



Ana Janevski, Roxana Marcoci, Ksenia Nouril, eds.. *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*. MoMA Primary Documents Series. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. 408 pp. \$40.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-63345-064-6.

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Published on H-SHERA (April, 2019)

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Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe is an anthology that takes as its point of departure the transformation years between 1989 and 1991 in Central and Eastern Europe. Changes caused by the fall of communism and its effects on artistic practices and theory are the main focus of this impressive and extensive publication. The book is a work of three editors, Ana Janevski, Roxana Marcoci, and Ksenia Nouril, and a result of several years of research initiated by the establishment of MoMA's Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives (C-MAP) project in 2009. Since its start, C-MAP's focus has been on researching art histories from outside Western hegemonic models. This anthology is one of several publications from MoMA's Primary Documents series, following on from their 2002 publication, *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for East and Central European Art since the 1950s*, which covers an earlier period.

The common "desire of the authors of this anthology is to contest the ecumenical version of Western modernity. In reclaiming their own histories, they offer new perspectives that underscore the significance of the socialist legacy as an intellectual and moral force in both local and global contexts" (p. 12). This objective has proven to be essential when trying to analyze and understand

local art histories in Central and Eastern Europe. There is a need to dismantle the idea of genealogical roots of contemporary art to Western modernity without considering local histories and particularities. The anthology thereby aims to present the former Eastern socialist bloc not as a homogeneous entity but rather as a complex and diverse region. The authors explain the region's singularities by including concrete artistic practices and different sociopolitical conditions.

The anthology is divided into seven chapters. Each chapter starts with three texts that were specifically commissioned for this book: a conceptual essay providing a framework for the subject of the chapter, a summary essay, and an interview with an artist or artists by a member of the C-MAP project. One such interview is an interview by Nouril with Dmitry Vilensky, a member of the Russian art collective Chto Delat (What Is to Be Done). In the interview, Vilensky recalls the legacy of the Russian avant-garde on the current activities in the School of Engaged Art in St. Petersburg (established in 2013). He explains: "We believe in not only establishing links to the ideas of historical avant-gardes but also in testing how they might function in a completely new political, economic, and social situation" (p. 233). Vilensky also says about engaged art today, "I think we—artists

and the art world—should provide fewer services aimed at improving the existing disorder of the neoliberal world, leaving that to the vast number of proper NGOs with serious budgets and structures, and instead focus our energies on forming and addressing not-yet-existing communities” (p. 234). The interview provides insights into the current work of Chto Delat and their activities at the School of Engaged Art but also discusses in depth the relationship between art and politics and activism. The interview eloquently completes the introduction to this chapter by Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, who asks, “Can art seriously change the world?” She observes the double paradox of art and hence states that “it must be continuously freed from its prison within the neoliberal system and reclaimed if it is to fulfil its latent potential to effect change. Yet neither can the field of culture exist independently of the fields of state and socioeconomics—in short, real politics” (p. 227). Similarly, but more cynically, feminist art historian Angela Dimitrakaki observes that socially engaged art “must therefore deny its identity as an experimental form of unknown outcome played out in the biopolitical terrain with the purpose of leading a system-wide transformation—which is what makes it an avant-garde.”[1] Or, in other words, socially engaged art lies in the biopolitical arena; it cannot exist “outside” of the system in an autonomous art zone. Maybe it is exactly like Artur Żmijewski points out in Petrešin-Bachelez’s introduction: “By becoming once again dependent, art may learn how to be socially useful” (p. 230). In sum, chapter 5, “Maintaining the Social in Post-Socialism: Activist Practices and Forms of Collectivism,” opens up important questions regarding the relationship of art and politics existing in the current neoliberal capitalist condition.

Vít Havránek’s excellent essay, “The Post-Bipolar Order and the Status of Public and Private under Communism,” explores the effects of the fall of communism. Havránek puts it precisely when he states that after the fall of communism, the West was dealing with “the loss of its own al-

ternative and the polarity it had known. Let us not forget that Marxism as an idea of a socially just society was a project of Western political theory” (p. 185). He explores the tension between private and public space in relation to artistic resistance in the 1960s and 1970s/80s. Based on artistic examples like *Happsoc* (referring to the merge of “happening” and “society”) declaration of 1965, Havránek demonstrates how a conceptual artistic action, invisible to the authorities, could become a subversive gesture that aimed to reclaim the public space for artistic activities. In their *Happsoc* manifesto, artists Stano Filko, Alex Mlynárčik, and Zita Kostrová “declared all of Bratislava, along with all its inhabitants, buildings, balconies, dogs, etc., to be a work of art” (p. 188). Conversely, in comparing the situation in 1970s Yugoslavia, Havránek observes that in the environment of relative cultural autonomy, artists were still responding and distancing themselves from communist ideology by employing subversive gestures in the public space. For example, the performance *Triangle* (1979) by Sanja Iveković demonstrates her rejection of local state control over individuals by sitting on her balcony pretending to masturbate while reading “Western literature” in “full view of the police looking on from the surrounding rooftops” during the procession led by the communist leader Josip Tito (p. 191). Havránek makes a correct observation in his essay here that the modest condition of these “Eastern” artists has resulted in common non-studio practice and closer engagement with the *real world* in these artists’ art practice.

It is great to see an essay discussing Romani’s exclusion, the topic so inseparable from the region but overlooked. Tímea Junghaus’s essay, “Our Beloved Margins: The Imaginings of the Roma Transformative Subject and Art History Scholarship in Central Europe,” claims that in Central and Eastern Europe, individual states “still retain control over access to political rights and economic opportunities; where under the banner of free speech, hate speech has become the public norm;

and where anti-Gypsyism is still considered a moderate attitude” (p. 381). Referring to Roma scholars, Junghaus argues that “the Roma community should be considered Europe’s largest colony” (p. 382). Hence, the argument to employ postcolonial theories to understand Roma oppression is proposed in this essay. A similar position is adopted by artist Ladislava Gažiová who bases her library project Romafuturism on postcolonial theories, the African American diaspora, and Afrofuturism. Gažiová, an artist and intellectual born in 1981 to a Slovak-Romani family, compares Romani racialization with colonial African American history and explains that “Roma know what slavery, non-acceptance, exclusion, sterilization of women, uproar, and police violence mean. In particular, the uproar and the impossibility of returning to their own history, the ignorance of their own background, is, in my view, the problem that the Roma share with the Afro-Americans.”[2] Junghaus’s text further offers an art historical reading of Romani representation as strangers, pagans, and aliens and delineates how “the Roma body has been denigrated, sexualized, and feminized in Western art” (p. 382). This is why, in her essay, Junghaus argues that the main objective of the Roma Contemporary Art Space, Gallery 8, in Budapest, is to expose “the Western universality of art as a historical legend” (p. 385). Hence, similar to the overall aim of the authors of this anthology, the objective of Roma emancipation and of Roma art institutions also contests the ecumenical version of Western modernity. For now, there is only hope that while Central and Eastern Europe is looking for its identity and place in New Europe, it will not forget to consider its minorities and their own histories and identities.

In the anthology, there is only one essay mapping the situation in art and culture in Ukraine: “Art and Antagonism: Here and Now” by Oleksiy Radynski. Radynski explains that “the most common one-term description that brings together the disparate elements of the atomized Ukrainian society is the adjective ‘post-Soviet’” (p. 257). Dis-

cussing art’s role in the neo-capitalist contemporary Ukraine, Radynski says that “art is entering the fields abandoned by the state in an attempt to repair the devastating effects of neo-capitalist policies and their impact upon social life” (p. 259). Radynski describes the shift when art started to address the matters external to art itself, especially politics and religious backlashes, which led to “a violent response on the part of local authority, supported by the far-right groups that expressed their hatred towards art and art-related critical practices in the most telling and sometimes violent forms.” As a result, the Visual Culture Research Centre was shut down. Radynski therefore suggests that art rather than being a “regime’s servant or an extravagant outsider” is becoming “a sovereign player in the social field.” The author concludes that this will allow “art to reclaim the social role that it was stripped of—not to simulate reality but to form it” (p. 260). It is great to see Radynski’s essay included in the anthology, as Ukraine is often ignored among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe covers a vast and heterogenous field and represents a selection of critical essays collected specifically for this anthology, which cover a vast region of Central and Eastern Europe. However, some countries are represented more than others. For example, there is no mention of Albania or Montenegro, and Ukraine, for instance, is represented only in one essay. The anthology covers well important themes related to the post-communist context of art and culture of Central and Eastern Europe. However, it will be interesting to see how some current sociopolitical issues will further form and influence art and culture in this region. As the editors Janevski and Marcoci point out in their introduction: “In a time of resurgent nationalisms and xenophobic sentiment, the audacity to embrace complexity, envision future trajectories informed by multifaceted histories and build discourses through network of alliances and collaborations (both political and aesthetic)

that refuse the primacy of borders is increasingly urgent and relevant” (p. 13).

It would be crucial to observe and critique these and other issues in the region after 2004 (when many of the countries entered the European Union), which would hopefully happen in the next comprehensive art and theory anthology devoted to Central and Eastern Europe. It would be important to cover such problems as the church and its dominant position in the region, concurrently with the rise of right-wing governments, as it affects women’s rights, abortion laws, and LGBTI people’s rights; the lack of hospitality toward refugees coming from non-Catholic countries; the ways the Chernobyl disaster site became a tourist destination; or, the ways the Ukrainian revolution and the annexation of Crimea influenced the development of culture and position of art institutions in the country. These are just some of the many questions and issues concerning the diverse, complex, and vast region of Central and Eastern Europe today.

Overall, *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe* consists of a great range of essays discussing many essential topics related to the region, including curatorial practice of the former Eastern bloc, democracy and the New Europe, art and politics and debates around art’s relevance in society, gender discourses and invisibility of a nascent Eastern European feminist and gender discourse, or the Roma subject in relation to art history of Central Europe. The editors envision that this book will “trigger new reflections and fresh thinking about the hybridization of modernism and the contemporary situation, and that it will contribute to a reorganization of knowledge and scholarly research” (p. 15). I believe that this publication certainly has got all the means to succeed in doing so.

Editorial note: The original version of this review incorrectly stated that this anthology is C-MAP’s second publication.

Notes

[1]. Angela Dimitrakaki, “The Avant-Garde Horizon: Socially Engaged Art, Capitalism and Contradiction” (paper presented at the public forum Socially Engaged Practice: Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics or Economics?, Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, with Austrian collective Wochen-Klausur, March 3, 2013), 6. This public forum was organized in the context of the curatorial project ECONOMY (www.economyexhibition.net) in Edinburgh and Glasgow, January to April 2013.

[2]. Ladislava Gažiová, “Svou historii si musí past Romové sami,” interview by Tereza Stejskalová, Artalk.cz, <https://artalk.cz/2018/02/23/svou-historii-si-musi-psat-romove-sami/> (my translation).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-shera>

Citation: Denisa Tomkova. Review of Janevski, Ana; Marcoci, Roxana; Nouril, Ksenia, eds. *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe: A Critical Anthology*. H-SHERA, H-Net Reviews. April, 2019.

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