopolitical situation in Europe, and the rapid processes of globalization in that decade, all of which have effected lasting changes in the world-map of art.”

This book collects essays by Zdenka Badovinac, the forward-thinking Slovenian curator, museum director, and scholar. Badovinac has been an influential voice in international conversations rethinking the geopolitics of art after the fall of communism, a ferocious critic of unequal negotiations between East and West, and a historian of the avant-garde art that emerged in socialist and post-socialist countries in the last century. She has been, moreover, an advocate for radical institutional forms: museums responsive to the complexities of the past and commensurate to the demands of the present.

Gathering writings from disparate and hard-to-find sources alongside new texts, this book offers an essential portrait of a major thinker, and a crucial handbook of alternative approaches to curating and institution-building in the 21st century.

“Whip smart, politically astute, curatorially inventive: Zdenka Badovinac is nothing less than the most progressive and intellectually rigorous female museum director in Europe. This anthology includes key essays accompanying her series of brilliant exhibitions in Ljubljana, and is essential reading for anyone interested in the differences between former east and former west. For anyone seeking curatorial alternatives to the neoliberal museum model of relentless expansion and dumbed-down blockbusters, Badovinac is a galvanizing inspiration.”

—Claire Bishop, art historian and critic
ICI PERSPECTIVES IN CURATING

Comradeship
Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe

Zdenka Badovinac
Comradeship: Curating, Art, and Politics in Post-Socialist Europe is the third of the publication series PERSPECTIVES IN CURATING developed by Independent Curators International (ICI). It offers timely reflections by curators, artists, critics, and art historians on emergent debates in curatorial practice around the world.

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We had nice weather last week in Ljubljana, though I am unsure it still deserves that name. The young artist Nika von Ham and I were hanging out among the ruins of Moderna galerija and stretching our muscles. In the old days, Nika used to guard our collections. I remember she had a strange habit of laying down on the floor and posing for the security cameras. That, she remembers, was her art project. As we chatted, recounting the old days before the catastrophe, she recalled some useful things about the museum. I asked her if she would describe her recollections through drawing. Memories, after all, are the only thing left.
DESTRUCTION

These days my thoughts often drift back to Malevich… to his demand that all museums be burned to the ground. The only way the artworks they housed could be made relevant again, he said, was if they were incinerated—reduced to ashes, collected in jars, and placed in a pharmacy. Then, he allowed, contemporary artists could use them as a kind of medicine. I also think about Boris Groys, who sometimes reminded me that Malevich’s black square touched on the essence of revolution. It was not constructive, it did not imagine a new society, but instead pictured the radical destruction of his society and, indeed, every existing society. As Boris described it, the black square was an image of that destruction; destruction is all that survives permanent change. As such, it countermanded all the imagery of construction that followed the revolution— and, indeed, the project of building an ideal communist society altogether. Material forces are non-teleological, Boris said; they never attain their telos, never reach their end. Destruction was the only thing Malevich expected from the future. Being a revolutionary artist, on Boris’s terms, meant accepting a universal materialistic flow that destroyed all temporary and political orders.
WAR TIME

Today, we can speak only about one time, the time of catastrophe. When our museum still existed, we organized its collections around the idea of eleven times, one of which was the time of war. War time was the time of irruption; it brought contemporaneity. When the barracks of the Yugoslav People’s Army were vacated after the army’s departure of Slovenia, the building they left behind became a museum of contemporary art. The wars in the Balkans therefore directly inaugurated our contemporaneity. Every second there was a war happening somewhere in the ‘90s. Contemporary time, as we experienced it, was the time of war. How we should respond to war, and specifically the war in our vicinity, was thus a constant question. We assembled a symposium, called Living with Genocide, dedicated to the war in Bosnia and the genocide enacted against the Muslim population, and we organized an exhibition: artists donated their works to the future Ars Aevi museum in Sarajevo. Later this was called a museum of solidarity.
Those times, when a museum could be concerned with its own history, seem far away. Before the catastrophe, I believed the museum should be more open, should extend itself outward, into the world. At the same time, I thought it should be more and more concerned with itself, should understand itself as an independent system with its own history. Let me put it another way: a museum was a system that constantly reestablished its relationship toward the outside world. It did so by introducing certain strategies of art into the logic of its work. Not only did it represent art but it tried to observe itself from an outside position. By doing so, though, the museum was confronted by its own traumas and complicities: its instrumentalization by capitalism and ideology, its imbrication in hegemonic systems of knowledge. These pressures had only intensified before the catastrophe, taking forms that were new and hard to recognize.
THE AUTHENTIC INTEREST
OF THE MUSEUM

Everything is gone now. Yet I remember it so clearly, as if it was right in front of me. Long ago, my work concerned the need to reclaim concepts that had been absorbed by capitalism—ideas like “authenticity” that had come to seem useless or outdated. Capitalism was of two minds about authenticity. On the one hand, it was seen merely as an illusion. On the other, it was presented, within the world of consumption, however cynically, as a quality that commodities may nevertheless possess. We sought to reclaim the idea from this contradiction. Once the master narrative of the West began to crumble, and with it the universalist models of the museum, it became necessary to define the authentic interests of local institutions: their needs and the methods by which they could join international networks. Making connections was the imperative of the time, and it required adjusting to the circulation systems of global capitalism. Authentic interest meant the opposite: a kind of not-adjusting to global capitalist norms. This had little to do with either the cultivation of traditional identities or with isolationism. Rather, we sought connections of a different kind, with institutions and with people around the world who shared our urgencies.
HISTORICIZATION

It seemed at the time that capitalism would last forever. Our museum aimed to resist that system, and the cultural hegemonies that had grown from it. I was committed to the historicization of Eastern European art; that word, historicization, had a specific meaning in my work. It was associated with what was then arriving to history: not only new information into an existing system of knowledge but new ways of thinking that would necessarily transform that system. One of the aims of this kind of historicization was to oppose the single master narrative of history. I imagined a form of history that was not linear, that did not speak of mastery. Historicization was history-in-process, constantly supplementing and interrupting itself.
Local Avantgarde

Irwin

Maljković

Zhilyaev

Kabakov

Solakov
SELF-HISTORICIZATION

To this idea I added the notion of self-historicization—an idea that emerged from my encounter with certain features of Eastern European art in the socialist era. The local institutions of the non-Western world, when they existed at all, took a dismissive attitude toward such art. Self-historicization was an informal system practiced by artists who, in the absence of any suitable collective history, were compelled to search for their own historical and interpretive contexts. Artists archived documents of their own work, of other artists, of broad art movements and their conditions of production. In the post-socialist period, this practice continued, but assumed new forms and took on new subjects. Critical toward new forces in society that aimed to instrumentalize history, their subjects included the cultural legacy of socialism and, among artists living in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav partisan movement.
1960
NEW ARTISTIC PRACTICES

1991
WAR IN SLOVENIA
CONTEMPORARY ART

I remember it vividly. In 2011, we started operating in two locations—not only in the existing Moderna galerija but now also in the Muzej sodobne umetnosti Metelkova (+MSUM) [Museum of Contemporary Art]. Working across these two sites made it necessary for us to define the difference between a modern museum and a museum of contemporary art. As I thought about it then, contemporary art had two beginnings. The first came in the 1960s with the introduction of conceptual art, Land art, and performance art—or, as we called all of this in Yugoslavia, new art practices. These artists assumed a critical position toward modernism, including its central concepts of the autonomy of art, the originality of the artwork, and the neutrality of the white cube. A second beginning then arrived in the early 1990s with the fall of the communist regimes, the acceleration of the processes of globalization, and the expanded use of digital technology. Contemporaneity was therefore not easily demarcated in simple chronological terms. It did not have just one beginning. Contemporary art engaged most deeply with matters associated with its second beginning: the processes of globalization and their impact on individual local spaces; the instrumentalization of technology, science, ecology, and other forms of knowledge; the colonization of the private sphere; marginalized art traditions; and searching out the potentials of emancipatory social political traditions.
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Before the founding of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, museums looked primarily to the past, and largely organized art into national schools. With the founding of MoMA, the museum’s director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., inaugurated a new understanding of history that differed significantly from that model: a genealogy based on linear time, and advancing universal styles (like geometrical abstraction) over national schools. The museums of modernism that have followed have therefore been more interested in time than geography. Time determined quality for museums of modern art. In other words, a work of art of the highest order should, in a sense, be the quintessence of art’s development up to that point, while, at the same time, should also represent the transition to the new. Barr had imagined that this commitment to time would require the museum constantly to move forward—to be both contemporary and modern—yet over time it became primarily a museum of the modern past—a past that accumulated as time moved on.
THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS TIME

The modern and the contemporary were not discrete periods; indeed, the two categories can be said to overlap. The tradition of modernism remained alive right until the end (rumors suggest it may have contributed to the catastrophe); contemporary art in many ways encompassed the history of the modern. Where the two types of museums differed absolutely was in their respective models of time. The modern museum embraced a teleological and linear view of time. The contemporary art museum was characterized, in contrast, by a critique of that model, as well as of the modernist understanding of quality. Quality was connected to newness. What happened first was venerated, and therefore recorded in history. Anything that followed chronologically was automatically seen to lag behind and was, therefore, both irrelevant to the historical record and of questionable quality. Modern art in the non-Western world was, for a very long time, written off in this way as behind the times, a verdict that can only be handed down if one presumes the universal applicability of an unproblematized single and linear time. Today, such matters of order and priority are less important. With no more museums, nothing is “behind” anything else.
NARRATORS

Memories are all we have left today. All books, artifacts, and archives have been destroyed. Not only museums but schools and libraries have been wiped from the face of the earth. Our future will therefore be built only from our memories and what we tell each other, as it was in premodern times. I can still recall whole sentences of Alessandro Portelli’s essay on oral histories, though the title escapes me. He wrote that oral histories were fragmented and tied to the memory and subjective perspective of the individual, group, or class concerned. He wrote that while orality is saturated by writing, the memory behind it is not a passive depository of facts but an active process of creation of meanings. In premodern times, people remembered by telling stories. Only some of those stories were ever written down—and not even by the people who told them, but by learned individuals. After the collapse of the educational system, all memories are now equal, whether the one who recalls them is rich or poor, male or female, black or white. Today we are all narrators, and all narratives count the same. I have to say that I am relieved that I no longer must sit for whole days in front of a computer checking emails. People are listening to each other again! We realize how precious and unique our memories are.
THE SUSTAINABLE MUSEUM

These days we meet and talk in underground chambers, beneath the ruins of our former institutions; all we have left are our human resources. A diagram from an exhibition close to the end, *Low-Budget Utopias*, comes to mind, in which I illustrated four models of the museum. The first two, the universal museum and the global museum, were for me associated with MoMA. Such ideas seem absurd today, when there are no more museums. Then there was the sustainable museum. That one didn’t have much to do with the eco-friendly, energy-saving “green” museum people were talking about back then. The sustainable museum operated in a low-budget environment. Though Slovenia was not such a poor country, it afforded little money to culture, so we were always enduring little catastrophes, budget-wise. Such a museum, which rested on human efforts in specific material conditions, could even operate without a building. Finally, there was the meta-museum of Walter Benjamin, which offered an outside perspective on both art and the museum. Comprised of both copies and originals, this museum contained symbols testifying to what we once called the canon. The sustainable and meta-museums did not require constant expansion or the perpetual acquisition of more and more objects. They were designed to survive catastrophes like this one. Such catastrophes do not mean the end of the human needs embodied by museums, even if we do not use that name. What matters is collective memory: not only the memories of experts or museum guards but the public and the fire brigades.
These days I often think back to the 1980s. As their world was about collapse into war, Yugoslav artists were already thinking about how to build a new world: one that might resurrect the spirit of the avant-garde, if not the Reformation. On the night of October 23, 1984—the date is etched
into consciousness—The Sisters of Scipio Nasica Theater staged an event called the *Retrogarde Event Resurrection*. Members of the group went to all the institutional theaters in Ljubljana and, like Martin Luther calling the Catholic church to order, nailed on their doors a call for theater’s renewal. The Sisters had no mercy for anything institutionalized; indeed, on their founding in 1983 they had announced their eventual self-termination, seeking to avoid becoming an institution themselves. True to their word, the group resolved itself in 1987 and was resurrected with a new vision and name. I have often thought that if institutions of art followed the dictates of art, they would be inevitably changed in just this way: transformed from inside by the very art that they housed, or perhaps birthing new and parallel institutions. “Institutional building” was my term for this. I first used the phrase when assembling a retrospective of the collective project Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), which included The Sisters alongside IRWIN, Laibach, and five other departments. Unhappy with the institutions of the socialist era, the NSK groups sometimes infiltrated the institution like a Trojan horse, aiming to transform it from the inside. As often, they accorded to themselves the institutions’ duties, building for themselves the history the institutions had ignored. Unwilling to accept the marginalization or underfunding of Slovene art, they developed their own international networks and sources of funding. NSK could have survived without museums. That is a good lesson for our present situation.
No museums, no careers, no Documenta, no Venice. No competition over prestige, no funding, no government. Just a bloody fight for survival, with no hypocrisy or masquerades. I recognize now that this struggle did not start with the catastrophe. My years at the Moderna galerija were already a battle, one I hardly would have survived without a community held together not just by family ties or personal friendship but by a cause bigger than any of us as individuals. Through war to peace, through socialism to capitalism, from the Yugoslav dinar to the Slovene tolar and finally to the euro. The last moment, remember, when Slovenia joined the European Union, was somehow meant to signal the end of the great social transition! How ironic, then, that this transition was accompanied by the election of a right-wing government in Slovenia and, we feared, a new era of fascism.

But that bad future didn’t last. The living memory of civil society from the 1980s was too strong. That spirit reawakened and answered the threat. A spirit of collectivism lives on, too, in L’Internationale, the international confederation of institutions launched in the very place where Nika and I sit now. Our museums are gone, and we don’t meet as often since we can no longer travel by plane. But our friendship has only grown stronger. Cynical reason having lost its purchase, there is now even greater idealism among us. The senses of solidarity and shared humanity once left in the dustbin of history are in the new light of aftermath being revived and redefined. I think we will survive this disaster. My friends are alive and I can hardly wait to see them roar again like young lions—to sit down with them again in some ruin and start planning a renewed world.