

CFront Ending¹

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“What is this third world artist?” – you will ask me. “Which third world are you talking about? There is no second world, is there?”

Yes, I will answer, the second world – the world of ungifted, clinical, weak-minded socialism – does not exist, but the third world is still around. It is the world of fragmented obscurantism, the world of old technologies, the world of indigent market, the world that has suffered the catastrophe of communal ideology, the world of semi-decayed ethic and aesthetic rags. This world does not belong to the West, East, North or South. It is everywhere. It is localized in a great number of spaces, as a torn scrappy blanket, which covers the gorgeous overripe body of modern neo-liberalism. The third world is the world of despised discourses and wasted hot flesh outbursts, spit and sperm in the poor districts of Mexico City and Brooklyn, in the Viennese Turkish ghetto and in the heart of Moscow. This excited, tongue-tied, pimple-faced third world also needs an artist. How else could it be? Then why can't I be this artist and explain to you what kind of unpleasant art he is trying to create?

Alexander Brener, *Third World Artist*²

As I enter the production of epilogues in order to announce that a project is ending, I may be tempted to declare the bankruptcy of a discourse. If I need justification, I can always make it clear that such a conclusion is inspired by postmodernism. My atrophied sensibility towards the “shocking” effect of any discourses on the “end”³ is easily explained by the contemporary cultural climate – characterized

¹ After the title of Woody Allen's 2002 movie *Hollywood Ending*. Hollywood and its machines for producing illusions are falling apart like the tower of Babel. The cinema from around the world, and the people making it, cannot communicate without translators. Every one speaks their own language, the translator is fired, and the canon gets lost in translation. And Hollywood does not cease to be ending.

Communication Front /international project of electronic and media art and culture/ took place in Plovdiv, Bulgaria in June 1999, 2000 and 2001. You can find the CFront 2000 book online at <<http://www.cfront.org/cf00book>>.

² Alexander Brener, *Third World Artist*, 25 March 1998 <<http://www.cfront.org/cf00book/en/alexander-thirdworld-en.html>>.

³ Apologies to the “end” had something of a boom after 11 September 2001.

as it is by contradictory stipulations inherent in expressions such as postsocialist, postmodern, posthistorical, postindustrial, postcolonial, or postfeminist. I can continue juggling with the concepts, closely following the contemporary political, social and cultural events. I may however end up giving in to the inertia of my assessment, and be left with no choice but to debate the usage of ending and post.

The stream of speculative stories of the Hegelian type is not at its end, despite the general apathy towards them. They continue to arouse the curiosity of an unprejudiced part of the public. Whether they announce the end of history (Alexandre Kojève, 1946; Francis Fukuyama, 1992), of ideology (Daniel Bell, 1960), of art and art history (Hans Belting, 1984; Arthur Danto, 1996), of work (Jeremy Rifkin, 1994), of the nation state (Kenichi Ohmae, 1996), of utopia (Russell Jacoby, 1999), or yet more daringly the end of democracy (Jean-Marie Guéhenno, 2000), of imperialism (Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, 2000), of the West (Patrick Buchanan, 2001), or globalism (John Ralston Saul, 2004). Similar to hypertext, the list keeps swelling up, accumulating everything on its way. What at first glance may look subversive hides behind an urge to restructure the contents of whatever is supposedly ending, and ends up at the service of finding arguments for assembling the skeleton and proving the historical inevitability of the New World Order.

Some background, or Globalization revisited

It should be remembered that the word 'democracy,' which is used so frequently in the modern mass media, is by no means the same word 'democracy' as was so widespread in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The two words are merely homonyms. The old word 'democracy' was derived from the Greek 'demos', while the new word is derived from the expression 'demo-version.'

Viktor Pelevin, *Generation 'P'*⁴

The radical changes in social identity and the organization of social life both in the East and the West, which became evident at the end of the eighties, have been termed by some, somewhat

⁴ Viktor Pelevin, *Generation 'P'* (1999), translated from Russian by Andrew Bromfield, Faber and Faber (2000).

daringly, 'Revolutions.' The series of 'Revolutions' is not formed only of the 'Velvet' revolutions, the events around the fall of the Berlin wall, but also the revolution in information technologies, the rise of the Internet and genetic engineering. Some experts classify the latter as the "Revolution of Knowledge 1950-2001".⁵

After the fall of the Berlin wall and the toppling of ideological taboos, revolution(s) with their entire arsenal of symbols and historical experience, once more turn out to be a good capital investment. At this point we can see revolution as a convertible strategy or an advertising instrument of business.

Kojève,⁶ as one of the first in the multitude of heralds of the end, immediately after the Second World War announced that henceforth the "social revolution" was impossible.⁷ And declared the capitalism of Marx's day dead. The term 'capitalism' appears in the nineteenth century. And while Karl Marx provided it with a precise, specific meaning, according to Kojève his prognoses will not come true in the new global capitalism. This is because these so well argued prophecies about "social revolution" as a historical necessity, based on the theory of added value and capitalism destroying the social balance, are stripped of their logic in the new capitalism. Marx and his followers were wrong in only one point: They assumed that the capitalists would remain naïve, superficial, blind and would always lack understanding. In contrast, the new capitalists "have rearranged capitalism in a Marxist kind of way" in order to present capitalism not so much as "revolutionary" or "dictatorial," but as peaceful with a democratic face.

⁵ This is the title of an article in my nine-year-old son's encyclopedia of history: *Das grosse Arena Lexikon der Weltgeschichte*, German edition of: *The Kingfisher History Encyclopedia*, 1999.

⁶ Alexandre Kojève, French philosopher of Russian origin (born Aleksandr Vladimirovich Kozhevnikov), specialist of Hegel who introduced Hegel to French scholarship, held important positions in the French Ministry of Economic and Financial Affairs, was influential in the GATT treaty negotiations and the shaping of the EEC (European Economic Council), cf. <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/k/kojeve.htm>>.

⁷ Alexandre Kojève, *Colonialism from a European Perspective*, published in English translation in *Interpretations*, 2001/1, pp. 115-130. Online in Russian translation at <<http://www.politizdat.ru/article/16>>. This is Kojève's lecture at a conference in Düsseldorf in front of a group of businessmen on 16 January 1957, which Carl Schmitt invited him to do on the topic of "Underdeveloped Countries."

Kojève also speaks of the new colonialism. For the type of colonialism typical of the new capitalism, territory is not of primary importance. The new colonialism is not based on political, but rather on economic colonizing. In this process even the highly developed countries end up self-colonized.

After the end of the Cold War the Western world has imposed the neoliberal model to the countries of the former Eastern Bloc – through democratic standards and the free market, the neoliberal ideology, wars, the pressure to innovate or the “idea of Human Rights.”

Just like in Marcuse’s and the Frankfurt School’s “critical theory,” Kojève rejects the notion that there is a principal difference between capitalism and socialism, arguing that the two systems are modifications of industrial society, in which technical progress sustains the creation of a “total” system.⁸ Some contemporary theorists of the crises of capital accumulation, such as the circle around “Materials for a new anti-imperialism,”⁹ use similar arguments to explain some of the phenomena related to the Yugoslav Republic, the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, and the “transition” of the countries in this category from “state capitalism” through privatization to “market capitalism.”

At the same time, even such conservative authors as the French linguist of Bulgarian origin Tzvetan Todorov have almost understood, and note that communism is a sinuous path leading from capitalism to capitalism.¹⁰

⁸ In an art context, Boris Groys develops a similar argument: *Now, the Communist project in itself was an extremely radical utopian universalist project, as I already said. And the self-isolation of the Communist nations, of the Communist states, of the Communist world, had nothing to do with a kind of a pre-modern way or mode of existence of a closed, traditional society.* Boris Groys, *The Complicity of Oblivion*, presented at the MoMA symposium of 23 March 2003, *East of Art: Transformations in Eastern Europe* <<http://www.artmargins.com/content/moma/groys.html>>.

⁹ See, in German, their analysis of the beginnings of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, “*Ethnicizing the social – The transformation of the Yugoslav society in the medium of the war*” <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/archiv/Internationalismus/jugoslawien/materialien_06/>. Not available online, but also relevant here, in German, is “*Das Ende des sowjetischen Entwicklungsmodell – Beiträge zur Geschichte der sozialen Konfrontationen mit dem sozialistischen Akkumulationskommando*” (“*The end of the Soviet development model – Contributions to a history of the social confrontations with the socialist accumulation command*”), 1992.

The Eastern Bloc meets the Western World

Levi Strauss & Co.

Original Riveted

Quality Clothing

Trademark

Since 1873

For over 130 years

Our celebrated high quality denim riveted jeans have been before the public.

This is a pair of them!

Created by Levi Strauss in 1873 – has become an American tradition, symbolizing the vitality of the West to people all over the world.

We shall thank you to carefully examine the sewing, finish and fit.

See that this pair bears our famous red tab.

Levi Strauss & Co.

Printed on the inside of a pair of blue jeans, size 29/32, on the back of the front pocket.

The Cold War was the only war to be won in advance – the end of this war being marked by the beginning of the wars in South-Eastern Europe. The essence of these historic events, which dramatically changed the lives of millions of people, can be condensed into one little sentence: “One red was replaced by another red.” What I have in mind is how the red flag, symbol not only just of revolution at large, but concretely of the revolution of the councils, the Soviets, was swiftly replaced by the red color of the trademarks of Coca Cola and Levi’s red tap,¹¹ where once again the color red is meant to symbolize the shortest path to freedom.¹²

What totalitarian technocratic universalism had failed to achieve – the new type of capitalism took care of with no effort. All ideological considerations left behind, the pragmatic needs and convenience are the driving forces of contemporary events.

The feeling of total universality is achieved through the hegemony of the free market. The world of trademarks excludes

¹⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *L’homme dépaycé*, 1996 (published in Bulgarian under the title “*In a foreign land*”, 1998).

¹¹ ... and McDonald’s, and Kentucky Fried Chicken, etc.

¹² Inspired by Ivaylo Ditchew, *From affiliation to national identity. Politics of the image* (in Bulgarian), Sofia 2002.

any differences. Prejudices based on race, gender, age and territory no longer affect the statistics of who comes into the category of the average citizen with consumer power. In this unified world the complacent consumer is regarded as the transterritorial subject of the new class, the genuine new engine of historical progress.

The standardization of life thus imposed has given rise to a new feeling of global mutual dependency. Of course this feeling does not lead to a yearning for freedom, equality and solidarity. It is, rather, the dependency of the stock exchange on armed conflict, or the omnipresence of the mass media and communication channels in a bundle with CNN's global weather forecast.

Ending or New

“Political correctness” – this type of public consensus producing complex discords, decent inequalities, appeased clashes, peace-kept conflicts.

Alexander Brener, *The Art of Leading a War Against an Institution*¹³

In his essay *“Three Decades after the End of Art,”* Arthur Danto confirms that he indeed had the intention to announce the end of the historical development of art, and *“that an era of astonishing creativity lasting perhaps six centuries in the West had come to an end, and that whatever art was to be made from then on would be marked by [...] a post-historical character.”*¹⁴

There is something attractive in Danto's idea to categorically break with historicity, and correspondingly with totality. This radical breaking, contrasting with the slow and sometimes sluggish natural “evolutionary” development in which it is difficult to define the exact beginning or exact end of a period, should be sufficient guarantee for the rupture with the conservative tradition, with the discursive whole and discursive conventions.

If on the one hand Hegel has proclaimed totality and shaped it, on the other its critique, again acting within the same conceptual framework of cultural totalities, in fact contributes considerably

¹³ Alexander Brener, *The Art of Leading a War Against an Institution*, The Moscow Art Journal, No. 23 <<http://www.guelman.ru/xz/362/xx23/x2301.htm>> (in Russian).

¹⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *Three Decades after the End of Art*, in: Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art*, New York (1997), p. 21.

to the writing of a global history, in which the decentralization contributes to confirming once again a privileged position.¹⁵ This is not a true encroachment on the hierarchical structure of history, or a kicking¹⁶ of historical dialecticism or of the conservative tradition of high and true art. Again according to “historical” notions, this time Hans Belting's, another male theorist from the Western world, it is important to note how a non-negligible quantity of art was created before the era of the arts,¹⁷ or rather what Hegel had defined as such. Hegel, who defines Africa as “no historical part of the world,”¹⁸ erasing also other geographical locations from the map of “true,” total art.

Of course, we are separated not only from Hegel, but also from Hans Belting by an ample amount of time and by different critical theoretical practices. What is the situation now, as the central streets of the great Western European cities are full of less or more chic galleries for “authentic” African art? I will not comment here on the origin of these collections, or the misbalance in what their authors, their masters are paid, or the speculative profits of the dealers. In the West, African art standing in the folkloristic tradition is often presented as contemporary. This is

¹⁵ In this argument I follow loosely Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 1972 (French edition: 1969).

¹⁶ Bobo, Toshio & Tabakov and Limbourg Brothers, *Da naritash kulturata* (Bulgarian: *To Kick Culture*), CD published in 2000 in Sofia.

¹⁷ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, Chicago (1994).

¹⁸ *The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas – the category of Universality. In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence – as for example, God, or Law – in which the interest of man's volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. This distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained; so that the Knowledge of an absolute Being, an Other and a Higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting. The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality – all that we call feeling – if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character. [...]*

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it – that is in its northern part – belong to the Asiatic or European World. [...] What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit,

not “correct” towards African artists making contemporary art. They are of course right to protest that this is not contemporary art from Africa. At the same time, the “true” contemporary art from Africa that is exhibited does not differ substantially from Western contemporary art.¹⁹

This constitutes an argument in support of the following idea, contrary to Danto’s: that with globalization we come across a new totalization, which in this variant indeed does not leave any room for the existence of the Other. Gone is the familiar tension between the vertical methods for measuring history based on the universalist Western system of values, with its imposing of unified, common standards from the “era of art”, and the Undefined, the Other that populates the non-Western world.

Nevertheless, art from this posthistorical period is just as compromised by power relations as anything that may be recognized and defined as such in the times before. I doubt that it is really desirable to define as art what can be recognized as art before and after the “era of art,” despite the pluralist readiness of the posthistorians of art to accept everything as art, proclaiming that “no art is any longer historically mandated as against any other art. Nothing is any more true as art than anything else, nothing especially more historically false than anything else.”²⁰

But following the motto of the digital generation: “Be creative!”²¹ I fully realize how I fall victim to chronological and historical inadequacy when I pursue the inevitable and natural end of the “East-West” discussion within the discourse of contemporary art and the networks. I know that in this endeavor I will not be the first. Some have already done it. Others have

still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History.

Georg Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, translated from German by J. Sibree, Batoche Books (2001), pp. 110-111, 117 <<http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/hegel/history.pdf>>.

¹⁹ The exhibition “*The African Exile Museum*” at the *migros museum for contemporary art* in Zurich, 22 March-25 May 2003, may serve as one example.

²⁰ Arthur C. Danto, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²¹ The digital generation, like Joseph Beuys before it, bases its ideology on creativity. Joseph Beuys’ aesthetic credo, and arguably the substrate of his philosophy, is: *Creativity = Capital* (slogan on a poster by Joseph Beuys), in: Isabel Siben, *Joseph Beuys, Plakate/Posters* (2004), p. 45.

moved on without much effort, arguing that one can always find more exciting topics, fitting in with the newest tendencies in funding programs. In contemporary art, the new forms of artistic creativity are still widely seen as linked to digital and communications technologies. It may well be more advantageous to take part in yet another project gravitating around the topic of the city or the necessity of prompt action to protect robots, or something entirely different. As Giancarlo Politi, publisher and editor-in-chief of *Flash Art*, explained to an amazed audience in a public lecture in Sofia on 11 March 2001, the trends in contemporary art, and the interest in their authors, change so swiftly that they survive no longer than a collection or tendency in the fashion circles and garments industry. After one, if you are lucky a few seasons it turns out that you have become unbearably boring, and you find yourself useless, lying about in the sales baskets with other reduced stocks, a bargains sticker attached to your toe.

In a concept of the “end” synthesized from and in the context of media art and theory, or contemporary art, or what we recognize as such, it is first and foremost a question of taste and personal priorities whether we look for its concrete manifestations in one or the other of two discussions produced in those same contexts: “East-West” and “North-South.” The two pairs of opposites are equally well suited to an analysis leading to this type of conclusion. The more optimistically disposed may object that both discussions have existed precisely in order to be eliminated with the imposing of a new set of standards, and their inevitable end was coded in their very beginning. Both are part of a broader and more general critical discussion related to cyberdiscourse, to the discourse on identity and the question of localizations. They express the contradictions between local histories and canonically imposed norms of Western culture and art. They are mutually related also by questions born out of the conflict between the real possibilities of translation and its possible interpretations – questions also concerning the input and output between art inside and outside the context of the Euro-American Art World.

A specter is haunting Europe...²²

*Then Saint Nicholas foams with rage:
Look at him on this very page!
He seizes Caspar, seizes Ned,
Takes William by his little head;
And they may scream, and kick, and call,
But into the ink he dips them all;
Into the inkstand, one, two, three,
Till they are black, as black can be;
Turn over now and you shall see.*

*See, there they are, and there they run!
The black-a-moor enjoys the fun.
They have been made as black as crows,
Quite black all over, eyes and nose,
And legs, and arms, and heads, and toes.
And trowsers, pinafores, and toys, -
The silly little inky boys!
Because they set up such a roar,
And teas'd the harmless black-a-moor.*

Heinrich Hoffmann, *The Story of the Inky Boys*²³

Even though the unfolding of such discussions as “East-West” and “North-South” should have helped the figure of exoticism that had then surfaced²⁴ to be absorbed in the multicultural strategies of liberal democracy, the two discussions continue to boast an

²² From the *Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to the mailing list <spectre@mikrolisten.de>.

²³ Heinrich Hoffmann, *The Story of the Inky Boys*, in: Heinrich Hoffmann, *Struwwelpeter* (in German; 1844), English edition: *Slovenly Peter or Cbeerful Stories and Funny Pictures for Good Little Folks*, Philadelphia (ca. 1900), transl. from German by anonymous <<http://www.fln.vcu.edu/struwwel/bubeng.html>>.

In the German original, the black-a-moor is termed “kohlpechrahenschwarzer Mohr.” Literally, this means “coal-pitch-raven-black moor.” Quite an achievement of German bourgeois imagination to describe how other the Other is.

²⁴ *Sometimes - rarely - the Other is revealed as irreducible: not because of a sudden scruple, but because common sense rebels: a man does not have a white skin, but a black one, another drinks pear juice, not Pernod. How can one assimilate the Negro, the Russian? There is here a figure for emergencies: exoticism. The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he no longer threatens the security of the home. This figure is chiefly petit-bourgeois. For, even if he is unable to experience the Other in himself, the bourgeois can at*

entire range of polar confrontations, stereotyped definitions and negativism. It is no accident if the two discussions have almost simultaneously lost part of their nimbus as relevant and important for the international art community, and have of late been sounding banal, old-fashioned even. Structured as they were up until now, they are not exciting to anyone besides a handful of remaining activists and a few funding schemes whose assets have not yet been fully exhausted.

It would be easy enough to find an explanation for this truly new situation as a consequence of the changed geography. This relates not only to cyberspace and its “new digital world borders,” described with clarity some years ago in an interview by the Austrian theorist Christian Hoeller with the American artist of African origin Olu Oguibe in Springer magazine, focusing on those excluded or ignored by this discourse. The high technologies suggest an additional type of discrimination, along with those well known from before. Looking for a typical example of inequality, we find that the question of access to technologies and the use of the Internet is most often mentioned. I am far from saying that it has lost its currency. However, entering the complex of questions linked to cyberdiscourse, we should not forget that outside its discursive borders, a majority of people are left with no chance whatsoever to access technologies. As a “method” for identifying the different social categories of the users some would propose to use a four-dimensional model reflecting the arguments that have led to their using the Internet: business, entertainment, education, services. Few are those, seen in proportion, who fit into all four categories, so that in this research framework many people may well fall overboard from the category of the high-tech elite. This includes the economically “highly developed” states. In the periphery or the center of a post-industrial city, your alienated children are banging all day on the “death” button of their playstation while you are producing microchips for Nokia. This immersion in technology is not suited as a letter of

least imagine the place where he fits in: this is what is known as liberalism, which is a sort of intellectual equilibrium based on recognized places.

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957), p. 152, translated from French by Jonathan Cape (1972).

introduction guaranteeing you a privileged position in the digital circles. At the same time, you may well fall out of this category because on a quite personal, psychological level you are unable to deal with the challenge of all these wires and buttons. This is something more than technophobia – it is a social question.²⁵

Now everyone has realized that the geopolitical map is not subject to the old concepts.²⁶ The argument about cultural differences, used by some to emphasize the communication difficulties between such polar opposites as “East-West” or “North-South,” can be sharply criticized. It would seem that the argument becomes much more convincing if we speak of differences in education, gender, social origins and others. Contemporary culture makes use of a host of instruments through which it attempts to convincingly hide the antagonistic contradictions of class differences, seeking justification for social tension around the folkloristic phantasmagorias of artificially created ethnic problems.

In an interview with the artist Shirana Shahbazi in *Flash Art*,²⁷ we are once more faced with the contradictory systematic formulation of the Other by the liberal and multicultural Western society. A problematic identity dwelling in that no man’s space which is neither East nor West. Not somewhere in the far corners of peripheral regions where identities based on this liberal model are unstable at best, but destabilizing the very center of universal culture. Shirana Shahbazi was born in Teheran, but grew up and received her education in Germany, where she moved with her family as a baby child. She thus finds herself, due to her very life

²⁵ Christian Hoeller, *The New Digital World Borders*, Interview with Olu Oguibe, in: Springer: Hefte für Gegenwartskunst, No. 31, September 1996. English translation online at <<http://www.camwood.org/springer.htm>>.

²⁶ After the economic and the corresponding political transformations, and negotiations that have lasted for years, two political acts this year, on 29 March and 1 May 2004, drew the end of a long and painful process. After the official ceremony in Washington and a fervid speech by the American President on this occasion, the new member countries of NATO were announced – a second wave of former Warsaw Treaty countries joining NATO. One month after this, the borders of the European Union were extended to include the first of a list of countries from the former socialist bloc which had fulfilled the conditions and complied with the requirements for membership.

²⁷ Michele Robecchi, *You are here*, Interview with Shirana Shahbazi, *Flash Art*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 233, November-December 2003, pp. 77ff.

situation, in the “disadvantageous” position between two frames of reference.

The artist opposes the curatorial approach of classifying artists based on the stereotypical methodology of a system under the influence of their ethnic and geographical features, and of interpreting their work through the lense of the folkloristic traditions and the mythology of a given geographical territory.

I’m not doing typical Iranian photography. It’s much more like German photography or European photography. But people still put me under this Iranian banner. We have strange discussion, and it’s crazy how you can’t escape from those terms. And when I do something else, such as in the Biennale, people are surprised to discover an Iranian woman dealing with a subject such as the Madonna. [...]

I recently went to two Shirin Neshat lectures, and I don’t know if it came through her success or if her success was also enhanced by the fact that there was a big ‘Iran boom,’ but there are many exhibitions in which I am invited to partake such as “Iranian photographers in Spain” or “Iranian artists in Berlin.” I don’t take part in every single one because I am trying to stay outside this movement.

In the same interview, Shirana Shahbazi mentions how one of her photographs keeps being cited in all articles concerning her work. A quite banal picture with documentary character. A picture of a woman sitting on a sofa smoking.

It seems to strike people as a very touching or moving matter that a woman with a veil should be smoking. I wasn’t aware of how touching it could be for a Westerner to see that. To me it is completely normal.

It goes without saying that this sight is not as inoffensive as it would seem at first. This is also the strength of this picture. The artist acts subversively, using an inoffensive visual language. The way she presents a scene from everyday life, an insignificant moment from the life of a woman, the “exciting” or “exotic” is “channeled” exclusively and obviously through the veil. A disturbing question can be asked: whether in the case of this photograph, the unprejudiced Westerner’s voyeuristic uneasiness or thrill derives from this only fact. As if through an allusion to all those exotic scenes from harems in paintings by Ingres, Delacroix, or Gérôme which have aroused the curiosity of the

public.²⁸ In which the naked bodies of the women, absolutely forbidden to the outside observer, are on show. These compositions, characterized by the typical colonial view of the world, have in fact been inspired and provoked by a revolt against the quite real political and cultural life, and not by the wish to legitimize some foreign and Other cultural identity. Some sort of escape. An aesthetic rebellion. But this time not to the village and into the pastoral, but into romantic imagination expressing the yearning of the Western spirit to overstep the bounds of the forbidden. All this without leaving the framework of one's own ethico-philosophical problems.

Returning to the visual language of Shirana Shahbazi's photograph, it excludes any esthetic assumptions in the spirit of the traditional interpretation. This woman with the veil is not an exotic object from far-away places. You could well meet her as she takes her children for a walk in the park just like you, goes to the hospital just like you, gives birth to her children just like you do, and her children later will be in school with yours. You could well be waiting in line behind her as she pays at the cash register at the local supermarket, then bump into her again in the parking loading her groceries into the car, or even in the town hall where you are handing in your tax return form, always loyal to your country. She, the woman with the veil, always remains at a due distance, and she'll look almost just like you. What easier way to explain the differences around this "almost" than by pointing to the exterior distinguishing mark, the veil? This veil, guiltily reminiscent of the existence of something Other. Such as wild and primitive patriarchy – for instance. The veiled woman as a symbol of the ghetto in your own city.

A veiled specter is haunting Europe and troubles the sleep of a majority of the citizens of the Western world. This is not an image of Islamic fundamentalism or a symbol of the threat of possible attacks. It is the materialized specter of your own fears and uneasiness with the unknown, with the corrosion and the

²⁸ Jean Dominique Auguste Ingres (Montauban, 29 August 1780 – Paris, 14 January 1867); Eugène Delacroix (Charenton-Saint-Maurice, 26 April 1798 – Paris, 13 August 1863); Jean-Léon Gérôme (Vesoul, 11 May 1824 – Paris, 10 January 1904).

decline of the very center of the Western world. Subverting from within its very foundations, calling into question the universal values of the constitutional state. It is, rather, the image of the enemy that liberalism points the finger at when trying to explain the collapse of the welfare state, the loss of what had been reached in long struggles.

On the offset

Nonetheless, today the "context" became a magic term for evaluating and dis-evaluating contemporary productions that come from the non-Euro-American art world. The question is why we presume that only when the audience knows the "context" it would be able to "understand" art in Eastern Europe, Central Europe or Russia.

Bojana Pejic, *What Comes After the Wall?*²⁹

In the context of contemporary art the beginning of the "East-West" discussion is inevitably linked to the beginning of the 1990s. This is when, after the disintegration of the USSR and the former Yugoslavia with the consequent economic, political and social transformations, the effects of globalization became categorically visible, became part of the landscape of Eastern Europe. On the other hand the discussions touch on the painful complex of questions around imposing the Western model, where cultural politics is part of the general bundle of "reforms." They are animated by the spirit of the politico-geographical principles behind the concepts for defining the European borders of cultural identity. The institutionalized discussions went about the intense and hectic defining of a European identity with its cultural, political and economic borders, as part of the project for a Greater Europe.³⁰ The discussions had the blessing both

²⁹ Bojana Pejic, *What Comes After the Wall?*, presented at the MoMa symposium of 23 March 2003, *East of Art: Transformations in Eastern Europe* <<http://www.artmargins.com/content/moma/pejic.html>>.

After the Wall: Art and culture in post-Communist Europe, 16 October 1999-16 January 2000, Moderna Museet Stockholm, Sweden; curators: chief curator Bojana Pejic (Berlin), with David Elliott, director of Moderna Museet and Iris Müller-Westermann, curator of Moderna Museet.

³⁰ *Imminence, in 1939, was not only a terrifying cultural configuration in a Europe built in strokes of exclusion, annexations and exterminations. This imminence was also that of a war and a victory after which a partition of*

of the local and the supranational institutions and were almost always the invention of the system itself. They represented a rather political act – cultural politics, stimulated by the numerous mechanisms of power.

According to Bojana Pejic there are not many curators who try to show mainly good art, without being influenced by this context. Most of them, and even of those who have contributed to “breaking the ice” and lived out the role of activists in this discussion, have always maintained a distance appropriate to the status quo of their own class affiliation – led by their petit-bourgeois prejudices despite their politically correct behavior.³¹ It comes as no surprise if the problem of migration tacked itself to the discussion, from a new perspective.

This question, complex for the Western world, took on a renewed meaning with the economic immigrants from the new democracies and a substantial number of refugees from the wars following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Before the “end” of the Cold War, more or less every Eastern European who dared pass the Iron Curtain was declared a dissident and accepted with open arms by the West. Subsequently, after the ideological arguments

European culture was to get frozen for the time of a quasi-naturalization of the borders, in which the intellectuals of my generation have spent most of their adult life. Today, with the tearing down of the Berlin wall, the prospect of German reunification, a perestroika still lacking resolve, and the wide range of “democratization” movements, the legitimate but at times quite ambiguous aspirations to national sovereignty, is the reopening, the denaturalization of these monstrous partitions. We find today the same feeling of imminence, hope and menace, anguish in the face of the possibility of other wars with unknown forms, the return of old forms of religious fanaticism, nationalism or racism. We are faced with the greatest of uncertainties with respect to borders of Europe itself, to its geographico-political borders (in the center, in the East and in the West, in the North and in the South), to its so-called “spiritual” borders (around the idea of philosophy, reason, monotheism, of Jewish, Greek, Christian (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox), Islamic memories, around Jerusalem, a Jerusalem itself divided, torn apart, around Athens, Rome, Moscow, Paris, and we must say, “etc.,” and we must divide each of the names with the most respectful of relentlessness).

Derrida, *L'autre cap*, Paris (1991), pp. 62-63. Translation of this passage by code flow. Published in English as *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, translated by Michael B. Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault, Indiana University Press (1992).

³¹ *The petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other. If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself. In the petit-bourgeois universe, all the experiences of confrontation are*

have turned into a useless attribute of power, the emigrant flow streaming in from these geographical places is classified as an enraged crowd of greedy consumers. In other words, they have come only to take a free ride on the achievements of the highly evolved Western social community. This opinion, often stated publicly in the Western world, turns out to be a conception shared by a host of theorists, activists and curators. Of course they are led by the purest of intentions, and their assurance roots in a certain dose of idealism. They'll argue that the local economy needs to be helped, that jobs need to be created locally, etc.

On the other hand, a critical position has always sneaked into this discussion and made itself felt. It represents the position of existing criticism towards the institutions of the Art World system itself, expressed from the point of view of those very artists or curators whose careers depend on the existence and evolution of this framework. This is something of a reaction against the lack of results of cultural exchange activities, against the difficulties in integrating themselves in the Western model and in “the art market” structures. A kind of protest against the unequal distribution of wealth in the system of cultural funding. In spite of this, it is hard to make out demystifying tactics built around this critical position, because in its essence, it also expresses dominating interests of power – in this case, the pressure via the dominating interests of the funders and the institutions representing them.

To those looking in from the outside, the historical development of contemporary art in Eastern Europe may look chaotic, normal or like a completely natural consequence of the multilateral processes related to the opening of these societies towards the world after so many years of ideological oppression.

reverberating, any otherness is reduced to sameness. The spectacle or the tribunal, which are both places where the Other threatens to appear in full view, become mirrors. This is because the Other is a scandal which threatens his essence. [...] There are, in any petit-bourgeois consciousness, small simulacra of the boogman, the parricide, the homosexual, etc., which periodically the judiciary extracts from its brain, puts in the dock, admonishes and condemns: one never tries anybody but analogues who have gone astray: it is a question of direction, not of nature, for that's how men are.

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957), translated from French by Jonathan Cape (1972), pp. 151-152.

However, taking a closer look it turns out that this beginning is always linked, through a direct or more winding path, with the activities, politics and interests of the network of Open Society foundations in Eastern Europe or the local Soros Centers.³² While the artists are taught, funded, guided and protected by the corresponding office of this institution. This kinship includes the entire exchange and circulation of information, ideas, people and events. Both from the headquarters to the peripheral offices and in the opposite direction, via channels specially set up for direct communication using the technological potential of the Internet, channels which establish a social web known under the term of network. Consecutively, an active part in this network is played by the newly appeared “new” art and by its representatives, both of them at the service of a certain political line and the interests that can be presumed behind it. It comes as no surprise that from its inception, this art is predestined to serve some institution, or system of institutions which act within the framework of the neoliberal model.

Since its appearance as a cultural phenomenon in Eastern Europe this art has been seen as *elitist, creative, export* art rather than some underground, alternative, political or social involvement. It therefore comes as no surprise that politically engaged art never made its appearance on the local eastern scenes. Nor did any other form of art as resistance that could have evolved out of similar discussions and social engagement, with the exception of its ideological forms of extreme propaganda.

In spite of this, in the public space in Eastern Europe even today one speaks of contemporary art as of *young, non-conventional, even “avant-garde”*, continuing to search for the alternative, that unattainable ideal of contemporary people from the twenties of last century to the beginning of this century, from Dada art to the advertising imagery of Diesel. And so out of inertia, contemporary art still presents itself as in opposition to

³² George Soros, “Eastern Europe’s uncrowned king and the prophet of ‘the open society’” and at the same time the “archetypal amoral capitalist” according to Neil Clark, *New Statesman profile - George Soros*, New Statesman, 2 June 2003 <<http://www.mindfully.org/WTO/2003/George-Soros-Statesman2jun03.htm>>.

official art.³³ At the same time in these geographical latitudes the official local institutions, as much as they have been radically restructured, remain natural carriers of the conservative, of the past (if they do not merely simulate their own existence), there are hardly any local funding programs.

Attempting to understand the local institutional framework of Eastern European contemporary art, we will usually find that contemporary art is driven and legitimized by external institutions, both in financial and ideological terms. Regardless of whether these are external state programs, as is the case of Pro Helvetia in Switzerland, KulturKontakt in Austria, or the French, British or German cultural information center, or private corporate interests, as in the case of the Soros centers. With their contradictory strategies supported by the official institutions, many of the funding programs were intent on contributing, through cultural exchange, to the construction and maintenance of a European identity.

“History” of the network in the context of media art

Despite increasing interest and exhibition events, artists from the East have a problem with access to the market. We find that many artists from Eastern European countries are deeply disappointed because their work is so little accepted in the West. This applies not only to the art market, but also to the readiness of museums and exhibitions to take account of their work in exhibitions. The artists still feel excluded, and some even talk about Eastern Europe as the “ghetto of the art world.” One reason for this perceived isolation may be the fact that new art forms and specific networks that question the traditional art business are growing up in Eastern Europe in particular.

Nicolaus Schafhausen and Ursula Zeller, *Preface - Artistic Developments in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe in the Post-Communist Era - A European Dialogue?*³⁴

³³ Attila Tordai-S., *Aperto Romania*, Flash Art, Vol. XXXVI, No. 233, November-December 2003.

³⁴ Nicolaus Schafhausen and Ursula Zeller, *Preface - Artistic Developments in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe in the Post-Communist Era - A European Dialogue?*, in: ifa dokumente 2/1999, *1st Congress about Art and its Mediation in Central and Eastern Europe*, 20-22 November 1998, Stuttgart.

East European contemporary art is still faced with identificational difficulties, not only in terms of the legitimizing “meta”-discourse. It is often called into question at the local level, or it creates its own discursive crises, like in the case of the debate on whether this or that can be regarded as art. In this way, it legitimizes its identity on the basis of polar opposites, while at the same time it is based on the tension caused by internally unclarified categories, like high/low, official/alternative, old/new, conventional/non-conventional.

And if I assume that the contemporary and the new link in with the Western World, whereas the traditional bears the stamp of the past and the old communist system, I am ready to claim that the very contrasting of East with West has turned into a fundamental question on all identificational levels of contemporary art made in the East, both locally and internationally.

This art is characterized by a strong desire to move on beyond the territorial, political, social and discursive frameworks of the local contexts in which it is created. The desire to eliminate difference between themselves and the world, to close the gap, is the fundamental complex of the everyday life of the “young” and “new” artistic elites. It is self-understood that it has been difficult to locate in such discourse any political or social commitment. In order to circulate in the international exchange of the art system, in order to be interpretable in a fundamentally foreign context, this art must feature total traits.³⁵

In spite of this, the Moscow artists have understood early on: a career in contemporary art in essence means an international career. At the same time these artists are outside the institutions – because the institutions do not want to bear much of Russian artists. The institution discriminates. And in this direction the Russian artists are frustrated: they, like all artists in the world, are seeking success, attention, fame, understanding, recognition, money and power, eventually... It's hard for them, hard...

Alexander Brener, *The Art of Leading a War Against an Institution*³⁶

³⁵ Nedko Solakov, *A bitter text that ends in a joke*, in: *Communication Front 2000 Book*, Sofia 2002 <<http://www.cfront.org/cf00book/en/nedko-bitter-joke-en.html>>.

This is why it becomes a real local problem when most entrances and exits towards and from the international Art System are obstructed by those artists who were the first in the starting blocks, to some extent taking advantage of the political constellation of the moment, and their experience as cunning players in the old communist system. For instance in the Komsomol,³⁷ an organization in which the necessary optimism and obedience were the building blocks of hierarchical structures and flows reminiscent of the undercurrents of the international art world. To this day, these artists are passably good at launching their image as young and convertible artists, even if some of them have gone into their fifties.³⁸ They jealously defend the positions they hold, and cannot tolerate even a hint of competition, nor any wish to build up a local scene, which would potentially contribute later on to their being more quickly and miserably deposed. The lack of certain institutions vital to the art world, or the impossibility of their functioning normally at a local level, additionally poison the atmosphere and intensify this identificational crisis.

The Western world is almost always either idealized or naively cursed in the local East European art context, not only in its cultural, ethical aspects. The meandering between what would seem at first sight to be polar opposites reflects a typically provincial point of view and mind set: *The scene here is all too insignificant, the criticism inopportune, the theory full of misunderstandings, whereas there, my efforts and talent will be valued* – if it's not the exact opposite.³⁹

³⁶ Alexander Brener, *The Art of Leading a War Against an Institution*, The Moscow Art Journal, No. 23 <<http://www.guelman.ru/xz/362/xx23/x2301.htm>> (in Russian).

³⁷ Communist Youth Organization, from the Russian Komunisticheskiy sojuz molodjozhi (Communist Youth Association; in the Soviet Union, specifically the All-Union Leninist Communist League of Youth); very often, the Russian acronym was used even in Bulgaria, in place of the official DKMS: Dimitrovski komunisticheski mladezhki syjuz (Dimitrov Communist Youth League).

³⁸ For reference, cf. the CVs of the East-European participants in the various editions of *Manifesta*.

³⁹ This duality leads us to the Hegelian mechanisms of the overturn in the dialectic of the “inverted world” in the chapter on consciousness, *Phenomenology of the Mind*.

The consequences of this condition are so drastic that a feeling of shame and inferiority accompanies the local events and public discussions in almost all cases. The inner conviction, often one of the driving forces in the work of an artist, is not always able to cope with this state of affairs leading to self-discrimination. A mechanism that incites a feeling of collective insufficiency or leads straight to a condition of complete “impotency” of the artistic discourse in the local scene.

This leads us to the paradox of the “unanalyzable” Slovenian – cunningly used by Slavoj Žižek to present the function of the ego-ideal, i.e., the symbolic identification with the ego’s imaginary correspondence, with the ideal (virtual) place from which the subject looks upon itself when its own life looks like an empty and repulsive spectacle.

“*What does it mean, in psychoanalytical terms, to be a Slovenian?*” [...] *We Slovenians, ‘unanalyzable’ according to Freud, had to wait for Lacan in order to meet with psychoanalysis.*” Žižek lets orthodox Freudianism collide with Lacan’s logical paradox ‘of the prevention of the subject’ in which the absence of law is responsible for universalized prohibition. “*Freud’s Slovenian shows the inadequacy of this logic of the ‘liberation of desire from the constraints of internal repression.’*”⁴⁰

The word “Slovenian” is found only once in the entire opus of Freud. According to Žižek this reference is more than sufficient, since it contains within itself a whole series of questions that are key to psychoanalytic theory and praxis. The passage mentioned is from a letter by Freud to the psychoanalyst Eduardo Weiss on 28 May 1922. Weiss has asked Freud about his opinion on two of his patients, both of whom suffered from the same

⁴⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do – Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (1991), quoted from the Bulgarian edition, Sofia (2001), p. 17.

The book contains a collection of six lectures that served as an introductory course on Lacan, organized by the Slovenian Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis and aimed at a “sympathetic neutral” public of intellectuals, who were the initiators of the democracy movement.

The lectures were held in the unique atmosphere of those months: a time of intensive political agitation, only a few weeks before the ‘free elections,’ when all possibilities still seemed open, the time of the ‘short circuit’ which mixed political activity with ‘high’ theory (Hegel, Lacan) and unlimited delight in the ‘lower’ mass culture – a unique, utopian moment.

Slavoj Žižek, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

symptom of impotency. According to Freud the methods of psychoanalysis cannot be applied to one of the two patients, the young Slovenian. In his answer to his student and follower, Freud presents the Slovenian as someone who does not deserve being helped by psychoanalysis, implying that his is a simple case of immediate, superficial evil and amorality without any of the ‘depth’ characteristic of our unconscious psychological dynamics. Without transition, in the next sentence, his case is presented on the contrary as one who cannot be analyzed. The barrier here is not of an ‘ethical’ nature (does not deserve analysis), but epistemological (the case is in itself unanalyzable).⁴¹

One can say today that the illness is diagnosed. And the panacea is found. It is called communication. Communication at all sorts of levels. Communication as an instrument, a category, a method, a fundamental criterion for signifying, assessing and interpreting. A game of success. It warrants that you’ll be able to secure yourself access to all spheres of the system, both in the mental and in the purely physical sense of the word.

The rise of the Internet and the elaboration of an ‘actually active’ network, first strategically built up by the Third Sector⁴² and later broken up by some alternative networks,⁴³ shed new light on the euphoria of communication and the desire for quick self-realization, progress and the consciousness of freedom. While pushing the idea that through communication and information, or rather through wiring and the free market, one can ensure everyone gets their chance. A sort of remake of Lenin’s dialectical slogan: electrification + Soviet power = communism.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴² The NGOs successfully imitate the notion of civil society, with its “good” and “soft” institutions. A type of privatization of a part of the public sphere was accomplished. At the same time, this is pure netocracy, i.e., they serve exclusively their own interests, or in the words of Ivaylo Ditchev:

Despite their aura, non-government organizations by definition represent no one except their own members. Hence many of the paradoxes regarding them.

Ivaylo Ditchev, *From affiliation to national identity. Politics of the image* (in Bulgarian), Sofia 2002, Footnote 1, referred to from p. 7.

⁴³ Syndicate, nettime, and other more recent lists mostly related to the global anti-capitalist mobilizations.

⁴⁴ *Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country.*

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Report On The Work Of The Council Of People’s Commissars*, Eighth All-Russia Congress of Soviets, 22 December 1920 <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/8thcong/ch02.htm>>.

In search of freedom and change – the new artistic revolution

The aim is primarily to show net.art as an extremely social art form.

National Museum of Contemporary Art, Norway, *The short and hectic history of net.art*⁴⁵

In the mid-nineties, with the headlong development of communication technologies and the Internet, some artists in both the West and the East realized the benefits of the emerging opportunities for network art. The new form of media art that had then appeared experienced identificational difficulties. The question arose whether it can be recognized as art. In its more positive instances, it did not even want to be legitimized as such. In the meantime the international network art community, with the legitimacy it has acquired, and some experts who have established themselves in this context have defined subtypes like net.art, software art, social and political activism, institutionalized art and other forms using the potential of the Internet and the World Wide Web to various degrees.

Moving on the borders of the system, network art, net critique and the various practices and activities developing from there have given rise to a feeling that the discourse can indeed be undermined. Some saw in this the “alternative” to the dominant cultural discourse, or a way to escape the institutional framework of the Art System itself. A possibility to give a real social aspect to art. To develop political interests in order to go beyond the aesthetic concepts and the cultural norm of the official canon. For instance by undermining the author, the claim to authorship, both in the spiritual and in the most pragmatic and literal sense, by rejecting the notion of copyright, or by creating social software with open code.

Even if they were for some time perceived by the more heavyweight institutions as a whim, an obsession or a fad, network art and its representatives at one moment found themselves in the center of attention of that very same official canon. Losing some

⁴⁵ *The short and hectic history of net.art* <<http://www.museet.no/English/exhibitions/netart>>.

of their “mythical” aura of radical activists, they were swept off by the centrifugal forces of the very thing they had been struggling against, in order to be swallowed by the flow of the system itself. But what is to be done?⁴⁶ History teaches us that this is what happens to most “alternative” cultural movements that have fought the official discourse and have subsequently been incorporated or tamed by it. While legitimately and correctly they are given the right to create, represent and maintain their difference.⁴⁷

With the disintegration of the Syndicate family⁴⁸ – or rather its transmutation from a community with common political and social interests into a communication channel – the network art community has left its childhood behind. A period filled with a hope for some kind of change and with a responsibility towards economic, historical and cultural processes has come to an end.

These remarkable events did not happen without the active contribution of the media terrorist Net Tochka,⁴⁹ who had the

⁴⁶ See also Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *What is to be done?* (1902) <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>>.

⁴⁷ Cf. Robert Pfaller, *Vom Kanon zum Schibboleth. Sieben Thesen über Parteilichkeit und Erbarmen in der Kultur*, in: *Kunstforum* No. 162, Nov/Dec. 2002, pp. 54-63 (in German); *From canon to shibboleth. Seven theses about partisanship and mercy in culture*. Quoted here from the Bulgarian translation published as: *The wars of the canon*, LIK, No. 7, July 2003, p. 4.

⁴⁸ *Initiated by a meeting of 30 people at the Next Five Minutes in Amsterdam 1996, the Syndicate was established as a platform for the exchange of information between East and West European cultural activists. [...] Syndicate network is an experimental research project on the possibilities of building open transcultural communities by using the advantages of tactical media in decentralized structures as the Internet provides them.*

Description of the Syndicate mailing list by its administration team <<http://sympa.anart.no/sympa/info/syndicate>>

The syndicate list lost a consistent amount of its relevance together with the change of the policy of the Soros network. Less support, less money, less interest went together hand in hand.

Anna Balint, post to the nettime mailing list on 2 June 2003 <<http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0306/msg00014.html>>

⁴⁹ Actually: Netochka Nezvanova, name borrowed from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s first novel. The name translates to something like Nameless Nobody. In the case of the phenomenon of the network art scene mentioned above, with “tochka” meaning “dot”, we are left with “Net.” as in “Net.Art”. Ostensibly of East-European (or any other) origin, Netochka reminds of another Balkan tradition of terrorism, which played a key role in getting World War I started. A tradition which has also seen the first woman kamikaze terrorist on the

impudence of bombarding the mailing list with an impressive quantity of everyday spam. Spam which, without irony, had the privilege of being recognized by some experts as pure network art. As some sort of apotheosis of communication, which in some interpretations in the network context would easily arouse sympathy.

At the same time, a media community losing its faith was slowing down in its activities, and languidly arguing about what a mailing list is all about. The discussion revolved around the difficulty in moderating the list, including the worries about fulfilling all sorts of wishes and different interests, like what is the acceptable limit of traffic of information, should information be censored, is there a need to sustain a mailing list just to accommodate the megalomania of some bombers and a handful of active graphomaniacs.

It is clear to everyone at this point that interpreting is *démodé*. What the artistic networks primarily need now is impartial information, free from any personal judgment. As if inevitably, with this act the haze of romantic mood that had surrounded the new technologies was gone, along with the conviction that a new artistic revolution was imminent as a result of their use.

Some of the media artists and activists, frustrated from the general discursive crisis in contemporary culture, suffering from the lack of adequate ideology, embittered by the institutional framework or simply having come to terms with it, took the path of the subcultural movements linked to the new technologies. On the border between complete commerce, the aquarium, alternative gestures and fashion attributes – the context of some festivals, night clubs, DJ and VJ parties or an e-zine looks quite free at first glance, outside any discursive norms, giving rise to the feeling that every one can choose for themselves. Then again we can remind ourselves how illusory freedom can be when it is granted by the alternatives produced by mass culture.

European continent, again in the same region, where Mara Buneva killed the chief of a secret police in 1928 before killing herself.

At the same time, a deep mystery surrounds Netochka. She has been used by a variety of groups and individuals as an avatar, and has become a virtual, collective identity, somewhat like Luther Blissett (perhaps Netochka is in real life a football player?) – a form of intervention pioneered by the mathematician Nicolas Bourbaki <<http://www.bourbaki.ens.fr/>>.

Alternatives and Manifestos

In short, the elitist cultural industry of discourse digests all of this in its lovely meat mincer and crams it on your plate in the quality of, let's say, "incorrect" politically correct art, savage social art, cyber-feminism, savage feminism... Spicy cuisine has always been the strength of the art system.

Alexander Brener, *The Art of Leading a War Against an Institution*⁵⁰

Traditionally in the history of modern art, the manifesto defines some movement or style that proclaims itself to be the one and only type of *in* art at that moment, i.e., the art that pretends to open a new paradigm which will destroy the existing norms of the official canon in order to impose the standards of the new and creative. Danto claims "it is part of the post-historical moment of art history that it is immune to manifestos and requires an altogether critical practice."⁵¹ Trying to apply, to the extent that this is possible and necessary at all, this method of an "altogether critical practice" to contemporary culture and specifically contemporary art, and like this to analyze more carefully this "posthistorical" situation, in practice this period will also appear fragmented by a great number of examples proving the opposite. We do not cease to be confronted with the antagonism of statements held in the spirit of manifestos such as they accompany most contemporary art events and projects. *Ars Electronica* may serve as a good example:

"The Digital Revolution is whipping through our lives like a Bengali Typhoon," wrote Louis Rossetto in the first edition of WIRED.⁵² If we continue this comparison, the typhoon will not only whip through the fields of economics, but also

⁵⁰ Alexander Brener, *The Art of Leading a War Against an Institution*, The Moscow Art Journal, No. 23 <<http://www.guelman.ru/xz/362/xx23/x2301.htm>> (in Russian).

⁵¹ Arthur Danto, *Three decades after the end of art*, in: *After the end of art - Contemporary art and the pale of history*, Princeton (1995), p. 29.

⁵² *Wired*, life-style magazine for the electronic generation, founded in 1993 <<http://www.wired.com/wired>>.

Wired is about the most powerful people on this planet today - The Digital Generation.

Louis Rossetto, in: *Wired 1.01 (Premiere Edition)*, March-April 1993 <<http://premiereissue.blogspot.com/2004/07/31-wired-premiere-issue-of-wired.html>>

the constructs of ideas and art, yet at the same time, it will also be clearing the ground for a new cultural era.

Hannes Leopoldseder, *Cyberart: Art of the Future - The Future of Art*⁵³

All this desire to redefine, through the new forms of artistic creativity or through new technologies, theory and art itself or any other intellectual activities that are so far recognizable as art, continuously hurls us back to the crisis of modernity with its host of manifestos. It is not difficult to draw a parallel between some statements of post-historical authors and the statements of the modernists that have become history. Again in the same spirit, but this time using completely different media, “[Pablo] Picasso told [Françoise] Gilot that he and [Georges] Braque were endeavoring to ‘set up a new order,’⁵⁴ one which would do for art what the canon of rules of classical art did, but which broke down, he thought, with the impressionists. That the new order was to be universal was marked by the fact that the paintings of early cubism were anonymous, and hence pointedly anti-individual because unsigned.”⁵⁵

In this entire race to “set up a new order,” stimulating progress and innovation in art, “Manifesta - European biennale of contemporary art” stands out as a more than adequate example. The newer of the great, institutionalized events has been contributing for years to the development of art in the direction of progress.

“What is Manifesta?” - the answer is published on the official site of the first edition of Manifesta: “Manifesta is a network and a process.” A trans-European NGO wrapped in the aura of mysterious alternative, providing a chance to young artists who are not integrated in the system, and at the same time intimately

linked, both in terms of ideology and funding, with the Soros network and other supranational institutions. They symbolize intercultural cooperation, multicultural progress, but also the pressure to integrate the “new democracies” in the Western world, with the totality of the network, via the channels of efficient and instantaneous communication - the trans-European cultural apparatuses of control and unification subordinate the artistic discourses and practical norms in order to impose the hard rules of the correct, the hegemonic culture.⁵⁶

With its first manifesto, “Manifesta” does not proclaim anything different than the manifestos of the “modernisms” preceding it, long ago tamed and legitimized by official discourse. As if trying to subvert only within the framework of the officially imposed academic norms and modernist canon. “Manifesta” activates a process which, if anything, pseudo-politicizes the existing contemporary artistic discourses. This leads me to think that most attempts to write manifestos after the modern era prove the very “historical” inadequacy of such linguistic exercises.

Already the generation of 68 “kicked ass”, deconstructed, demystified, fragmented or derided any attempt at declaring a one and total, cosmopolitan standard, a common interpretation of the dominant metadiscourse. In the meantime there have been a few attempts at rehabilitating and dusting off, shaking off the naphthalene from this epistolary form. Today’s manifestos rather express the desire of marginalized groups to clearly structure their identity in order to demarcate themselves from the dominating majority, which in due correctness grants them this possibility. The writing of manifestos today is a lonely business,⁵⁷ old-fashioned. Over the past 20 years, it is the writing of obituaries that has imposed itself as more state-of-the-art, the writing of conceptions, e-mails or, even simpler, reducing the genre to true minimalism - SMS.

⁵³ Hannes Leopoldseder, *Cyberart: Art of the Future - The Future of Art*, in: Hannes Leopoldseder and Christine Schöpf, *cyberarts - International Compendium Prix Ars Electronica, Edition 97*.

⁵⁴ We were trying to set up a new order, and it had to express itself through different individuals.

Françoise Gilot and Carleton Lake, *Life with Picasso*, 1993, p. 69.

⁵⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *Three Decades after the End of Art*, in: Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art - Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, 1997, p. 30.

⁵⁶ “Europe” is defined in the widest possible geographical sense, as stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals and from northernmost parts of the continent to the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. At a conference held in January 1994 in The Hague, an overwhelming majority of national representatives agreed to cooperate in this new European network.

From the official site of Manifesta 1 <<http://www.manifesta.org/manifesta1/advboard.htm>>.

⁵⁷ Speaking with Ray Bradbury.

The Manifesto of “Manifesta 1”

*you will be amused and bewildered
you will not find paintings or monumental sculptures
you will not see a traditional presentation
it will not be a form of art involved only with itself, with art*

From the official site of Manifesta 1⁵⁸

If there is one key question hiding behind the concept of the “Alternative” – the alternative proposed by events like “Manifesta” –, not only does it not escape the official discourse imposed by the global Art Scene. It conjures it up, produces, reproduces, presents and represents recognizable current conflicts in order to create its own alternativelessness.

*“Manifesta is a pan-European event, which aims to be open, fresh and ‘alternative.’”*⁵⁹ It is thus no accident if “Manifesta” succeeded already with its first edition in gathering under its warm institutional wing most of the media projects that had so far had some visibility, as well as other experimental and new artistic practices related to the Internet and communication technologies. This includes the works of some of the “half-institutionalized” but still quite “alternative” and “forever young” East-European artists.⁶⁰

The Global Art Scene

But the so-called “contemporary art” is a product of the contemporary neoliberal political system, and to my perhaps to some extent barbarian eyes, this is one of the most effective and actively working models of this system. [...]

This system is deep, structured in complex ways and incessantly incorporates into itself new elements: starting with the latest sorts of yogurt to immigrant families from Africa or Asia, from ultra-

contemporary models of weapons to the newest artistic movements. Yes, yes, precisely! The artistic movements in the contemporary world also secure the system of control and the system of production, like for instance sports and tourism.

Alexander Brener, *The Art of Leading a War Against an Institution*⁶¹

If I try to map out, to study the distribution of contemporary art, there is no need to draw a new map. Basing myself on the “objective” and “neutral” discipline of geography I can use one of the marvelously prepared geo-economical world atlases, for instance the “Atlas of Globalization” published by the French monthly newspaper *Le Monde Diplomatique*.⁶² Susan George of the French “anti-globalization” NGO ATTAC⁶³ advertises it as follows: *“In this atlas you’ll find everything one needs: maps with background information, informative data and charts as well as competent explanations about the fundamental economic, ecological and political questions of globalization – all this presented in useable and clear form. It is a great achievement of Le Monde Diplomatique, a dense compendium and, not least, the indispensable handbook for all those who want to stand up for a more equitable world order.”* Of course, despite the expert words of praise, I need to partly fall back on my imagination, or rather make use of an elementary comparison to superimpose my real-imaginary map of contemporary art with the maps in the “Atlas of Globalization.” I then find that the distribution of contemporary art in the cultural space of the Third World coincides marvelously with the

average age of 30-45 years, this slogan was a take-off on the state of things at the time – one had to wait in the rows of the AMH until the age of 40 before one could become a member of SBH.

⁶¹ Alexander Brener, *The Art of Leading a War Against an Institution*, The Moscow Art Journal, No. 23 <<http://www.guelman.ru/xz/362/xx23/x2301.htm>> (in Russian).

⁶² Unfortunately, no English edition has been published to date. The French edition is called “L’atlas du Monde Diplomatique”, the German edition *Atlas der Globalisierung*.

⁶³ ATTAC stands for the French “Association pour une Taxation des Transactions financières pour l’Aide aux Citoyens” (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for Helping Citizens), an effort to NGO-ize the global anti-capitalist mobilizations that have emerged since 1998, using a platform based on the Tobin tax on speculative flows to herald the taming of wild capitalism.

⁵⁸ Manifesta 1 <<http://www.manifesta.org/manifesta1/index.html>>.

⁵⁹ From the official site of Manifesta 1 <<http://www.manifesta.org/manifesta1/statemnt.htm>>.

⁶⁰ In Bulgaria, after the fall of the Berlin wall, in an attempt to survive in the new economic and especially political conditions, a fraction of SBH and AMH, respectively (SBH: Association of Bulgarian Artists; AMH: Young Artist’s Studio), renamed itself to Club of the Eternally Young Artist. With an

opening up of the most remote and least industrialized territories towards the technologies and the economic, social and ideological processes of globalization.

With its entire range of power systems, the institutional framework of contemporary art includes the role of museums, galleries, kunsthallen and the gigantic networks of exhibitions, but also the function of art theory and criticism, the art market and the entire system of cultural funding, with the special programs for helping and correspondingly incorporating the art of the less developed regions where the processes have unfolded more slowly and less successfully, or the non-Western regions that have not been colonized at all, into this system. The “detrterritorialized” – or global – art is a phenomenon of central importance for the very process of “integration” of the newly acquired territories. At the same time, it constitutes a very convincing and ingenious means of imposing strict rules and common standards.

The Mongolian, Tibetan, Bulgarian or some of the other artists positioned outside the center of the Art System are just as open, inventive, up-to-date and contemporary as their colleagues based in the very center. They might feel somewhat offended if their art was looked upon from a different perspective from that applied in the analysis of the art of their New York or London based colleagues. Their colleagues who are lucky enough that leaving their studio, they can immediately participate in the preparation of the context itself, in the very center of the factory of metadiscourses, not in one of its remote subsidiaries.

“The Show Must Go On”⁶⁴

Being subjected to this external judgment on it, this art becomes Eastern European; becomes informative about what Eastern Europe is, what Russia is, what the Czech Republic is. So we can't ignore that. And in this sense, Eastern European art is really Eastern European art and nothing else.

Boris Groys, *The Complicity of Oblivion*⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Song by the world-famous British pop group Queen, released on 14 October 1991 as a single, then on 28 October on the album *Greatest Hits II*.

⁶⁵ Boris Groys, *The Complicity of Oblivion*, presented at the MoMA symposium of 23 March 2003, *East of Art: Transformations in Eastern Europe* <<http://www.artmargins.com/content/moma/groys.html>>.

Boldly I can assert that despite all the convincing arguments that can be heard to the opposite effect, a part of the art produced in the East is absolutely not fake or an imitation of anything else, pre-existing. It is rather, like all other contemporary art, a replica of some other replica of some quote taken from someone, sometime and somewhere. In this sense it too is free to have quite up-to-date, total and global character. In spite of these engaging arguments the stereotype in the selection of East-European artists as well as the way in which their work is interpreted have been marked and continue to mark the lines of discrimination in which they have been crammed already with the first projects to which they have been allowed to participate.

In most cases, even now towards them and their art arguments are used which are based on some geopolitical details or historical facts. Their art is selected and presented based on regional principles embraced by the curators and the institutions. This method often stands in contradiction to the criteria used when it concerns the art of the Western World.

At the beginning of the nineties, after the fall of the Berlin wall, described by some theorists as an infantile period of mutual interest, a number of large projects and exhibitions were produced to enable East-European artists to join in the international artistic exchange and overcome the isolation and frustration. Their thematic accent lay on the region, the new names and East-European contemporary art. And if the titles from this early period are saturated with theoretical sense and testify to political and social involvement, like “Ostranenie”⁶⁶ or “After the Wall: Art and culture in post-Communist Europe,”⁶⁷ currently the thematic and sizeable presentations of East-European art in the Western World refer us rather to the entertainment cultural industry and show business. Titles dripping with a dramatic

⁶⁶ Ostranenie, from Russian: estrangement, specifically as used by Viktor Shklovsky in his 1916 article “*Art as Device*,” one of the founding texts of the Russian formalists. *Ostranenie Festival* at Bauhaus Dessau, 1993-1997, which aimed at presenting artists from Eastern Europe and make their work visible. The Web site <<http://www.ostranenie.org>> unfortunately does not exist any longer.

⁶⁷ *After the Wall: Art and culture in post-Communist Europe*, from 16 October 1999 to 16 January 2000, at the Modern Museum Stockholm, Sweden.

sexual energy characteristic of erotic films, skillfully combine with the illusion of the dynamic sequences of an action film: “*Blood & Honey / Future’s in the Balkans*”,⁶⁸ or “*In the Gorges of the Balkans*.”⁶⁹

There is still the possibility that these associations contain ironic references to the entertainment industry and the show business. It is clear that politically and socially engaged art will have difficulties in attracting that object of desire – the public. And when the big names are absent from the exhibition – those who could guarantee you that it is worth the effort – your failure is guaranteed. The bloody public will not show up anyway. The formula for success lies in those exhibitions that even with their title promise the experience of a spectacle. After all, the deficit of visitors is not an peculiarity of the East. This painful question is on the agenda not only in the system of the hallen, but takes on an increasingly important and greater part in the complex of questions around the exhibitions of every major international event in the World of Art. The sponsors become more and more capricious, want to know what happens with their money. For them the most important thing is the result – added visibility in terms of its societal and mass-media reflection. More visitors – this is one of the fundamental reasons for the pressure on the curatorial team from the board, the sponsors and the institution. More and more, the vision that is in demand is that of the curator as an impartial manager who juggles well between her/his intellectual aspirations and her/his business responsibilities as a TV host. On that Front the battle cannot be lost, since the formula is quite simple, flexible, transparent and correspondingly easy to master: “Due to the extremely graphic nature of this show, you may end up watching it over and over again!”⁷⁰

... THE END

⁶⁸ *Blood & Honey / Future’s in the Balkans*, The Essl Collection, Klosterneuburg/ Vienna, 16 May-28 September 2003 (curator Harald Szeemann).

⁶⁹ *In the Gorges of the Balkans*, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, 30 August-23 November 2003 (curator René Block).

⁷⁰ Warning from the short animated film “*When animated animals attack*” on MTV (1’50”), itself a take-off on a reality show on Fox, called “*When animals attack*”.



Photograph by Alain Kessi (who found this object on a sunny summer afternoon while out for a walk with our children along the river near our house as I was writing this text)