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# History is Not Given

By Krzysztof Fijalkowski

*East Art Map* is the book is part of an ambitious interactive project to (re)construct the history of contemporary art in Eastern Europe.

Orchestrated by IRWIN, the visual arts wing of the Slovenian culture collective NSK, but written by numerous writers and artists, it erratically traces the complex relationship between national identity and modernity, ideology and art. But which histories are preserved and which ideologies served? asks Krzysztof Fijalkowski?

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It will not be long before certain institutions start planning how they should celebrate the twenty year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall – that ubiquitous symbol of a post-war geopolitical constellation that itself only spanned some four decades. No doubt this will be a moment to reflect on the seemingly unprecedented changes in fortune of former socialist Central and Eastern Europe, and for some a chance to trumpet the triumph of Western-led values of integration and federalism as ever more of this territory enters the ‘mainstream’ orbit of the European Union. With the rhetoric of unification in the ascendancy, and the events of the 1980s performed now inscribed as historical rather than contemporary experience (the anniversary will roughly coincide with the first generation of graduates in former socialist regimes to have been born after their demise), it feels more than a little unexpected to pick up an immense volume that appears predicated on a reaffirmation of the distinction between East and West, in a format that at first glance would seem to support rather than challenge on the one hand what many would argue is becoming a redundant paradigm, and on the other the tendency of the Western art system since the early 1990s to construct recent Eastern European art in terms of a righteous politicisation vindicated by history.

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A combination of this volume’s cover – a flag-shaped field of red bearing a large yellow star – and its jacket blurb (in which the ‘less celebrated sector of Europe’ is described as ‘now among the most significant areas for the production of contemporary culture’, as though the latter had but lately been visited upon it) rings immediate warning bells. But this is a work of greater complexity and ambition than first impressions might afford; if its size, scope and the sheer unfamiliarity of its contents to many readers may feel daunting, and the intricacies of its generating principles filled with potential traps and inconsistencies, this is nevertheless both a distinctive and significant project that insists on bearing the burden of its own autocritique within its remit.

Any reader aware of the editors’ past work will be alert to many of these properties. IRWIN are a group forming the visual arts wing of the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) collective, a multilayered assault on socialist and post-socialist history founded in Ljubljana in 1984 that also includes the rock group Laibach. A key feature of NSK’s strategies, exemplified by IRWIN’s ‘retro-principle’ method, is the critical work performed on the recent and contemporary Slovenian cultural context not by simply interrogating or opposing it, but by isolating and magnifying the rhetoric of totalitarian events and images so as to both merge with them and empty them of their content. As the group declared in

1984,

The retro-principle advocates a constant changing of language, the switching from one form of art expression to another. It identically merges with art-history, selecting it together with culture as a whole as its field of activity ... It is a way of thinking that advocates the process of assimilation.[1]

Whilst some of these features are absent from the monumental East Art Map's rationale – most notably the spectacular affirmation of totalitarian practice and the localised focus on Slovenian history – other elements of IRWIN's tactics inform it directly, in particular the emphasis on collective activity, the complex engagement with relations between national identity and modernity in an East European context, and the articulation of a field operating between ideology and art. The aim of the broader East Art Map project, of which this book is a kind of mid-term report, is to attempt to assemble for the first time a selective overview of contemporary visual arts practice in the 23 countries that now make up the former socialist territories of Eastern and Central Europe, by canvassing contributions to a list of 250 key artists and events from the period since 1945. Billed in the introduction as a (re)construction of the history of contemporary art, the invitation to a collective responsibility for this task is put more bluntly in the byline of the project's website [www.eastartmap.org]: "History is not given. Please help to construct it."

The *East Art Map* publication, coming some five years after the project's initiation, is split into two distinct sections. In the first, invited specialists from each country submit concise and cogent encyclopaedic entries on their choice of artists and events, often with some broader contextual discussion to locate them; a generous spread of colour illustrations apportions one image per entry. The second section is less programmatic in its distribution but equally valuable in exemplifying contexts and terms of debate, in offering a selection of republished or specially commissioned essays on specific questions and problems of current art practice in the region, one of which announces East Art Map's next phase: the proposed establishment of an East Art Museum. A pullout map plotting names and vectors of affinity, like some particularly intricate air traffic control chart (and in which IRWIN itself represents one of the busiest sites of intersection) offers the literal – if slightly baffling – cartography of the project's field, its ambitious graphics reminding the reader that the latter's printed incarnations first as a special issue of *New Moment* (2001) and now as a book, rather than in a digital format, seems curiously anachronistic given not only its explicit orientation towards emerging practice but also the sense that interactivity is a key part of its intention.

[IMAGE]

Image: *East Art Map*, IRWIN, 2002/2005

If a structure based on autonomous collectivity is the first element lending the project both a distinctive flavour and an intriguing instability, the second is the ambivalent status of the work as an art history – one that recalls precisely IRWIN's 1984 intent to "merge with art history" rather than merely practice or challenge it. Of course, one should pay attention to the volume's very specific subtitle: *Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*. If this is a history, then, it is one intended to locate the contemporary (and indeed an "edit" function on the web site suggests possibilities of deleting as well as adding entries as the project matures), and this strategy has a number of implications for the other kinds of historical accounts one might have expected to find in it. Here the fact that each contributing author to the book's first section has followed his or her own rationale of choice and presentation makes generalising about their selections difficult (not to mention the inadvisability of summarising the historical conditions of 23 countries all of which have undergone fundamental political and often territorial changes in the post-war era); in a sense this also affords a welcome variety in what might otherwise be a rather flat succession of (to any non-specialist) a predominantly

unfamiliar list of names, facts and readings. The sheer quantity, variety and frequent interest of practice laid out here in a volume over 500 pages long is an argument in itself both for the vitality and critical range of the region's artistic production and for the fact that Western critics and curators have until very recently tended to present the field in a fractured and woefully incomplete manner. Of particular note are both the many artists' groups featured here, and the reinscription of Eastern Europe as a key forum for the rise of conceptualism in the face of very specific sets of political and cultural circumstances.

Whilst the emphasis is on presenting and contextualising contemporary practice, many of the contributors to the book's first section have also included a range of earlier figures, principally spanning the period of the 1960s and 1970s but just occasionally going back to the 1940s. Anyone interested in orienting this contemporary map using more familiar historical co-ordinates is likely to find this uneven approach frustrating, and indeed it highlights the ambivalent way in which many of the authors perceive the significance for today's artists of work made either under the rubric of socialist culture or within the framework of modernism (for which read: Western models of modernism). The implication, then, is that while stress may be laid on the 'Eastern Europeanness' of their backgrounds, contemporary practitioners tend to see Eastern European modernism as bearing little relevance to their current situation.[2] Unsurprisingly, art made with the tacit or active support of socialist regimes also tends not to figure in this contextual history either, and with the exception of one or two nonconformist socialist realist painters the work of any more progressive artists who somehow managed to exhibit or gain commissions under totalitarianism appear here to have forfeited their place in history in favour of those working within underground or oppositional frameworks. Finally, the interesting position of emigrant artists, Krzysztof Wodiczko or Ilya Kabakov likely to be precisely most familiar to a Western audience whose mature work has often unfolded within a Western context even when it may have been rooted in Eastern histories, is also not very clearly situated among the constellations of Eastern personalities and networks. figures such as Christo, Marina Abramovi

This last set of points raises in turn the question of who exactly the intended audience for *East Art Map* is. On the one hand the volume is published in the West and, as with its parent website, in English (incidentally, issues of translation or of writing in a second language never seem to intrude in texts that read as uniformly clear and well edited), suggesting that the project's focus is to correct a significant gap in 'Western' art history and theory. But on the other the project is also presented as a diagram of connections leading from the local to the regional, intended for specifically Eastern artists, critics and curators, in the absence of either a coherent cross-cultural account or a comprehensive set of comparisons between Eastern and Western counterparts. Presumably, of course, the answer is a mixture of both of these positions: the offer extended to the region's art world to better understand the networks in operation after socialism, and an invitation to those outside it to follow their curiosity and broaden a limited Western canon.

It should not be assumed that reservations like these seriously undermine what remains in many ways a fascinating and necessary enquiry and indeed while IRWIN is at pains to indicate *East Art Map*'s provisional and evolving nature, this volume's publisher suggests (on the back cover for example) that it should also be read as an artist's project as much as a formal enquiry. Furthermore, it is in the book's second section, where a selection of international critics, curators and academics present 19 essays on a range of topics, that a space is opened up for considering and problematising *East Art Map*'s terms of engagement. Essays on the role of conceptualism (Igor Zabel, Boris Groys), on the problems of freedom (Slavoj Žižek) or of global hegemony (Susan Buck-Morss), or arguing for the re-politicisation of art (Marina Gržinić), for example, open debates on the complex relationships between artists and states both before and after socialist rule, and a number of writers help focus attention on the project's key assumptions. Foremost among these is *East Art*

Map's reaffirmation of the distinction between East and West that, as Andreas Spiegl suggests, represents an uncanny return of lost domestic boundaries (p.433). Writing in the keynote opening article 'East!', Rastko Mošćanić observes that this redefinition of East versus West

refers to a new situation in the terms of an old one. What is more, the new situation was originally meant ... to supersede the old one and to make its terms obsolete: the very recurrence of the old classification now sounds like an omen of defeat.(p.343)

A number of authors point to this problem, noting further that it is an opposition formulated in favour of the default Western position, whose discourses, ethics and art history have been constructed largely on its own terms. What is more, of course, this notion of 'East' is a predominantly modern one, relating to a relatively recent political division, and here tends to ignore 'perhaps for reasons of clarity and brevity' other and deeper histories (even those of the interwar period). This is also a strategy that might be seen to continue to assert that what the region's components share in terms of the immediate past is more significant than the vastly different experiences, say, of the Baltic and Balkan states, that tends to ignore the centuries-old ties that drew Eastern intellectuals into Western culture, and that along the way risks conflating 'the West' and a more specific Western *Europe*. Just as significantly, perhaps, the geographical division tends to mask not only the extent to which contemporary practitioners follow increasingly nomadic careers, but also the distinction between those artists prepared to engage positively with a capitalist paradigm through their work and those seeking different sociopolitical models of thought.

A key intention of East Art Map, and one that the editors here acknowledge has only partially been achieved, is the cross-referencing of work by Eastern artists with their Western counterparts. Perhaps this now seems less necessary in several ways, not least because if the East really does retain a distinct identity, then the discrete language of Eastern art historical and art critical positions must be discernible too, one that is surely the very point of East Art Map's wider endeavour. In the end, I suspect, East Art Map is really both about the contention that a clear and viable Eastern European identity might be a way of finding a third path against the choice between the local and the global, and about how this regional exchange and communication in the context of a shared political reality might be at one and the same time the subject, the guiding principle and the outcome of art.

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[1] IRWIN group declaration, cited in Mojca Oblak, 'Neue Slowenische Kunst and new Slovenian art', in *New Art from Eastern Europe: Identity and Conflict*, Art and Design, March-April 1994, vol.9, nos 3/4, pp.8-17 (p.13).

[2] It would be churlish, given my limited specialist knowledge, to dwell on alleged omissions in the encyclopaedia entries, but from my perspective for example as someone with an interest in a Central European practice such as Czech surrealism (whose unbroken survival, collective structure and cultural critique stretching from the late 1940s to the present might seem to qualify it well), I was surprised to find that such points of concern designate just quaint old towns for a map designed to trace the new multi-lane highways from one emerging conurbation to another.

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IRWIN, eds, *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, London: Afterall / Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, 2006

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