Klara Kemp-Welch. *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe, 1965–1981.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019. 480 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-262-03830-0.

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Klara Kemp-Welch's latest book, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981*, challenges the idea of unconnected isolated art production of the Cold War period by exploring experimental artists' networks. The book specifically addresses the period running up to the Prague Spring to the end of the 1970s. Geographically the focus of the publication is on the region of East Central Europe. Kemp-Welch explores the "art world" as "the web of connections that made ideas circulate and things happen." The aim of the book is to reveal "how the art world worked in a non-market context and how it related to wider Cold War-era questions of people versus power" (p. 4). Kemp-Welch returns to writing by György Konrád, similarly like in her previous book *Antipolitics in Central European Art* (2014), where she referred to Konrád's landmark work *Antipolitics* (1982). Konrád's call for strengthening "the horizontal human relationships of civic society against the vertical relationships of military society" is proposed here by Kemp-Welch in relation to the interactions and relationships among the representatives of the experimental underground art world in Eastern Europe.[1]

This book, similarly to other recent publications, contradicts the traditionally believed notion of isolated art production of the Cold War. The book highlights the links and networks within cultural production in Eastern Europe. Similarly, in 2018, Beáta Hock and Anu Allas edited the collection *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present*, which links regional art historical discussions with the global context. The same has been observed about theater, as argued in the edited volume by Christopher B. Balme and Berenika Szymanski-Düll, *Theatre, Globalization and the Cold War* (2018). The theater is here reconceptualized in terms of transnational and global processes.

Networking the Bloc is divided chronologically into three parts. The first part, "Mobilization," focuses on the period from the mid-1960s to 1972; the second, "Points of Passage," covers 1972-75; and the last section, "Convergences," tells the story of the period 1975-79. The book chronologically ends in the period of the "formation of the Solidarity movement in Poland, when priorities changed and the experimental activities that had characterized the previous decade shifted in the face of a new set of sociocultural concerns" (p. 10). From a vast number of examples presented in the book, I will highlight three ways (presented by Kemp-Welch) artists were networking during the Cold

War: community formation through friendship circles, mail art, and the Edinburgh festival.

Friendships served as art networks and the audience for art. During the 1960s and 1970s in East Central Europe, gatherings in remote villages with circles of trustworthy friends fulfilled the role of a small private art world and formed an aspect of community. However, Kemp-Welch's focus here is specifically on friendships with foreign artists and the East-West exchange rather than on the unofficial communities of artists in the Eastern bloc. For instance, when talking about Alex Mlynárčik's work, the book focuses on his friendship with French critic Pierre Restany. "Mlynárčik's friendship with Restany was one of the earliest instances of mutually invigorating unofficial, noncommerical East-West exchange" (p. 37). Similarly, when describing Milan Knížák's work, the book describes his Aktual Art activities, which were meant to grow to an illegal movement in Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, the main focus is on Knížák's links with Western Fluxus artists. It was art critic Jindřich Chalupecký who introduced Knížak to Allan Kaprow. Consequently, Knížák became the director of Fluxus East and expressed a sense of community with Western artists: "We are all basically the same. Most artists are searching for humanity, they are looking for something that connects people" (p. 50). Fluxus was a 1960s avant-garde international community of arists, poets, and musicians whose vision was to bring art closer to life.

Kemp-Welch specifically uses the umbrella term "experimental" over "conceptualist" to describe the art practices examined here. She chooses this terminology over "conceptualist" because of the connotations of the term "conceptualist," such as having roots in the work of Joseph Kosuth or being specifically Anglo-American terminology. Experimental then "designates an attitude rather than any identifiable movement or style" (p. 6). The omission, then, of a discussion on Polish artist Jan Świdziński's *Art as Contextual Art* (1976) seems surprising. Since Świdziński's contextual art theory was a criticism of the universal ideas of conceptualism and was concerned with social and economic issues in their particular context. Similarly, like the other two artists mentioned above, Świdziński also met with his Western peer, Kosuth, to discuss their perceptions of art.

In the section "Communication on Distance," the book focuses on mail art as described by Jean-Marc Poinsot in his book *Mail Art: Communication à distance. Concept*, from 1971. Poinsot's book includes Hungarian artists Gyula Konkoly and Endre Tót and Czechoslovak Petr Štembera. Kemp-Welch refers to Poinsot's observation about the division of Europe by the Iron Curtain: "This feeling of the division of Europe, we had it from a political perspective, but from the point of view of relationships between people, because things happened by post, I myself never had any difficulties in communicating with the artists I had invited." Kemp-Welch comments that it was also maybe Poinsot's young age at that time which made "the impossible possible" (p. 95). In addition to mail art examples presented in Poinsot's book, Kemp-Welch also includes, for instance, Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski's conceptual NET proposition circulated by mail, which prompted East-East and East-West exchanges. NET was their nine-point artistic statement produced in Polish and English, which they signed and mailed to more than 350 recipients. Kemp-Welch explains that NET was "pioneering theorization of the alternative network" (p. 101).

In the section "Edinburgh Arts," Kemp-Welch focuses on the influence of Edinburgh-based gallerist Richard Demarco, who, as she describes, was "fostering dialogue and bringing a shared spirit of a common European culture to Scotland" (p. 223). The book presents Demarco's influence on mediating and connecting artists through the Edinburgh festival activities. The author describes him as an excited personality, "suddenly exclaiming: 'My God!' in excitement at an artwork and grasping them by the shoulders, before snapping a photo-

graph and giving out half a dozen business cards and recommendations of people to meet" (p. 224). Those of us who met Demarco can relate to this description of his personality. Among many artists who presented thanks to Demarco in Edinburgh, Kemp-Welch mentions Polish Tadeusz Kantor, who was, like Joseph Beuys, invited to present on his philosophy of participating artists as part of the Edinburgh Arts program launched by Demarco in 1972. The importance of Edinburgh demonstrates that when 2015 was declared the Year of Tadeusz Kantor by UNESCO, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow organized the exhibition highlighting Kantor's success in Edinburgh. The exhibition and the accompanying publication focused on three artists—Beuys, Kantor, and Demarco—who met in 1973 in Edinburgh.

Despite its title, *Networking the Bloc* extends its focus beyond the borders of Soviet bloc countries. As Kemp-Welch explains: "While my ambition was to plot a topography of experimental exchanges within the Soviet bloc, the scope of the material made it necessary to extend my focus beyond the borders of the Soviet satellite countries" (pp. 410-11). Overall the book gives an impression of focusing more on the East-West exchange rather than the networks within the bloc. However, the reason is most probably the fact, as Kemp-Welch argues, that "East-East relations often took detours via Western way stations" (p. 411). To summarize, *Networking the Bloc* is written in Kemp-Welch's distinctive style. The writing is clear, precise, well researched, and comprehensibly presented. The book adopts Piotr Piotrowski's horizontal comparative approach to art history and covers a wide range of artistic examples, and it is based on interviews with the artists conducted by the author. *Networking the Bloc* presents an important publication in understanding the art activities from the former Eastern bloc not in isolation but rather in the context of global art history. Kemp-Welch rightly concludes that "experimental art in Eastern Europe has always been and remains inseparable from the collective production of a global art history" (p. 414).

Note

[1]. György Konrád, *Antipolitics: An Essay*, trans. Richard E. Allen (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 74.

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