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Conceptualizing Exhibitions as Sociopolitical Research: An Analysis of European Exhibition Practices of the 1990s*

Mateusz Sapija

This article examines the role of contemporary art exhibitions in the process of the political integration of Europe between the Cold War's end and the European Union's Eastern Enlargement. To do so, it analyzes a range of inter-European exhibitions that aimed to construct and disseminate a new notion of a 'united' European art world. These exhibition projects intended either to 'bring together' artists from the former East and West, so as to break the dichotomies of their distinct sociopolitical roots, or to

conduct major surveys on Eastern European art, aiming to legitimize art from the region and place it into a universal cultural context. The article demonstrates how curatorial research was employed to strengthen and illustrate international political policies. Consequently, it discusses resonating examples of such institutional strategies, using five major art exhibitions (*Europa*, *Europa*, *Interpol*, *Manifesta 1*, *Manifesta 2*, and *After the Wall*) realized between 1989 and 2004 as case studies.

Keywords: contemporary art, cosmopolitanization, curating, democratization, Europeanization, post-communism, universalization

Attempts to define Europe's sociopolitical and cultural 'essence' post-1989 have primarily constituted a political project, which nonetheless included various aspects of a cultural critique. Contemporary art exhibition practice was one of the contexts, and practices, used for questioning and breaking the dichotomies between the European East and the West with regard to their sociopolitical roots, assumed to be distinct. Such projects were organized mainly in Northern and Western Europe, intending either to 'bring together' artists from the East and West in collaborative group shows, or, through curating major surveys of Eastern European art, to inscribe their practices into the universal/Western cultural context.¹

In 1991, German curator Christoph Tannert spoke about the West expecting 'beneficial, exotic powers from the East' and a renewal of Western art—speechless and oversupplied—through the East (Tannert 1991: 32). Western Europe, facing crises of 'meaning' and 'identity' in light of the collapse of its main ideological counterpart, awaited refreshing cultural energy from the East, hoping for a cultural awakening to come from the unexplored territories. Cultural circles had high hopes for the Eastern subversive approach

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to art, based on 'dissidence' (Piotrowski 2012: 15). According to Tannert (1991), the main task of Western European institutions was to 'protect and stabilize its moral attitudes' in order to preserve the Eastern dissident attitude, potentially beneficial to the West (p. 32).

Simultaneously, the East European art scene opened itself towards Western sociopolitical paradigms, which included the Western art world. Despite being created in geographical proximity, East European art had developed under fundamentally different conditions. Eastern European artists and curators operated under Western influence and, in many cases, in confrontational relation to the official cultural politics of the state (Piotrowski 2012).

Thus, the process of actual merging these two systems—including their aesthetic traditions, institutional attitudes, and sociopolitical realities—appeared extraordinarily complex. Through the analysis of four European contemporary art exhibitions developed between 1994 and 2000, this paper aims to problematize the use of contemporary art as a presumably neutral platform of dialogue between Eastern and Western European states that in reality supported the process of sociopolitical Europeanization of the former East. Furthermore, the analysis situates these projects within the broader debates on the attempts to construct the post-ideological sociopolitical landscape of democratized Europe post-1989, through the means of contemporary art, as well as identifies and conceptualizes four distinct attitudes towards the process of European democratization: universalization, confrontation, cosmopolitanization, and problematization.

Discussing resonant examples of these institutional (and simultaneously political) strategies that informed exhibitions such as *Interpol²* (1996), *Europa, Europa³* (1994), *Manifesta 1⁴* (1996), and *Manifesta 2* (1998), as well as attending to a less debated exhibition entitled *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-communist Europe⁵* (1999), is meant to provide fresh understanding of European democratization as pursued through exhibition making and reassess the outcome of those efforts. Consequently, the article contributes to research assessing the post-1989 changes within the art world. By combining a review of literary sources (such as exhibition catalogues and debates from the time) with primary data sourcing (i.e., an interview with the Moscow-based and internationally acclaimed curator Viktor Misiano), the paper aims to deliver new knowledge on already debated case studies. Its main argument is that the majority of exhibitions aiming to explore the process of Europeanization and democratization in the 1990s can be analyzed as employing one (or more) of four curatorial/epistemological strategies: universalization, confrontation, cosmopolitanization, and problematization. The article is structured around introducing each of the strategies and analyzing them through a case-study approach.

The predominant motivation driving the curatorial strategy of universalization was an ambition to inscribe Eastern European modern art into the previously western-dominated art historical canon. At the same time, this curatorial and research effort responded to the necessity of producing new and improved discourse on Central and European art history, canonizing

new artists, and finally, producing new narratives describing previously neglected (by institutions and scholars) Eastern European art history. Universalization meant to challenge the hegemonic relations operating within European art history by employing a comparative approach, questioning the canon and searching for the essence of post-Yalta identity. This type of curatorial discourse—discussed here using the example of *Europa, Europa*—mirrored the political narrative of Europeanization by using the language figures of ‘building bridges,’ ‘overcoming divisions,’ and ‘creating the whole picture’ (Czubak 1995). It looked for roots common to European culture as a whole (in case of *Europa, Europa*’s rhetoric, located in Christian, Greek, and Jewish traditions) and questioned national distinctions. Universalization championed the avant-garde tradition as a movement operating both in Eastern and Western Europe, and deemphasized the specificity of Eastern European art. At the same time—as proven by my examination of *Europa, Europa*’s outcomes—this strategy was questionable from the perspective of art history itself: it lacked theoretical and methodological novelty, ultimately adjusting itself to hegemonic approaches, endorsing and mythologizing the concept of universalism. The research effort pursued under Stanisławski’s lead and, consequently, the institutional strategy driving the exhibition were largely directed at establishing Eastern European art as ‘worthy enough’ of appreciation by a western public and scholarship, ultimately leading to what may be called a simplified reading of European modern art history based on juxtapositions and similarities between Eastern and Western art.

Developed in the transitory moment of the mid-1990s, and representing the confrontational model of exhibition making, *Interpol* invited its participants to establish the boundaries between the space of their practices and the institution’s territory. The exhibition exemplified an early stage of curatorial practice as an artist-led, participatory, and collaborative endeavor. *Interpol*’s format, with artists having to negotiate the relationships between themselves and the shared space of the exhibition, determined its confrontational aspect. At the same time, the format and dynamics of the project, which entailed replacing the artists’ previous individual identities with a new, unified community, became a reflection of the unification and post-ideological reform of the redefined Europe. Hoping to become global and cosmopolitan, while at the same time enacting a praxis of radical democracy, *Interpol* ultimately became an idealistic and not fully achievable project. As revealed by the project’s final stage, the confrontational curatorial strategy often led to uncontrollable and counterproductive results. The negotiation and inevitable conflict that it stimulated ended up unconstructive due to a range of factors: incoherencies in the curatorial and institutional work; the distinct characteristics, ambitions and backgrounds of the Russian and Swedish artists who were both *Interpol*’s main participants and its antagonists; and, finally, differences in the ideological and aesthetic understandings of art represented by those involved. The project’s controversies came from its rebelling against the idea of the ‘universal’ and largely ‘post-ideological’ order proposed for the post-1989 European contemporary art world. Simultaneously,

Interpol's outcomes demonstrated the diversity of European art scenes and uncovered the necessity of establishing a sustainable and horizontal dialogue within them, as well as providing evidence for a sense of identity crisis in the Western world after the fall of the Berlin Wall in which the formerly hegemonic Western cultural institutions and stakeholders searched for 'the other' in order to position themselves.

The roots of the cosmopolitan approach, exemplified by the nomadic Manifesta biennale, are located in the concept of cultural globalization being an effect of the post–Cold War paradigm in which Western Europe, as both a geopolitical and philosophical space, projected itself as a realization of a political utopia of liberalism. Through projects like Manifesta 1 and Manifesta 2, and their commitment to championing the reunited post-1989 continent, a cosmopolitan approach to exhibition production meant to solidify the sense of Europeanness through a post-ideological cultural discourse. Emerging from a need to respond to the reconfigured cultural and political landscape after 1989, Manifesta aimed to inhabit consequential cultural spaces. In this instance, with cosmopolitan curatorial discourse largely driven by Europeanization and bridging the gaps between the former European East and West, exhibition making became a particularly visible part of European integration policies. Manifesta, supported by funding coming from respective national offices responsible for promoting culture abroad, appointed itself the task of supporting the renovation of democracy in Eastern Europe and the development of democratic procedures within it—endeavors reflected in the exhibition's allegedly fully democratic, inclusive, and open format. Simultaneously, Manifesta's discourse was para-political, promising access to the art market and network. However, until very recently, the biennale did not decide to operate in Eastern European countries, attributing this choice to a lack of infrastructure, poor local economies, and unfriendly political climates. Early iterations of the biennale often led to strengthening the Western-hegemonic discourse, even though it promised an in-depth interrogation of an integrating Europe. The project's ambition and the model it employed were common to several curators and researchers who engaged with cosmopolitanization in the 1990s and early 2000s: their aim was to capture the spirit of the post-1989 era, present and champion a new generation of artists, and position them in the redefined European cultural landscape. As a project marked by a predatory approach to the cultural and artistic peripheries of Europe, Manifesta may be a perfect example of two processes characteristic of the strategy of cosmopolitanization: implementing cultural diplomacy policy through contemporary art and Northern institutions and curators taking an early-1990s hegemonic approach to the post-1989 cultural-political landscape.

Problematizing the post-communist condition marked the final stage of curatorial research inquiry into Europe's 1990s integration and the meaning of the post-communist condition—a notion that had, until then, existed primarily as a geopolitical reference. *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, which aimed to counter the 'othering' of Eastern

European art and the 'representational model' of curating, exemplifies this approach. To do this, the project staged an interrogation of post-communism, weaving it out of individual artistic practices. Simultaneously, it rejected the sociopolitical context as the only framework through which the art of the 1990s should be read, claiming that achieving a 'balanced view' through a singular curatorial endeavor was impossible. The strategy of problematization recognized that despite the communist era being politically over, several artists and intellectuals were still keen to interrogate its legacy. David Elliott, in one of the exhibition's catalogue essays, notes that the period of post-communist normalization was meant to be temporary (Elliott 1999), lasting until the end of the 1990s. This limit extended to artistic and curatorial production as well. *After the Wall* meant to problematize this *zeitgeist*, defined by the rhetoric of a 'common future' and expressed by the slogans of 'rebuilding' and 'bridging' two reunited Europes, proposed by the 'old EU' as it underwent an identity crisis. It took aim at it by critically interrogating the Europeanization process and the role of contemporary art within it. According to the show's main curator Bojana Pejić, the difficulty of grasping the changes in post-1989 Europe came from an accumulation of accelerating and (often) novel sociopolitical processes at that time: globalization, post-communist transformation, and post-colonization within and outside of Europe (i.e., the process of bridging separations while simultaneously creating new ones in the continent). As Piotr Piotrowski (2011) claims, even though his own cultural analysis unraveled 'many Europes,' the West recognized Eastern Europe only on the basis of universality and similarity. In this framework, the post-Soviet space became the European 'gray zone,' playing a role in creating new separations. Ultimately, *After the Wall* was a result of extensive research engagement with post-1989 Europe, contributing to expanded investigation of the notions it proposed, although it simultaneously reinforced the 'cultural representation model' to which it had initially objected by framing all participating artists as inhabitants of the 'post-communist condition.'

Aspirations of universalization

Unprecedented in its scope, *Europa, Europa* was one of the largest and most comprehensive surveys of Central and Eastern European post-war and contemporary art to be realized by a Western institution after 1989. Presenting more than 700 works by 200 artists, along with an equal volume of material from the fields of literature, film, theater, music and architecture, it took on the challenge of expanding a universal art history to encompass the former East of Europe. In this way, the project responded to the lack of discourse, or rather of 'high-quality discourse' (Stanisławski 1991) on Central and East European art in Western art history. The exhibition's curatorial team, supported by a range of specialists including the influential Polish art historian Andrzej Turowski, proclaimed that contemporary art history is fragmentary and questioned the Western-centrality of European art (Turowski 1991). After choosing Bonn and



Figure 1. Ryszard Stanisławski (left) and Stanislav Kolbel installing the *Europa, Europa* exhibition curated by Stanisławski and Christoph Brockhaus at Kunst-und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 28 May–16 October 1994 (courtesy of Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki)

its Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany) as a neutral and relatively new location for a major show, and also a city surrounded by important metropolitan centers such as Berlin or Frankfurt, the German curatorial team assigned a specialist to every country represented. Driven mostly by Ryszard Stanisławski and Turowski, with Brockhaus's role reportedly a token, marginal one (Mazur 2016), *Europa, Europa* took on an ambitious task: that of challenging the paradigm of European art history so as to prevent hegemonic relations from operating within it (Turowski 1995). To do so, the curators adopted a comparative approach and questioned the canon of European art history, while at the same time posing questions about post-Yalta European identity (Piotrowski 2011).

The curatorial discourse of *Europa, Europa* resembled the political messages of that time: it focused on 'building bridges,' 'rejecting East-West divisions,' and seeing European culture 'as [a] whole' (Czubak 1995: 313–316). Stanisławski claimed that European culture had been 'built on the Greek and Christian traditions,' which included the traditions of Eastern artists and their oeuvres (Czubak 1995). His framework consisted of three main elements: 1) questioning national distinctions in post-war European art and focusing on the traditions of both Western and Eastern avant-gardes 2) highlighting the pluralism of East European art, and, finally, 3) weaving Judaic culture and its impact into the complete picture of European culture. In result, a complete picture of a homogenous Europe and its culture was constructed based on the blend of the avant-garde and Jewish culture (Turowski 1995).

It is difficult to question the extraordinariness of *Europa, Europa* when it comes to the amount and quality of historical and artistic material

it presented. At the same time, however, its approach to redefining East European identity and culture, as well as its strategy for rewriting and intervening into modernist art history, might be seen as problematic from the point of view of the discipline itself. As pointed out by the seminal voice of the late Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski (2011), the exhibition did not offer any new theoretical or methodological approach, but rather adjusted itself to a previously organized art geography. It did not question the Western concept of universalism, but endorsed and mythologized it, 'subjecting Eastern European art to an inspection of the West' (Piotrowski 2011: 18–19).

Confrontation as a curatorial research strategy

Interpol was a joint project of Russian and Swedish curators Viktor Misiano and Jan Åman realized in Stockholm between 1994 and 1996. Drawing on Misiano's curatorial strategy, it was based on inviting a group of artists from Russia and Sweden and asking each of them to invite an international artistic collaborator in order to produce an artist-led and collaborative exhibition, ultimately reducing the role of the curator to that of a mediator (Misiano 2018, personal communication⁶). As commissions by artists were meant to occupy the whole space of the exhibition, their collaboration involved the negotiation of conflicts through dialogue from the outset (Misiano 2005). Realized in a historical moment for both countries—the end of state socialism in Russia and Sweden's ambition to reject its peripheral status—the exhibition became a project on democracy and a symbolic metaphor of a new, post-ideological and unified Europe made from the former East and the former West (Misiano 1996). In response to the sociopolitical spirit of the 1990s and inspired by some of the ideas of Agamben's *Coming Community* (1990),⁷ the curators aimed to dispense with the previous identity of the artists and build a new community (Misiano 2018). As described by Misiano, *Interpol* aimed to be a global and collective piece, willing to execute 'globalization from below' (Misiano 2018, personal communication), yet, at the same time, an enactment of radical democratic ideas—a consciously utopian and romantic project.

The staged conflict happened to be less productive than envisaged by the curators. Incoherencies in the visions of *Interpol* curators Misiano and Åman meant that the invited artists represented two separate artistic approaches: Russian artists followed their usual strategy of enacting public actions and gestures (determined by the socioeconomic conditions of the Russian art scene), while Swedish artists, interested mostly in object-based practices, envisioned their participation as autonomous (Misiano 2005; Misiano 2018, personal communication). In consequence, two separate groups and visions of *Interpol's* methodology were formed. The list of accusations was long, 'the Swedes were rich idlers who were no more than mediocre designers where art was concerned; the Russians were in turn, aggressive talkers' being some of them (Misiano 2005: 45). As a result of the conflict subverting the dialogue, combined with the effects of Färgfabriken gallery's

indulgence in facilitating most of the proposals coming from the Russian artists, most of the works (including, for example, Anatoly Osmolovsky's proposal for a referendum vote among the public on whether the exhibition should remain open or be closed) remained unrealized (Misiano 2018, personal communication). One of the turning points of the project was arranged by Dmitry Gutov's dinner,⁸ a partly realized proposal for a performative meal meant to be archived on film during which the artists discussed the *Interpol* experience (Misiano 2018, personal communication). Throughout that night, another Russian artist, Alexander Brener, called the project a 'hypocritical affair' and announced that he would 'attack the exhibition,' which at that point consisted mostly of Wenda Gu's installation *United Nations* occupying two-thirds of the exhibition space (Misiano 2005: 48).

The exhibition opened with a performance by Brener, who played drums (for the first time in his life) for around one and a half hours, after which he tore down and destroyed Gu's installation, ultimately running out of the building (Gu 1996). Just afterwards, Oleg Kulik, who at this point was recreating one of his performances consisting of the artist posing as a watchdog, wished to respond with something equally strong (Misiano 2005), and so he destroyed the installation by Ernst Billgren and started attacking and biting the opening guests, including one of the main exhibition sponsors (Misiano 2018, personal communication). In response, Jan Åman kicked the artist in the face, forcing him to go back to the kennel, and called the police, who afterwards arrested Kulik (2003).



Figure 2. Exhibition view of *Interpol*, curated by Viktor Misiano and Jan Åman, at Färgfabriken, Stockholm, 2 February–17 March 1996 (courtesy of Robert Misiano). The projected second leg of the exhibition in Moscow was never realized

art critic Oliver Zahmm penned an open letter to the art world (Åman and Zahmm 1996), signed by most of the Western *Interpol* participants. Methodically distributed throughout the Western art world and written in a highly political language (András 2005), this letter became in fact the only discourse proposed by Färgfabriken. The pamphlet accused Brener and

Kulik of being 'against art and democracy' and leaving the visitors 'shocked and hurt,' while Misiano was charged with 'legitimizing the destruction' and presenting it as a 'new experience' as well as producing a discourse representing 'skinhead ideology.' Finally, it implied that all three Russians—in fact representing 'The East' at large (Zabel 2012)—performed a post-imperialist attack on a peripheral art institution (1996).

The content of the open letter, along with the fact that only the Western artists were invited to sign it, sparked a long-lasting debate and resulted in the opposite effect of the one desired by Åman and Misiano. *Interpol*—a performative project and an exercise in cultural diplomacy at the same time—failed not only due to the different ideological and aesthetic contexts of the participating artists (Bishop 2012), but also due to the lack of coherent and consistent curatorial input. The *Interpol* exhibition and its aftermath revealed a lack of homogeneity in European culture post-1989, and a need for a debate on the new East-West relations. It highlighted the West's identity crisis in the post-Wall European moment, and a consequent search for 'the other' in order to define itself (Piotrowski 2006). *Interpol's* scandal might be seen as an East European refusal to 'normalize' itself, a bipolar moment of seeking identity through guerilla war methods, led by East European artists using strategies mythologized in Western art history (Piotrowski 2006). Even though *Interpol* is remembered mostly as a scandalous affair, it revealed a lot about the consequences of aspirations to deideologize culture, as well as the fragility of aspirations to export Western democracy after 1989.

Exhibition making as an act of cosmopolitanization

Known as the roving European biennial, Manifesta is another project that represents the cultural consequences of the 1989 political changes that took Europeanization as a theme and responded to the cultural differences between the European East and the European West (Vanderlinden and Filipovic 2005). Based on a biennale model and financing itself through partnerships with European offices responding to calls to promote national cultures abroad (Block et al. 2005), the exhibition from the start aimed to conduct European integration as an extension of European Union policies (Enwezor 2005). Except for its larger focus on younger artists than other perennial exhibitions such as documenta or the Venice Biennale, Manifesta's most significant particularity was its nomadic character, which consists in moving its location every two years.

Founded on pan-European euphoria and ambitions to extend the global art world towards Eastern Europe, Manifesta proclaimed a need to respond to the New Europe and geopolitical reconfiguration post-1989 (Block et al. 2005). Manifesta appointed itself the task of supporting the process of rebuilding democracy and acting as a tool for the 'development of open-ended democratic procedures,' reflected in its concept of its format as fully democratic, that is, 'open and inclusive' (Van Winkel 2005: 220). Apart from

openly espousing para-political aspirations, the rhetoric of Manifesta also promised access to the art market and network for peripheral East European artists (Block et al. 2005).

The openness of Manifesta happened to be limited to its rhetoric. Until 2014, the biennale had not moved to any East European country (except Manifesta 3 organized in Ljubljana, a city located in East Central Europe, although still positioned in close proximity to the art world's focal points such as Venice, Vienna, and Milan). This was dictated, according to Manifesta's representatives, by the weakness of local economies (the host city was meant to cover not only the biennale's costs, but also the finances of its Dutch office) and 'political uncertainties' in Eastern Europe (Block et al. 2005). It is the nomadic aspect of Manifesta, though, that could be said to be its most troubling and ineffective aspect. As a result of changing its geo-cultural setting every two years, and the consequent difficulty of properly addressing the new context of each edition, Manifesta's international curators often ended up with stereotypical and often superficial readings of the locality they encountered (Checchia 2015). The manner in which the institution travels has also had an impact on the sustainability (and infrastructure) given to the local hosts. With strategies such as those of the curators of Manifesta 2,⁹ who decided to travel throughout Europe by criss-crossing the continent in order to conduct their research (Fleck, Lind and Vanderlien 1998), rather than moving through neighboring countries, the institution proved that even its itinerant character was not sustainable.

Manifesta was driven by a common ambition to capture the spirit of contemporary art and define its Europeanness (Fleck, Lind and Vanderlien 1998). While its constant reinvention was claimed to maintain an effective dialogue between the peripheries and established art circles, it most often resulted in extending the hegemony of Western epistemology wherever the project appeared. Even though Manifesta 1 offered a promising interrogation into the complexity of European integration, its second edition resulted in a problematic reading of post-1989 European art, perhaps manifested most loudly in an essay by the show's co-curator Robert Fleck titled 'Art After Communism?' (1999). In this text, one of the three published in the catalogue, the German author rejected the post-communist condition of the Former East, asserting Europe's homogeneity and the disappearance of its peripheries.¹⁰ His decentralized reading of Europe and its art was motivated by an alleged absence of aesthetic differences in artistic production across Europe and the formation of an 'international style' in the continent in the 1990s. Drawing on an anonymous account of a Warsaw-based artist who claimed that he had no relation to communism, Fleck drew conclusions about a lack of divisions in Europe, as well as equal access to economic and cultural resources (Fleck 1998). In consequence, Manifesta, resulting from a belief in a borderless Europe, appears today to have exemplified the 90s-era Western approach to post-1989 sociopolitical changes: an institutionalization of non-institutional aspirations (Van Winkel 2005) and a superficial exploration of the notion of a periphery on the wave of the global biennialization of the art world.



Figure 3. Manifesta 1 curated by Katalyn Neray, Rosa Martinez, Viktor Misiano, Andrew Renton, and Hans Ulrich Obrist in Rotterdam, 9 June–19 August 1996. Olafur Eliasson, *Show me, by means of sudden intuitive*, installation view (copyright Manifesta Foundation and Olafur Eliasson Studio)

Problematization: The final stage of curatorial post-communist inquiry?

After the Wall was an exhibition showcasing works by 115 artists from 20 countries; it was the biggest project ever realized by Stockholm's Moderna Museet (Elliott 1999) at the time. Encompassing an extensive public program, it afterwards travelled to major institutions in Berlin and Budapest. Due to its scale and time of preparation, it attracted strong attention from the art world. Some critics labeled it the 'Eastern version of documenta' (Pejić 1999), while others questioned the motives of a Western institution undertaking the organization of such a show, accusing the institution of patronizing the Eastern art world as well as criticizing the curators for including only East European artists in the survey at a moment of accelerating globalization (Pejić 2003).

The exhibition's curators Bojana Pejić and David Elliott divided the show into four parts thematized as follows: various aspects of post-communist sociopolitical reality, pre-WWII history, the social role of artists, and gender and the body. The exhibition aimed to reject the ideas of Eastern Europe as 'Another Europe' and the 'representational model of nationhood' (Galliera 2013: 22); instead, it focused on individual artistic practices, as well as an extensive reflection on the post-communist condition. At the same time, the curators questioned the idea of reading East European art production only through its context, and consciously dealt with the impossibility of delivering a 'balanced view'¹¹ of post-1989 art through one exhibition (Elliott 1999: 11).

Several texts in the show's catalogue elaborate on the problematics covered by the exhibition. In its introduction, David Elliott (1999) pointed to the fact that even though communism had been rejected by the majority of political forces within Eastern Europe, regional artists were still keen to engage with and problematize its legacy, influencing the societies within which they operated. Moreover, he pointed to the temporality of this

uncture, soon to disappear and be covered by other issues (Elliott 1999). In her text titled 'Dialectics of Normality,' Bojana Pejić (1999) reflected on the post-communist transition as a period of 'normalization,' allegedly—according to European politicians—already over by the end of the 1990s. Pejić referred to the notion of 'catching up' and noted how the attempted normalization also encompassed East European art, critically reflecting on the discourse of Manifesta. Further, she pointed to the identity crisis that affected the European Union after the dissolution of communism. Simultaneously, she stated that the main EU discourse, spreading towards the East of the continent, was founded on the 'myth of the future,' and, in fact, a range of its main metaphors, such as the notions of 'building' and 'bridging,' are common to both communist and EU rhetoric. The curator claimed that even though Eastern Europe was not a homogenous sociopolitical and cultural construct, it did have a common set of myths and beliefs, such as the idea of being 'in between' Western and Eastern cultural and political paradigms. The impossibility of fully understanding post-1989 changes in Eastern Europe and beyond came, according to Pejić (1999), from a synchronization between the post-communist transformation and globalization processes, and Western Europe's consequent focus on the colonial 'margins' rather than the internal changes of the continent.

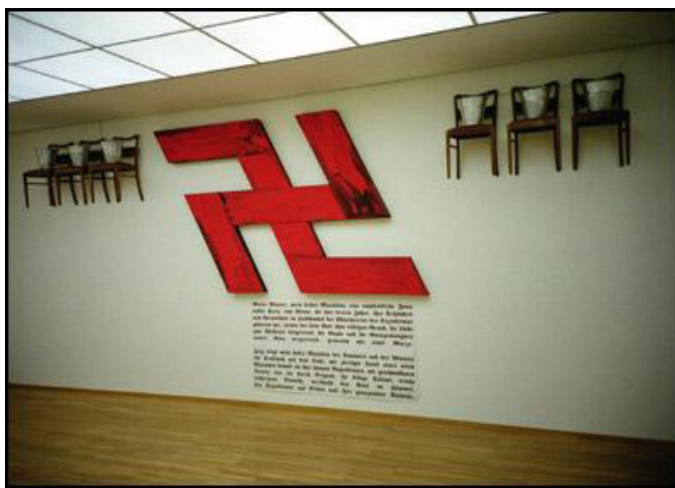


Figure 4. Rasa Todosijevic, *Gott liebt die Serben*, 2000, installation view at Museum Hamburger Bahnhof. Exhibition view of *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, curated by Bojana Pejić and David Elliott at Moderna Museet (16 October 1999–16 January 2000), then Max Liebermann Haus and Hamburger Bahnhof (1 October 2000–4 February 2001) and Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest (15 June–27 August 2000) (copyright Moderna Museet and Rasa Todosijevic)

Other texts published in the exhibition catalogue presented a range of critical views on both the process of Europeanization and the role of the art world within it. Theorist Nebojša Vilic (1999) pointed to the fact that while a range of exhibitions such as Manifesta took an interest in pan-European discourses and fantasized about a borderless Europe, other divisions were simultaneously created within Europe, such as those of in- and outside of NATO or the EU (Vilic 1999). In another text, Piotr Piotrowski (1999) wrote that the cultural geography of Europe unravels many Europes, though Eastern Europe is recognized by the West only on the basis of similarity and

universality. He referred to the post-Soviet (and 'near-Soviet' countries such as Yugoslavia) as a 'Gray Zone' Europe that soon would build other walls to divide Europe again (Piotrowski 1999).

After the Wall and its discourse reflected a heavy research program and academic interest in post-Wall Europe at the time and contributed to its expansion through the means of exhibition practice. However, the exhibition framed all participating artists through the lens of the 'post-communist condition.' Rather than going beyond the 'cultural representation model,' it reinforced it. Simultaneously, the project marked the end of focus on the post-Soviet period¹² within the exhibition practices of large-scale art institutions. 1999 was the last possible moment to organize a project of that scale (within an institutional framework) (Piotrowski 2011). Afterwards, post-Wall Europe became a historically determined territory from the perspective of geopolitics, while the post-Soviet world started to disappear, at least from the point of view of major European art institutions.

Conclusion: Four types of curatorial engagement with European democratization and their role as research tools

This article aimed to conceptualize four approaches to European exhibition making dealing with the former East and West of Europe, by revisiting and rethinking their aims, context, and outcomes. Consequently, it proposed four types of curatorial engagement with Europeanization and their role as research tools: universalization, confrontation, cosmopolitanization, and problematization. Stanisławski's approach to *Europa, Europa* may be seen as typical for some of the Eastern European art practitioners who aimed to universalize Eastern art. We see this universalization as natural, given the history of the twentieth century, though it renders impossible a process of properly defining cultural identity. What we can say is that when Hans Belting called for 'two harmonious voices of art history,' (Piotrowski 2006) Stanisławski—through *Europa, Europa*—aimed to merge them into one. Other Eastern European curators and artists from the 1990s—for instance, the participants of *Interpol*—responded to their position within the European art world in a transitory mode (Misiano 1998). They saw their practice as operating in the absence of a constituted institutional system—and, as a result, the absence of boundaries and limits. Their method to reconstitute them was to provoke and confront those boundaries. As regards the early iterations of *Manifesta*, approaching Eastern Europe from a cosmopolitan perspective had its roots in cultural globalization, which emerged after the (assumed) collapse of the Cold War perspective. Western Europe (and the Western world as a political and philosophical construct at large) proclaimed itself as a role model for the entire world, a geopolitical construct where a political utopia was realized (Groys 2004). Here, European cultural rhetoric, enacted through exhibition practice, attempted to construct a post-ideological and cosmopolitan image of both European contemporary art and

the sociopolitical landscape post-1989. The final stage of this curatorial inquiry into the 1990s European integration could have been manifested by *After the Wall* and its enquiry into the meaning of the post-communist condition. This existed as primarily a geopolitical reference applied to countries that rejected communism. As it happened, however, it had more than a purely geographic character. The post-communist condition, although different from country to country—as sociopolitical realities emerged in different patterns—was not a fantasy, but a lived reality. Finally, it was a transitory condition, affecting a larger space than just Eastern Europe. It constituted a historical and universal state of this period.

The exhibitions discussed here gave artists the opportunity to network and be recognized by Western audiences. However, they failed to fully address the complexity of democratization's impact and the role of contemporary art within it in either a regional or a wider perspective. This happened because curators had not yet achieved historical understanding of that moment when the social and political projects of post-1989 neoliberal democracy dominated the continent. There is, however, little doubt that contemporary art did not prove itself a neutral platform for dialogue between East and West, to the extent this dialogue was actually enacted. In most cases, the notion of Europe and its cultural and sociopolitical status remained generalized, without sufficient attention to its complexity.

As an act of thinking, but also as a site for both presentation and representation, exhibition making may be understood as a form of research (Sheikh 2013). In the case of curatorial strategies discussed in this article, research was employed not only as a method of historicization, but also as a practice of curatorial expansion—from the space of culture towards that of geography and politics. The different attitudes represented by European curators and institutions between the end of the Cold War and the EU's Eastern enlargement (from universalization to confrontation and from cosmopolitanization to problematization) were not only tools for researching concrete subjects (i.e., the place of Eastern European modern art in art historical canon), but also a field of experimentation with the potential of exhibition making as a practice based on antagonizing artistic communities or creating nomadic institutions. What integrated the exhibitions was their ambition of examining and supporting social and political transformation, ultimately joining in discourses traditionally associated with sociopolitical processes. All of them could be seen as proposals or theses (ultimately proven or disproven) investigated, mediated, and carried by the means of curatorial research inquiry. What this paper aimed to achieve is an understanding of their role within the larger cultural and sociopolitical paradigm, as well as a formulation of interpretative models for further studies on this extraordinarily rich art historical time-space.¹³

1. Several other smaller-scale initiatives exploring and problematizing the post-1989 socio- and geopolitical paradigm were organized also in Eastern European countries (predominantly in Russia). Their artistic and curatorial history is presented in an extensive publication, *Exhibit Russia: The New International Decade 1986–1996*, edited by Kate Fowle and Ruth Addison.
2. *Interpol* was an independent project organized by Jan Åman and Viktor Misiano at the Färgfabriken in Stockholm in 1993. Originally, the project was meant to be developed through two iterations: the first in Stockholm, the second in Moscow. Ultimately, due to financial limitations, only the exhibition at the Färgfabriken took place.
3. *Europa, Europa* (28.05–16.10.1994) was a joint project of the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Foundation for Art and Culture of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia. It was curated by Ryszard Stanislawski and Christoph Brockhaus at the Kunst-und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany) in Bonn, Germany.
4. Manifesta 1 was organized by the Manifesta Foundation in Rotterdam between the 9th of June and the 19th of August 1996. The exhibition was curated by Katalyn Neray, Rosa Martinez, Viktor Misiano, Andrew Renton, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, while the funding came from respective national offices responsible for promoting culture abroad.
5. *After the Wall* was an exhibition organized by the Moderna Museet in Stockholm between the 16th of October 1999 and the 16th of January 2000. It was curated by Bojana Pejić (as guest curator) and David Elliott (Director of the Moderna Museet). The exhibition travelled to Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest (15 June–27 August 2000) and Max Liebermann Haus and Hamburger Bahnhof (1 October 2000–4 February 2001).
6. Misiano V (2018, December 23) Personal communication, phone interview on the topic of *Interpol* project.
7. In this work, Agamben explores the notion of community, rethinking its status after the turbulence of the twentieth century.
8. Gutov's performance *The Last Supper* was a staged dinner during which Gutov asked artists and curators 'to discuss the artistic cooperation leading up to the show and videotaped the proceedings. During the meal, the Russian artist Alexander Brener stated that the project was a failure, and expressed scepticism that a participatory structure could itself be the content of the show, with no further guidance or position from the curators' (Bishop 2012: 211). The remains from the dinner were exhibited as Gutov's contribution to the exhibition.
9. Manifesta 2 was organized by the Manifesta Foundation in Luxembourg between the 28th of June and the 11th of October 1998. The exhibition was curated by Robert Fleck, Maria Lind, and Barbara Vanderlinden. Its funding came from the same sources as the first edition of the biennale.
10. In his text 'Art After Communism?' Robert Fleck writes, 'Whoever, today, travels all parts of the continent, determines no fundamental difference in the aesthetic paradigms of younger artists from the various regions.' He

continues, delivering anecdotal evidence from a young artist who grew up in Warsaw and 'never experienced communism.'

11. The idea of 'objectivity' is rejected right away in the introduction to the exhibition's catalogue.
12. Several curators and institutions continued exploring the topic, but no project on that scale materialized afterwards.
13. It is a concern for future research whether those types of curatorial approaches are applicable to other exhibitions tackling similar problems and phenomena, such as *Kunst, Europa: 63 deutsche Kunstvereine zeigen Kunst aus 20 Ländern* (organised by Arbeitsgemeinschaft deutscher Kunstvereine in 1991) or *Aspects/ Positions: 50 Years of Art in Central Europe 1949–1999* (mumok, Vienna, December 1999–March 2000 and Ludwig Museum, Budapest, March–May 2000), or whether each of them should be approached on its own conceptual terms.

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