

Zdenka Badovinac

Contemporaneity as Points of Connection

01/07

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Zdenka Badovinac
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When the editors of *e-flux journal* invited me to write about contemporaneity, they suggested that I take my own professional experience as a starting point. And it seems that, in order to understand contemporaneity, we cannot neglect the particularity of various approaches. Contemporary theory, however, and especially Badiouan theory, teaches that this can lead us astray and we should rather devote ourselves to thinking about a new understanding of universality. For this reason, I have tried to place my own particular story – which is linked to the broader context of Eastern Europe and, more narrowly, to my work at the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana – in connection with other, related experiences, especially those linked to the issues surrounding the Global South. One might even suggest that sharing various points of connection is, in fact, one of the key concepts of contemporaneity.

I. Narratives in the Plural

If we can no longer speak of the evolution of art over the course of history, we can certainly speak about the evolution of its accessibility. Accessibility to art increased exponentially in the twentieth century, primarily through the power of reproduction and the work of museums open to the general public. The democratization of art is, certainly, one of the important aspirations of modernity, although in many ways this is still limited to educating from above and the selective standards that entails. But today this enlightenment model is already being threatened by knowledge penetrating from below. I am speaking especially about current processes that oppose the various hegemonic models created by Western modernity. In this essay, I use the word “contemporaneity” as an alternative concept to modernity – a term which I do not connect with any specific time period.

“‘Modernity’ is not a historical period but a discursive rhetoric, that is, a persuasive discourse promising progress, civilization and happiness.”¹ This is how Walter D. Mignolo describes modernity, especially with regard to its darker side, which he calls “coloniality.” For theorists of decoloniality, “coloniality” is something that still persists today, and in opposition to the processes of decolonization.² The distinguishing features of coloniality, which link the issues surrounding the Global South, may also apply, at least in part, to Eastern Europe. Despite the fact that socialism was itself a unique project of modernity with its own globalization project, its own colonialism, and its own (pop) culture and art, the socialist countries, like other parts of the world, were hardly immune to Westernizing processes.



Exhibition view of "The Seven Sins: Ljubljana - Moscow," 2004.



Exhibition view of "The Seven Sins: Ljubljana - Moscow," 2004.



Exhibition view of "Interrupted Histories" at Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana. Pictured are works by Vadim Zakharov, Zofia Kulik, Luka Prinčič, Marjetica Potrč, ARTPOOL.

If attitudes in both East and West influenced each other mutually during the Cold War, then today the various interminglings of their processes can only testify to a further accelerated global dimension. To many, therefore, it seems that "planetary negotiations, discussions between agents from different cultures" are today taking place unhindered.³ For this reason, too, it is becoming increasingly important to ask how great a share a given space really inhabits in the global exchange of ideas, and to what degree this exchange reflects the polarization of the world into Global North and Global South.

When we think about contemporaneity, then, we must by no means overlook the question of participation, both in global exchanges and in particular spheres of life. Irit Rogoff describes contemporaneity as a sense of participation in discussions about unstructured forms of knowledge:

"Contemporaneity" is our subject – not as a historical period, not as an explicit body of materials, not as a mode of proximity or relevance to the subjects we are talking about, but rather as a conjunction.

"Contemporaneity" for us means that in the contemporary moment there is a certain number of shared issues and urgencies, a certain critical currency, but perhaps most importantly a performative enablement – a loosening of frames all around us, which means we can move around more freely, employ and deploy a range of theoretical, methodological and performative rhetoric and modes of operation, inhabit terrains that may not have previously made us welcome or, more importantly, which we would not have known how to inhabit productively.⁴

Although Rogoff is speaking here primarily about the interlacing territories of various fields of knowledge that are connected by a shared sense of urgency with regard to certain common questions, we could apply a similar model to the exchange of knowledge between various geopolitical territories. Access to different kinds of knowledge through various points of connection as well as the possibility of participating in common debates may be counted as part of the same set of concerns that characterize concepts of decolonization. Issues of access and participation in various processes of knowledge are also shaping, to an increasing degree, the basic features that define the imaginary of contemporary art.

In "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?" Hal Foster discusses the need to create a new narrative that, following the psychoanalytical model, would treat neo-avant-garde art concepts in terms of their repeating the unfinished work of the artistic revolutions of the early twentieth century. Foster writes:

The status of Duchamp as well as *Les Demoiselles* is a retroactive effect of countless artistic responses and critical readings, and so it goes across the dialogical space-time of avant-garde practice and institutional reception.⁵

The mature art system and its market contributed crucially to the fact that a given artwork could become part of history through countless cycles of repetition. Regardless of how we define the repetitions of the historic avant-garde vis-à-vis those of the neo-avant-garde – merely as farce or as the full, if deferred, realization of the avant-garde's potential – the story remains embedded in the logic of that same art system. The hegemonic art system, with its museums, theory, and market, makes possible the repetition of artistic concepts over various historical periods.

But that which the system assimilates must conform to its standards. If, as Foster writes, the institution of art was something the artists of the historic avant-garde wished only to do away with, and something that was in fact analyzed by the neo-avant-gardists, then it must be made clear that this applies above all to the Western space. Even if, for instance, the Russian avant-gardists wanted to burn down everything old, including the bourgeois institutions, we do not see in the works of their heirs in the East any kind of repetition in the sense of an institutional critique, at least not to the same degree as we have in the West. For the Eastern neo-avant-garde movements, the primary target of their

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Zdenka Badovinac
Contemporaneity as Points of Connection

attack was ideology and not the art system, which even today has, for all practical purposes, not yet developed in the East in any form comparable to that of the West. So when we speak of a new narrative that would be more suitable to the present and to the global situation, we can only speak of narratives in the plural.

04/07



Braco Dimitrijević, *The Casual Passerby I Met*, 1969. Image on building exterior, Ljubljana 2000.

While the concept of the plurality of narratives can be connected with the idea of the unfinished nature of the historic avant-gardes, it should, however, be linked first and foremost to the unfinished project of decoloniality. The production of local bodies of knowledge, which include the genealogies of local avant-gardes, is a precondition for establishing any “planetary negotiations” on an equal basis. We could relate such thinking to the notion of “transmodernity” put forward by the proponents of decolonialist theory.⁶ The decolonialists oppose the concept of transmodernity to the Western concepts of postmodernity and altermodernity, as well as to such notions as alternative modernities, subaltern modernities, and peripheral modernities. In Mignolo’s view, all these concepts still maintain “the centrality of Euro-American modernity or, if you wish, assume one ‘modernity of reference’ and put themselves in subordinate positions.”⁷

We would be very mistaken if we in any way supposed that emancipatory ideas come only from the non-Western world. This would be like saying that socialism was solely the project of the East. Susan Buck-Morss has nicely stated that this was not the case: “The historical experiment of socialism was so deeply rooted in the Western modernizing tradition that its defeat

cannot but place the whole Western narrative into question.”⁸

No single place can claim exclusive rights to emancipatory knowledge, which is important to the entire planet. It is true, however, that certain spaces have more potential to instrumentalize knowledge than others. Those that are in a better position in this regard also, therefore, contribute more to the positive or negative development of global society. Spaces with a weaker infrastructure, which might otherwise serve the ongoing structuring and distribution of local knowledge, are here in a disadvantaged position. The most these spaces can do is seek connections with other, similar conditions in the struggle for greater participation in the global exchange. That something of this sort is already happening can be seen in the congruity between various theoretical concepts, such as the notion of pluri-versality that Mignolo describes: “Pluri-versality requires . . . connectors, connectors among projects . . . moving, advancing, unfolding in the same direction (departing from the colonial matrix of power), but following singular paths emerging from *local histories*.”⁹

II. Self-Definition

In my day-to-day work, much of what I do involves questions around defining contemporaneity within the field of art, with regard to both artistic practices and the spaces where art is presented. Over the past twenty years I have constantly been forced to consider these questions by, among other things, the specific nature of the Slovene space, which at the beginning of my professional career in the second half of the 1980s, was entirely dominated by representatives of the modernist orthodoxy. In addition, the specific needs of the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana, where I have served as director for over a decade and a half, have also led me to a more intensive examination of the issues surrounding contemporaneity. This institution’s various acute needs have culminated today in the idea of a museum of contemporary art, which will become a reality, we expect, in a little more than eighteen months. In the remainder of this text, if I discuss my own experiences in this country of two million people, it is only because I believe they are, in a way, symptomatic – an example of the praxis of what are called “peripheral spaces” and an illustration of all that I have presented above on a more general, theoretical level.

At the beginning of the 1990s, when I became the director of the Moderna galerija, I found myself in a situation where I had to adopt a clear and unequivocal stance on many different issues – not only because of the importance of the position I had assumed, but also because of

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Zdenka Badovinac
Contemporaneity as Points of Connection

the particular nature of the moment we were living in. With the collapse of Yugoslavia, the Moderna galerija had become the central art institution of a new country, whose birth had been accompanied by a ten-day war, a war that had then shifted to the rest of the Balkans, where it continued for the next several years. The proximity of war, the old/new nationalisms, the blurring of the progressive ideas of communism and the equating of communism with fascism, the increasing emulation of the West, and the beginnings of a new liberal economy – all of this helped to create the spirit of the time, which was already so different from that of the late eighties, when I had started working at the Moderna galerija.

Along with my colleagues, especially Igor Zabel, with whom I had worked for many years, I asked myself how a museum can move forward in its work when it has been primarily dedicated to a national art – an art that, as even the most ambitious studies took pains to stress, lagged eternally behind Western art. The prevailing criticism and theory would, sometimes quite crudely, place our art in the “universal” Western context and blithely neglect anything that was associated with our own avant-garde traditions and the very powerful processes of self-contextualization that had been happening in artistic practices in Slovenia, particularly throughout the 1980s. And I am not even speaking here of the near-total absence of a critical theory that could place these relations in broader political and social contexts – a critical theory of which even today we find no trace, at least in the way art history is taught. A great lack of self-confidence, which at times borders on servility toward the West, exists not only in Slovenia but in all the so-called peripheral spaces; this was, and still is, responsible for everything we might designate, at least conditionally, as coloniality. How do we remedy such a situation? How do we improve our self-image?

These and similar questions encouraged us to find a different way of defining the priorities of our work. Our museum, founded in 1948 in a country which had that same year, through Tito’s Cominform dispute with Stalin, taken a stand against Soviet colonialism, now began to consider a “third way”: a break with the socialist tradition of national museums, a refusal to accept the “universal” Western example, and a search for a museum model that would suit its own time and space. For us, the imperative of contemporaneity became the idea that we ourselves would be the producers of our own knowledge and, as much as possible, that we would stop being the passive recipients of Western ideas. In this process we relied, right

from the start, on the experiences of artists and small non-institutional spaces that had, especially in the eighties in Slovenia, developed particular strategies for self-organization, alternative networking, and operating internationally, and that were significantly more successful at doing this than the official cultural policy was. I could say, then, that in our future operations we would use knowledge that came “from below,” and in doing so, we often refused to heed the demands and expectations that came not only from the official cultural policy but also from a certain general standard of institutional behavior. Our understanding of contemporaneity was also dictated by our interest in other spaces that had till then been shut out of the artistic “universe” and with which we shared a number of similar priorities in the new historical moment. And it was our similar priorities with these spaces that saw our directives come together in new conjunctions, which we also started to understand as our principal international context.

Throughout the 1990s, then, the Moderna galerija put together a number of projects connected with the Balkans and, more generally, Eastern Europe. In 2000, we also inaugurated the first museum collection of Eastern European art, which was later followed by a series of shows we called Arteast Exhibitions. The objectives of this program were, and still are, connected above all to the idea that Eastern Europe must contextualize itself as soon as possible, that it must become the subject of its own historicization and not merely an object for the more powerful Western institutions. On the basis of my experience with these issues, I have on a number of occasions already pointed to two possible ways for Eastern European art to be musealized. The first is based on the mere inclusion of non-Western art, through its best examples, in the master narrative and in the hegemonic institutions; the second way has been to offer more possibilities for local institutions to produce knowledge about their own history, and thus indirectly influence the global art system. Of course, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive; the only question is which of them will end up becoming dominant in the future.

When I talk about the Moderna galerija as a museum of contemporary art, however, this is not merely in the sense of the topics discussed above, but also in the very concrete sense of the actual reorganization of its work. The Moderna galerija was founded as a museum of modern art, but after more than sixty years, its official mission became too narrow and its physical space too small. Years ago, in order to solve its space problems, the Moderna galerija acquired a

05/07

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Zdenka Badovinac
Contemporaneity as Points of Connection

second building for its use, one that was in need of a total renovation. Thus the museum was forced to reorganize its activities between two separate locations. This led to the idea of a division not only between two locations but also between a museum of modern art and a museum of contemporary art, housed in two separate buildings, which in turn led to an urgent need to focus on questions around the relationship between the modern and the contemporary.

06/07



Mangelos, *Manifest About Energy*, no. 000, 1977–78.

At a time when museums of modern art are increasingly becoming museums of what are now historical styles from the twentieth century, an art that has been accumulated over decades, the museum of contemporary art needs a new definition. Above all, contemporaneity needs its own museum, just as, in the early twentieth century, modern art – the art that was then contemporary to its time – needed its own museum. In a certain way, the Moderna galerija was lucky. Circumstances of various kinds have always forced us to continually define our position toward contemporaneity and thus, in a way, to defend it. From my own experience, then, I would summarize the definition of the museum of contemporary art – which is different from the museum of modern art – as follows:

If the museum of modern art served certain universal paradigms, a master narrative, and the hegemonic goals of the big Western institutions,

then the museum of contemporary art must serve the needs of local spaces so that they can enter as equals into dialogues with other spaces. In order for conditions to be at all possible for designing a museum of contemporary art as I describe it here, local spaces must determine their own work priorities, which cannot be universal. The pursuit of these principal objectives is necessary if a given space is to rid itself of backwardness and provincialism and become truly timely, and not merely concurrent with the West. The museum of contemporary art must make possible the perception of art as it has developed in various contexts. And here I am thinking not only of the various artistic movements that developed within different social realities, but also of the manner of presenting art in such a space. A museum of this kind can no longer be merely a museum of art. It must also be a museum of history, a museum of a diversity of narrations and their presentation. The white cube is just one of a number of possible models for this museum. Most important here are, above all, the points of connection between the various surfaces of the cube.

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Translated from the Slovene by Rawley Grau

Zdenka Badovinac has been director of Moderna galerija / the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, since 1993. She has curated numerous exhibitions presenting both Slovenian and international artists, and initiated the first collection of Eastern European art, Moderna galerija's 2000+ Arteast Collection. She has been systematically dealing with the processes of redefining history and with the questions of different avant-garde traditions of contemporary art, starting with the exhibition "Body and the East – From the 1960s to the Present" (Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, 1998; Exit Art, New York, 2001). She continued in 2000 with the first public display of the 2000+ Arteast Collection: "2000+ Arteast Collection: The Art of Eastern Europe in Dialogue with the West" (Moderna galerija, 2000); and then with a series of Arteast Exhibitions, mostly at Moderna galerija: "Form-Specific" (2003); "7 Sins: Ljubljana-Moscow" (2004; co-curated with Victor Misiano and Igor Zabel); "Interrupted Histories" (2006); "Arteast Collection 2000+23" (2006); "The Schengen Women" (Galerija Škuc, Ljubljana, part of the *Hosting Moderna galerija!* project, 2008). Her other major projects include "unlimited.nl-3" (DeAppel, Amsterdam, 2000), "(un)gemalt, Sammlung Essl, Kunst der Gegenwart" (Klosterneuburg/Vienna, 2002), "ev+a 2004, Imagine Limerick, Open&Invited" (various exhibition venues, Limerick, 2004); "Democracies/the Tirana Biennale" (Tirana, 2005). She was Slovenian Commissioner at the Venice Biennale (1993–1997, 2005) and Austrian Commissioner at the Sao Paulo Biennial (2002).

07/07

e-flux journal #11 — december 2009 Zdenka Badovinac
Contemporaneity as Points of Connection

1
Marina Gržinić and Walter Mignolo, "De-linking Epistemology from Capital and Pluri-Versality: A Conversation with Walter Mignolo, Part 3," *Reartikulacija*, no. 6 (2009), 7; http://www.reartikulacija.org/RE6/ENG/decoloniality6_ENG_mign.html.

2
As Ramón Grosfoguel explains: "Peripheral nation-states and non-European people live today under the regime of 'global coloniality' imposed by the United States through the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the Pentagon, and NATO. . . I use the word 'colonialism' to refer to 'colonial situations' enforced by the presence of a colonial administration such as the period of classical colonialism. . . I use 'coloniality' to address 'colonial situations' in the present period in which colonial administrations have almost been eradicated from the capitalist world-system. By 'colonial situations' I mean the cultural, political, sexual, and economic oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant racial/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations." "Transmodernity, Border Thinking, and Global Coloniality: Decolonizing Political Economy and Postcolonial Studies," *Eurozine*, April 7, 2008, <http://www.eurozine.com/pdf/2008-07-04-grosfoguel-en.pdf>.

3
Nicolas Bourriaud, "Altermodern Manifesto," written for the 2009 Tate Triennial (Tate Britain, London), <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm>.

4
Irit Rogoff, "Academy as Potentiality," in A.C.A.D.E.M.Y., ed. Angelika Nollert and Irit Rogoff (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006); available online at <http://summit.kein.org/node/191>. This book was published as part of an international series of exhibitions and projects initiated by the Siemens Arts Program in cooperation with the Kunstverein in Hamburg, Goldsmiths College in London, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerp, and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.

5
Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde and the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 8.

6
"Transmodernity is the Latin American philosopher of liberation Enrique Dussel's utopian project to transcend the Eurocentric version of modernity... Instead of a single modernity centred in Europe and imposed as a global design to the rest of the world, Dussel

argues for a multiplicity of decolonial critical responses to Eurocentred modernity from the subaltern cultures and epistemic location of colonized people around the world." In Grosfoguel, "Transmodernity, Border Thinking, and Global Coloniality."

7
Walter Mignolo, "Coloniality: The Darker Side of Modernity," in *Modernologies: Contemporary Artists Researching Modernity and Modernism*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009), 42; available online at http://www.macba.cat/PDFs/walter_mignolo_modernologies_eng.pdf. As an example of "altermodernity," Mignolo cites Bourriaud's "Altermodern Manifesto" (see note 3).

8
Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), xii.

9
Marina Gržinić and Walter Mignolo, "De-linking Epistemology from Capital and Pluri-Versality: A Conversation with Walter Mignolo, Part 2," *Reartikulacija*, no. 5 (2008), 21; http://www.reartikulacija.org/RE5/ENG/decoloniality5_ENG_mign.html.